



Fakes, Literary Identity and Public Culture

MARIA TAKOLANDER AND DAVID MCCOOEY,
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

The fake presupposes the genuine. The fake author implies the real author, and fake literature presupposes real literature. But literature itself is often about—perhaps fundamentally about—successfully faking it. However, the concern and hostility with which literary public culture has responded to fake authors and what is deemed to be their “fake” literature suggests that the notions of real authors and literature remain centrally important.

This may have something to do with a wish to anchor the realist illusion to a transcendental and tangible reality, namely, the body and life of the author. However, the moral intensity of the reaction, clearly seen in the wake of the exposure of the Demidenko hoax, suggests that something of greater importance than the mimetic experience is at stake. Such a conjecture finds support in K.K. Ruthven’s *Faking Literature*, the punning title of which illustrates Ruthven’s belief that literature can not only be faked but is itself a kind of fake. Ruthven’s substantive argument is that the literary fake is a kind of literary and cultural critique, but one that disturbs the usual protocols of such critique. For while a writer is allowed and even encouraged to be “disturbing” in terms of innovation and ideology, Ruthven argues, “no writer is permitted to disturb those cultural institutions which accredit and mediate literature by demonstrating inefficiencies in their operations and thus questioning the grounds of their existence” (2–3). Literary fakes are perceived precisely as undermining these literary institutions. The controversy generated by the literary identity scandals of the 90s centred on the authority of the literary institutions responsible for distributing literature (publishers) and administering value (literary critics, prize committees and funding bodies).

There is no doubt that literary fakes are seen to “disturb” the authority of those literary institutions that are responsible for disseminating literature and literary

value. However, literary fakes also reveal how authorial identities operate in the public sphere as commodified authenticity and as markers of an ethical aesthetic, in association with which reader identities are constructed and displayed. Literary fakes, we argue, are only understandable in relation to identity and public culture.

Literature, which constructs chimerical worlds in which we as readers have agreed to believe, is itself, as Pierre Bourdieu has famously argued, a chimera in which we as readers have agreed to believe. Readers have historically invested literature, the study of literature and even writers of literature themselves with a moral import, purpose and authority. Literature has been endowed with an authenticity, a transcendental moral truth, which it cannot possess, indeed, that it by its unstable nature radically undermines. According to David Carter, while "literariness" has always been "an ethical quality," it is, in contemporary "Australian book culture," "precisely high aesthetic value and moral seriousness" that are now more than ever "packaged as desirable commodities." Such books are "pitched at morally-serious readers" and presented as "precious objects" and desirable possessions in a "circuit of exchange of symbolic value." The "morally-serious readers" to whom these books, which "deal (stylishly) with 'issues,'" are pitched belong to what Carter calls a 'middle brow' demographic in Australian public culture. Carter suggests that a middle brow book buying class, whose identity relies upon the literary as a status symbol of their aesthetic and ethical integrity, is the target market for literature in Australia today. Such a demographic patronises inner city book stores, attends writers' festivals, and, we argue, is the target audience of contemporary Australian literary fakes.

The cosmopolitan and morally serious character of this demographic perhaps contributes to explain why ethnicity and victimhood have been deeply implicit in recent literary frauds. Helen Demidenko (Helen Darville), Wanda Koolmatrie (Leon Carmen) and B. Wongar (Streten Bozic), as well as the new case of Norma Khouri, are well-known examples of contemporary literary fakes who played the ethnic victim card. The Anglo Paul Radley hoax (in which Radley published novels written by his elderly uncle), for example, generated little excitement in the Australian media in contrast to the Demidenko deception or the perceived Mudrooroo identity fraud.

Fake authors, such as Darville/Demidenko, Koolmatrie/Carmen and Wongar/Bozic, appear to demonstrate a cynical but also unconsciously keen perception of both the nature of literature as fakery and of the literary, in contemporary Australia, as ethical commodity. Not surprisingly, given the investment that middle brow readers and the literary industry have in presenting literature as authentic experience, literary fakery has provoked considerable attention and anxiety. The context for such focus and concern is a pronounced shift in cultural authority. Literary culture has become, as John Frow argues of high culture generally, "a

mere pocket in commodity culture” (86), a minority pursuit in a mass culture that has long expressed suspicion about literature, suspicion that the Ern Malley hoax mobilised and that fakes continue to inspire.

Literature, as we have suggested, has been increasingly involved in the commodification, in particular, of identity. This is partly observable in material changes in literary public culture, such as a shift to biography, autobiography and the personal essay as the valorized literary forms and the emergence of the “public intellectual” as a figure of aesthetic and ethical authority (one who has intervened profoundly in scandals of literary fraud).

Incorporated into what Graeme Turner in “Australian Literature and the Public Sphere” describes as “the mass mediated promotional world of fashion and celebrity” (16), literature also appears to have become largely about the saleability of the author rather than primarily about the “literary” quality of the book. Turner, Frances Bonner and P. David Marshall write in *Fame Games* that “Book publishing has become more and more concerned about the nature of the author’s image/identity and how it might assist sales” (88). This ethos of “market the author/sell the book” taps into a larger obsession with celebrity and identity that is apparent in public culture, in which the celebrity may represent, as Turner, Bonner and Marshall suggest, “the ultimate in unauthenticity through the perceived artificiality of their personality,” but in which “audience interest is nevertheless aroused by the possibility of penetrating that construction and gaining access to some essential knowledge about that celebrity” (12). The means through which the public attempts to reach the authentic self behind the chimera of the celebrity is by buying the commodities which celebrities, in a marketplace *mise-en-abyme*, often exist merely in order to sell. Paradoxically, the desire to penetrate beneath that textual surface, to reach a transcendence beyond that tantalising world of Borgesian simulacra, motivates the purchase of the commodity, that is, the investment in that *mise-en-abyme* effect.

The book, marketed in terms of its author, becomes a product that offers the seductive possibility of, as Turner, Bonner and Marshall claim, bridging “the gap between the celebrity and the ordinary person” (149) and going through the superficial exterior of the celebrity to reach the “real thing.” In fact, the book, more than any other commodity, seems to offer the possibility of penetrating through to the authentic identity of the author. It seems to offer the possibility of an exchange of interiorities. Authors also represent for the aesthetically and ethically minded reader an identity with which it is worth identifying and attempting to penetrate.

The reaction to the Demidenko hoax shows the importance of, and the contradictory impulses regarding, the operation of identity and authenticity within public culture. As most readers would remember, the hoax was notably complex. *The Hand that Signed the Paper* won the Vogel Award and was published under

the name of Helen Demidenko. The novel subsequently won a number of other significant literary awards (the Miles Franklin and the ALS Gold Medal) and quickly attracted both supporters and detractors, with debate occurring in the mainstream print and electronic media as well as literary periodicals. Indeed, the terms of the Demidenko transgression were themselves objects of debate. Helen Darville was anti-Semitic; her history was inaccurate; she was a “bad” writer; the book was insufficiently “Australian” to win the Miles Franklin. When Darville’s imposture became known this led to further attacks on both the book and its author. It also led to new charges of plagiarism. If Demidenko was not a real identity, then it apparently followed that she could not be a real author.

The Demidenko affair also showed up the contradictory nature of literature—as an ethically neutral “space of writing” and as an ethically charged engagement with others. The Demidenko affair is notable for the volatile ways in which it engaged these antithetical literary models. It is also notable for how widely such debates about literature occurred in public culture. Among its participants were David Marr, Robert Manne and Peter Singer.

The affair also highlights the literary investment in identity. The most significant term in the Demidenko scandal was ethnicity. Whereas Ern Malley (discussed below) represented a nationalist suspicion of European modernism through the character of a working class man, the Demidenko affair was decidedly 90s in its use of multicultural ideology. As Peter Goldsworthy suggests, a common complaint aired during the scandal was that the Miles Franklin Award had become, in being given to *The Hand that Signed the Paper*, “a kind of multicultural affirmative action prize” (32).

Naturally the Miles Franklin judges denied any such thing, claiming that the novel won on literary merit alone. Indeed, Jill Kitson, one of the judges, argued on a number of occasions that the novel was an even more accomplished work of fiction because it had been wholly imagined. However, the exotic authenticity and moral seriousness that Demidenko represented was clearly central to the success of the hoax as well as to the controversy that followed its exposure. Kateryna Olijnyk Longley argues that Demidenko’s hoax “was for the press and the public unforgivable, not because of the fraud itself but because it exposed, by means of this double twist, Australian mainstream culture’s complicity in her act by way of its fascination with the exotic” (38).

The Demidenko hoax also reignited curiously old-fashioned ideas about Australian cultural identity. In the judges’ report, the Miles Franklin judges wrote: “Novels about the migrant experience seem to us to be seizing the high ground in contemporary Australian fiction, in contrast to fictions about the more vapid aspects of Australian life” (qtd. in Jacobson 15). As Howard Jacobson put it, quoting Ern Malley, this observation houses an old complaint: “that life is trivial and unreal in Australia, that the real thing is somewhere else, that the black swan

trespasses on alien water” (15). Similarly, Peter Craven suggests Australian cultural vacuity when he writes that “For what seems an age now, Demidenko has looked like a symbol of the void around which our cultural life flitters” (17). The Demidenko hoax, in an unexpected sleight of hand, exposed the relationship between anxiety regarding authorial identity and anxiety regarding national identity in the public sphere.

Not only literary fakes but also genuine writers, such as Peter Carey, demonstrate a certain sleight of hand in selling themselves and their literature in the public sphere. Indeed, while Carey is ostensibly who he claims to be (a Bacchus Marsh born writer who lives in New York), he has, like other literary fakes, created a fictional identity that operates as bait for book consumers and that serves to legitimize his fiction. Turner has documented how “Carey has himself deliberately intervened in the construction of his personal fame” to position himself as a “national author” in such a way that “his novels are not his only fictions” (“Nationalising the Author” 134). Suneeta Peres da Costa contentiously suggests that the difference between the identity construction of a “fake” author like Demidenko from that of a “real” author like Carey is only “*the extent that it [has been] demystified as such*” (77). However, Carey’s recent novel, the ironic and self-reflexive *My Life as a Fake*, suggests that Carey is aware of the negotiability of the distinctions.

Carey, as his success would suggest and despite the apparently transgressive nature of his new hoax novel, reveals himself to be finely attuned to readerly desires and anxieties in regards to literary identity and literature’s status in the public sphere. At his 2003 appearance at the Melbourne Writers’ Festival to promote *My Life as a Fake*, Carey began by suggesting that he would show some holiday snapshots, teasing and frustrating the desire of the audience for this “fake author” to reveal “his life as an authenticity.” Morag Fraser, the session chair, had already whetted audience appetites in an intensely personalizing and fetishizing introduction of Carey, in which she referred to a newspaper photograph that showed Carey alongside other Australian star writers and described him as “weird, exotic and exactly at home.” While Fraser was ostensibly parodying media representations of Carey, her preamble nevertheless reinforced not only Carey’s status as both familiar Australian and exotic internationalist but also the paradoxically exoticist nature of the “authenticity fix,” for which the festival audience was hungering.

Carey, if he refused to fulfil the desires of the audience to penetrate his celebrity, agreed to pander to the putatively centrist social positioning of his middle brow festival audience. He sneered at both journalists and academics, who attempt to link his novel, which is based on the Ern Malley literary hoax of 1944, with that literary hoax. As he put it in an interview, “It really is like taking Miles Davis doing Bye Bye Blackbird and really reviewing Bye Bye Blackbird, which is certainly not the fucking point” (qtd. in Symons 5). Journalists, he suggested, don’t possess the literary nous to come to terms with the fantastic conceit of his

novel regarding an Ern Malley-like character (Bob McCorkle) who is given a corporeal existence. Alternatively, academics, unable to accept literature as a form of “primitive, magical thinking” (Carey’s terms), interpret the novel with regard to Australian cultural identity or even (God forbid) the Demidenko hoax and the ensuing debate in the Australian public sphere. Carey’s attack on the stereotypical literary imbecility of the low brow and what he represented as the literary wank factor of the high brow appeared to be perfectly pitched. The middle brow writers’ festival audience laughed on cue.

Carey’s engagement of conflicting stereotypical class attitudes to literature is interesting given that he was promoting a novel that deals with a hoax that engaged similar stereotypes about conflicting class attitudes to literature in the public sphere and that provoked genuine class conflict. James McAuley and Harold Stewart may have constructed the working-class poet Ern Malley (supposedly a recently deceased mechanic/insurance salesman) as an avant-garde “in joke” directed, as Brian Lloyd puts it, “against another avant-garde text” (31). However, as David Musgrave and Peter Kirkpatrick recognize, Malley was not only a “performance within high culture” but was also “inextricably bound up with popular culture” and “socially produced by very different frictions issuing from below” (137). When McAuley and Stewart criticized what they perceived to be the “arty-farty” meaninglessness of the modernist poetry favoured by Max Harris and his journal *Angry Penguins* (where the Malley poems appeared), they did so by constructing a figure who represented the average Australian (McAuley qtd. in Lloyd 23).

They also revealed their hoax in a tabloid newspaper, thus engaging Australian working class *ressentiment* against the cultural elite to support their case. According to Cassandra Atherton, “the public was delighted by the hoax [. . .] *The Bulletin* [. . .] lent their support to the McAuley/Stewart cause at the time, publishing the comment: ‘earnest thanks to the diggers who are joint debunkers of Bosh, Blah and Blather’” (16). When Max Harris was subsequently put on trial for publishing obscenities, literature itself, perceived as a foreign, undemocratic, decadent and un-Australian activity, was clearly the offender. As Philip Mead points out, “That a State’s heaviest legal ordinance could be mobilised [. . .] against a handful of poems and a few other passages of a literary magazine is surely evidence that something more than a merely literary dispute was being tried” (87).

Similarly, the more recent “ethnic” hoaxes have attracted attention from reactionary quarters. As Peres da Costa suggests, “The broadsheet press,” which has configured itself as the voice of the proletariat, “with its own entangled investments in literary realism and authorial omniscience, took a particular pleasure” in exposing the Demidenko hoax, for example (76). “Controversy about the novel [. . .] became [. . .] part of journalistic claims to objectivity and truth. Details of the Demidenko persona by which journalists had originally been beguiled [. . .] were now catalogued as the spoils of the investigative journalists’ heroic truth-

seeking mission.” The exposure of the fraudulence of the literary has also been typically accompanied by attacks on the aesthetic and ethical integrity of the reading classes who employ the literary, in part (as Bordieu and Frow have argued), as a status symbol of their aesthetic and ethical integrity. As Richard Guillatt suggests, the “scandals” regarding Mudrooroo, Carmen and Durack have “been a picnic for right-wing commentators such as Pauline Hanson, who commented last month that life as an Aborigine couldn’t be all that bad considering the number of whites who aspired to be black” (13).

Those whose subjectivity is more obviously formed in part by the category of literature, however, have experienced their own anxieties about the aesthetic and ethical integrity of the literary (and of their identity) in the wake of literary identity hoaxes in Australian public culture. The revelation of a literary hoax exposes the commercial operation of authors selling a commodity and thereby exposes the ideological spuriousness of the “authenticity fix” and “ethical fix” looked for in the identities and literature of ethnic or victim writers. As Carter puts it, middle brow literary “ethics” is one that “is always ready to turn into aesthetics.” While Robert Manne believed that the Demidenko hoax demonstrated that Australia remained uncivilized, what it arguably showed was the desire of an Australian literary culture to prove itself civilized, through a display of cosmopolitanism and tolerance, as well as an interest in moral issues of global import, in order to distinguish itself from the traditional stereotype of the Australian philistine. In the light of this, we can see how the exposure of such literary identity hoaxes also stirred up old colonialist anxieties about Australian literary identity as a fraud that has been constructed over an essential cultural void.

Attempts at damage control have been varied. As we have suggested, while many academics defended literature from being tainted by literary identity hoaxes by pointing to the poststructural purity of textuality, public intellectuals usually defended the sanctity of literature by attacking the immorality of the perpetrator of the literary identity hoax. Carey’s *My Life as a Fake* can be read as part of the efforts at damage control. It perspicaciously addresses the problem of literary hoaxes and the uncertainty about the status of authorial identity and the literary in the Australian public sphere that fakes provoke. Indeed, it can be read as a salve to middle brow anxieties about these issues. Although the violence of its defence of literature, which is a defence, after all, of Carey’s life blood, makes the use of the term “salve” seem a little inadequate.

Carey’s novel combines the textualist and moralistic arguments that have been used to defend literature from literary identity hoaxes, representing literature as a force that escapes the control of the immoral literary hoaxer, Christopher Chubb, and that has the power to create a genuine physical form out of an imaginary literary identity and a sacred authentic text out of an intended textual trick. Bob McCorkle, the product of a hoax, is presented as emphatically physical, and his

work is that of a genius. Christopher Chubb, the perpetrator of the hoax, is an irresponsible Frankenstein but also ultimately redundant. Carey also cleverly negotiates the class conflicts surrounding literature in the Australian public sphere. While the novel is clearly critical of a stereotypical, philistine, masculinist, sporting Australian culture, it nevertheless represents Bob McCorkle as a stereotypically Australian working class character. In other words, he suggests, Australian culture exists. We must continue to believe. We must continue to buy books.

Literary hoaxes provoke anxiety in Australian public culture because they point, like the fake authors and books in Borges' stories, to the chimerical nature of literature, identity and culture, to the void that they hide, to the death that lies in place of authenticity.

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