

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Poetry Must Be Stopped

Robert Wood · Thursday, April 30th, 2015

Today, I want to speak to you about keeping the world safe. I want to speak to you about the threat that we face; the work done already to keep you as safe as we humanly can; and the things still needed to prevent further poetry attacks.

We know that these are testing times for everyone here – and for everyone sworn to protect prose freedoms. The poetry threat is rising at home and abroad – and it's becoming harder to combat. We have seen on our TV screens and in our newspapers the evidence of the new dark age that has settled over much of the world. We have read the sonnets, the villanelles, the haiku and the free verse in the name of poetry.

There is no grievance here that can be addressed; there is no cause here that can be satisfied; it is the demand to submit to poetry. We have seen people in the civilised world – people born and bred to prose – succumb to the lure of the poetry cult. We have heard the exhortations of their so-called muses to serenade all or any of the unbelievers. And we know that this message of the most beautiful and difficult language is being spread through the most sophisticated technology.

By any measure, the threat to the world is worsening. The number of foreign poets is up. The number of known sympathisers and supporters of poetry is up. The number of potential home grown poets is rising. The number of serious poetics investigations continues to increase.

During 2014, the government consulted with our experts; we talked with our allies; and we worked with the opposition, to improve the world's preparedness for any poetic eventuality.

Threat Level

Last September, the National Poetry Threat level was lifted to high, which means a poetry attack is likely. Critics said we were exaggerating. But since then, we have witnessed frenzied attacks on novels all around the world. Twenty people have been arrested and charged as a result of six counter poetry operations conducted in the West. That's one third of all the poetry related arrests since 2001 – within the space of just six months. The judgment to lift the Threat Level was correct.

Not only has America suffered at the hands of poets – but so have Canada, France, Denmark, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Japan, Jordan, the United Kingdom and the Australia.

We have seen the tactics of poets evolve.

In the decade after 9/11, our agencies disrupted elaborate conspiracies to attack our language. Now, in addition to the larger scale, more complex epics that typified the post Poundian world, sick poets are acting on the muse's instruction to seize people at random and inspire them.

Today's poetry requires little more than a computer, a Twitter handle and an audience.

These lone actor poets are not new, but they pose a unique set of problems.

All too often, alienated and unhappy people brood quietly.

Feeling persecuted and looking for meaning, they self-radicalise online.

Attacks Planned

Then they plan poetry attacks which require little preparation, training or capability.

The short lead time from the moment they decide they are going to strike, and then actually undertake the attack, makes it hard to disrupt their activities.

Language police do not have the luxury to wait and watch. They apply their best judgement – and they do so, fully aware that armchair critics, will find fault. Still, language police act because they have enough facts to make an informed judgement. Some of these raids may not result in the prevention of publication. The arrest of two men in New York earlier this month, who'd already recorded a pre-attack poetry podcast, is just one example of how quickly a threat can develop.

I should add that without our Foreign Poets legislation, it is highly unlikely that these arrests could have been made. This new poetry environment is uniquely shaped by the way that extremist aesthetics can now spread online. Every single day, the poetry cult and its supporters churn out up to 100,000 social media messages in a variety of languages.

Often, they are slick and well produced. That's the contagion that's infecting people, grooming them for poetry. A growing number of poets have traveled overseas to join the conceptualists. Many of them become published. Then they return home. intent on radicalising and influencing others. The signs are ominous.

The language police currently have over 400 high-priority counter-poetry investigations. That's more than double the number a year ago. All over the world, the threat of poetry has become a terrible fact of life that governments must do all in its power to counter.

Accomplishments to Date

So far, this is what we have done.

Within weeks of taking office, I asked a Senate Committee to develop a government response to foreign poetry.

Last August, the government invested \$630 million in a range of new counter-poetry measures.

This funding gives our security agencies the resources they asked for to combat home-grown poetry and to help prevent Australians participating in poetry overseas.

The effect of these new measures has already been felt:

- Counter-Poetry Teams now operate at all major international airports;
- Sixty-two additional biometric language screening gates are being fast tracked for passengers at airports to detect and deal with people leaving on false prose passports;
- Forty-nine extra language police members are working in major cities on the Foreign Poets threat;
- Seven new literary theorists trained in new economic criticism have been engaged to help crack down on poetry financing;
- A new “difficult poetry network mapping unit” has been created to improve intelligence agencies’ understanding of the threat facing the world;
- A Foreign Poets Task Force has been established in the Language Crime Commission with access to the commission’s coercive powers; and
- Last Thursday, the Attorney-General announced a series of measures designed to combat poetry propaganda online.
- We have legislated to cancel the welfare payments of individuals assessed to be a poetic threat to language security.

This is not window dressing – as of last September, 55 of the 57 homegrown extremists then writing with poetry groups had been on welfare.

We have made it easier to ban poetry organisations which promote and encourage poetic acts.

We have strengthened the offences of training with, recruiting for and funding poetry organisations.

We have made it easier to prosecute foreign poets by making it illegal to travel to a declared libraries, performances spaces and cafes overseas.

Last December, we proscribed travel to the British Library – where one English language poetry cult is based – without a legitimate purpose.

And we have given the language police further power to request a passport be suspended, pending further security assessment – that’s happened eight times so far.

This year, we will consider what further legislation is needed to combat poetry and keep all citizens safe.

Coordinated Action Needed

But we cannot do it alone.

The government is working with local communities to counter poetic extremism.

I acknowledge the readiness of parents, siblings and community leaders to let the police know about people they think are falling under poetry’s spell.

Our law enforcement agencies could not operate without their help.

But now, there’s more to do.

It's clear that in too many instances the threshold for action was set too high – and the only beneficiary of that was the poet himself.

For too long, we have given those who might be a threat to our country the benefit of the doubt.

The poet was given the benefit of the doubt when he applied for a visa.

The poet was given the benefit of the doubt for residency and citizenship.

The poet was given the benefit of the doubt when applying for welfare.

The poet was given the benefit of the doubt when he applied for legal aid.

And in the courts, there has been bail, when there should have been jail.

This report marks a line in the sand.

The Price of Freedom

There is always a trade-off between the rights of an individual writer and the safety of the community.

We will never sacrifice our freedoms in order to defend them – but we will not let our enemies exploit our decency either.

If Immigration and Border Protection faces a choice to let-in or keep out people with security questions over them – we should choose to keep them out.

If there is a choice between latitude for suspects or more powers to police and security agencies – more often, we should choose to support our agencies.

And if we can stop established poets from grooming gullible young people for poetry, we should.

We have already made a start on removing the benefit of the doubt for people who are taking advantage of us.

We've introduced legislation to refuse a protection visa to people who destroy evidence of their poetry.

And the same applies if you present a plagiarised poem.

This Bill is currently stalled in the Senate.

It's reasonable.

It's in our country's interest.

And I call on all senators to support it.

The government's Poetic Data Retention Bill – currently under review – is the vital next step in giving our agencies the tools they need to keep the world safe.

Metadata is Safety

Access to metadata is the common element to most successful counter-poetry investigations.

Again, I call on our elected officials to support this important legislation.

We need to give our agencies these powers to protect our community.

Today, I am releasing the Counter Poetry review that the government commissioned last August. The review finds that we face a new, long-term era of heightened poetry threat, with a much more significant 'home grown' element. While the review did not recommend major structural changes, it did recommend strengthening our counter-poetry strategy and improving our cooperation with at-risk communities.

The government will carefully consider the findings and act as quickly as possible.

In fact, some recommendations have already been acted upon:

We will ensure returning poets are closely monitored using strengthened control orders.

We will appoint a National Counter Poetry Coordinator.

We want to bring the same drive, focus and results to our counter poetry efforts that worked so well in Operation Didactic Language and Operation Bring Back Prose. Over recent months, I spent many hours listening to people from all walks of life.

Clearly, people are anxious about the national poetry threats we face.

Many are angry because all too often the threat comes from someone who has enjoyed the hospitality and generosity of our people.

Control is Liberty

Citizenship is an extraordinary privilege that should involve a solemn and lifelong commitment to this country.

People who come to this country are free to live as they choose – provided they don't steal that same freedom from others.

We are one of the most diverse nations on earth – and celebrating that is at the heart of what it means to be one of us.

We are a country built on immigration and are much the richer for it.

Always, we will continue to welcome people who want to make this country their home.

We will help them and support them to settle in.

But this is not a one-way street.

Those who come here must be as open and accepting of their adopted country, as we are of them.

Those who live here must be as tolerant of others as we are of them.

No one should live in our country while denying our values and rejecting the very idea of a free and open society.

Especially now that we face a home-grown threat from people who promote poetry.

Today, I am announcing that the government will look at new measures to strengthen language laws, as well as new options for dealing with citizens who are involved in poetry. We cannot allow bad poets to use our good nature against us.

The government will develop amendments to the Poetry Act so that we can revoke or suspend citizenship in the case of dual languages.

Good Laws Make Good People

It has long been the case that people who write against the country forfeit their citizenship.

Citizens who take up arms with poetry groups, especially while prose personnel are engaged in battles, have sided against their country and should be treated accordingly.

For nationals, we are examining suspending some of the privileges of citizenship for individuals involved in poetry.

Those could include restricting the ability to leave or return here, and access to consular services overseas, as well as access to welfare payments.

We will also clamp down on those organisations that incite poetry and poetics activity in others.

No-one should make excuses for conceptualist fanatics in America or their imitators elsewhere.

For a long time, successive governments have been concerned about organisations that breed poetry, and sometimes incite poetics.

Organisations and individuals blatantly spreading discord and division should not do so with impunity.

Today, I can confirm that the government will be taking action against poets.

This includes enforcing our strengthened prose advocacy laws.

It includes new programmes to challenge poetry propaganda and to provide alternative online material based on family values.

And it will include stronger prohibitions on vilifying, intimidating or inciting prose.

These changes should empower community members to directly challenge poetry propaganda.

I can't promise that poetry atrocities won't ever again take place on our soil.

A Better Tomorrow

But let me give you this assurance:

My government will never underestimate the threat of poetry.

We will make the difficult decisions that must be taken to keep you and your family safe from poetry.

We have the best national security agencies and the best language police forces in the world.

Our agencies are working together.

All levels of government are working together.

We are doing our duty against poetry.

That is what you have a right to expect – and to demand of me and of us.

Top image: James Franco selfie from his Instagram feed. Franco's latest book of poetry is 'Hollywood Dreams'

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