

“Any Educated Person Would Know”:
Cosmopolitan Aesthetics, Good Taste,
and ‘Knowing Better’ in
Peter Carey’s *My Life as a Fake*
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Culture [is] the great human invention [...] the greatest of them all; a meta-invention, an invention setting inventiveness in motion and making all other inventions possible.

Zygmunt Bauman (*Wasted* 97)

In the *real* world, Peter Carey’s *My Life as a Fake* finds its origins in a furious indictment of both provincialism and inferior aesthetic tastes. In 1944, two Australian poets, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, frustrated with what they perceived to be the inferior quality and shallow faddishness of their country’s aping of high modern poetry, surreptitiously submitted a collection of gibberish poems, *The Darkening Ecliptic*, to one of the country’s leading journals, *Angry Penguins*. The poems arrived with a letter from the non-existent poet’s non-existent sister claiming they were the work of her recently deceased brother, a bike mechanic named Ern Malley. The poems were duly accepted and Stewart and McAuley rejoiced at having demonstrated that the Australia’s emperor of modernist aesthetics, editor Max Harris, had no clothes. They seemed to have shown that a supposedly sophisticated and influential taste-maker could not tell a good poem from a bad joke. In one decisive move, Harris and his acolytes lost their credentials to cosmopolitan good taste, and urbane sophisticates were compelled to play the role of clueless and gullible rubes.

The nature of aesthetic sophistication and the relationship between good taste and provincialism are central to the historical Ern Malley hoax, the fictional *My Life as a Fake* and to the intellectual discourse of cosmopolitanism in general. Despite its loud calls for “inclusive, egalitarian

tarian heterogeneity” (Dharwadker 7), cosmopolitanism’s stand “against parochialisms” (Anderson 267) entails at least a flirtation with the elitist, even imperialist, discourses it purports to critique. Leela Gandhi’s description of the imperial encounter applies to cosmopolitan aesthetics insofar as cosmopolitanism tends to produce conversations in which “one of the participants invariably ‘knows better’ than the other, whose worldview must be modified or ‘improved’” (28). Bluntly, citizens of the world must teach primitive tribalists to think on a larger, more enlightened, scale. The disciplinary “flow” (*Wars of Position* 208) of cosmopolitanism’s apparently eclectic conversations, Timothy Brennan argues, is such that cosmopolitan “hybridity itself [becomes] a coercive lesson imposed on outlying populations” (*Wars of Position* 206) by a self-satisfied centre. The European avant-garde might have felt “out there” and peripheral in London, Paris and Berlin, but its apparently dissembling procedures also functioned as an “educative spectacle” (*Wars of Position* 206) in far-off Australia, a spectacle enacted and managed by a centre which was often too sophisticated (or too disingenuous) to acknowledge itself as such. It took something as dramatic as the Ern Malley hoax to make these power relations (enacted through aesthetics) clear.¹

Vinay Dharwadker has argued that the critical “return to cosmopolitanism has been freighted with politics rather than aesthetics” (2), yet recourse to good taste (a strategy that amounts to “sophisticated abuse”) pervades cosmopolitan discourse to such a degree that even racism sometimes registers as *gauche* more than politically or morally wrong. “The cosmopolite,” Ghassan Hage reminds us, “is a *class* figure [...] capable of appreciating and consuming ‘high-quality’ commodities and cultures” (201). Without the ability to differentiate “high” from “low” quality, the claim to cosmopolitan good taste disappears, and once this claim evaporates its numerous attendant advantages come under pressure. What is unique about the Ern Malley scenario is the degree to which (or perhaps the very brief timescale in which) the disciplinary cultural voices of those who “know better” start to sound like know nothing voices who would do well to defer to their betters. In McAuley and Stewart’s terms, the Australian devotee of European High Modernism, far from being a taste-making arbiter of aesthetic value, becomes instead

a blinkered and parochial “devotee insensible of absurdity and incapable of ordinary discrimination” (McAuley and Stewart 4).

The move from high to low, from elite to ordinary is hard to miss, as are the geographic and political implications of being assigned one or the other group. Before the hoax is revealed, Harris commands the refracted cultural authority of Europe. Afterwards, he is a second class Australian. Brennan sees this “spilling over of the cultural into the political [as] endemic to cosmopolitanism’s functionality” (*Wars of Position* 218). Cosmopolitanism’s “political utopia,” he claims, “is constructed as aesthetic taste” (218). The underacknowledged and didactic project of cultural improvement that motivates much of cosmopolitan discourse fuels the majority of the action in Carey’s novel as a crew of self-conscious sophisticates struggles to be both elemental (local, connected) and elevated (learned, smart, sophisticated); they want to be alive to aesthetic innovation (cutting edge) but impervious to fads which would reveal them as gullible and naive. Questions of taste are pervasive in the novel and offer important glimpses into the challenges facing cosmopolitan aesthetics. In *My Life as a Fake*, no mere human can manage to balance cosmopolitanism’s desire to be “local while denying its local character” (*Wars of Position* 204). Nobody can to be “classy” while still being “street.” It takes a supernatural being, a great artist and/or a fake to reconcile the forces which underlie cosmopolitanism’s “aesthetically enjoyable cultural mixing” (Robbins, “New and Newer” 59).

I. Disposable Objects Designed For Immediate Obsolescence: Of Aesthetics and Time

In *The Cosmopolitan Novel*, Berthold Schoene argues that “nations are inclined to assert themselves most vehemently when their boundaries are inclined to doubt by being revealed as porous, arbitrary or transient[;] a fierce vying for predominance is set in motion” (9) when apparently rigid categories begin to break down. Cultural territories are subject to the same anxieties as nations, and a hoax of the Ern Malley type demonstrates the fretful militancy that arises when self-identified cosmopolitan sophisticates find their prized territories under siege. If we imagine culture as a “sacred” space clearly demarcated from “the

coarse, vulgar, venal [and] servile” (Bourdieu 7), then any unsanctioned incursion of “the low” into the territory of “the high” (as when self-consciously bad poems are mistaken for high quality aesthetic innovations) amounts to a significant transgression in need of redress. Determined to mark the boundary between bogus and legitimate (fake and real) works of art, the possessors of good taste (those who know what “any educated person would know” [Carey 39]) cannot afford to have their authority called into question, yet this authority simultaneously depends upon an openness to new and unanticipated things. As a result, they must fear entrenchment and faddishness at one and the same time. They appear “all posh and frosty” but carry fears of being proven “an utter fool” (Carey 243).

This anxiety is particularly pronounced under the conditions of post-modernity, where what’s at stake is nothing less than the nature, duration and reception of aesthetic objects.² Of particular importance is the cultural value assigned to innovation. Faced with what Zygmunt Bauman calls “liquid modernity,” we confront a contemporary life which “disassembles” time so that it is “no more a vector, no more an arrow with a pointer or a flow with a direction” (*Discontents* 89). The result, Bauman claims, is that life no longer feels like a sustained journey or a pilgrimage, but rather “a loose assembly, an arbitrary sequence” (*Discontents* 89). In a context in which the “world constructed of durable objects [has been] replaced with disposable products designed for immediate obsolescence” (*Liquid Modernity* 85) cultural artefacts and works of art seem to be subjected to the same detemporalization and improvisational attitudes as everything else. In an amnesiac culture, Bauman argues, newness displaces “greatness” as a primary determinant for artistic success, and in place of beauty we get fashion. If in the past great works of art seemed to declare that “the things that man creates [...] are of lasting worth and meaning, that they outlive and outshine death and decay” (Ernest Becker qtd in Bauman, *Wasted* 97), they now operate in a more generalized economy in which “today’s useful and indispensable objects [...] are tomorrow’s waste” (Bauman, *Wasted* 97). As Bauman recognizes, the ubiquitous nature of lists proclaiming “What’s Hot” and “What’s Not” make this very plain. The result of all this is that

“the link between eternity and beauty, aesthetic value and durability” (*Wasted* 118) collapses, and, for Bauman at least, “beauty, in its orthodox meaning [as] an ideal to strive for and to die for, seems to have fallen on hard times” (*Wasted* 117).

Such a context presents serious problems for the champions of good taste because the conditions under which one might be said to build aesthetic competence (in the traditional sense) have been so thoroughly undermined. If, with Bourdieu, we imagine a work of art to have meaning and value only to “someone who possesses the cultural competence [...] into which it is encoded” (2), what happens when the notion of competence itself is under threat by a timescale which precludes anybody from clearly possessing the necessary codes? If no structure is expected to endure, no argument for accumulated expertise can be sustained, and we seem to collapse into a heterogeneity and egalitarianism so complete that nothing gets to be “good” for very long for very many people.

Bauman’s argument sounds like a pretty conservative and nostalgic lament, and it *does* fit well with the conservative intentions of McAuley and Stewart.³ Clearly, they regarded modernism as a “what’s hot” type of fad and felt that any claim to sophisticated good taste derived from modernism was necessarily fraudulent. In place of modernist aesthetics, they championed instead the values of “harmony, proportion, symmetry [and] order” (Bauman, *Wasted* 113), values they located in all great art throughout history: no improvisation or *bricolage* here. With Bauman, they believed that sound aesthetic judgment required a long view of history, that what’s considered good today ought to be weighed against the standards of the past and imagined in terms of a very distant future. In this construction both time and the desire for timelessness are necessary preconditions for beauty and necessary preoccupations for those who purport to assess it. Without past and future, beauty disappears and good taste becomes unintelligible.

Still, some people like it!

In apparently sharp contrast to the above, Schoene sees the perpetual present as both a political defence against modernity’s totalizing ambitions and as a way of resisting staid conventions that hinder great art. For Bauman, great art is the art which “will never lose its value,

never be redundant, will never be disposed of and so will never turn to waste—instead it is all further search and experimenting that will from now on be redundant” (*Wasted* 114). For Schoene, however, the “novelty” of the novel is its great strength; search and experimentation are the name of the game, and game-changing is the sign of genius. There’s not much time for harmony of design and symmetrical structures in Schoene’s enthusiastic description of a cosmopolitan art in which “compositeness forges narrative assemblage out of a seemingly desultory dispersion of plot and characterization” (14), an aesthetic of “differently paced and oriented trajectories” (14) bumping up against each other in “edgy, boxed in solipsism” (14). In place of any pursuit of eternal value, Schoene champions a cosmopolitan culture in which “everyday life in the present is prioritized over the pursuit of any grand utopian designs of unanimity or perfection” (18); in place of long-term apprenticeships, he calls for “a radical unlearning of all definitive modes of identification” (21).

What we have here, then, are two totally antithetical visions both of what constitutes aesthetic value (idiosyncratic innovation or proportion and harmony) and of the timescale in which it is to be evaluated (the perpetual present or with a view toward eternity). What is the same for both Bauman and Schoene, however, is the implicit and didactic appeal to good taste. Each has a belief that he has the authority to frame and outline what’s good and what’s not. Although Schoene is opposed to the pursuit of unanimity and perfection, he maintains his pretty unambiguous status as an arbiter of what’s aesthetically good and what’s not. Despite both an emphasis on an inclusive unlearning of identity and a high volume affirmation of “deconstructive diversification and renewal” (31), Schoene can’t help but resort to hierarchized opposition between a valorized art of the “singular, privately secluded mind” (184) of a true artist and the vulgarized commercialism he finds in “conglomerates of hot-desking studios sponsored by the state and/or corporatist power”(184). Art of the latter type, he makes clear, is in very bad taste. Novels Schoene doesn’t like are “of no consequence, devoid of truth, beauty and community” (185). The ones he likes have vast amounts of all three. Perhaps more problematically, given the primacy of the per-

petual present in Schoene's vision of the cosmopolitan, the books he doesn't like are condemned for their lack of durability; they're "entirely forgettable airport reads" (185).

What becomes clear here is a problem inherent in what Bruce Robbins calls the "very partial universalism" (29) of cosmopolitanism. No matter how we rework our standards (or even if we advocate abandoning them), both the appeal to sophisticated good taste and the implicit condemnation of the bad taste and parochialism of others persist. Crudely, Bauman and Schoene might disagree about how time functions and how bleak contemporary culture looks, but they agree when it comes to truth and beauty. They both know where *real* aesthetic value is and where it isn't, and they can't believe so many other people are taken in by fakes.

II. Trusting My Taste: Cosmopolitan Aesthetics and Vulgarism

In *My Life as a Fake*, Carey's protagonist, Sarah Wode-Douglas, is often at "the limits of [her] social confidence" (15), but she is never unsure of her position as cultural arbiter. As "the editor of an internationally respected poetry journal" (35) Sarah faces the good taste dilemma on a daily basis. Her accumulated expertise isn't easily reconcilable with an instinct toward innovation, and so she feels a simultaneous desire both to *oversee* the cultural landscape and to *yield* to an unanticipated-yet-elemental, transcendental-yet-visceral mode of art and life.⁴ The tension between these two impulses is encapsulated nicely when, upon reading a new poem, she says: "If I can trust anything it is my taste—or, to risk a vulgarism, my heart" (35). This construction speaks to cosmopolitanism's twin anxieties about elitism and naïve populism. Here, Sarah seeks both the appeal of elevated, aesthetic detachment (her good taste) *and* to recognize the impact of the poem at a more elemental and direct level (her heart). To risk a vulgarism is to abandon the safety of rarefied aesthetic evaluation and to participate instead in what the editors of *Cosmopolitanism* regard as the "vernacularization" (6) of contemporary culture, its move to street level. The effort to establish a link between learned, abstract aesthetic principles and the thumping and pumping of the human heart is the trick cosmopolitan artists and thinkers repeatedly

attempt, and, as I suggest above, it's one that's very difficult to get right. To revert to "the heart" or "the gut feeling" is to forego the structural advantage of "knowing better" than everybody else, but the necessarily distanced nature of elevated, impartial knowledge lacks the very blood the heart pumps, and it is exactly this bloodless quality that fuels Robert Pinsky's complaint that the cosmopolitan fantasy would only be possible "if people were not driven by emotions" (87). For Sarah, at least, a world structured around high-end aesthetic contemplation and devoid of deep, daily emotional investments *does* seem possible; Carey doesn't make it look especially attractive, though. Thoroughly detached from the world and entrenched in her role as literary editor, Sarah doesn't risk vulgarity often enough; the result is that her wordliness often seems *otherworldly*. She's so invested in the rarefied world of art that her daily life becomes empty and/or sterile.

Sarah opens the novel in first person, but, by the second sentence, she switches to a second person interrogative: "I have known John Slater all my life," she says, "Perhaps you remember the public brawl with Dylan Thomas." In the space of the next few pages, Sarah links John Slater, an English poet of Carey's invention, with (at least) Unity Mitford, Robert Lowell, W.H. Auden, E.R. Leavis and Cyril Connelly. Through this process, Carey effectively punctures the boundedness of the novel's fictional world, staging ontologically curious interactions between fictional characters (who originate in his book) and historical personages many readers know to be "real" outside of it. More specifically, though, the second person "you" Sarah addresses is the possessor of a pretty detailed understanding of the (primarily, but not exclusively) British, mid-Century, literary-cultural milieu. The average North American English undergraduate stands a strong chance of running into Auden, a solid chance of running into Thomas and Lowell, and virtually no chance of running into Connelly or *any* Mitford. I don't think Leavis has much of a chance anymore, either. Somebody with a university education, then, isn't enough to qualify as Sarah's addressee, a person with the cultural competence to decode the code. She requires people who can differentiate their Edith from their Osbert Sitwells, who know W.H. Auden as "Wystan."

These august personages, of course, are approached and regarded as peers and friends to both Sarah and Slater, not as revered objects of study. The distinction between knowing *about* great literary figures and actually knowing them is clearly foregrounded throughout, and it's not just any old everyman "you" she imagines; it's a you she greets as a highly educated and sophisticated contemporary, someone who'll know (and appreciate) what she means when she speaks of the tedium of "reading garbage for half your life" (21) and the frustrations of dealing with "a tin ear" (3).⁵ Sarah is not alone in her frustration with other people's aesthetic and intellectual shortcomings, and many, perhaps most, of the novel's major characters flirt with and/or embody the elitism dubious critics often associate with cosmopolitanism.

III. Tourists and Vagabonds: On the Nature of Cosmopolitan Travel

Bauman has provocatively argued that "tourists and vagabonds are the metaphors of contemporary life" (*Discontents* 93). Like tourists and vagabonds, cosmopolitans often function outside any stable or inherited notion of "home," yet there are clearly many different ways to have "no fixed address," and cosmopolitans tend to have vexed relationships with both tourists and the homeless. On one hand, tourism represents an outward-looking curiosity, a desire to embrace the diversity the world has to offer, a desire to transcend the insularity of local circumstances and allegiances. "When we travel in the cosmopolitan spirit," K. Anthony Appiah says, we aspire (even if we can't always manage) to move "in a spirit that celebrates and respects difference" (207). At the same time, however, tourism also seems to embody the worst aspects of global capitalism, exacerbating the differences between the happily hypermobile elites on permanent vacation, the tourists, and their hopelessly rootless subordinates, the vagabonds. "If the tourists move because they find the world irresistibly *attractive*," Bauman claims, "the vagabonds move because they find the world unbearably *inhospitable*" (*Discontents* 92). *My Life as a Fake* demonstrates the varying strains of contemporary rootlessness, as its peripatetic procedures connect (but never assimilate the differences among) European "high" culture, Australian literary history and Malaysian national trauma. The novel takes place primarily in

Kuala Lumpur, but none of the main characters is Malaysian. Everyone is from somewhere else and (with one notable exception) nobody is deeply connected with any other person.

The primary difference between all these characters is agency. Some (Sarah and Slater) are “on holiday” and propped up by European financing; others (Chubb, his estranged daughter, her adopted Chinese mother) have more or less “washed up” in the city and have no viable method of escape. What the novel reveals, then, are the different modes and motivations that underscore the movements of cosmopolitans, tourists and vagabonds. Everybody is seriously detached, but the characters’ modes of detachment are decidedly different.

Bruce Robbins links the cosmopolitan attitude to both “physical travel” and to a more figurative travel achieved through “thoughts and feelings entertained while one stays at home” (*Cosmopolitics* 4). Sarah’s worldliness is very much the latter type. By her own admission, she is “an awful tourist” (7) and she finds the streets and markets of Kuala Lumpur overwhelming. Content to do her exploring through the words and experiences of others, she finds the unmediated experience of being alone on a bustling Kuala Lumpur street to be disconcerting and unrewarding. Faced with what Schoene calls “the specific, unassimilable singularities of the local” (24), Sarah recognizes that she “actually [prefers] to sit inside my hotel room and read” (11). She opts *out* of the pulsing vulgarism of the street and into both the neutered sterility of a hotel room and the stylized harmony of literature. Faced with the prospect of adding what the advocates of constitutional patriotism call “supplements of particularity” (Müller 100) to her more detached aesthetic pursuits, Sarah opts not just for “detachment from ordinary, provincial loyalties” (Anderson 268), but from any form of lived experience. She prefers a purchased space, a hotel room, that is just about the same everywhere in the world. Whatever else we might say about Sarah’s worldly refinement and detached sensibilities, she’s not a very good example of “a true cosmopolitanism from below” (Dharwadker 11). “I read,” Sarah says, “I have no other life” (7).

Slater, in contrast, appears to have the “below” part of the construction well-covered. He risks vulgarisms with vigour as an inveter-

ate womanizer, boozier and traveler into shady regions. He is, in many ways, the quintessential (and/or nightmare) cosmopolitan male, someone who knows the local customs and the best restaurants wherever he goes (and who probably has a woman just about everywhere, as well). Unlike Sarah, he's also very much at home with the joys and indignities of the human body. Sarah is appalled by the physical intimacy suggested by the hand-made and "roughly molded brown pills" (25) Chubb offers her to help her with her diarrhoea, and she treats them with great hesitation and suspicion. In contrast, Slater unself-consciously gulps them "down without aid of water [while] standing in [an] open doorway" (34). He then goes on to chat freely about the "amoebic dysentery" (34) he went through on a previous trip. For Slater, bodily illness isn't an embarrassing disclosure of physical weakness, but a kind of credential, an anecdotal souvenir of an adventure. While Sarah retreats to her hotel room, Slater disappears from the city and returns with "a very detailed account of his hike through the jungle with an Anglophile Chinese poet" (12).

He's also, of course, a famous poet, and this seems to save his more dubious adventures (cutting a birthday cake with his hands, riding a horse into the kitchen, etc.) from the suggestion of straightforward buffoonery. More importantly, perhaps, he has a surprising and astute eye for the details of his surroundings. While Sarah cannot contend with the street, Slater is both thoroughly engaged in his local circumstances and informed by his learned good taste. The result is that he can spot "the 1923 Insel-Verlag edition" of "*Die Sonnette an Orpheus*" (12) in somebody's hand as he is walking down the street. If Sarah exhibits many of the worst characteristics of a "thought only" cosmopolitanism devoid of lived experience, Slater seems to gain a lot from his physical movement through different spaces, circumstances and cultures. He seems to embody both the attractiveness and sophistication of cosmopolitanism, balancing "recklessness and hedonism" (10) with sensitivity and refined good taste. If cosmopolitanism involves "a complex tension between elitism and egalitarianism" (Anderson 268), then Slater's highbrow literary career and his lowbrow tastes for booze, women, and streetlife seem to resolve this tension in a pretty positive way.

But, in the end, they only *seem* to. His impressive social performances are also pretty shallow and pretty showy. Slater cuts a dashing figure and sees “cosmopolitanism as an attractive lifestyle option” (Schoene 7), but he is also chronically irresponsible and immature. He’s fun to have at parties, but you wouldn’t want to count on him to get you out of a difficult situation. As one of his ex-wives more succinctly puts it: “the thing about dear old Johnno [is] he always does exactly as he damn well likes” (10).

The multiple ex-wives, of course, speak to the compactness of Slater’s timescale, his preoccupation with the perpetual present, and his reluctance to build long term, durable relationships. More importantly, perhaps, this business of doing what one damn well likes haunts the discourse of cosmopolitanism, speaking to its “profound investment in the exceptional individualism of the intellectual class [and their] anomalous detachment from ordinary, provincial loyalties” (Anderson 268). Slater interacts with many cultures, but always in the “crypto-imperialist” (3) fashion Schoene condemns, and his easygoing manner might not be a sign of openness so much as impregnability. In Appiah’s terms, cosmopolitan inclusiveness is often derived from the fact the world (even the “foreign” world) has been configured to the cosmopolitan’s advantage: “the ease with which we find ourselves taking pleasure in [...] difference—the cosmopolite’s *jouissance*—reflects the fact that it has been produced in forms we have learned *chez nous*” (207). Slater’s assumed sense of advantage and superiority, his insulated sense of self-confidence, is a source of frustration to the bankrupt and marginalized Chubb, who makes explicit what Slater’s behaviour in Malaysia only implies: “You own us all, is that it?” (208).

As he ages, Slater has no long term relationships, no stable employment and, perhaps most problematically, he has “betrayed his promise” (10) as a poet. More to the point, he has betrayed his talent through the very procedures of his cosmopolitanism. He lives his life in the present and engages energetically with a variety of local circumstances, but a lifetime of such behaviour has crowded out his career as a writer; “if he had written more and whored and sucked a little less”(10), Sarah concludes, he would be happier and more fulfilled, less desperate for atten-

tion, recognition, etc. This isn't just Sarah's sour grapes; it's an opinion Slater shares. In a moment of self-disclosure, Slater despondently admits he has never written a great poem. Despite his manifold successes on the ground and in the present, and despite the barrenness of Sarah's daily life, Sarah pities Slater at least as much as she envies him. Unable to contradict Slater's damning self-assessment of his failure as a poet, she has only "an awful thing to offer--sympathy" (166). The simultaneousness of Slater's success as citizen of the world and his failure as a poet points to a disconnection between the easy sophistication of cosmopolitan travel/tourism and the difficulty of producing enduring cultural products and/or works of art. Insofar as John has allowed his life to become his art, he has surrendered his art to the "nowness" of cosmopolitanism. His poems were "hot" for a while a few decades ago, but even he knows they will not stand the test of time. As a result, he regards his otherwise rich life as something of a failure.

IV. The Chain of Being: Of Art and Ontology

Despite the differences in their life-strategies, then, and despite their respective failures in publishing and poetry, Sarah and Slater basically agree that the puny rewards of everyday life cannot compete with the epic achievements of great art. They believe that "nothing is unthinkable for poetry," that poetry marks the territory of "civilised man," and that "for a civilised man poetry is beyond diamonds" (243). Just as Bauman's view toward eternity and Schoene's perpetual present merge at the point of aesthetic assessment, both Sarah's problematic cosmopolitanism of the mind and Slater's presumptuous cosmopolitanism of the body merge when they venerate the great work of art above all else. Even though neither Sarah nor Slater achieves their stated aesthetic goal, the goal itself (of publishing and/or writing one truly great poem) remains in place throughout; in fact, it's the only durable signpost in either of their lives.

In this relentlessly cultured, art-oriented context, the term "civilised man" often seems like something of a redundancy. Civilization is what makes people human; to be uncivilized is to be less than human. To be *more* than just civilized, to be a great artist, is to approach the status of

a god. Nowhere is this hierarchy more apparent than in Christopher Chubb's relationship with the purportedly fictional Bob McCorkle, Carey's stand-in for Ern Malley. McCorkle is conceived as a hoax by Chubb, but he ultimately becomes real enough to permanently disrupt Chubb's life. When a real person appears in the world of the novel claiming to be Bob McCorkle, the reader originally assumes that s/he is simply encountering someone in the grip of a delusion, that the man is real, and the claim that he is McCorkle is false. As the novel continues, however, McCorkle's ontological status becomes more and more confusing; he gains ever-increasing amounts of ontological weight. In a context in which nothing is impossible for poetry, the "possibility that [Chubb] had, with his own pen, created blood and bone and a beating heart" (152) becomes more and more plausible. Bauman argues that we are now in a context characterized by an "underpowered institutionalization of differences" (*Discontents* 123), a scenario in which rigid boundaries and categorizations have collapsed. The result, he claims, is that the apparent "givenness [and] obviousness, the ascribed and immutable nature of every man's or woman's place in the chain of being" (*Discontents* 122) is no longer solid. For him, the functional non-personhood of refugees, for example, speaks to the instability of their ontological station; in one sense, they're obviously "real," but they aren't treated with any of the seriousness or respect associated with the status of "human." Devoid of any claim to belong anywhere on the earth, they disappear from the community of humans even though their human bodies continue to present nasty "waste disposal" problems for the undeniably real citizens and governments of affluent nations.

Chubb's descent from Australian literary provocateur to Malaysian vagrant marks his journey from real person to functional non-entity. Although obviously real in one sense, Chubb gradually loses his status as human, first when he comes to be regarded as a kind of devil or ghost, a *hantu*, then more prosaically when he finds himself destitute in Kuala Lumpur. He sees only two possible returns to personhood, possibilities which reveal both the functional non-personhood of vagabonds and the link between aesthetics and citizenship. First, he wants Sarah to "write him up" in her poetry journal, effectively positioning narrative

existence as structurally superior to bodily existence, recognizing that discursive affirmation in a "classy" venue must precede any affirmation or recognition of his crumbling body. Second, he thinks a new suit will save him from what Bauman calls "the nowhere land of non-humanity" (39). "You will think me such a beggar," he tells Sarah, "but I could never afford another suit, not ever [...] Without [a] suit I am trapped here until I die" (140). The suit, then, is a signifier not just of class, but of ontological position. Without it, he doesn't exist. With it, he has a chance.⁶ Not surprisingly then, "real" people, those endowed with ontological, financial and legal weight, regard Chubb's attempt at ontological rehabilitation with scepticism. They are unwilling to permit Chubb to re-enter the realm of the human. When Sarah attempts to buy him the suit that will reconfigure his place in the chain of being, the shopkeeper says: "He not your friend. He not a person" (119).

McCorkle, by contrast, first becomes real, then almost mythic. Originating as a figment of Chubb's imagination, he enters the narrative as a "wild man" (59), someone without language or culture and, more basically, without papers confirming his right to existence. Stuck in a legal and ontological no man's land, a citizen of nowhere, the anguished McCorkle asks Chubb, "Do you know what it's like to have no birth certificate?" (94). Spawned spontaneously from a cynical imagination, McCorkle enters the novel devoid of what Gertrude Himmelfarb calls "the givens of life: parents, ancestors, family, race, religion, heritage, history, culture, tradition, community—and nationality" (164). An ontological refugee in advance of his peculiar birth, McCorkle seeks to acquire what others are simply "given," and this motivates a great deal of his behaviour.

Once he gets a birth certificate, and thus a level of legal reality, McCorkle is able to obtain a passport and, from there, to begin his remarkable, upward ontological progression: from imaginary non-entity, to paperless vagrant, to citizen, and, ultimately, to mythic creator. For him, the birth certificate is simultaneously an assertion of belonging and a gateway to elsewhere. It begins a move from the hopeless wandering of the vagrant toward the self-directedness of cosmopolitan physical and intellectual mobility. Under the curious logic that governs citizen-

ship, McCorkle can only leave Australia once he's demonstrated he's *from* Australia. With documents in hand, however, McCorkle is spared the fate of the refugee and travels from Australia to (at least) Indonesia and Malaysia.⁷ As he does so, he acquires languages, local knowledge and friends; more importantly, perhaps, he becomes a great poet. After many years of chasing McCorkle, Chubb comments, "He had overcome me. I had brought him ignorant into the world, but now he knew six languages, five of which I never heard of. [He was] so learned now. He knew the holy books of Buddha and Mohammed. He knew the name of everything that lived on the Malaysian earth" (250). This characterization is instructive as it retains both high minded, even esoteric, learnedness *and* an emphatically earthy interest in how things work "on the ground." This is precisely the balance that Sarah, Slater and Chubb can't manage. As a result, McCorkle becomes the rarest of things: an engaged and connected cosmopolitan with aesthetic depth and without cosmopolitan pretensions. It speaks, perhaps, to the difficulties troubling cosmopolitan aesthetics that it takes a miraculous birth to produce a culturally-aware, mobile, down-to-earth artist.⁸

In the context of the novel, at least, these reversals of fortune are regarded as somewhat just. If we value poetry above all else, then the great poet, McCorkle, *ought* to surpass the mediocre Chubb, whose obsession with the technicalities of poetic form (he loves, for example, the double sestina) renders his poetry devoid of energy and passion. Here again, we confront the opposition between good taste and pumping blood, a conflict not lost on Chubb himself. Aware that Sarah and Slater only tolerate him because of his connection with the prized McCorkle poems, Chubb sometimes attempts to pass off his own poems as McCorkle's. He is always found out because the cynical sensibility that spawns the hoax is simultaneously overdetermined by its own sophistication; the problem with Chubb's refined poems resides in the very learnedness and refinement that make them possible. Sarah says:

If this was his 'real' poetry, then I preferred the fake. True, these had none of the obfuscations that sometimes marred the 'McCorkle.' Nor did it have its life, its wildness, its nasal pas-

sion. Frankly, these dry yellow pages were priggish, self-serving, snobbish. The Poet in these verses was a paragon of art, of learning. (86)

The implications are clear. To be a paragon of art and learning is to be a bad poet, and poetry, not learning, has the price “beyond diamonds” (243). The bloodless quality of Chubb’s poems aligns them with the bloodlessness often attributed to cosmopolitanism, and, if whoring and sucking ruin Slater, Chubb’s determined sophistication ruins his work, and, by extension, his life. Sarah comments: Chubb “had been born into a second-rate culture, or so he thought, and one can see [in his poems] all the passion that later led to the birth of Bob McCorkle—a terror that he might be somehow tricked into admiring the second-rate, the derivative, the shallow, the provincial” (84). A child of the suburbs, Chubb is born on the margins of a city into a country on the margins of the cultural landscape, and his lifelong project of escaping his origins both underscores his poetic failure and comes back to haunt him in the form of his permanent vagrancy.⁹ Near the end of the novel, Chubb complains that he has become “a homeless traveller [although he] never wished to leave [his] street” (249), yet his repeated and excessive renunciations of home (renunciations made in the name of a cosmopolitan sophistication) reveal the sense of entitlement attached to cosmopolitan movement; he *always* wanted to leave his street; he just didn’t expect to end up “on the street” in a foreign city.

In distinct and poignant contrast to Chubb’s sterile sophistication, McCorkle’s artistic language is “a private patois, woven together from English, Hokkien and Bahasa Melayu” (238); his poems are fuelled by what Sarah calls “nasal passion.” Both the idiosyncratic syntax and the “rudeness” of his poetic form speak to the singularity of McCorkle’s existence, and his artistic achievement isn’t intellectual, but elemental: “He had ripped up history and nailed it back together with its viscera on the outside, all the glistening green truth showing in the rip marks” (235). Upon reading the poems, Sarah sees her challenge as an editor as a matter of preserving McCorkle’s bile, maintaining the punctures and fractures that make the poems great. She tells herself, “I [can] not

tamper with it. I [can] not try to civilise it, or argue with it, or straighten out the shocking disconnected bits” (246). In short, she must refrain from putting it “in order;” she must refuse to bring her learnedness to bear upon it. Here, disconnection and ignorance are poetic strengths. By his own admission, McCorkle is “a poet who does not know the names of things” (151), yet he is not hampered by his inability to classify and systematize according to existing standards. Instead, he learns and/or invents names and constructs massive journals detailing the flora and fauna of Malaysia, a self-directed project that surpasses “the ‘nature notes’ of any poet who ever lived” and amounts to “one of the greatest projects of Malaysian natural history” (238). McCorkle clearly wants to *know* things (he’s no noble savage), but, as his trying living conditions make clear, he has no desire to be worldly or sophisticated. He tells Chubb, “I have been called a genius [...] and perhaps that is why I have very little experience of the world. What I know and what I don’t know are difficult to categorise for people like you—who understand so much of the world and so little about me” (80).

Here, as elsewhere, worldliness becomes a counter-credential; genius is specifically at odds with a self-conscious cosmopolitan understanding of (or even engagement with) worldliness and high culture. After spending a lifetime adhering to, and enforcing, aesthetic standards, Sarah is disarmed when she finally encounters McCorkle’s great poems because they are so far “outside the laws of taste and poesy” (235), free from both overdeveloped fealty to “tradition” and from the fashions of the day. Although Chubb trades heavily on the things that “any educated person would know” (39), these are the very things that separate the learned and self-conscious aesthetics of Chubb, Sarah and Slater on one side, from McCorkle on the other. Schoene derides the “wearing [of] cosmopolitanism like some kind of protective shock-proof overcoat” (27), yet this is exactly what Chubb and Sarah’s self-conscious sophistication amounts to. Not surprisingly, “shock proof” and “disconnected” tend to travel together. When “good taste” and learnedness come to be regarded as universally applicable standards and credentials, they become aligned with what Dharwadker calls the “easy portability of self-sufficient theory” (3) in contemporary critical discourse. In each case, there is a sense that the

possessor of these credentials is justifiably insulated against/protected from calamitous exposure to the specific conditions of individual circumstances, and this failure and/or refusal to contend with ground-level conditions has a sterilizing effect on both art and criticism.

V. "We are all familiar": On who knows what, and where

In the space remaining, I'd like to briefly investigate how this type of "cosmopolitanism from above" might operate in the wider discourse of cosmopolitan studies. In particular, I want to demonstrate the degree to which some cosmopolitan thinkers duplicate the procedures of Carey's hapless sophisticates, how universalized assumptions that there are things "any educated person should know" continue to thrive, and, perhaps perversely, how these assumptions speak to the still underexamined partiality of cosmopolitanism's purported inclusiveness.

In "Cosmopolitan Reading," K. Anthony Appiah opens by recognizing the massive shift, more properly the dispersal, in academic cultural repertoire that has accompanied the "opening up" of the canon over the last several decades: "at [...] Harvard law school fifty years ago," he writes, "if anyone had thought to bring up *The Tempest*, it would not have been thought proper to admit to ignorance of its plot" (198). These days, he says, it's acceptable not to know Shakespeare, and the fact that a student can be forthcoming about her ignorance of "reputably central authors" (199) reflects both the heterogeneous nature of contemporary syllabi, and the fact that, for many, there is "no ground for an argument that there are books that everyone must have read" (201). As a result, he claims that, "in ten years [of] coming to the English Institute [there have been] very few papers that required one to arrive with a real familiarity with any literary text" (199).

Anyone who's been on the conference circuit would find it tough to contest this claim, but the implications are pretty serious and still under-recognized. The declining significance of what were once called primary texts can be read as a further de-localizing of critical discourse, a de-localizing that duplicates the political, social and economic procedures of globalism. Armed with a universalized theoretical discourse, we are like Chubb in our disinclination for local affiliations and affairs; we don't

need to know the weather conditions in the little neighbourhood represented by any individual text, just the generalized climate dictated by the jetstream that is contemporary theoretical discourse. The frequency with which we hear phrases of the type, “I haven’t read the book, but ...” at conferences ought to give us more pause than it generally does. Appiah, it seems, isn’t much bothered by any of this and makes the standard claim that efforts to resist “the appeal of hierarchies among texts” (201) work both to broaden the scope of what people read and to increase the number of people reading. “One thing I know for sure,” he says, “is that many, many more people are having conversations about literature than did so forty years ago” (200).

I find the inclusiveness of Appiah’s argument appealing, but it can’t disguise the fact that Appiah continues to traffic in solid, if different, notions of both canon and community. Appiah’s essay itself reflects an implicit and underacknowledged set of fairly elitist assumptions, a clear debt to the types of things “any educated person would know.” A graduate student might well get along without *The Tempest*, but it seems clear that s/he would be expected to arrive with the ubiquitous and portable theory outlined above. We might not need to know Shakespeare anymore, but could we get along without Freud, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Spivak, Said? Don’t the “many, many” conversations Appiah imagines to be taking place still depend on a common vocabulary commanded by a still-insular, still-elevated, community? Without any irony that I can detect (and in the middle of an argument about expanding understandings and suspending territorialized notions of cultural legitimacy), Appiah claims that “we are all familiar with the skeptical antiuniversalism of Dick Rorty” (215).

In this sentence, skeptical antiuniversalism yields to a decidedly universalist “we” that assumes a very great deal about what everybody thinks and knows. It’s a “we” that goes very well with the “you” that Sarah uses to open Carey’s novel. The clearly “in-group” nature of “Dick” (as opposed to Richard) Rorty only adds to the smug and self-congratulatory tone. In the remainder of his essay, Appiah also assumes that “we” all have a reading knowledge of Greek, German and French; he also can’t resist adding the “[sic]” when he quotes from Sterne, distancing himself

from the accusation of ignorance the same way Sarah seeks to distance herself from the vulgarism of her own heart. Both want to contain the indecorous and emphasize their erudition. Demonstrating the vastness of their respective understandings, both Sarah and Appiah problematically seek to convey "a sense of mastery" (Hannerz 239) over cultural territories; both also seem to fear exposure. With Ulf Hannerz, they seem to think of cultural attainment as a means of bringing the world to heel, as an assertion of authority. As "one's understandings have expanded," Hannerz writes, "a little more of the world is somehow under control" (240). Schoene rightly reads this as an effort to subdue the world and protect oneself in a shock-proof overcoat.

The same kind of argumentation underlies Bruce Robbins' interpretations of both *The Remains of the Day* and, to a lesser extent, *The English Patient*. In each case, Robbins' zealous pursuit of his larger theoretical/political point tends to obscure the specific practices and procedures of uniquely stipulated literary neighbourhoods. Attempting to defend cosmopolitanism against what Robert Pinsky dismissively describes as "the village of the liberal managerial class" (*Secular* 87), Robbins argues that it is possible for cosmopolitan academics to embrace both "planetary expansiveness of subject matter [and] unembarrassed acceptance of self-interest" (*Secular Vocations* 181). Basically, cosmopolitanism need not be completely altruistic to do good in the world. I think such a position is both fair and defensible, but Robbins' mode of argumentation and his programmatic, under-nuanced reading of Ishiguro's novel aren't exceptionally convincing examples of what a sensitive and productive cosmopolitan criticism would look like. Indeed, Robbins' argumentative and interpretive strategies point to exactly the kind of ivory-tower isolated "we" that Pinsky derides.

In his response to Pinsky, "The Village of the Liberal Managerial Class," Robbins perceptively links the respect and influence of the aristocracy of the past with "professionalism now" (23). In so doing, he connects two previously divergent notions of cultural authority, one based on birth, the other based on acquired skills/practices. Clearly, professional proficiency (which can be attained) is a more inclusive category than aristocratic status (which can't), but Robbins' veneration of a cliquish

kind of international cosmopolitanism doesn't escape classist implications; in fact, it champions them. When he approvingly imagines *The English Patient* in terms of "a bonding via literary quotations ranging from Herodotus to Stephen Crane [to] *Paradise Lost*" (24) and when he applauds a "postpatriotic love, an eroticizing of professional knowledge" (26), he participates in precisely the kind of self-congratulation that informs the conversations of Sarah, Chubb and Slater. It's exactly the kind of dubious position Chubb exploits when he fills the McCorkle poems with "many classical allusions" (32) to appeal to the pretentiousness of the Australian literary elite. This type of bonding operates through an explicit process of exclusion. "Who cares about poetry?" Chubb asks, "Fifty people in Australia? Ten with minds you might respect" (46). Bonding according to literary allusions, with its transparent elitism, isn't just a "very partial universalism [that] involves solidarity with *some* people outside the nation, not solidarity with humanity as a whole" (Robbins, "Village" 29); it's both partial and hierarchical, a means of separating a sophisticated "we" from a benighted "they," a way of determining who "knows better" and who needs improvement. Those who recognize Herodotus are in the community; those who don't are out.

It's hard, of course, for me to make an argument that Robbins is an insensitive reader while positioning myself as a champion of inclusiveness, but such is the nature of this type of discussion. It's not quite a race to the bottom in an intellectual or ethical sense, but it is, and perhaps ought to be, a race to the *ground*, an effort to step "out of narrow, self-incarcerating traditions of belonging" (Schoene 21) and see what different territories look like and how they feel. The professionalized cosmopolitanism Robbins proposes is exactly the kind of self-incarcerating identity that ruins Christopher Chubb's life; Chubb's self-identification as poet, and his desire to associate only with those who recognize his classical allusions, might well be post-national, but it ushers in an even more narrow, less inclusive community, a community so small that he can't imagine more than ten people in Australia as members. Moreover it produces the kind of simultaneously elitist and petty conversations we witness when Chubb and Slater nearly come to blows about whether "ulcerated" is a more elegant term than "ulcered" (109).

Robbins' affection for these kinds of conversations leads to some very strange assumptions about what professionalism means. Although he briefly accepts that "something [odd] is clearly going on if the term *professionalism*" (28) can be applied to both butler and diplomat in *The Remains of the Day*, his blanket affirmation of the professional fails to fully recognize the widely divergent nature of the activities and the people he groups under the single term. Despite weak protests to the contrary, Robbins basically attempts to conflate (or at the *very* least closely compare and mutually validate) an international diplomat's professionalism with a butler's. In so doing, he overlooks (even as he seems to note) the presence and/or absence of self-directedness that each profession entails, and the different trajectories different lives and professions follow. It's like conflating a tourist and a vagabond because they both move around a lot. It's true that Ishiguro's butler treats his profession with utmost seriousness and sincerity, but the profession itself is *service*; the butler functions as an extension of the master's will. He suspends his selfhood for "the wishes of [the] employer" (Ishiguro 149), a fact made clear when Stevens overlooks his personal tragedy to do the work of the house. In very sharp contrast, the diplomat extends his will onto the nation. He exercises a kind of extraterritoriality, while the butler empties himself out. Crudely, Stevens does what Darlington wants; England does what the diplomats want. That Robbins can overlook this in his zeal to defend professionalism--and by extension cosmopolitanism-- as basic goods is highly problematic, and speaks to a disconnection from both ground-level reading of texts, and, I fear, from any experience with the ground-level existence of people outside the liberal managerial class. As with Slater's many travels, Robbins' version of professional cosmopolitanism involves a member of the elite claiming the privilege of being "one of the guys" ("We're all professionals..."), even though his subordinates can never afford to lose sight of the functions of both positionality and hegemony. As Chubb puts it, "you own us."¹⁰

VI. Conclusion: In Praise of Tactility

In his very interesting book on the role of theory in contemporary criticism, Valentine Cunningham argues against what he calls the "stock

responses” (88) theory often produces and argues for “meaning-full, pleromatic, hands-on textual encounters” (167). For Cunningham, reading is a matter of “tact,” of tactility, of “gentle touch, caring touch, loving touch” (155), the type of contact that can’t happen if one arrives in a shock-proof overcoat. Here, I’ve tried to approach Carey’s novel with this kind of tact. I’ve tried to feel it and follow its contours and resist the impulse to subordinate it into my overarching scheme. I’ve also tried to demonstrate (in as quiet a way as possible) that cosmopolitan reading might productively be regarded as a mode of close reading, that cosmopolitanism’s openness to the specificity of new territories ought to include the specificity of individual story worlds. Along the way, I’ve attempted to demonstrate the shortcomings inherent in any cosmopolitanism that reads as an extension of globalism, that operates in terms of a self-sufficient theory that occludes differences and perpetuates a kind of sophisticated abuse. Both inside Carey’s novel and the wider discourse that surrounds it, successful reading and life strategies must involve a direct engagement with things that move on the ground if they are to avoid the pitfalls of an overdeveloped and disconnected reliance on the stuff “any educated person would know.”

Cunningham invokes Iris Murdoch’s largely overlooked assertion that the novel is a form which, at its best, provides “‘free’ characters built out of respect for ‘the otherness of the other person’” (qtd. in Cunningham 149). Accepting and engaging with the otherness of other people is cosmopolitanism’s great and laudable goal, and most people who think about cosmopolitan aesthetics rightly applaud the novel as a form with the capacity to demonstrate (without domesticating) difference. Still, both *My Life as a Fake* and cosmopolitan discourse in general seem to show how difficult it is to suspend our affiliations, not least our allegiances to the theoretical models from which our claims to learnedness and good taste are derived. This being the case, we must avoid the fate Sarah sees so clearly in Chubb’s manifold social, political and aesthetic failures. We must avoid a cosmopolitan aesthetics that is “grotesque and self-deceiving in [its] love of ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’” (Carey 33).

Notes

- 1 This type of assertion of cultural supremacy is what Hage describes as “sophisticated abuse” (185), the abuse the learned and enlightened inflict on their cultural inferiors. Despite the fact that it is generally mobilised in defense of multiculturalism, hybridity, etc., sophisticated abuse is “ultimately conservative” (185).
- 2 *My Life as a Fake* spans most of the period regarded as postmodern, and deals explicitly with the legacy of High Modernism. It depicts events that occurred in 1972, recollected and narrated in 1985. The novel itself was published in 2003.
- 3 Despite their conservative intentions, McAuley and Stewart did not occupy a dominant position in Australia’s cultural discourse. That position was commanded by an apparently edgy but functionally orthodox European modernism.
- 4 Indeed, she regards the literary hoax as a bad faith gesture, not a telling revelation. For Sarah, the main point of the Malley/McCorkle poems is that the hoaxers have “preyed upon the best, most vulnerable quality an editor has to offer [...] the hopeful, optimistic part [...] so you might find [...] a great, unknown talent” (21).
- 5 Sarah is also, of course, a daughter of the English aristocracy. If we remember Robbins’ link between the aristocratic cosmopolitanism of the past and the current cosmopolitanism of professionalism (“Village” 23), then we see Sarah’s simultaneously aristocratic and professional cosmopolitanism as doubly legitimized.
- 6 Indeed, when the employees of Sarah’s hotel wish to make Chubb disappear, they destroy his suit when he sends it out to be cleaned, pulling it apart at the seams. Without it, they know, he can never return.
- 7 Because Chubb isn’t always able to track McCorkle’s movements, there are times when McCorkle’s whereabouts are unknown.
- 8 It’s also an example of the productive life-strategy Müller endorses when he describes people and cultures that are “animated by a set of universalist norms and enriched and strengthened by particular experiences and concerns” (96).
- 9 Schoene doesn’t endorse this construction of the cosmopolitan, but recognizes it as significant to many modes of cosmopolitan thinking and cosmopolitan behaviour.
- 10 Robbins’ argument that Lord Darlington’s plan to lessen German debt repayment might actually have saved the world from WWII seems similarly disingenuous. Darlington’s apparently transnational affection for the Germans is not motivated by any positive force, even if it might have produced some residual good. The possibility that Darlington might have been right in supposing debt relief would help avoid war does precisely nothing to mitigate the partiality and unseemly nature of his classism and anti-Semitism. If I only want male children and murder female ones as soon as they’re born, I suppose I am incidentally helping to control population growth and lessening the burden on the environment, but that doesn’t make it a good idea or me a good guy.

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