

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

In this essay I will consider how the relationship between an idealized text and its imperfect physical embodiment is explored in a perhaps 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 that had begun in 1954. Hancock's eponymous character is a lugubrious and unfulfilled aspirant living in conditions of English post-war austerity, painfully aware of the glamour in the lives of others whom he seeks to imitate. Hancock lives with his friend and minor criminal Sid James in suburban East Cheam, close enough to feel the exotic pull of London but marginal and essentially provincial in outlook.

The episode begins with Tony Hancock visiting his local public library in East Cheam, of which he has been a member since childhood and has rather outgrown. The librarian claims there are 25,000 books in the library, but Hancock says that he has read them all and cannot face reading them again. Amongst this specious plenitude, only newly acquired works are truly new for the avid reader, and there can be stiff competition for access to these. In the television episode Hancock repeatedly asks if

Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita, first published in 1955 (Nabokov 1955), is still out to another reader, and for the subsequent audio recording this was updated to Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer (Miller 1935), which had no United Kingdom edition until 1963 (Miller 1963). Both books were exotically notorious in the 1950s for their sexual content and were much whispered about. Upon returning his previously-borrowed books, the librarian asks Hancock if the egg stains in one of them are his, which raises the recurrent tension between reading as a rarefied intellectual activity and reading as a mental gratification of bodily desires. In a radio episode called "The Scandal Magazine" (Galton & Simpson 1958) Hancock defends himself against accusations of sexual impropriety--caught with "Mabel under the table" at a night-club, as the headline puts it--made in the scandal sheet Blabbermouth magazine. Hancock's secretary Griselda Pugh (played by Hattie Jacques) has dozens of back issues she reads while consuming boxes of chocolates. Hancock pleads innocence of the library-book egg staining and insists that the librarian will not find folded-down corners either since he uses the ribbon from his chocolate box as a bookmark. Like his secretary, Hancock simultaneously indulges his mind with vicarious pleasures and his body with chocolates.

Having fallen out with the librarian over the late return of his books, Hancock redeems himself by asking to borrow a collection of books whose erudition and classical learning deeply impress the librarian: Sir Charles Bestead's Complete History of the Holy Byzantine Empire, the Wilkinson edition of Ulbricht's Roman Law, and Homer's Iliad. (The first two are plausible but invented titles.) As a guardian of high culture, so lamentably neglected in East Cheam, the librarian is delighted to be asked for

these, "the best books in the whole library". With the librarian brightening towards him, Hancock confides that he finds these books "most useful" and frequently "borrows" them, the ambiguity of which terms becomes clear when he places this thick stack of books on the floor to provide a step up to reach the top-shelf crime fiction which he seeks. The scholarly phrases "most useful" and "borrowing" are ambiguous in the library, but more fundamentally so is the term "book". Finding his criminal acquaintance Sidney James looking around the shelves of crime fiction, Hancock is suspicious. Sid surely has never read a book, although he undoubtedly has "run one". An inexperienced reader, Sid asks for guidance and has to be corrected: Kiss the Blood Off My Hands is not, Hancock assures him, in the Bertrand Russell oeuvre. Hancock is sure that it is one of Aldous Huxley's. By the 1950s, Huxley was largely known as a popular intellectual, and that Hancock drops the name while clearly ignorant of the actual works is an economic means by which Galton and Simpson signal his pretensions to culture and learning.

Hancock and Sid select murder mystery novels from the library and return home. Sid expresses dissatisfaction with his choice, The Stranglers of Bolton by Grant Peabody, the title of which is probably an allusion to the shock horror film The Stranglers of Bombay released by Hammer Films the previous year (Fisher 1959) and given the bathetic twist characteristic of Galton and Simpson's comedy. Hancock is engrossed in Darcy Sarto's Lady Don't Fall Backwards. As in the library, silence is essential for concentration. Recalling the library discussion of eggs and chocolates, immersion in intellectual consumption is associated with oral consumption and potential damage to the physical fabric of a book: Hancock repeatedly brings a glass of water to his mouth

without pausing to drink from it. The analogy of oral and mental satisfaction is sustained and extended: the satisfying drink of water is held off just as the revelation of 'whodunnit' is held off by the structure of this kind of writing. Both 'solutions' remain tantalizing close but their consumption is deferred. It will all be explained on the final page, Hancock tells Sid, who has given up on the Bolton stranglers.

The detective fiction 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 one knows that gratification must be deferred until the end of the work. An experienced reader, Hancock knows the structure and can give the television show's audience a taste of how it should end. The murderer is unmasked, "The End. You turn over: a list of new books and an advert for skinny blokes". This foretaste of how Darcy Sarto ends all his novels about the detective Johnny Oxford is necessary to enable the bathos when this particular one goes wrong. Utterly familiar with the genre, Hancock knows to expect that the advertising after the end of the novel proper includes a list of new books, since having read everything in the library such lists shape his future selections. Hancock is a consumer of just-released new fiction, or at least he feels like one; we discover later that this copy of Lady Don't Fall Backwards has had two previous readers, one of whom appears in the episode.

An inexperienced reader, Sid wonders why anyone would persist with a genre which is as predictable as Hancock's experience with Sarto's detective novels. For Hancock,

the figures can be interchanged and the works still have pleasure with the same structure. Sid and Hancock enjoy the ending of Lady Don't Fall Backwards together, the latter reading aloud as Johnny Oxford sums up the clues in preparation for unmasking the villain. Hancock has already recited to Sid the formula for the ending of a Johnny Oxford story, and Lady Don't Fall Backwards conforms to the type, repeating the words Hancock used earlier. 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 . . . [his eyes skip to top of recto] 'Men, are you skinny? Do you have sand kicked in your face? If so . . .' (parenthetical direction added)

A ragged edge of paper indicates that the last page has been torn out. Sid suggests that perhaps someone tore it out to light a cigarette, a probably unconscious echo of the first clue which put Oxford on the right track: a book of matches from the Mocambo club. A book of matches becomes functional only when one of its contents is torn out, and this will become an apposite metaphor for the detective novel.

The lacuna in Lady Don't Fall Backwards begins on a recto page, whose absence allows Hancock to misread (as though the final paragraph) an advertisement on the underlying recto. It occurs to Sid just who might have a motive for tearing out the last page: the murderer, so the crime would remain unsolved. This trick of relating the inner story to the outer story is a recurrent feature of the Hancock Half Hour series in which Hancock plays 'Hancock', the star of his own BBC radio and television programme,

which inset series is not as successful as the outer one actually was. 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.

In a well-constructed story of this type, the revelations start slightly before the climactic denouement: there should be a series of 'of course!' moments leading to the final unmasking. In Lady Don't Fall Backwards one such clue was a trail of footprints in the snow, "all made with a size 10 left-footed shoe". This told Johnny Oxford that the killer was a man who could walk comfortably in two left shoes, so it must have been a small man who put on a big man's shoes to lay suspicion on someone else, but in his hurry he did not realize he had put on two left shoes. With this 'of course!' moment, Hancock gives the effect of this clue on his own, considerably weaker, powers of deductive reasoning: "I never thought of that. I've been waiting for two one-legged twins to turn up". Comically absurd as it is, Hancock's 'solution' is more imaginative than the actual one and connotes a creative but undisciplined mind with a weak grasp of the plausible. Galton and Simpson's subtle gesture of Hancock's actually awaiting these

twins' appearance suggests a touching faith in his own creativity.

The point of a detective novel is to put oneself in the place of the hero, and the absence of the final page--which seemed a disaster--is in fact an opportunity to extend this vicarious pleasure to its logical limit: Hancock will solve the mystery using the clues provided. Not only is the last page redundant, the loss of it paradoxically enhances the vicariousness which gives the form its pleasure, since now the reader is in precisely detective Johnny Oxford's position of having all the clues but no ready-made solution.

Thus Hancock can 'get into' the novel almost as completely as Professor Kugelmass in Woody Allen's short story The Kugelmass Episode (Allen 1977), which takes the idea to a literal extreme. Kugelmass employs the aid of the magician Persky to enter a copy of Flaubert's Madame Bovary, to the surprise of literary critics who explain the presence of a middle-aged American in a leisure suit in nineteenth-century France as demonstrative of the principle that great literature reveals more of itself on each reading. Lady Don't Fall Backwards is written to allow readers to imaginatively enter the story and has an aid to readers wanting to cast themselves as the detective: a list of characters in order of appearance.

Sitting up in bed, Hancock works his way through the list of characters and considers the occasions of their demise. All the murderer's victims were typists at the United Nations Organization in New York, and with the exception of one who was killed by water poured on her electric typewriter, the deaths have a sexual frisson. Jocelyn Knockersbury was strangled with one of her own stockings and Freda Wolkinski was in her pull-down bed when someone pressed the button that made it fly up into the wall and

she suffocated. Both die by asphyxiation and in both cases Hancock breaks off his deliberations because their deaths implied that they were sexually active: the killer had access to Jocelyn's underwear and knew the "topography of Freda's boudoir". The details which emerge contain a number of cultural alterities for most of an British television audience of 1960. The new technology of electric typewriters was still uncommon in offices in the United Kingdom, and the space-saving device of a pull-down bed was associated with small purpose-built apartments for low-income workers in big metropolises.

That Freda had, apart from the killer, two boyfriends in different towns speaks of the sexual sophistication of New York, and Hancock only just manages to overcome what he calls his "naturally prudery" to consider the facts: "after all, New York is probably a lot racier than East Cheam". This entire scene takes place with Hancock sitting up in bed while Sid tries to sleep in an adjacent bed, which potentially sexual setting seems to have had absolutely no meaning for the writers or the original audience. This phenomenon persisted until recently. In their British television comedy shows of the 1970s Eric Morecombe and Ernie Wise shared a bed with no more sexual connotation than has attached to Bert and Ernie sharing a bed in the Children Television Workshop's Sesame Street. With Hancock staying up late to solve the crime, Sid cannot sleep either and, a minor criminal himself, he feels qualified to skim-read the book to reach a quick solution. Naturally, the book is too complicated and finally Sid and Hancock try to solve the mystery between them, which tactic throws up what seems to be the solution. The killer is, of course, the United Nations Organization's personnel manager Harry Zimmerman, who had perfect opportunities and moreover was small enough to fit the

left-footed shoe theory. Hancock and Sid retire finally satisfied that they can put the book behind them, until on the point of falling asleep, Hancock remembers that Harry Zimmerman died in chapter three.

Early the next morning Sid and Hancock return to East Cheam public library and confront the librarian who pleads that he does not know the solution because, although their custodian, he cannot be expected to read all the books in the library, as Hancock had previously boasted of doing. It transpires that East Cheam library 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 'many-identical' nature of book publishing might be expected to provide a common reference system denying a privileged status of any single copy, but here it does not. The printed book has returned to something of the status of a manuscript, unique in its physical peculiarities in a way which entirely transforms its consumption. As we shall see, this is no bad thing. With the extant material book now dethroned as the centre of its own meaning, the search for alternative authorities begins. Perhaps a previous reader had access to the book before its mutilation and will be able to share that privileged access in the form of a verbal account of the solution.

As historians often remind us, extraordinary events are more likely to be recorded than mundane ones, especially where statutory authorities are involved in punishing transgressions. Because the previous reader kept the book overdue there will have been a fine paid, and hence a record of the reader's name, "Proctor, W.", and his address. Sid and Hancock visit the previous reader, but alas the book was already mutilated when he

read it, so with the reawakening of Proctor's obsession about Lady Don't Fall Backwards there are now three men desperate to solve the case. Not all react equally to such pressure, and Proctor becomes hysterical while describing the futility of his own six-year search for a solution. Proctor found the reader who had the book before him, but this reader gave up before the end, and 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.

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 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. A potential final authority which Proctor had not thought to consult when trying anchor his reading of Lady Don't Fall Backwards is the author himself, Darcy Sarto. Even if he has no copy of the book, he will have the manuscript which is a prior authority. Indeed, the author represents in himself the ultimate authority since his personal knowledge of his idea supersedes any imperfect paper representation of that idea. Sarto, of all people, can be relied upon to name the murderer..

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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 "The Missing Page". Hancock and Sid locate the home of author Darcy Sarto but 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. It appears that the copyright system, and the stabilizing institutional power of the state library, is about to triumph over the vicissitudes of a suburban, council-run, library. In the absence of the author, the British Museum library offers the next best thing, a pristine copy of the book.

The British Museum librarian who fetches the book is a materialist, more interested in the gluing of the binding than the contents, and in this story the original dust-jacket is still on the book. Librarians vary in their practice regarding dustjackets. The British Library (which the British Museum library became in 1973) currently keeps dustjackets for novels only. Between 1956 and 1992 all dustjackets were retained but because they were bundled by month of acquisition it is now impossible to retrieve one by novel title.

Between 1925 and 1955, the period within which Lady Don't Fall Backwards would have been acquired, the library had an agreement with the National Art Library (the Victoria and Albert Museum) to conserve dustjackets from a range of books selected by criteria which cannot now be concisely stated, but it would be unlikely that the cover for a novel by a minor novelist (as Sarto is supposed to be) would have been kept (Price 2001). In any case, the cover would not be on the book when fetched from storage, as it is in "The Missing Page". Even more unrealistically--and no doubt scandalizing anyone involved in book preservation--the novel arrives from storage covered in dust which must be blown away. This suggests that no-one has consulted the book since it was acquired, probably because the library does not usually attract readers with tastes like Hancock's, and that it is in fact unfashionable and out of date.

Now in possession of a copy of Lady Don't Fall Backwards which the librarian assures them is unmutilated, Hancock and Sid prepare to hear the solution to the mystery. Without actually reading the final page, Hancock is able to tell that it is present by glancing at its page number, 201, the one missing from his mutilated copy. To set the scene Hancock returns to the detective's preparatory summing up on the penultimate page, which the audience has heard before. For the audience as much as a Hancock and Sid, tension mounts as Hancock reads the final lines at the bottom of the penultimate 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 . . . [his eyes skip to top of recto] 'Men, are you skinny? Do you have

sand kicked in your face? If so . . .' (parenthetical direction added)

Again, Hancock moves from last verso to the last recto and accidentally reads an advertisement on a fly-leaf. It seems that 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 and take up the gramophone record for entertainment.

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As soon as Hancock's Half Hour was a substantial success on the radio, it ran on television also, so that for much of the show's lifetime it was transmitted as separately recorded episodes on both media, occasionally using the same plot but different scripts. One of the factors which limited the (otherwise intolerable) pressure on the writers Galton and Simpson was that they wrote to a formula. Almost invariably, the final moment of each episode would reprise an earlier moment or principle in a new ironized form which typified the failure of Hancock's achievements to meet his aspirations and of his world to match the glamour of worlds represented in the fictions he consumes. This persistent strand of prolepsis in the scripts suggests a compositional technique of reviewing an incomplete script in order to select material for re-presentation in the final moment. In the least successful scripts this technique merely repeats the earlier moment, but in the most successful the principle binds an entire thirty-minute script into a single

irony about Hancock's personality and life.

The most impressive example of an event repeated and reworked is an extraordinarily avant garde sequence in "The Christmas Club" (Galton & Simpson 1959) which shows the influence of Samuel Beckett in its drawing out of dramatic tension by perverse inaction. At home discussing preparations for Christmas, Hancock and Sid respond to a knocking at the front door by wondering who it might be and speculating about what they might want, but they both refuse to actually answer the door. For an excruciating three-and-a-half minutes of radio air time the knocking punctuates an absurd discussion of why someone might persist in knocking despite receiving no answer. The matter might be highly important, they reason (without acting upon that sense of urgency), or else the knocker might be allowing the householder time to get out of a bath. When the door is finally answered the knocker has gone away, only to begin knocking on the back door and the entire cycle of inactive speculation threatens to start again before Hancock gives in and answers the door. This turns out to be a mistake. The caller is a police sergeant leaving an envelope for contributions to the Police Benevolent Fund, into which Sid mistakenly puts Hancock's entire Christmas savings. Knowing that they are without food over the entire holiday period, the police agree to detail a constable to knock periodically upon their door and if he receives no reply to alert the emergency services. The second non-answering of the door echoes the first, which seemed at the time to be pointless and exasperating dithering. However, had they not finally given in and answered the door, the disaster would have been averted.

Other, weaker, examples of the final moment reprising a moment from earlier in an

episode abound and one may stand for all of them. "The Last of the McHancocks" (Galton & Simpson 1957) begins with Hancock, recently informed of his inheritance of a Scottish lairdship, wearing a home-made kilt with a paint-brush for a sporran, tossing a bean-pole in imitation of the Highland Games event of tossing-the-caber. At the end of the episode Hancock is forced to compete in the real Highland Games against Hamish McNasty (played by James Robertson-Justice) who can throw real cabers with ease, and against Sid who wins by using lightweight balsa wood cabers. Most such examples are not obvious upon first hearing and merely betray a compositional short-cut by the writers, while the best examples embody a narrative unavoidability, an inevitably fated repetition, that epitomizes the impossibility of Hancock's achievements meeting his aspirations.

Under the pressure of writing a weekly show, it is not surprising that Galton and Simpson mechanically over-exploited their formula. 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 (like theirs), one conforming to a pattern which dictates the shape of the outcome, being as it were detailed, stripped of its ending. 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 (Tanselle 1989)--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 copy 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 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 imagine, this essay's reader, have already guessed that it is Schubert's Unfinished Symphony.

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