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The missing page: Hancock's half hour and the debasement of literature

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"The Missing Page: *Hancock Half Hour* and the Debasement of Literature" by Gabriel Egan

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 tells Sid. This exchange is 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 a fine for 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]. This is not quite the first abuse of books in the episode, for Hancock's habit of eating while reading leads to the destruction of one library book and the librarian's demonstration of how to read a book destroys another [VIDEO CLIP][BLANK SLIDE]. The episode, then, is closely concerned with the physicality of books, and the ease with which they may be abused or destroyed.

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 will be 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 killed"--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, plies them with alcohol and then 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.

In case you are not familiar with adverts for skinny blokes, the allusion is to the successful series of ads created to promote the body-building and exercise method of Angelo Siciliano (1892-1972), who renamed himself Charles Atlas [SLIDE]. These two are typical of the ads, showing the 'skinny' gibe on the left--above a picture of Atlas himself--and the sand-in-the-face insult on the right, both of which Atlas claimed actually happened to him, motivating him to develop his body. These adverts were highly successful, and appeared in comic books and at the ends of works of pulp fiction, the genre to which *Lady Don't Fall Backwards* is supposed to belong.

At Sid's suggestion, Hancock begins to read aloud the ending of *Lady Don't Fall Backwards*, from 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. As Hancock approaches the bottom of the penultimate page, the tension mounts [VIDEO CLIP] [BLANK SLIDE]

'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 . . .'

In a flash of inspiration it occurs to Sid who might have torn out the page: the murderer himself, to conceal his identity.

Because his murder mystery book is formulaic, it occurs to Hancock that the last page is unnecessary: the preceding pages must contain enough information to deduce who was the killer. This is a prerequisite of the conventional detective novel formula since part of the pleasure is the retrospective realization that one had been given sufficient information to solve the crime for oneself; the detective has no superior access to the facts, only superior powers of interpretation. Moreover, the reader is expected to make inferences from the clues as they are provided, and to construct hypotheses which in the final revelation turn out to be less plausible, less collectively coherent, than those made by the detective. It is this shortfall in the reader's conjectures that gives rise to the forehead-slapping sense of 'of course!' which accompanies reading the solution on the last page.

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. That is, a mutilated detective novel is, paradoxically, more of a detective novel than an uncut one. However, despite staying up all night discussing the case, Hancock and Sid fail to live up to the deductive powers of their idol Johnny Oxford and they just cannot solve the case on their own.

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 ascertains that they sold all their copies, and that copies remaining unsold in shops were returned to the publisher for repulping. As a preserver of human knowledge the publishing industry fails miserably.

In the very name of the 'pulp fiction' trade, the low quality of the material book made from relatively untreated wood-pulp (and hence easily recycled to make new books) has come to stand for the low quality of the literary contents: these are words not worth recording in a permanent medium. (Ironically, this diminution in the value of the printed word has a contrary effect if the writer goes on to achieve widespread popularity. If unsold copies of early works were repulped, the few that survived are all the more rare and valuable.) When writing is so commodified that an existing book may be worth more as the raw material for new writing than as the embodiment of old, the reader may well feel, as Galton and Simpson's characters do, that literary authority itself is in question. The final authority to which Sid and Hancock resort is the author himself, since even if no copies of the book survive--even if his manuscript does not survive--he will know who the killer was. Or he would were he alive: a London County Council commemorative plaque on the wall of his house reveals that he has been dead for more than 10 years.

Suddenly a new avenue of enquiry occurs to Hancock. The British Museum library, he remembers, keeps a copy of every book published in this country, and therefore it 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. Before trusting himself with a re-reading of the ending, Hancock must check that it is uncut and that the last page is present [VIDEO CLIP]

'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 . . .'

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 and work forwards. He vows to switch media and listen to gramophone records instead of reading books, and so he sets off to buy the latest stereophonic equipment.

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 uncompleted 'work'. The publisher's note is a doomed attempt to give the book some kind of wholeness, and its removal 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 state, the mutilated book 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, I think, would have guessed what record Sid would buy, and if this audience has guessed it too then I suppose I ought to mimic my material and end without playing my final clip. But no, I am with Hancock on this one: things should be ended properly.

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