

David McCooley

Deakin University

Marginalia: The Public Life of Australian Poetry

Those about to die young,
the insane, the criminal,
they encourage them all
to write poetry.

Laurie Duggan, *The Epigrams of Martial*

Discussions of poetry's place in Australian public culture (especially those that appear in the mainstream press) generally propose two defining features of the condition of poetry. Firstly, there is the disjunction between poetry as something produced and as something consumed. Everyone, it seems, is a poet. No-one, apparently, reads poetry. If this is the case, then, it is no surprise that, as Simon Catterson put it recently in *The Sunday Age*, 'Poets have never been more numerous, and never less visible' (2005, p. 31). The idea that poets want to write but not read or buy poetry is a hyperbolic expression of the marginal status of poetry in the public sphere: its decline as a type of public speech, the withdrawal of mainstream publishers from the field, and the declining presence of poetry in secondary and tertiary curricula.

Secondly, and in a related move, discussions of poetry as public culture tend to reify the role of the poet while highlighting, again, poetry's marginality. The anonymous piece from *The Economist* entitled 'Poetic Injustice' (which was reprinted in 1998 in *The Australian*) gives definitive expression to this: 'Whatever happened to poetry? Once poets spoke for the age and strutted the cultural stage as stars. What would European romanticism have been without Byron or Schiller? French symbolism without Rimbaud or Baudelaire? Anglo-American modernism without Eliot or Pound? It is easy now to forget just how ubiquitous poetry once was and how central to the cultivated life' (1998, p. 39). It is also easy, apparently, to forget how marginal all of those figures named once were.

Such accounts of the place of contemporary poetry are recounting, subconsciously or otherwise, much of what was covered in the 'Death of Poetry' debate that played out in the 1980s and 1990s in the USA. One of the best-known interventions in this was Dana Gioia's essay 'Can Poetry Matter?', subsequently published in an eponymous book. Gioia begins by lamenting that 'American poetry now belongs to a subculture' (2002, p. 1) and therefore, by implication, does not operate in the broader public culture. Gioia argues that poetry has no role in public culture despite the vestigial prestige afforded to poets: 'As a class, poets are not without cultural status. Like priests in a town of agnostics, they still command a certain residual prestige. But as individual artists they are almost invisible' (2002, p. 1), a sentiment that

echoes Caterson's. Gioia laments that poets are alienated as workers: 'The new poet makes a living not by publishing literary work but by providing specialized educational services' (2002, p. 9). (This is despite the fact that poets from earlier in the twentieth century, as he admits, did not make a living from writing poetry). Intriguingly, Gioia also asserts that 'Without a role in the broader culture...talented poets lack the confidence to create public speech' (2002, p. 10).

These two assertions are interesting moments in an essay that claims that poetry has become subcultural. To what extent, one wonders, does working in educational institutions make one non-participatory in public culture? What more 'broader role' is required to enable 'public speech'? The sense that poets are no longer active, but once were, in the political public sphere is a topos often repeated. Jamie Grant (2001), for instance, makes the case that nineteenth-century Australian poets were more active in the public sphere because political poetry had a vitality it now lacks.

Assertions regarding the role of poetry as political commentary become especially hyperbolic with reference to poets who lived or live under oppressive political regimes. According to the anonymous author of *The Economist* essay, Russian poets once filled football stadiums and people risked their lives to read forbidden poetry. Soviet citizens were equally happy, apparently, with both state-sponsored and subversive poetry. As this story shows, there is a general confusion among commentators with regard to poetry as 'popular' and poetry operating as 'public'. As *Index on Censorship* illustrates, poets are still being persecuted today, though whether they write popular poetry or not is often irrelevant to their persecution. In addition, the anonymous essayist's claim that 'Today Russia seems to have turned its back on contemporary poetry, now that made-for-television movies, hamburger joints and other temptations are available' (1998, p. 39) suggests the nostalgia at the heart of such discussions about poetry and the public sphere. In these scenarios, poetry is presented as not only having been accorded greater status in earlier cultures but also as being inimical to modernity itself. Here the official, public role of the bard is the archetypal figure that represents what poetry has lost. There is a tension here, too, since the bardic role in popular culture is often presented as public but not necessarily official.

In Australia, the poet most associated with this role is Les Murray (often referred to as the Bard of Bunyah). As Helen Lambert writes in her essay on Murray:

The bard is not a member of academe, nor confined to a small network of poets and their readers; he is not elitist but radically democratic. After all, if the people are the government, their bard is a member of the people, and not the parliament. Further, the bard sings the particularities of a place, and journeys in order that he may remain in one place, because he is loyal to his people and origin. Most importantly, the bard speaks for his people, and against the power of what Murray calls the 'ascendancy', the elite of Australia - those who hold power, money and influence, and who shape the political, academic, and cultural milieu. (2004, p. 10)

As Lambert argues, such a role is contradictory in its attempt to be 'loyal' to the people it putatively represents without engaging in the political discourse of the 'ascendancy'. Bardic statements are characteristically political in intent.

The apparent oddity of appealing to premodern models of the poet (who, for instance, is nostalgic for absolute monarchy and feudalism?) makes more sense when one considers the continued relationship between poetry and orality (even if it is usually a secondary orality). As Murray's concept of the 'vernacular republic' suggests, the ideal poet speaks the language of the people. This accounts in part for the continued presentation of poetry as something revitalized by rejections of the conventions of poetry that are seen to be artificial, arcane and alienating. Hence Courtney Trenwith can report in the *Illawarra Mercury* of a schools visit by the poet Stephen Herrick, who 'has done away with alliteration and onomatopoeia and brought in "everyday" words and a bit of humour' (2005, p. 13).

It is not surprising, then, given this valorization of poetry as both ancient and oral, that the most often-cited examples of poetry both 'making a come back' and operating in public culture are the poetry reading and its problematic cousin, performance poetry (and, more recently, the competitive poetry slam). The poetry reading has been enjoying a more or less permanent comeback. For instance, in a *7:30 Report* profile on Dorothy Porter and the success of her verse novel *The Monkey's Mask*, Kate Torney asserts that 'While Porter's unconventional style has done little to win the hearts of traditionalists, it's attracted a huge following of young people and can take some credit for the resurgence of pub poetry' (1999). Some years later, Laurie Clancy in *The Sunday Age* notes that 'Poetry readings are making a big comeback in Melbourne' (2003, 10). Similarly, in *The Sunday Times Magazine*, the story 'Poetry in Motion' (by Joanna Bounds and Sheryl-Lee Kerr) claims that poetry is 'reinventing itself - in pubs, online and even on toilet doors' (2005, p. 13). As implied here and in the *7:30 Report* story, this revival is both about performance and 'breaking the rules'. This constant revival of poetry is a feature of its status in public culture and is something echoed in the choice of title for the short-lived annual anthology, *A Return to Poetry* (produced by Duffy & Snellgrove and featuring poems chosen by writers and celebrities). Through such a repetitive revival and putative 'breaking of the rules' poetry exists in public culture by repeatedly *performing* its marginality.

The reading or performance as the site of poetry's revival is significant. To begin with it does not solely imply the radical or the urban. The bush poetry movement is neither politically radical nor urban but it relies heavily on performance and the valorization of the oral. (It is often a point of honour for bush poets to recite work from memory). Orality is a kind of conservation and bush poets often consider themselves as preserving a lost tradition. Bush poetry is also politically conservative. Daniel Lewis in the *Sydney Morning Herald* reports that Jim Haynes (the editor of *An Australian Heritage of Verse*) 'believes bush poetry is now "a bit of a refuge" from the American culture that's otherwise drowning Australia's' (2004, p. 19). The article also presents the argument that bush poetry was significant in the development of the concept of mateship. Such an argument (which ignores the fact that 'bush poetry', as we understand it, is a twentieth-century invention) suggests again that appeals to an apolitical 'vernacular republic' are in fact engaging in political speech.

Poetry, then, however marginal, continues to attempt political and cultural agency. In the case of bush poetry we again see a nostalgic project, with its authority rooted in a past associated with an 'authentic' Australia. Poetry in the public sphere is staged as a continual revival that is also eternally deferred, based on nostalgic models of poetry that emphasize the poet as seer, as bard, as presence, as performer, as purveyor of special knowledge. One might say that poetry's role in public culture is to personify marginality, to

remain as a trace of the premodern that can be neither rejected nor incorporated.

There are two possible responses to this. One is to consider the ability for poetry, however marginal, to make real interventions in the public sphere through its engagement with public institutions. The most obvious of these (though also the most problematic) is the University. As Gioia's essay suggested, the place of poetry in writing programs is one source of anxiety in the 'death of poetry' debate (especially regarding the lack of artistic merit of the 'workshop poem' and the putatively self-perpetuating practices regarding publishing and funding). As Paul Dawson demonstrates in *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, the place of writing (including poetry) in creative writing programs is surprisingly complex. Dawson argues that Creative Writing is 'an element of Literary Studies' which developed from the 'crisis' of English studies and that provides 'an institutional space for writers to assert their literary authority'. Dawson argues that this condition (in the context of the 'New Humanities', with its emphasis on 'socially beneficial and economically productive research' (2005, p. 179)) is inherently related to the public sphere:

Since intellectuals within the post-Theory academy are concerned not only with the refinement of disciplinary knowledge, but with the deployment of this knowledge within public debate, students and teachers of Creative Writing who perform intellectual work as writers are positioned to contribute to the New Humanities by virtue of the fact that their work is geared towards an audience in the public sphere. (p. 205).

Poetry, then, as a sector of Creative Writing in the New Humanities is a discourse that has the potential to engage in social intervention: 'Within the workshop the literary work can be conceptualised as a zone of social contestation not by dismantling the desire to craft an individual work of art, or by policing the literary representation of identity in the service of social justice, but by exploring how the compositional process is a mode of social intervention at the level of discourse' (p. 214).

Whether or not such intervention occurs within an institution that is itself in some way marginal is an interesting point. Universities could be said to be simultaneously central and marginal to public culture, something that Dawson is aware of. Dawson's work is another addition to the large body of literature (mostly scholarly) that seeks to do away with simplistic disjunctions between aesthetics and ideology.

Other institutions have shown themselves to be open (sometimes resistantly) to poetry as public discourse. Though such intersections have occurred far less often and in a far less structured way than in the University, two examples are worth considering: the writer in residence and the 'activist' poet. The former has become less visible since changes to Australia Council funding more or less killed them off in Universities. Nevertheless, they still exist. The poet Jennifer Maiden was writer in residence at the NSW Torture and Trauma Rehabilitation Unit, an experience that features in a number of her poems.

As this example suggests, the activist poet is also usually 'in residence'. Similarly, the 'working-class' poet, Geoff Goodfellow, has effected poetic interventions in the public sphere by, as Mark Morrison points out in *Labour History*, reading at prisons and work sites and thereby creating public spaces

for people usually excluded from literary culture and from the dominant public spheres. According to Morrison they have not only allowed a space for reflection on working-class issues, but they have also 'had an impact upon corporate and government policy in areas like prison reform and labour disputes' (2000, p. 71). As well as showing an instance of poetry's efficacy in the public sphere, Goodfellow also illustrates ways in which poetic antecedents can function in a way other than the nostalgic. Goodfellow has stated that he discovered poetry through Lawson and Paterson (2000, p. 73). The political/bush poet, then, is for Goodfellow more than merely a sign of poetry's reified but marginal condition. Rather, it offers a model for contemporary praxis. In addition, according to Morrison, Goodfellow's 'performances are interactive, even contestatory...and it is Goodfellow's ability to create such a deliberative space that allows self-revelation and reflection and socio-political agency' (2000, p. 84). The intersubjective nature of Goodfellow's poetry and practice (which includes publishing the work of others) means that poetry becomes an active social discourse, rather than one gesturing towards the social through images of lost roles (the poet-as-Bard and so forth).

Nevertheless, even here the margins remain important. It is significant that Goodfellow continues to embed his poetry and practice in the margins: social spaces not, as Morrison points out, usually associated with literary culture. These include not only work sites but also RSL clubs. And the poems themselves (while employing central modes of poetic composition such as the dramatic monologue) usually concern themselves with lives that would be conventionally described as marginal or with activities (such as brick laying) that are marginal to most lyric poetry.

Given these instances, might it be more accurate to regard poetry as a 'minority' art rather than a marginal one? Certainly there have been a number of well-known instances where poetry or a poet have intervened in significant ways in the public sphere. In Australia, Les Murray has been central to a number of these. In 1992 he was asked by the Keating government to update the Oath of Allegiance for migrants seeking Australian citizenship. The wording of the oath was not adopted, in part because of Murray's desire to end the oath with the words, 'And I expect Australia to be loyal to me'. In 1999 he was asked by the Prime Minister, John Howard, to help draft a preamble for the Australian constitution should Australia become a republic. Both the preamble and the republic were rejected by referenda. (These events are discussed in detail in Helen Lambert's essay on Murray). Given his experiences it is probably not surprising that when the idea of an Australian poet laureate was mooted by the Council of the Centenary of Federation in 2000, Murray (who was the obvious candidate for such a position) rejected the idea outright (as reported by Laura Tingle and Mark Metherell 2000, p. 5).

The public life of poetry is also visible in festivals (such as Overload and National Poetry Week) and even charity events such as the Perth Poetry Challenge. Some poetry titles (such as Murray's *Subhuman Redneck Poems* and Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*) have received general press coverage. In addition, essays in poetry appear in generalist literary magazines such as *Australian Book Review*, and poetry continues to be supported by the Australia Council and literary prizes.

In these instance too, however, the marginal condition of poetry is usually taken as a starting point. Marginality, as I have been suggesting, may be fundamental in our culture to the notion of poetry. However, marginality need not be, as Dominique Hecq suggests in 'Margins: The poetic text and its theoretical gesturing', merely a source of nostalgia. Rather, the marginal can

be seen as intrinsic to a strong model of poetry's role as a public discourse. As Hecq reminds us, 'the marginal position of poetry on the literary scene is partly the reflection of the inner distortions and dislocations achieved by the effects proper to the language of poetry: poetry can only stake out its proper place for itself resisting today's media-saturated world by creating unconforming forms that ceaselessly raise the question of how meaning is articulated in language' (2005).

Poetry as a nonconforming energy is clearly a strategic attempt to reaffirm (however paradoxically) poetry's status as public discourse. Another strategy is to reconfigure the experience of poetry as already public, already intersubjective. This is Peter Middleton's position in *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*, in which he argues that the cultural work of producing meaning is shared among poets, readers, editors, researchers and reviewers (2005, p. xiv): 'The production of meaning by a poem is an intersubjective process extended over time, many individuals, and only ever partially available for cognitive reflection' (2005, p. xv). As Middleton also argues, poetry readerships are often diffuse (both temporally and geographically) and readerships 'need training, they need to be brought into being as economies of affect, memory, and interpretation. Poets are extremely aware of this, as they are also aware that their writing has to try hard to be heard in public cultures where other forms of discourse and knowledge have far more legitimacy' (2005, p. xv).

While the notion of 'close reading' is central to modern understandings of lyric poetry, Middleton sees figures of distance as determining poetic culture: 'Secret languages, sacred powers, initiation rituals, lost traditions: these are frequent topoi in contemporary poetry, and one indication that distance is widely performed in contemporary poetry's reading and interpretation' (2005, p. 11). Which ever way one heads, it seems, one finds oneself in the margins.

In Martin Harrison's recent collection of essays on Australian poetry, significantly entitled *Who Wants to Create Australia?*, Harrison writes that readers give up reading poetry 'when they feel that poems can no longer address the significant big and the significant small questions of their lives' and when 'poetry just stops looking like part of the instrument panel' (2004, p. 5). This discussion of the marginal status of poetry in the Australian public sphere cannot, just as poetry cannot, come to a conclusion about its status, since being marginal in a marginal country means relying on the continual interaction between margin and centre, between active and nostalgic models of the poet, to engage in the public sphere. Poetry, it seems, remains a contradictory pursuit.

References

Anonymous 1998, 'Poetic injustice', *The Australian*, 18 February, pp. 39-40. Return to text

Bounds, Joanna & Sheryl-Lee Kerr 2005, 'Poetry in Motion', *STM: The Sunday Times Magazine*, 13 February 2005, pp. 12-15. Return to text

Caterson, Simon 2005, 'In prose of poetry', *The Sunday Age*, 16 January, p. 31. Return to text

Clancy, Laurie 2003, 'Not averse to a pot of poesy', *The Sunday Age*, 13 July, p. 10. Return to text

Dawson, Paul 2005, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Routledge, London. Return to text

Gioia, Dana 2002, *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture*, 2nd edn, Graywolf Press, Saint Paul. Return to text

Grant, Jamie 2001, 'Poets well-versed in current affairs', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 January, p. 7. Return to text

Harrison, Martin 2004, *Who wants to create Australia? Essays on poetry and ideas in contemporary Australia*, Halstead, Sydney. Return to text

Hecq, Dominique 2005, 'Margins: The poetic text and its theoretical gesturing', *TEXT*, vol. 9, no. 1, <http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/april05/hecq.htm>. Return to text

Lambert, Helen 2004, 'A Draft Preamble: Les Murray and the Politics of Poetry', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 80, pp. 5-14. Return to text

Lewis, Daniel 2004, 'Back to Bourke', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 December, p. 19. Return to text

Middleton, Peter 2005, *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa. Return to text

Morrison, Mark, 2000, 'Performance Poetry and Counter-Public Spheres: Geoff Goodfellow and Working-Class Voices', *Labour History*, no. 79, pp. 71-91. Return to text

Tingle, Laura & Mark Metherell 2000, 'Strangle poet idea at birth: Murray', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 March, p. 5. Return to text

Torney, Kate 1999, in 'Australian Poetry Makes a Come Back', Interview Transcript, 7:30 Report, 22 October, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/stories/s61484.htm>. Return to text

Trenwith, Courtney 2005, 'Passionate about prose', *Illawarra Mercury*, 10 March, p.13. Return to text

David McCooey has published widely in the fields of life writing, poetry and Australian literature. He is the author of Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography, which won a NSW Premier's Literary Award. He is also the author of the 'Contemporary Poetry' chapter in The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature. He guest-edited issue 2 of Life Writing on 'Life Writing and the Public Sphere' in 2004. He is a co-recipient (with Wenche Ommundsen and Michael Meehan) of an Australia Research Council Discovery Grant for the project 'Australian Literature and Public Culture'. His first book of poems, Blister Pack, was recently short-listed for The Age Book of the Year Award. He is a senior lecturer in literary studies at Deakin University (Geelong).

TEXT Special Issue

No 4 October 2005

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>

Editors: Wenche Ommundsen and Maria Takolander

General Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb

Text@griffith.edu.au