

# “Black Swan of Trespass”: Surrealism, *Angry Penguins* Journal, and the “Ern Malley” Experiment

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*Angry Penguins* was a modernist literary and arts journal, most commonly associated with its main editor and poet, Max Harris. Established in 1940, it began as a student literary magazine at the University of Adelaide and aimed at the advancement of modern literature and radical politics in Australian culture. In 1943, Harris had formed an alliance with prominent figures involved in Melbourne’s cultural scene, giving rise to the eponymous group of artists, writers, and poets, which included Harris himself, the influential proponents and benefactors of Australian modernism, Sunday and John Reed — the latter of whom was appointed co-editor of *Angry Penguins* in 1943 — , and the legendary artists Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, and Joy Hester. This connection had also ensured significant growth in accordance with the editors’ high aspirations, from a low-cost student magazine to a sophisticated and impressive journal for all things modern. According to Harris’s retrospective statement, *Angry Penguins* expressed “a noisy and aggressive modernism” with the intention of “break[ing] through the Deep South isolationism of [Australian] culture” (“*Angry Penguins and After*” 6). Through the adoption of a “Europeanizing policy” (6) the *Angry Penguins* looked to surrealism in particular as a source for liberating artistic expression, which entailed their interest in and artistic use of dreams and the unconscious, spontaneous insights, non-representational forms and collage, radical politics, and the renewal of the Australian cultural myth. Their outlook was evidently met with opprobrium from leading commentators of both conservative and communist factions; the most consequential opposition, however, came from the young poets James McAuley and Harold Stewart, who were convinced of surrealism’s degenerative influence on poetry, which led to Australia’s most famous literary hoax, the creation of the spurious figure, “Ern Malley.” Harris and Reed, upon receiving the poetry manuscript from Malley’s equally fictitious sister “Ethel,” enthusiastically published *The Darkening Ecliptic* in its entirety in the 1944 “Ern Malley edition” (fig. 1). Once “Malley” was exposed as a hoax, the *Angry Penguins*, and indeed, international movements associated with surrealism, were

widely considered to have been debunked. Historically, the remarkable circumstances surrounding the hoax have tended to overshadow the achievements of *Angry Penguins* journal, and the role of surrealism has remained ambiguous. This essay will discuss the early reception of surrealism in Australia, focusing on the figures involved in, and contents of, *Angry Penguins*. This will entail identifying an Australian iteration of surrealism that reflects aesthetic and conceptual divergence. It will also attempt to assist the realignment of the historical role of “Ern Malley,” from marionette and triumph of traditional values to experimental “ghost poet,” by arguing that the technique and textual patterns of “Malley’s” poetry are compatible with those of Dada and surrealism.

While surrealism was a key stimulus for much artistic and poetic activity in the 1940s, there are notable accounts of emergence from the preceding decade. The arrival of Italian émigré Gino Nibbi, who settled in Melbourne in 1928 (and who was also part of a cultural group in Rome that included Giorgio de Chirico), provided nascent Australian modernists with an essential and direct connection to Europe. Nibbi, who was later involved with John Reed and the artist George Bell in founding the Melbourne branch of the Contemporary Arts Society (CAS) in 1938, made his initial impact with the opening of Leonardo Art Shop on Little Collins Street, which became a locus for creative and intellectual activity in direct response to European modernism. Alister Kershaw, poet and *Angry Penguins* affiliate, among other notable figures, was a frequent visitor: in his memoirs, Kershaw comments on how he, and his peers, would often go to Leonardo “to pore, goggle-eyed, over copies of *transition* and *Minotaure* and to spell our way through volumes of poems by Péret and Aragon” (3). Local artists were also introduced to reproductions of surrealist art through Leonardo (Taylor 28), and by the early thirties, the first experiments with surrealism in the visual arts were beginning to emerge: Sam Atyeo’s *Surrealist Head* (1932) is perhaps the earliest painting that directly cites surrealism, followed by Eric Thake’s early experimentation in the trompe l’œil “illusionist” styling with *Flight* (1934) and *Inside Looking Out* (1934), which were unfortunately destroyed in 1961; and later in the decade, Nolan’s collage *A Mythological Battle* (1938) and the abstracted *Head of Rimbaud* (1938-1939).<sup>1</sup>

Further, Nibbi’s own attitude towards art and culture was in accordance with a European leftism also perceptible in certain political positions of surrealism. Art historian Richard Haese, in his seminal book *Rebels and Precursors* (1981), identifies Nibbi’s support for “the Italian Republican Party, with its strong liberal tradition

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<sup>1</sup> In the mid-1930s, the Sydney photographer Max Dupain was also experimenting with surrealist techniques of “photomontage, multiple exposures, solarisations and photograms,” notably influenced by the international photographers Lee Miller, Brassai, and, in particular, Man Ray (Ennis 106). This indicates that the presence of surrealism was not limited to Nibbi’s shop but was indeed emerging across Australia’s major cities.

of anti-clericalism, anti-monarchism and anti-fascism," which, in turn, accounts for his pivotal role "in the attempt to clear away the effects of nationalism in Australian art" (11). This would later become a key motivation for the CAS, partly created in opposition to the Menzies school and all that was perceived to be "conservative, reactionary, potentially fascist, and morally iniquitous" (67).

While Nibbi's modern salon accounts for emerging local interest, the rather belated year of 1939 signifies the height of surrealism's influence in Australia. The *Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art*, sponsored by Sir Keith Murdoch and curated by Basil Burdett, is described as "the most momentous exhibition in Australia's art history" and as having "established a basis for the development of an entire generation" (Chanin and Miller 17). Showcasing works from modernist artists associated with international surrealism, including de Chirico, Ernst, Dalí, and Picasso (Chanin and Miller 197), the exhibition was visited by more than 70,000 people across Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney. In the immediate wake of the *Herald Exhibition*, the CAS had scheduled its inaugural exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria – an event "dominated by Surrealism" (Butler and Donaldson 6).<sup>2</sup> In Melbourne, surrealism was clearly emerging as an exciting new style among artists. Elsewhere in the country, its transmission was also being received but via literary channels.

In 1940, the Adelaide University Arts Association appointed the students Donald Kerr and Max Harris as editors of a new undergraduate literary magazine. The appellation, *Angry Penguins*, suggested by the classicist and poet, Professor Charles Jury, had derived from Harris's poem, "Progress of Defeat" – "as drunks, the angry penguins of the night" (*Gift of Blood* 60) – as it sounded "suitably surrealist, the art and literature of that movement being a particular enthusiasm of [Harris's]" (Dutton 85). And there is no doubt that Harris, at the commencement of his literary career, was emphatically energized by surrealism. The 1939 articles, "I Am an Anarchist – So What?" and "Surrealism in Harold Herbert," published in the Melbourne magazine *Bohemia*, both contain explicitly radical pronouncements, declaring allegiance to surrealism, including the audacious demand for a "new approach to Australian poetry" ("I Am an Anarchist"). Outlined in his credo, the tenor of his poetics recalls the unfettering of personal and social domains prepared by Coleridge's imagination and Shelley's anarchism, to the modern writings of D. H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, George Woodcock, and the English surrealists, where the artist "must be free to be revolutionary, reactionary, traditional, innovator consistently inconsistent." Harris's comments concerning the radical renovation of Australian poetics, which "will express itself as the tail of the beast of the romantic sources," is completed by the paraphrase of

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<sup>2</sup> The exhibition included the following paintings clearly influenced by surrealist aesthetics: *The Attitude of Lightning towards a Lady-Mountain* by James Gleeson, *Happy Landing (The Happy Father)* by Thake, and *The Philosopher* by Tucker.

Hugh Sykes Davies's essay, "Surrealism in This Time and Place": "This tail will involve the use of imagination in the sense of Coleridge and Wordsworth. . . . [I]t explains the interest of the moderns in imagination (Surrealism) and its limits, studied in the psych-analysis [sic] of Freud." In his recitation of André Breton's well-worn *Second Manifesto* metaphor, Harris did in fact fail to acknowledge the original source: the seemingly minor omission nevertheless denotes what will become the central disconnect between Harris's new approach to poetry and French surrealism. While language differences were in part a contributing factor, the historical and cultural connection between England and Australia had ensured direct and reliable dialogue: it is therefore not an exaggeration to suggest that Harris's interest in surrealism, which he so aggressively endorsed during the war years, was almost entirely filtered through British sources.

The pre-eminence of English theoretician Herbert Read, whose critical texts *Art Now* (1933) and *Surrealism* (1936) had popularized surrealism in England, had also created the conditions for the reception of English modernism for Anglophone nations further afield (Butler and Donaldson 3).<sup>3</sup> Haese asserts that it was in fact in the writings of Read, and not Breton as such, where "The Australian Angry Penguins (Tucker, Harris, and John Reed) found a fertile source of ideas, which offered at once a language and a framework for radical liberal values centered on individual experience and freedom" (11). Notwithstanding several important differences between the French and Australian expressions, which will be dealt with later on, Australians were beginning to develop their very own response to surrealism, and by August 1939, Harris was publishing "Australian surrealist poems" ("Surrealism in Harold Herbert" 9) — the first claim to authorship of surrealist poetry in the country.

Within this vein, the first issue of *Angry Penguins* (1941) reflected Adelaide's actively modernist scene publishing the works of student poets Paul Pfeiffer, Geoffrey Dutton, Donald Kerr, Hilda Mary Swan, and Harris himself, who were each beginning to experiment with modes of international modernism. Under the guidance of Professor Jury, who was sympathetic to modernism, Harris defined *Angry Penguins* from the very outset as an "act of defiance" ("Note" 7). Briefly, its *raison d'être* was the steadfast revolt against the ossified traditionalism of Australian literature and culture, as well as the aspiration to reflect the latest European and American impulses in the Australian context. Surrealism in particular provided a new terrain for verbal and visual exploration; it was also highly regarded by Harris, as Read points out in his introduction to *Surrealism*, for "liquidating" classicism's "anaesthetic effect" (22–23), and thus providing a radical alternative to the ongoing tradition of the nineteenth-century bush balladry of Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson.

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<sup>3</sup> Editors' note: For a further reading of British surrealism in the context of the periodical *The London Bulletin*, see Caterina Caputo's essay in this issue.

Poetry, for Harris, was ultimately concerned with individual expression and the symbolic import of dream imagery, which he perceived to be the primary domain of the surrealists. Jury, in his article "Two Poets," admits that Harris's poetic play, *The Gift of Blood* (1940), is "incompletely intelligible," noting, in result of an expression that is "turgid to a disconcerting degree," that while his idiom tends to bewilder and frustrate the reader, there are "strange crudities" and "passages of glorious beauty" (10-11). Jury explains further: "I can see in a vague way that it comes partly of Marx and Freud. . . . There is something cabalistic about it, and something oracular, and indeed hieratic; it seems to achieve a kind of psychoanalytic mysticism" (11).

Indeed, *The Gift of Blood* is distinctly extravagant and obscure: there are obvious moments that repeat Marxist and surrealist attitudes, made by Harris's mouthpiece, Isaac, "a dark jew" (7): "as peasant hordes / destroying the vines and the old symbols, / As a monstrous figure marching into time" (14) ; and, "The contradictions are to be resolved, / are to go, are to rise anew" (17), which is followed by the killing of the central German character, Ludovik. Written in the climate of Nazi anti-Semitism, and with a particularly European orientation, Harris, who was Jewish himself, found in surrealism and related modernist expressions a channel for his own political and aesthetic rebellion. Yet Harris's "surrealistic" style, the apparent "psychoanalytical mysticism," or, in Dutton's sober description, his "lovely lyrical gift, which he later tended to smother in turgid profundities or tangles of surrealist imagery" (84), is most prominent in the extended and abstruse poem, "The Pelvic Rose," in the first issue of *Angry Penguins*. In the preface, Harris supplies a reading list, including Miltonic Arianism, Huxley's essay on Pascal, Freud, Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and Herbert Read's Introduction to *Surrealism* (12); the poem is dedicated to Salvador Dalí.

from the shimmering noon into the shaded cloister  
whispering among the vines and desires in corners . . . .  
stand in the arch, observe observe in the dusky  
foldings of the room bounded by the Gothic keyhole  
the old old man at the withered breast, weeping  
foetus-tears, crabbed fingers sliding the green  
smooth stem, nuzzling the pelvic rose.

Across the womb-frame, binoculars of vision,  
such a play is acted that fears freeze  
in being and love seems never to have been (24)

According to Harris, "The Pelvic Rose," which juxtaposes theological insignia with biological and sexual imagery, "advances a spiritual attitude" (12), as is the case for much of his poetry; however, a dreamlike ambience is often attained through a conscious and constructive rendering, inscribed with the "elemental rhetoric of blood, bone, seed, womb, water and earth, derived largely from [Dylan]

Thomas and George Barker" (Heyward 29). Even if Harris's poetry exhibits densely obscured images, there is a notable structural coherence, evidenced by deliberate and purposive practice. As such, the characteristic textual patterns of surrealism, that is to say, automatic divergences or radically disjunctive associations, appear secondary to craftsmanship. Thus, for Harris, surrealism was in fact ancillary to anything related to the profound and tenebrous production of the unconscious mind.

Much of the same can be said for many artists and writers associated with the Angry Penguins: notably, in compliance with Herbert Read's writings, there is considerable stress on Coleridge's imaginative faculties and the English tradition of Romanticism, supported by the modern theories of Freud and the growing body of English modernism. This tended to attenuate the more radical aspects of surrealist poetics. Surrealism for the Angry Penguins was underscored by anti-nationalist and experimental sentiment, but also emphasized intellectual and conscious agency. The outcome of this approach, as expressed by the Adelaide "surrealist" painter Ivor Francis in the article, "Reintegration and the Apocalypse," flatly rejects surrealist automatism, which had apparently rendered the unconscious "sterile by denying the right of the individual to integrate with purpose whatever he finds there." Moreover, Francis insists on the favorability of the British corrective, the New Apocalypics, as to "negate the negation" of French surrealism, and to reinstate the artist's right to "personal and aesthetic integration."

Yet, in their conception of surrealism, the direct members of Angry Penguins were not necessarily as reductive as Francis's statement might suggest, often acknowledging the important role of surrealism in their practice. Tucker's 1940 address to the Federation Arts Society of Sydney on the topic "What is Surrealism?" generally defines the Angry Penguins perspective as such: "Surrealism . . . will make its contribution when, paradoxically enough, it commences to exercise judgment and reason, when it subjects the new material it has found for us, to a critical analysis. And then it will cease to be Surrealism" (qtd. in Uhl 15-16). The key distinction here is that while Angry Penguins tended to borrow elements of surrealism's vocabulary and experiment with its idiom, there is clear resistance to any doctrinaire positions such as those advanced by Breton in his *Manifestoes*, including the 1924 definition, "Automatisme psychique pur" 'Psychic automatism in its pure state' ("Manifeste" 328; *Manifestoes* 26). Instead, for Angry Penguins, surrealism referred to the profound emotional origins of mythic and symbolic imagery, informing the social utility of more figurative and expressive forms of art and literature.

While surrealism in the hands of an Australian counterpart had received considerable adjustment, the Angry Penguins continued to find within its artistic and literary output a fertile source of inspiration. In 1941, *Angry Penguins* co-editor Kerr, and associate editors, Dutton and Pfeiffer, enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force, leaving Harris in charge of the second (1941) and third (1942) issues

(Snowden 171). By now, surrealism's presence had increased and can be traced in the modes and discussions of the following contributions: H. M. Swan's *rimbaldien* poem sequences of accumulating imagery and the hallucinatory short story, "The Drug;" J. M. Keon's essay, "Call Down To-Day," which discusses the vitality of the unconscious for the artist and acknowledges surrealism's importance in nullifying "the popular inferences from consciousness" (17); articles by John Reed, indicating the commencement of Harris's collaboration with the Melbourne modernists, including "Psychiatry and Literary Style," and the short description of Albert Tucker's *Children of Athens* (1942); the reproduction of Sidney Nolan's painting, "Woman and Tree;" and, of course, Harris's nebulous poems.

Both issues also feature art reproductions and poems by the Sydney artist and writer James Gleeson, who, unlike other figures from this period, "maintained an unwavering commitment to Surrealist practice" (Maidment and Taylor 4). Gleeson's centrality to "Australian surrealism" is undeniable: he was raised in a milieu that was deeply affected by the atrocities of the Great War. By the late thirties, as the world was preparing for World War II, the ideas originally promulgated by Dada and surrealism had affirmed for Gleeson the failure of logic and reason, and he turned his focus instead toward the artistic evocation of the irrational and unconscious. By 1938, Gleeson was reading Breton's *What is Surrealism?*, David Gascoyne's *A Short History of Surrealism*, and Dalí's *Conquest of the Irrational* (Klepac 16); and in 1940, he contributed the tract "What is Surrealism?" to *Art in Australia*, which presents surrealism through an emphatically Freudian lens. His poetry, which first appeared in the third number of *Angry Penguins* (1942), displays phantasmagoria via compacted syntax and accreting imagery:

Eyes that are pumps draw night's wide sores,  
their thick eruption feining [sic] lunar gardens,  
in the meteorite blaze;  
there, too, is dreamt plurality of bloom  
to shut corroded domes in tides of livid sap  
and living timid blood;  
to cancel tower's call of phalloid remedy  
through thaumaturgic hospitals of mud  
and human daub. ("Poem" 44)

Gleeson's "Poem" evokes the mechanical and expendable nature of the human body through a distinctly apocalyptic expression. Further images, which include: "dead kings squeeze their requiem"; "Sun's muscle puts the human wood / to girder sun's collapsing hall," and "Brain yoked in barren totem duties" (44), promote abstraction through the maintenance of syntactic proximity, but preserve the author's psychical anguish. David Lomas describes this as surrealism's cultural space: "against a backdrop of severe, unremitting oppression within which a non-normative desire could be represented, albeit in the coded language

of the manifest dream" (1–2). Far more successful in his painting than in poetry, Gleeson is long recognized as Australia's leading exponent of surrealism — even so, he remained external to the Angry Penguins movement.

The next important phase for *Angry Penguins* arrived when John Reed, who was already providing Harris with financial support, in 1942, invited the poet to Melbourne, suggesting "that the journal should include a visual arts section and that he himself be the arts editor" (Snowden 171). The collaboration between Harris and Reed, which also involved the support of key practitioners affiliated with the Contemporary Art Society, led to the inception of the publishing company, Reed & Harris, as well as growth in cultural impact, where the members of this newly formed alliance shared a "common fascination with surrealism and radical politics" (Haese 109). In this issue, a fascination with surrealism, and, indeed, international modernism in general, is palpable: the front cover displays a reproduction of Gleeson's psycho-symbolic painting, *Coagulations on the Maintenance of Identity* (1942); and within its contents, Gino Nibbi's essay, "Rousseau Le Douanier;" Mary Williams's "Baudelaire – analysis and poetic unity;" and Sidney Nolan's "Faithful Words" extolling the "angel naked and possessed" (44) in the figure of Arthur Rimbaud.<sup>4</sup> This issue was also the first to include the poetry of Dylan Thomas and Karl Shapiro, which would in fact signal an increased focus on publishing alongside Australian poetry leading figures from Great Britain and America.<sup>5</sup>

Starkly aware of surrealism's turn to the unconscious as a means for disrupting habitual conscious order and thus opening the possibilities for artistic expression, the Angry Penguins also sought to achieve social and political liberation. Harris, claiming to have been the "founding force behind the first Communist Party Branch of the University of Adelaide" (qtd. in Haese 110), in 1942, maintained that *Angry Penguins* should be a "vehicle for left-wing political as well as advanced aesthetic ideas" (110). At the same time in Melbourne, however, an ideological rift had developed within the CAS concerning the limitations on art set by the communist agenda. "The Contemporary Art Society," as stated at the 1941 exhibition, "offers absolute freedom to the Australian artist, imposes no limitations and refuses no work, except that which has no aim other than representation. . . . the Society realises it must show work at all stages of

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<sup>4</sup> Within *Angry Penguins*, Rimbaud's influence is substantial, especially for Nolan, who developed a particular affinity with the *enfant terrible*. Sunday Reed, who was also enthusiastic about Rimbaud, contributed the translations "Poem," "Dream for Winter," and "Dreamer" to the same issue.

<sup>5</sup> In the early 1940s, the Angry Penguins had formed an alliance with American poet and army officer Harry Roskolenko, who was in Australia during the war. Roskolenko substantiated the internationalist outlook of the Angry Penguins by providing an American link, where he sourced for the publication poetry from contemporary American poets such as Kenneth Rexroth, Vincent Ferrini, and Harold Rosenberg.



experiment and discovery” (qtd. in Haese 71). However, as Haese affirms, in its staunch opposition to fascism there was indeed much attraction to what was thought of as the political corrective: “Many of the leaders of the Contemporary Art Society between 1938 and 1942 were either members of the Communist Party or had seriously entertained the idea of membership” (66). The role of art then, according to the dedicated communist faction of the CAS, involving the likes of Noel Counihan, Harry de Hartog, Yosl Bergner, and Vic O’Connor, was to advance through social realism their commitment to the collectivist struggle of the working class and the war effort (Burke 327). By contrast, the *Angry Penguins* instead employed the anarchist teachings of Herbert Read, who framed anarchism as non-dogmatic and free from the imposition of rigorous systems, elevating the individualist, experimental, and psychological over the collectivism of Marxist convictions.

If political difference had become a point of tension within the CAS, Tucker’s article, “Art, Myth and Society,” published in *Angry Penguins* no. 4, would only make matters worse. As Burke observes, Tucker’s article contains “the fervent beliefs, the grandiose statements, the humour and gusto with which the surrealists imbued their manifestoes” (328). In his attempt to square the prime role of art with individualist freedom and social advancement, Tucker’s focus on “myth” emphasizes unconscious integration as method for political subversion, which had elicited sharp reaction from the communists, where, for instance, Noel Counihan, in “How Albert Tucker Misrepresents Marxism,” published in *Angry Penguins* no. 5 (1943), dismisses anarchist politics as “really only bourgeois individualism in fancy dress.” Vic O’Connor, in *The Communist Review*, even goes so far as to suggest that the *Angry Penguins’* emphasis on freedom was in fact on course for alignment with fascism: “If ‘Angry Penguins’ continues on this path it must finish in open alliance with all the worst and most reactionary sections of Australian society, in opposition to the development of a free society and a free art” (303). With tensions rising within the CAS, the *Angry Penguins’* interest in, and appropriation of, surrealism’s creative imagination had not only affected the harmony within their own networks, but also their wider reputation, which in turn came to them at great cost.

In commemoration of the “Australian poet Ern Malley,” the *Angry Penguins* 1944 Autumn edition announced the “switch over from dreary academicism to modernism” in Australian culture (Harris and Reed iv). Advertised by Harris and Reed in the issue’s editorial, the cultural fight against traditional modes of art and literature had witnessed three major triumphs: the discovery of “Ern Malley,” the publication of Harris’s first novel, *The Vegetative Eye* (1943), which proposed to unfold “new fields of potentialities in Australian literature” (iv), and the controversy surrounding the Archibald Prize, which was awarded to William Dobell’s “caricature” of the illustrator Joshua Smith. The first of these triumphs was extensively covered in the publication, which included “Malley’s” oeuvre of

sixteen poems, *The Darkening Ecliptic*, supported by an abstruse aesthetic doctrine, an introduction to “his” life and poetry, co-written by Reed and Harris, not to mention poems by Harris in dedication to the supposedly deceased. Even the front cover, a reproduction of Nolan’s lyrical painting *The Sole Arabian Tree* (1943), was inspired by lines from “Malley’s” poem, “Petit Testament.” The astonishing circumstances surrounding the mysterious and wayward figure, who worked in Sydney as a mechanic, then later as an insurance salesman in Melbourne; who also wrote experimental poetry, and, at the age of 25 had tragically died of Graves’ disease, came to the Angry Penguins as validation of the new style that they had so fervently promulgated.

In their introduction, Harris and Reed comment on the “colossal strides made in Australia” (iv), and Harris declares in his introduction “Ern Malley” to be “one of the most outstanding poets that we have produced here” (2). Shortly after the poems were published, the following statement made by McAuley and Stewart was released detailing the actual motivation behind the poems:

For some years now we have observed with distaste the gradual decay of meaning and craftsmanship in poetry. Mr. Max Harris and other *Angry Penguins* writers represent an Australian outcrop of a literary fashion which has become prominent in England and America. . . . Their work appeared to us to be a collection of garish images without coherent meaning and structure; as if one erected a coat of bright paint and called it a house. . . (qtd. in Heyward 172).

The hoaxers also account for their methodology:

We produced the whole of Ern Malley’s tragic life-work in one afternoon, with the aid of a chance collection of books which happened to be on our desk: the Concise Oxford Dictionary, a Collected Shakespeare, Dictionary of Quotations. . . . We opened books at random, choosing a word or phrase haphazardly. We made lists of these and wove them into nonsensical sentences. . . . (173)

McAuley and Stewart even provided their rules of composition: the poems were written in absence of any theme, with no care for formal technique, imitating the style of Dylan Thomas, Henry Treece, and others. With their central concern being the lack of coherent meaning and structure evident in international movements associated with surrealism, McAuley and Stewart found in *Angry Penguins* a local target, in order to expose the editors’ lack of critical discernment and prove the insubstantiality and degenerative effects of modernism.

# Angry Penguins



1944 Autumn Number  
to Commemorate  
the  
Australian  
Poet  
**Ern Malley**

*"I said to my love (who is living)  
Dear we shall never be that verb  
Perched on the sole Arabian Tree"*

*"(Here the peacock blinks the eyes  
of his multipennate tail.)"*

Painting by Sidney Nolan.

Figure 1: *Angry Penguins* no. 6 (Autumn 1944) (Cover). Courtesy the publishers ETT Imprint, Exile Bay.

Over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the story of the Ern Malley hoax itself has tended to attract the most attention. Understandably, the dramatic and unusual events that transpired have led many commentators to consider the Ern Malley hoax among the greatest literary hoaxes in Western culture. However, increasing interest in Malley's poetry, which was defended by the *Angry Penguins* from the outset, has been a contributing factor to sustaining the mythology of the spurious poet himself. On one level, extending Malley's status from that of hoax poet to the elusive and obscure ghost poet highlights a

doubling effect, situating the figure in a paradoxical, and evidently surreal, space. Tucker, after the fact, referring to Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (1962), cites the paranormal and unconscious force, Philemon, by way of separating Ern Malley from his creators: "There is something in me which can say things I do not know and do not intend, things which may even be directed against me. . ." (qtd. in Tucker, Introduction x). Through this optic, Malley can therefore be read as both actual (a deliberate creation) and imaginary (aleatoric and unconscious). The latter approach is further justified since the basis of Malley's originality also stems from his "erratic and unpredictable diction" (Mead 89). In the interest of this study, Malley's distinctively liberated technique, which reflects free association and disjunctive imagery, is in fact comparable to that of literary surrealism.

As perceived in the immediate wake of the hoax, arguments in support for the automatic and unconscious nature of *The Darkening Ecliptic* had come to light. In response to the backlash, *Angry Penguins'* editors hastily sought testament in favor of Ern Malley from authoritative figures, published in the 1944 December issue. Professor of French and author of the study *The Art of Arthur Rimbaud* (1930), A. R. Chisholm, confirms that "much of it really is poetry" (8), while the psychiatrist Reg S. Ellery offers a classically psychoanalytic reading which emphasizes the Freudian intrusion of unconscious processes: "Ern was actually an unwitting projection of their separate secret wishes, fashioned in the unconscious admiration of a modern surrealist poet" (10). Yet, the most essential supporting evidence came from Herbert Read himself, after the editors made contact soliciting his opinion. Read's cable letter was reproduced as the foremost buttressing claim, which states that Malley's work reaches an "unusual level of achievement," highlighting the perils of the hoaxers' mode of production:

We have only to ask ourselves how the parodist or hoaxer goes about his business to realize that he must inevitably use processes akin to, if not identical with, the processes which produced the original work of art. . . . But if, as in the present case, the type of art parodied is itself unconventional, experimental, then the parodist has exceptional freedom, and because of this freedom, *can end by deceiving himself*. (Cable 5)

"It comes to this," as Read states, "if a man of sensibility, in a mood of despair or hatred, or even from a perverted sense of humour, sets out to fake works of imagination, then *if he is to be convincing*, he must use the poetic faculties. If he uses these faculties to good effect, he ends by deceiving himself."

Read's argument, that, in the elation of concocting the hoax, McAuley and Stewart had inadvertently created a poet who was astonishingly original, has become the foremost argument in support of *Angry Penguins* and Ern Malley's poetry. Philip Mead addresses the hoaxers' assertion that there cannot be any surrealist claim to the poems as psychological documents, because they are the

“conscious product of *two* minds, intentionally interrupting each other’s trains of free association, and altering and revising them after they are written down” (qtd. in Heyward 175): a claim that Mead contests since the nature of the experiment was to replicate the conditions of surrealism. If, in line with Read’s argument, the Ern Malley poems are the simulacrum of the genuine article, it appears possible that in concurrence with the consciously parodic and intentional procedure is also the utilization of chance arrangements, free association, and haphazard collaboration. As Mead points out, McAuley’s and Stewart’s process that was outlined in their statement is in fact basically “a description of surrealist collaborative techniques” (104). Thus, in terms of their technical approach and the resulting textual patterns, in Noel Macainsh’s terms, McAuley and Stewart “were not being hoaxers at all but Surrealists” (22).

Throughout Malley’s oeuvre, there are indeed specific instances that directly utilize surrealist language. For instance, the final line of the collection, “Beyond is anything” (46), distinctly recalls in its obliqueness and lingual structure Breton’s closing *Manifesto* statement, “L’existence est ailleurs” ‘Existence is elsewhere’ (“Manifeste” 346; *Manifestoes* 47). There are also potential clues littered throughout the text suggestive of other and displaced identities, which can be interpreted in these lines from “Durer: Innsbruck, 1495”:

Now I find that once more I have shrunk  
To an interloper, robber of dead men’s dream,  
I had read in books that art is not easy  
But no one warned that the mind repeats  
In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still  
The black swan of trespass on alien waters. (25)

Yet, since “Durer” was in fact a serious poem written by McAuley prior to the hoax, the image of the “black swan of trespass” may engender an array of interpretations. It may also assist in making the transition from reading Ern Malley as the intentional hoax poet to seeing him as the spontaneous “ghost poet.” Michael Heyward alludes to this paradox in his 1993 biography of the hoax, *The Ern Malley Affair*: “He has become his own expanding universe. . . . Since Ern Malley was never born he can never die, a peculiar immortality” (xxiii). Under this light, the elusive and ghostly figure of “Ern Malley” is also congruent with the textual result of *The Darkening Ecliptic*, which displays an idiom that is unexpected, disjunctive, and dreamlike. In “Culture as Exhibit,” McAuley and Stewart playfully include the lines, “Swamps, marshes, borrow-pits and other / Areas of stagnant water serve / As breeding grounds” (38), borrowed from an American military-scientific report, which Mead likens to a Duchampian ready-made procedure, where “an already existing non-literary text” is sampled and re-contextualized as poetic discourse (101). “Sweet William” contains imagery of hallucinatory lyricism and contradiction: “And I must go with stone feet / Down the staircase of flesh;” “One moment of daylight let me have / Like a white arm

thrust [sic] / Out of the dark . . . ;” and, “My white swan of quietness lies / Sanctified on my black swan’s breast” (28). These images juxtapose their contrary elements: the stone feet, “white arm in the dark,” and the white-black affinity, all resemble the expansive and endless relationalities of surrealist language. Other images fulfill elements of surrealist aesthetics, identified by Breton in his Manifesto’s list of classifications, where the image “prête très naturellement à l’abstrait le masque du concret” ‘very naturally gives to the abstract the mask of the concrete’ (“Manifeste” 339; *Manifestoes* 38): “Sands of time in my throat” (*Collected Poems* 36); “The new men are cool as spreading fern” (41); and “Spain weeps in the gutters of Footscray” (46) evoke a semantic clash of difference. Moreover, the poem “Egyptian Register” should be noted for its accreting imagery and distant semantic association, evidenced by the following excerpt:

The hands burn resinous in the evening sky  
Which is a lake of roses, perfumes, idylls  
Breathed from the wastes of the Tartarean heart.  
The skull gathers darkness, like an inept mountain  
That broods on its aeons of self-injury.  
The spine, barbed and venomous, pierces  
The one unmodulated cumulus of cloud  
And brings the gush of evanescent waters.  
The lungs are Ra’s diving aquaria  
Where the striped fish move at will  
Towards a purpose darker than a dawn. (39)

Despite Malley’s eventual ascension to mythical proportions – as Stewart later quipped in conversation with Heyward: “perhaps neither McAuley nor I ever existed except in the imagination of Ern Malley” (Heyward xxiv) – the event of the hoax was enough to rupture the Angry Penguins’ momentum, and generally speaking, Australia’s confidence in modern poetry. Barrett Reid verifies that the hoax had been a “very damaging experience” for a young poet such as himself: he attests that friends and relatives turned against “the kind of person who could read such poetry or believe in it” and that a lot of poets “began writing in iambic pentameter” and other respectable verse forms (Thompson). Further, the 1944 December issue also details counter-arguments to Ern Malley’s value. In “The Anopheles,” H. M. Green argues for the necessity of conventional virtues: “Images, subtlety, and a determination to startle: these are not enough for poetry; the poet must have something to say and he must say it.” Dorothy Green is critical in making the assertion that “[a] magazine which started out with the pretensions of Angry Penguins is not a thing to be undertaken lightly” (16), and A. Campbell, in “Ego,” critiques Harris’s poetic judgement: “I think that Harris was completely bewitched by the strained imagery in the poem . . . evidently Harris doesn’t know the affected from the fake” (18).

In the same issue, it is clear that the hoax had disconcerted Harris quite profoundly. In "The Aesthetics of the Ern Malley Case," Harris writes:

McAuley and Stewart with their Nelson eye will shriek "garish imagery" and "surrealism." I as heartily despise that dangerous pitfall of this category of verse as they do. But the Songs of Innocence and Experience of Blake come from such a casual genesis. They have no intellectual meaning in the McAuley-Stewart sense. (40)

This statement demonstrates Harris's departure from what he considers the limitations or risk associated with surrealism, and he is quick to realign his poetic discourse with the canonically robust romanticism of Blake. Elsewhere in the same issue, Harris writes: "the surrealists were the example of an impasse, a flank that bore only limited fruit" ("Current Literary Scene" 101). Harris's assessment, of course, overlooks the far broader impact surrealism was effecting within art and literature of this period, not only within France and Europe, but also as a global development. Harris would have scarcely been aware that by the time the Ern Malley hoax transpired, surrealism was influencing major developments in art and literature in the United States, Egypt, Mexico, the Caribbean, and parts of Latin America. But in terms of Australia's literary alliance with surrealism, in consequence of ignominy caused by the hoax, the link was deeply fractured.

In the aftermath of the Ern Malley hoax, *Angry Penguins* journal had commenced its decline. Multiple factors unsettled the journal's editors and patrons: complications amongst the group prompted a rift between Sidney Nolan and the Reeds; Max Harris was tried and convicted in Adelaide under the pretext of publishing obscene material in the "most transparently innocuous" Malley poems ("Angry Penguins and After" 8); and Tucker departed Australia to pursue a bohemian lifestyle in Europe. After publishing its final full-length issue, *Angry Penguins* produced reduced-sized broadsheets at regular intervals throughout the years 1945-1946 before terminating its six-year operation.<sup>6</sup>

During the years of 1939-1944, the *Angry Penguins* were clearly influenced by the ideas and aesthetics of surrealism, although the shape of surrealism's influence is very much perplexed by differing individual approaches and interpretations. A survey which charts the presence of surrealism in *Angry Penguins* journal reveals that the impetus, while compatible with surrealism's emphasis on radical politics and exploration of the unconscious, also indicates conceptual deviation. Returning

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<sup>6</sup> The *Broadsheets*, edited by Harris, Nolan, and James McGuire, attempted to promote a similar ethos to the full-length editions; however, by 1946 its impetus had been seriously blighted. Following a six-year intermission, Harris, Barrett Reid, and John Reed re-emerged with *Angry Penguins'* reprisal, *Ern Malley's Journal* (1952-1955); yet the journal "failed to elicit a deep response from artists and writers and, in the illiberal atmosphere of the early 1950s, appeared to be no more than a faint bleating in the wilderness" (Haese 292).

to Tucker's proviso that "Surrealism . . . will make its contribution when, paradoxically enough, it commences to exercise judgment and reason, when it subjects the new material it has found for us, to a critical analysis. And then it will cease to be Surrealism" (qtd. in Uhl 15–16), a directional turn is highly apparent. The adoption of a dual process, perceptible in Dylan Thomas's critique of surrealism, "I do not mind from where the images of a poem are dragged up . . . but, before they reach the paper, they must go through all the rational processes of the intellect" (qtd. in Lahey 61), tends to reinforce the incompatibility of dream and reality, and inevitably downplays the role of surrealist automatism. The Angry Penguins' overt apocalyptic approach, therefore, exhibits closer allegiance to the British surrealist theoreticians, practitioners, and affiliates, but it also portrays a local response to the uncertain modern era of Depression, the looming threat of fascism, and the outbreak of the Second World War. In *Angry Penguins'* short-lived successor, *Ern Malley's Journal*, Max Harris refers to the "ghost poet" as representative of the "true sorrow and pathos of our time" ("Wolfgang Borchert" 6): indeed, the Angry Penguins' revolt against Australian traditionalism, and the progress of radical modes in Australian poetry at least, was significantly delayed by the Ern Malley affair. Yet, the enigmatic and paradoxical ambience surrounding the poet has maintained an unusual immortality, one that is in part due to an unexpected and disjunctive poetic expression, the likes of which had scarcely been recorded in Australian poetry until 1944.

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