

Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake*: A post-modern Prometheus-tale?

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Introduction

Ever since Patrick White, no Australian novelist has managed to effectively place himself within the context of world literature while having an eye on national myths. Peter Carey's tendency to play self-conscious post-modern games of story-telling in a uniquely Australian fashion could be considered a narrative strategy of "toy[ing] with mythologies in the process of pursuing his own destiny as a literary artist" (Craven 1st). Carey's acknowledgement of the world's literary traditions as well as his vivid imagination saves him from the label and restrictions of an 'all-Australian' writer. Yet he maintains in an interview in 1999: "My fictional project has always been the invention or discovery of my own country" (Carey in *Bold Type*).

His former novel, the Booker Prize-winning *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2001), for instance, is a fictionalised version of the 19th-century Australian outlaw and people's hero Ned Kelly. Carey created a character both 'real' and 'fictitious,' taking considerable liberties with the facts. Although Ned Kelly was hanged by the Australian authorities over a century ago, this heroic villain retains a mystical hold on the minds of individuals who romanticize a criminal with an evident moral fibre. Ned Kelly and his gang evaded the police for twenty months from 1879 to 1880, performing daring deeds that captured the soul of the Australian nation. Hence, Ned Kelly was the Australian descendant to Robin Hood.

Jack Maggs (1999) may serve as another example. Carey rewrites a canonical text from the English literary tradition, namely Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, allowing the transported convict Magwitch to take centre stage. In *Jack Maggs* the central narrative conceit is to tell a story from the standpoint of a formerly minor character, the convict Magwitch. The State Library of Tasmania promotes the novel as "modern sequel" to Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Such a claim suggests continuity between these novels, but quite the opposite is the case. It is Carey's scheme to give Magwitch, whom Dickens depicted from the coloniser's perspective, his own voice. In an interview on *Jack Maggs* Carey explains his uneasiness with the predecessor:

I am Australian. Our founding fathers and mothers did not come to our shores in search of liberty, they came to prison. Very few modern Australians are descended from those first convicts, but I believe that they affected the character of our nation forever - after all, not many modern Americans have ancestors who were on the Mayflower, but those folks on the Mayflower affected America forever. [...]. Unlike Americans, Australians do not like to celebrate this moment when the nation is born [...]. There is a great deal of self-hatred, denial, grief, and anger, all unresolved. (Carey in *BT*)

Today, for Australian readers *Great Expectations* is "not only a great work of English literature" but also "a way in which the English have colonised our ways of seeing

ourselves" (BT). In this sense Dickens' canonical work has imprisoned the imagination and self-esteem of many Australians; with *Jack Maggs* Carey counters Dickens' anticipation in the dominant colonial discourse that operated as an instrument of power:

Then one day, contemplating the figure of Magwitch, the convict in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, I suddenly thought THIS MAN IS MY ANCESTOR. And then: this is UNFAIR! [...]. Dickens' Magwitch is foul and dark, frightening, murderous. [...]. I wanted to reinvent him, to possess him, to act as his advocate. I did not want to diminish his 'darkness' or his danger, but I wanted to give him all the love and tender sympathy that Dickens' first person narrative provides his English hero Pip. (Carey in *Bold Type*)

Thus at the heart of *Jack Maggs* lies the investigation of the hero's hybrid identity, claiming his Englishness and simultaneously denying his Australian heritage (cf. www.LitEncyc.com). Carey's portrayal of Magwitch corresponds to recent postcolonial theory, the term 'hybridity' being associated with Homi K. Bhabha's analysis of colonizer/colonized relations. It shares Bhabha's idea that cultural identity emerges in a contradictory and ambivalent context, the so-called "third space of enunciation" (Bhabha 37). The recognition of the mutual construction of identities/subjectivities in the colonial and post-colonial process resists a Eurocentric world view and allows for cultural diversity.

Integral to this exposure of colonialism are the metafictional strategies of the novel which call attention to the process of fictional invention, not 'lying' as in *Illywhacker* (meaning 'Liar'), but as theft. Nonetheless Carey's 'variant' of *Great Expectations* is all but plagiarism. It is his moral concern to rewrite Australia's history in contrast to the way it is inscribed in English canonical literature, the minds of the English and even in the minds of many Australians. Carey thus offers a counter-narration, subverting the dominant colonial view, showing that the writing process has the capacity to deceive or liberate. As the title of his latest novel already implies, in *My Life as a Fake* Carey once again is obsessed with fictional (re)invention as well as the rediscovery of yet another famous English tale, in this case Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Hence, fresh from his appropriations of the Australian legendary figure Ned Kelly and Dickens' Australian villain, in *My Life as a Fake* (2003) Carey reinvents Australia's most famous fictitious poet, Ern Malley, by referring to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as a literary model. Whereas any reader is familiar with Victor Frankenstein, a young Swiss student of medicine, and his hideous monster, the Ern Malley affair belongs to Australia's national history and is therefore largely unknown to non-Australian readers.

The Ern Malley affair¹ is a true incident that occurred in Australia in the 1940s and is still an embarrassment to literate Australia (cf. Heyward, "Prelude" 16f). Experts in the field of Australian poetry compare the fictitious poet 'Ern Malley' to 'Ossian' in 18th-Century Scotland, referring to Ern Malley as "Ossian in Australia" (cf. Prießnitz

¹ For an extensive reconstruction of the Ern Malley Affair consult Heyward's *The Ern Malley Affair*.

66, Kane Chapter III). Ossian became known in 1776 throughout Europe when the Scottish poet James Macpherson 'discovered' and published *The Poems of Ossian* as a translation of an epic cycle of Scottish poems from the early dark ages. However, Macpherson was the author of the entire work (cf. "Ossian", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Though Ossian was a forgery, *The Poems of Ossian* had a strong cultural impact on literature and art during the 18th and 19th centuries. 'Ern Malley' was also a fictitious poet, created by two skilful anti-modernist poets from Sydney, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, victimizing what they regarded as the pretensions of a modern Australian poetry magazine called *Angry Penguins*. The central editorial group consisted of the young poet Max Harris, the working-class painter and autodidact Sidney Nolan, and his associates John and Sunday Reed. Their *ménage à trois* of Nolan and the Reeds was "an open secret" among their exclusive circle (17). *Angry Penguins* was founded in Adelaide in the early 1940s for the university arts association; from 1943 it was produced in Melbourne, designed by Sidney Nolan and financed by the Reeds. It soon became the "plushest literary magazine in the country" (17). When John Reed warned Harris early in 1944 that "we are in a position [...] were we can either influence the course of events quite considerably [...] or where, by a single tactical error, we can lose all control whatsoever," he was unaware that McAuley and Stewart were just about to make this predicament come true (quoted in 19). The hoaxers invented the fictitious Ern Malley, made up a romantic biography, wrote sixteen poems under his name and submitted the outcome to the magazine editor. Harris published a special issue and introduced 'Ern Malley' as a literary discovery in his foreword. When the hoax was exposed, the editor suffered not only humiliation, but also found himself in court facing a charge of publishing obscenities². Peter Carey cleverly weaves these two sources into a complex story, raising questions about identity and authenticity in both 'real' life and fiction.

In order to decide whether or not *My Life as a Fake* should be called "A Post-modern Prometheus-tale," the intertextual relations between Carey's *My Life as a Fake* and Shelley's *Frankenstein* will be examined - bearing in mind that Mary Shelley's tale draws heavily on Greek mythology and explicitly refers to the Prometheus-tale as a source of inspiration.

My Life as a Fake as a multi-layered Fake

The post-modern playfulness and self-conscious fictionality of Peter Carey's work has been examined by various critics (cf. Woodcock 120-22). Again and again Carey investigates the 'true' nature of fiction and experiments with the fine balance of fiction and lies, the blurring identities of both novelist and narrator, 'true' people and fictitious characters. Peter Carey's novel *Illywhacker* (1985) is interpreted as both a "metalinguistic novel" (Thwaites 405) about Australian novels or a "combination of metafictional devices with political engagement" (Fletcher 12). This existing overlap between post-modernism and post-colonialism can also be found in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and in most of his stories and thus remains a challenge to Carey's critics. *My Life as a Fake* and *Jack Maggs*, in

² Again Carey combines fact and fiction by using the original transcripts of the Weiss-trial.

particular, share similar narrative structures: As in *Jack Maggs* Carey's most recent novel has numerous digressive stories, and this proliferating spiral of story-telling reflects the seemingly endless process of narrative invention. Also in both novels Carey investigates the nature of authorship and story-telling. At the centre of *Jack Maggs* is the relationship between the hero and the befriended novelist Tobias Oates who is clearly modelled on Charles Dickens. Both men are orphans and suffer from the corrosive nature of their identities and English culture. The hero's journals and Oates's drafts of his novel-in-progress are interwoven with the key narration, and there are also episodes in which Maggs orally tells his story to Oates. Likewise, in *My Life as a Fake*, there coexist the fake poems by the fictitious Bob McCorkle alias Christopher Chubb, the poems by the 'real' Bob McCorkle titled *My Life as a Fake* as well as the hoaxer's story told to Sarah Wode-Douglass, editor of a Poetry magazine, who takes notes in her notebook while Chubb tells his confessional tale. Wode-Douglass' half-hearted note-taking soon develops into a biography of Chubb's life, and it is difficult for the reader to distinguish between Chubb's story and Wode-Douglass' reflections upon it.

In both novels issues of fictionality are raised in the context of post-colonialism, and it is argued that "Carey's post-modernism is used in the service of his post-colonialism" (K.H. Petersen quoted in Woodcock 122). Carey seems to suggest how difficult it is to (re)gain one's own voice, particularly as a post-colonial writer. But he is not just 'listening' to the great English narratives but also uses his own works as a treasure-house for themes, narratives and narrative strategies. So Carey seems to 'steal' his own ideas and, by doing so, parodies the post-modern narrative strategy of referring to various texts or authors and the post-colonial device of referring to the homeland's literary traditions.

Key Conceits in Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake*

The novel's title already implies the complexity of the tale and its many implications: "*My Life as a Fake* – but whose," asks Gorra in his review entitled "Fabulous Forgeries," as "the phrase could apply to almost any character here, starting with his principle narrator: Sarah Wode-Douglass" (163). The same applies to both the hoaxer Christopher Chubb making his 'confession' to Wode-Douglass as well as to his creation Bob McCorkle whose unpublished volume of poems is also entitled *My Life as a Fake*. Also the reader was half-expecting a confessional, autobiographic tale by Carey himself, but is offered a tale in which Carey's identity as a man and writer is further blurred in the maze of *My Life as a Fake*. While Carey is often accused of "narrative trickery" (as in Ryan-Fazilleau 51f), leading his own readers astray, in this essay it is argued that *My Life as a Fake* could be read as a post-modern defence of literature., reminding the readers of the nature of literature as 'fake'.

My Life as a Fake is a novel obsessed with any possible form of pretence: The reader encounters a 'fake' poet with a 'fake' biography, 'fake' poems written by the hoaxer Christopher Chubb, and characters that tend to communicate several variants of 'truth' about themselves. The story itself is based on a lie, "and that is where the story begins, for it was clear to me that he [John Slater] was lying" (Carey, *MLF* 12). The novel's

main I-narrator is Sarah Wode-Douglass, editor of an English poetry magazine called *The Modern Review*, obviously intrigued by literature that Plato regarded as fake, an imitation in words of an imitation in matter, hence being inferior, deceptive, and dangerous.

Wode-Douglass is introduced as an unreliable narrator as she still suffers from a trauma that continues to affect her faculty of judgement as well as her memories. When she describes her tragic family background with her mother's suicide at the centre, she explains that, according to her memory, the poet and family-friend John Slater is to blame for her mother's death, "finally I understood, or thought I did" (3). It is Slater who, half-way through the novel, helps her to regain her childhood memories that she had successfully suppressed for decades. The disclosure of her families' secret causes a fundamental identity crisis as "almost everything I had assumed about my life was incorrect, that I had been baptised in blood and raised on secrets and misconstructions which had, obviously, made me who I was" (136). The novel's narrative structure is constructed around this maze of (self-) invention; Carey cleverly transfers the main plot – and the disclosure of several sub-plots – to Malaysia, offering a "clammily atmospheric depiction of 1970s Kuala Lumpur" (Flockhart), the focal point of new Malaysia. The former British colony, which became independent in 1957, symbolises the potential of any colony to claim autonomy and the potential for substantial change. It is Slater who, right at the beginning of the narrative, asks Wode-Douglass to join her on his trip to Kuala Lumpur and drags her both into the city's mesmerizing atmosphere and her own memories. As Kuala Lumpur suffered from a severe crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the civil unrest that was spawned by racial tensions, so does Wode-Douglass undergo transformations that yet again cause unexpected twists in the story.

Wode-Douglass agrees to accept Slater's unexpected invitation because she is hoping to discover the 'truth' about her family's history as well as Slater's role in it. Hence in Malaysia, much of the action of the novel is set, unfolding on several narrative levels. Wode-Douglass coincidentally meets the hoaxer Christopher Chubb at his bicycle repair shop situated close to "the stinking Chinese wet markets" (10), a shabby man whose legs are covered with repulsive ulcers. And yet the man, sitting on a broken plastic chair, catches her attention because he is reading Rilke's *Sonnet to Orpheus*. She spontaneously decides to give him the latest copy of *The Modern Review*. Later Chubb offers her the story of his life – in an Australian English with Malaysian inflections. Wode-Douglass is drawn into his narration, a maze of events on the verge of credibility. Upon glimpsing a manuscript in Chubb's possession, a book of poems entitled *My Life as a Fake* – Wode-Douglass is eager to obtain them for *The Modern Review*. Although the McCorkle hoax should be seen as a cautionary tale such as its literary model, she is seduced by the dream of every editor to publish a hitherto undiscovered genius. The more eager she becomes, the more uncomfortable the reader feels as the question is lurking whether or not Wode-Douglass is being hoaxed just as David Weiss was before her. The reader's discomfort worsens when he learns that she had indulged in lifelong self-deception over the nature of her parents' marriage.

In addition to these two central narrative voices we find several other I-narrators, for instance John Slater's account of the McCorkle hoax. Also each and every character in the novel offers different versions of 'truth' so that 'truth' is uncertain, ignored or unbelievable. As a consequence in *My Life as a Fake* Peter Carey "has tackled the ultimate post-modern subject area, creating a story that is onion-like in both structure and its layers of meaning" (Thomson).

At the centre of the novel are two conceits (cf. Mahony 2): Firstly, with his "Author's Note" Carey establishes a clear reference to the Ern Malley hoax as the inspiration behind the novel. Carey takes Harris' notion, "I still believe in Ern Malley," and makes it literal by having the fictitious poet called into existence by the hoax. Carey is pushing this idea to the fictional limits by imagining the unhappiness of a creature who was "dragged into the world fully formed at the age of 24" (2) and kidnaps Chubb's adopted baby daughter as a compensation for being denied a proper childhood.

Secondly, Carey's earnest admiration of the fake poems created by McAuley and Stewart made him consider these poems as superior to their true author's work. Consequently, in *My Life as a Fake*, the faked Bob McCorkle's poems are presented as masterpieces that surpass any other work ever written by Chubb. Carey plays with this notion when it is claimed by Chubb that the incarnation of Bob McCorkle has written poems clearly showing the hand of a genius. It is this complex twist in the story that serves as frame tale enfolding the saga of Chubb and McCorkle, the Frankenstein-figure and his enraged monster.

Intertextual references to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)

The chief idea behind *My Life as a Fake* is the way in which the creation of something inanimate, in this case a set of poems, can generate its own life. In the original Ern Malley-incident, the fake poems generated their own devotees and criticism, gaining 'life' independent of their authors. Consequently, Ern Malley is referred to as "Australia's 'National Poet'" (Lehman 47), a claim that parodies the Eurocentric view on Australia as a formerly colonised nation lacking its own national identity. Years after the exposure of the hoax, Max Harris charmingly upheld that Ern Malley has a tangible existence: "I still believe in Ern Malley" (quoted in Carey, "AN" 273). The humiliated editor did not mean this position as "a piece of smart talk" but suggested that he was offered – along with the poems – Ern Malley's "life, his ideas, his love, his disease, and his death" (273). It might have been Harris' romantic vision of Ern Malley that inspired Carey to write *My Life as a Fake*:

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. (274)

Carey quotes this "article of strange faith" (Updike) in his "Author's Note" and includes the epitaph from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as intertextual reference:

"I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me."

Mary Shelley,

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818.

The subtitle *The Modern Prometheus* refers to a figure in Greek mythology that was held responsible for a conflict between mankind and the gods. It is said that Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans. In vengeance, Zeus created Pandora, who married Prometheus's brother and set loose all the evils of the world. Also Zeus had Prometheus chained to a mountain and sent an eagle to devour his liver that regenerated over night so that he had to suffer the same torment over and over again. It also refers to the story of Prometheus in which it is claimed that he created mankind out of clay. These two myths eventually became one; and the stolen fire is the fire of life with which he animated his clay models. Prometheus, as both the creator and animator of mankind, became a symbol for the artist in the eighteenth century. Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can indeed be considered "The Modern Prometheus" as he defies the gods by creating life himself. Victor assumes God's place as a creator and, just as Prometheus, Victor gets punished for his deeds. Mary Shelley's variant of the Prometheus-tale invents that her creator-figure is not punished by God but by his own creation.

The epitaph proves that Carey's *My Life as a Fake* is a post-modern take on the multi-dimensional story of Prometheus – and his literary successors. Carey combines elements from the original Prometheus-tale and from Shelley's *Frankenstein*, fusing them to become the 'Prometheus'-figure, Christopher Chubb, who creates a human 'monster' that haunts him for years. The flesh-and-bone appearance of Chubb's fictitious poet, Bob McCorkle, can be seen as the punishment, reminding us of Shelley's cautionary tale. As Victor Frankenstein was merely interested in a scientific experiment, ignorant of the consequences for his monstrous creature, so does Chubb think he is merely writing several fake poems in order to teach his old school fellow David Weiss a lesson. When Chubb is narrating the background of the hoax that turned into disaster to Wode-Douglass, eager to be forgiven, he suggests it was merely meant as a harmless trick on a schoolfellow:

Well, I was jealous of Weiss, won't say I wasn't. We were all struggling poets, trying to find our voices, to be published in little magazines printed on brown wrapping paper. It was the war, the end of civilisation, who could know? I was twenty-four, a private in the army in New Guinea. Weiss had some cushy job in the Department of Defence. He sat on his bum in Melbourne. I was shot by bloody Japs, carried on a litter for sixty miles, dropped and bloody-well abandoned in an ambush. *Cheh*. [...] Delivered to hospital in Rabaul; transferred to Townsville, where I was given this poetry magazine called *Personae*. No brown paper here-*lah*. Top-hole only, the best stock, a cover painting in colour. Inside, all the very latest fashions in poetry and art. And who was the editor? David Weiss! My first feeling? Jealousy. (Carey, *My Life as a Fake* 31-32)

Wode-Douglass is to serve as a substitute for the deceased David Weiss; if she believes Chubb's tale in which he presents himself as victimised, she will absolve him

for his vices. Silently, they make a deal: "I wished to read that fragment again, as he well knew, and so I must endure his tale" (29). Although Slater, voicing Plato's concern, warns her that "he will drag you into his delusional world, have you believing the most preposterous things" (37), she cannot resist though she is aware of the danger involved: "Although here again I was reminded of the way a dog or cat will eat, always cautious, concerned that a delicacy might be the bait inside a trap" (37-8). Chubb opens his story by telling her that "it is not poetry I want to tell you about [...]. Something much worse-*lah*. Sit" (42). So she sits down and listens to Chubb's tale of how he found himself followed and threatened by a man claiming to actually be the fictitious poet, Bob McCorkle. It is in this sense that Carey's work self-consciously mirrors the idea of Victor Frankenstein, the creator haunted by his creation. Interestingly, Chubb discovered that David Weiss was being punished for his 'joke' while in military hospital in Townsville where another patient was reading about the Weiss-trial in the *Townsville Advocate*:

There are two headlines that are burned into my brain, said Chubb. The first is WAR WITH GERMANY. The second, seven years later, is 'BOB MCCORKLE' TO BE PROSECUTED FOR OBSCENITY. [...]. Poetry on the front page! Imagine! The photograph I recognised as one I made myself, patched together from three different men. My creature. Over six feet tall. Fantastic head, huge powerful nose and cheekbones, great forehead like the bust of Shakespeare. I had put him together with the help of my friend Tess McMahon. Chopped him up and glued him. [...]. What resurrectionists we were-*lah*. Tess laid a sixty-five screen stipple over it all, and the papers had to rescreen it. After all, no scars visible. (52-53)

He immediately called Weiss overseas, and as he recalls the "three-minute call," Weiss claimed that the fake poems were "far beyond me," insisting that "I was incapable of writing what I wrote. What hubris-*lah*". When Chubb reminds him, "I was the one who made Bob McCorkle, not just the words, but also cut up his head and legs and body. I physically pasted him together," the young editor replies, "doesn't matter. I am his publisher" (53-4). These words clearly refer to Carey's two sources of inspiration, the Ern Malley hoax with Max Harris belief in McCorkle's existence and Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the way how Victor Frankenstein discovers how to animate lifeless matter and, by assembling body parts, creates a hideous monster that will later confront him with his life story:

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. [...], I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? (Shelley Chapter V)

Chubb must have felt similarly when, during the trial, a man appears who looks like McCorkle's photograph. Weiss is convinced that Chubb "employ[ed] this creature to taunt me" (64). When he confronts Chubb that "it is the malice, Christopher, that sickens me. [...]. You take my breath away" it is foreshadowed that Chubb caused his death – and Weiss "[went] home to hang himself" (65). On the day of Weiss' funeral, the person that had caused such uproar at court follows Chubb. He is described as a

giant with a strong Australian accent dressed expensively in black (cf. 76). The man who will soon claim to be McCorkle confesses to Chubb that he had attacked Vogelsang, the leading prosecutor of Weiss, to "prevent further insult to my publisher" (77). According to the creature, Vogelsang "failed to understand the authority given me as a poet. He told me it did not matter what I did. I could not prevent David Weiss being found guilty" (80). Again Carey raises the issue of authorship and compares the creature's relationship to his publisher/creator to the colony/coloniser relationship: "You must understand that David Weiss was like a mother, for he had brought me into the world, had given me life, had stood by me no matter what my enemies had said. When they called me a fake, he never once doubted me" (81). Carey not only suggests the complex relationship between Australia as colony and England as motherland but also implies that Australia was invented by what has been written about the country that had not yet raised its own voice:

Yet here is the strange thing – we had not met personally. All he had were letters from my so-called sister. I have no sister but these were written by someone who claimed that I was dead. Certain of the allegations were fair enough. I had been a bicycle mechanic and I still work for Mass Mutual, where I happen to be a successful salesman. But I had not died and the person who wrote those letters was a liar many times over. (81)

Reading this passage as an allusion to the relation between England and Australia, Carey suggests that, although England got some details right, the coloniser's presentation of Australia is based on lies and misconceptions. The passage, from a post-colonial perspective, suggests that Australia (the creature) confronts its motherland (the hoaxer) with its own version of the 'truth' to dismantle the colonialist power. It is a clever detail to claim that "we had not met personally", thus stressing the fact that the relationship is based on written material (letters) from a third party (so-called sister). The creature continues its tale, describing how their first personal contact had utterly failed:

Alas, he said, I frightened him. I did announce myself, of course. I am Bob McCorkle, I said. And it was not as if he had not seen my photograph. He'd published it himself. You must have seen it too. [...]. But he shrieked at me to get out. Shrieked! At me! He was dressed only in shirt and underpants, but he was my publisher. I loved him. I took off my coat and held it out so he could cover himself but he struck it from my hand and cried, Monster! (83)

In agony, McCorkle repeats, "I am Bob McCorkle". He wanted to prove his point by reciting one of "his poems" (83). Here Carey inserts an original 'fake' poem of 'Ern Malley' and lets the creature recite it once again to Chubb. "But noting had prepared [Chubb] for this performance of it, [...] and the voice [...] was here so fierce and nasal, hoarse, ravaged by failure and regret" (84). And as the poem had been "conceived as a parody," it now becomes "the song of the autodidact, the colonial, the damaged beast of the antipodes" (84). Weiss fled from the creature's performance and "spoke your name and said I was your creation, that you'd put my parts together" (85). According to McCorkle, Weiss tried to get out of the window, but his head hit the floor. "I killed him," said the creature to Chubb and released Chubb's arm. He ran off and decided to travel to Sydney to find out about the dubious 'Bob McCorkle,'

Consulting birth registers. It is much later when he understands, "I had brought him forth" (100). When Wode-Douglass asks, "from where," he says, "How do I know from where) From hell, I suppose. How would I know where I brought him forth from? Imagined someone and he came into being" (100).

In addition to 'bringing forth' the fictitious poet, Chubb even became the 'father' of an infant. It was in 1975 when Chubb's lover, Nousette, delivered a baby that she rejected immediately after the birth. Chubb, on finding adoption papers that said "Father Unknown," told her that he would adopt her baby girl. But within a week of acting as the father does McCorkle creature and he accuses Chubb, "you never gave me a childhood" (154). "Can you imagine to be born at twenty-four," he asks, claiming "you made my life a joke" (154-5). When Chubb tries to find out where McCorkle now lives, he answers:

Wherever I am, I have put myself outside your power. I have made myself a whole man, almost – except, when I hold this child, I feel the weight of everything you stole from me. This I had not expected, but now I know exactly what I want from you. [...]. This is a childhood, he says. (155-6)

According to the reading of *My Life as a Fake* as a Prometheus-tale with post-colonial implications, the creature/Australia recognises that the creator/England had withheld him his own childhood/history. He claims his own power over its biography/history, and – by stealing the baby symbolising 'new literature' – he relives/rewrites his childhood/history. Chubb was accused of murder and "by the time Chubb was found not guilty, his life had been effectively destroyed" (160). Then, Chubb tracks the creature down, after years of chasing him. Nousette's little girl had accepted the creature as her father. While Wode-Douglass writes down Chubb's tale in several sessions, she recognises her "growing involvement in his history" (207). By documenting his life at Hotel Merlin, Kuala Lumpur, in August 1972, she "had become his collaborator" (209). But as she knows that Chubb will not give her the book with poetry written by McCorkle, until she "had recorded every remaining detail of his damn history", she agrees (217). Wode-Douglass has become obsessed with the idea of obtaining the volume that seemed to have a life of its own:

Chubb now touched the book which had sat there on the table these last three hours. Its binding was both disfigured and beautiful, like the bark of a birch, but also wrinkled and tropical, like a Morton Bay fig. It was mottled, striated, and when he laid his square hand on it and his cracked nails and liver spots made contact with its weathered skin, both book and hand seemed to be related parts of the same creature. 230

Just as McCorkle had taken the baby girl as his token, so does Chubb now use McCorkle's volume of poems as a token, and this parallel is highlighted by depicting the book as a living creature. Later on Wode-Douglass decides to pay Chubb's 'family' – Nousette's grown daughter and McCorkle's former lover, a Chinese woman – a visit to ask for McCorkle's book. The women, however, want to trade it for money: "We helped him make his poetry. We gave everything. Now we must have money" (239). Only under constant supervision does the Chinese woman allow her to read in McCorkle's book. Despite the strange conditions, she realises that the poems are masterpieces: "Whoever he was or had been, Bob McCorkle was indeed a genius.

He had ripped up history and nailed it back together with its viscera on the outside, all that glistening green truth showing in the rip marks" (240). Carey seems to suggest that 'truth' can only be found when history (as dominant discourse) is rewritten by the colonized. Wode-Douglass, thus intrigued by her valuable discovery, conjures up a romantic vision of McCorkle's life:

What a bloody battle it had been, and all through the combat the personae of the poet rage like a Hindu hero, many-limbed, a swirling figure, at once God and Fool. 'Not a word was known to him and twenty-four years gone.' To say that the poet had attempted to create a country may sound simply glib, until you understand that this is exactly what he has done [...]. This was worth being born for, this single giddy glimpse, on this high place, with the sound of my own blood singing in my ears. (240)

Reluctantly, she hands the book back to the women she describes as custodians. The book is part of McCorkle's unpublished works, fifty volumes altogether, and "the scope and ambition of the work far outweighed the 'nature notes' of any poet who ever lived" and the women "had been partners in one of the greatest projects of Malaysian natural history" (244). These fragile books had 'travelled' through the humid fungal rain forests of Malaysia" and had survived although the "jungle rots and discolours paper as brutally as it does human skin" (244). McCorkle's daughter Tina and his former lover, her body marked with scars, she and John Slater learn about their life with McCorkle. The Chinese woman told her how her husband had been murdered by pirates and when McCorkle and Tina arrived in the Malaysian jungle, "collecting leaves and flowers, and peeling bark and fibre to make paper for the journals", they visited the isolated widow in her shelter, and McCorkle provided her with food. Soon "the pair of them drew closer and ultimately became [...] a couple" (242). Chubb, however, stresses another aspect of their relationship between the three outcasts:

They are slaves to that damn creature, he continued. What a great egoist McCorkle was. All for art! He drove them through thorns. [...] Mauled by a wild pig, I am not joking, my daughter nearly died. Not just her, the pair of them. The bastard bent them, twisted them. They served him and even now that he's dead and buried they serve him still. Every night, they burn their incense and dust off his memory. And the book, that is the heart of it. They have not the least idea of what it is they guard, but they set its value very high. (248-9)

Mesmerized by her exceptional discovery that she plans to publish in her struggling poetry magazine, she and Chubb decide to steal the book. This plan reminds of McCorkle kidnapping the infant girl. But before Chubb can deliver her the poetry she could "put together an issue so extraordinary that all the problems would be solved," he insists that he first has to "tell her the worst" of his life story (252). Wode-Douglass records Chubb's anger about the creature's capacity to "poison [his] daughter's natural love for [him]" (253) and how he tried to kill it. After the incident in which the man had not died, the attacker was deported to Australia by the authorities – an obvious allusion to Australia's early history as a penal settlement. It was the creature that had "shaped my life, stolen my heart, cramped my fingers, made me a homeless traveller" (255) – just as Victor Frankenstein was chased by his monster. A year later the creature wrote a letter to Chubb, writing: "'It is thanks to you', he wrote, 'thanks

exactly to what you planned for me, that I am now dying of Graves' disease and will leave my family alone and penniless" (256). Chubb once again travelled from Sydney to Malaysia to make his daughter "see me save the bastard's life" (257). Chubb finds the "miserable monster" in the care of the two desperate women who display their hatred towards him openly: "And there he lay, the thing I had brought to life, the brutish genius, glistening in the dark" [...]. He had become disgusting – gaunt, emaciated (259). "At this stage," he said to Wode-Douglass, "I did not doubt I had invented his disease" (259). The sick creature that Chubb depicts as a "dying Jesus in a Roman church" makes him understand to nurse him, "I was the one he designated to touch his skin" (260). Fifteen years after the McCorkle hoax creator and creature find themselves intimately connected; and the creature claims on the deathbed, "we are one, you and I" (262). After this confession he gives Chubb his volume of poetry entitled *My Life as a Fake*, and Chubb promises to guard it. On the following day the man dies, "hold[ing] the book against his chest" (263).

Having finished his tale, Chubb leaves Wode-Douglass with the promise to obtain the book for her. When Slater finds out their plan to steal the book, he calls the women "dogs of hell" and insists that she has to "call him off" (267). The two of them walk to the bicycle repair shop, but they are too late, and find Chubb beheaded, "a soft blur of that beautifully shaped monk's head" (269), his body dismembered. This is how the women reverse his former act of creation. It is Slater who leads Wode-Douglass away from the horrible sight and – yet again – tells her the truth of the incident that she herself could not grasp: "They're lying, darling. About bloody everything. [...]. Darling, don't you understand? They killed him" (271). As a cover-up of their murder, they had inflicted wounds on each other.

To Wode-Douglass, this traumatic experience and the loss of her "extraordinary find" feels like "a wound that would not heal". After the incident, she explains the reader, she commenced travelling compulsively "gathering up limb by limb of that horrid puzzle" (271). When, in 1985, she suffers a nervous-breakdown and it is deemed important for her convalescence to return to Kuala Lumpur, Slater joins her on her trip to Kuala Lumpur. The novel ends with them revisiting the bicycle shop in which thirteen years ago the murder of Chubb had been committed: They recognise Tina and the Chinese woman and leave the place. The novel ends with Wode-Douglass' assumption that "McCorkle's manuscript remained in the shrine upstairs, although by then it seemed foul to me as the disgusting giant orchid with which Mrs Lim had first attracted the poet's attention" (272). Chubb's death, particularly the dismembering of his body, is stated as the 'logic' consequence of his creation; the reversal of joining together different body parts to create his 'monster'.

Conclusion: Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake* as a post-modern Prometheus-tale?

As Mary Shelley subtitled *Frankenstein* "The Modern Prometheus," it is tempting to consider *My Life as a Fake* as "The Post-modern Prometheus". The book review of *My Life as a Fake* with the catchy title "Never Mess With a Poet," also suggests this line of thought (cf. Rafferty 12). By framing the novel with the epitaph and his afterword, Carey's acknowledges that he is both indebted to the Ern Malley hoax and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. And yet *My Life as a Fake* is not just a novel drawing

heavily on a famous Australian hoax and an English masterpiece, but demonstrates that the production of literary forgery reveals the false nature of literature itself. Thus *My Life as a Fake*, though probably not as substantial as some of his former novels, should be considered a post-modern reflection of the 'true' nature of literature. With *My Life as a Fake* Carey has once again placed himself in the context of world literature, also referring to diverse writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, and T.S. Eliot. While Heyward referred to Ern Malley's set of poems as "the most decisive piece of literary criticism ever produced in Australia" (quoted in Lloyd 238), I herewith suggest that Carey challenges literary criticism to re-open the ancient discussion on literature. While Carey self-mockingly tries to overcome the Australian's inferiority complex, he reminds his readers that all literature, regardless of the writer's nationality, is – fake. Or is it not?

The discussion is opened.

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