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Monstrous (In)Authenticity: Text and Identity in Peter Carey's My Life as a Fake

Abstract

Taking (in)authenticity as his subject and intertextuality as the structuring principle, Peter Carey brings together Australian literary and social history, literary theory and a self-reflexive probe into the issues of identity, authenticity and cultural insecurity of a postcolonial society. The novel is interpreted as an allegorical account of national history and an allegorical narrative on the theoretical matters of originality and authorship.

Keywords: Carey, identity, (in)authenticity, intertextuality, text, postcolonialism.

Introduction

The most well-known Australian author today, Peter Carey, has more than once found inspiration for his novels in already existing texts of British and Australian cultures. The most notable examples are his sixth novel titled Jack Maggs, his seventh novel titled True History of the Kelly Gang and the one explored in this paper, his eighth novel titled My Life as a Fake. Carey's Jack Maggs (1997) retells the story of Dickens' Great Expectations and in a postcolonial fashion of re-writing imperial texts gives voice to the previously marginalised point of view so that the story is told from the perspective of the runaway convict, Magwitch. The Booker Prize winning True History of the Kelly Gang (2001) is inspired by the so-called "Jerilderie letter," which was written by Australia's most famous outlaw, Ned Kelly, after a bank robbery in 1879. The fifty-six page long original letter is expanded in Carey's version into thirteen parcels which actually make up this epistolary novel. My Life as a Fake (2003) is a roman a clef based on the literary hoax which took place in Melbourne in 1944 and assumed an Ossianic significance in the Australian literary

establishment. Wishing to explore the depths of degradation which, in their opinion, Australian modernist poetry had reached, two young disgruntled poets, Harold Stewart and James McAuley, conjured up a fictitious poet, Ern Malley, a mechanic and the author of The Darkening Ecliptic, a collection of about fifteen poems, whose verses were actually put together by Stewart and McAuley in a patchwork manner. They borrowed lines randomly from various books of poetry and military manuals at hand to assemble a manuscript which was "found" by Malley's equally fictitious sister after Ern Malley's untimely tragic death and sent to Max Harris, the editor of the literary magazine Angry Penguins. Unsuspecting Harris was immediately taken in and published the poems. However, the praise he expressed for Malley's poetry in his admiring preface was shortly after matched by the disgrace he suffered after the hoax had been revealed, ruining his career and making him the butt of all jokes in Australian literary circles. Moreover, as some prudish readers found those poems to express unacceptable homoerotic content, Harris faced charges for publishing obscene materials.

Interested in "the effect of the fake on an anxious self-doubting culture" (Gaile, "Contrarian Streak" 15), Carey takes over and builds upon the familiar story, extends it with his imagination to incorporate a character who claims to be the fictitious poet. Stewart and McAuley are fused into the character of Christopher Chubb, whose infant daughter has been abducted in an act of vengeance by his rejected creation, the monstrous McCorkle. Attempts to track down McCorkle and the quest for his daughter have brought Chubb from Australia to Malaysia, where two Londoners, Sarah Wode-Douglass, a young editor of an elitist poetry magazine, and Christopher Slater, a not so talented but successful old poet, meet him. My Life as a Fake combines fact and fiction, incorporates verses from The Darkening Ecliptic, transcripts from the original trial and borrows its epigraph from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Having read how Victor Frankenstein "beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom [he] had created" and how the monster "held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on [him]" (Shelley 43; Carey, My Life as a Fake), the reader is tuned to the story about the creation that comes to life to torment and haunt its creator, and take vengeance for being rejected by taking away what the hated creator loves most. Moreover, in a postcolonial context and its agenda of revealing the fictionality of historical texts, My Life as a Fake is Carey's comment on how the result of fabrication and

transformation can appear not only more real than what is taken as reality but can assume a life of its own. Taking (in)authenticity as his subject and intertextuality as the structuring principle, Peter Carey writes an allegorical narrative on the theoretical matters of originality and authorship alongside an allegorical account of national history and resultant identity issues.

Monstrous (In)Authenticity: Text

My Life as a Fake, a story about monstrous birth, makes real the creative metaphor which envisages a literary text as a brain child of its creator. In his novel, Carey investigates what it would be like if the product of poetic imagination could literally materialise as an independent entity, if the brain child could actually walk and talk, make decisions and take action. Until the end, it is not explicated whether Chubb and McCorkle are one and the same person. The novel offers a Borgesian answer – there is a distinction between "man" and "writer," "Borges the man" has to live his ordinary life so that "Borges the writer" could write (Graham 39-40; Ross 44-58). "Chubb the man" is a middling poet and his most valuable creation is his daughter. On the other hand, the most valuable creation of "Chubb the poet" is Bob McCorkle and that is the accomplishment by which generations of poets will remember him; the Poet's life becomes superior and more important than the Man's life, as Carey makes clear by having McCorkle abduct Chubb's daughter and raise her as his own. Producing a child ascertains the continuation of life for man and that is why Chubb, in his search for McCorkle, "must serve life" (Carey 163). Conversely, poems represent life for the poet and Sarah feels "organic softness" (Carey 234) when she touches the manuscript containing McCorkle's poems. Indeed, readers often identify creative writers with their work and the two become inseparable in their mind. The success of McCorkle's poems has "trick[ed] [Chubb] into living [his] own lie" (Carey 257) – from a Melbourne intellectual Chubb has turned into a bicycle mechanic in Kuala Lumpur, whose "lines of fate and love were highlighted by the oil of bicycles" (Carey 83). That McCorkle is the embodiment of the deepest and most intimate part of Chubb's intellectual, spiritual and physical being is supported by the feeling Chubb has while holding the dying McCorkle: "To be so intimate with Bob McCorkle was disgusting, as unnatural and frightening as holding one's own vital organs in one's hands" (Carey 254). McCorkle is the poetic genius in Chubb, the genius that eats him from within, bothers him and will not let him

rest until it is let out (on the paper) “like a tapeworm who has tortured you so long” (Carey 254). Chubb thinks that McCorkle has deprived him of his life and McCorkle thinks that the two of them are one (Carey 255-256). The writer and his creative work might be one, but the work usually assumes an independent existence and quite often becomes more famous, loved and respected than the author, thereby asserting the superiority of art over life. Bob McCorkle is the metaphor of such a text/child that separates from the author/parent and develops in a free interaction with the readers/the world.

What a triumph he now was. How he had overcome me. I had brought him forth ignorant into the world but now he knew six languages, five of which I never heard of. So learned now. He knew the holy books of Buddha and Mohammed. He knew the name of everything that lived on the Malaysian earth. He was the greatest writer ever born. (Carey 250)

Revolving on the lives of three poets, My Life as a Fake is a novel dominated by the metafictional focus on creativity, inspiration and authenticity as well as on their opposites: plagiarism, theft and inauthenticity. Carey’s novel investigates the role and significance of authenticity in a specifically literary context and one of the reasons for Frankenstein being Carey’s starting and major reference point is because Mary Shelley’s novel is composed of a number of textual sources including Milton’s Paradise Lost, Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and notes of Erasmus Darwin, who was known for his experiments in galvanism. Mary Shelley takes her epigraph from Paradise Lost and it is from Milton’s text as well as from Coleridge’s poem that Frankenstein’s monster gets his first lessons on human virtues and flaws. Carey’s characters also seek support and solace in Milton’s verses. Infuriated, McCorkle quotes the same verses Mary Shelley borrows for the epigraph when he demands from his maker also to make him a birth certificate (Carey 95), and Sarah Wode-Douglass finds refuge in reading Paradise Lost whenever she feels trapped in emotionally fraught and confusing situations. Both authors utilise intertextuality with a view to explore the roots of original art. In the preface to the influential 1831 edition, Mary Shelley remarks on the analogy between the process deployed by Victor Frankenstein to assemble his monster and her own method of writing (Macfarlane 343).

Invention (…) does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. (Shelley 8)

In much the same manner, Carey's novel is riddled with intertextuality and references to the Western literary canon, especially English literature (for an exhaustive list see Gaile, "Alphabet of Australian Culture" 44) and Chubb's McCorkle, or his photograph, is "patched together from three different men" (Carey 51). Chubb literally "[c]hopped him up and glued him (...) physically pasted him together" (Carey 51-52). Mary Shelley in Frankenstein and Peter Carey in My Life as a Fake demonstrate, by means of intertextual references and by means of analogy, that writers never actually start from a "blank page." A literary work is bound to entail a certain degree of inauthenticity, it is always a fake to some extent, because creativity is ultimately revealed in the art of restructuring and recombining already existing pieces. Writers are "bricoleur[s]", to borrow the metaphor from Lévi-Strauss (16), who "make do with 'whatever is at hand' (17), which in turn makes the text "a kind of intellectual 'bricolage'" (16), an eclectic expression of "a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited" (16). In Roland Barthes famous phrasing (188) "[t]he text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture," it is a "space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash." Who can claim the text, then? My Life as a Fake dramatises that unceasingly inconclusive struggle over ownership by having Chubb represent the author's claim, Sarah express the reader's claim and McCorkle embody the text. The novel seems to suggest that authenticity is ultimately not predicated on the author's intention but the reader's conviction and understanding, which means that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 189).

In addition, My Life as a Fake is a story about a linguistic struggle. In the context of former colonies which use the language of the former imperial centre, Bill Ashcroft (1) expounds on what he calls the practice of "postcolonial transformation" which operates through the appropriation of representational modes and the taking over of "dominant discourses" only to transform them "in the service of their own self-empowerment." Furthermore, a special relationship of ambivalence is developed in the case of settler colonies (offspring) and their filial ties to imperial centres (parent

cultures). McCorkle is the embodiment of postcolonial transformation, of the child who speaks the language of his parent but to a uniquely different effect. Chubb hears McCorkle's voice for the first time while McCorkle is reciting one of the poems Chubb has written as part of his hoax. Chubb is appalled and disgusted.

Chubb knew the poem, of course, but nothing had prepared him for this performance of it (...) And the voice, which its original author had always imagined to be some variation of standard BBC English, was here so fierce and nasal, hoarse, ravaged by failure and regret. (...) This was and was not the poem Chubb had written. It had been conceived as a parody and the first key to the puzzle of the hoax, but this lunatic had somehow recast it without altering a word. What had been clever had now become true, the song of the autodidact, the colonial, the damaged beast of the antipodes. (Carey 81-82)

McCorkle's story is the story about Carey's writing and about all literatures which adopt the dominant language or the discourse of the imperial culture, transform it and use it as a tool to portray and investigate local realities. McCorkle was born as a hoax but his voice is strikingly different from the voice of his creator that it earns him an independent existence. However, these transformative "assaults" will always have to fight against accusations of fakery and will always be challenged to prove their authenticity.

Monstrous (In)Authenticity: National Identity

In addition to metafictional explorations concerning authorship in general and postcolonial anxiety of influence in particular, My Life as a Fake can be interpreted as an allegorical account of the development of a new nation haunted by its monstrous or unnatural birth and subsequent anxieties over national identity. The allegorical quest, much like the metafictional one, ends in hybridity. Australia's origins as a remote penal colony and British social experiment irreversibly affected its socio-political as well as psychological and cultural patterns. McCorkle's relationship with Chubb bears a conspicuous resemblance to (post)colonial Australia's relationship with England because both are cast in the roles of rejected children who demand of their parents to acknowledge the mistreatment and take responsibility for their actions.

My Life as a Fake portrays psychological disturbances caused by an unnatural birth; it depicts a struggle over parental rights and it is also a tale of a love denied. All these issues are readily applicable to the course of Australian history. In that view, Carey's novel reads like a postcolonial allegory with the character of McCorkle as an allegorical figure that represents Australian culture which doubts its own value, fears accusations of inauthenticity and feels ashamed because of its unnatural birth. McCorkle exemplifies Australia's monstrous birth and the consequences it had on the collective consciousness. Peter Carey exploits narrative patterns and literary conventions which commonly represent Australians as uncultured, irreverent of fine art and suffering from the inferiority complex, the so-called "cultural cringe," a belief in the inferiority of their culture which they experience as inauthentic, fake and second-rate. In the words of the Melbourne critic A. A. Phillips (299), who coined the term in 1950, it is "an assumption that the domestic cultural product will be worse than the imported article." This "disease of the Australian mind" (Philips 299) leads to an "admiration for everything foreign (especially English) which precluded regard for any excellence that might be found at home" (Heseltine 189). McCorkle's recitation of the fake poem is so strikingly remarkable that he endowed it with uniqueness and authenticity, so that his literary creation serves to defend his own authenticity despite his low birth: "where I live I am not a joke at all, not a fake in any way" (Carey 152).

Early in the novel, John Slater ponders the unshakable stability of the self-confident English culture, which is therefore not vulnerable and susceptible to hoaxes, unlike the self-doubting Australian culture where "the whole thing is much more fragile" (Carey 19). Chubb explains to Sarah that he staged the hoax "for the sake (...) of art itself, and for a country where we seldom understand that we must be prepared to fight for issues bigger than an umpire's decision at the Melbourne Cricket Ground" (Carey 78). Australian culture is vulnerable because it considers itself to be second-rate, transplanted and cut off from European centres of culture. The example of Christopher Chubb, an educated member of that culture, confirms such a view:

Chubb had been a sort of beloved boy in Sydney literature, respected not only for his precocious learning and the rigor of his arguments but for his ferociously high standards. The boy from Haberfield was known for the small number of poets he would allow into his library: Donne, Shakespeare, Rilke, Mallarmé. He had been born into a second-rate culture, or so he thought, and

one can see in that austere bookshelf all the passion that later led to the birth of Bob McCorkle – a terror that he might be somehow tricked into admiring the second-rate, the derivative, the shallow, the provincial. (Carey 84)

McCorkle has been created by Chubb to ridicule the editor Weiss, whose education and capability of true appreciation of art, in Chubb's opinion, are not a match for the position he holds. Chubb's stance is elitist, imperialistic even, because he is absolutely convinced that the uneducated cannot create poetry. That is why he thinks Weiss should be able to suspect the hoax.

Weiss was a pinko, he said angrily. I would have made McCorkle a coal miner except they'd have gone looking for his union card. I gave birth to a bicycle mechanic instead. But his poems would be learned, so many classical allusions – from a grease monkey. Explain that. It cannot be. What a notion, that the ignorant can make great art. (...) It reeked of a rat-lah. (...) Reeked, he said, but I knew young Weiss had lost his schnozzle. He would so want pearls in the shit of swine, so want the genius to be a mechanic that he would never stop to question the evidence. (Carey 32)

What Chubb does not expect is that the grotesque, impossible "creature" (Carey 95) should become real. His intention has been to ridicule the Australian quest for an authentic voice, but working on his project he has found in himself and released an authentic Australian poet whose existence he has been denying. In other words, the preposterous idea that a second-rate culture can produce first-rate art has materialised. This is the major revelation of Carey's novel. The first one to have that epiphany is Weiss, who unfortunately dies shortly after but the truth of his belief remains set in stone, as his parents have McCorkle's verses engraved on his tombstone. Consequently, My Life as a Fake could be read as a postcolonial allegorical story of the affirmation of Australian national culture and identity against the cultural superiority of the former imperial centre. McCorkle chooses to be proud of what he has rather than be ashamed of his aspirations, as is the case with Chubb or Sarah's mother, which is evident from their conversation.

Yes, we have a terror of being out of date.

Mother did not like to talk about Australia. She had rather a set against it.

Yes, she is Australian. She is wondering, what are people saying in France or wearing in London?

That is the issue for her, isn't it? (...) They call it the Tyranny of Distance, so I am told. (Carey 29)

The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History (1966) is a study by Geoffrey Blainey analysing the decisive impact of geographical distance on Australia's history and the process of identity formation. John Slater warns Sarah at the very beginning that Australia is "the country of the duck-billed platypus. When you are cut off from the rest of the world, things are bound to develop in interesting ways" (Carey 19). The platypus functions as an expression of monstrosity – a bizarre looking, uniquely Australian animal, which seemed to the first Europeans as a joke of Mother Nature which composed it from parts of other animals. It is the only mammal which lays eggs; it has a bird-like bill, beaver-like tail and otter-like legs. The idea that such a creature could exist seemed to the first Europeans in Australia as preposterous as the idea that a crude culture like the Australian one could produce fine art seemed to Chubb.

Conclusion – Hybridity

Images of creatures that seem to be compilations of incongruous parts of other beings (Frankenstein's monster, the photograph of McCorkle, the platypus) support Carey's analysis of literary originality and the integrity of the text as well as the investigations of independent national identity. Indeed, My Life as a Fake is not the only novel where Carey tackles the issue of monstrosity by introducing monstrous creatures, or at least creatures perceived by others as monstrous. The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith (1994) not only features a disfigured central character who experiences identity slippage but much like My Life as a Fake can be read as an allegory of Australian identity and its (post)colonial history. Similarly, for his final shootout with the police Ned Kelly fashions a suit of armour made of various pieces which he assembles from scrap iron. To the onlookers he seems to be a monstrous "creature" (Carey, Kelly Gang, 11). Like these monsters, whose composite bodies represent a unique, irreducible synergistic whole governed by a unique consciousness, postcolonial texts and identities are textual or organic jigsaw puzzles or hybrids unified by a single consciousness of the author and/or the reader and the experience of the nation as an (imaginary) community. My Life as a Fake, as an exploration of the authenticity of texts and identities in a specifically postcolonial context, advocates authenticity of a hybridised culture, its texts and its identity.

The hybrid nature of a given culture, text or identity makes them by no means inauthentic or unreal. My Life as a Fake holds quite the opposite view – hybridity confirms authenticity and reality. That is why Max Harris, the duped editor, says in a letter which was published years after the hoax and which Carey includes in his "Author's Note:"

> I still believe in Ern Malley. (…) For me Ern Malley embodies the true sorrow and pathos of our time. One had felt that somewhere in the streets of every city was an Ern Malley (…) a living person, alone, outside literary cliques, outside print, dying, outside humanity but of it. (…) As I imagined him Ern Malley had something of the soft staring brilliance of Franz Kafka; something of Rilke's anguished solitude; something of Wilfred Owen's angry fatalism. And I believe he really walked down Princess Street somewhere in Melbourne. (…) I can still close my eyes and conjure up such a person in our streets. A young person. A person without the protection of the world that comes from living in it. A man outside. (Carey 267-268)

The firm belief in the idea is, ultimately, what preceded the European discovery and consequent settlement of Australia. The history of Australia started in the European mind as a belief in the possibility of an existence of a landmass in the Southern Hemisphere, and in 1788 the first colony in Australia came into being as a social experiment, "a joke" McCorkle would say, conceived and perpetrated by Britain. At first, the fledgling community was made up from rejects and renegades but after the opening up of the interior, when the way over the Blue Mountains was found in 1813, and especially after the discovery of gold in 1851, the colony started to receive more and more free settlers, those who saw Australia as a land of opportunity and a welcome alternative to prospects in Britain. This colonial creature, composite in its nature, has gained an independent existence and learned many languages which its creator has never heard of. It is in these languages that the creature is now writing back to its creator and haunts him with its "many-limbed" (Carey 235) body. This, at least, seems to be the conclusion of Carey's eighth novel, which is interpreted in this paper as a study of the tension between a settler society (Australia) and its 'parent' culture (Britain) and more specifically, as a struggle of a self-doubting settler culture to fend off the accusations of derivativeness and inauthenticity.

However, how independent Australia really is and how appreciative it is of its increasingly multilingual and multicultural society is a complex question which Carey addresses time and again in his fiction, most notably in Illywhacker (1985), where Carey undermines the self-image of Australia as a free and independent country, showing it to be always dominated by a distant imperial centre (Britain, the US and Japan). Moreover, the trajectory of Carey's own success as an Australian writer seems to echo the pattern described by Henry Lawson back in 1894 in his "Preface" to Short Stories in Prose and Verse:

> *The Australian writer, until he gets a "London hearing," is only accepted as an imitator of some recognized English or American author […] But mark! As soon as the Southern writer goes "home" and gets some recognition in England, he is "So-and-So, the well-known Australian author whose work has attracted so much attention in London lately." (qtd. in Prout 126)*

Significantly, Illywhacker, his first novel to have been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, was published in Britain and the United States prior to its publication in Australia, and by the time Carey won his second Booker Prize in 2001 he had already moved to the United States. The fact that arguably the most widely-known contemporary Australian author, Peter Carey, is an expatriate writer, living and working in the United States, the country which in The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith (1994) he portrays thinly disguised as Voorstand, a former colony which has grown into a world power and wields its neo-colonial sway over another former colony Efica (Australia), might throw an ironic light on My Life as a Fake as a story about a successful struggle for independence.

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