

# Poetry and Public Speech: Three Traces

DAVID McCOOEY  
Deakin University

Contemporary poetry is routinely seen as ‘marginal’ to public culture. As Simon Caterson wrote in the *Sunday Age* in 2005, ‘Poets have never been more numerous, and never less visible’ (31). The simultaneous ubiquity and marginality of poets is usually noted in terms of poetry having lost its status as a form of public speech. The American critic Dana Gioia, in his oft-cited essay ‘Can Poetry Matter?’ (1991), asserts that ‘Without a role in the broader culture...talented poets lack the confidence to create public speech’ (10). Such a condition is often noted in nostalgic terms, in which a golden era—bardic or journalistic—is evoked to illustrate contemporary poetry’s lack. In the bardic model, the poet gains status by speaking for the people in a form that is public but not official. Gioia evokes such a tradition himself when he describes poets as ‘Like priests in a town of agnostics’ who ‘still command a certain residual prestige’ (1).

In the Australian context, Les Murray has most often been associated with such a bardic role (McDonald, 1976; Bourke, 1988). In the journalistic model, one evoked by Jamie Grant (2001), the poet is presented as a spokesperson, authoritatively commenting on public and topical events. This model is supported by Murray in his anthology *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (1986). In the introduction to this work, the only historical observation Murray makes is that ‘most Australian poetry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries first saw the light of day in newspapers’ (xxii), before poetry became marginalised in small literary magazines. Both these models, bardic and journalistic, suggest a certain disquiet concerning modernity. The bardic model looks to pre-modern cultures in which poetry had a central role to play in a society’s governance. The journalistic model looks to earlier forms of modernity in which print culture was both dominant and willing to support poetic expression as a form of legitimate political discourse.

In mainstream discourse on poetry (such as it is), poetry’s marginality is usually twinned with its imminent ‘return’. As I have argued elsewhere (McCooey, 2005), contemporary poetry in the public sphere is staged as an endless revival (‘poetry is making a comeback’) that is also eternally deferred, based on the nostalgic models mentioned above and a general emphasis on the poet as seer, presence, performer, spokesperson, and/or purveyor of special knowledge. While these tropes may seem to empower the poet, the continual ‘return’ of poetry (as it is routinely described in the mainstream media) in pubs, poetry slams, bush poetry, and so on, implies the endless deferral of poetry’s return to mainstream public culture. One might say, then, that poetry’s role in public culture (as both essential and eternally deferred) is to exemplify marginality, to remain as a trace of the pre- or early-modern that can be neither rejected nor incorporated.

But traces of poetry as a form of public speech can be found in various extra-poetic contexts that cannot be described as marginal. To move beyond the ‘poetic’ contexts of

books, journals, poetry slams, and poetry readings is to find traces of poetry as a form of public speech. In this essay, three examples of poetry operating in ‘extra-poetic contexts’ will illustrate the different, sometimes troubling, ways in which traces of poetry as a mode of public speech can be observed in contemporary culture here and elsewhere: the poem-cartoons of Michael Leunig; the role of the poet Les Murray in the drafting of a proposed preamble to the Constitution of Australia; and the quotation of William Ernest Henley’s ‘Invictus’ by Timothy McVeigh (the ‘Ohio Bomber’) as his final statement prior to being executed. Such traces of poetry and the poetic can be seen to operate—in part—along the lines outlined above. The first two examples can be seen as evoking the tropes of journalistic and bardic poetic models respectively. The third example is harder to categorise. As a form of apologia (via citation) it represents what I will call an ‘uncanny’ model of poetry as public speech.

The first two examples are Australian and the third is American, though each example has a stake in nationalist discourse. Leunig’s poems commonly comment, either implicitly or explicitly, on the relationship between public policy (Australia’s involvement in Iraq, the Howard government’s refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations) with myths of Australian national identity. Murray’s involvement in the preamble clearly linked his position in Australia as a kind of de facto national poet with the nation-defining act of writing a preamble to the national constitution. McVeigh’s citation of ‘Invictus’ offers an instance, not found in Australia, of a kind of cultural terrorism that is part of a larger project of terrorism directed against a citizen’s own government. It is both the most ‘extreme’ and opaque example of poetry’s trace functioning as a form of public speech, but its particular cultural and political contexts should not blind us to what it can say about the relationship between poetry and public speech in the Australian context.

My examples should make it clear that I am not concerned here with *literary* poetry that speaks of, to, or for variously defined public spheres. It is obviously the case that numerous, if not most, Australian poets continue to write poetry that deals with public matters. Recent collections of poetry by Jennifer Maiden, J. S. Harry, and Robert Adamson are, in part, public interventions in the so-called ‘war on terror’, and they are three notable examples of a very large class of Australian politically inflected lyric poetry beyond the scope of this essay. In addition, I am not concerned with charting the politicised *reading* of poetry by various public audiences, as Joseph Harrington is in *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (2002), though like Harrington I wish to refigure the evaluative, canonical critical question ‘Is it any good?’ to ‘What is this good for?’ (Harrington 4).

Rather than read poetry on public issues, or broadly chart poetry’s ‘social form’ (that is, its institutional and social production, interpretation, and reception), I wish to consider how traces of poetry and the poetic operate in specific extra-poetic contexts as forms of public speech. In part this is to consider how poetry operates in public culture, albeit in indirect and unexpected ways. I am interested in neither ‘marginalist’ models of poetry (in which poetry’s marginality is bemoaned, as by Dana Gioia, or celebrated, as by James Longenbach) nor populist models of poetry (in which poetry is seen as

undergoing popular resurgence through new media and so on, with Gioia [2004] again an exemplary instance). Rather, I am looking at what I call poetry's 'ambiguous vitality' by looking beyond poetic realms to extra-poetic realms. Such realms, of course, go beyond my three limited examples. They include the everyday (poetry magnets for fridges), the ritualistic (poems read at funerals and weddings), the intertextual (films and other media that incorporate poetry and thematise poetry and the figure of the poet), and the scandalous (such as fakes and 'poetry wars').

One may notice that traces of poetry in these 'extra-poetic realms' are far more common and vital (albeit still ambiguously) than my three examples. My three examples, it is true, are not easily seen as representative. Nevertheless, I believe that they are worthy of consideration for the following reasons: they are culturally significant; they illustrate the paradoxical condition of poetry's marginality operating in mainstream culture; and they allow consideration of the ways in which public culture is 'haunted' by poetry. Each of my examples, diverse though they are, deals with a figure who has had considerable impact on mainstream culture, and is a clear instance of poetry (albeit in trace form) operating in the public sphere.

The poetry of my first example, Michael Leunig, appears in metropolitan, broadsheet newspapers, gaining its author a readership far in excess of almost all 'literary' Australian poets (even those few who appear in metropolitan, broadsheet newspapers). Leunig's poetry operates as a 'trace' of the journalistic model (of the radical rather than reactionary tradition) in part because Leunig is best known as a political cartoonist. Many of his 'cartoons', however, particularly in recent years, are illustrated poems, though Leunig is prepared to republish the texts of these cartoon-poems as 'straight' poems, as seen in his collection, *Poems: 1972-2002* (2003). As *Poems: 1972-2002* also illustrates, Leunig's poetry is self-evidently 'light verse' and strongly marked by whimsy. For instance, 'My Big Toe' begins: 'My big toe is an honest man, / So down to earth and normal, / Always true unto himself / And pleasantly informal. / Full of simple energy, / Contented with his role. / If all of me could be like him / I'd be a happy soul' (41). But as poems such as 'Modern Stupid' and 'The Missile' show, Leunig is also commonly satirical in tone, often directing his satire towards modernity and the political realm.

Not all critics find Leunig's mix of existential whimsy and left-wing satire satisfying. Imre Salusinszky, for instance, has described Leunig and the sometime-poet John Laws as 'possibly the two most popular poetasters at work in Australia today' (40) (though Laws doesn't appear to have been 'active' as a poet for many years). About Leunig he writes that he is 'the man who helps us rediscover our inner child and makes us want to drive that child far out into the countryside and leave him on the apron of the highway with no identifying paperwork' (40).

What makes Leunig even less popular with commentators such as the *Herald Sun* columnist Andrew Bolt is the overtly partisan nature of some of his work. This has been most evident in his cartoons on the Iraq war and David Hicks, the Australian citizen incarcerated by the US Government in the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp from

2001 until his return to Australia in 2007, after having been the first person to be tried and convicted under the controversial US Military Commissions Act of 2006. For the most part, Leunig tends to employ poems in the less directly political works, but as the following example shows, there are notable exceptions to this generalisation. In 'The Tao of John' Leunig offers an indictment of the Howard government's refusal to intervene on behalf of one its citizens:

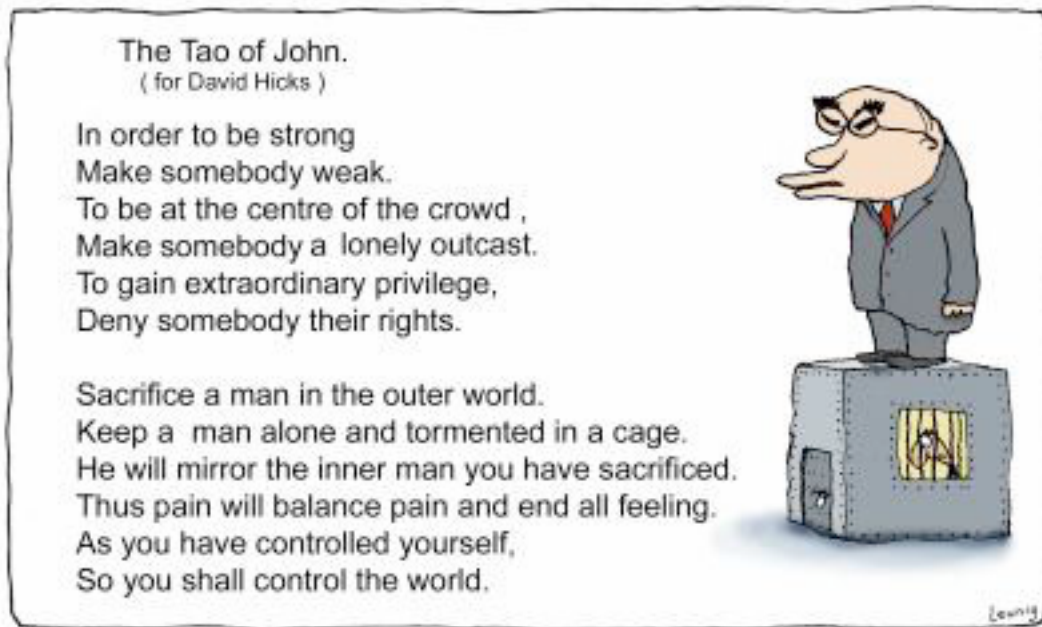


Figure 1. 'The Tao of John', by Michael Leunig. Age 9 December 2006, A2: 56. Reproduced with permission from Michael Leunig.

Image and text here are complementary, rather than either being in a merely 'illustrative' role, though the 'peritexts'—the title and dedication—are what make the work explicitly political. As a parody of the *Tao Te Ching* the poem employs that work's use of paradox and parallelism to offer a critique of the Howard government's position on Hicks (here represented as a position of physical dominance). Interestingly, while the image clearly shows the larger of the figures to be Howard, the figure in the cell is a generic Leunig character, a kind of Everyman or (according to the logic of the poem) the personification of Howard's conscience, rather than an image of Hicks. As well as the style, Leunig employs the lexis of the *Tao Te Ching* (especially the word 'control'). For instance, the *Tao Te Ching* advises that 'If you want to be a great leader, / you must learn to follow the Tao. / Stop trying to control' (Lao Tzu 57). In representing the Howard government *as* Howard (in a strategically pre-modern conception of government), Leunig offers a critique of Howard's political psychology, one in which 'pain will balance pain and end all feeling'. In addition to mobilising the 'ancient wisdom' of the *Tao Te Ching*, Leunig employs poetry in a journalistic context, invoking an earlier print culture in which poetry had a less ambiguous role as public speech. By employing the wholly symbolic media of cartoon and poem, Leunig sidesteps the rationalist-polemical discourse that usually defines public speech in

mainstream media today, which no doubt helps to make him such an irritant to right-wing columnists.

Parody is integral to Leunig's strategy, and appropriately so, since parody was central to the kind of journalistic-poetic tradition that Leunig is mobilising (and is also often a characteristic of light verse). In addition to the *Tao Te Ching* Leunig parodies more-or-less public works, such as the Australian national anthem, various parts of the Bible, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and, in the following example, Dorothea MacKellar's 'My Country':

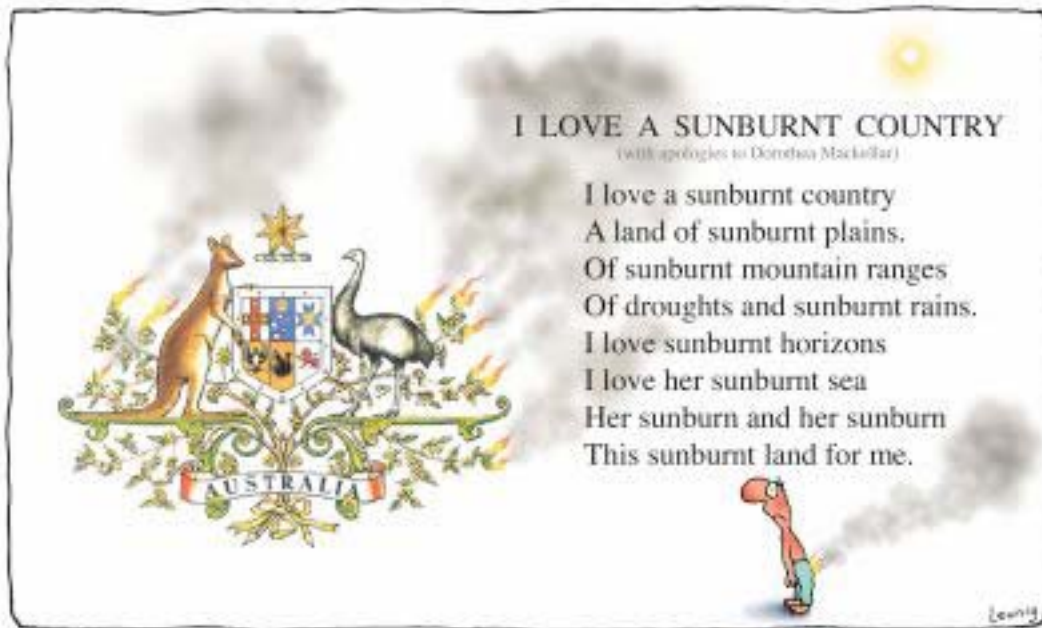


Figure 2. 'I Love a Sunburnt Country', by Michael Leunig. *Age* 16 December 2006, A2: 48. Reproduced with permission from Michael Leunig.

The topical or political nature of this work is probably unclear if one doesn't know that the cartoon was published in the *Age* on 16 December 2006, at the end of a week in which bushfires had caused death and destruction in Gippsland, fueling debate about the link between climate change and bushfires. The page-one article in the *Age* on the same day that Leunig's poem-cartoon appeared, 'Climate Change Stoking Bush', reported that Victoria's Emergency Services Commissioner believed that 'climate change is causing longer, more aggressive bushfire seasons and must be factored into the state's firefighting plans' (Kleinman et al 1). The degree to which 'I Love a Sunburnt Country', a much lighter poem than 'The Tao of John', is political is hard to say. The Leunig figure at the bottom of the frame appears to be a rather benign version of the proverbial person who 'wouldn't know if his own arse was on fire', which may or may not resonate in the minds of readers who have read in 'Climate Change Stoking Bushfires' that 'Mr Howard said there was not enough evidence to suggest climate change had caused extra bushfires in Australia' (1).

Like any speech act, the context in which Leunig's cartoon-poems appear, then, is clearly central to their effect as public speech. 'The Tao of John', for instance, appeared at a time in which the *Age* was undertaking a concerted campaign to have Hicks released from the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp. The poem-cartoon, 'Torture', was similarly topical, appearing in the *Age* on 21 May 2005 at a time of intense debate on the acceptability or otherwise of the use of torture in matters of national security. But as 'Torture' also illustrates, Leunig's poems are not always concerned with engaging in the topical events to which they seem to be advertizing. Rather than engage in the 'debate' on torture, the poem covers familiar Leunig 'existential-angst' territory, with its protagonist asking rhetorically 'Oh why did we all have to torture each other?' (8) As such it is an instance of how Leunig's 'political' work often gestures towards a realm beyond politics, where the poetic, the comic, and the existential coexist as a way of making life in the political realm more bearable. One might call such a model 'humanist', though Leunig's inclusion in his work of animals—such as his ubiquitous duck that appears in 'Torture'—offers a glimpse of the limitations of that term as a philosophy.

An example of a bardic model of poetry-as-public-speech operating in extra-poetic contexts can be seen in Les Murray's part in drafting the preamble to the Australian constitution. In 1998 the Constitutional Convention made a number of recommendations regarding Australia becoming a republic, as well as recommendations regarding a preamble to the Australian constitution if such a republic was to come into being. As he relates in his essay in *Constitutional Politics: The Republic Referendum and the Future* (2002), Murray was asked in 1999 by the journalist Tony Stephens to write a sample preamble. A week later, Murray heard from John Howard, who had liked the sample preamble and wanted him to write 'the real one' (81), which Murray did, with input from Howard. Comprising of eight clauses the preamble's most controversial elements were the sixth and seventh clauses:

Australians are free to be proud of their country and heritage, free to realise themselves as individuals, and free to pursue their hopes and ideals. We value excellence as well as fairness, independence as dearly as mateship.

Australia's democratic and federal system of government exists under law to preserve and protect all Australians in an equal dignity which may never be infringed by prejudice or fashion or ideology nor invoked against achievement. (Lambert 7-8)

As these two clauses show, while written in prose, the preamble clearly illustrates the trace of a 'poetic' language in its role as public speech. This was no doubt appropriate for a document that was wholly symbolic, with no legal instrumentality or standing. The use of anaphora and parallelism, and the serious tone, all suggest a rhetoric that is 'epideictic', the ornate and figurative oratory of praise. The fact that Murray, often considered a kind of unofficial national poet, was hired for the job also suggests that the figure of the poet had also retained a trace of the bardic model I have referred to, in which there exists a special relationship (which involves both praise and blame)

between poet and nation. (This is something also seen in Murray's involvement, for a Labor government, in redrafting the Oath of Allegiance in 1992).

As related in his essay in *Constitutional Politics*, Murray was not happy with the inclusion of the word 'mateship' (the one word that received the greatest scrutiny in the document) in the sixth clause, but as Howard 'dearly loved the term' and was the 'client' it stayed in (82). This version of the preamble was not popular. According to Murray, it received a 'brown blizzard of contempt and vilification' in the media in March and April 1999 (83). The revised preamble was disliked by all commentators (including Murray), and, along with the Australian republic, it was rejected by the Australian people at the November 1999 referendum. Of the 148 electorates only 16 voted in favour of the preamble (Murray, 'Mates', 86). As Helen Lambert suggests in 'A Draft Preamble: Les Murray and the Politics of Poetry', 'Perhaps the preamble was a ruse all along, designed to fail, and drag along with it the very notion of an Australian republic' (8). If it was, as Lambert suggests, 'a well-timed political distraction' (9), it wasn't Howard's first.

Regarding the penultimate clause (whose reference to 'prejudice', 'fashion', and 'ideology' was of concern to many commentators) Murray has this to say, 'Although mutterings about a "polemic against political correctness" surfaced at times, no clear acknowledgement that the draft preamble's bottom line was aimed directly at the throat of our over-mighty media was ever made' (83). For a poet working on such a significantly public text, this sentiment is telling, illustrating a desire for an alternative form of public speech beyond mainstream media, politics and even the law (the ostensible subject of the clause). For a writer so interested in delineating the differences between poetry and prose, this realm could be seen as a poetic realm. This bardic poetic that Murray places into the public, prose work of the draft preamble is a significant example of how traces of the poetic continue to occur in extra-poetic contexts.

My last example is troubling, ambiguous, and apparently singular. In 1997 Timothy McVeigh was found guilty of single-handedly bombing the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 (an event that caused the deaths of 168 people). This was the deadliest act of terrorism within the US prior to 9/11. In court, McVeigh argued that his attack was a justifiable response to the deaths of 76 Branch Davidian members, caused by the US government, at the Branch Davidian siege at Waco, Texas, in 1993. McVeigh was tried in a federal court for the murder of eight federal officers, and he was executed in 2001, the first convicted criminal to be executed by the US federal government since 1963.

I do not wish to discuss further the trial, McVeigh's motives, or whether he acted alone—Gore Vidal is one high-profile commentator who has written on these matters. Rather, I wish to attend to a minor feature of the McVeigh story, one that gets little more than a quizzical mention, if at all, in accounts of McVeigh's crime and punishment: his 'final statement'. McVeigh chose as his final statement 'Invictus' (1875) by the English poet William Ernest Henley (1849-1903). He apparently knew

the poem from memory and the statement was released by McVeigh's lawyers as a press statement. The poem reads:

Out of the night that covers me,  
 Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
 I thank whatever gods may be  
 For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
 Under the bludgeonings of chance  
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
 Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
 And yet the menace of the years  
 Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
 How charged with punishments the scroll,  
 I am the master of my fate:  
 I am the captain of my soul. (685)

As Vidal makes clear in his *Vanity Fair* essay, 'The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh' (reprinted in *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace*), the citation of this poem can be read as a form of self-heroising on McVeigh's behalf. According to Vidal, 'The stoic serenity of McVeigh's last days certainly qualified him as a Henley-style hero' (96). Despite being a poem that had previously been anthologised and popular in schools for its expression of (state-approved) stoicism, Vidal claims that in the US media at the time, no-one 'mentioned Henley's name, because no one knew who he was. Many thought this famous poem was McVeigh's work' (96). Such confusion suggests something of the fragile condition of poetry in public culture. Citation (like parody) relies on a sense of shared knowledge. When shared knowledge is absent, then poetry as public speech becomes doubly vestigial.

But McVeigh's citation of the poem is a more complex act than one of self-heroising. Interestingly, it was not McVeigh's first act of strategic citation. Just before he was sentenced, McVeigh made his first and only statement in court: 'I wish to use the words of Justice Brandeis dissenting in *Olmstead* to speak for me. He wrote, "Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or ill, it teaches the whole people by its example"' (Vidal 81). According to Vidal's account, after making this statement McVeigh was sentenced to death by the state.

A less sympathetic observer than Vidal may see both citations as a form of obfuscation, rather than acceptance of responsibility. McVeigh chooses to break his silence only with the symbolic and ambiguous quotation of others. For some, McVeigh's



appropriation of Henley may appear scandalous because it seems to implicate an innocent (and worthy) literary figure into the narrative of a terrorist. For such observers McVeigh's quotation is scandalous because it shows us that the world, even the world of terrorists, can have purchase on the world of art. The fact that McVeigh's final statement was recognisably 'of' the culture that he had attacked underscored the profoundly difficult fact of an American having been responsible for such an act. McVeigh's citation is scandalous, then, because it shows the terrorist as 'one of us', as culturally literate, and as having access to sophisticated forms of articulacy: citation, irony, symbolism, and poetic speech.

McVeigh's citation of Henley is significant also because it shows the volatility of poetry as a form of public speech, even when only existing in trace form. It harks back to neither a bardic nor journalistic tradition, but seems to call into being a 'tradition' of poetry-as-uncanny. The uncanny is central to any discussion of poetry's 'ambiguous vitality', since poetry *as a discourse* is more or less uncanny. As I have been arguing, while marginal, poetry continues to appear as a ghostly trace within the public sphere. Nicholas Royle's account of the uncanny, in his eponymous book on the subject, is especially resonant with regard to poetry in public culture. 'The uncanny,' Royle writes, 'entails another thinking of beginning: the beginning is already haunted'. According to Royle, the uncanny is also 'a crisis of the proper' (disturbing notions of ownership and proper names) and 'a crisis of the natural' (disturbing understandings of self, human nature and the nature of the world) (1).

Lyric poetry generally uses the uncanny to engage in defamiliarisation. But the uncanny works at more than the textual level in the traces of poetry-as-public-speech. Poetry can become thematically uncanny when it is made to act as public speech. The 'uncanny model' of poetry-as-public-speech, like the uncanny generally, confuses the categories of the familiar and the unfamiliar, as well as stable singularity with unsettling doubleness. As Royle writes, the uncanny (which comes from the German for 'unhomely') 'can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home' (1).

As previously suggested, McVeigh's final statement clearly shows up something 'unhomely at the heart of hearth and home'. It also confuses the categories by which we usually recognise something as 'poetry'. Henley's poem, as McVeigh's final statement, becomes a double of a poem, a poem in quotation marks (and therefore not simply a poem). The act of citation in this context, which may or may not be seen as an act of cultural terrorism, makes reading a familiar poem an utterly strange and unfamiliar experience. McVeigh radically unsettled the poem's origin. Where does the poem begin? With the author's intentions or the intentions of the person quoting it? McVeigh also unsettled notions of the proper. Who 'owns' the poem? The author or its user? The poem seems to (improperly) have two names attached to it (Henley's and McVeigh's) and its recontextualisation unsettles usual notions about what uses poetry could 'properly' be put to. McVeigh's citation of the poem also instigates a crisis of the natural, since in its illustration of a terrorist as articulate and cultured it shows human nature and the nature of the world to be suddenly unfamiliar.

McVeigh's citation illustrates the truly radical nature of modern literary theory's interest in citation, repetition, and parody. McVeigh's 'Invictus' (if I can call it that for a moment) is a discomfiting example of the Derridean concept of dissemination in which uncontrollable meaning is endlessly dispersed. Academic criticism of poetry can also become uncanny when read with McVeigh's citation in mind. James Longenbach presumably did not have McVeigh's poetic act in mind in *The Resistance to Poetry* (2004), his work on poetry's self-resisting language, but as the following passage shows, it can read as strangely apposite:

But poems do not necessarily ask to be trusted. Their language revels in duplicity and disjunction, making it difficult for us to assume that any particular poetic gesture is inevitably responsible or irresponsible to the culture that gives the language meaning: a poem's obfuscation of the established terms of accountability might be the poem's most accountable act—or it might not. Distrust of poetry (its potential for inconsequence, its pretensions to consequence) is the stuff of poetry. (1-2)

These three examples illustrate that poetry as public speech engages with political discourse in diverse, incommensurate ways. Leunig's occasional cartoon-poems, appearing in the metropolitan press, are examples of poetry at its most public and politically engaged. And yet, Leunig's work repeatedly gestures towards a realm beyond politics. Les Murray's role as a 'national' poet in the failed attempt to introduce a preamble to the Australian Constitution illustrates the vestigial (bardic) role that poets can play in nation building. As his reference to the 'bottom line' perhaps more tellingly shows, Murray's text was an attempt to reassert poetry's social (even quasi-legal) standing against an 'over-mighty media'. Lastly, McVeigh's quotation of Henley, made without any explanation, shows the uncanny and volatile potential of poetry as public speech.

Significantly, then, these three examples variously engage in arguments about the relationship between the individual and the state, and between private identity and national history. This may or may not suggest a general theory about how traces of the poetic operate as public speech. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the three very different cases discussed here, traces of the poetic in public speech act so as to not only enable participation in the public sphere, but also to symbolically move those participants in the public sphere to a realm *away* from the aggression (if not the actual violence) of politics, the law, and the state. In this respect, it may be that one of the most ghostly, but most constant, features with regard to the traces of poetry in public culture is the one adverted to at the beginning of this paper: the uneasy relationship between the pre-modern and modernity within poetry.

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