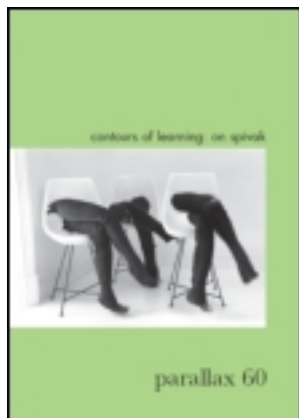


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The Art of the Hoax

Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll

Varieties of Hoax

'Why did I do it?' writes Alan Sokal, a man whose name has become synonymous with a particular kind of critical hoax: 'While my method was satirical, my motivation was utterly serious'.¹ Sokal's now famous hoax involved deceiving the editorial board of a prestigious Cultural Studies journal by passing off an essay riddled with jokes and absurdities as scholarship. The success of the hoax lay in the fact of its publication. Sokal is not alone in his orientation, and hoaxes are both an important cultural phenomenon and a surprisingly common one. The combination of serious purpose and comic means pervades many kinds of hoaxes, perhaps most, united as they are in the fact they all involve some kind of artful deception, an aesthetically sophisticated act of trickery, of mimetic *artistry*.² A good hoaxer is a very skilled reader and manipulator of textual genres and often specialized discourses.

This inquiry into the nature of the hoax has always to return to the fact that despite them being recognizable when they occur, it is difficult to define them. There are three reasons for this. First, there are a number of different kinds of hoaxes. One useful way of dividing the varieties of hoax is in terms of their relationship to deception. We call anything that seeks to deceive a hoax, despite the fact that some are structured to make a point (and can only do this by being revealed or discovered), whereas others are more akin to fraud, and are designed to conceal their very existence from discovery at any stage.³ Second, hoaxes also can be more or less performative (and we will look at this later), with some being no more than textual performances – if indeed they are performances at all. Then again, third, we tend not to call pranks or jokes hoaxes, although these are clearly related genres. In this essay, we are principally concerned with the didactic hoax, the one that is intended to be discovered rather than the attempted fraud (even if the deceptive lie ghosts our treatment throughout). We are less interested in pranks, because to the extent that they share terrain with hoaxes, then the things we say of hoaxes will relate also to the prank.

In the criticism of most textual genres, there exists already a typology of the genre concerned. We think of Northrop Frye's analysis of myth, and indeed of Hans Robert Jauss's typology of comic heroes, something he analyses in terms of audience affect, and hero-type, among other things.⁴ Nothing like this would appear to exist in the case of the hoax, and we seek therefore, even early in our essay, to assay the topic

with what are, at best, provisional starting points of an analysis. To be sure, Alex Boese, on a website and in his book, *The Museum of Hoaxes*, offers a ‘Collection’ of hoaxes (and indeed, on the cover of the book, is styled a *curator*). We might reasonably expect the exhibits to be laid out like a museum, but he does not do this. Instead, he offers an historical account, and within this an alphabetical listing; at the end of the book, he offers a system of ‘hoaxes by category’.⁵ But he clearly has not thought much about what a category is because these are very inconsistent *kinds* of things. That is, Boese’s list is less a gathering of categories than a Borghesian list: he has headings that include ‘April fool’s day’ (topic), internet (site, or perhaps communication system), literary/linguistic (genre), social commentary (effect/affect).

Perhaps Boese is just responding to the nature of the hoax itself. After all, hoaxes exist in many genres, and are themselves designed to deceive: it might therefore seem impossible to construct any kind of typology at all. There are good reasons to suspect that this could be the case – the hoax is a deconstructive structure that *inhabits* what it attacks – and because of this draws its formal generic features from the text-genre of what is actually being hoaxed.

All this does not mean we cannot say anything about hoaxing in general. Indeed, we already have: just by taking the explanation offered by Alan Sokal for his hoax have we not already made some progress towards a thesis? Hoaxers of the Sokal kind are teachers of a sort. They are, as Horace said of poets all those years ago, people who wish either to do something good or to delight their readers – and in the process, they say something in an apt and pleasing way about life itself.⁶ The strangely moralizing quality of the hoaxer reveals a latent teacher at every turn – as well as an artist. And as our reference to reception theory suggests, hoaxes also depend upon an audience. Most important of all, the hoax occupies a strange borderline between truth and falsehood, and indeed between actual performance and constative utterance. Before we can say anything of the hoax in general terms, therefore, we must deal with what kind of performance – or axis of proposition – the hoax actually is. To do so, we begin with performance in general, and most especially of the join between the work of John Austin and his subsequent interlocutor, Jacques Derrida.

Derrida and Austin: The Performative and Constative Dimensions of Hoaxes

Boese makes two useful definitional observations about the hoax – hoaxes happen in *public* and involve *deception*.⁷ We concur with both criteria, and would go so far as to say that a hoax has to be *staged*. By this, we do not mean it has to be staged physically because the hoax can be entirely made of words. It can, for instance, be an article or a text masquerading as something other than itself. Such a case would be Sokal’s hoax, which we discuss below. Sokal pretended to be writing a real essay contributing to cultural studies, but he was actually writing a spoof. The critical or didactic hoax can be made entirely of words but need not be so. Indeed, it can be a staged performance, as when the duo calling themselves The Yes Men pretended to be, for instance, officials from the World Bank and wound up giving papers at

economic fora and being interviewed by world television channels. Staging in the sense we are talking about is a kind of framing; in theatre, the stage is the frame that allows us to make sense of what is to follow – that the execution wasn't really an execution, that the newlyweds aren't really married. While not a part of the performance itself, the frame is what allows us to see it as a performance. In the hoax, the staging inverts this and suggests that we are not to read this as fiction. And then, as a kind of final act, in the revelation of the hoax, we see the stage itself.

In his analysis of performative utterances, John Austin develops a 'doctrine of infelicities' to deal with those performatives which go awry.⁸ Performative utterances, unlike constative ones, cannot be assessed in terms of truth or falsity but are instead, Austin says, 'happy' or 'unhappy' – felicitous or infelicitous. Austin further divides infelicities into what he calls 'misfires' and 'abuses'. Where misfires are performatives that fail, abuses succeed, but involve some subversion of process. In turn, these two sets can be further subdivided, misfires into 'misinvocations' (where the act is disallowed) and 'misexecutions'. The former concerns procedural correctness, the latter contextual correctness. (Austin gives the example of an incorrectly worded marriage vow in the former; of an unauthorized person naming a ship in the latter). Abuses, on the other hand, happen if we – for instance – say 'I do' but say so insincerely (or, in another case, do not behave correctly afterwards). Hoaxes often operate by 'voiding' their execution, often by employing an unauthorized person to carry out an authorized task (like the Yes Men) or by gumming up some communicative procedure (as when Orson Welles, speaking as Princeton astronomer Richard Pierson, announced a Martian invasion on prime time radio in 1938). However, unlike *unintended* voiding of processes, the hoaxer makes it seem as near as possible to the real so that it becomes almost indistinguishable from it. Abuse of process is even more common when someone hoaxes by enacting something with authority, but to make a counter-point.

But are speech-events really events at all? According to Austin himself, once we move beyond the fact that something simply appears in the world (a book or article etc), we should really be handling textual variants of the hoax as constatives and not as performatives. In breaching the distinction that Austin himself hesitated over at times, we find ourselves back in the terrain of a critique staged by Jacques Derrida. Employing an analytical move that had by then become a quasi-trademark of his, Derrida questioned Austin's theorization of performative speech acts because of its predication upon a schema that posited a fundamental opposition between original or legitimate speech acts and speech acts that are parasitic on these. Convincingly – albeit somewhat mischievously – Derrida shows such an opposition to be even more unstable than Austin (or John Searle) acknowledges. Speech acts – performative or not – are always already iterations, simultaneously repetitions and alterations. If infelicities *are* parasitic subversions of a sort, then a theorization of their nature has to find a more adequate basis than merely the idea that they are repetitions of some original performative. Not content to hammer home his point with mere constatives, at the end of the essay, 'Signature Event Context', Derrida 'stages' his signature in three different ways (by means of initial, by means of a photocopied signature, and by typing out his name). How do we know these are signatures in the ordinary

course of events? By their situation in the text? By their formal features? By their contexts? At one level, we do not mistake them – yet there is something strange about this endlessly reproducible mark of the authentic: ‘Such a missive therefore had to be signed. Which I did, and counterfeit here. Where? There. J.D. [signature] J. Derrida’.⁹

But it is not a forgery – nor was it intended to be. Here: this is my real signature, I signed it – it is a forgery. Well, actually, I did sign it, but that is only a photocopy of my original. Or, I signed it there, but those other two are only typewritten. Or, all of them are real, and hence in a surfeit of the real, we risk drowning in authentic signs. At the centre of the authenticating sign is the signature – yet the signature itself *is* just a sign, and is therefore infinitely reproducible. The individual requires the thought of the original and the reproducible all at once; through the signature, the individual is *designated* by a sign which is reproducible (and can therefore be faked) – but the individual remains alone just the same. The pattern is familiar to us all the time, in the routinized behaviours – and failures – of copyright controls, the necessarily reproducible signature panel at the bank and so on. Each of these has an event-quality, one that is able to be subverted and able to be restaged, hoaxed.

Derrida’s intervention calls attention to further aspects that define the hoax. Apart from the instability of the location of its performance described above, the hoax is also definable in terms of a strange instability of time. The hoax, from the outset, entails a thought of *afterwardness*. This afterwardness is embedded in it *prior* to its instantiation. The hoax is designed to deceive, yes, but *only for a time*. The joy – and sting – of the hoax lies in the revelation *and* its anticipation in advance; after the deception has taken hold, then there is the ‘*ecce!*’ as the shroud of deception is stripped away, a flourish of sorts, as when the magician cries out ‘*Voilà!*’ – and the audience gasps in astonishment. Like irony, the hoax means the opposite of what it says and its ultimate truth, if we are still brave enough to talk in these terms, depends on its falsity being *taken* for truth. The deception, in this respect, is temporal and temporary – the hoax is no good if it cannot, at some stage, be revealed (unless, of course, the aim is simply to defraud).

The hoax is also an instance of Derridean double writing. Like the image Derrida analyses of Matthew Paris’s depiction of Socrates and Plato (with Socrates standing behind Plato a kind of master-inscriber imagined by Paris – and the West),¹⁰ the hoaxer ‘writes’ an event that resembles the original, but has, written within it in palimpsestic fashion, another text, one that frames, and yet is contained by the main text. It simultaneously conceals and reveals – again, it must have clues buried in it; this economy between concealment and revelation constitutes perhaps the key element in its artistry.

The hoax is Derridean in yet another, decisive, sense: it is, in our view, the most literal of deconstructions. It is such because there is an *inhabiting* of a discourse so as to produce an event or text that is – except for minor inscriptions – indistinguishable from another that is designed to produce a different effect. Like many kinds of deconstruction, the hoax is designed to *do* things with words – and

most especially to disturb and perhaps ultimately to *displace* orders of subordination.¹¹

We will consider Sokal next, but will pause briefly to indicate that we have already the notes we need to establish our inquiry. Let us recapitulate:

1. All successful hoaxes deceive;
2. All have artistic, and often profoundly aesthetic, dimensions;
3. All are framed by purposive intentionality: they either exist to defraud or to educate and so, in both cases, the hoax is inseparable from a certain ethical horizon;
4. Hoaxes have a public dimension, and indeed, it makes sense to think of them as staged (recalling Aristotelian comic idioms through which people are made the butt of ridicule);
5. Because they are staged, hoaxes, even literary hoaxes, have an event-quality (Derrida's term for this is *événementialité*)¹²;
6. Because they deceive and because they are public, hoaxes are both fuelled by a certain resentment and equally *provoke* resentment from those on whom the hoax is perpetrated;
7. Because of the eventness of the didactic hoax, there are instabilities in the performances that exceed the intentionality of the hoaxer, with the possibility that they will show *more* than they intend – or something *other* than what they intend;
8. Hoaxes are kinds of deconstructions that work through double inscription, mimicking what they attack and seeking to displace their targets' systems of organization or those mechanisms which ostensibly underwrite those systems' legitimacy.

Let us now see hoaxes at work by keeping in mind this provisional list and relating it to some examples.

Alan Sokal: the Didactic Work of the Hoax Goes on and on (and on)

When Alan Sokal wrote his essay, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformatative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', he spliced an array of fashionable names, especially postmodern ones, into a tract deploying – supposedly – mathematical and physics-based concepts. He made sure some of the key conceptions from his own field of expertise (physics) were not just spurious, but also, that anyone writing in those fields, would see them to be self-evidently problematic or even absurd. The essay is a brilliant attack on the contemporary humanities, and its genius lies in the fact that it *mirrors the practices of what it attacks*.

Sokal's essay opens with a supposed attack on his own field (the sciences, *holus bolus*), and begins (as perhaps required) with something that is actually true. Listen to how the register of language skewers the baroque excesses of its target: 'There are many natural scientists, and especially physicists, who continue to reject the notion that the disciplines concerned with social and cultural criticism can have

anything to contribute... to their research'.¹³ From here, though, he slides quickly to a recognizable rhetoric (and to the point of the essay-as-hoax): these dreadful physicists 'cling' to the 'dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook' which includes such preposterous contentions as the idea that there 'exists an external world'.¹⁴ By sentence-end, these purveyors of hegemony are such because they think (note the qualifications!): 'human beings can obtain reliable, albeit *imperfect and tentative*, knowledge of these laws by hewing to the 'objective' procedures...prescribed by the (so-called) scientific method' [emphasis added].¹⁵

Let us note that – for the *first* time – this hoax not only works, *it keeps on working*. There is no reason whatever to imagine that a very similar paper would not be accepted in another similar kind of journal today, even with the 'deep and corrosive attitude of suspicion that may now be in full flower in the offices of learned journals because of what he [Sokal] has done', in the words on Stanley Fish.¹⁶ Sokal's essay works not so much by mirroring what it attacks as by *re-enacting* it.

From its ideological stance and *topoi* to its linguistic style and parade of proper nouns, Sokal is relentless. He 'interrogates', 'transgresses', 'problematizes', and 'resists' – he nominalises and qualifies and puns; tellingly, he cites repeatedly the work of the editors of *Social Text itself*: Andrew Ross, Ella Shohat, and Stanley Aronowitz. Sokal weaves stock phrases – about subversion and heterogeneity and bricolage – with ghostly reminders of method and scholarship – hermeneutics, transformational grammar, even something called 'towardness'. The essay is a paradigm of artful hoaxing in that, from the outset, Sokal's essay tries not simply to mirror its target, but to outdo it, to exceed it. The title is less real than – in Baudrillardian terms – *hyperreal*, less facsimile than mock homage. As a performative, the hoax *worked*. It worked not least because it was actually *published*. In the same movement it succeeded in being public (that is the effect of publication), and in so doing deceived the editors – and presumably some gullible readers. The text was therefore sufficiently artfully wrought that it would persuade the reader of its authentic status.

If we think of the hoax of the Sokal-variety as a didactic strategy, we can see not just its success, but also, potential problems. The hoax, as we said not only works, *but for the second time, keeps on working*. It keeps on working not just within the bounds that the hoaxer intended, but carries on beyond. In the process, it always has the potential to reveal rather more than its authors might imagine. Most obviously, there is little reason to imagine that Sokal's own disciplinary field would be immune to this. Even if he did show that some of the university dons of cultural studies were fools, we have no reason whatsoever to believe that foolishness stops outside the walls of the physics department, as episodes like the Bogdanov Affair suggest.¹⁷ Sokal got away with it in part because he sent it to a journal that purported to publish interdisciplinary material – and the problem is that what he shows is that there is a problem with such *publication processes*. We do not need to delve into the controversies surrounding climate change debates to see how difficult it is to maintain a high level of consistently high scholarship (especially if funding is at stake). The hoax, then, *works in a third and ongoing way* because it seems that it is entirely possible in the 1990s

(and now 2000s age) of the mechanical double-blind reviewer for any *apparently* competent cross-disciplinary essay to get through to a journal like this, without anyone doing anything remarkably wrong – it gets through almost on autopilot. This perhaps is the most devastating message of all, and is certainly not one that Sokal himself conceived.

Let us go even further – had Sokal himself not pointed to the hoax (*ecce!*), it may *never* have even been noticed. Indeed, like many articles in such journals, it is quite possible it may never have even been *read* by anyone except the editors – assuming they read it themselves. Most of Sokal’s essay is moderately competent writing and citing, references in place, a thesis line broadly in place (the way hermeneutics is mashed into postmodernism is odd – but surely forgivable in a cross-disciplinary piece). The jewels in the essay are the analogies and even conclusions that the essay pretends to draw in *between* fields – a cultural studies reader would assume, wrongly, that someone else would be checking the science; a scientist would have trouble making head or tail of the cultural studies argument. (And as for Rupert Sheldrake’s ‘morphogenetic fields’, these have a wider following than Sokal himself subsequently concedes – but perhaps that is part of the point). The artistry of the argument points to increasingly obscure audiences whose mastery of the fields they read is often suspect – and this is what Sokal relies upon in his assault on the editors of the luckless journal.

Sokal’s hoax lets us gain further insights into the way hoaxes work, and indeed, what they really are. For Sokal suggests, by his practice, that mumbo jumbo baffles the reader’s intellectual defences. The OED hesitates not once, but twice, in its etymology of the word *hoax*. As well it might. Its origin, apparently, *may* lie in the term hocus pocus (then again it may not). And if it does, the origin of that term, *hocus pocus*, in its turn *may* lie in a medieval incantation uttered in much the way that children now cry out ‘abracadabra!’ – flourish – *ecce!* The term they used to utter, so the history would have it, is *hax pax max Deus adimax*. And what does *that* mean? Well, it would appear not to mean anything:

Abraxas, another magical word, is often found on gems. Hocus-pocus appears much later, and its etymology is controversial; some derive it from the Middle Ages formula *hax pax max Deus adimax*, which was first used in the Middle Ages by vagrant scholars who performed magical tricks; others see it as a parody of “*hoc est corpus*”; “this is the body,” which was spoken by priests during Holy Communion.¹⁸

Hoax, the word, according to someone with a name close enough to know, is ‘perhaps’ derived from all this.¹⁹ Maybe. Then again, maybe not.

Like morphogenetics, transformative hermeneutics, and so on, *hax pax max Deus adimax* can’t quite make sense because it is a string of words with no verb, and hence no certain subject. (For instance, *Deus* and *pax* are both nominative; *hax* is not a word at all, but it sounds like a lot of words, a vernacularizing perhaps of *haec* or *hac* (this or here); *max* short for maximum, greatest or largest, *Deus* (God), and *adimax* (an absurd-sounding amalgam approximating the rules of *ad* + word to make a compound) – so it sounds at once ridiculous and nice (say, Great God this peace, to

the max!). How similarly benign and absurd sounds the attempt to derive a *transformative* hermeneutics from or for quantum gravity! Our inner being will be refreshed; our understanding grounded in really *good* mumbo jumbo from physics.

The hoax was serious – hoaxes of this didactic kind always are. They are, to an extent, moralizing. The later claim that the author felt sadness, however, strikes us as bunk.²⁰ And why should he feel sad? The hoax was motivated by anger, and it worked a treat. It was itself a work of art, and the author is entitled to feel – though he is not vain enough to claim it – a delight in his success. Its didactic punch is contained in its considered dramaturgy. A dramaturge is someone who is an expert in structure – in social setting; as experts in genre, dramaturges help adapt things for the stage. And this brings us to the theatre of the arts itself.

Ern Malley: the Literary Didactic Hoax

Modernism reached Australia rather later than the rest of the world. The belated arrival did not mean it had no impact. On the contrary, it brought an astonishing renewal of Australian letters – the novels of Eleanor Dark, Patrick White, the verse of Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright, and the paintings of Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd are all indebted to it. One of its late champions was Max Harris, the youthful editor of a journal devoted self-consciously to all things modernist. Harris himself wrote the poem that gave the journal its name:

We know no mithridatum of despair
As drunks, the angry penguins of the night
Straddling the cobbles of the square,
Tying a shoelace by fogged lamplight.²¹

It isn't bad verse (though the music of the last of the above lines stumbles unexpectedly on the last three syllables); we do wonder, of course, what on earth Mithridatic references do here – and so did others. Harris attacked and was attacked, and the journal would likely have passed into oblivion had it not been for two even *angrier* poets, with a talent that – even in casual banter – eclipsed that of most of Harris' contributors.

James McAuley's political disillusion has, perhaps, made him a difficult figure for subsequent generations to like. In his prime, however, he was one of Australia's most formidable wordsmiths; his part in Ern Malley makes this even more difficult to ignore. Harold Stewart's own verse may not have the same force as McAuley's, but his ornate turn of phrase suited the hoax well – and with McAuley, even though they really were only fooling around – the effect was to be dramatic and unforgettable. The two concocted a fake person who was not in the least bit angry – and a fake sister to uphold his legacy. The fake sister wrote a letter describing the fake poetry of the fake brother this way:

When I was going through my brother's things after his death, I found some poetry he had written. I am no judge of it myself [that will be

your job, Max!] but a friend who I showed it to thinks it is very good . . . [O]n his advice I am sending you some of the poems for an opinion.²²

Note the little grammatical errors (who for whom) and the awkward expression. Ern, ‘she’ said, had died of a disease called ‘Grave’s disease’. It sounds like a made-up disease, but it is real. The illness itself is a delightful choice – given that Ern has obviously had a fake burial too – and it bears noting that it is hard work to die of this illness.²³

And it gets better – the letter is a litany of Romantic alienation. Ern is the ultimate modern victim of an uncaring society. He didn’t finish school because his father died (of war wounds), and then, after his mother’s death, he went off to a room by himself, a lonely and misunderstood eccentric living humbly by mending watches.²⁴ Clues abound concerning the hoax, many only apparent after the fact; Malley, for instance, possessed just one book – Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*, a defining text on the economics and culture of snobbery, and hence a subtle poke at the bourgeois pretensions of the uppity young old modernists.

But the best clues really lie in the verse itself. These are by turns brilliant and riddled with jokes. Some of the jokes are so blatant that they are breath-taking in their effrontery: ‘I had read in books that art is not easy’.²⁵ Witness the following stanza in the poem, “Dürer: Innsbruck 1495”:

It is necessary to understand
That a poet may not exist, that his writings
Are the incomplete circle and straight drop
Of a question mark
And yet I know I shall be raised up
On the vertical banners of praise.²⁶

The hoax announces itself (he after all, does not exist) – and cloaks itself in the half-rhyme, the ambiguity, and the absurdity of using verse to describe the shape of a question mark.

The puns are blatant, strewn liberally through all the verse. So how did Harris fall for it? The answer is simple – the forgery is the work of two gifted wordsmiths, and contrary to those critics with the benefit of hindsight who lashed Harris’ judgment, these were at worst opaque poems, and at best, superb. McAuley’s rhythm, Stewart’s image-sharpness, and the off-kilter savagery of the satire combine to produce moments – and occasionally entire poems – of remarkable force and value. The strongest of all is ‘Sweet William’, a poem organized deliberately so that it does not fall into two eight-line stanzas (the first has nine). Witness the sonic brilliance of the verse:

I have avoided your wide English eyes,
But now I am whirled in their vortex

My blood becomes a Damaged Man
Most like your Albion.

The opening line shows rhythmic mastery. It relies on sound and sense and not punctuation for its pacing: the line opens in a blur, with stuttering ‘v’ sounds, but then slows right down by the difficulty of articulating the words ‘your wide’ at the same pace as the line commenced – and also, then by assonance lending emphasis to the heavily stressed monosyllabic words, wide and eyes. The poem is established already in the first line in iambs (confirmed only in the last foot, and again, the anticipated stressed syllable on wide lends the line emphasis and gravity). The next line, aptly enough, turns; once again it is in rough pentameters, launched this time with a strange vowel concatenation – ow, ai, ur (now/I/whirled) before being snapped off with the last double hit – ‘vortex’ in which both syllables are stressed, but the former more than the latter, upsetting the usual iambic expectation that poets use a regular foot in the last of the line. It is standard practice among good poets to allow a few lines for the rhythmic pattern to settle – and in the third line, we get a completely, even absurdly, regular iambic pattern – except there is now a foot missing! The line is staccato (and it is hard not to imagine the two authors’ laughter as they composed its staccato stumbling sonic regularity (and sudden semantic punning – does *becomes* mean ‘turns into’, or does it, more cleverly and plausibly, mean ‘it is becoming – that is appropriate to?’). And then the brilliant stroke – a switch to shorter lines. The first of them is a line which races away. There are actually six syllables in this fourth line, but it hardly seems so - there is no pause at all (with the final three syllables being held in the one word, laden with apparent sense, Albion).

Consider then the next lines, also each of seven and six syllables, where the pace is again slowed down with a sense of import and solemnity that makes us weigh every word:

And I must go with stone feet
Down the staircase of flesh

At least four syllables are stressed in each line (by our count five of seven in the first of the two lines), and each word in the first phrase needs to be articulated slowly and deliberately, concluding with an iambic foot to maintain the pattern. And if we can just hear their uproarious laughter as they wrote the lines ‘to where in a shuddering embrace/My toppling opposites commit/the obscene, the unforgivable rape’, the first of these three lines really does work to set up the collision, and the sibilant hissing of the s and t sounds in the line obscures the joke just enough to let the stanza conclude with force (a force ensured by the startling reference to an ‘obscene, the unforgivable rape’.

The poem also has a semantic progression – it is no nonsense work. It concludes with a lover’s scene in which ‘my white swan of quietness lies/sanctified on my black swan’s breast’. This is the best of the poems, but there are others that justify Harris’ misjudgement (‘Dürer, Innsbruck 1495’, for sure, and who can deny with certainty the poem ‘Documentary Film’ in light of the bombing of London and the potential

for an Antipodean critique of imperialism embodied in India.²) – indeed, these poems really *are* better than many that appeared in his journal, and crucially, at least part of what makes them good verse is the energy that has gone into the hoaxing itself.

Well then may we agree with these hoaxers that poetry is a work of some mystery. They write, again we can be sure, with more than a dash of humour in ‘Sonnets for the Novachord’:

Poetry: the loaves and fishes
Or no less miracle;
For in this deft pentacle
We imprison our wishes

As to what a pentacle might be – it is something other than a tentacle (a joke in other words); but a pentacle is a talisman, and as such, like the poem, has a riddling aspect to it. And if it is not Elizabeth Barrett Browning, it is not bad either.

And then Came the Real

Ern Malley never existed; he never had Grave’s disease; he was never ‘cowed in heavy slumbous air’ anywhere. Yet in the manifold of Australian writing, Ern Malley *does* exist, and even if no one seems keen to hold his copyright, a well-visited website holds all the images of that issue of *Angry Penguins* for all to see.

As we have contended in relation to the Sokal hoax, the hoax continues to work well beyond the borders the hoaxers themselves intended, and well after they have their moment of fame. Frank Kermode remarks that

He [Harris] fell, but not so hard that he deserved the fate he got. It was particularly gross that the final revelation of the hoax was made in a supplement of the *Sydney Sunday Sun*. This was simply throwing him to the philistines, natural enemies of the small artistic community... they needed no inducement to jeer at poetry... the hoaxers produced effects they had not intended to cause, but they must have known that they had cheated by attributing good poems or lines to Malley.²⁷

And that was before the court case...

Ern may never have existed, but this was never something to stop an officer of the law. As editor of *Angry Penguins*, having been hoaxed, Max Harris was then taken to court and charged. Part of his task in court entailed defending the semantic plane of the poetry against the charge of obscenity. The danger with hoaxing lies in its real effects. The hoax in this case is an instance of simulation. Jean Baudrillard is right when he remarks grimly in his own superb essay on the matter that compared to usual violence and oppression, simulation is ‘infinitely more

dangerous since it always suggests over and above its object, that *law and order themselves might really be nothing more than a simulation*'.²⁸ The fact that this was a hoax makes the entire legal process seem not only utterly unjust (since Harris was duped into thinking the poems really were about something other than modernism itself), but also farcical.

The ways by which such insertions of juridical control assert themselves are very various. There is a difference between the Ern Malley trial and the trial of French novelist Boris Vian. Vian, an America-phile who never actually visited the US, wrote a best selling novel under the pseudonym of Vernon Sullivan, passing it off in France as a translation. The rage that ensued when Vian's deception was unmasked is extraordinary at one level – he was passing off his own *fictional* work as that of someone else. He, like Harris, was found guilty and fined. Vian responded by going on to write a string of further Vernon Sullivan novels in exactly the same vulgar idiom as *Je vais crâcher sûr vos tombes [I'll Spit on Your Graves]*. At least part of the artistry of this remarkable and many-talented writer lay in the way he construed identities – and disassembled them. Vian's defiance shows that he knew exactly what he was doing, and it was (like his music and his plays) a frontal attack on the law that Baudrillard describes.

Hoaxes are, therefore, violent, as well as playful. Baudrillard captures this violence very aptly:

How to feign a violation and put it to the test? Go and simulate a theft in a large department store: how do you convince the security guard that it is a simulated theft? There is no "objective" difference . . . as far as the established order is concerned, they are always of the order of the real. Go and organize a fake hold-up. Be sure to check that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no life is in danger . . . But you won't succeed: the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with real elements (a police officer will really shoot on sight, a bank customer will faint and die of a heart attack).²⁹

Baudrillard's point is that simulations have reality effects – and even if a simulation can be conceptually separated from the world that gave rise to it, once it has transpired, its meshing with reality is often dangerous indeed.

So it was that Harris found himself in the astonishing position of having been duped by McAuley and Stewart into believing the verse had coherent narrative, and *then* having to explain what it meant, and to justify his choice on aesthetic grounds. Harris was hauled up before the court:

The *Angry Penguins* obscenity trial was listed for Tuesday, 5 September 1944 at 10am in the Adelaide Police Court . . . Harris entered a plea of "not guilty" to the alleged offence of "Indecent Advertisements".³⁰

As Heyward – without any reference whatsoever to Baudrillard – put it:

The *Angry Penguins* trial concluded a script which nobody without a sense of humour could have invented, and nobody with a sense of humour could resist. If the Ern Malley poems were surreal, so was the situation. The trial confirmed all over again that the hoax had demolished its literary boundaries, and invaded the world [Baudrillard could not put it better]. It made Ern Malley even more famous and legitimized the shrieks of approval that greeted the hoax. McAuley and Stewart had not for a second intended to trick Harris into the courts. They failed to realize that Ern Malley would hand out guns to philistines.³¹

And – to continue the blurring of art and reality – as Heyward puts it, this was the ‘hottest show in town’,³² culminating in the unsuspecting editor being found guilty and fined £5 (plus £21, 11 /- in costs).³³

What is a Hoax?

Although they channel a virtual reality, hoaxes themselves are not virtual; they *exist*. They exist usually for a purpose, and that purpose is inscribed in the text of the hoax itself (so that once it is revealed, the stagecraft of the hoax is allowed to emerge). As a result, there is a tendency to narcissism and self-flattery in the hoax. It commences with the premise that it has superior knowledge of some kind, and that the hoax will reveal something critical (and usually negatively so) about the state of things in a given field. Sometimes, to be sure, hoaxers are motivated by a desire to correct error, to right wrongs, or to do a social service – but such noble sentiments often themselves do little to obscure the fact that hoaxers see themselves as being in a position of superior knowledge.

Because hoaxes are at once textual and metatextual in their strategies of attack, their ‘cleverness’ entails a lot of work both in their creation and in their unveiling. That is, hoaxes are recognizable because they trigger a kind of epistemological neuralgia. Mirroring what they attack, they rely upon knowledge of the textual system in question. This makes them a very literal kind of deconstruction, one that participates in the system being critiqued, but not – as Derrida repeatedly pointed out – as commentary. Although we recognize them, the hoax has no inherent formal features. It is a literal deconstruction because it uses the resources of the system it seeks to subvert in order to attack it. The hoax – unlike the internet advertisement campaign – really *is* viral because it infects the system by echoing its internal DNA. All this makes the hoax an order of double writing – whether it is revealed or not, it shares formal features with the system upon which it is parasitic. Hence we may say the hoax is artful – proceeding in a double register, it must be able to function simultaneously and sensibly *in both*.

While we cannot say the hoax has definable formal features, it does have *stagecraft*. This quasi-formal feature has to be qualified, because sometimes the staging is entirely textual in nature, and this means we cannot, strictly speaking, call many such hoaxes performative at all (or can only call them such by stretching the

definition to its Derridean limits). But the hoax has an event quality at least to the extent that it has to transpire in some public arena, and in that sometimes metaphorical sense, it can be said to be *performed*. Integral to such performance is its unveiling – once performed – like a magical show – it can then be revealed as a hoax with the flourish of an Alan Sokal or a James McAuley.

The hoax also has what might best be called *receptive features or regularities*. To start with, as we have seen at every turn, the hoax triggers resentment. Some of them also trigger hilarity. In terms of reception it is both serious and humorous. It has a bifurcation in its very horizon of reception. The hoax either *works or it does not work*. While we have analysed the authoring of hoaxes, it could be contended that the didactic hoax is also intentionally oriented (its *noesis* is that it makes a point about something, it brings something to awareness), and that its intentionalities are visible in its design. But the inadequacy of the authoring is a correspondingly exigent pattern of the hoax – because the context envisaged by the hoaxers is not enclosed in the way they imagine and *the hoax goes on working* in ways that no authors could possibly envisage.

The *ethical* dimensions of the hoax also approach the quality of a formal feature. But there is a remarkable instability in this structure. Let us suppose that, as we have contended throughout, that the hoax is an ethically charged and devised intervention. It makes a point, and seeks, sometimes, indeed to correct deceit and folly. Yet to do this, to afford its joke, it does so at someone else's expense. Apart from unpleasantness, there is an ethical problem with a textual formation that is deliberately designed as *a lie*. Its humour is inherently mean-spirited, and unethical. Yet it protects itself from resentment by claiming ethical value. Let us put it thus: the hoax *lies in order to tell the truth*.

So it is that we find ourselves back in the terrain of the Cretan paradox (I am a Cretan, and I tell you all Cretans are liars), or indeed with Derrida when he 'truly' signs his name. At risk of repetition (and it is surely a paradox of sorts that we can repeat our original sign): 'Such a missive had therefore to be signed. Which I did, and counterfeit here. Where? There'.³⁴ But then he was only kidding – unlike us, who have been, at every turn, entirely serious.

Notes

¹ Alan Sokal. "Transgressing the Boundaries: An Afterword." <http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/lingua_franca_v4.pdf> [accessed 10 may 2010]. We have chosen to use the widely and freely available website that makes a variety of materials available. Page references are therefore to the files hosted at the faculty website at New York University <<http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/>> (papers).

² In Australia, certain people are called 'bullshit artists', referring to a habitual pattern of remarkably well-crafted, and so moderately convincing, bullshitting.

³ The case of Helen Darville's novel *The Hand that Signed the Paper* is perhaps the most recent, notorious, case of this in the Australian context. Darville changed her name (to Demidenko) and fabricated a personal history and ethnic identity that she envisaged would better underwrite the authenticity of the narrative.

⁴ Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p.159.

⁵ Alex Boese, *The Museum of Hoaxes* (New York: Dutton, 2002), p.257.

- ⁶ 'Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae/Aut simul et iucunda et idonea dicere vitae' Horace, 'Ars Poetica', *Opera* (London: OUP, 1901), np.11333–34.
- ⁷ Alex Boese, *The Museum of Hoaxes*, p.2.
- ⁸ John Austin, *How to do Things with Words*. 2nd edn (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1962), p.14.
- ⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', *Limited Inc.* trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.330.
- ¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987) p.251.
- ¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) p.41.
- ¹² It therefore entails thinking another historicity – not a new history or still less a "new historicism", but another opening of event-ness [*événementialité*] as historicity (Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'Etat de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), pp.125-26.
- ¹³ Alan Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries' p.2.
- ¹⁴ Alan Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries' p.2.
- ¹⁵ Alan Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries' p.2.
- ¹⁶ Stanley Fish, 'Professor Sokal's Bad Joke', in *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham that Shook the Academy*, ed. Lingua Franca (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p.84.
- ¹⁷ See the article by physicist John Baez ('The Bogdanov Affair'. June 21, 2006, <<http://math.ucr.edu/home/baez/bogdanoff/>> .
- ¹⁸ George Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, 2nd edn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p.86.
- ¹⁹ Terry Hoad *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.218.
- ²⁰ Alan Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries' p.2.
- ²¹ Cited in Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair* (Sydney: Vintage, 2003), p.26.
- ²² cited in Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*, p.69.
- ²³ <www.Mayoclinic.com.health/graves-disease>. [Accessed 29 November 2009].
- ²⁴ Cited in Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*, pp.77-78.
- ²⁵ Dürer, Innsbruck, 1495, The Darkening Ecliptic, <<http://jacketmagazine.com/17/ern-poems.html>> [Accessed 29 March 2010].
- ²⁶ Sybilline, <<http://jacketmagazine.com/17/ern-poems.html>> [Accessed 29 March 2010].
- ²⁷ Frank Kermode, *Pleasing Myself: From Beowulf to Philip Roth* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.88-89.
- ²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Simulacra', in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Harvester, 1993), p.197.
- ²⁹ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Simulacra', p.197.
- ³⁰ Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*, p.225.
- ³¹ Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*, p.229.
- ³² Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*, p.229.
- ³³ Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*, p.260.
- ³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p.330.

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