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The cup of John Howard's poetry

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THE CUP OF JOHN HOWARD'S POETRY

TOM CLARK GIVES A BRIEF RHETORISPECTIVE.

2001

We will decide
Who comes to this country –
And the circumstances
In which they come.

How like a piece of poetry it was,
the roughening iambics,
those sharpened 'c's', like angled pikes,

the two-beat lines that got us going –
except line 3 which had its extra
fist banged on the table.

Note the subtle half-rhyme, too,
'country' matched with 'come'
and how the preposition 'in'

assumes its proper place.
Like most great poetry, of course,
it's mainly made from echoes:

the glorious Three Hundred Greeks
who held Thermopylae
and Winston Churchill roaring still

"We shall fight them on the beaches ..."
Like all such deathless works of art
it's shivering with myth:

the golden hordes who spoiled our sleep
across two centuries,
the bard far back with lyre and smoke

declaiming his alliterations,
the ancient battles of his race
with dragons, gods and men.

No wonder, then, that those who might
have shown us something else,
defeated now by poetry,

had nowhere left to turn.[1]

I hope Geoff Page will forgive me if I differ on points of scansion. I'd represent Howard's as a pair of tetrameter lines, after the rhythms of much of the English language's blank verse and the overwhelming majority of its alliterative meter. Also, I do not accept Page's reading of a hypermetric stress: the "extra fist banged on the table."

But that, as they say, is just the details.

I do share Page's starting point: that Howard's infamous maxim scans as verse. I do share his inclination to compare the public utterance to the notion of a published poem. And, like Page, the more closely I look into Howard's lines, the more I realise that they are not merely comparable to verse but the thing itself. That is not just because the lines were composed and performed to achieve public ends through the use of poetic techniques, it is also because *public language is poetry*.

What does it mean, this claim?

We can take the terms one by one.

Firstly, for my purposes, *public language* means the language that public speakers and writers such as sports stars, business leaders, politicians and others use to audiences and through the mass media. It includes media-generated language (such as 'opinion', entertainment and advertising), as well as language replayed or reported by the media. It is a polymorphous phenomenon, then, which we define

more by the relationship between speakers/writers and listeners/readers than by the specificities of its content or styling, as significant as those latter factors may be.

Secondly, when I say that public language *is* poetry, I mean something more substantial than a heuristic metaphor. The relationship between public language and poetry can be discussed concretely. They both share elements or qualities that are important to their operations. Similar shifts in context produce like changes in both of them. While their teleologies, their strategic outlooks and the purposes for which they are deployed may diverge significantly (a reason why their separateness is usually taken for granted), they share a common relationship to the situational constraints upon them. That relationship is one of *subjection*: public language and poetry are both subject to the rules (ideologies) of their situations, which manifest in rules of semantics, syntax and aesthetics.

Thirdly, by *poetry* I mean a mode of language whose manifest forms are extremely diverse. Even its subjection to form is frequently contested. Poetry valorises the aesthetics of language, including the aesthetics of its syntax and semantics, although the reasons why it does so and the aesthetic elements valorised can vary greatly from situation to situation. Whether it is a memory-aid for oral genealogies, or a pictorial problematic in concrete poems, to name it poetry means that the form of its language is noticed and exploited by speakers, writers, listeners and readers. That a version of this observation can potentially be applied to any language act (both uttering and interpreting) goes not so much to dilute the definition as to show how any language act can be within, or slip into, the poetic mode. Public language is always necessarily in the poetic mode.

THE SCOPE OF PUBLIC LANGUAGE

In his *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner sets out seven defining criteria for the identification of publics.[2] The first, and arguably most fundamental, is that a public is constituted not by members so much as by texts: people come together around shared textual experiences. Publication is thus the starting point for a public. If we reconcile this theory with the notion of public language described above, it implies a very recursive system of communication.[3] We can see that the pronouncements of public

figures go to creating and sustaining the context of their own reception: public figures cultivate the publics into whose realm their public remarks are published.

At the same time, Warner is careful to describe 'a public' and plural 'publics', as distinct from generalised notions of 'the public'. Working through this distinction systematically is important for our understanding of the complexity in public communication. It shows us that the specificity of each public, combined with the proliferation of specific publics (and 'counterpublics'), drives a strife of the gods in public affairs, which are necessarily agonistic.

If, as Warner argues, "a public is poetic world-making",[4] then certain consequences follow. First, public worlds and world publics are poetic constructs. That is, we may, and indeed normally do, read world affairs as we read poetry: sensually, suggestedly, closely, if sporadically.

Secondly, these recursive semiotics become a *resonance phrasing*. The public persona makes utterances which constitute the hearing/reading experience of her/his public and which therefore mark out elements of the prosody for communication in and with that public. In other words, the (stylistic) *way* a public figure speaks constitutes the manner in which her or his public listens.

Thirdly, the dialectic between and within publics – the negotiations and conflicts through which publics are reconstituted and redefined in relation to one another – is a dialectic between worlds or cosmologies. It is a clash of accounts of the past, the present and the future. For the psychoanalytical theorist, Nicolas Abraham, the reconciliation of these three elements is the fundamental business of poetry.[5] Their clashing, as Page shows, is a rivalry of poetries.

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES ARE POETICAL STRATEGIES

Earlier I indicated a difference on some technical points of scansion with Page. The disagreement is not nearly so significant as the points on which I share (and have learned from) his reading of Howard, but here is my representation of the then Prime Minister's lines. I have checked pause and stress patterns against the source:[6]

Wé will de**cíde** / who **cómes** to this **cóun**try —
and the **cír**cum**stán**ces / in **whích** they **cóme**.

The stress rhythm is strong but varied, strident yet organic. It springs from a grand old well of poetry that once connected the Germanic peoples, a source most brilliantly described by Eduard Sievers in his *Altgermanische Metrik* (Old Germanic Meter).[7] Each line has two verses, and each verse contains two lifts, or beats – here marked with an accent and in bold type. The distribution of unstressed (quieter) syllables around those beats determines the rhythm of each verse: the Sievers approach tells us this is an E-type verse followed by three B-type verses. The juxtaposition of rhythmically varying yet metrically compliant verses sustains listener interest in, and engagement with, the rhythm of the poem.

In true alliterative meter, such as most of the examples that Sievers describes, there would be a requirement that the initial sounds of the beat syllables follow one of a limited number of patterns. Clearly that element of versification is not operative here – and we would not expect it to be in a prime ministerial utterance in Australia in the year 2001. Nevertheless, the rhythm patterns of Germanic versification do prevail.

I want to turn to those quieter syllables directly – but first, a little empirical research. In my household, we shop for our groceries at the Victoria Market in Melbourne most Saturday mornings. We have a group of friends whom we see there pretty consistently each week. They are aged in their thirties. In the 2007 election, I am quite sure that all of them voted for Labor, the Greens, or parties and candidates further to the Left. They are more interested and active in political life than the majority of the Australian electorate, although none is a professional politician.

One Saturday, as eight of us sat around a table drinking coffee, I asked our friends if they could recall the Howard slogan of six years previously. Perhaps not surprisingly, they were not completely consistent in their recollection. I took note of their versions, which I can represent as follows:

Wé X1 de**cíde** / who **cómes** X2 this **cóun**try – and the **cír**cum**stán**ces / X3 **whích** they **cóme** X4.

X1 represents the first of the words on which there was disagreement: while several believed it was 'will', two thought it was 'shall', another that there was no word in this position – and then several became unsure when presented with the dilemma. X2

reflects some doubt as to whether Howard had said 'to' (most thought this) or 'into' (two respondents). Two respondents thought Howard said 'under' in the position of X3; a third asked if the word was 'with', before being convinced by other friends that it was probably 'in'. Finally, some respondents believed that there was a final word, 'here', in the position marked by X4. While another opined that "it would sound more impressive if there was" (and compare Page's point about the half-rhyme with 'country'), most were confident that this word was not present in the original.

All the disparities in this sequence occur on the unstressed syllables, and even then only on some of them – those unstressed syllables occurring in words that included beat syllables were unanimously agreed upon. Likewise, those unstressed words for which Howard's syntax left no alternative phrasing were agreed. The disparities show up in those unstressed words that can be substituted by other mundane words without detracting from the sense, the syntax, or the meter of the original. That is to say, Howard's aphorism is committed to memory in the same way as oral traditions commit their poems to memory. If it were not for the existence of transcriptions and recordings, we could anticipate that the variant recollections would be on a more or less equal footing.

Where does this leave the stressed syllables? First, they are clearly among the more memorable words in this maxim. Interested citizens remembered Howard's slogan quite faithfully, according to this evidence, even six years after the uttering. Even if we treat the X-disparities as positions devoid of meaning (which my respondents most certainly did not), the key political ideas of Howard's sentence hold up very strongly: *We decide who comes this country and the circumstances which they come.*

Secondly, note that half (that is, four) of the stressed syllables fall in Latinate words: "de**cíde**", "**cóun**try" and "**cír**cum**stán**ces". Moreover, none of the Latinate words in Howard's maxim are without stress. In the history of Anglophone politics since the Norman invasion, the Latinate vocabulary has typically been privileged over the mundane Germanic vocabulary around it. Church Latin (as well as church-imported Greek) and Norman French have provided the bulk of the English language's words for abstract thought, religious devotion, legal title, parliament, the judiciary, the military, the

prison system, high culture, trade and commerce, and so forth.

In this example we can hear the stress patterns of the phrases chiming with their underlying hierarchies of power.

Thirdly, although the stressed words comprise seven of this utterance's fifteen words, note how they coincide with the majority of poetic resonance achieved through consonance and assonance: *we, the deciders (which circumstances) – come, country come!* In particular, note how the action becomes increasingly focused on the concept of arrival or invasion as the sentence develops, resonating on syllables with the structure <ku[n/m]>.

That is to say, these syllables both alliterate and rhyme: 'comes', 'coun-,' '-cum-' and 'come'. The conceptual problem of the first verse (E-type rhythm) is thus amplified through a phonic panic-note in the last three (B-type rhythm). Its echoes of pornography remind us that a vital narrative here is the trajectory towards imminent (immanent!) *release*. This unruliness, the spillage that is wrought by people who do not understand (white, Christian, conservative) Australia's laws makes for an extremely strong example of Howard's widely discussed rhetoric of fear. At the same time, its internal logic is a call for denial of that release, for containment. *Their freedom is imminent: arrest them!*

Fourthly, mindful of Page's reading, note how different orders or levels of stress collide, merge and compete with one another. A stressed syllable stresses the importance of a word. Thus Howard calculated to stress the importance and the stressfulness of his topic. But in stressing 'our' stresses, Howard thwarted any view of the asylum seekers' *di*-stress. The white, Christian, conservative and other publics to which his comments were aimed were bolstered by those comments and their priorities. Other publics, including the asylum seekers themselves, were 'defeated now by poetry' indeed.

Could Howard have achieved similar ends with more prosaic language? This (rhetorical) question misses the point: his ends were thoroughly poetical. Howard's slogan, maxim, proclamation serves as a key text in the history of his publics. That Australians voted for him – and in sufficient numbers to wreck the credibility and political capital of his main opponent in the 2001 election, Kim Beazley – is a function of how well Howard's textual strategies constituted his publics within the Australian electorate. The alternative story of the late Peter Andren, returned with an increased majority at the same election, in his inherently conservative electorate, and despite standing out publicly against the Howard government's approach to refugees, provides an instructive example of what the Australian Labor Party failed to do.

A FORMULAIC POETICS FOR PUBLIC LANGUAGE

Poets produce their work through a combination of scripted and improvised language: no poetic work is perfectly improvised or completely free from improvisation; no performance is completely scripted or perfectly free from scripting. For the most part, the balance between scripting and improvisation is determined by poetic genre. In other words, it is a function of the prosody of its genre. Thus we find that freestyle hip-hop is demonstrably more improvised than the bush ballad, even though both are current rhyming verse styles. That does not mean freestyle is free from prescription, though. Its performers predominantly create their poetry through the use of ready-made phrases that reference well-known topics, practised rhyming links, preconceived syntactic relations between rhymed phrases, and variations on the rhythmic positioning of rhyme and stress syllables that vary within a more or less fixed paradigm. Often the poetry is as self-generating – as automatic – as it is composed. Even a highly rehearsed example can illustrate the point:

> D-Boy baby mama actin' roudy outside,
> Roudy outside, roudy outside
> D-Boy baby mama actin' roudy outside,
> "Later!" for that shit, we don't fuck with 'em
>   like swine
> Actin', maxin,
> Blappin' automatics
> Savage to extensive damage
> Havin' sucker-absent
> Man, look at baby – she want me to tap it!
> If I hit it once, she gonna jock me & trap it
> Strip the game naked like Mac & Magic Mike
> And I come from the slum where life is strife
> But tonight, pass the Remy right
> To a Mac, like a Gucciano blessing the mic
> Cutthroats in the building, and you know they
>   high
> Chastise sayin' "Mac'n, yo flow so tight!"

For real, Side Show
Smokin' Backwoods with my folks.[8]

Mac Mall and John Howard answer to quite different prosodic and political imperatives. The rapper deploys his symbolic violence and his identity markers for different strategic purposes – but he still fundamentally answers to both categories. He is fundamentally a public language performer: how he comes across is still fundamentally what he stands for.

Variation within a fixed paradigm is what Sievers describes. Looking at the prosodies of old Germanic verse, he finds five essential verse rhythms (with myriad sub-type variants). These stretch in their practical application across dozens of dialects, thousands of kilometres, and at least one (and quite likely several) millennium. Subsequent scholarship is still fundamentally indebted to his breakthrough research. It seems that, whether in slowly crafted texts or in transcripts from improvised performance, the old Germanic poets were using tried and tested patterns of rhythm to meet the requirements of their meter.

A similar observation can be made about phrasing: the poetry of each dialect relies heavily on phrases found nowhere other than in poetic texts, but found abundantly throughout the surviving poems of that dialect. Comparable phrases in Homer's epics provided the standout evidence for what the classicist Milman Parry dubbed *the poetic formula*: "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea".[9] The key to this concept, as with any formal aspect of versification, is resonance: formulas play on the idea that a phrase has been heard before and is likely to be heard again. And it is not restricted to resonance within a poem. Formulas are phrases and themes common across entire traditions of verse. In other words, when we notice a phrase or theme in a formulaic poem, we assume it is likely to recur – more or less verbatim – every time the same meaning becomes relevant in the same prosodic circumstances.

Formulas are everywhere in poetic genres, not least the bush ballad, but they take on a particular importance for the more improvised genres. An improvising poet is especially reliant on stringing together sequences of pre-worked language, phrases whose meaning is already proven and whose com-

pliance with the prosody is already established. Improvising poets rely on formulas in at least five ways:

1. As an organising device – helping compositional arrangement;
2. As a mnemonic device – a way to recall information;
3. As a rhetoric-disciplining device – helping poets stick to topics and phrases that do not get them into trouble (e.g. through self-contradiction, or through uncontrolled nuance);
4. As a 'verbomotor'[10] – enabling poets to generate words that fill out texts and performances; and
5. As a headlining and summarising device – enabling poets to name the themes of their texts and performances in ways that make explicit the lines of interest for their audiences.

The performance of public language is also dominated by formulaic composition, although we don't usually attribute it to poetry. George Orwell clearly detested the "prefabricated" nature of public phrasing.[11] Don Watson targets the uncritical reuse of pre-loved phrases when he laments a "death of public language" throughout Australia and the Anglosphere more generally.[12] In other words, an artistic technique that many philologists appreciate under the name of formulas is one that many political commentators deplore as cliché and platitude.

When it comes to cliché and platitude, Howard has hardly been outstanding. Kevin Rudd's acceptance speech on 24 November 2007 must rate higher on scales of derivative expression than any speech Howard gave during his term in office.[13] *The Chaser* compiled a brief video montage in which they captured Rudd uttering the phrase 'working families' 300 times during the course of the election campaign – and to date, nobody has tendered a satisfactory definition of what, if anything, the term is supposed to mean. But Howard as prime minister was an especially improvisatory public speaker. He was keen to project the image of a public figure armed, not with speaking notes, but with a cup of tea – precisely because it communicated that he was responsive to the electorate, sensitive to changing moods, an improviser. This means that he was particularly reliant on his poetic formulas and that he worked them particularly hard.

We can identify several formulaic qualities in

the 'We will decide' couplet, but I want to illustrate this aspect of Howard's poetics with a more recent example. Announcing the date for the 2007 election, Howard said, "Love me or loathe me, the Australian people know where I stand on all the major issues of importance to their future."[14]

If we allow that journalistic commentary sits within the broad poetic tradition of Australian political language, the take-up and repetition of this sentence makes it a perfect case in point. Every metropolitan daily newspaper, every national network for radio and television, reported or directly quoted Howard's self-assessment. Revealingly, as with 'We will decide', there were some small-scale discrepancies in the phrasing as quoted, especially if we extend the bounds of the reportage to include blog commentary:

> Love me or loathe me, X know/s where I stand Y.

Here X is an obligatory position, designating a phrase for the Australian people or electorate. Y is an optional position, designating a phrase that sets the frame of reference or context for Howard's stand. But for all the reportage that this utterance received, Howard actually used the formula many times before 13 October 2007 (and several times afterwards).

Several of those other occasions also received significant reportage. When we synthesise the range of Howard's 'Love me or loathe me' utterances, as well as the media reportage of them, the formula can be reduced to an even more flexible kernel:

> Love me or loathe me, X1 X2 X3 X4 stand Y.

Here Y is still an optional position and X is still an obligatory position. X1 designates a phrase for the Australian people or electorate. X2 designates a phrase for knowing, acknowledging, appreciating, or even being happy. X3 designates a syntactic bridge, a phrase that will link X1, X2 and X4 to the fixed verb 'stand'. Finally, X4 designates a phrase for Howard, or for the party or government that he leads.

Mindful of the 'We will decide' analysis already undertaken, we can see how the formula in this case has given us limited flexibility around a memorable phrase and a core verbal process. 'Love me or loathe me' turns up every time. What is more, much as Page identified in the syntax of "the circumstances in which they come", we can see that Howard's

word "loathe" is strikingly quaint. It is self-consciously archaic, as with so many of those phrases that philologists call 'poetic lexicon'. And so we recall that *Howard is the love-me-or-loathe-me guy*. But we also recall the idea that *Howard stands*. He was an outstanding stander. He was forever adopting stances. The context and permutations of his standing were flexible, which is to say renewable, as the circumstances of his utterances changed, but the formula always reminded his public that *Mr Love-Loathe stands on*. And just as we knew where he stands, he invited us (X1) to know (X2) where (X3) we (X4) stand in relation to him (Y): *love me or loathe me*.

CONCLUSION

Appreciating Howard's domination of Australian public language since Keating[15] means understanding how his peculiar style of poetry worked.

In Howard, over several decades, we witnessed an extraordinary resourcefulness in the development and the deployment of formulas. He crafted a range of phrases, phrase-building tools and thematic connections that complied with the prosodic requirements of the situations in which he found himself – that is to say, the situations which Howard had constructed for us to observe him in. In so doing, he had a lengthy and uninterrupted period to build up the publics in which his poetics resounded. Thus his clichés and platitudes achieved a resonance greater than political commentators have managed to explain so far.

Finally, it is a kind of 'poetic justice' that Howard's political odyssey was brought to its end by a new style of cliché and platitude – that is to say, a new formulaic poetics. "A journey is like a journey," as I once heard at a wedding reception. But a poem can be uncannily like a poem, too.

1. Geoff Page, '2001', *Overland* 181, 2005, p. 92.
2. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone Books, New York, 2002, pp. 65–124.
3. Compare the notion of 'recursive governance' in Michael Crozier, 'Recursive Governance: Contemporary Political Communication and Public Policy,' *Political Communication*, vol. 24, January 2007, pp. 1–18.
4. Warner, p. 114.
5. Nicolas Abraham, *Rhythms: On the Work, Translation, and Psychoanalysis*, trans. B. Thigpen and N. Rand, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, pp. 65–103.
6. John Howard, 'Address at the Federal Liberal Party Campaign Launch,' transcript of a speech given 28 October 2001, *National Library of Australia Pandora Archive*,

<pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/21947/20011112-0000/vcepolitics.com/news/2001/01-10-28.html>, viewed 3 December 2007.

7. Eduard Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik*, Max Niemeyer, Halle, 1893.

8. Mac Dre, f/ E-40, and Mac Mall, 'Dredio' Lyrics, The Original Hip-Hop (Rap) Lyrics Archive Version 2.0 (Beta), <www.ohhla.com/anonymous/mac_dre/dausopen/dredio.mdr.txt>, viewed 15 August 2007. Some typographical errors in the transcript have been emended.

9. Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The collected papers of Milman Parry*, Adam Parry (ed.), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 272.

10. Berkley Peabody, *The Winged Word: A Study in the Technique of Ancient Greek Oral Composition as Seen Principally through Hesiod's Works and Days*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1975.

11. George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language,' in *Selected Essays*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1957, pp. 143–157.

12. Don Watson, *Death Sentence: the decay of public language*, Random House Australia, Sydney, 2003.

13. Kevin Rudd, 'Election Victory Speech,' transcript of a speech given on 24 November 2007, Australian Labor Party website, <www.alp.org.au/media/1107/spepme240.php>, viewed 3 December 2007.

14. *ABC News*, 'Howard announces Nov 24 poll', news story posted 14 October 2007, Australian Broadcasting Corporation website, <www.abc.net.au/news/video/2007/10/14/2059106.htm>, viewed 3 December 2007.

15. Keating, for his own part, makes a fascinating case study in the tensions between fluent oral improvisation and tongue-tied performances from script.

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