I have before me five books: The Hand that Signed the Paper in two separate editions (one by Helen Demidenko, the other by Helen Darville), Natalie Jane Prior's The Demidenko Diary, Andrew Riemer's The Demidenko Debate and The Demidenko File, edited by John Jost, Gianna Totaro and Christine Tyshing. I am persuaded by the evidence in The Demidenko File that, by and large, all the participants in the debate are of the same political and literary persuasion. They all believe in a relatively homogeneous, liberal and fair-minded Australia where civilized people can disagree without rancour. They also agree that the literary domain is something special that must be preserved. Because of this singularity of cultural attitude, each has been able to enlist the others for his or her own reading of the affair. So Leonie Kramer, David Marr, Ivor Indyk and Peter Pierce can be on one side, while Robert Manne, Gerard Henderson and Bernard Cohen can be on the other. One senses that everyone cited in the File misses the absence of a Dostoyevsky in our culture; if only Demidenko had been a novelist capable of capturing the nature of evil there would have been no scandal, no debate.

While the Holocaust and its representation is the obvious focus of the debate, it is not the only one. Another is the right to speak on behalf of other people, especially on behalf of ethnic informants who have their own problems of self-representation in a multicultural Australia. And when you mix the two—Holocaust and the privileges of the native informant—you end up with a cocktail that is not a
Bloody Mary but a Bloody Molotov. When the dust has settled we may look back on this as a saga that did real violence to the staid politics of Australian culture. With Demidenko, debates about the definition of the literary have entered the public sphere. The move from narrowly academic to public is signalled in the File, which carries accounts of commentaries in the print and electronic media. And if recent debates on the Internet are anything to go by, there is no respite in sight. In time to come, I venture to suggest, the affair will be seen as that moment when Australian literary culture finally came of age and 'some deep fractures in Australian culture' were laid bare.

A Theoretical Template

Since the print media's most elaborate criticism of the book has been organized around the sign of the Holocaust, our point of entry can be any artistic representation of this event.

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

—Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy'

Auschwitz bequeathed to all subsequent art perhaps the most arresting of all possible metaphors of extremity, but its availability has been abused. For many it was Sylvia Plath who broke the ice ... In perhaps her most famous poem, 'Daddy,' she was explicit ... There can be no disputing the genuineness of the pain here. But the Jews with whom she identifies were victims of something worse than 'weird luck.' Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews. The metaphor is inappropriate ... I do not mean to lift the Holocaust out of the reach of art. Adorno was wrong—poetry can be made after Auschwitz and out of it ... But it cannot be done without hard work and rare resources of the spirit. Familiarity with the hellish subject must be earned, not presupposed. My own
feeling is that Sylvia Plath did not earn it, that she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place.

—Leon Wieseltier

There are three issues here. The first is whether Adorno was right, not if we take him literally, but if we interpret his remark ("There can be no poetry after Auschwitz") to mean that there can be no poetry about Auschwitz. The second is whether the Holocaust can be available as a metaphor to artists—the case of Sylvia Plath being among the most important in recent times. The third can be presented as an interdiction: the Holocaust, wrote Claude Lanzman, the French filmmaker, 'is above all unique in that it erects a ring of fire around itself ... I deeply believe that there are some things that cannot and should not be represented'. The first two relate primarily to the aesthetic domain. They are issues about the nature of representation, about metaphor and imagination. The last is about the politics of identification. But it is also about the right to speak about the unspeakable, and about the conditions under which such a right may be earned. It is about the use of the Holocaust to interrogate suffering itself. It is also, finally and fundamentally, about justice and racism.

There is a challenging book by Jean-François Lyotard in which he reminds us of a growing right-wing movement in Europe which claims that Auschwitz never happened, arguing that since there are no survivors of gas chambers there can be no testimony of their existence. For Lyotard what is at issue here is the right to possess or define the referent and the procedures that legitimate it. Lyotard reads 'reality' as an 'object' that can be discussed because culture has put in place 'a unanimously agreed-upon protocol' by which to read it. Although this protocol may change in time (or else culture itself would be fossilized), we cannot discuss reality without reference to it.

There are, however, instances in which one group's reading of a certain reality is different from another's, even though they live within the same nation-state. For example, British Muslims read Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* politically, whereas British liberal intellectuals read it primarily along aesthetic lines. When it came to the 'reality' of the Rushdie text, these groups were clearly using different procedures or protocols of interpretation. Not surprisingly, they constructed two mutually irreconcilable texts, and yet both wished to
resolve their differences by referring to legal procedures. This proved impossible, however, because there are no statutory laws concerning blasphemy against Islam. In such instances, Lyotard suggests, we are ‘bearing witness to the differend’.

The ‘differend’ is a useful concept for situations in which two irreconcilable positions are advanced. Lyotard defines it as follows:

As distinguished from a litigation, a differend (differend) would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule).^6

The point is that in such cases we cannot fall back either upon consensual politics or established juridical principles of conflict resolution. In their place we need to ‘argue for a nonresolvable heterogeneity (the basis for all true discussion) that is not a simple pluralism’.^7 We must, in other words, devise a language in which conflict resolution and consensus are replaced by an understanding of how opposing logics and procedures can be understood and addressed.

In recent years the domain in which the differend has been most apparent has been that of literature, where sometimes, as in the Rushdie affair, it has been played out on a truly global scale. For Jacqueline Rose the proof text for such a condition is Sylvia Plath. For my purposes here the proof texts are the Demidenko texts, the debates about them and the positions held by the various commentators.

The Hand(s) that Wrote the Book(s)

The two versions of The Hand that Signed the Paper are identical in almost every way, except that one (second edition, 1995, like the first) has as its author ‘Helen Demidenko’, while the other (third edition, 1995) has as its author ‘Helen Darville’. Whereas in legal discourse names authorize acts and acts can be traced to names, in literature names have a copyright but not an agency function. The
meaning of the text need not be linked to the author herself. But it is important to spell out what is at stake when an artist puts on a mask that transforms her into a privileged informant of a particular culture, especially when this enables her to speak about the unspeakable by conflating the text with her own personal history (as in Darville's claim that members of her family had been butchered by 'Jewish Communist Party officials').

What is at issue is the concept of 'passing', a practice with some relevance for ethnics who need to sustain a repertoire of subject positions in a multicultural society. Passing is linked to empowerment and cannot be defended, in Darville's case, on the grounds that the persona took over the person, as Padraic McGuinness suggested. On the contrary, we have to question the moral propriety of assuming someone else's gruesome archive as one's own. We need to look at the ethics of passing, especially when such an appropriation could not be defended by the author, no matter how dedicated to the concept of the pseudonym or the autonomy of the literary text. For instance, under what literary licence could Demidenko deny that the idea of the Herrenvolk required the Gypsy and the Jew, both people without land, and in the case of the former without history, as Franz Liszt once observed? These questions impinge upon the ethics of passing because ethnicity is not a 'diversion', whatever Leonie Kramer says, and cannot be dismissed.

Here the Salman Rushdie affair provides us with a neat parallel. Rushdie wished to pass as an interpreter of Islam's Holy Book (just as Demidenko adopted a revisionist position on the Holocaust) but he did not wish to pass as someone else. There was no new genealogy of the self that had to be created. It is not a question of whether Darville has the artistic right to be a Demidenko, but a question of that appropriation's effects. And if, as it seems, the name was taken to position the author as a native informant of Ukrainian culture and thereby make postcolonial claims about the text's allegorical status, then we need to know the conditions under which the 'exotic' is incorporated into mainstream Australian culture. As for Demidenko herself, we need to ask whether she consciously parodied the seeming valorization of multiculturalism in Australia. Was she, in effect, a functionary of a new form of racism?

I suspect Natalie Jane Prior is right here: Darville knew exactly what she was doing. She knew that an otiose settler tradition needed
the multicultural writer. And she knew that naivety (the unmediated, raw style of the author) would be seen as the characteristic of a multicultural writer not quite in control of her intertexts. This is the judgement not only of the official judges (Vogel, Franklin and ASAL) but of the common reader as well. Whatever the origin of the name, the effect is of confirming that the 'ethnic' enters Australian culture as an already-read text. This is the essence of postmodern racism.

The Russian cultural theorist Plekhanov observed that any ascendant ideology would be quickly internalized, transformed and made its own by the bourgeoisie. The Demidenko affair demonstrates this insofar as the ideology of multiculturalism is endorsed by the ruling class. More dangerously, the affair also illustrates how the establishment becomes the arbiter of multicultural taste, deciding which multiculturalists should be rewarded and whose works canonized. If an error is made, the establishment can defend itself by invoking the neutrality of artistic value on the one hand, and ensuring that the work is sidelined on the other. Once Demidenko had been exposed, her defenders claimed how brilliant the author's imagination must have been in the first instance, and how skilled they had been all along in detecting this—an argument that Riemer, for all his detachment, embraces enthusiastically because it silences the political even as it affirms a romantic view of the imaginative process.

There is, of course, another issue here that may be presented simply as an anxiety, or perhaps even a pathology, about Australian literature and who owns it. Are we, in fact, witnessing a shift of artistic subject in the ex-settler dominions, and even in the metropolitan centres of the ex-empire? The Booker of Bookers goes to Salman Rushdie; M. S. Vassanji, who writes about his East African Indian background, wins the Giller Prize, the Canadian equivalent of the Miles Franklin. Adib Khan, an Australian Pakistani, wins the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book. Does this mean that the political winds of change, ever so attuned to these shifts in culture, actually favour the ethnic?

In one of her many moments of self-assuredness Demidenko invoked 'ethnic privilege' by claiming, that the work was neither fact nor fiction but faction. Elsewhere, in her Author's Note, she claimed that historical events and people were used when she felt they were necessary. Although she was subsequently vilified for historical
simplification and for conflating fiction with fact, I do not think that historical distortion in fiction is the point at issue. The point is how these historical facts are given artistic form. If the Holocaust is not particularized but presented as a theoretical problem, then its artistic exploitation is legitimate, provided that no laws of a civilized democracy are broken. But if the subject matter itself is such a terrible part of the collective unconscious of a particular race that its representation requires quite extraordinary effort on the part of the writers, then clearly we are back to what Lyotard theorizes as the differend. On juridical grounds there is nothing to prevent the Holocaust from being made into a backdrop for fictional remembrances. But we must ask whether we can write about the Holocaust without matching metaphor with experience, whether we can write about it without earning the right to do so. With this shift in focus we move towards a radical incommensurability between freedom of speech and the conditions under which the unpresentable may be given form.

The Hands that Signed the Reviews

It is clear that Demidenko is more than just the name of an author. It is a commodity that was circulated in Australian culture (both high and low), producing quite specific effects. It is only proper, then, that we move from the text of Demidenko to the texts around Demidenko. The Demidenko File serves a very useful function not unlike Appignanesi and Maitland’s similar file on the Rushdie affair.17 (Though like its prototype, it too could have done with an index.) What the compendium reveals is the progress of the controversy in waves following key terms: Holocaust, migrant experience, judges, authorial responsibility, back to Holocaust, migrant experience, the true identity of the author, plagiarism. At every turn there is a new twist to a plot that is at times mock-epic, and at times almost tragic. My second critical text—Natalie Jane Prior’s book—has little to add to what we find in The Demidenko File. Her twin targets are the gradual erosion of the aesthetic in our culture and the growth of an ideology of multiculturalism in a country that now privileges difference over commonality. These are also, in different and more sophisticated ways, part of the Riemer thesis, the third and most
important of the secondary texts before me. There is much in Riemer that I admire, and even if I will have cause to disagree with him, I believe that his honesty and decency are unquestionable.

Riemer's book is not, as Robert Manne has declared, 'almost comically self-contradictory'. It is a systematically argued last-ditch attempt to defend the relative autonomy of the literary object. It is longer than the novel itself, and Riemer has taken his task seriously, yet for all its serious intent it has something of the quality of fiction. It is Riemer's own quest myth: in Germany moved by the terrible news about a young writer whose work (under another name) he had defended, Riemer returns to Sydney (the great melting pot), through Melbourne (that bastion of Jewish orthodoxy), and finally makes a fleeting visit to Brisbane to interview his subject. In the final pages, the discovery complete, a few inconclusive words are in order: a couple of cheers here, one or two there, and some consoling remarks about the liberal-humanist project. Alas, true art is no longer possible in our world of 'impoverished sensibility'. In the absence of a unified theory of evil, in the absence of a theory that would allow us to connect language with lived experiences, but above all in the absence of that absolute signified, God, great art is a thing of the past. (One suspects Riemer would rather be writing a commentary on Hamlet.) Great themes like the Holocaust (a word that Riemer would rather do without since he does not read it as a 'special case' of genocide—to argue that my people's suffering was intrinsically different from the suffering your people endured is close to racial, tribal or nationalistic arrogance) can no longer be the subject of art. It is a theory that the early Hegelian Lukács knew only too well, but he was sufficiently materialist even then to know that the world changes because labour and capital change, not because consciousness suddenly takes a new turn.

So who can we blame? Postmodern theory and of course its attendant 'modish' cultural theories for one (the words occur at least ten times in the second half of the book), intertextuality (mistakenly defined as 'a self-conscious and sophisticated form of plagiarism') for another. In Riemer's reading of a world that has become totally relativized and totally pluralist (Riemer conveniently forgets that for people of colour late modernity gave them unprecedented political and artistic freedoms), a Helen Demidenko will always create fiction in which the moral order will have to be situated ambiguously. Riemer
argues that detractors of the work (who speak from political and ideological motives) make demands that are well beyond the capacity of postmodern discourses to begin with. It is not that political criticism is false (and Riemer has very positive things to say about Manne and Gaita in particular), rather it shifts the focus from the condition of the literary in late modernity to matters that threaten the 'immunity or extraterritoriality' of literary culture.

Not surprisingly, Riemer wishes to separate the aesthetic from the ideological and insists upon a proper understanding of the text in its own literary terms. As he reminds us (sometimes to the point of exhaustion), we need to keep in mind the conventions of fiction and the obvious limitations of a young and nervous novelist whose work has been 'asked to sustain more critical commentary' than many similar works. Riemer returns to the novel's dialogic structure: there will always be a multiplicity of voices in the text and only an untrained reader would conflate authorial voice with those of the narrator(s) or characters. The trouble is that no matter how complex the narrative, judgements about authorial complicity at any given point will have to be made by the reader. And no matter how well trained, under some circumstances or faced with a particular text, the reader establishes a direct line of connection between a given voice in the text and that of the author. In spite of Riemer's insistence on authorial distancing, what is missing from The Hand that Signed the Paper is the dialogic imagination, not as a generic characteristic of the novel, but as a device that links speaking subjects and points of view with power and ideology. As Helen Daniel remarked, 'there are no contesting views here.'

Postmodern Racism

It seems to me that the narratives around the Demidenko text, its universe and its readers are really variations on the fundamental theme of racism in the postmodern world and how racism is the barbaric underside of all history. The difficulty is that this brand of racism is never explicit but often so camouflaged by a metalanguage that it emerges not as a social fact but as an aesthetic. We are told by Renata Salecl that the old racism slotted people into essentialist categories
so that the 'Other' was really a threat against the 'Us'. Being biologically determined, the old racism was easy to grasp and simple to operate through institutional practices such as apartheid. What has been dropped from the new racism is race itself. In its place we have cultural difference. However, as Salecl points out, in this new form of postmodern racism 'culture itself functions as a “natural” determinative force: it locks individuals and groups a priori into their cultural genealogy.' Cultures are then seen as fixed entities whose purities must be maintained. Etienne Balibar called this 'meta-racism'.

How does meta-racism operate in Helen Demidenko as text, author and textual effects? The meta-racist defends the killing of Jews by Ukrainians by claiming that deplorable as racial genocide is, we must place the acts themselves in their proper historical context. This context will show that Jewish commissars in the Ukraine were perceived as the perpetrators of the Ukrainian famine in which millions died. The meta-racist would also point out that after Stalin any leader, including Hitler, would have been seen as a saviour. If you drew attention to the existence of systemic racism in the Ukraine against the Jews, the reply from the meta-racist would be that such a racism is 'the product of contingent historical circumstances'. It is easy enough to transfer the meta-racist defence to many of the defenders of The Hand that Signed the Paper, as well as to the author herself. Anyone who could defend the author on the grounds that she had internalized her Ukrainian persona and had begun to believe that she was in fact Vitaly's niece is unwittingly using a meta-racist discourse. In terms of Lyotard's differend the discourse of the meta-racist is meant to provide a consensual framework within which difference can be contained and justice meted out without addressing the question of racism itself.

For many diasporas racist fiction is a kind of jouissance around which the fantasy of the homeland is constructed. Racist fictions are part of the way in which nations are narrated, becoming imaginary homelands that are always in some ways under threat. What Helen Demidenko's fiction uncovers is this racist fiction; in the process she becomes complicit in that fiction and unable to detach herself from it. What is worse, she hoists that fiction onto the unspeakable sign of the Holocaust and makes it into poetry. Two problems arise out of this. The first is that the Holocaust may then be justified through
a meta-racist logic and the second is that the genocide of the Jews can be discussed within the framework of civilized law. What the collapse fails to address is that the Holocaust is such an unpresentable moment in human history that to reduce it to the discourse of legal litigation is to trivialize both the memory and the experience of those who suffered.

Hobbes, Plutarch and Thomas, the three authors of Darville's epigraphs, were probably aware of how the sublime functioned, which leads me to think that if Demidenko read these texts she may not have read them well enough. Had she done so, she might have used the literary text to play out the differend to demonstrate that the old humanist consensus of 'they killed because they were savages' does not work. The knowledge that forms the basis of The Hand that Signed the Paper requires us to look at the way the narrative of racism operates. The failure to do so on the part of the Australian literary establishment points to a differend that exists between the autonomy of the work of art and the reality of meta-racism.

It is hard to escape the judgement that both the author and many of her enlightened readers (both supporters and detractors) have been complicit in a form of postmodern racism. This racism was then attached to a conflict between the political and the aesthetic, so that within the text the argument between Nazi/Ukrainian and Jew/Bolshevik was not one of race but one of contingency. Seen in this light the real issue of this dangerous affair is how to speak about the autonomy of the aesthetic order without becoming agents of a meta-racism. For the fact is, postmodern racism is 'racism pure and simple'. The responsibility lies squarely with the artist and her art. The Holocaust, its representation, as well as postmodern ethnicities require art that is aware of the play of differends. The answer does not lie in a compromise between the political and aesthetic domains; it lies in an art structured to include the differend. It is not a question any more of degrees of morality within a master narrative of racism, but of ensuring that one form of racism is not replaced by another. In the context of Australian multiculturalism this is knowledge that we will have to address, with or without the spectre of a Helen Demidenko.
NOTES

I would like to thank Tom O'Regan, Len Ang, Deborah Robertson and Dennis Haskell for their criticism.


6 Lyotard, p. xi.

7 David Carroll, 'Rephrasing the Political with Kant and Lyotard: From Aesthetic to Political Judgments', *Diacritics* 14.3 (Fall, 1984), p. 80.


9 Some of the conventional incidentals to the text have been slightly modified.

10 *File*, p. 66.

11 *File*, pp. 233-5.


13 *File*, p. 296.


16 *File*, p. 61.


21 Riemer, pp. 212, 273, 52.

22 *File*, p. 120.


25 Salecl, p. 12.

26 Salecl, p. 15.

27 Salecl, p. 12.