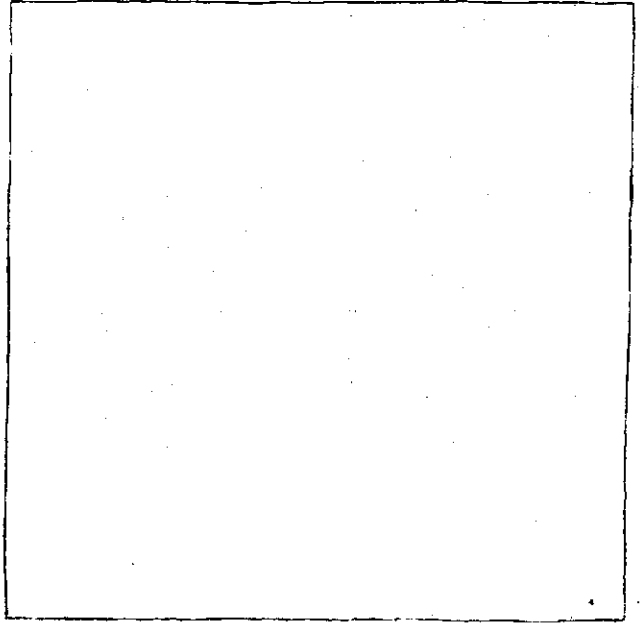


# ERN MALLEY'S NAMESAKE



ERNST MALLY



ERN MALLEY

**E**RNST MALLY was an Austrian philosopher who, early in this century, helped to develop Alexius Meinong's theory of nonexistent objects. Ernest Malley, better known as Ern, *was* a nonexistent object. The coincidence of names, if coincidence it be, strains credulity.

Why should anyone need a theory of nonexistent objects? Because, so it seems, we can direct our thoughts toward them. Think, for instance, of the golden mountain. That which you are thinking about is golden, it is a mountain, but it does not exist. Or think of the round square: it is round, it is square, but it *could* not exist. Existing, it seems, is not a prerequisite for being so-and-so sort of thing. Mally called this the independence of *Sosein* from *Sein* – of “so-being” from being. Whether such a line of argument is common sense, or whether it is uncommon nonsense, is a much-debated question. Let us not debate it here.<sup>1</sup>

Those who take nonexistent objects seriously will say that fictional characters

are nonexistent objects. A hoax is a fiction: unlike other fictions, it is a fiction meant to deceive. When James McAuley and Harold Stewart perpetrated their famous hoax,<sup>2</sup> they directed their thoughts toward a nonexistent object: Ern Malley. Ern's so-being includes such properties as being an unknown modern poet, dying young, writing “I am still the black swan of trespass on alien waters”, and so on. Soon, the duped directed their thoughts toward this same nonexistent object. We still do today.

It might be coincidence that the nonexistent object shares a name, almost, with the theorist of nonexistent objects. It just might be. Or it might not. The hoaxers might have thought it fun to plant a none-too-easy clue. Would they do such a thing?

They would. They were plenty of unlikely episodes in the life of Ern Malley. Of one, McAuley later said it was meant as a clue; of another Stewart said, “Wouldn't you have thought that would have alerted them?” (Heyward, pp 107-

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9). And we can ask: what is a "black swan of trespass on alien waters"? Something out of place? Something amiss? The name "Malley" resembles not only the name "Mally" but also the name "McAuley". Best of all, McAuley claimed descent from Peter Lalor, the hero of Eureka – and "Lalor" was Ern's middle name (Heyward, p 89). One clue more would be no surprise at all.

Critics have discerned much significance in Ern Malley's name, though his namesake has gone unmentioned. It's a good Irish name, shortened in the proper Australian way. It puts us in mind of the Mallee, Mallarmé, and *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Ernest does seem an earnest fellow, unlike his inventors (Heyward, p 89). Do we really need yet another hypothesis? Not to worry: the hypotheses are not in competition. What poet worth his salt is content with just one layer of double meaning? The more the merrier. Maybe all those different associations, and more, ran through the hoaxers' minds when first they heard the name of Ernst Mally.

Mally is not well-known even among philosophers.<sup>3</sup> Students of Meinong know him well; other philosophers do not. One student of Meinong, Edward Zalta, recently lectured about Mally to several Australian philosophy departments. The surprised laughter that greeted him showed how much better known Ern Malley is than his philosopher namesake.

How could McAuley and Stewart have heard of Ernst Mally? We can but speculate. The speculation I offer is not the only possible one; perhaps it is not the best; but it will serve as a proof of possibility. McAuley studied phi-

losophy at Sydney University. John Anderson's philosophy department was no centre of Meinong studies, but Meinong was not altogether ignored. John Passmore, once a member of that department, recalls Anderson's plan that the departmental staff should read Meinong's *Über Annahmen* together in German. Anderson had once mentioned Meinong in print, and it was in one of his best-known papers.<sup>4</sup> Anderson does not cite Meinong himself, but rather quotes from an account of Meinong by Dawes Hicks. What's said is tantalisingly brief. Might a tantalised reader seek out further information?

Meinong, at least, was known at Sydney. Mally was not. However, McAuley once said that he got his education in the library.<sup>5</sup> If he went there to learn more about Meinong, it's a good bet that he would have learnt about Mally as well. He probably would have found his way to *Meinong's Theory of Objects*, by J.N. Findlay.<sup>6</sup> That book discusses Mally's ideas at several places; it has a preface thanking Mally for help; and it has a foreword by Mally himself. It was available in the Fisher Library at Sydney University. Passmore thinks it would have been recommended in reading lists for essays.

Or McAuley might have found his way to the October 1905 issue of *Mind*. There he would have found Bertrand Russell's very famous paper "On Denoting", in which Russell disowns his former quasi-Meinongian views; and in which Russell cites a collection of articles by Meinong, Mally and others.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere in the same issue of *Mind*, Russell reviews that collection at length, and devotes a third of his review to Mally's article.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

1. Beware: our introductory examples are misleadingly easy. Big trouble lies ahead. Try thinking of the existent round square. (Build being into its so-being.) That which you are thinking of now is round, it is square, it is existent, it does not exist. Bertrand Russell raised this difficulty; Mally solved it two different ways. First, flat-footedly: he said that not just any property is eligible to be built into the so-being of an object. Existence is one of the ineligible ones: it is *ausserkonstitutivisch*. Later he changed his mind. He said instead that there are two different senses in which an object can have a property. In one sense, the existent round square has existence: it has existence built into its so-being. In a more everyday sense, it lacks existence: it does not exist. No contradiction there. See Edward Zalta, *Abstract Objects*, Reidel, 1983, pp 10-12.

2. See Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*, University of Queensland Press, 1993.

3. In John Passmore's monumental history *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Duckworth, 1957) Mally gets one brief mention (on p 399). It is not for his ideas about nonexistent objects but rather for his logic of imperatives.

4. "The Knower and the Known", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 27, 1926-27, p 78.

5. *James McAuley: Poetry, Essays and Personal Commentary*, ed by Leonie Kramer, University of Queensland Press, 1988, p xvi.

6. Oxford University Press, 1933.

7. *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie*, ed by Alexius Meinong, 1904. Since McAuley had a good reading knowledge of German, we may ask whether *Untersuchungen* itself could have been the bridge that led him from curiosity about Meinong to knowledge about Mally. Not unless he could lay hands on it; and unfortunately it seems that *Untersuchungen* was not available either in the Fisher Library or in the Public Library.

8. I am grateful for help from D.M. Armstrong, John Passmore, Gideon Rosen and Edward Zalta.