The Creation of Genius - Peter Carey's
My life as a Fake
Geoffrey Gates
Peter Carey’s 2003 novel *My Life as a Fake* challenges received ideas about the nature of genius through the invention of a hoax poet, Bob McCorkle, whose poetry is considerably better than his inventor, Christopher Chubb. No stranger to works of fiction that draw on history or established literary texts, Carey incorporates Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a textual skeleton, while the real life story of two Australian hoaxers from the 1940s, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, provide the historical guts and gizzard. To demonstrate Carey’s thinking -- McAuley and Stewart ‘created’ Ern Malley as a deceased modernist poet and fooled the editor of the avant-garde Australian magazine *Angry Penguins* into publishing ‘The Darkening Ecliptic’, only for the poetry to live on, lauded as surrealism by such critics as Robert Hughes. In *My Life as a Fake*, McCorkle as hoax poet more literally comes to life, stealing Chubb’s daughter and making his life one of terror and pursuit, under the power of the monster let loose by his own pen.
Carey’s innovations on these two sources are many, interesting and culturally significant. At the heart of the historical hoax is a biff with modernism which McCauley and Stewart regarded as a ‘fad [so that] any claim to sophisticated good taste derived from modernism was necessarily fraudulent’ (MacLeod, 2011, p. 39). Parody is as natural a reaction to the judgements of literary elites as graffiti is to political disappointment. Carey’s commentary centres on this significance of such a hoax in a ‘fragile’ Australian culture, whose view of itself at the time was that of the ‘second rate, the shallow, the provincial’ (Carey, 2003, p. 88). This is to say, once the hoax is uncovered, the egg on the face is of a post-colonial variety – all the more sticky and embarrassing for it. Bill Ashcroft and John Salter, as post-colonial theorists, see the influence of modernism beyond the metropole in imperialist terms: ‘Modernity and modernism are rooted in empire’ (cited in Ramazani, 2006, p. 447). The shift from Australia to post-colonial Malaysia for much of the story emphasises these concerns. Into this setting, Carey places British literary editor Sarah Wode-Douglas as a storyteller and would-be imperialist/modernist whose ‘discovery’ (of McCorkle) will rescue her magazine, itself a kind of literary theft and appropriation to the centre. That Carey has a fierce Chinese woman and Chubb’s/McCorkle’s daughter thwart Wode-Douglas’s desires is as much the point as it is the frustration of the novel’s conclusion.

To embellish a little – a ‘provincial’ culture longs for recognition by its imperial centre, just as Frankenstein’s creation ultimately wishes for the approval of Frankenstein; his bitterness and revenge equal in this respect to his yearning for love. In his novel telling, Carey includes extracts from McAuley and Stewart’s ‘The Darkening Ecliptic’ and details from the subsequent obscenity trial for its inclusion of sexual allusions beyond the conservative Australian tastes of the time. There has been some discussion about whether McAuley and Stewart wished to go further in writing more than the seventeen poems they submitted to Angry Penguins; in My Life is a Fake this is clearly the case. Like Shelley’s Frankenstein’s creature in his Swiss hideaway, learning language is a first step. Carey’s placement of the story in Asia means that McCorkle’s intellectual progress is beyond his creator’s experience: ‘What a triumph he 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 had never heard of’ (Carey, 2003, p. 241). In an episode alluding to Frankenstein, then, this creature leaves food for Mrs Lim, who in turn provides the names of things, the beginnings of McCorkle’s encyclopaedic collection. Wode-Douglas concludes from the sampling of one of fifty volumes that ‘the scope and ambition of [McCorkle’s] work far outweighed the “nature notes” of any poet who ever lived’ (Carey, 2006, p. 231). On the same page, Carey mentions that ‘this occurred in November of 1960, by which time Malaya had won independence’ – reminding us of the post-colonial context. In such a context, surrendering the poems to a London magazine – even if this might lead to belated recognition by the centre of provincial genius – is less satisfactory than them remaining unsullied, guarded above a bicycle shop in Kuala Lumpur.

If I can speculate a little further, perhaps Carey is suggesting that a work of genius and the genius behind that work can exist even if not receiving recognition in the European centre, or being published in a modernist magazine to establish its glory. This notion in turn serves
to countenance its opposite idea, a sacrilege of sorts. What if much that is taken to be a sign of European genius represents a fake in itself, an assemblage of parts, positioned by fashion and taste? What if Eliot, or Pound or Thomas is -- in part at least -- McCorkle born in the right time and place, rather than in far-flung Adelaide, or Sydney or Kuala Lumpur? Carey does not suggest anything as directly as this in his own work, though he lets us in to literary parties where part-time narrator John Slater is obviously well-connected, but something of a wastrel: certainly a poetic under-performer. Whereas poor Christopher Chubb as antipodean version of a charlatan poet longs for a suit to give him status and ‘face’, Englishman Slater strolls through the novel with nonchalance, dressed ‘in a rumpled white linen suit in which he managed to suggest a romantic, if elderly, incarnation of the English poet’ (Carey, 2003, p. 138). Here is a great irony of which perhaps only a ‘provincial’ writer can get away with. Carey’s Australian characters – Chubb and his nemesis offspring, McCorkle – end the novel unrecognised, with McCorkle’s manuscript *My Life as a Fake* well hidden from view. In the meantime, double-Booker Prize winner Carey struts his stuff by making an authentic tale out of the skeleton of a European classic and the guts and gizzard of an Antipodean embarrassment. That is, in some senses at least, the creation of genius.
Works Cited


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Australian writer and teacher. His short fiction has appeared in academic journals such as *Ve-randah, Dotlit, Vanguard, LINQ* and *Southerly*. Geoffrey’s novels *A Ticket for Perpetual Locomotion* (2005) and *The Copyart Murders* (2015) were published by Interactive Press. Geoffrey is currently undertaking a Doctor of Creative Arts degree at Western Sydney University, where his research interests include modernist art and Australian expatriate writing. He spent the month of September 2017 in Barcelona at the Jiwar Writer and Artist Residency, working on a novel set partly in Barcelona.