

# Hideous Progeny: Forgery, *Frankenstein*, and Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake*

MARK OSTEEN

*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 me that the mind repeats  
In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still  
The black swan of trespass on alien waters.*

—Ern Malley, “Durer: Innsbruck, 1495”

*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* 60

One Saturday afternoon in October, 1943, Lt. James McAuley and Cpl. Harold Stewart, poet/soldiers stationed in Melbourne, Australia, decided to play a trick on Max Harris, the youthful editor of *Angry Penguins*, a literary journal that championed modernist poetry. Using only the books they had at hand—a complete Shakespeare, Ripman's *Pocket Dictionary of English Rhymes*, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, a book of quotations, as well as a report on mosquito control—they crafted a series of poems that they attributed to an imaginary figure named Ern Malley. After crumpling the paper and staining it with tea to evoke Malley's tortured drafting, they sent three poems and a letter from Ern's equally fictional sister, Ethel, informing Harris that the twenty-five-year-old Ern had recently died from Graves' disease and had left his work with her. Immensely impressed, Harris replied to Ethel that he wanted to publish the poems and wished to see more of Ern's output. Ethel duly sent a book

of seventeen poems entitled *The Darkening Ecliptic*, along with a preface outlining Ern's aesthetic principles. Harris published these writings in June 1944. Within two weeks the hoax was exposed, and McAuley and Stewart penned a letter explaining that the trick was a "serious literary experiment" aimed at discrediting modernism, which had led to the "gradual decay of meaning and craftsmanship in poetry" (*Ern Malley's Poems* [EMP] 7). Not long afterward, Harris was arrested, tried, and convicted of publishing "indecent" material in the Malley poems.

Many literary historians, especially Australians, are familiar with this version of the incident. But like all literary fakes, the Malley forgeries are enveloped within at least two stories—one meant to authenticate the fake, and a second designed to explain and justify the perpetrators' motives. The second story is also partly fictional.

One night in June 1816, eighteen-year-old Mary Godwin had a "waking dream" (Shelley 24). Charged—along with her lover, Percy Shelley, and his friends, Lord Byron and John Polidori—to write a ghost story, she had struggled to discover a topic. Out of her nightmarish vision arose the image of a "pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together" (Shelley 24). She saw the being stir and the creator awaken: "behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening the curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes" (24). Thus did she conceive *Frankenstein*, according to her preface to the 1831 edition. At the end of that preface, she writes, "I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it; it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words" (25). Mary Godwin Shelley's wish for her patchwork novel identifies literary and physical creation—a striking association from a woman who had, by 1831, borne four children and watched three of them die. It was as if her literary offspring might compensate for her babies' deaths.

In 2003, Peter Carey married the Malley and Shelley stories. The issue of this unlikely alliance is a novel about forgery, mon-

strous creation, and kidnapping told, like *Frankenstein*, via embedded narratives. As if to acknowledge its second-hand status, Carey titled his novel *My Life as a Fake* [*MLAF*]. The Ern Malley affair seems tailor-made for an author long fascinated by liars and frauds (e.g., Herbert Badgery, the extravagantly lying narrator of *Illywhacker*). Carey’s brainchild exemplifies the absurdities, complexities, and provocations of literary forgeries and the fictions they inspire and raises challenging questions about authorship, parenthood, and the power of writing to shape identity.

Carey’s frame narrator is Sarah Wode-Douglass, editor of *The Modern Review*, who, in 1985, remembers being lured to Malaysia thirteen years earlier by a family friend, elder poet and best-selling novelist John Slater. In Kuala Lumpur she met an Australian named Christopher Chubb, who told her a complicated and frankly incredible tale. In the 1940s, Chubb, angry at having his poems rejected by David Weiss, editor of the journal *Personae*, invented a (deceased) working-class poet named Bob McCorkle and his sister, who sent to Weiss McCorkle’s book, *The Darkening Ecliptic*. Chubb even fashioned a photo of McCorkle by cutting and pasting images from a magazine. Weiss published the poems, enthusiastically announcing the discovery of a genius, but was soon arrested and tried for obscenity. So far, aside from the number of hoaxers, the story follows the Malley affair closely. Enter Frankenstein, or, rather, Frankenstein’s creature: a tall man calling himself Bob McCorkle interrupted the trial and soon semi-accidentally killed Weiss. A few years later, McCorkle kidnapped Chubb’s adopted daughter, Tina, and led him on a chase across Malaysia. Then McCorkle died, leaving behind his own hideous progeny—both his scarred daughter and a manuscript of brilliant poems written on bark paper. Ultimately Chubb was killed; and despite her obsessive pursuit of the McCorkle magnum opus, Sarah never obtained it.

In revisiting the most famous literary forgery of the twentieth century Carey perpetrates a different sort of forgery by enlisting *Frankenstein* and expanding Shelley’s (and Malley’s)

metaphoric link between physical reproduction and textual creation. The result is more hideous progeny—a textual body formed by stitching together fragments of other textual bodies. Carey’s novel indeed suggests that all literary works are fakes that nonetheless thrust themselves, like Frankenstein’s creature and Bob McCorkle, into the real world. Far from endorsing Foucault’s definition of an author as the “principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning” (159), *MLA* suggests that authorship fosters proliferation and that forging never ends.

The Ern Malley poems differ from, say, William-Henry Ireland’s Shakespeare forgeries, in which The Bard’s name was used to garnish Ireland’s clumsy work. What makes them both forgeries? Umberto Eco proposes that a forgery is “any text whose actual provenance differs from what it is made out to be” (606). This admirably succinct definition elides too many nuances: for example, it would also encompass plagiarism. But a plagiarist signs her own name to someone else’s work, whereas a forger signs someone else’s name to her own work. A plagiarist desires credit; a forger (ostensibly) denies it. According to Nick Groom, a forgery “has no actual source; it conjures the illusion of a source. A forgery of a Picasso would be an original work, but located in Picasso’s oeuvre” (*Shadow* 16). This definition is not quite right, either: forgeries such as Thomas Chatterton’s Rowley works possess an actual source—Chatterton. What these definitions miss is that the essence of forgery is *the signature* that transforms a work—whether original or copied—into a fraud. Authorship, that is, depends upon an autograph. The signature is designed to link mind and body, to serve as a tangible signifier of an author’s presence. In the economic domain, an autograph likewise distinguishes genuine from counterfeit currency or forged checks. A false signature, as Peter de Bolla points out, “inserts the possibility of multiple personality, or no identity at all, into the paper-thin circulation of trust in a speculative society,” thereby creating “the possibility for the destabilization of self, society and certainty” (73). Such multiple personalities

and destabilizations occur not only in the Malley forgeries, but also in *Frankenstein* and *MLAF*. Carey’s novel further suggests that human selfhood is brought forth, for better or worse, by writing and storytelling but that such identities are always unstable and metamorphic. In this regard a forged work is part of a larger imposture —the impersonation of an artist or author. A forgery offers a false story of origins, a masquerade authorized by a signature, emerging from what K. K. Ruthven calls “dispersed” authorship (92).

### BLACK SWAN

*“If this be the norm / Of our serious frolic / There’s no remorse”*

—Ern Malley, “Sonnets for the Novachord” (Brooks 305)<sup>1</sup>

“Literary forgery is criticism by other means,” writes Ruthven, who concludes that hoaxes “release creative energies not yet domesticated by those cultural conventions which legitimate literature as a social institution” (171, 199). His description fits the Malley poems, which Michael Heyward has called “the most decisive piece of literary criticism ever produced in Australia” (293). Throughout the affair and its aftermath, McAuley and Stewart insisted that their aims were literary, not personal. Nevertheless, Max Harris, a student at the University of Adelaide who had burst onto the scene as a champion of modernism with *Angry Penguins*, seemed to them as plump a target as a flightless bird, and Cassandra Pybus has shown that envy of the precocious Harris motivated the fraud (143-44). But Harris wasn’t entirely credulous: he sent the Malley poems to Adelaide Professor J. I. M. Stewart, who found them “derivative” and “incomprehensible” but did not detect a fraud; Harris’s co-editor, John Reed,

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<sup>1</sup> *The Darkening Ecliptic* poems are reprinted in Brooks 304-24. I’ve chosen this text over the one in *Ern Malley’s Poems* because Brooks incorporates an apparently unfinished poem, “So Long,” which McAuley and Stewart included in the packet but which Harris rejected.

deemed them marvelous. After Harris's encouraging reply to Ethel, she filled in Ern's biography: he had been a mechanic, then sold insurance, but died unknown and unpublished. Along with the seventeen poems comprising *The Darkening Ecliptic*, she forwarded Ern's "Preface and Statement," a manifesto packed with proclamations such as "Every poem should be an autarchy" (*EMP* 23; the line is plagiarized from Herbert Read). Both the preface and the biography—that of an unpolished, working-class genius—appealed to Harris's sensibilities. Fancying himself Max Brod to Malley's Kafka, he forged on with publication.<sup>2</sup>

McAuley and Stewart weren't merely pranksters: though only in their mid-twenties, both were published poets. Something of a prodigy and renaissance man, McAuley played accomplished jazz piano and had steeped himself in European poetry, particularly the French *Symbolistes*. Stewart had studied Jung, translated Mallarmé, and later became a Buddhist (Heyward 48, 65). They agreed, however, that modernism was a sham and proclaimed in their public statement that it "rendered its devotees insensible of absurdity and incapable of ordinary discrimination" (*EMP* 7). Yet they must have meant for Harris to realize eventually that he had been gulled: no exposure would mean no humiliation, in which case the jape would have no point. The Malley forgeries thus exemplify what Brian McHale calls a "trap-hoax," one designed "with didactic and punitive purposes in mind" (236).<sup>3</sup> To rub it in, they claimed to have "deliberately perpetrated bad

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<sup>2</sup>Meanwhile, Harold Stewart made Malley a visual artist as well, sending collages he had crafted from *National Geographic* photos and images borrowed from Dalí and Blake (Heyward 137). Malley's visual art, like his poetry and Frankenstein's creature, is a patchwork affair.

<sup>3</sup>McHale usefully distinguishes this type from the "genuine hoax," perpetrated "with no intention of ever being exposed," and the "mock-hoax," which is meant to be detected without springing humiliating traps (236-37). These classifications require assessing a hoaxer's intentions, however, which can be shifting or ambiguous and which may change depending on audiences. Thus some readers may see a given work as a trap-hoax while others view it as a mock-hoax.

verse,” selected awkward rhymes from Ripman, and pilfered the opening lines of “Culture as Exhibit” from a US officer’s report on draining mosquito breeding grounds (*EMP* 8). They also nonchalantly declared that they had written the Malley poems in a single afternoon (8). Their rules? They would muster no coherent theme, but present only inconsistent hints “held out as a bait”; they would take no care with verse technique; and the poems would imitate “the whole literary fashion” of European modernism (*EMP* 8). Ruthven comments that literary forgeries “disturb the societies in which they are produced . . . in ways resented by the guardians of cultural institutions” (2). In this case, however, the self-appointed “guardians” were the ones creating the disturbance. What were they guarding against? The incursions of cosmopolitanism. As McHale observes, a “nationalistic subtext” runs through this hoax (242), as it also did in James Macpherson’s Ossian poems, in Chatterton’s Rowley works, and, to a lesser degree, in the Ireland forgeries.

Should we believe their account? Probably not, for David Brooks has demonstrated that this story is nearly as fictional as Ern himself. First, their assertion of spontaneity and rapid composition is “undermined by a number of factors,” including the insertion of the Durer poem, which McAuley had written earlier and rejected (Brooks 70). They also used, or remembered, numerous other works in addition to those they listed, including several by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as those of Dante and Keats, among others (Brooks 240). Their professed disgust for modernism also seems suspect, given that McAuley had written a master’s thesis on the French *Symbolistes* a few years earlier and that Stewart had completed a book displaying the influence of Hart Crane, Mallarmé, and Rilke (Lloyd 22). Brooks thus argues that the Malley poems were the issue of McAuley’s internal struggle, a “dark night of the soul” from which he emerged with a scathing contempt for his former self (19). Ern Malley was a composite image of their former poetic personae. Yet the hoaxers’ procedures were, Philip Mead notes,

quintessentially modernist, as they employed found materials and aleatory methods reminiscent of the same Dadaists they scorn in their statement (117; *EMP*9).<sup>4</sup> The poems, then, are wrapped in a package of falsehoods: not only is the story of Ern and Ethel a fiction; the second, self-justifying story is at best misleading and at worst mendacious—a part of the hoax.

Soon after the hoaxers pretended to come clean, a police detective named Vogelesang arrested Harris for obscenity, having found some lines in Malley's poems "indecent." "Boult to Marina," which glosses some scenes in Shakespeare's (and a co-author's) play *Pericles* and contains a suggestive pun about standing "Boult-upright," and "Sweet William," which refers to an "unforgivable rape," were the main targets, but the poems were indicted as much for obscurity as for obscenity (Heyward 237). The September 1944 trial was a farce, with the prosecution arguing that the poems were nonsense while at the same time claiming their meanings were clear—and immoral. Literature professors J. I. M. Stewart and Brian Elliott testified; although the latter had expressed admiration for the poems, the two now agreed that parts of *Darkening Ecliptic* were "indecent" and "distasteful" (Heyward 169, 253-54). Ultimately Harris was convicted of publishing indecent material, fined £5 and forced to pay more than £21 in court costs.<sup>5</sup> McAuley and Stewart, though "embarrassed and appalled," faced no criminal or civil charges (Heyward 261). Despite its absurdities, the trial raises questions that Carey's novel develops: who is responsible for a work of literature? Is the author its sole "parent," or do other parties—editor, publisher, reader—serve as co-creators? Does

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<sup>4</sup>Herbert Read, who was likely the hoaxers' ultimate target, wrote to Harris that such fakers must follow procedures that are "akin to, if not identical with, the processes which produced the original work of art." Nor does it matter that they incorporated other sources, for such "mechanical aids to inspiration" are "legitimate" (qtd. in Harris, Introduction 10, 11).

<sup>5</sup>Much of Judge L. E. Clarke's decision is reproduced in Harris (Appendix 45-56).

a literary work, like a child, take on its own life once released from authorial control?

*“It is necessary to understand  
That a poet may not exist, that his writings  
Are the incomplete circle and straight drop  
Of a question mark. . . .”*

—Ern Malley, “Sybilline” (Brooks 308)

McAuley and Stewart end their public statement thus: “the writings of Ern Malley are utterly devoid of literary merit” (*EMP* 9). Many readers have disagreed. For one thing, *The Darkening Ecliptic* succeeds brilliantly as parody, cleverly alluding to various modernists and mimicking their styles (Heyward 184-85). In a piece included in the 1961 edition of the poems, Herbert Read points to the poems’ “effective use of vivid metaphor” and “subtle sense of rhythmic variation” (*EMP* 10); Brooks concludes that the Malley poems are “glorious, luxurious, sensical, profound” (243). Even venerated figures such as Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery have found much merit in them and have published their own “Malley” poems.<sup>6</sup> For these critics, Malley’s work exemplifies “a successful experiment in collaborative writing” (Mead 116), a prime instance of Ruthven’s “‘dispersed’ authorial practice” (92).

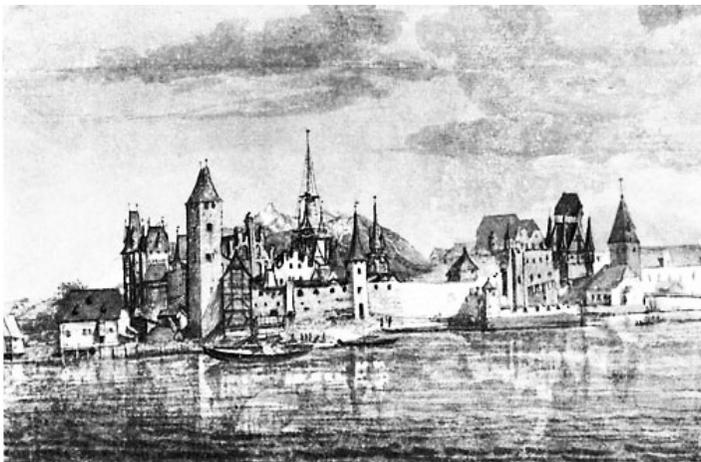
Robert Hughes suggests that the hoaxers “reached inspiration by the side door of parody” (305), but years later, McAuley maintained that the controversy was really a “quarrel over the nature of inspiration” and gamely tried to distinguish between “pseudo-inspiration”—which is a “surrender to irrational forces” without the “sovereign power of the shaping intellect”—and

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<sup>6</sup>While teaching at Brooklyn College in the 1970s, Ashbery administered an exam in which he presented students with a Malley poem next to one of Geoffrey Hill’s Mercian hymns and asked them to determine which one was the spoof. About half got it right (Heyward 288-89). Ashbery has also written two “Ern Malley poems.” Koch republished “Boult to Marina” and “Sybilline” in *Locus Solus II*, a journal of experimental writing that he edited in 1961 (Mead 116).

genuine inspiration, which is an “action of the whole man” (*EMP* 15, 16). But of course he and Stewart *did* shape *The Darkening Ecliptic* with their intellects, as the numerous allusions and the clever parodies demonstrate; hence, the poems are genuinely inspired according to McAuley’s own definition. And indeed, despite its weird words and awkward rhymes, *The Darkening Ecliptic* shoots off sparks of brilliance. Moreover, it coheres through motif and theme, the most pervasive being Malley’s nonexistence and the hoax itself.

This is never better expressed than in the complexly layered, ekphrastic opening poem, “Durer: Innsbruck, 1495,” a gloss on Albrecht Durer’s early painting “View of Innsbruck” (below), in which the town’s buildings are reflected in ghostly fashion in the river before them. The speaker envisions the painting behind his closed lids and finds the town “real,” but then understands that Durer had already grasped that art cannot capture reality but only copy it, that the water’s reflective powers anticipate his own representational art. The painting is thus a third-order representation that seeks to depict both the real town and its reflection in the water. The speaker’s creation, therefore, is



fourth-hand, a copy of a copy (the painting) of a copy (in the water) of the actual town.<sup>7</sup> More broadly, the poem implies that all modern art must acknowledge its belatedness—and it does so cleverly, through its symbiotic relationship to a previous work. Trumpeting its own lack of originality, it tests the notion that all art involves forgery or imitation—and embodies it, since the poem, written earlier by McAuley, is itself a kind of fake fake.<sup>8</sup>

There are further indications, such as the lines from “Sybilline” quoted above, that a fraud may be afoot.<sup>9</sup> For example, “Palinode” alludes to an “ancient forgotten ruse / And a natural diversion” (312). “Boult to Marina” imagines a dialogue between the pimp Boult and the lost daughter Marina derived from Shakespeare’s late play *Pericles*. But of course that play was a collaboration with another playwright, probably George Wilkins. Attributed to Shakespeare in the Quarto but not written solely by him, *Pericles* is a semi-forgery; the hoaxers likely selected it for this very reason.<sup>10</sup> In “Petit Testament,” the speaker, though admitting failure, allows that it is “something to be at last speaking / Though in this No-Man’s-language appropriate / Only to No-Man’s-Land” (323). Who speaks “No-Man’s-language”? A person who doesn’t exist. But there is another answer.

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<sup>7</sup>We may wish to add a fifth layer here, for Stewart recalls that the poem was based not on the painting but on a postcard of the painting (*EMP* 17).

<sup>8</sup>Although McAuley was probably not aware of this fact, Durer was one of the most frequently forged of early modern painters. Frank Arnau observes, for example, that there were far more Durer forgeries than authentic Durer works circulating during the sixteenth century (119-20).

<sup>9</sup>Brooks cites the *Pericles* allusions as part of what he calls the poems’ “signature”: clues that, post-exposure, allow the forger to say, “See!? How were you deceived?” (71). Among these signatures he also lists “Petit Testament” and the lines from “Sybilline” used as my epigraph.

<sup>10</sup>See Vickers 291-332 and Jackson for extensive analyses of *Pericles*’s co-authorship. These scholars conclude that George Wilkins wrote acts I and II and Shakespeare the remainder. The scenes with Boult and Marina, then, were likely written by Shakespeare.

One might also read these lines as the *cri de coeur* of an unrecognized poet. A prime reason for his despair is the sense of belatedness introduced in the Durer poem. McAuley and Stewart use artful allusiveness to develop this theme. Thus “Sweet William” addresses Blake, “Boult to Marina” and “Young Prince of Tyre” refer to *Pericles*, and “Colloquy with John Keats” opens with a line echoing Pound’s “A Pact”: “I have been bitter with you, my brother” (320).<sup>11</sup> This speaker admits that they “are as the double almond concealed in one shell,” a line that simultaneously figures Keats and Malley as twins and intimates that the speaker is really two people. This double-voicedness, as Lloyd points out, pervades the volume (28).<sup>12</sup> For example, the two “Night-Piece” poems present twin sensibilities working through the same material: lovers near a pond hearing frogs and a splash, viewing iron birds over a gate, feeling melancholy. The first has a world-weary, Eliotic tone, as well as some sesquipedalian diction (“umbelliferous”); more objective, the second version eschews such grandstanding and conveys an atmosphere of desolation and loss in neo-Symbolist fashion. Elsewhere, the text battles with itself, its “creeping disjunct minds” (“Young Prince of Tyre” 319) forming awkward juxtapositions and forging clunky language yet fostering provocative tensions. In short, the collaborative composition enhances the volume’s effects.

This doubling effect couples with the poems’ portrait of the lovelorn artist as a young man. In this sense, the letters, biography, preface, and poems are parts of the textual body of Ern Malley, a “haphazard amorist / Caught on the unlikely angles / Of an awkward arrangement” (“Palinode” 312). The “arrangement,”

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<sup>11</sup>Pound’s poem begins, “I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman,” and proceeds to ask for reconciliation, acknowledging that “We have one sap and one root.” Brooks also finds allusions to *The Cantos*, especially Canto I, and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* (168-72).

<sup>12</sup>Lloyd contends that the first voice builds up a sense of readerly engagement “only to be interrupted by a second, contrary, tendency which introduces ludic comment, deliberately awkward versification, or veiled attacks on *Angry Penguins* personnel.” The results alternate between “elevation and hard landings” (28).

however, is likely not with an imaginary lover, but between the hoaxers. In their statement, McAuley and Stewart admit that they “gave birth to Ern Malley” (*EMP* 8), and as Ern takes shape, the poems conflate literary and physical reproduction, texts and bodies. For example, “Sonnets for the Novachord” equates poems with “loaves and fishes” (305); “Culture as Exhibit” compares humans to “wraiths and wreathes of tissue-paper” and depicts the speaker as a bookworm who “chewed / Back-numbers of Florentine gazettes.” Those words are now incorporated into his textual body (316). “Petit Testament” confesses that “we shall never be that verb / Perched on the sole Arabian tree” (322): through a miraculous metamorphosis, bird becomes word. In the final lines of “Petit Testament” the speaker describes a pelvis that “Explodes like a grenade” and likens himself to a thistle that “Puffs its full seed upon the indicative air.” The metaphor is itself an exploding seed that weds words and weeds, literary reproduction and physical production (323). We may thus read *The Darkening Ecliptic* as the offspring of two minds colliding and converging in what Wayne Koestenbaum describes as “a way of discharging language in a masturbatory *folie à deux*” (8).<sup>13</sup> Ern is ejaculated into existence through textual intercourse. In this sense, the production of Ern Malley, undertaken without sexual congress with a female, resembles Victor Frankenstein’s creative procedures.

McAuley and Stewart tried to fail; they failed. Ross Chambers aptly concludes that the hoax worked “for the very same reason that it fizzled, which is that . . . the pseudo and the real thing are not so easily distinguished” (40). Thus, although Malley remains the “black swan of trespass on alien waters” (304), by the conclusion of *The Darkening Ecliptic* he has announced himself

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<sup>13</sup>Musgrave and Kirkpatrick cite Koestenbaum’s sentence as part of their argument that *The Darkening Ecliptic*’s body is “continually in a kind of *ekstasis*” that “approximates a fluid multiple identity” characteristic of what Deleuze and Guattari call a “minor literature” (133). They also develop the hints of homosexual desire in the poems, an impulse also noted by Pybus (148), who hypothesizes that the gay Stewart was in love with McAuley.

to our ears, paradoxically, by describing his failure to be heard. In this respect, the Malley poems—like *Frankenstein* and *My Life as a Fake*—are about their own creation. Indeed, *The Darkening Ecliptic* could have been titled *My Life as a Fake*.

The last lines of “Petit Testament”—the final lines published in *Angry Penguins*—read, “I have split the infinitive. Beyond is anything” (323). “Beyond” was almost anything, for the hoax yielded consequences that far transcended what McAuley and Stewart could have envisioned. As years passed, Malley, like Jack’s beanstalk, grew and grew, becoming a symbol of Australian culture as potent as Phar Lap or Ned Kelly. Malley’s presentation of himself as dwelling in “No-Man’s-Land” resonated with Australians who had seen themselves as living in a “fake culture, . . . [as] defenders of the butt-end of Europe in a land they did not understand” (Heyward 19). Moreover, the poems have undergone canonization (Mead 116) partly because of Australian poets such as John Kinsella and John Tranter, who have advanced the legacy of this imaginary being whom they perceive as “a patron saint of experimental verse” (“Malley Variations” online). In 2006 Tranter published “The Malley Variations,” ten poems that place *The Darkening Ecliptic* in dialogue with authors such as Allen Ginsberg, Gertrude Stein, and Louisa May Alcott (!). Quotations from *The Darkening Ecliptic* sporadically flash through the gloaming. For example, “An American in Paris” contains the line “I have I found you, my brothel” (357), which not only echoes the opening lines of “Colloquy with John Keats” but sets up a five-way conversation among Keats, Pound, Malley, Tranter, and Henry Miller (according to Tranter’s online notes). This dramatization of belatedness and multiple authorship is in the very spirit of Malley.

Other Australian artists have found inspiration in the poems. Ian Kennedy Williams’s 1991 novel *Malarky Dry* depicts a “real” (non-poet) Malley.<sup>14</sup> Visual artist Sidney Nolan (an associate of

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<sup>14</sup>In *Malarky Dry*, Malley’s poems are written by one Henry Fitzhubert-Ireland, whose name alludes to another notorious literary forger, William-Henry Ireland. Through

the *Penguins* group) created a series of Ern paintings in the 1970s (Heyward 219); in the 2000s, Garry Shead fashioned a group of etchings to accompany the poems. And in 1976, composer/lecturer/broadcaster Peter Tahourdin created *Ern Malley: A Dramatic Testament*, a musical piece for narrators, tape, soprano, baritone, and chamber ensemble.<sup>15</sup> The strongest evidence of Malley’s importance, however, is this: although McAuley and Stewart went on to publish several books each, none has become as famous as *The Darkening Ecliptic*—nor, as many argue (Tranter and Elliott among them), is as effective.<sup>16</sup> The tricksters ended up trapping themselves, and Harris, who became a prosperous bookseller and republished the poems with his own glosses and explanations, got the last laugh. Like Frankenstein’s creature, Ern became an unkillable monster who would forever haunt his heedless parents.

#### EPIPHYTE

*“A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy, excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.”*

—Shelley, *Frankenstein* 57

Mary Shelley identifies Frankenstein’s creation of the monster with her own creation of the novel. Indeed, writes Chris Baldick,

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the comic misadventures of a drunken former reporter named Bernard Peach, the poems end up being attributed to the deceased Malley. Williams also weaves in allusions to Thomas Chatterton’s life by having Malley reside in a rented attic room and by giving another character the name Rowley—the fictional monk to whom Chatterton attributed many of his works.

<sup>15</sup>The piece was performed in 1988. Tahourdin’s fascination with Malley has influenced generations of composers: every year, students are assigned to set selected poems from *The Darkening Ecliptic* for voice, solo or unaccompanied (“This Story”).

<sup>16</sup>Tranter, for example, avers that Malley’s works are “more interesting than the serious poetry produced by the hoaxers,” whose works are “now neglected” (“Malley Variations” online). Brian Elliott similarly opines that the Malley poems are “decidedly superior in some ways to anything they had written independently” (*EMP* 14).

both the novel's "composition and its subsequent cultural status mim[e] the central moments of its own story" (30). That is, like Victor Frankenstein (and the Malley hoaxers), Shelley lost control of her creation. *My Life as a Fake* both literalizes her identification between literary and physical creation and adopts *Frankenstein's* (and the monster's) structural design. As many critics have noted, Shelley's novel is "patched together from numerous textual sources" (MacFarlane 342; Ketterer 15), including *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Erasmus Darwin's field notes, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, the writings of Rousseau and Locke, and especially *Paradise Lost*, which she was rereading during the novel's composition.<sup>17</sup> Her method, that is, mirrors her protagonist's: assembling an assortment of fragments. Sandra Gilbert further asserts that Shelley's "principal mode of self-definition . . . was through reading" (41). Frankenstein, it follows, errs by "brooding upon the *wrong*books" (e.g., Cornelius Agrippa); likewise, his creature, whose library is limited to Plutarch, Goethe, *Paradise Lost*, and an overheard translation of *The Ruins of Empire*, "must have been parented, if at all, by *books*" (Gilbert 49, 53; emphasis original). Barbara Johnson thus concludes that *Frankenstein* is about "the experience of writing *Frankenstein*" (7). If so, Victor Frankenstein is a barely disguised representation of his "parent," an author who, according to Shelley's preface, "can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself" (23).

Mary Shelley had difficulty bringing her authorial self into being as well. As Susan Eilenberg reminds us, *Frankenstein* was first published anonymously (167), with Shelley dedicating it to her father without acknowledging their filial relationship, as if she, like Ern and her creature, had no parents (177). She also employed manifold versions of her own name in letters, inserting and removing her father's, mother's, and husband's surnames seemingly willy-nilly; in at least one case, she signed

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<sup>17</sup>For a list of the texts that influenced Shelley, see Ketterer 19-33.

herself “Marina”—the name of the lost daughter in *Pericles* (Eilenberg 170-71). She thus presents herself alternately as a composite, like the monster—a “multiple, a crowd, . . . a family” (Eilenberg 182)—and as nobody at all. She passes this condition of anonymity or polyonymity on to her hideous creature, who is called many things in the novel but is never given a name.<sup>18</sup> Now let us reconsider the question I posed above: Who speaks in “No-Man’s-Language?” Answer: Frankenstein’s monster, whose efforts to speak himself into existence are all mediated (hostilely) by Frankenstein and the sea captain Robert Walton: their authorship appropriates his. In Shelley’s self-effacement, then, we find not only an identification with her stitched-together creature, but, writes James Carson, an “incipient critique of the individualistic notion of originary creativity” (436) and an allegiance to the kind of dispersed authorship exemplified in *The Darkening Ecliptic* and *MLAF*.

Her self-portrait thus welcomes other collaborators. These included her husband, who impersonated her in the preface (Eilenberg 178) and contributed about 4,000 words to the novel (Ruthven 92), thereby intensifying its stilted diction (see Mellor 14-15). Their collaboration went in the opposite direction as well, for Mary Shelley’s second-most famous literary progeny was the poet Percy Shelley. After he died, she became her husband’s editor, publishing unpublished works, gathering his essays, and changing his image from that of atheistic libertine to that of what Susan Wolfson calls “Christlike idealistic martyrdom” (203). As Wolfson writes, “editor Shelley authorizes herself as the textual producer/recreator of poet Shelley,” putting him together from fragments just as Frankenstein does in building his creature (196). In the process, she also put herself back together after

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<sup>18</sup>In her journal, Shelley wrote that she had written “a book in <favor> defence of Polypheme” (the murderous cyclops in the *Odyssey*; Eilenberg 170), curiously conflating Homer’s monster and her own, while transferring namelessness from Odysseus, who fools the cyclops by calling himself “Outis” or Nobody, to the one-eyed cannibal.

the deaths that ravaged her family: resurrecting Percy revived Mary as well and allowed her to solidify an authorial identity (Wolfson 205). Yet these facts evoke the same questions that Carey poses in *My Life as a Fake*: who is the “parent” of a text? The initial writer? The editor? The publisher? The reader? All of the above?

Extrapolating from these phenomena, Carey’s novel implies that all literary creation is collaborative and forever unfinished and that such creations have more than one life. It does so, first, through characters and events that parallel *Frankenstein’s*. Here is a (probably incomplete) list of features borrowed from Shelley’s novel:

1. A patchwork creature comes to life and develops hatred for its creator.
2. The creator refrains from explaining his creation to others, thereby incurring more damage.
3. The story unfolds through embedded narratives told to a frame narrator.
4. The creature recounts his story to his creator but gets little sympathy.
5. The creator forms a complex love/hate bond with his creature, then pursues the creature with malicious intent.
6. Both creator and creature die at the end.
7. A theory of creativity, self-formation, and parenthood emerges, along with a warning about the perils of irresponsibility and obsession.<sup>19</sup>

Christopher Chubb’s wild tale-within-a-tale, related in segments while he works as a bicycle mechanic (the same trade that he and the Malley hoaxers gave to their fictional poets), thus reenacts *Frankenstein’s* narration to Walton, with Sarah playing the auditor’s role. Sarah also mirrors Margaret Saville, Walton’s sister and the recipient of his letters (and of all the embedded narratives), as well as the Great Assembler herself, Mary Shelley. Sarah even resembles *Frankenstein’s* creature, someone who would prefer to stay in her room and peruse *Paradise Lost* (Carey 11) and whose identity is formed through reading. Ultimately,

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<sup>19</sup>Nathalie Martinière lists three features that the books share and that are specific to the “myth” of *Frankenstein*: the creature is patched up; it rebels against its creator; and questions of identity and literary creation are superimposed (160).

she inhabits the role of Frankenstein himself—at once author and product of her creation. Hideous progeny proliferate: not only are McCorkle and his poems the “children” of Chubb, but so is Tina, Chubb’s (probable) daughter, whom McCorkle kidnaps and raises. Although we are never sure if McCorkle is the fabricated poet come to life or a mad genius who has borrowed McCorkle’s name, the point is that “giving birth” to him *literarily* gives birth to him *literally*. The final offspring is *My Life as a Fake* itself: Carey reincarnates Frankenstein’s monster as he reforges the Malley forgeries.

*MLAF* thus typifies what David Cowart has dubbed a “symbiotic” text: one that appropriates characters and plot lines to retell an earlier story from a different point of view or with an updated setting (4-8). Examples include Carey’s own *Jack Maggs* (1998), which reimagines the life of Magwitch, the convict in *Great Expectations*. Such texts resemble what jazz musicians call “contrafacts”—melodies written over the harmonies of pre-existing songs—and further demonstrate the collaborative properties of literary production. They seem to fit Groom’s description of a forgery, which he likens to “an impostor—or even a parasite” (“Original” 6). But whereas a parasite harms its host, symbiotic texts engage in a mutualism that benefits both (Cowart 4). That is, the “guest” text gains value from readers’ familiarity with the “host” text even as the earlier, host text is afforded new life and reopened to fresh insights. This is the case with *Frankenstein* and *MLAF*. Late in his novel, Carey offers a related metaphor for such intertextuality—that of an epiphyte, a plant that grows from the body of another plant without harming its host (237). Such works are, like the Malley poems, at once literary creations and literary criticism, Frankensteinian quilts fashioned of fragments torn from a myriad of sources. Ghostwritten texts, they are haunted by the shadows of preexisting textual bodies.

## TO MOULD ME MAN

*“Like you I sought at first for Beauty / And then, in disgust, returned / As did you to the locus of sensation”*

—Ern Malley, “Colloquy with John Keats” (320)

John Slater lures Sarah Wode-Douglass to Malaysia by exploiting her contradictory feelings for this suave but undependable father-figure with whom she has a quasi-incestuous, though non-sexual, relationship. Similarly, as she hears and transcribes Chubb’s story, her emotions careen wildly from disgust over his exploitation of Weiss to pity for his losses to a grudging admiration for his endurance. Her critical faculties are no more reliable. Trusting only her pulse rate (27) as the true measure of a work’s value, she declares that one “cannot really counterfeit a voice” (26). Has she never heard of the dramatic monologue? In any case, Chubb’s description of McCorkle’s post-*Ecliptic* poems prompts “covetous emotions” in her (65). She will even endure his lengthy, convoluted yarn if that’s what she must do to get them. Sarah envisions herself as Coleridge’s Wedding Guest, unable to tear herself from the glittering eye of this “grey-beard loon” (39, italics original; 114). Mesmerizing eyes embody the power of narration throughout *MLAF*, while also alluding to the optic bond between Frankenstein and his creature displayed in the lines that serve as Carey’s (and my second) epigraph. Like the Guest and Walton, Sarah needs to hear this tale. Why? Because she too is a fraud. Less than halfway through the novel, Slater disabuses her of a long-held belief that her mother drowned herself after Slater rejected her (the early death of her mother being another trait Sarah shares with Victor Frankenstein and Mary Shelley). Suddenly she grasps that “misconstructions” had “made me who I was” (133). Who she is is a closeted lesbian whose longtime lover, Annabelle, remains married to a man. One ironic result, then, of Sarah’s immersion in this maze of lies is a discovery of a truth: she is a fake, a misconstructured being like Frankenstein’s creature.

John Slater, erstwhile enfant terrible, legendary womanizer, and author of *Dewsong* (dismissed by Chubb as “overripe Dylan Thomas”109), has become rich and famous for writing popular novels and in his sixties retains a louche grandeur. Sarah initially views him as the “incarnation of deceit” (4), but she starts to trust him as he recounts the McCorkle hoax. Yet he too is a fake and a forger. Just after the war, McCorkle, burning to legitimize himself, approached Chubb demanding a birth certificate; Slater, then working for MI5, fabricated one for him. In this sense, Slater is as responsible for authoring McCorkle as Chubb is, each of them having brought him into existence through writing.<sup>20</sup> The knowledge that Sarah and Slater, each of whom narrates at times, are fakes at once undermines our faith in their credibility and emphasizes Carey’s thesis that all creation involves collaboration and chicanery.

“*alack, / That monster envy, oft the wrack / Of earned praise. . . .*”

—Gower, *Pericles* 4.11-13

Christopher Chubb is, or was, a nasty fellow—a sore loser, a snob, and, according to Slater, a “leech” (35). Chubb, of course, contends that Weiss was the fake (31) and that he, Chubb, has always been a lover of truth (38). Like many real-life forgers, he was motivated both by envy and by a belief that *he* was the true guardian of aesthetic virtue. Defending his “savage jest” (72), he quotes McAuley and Stewart’s dismissal of modernism and maintains that he meant no harm to Weiss (38).<sup>21</sup> He also

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<sup>20</sup>Slater perpetrates a more minor forgery in the novel’s present time. When Chubb’s threadbare tweed suit is ruined by the hotel dry cleaner, Slater writes a note telling Chubb that they’ll pay for it and signs it in the manager’s name (113). Slater’s position in British intelligence may also be Carey’s sly acknowledgment that *Quadrant*, the literary journal that James McAuley edited for many years, was funded by the CIA (Pybus 149).

<sup>21</sup>Carey uses verbatim quotations from the Harris trial (see 50, 56). The crux here also revolves around “Boult to Marina” (47), and Weiss testifies to the “manner in which the hoax itself was both subject and key to the mystery of the poems” (57).

boasts of cobbling together the photo of McCorkle from parts of three different men, building an immense creature with a “huge powerful nose and cheekbones, great forehead like the bust of Shakespeare.” He “[c]hopped him up and glued him. . . .What resurrectionists we were-*lah*” (51; he thus mirrors Cerimon, the sorcerer in *Pericles* who brings Pericles’s wife Thaisa back from the dead [3.2]).<sup>22</sup> But when he volunteered to be prosecuted with Weiss, he says, the latter accused him of wanting to share the glory and asserted that McCorkle’s poems were beyond Chubb’s capabilities (52). Weiss may have been right, for Sarah finds the poems Chubb has written in his own name “priggish, self-serving, snobbish,” lacking McCorkle’s wild, “nasal passion.” “If this was his ‘real’ poetry,” she concludes, “I preferred the fake” (86). For Chubb (and for Carey), authenticity requires fakery.

An episode involving Chubb’s ruined suit (which Slater pays to have repaired) interrupts his story and sheds light on his current condition. In fact, Chubb changes his “suit” several times in the novel—the man who began adulthood as a promising poet has become, in turn, a pariah, an insurance copywriter and salesman, an indicted murderer, an outraged parent, an abject exile and bicycle mechanic, and a self-defender. He is a shapeshifter, a patchwork persona; the suit is merely his current costume. But he’s stuck with it, for the tailors in his district refuse to serve him: “He not a person,” one explains (119), but a vampire who will “drink your blood until you grow weak and die” (120). For them Chubb, not McCorkle, is the parasite. The suit episode reinforces the sense that Chubb has vanished into McCorkle’s penumbra: as his creature thrusts himself into prominence, Chubb grows thinner and thinner, as if being devoured by an internal worm.

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<sup>22</sup>The term “resurrectionists” was used for the sort of grave-robbers upon whom Frankenstein would have relied for his materials. I’m grateful for this insight to an anonymous reader of an earlier version of this essay.

In Chubb’s account, Weiss was essentially Max Harris, a handsome young impresario of the literary vanguard.<sup>23</sup> But Weiss was as confused as Chubb, on the one hand maintaining that Chubb couldn’t have written the McCorkle poems and on the other accusing him of enviously hoaxing him (62). All Chubb would ever be known for, he asserted, is the work of McCorkle. Alas, the same is true of Weiss, for the McCorkle poems have placed them in an epiphytic relationship. Hence, after Weiss’s death, Chubb witnessed a grotesque irony: lines from McCorkle’s (Malley’s) “Petit Testament” were used as Weiss’s epitaph! Just as ironic: the only person truly capable of appreciating the cleverness of Chubb’s hoax was now dead (57). Chubb needed Weiss, and when he died the brilliance of his prank was eclipsed.

*“Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man, Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?”*

—Milton, *Paradise Lost* 10.743-45

Partway through Weiss’s obscenity trial, a massive man with “wild dark eyes and black, shoulder-length hair” burst out angrily, “Ask the author, you fucking philistine” (59). It was as if, writes Chambers, “Frankenstein’s monster was declaring himself to be Frankenstein” (41). McCorkle here personifies “the *textual* subject produced by readerly authority” (Chambers 39; italics original): that is, he embodies how characters and texts become independent of their initial creators. Recounting McCorkle’s narration, Chubb recalls hearing him quote the *OED*’s definition of “publisher”: “one whose business is the issuing of books, . . . one who undertakes the printing or production of copies of such works” (75). McCorkle was outraged by this denotation, but it shrewdly captures the publisher’s tripartite roles as creator (“issuing”), copier, and killer (or at least undertaker), roles shared, Carey

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<sup>23</sup>I have elected to break with convention and use past tense to describe the events in Chubb’s story in order to help distinguish the time of his narration, in 1972, from the time of those events, which took place years earlier.

suggests, by every party in the creative process. Weiss apparently agreed, for when Chubb reminded him that he was the actual author of the McCorkle poems, Weiss responded, “Doesn’t matter. . . . I am his publisher” (52)—his co-creator. McCorkle then told Chubb that he broke into Vogelesang’s residence, scalped him, and declared, “I would take any amount of skin and hair for the cause of poetry” (78).

Yet McCorkle also insisted that Weiss “was like a mother, for he had brought me into the world, had given me life, had stood by me” (78). Upon breaking into Weiss’s home, McCorkle recalls that he exclaimed, “I am your author, Mr. Weiss” (81). And then comes a pivotal moment in the novel: McCorkle recited “Durer: Innsbruck, 1495” to Chubb just as he had earlier recited it to Weiss. Voiced by this “wild man” (81), the poem was remade: “This was and was not the poem Chubb had written. . . . [T]his 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” (82). By reading the work, McCorkle author(iz)ed himself: he became a creator whose offspring was Bob McCorkle. The scene reopens the question of who is responsible for a literary work. A writer produces words, but unread they lie dormant on the page. An editor cuts the umbilical cord, wraps up the product, and places it in hands of the publisher. The publisher midwives its emergence into the world of other books and “issues” it to others. And the reader, like a foster parent, adopts and reshapes the work with each reading or recitation. Conversely, as McCorkle’s proclamation indicates, the writer also authors the publisher, creating him/her as such by placing the progeny in that person’s hands. As with Frankenstein and his creature, each party engenders the other. McCorkle and Chubb were both brought forth by *The Darkening Ecliptic*; Sarah desires a similar delivery.

Into the story comes Nousette Markson (whose real name may be Mary Morris), an artist and photographer who seduced Chubb in the hoax’s aftermath and who, between 1945 and

1952, changed her occupation five times and her nationality twice (145). She knew she could trust Chubb not to spoil her secrets, for, she reminded him, “you are a fake yourself” (91). Imagine Chubb’s surprise, then, when Nousette introduced him to her good friend—a large man named Bob McCorkle. “You see, my darling,” she announced to Chubb, “you are not a fake at all” (94). Throughout McCorkle’s narration McCorkle’s “[p]iercing dark eyes” held Chubb in thrall as he demanded a birth certificate, then recited the lines from *Paradise Lost* quoted above (which are also *Frankenstein*’s epigraph; 94-95). Paradoxically, this piece of paper proved that McCorkle was *more* than a piece of paper. As I’ve noted, McCorkle’s certificate, created by John Slater, was a forgery, yielding an identity as fraudulent as Ern Malley’s. Nevertheless, it inscribed McCorkle into existence: writing ratified the connection between name and body. “He wants to be Bob McCorkle,” Nousette advised Chubb, “let him be Bob McCorkle” (95).

But Bob wanted to author more than himself. After Nousette was impregnated—probably by Chubb, but possibly by Slater—she bore a child named Tina. Like *Frankenstein*, she didn’t want her offspring, and Chubb adopted the baby despite having no idea how to rear a child. So why was he not relieved when, a week after taking in Tina, McCorkle broke into his house and kidnapped her? “You never gave me a childhood,” McCorkle charged (151); holding the infant, he declared, “This is a childhood” (153). Echoing *Frankenstein*’s hideous being, McCorkle demanded “justice” (152); Tina would be his vehicle. Alas, Chubb now faced the liar’s plight: nobody believed his claim that the baby was kidnapped, especially not by a person whom they all knew to be a figment of Chubb’s malicious imagination. Though he was acquitted of murder, Chubb’s life was destroyed. But whose daughter *is* Tina? The novel’s identification of literary and physical creation implies that, like a text, a child may have multiple “authors.” The remainder of the novel translates

Chubb's ambivalent desire to "own" McCorkle and his literary offspring into a quest to recapture Tina.

*HANTU*

*I am no viper, yet I feed / On mother's flesh which did me breed.*

—*Pericles* 1.1.65-66

In the last third of the novel, intertextual progeny multiply along with the narrative layers. This embedding mirrors *Frankenstein's* complicated structure. For example, beginning in Chapter 11 of Shelley's novel, the creature relates his history to Frankenstein, who conveys it, much later, to Walton; Walton, in turn, writes the story and sends it to his sister, Margaret Saville. The implied reader, then, is the sister of the frame narrator, and thus the model relationship between teller and auditor is that of siblings. A sibling would be a sympathetic auditor—unlike Frankenstein, who briefly empathizes with his malformed product but ultimately refuses to build him a mate. In *MLAF*, Chubb narrates his story in pieces to Sarah, who later assembles the fragments. She thus blends the roles of Walton and Margaret Saville, serving as Chubb's "collaborator" (204). Indeed, as Chubb talks, Sarah begins to feel as if *she* were his creature and he her surrogate father (he is mistaken for her father by a hotel employee).

Chubb's story is a composite affair. Slater and Tina fill in gaps, and Chubb relays McCorkle's words as well as the experiences of a bizarre character named Mulaha, the poisoner he encountered during his pursuit of McCorkle. As in *Frankenstein*, characters are doubled or even tripled: Mulaha is Chubb's alter ego, another man whose existence has been narrowed to a single overpowering emotion—in his case, fury—thereby transmogrifying him into a monster ("mulaha" means "temper" [189]). Because of a war injury, one of Mulaha's eyes has turned sideways—a synecdoche of his emotional injury and cyclopean rage as well as of Chubb's own cockeyed creativity. This single eye is as captivating

as McCorkle’s pair, and it seems to trap Chubb into agreeing with Mulaha that McCorkle must die.

McCorkle’s kidnapping of Tina also replays a plot element in *Pericles* in which Marina, the title character’s daughter, is stolen by pirates and sold into a brothel. Moreover, the relationships among the various creators and their offspring resemble the venomous kinship between the play’s King Antiochus and his daughter, described in a riddle (two lines of which I’ve quoted above) that Pericles solves early in the play.<sup>24</sup> That is, Chubb’s “son” hated him, and Chubb wanted to kill his first “child.” Yet when he briefly wrested Tina away from McCorkle, she called Chubb a *hantu*, or demon, and screamed for her real father—McCorkle. If one were to adopt a common interpretation of *Frankenstein* that argues the creature enacts Victor’s unconscious desires, one might conclude that McCorkle kidnapped Tina because Chubb didn’t really want her and that McCorkle only carried out Chubb’s desire to disappear. His etiolated condition in 1972 bears out this reading, as does his insistence that he “could never, *ever*, have made [McCorkle’s later] poem” (164; emphasis original). But in 1972 he wants the poem back, perhaps so that he can verify his own existence and thereby get credit for McCorkle’s works, and he wants to enlist Sarah as accomplice.

After an arduous search, Chubb found Tina and McCorkle and had them brought to a jungle lord, who soon became convinced that Chubb was the kidnapper and set him adrift on a raft to die; he was rescued by another jungle lord who also soon decided that Chubb was the kidnapper.<sup>25</sup> A chastened Chubb

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<sup>24</sup>Of course, Victor Frankenstein’s relationship with his “cousin”/sister/betrothed Elizabeth contains more than a hint of incest, a fact that likely discourages him from marrying her.

<sup>25</sup>The raft scene may lead us back, circuitously, to McAuley and Stewart. According to Brooks, they were influenced by a literary hoax in the 1880s contrived by two French poets who parodied the *Symbolistes*. Their invented poet, Adoré Floupette, wrote a book called *Les Délivrescences*, the first poem of which, *Les enervés de Jumièges*, is an

returned to Mulaha, who had constructed a booby-trapped package to mail to McCorkle; by touching a poisoned nail upon opening it, he would expire on the spot. But when the time came, Chubb drew a dagger and stabbed the giant ineffectually in the buttock. Clearly Chubb did not want to kill his creation; he only wanted to, um, stab him in the rear end. (The homoerotic elements in *Frankenstein* and the Malley hoax are clearly at play here.) Chubb should have felt free. But no: McCorkle “had become part of me” (249). Author and text have brought each other into being. Thus when, a year later, he received a letter from McCorkle explaining that he was dying in Malaysia from Graves’ disease—the disorder given to Ern Malley that responds readily to iodine treatment—he brought the necessary drugs to Kuala Lumpur.

Entering the sick room, Chubb beheld, like Frankenstein, “the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes—*wah!* what eyes—were fixed on me” (252). As McCorkle lay dying (from, it turns out, leukemia), Chubb reassumed the parental role, as if, like Frankenstein, he suddenly “felt what the duties of a creator towards his creature were” (Shelley 94). Raising McCorkle “like a damned lover in my arms,” he felt as if he were “holding [his] own vital organs in [his] hands” (Carey 254). McCorkle’s “terrible” eyes elicited Chubb’s promise to care for Tina and McCorkle’s common-law wife, Mrs. Lim, after he died (255). McCorkle said to Chubb, “We are one, you and I” (256)—“the double almond concealed in one shell,” as Malley’s (or McCorkle’s) “Colloquy with John Keats” has it.<sup>26</sup> Then he handed him the book he had

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ekphrastic work based upon a painting of the legend of the two sons of Clovis II, who, after rebelling against their father, were set adrift on a raft in the Seine (Brooks 4-11). Perhaps Carey knew of the hoax poem and had seen this painting, which has for years hung in Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales.

<sup>26</sup>The same words are uttered by Victor in David Wickes’s 1993 adaptation of *Frankenstein* just before he kills himself and the creature. McCorkle’s words are true in more than one sense here, for by the time Chubb tells his story, he has already been

been writing since leaving Australia (256). Its title? *My Life as a Fake*. This poetic confession of fraudulence has, paradoxically, made McCorkle real. Yet Chubb still refuses to believe that Tina could have loved this loathsome “tapeworm” who stole and fed off her (254): “He was a user and a thief, yet tears were shed for him. My role was to be his cause of death” (258). As in *Frankenstein*, a creator is also a killer. In making and unmaking McCorkle, Chubb unmade himself.

SPARAGMOS

*“O’er bear the shores of my mortality. . . . / O, come hither, / Thou that  
beget’st him that did thee beget.”*

—Pericles to Marina, *Pericles*, 5.1.193-95

During the breaks in Chubb’s narration, Sarah finally sees McCorkle’s photo (and those piercing eyes) and glimpses the cover of his book, “grey and wrinkled like the bark of a tree” (209). The glance reaffirms her determination to possess it at all costs, as if she too has become a *hantu* scheming to kidnap McCorkle’s progeny. In 1972 Tina, speaking to Sarah in her shrine to McCorkle, gestures toward the books crowding the shelves and explains, “This is our family. . . . Bob McCorkle is the tree-*ah* . . . we are the roots. These poems are the flowers . . . . When that old man [Chubb] steals this book, he has broken the flowers from the tree” (231-32). Tina’s words aren’t merely metaphors, for the three of them fashioned the book’s paper from bark and plants they gathered throughout Malaysia. Earlier Sarah had witnessed Chubb holding McCorkle’s book and noticed that “both book and hand seemed to be related parts of the same creature” (225), as if it were literally made from skin. Whose? Perhaps Tina’s, for when she bares her flesh to Sarah, her scars seem as “dense and

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an insurance salesman and a bicycle mechanic—the very occupations he assigned to McCorkle. It’s as if he is living in “the sixth circle of his own prank” (158)

as widely distributed as those on a rubber tree" (233). Apparently McCorkle truly believed that "any amount of skin and hair" should be sacrificed for poetry: Tina "gave everything" to make the book (234). And so did Mrs. Lim (limb?). As Mrs. Lim recalls in another embedded narrative, in 1960 (the year of Malaysia's independence), after she joined the pair as they gathered bark and leaves to make paper, they encountered assassins who slashed her with machetes, leaving livid scars across her body and face. All this for a book! And now these thieves want to steal it. Can we blame her for protecting it so fiercely?

Under the suspicious eyes of McCorkle's minions, Sarah at last reads McCorkle's *My Life as a Fake*. She is stunned. "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" (235). A body composed of elements of himself, Tina, Mrs. Lim (and Chubb), McCorkle's book literalizes Shelley's and Carey's (and Malley's) identification of physical and literary creation: they all conjugate that verb on the tree. They are also parts of Malaysia. "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," Sarah concludes (235). McCorkle succeeds in doing what Macpherson and Chatterton merely attempted. No longer writing in "No-Man's-Language appropriate / Only to No-Man's-Land," McCorkle has forged himself and his new country with words. What are these words worth? "[W]hat price would I put on a Shakespeare sonnet?" Sarah wonders. "How much for Milton, Donne, Coleridge, Yeats?" (243). What is the value of art, and how is it determined? This is a central question for all forgeries and the fictions surrounding them. Sarah's answer is that the book is "worth being born for" (235). But is it worth killing or dying for? That is what she must now decide.

Mrs. Lim recalls repaying McCorkle's kindness by giving him a gigantic orchid (237). This epiphyte provides an apt metaphor

for McCorkle’s and Carey’s works. We might read the trope as a further expansion of Tina’s metaphor, in which Bob is a tree. But since he is a creature of Chubb, McCorkle is not the tree (that would be Chubb) but the epiphytic plant that grew from it; his book and his daughter are the flowers. Similarly, Carey’s book, grafting together *The Darkening Ecliptic* and *Frankenstein*, blossoms into a new epiphytic flower, while doing no harm to—indeed, reviving—its germinating texts. And McCorkle, by providing Chubb with material for his story and a reason, however perverse, for living, brings Chubb back to life, begetting him that didst him beget. What resurrectionists they are!

*“For Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them.”*

—Milton, *Areopagitica* 3

And what murderers! After Chubb promises Sarah that he’ll procure McCorkle’s book for her, she follows him to his house, where she instead finds the women wounded and Chubb dismembered, lying in a puddle of blood (263). The women claim that thieves killed him and stole the book, but actually they murdered him to protect *My Life as a Fake*. Chubb’s fate is cruelly ironic: the man who assembled McCorkle from fragments has been disassembled in an act of “*sparagmos*” (265). The scene recapitulates the moment in *Frankenstein* after Victor decides not to make his creature’s companion: “The remains of the half-finished creature, whom I had destroyed, lay scattered on the floor, and I almost felt as if I had mangled the living flesh of a human being” (Shelley 148). Staring at this carnage, Sarah, blood literally on her hands, realizes that her effort to kidnap McCorkle’s book has caused Chubb’s death (Carey 263). No longer Margaret Saville, she has become Victor Frankenstein and his murderous creature. Left with “a wound that would not heal,” Sarah sees herself as one of those “sad friends of Truth” in

Milton's *Areopagitica*, searching for the mangled body of Osiris (Milton 22-23). The truth, too, has been "dismembered and scattered" (265). And so since 1972 she has been recollecting the parts of this "horrid puzzle" (265), imitating Shelley, Frankenstein, Chubb, and McCorkle (and the Malley hoaxers) as she composes her work and herself from leftover bits and pieces. While Chubb's fate may be poetic justice, McCorkle's *My Life as a Fake* remains in his upstairs shrine, now as foul to Sarah as Mrs. Lim's "disgusting giant orchid" (266). Carey's *My Life as a Fake*, likewise an epiphytic orchid blossoming from the trunk of earlier texts, has fully sprouted.

Sarah is haunted by Chubb, and her book—also called *My Life Is a Fake*—has been ghostwritten by McCorkle and Chubb. Similarly haunted is Carey's novel, ghostwritten as it is by Ern Malley, Mary Shelley, Harold Stewart, and James McAuley. Who, then, is the author of Bob McCorkle and his works? Chubb is and is not: he admits he could not have written McCorkle's later poems, and the poems in his own name cast doubt even on the authorship of *The Darkening Ecliptic*. McCorkle makes *The Darkening Ecliptic* his own by reciting it and verifies his authorial powers with his later creations. Sarah admits that she is Chubb's collaborator, and Slater forges McCorkle into existence with a birth certificate. Tina and Mrs. Lim give McCorkle their love, gather and create his paper, and sacrifice their bodies. In short, they are all co-authors. Carey's novel is similarly collaborative, as he builds *his My Life as a Fake* by marrying fictions, facts, and forgeries, enlisting multiple narrators and retold tales to consecrate the ceremony. Yet in another sense, the book is, like *Frankenstein*, anonymous: the possessive pronoun in the title refers to so many characters that, like Shelley's hideous progeny, it seems to have no author at all. *The Darkening Ecliptic* was, of course, really written by McAuley and Stewart; in that sense, Carey too commits forgery by attributing their poems to Chubb/McCorkle. Thus, as Robert MacFarlane observes, the novel shows how "under careful scrutiny, the apparent opposi-

tion between ‘making’ and ‘faking’ collapses into near-identity,” that fakery is “a necessary condition of literary creation; and that repetition is the first making and plagiarism the unoriginal sin” (345). Authors, that is, are never sole creators: a work may be set down by one or more writers but upon “birth” becomes an orphan reared by a myriad of foster parents—editors, publishers—then nurtured and reshaped by readers and critics. In this sense, then, all literary texts are the products of collaborative breeding, epiphytes clinging to the tree of literature. And yet, like that orchid, they bloom.

The same is true of human identity. As Mary Shelley’s “creation” of Percy Shelley, and Chubb’s and Slater’s (and Sarah’s and Carey’s) authoring of McCorkle and of their own histories imply, human beings write, speak, and read ourselves into new selves. In that sense, all authors are fictional characters who must be resurrected and remade, like *Frankenstein*’s creature, by imaginative readers. It matters not whether the name on the cover matches the one on the birth certificate, because authors forge our existences through the words that we leave or induce others to leave. Like sorcerers spelling ghosts, we bring the dead back to life so they may speak to us. Yet we are also murderers: as Sarah realizes, the quest to make is inextricable from the urge to destroy, to cross out and rewrite old stories and personae and forge them anew. Epiphytes blossoming from the tree of words, authors are all robbers of dead men’s dreams.

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