

The book as object in Ray Galton and Alan Simpson's *Hancock Half Hour* episode "The Missing Page"

It is common critical practice these days to describe the work of previous generations of critics as idealistic in the worst possible sense, treating literature as though it existed in a realm of pristine ideas when in fact it can only ever exist in material form as one or more textualizations. In this paper I want to consider how the relationship between an idealized text and its imperfect physical embodiment is explored in an unlikely corner of English comic history, an episode of the BBC radio and television show *Hancock's Half Hour* starring Tony Hancock and written by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson. The episode is called "The Missing Page" and was first broadcast on 11 March 1960 (Galton & Simpson 1960) on BBC television and re-recorded with virtually the same script as an audio performance five years later (Galton & Simpson 1965).

Tony Hancock was a music-hall and radio comedian who, in the late 1950s, was offered a BBC television version of his popular radio series *Hancock's Half Hour*. Hancock's eponymous character is a lugubrious and unfulfilled aspirant living in conditions of provincial English post-war austerity, painfully aware of the glamour in others' lives whom he seeks to imitate. Hancock lives in East Cheam with his friend and minor criminal, Sid James. There is no 'East' Cheam in reality, but having chosen as a suitably liminal place the real satellite village of Cheam, not quite within London's cultural gravitational field, the writers Galton and Simpson decided that Hancock would not have achieved even its provincial centrality, so he had to be somewhere east of Cheam (Goodwin 2000, 178). The episode "The Missing Page" begins with Hancock visiting his local public library, of which he has been a member since childhood and has rather outgrown. In his more fanciful moments Hancock thinks of himself as one of the intelligentsia and he boasts that he reads murder mystery novels only as an *hors d'œuvre* to an all-night session reading Bertrand Russell. Sid James is vaguely familiar with the name Bertrand Russell: "didn't he write *Kiss the Blood off my Hands?*", asks Sid. The very thought scandalizes Hancock -- "Bertie of all people!" -- and he assures Sid that Bertrand Russell does not write such stuff. "No, you're thinking of Aldous Huxley", he informs Sid. This exchange is entirely typical of Galton and Simpson's main device with the character Hancock, the bathetic descent from Hancock's cultural and intellectual aspirations to the reality of his life and pursuits. Having fallen out with the librarian over the late return of books, Hancock redeems himself by asking to borrow a collection of books whose erudition and classical learning deeply impress the librarian [VIDEO CLIP].

So begins this episode's exploration of the physicality of books. Hancock and Sid return home with the murder mystery novel *Lady Don't Fall Backwards*, one of the kind where everything is explained on the final page. The genre demands that the reader knows the outcome in general terms (the crime be will solved) but not the particulars, although all the information presented to the fictional detective is available to the reader. The raising of false hopes is part of the pleasure -- "Every time I suspect someone", comments Hancock, "he gets murdered" -- and gratification must be deferred until the end of the work. An experienced reader, Hancock knows the structure and tells Sid how this novelist's works always end. On the last page the detective calls the suspects together at his apartment, where he unmasks the murderer, who rushes to the window, slips and falls, and hits the pavement below.

The detective, Johnny Oxford, finishes his Manhattan cigar and says "'New York is now a safer place to live in'. The End. You turn over, and there's a list of new books and an advert for skinny blokes", as Hancock puts it.

Sid James is not an experienced reader and he wonders why anyone would persist with a genre which is as predictable as this. In a radio episode of *Hancock's Half Hour* called "The Conjuror" (Galton & Simpson 1956), Hancock is advised to change his music-hall act because it has become entirely predictable. To this Hancock has an answer of impeccable logic: "you don't ask Laurence Olivier to change *Hamlet* just because you've heard it before". How true! What we consider afresh with each new production of Shakespeare (and arguably a handful of other classic dramas) is not the plot but the particular ordering of stresses and emphases within what has become, for those who know the plays, an entirely formulaic experience. Who has not sometimes wished it were otherwise, that a particular performance were cut short by the taking of roads not normally travelled? Kenneth Tynan had this feeling watching Glen Byam Shaw's 1958 production of *Romeo and Juliet* at Stratford on Avon, and observed that the play collapses halfway through,

. . . not, as is commonly thought, with Mercutio's death, but later when Romeo leaves his wife's bedroom for banishment. It collapses because a vital question, which might have bypassed those dope-pushing priests and apothecaries, is neither posed nor answered: 'Why doesn't he take her with him?' (Tynan 1958)

Putting such thinking into action, an abbreviated version of a Samuel Beckett classic was performed at the Edinburgh Festival some years ago. It ended after ten minutes upon the arrival of a man who announced himself simply with "Hello, I'm Godot" (Wood 2000).

We left Hancock reading *Lady Don't Fall Backwards* aloud to Sid, at the moment when detective Johnny Oxford begins his summing up prior to unmasking the villain. We are almost on the last page, where the solution is, and *Lady Don't Fall Backwards* is shaping up exactly as Hancock said it would. To dramatize the moment for Sid, Hancock uses his best New York detective accent, and with your indulgence so will I. As Hancock approaches the bottom of the penultimate page, the tension mounts:

'So, Inspector, you can see that the only person who could have done all these murders is the man sitting over there.' So saying, Johnny Oxford pointed his finger at . . . [*skips to top of recto*] 'Men, are you skinny? Do you have sand kicked in your face? If so . . .'

Hancock moves from the left page to right and accidentally reads an advertisement on a fly-leaf -- the last page is missing! A ragged edge of paper indicates that the last page has been torn out. Someone probably "lit a fag" with it, suggests Sid, which levity does not relieve the pent up tension of Hancock, for whom this is "sheer, unmitigated sadism". In a flash of inspiration it occurs to Sid who might have torn out the page: the murderer, to conceal his identity.

The point of a detective novel is to put oneself in the place of the hero, and the absence of the final page -- which seems a disaster -- is in fact an opportunity to

extend this vicarious pleasure to its logical limit. Hancock decides to solve the mystery himself using the clues provided. Not only is the last page redundant, the loss of it actually enhances the vicariousness which gives the form its pleasure, since now the reader is in precisely Johnny Oxford's position of having all the clues but no ready-made solution. However, despite staying up all night discussing the case, Hancock and Sid fail to live up to their idol Oxford, they cannot solve the case.

Early next morning Sid and Hancock return to East Cheam public library which, they find, buys just one copy of each book so there is no way to check the solution of *Lady Don't Fall Backwards* in another copy. The mass reproduction and dissemination of texts which is modern book publishing should provide a common reference system denying a privileged status to any single copy, but here it does not. With the extant material book now dethroned as the centre of its own meaning, the search for alternative authorities begins. Perhaps a previous reader saw the book before its mutilation and will be able to share that privileged access in the form of a verbal account of the solution. Sid and Hancock visit the previous reader, but alas the book was already mutilated when he read it, and reader who had the book before him gave up before the end. An enquiry to the publisher ascertained that they had sold all their copies. Copies of the book which remained unsold in shops were returned to the publisher for repulping. As a preserver of human knowledge the publishing industry fails miserably.

In the mid-1970s two influential essays about authorship reached English-speaking readers: Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (Foucault 1975) and Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" (Barthes 1977). Their concerns, however, were anticipated in this episode of *Hancock's Half Hour*. Thinking of him as the ultimate authority, Hancock and Sid locate the home of author Darcy Sarto but they find that he has been dead for over ten years, as indicated by a London County Council commemorative plaque on the wall. Suddenly a new avenue of enquiry occurs to Hancock: the British Museum. Sid objects that Sarto will not be there, having almost certainly been buried, which joke glances at the serious question of where ultimate authority is located, in the writer or in the archival trace of what was written. The British Museum library, Hancock remembers, keeps a copy of every book published in the United Kingdom, and therefore is certain to have a copy of *Lady Don't Fall Backwards*. Might the legal deposit system and the stabilizing institutional power of the state library triumph where a provincial council-run library failed?

In the absence of the author, the British Museum library offers the next best thing, a pristine copy of the book. Without actually reading the final page, Hancock checks that it is present. To set the scene Hancock rereads the last few lines on the previous page:

'So, Inspector, you can see that the only person who could have done all these murders is the man sitting over there.' So saying, Johnny Oxford pointed his finger at . . . [*skips to top of recto*] 'Men, are you skinny? Do you have sand kicked in your face? If so . . .'

Again, Hancock moves from last verso to the last recto and accidentally reads an advertisement on a fly-leaf -- the last page is still missing! No, Sid spots the crucial difference in this copy: what Hancock thought was the final page is in fact a half-page

publisher's note informing the reader that the author's manuscript ended exactly at this point -- he died before he could complete it. The publisher chose to publish the incomplete manuscript because Sarto's fans would doubtless want what there was of his last work. Disgusted, Hancock vows to read no more detective novels. The Chinese, he observes, would not be caught out by books with no endings, since they start at the back work forwards. He vows to jump media and listen to gramophone records instead of reading books. There is considerable irony in Hancock's jumping media, as the audience of the show *Hancock's Half Hour* had jumped from radio to television, and in his idea of anticipating the end by reading in reverse. Fifty years before the sudden ubiquity of television, recorded discs, played on a gramophone, had ousted recorded cylinders played on a phonogram. When patenting his disc player in 1887, Emile Berliner gave it the name 'gramophone' simply by reversing the syllables of 'phonogram' (OED *gramophone n.*)

In bringing together the theme of vicarious living with a consideration of the nature of formulaic pleasure, Galton and Simpson explored the consequence of a highly formulaic work of art, one conforming to a pattern which dictates the shape of the outcome, being as it were de-tailed, stripped of its ending. In the longer version of this paper I interpret this as a reflection by Galton and Simpson upon their own formulaic writing practices, especially their use of prolepsis to end each episode with the reprise of an earlier event in a new ironized form which binds the entire 30-minute script into a single irony about Hancock's personality and life. In "The Missing Page" this exploration is initiated by the physical textualization of an artistic work, and continues through a search for alternative authorities in the form of other copies of the text, witnesses to an earlier state of the extant text, the authorial manuscript, and finally the author himself. This search proves fruitless because one cannot determine if the 'work' (in G. Thomas Tanselle's sense of the author's mental labour) was ever completed and neither a mutilated nor a pristine copy of the textualization can answer that question. Moreover, the mutilated and pristine copies are not equal; contrary to our usual assumptions the British Museum library is inferior to the copy in the East Cheam public library. Whoever tore out the publisher's note in the East Cheam copy was right to do so, because the ragged remainder of the page more properly represents the status of the 'work'. Moreover, the removal of this page creates for the reader the conditions under which the fictional detective operates: all the pieces of the puzzle are present, but the answer has to be worked out for oneself. In this the mutilated books promotes a more thorough process of vicarious identification with the hero than can be achieved via the perfect copy, and so it is the better work of art. That Galton and Simpson were operating within similar formulaic principles is clear, I think, from their choice of symphony for the record that Sid buys for Hancock to play on his expensive new stereophonic gramophone. The show's audience, and I presume this one, have already guessed that it is Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*.

Notes

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