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
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. Irre 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
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,

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).
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
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.
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