

adventures in malley country

Concerning Peter Carey's
My Life as a Fake

ROSS CHAMBERS

La poésie ne change pas la vie, elle l'échange.

Edmond Jabès¹

— POIESIS AND PSEUDOPHOBIA

I asked why he had taken the human form as a model. There seemed to me then, and there still seems to me now, a strange wickedness in that choice.

HG Wells, *The Island of Dr Moreau*²

Contemporary anxieties around cloning and genetic modification have deep roots in a nineteenth- and twentieth-century tradition of narrative thought-experiments about the artificial reproduction of human life. In the 'strange wickedness' to which HG Wells's narrator refers—as good a condensation of the tradition's topic as any—strangeness has always been as prominent as wickedness. In that tradition the myths of Prometheus and Faust, of the golem and the doppelgänger, together with fables and fictions concerning automata and scientifically produced monsters and/or reflections on the real and the illusory, have converged to define a problematic of the sorcerer's apprentice. We will see that such a problematic reflects a powerful fear of artifice, or more accurately a phobia: a fear of artifice as great as the attraction it also exerts. ETA Hoffmann's 'Der Sandmann' (1814), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Tomorrow's Eve* (1886), HG Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) and Bioy Casares's *Invenición de Morel* (1940) are landmark works in this phobic tradition.³ But it includes also the many variants, adaptations and imitations of these and other stories in opera, ballet and film (the medium that is itself implicated in Casares's novella), as well as innumerable popular cultural manifestations of many kinds.

Peter Carey's most recent novel, *My Life as a Fake* (2003), is not without forerunners and precedents, then.⁴ But where Mary Shelley's genius lay in her ability to foreshadow so many of the themes and motifs that were to attach themselves to the thematics of artifice and artificial life, the significance of Carey's contribution lies in his having retrospectively identified, at the heart of Western reflections on this topic, a concern with language and in particular a problematic of poesis. It's as if the question of language and its uses—of discourse as what we *make* when we 'do things with words', but also of what we *do* when we 'make things' out of words—has been plainly revealed, now, at the heart of a lengthy and, in the era of genetic modification and cloning, increasingly *vital* tradition.

The question of discourse, then. But also therefore that of intercourse in all the senses, sexual and social, of the word. For where the strangeness of artificial life is a function of what I will call the phenomenon of singularity—that is, of its apparent transgression of conventional and therefore socially acceptable understandings and expectations—its wickedness is regularly conceptualised in terms of the problem that is at the heart of all sociality: that of relationality. Relationality manifests the difference-but-similarity of self and other, their interdependence; and thus it identifies within supposedly individual identity a split that makes each of these two terms problematic, a split without which, however, sociality would be unthinkable. The locus classicus in literature of this sort of identitarian split and in particular of its implications in terms of good and evil ('wickedness') is, of course, RL Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), a text about identitarian split that is itself, appropriately enough, in a relation of difference and similarity with the tradition of narrative thought-experiments concerning artificial life.⁵ For with that tradition it shares some key motifs (Dr Jekyll's scientific pursuits, Mr Hyde's monstrosity, and of course the combat of the two for identity), although it never adverts specifically to the thematics of the artificial reproduction of life.

In the texts that do cluster around that thematics, identitarian splits regularly take the form of a duality enacted as rivalry but also mirroring between males, often (but not necessarily) between a natural male and a created, artificial one. Usually (but not always) this rivalry has as its object a woman, who may be natural or artificial, but is often paired with her corresponding (artificial or natural) other, or even presented—as is the case with Carey's *Noussette*—as undecidably natural *and* artificial. Particularly prominently in Shelley and Carey, such male rivalry is the text's basic narrative motor, the mirroring that accompanies it illustrating what René Girard, some time ago, described as mimetic desire as well as what, more recently, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick brilliantly identified as 'homosexuality'.⁶ Homosexuality is a desiring relation between males that is mediated by a woman, whose presence is therefore both crucial and backgrounded within the relation. She is the 'excluded third', absent as much as she is present, the whole apparatus pointing therefore to the mutual intrication, each implying the other, of heterosexuality (in which the woman is present albeit

backgrounded) and homosexuality (in which she is only apparently absent). In *The Island of Dr Moreau*, as also in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, women are in fact literally absent, except as walk-ons, and exert no narrative or novelistic influence. It's as if everyone in these literary environs is a bachelor—and in fact bachelorhood, upon examination, turns out to be something of an issue, although it is rarely foregrounded thematically, in every text in this tradition that I can think of, beginning most notably with *Frankenstein* itself. The conclusion seems inescapable: under the guise of bachelor singularity it is queerness, and specifically the queerness of the indissociability of hetero- and homosexuality, that is at issue. Carey alludes to this indissociability in the character of Sarah's bisexual father, Boofy; but the problematics of queerness is developed most prominently in Bill Condon's recent film, *Gods and Monsters* (1998), itself adapted from Bram Stoker's novel *Father of Frankenstein*.⁷

When women appear at all in this bachelor universe, they conform to one or the other of only two types. They are either the girl-next-door, a flesh and blood woman who is 'all heart', or her opposite, a glamorous mechanical doll or other illusory image whose heartlessness does not prevent her from exerting a fatal attraction over some young male student or marooned traveller.⁸ Among the men, on the other hand, it is much harder to draw so sharp a contrast, in part because the male figures of artificial life are never mechanical marvels but fleshy and warm-blooded, albeit misshapen, creatures, and in part because the scientists who create them suffer as it were from a hypertrophy of brain and a corresponding deficiency of good sense, and are consequently disturbingly close to achieving a certain monstrosity of their own. The creators are thus almost as creepy as their creatures, Wells's Dr Moreau being only the most obvious example of this disturbing near-equivalency of man and monster.

So in order to enforce a necessary binarism of good versus evil between the brainy males and the creatures of their artifice, it becomes imperative to engineer some sort of *transfer of evil*, from the mad scientists to the hulking brutes. This is achieved through a process of scapegoating that is allegorised, for example, in Mary Shelley's novel and later treated almost explicitly in Peter Carey's. Scapegoating simultaneously exculpates the creators and turns the creatures into figures of outsider status. By contrast, artificial women—whatever their sins—are *never* treated as outsiders, presumably because their cold and empty glamour is thought of as complementary to the stay-at-home ordinariness of the girls-next-door, even as the two types function as rivals. Any similar complementarity of brain and brawn cannot be acknowledged, however, if the hulks are to be successfully scapegoated. So it is the male monsters who are confined to some experimental island, or walk the earth like their archetypal ancestors: Cain, brother of Abel, or Judas, betrayer of Christ, incarnated as the Wandering Jew. Their status is that of the false and the supernumerary, the untrustworthy and the *de trop*.

The artificial women's falsity is *recognisable*, and can be acknowledged as complementary to their opposite numbers' reality—to the point that it is deceptive, on occasion, to the young lovers who take them to be real—for the reason that it is understood to stimulate desire: theirs is the falsity of the surrogate that generates illusion. The falsity of the men, however, is recast as monstrosity, and hence as scapegoatable because *their* complementarity cannot be acknowledged. For if it *could* be recognised, it would have to be understood, not as surrogacy but as supplementation (the supplementation of brains by brawn, and vice versa). But *that*, in turn, would entail acknowledging that natural men are not complete in themselves and not self-identical, but constructed out of a *lack* and in need of an *other*, in order to be (or rather to become) 'themselves'. The monstrosity attributed to these false men is thus of a piece with the necessary denial of homosocial desire.

In this way, the queer bachelor universe of artificial life generates two distinguishable (although not distinct) plots—plots that are interrelated and sometimes combined because each is complementary to the other. One is the plot of desire, having both its source and its object in surrogacy. This heterosexual plot has mechanical dolls at its centre, and it reads the queerness of artificial life as an alluring glamour that dangerously enhances natural feminine beauty. The other plot is homosocial. In it, male queerness is read as creepy monstrosity in order to be scapegoated; it concerns a problematic of identity in light of the phenomenon of supplementation. *Frankenstein*, *The Island of Dr Moreau* and *My Life as a Fake* are versions of this male rivalry plot, with strongly homosocial and covertly homosexual overtones; while the heterosexual plot of feminine allurements and illusoriness is represented by 'The Sandman', *Tomorrow's Eve* and the *The Invention of Morel*. The cultural strength of the male-rivalry, scapegoating plot is exemplified strikingly by the fact that popular culture has transferred the name 'Frankenstein' from Mary Shelley's creator to the created monster; and it is this identity plot that, in the next section, I want to follow out in *My Life as a Fake*.

We can bring Freud to bear on this plot as well as Girard and Sedgwick, by observing that in it the male monster is treated as a phobic object. For the powerful fear of artifice that animates the scapegoating plot I suggest therefore the name of 'pseudophobia', intending an implication of false or unwarranted fear as well as fear of the false. For the function of the phobia is to *suppress the attraction* that exists in the homosocial plot between men (the male creator and the male creature) by making the artificial male an object of repulsion. Cultural manifestations that are queer in the sense that they embody the undecidability and the deconstructability of difference—here, the difference not only of natural and artificial life, but also of heterosexuality and homosexuality—have a social status equivalent to that, in psychic life, of the return of the repressed. As such, they are uncanny. It is the *denial* of this uncanny return, in the case of male monsters, that transforms the uncanniness of the queer into the creepiness of something that is alleged, with disapprobation, not to be

supernatural and ghost-like but to be preternatural ('beyond' the natural, 'out in front' of the natural) and, as such, tinged with evil: monstrous. The creepy, then, is the uncanny when it is read less as disquieting than as simultaneously attractive and strangely wicked; and it is the creepy phobic object that needs to be foreclosed, or rather *invites* foreclosure, through scapegoating. (Contrariwise, the glamorous—a word etymologically related to 'grammar' and to French '*grimoire*', a strange or arcane sign—is likewise a manifestation of indifferenciation and hence a return of the repressed, but one that is read as strangely attractive to the extent that the desire it arouses enjoys the legitimacy of heterosexuality.) Taken together, the creepiness inherent in the male-identity plot and the allure inherent in the plot of desire and female surrogacy thus specify the whole tradition of novels about artificial life as phobic. Between them, they reproduce the ambivalence of attraction and revulsion that is characteristic of phobia.

But if the tradition is a phobic one, we can say that Carey's novel is a very largely non-phobic rehandling of the tradition in which both its prominent identity plot and its subsidiary desiring plot (centred on the figure of Noussette) participate. It understands pseudophobia, in other words, as a fear of the false that is also a false, or unwarranted, fear. Accordingly its mode is comic rather than melodramatic; its stance is diagnostic in relation to what it treats as a social pathology. Furthermore, this critical stance is coterminous with the thematic breakthrough mentioned at the outset—the breakthrough that consists of recognising the poetic (and more specifically the poietic) character of the phobic object. Artificial life, in Carey's illuminating rereading of the tradition, has the qualities of constructedness and ingenuity that were characterised in ancient rhetoric under the rubrics of *dispositio* and *inventio*. Or, in more modern terms, suggested by the work of Deleuze and Guattari, we might say that it is the product of an *agencement* (a word suggestive of an act of 'agencing' to which it will be necessary for us to return, but usually translated as 'assemblage' or 'device').⁹

Artifice, in other words—and whether we think of it as surrogacy or supplementation—is also a way of describing human 'making' (poiesis) as an example of ordinary art and craft (Greek *techne*): a matter of productivity rather than of supposedly forbidden knowledge and trespass. And if hulking monsters and glamorous dolls become figures for the human propensity to make, out of some given primary matter (such as 'life'), some *new* thing, in the way that poiesis as the making of poetry forms out of ordinary language an utterance that is unprecedented in its form but strangely, and uniquely, significant, then the question of the 'artificial life' that is called fiction also arises, since prose fiction can readily be understood, alongside of poetry (and drama), as one of the modes of poiesis. Can it be that monsters and dolls are, self-reflexively, figures for the works of fiction themselves in which they occur? Is mimetic fiction to poetic fiction—the category that includes fictions of artificial life—as surrogacy is to supplementation, in a way homologous with the relation of dolls to

monsters in that fiction? And does such self-reflexivity suggest that the fiction in question is in solidarity with its figures of artificial life, as a function of its textuality, even as its narrative apparatus defines them as phobic objects?¹⁰ Such questions, and the observations in which they are grounded, are suggested and supported by the thematic premise of *My Life as a Fake*: that there is a continuity of some sort between the Ern Malley affair—a quarrel about the significance of poetry *and* about poetry as a mode of signification—and the longish tradition, launched in English by Mary Shelley, of novels concerning artificial life.

That there is an implied, metaphoric equivalence between the constructed monsters and dolls in such fiction and writing itself, in its generic character as poetic narrative (often called fable), is strongly hinted in at least two prefaces, the one historically foundational, the other a kind of modernist manifesto. Mary Shelley's preface to *Frankenstein* argues for the poetic status of her narrative in terms that have the grandiloquence of her period but which may also be intentionally unspecific. Her narrative, she avers, is worthy of comparison with 'the highest specimens of poetry' (Homer, the Greek tragedians, Shakespeare, Milton) in that she has extended to prose fiction the 'rule' of 'preserving the truth of the elementary principles of humanity' while not scrupling to 'innovate upon their combination'. (xxxiii) This idea, of recombining elementary principles, contains a seed of the theory concisely and much more forcefully, not to say provocatively, expounded by Jorge Luis Borges in his 'Prologue' of 1940 to Casares's *Invention of Morel*:

The typical psychological novel is formless [because it espouses the real]. The adventure story does not propose to transcribe reality; it is an artificial object, no part of which lacks justification. It must have a rigid plot if it is not to succumb to the sequential variety of *The Golden Ass*, *The Seven Voyages of Sinbad*, or the *Quixote*.

Borges's examples of 'adventure stories' with admirably tight plots are 'The Turn of the Screw', *The Trial*, Jules Verne's *Voyage to the Centre of the Earth*, and finally Casares's own text. 'I have discussed with the author the details of his plot. I have reread it. To classify it as perfect is neither an imprecision nor a hyperbole.' (6)

The emphasis in Shelley on combination and in Borges on justification and the perfectly engineered plot describes textuality as a matter of technical adjustment, and resonates on one hand with the constructive skill of fictional creators like Frankenstein, the Spalanzani-Coppelius pair in Hoffmann, Villier's Edison and even the evil vivisectionist Moreau, and on the other hand with Mallarmé's famous modernist definition of the poet as a *syntaxier*, one who puts words together into inventive and suggestive patterns. It resonates even more strongly with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *agencement* as an 'assemblage' that 'agences' a displacement of authorial authority (as 'intention') by producing, through writing,

an *object of readability* that cannot be understood as a mere projection of the author's subjectivity.

For such a scenario of agencing seems to replicate the 'sorcerer's apprentice' plot—of an invented monster that escapes its creator's control—that legitimates the scapegoating of artifice. To understand writing as a mode of invention and combination—that is, of agencing—comparable with the skill that goes into the creation of the artificial monsters and living dolls of fiction is to understand it simultaneously as semiosis, then—as productive of meanings that are beyond authorial control as the creatures of artifice so regularly escape their creators' intentions and enjoy a life of their own—and as an object of scandal. It scandalously challenges inherited views of writing as a mere surrogate of speech and a vehicle of mimesis, and acknowledges it instead, as a phenomenon of supplementation: not just a harmless replica but something strangely new and other, a site of difference and—as Derrida would add—of deferral and '*differance*'.

A quarrel over poesis in such a sense—not only what it means but also how it means—is arguably what was at stake in the trials for 'obscenity' or, in France, '*outrage aux mœurs*', that dotted the history of literary modernity (Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov ...). Authors were prosecuted for having supposedly intended sexual reference of a kind that was held to be unacceptable, but what was more probably on trial was the strangeness and opacity of writing that was socially disquieting because of the difficulty of reading it as having literal sense: a sense that could be thought to be grounded in either the mimesis of natural reality or the author's individual subjectivity, or of course in both. If it was a form of life, this writing was artificial life, and writerly artifice names the object of prosecution at these trials more surely than the legal definitions of obscenity that provided the alibi for scapegoating authors and publishers, and banning the offending texts. Equally arguable is that the great outsider trials of the modern era—Oscar Wilde in England, Alfred Dreyfus in France—were similarly structured, and designed likewise to foreclose manifestations of queerness recast as artifice, untrustworthiness and creepiness by punishing a 'sodomite' (sic) and a Jew for being opaque and unreadable and hence artificial and false. Wilde and Dreyfus were figures recognisably alien although indistinguishable from the 'natural' humans they were held to impersonate (straight men, real Frenchmen), in the way that writing by Flaubert or Baudelaire, Joyce or Nabokov, was generically recognisable (as a poem, a novel, written in French or English) but—by virtue of, precisely, its writerliness, its poesis—strange, perverse and therefore evil.

My premise then in what follows is that, taking the Ern Malley affair and the obscenity trial of Max Harris as an episode in the history I have just very briefly sketched, *My Life as a Fake* departs from that historical manifestation so as to explore, in the mode of a poetic

fiction, a fable or—as Borges has it—an adventure story, some of the implications of the pseudophobia that surrounds poesis as the creation of artificial life. That the fictive Malley's opus, 'The Darkening Ecliptic', was intended as a fake but turned out to be not easily distinguished from genuine poesis in the modernist mode is the crucial paradox: poetry is the queer object that indifferentiates—makes moot or undecidable—the supposed distinction between natural and artificial speech, intended and produced meaning. I'll look, in the next section, at the relation of poietic semiosis to the pseudophobic plot of rivalry and dual, or split, identity; and return, in the final section, to the novel's version of the Ern Malley obscenity trial in order to work out some of the implications of its implied self-identification, as poetic fiction, with the scapegoated figure of Malley—or, in the novel, Bob McCorkle.

There will not be space to analyse in detail the novel's own *agencement* as a text: the very complex apparatus of combination and adjustment that forces the reader to mime the narrator's (Sarah's) own efforts to put the story together. My interest is thematic: I want to explore what this elegant fable of Carey's tells us about poesis and pseudophobia; but also—and beyond that—about the way culture supplements nature, art supplements life, and poetry supplements history. About how, in so doing—and like the dolls and monsters in the novels of artificial life that form so large a part of Carey's intertext—culture, art and poetry *interpellate* us, and require us to respond to the question of what it means to be human.

— DUALITY AND MEANING

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* (cited as epigraph to *My Life as a Fake*)

What is one to call the monster's eyes if not eyes? Yet for Frankenstein the monstrous eyes seem to call into question what the word 'eyes' means. Artificial life questions some of the easy certainties that go with our use of language and make it possible. An unexpected split arises, within language, that corresponds to the identitarian duality of 'I' and 'he', the 'miserable monster' that 'I' has nevertheless created as an alter ego. The split challenges the straightforward referentiality that has heretofore governed Frankenstein's use of that particular word. Yet, on this occasion as on others, he and the monster nevertheless *converse*, without apparent difficulty. They have a common language that seems to work quite smoothly despite the split that has arisen in the meaning of the word 'eyes'. How are we to understand this puzzle?

Similarly the good Dr Jekyll and the evil Mr Hyde both speak, although never to each other. What Jekyll and Hyde have in common is writing, and more specifically their joint signature, which slopes in one direction in Jekyll's case (surely to the right, the dexter) and

in the other in Hyde's (equally surely to the left, the sinister). Correspondingly Carey's Christopher Chubb and Bob McCorkle—his version of the creator–creature duo—converse on a number of occasions, and what *they* have in common is poetry, which like the Jekyll–Hyde signature is simultaneously split, Chubb inclining to sestinas and villanelles, McCorkle to what sounds like modernism. Moreover Carey's narrator, Sarah, the editor of a poetry journal, judges Chubb's work to be aesthetically bad—indeed unpublishably so—somewhat in the way that Hyde is morally evil, while McCorkle's verse is so beautiful as to be sublime: where Jekyll is virtue personified, McCorkle writes poetry that is supremely good. In all these cases, then, what joins—the common language in Shelley, the signature in Stevenson, poetry in Carey—is also what differentiates and produces a duality. Conversely, the aesthetically good and the aesthetically bad, the morally good and the morally evil, the linguistically normal and the linguistically dubious cannot be unrelated to each other, if only because they could not be compared or contrasted if they did not have something in common: poesis, morality, language. Frankenstein and the monster, Jekyll and Hyde, Chubb and McCorkle, are couples in communication. What enables them to communicate, traditionally thought of as an exchange of agreed meanings, is also at the heart of their difference, which involves matters of judgement (briefly, an evaluation of what properly constitutes the human and what the monstrous). But it hinges also on a buried dispute over the way we mean—a dispute that comes to the fore in *My Life as a Fake*, like McCorkle the 'fake' author emerging at Weiss's obscenity trial.

I want to begin by asserting that meaning does not inhere naturally in words, in the way that Frankenstein appears to believe in the quotation above. Rather meaning is a phenomenon of supplementation, and as such a matter not of unproblematic reproduction but of unlimited and ongoing *production*—an affair too of cooperation, of society and culture. So Frankenstein, who believes in an inherited meaning, is led by the undoubted reality of the monster he has created, to make an implied request to his reader to cooperate with him in extending the sense of the word 'eyes'. In his sentence, how words mean becomes a matter of dissidence: there is a disjunction between an idea of inherent meaning, taken to be natural, and the idea of a jointly produced meaning, associated with the artificial and thought to be monstrous, but to which Frankenstein nevertheless gestures. The question of meaning, in other words, has its roots in pseudophobia. And it arises, I suggest, from a cultural unwillingness to acknowledge that the natural is not a self-sufficient category but is subject, rather, to supplementation, culture itself being as I've already mentioned a prime example of such a supplementation of the natural. I am positing, in other words, that the character of culture, the mediator of human communication, is to mistake itself for the natural, and to do so by classifying as monstrous and thus scapegoating, as artificial and creepy, the manifestations of queerness that assert the indivisibility of the natural and the artificial, the inherited

and the produced. This is what we see being played out in linguistic terms in Frankenstein's sentence. Fictions of artificial life, written and read in the perspective of inherited meaning, perform the task of scapegoating the queer. But they are also oddly suggestive, in the relationalities they produce between figures exemplary of the natural and inherited model of human meaning and figures exemplary of the artificial and the produced, of *culture itself as a poiesis*: not the opposite of the natural but a supplementation thereof, and of poiesis as a phenomenon governed therefore by *co-signature*, a matter of what is called communication.

Commonsense theories of communication that assume the active emission and the passive reception of a 'message' are visibly modelled on an idea of inherent meaning and of inheritance as transmission. In these theories, communication adheres to a reproductive schema that assumes a semantic equivalence between input and output without loss or gain. I ask you to bring home half a dozen eggs from the market; you return with six eggs. Such a model works well enough in conventional circumstances; and it is understandably favoured by the powerful because it concentrates all author-ity in an intention. A productive theory of communication, however, depends more on the idea of readability, and hence of a supplementation that supersedes transmission. Readability distributes author-ity between, most simply, two agencies, and in so doing introduces into the communication system the possibility of noise, in the form of semantic loss or gain. There is room for manoeuvre, and hence the production of a history that arises, not as the transmission of an intention, but as a function of interpretability.¹¹ Theories of supplementation or readability are regularly derided from a commonsense perspective, because they are held, mistakenly, to make language 'meaningless'. But what they do is generalise from unconventional circumstances and singular utterances. That is, they seek to account for supposedly ordinary circumstances of communication in a way that simultaneously explains the cases that transmission theory can only describe as anomalous and regrettable lapses, entailing an unfortunate loss of meaning. Cases, that is, like Frankenstein's sense that monster eyes cause the word 'eyes' to lose their (inherited, transmissible) meaning.

For readability or supplementation theories of meaning, communication (if communication it may still be called) is not the outcome of a unidirectional action of transmission, but of a dynamics of interaction in which, in the simplest cases, a double agency is at work. It takes at least two to tango, and because it takes two it takes a third also, which is what mediates between the two: the dance in the case of a tango, a language and a culture in the case of verbal communication, in all cases some shared convention or set of conventions that are not a purely transparent medium or code, but a material participant and simultaneously a source of what in information theory is called noise. Such a mediated interaction would look more like an intender-interpreter relation than a sender-receiver message, were it not that in such interactions the function of intending inevitably itself involves interpretation

while the function of interpreting, or reading, has its own intentional component. It is always framed by presuppositions, prior understandings, desires and the like.

'Let's not go to the movies tonight', you might say, 'intending'—that is, thinking—that I might prefer to stay home and cuddle by the fire. Uh-oh, I might 'interpret' (think), this relationship is really on the skids, I'm getting the brush-off. If the words 'Let's not go to the movies' have a meaning, their meaning was never anything as simple as let's not go to the movies, reduced to the supposedly inherent signifieds, the so-called 'literal sense', of those words. Meaning (if meaning it may be called) emerges rather as something like a sometimes unexpected (and always unpredictable) outcome of an interaction that itself has a history: the conclusion, say, that one, the other, or both of us might draw from the spat, to take one possible outcome, that is about to emerge from this particular contretemps. 'Here's a relationship that could do with some empathy, let's work on it.' Or: 'That's the last straw, I'm going to look for someone else.' Or conceivably: 'These tempestuous affairs are great, and X (or Y) is so hard to fathom, I hope we can stick together forever.' But if meaning is in this way an outcome uncontrollable by any of the parties in communication, such an outcome cannot itself be secure or conclusive, for the reason that supposed outcomes are always the predecessors and genitors of further outcomes. Meaning is always a historical phenomenon, with an upstream and a downstream. It is *never* closed, always (as Derrida famously pointed out) deferred—and that both despite and because we have a common language.

Of course any sense we may have that communication entails a duality of difference (I simplify again), and with it the noise that results from the fact that every utterance mobilises at least one 'intending' subject and one 'interpreting' subject, together with a distancing/mediating element that is as opaque as it is transparent, is subject to the effects of conventionality, which are practice and habit on the one hand, and on the other a need to innovate under certain circumstances. Practice and habit ensure that language mostly works just fine; we have the sense of a smoothly noiseless communicational process even though it may work in a way somewhat different from what we imagine. It is the occasional contretemps, together with the more unconventional uses of language that (following Laurent Jenny) I call singular utterances that set the cat among the canaries.¹² These tend to lay bare the fact that always pertains, even when the interaction is more conventional: that we 'read' even when we think we are 'receiving a message'. For that reason the word 'writing', in its strong sense, can serve as a synonym for language uses that contest the assumption of an inherent meaning and of communication as noiseless transmission of that meaning. By *detaining* us in the act of reading that normally we perform smoothly and unselfconsciously, writing makes reading's supplementing, productive, intending-interpreting character inescapable. We pause, hesitate, wonder or ponder, somewhat like Frankenstein suddenly asking himself whether the word 'eyes' is working as it should, even as he continues to use it. This awareness of

communicational noise puts paid to any sense of a meaning that might inhere naturally in words, at the same time as more challenging and productive possibilities emerge from the insight that their meaning is something that has to be endlessly supplied.

Writerly utterances of this kind that we interpret as *intending* their meaning to be supplied as a matter of reader-input constitute the rhetorical category of the figural. This is a category that includes not only the conventional tropes that have been catalogued since antiquity, but also many other cases of linguistic singularity that amount to nonce-tropes. (Thus Frankenstein asks us to regard the monster's 'eyes' as figural, while his own are eyes in a conventional, supposedly inherent, sense.) Of course, the figural and the conventional are no more opposites than Frankenstein and the monster, sharing a common language, are distinct entities; between writing and non-writing there is no uncrossable gulf. Unconventional language uses can themselves become clichés, through habit and practice: if someone uses the phrase 'sets the cat among the canaries', as I just did, it is hardly likely to give a practised speaker of English pause. To an unpractised speaker, on the other hand—a foreigner, say, learning the language and encountering it for the first time—the phrase might change category again and seem a remarkably vivid linguistic invention. (So indeed it seems to *me*, now that I've begun to think about it in terms of cats and canaries rather than in terms of the phrase's supposedly inherent meaning ...) But imagine now that the phrase is not a cliché or a revived cliché but something like 'the black swan of trespass', or 'my trembling intuitive arm', and that I encounter it in an utterance that presents itself as a poem. (Malleyphiles will recognise these phrases' provenance; they are from 'The Darkening Ecliptic', which Carey in turns attributes to McCorkle.) Independently of my previous language experience, *these* unconventional utterances will inevitably slow my reading, which will become consciously interpretive, for the reason that I can neither mistake their figural intent nor reduce the metaphoric phrasing to a sense that I might understand as inherent, or literal. I can only work with them, thoughtfully and productively—not reproductively—supplementing the lack they seem to display (the lack, that is, of an inherent meaning) by input of an interpretive kind that attempts to convert their noise into something I can recognise as meaningful, even though I may not either wish or be able to state that meaning 'in so many words'.

Obviously phrases such as these run a certain risk. Because they count as linguistic innovations, and in that sense as artificial inventions, their acceptability and success depend on genre conventions, the function of which is precisely to naturalise writerly ways of saying that, under other circumstances, would be regarded as strange, inappropriate or impertinent. That's why, a moment ago, I introduced these examples by framing them as occurring 'in a poem'. What I make of, or do with, the Malley corpus depends entirely on whether or not I acknowledge its claim to be poetic speech (which, of course, was exactly the bone

of contention in the Malley affair). For genre is itself subject to the same dynamics of intending-interpreting as words are; so genres themselves can easily be misrecognised, disputed and rejected. The speaker of singular utterances can be thought, depending on circumstances, to have made a pardonable slip, or gone crazy, or to be committing, perhaps deliberately, an error of tact or taste (alluding inappropriately to sexual matters, for example, as the prosecutors in the Malley trial thought). Accusations can be made: the utterances are pretentious, stilted, not natural, artificial; or they demonstrate the ‘decay of meaning’ (as the Malley hoaxers intended). And meanwhile, where there is a sense of genre appropriateness, the selfsame phrasing may be understood as meaningful precisely *because*, in the way I’ve suggested, it resists immediate or automatic reading. Most particularly, its figural character can be understood as an attempt to utter something that, for whatever reason, is seeking to *emerge*—to become culturally recognisable—although it cannot be more simply stated.

Although I may well assume that such an act of writing has an author who is responsible for its existence and can be understood as an intending subject, the author in the classical sense of the term is as good as supplanted, in such instances, by the subjective agency of reading as a vehicle of cultural emergence. Because there can be no reading that does not have a text as its object, the author as agent of writing can’t be wholly dismissed in this process, even as—like Jekyll disappearing into Hyde or Hyde into Jekyll—the supposed authorial function of responsibility for meaning is relayed by a reader without access to authorial intent other than that mediated by the textual singularity. The consequence is a duality of ‘authorial’ subjects (writer and reader) who are in a relation of *split*, each the other’s other, because their joint participation in the activity called communication (but which I’m describing as production and emergence) implies that neither can claim absolute author-ity. With nothing to supplement, the readerly authority cannot function, yet the text per se, as produced by the author-as-writer, does not signify unless and until it is read. To minds accustomed to think of language use in terms of a logic of transmission, this relation of co-agency and of mediated doubling and difference that is implied by the logic of supplementation can only be grasped as a kind of rivalry—a tug of war or a seesaw effect of dominance-or-eclipse—and it is this kind of rivalry that Carey fictionalises in his novel as the dispute of Chubb and McCorkle, in which McCorkle personifies the *textual* subject produced by readerly authority. He does so, however—and I believe this to be crucial—in a narrative whose function is to repair the either-or breach, that is, to introduce a perspective closer to the productive alliance assumed by a logic of supplementation.

At first, though, Chubb and McCorkle reprise the story of the Ern Malley hoax cooked up by James McAuley and Harold Stewart in 1941–42, a story that reproduces the sorcerer’s

apprentice scenario so fundamental to fictions of artificial life. The hoaxers cobbled together a set of texts that they thought would be self-evidently recognisable as so much meaningless nonsense, pseudo-poetry. The idea was to expose as fakers those enthusiasts for modernist poetry, Max Harris and his friends, who would expose themselves to ridicule by mistaking the pseudo-poetry for the real thing. For the hoax to work, however, these invented texts had to be framed as belonging nevertheless to the genre of the poetic; such was the function, *inter alia*, of the cover letter attributed to the fictive Ern's equally fictive sister Ethel conceived—with a view perhaps to appealing to Romantic understandings of the artist as uncomprehended genius—as a sort of simple-minded but good-hearted twin of Isabelle Rimbaud. The hoax worked, then, for the very same reason that it fizzled, which is that the character of poetic invention is such that the pseudo and the real thing are not so easily distinguished, 'artifice' being of the very nature of poesis, as indeed of all language use. Categories like authentic and inauthentic are ultimately irrelevant, the question being the more pragmatic one of whether and how a poem 'works', whether it lends itself to the production of poetic meaning as a matter of supplementation and emergence—what we call reading. Independently of the hoaxers' intention, then, Ern's supposedly meaningless texts turned out to have the kind of readability that many poetry readers, then and now, associate with the genre of the poetic, so that Harris, who was covered with ridicule, even vilified, in the press and elsewhere, *also* turned out not to have been completely mistaken. Readers at the time, and since, have asserted the truly poetic quality of the corpus created to be fake, so that an unexpected and unintended *alliance* eventually emerged between the fakery of the hoaxers and the victim whose fakery they intended to expose (and did in a certain sense expose). Wholly unintended by the perpetrators and unacknowledged by their victims, this *de facto* alliance succeeded in demonstrating the opposite of what was originally intended, *viz* the inapplicability to poesis of the authentic–inauthentic, real–fake distinction. We still don't know for sure, I submit, whether 'The Darkening Ecliptic' is fake poetry of some genius, or a genuinely poetic outcome, an emergence accidentally engineered in the hoaxers' Frankensteinian laboratory in Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, in October 1941.¹³

'I am Chubb', says Chubb, at one point in *My Life as a Fake*. 'He is McCorkle.' To which Sarah, the general narrator, responds: 'Frankly that is a puzzle.' (168) I don't intend to follow out in detail the intricacies of the puzzle that arises from Carey's complex and ironic plotting of the Chubb-McCorkle story, the intricacies of its *agencement* as a narrative. The structure of embedded narrations, fragmented stories to be patiently pieced together, parallels between past events and those of the narrative present—even, I suspect, some apparently irrelevant episodes thrown into the mix like those baffling jigsaw bits that seem to belong to another puzzle altogether—is a topic for another essay. There is a framing story

that concerns Chubb's attempt to sell Sarah McCorkle's manuscripts in a kind of repetition-with-a-difference of the original hoaxing of David Weiss/Max Harris, the difference being that this time around the McCorkle manuscripts are described unequivocally (but on Sarah's of course subjective authority) as the genuine poetic article, written by an authentic McCorkle. In the framed story, much of which, like the framing story, is set in Malaysia—think Malley-Asia, or Malley country?—McCorkle comes alive at age twenty-four (the age of Malley at his death), and lays his claim to be the real author of Chubb's hoaxing invention, 'The Darkening Ecliptic'. The assemblage of words and phrases cooked up by Chubb gives birth to its (other) author as a hulking, foul-mouthed, working-class brute, almost seven-feet tall, ignorant of how ordinary unpoetic things are named, and (like Frankenstein's monster) calling for justice, which in this case means recognition of his authorship. It's as if Frankenstein's monster was declaring himself to be Frankenstein, and thereafter the rivalrous relation of Chubb and McCorkle takes the form of a life-and-death struggle for paternity rights. To these rights, in fact, neither party has a very clear claim, since their object is embodied in Tina, the daughter of Noussette, herself a mysterious woman whose ability to invent and reinvent herself is matched only by her alluring beauty, and who stands therefore as a feminine incarnation of poetic artifice. When Chubb half-steals Tina from the hospital only to have her kidnapped from him by McCorkle, poetic authorship of both kinds is figured as a dubious personal appropriation of creative powers that might be more legitimately attributed to the process of poiesis itself, the productivity inherent in language. Nevertheless, like Frankenstein relentlessly tracking the monster across the Arctic ice, Chubb pursues McCorkle and Tina to Malaysia, where he attempts unsuccessfully to capture back the kidnapped embodiment of poetry, and to eliminate her captor by assassinating him. It's as if the allegorisation of poiesis through women characters yields to an agonistics of (male) authorship in the interest of there being a novelistic 'adventure story' plot, this being Carey's version of the split, in the tradition, between a male (rivalry) plot and a (desiring) plot centred on femininity as artifice.

But in a way not predicted by the tradition, resolution comes finally in Carey's novel when, learning years later that McCorkle is dying in Kuala Lumpur, Chubb hastens to nurse him, proving as unsuccessful in keeping his alter ego alive, however, as he had previously been in assassinating him. McCorkle dies in Chubb's arms, then, of a misdiagnosed case of leukemia which has been treated as Grave's disease (the non-fatal illness that, according to Ethel, carried off Ern Malley). Chubb then joins McCorkle's surviving family, consisting of Tina and an elderly Chinese woman, and with them devotes his life to tending McCorkle's shrine, the depository of his manuscripts. For McCorkle's hunger for names, it turns out, has given him mastery over several languages and has made him the author of an encyclopedic 'natural history' of the Malayan peninsula, while his poetry, 'outside the law of taste and poesy' (says

Sarah), is a manifestation of sheer genius—the genius of which Chubb now recognises himself incapable. But it is as if the poetry itself transcends the opposition of the natural and the historical (the real) and the artifices of language.

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, and so deeply, and in such breadth that he sends you, as Pound will, back to the library of Babel, deep into the histories and theologies and dictionaries, like *Hobson-Jobson* with its treasury of *jamboos*, *jumboos*, *lacs* and *kyfes*. (241)

Authorship, then, as a poetic enterprise, entails the creation of a 'country' that is simultaneously and apparently interchangeably the object of a real, 'natural' history and an assemblage of singular utterances, a jumble really, but bearing (shades of Jekyll and Hyde) a characteristic 'signature'. The strange Babelian dialect of McCorkle country is what the narrator finds the family, including Chubb, still speaking when she encounters them some years after the poet's death. It combines Australian English, Hokkein and Bahasa Melayu into a dialect that has the character of singularity.¹⁴

As for Chubb's death, it ensues only when the framed story encounters the framing story. Misinterpreting his attempt to get the narrator, Sarah, to publish McCorkle's poetry, the uncomprehending women, fiercely devoted like Ethel Malley to something they do not understand, murder him and dismember the body. So the manuscripts remain in their shrine, unpublished, while Sarah, whose arrival and also ill-advised intervention has precipitated this outcome, embarks on her own quest, which is to piece together the broken pieces of the story—the story, that is, that we ourselves, the readers, have just finished piecing together in Carey's own brilliantly plotted version of it. For if Pound is relevant to the way McCorkle's poetry sends us back to the library of Babel, Carey's narrative, too, as a form of poesis in its own 'write', has Poundian affinities too. 'We shall spin long yarns out of nothing', Sarah's travel companion and informant John Slater had quoted, in ironic and punning commentary on a small narrative performance of his own. (112)

Out of nothing? Or—as we're now prompted by Carey's text to ask—out of Milton's 'mangl'd body of Osiris', which Sarah rephrases immediately as 'The body of truth . . . dismembered and scattered—in Greek, *sparagmos*'? (274) The Osirian myth suggests that if fictional storytelling is a piecing together of scattered fragments into a fully 'justified' whole, and in that sense the creation of an artificial life, what such storytelling emerges from is not exactly nothing. Not nothing so much as 'the truth', mangl'd as a consequence of some (un-justified) exercise of power: say the jealous crime of Osiris's brother Set, or the similarly insane fraternal rivalry that leads Chubb and McCorkle each to seek to eliminate the other and ends in their reconciliation, but a reconciliation in death. Not out of nothing, then,

but out of poiesis's absolute opposite, which is the silence of a non-emergence—of what Walter Benjamin called *das Ausdrucklose*, the expressionless, understanding by that the consequence of a historical repression.¹⁵ Artificial life in this perspective is a coming-to-existence, through art—in this case the art of narrative—of something repressed that has been denied the justice of *returning*, and must find a substitute mode of expression. And putting things together, in any case—what Sarah, Isis-like, patiently does, and what we readers do in turn as Sarah's narratees and as co-agents with Carey of a narrative emergence that counterbalances the non-emergence of the McCorkle manuscripts—puts us, like Sarah, in the lineage of the constructors of poetic assemblages: not only McCorkle but also Chubb the hoaxer (and thus McAuley and Stewart, too, the historical agents of what emerged as the Malley affair). And, beyond them, of all the tinkerers in their various laboratories, the fictional creators of artificial life, from Frankenstein to Moreau and on to their twentieth and twenty-first century counterparts.

However, the Osiris myth also instructs us that *sparagmos* implies a flaw, an imperfection, a *lack* in such artificial life, as it is pieced (back) together. A split, that is, between the life that we can make (poiein)—the 'artificial' life of cultural subjects, put together out of others' lives like Malley's (and McCorkle's) photograph, a fake assemblage of bits of three other photos—and ... what? What is the alternative? Life in some unknown, pre-*sparagmos* integrity? Life as we like to imagine it to be? In culture we cannot *know* the natural. Or rather, we can know it, but only as always already cultural, 'beyond' the natural, the preternatural other of the natural. Our lives are second nature, not first nature, and hence a fake. They have had to be created—or, as it was once fashionable to say, constructed—in response to disaster; but that does not make them unreal. *My Life as a Fake* is McCorkle's 'fiercely sarcastic' title for the sum of his life's work. (163) But its reprise in Carey's own title suggests that we should take it as limitlessly generalisable. Culture supplants nature even as it supplements it.

So there is an ineradicable split or fissure, a sense of lack, and hence a duality of difference, that brands our assemblages and reassemblages, however well justified they may be, as fictions—artificial, other-than-natural concoctions. This inescapable sense of lack that arises from the supplanting of nature by culture is, I suggest, the stumbling block or snare, the *skandalon* (as René Girard might say) that leads us, suspecting as we must our own post-*sparagmos* fallenness, to deny it so obstinately, and to do so by scapegoating the artificial as singular or queer and creepy. In that way we affirm meaning, more comfortingly, to be something other than what we produce for ourselves, making it up, as it were, as we go along. But we do so only at the price of condemning, as simultaneously void of sense and a strange wickedness—something unspeakably monstrous—those alien eyes we have created, that stare at us through the bed-curtain for all the world as if they were our own.

— SINGULARITY

The overwhelming impression given by the prosecution case was not that the poems had outraged the community by their obscenity, but that the moment had come to address anxieties about their anomalous condition, their failure to have been written by Ern Malley, their failure to mean anything.

Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*¹⁶

Most obscenity trials bring to the dock the author of a text that has given offense. Sometimes both author and publisher are prosecuted. One of the bizarre features of the very bizarre Ern Malley obscenity trial that took place in Adelaide in late 1944 was that, although there was a plethora of potential authorial defendants, it was the poems' publisher, Max Harris, who was singled out for prosecution while the interesting question of their authorship was studiously ignored. Possibly the issue of authorship was being tacitly shifted onto the publisher, who was asked at one point in the proceedings whether he considered himself one of 'Australia's great writers'. But the effect of choosing to prosecute a *publisher* was inevitably to foreground the question of how 'The Darkening Ecliptic' should be *read*. In that way Harris did duty both for the authors who caused the texts to exist (McAuley and Stewart) and for the poetic qualities these texts acquired through their readability as singular utterances (something one might label Malley).

This ambiguity gave Harris an out, or at least seemed to, when he was pressed, as he repeatedly was, to *state the meaning* of a given poem or a selected group of verses, even sometimes a single word. He could simply deny his own authority by responding, after a few not very felicitous stabs at exegesis: you had better ask the author what the meaning is. Of course he took good care not to specify whom the term 'author' might designate, whether the McAuley–Stewart duo or Ern Malley, and the prosecution forebore to ask. In this way Harris pointed up the real problem that the court, in its bumbling way, was addressing by so manifestly failing to address it: what is the status of meaning when it cannot be equated with an intent to mean? The 'problem' of readability was being posed, in other words, and in a way that necessarily called forth the spectre of what the court least wished to address: an understanding of meaning as supplementation. Things do have a way of coming up at trials in this way that are not what the trials are ostensibly about: they are important sites of cultural emergence. But their role is also one of cultural gatekeeping. One of their functions is to decide what, among the various issues that may press upon a culture, will be acknowledged, and what will be ignored, denied or repressed. Such a dynamics of emergence and re-repression (or denial) is what makes a good trial such a dramatic affair. We might attend, therefore, to the fact that Carey has his Malley character, McCorkle, as a figure of

supplementation and of authorship-as-reading, emerge at the trial of David Weiss (Max Harris), only to be immediately evicted from the court.

Of course, in one sense the prosecution of Harris was apt, given that the true scandal that attaches to any kind of obscenity lies in its being published. No one really cares about the obscene's existence so long as that existence remains *covert*; its character is to be actual but ignorable, as is suggested by the etymological sense the word shares with words like 'obscure', and probably 'scandal' too. Philologists conjecture an Indo-European radical, *-sku-*, signifying covered. But in all these terms there's a fundamental ambiguity, which arises from the fact that they refer less to 'coveredness' per se than to the visibility that is already associated with the idea of being *covered up*. So it seems part of the destiny of the scandalous, the obscure and the obscene that they do eventually come to light, according to the dynamics described by Freud as the return of the repressed. It is just that such a return, says Freud, is also inevitably denied, which is why it returns in disguised form. It is then, however, I add, that the *agent* of return may be scapegoated, as when the publisher of obscure verse, declared to be obscene, is punished. It is in this latter way that the obscenity of obscurity—as an attempted return of Benjamin's historical unexpressed—is vicariously unpublished and re-repressed, albeit a little late since it will already have emerged. Harris was convicted and fined; in Carey's novel, McCorkle emerges and is evicted. And yet ... Even so there still remains a further possibility. For what is scapegoated in such a way may return yet again in yet another transformed guise, which I wish to claim is what we see enacted in storytelling such as Carey's fiction.

Shoshana Felman has recently written very powerfully about certain trials—she calls them 'trials of the century'—that have functioned culturally as scenes of emergence for the scandalous, the obscene, the obscure (scene being, by the way, yet another *-sku-* word).¹⁷ Felman is interested in the way trials can both favour the emergence of, and re-repress instances of, collective trauma, that is, in the vocabulary I have just been promoting, of scandals that have the concealed or unacknowledged status, within a culture, of the obscene in the sense of the covered up. Where the Adolf Eichmann trial was the occasion of a (re-)emergence into widespread public consciousness of the Holocaust, which had haunted post-Second World War culture since the opening up of the Nazi camps in 1945 but without being seriously addressed, the OJ Simpson trial staged an unfortunate conflict between the trauma of domestic violence against women (to which the prosecution alluded) and the trauma of Black oppression in the USA (mobilised by the defence). It was the latter that prevailed, the former that was re-repressed. Felman might be describing the Malley trial's insistence on the obscenity of sexual meanings when it was textual obscurity and readability that clearly troubled it, when she points out that 'what has to be heard in court cannot be articulated

in legal language'. (4) But she makes a second suggestive point a little later, when she adopts a couple of terms from Walter Benjamin's lexicon: 'in the courtroom, the *expressionless* turns into *storytelling*'. (14)

How a formulation such as this latter one might apply to literary as opposed to legal storytelling is something to which Felman has devoted a lifetime of compelling critical writing. I want to make her Benjaminian phrase resonate here, then, as a way of pointing to how and why the literary storytelling of *My Life as a Fake*, a poetic fiction, situates its own genesis in an Adelaide courtroom in 1944, transferred for fictional purposes to Melbourne. I want to propose that that court's refusal to take cognisance of the 'expressionless' that emerged there on the occasion of the Max Harris trial (from whose official transcript the novel borrows freely) becomes in Carey, with the emergence and expulsion of McCorkle, the Osirian moment of fracture and fragmentation whose consequences his narrative will explore and in its own way, as a return of the re-repressed (the denied and the scapegoated), attempt to repair, in the transformed guise of a literary fiction. The court transcripts are cited, then, as a way of indicating the point at which history and 'adventure story' are not only joined, but also part company, the task of fiction being the restorative construction of an artificial life: what I have been calling poiesis. Fiction in such a case comes to be definable as a kind of parahistorical gloss on, or corrective supplementation of, a history that amounts to a denial of justice. It is a restorative readjustment of the unjust.¹⁸

It's worth recalling first, however, that, as I indicated earlier, the Adelaide trial was only one in a long series of modern obscenity trials at which the true stumbling block or *skandalon* emerged as textual 'obscurity', the readability fostered by the singularity of modernist modes of writing. Dominick LaCapra has argued that the prosecution of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in 1857 had less to do with the sexual licence displayed by the heroine (Ernest Feydeau's *Fanny*, for example, had told a not dissimilar story without attracting disfavour) than it concerned the strangeness of the novel's writing as a *text*, its 'authorlessness' in the sense that no clearly authorial intention to mean could be discerned, given the prose's particularities of style (notably its deployment of what is now called free indirect discourse, a form of irony).¹⁹ A similar argument could clearly be mounted concerning the trials to which *Les Fleurs du Mal*, or *Ulysses*, or *Lolita* were subjected; and indeed the 'artistic merit' or 'redeeming artistic value' defence seems to have been developed, historically, as a way of naturalising, and so neutralising, for legal purposes, the discursive singularity that made modernist writing so easily considered something 'strangely wicked', or culpably queer.

But as I've also already suggested, such a history intersects also with the trials of supposedly singular or outsiderly individuals such as Oscar Wilde or Captain Dreyfus. Like Wilde's aestheticism, Dreyfus's Jewishness functioned as a signal that marked him as suspect—suspect because untrustworthy and difficult to read. Each figure was vulnerable, therefore,

to charges of inauthenticity, artifice and fakery that were legalised in one case as sodomy and in the other as treason (although homosexuality became an issue also in the Dreyfus affair). It's no accident, then, that Carey emphasises his Max Harris character's outsider status, his vulnerability to scapegoating, as simultaneously a Jew caught up in a 'Christian machine' (the court, we read, has a 'church-like aspect', 56), and an aesthete among the philistines, appearing in court in 'a long flocked-velvet smoking jacket and a drooping black bow tie' (55) like some 1940s throwback to London in the 1890s. Singularity of this kind is clearly perceived as akin to, and possibly interchangeable with, the kind of modernist writing that manifests the scandal of readability: in each something 'expressionless', as Benjamin might say, threatens to emerge and needs to be re-repressed by legal means.

For that reason, Carey links Weiss, the judicial scapegoat, with McCorkle, his figure of readability, and—through the concept of authorship to which Weiss, like Max Harris, appeals—with Chubb, the hoaxer. In the courtroom there is a certain solidarity, that is an alliance despite differences, among these three figures who do not know one another (although Weiss recognises Chubb). Weiss is taking the rap for the two authors, one the agent of the poems' writing, the other their poetic (readable) subject. Chubb, alter ego of McCorkle, expresses sympathy and admiration for Weiss, whom originally he had set out to humiliate. (57) McCorkle, the foul-mouthed, working-class outsider, protests openly on behalf of the urbane and fastidious outsider, Weiss, and since he is linked by authorship with Chubb—between them they represent the co-agency through which readerly meaning as evidence of supplementation emerges—he is at the apex of the triangle that links all three, sharing outsider status with Weiss and textual agency with Chubb. Although all three are jointly responsible for the emergence of the 'expressionless' that so worries the court—and thus stand for the collective agency that produces meaning, its reality as a social product and never-concluded outcome of an ongoing process of interaction—it is appropriate, therefore, that this emergence be symbolised by the unexpected materialisation, on the 'scene' of the court, of McCorkle—the monster of artifice.

Meanwhile, however—and by contrast with the triangular alliance whose existence no one in the courtroom can be aware of—the defence and the prosecution are manifestly at loggerheads, although each is in a double bind. There being no 'artistic merit' defence in Adelaide or Melbourne in 1944, the sole legal issue is whether the unconventional imagery and intricate patterning of 'The Darkening Ecliptic'—verse which, remember, was written specifically to caricature modernist writing as evidence of the 'decay of meaning'—does not have a simple, putatively self-evident meaning, one calculated to deprave and corrupt susceptible readers by its obsessive reference to sexuality and sexual acts. Under the hectoring he endures, the unfortunate publisher's line of defence, as we've seen, is to deny that he has instant access to the meaning of the verse he is asked to explicate, and to pretend,

knowing full well that the vexed question of authorship is one the court has decided to ignore, that 'the author' would know better than he what it signifies. This flawed tactic has the effect, however, of affirming the very obscurity of the writing—its singularity and 'anomalous condition'—that so troubles the court, even as the prosecution presses the scapegoat defendant to confirm the straightforward sexual meanings it takes to be as good as self-evident.²⁰ Weiss, then, is in an embarrassing damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't position, while the court is itself caught in a bind of its own, between its obvious exasperation over the verses' supposed meaninglessness and its insistence that their meaning is both evident and reprehensible.

A stalemate such as this is symptomatic. It bespeaks a deeply conflicted culture, one that is paralysed by a disparity it can't face. This is the disparity between evidence and a deeply held conviction: the evidence (which can't be either ignored or acknowledged) that our meanings—all of them—are not given but supplied, and consequently can neither be determined nor controlled by any single participant in their collective production; and the firm belief (one not open to challenge) that meaning is reproduced, and reproduced naturally, so that it is inherent and *can* therefore be both determined and controlled, notably by the powerful. Such is the stalemate that is recorded in the historical transcript of the Malley trial. Carey's novelistic intervention, an intervention that is also a point of departure for his fiction, consists then in the invention of a stalemate-breaker, a fictional character who comes to 'life' and emerges onto the scene as a figure of what the trial was repressing. McCorkle materialises at a moment when the trial seems permanently bogged down in the inanity of its internal contradictions. He steps forward out of the anonymous crowd of spectators and forces his way into the action of the court, upsetting the judicial proceedings like so much noise interfering in the legal system, and heckling the prosecutor in supportive response to Weiss's insistence that 'the author' be consulted. "Ask the bloody author," he cried. "Ask the fucking author, you philistine." (58) His interjection means something like: *read*, read the *poems*, read them as *poetry*. But in the eyes of the court the problematics of authoriality can mean only disruption, disturbance, a threat to its control.

A 'massive man with wild dark eyes and black, shoulder-length hair', (59) McCorkle's appearance actualises the very 'monstrousness' that, under the guise of sexual obscenity, the court has been both prosecuting and ignoring: the uncontrollability of what has been denied recognition and reduced to expressionlessness. Here, then, it is for all to see. But immediately the machinery of foreclosure goes into action. No sooner does McCorkle emerge in this way than he is again, this time physically, excluded. And once he has gone—his departure is part eviction part disgusted exit—the court is free to return to its strictly legal concerns. The judicial process grinds on unruffled and imperturbable:

PROSECUTION. You don't think it would be possible for any fair-minded person to think that the author in using the word 'index' was referring to a penis in the state of erection? (59)

But here there is another interruption. Weiss responds to *this* question by pointing dramatically to Chubb. 'I will not continue, the defendant informed the court, while that man is sitting there.' (59) So, with McCorkle's exit, the disintegration of the alliance has begun, and Chubb's departure from the court rapidly follows McCorkle's exclusion. Within a few hours Weiss himself will be dead, not by suicide (as appearances suggest) but killed, the narrative informs us, as an accidental consequence of a visit from McCorkle. For the monster, as he now is—untutored in the ways of society and crudely put together, as we recall, from the photographs of three different men like Malley—becomes increasingly wild, ungainly and uncontrolled. He is less 'the poet' than an object of cultural pseudophobia incarnate in the form of something creepy: a living but misshapen thing, an imperfect imitation of a man. And it is this wildness in him—his kidnapping of Tina—that sparks the long rivalry that drives the novel's plot, the mutual jealousy between Chubb and McCorkle over their respective rights to the guardianship of the girl who figures poiesis and the poetic. Only the reconciliation at the end, achieved through McCorkle's death and then Chubb's, restores some semblance of the old courtroom community and solidarity, when all the adventures in Malley country will have played themselves out.

Leaving the legal machinery to its work of foreclosure, the narrative machine stages itself, then, as coming into play from the moment of McCorkle's exit from the court. It will enact a second return, in transformed but still poetic guise, of the repressed whose return at the trial was rejected and refused—that is, denied—by judicial scapegoating. In lieu of the justice McCorkle called for in court and was denied, the narrative assembles the now scattered parts and recomposes them, adjusting and justifying them with wonderful precision and putting them into motion. Now there are no transcripts to follow and quote: history and fiction, to all intents and purposes, have parted company. But storytelling presents itself in this way as a compensatory fabrication, an artifice whose function is one of readjustment and supplementation. Its role is to repair as best it may what history breaks, in the way that Isis repaired her slain sibling-husband's body, carved into fragments by a jealous brother lusting for power.

Poetry 'exchanges' life, being unable to change it. Jabès's dictum, which gives my essay its epigraph, applies not simply to poetry but to all forms of poiesis as artificial life: a novel such as Carey's 'adventure story', or the life-as-a-fake that is constructed for us all by our culture. Jabès does not imply, I think, that these things are surrogates; his phrasing itself manifests the singularity that signals supplementation, not replacement. What we get, in lieu of justice,

is adjustment, and my own essay, as a critical supplementation of Carey's poetic and fictional supplementation of the cultural text we call history participates, no doubt ineptly, like the crudely put-together monster that it is, in that same effort of restorative re-collection and reassembly that participates in life by being other than life. So I would like to think that it too has something of the interpellative force that attaches, like the monstrous eyes Frankenstein sees staring at him through the raised bed-curtain, to the whole tradition of poetic fiction concerning artificial life, which asks so persistently who—or perhaps rather what—we think we are.²⁰

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1. Edmond Jabès, *Poésies Complètes 1943–1988*, Gallimard, Paris, 1990, p. 309.
2. The Modern Library, New York, 2002, p. 99.
3. ETA Hoffmann, 'The Sandman', in *Tales of Hoffmann*, Penguin, London, 1982; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, The Modern Library, New York, 1989; P Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Tomorrow's Eve*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2002; Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel*, New York Review of Books, New York, 2003.
4. Peter Carey, *My Life as a Fake*, Random House, Sydney, 2002.
5. RL Stevenson, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Bantam Books, New York, 1981.
6. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1976; *Violence and the Sacred*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1972; *The Scapegoat*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985.
7. Plume, New York, 1995. The video of *Gods and Monsters* is issued by Lions Gate Films-Universal.
8. Only Villiers argues for the superiority of artifice and 'the ideal' over flesh-and-blood femininity; but in order to do so he simply reverses the valencies of domestic virtue (in Villiers associated with vulgarity and crudeness) and dangerous allure (in Villiers the object of men's desire for ideality).
9. See, in particular, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, Chapter 4.
10. I distinguish narrative and textual 'functions' in modernist writing in *The Writing of Melancholy*, trans. Mary S Trouille, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993.
11. Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991.
12. Laurent Jenny, *La Parole Singulière*, Belin, Paris, 1990.
13. Ken Ruthven argues similarly that 'literary forgery is not so much the disreputable Other of "genuine" literature as its demystified and disreputable Self'. See *Faking Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 3.
14. That the women who tend the McCorkle shrine are simple creatures without an understanding of poetry who nevertheless 'naturally' speak its language is consistent with the Noussette allegory: their naivety is that of poetry itself, which does not think, intend or interpret but mediates the relation of readability. They are not Muses, then. Unfortunately, however, such an identification of women with mediation, with its Ethel Malley overtones, has a misogynistic flavour, which arises perhaps from Carey's allegiance both to the male-rivalry plot and to the specific tradition (Hoffmann, Villiers, Casares) that connects women to artifice as empty glamour.

15. Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's *Elective Affinities*', *Selected Writings I (1913–1926)*, Marcus Bullock and Michael W Jennings (eds), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1996.
16. Michael Heyward, *The Ern Malley Affair*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1993, p. 206.
17. Shoshana Felman, *The Judicial Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2002.
18. Needless to say, this view of fiction as parahistorical supplementation can be read back into Carey's fiction as a whole. In recent novels like *Jack Maggs* and *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the slant-relation of fiction to history is in part figured by the practice of pastiche.
19. Dominick LaCapra, '*Madame Bovary*' on Trial, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1982.
20. Heyward, p. 20.
21. My warm thanks to Anne Freadman for her encouragement and advice with this essay. Such exact knowledge as I have of the Ern Malley affair and Max Harris's subsequent trial I owe to Michael Heyward's excellent *The Ern Malley Affair*.