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Speaking for the dead: Writing and the Unknown Australian Soldier

Abstract

One third of the 60,000 Australians killed in the 1914-1918 war were unable to be identified. Known collectively as the 'Unknown Soldier' they were reburied in the postwar years with the inscription 'Known unto God'. In 1993, the remains of one Australian killed on the Western Front were exhumed, repatriated and interred in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial. In 2007, Archie Weller published a poem titled the 'Unknown Soldier' (Weller 2007) which gives a name, voice, history and character to the soldier-larrikin and anti-hero whose bones lie there, effectively challenging former prime-minister Paul Keating's eulogy which insists 'We will never know who this Australian was' (Keating 1993). Weller deploys prosopopoeia, which has been described as the 'fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave' and a 'master trope' of poetic discourse. His verse undercuts notions of the sacred associated with the Unknown Soldier and creates presence from absence, making explicit a key motive of imaginative writing. This paper speculates on the potency of the 'unknown' and the way that texts like tombs assist concealment and revelation, remembering and forgetting, resurrection and erasure.

Keywords: Unknown Australian Soldier, corpse poem, First World War

Introduction

“Like” and “like” and “like” – but what is the thing that lies beneath the
semblance of the thing?...

There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it
upon the oblong.

They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is
left outside.

The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so
various or so mean;

we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this
is our consolation.

– Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (2000: 90-91)

One third of over 60,000 Australians killed in the 1914-18 war were unable to be identified. Known collectively as the 'Unknown Soldier' they were reburied in the post-war years in dedicated overseas cemeteries with the inscription 'Known unto God'. Now, in the heart of Australia's capital lies a pile of old bones that were dug up in 1993 from Adelaide Cemetery in Villers Bretonneux,

France, sealed into a Blackwood coffin, transported by Qantas to Sydney and then by the RAAF to Canberra (Inglis 1999: 8). These bones, reburied to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of the First World War, occupy the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial (AWM). What are they doing there? What do they say? How might we answer?

After attending the Australasian Association of Writing Programs conference in Canberra in 2016, I visited the AWM and Australian Unknown and was challenged by sorrow and misgiving, awe and ambivalence. The concealed bones were mute, surely, but was there a voice nonetheless? Who or what was speaking? Inscriptions? Histories? Why did this deathly pose, or prose, feel so ... alive? There seemed a link with writing, with text, with reading that I could not quite fathom and which has troubled me since. As visitor or 'reader', I was faced with an enigma: a fragmented body (text) within an arresting and emphatically coherent framework (or paratext). Evident affective strategies – space, silence, solemnity, spectacle – generated visceral responses and imageries of grief, despite my intention to observe dispassionately, to resist state-sponsored languages of commemoration in order to better see 'the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing'.

Should we commemorate the dead of past wars? Can this be done without repeating, symbolically and ritualistically, former erasures and violations? By choosing one type of commemoration over another, such as repatriating and reburying one body from one war, what myths are reiterated and exclusions naturalised? Aged whitened bones, entombed by traditional Anzac rhetoric, speak of killed white men – a Dominion's youth – who died dutifully and miserably in distant lands. But what of other bodies, other remains – those of Indigenous volunteers deployed in twentieth-century wars, as well as men, women and children killed and dispossessed by frontier wars that persisted across the continent for over 140 years, even beyond the First World War? [1] What lies beneath the semblance of the thing greatly amplifies this nation's losses, pressing for acknowledgement, for mourning, despite institutional suppression. Loss also transcends these shores to include the many millions of war dead of other countries. Efforts to ensure the Australianness of the Unknown's bones only illuminate the possibility that they might have belonged to another nation's youth.

Bones, regardless of their histories or shroudings, confront us with embodiment and transience. For Mircea Eliade they induce dualism: on the one hand, bone 'represents the very source of life' and on the other 'reduction to the skeleton has ... an ascetic and metaphysical value – anticipating the work of time, reducing life by thought to what it really is, an ephemeral illusion in perpetual transformation' (quoted in Wittman 2011: 33).

People have long been 'fascinated by the disquieting corpse at the centre of their culture, dead but still alive, individual yet extended to all, a real body yet also the symbol of a new sort of transcendence, still in the making', according to Laura Wittman (2011: 6) in her study of the social and political meanings of Italy's Unknown Soldier, whose bones were re-interred in Rome's Vittoriano monument in November 1921, a year after the British Unknown Warrior was re-buried in Westminster Abbey and the French Unknown Soldier under the Arc de Triomphe. Over several decades, this 'mystical' figure has multiplied around the world to signify one human body, all war dead, and the body of the nation, and to enable and channel remembrance and mourning. But that is not all: Wittman crucially points out that the bones 'could be seen to express an individual story in their particular brokenness, a story that might be analogical to that of other missing soldiers, but never identical'. Accordingly, she adds,

‘discontinuity is foregrounded as we are faced with our own inability to comprehend the experience commemorated by the Memorial’ (55). War, as Deborah Buffton observes, has long been deployed in the aftermath as a means through which society is ‘cleansed, purified, and indeed resurrected’ (Buffton 2005: 29). Even so, we may be blindsided by such bold transformation of chaos into order, waste into worth, fracture into future, violation into salvation, insentience into significance.

Approaching the tomb as a kind of text and text as a kind of tomb illuminates how each interdependently generates voices – poetical, biographical, exegetical, political. This paper speculates on the potency of the Unknown, which arguably, like writing, involves concealment and revelation, forgetting and remembering, erasure and resurrection, absence and presence. It considers a polished rhetorical work, Paul Keating’s 1993 eulogy for the Unknown Australian Soldier, against less polished verse, a type of ‘corpse poem’, published in 2007 by Archie Weller in a collection entitled *The Unknown Soldier and Other Poems*. Weller uses the technique of prosopopoeia, a type of fiction wherein the dead can speak.

Nationalism

René Giraud asserts that there is ‘always a human death at the origin of cultural order’ and Wittman, drawing on his work, contends that the ‘foundational role of this death is repressed and returned only obliquely in stories about sacrifice’ (Giraud 2011: 98). The resurrection and reburial of unknown soldiers after the First World War begins a modernist story about sacrifice that might seek to transcend, yet also depends on, nation. Adam Smith’s theory that sympathy for the dead provides a basis for social sympathy that is necessary for community underpins Esther Schor’s assertion that ‘forgetting and remembering the dead have enormous consequences for the present and future of our world’ (Schor 1994: 4). She adds that ‘the living imaginatively bring the dead to life, and by so doing, invent history. “Bearing” the dead entails both “naturally” supporting them and imaginatively conceiving and giving birth to them’ (9). Resurrecting, speaking of and speaking for the Unknown Soldier may serve to hold together a community if, as Schor contends, ‘society may be defined as those who share a common dead’ (37-8). The Unknown Australian symbolically carries a burden of uniting a disparate and by the late twentieth century ethnically and culturally diverse population. Gainfully translating bones from one realm to another, from old world to new, from the lost generation to the saved, requires the flesh of affective rhetoric. Of course, despite iteration political designs on the dead (as on the living) may never be fully realised.

Benedict Anderson’s highly influential concept of nations as ‘imagined communities’ (2006), social constructions partly enabled and maintained by print capitalism – the novel and the modern press – is ‘rooted in the grave’ (Allen 2011: 92). Nationalism, as a form of secular religion, promises not only community among unknowns in the present but ‘immortality through survival of the state’. Anderson considers that ‘no more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than the cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers’. These are ‘saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings’ and so important to narratives of national immutability that he dares readers ‘to imagine the general reaction to the busy body who “discovered” the Unknown Soldier’s name’ [2]. Seemingly impossible, such discovery would be ‘sacrilege of a strange, contemporary kind’ (Anderson 2006: 9). Rationalist secularism, emerging with the Enlightenment, brought ‘its own modern darkness’, Anderson argues, requiring a ‘secular transformation of fatality into continuity,

continuity into meaning' and 'few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation' (11).

Eulogy

In his 1993 eulogy for the Unknown Australian Soldier, then Australian prime minister Paul Keating opened with a declaration, 'We do not know this Australian's name and we never will,' then proceeded to illuminate other things we will never know – for example, the man's rank and battalion, age, birthplace, personal circumstances, religion, marital status, 'who loved him or whom he loved', or precisely how and when he died. Keating reiterated: 'We will never know who this Australian was' (Keating 1993).

Some of the above details would have been included on the soldier's attestation paper on enlistment but his war record – now digitised along with hundreds of thousands of others who enlisted in the First World War – will never, it seems, be matched to those exhumed and reburied bones. We do know, though, that the bones were retrieved from the Western Front, where 45,000 Australians had died, and not from Gallipoli or any other 'theatre' of death, and we know that the male was of an age deemed suitable for both service and sacrifice, even if his rank, class, ethnicity, race, age, religion and sexuality remain indeterminate. 'Fiction', Marc Redfield observes, 'seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations' (Redfield 2003: 36).

Keating's eulogy (written with Don Watson) is not unreconstructed: it understands criticism of bellicose nationalism and of the Anzac legend. The eulogy uses conventions of speeches and argumentative essays, where the writer puts a case but also anticipates and includes contrastive views or considerations, largely to diminish their potency. Keating stresses that the First World War was distinguished by 'military and political incompetence'. Additionally, it was a 'mad, brutal, awful struggle' and a 'waste of human life' that helped produce another world war but, although people might think, consequently, that 'this Unknown Soldier died in vain' Keating's eulogy rejects such a conclusion – not by reasoned argument but by literary feat. By the very act of 'honouring our war dead', he insists, '*we declare* that this is not true' (Keating 1993, my emphasis). This statement is extraordinary for its circularity, use of the plural pronoun, and confidence in performativity – Keating signals his belief, and by extension the nation's belief, in the power of language to effect what the speaker desires and pronounces – which is also what such commemorative ritual is designed to produce and affirm: ventriloquised, the Unknown Soldier asserts that no Australian soldier ever has or ever will die in vain. Service men and women as well as the general public can be assured that tragic waste, rightly treated, can fortify present and future generations [3].

Keating tells us that the First World War, though 'an inexcusable folly', produced a transcendent lesson, which is that ordinary people, by showing endurance and resilience, can transform into 'heroes', providing us with a model of Australians' courage and belief in themselves and their Australian community. The Unknown Soldier, he stated, 'was one of those who by his deeds proved that real nobility and grandeur belong not to empires and nations but to the people on whom they, in the last resort, always depend'. With an eye to the critics and sceptics, he seeks (unsuccessfully, in my view) not to 'glorify war over peace' or soldiers over civilians or men over women, for that matter, but rather to position the Unknown Soldier as one who 'honours the memory' of all who have 'laid down their lives for Australia', and he also makes explicit

the hope that this particular unknown will ‘continue to serve his country’ by dint of his anonymous residence in the nation’s capital (Keating 1993).

This expectation raises ethical questions about the uses to which a nation might put the remains of one of its populace, for while the Unknown may have enlisted without coercion he has had no say in his exhumation, transportation and reburial, no say in his resurrection and spectacular metamorphosis. The dead are conveniently silent.

A key sentence of Keating’s eulogy, ‘He is all of them. And he is one of us’, was in 2013 inscribed on the tomb, amid some controversy. The phrase encapsulates the symbolic and metonymic role the Unknown has been recruited to play. That his bones were exhumed and transported across the world suggests their significant role, but does *matter* – the absent body signified by the real bones, or the bones themselves – actually matter and, if so, why? The Unknown Soldier’s bones are, after all, not visible or touchable. Unless imagined, they lack a sensory dimension. Their destiny is to animate a soldier-figure, to be an effect and promise of the tomb – just as the author-figure is an effect and promise of the tome. The eulogy and title – ‘Unknown Australian Soldier’ – insist on presence and absence, and appears designed to invite both emotional and patriotic engagement. Australia’s continuing to be a constitutional monarchy may explain why convention was ignored in 1993 to label the bones ‘Australian’. A decade earlier, Anderson had observed that, because the figure of the Unknown Soldier was already ‘saturated’ with nationalism, ‘many different nations’ had felt no need ‘to specify the nationality’ (2006: 10) [4].

Notices at the entrance of the Hall of Memory in Canberra inform visitors, in various languages, that they are entering a sacred place (Inglis 1999: 17). KS Inglis questions whether ‘sacred’ means ‘protected against questioning’ (Inglis 1998: 461). But it is a writer’s prerogative to question, implicitly or explicitly, and Australian writer Archie Weller appears intrigued by this prospect.

Weller’s Unknown Soldier

Weller creates a ‘corpse poem’ to make the dead speak and the ‘unknown’ known in a way that cuts across and even mocks what might be considered Australia’s belated, nationalistic, idealistic, and somewhat macabre commemorative gesture, one which inevitably repudiates the long-contested notion that the British Unknown Warrior buried in Westminster Abbey can sufficiently represent the entire empire’s unknowns.

Born in 1957, Weller grew up in southern Western Australia. He identifies as Aboriginal, though this was questioned in the late 1990s when it was revealed his family does not so identify. Although his claims to Aboriginal descent via his paternal great grandmother have not been established, Weller’s case is ‘not to be confused with authors who deliberately set out to deceive by adopting false Aboriginal pen names’ (Ryan & Ryan nd). This complex matter speaks to what Maggie Nolan and Carrie Dawson describe as ‘pressing concerns about the nature of authenticity and attendant fantasies of originary wholeness and certainty’. Perceiving a ‘near obsession with questions of origin, or beginning, in considering Aboriginal identity and cultural production in Australia’ (Nolan & Dawson 2004: xii), they suggest ‘attempts to stabilise Indigenous identity in any definitive way are part of a long history of regulation and surveillance in which white bureaucracies determined who could and could not be defined as Aboriginal’. Selfhood, they argue, is constituted by ‘language and narrative’

and ‘embedded within history and culture’. It is also ‘deeply personal’ and a ‘psychic process ... enmeshed in desire and fantasy, making it difficult to differentiate among ‘acts of identification, acts of appropriation, acts of creation and acts of affiliation’ (xiii).

Weller’s fiction deals with race, disadvantage, poverty and prejudice. His first novel, *The Day of the Dog*, was shortlisted in the inaugural Australian Vogel Award in 1980, and in 1993 was made into a film, *Blackfellas*. Weller was the runner-up in that first Vogel award to Paul Radley, whose winning novel *Jack Rivers and me* was, in 1996, revealed to have been written by his uncle and disqualified (National Library of Australia 2018), which further suggests the instability of identities, naming and author-figures.

Weller’s interest in commemoration was strikingly evident in a short story he published in 2000, ‘Confessions of a headhunter’. A short film based on the story, co-written and directed by Sally Riley (Weller & Riley 2000), won several prizes including the script category of the 2001 Western Australian Premier’s Awards. In the story, told with a light touch but serious intent, Frank, a boilermaker, discovers his Aboriginal family, identity and history when an adult. He wants revenge when the statue of murdered Noongar hero and warrior Yagan is beheaded a second time after being repaired. (This is based on true events: the first desecration occurred shortly after the 1997 repatriation of Yagan’s skull to Perth from England.) Frank and Vinnie set about beheading numerous statues commemorating white colonialists. Vinnie stops short of damaging a statue that represents a couple of diggers, as if they, too, are victims of imperialism. The pair’s antics involve a road trip across the country and their vandalising ends with the beheading of the James Cook statue in Hyde Park, Sydney – the memorial recently and convincingly condemned for declaring that Cook ‘discovered this territory’ in 1770 (Grant 2017). The stolen heads are melted down and then sculpted into an Aboriginal mother, baby and child looking towards Botany Bay.

Weller’s ‘Unknown soldier’, a 108-line poem, is one of several in a collection that produces an identity – or multiple identities – for the bones that were returned to Australia on the basis of being unidentifiable though, according to then deputy director of the Australian War Memorial Michael McKernan, they were ‘sufficient human remains to be able to say this is an unknown Australian soldier ... from the First World War’, so that no ‘fraud’ would be perpetrated on the Australian people (McLintock 2013) – which is like a nervous publisher insisting on the authenticity of an autobiography it is about to launch.

In an author’s note for the collection Weller proclaims the concept of ‘burying an unknown person’ to be ‘wonderful for the imagination’. He also explains that his first idea was ‘to make him an Aboriginal soldier ... that being the greatest irony’ and in ‘Possum’ he pursues this notion. George (Darky) Parker, whose mother was Aboriginal and father ‘wadjela’ goes to fight in a ‘white man’s war’, even though his grandfather had ‘lost the battle for his green brown country / Yes, shot by soldiers from the settlement...’. In death his grandfather is ‘safe now from the Wadjellungs’ ways and lies’. George’s resurrected bones, selected to be the Unknown, are returned to a country where his family ‘still fight to survive’ and though ‘much is said in this shrine of the dead’, they do ‘not know who he was’. The natural world does know, however, and perceives one ‘spirit had come safely home’. In another poem, Weller suggests the exhumed soldier was homosexual and suffered additionally because of this. The identity of the unknown is unstable and generative, inspiring imaginative mobility and identification.

Weller seeks to bring the bones to life, to make them speak, to give singularity, story and presence to a potent signifier of loss and absence – one that can, as Wittman’s study of Fascist deployment of the Italian Unknown amply demonstrates – be recruited to nationalistic and antinationalistic, aggressive and pacifist, humanising and dehumanising causes and rhetoric.

Weller’s ‘Unknown Soldier’ has twelve stanzas of varying lengths and irregular rhythm and rhyme. This is an unpolished work but how much this is deliberate, to suit the speaker’s lowly status, and how much due to lack of experience with poetic form or limited editorial input is unclear [5]. What is more certain is that Weller sought to resurrect the dead, undo anonymity and question generic exaltation. This may be a ‘minor’ work of a type often dismissed by critics, teachers and the ERA, but it raises useful questions and contributes to discourse on how we produce the past, including how some kinds of remembering might become – intentionally or not – instrumental in forgetting. Texts, like bones, might resonate strangely, variously, materially, no matter their condition.

Weller’s speaker self-consciously and unromantically identifies himself as a ‘pile of bones no less’. He points to the pretence and deception of his position – he is in ‘a flash coffin’ that has ‘a flag over it as fancy dress’. He recalls, as if he were sentient, the prime minister’s presence at his burial and the public’s show of appreciation, ‘Clappin, cheerin’, pontificatin’ enough to raise the roof’.

In the second stanza the speaker protests his status as ‘unknown’. Weller undercuts notions of the universal, sacred and symbolic associated with the Unknown Soldier who, in the poem, insists on his individuality, identifying his ‘moniker’ as ‘Jimmy Dawson’ who ‘wasn’t unknown in Fitzroy’s back streets’. He speaks back to his unidentified audience, calling him (or us) ‘mate’ or ‘old horse’. His nickname was once ‘Jim the Spiv’ and he was known in the back streets of Melbourne’s inner, working-class suburbs where his ‘dark shadow and sly self would roam’. He was not unknown at two-up schools, but ‘horse-racing’ was his game. He was, in other words, a shady punter who broke ‘all the rules’ – a non-conformer and a member of the underclass. Jim the Spiv represents Jimmy Dawson, whom we might assume was christened ‘James’: we have here shifting nomenclature, where name changing or absence implies changing, acquiring or losing identity.

In the third stanza the speaker declares his lack of interest in the disputes of nations and his lack of commitment to ‘England’s sorry state of bloomin’ affairs’. His great grandfather was a ‘whipped and cruelly treated convict’ who survived, like ‘every other Dawson boy’, on his ‘wits’. But in stanza four the speaker registers the departures of others to the war – young Roy, with ‘bumfluff’ on his chin, then ‘big-mouth Frankie’ and ‘even the Prof’ who had ‘almost finished school’ and could ‘read and write’ – suggesting familiar types all marked by a kind of innocence or unsuitability. The Prof might be expected to be ‘knowledgeable of things’, says the speaker, ‘but ‘Even’ e left, sayin’ what a lark / it would be to see the Old Country once again’.

Eventually, Jimmy Dawson stands alone in Johnson Street, ‘Just a fag for company’. Even racing has ‘gone to the flamin’ dogs’. So he ‘hawks up a gob of spit’ and decides to give the war ‘a whirl’ because there’s nothing else to do.

Weller makes fun of the reputed physical superiority of the Australian Imperial Forces, declaring Jimmy Dawson to be ‘five foot five’ standing on his toes. He is also unfit, so exercise makes him sick, and with fear he ‘near turned green’.

He's irrepressible, though, and soon gets a two-up school going: 'You say unknown!? Why, I'd finally found me trade'.

On arriving in London, Jimmy finds 'dirty grey buildings' and poverty, just like home. But England has 'no place' for those like him. He finds English women a 'bit of all right', but not within reach of his rank and class. He feels alienated then, and inferior, and in England, presumably in training, he continues to be a petty criminal and sees the inside of the 'stockades', or military prison, 'more than once'.

In stanza 9, Jim the Spiv goes to the war and knows, finally, the adventure has begun 'for this old bastard'. Soon he has blistered feet from trudging across landscapes of the Western Front, and finds himself with Australian contingents in 'Rue de Kanga' to a backdrop of bombs and bullets. But here it seems Weller's purpose shifts, seems uncertain: his narrator begins to feel something other than boredom and disaffection. He hears a 'little pom / say... "Where these Cocky geezers from?"' answered with "'They're Aussies, Chum! Now we'll see old Fritz on the run'", rehearsing notions of Australians as stalwart fighters who can 'stick it to the Hun!' Jimmy Dawson is surprised to be 'filled with pride / for that was the time I felt that I belonged / and all them other years was just a waste'.

The irony is clear: this petty criminal is redeemed – saved from being society's waste by service to a greater cause. He had previously had one rule: 'Look out for Number One', but war gave him a valued community. Briefly. The Spiv now shuffles the cards of life and death and smokes what will be his last cigarette. He calls out, 'Come on good old Collingwood!' as he leaps into action with the other 'lads' – and into 'oblivion' – reminding that for this dubious gambler war is a kind of high stakes game, and this time he loses.

Yet his journey is not over, as it is for the rest of the dead. He acknowledges that, had he lived, he would have continued as a 'nobody', one of the socially dead. Instead, his bones are repatriated, making him more than some body, that is, an idea and ideal, an undying 'mystical' body (Wittman 2011).

Wittman argues that by insisting upon 'unknown status, the anonymity becomes essential and desirable rather than a tragic accident of history – an existential state, a positive quality' (10), so that while Keating's eulogy decries modern wars that have resulted in millions of unknowns, it also raises the stature of being unknown and calls for public avowal. Yet, commemoration rituals for the war dead, which Michael Nass describes as both 'profoundly moving and horrifying for their calculated effects', do manage to make the state effective at 'glorifying, recuperating, lifting up and putting to work the blood that is spilled, or the bones that are buried in its soil' (Nass 2003: 88). This questionable feat is undermined by Weller's verse, which reminds that the nation may celebrate anonymity in an effort to create meaning via the 'beautiful death', but the individual is loath to sacrifice his identity, no matter how ignominious. Weller points to the potential absurdity of honouring a body that has earned this only by dying and illuminates the problem of pressing human bones into perpetual national service on the basis of anonymity [6].

Jay Winter describes the unknown soldier a 'metonym for the army of the dead' who was not only a 'truncated life and a broken body' but also 'a voice, asking the living to state what was so important, so essential, that it required turning upside down the natural order of generations, so that the young died before their parents' (Winter 2013: 582). Part of the problem is that while the young die at war, the living continue in their corrupt habits, a point made in the silent film *J'accuse* directed by Abel Gance (1919), wherein thousands of war

dead rise up to chastise the living and demand that their blood was not shed in vain. Weller reminds that some who died at war were themselves corrupt, challenging selective memory and the tendency of remembrance to romanticise, embellish and depersonalise.

Weller rescues Jim the Spiv from complete infamy or depravity by suggesting he had with him his mother's Rosary beads when he died – for Catholics a point of redemption, perhaps. But as with his brief lesson in nationalism, this concession to faith or affection is undermined in the final stanza when Jimmy Dawson again proclaims his bones are undeserving; he was not and never would have become heroic. There were, Jimmy stresses, 'undreds better than meself' but fate's 'sharp guile' and 'strange 'umour' meant his dishonourable bones were chosen, those of 'coughin', spittin', gamblin', lyin', cheatin', useless me / who lasted just one lousy minute in this rotten war'. Weller deploys stereotype and anachronistic vernacular to propose that the entombed bones are counterfeit, or at least no match for Keating's rhetoric; highfalutin language only perpetuates the spiv's scams.

The 'spiv', furthermore, is a figure that invites disdain. The term is also anachronistic, anticipating a figure usually associated with the period during and after the Second World War, as if such delinquency would have become Jimmy's had he outlived larrikinism. In fact, the larrikin as a notable type disappeared in the aftermath of the First World War according to Melissa Bellanta (2012). Richard Hornsey points out that the spiv became an image of 'excessive consumption', the black market and 'suspect masculinity' (Hornsey 2010: 19), which sits uncomfortably within the Anzac legend.

In another act of ghosting, Weller also appears to invoke CJ Dennis's vernacular, in particular, that of Ginger Mick, a subsidiary character in *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915) who subsequently becomes the protagonist of *The Moods of Ginger Mick* (1916). Mick joins the AIF and goes to Gallipoli, where he dies for his nation and empire. Joy Damousi points out that Dennis's poetry was very popular during the First World War, including in the trenches, but was 'a middle-class representation; the vernacular was highly exaggerated and owed its tradition to a heavily pronounced cockney accent, despite the local flavour that contained Australian slang' (Damousi 2010: 210). This form of embellishment marks Weller's invention too. Damousi advises that Australian slang 'became popular at a time when Australian nationalism ... was at its peak' (211), and Weller's recent and paradoxical iteration both exposes exclusory and limited forms of national commemoration and invests in nostalgic resurrection of larrikinism and the Anglo-Celtic working class upon whose (lost) lives Australian nationhood was ostensibly founded.

According to Nass, nations attempt 'to forget death and the dead' and 'forgo mourning by ritualising it', and the fact we are so good at remembering the fallen suggests we are 'well on our way to forgetting' (2003: 86), yet in one ritual at least an aporia works against this. Commemorating *remains* 'leaves a gaping wound at the very heart of the glorious death' (88). By insisting on the speaker's status as bodily remains in this and other poems, Weller insists on presence and embodiment and the possibility of 'other' identifications, even as his use of archaic types and idiom distances twenty-first century readers and discourages identification.

Weller's decision to undo, with some levity, the 'unknown' status of the soldier partially reaffirms the Anzac legend his poem also unsettles. This kind of duality pervades public commemoration. Australian war dead are listed on the roll of honour at the Australian War Memorial, so their names survive. Jimmy Dawson, on the other hand, never existed. Weller is not resurrecting a historical

figure; this is not biography. Weller creates presence, making explicit a key motive of imaginative writing. But death deprives all dead of speech. And giving speech to the voiceless or fabricated risks a kind of transgression, theft or erasure, because by giving a voice, story and personality to the bones, the real unknown is doubly silenced. Yet this type of gifting is literary convention.

A shadowy interposition

The epitaph – where an ‘(absent) autobiographical self attempts to give itself textual form’ (Kneale qtd in Hess 2011: 55) – is invoked by Weller’s verse. Autobiographical discourse is ‘a discourse of self-restoration’ (de Man 1979: 925), but what strange purpose has fictional autobiography, where ‘I’ is non-coincident, even notionally, with the name of the poet? Weller’s unknown says ‘I tells ya straight’ but this declaration seems yet another con.

Wordsworth, in *Essays on Epitaphs*, calls the address from the grave a ‘tender fiction’ and also a ‘shadowy interposition’ [which] harmoniously unites the two worlds of the living and the dead” (Wordsworth 1836: 319). Karen Smythe calls it ‘a trope of consolation’ (Smythe 1992: 7) and Joseph Hillis Miller a ‘trope of mourning’ (Miller 1990: 4). For Paul de Man, the ‘fiction of the voice-from- beyond-the-grave’, or prosopopoeia, is the ‘trope of autobiography by which one’s name ... is made intelligible and memorable as a face’ (1979: 926), and he calls it a ‘master trope’ of poetic discourse and the ‘very figure of the reader and of reading’ (qtd in Davis 2004: 79) [7]. Prosopopoeia deals not only with giving a face but also with defacement, not only with asserting a ‘figure’ but also with figuration and ‘disfiguration’.

The paradox at the heart of Weller’s project – and perhaps all creative writing – is that scribing one identity or face precludes other possibilities, in some sense dooming them to oblivion like the inscription ‘Known unto God’. In the context of war and commemoration, imaginative recuperation risks further violation and erasure. The voice or ‘face’ of the Unknown Australian Soldier is brought into view by Weller but it is a fictional rather than biographically resonant face that effaces all others, so that the nation’s desire for the bones’ unknowability (beyond nationality and gender) is countered by literary recuperation that reveals by naming and telling – by language, by reading – which inevitably obscures the ‘thing’ beneath as surely as casket and tomb.

Many thousands continue to visit the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier each year, paying their respects in a space deemed sacred. Weller’s vernacular invention questions notions of honour, courage, glory and sacrifice essential to Anzac mythology. By identifying the bones as belonging to a disreputable ‘spike’, an oppressed homosexual or an Aboriginal recruit whose grandparent was slain in frontier wars, he asserts that what survives – the myth, the lesson – is a fiction just as questionable as his own creations. His verse implies that voice can survive fleshly annihilation, or be sustained by imaginative recuperation, which makes it a complicated defence against irreconcilable knowledge to the contrary. Hillis Miller finds prosopopoeia offers at best ‘a cover-up of death and of absence, a compensation’ (1990: 4).

Jimmy concludes that his story is one ‘bones can’t tell ya, mate!’, so this literary ghosting is made preposterous, a fictional appropriation that undoes compensatory reading with its illogicality. The Unknown’s bones are mute and, like a blank slate or page, can receive potentially unlimited projections, unlimited stories, rendering ‘truth’ elusive. Of course, as Helen Daniel reminds, ‘the Lie of fiction is built on paradoxes, always dialectic in nature, always two-

faced, containing the doubleness of truth and falsity' (Daniel 1988: 4), and sometimes writers seek to expose this. Weller invites us to question the fictionality of commemorative and autobiographical narratives, while roughing up the literary and political establishment.

Wordsworth recommended against 'tender fiction' or prosopopoeia, preferring that the survivor 'speak in his own person' about the deceased, rather than for them, because 'crossing the conditions of life and death – of speech and silence – is too poignant and too transitory' (de Man 1979: 927), though transitoriness is inherent and poignancy often sought after. Wordsworth's concern is that prosopopoeia strikes the living dumb, though he knows that 'the advocated "exclusion" of the fictional voice and its replacement by the actual voice of the living in fact re-introduces the prosopopoeia in the fiction of address' (928). Indeed Weller's poem, addressed, we assume, to an unknown visitor to the tomb, functions chiasmically, rendering the intradiegetic visitor mute along with the poet whose voice was loaned to the spiv. Being struck dumb by the graveside or by reading suggests or mimics death, usefully reminding the living of their own mortality and temporary, precious sentience.

While the fiction of prosopopoeia may seem extreme – the dead speaking – it also reveals the fiction of linguistics per se, Davis argues, given language is 'language is figuration, figuration is disfiguration and disfiguration is the necessary and deluded condition of intelligibility' (2004: 79). Language as trope is 'always privative' and prosopopoeia 'deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores' (de Man 1979: 930). This means that an act of restoration via language seems inevitably to be also an act of deprivation – figuring and disfiguring concurrently. When Paul Keating (2013) speaks of the Unknown Australian soldier 'serving his country yet again' this restorative fiction of agency equally deprives and disfigures, returning us to the question: is it ethical to press the body of a soldier into further service without his consent?

The face, the mask – language – cannot be coincident with the 'real'. If it were, Jimmy Dawson's manifestation as the Unknown would bring down a commemorative edifice founded on enigma. If the dead soldier is falsified by prosopopoeia, then so too is the whole structure of which he is a representative. At the same time, the seduction and falsity of the poem's propositions – the dead or absent can speak, language has a voice – are duly exposed. And yet this is the falsity and desire of all linguistic endeavour, all attempts at representation. Davis observes that we expect a text to address us, to speak, and for ourselves to make sense of it as 'sense-making subjects'. He adds that 'the fiction of an exchange with the dead and of a possible harmony and mutual intelligibility between separate worlds is a mystification inherent in language' (2004: 79).

Weller's attempt, however humble, to recuperate the Unknown, to make him known, suggests the aim of literary work generally; that is, to make what does not exist exist, or what once existed exist again. All such literary acts, Davis points out, remind us of 'the absence of the voice inscribed, of the desire of the poet to resurrect the past and have it live again, speak for itself, account for itself in the present'. It appears that 'endless prosopopoeia' giving voice and face to the dead is a 'madness' that will never end because it is the 'madness of words' (Davis 2004: 79).

Weller's own voice is occluded and biography effaced by the Unknown's storytelling. But paratextual matter counters the 'death of the author': an exegetical 'Author's note' foregrounds his imagination; a foreword by John Harper-Nelson outlines Weller's biography and publishing history; and the

dedication ('This is for all those fallen in battle, especially my grandfather's two brothers Herbert and Guy who lost their lives in the First World War and my Uncle Geoff Biggin of the RAAF. who disappeared in the Second World War') together assert Weller's presence, return his 'true' name, and provide a familial motive for writing about war that is also, I think, a pre-emptive strike against any offence his toying with 'sacred' places might provoke.

Beyond epistemophilia, or desire to know, and the pleasures of make-believe, what drives Weller's engagement? Why seek to disrupt the Unknown with verse? An obvious answer might be to provide some kind of post-generational testimony. And yet he does not attempt comprehensive witness to the atrocities of the Western Front, treating Jimmy Dawson's time there in a peremptory, clichéd manner. Jimmy does not survive long at the Front. First he is flattered, given the reputation of Australians. Then he comments on the beauty of a sky lit by firing, which deflects the ugly human carnage below. Jimmy, 'lasting just one lousy minute in this rotten war', provides no insights into the experiences that made him and his fellow soldiers 'bloody, muddy, weary-eyed'.

True witnesses, according to Primo Levi, are those who do not survive – death deprives them of voice: they cannot testify. By virtue of prosopopoeia, Weller raises one such voice. Deficient Jimmy may be, but, like any survivor or 'pseudo witness', he could have been recruited to 'bear witness to a missing testimony' (Levi qtd in Davis, 2004: 84). Weller creates the possibility of (fictionalised) true witness only to deprive us of it. This repeats the great silence of the Hall of Memory. What memory lives here? What, specifically, becomes known in this perfect dwelling-place of the Unknown? Bones, tomb – these signal presence and rest and respect – not slain, bleeding corpses and all that broke and silenced them.

Corpse poem

Diane Fuss offers a fascinating analysis of prosopopoeaic corpse poems, which are founded on paradox: 'A dead body and a poetic discourse are mutually incompatible, two formal states precluding each other. A poem implies subjective depth while a corpse negates interiority. A poem signals presence of voice while a corpse testifies to its absence'. Fuss explores an 'entire tradition of poems that deploy the strange literary device of a speaking corpse', asserting that the fictional impulse is to 'revivify' and 'reauthorise the dead' which also risks 'contaminating and killing poetry' (Fuss 2003: 1). Why, she asks, would a writer seek to experience 'prematurely the state of decomposition', whether one's own or someone else's? 'Why is a dead voice more appropriate than a live one?' What can be achieved, she asks, by speaking as a fictional 'remains' rather than with 'one's own living voice'? (2-3)

Fuss connects the birth of the speaking corpse in literature with 'the Enlightenment transformation of the dead body from an object of religious veneration to one of scientific experimentation and commercial value, given parts could be bought and sold'. Commodification increased fear of death, creating a 'new definition of the human body as spiritually irredeemable base matter' (3). With death increasingly depersonalised, people 'began to speak of it in new and increasingly creative ways. Poets began reviving the dead via the vitalizing properties of speech' (4).

The corpse poem emerged during the nineteenth century, when it was deployed largely as a vehicle of comedy or theology, and was developed in the twentieth century 'to critique politics, history and even literature itself'. Fuss locates five

key registers – comic, religious, political, historical and literary – to explore the ‘complicated interplay between language and death that this vital new literary form so self-consciously foregrounds’ (3).

Weller’s corpse poem engages several registers, including the comic, to give voice to the disenfranchised, dramatising the recruitment and exploitation of the poor or socially and culturally disregarded in a war they did not understand. Jimmy is haunted by his insufficiency and resentful of the role he is pressed to play. Weller’s verse invites us to question a contemporary act of nationalism that potentially colonises and exploits, yet again, bodies misused decades earlier. Jimmy, for example, journeys from one scene of powerlessness to another. The pride he expresses in the trenches is shot through with pathos. He is small, unfit, fearful and a scoundrel. If his bones could ‘tell ya mate’, he would not be entombed in the nation’s capital. This speaking corpse is comical in its incommensurability, which risks turning a terrible, shocking tragedy into a literary joke. However, by resisting mourning or the seductive ‘therapoetics of prosopopoeia’ (Gana 2003: 160), avoiding any pretence of revival and cure, Weller conveys, intentionally or otherwise, both the trope’s and the tomb’s inherent paradox and ultimate impotence.

Political corpse poems, among which Weller’s can be counted, ‘complicate the cultural tendency to treat the dead as either superhuman or subhuman’ and fall into two categories: ‘poems that deflate and poems that redeem’ (Fuss 2003: 13). The first group ‘humbles those corpses that have been culturally canonized’, and it is into this group Weller’s poem can be placed. The corpses ‘aim to correct a social injustice – politically opportunistic overvaluation of the dead on the one hand, and the no less calculated undervaluation of the dead on the other’. Weller deflates the grandeur and impersonality of the Unknown Soldier memorial but avoids denigrating diggers in the trenches; perhaps this is politically expedient, or it reveals genuine sympathy or seduction by Anzac mythology.

Fuss argues that political corpse poems challenge the cultural tendency to treat the dead body as nothing more than a symbol:

The violent reduction of a person to a sign literally kills the messenger, stripping the body that remains of any meaning of its own. By giving voice to the cadaver, political corpse poems belatedly seek to undo this semiotic violence by multiplying the ways in which the dead body might signify... These poems ventriloquise corpses not to perpetrate upon the dead another kind of profanation but to make manifest the violence of turning any physical body into a form of political speech. (16)

The paradox of prosopopoeia arises once again. Still, Fuss points out that ‘historical corpse poems offset the cultural process of forgetting with the literary work of remembering’ and can remind that ‘even most abject body has a story to tell’ (21).

Another way in which Weller’s project conforms to the modern corpse poem is that he is not, in this collection, resurrecting members of his own family, but a ‘more generic’ personality. ‘The critical prerequisite of any corpse poem is distance’, according to Fuss, ‘an emotional buffer separating the voice of the poet from the body of the corpse as if to shield the poet from the contamination and contagion such proximity to the dead inevitably entails’ (26).

Poetry highlights, by its economy, the status of ‘all words as dead letters’, according to Fuss (27). Invoking Celan, she concludes ‘words are corpses’ and

‘poems are coffins for language’s remains’ (30) which suggests, again, the metaphoric and chiasmic relations of literature and death, revealing perhaps just why my inquiry into the Unknown – which responds to its provocation – led me to writing and specifically to the corpse poem.

By using verse to revive the Unknown Soldier, Weller exploits what Fuss calls a ‘figure for poetry itself’ and a ‘spectral genre’ (Fuss 30). He offers up a specific language for an imagined dead soldier, a language that is itself dead and a coffin for words that belong neither to him nor the larrikin he creates but which entombs both in the poem. Weller aims to bring the dead to life, even as his language points to the widening gap between our present and the recruit’s brief moment. The language deployed is dead language but it is revived by the poet, so again lives when the poem is read. A ‘speaking corpse poem’ is, Fuss suggests, ‘suspended between the animated voice of the speaker and the frozen form of the poem that preserves it’. She concludes that such a poem

tells us something important about literature as a whole: poetry can ventriloquize the dead because literature, as a medium, already incorporates death... Is not every literary utterance a speaking corpse, a disembodied voice detached from a living, breathing body? Literature that immortalizes voice also entombs it, which is why every poem can be broadly understood as a corpse poem. (30)

Approaching the end of this funerary inquiry, I ask myself again what anyone seeks by visiting the Tomb of the Unknown. What did I want? Was it communion with living others or with the dead? And why this haunting by bones sealed into the dark? And why this resonance with reading? Those hidden, evocative bones, like poems, like all writing, are detached from a living, breathing, speaking body yet they touched me nevertheless. Such potency, where there is no body. In *Reading*, Virginia Woolf reminds us that ‘somewhere, everywhere, now hidden, now apparent in whatever is written down is the form of a human being’ (Woolf 1966: 28-9). Texts, like tombs, imply absence and disconnection, but their aura of permanence and resurrective potential points also towards life and connection. We fill both with our imaginings.

Notes

[1] The AWM currently refers in its colonial gallery to ‘civil disorder’ (Mortimer qtd in Daley 2013), but former deputy director of the memorial Michael McKernan, among others, finds its general silence on the frontier wars to be unjustifiable given the Memorial Act covers “‘all wars and warlike operations in which Australians have served” and ‘There were soldiers in uniform fighting and dying.’” He also refutes arguments that frontier conflicts were not ‘wars’ given ‘the dreadful loss of life that occurred under warlike operations’ (McPhedron 2013). However, the current director of the AWM, Brendan Nelson, remains against including these wars, saying they are outside AWM’s ambit and the task of the National Museum (Pooley 2013; Green 2014). The AWM has more recently recognised the significant role of indigenous Australians in twentieth-century wars overseas, and an exhibition on this theme, *For Country, for Nation* (Australian War Memorial 2018a), which also recognises the ‘desperately unequal social context in which this service was given’ (Nelson qtd in media release, Australian War Memorial 2018b) will be touring Australia from April 2018 to June 2021. [return to text](#)

[2] Anderson’s study, first published in 1983, preceded by a year the burial of the Unknown Soldier from the Vietnam War in Arlington National Cemetery in the US, with a eulogy delivered by President Ronald Regan. Strangely, 14 years later in 1998, that grave was opened, the bones were exhumed and their identity as belonging to Michael J Blaisie was confirmed. The predicted public outrage was not forthcoming, Allen says, raising questions about the imagined community of the United States. The explanation, which apparently appealed to and

appeared the public, was scientific progress and the development of mitochondrial DNA identification techniques (Allen 2011: 92). return to text

[3] Keating made another speech at the AWM a decade later in 2013, which was even more strident in its anti-war rhetoric and criticism of the ‘European cataclysm’ into which Australia was ‘dragged’, yet he reiterated key messages of the 1993 eulogy relating to service, loyalty and sacrifice, so that the unknown Australian soldier would ‘serve his country yet again’ and ‘his presence would give us a deeper understanding of what it means to be Australian as well as reminding us of the sacrifice of the more than 100,000 men and women’ who have not returned from various wars. ‘In the long shadow of these upheavals’, he concluded, ‘we gather to ponder their meaning and to commemorate the values that shone in their wake: courage under pressure, ingenuity in adversity, bonds of mateship and above all, loyalty to Australia’ (2013). return to text

[4] Bart Ziino (2015) points out that ‘one element in the creation of the tomb was to assert a more independent national sentiment as Australia moved slowly beyond empire’, and this is similarly ‘reflected in the creation of tombs in Canada (2000) and New Zealand (2004)’. New Zealand includes the country’s name but replicates the British use of ‘warrior’ rather than ‘soldier’. return to text

[5] Weller sometimes reverses the apostrophe that replaces an initial missing letter in contracted expressions; this has been corrected when quoting to assist clarity. return to text

[6] When the Unknown Soldier from the Vietnam War was identified in 1998 with the help of DNA testing (see note 2 above) the Medal of Honor that had been bestowed on him was not transferred to Michael Blassie. return to text

[7] It is well known that Paul de Man’s reputation was damaged by inferences of anti-Semitism and support for fascism during the Second World War. This followed the revelation in 1987, three years after his death, that for a couple of years as a very young man he had contributed articles and literary reviews to Nazi-controlled publications (especially *Le Soir*) while his country, Belgium, was under German occupation. One piece in particular appeared to support racist exclusionary policies while ambivalently praising Jewish intellectual and artistic competencies. On various grounds, condemnation of de Man has also been countered; he was defended by Jewish critics and others who knew him well and claimed never to have detected in him any such inclinations, including Jacques Derrida and Fredric Jameson. Clearly separation of an author from his works, whatever troubled circumstances helped produce them, is not possible or desirable and judgements, some censorial, will no doubt continue to be made; however, that task, even if I were qualified to attempt it, is beyond the purview of this paper. return to text

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