

Poetry, Terrorism, and the Uncanny

“Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’”

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Timothy McVeigh—the Oklahoma City Bomber—was executed by lethal injection at the Federal Correctional Complex at Terre Haute in Indiana on June 11, 2001. He made no verbal statement to those who had gathered to witness his execution.¹ He did, however, offer the following handwritten document as his “Final Written Statement” (figure 1):²

According to the *New York Times*, this document was “distributed [to the media] by officials at the federal prison in Terre Haute.”³

McVeigh had been found guilty of bombing (with the aid of two coconspirators) the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 19 April (Patriot’s Day) 1995. It was an act that killed 168 people, including nineteen children, fifteen of whom were in the America’s Kids Day Care Center housed within the Murrah Building. It was the deadliest act of terrorism within the United States prior to 9/11. After his conviction, McVeigh argued that his attack was a justifiable response to the US government, citing deadly sieges caused by federal agents at Waco, Texas, in 1993, and Ruby Ridge, Idaho, in 1992. McVeigh was tried in a federal court for the murder of eight federal officers and subsequently became the first convicted criminal to be executed by the US federal government since 1963.

I do not wish to discuss here McVeigh’s possible motives. Nor do I wish to discuss the trial, save for one moment in the proceedings. Rather, I wish to attend to McVeigh’s “Final Written Statement,” a document that attracts little more than a quizzical mention in most accounts of McVeigh’s crime and punishment. At first glance, the text is outwardly simple. The main text, with its lineation and use of end rhyme, is clearly a poem. The document’s *peritexts*—to use Gérard Genette’s term for those paratextual communicative elements at the threshold of a text—are notably spare, failing to tell us two important things about the text: the title and the author of the poem. The poem is “Invictus,” Latin for “unconquerable,” and it was written by W. E. Henley in 1875 in response to the amputation of his leg due to the bone tuberculosis he suffered throughout his life. The poem is described by *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* as a “defiant and stoic” work.⁴ Despite its low status in elite literary culture, it continues to be cited as an inspirational work for readers, ranging from British Prime

¹ For an account of McVeigh’s execution see Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 139-64.

² Timothy McVeigh, “Final Statement of Timothy J. McVeigh” (written prior to his execution in Terre Haute, Indiana, 11 June 2001), <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mcveigh/mcveigh-invictus.html>. It is assumed that McVeigh knew the poem by heart. Certainly, his reproduction of it is remarkably accurate. The final distich should be separated by a colon rather than the more idiomatic semicolon. Otherwise, McVeigh’s version is correct.

³ Anon., “Text of Statement from McVeigh,” *New York Times*, 11 June 2001, www.nytimes.com/2001/06/11/national/11CND-MTEXT.html.

⁴ Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 457.

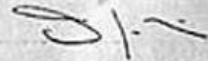
Final Written Statement of Timothy McVeigh

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.


June 11, 2001

Minister Gordon Brown⁵—which one commentator saw as “equivalent to choosing ‘My Way’ as a Desert Island Disc”⁶—to an anonymous reader of *O: The Oprah Magazine*.⁷

McVeigh’s decision to present a culturally ambiguous poem as his, or the metonym for his, “final statement” makes this document an exceptionally difficult one to gloss. What would it mean to read this poem as “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’”? To what extent is this work a literary act? To what extent is it even a poem? How do we reconcile this act of quotation with other acts of literary appropriation? “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” is, I would argue, a limit case for our understanding of poetry, quotation, and the relationship between literary and nonliterary discourses.

In this essay, I will consider how McVeigh’s enigmatic act of appropriation produces a poetry of the uncanny whereby seemingly stable categories such as *poet* and *terrorist* are shown to be disquietingly porous. I will also consider how “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” demonstrates the volatility of some basic concerns of contemporary literary theory, especially with regard to quotation, obscurity, and poetic address. Lastly, I wish to consider how “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” illustrates the unpredictable ways that a supposedly marginal cultural practice—poetry—can act in times of crisis.

#

The elision of the poem’s title for the *document’s* title is an important feature of the writing and dissemination of McVeigh’s “Final Written Statement.” The omission of the word “Invictus” may have been a mistake on McVeigh’s behalf. (It seems unlikely that McVeigh was aware that the title “Invictus” appeared only when the poem was anthologized in Arthur Quiller-Couch’s *The Oxford Book of English Verse* [1900]. Previously the poem, which was dedicated in memoriam to R. T. Hamilton Bruce, was the untitled fourth part of a sequence entitled “Echoes.”) Whatever the case, the inclusion of the words “Final Written Statement of Timothy McVeigh” certainly was not accidental. The adjectives make clear that this is not just any statement by Timothy McVeigh, and as such they call attention to their author’s implicit understanding of the importance that such a statement will hold for the public. As Marita Sturken makes clear in *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (2007), McVeigh had considerable access to the media in the last years of his life, especially just prior to his execution, and his ability to “get his voice into the media . . . was understood by the families and survivors of the Oklahoma

⁵ Rosa Prince, “Gordon Brown in Plea to Labour MPs as Leadership Attacked,” *Telegraph*, 11 January 2010, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/gordon-brown/6962538/Gordon-Brown-in-plea-to-Labour-MPs-as-leadership-attacked.html.

⁶ Christopher Howse, “Gordon Brown Chooses Invictus—The Favourite Poem of the Locked Ward,” *Telegraph*, 11 January 2010, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/culture/chris-howse/100006084/gordon-brown-chooses-invictus-the-favourite-poem-of-the-locked-ward/>.

⁷ Anon., “0 Magazine Readers’ Favourite Poems column,” *O: The Oprah Magazine*, letter from Christine Evans, April 2011, www.oprah.com/spirit/O-Magazine-Readers-Favorite-Poems/3.

City bombing to be an explicit and direct infliction of pain upon them.”⁸ As Sturken also points out, “At the same time, many of those in Oklahoma City fed the media frenzy by demanding over and over again in public statements that he apologize for his actions, so that they too appeared to be invested in his every word.”⁹ McVeigh’s *final* statement, then, was not an act devoid of a context or lacking in moment.

As such, McVeigh’s simultaneous (verbal) silence and (written) quotation of a nineteenth-century poem may seem curiously anticlimactic. Both acts, however, can be seen to contain considerable, if paradoxical, energy. McVeigh’s verbal silence was clearly not only a strategic refusal to offer the apology desired by some, but a refusal to offer *anything* verbally during the spectacle of his execution. His quotation of “Invictus” is also self-evidently a refusal to offer an apology. Indeed, given the sentiment of the poem, it is an act, simultaneously blatant and symbolic, of self-aggrandizement. Unlike his verbal silence, however, the reason that McVeigh’s last written statement took the form it did is not immediately clear. By choosing the indirect symbolic language of poetry (made doubly indirect via quotation), McVeigh is strategically enigmatic, offering a last statement that can resonate long after the moment of his execution.

The potential for such resonance can be judged in part by the singular nature of McVeigh’s “Final Written Statement.” In Robert K. Elder’s grim collection of *final statements* (both written and verbal) by condemned American criminals, *Last Words of the Executed* (2010), which includes McVeigh’s, there is no comparable statement. According to Elder, the collection’s historical organization, moving from hanging to lethal injection, represents a “cultural shift” in terms of “last words” as a kind of generic performance: “As execution moved from a very open spectacle with public square hangings to a very intimate event behind prison walls, last words became less formal and more plainspoken.”¹⁰ McVeigh, both in being verbally silent and in textually quoting a nineteenth-century poem (which is formal in both tone and structure), was operating in stark contrast to this shift. As such, McVeigh appears to be using the conventional performance of “last words” to highlight not only the significance of his execution but also its singularity.

Despite Studs Terkel describing, in his foreword to *Last Words of the Executed*, the prisoners’ statements as a kind of poetry (“the actual poetry in the speech of people at the most traumatic moment of their lives”¹¹), generally little is conventionally “poetic” in the last statements of convicted criminals in the contemporary period. The following two examples are representative of this lack of lyricism: “I deserve this. Tell everyone I said goodbye”; and “Goodbye to my family; I love all of you, I’m sorry for the victim’s family. I wish I could make it up to them. I want those out there to keep fighting the death penalty.”¹² The first statement was by Charles William Bass, the second

⁸ Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 146.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Robert K. Elder, *Last Words of the Executed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.

¹¹ Studs Terkel, foreword to *ibid.*, xi.

¹² Elder, *Last Words*, 196.

by Randy Woolls, both of whom were convicted of murder in Texas and executed in 1986. The other contemporary statements collected in *Last Words of the Executed* range broadly in tone from humble to aggressive or flippant, but only one can be likened to McVeigh's quotation. Michael L. McBride, in a written statement, quoted parts of the Bible, and "Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep," a poem attributed to Mary Elizabeth Frye (1905—2004).¹³ But this choice of poem makes the statement more in line with the conventional religious or repentant statements common to many other prisoners. It has little of the self-mythology of McVeigh's quotation of "Invictus." (McBride also did not maintain the verbal silence that McVeigh managed.) McBride's statement lacks paratextual features, such as the peritext of a title, suggesting that McBride was disinclined to present his text as having public significance (beyond that which applies to the execution of anyone).

As a peritext, then, "Final Written Statement of Timothy McVeigh" is one of considerable note. Whereas Genette in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997) is concerned with literary texts (or perhaps I should say literary acts), his distinction between the addressees of a title and the addressees of a text remains pertinent with regard to McVeigh's statement: "[I]f the text is an object to be read, the title (like, moreover, the name of the author) is an object to be circulated—or, if you prefer, a subject of conversation."¹⁴ In this case, too, for those readers who recognize a disjunction between title ("Final Written Statement of Timothy McVeigh") and text (W. E. Henley's "Invictus"), the title becomes more than an object of conversation (which it is): it becomes a provocation, for how could it not be provocative for a convicted murderer (a *terrorist*) to cite a canonical poem about stoicism and suffering by a poet conventionally respected for his bravery.

Not surprisingly, a number of commentators were provoked. Some saw McVeigh's act of literary appropriation as an act of cultural vandalism and a statement of bad faith. For instance, J.C., the author of an "NB" column in the *Times Literary Supplement*, saw the poem as "hopelessly inappropriate," since Henley, unlike McVeigh, was "up against" fate, not the state. J.C. adds that the poem

might have been more suitably mumbled by the maimed survivors of the bomb, rather than the bomber. The famous line, "My head is bloody, but unbowed", evoking courage in the face of dreadful disablement, can scarcely be said to apply to the mass murderer McVeigh, who is anyway not "unbowed" but dead. Even the "unconquerable soul" part does not fit McVeigh, a self-proclaimed agnostic.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 230-32.

¹⁴ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987), trans. from the French by Jane E. Lewin, *Literature, Culture, Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75.

¹⁵ J.C., NB column, *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5124, 15 June 2001, 18.

While more muted, A. N. Wilson, writing in the *Telegraph*, also found McVeigh's choice "curiously unsuitable for the occasion."¹⁶

In 2005, Catherine Robson, also writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, revisited McVeigh's final statement, drawing attention to the competing uses of the poem, from its continued place (post-McVeigh) in at least one American high school as an inspirational poem worthy of memorization (possibly how McVeigh knew the poem) to its use in an advertisement for a gun-mounted flashlight. She also refers to Oscar Wilde's allusion to the poem in his prose apologia *De Profundis* (1905). Robson fails to mention the importance of the poem to Nelson Mandela, who was, of course, defined as a terrorist by the apartheid-era South African government. Mandela's use of the poem as an inspiration while in prison is alluded to in the biographical sports drama *Invictus* (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2009), an account of the 1995 Rugby World Cup, held during Mandela's tenure as president in postapartheid South Africa. Robson does note, however, the use of "Invictus" by the Atlantic Olympics bomber, Eric Rudolph, who killed two people and injured 111 others at the 1996 Olympic Games, and who referred to himself in a seven-page manifesto as "a little bloodied, but emphatically unbowed." Regarding the use of the poem by terrorists, Robson asks, "How can you state that your own head is 'bloody, but unbowed' after you have caused the brutal deaths and woundings of others?"¹⁷

But moving beyond issues of aptness, we see how McVeigh's quotation, or appropriation, is marked by the paradox of enigma (which Aristotle defined in his *Poetics* as the "putting together of impossible things" [58a]). It offers a strange mix of clarity and ambiguity, articulating a clear statement of self-mythology, on the one hand, while, on the other, articulating nothing but an obscurely literary act of unknown status. In quoting another—in refusing to speak with his "own voice"—McVeigh is paradoxically both silent and not silent, both offering an account of himself while withholding such an account.

Such a strategy is consistent with McVeigh's one verbal statement—also a quotation—at his trial. Just before he was sentenced, McVeigh made his only statement in court: "I wish to use the words of Justice Brandéis dissenting in *Olmstead* to speak for me. He wrote, 'Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or ill, it teaches the whole people by its example.'"¹⁸ After making this statement, McVeigh was sentenced to death by the state.

Olmstead vs the United States (1928) was a case about privacy, testing whether wiretapped private phone conversations, obtained by federal agents without judicial

¹⁶ A. N. Wilson, "World of Books," *Telegraph*, 11 June 2001, www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4262920/World-of-books.html.

¹⁷ Catherine Robson, "Bloody, But Unbowed," *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5339, 29 July 2005, 13.

¹⁸ Quoted in Gore Vidal, "The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh," in *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace: How We Got to Be So Hated* (New York: Thunder's Mouth/Nation, 2002), 81–122, quotation on 81.

approval and used as evidence, broached the defendants' Fourth and Fifth Amendment rights. (The Fourth Amendment guards against unreasonable searches and seizures, whereas the Fifth Amendment protects against government abuse of process in a legal procedure.) While the issue of privacy may seem a long way from McVeigh's trial, the issue of government power is at the center of it, at least according to McVeigh's script. As a profoundly ironic counterpoint to his sentencing, using the language of the court at the very moment a court brings its most severe sentence against him, McVeigh's citation of Justice Brandéis is also consistent with his putative justification for violence. His violent act, McVeigh implies, is bookended by the violent acts sanctioned by the government: the attacks at Waco and Ruby Ridge,¹⁹ and McVeigh's impending execution.

McVeigh's attraction to strategic quotation can also be seen in that when, after the bombing, McVeigh was pulled over by an Oklahoma state trooper for driving without a license plate, he was wearing a T-shirt adorned with a quote from Thomas Jefferson that is allegedly favored by militias: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants."²⁰ Taken from a letter by Jefferson, who was serving as ambassador to France at the time, to William Smith (a politician and son-in-law of John Adams) in 1787, the comment refers to Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts (1786—87). No doubt, McVeigh, like the militias that favor this quote, was attracted to the authority of a founding father, and the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, apparently giving license to political violence.

Initially, however, McVeigh's citational practices were largely ignored. For most observers at the time, the significance of McVeigh's quotation of "Invictus" as a final statement was overshadowed by McVeigh's refusal to make a verbal statement immediately prior to his execution. As Sturken writes in *Tourists of History*, "[S]o much emphasis had been placed on speculation about his last words that his decision not to speak carried tremendous weight."²¹ This observation is supported by Jody Lynee Madeira's study on the effects that McVeigh's verbal silence had on the relatives of those killed in the Oklahoma City bombing, "Blood relations: Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma, and the Prosecution and Execution of Timothy McVeigh" (2008). Madeira reports that most participants of her study express either anger or relief at McVeigh's silence.²² The effect that McVeigh's quotation of "Invictus" had on her subjects is not considered.

Sturken, however, argues that McVeigh's verbal silence and textual citation are actually related effects, both having to do with the issue of "agency": "McVeigh's final refusal to speak was his last tactical move to give the impression that he was in control of his own death. He also attempted to establish his own agency in the final statement

¹⁹ McVeigh referred to these events as relevant to his motives, subsequent to his trial.

²⁰ Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 143.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

²² Jody Lynee Madeira, "Blood Relations: Collective Memory, Cultural Trauma, and the Prosecution and Execution of Timothy McVeigh," *Studies in Law, Politics, and Society* 45 (2008): 75-138, esp. 117-21.

that he released to the press through prison officials.”²³ Such agency is clearly related to McVeigh’s self-presentation of himself as heroically facing down the violent state, as seen in his earlier in-court citation of Justice Brandéis. (It is also consistent with McVeigh’s refusal to put off the date of his execution by undertaking any further legal appeals.²⁴) According to Gore Vidal, who corresponded with McVeigh and who, according to Sturken, represents the “oddest allegiance” that McVeigh created with the press, the quotation of Henley’s poem can indeed be read in terms of agency, albeit as a form of self-heroizing: “The stoic serenity of McVeigh’s last days certainly qualified him as a Henley-style hero.”²⁵ It would be true to say that this is a minority position among mainstream commentators.

McVeigh’s quotation of Henley is perhaps at its most provocative when it is seen as demonstrating the scandalous fact that the world, even the world of terrorists, can have purchase on the world of art. (Similarly, his quotation of Judge Brandéis is a scandalous demonstration of the criminal’s access to the language of the law.) That McVeigh’s final statement was recognizably *of* the culture that he had attacked underscored the profoundly difficult fact that an American was responsible for such an act of terrorism. McVeigh’s quotation of Henley is scandalous, then, not just because it “stole” the words of a worthy poet or because of its inappropriateness, but also because it shows the terrorist as “one of us,” as culturally literate, and as having access to sophisticated forms of articulacy: quotation, irony, symbolism, and poetic speech. That all of these forms are underscored by ambiguity only adds to their scandalous sophistication.

This unsettling effect of showing the terrorist as “one of us” relates to McVeigh’s place in American culture more generally. One of the features of McVeigh that was most problematic, and perhaps fascinating, for the American media was his *Americanness*, especially given that in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing it was generally assumed that an American could not have been responsible for such an act. As Edward T. Linenthal points out in *Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (2003), after the bombing “[t]here was an immediate and widespread call to arms against Muslim terrorists. Editorials called for a military response, perhaps even against foreign governments that sponsored this act of terrorism.”²⁶ As Linenthal relates, the ensuing response to McVeigh as both the alleged and convicted terrorist ranged widely in terms of how McVeigh was characterized (with the media being far less interested in his coconspirators), but a major strand of that response was to insist on McVeigh’s *Americanness*. This element was one that McVeigh himself clearly picked up on (as, of course, someone who styled himself as an American patriot would). A notable example of such self-styling is McVeigh’s response to a question from Fox News about him describing his juvenile victims as “collateral damage”: “Collateral damage?

²³ Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 157.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁵ Vidal, “The Meaning of Timothy McVeigh,” 96.

²⁶ Edward T. Linenthal, *Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17.

As an American news junkie, a military man, and a Gulf War veteran, where do you think I learned that?”²⁷ Such a moment shows that what is meant by *American* is already haunted, in an uncanny fashion, by what might seem most *un-American*.

As this example suggests (like the quotations of “Invictus,” Judge Brandéis, and Thomas Jefferson), one of the unsettling features of McVeigh’s crime and punishment was the way in which discourse was repeatedly shown to be a volatile force. Language used in one context could be strategically employed against its user in another context. McVeigh’s quotation of Henley illustrates such discursive volatility with particular reference to the supposedly marginal discourse of poetry. In this violent point of intersection between the discourses of terrorism and poetry—at the very moment of McVeigh’s public execution—McVeigh’s quotation produces, or unveils, a radically *uncanny* model of poetry, one that undermines conventional ideas about what is considered proper to poetry. It does this by showing that the discourse of poetry is one already haunted by the putatively antipoetic (just like the discourse of “Americanness” is haunted by the “un-American”), of which terrorism is a paradigmatic example.

In Sigmund Freud’s foundational essay on the uncanny (the English translation for *unheimlich*, or “unhomely”), he goes to considerable lengths to show how the terms *unheimlich* and *heimlich* (or “homely”) are radically unstable, the one inhabiting the other. Considering the semantics of the two terms, he concludes that “what is called *heimlich* becomes *unheimlich*.”²⁸ Taking his cue from Freud, Nicholas Royle in his eponymous book on the uncanny writes that the uncanny “can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home.”²⁹ McVeigh’s final statement, with its scandalous sophistication, clearly shows up something “unhomely at the heart of hearth and home,” profoundly akin to his status as an “American terrorist” (to cite the title of one of the more controversial books on McVeigh).

Two main features of the uncanny relate to “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus.’” According to Royle, the *uncanny* is “a crisis of the proper” (disturbing notions of ownership and proper names) and “a crisis of the natural” (disturbing understandings of self, human nature, and the nature of the world).³⁰ Firstly, “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” is a crisis of the proper because it disturbs notions of ownership by radically unsettling the poem’s provenance. Where does the poem begin? With the author’s intentions or the intentions of the person quoting it? Who can properly speak of the poem as being *theirs*? The author or its user? The poem seems now to (improperly) have two names associated with it (Henley’s and McVeigh’s), and its recontextualization unsettles typical notions about what uses poetry could properly be put to. McVeigh’s citation of the poem also instigates a crisis of the natural, since in its illustration of a terrorist

²⁷ *Sturken*, *Tourists of History*, 146.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919), *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2001), 132.

²⁹ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

as articulate and cultured it shows human nature and the nature of the world to be suddenly unfamiliar and uncertain.

The uncanny effects that McVeigh's quotation produces also bleed into discourses *about* poetry, most obviously literary theory, illustrating the truly volatile nature of modern literary theory's interest in citation, repetition, and parody. In demonstrating language's infinite potential for recontextualization, "Timothy McVeigh's 'Invictus'" is a discomfiting example of the Derridean concept of *dissemination*, in which uncontrollable meaning is endlessly dispersed.

McVeigh, then, can insert himself into literary-theoretical discourse in a way that makes such discourse disconcertingly unfamiliar (or illustrates the implications it is disinclined to follow up). James Longenbach, for instance, presumably did not have McVeigh's poetic act in mind in *The Resistance to Poetry* (2004), his work on poetry's self-resisting language, but as the following passage shows, it can be read as uncannily apposite:

But poems do not necessarily ask to be trusted. Their language revels in duplicity and disjunction, making it difficult for us to assume that any particular poetic gesture is inevitably responsible or irresponsible to the culture that gives the language meaning: a poem's obfuscation of the established terms of accountability might be the poem's most accountable act—or it might not. Distrust of poetry (its potential for inconsequence, its pretensions to consequence) is the stuff of poetry.³¹

If Longenbach is correct, then McVeigh's most uncanny, and scandalous, move was to engage in a terroristic practice that was also ironically proper to the discourse of poetry and, by implication, literature more generally.

McVeigh's act also illustrates the unconscious utopianism of much literary theory, as the previous reference to Derrida may have suggested. Such utopianism stems from the inherent abstraction of literary theory. The *free play* of meaning is usually considered as a form of hermeneutic energy that is unambiguously positive. For instance, and to choose an example almost at random, from the vast body of secondary literature that disseminates literary-theoretical ideas, in his primer on the work of Paul Ricoeur (a theorist interested in the intersubjective dynamics of texts), Karl Simms summarizes Ricoeur's theory of hermeneutics:

Interpreting texts—doing hermeneutics—is the route to self-understanding as a human being, because being historical—having historicity—is a specifically human trait. Texts propose a world which readers appropriate to understand their own world, and consequently to understand themselves. Texts are the medium through which readers arrive at self-understanding;

³¹ James Longenbach, *The Resistance to Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1-2.

they are the bridge between the subjectivity of the self and the objectivity of the world.³²

This, of course, is true enough, but it does not seem to consider the possibility that subjects such as McVeigh might “do hermeneutics” in ways that show little self-understanding or acknowledgment of the world’s objectivity. No doubt it could be argued that McVeigh misreads his text, but as Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) argues, misprision, or misreading, is also the hallmark of the strong poet.³³ In other words, McVeigh is everywhere anticipated by literary theory, and nowhere accounted for by it.

A more detailed reading of the link between McVeigh’s act and the importance of quotation in literary-theoretical discourse will help establish this further. In Mary Orr’s long discussion of quotation in *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (2003), she writes, “Quotation is ... the most condensed form of paradigm shift, transmuting the context, form and meaning of the items both inside and outside the quotation marks. It is always enrichment by inclusion, integration and proclamation of otherness, a dialogue not a monologue.”³⁴ McVeigh’s quotation certainly fulfills the terms of the first sentence. But few would argue that his use of “Invictus” amounts to “enrichment by inclusion, integration and proclamation of otherness.” Orr would no doubt argue that this is because McVeigh’s quotation does not fulfill one of the basic criteria of quotation: aptness.³⁵ As demonstrated, a common response to McVeigh’s use of “Invictus” is to comment on its singular (criminal?) inappropriateness. In McVeigh’s mind, of course, the poem was presumably appropriate, but then so (apparently) was his bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City. The notion of *aptness*, as Orr makes clear, is central to the practice of quotation, but this too is associated (less obviously) with a utopian sense of possibility:

Quotation also re-energizes and effects [*sic* | what borders on the marked segment (in literal or metaphorical speech marks) in both quoted and quoting contexts. It is in the latter especially that the negotiation process that constitutes aptness is worked out. Quotation therefore names an aptitude in selecting and rejecting sites and configurations to make the old and new fit together. As dynamic strategy to harmonize affinity and repulsion, provocation and revocalization in both host frames, quotation is the locus of a simultaneously magnetic (centripetal) and counter-magnetic (centrifugal) force.³⁶

³² Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London: Routledge, 2003), 43.

³³ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

³⁴ Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge, England: Polity, 2003), 133.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

The force of McVeigh's quoting practice would seem to be less about harmonizing competing forces than violently rejecting an order that the state, or society, would try to impose upon him.

Aptness, then, is clearly not merely a literary matter, or one of "taste." Rather, what makes for an "apt" quotation is something that is open to considerable dispute. The realm of "the literary," then, is not the utopian space that literary theory would often have it be. It is, like any social space, a space open to violence, abuse, and conflict. Orr seems to recognize this possibility in her description of allusion (a muted form of quotation), which she likens to an echo: "Like an echo, it depends on the noise that makes it, but is no less a presence that resounds, reverberates, distorts, mocks or amplifies."³⁷ Distortion, mockery, and amplification are certainly elements of McVeigh's quotation of "Invictus." And as Orr notes, "[T]he Devil is also a quoter but not a giver of Scripture. Therefore, it is not what is repeated, or indeed who repeats, that is intrinsic to quotation, but the how and why of its repetition."³⁸ In this case, the how and why of the repetition produce an uncanny echo (of a poem that originally appeared in a sequence called "Echoes") that distorts, mocks, and amplifies both the original text and its immediate cultural context. But generally speaking, Orr is uninterested in the how and why of the Devil's quoting practices.

While a lack of interest in such matters may be common in literary theory, it is not universal. Daniel Tiffany's *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (2009), for instance, sees a link between criminal and poetic discourses. Tiffany takes as his starting point the problem of *lyric obscurity*, that seductive poetic obscurity that commonly employs various linguistic items, such as slang, foreign to its readers. Such works range from sixteenth-century *canting songs* (verse written in the jargon of the criminal underworld) to contemporary rap lyrics. Readers of such obscure poetry are willing to "pay for the pleasure of cruising the unknown in a text, to sample the tongue of the cultural 'infidel,'" where *infidel* refers to a persona shaped by the criminal underworld and political radicalism.³⁹ Tiffany's project is to see beyond conventional literary theoretical responses to obscurity—hermeneutic or cryptographic forms of interpretation seeking a meaning that is considered to be "strategically or incidentally impaired"—to a recognition of the "spectacle" of obscurity's "pragmatic, aesthetic, and social effects."⁴⁰

This reference to lyric obscurity unleashing a spectacle of social effects is clearly suggestive with regard to "Timothy McVeigh's 'Invictus.'" "Invictus," however, does not on the face of it appear to be particularly obscure (even if it does mobilize tropes of obscurity in its first and third stanzas). However, as Tiffany points out, poetry persists *generally* in a state of cultural obscurity, and, more importantly, obscurity is "disclosed upon reception . . . not something intrinsic to particular properties of

³⁷ Ibid., 139.

³⁸ Ibid., 132.

³⁹ Daniel Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics: Riddles, Nightlife, Substance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

the verbal artefact.”⁴¹ For Tiffany, “the problematic of lyric obscurity” requires us to isolate not a poem’s moment of composition or construction, but “its *reception* by the reader, on poetic readership, and on the social configuration of poetry.”⁴² In the sense of reception, “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” is—as this essay has been demonstrating—a notable example of lyrical obscurity.

Relevant to our understanding, too, of “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” is Tiffany’s argument that an understanding of lyric obscurity requires an uncovering of the links between obscurity and the aesthetic experience of the sublime (an experience conventionally associated with catastrophe). Tiffany approaches the problem of the sublime as a feature of obscurity by suspending hermeneutical and cryptographic approaches to lyric obscurity and “pursuing a critique of obscurity rooted in concepts of action, expression, and aesthetic captivation”⁴³ or, in other words, an understanding of obscurity as a social act.

More problematic for our purposes is not the relative lack of obscurity with regard to “Invictus” (as a text), but Tiffany’s rejection of the common assumption that obscurity originates in the arcane, experimental, and virtuosic works of elite culture (which is more or less the provenance of “Invictus,” despite its current relatively low standing in elite literary culture). Rather, Tiffany looks to the origins of obscurity in the misunderstanding of demotic speech as seen in the lyric vernacular of poems composed in “slang, jargon, or dialect,” such as nursery rhymes, riddles, canting songs, and other submerged genres. Lyric obscurity becomes instead associated with “the dangerous speech of various social underworlds,” reversing the conventional association with the sublime and loftiness to produce a “sociological” sublime associated with various social underworlds.⁴⁴

One of the notable features of McVeigh’s use of “Invictus” is the way in which it complicates Tiffany’s model of lyric obscurity, since it shows how the movement between “vernacular” and “elite” cultures is not necessarily one way. Rather than offering an example of elite culture using the language of the criminal for the pleasure of “cruising the unknown text” by sampling the “tongue of the cultural ‘infidel,’” “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” reverses this structure. McVeigh mobilizes the language of elite culture (albeit a past elite culture) to engage in a socially obscure act that seeks to captivate its audience through the catastrophic language of the sublime. Such catastrophic imagery can only, of course, call to mind the material catastrophe that McVeigh caused. A detailed discussion of Tiffany’s study of the link between lyric obscurity and Leibniz’s theory of *monads* (self-sufficient mental entities), as a way of locating the material or “substance” of obscurity, is beyond the scope of this essay, but Tiffany’s characteriza-

⁴¹ Ibid., 2.

⁴² Ibid., 7.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 8.

tion of lyric obscurity as the ground of a negative sociability—“a splintering of mass experience into ‘sleeper cells’”⁴⁵—is again surprisingly suggestive.

Also suggestive is the more profound link that Tiffany makes between poetic expression and catastrophe by attending, as others have done before him, to the apparent historical link between riddle (or enigma) and the lyric obscurity of modernist poetry (and artistic expression generally). Tiffany sees the source of this link as an ancient one, arguing that “[a]ny serious consideration of the riddle as an enduring but occluded source of poetry must begin with the mythical figure of the Sphinx” (a figure that has concerned thinkers from Hegel to Maurice Blanchot and Giorgio Agamben).⁴⁶ The Sphinx was identified in antiquity as a poet, and her riddle was identified as a type of poetry. Sophocles, however, identifies the Sphinx as a *rhapsode* (that is, a Homeric singer or epic poet), which is eccentric to say the least, given that her “work” (one riddle) is clearly a departure from the epic tradition. As Tiffany suggests, this raises the troubling and subversive suggestion that the riddle was an instrument of “public, even civic, discourse.”⁴⁷ There are, of course, divergences between the riddling Sphinx and Timothy McVeigh (the Sphinx, like the Sirens and the Harpies, illustrates an ancient misogynistic association between dread and *female* voices); nevertheless, the riddling Sphinx does offer a way of understanding McVeigh’s “literary” act. For instance, as Tiffany writes,

The riddle of the Sphinx is not merely apotropaic [a protective power warding off evil] in its terrifying effects but apocalyptic, as it combines the promise of revelation and the threat of annihilation. In this respect, the operation of the riddle of the Sphinx captures a moment of public discourse when a certain kind of terror must be counted among the effects of poetry.⁴⁸

The link between terrorism and poetry is, indeed, one that Tiffany explicitly, if briefly, makes himself:

As a poet, the ancient Sphinx may thus be compared to the riddling serial killers and cryptographers of modernity (the Zodiac Killer or the Unabomber), each producing a vernacular train of “poetry” (in their cryptic letters to the public) recalling the apotropaic allure of the Sphinx and her single, compulsively reiterated poem.⁴⁹

Tiffany argues that such “allure” is related to a confusion of logic and lyricism, a confusion of course that McVeigh himself mobilizes. The rhapsodic poem

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* Willis Goth Regier notes the link between terrorism and the figure of the Sphinx in popular culture in his *Boo | of the Sphinx* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 8.

takes possession of public space as a materialization of reflection, acting as an instrument of poetic or philosophical terror—a terror that is “honey-sweet.” . . . Suspended between jinx and logic, rhapsodic poetry survives historically either by rarefaction—diagramming an “icy tremor of abstraction”—or by disappearing into the vernacular, that is, into the vernacular conjugation of song, reflection, and agitation.⁵⁰

While McVeigh does not unambiguously belong to this tradition (he was not, for one thing, itinerant), the perceptible link in “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” between obscurity, terror, public discourse, abstraction, and agitation illustrates that McVeigh’s enigmatic literary act can be understood, to some extent, through a literary-theoretical discourse that is not simply, and unconsciously, utopian in expression.

Literary theory, whatever its attitude, forces us to consider how McVeigh’s appropriation of a poem relates to other acts of poetic appropriation (or *dissemination*). McVeigh’s appropriation draws attention to those appropriations that occur daily in encounters between lovers, in wedding ceremonies, in readings at funerals, and in the ordinary act of solitary reading. While quotidian in nature, such usages are deeply associated with emotional intensity and, often enough, ordinary contact with extreme events associated with the sublime, death, and catastrophe. As already suggested, McVeigh’s appropriation causes disquiet partly because he shows the radically unstable nature of texts, and, indeed, the possibility that a text may really be said to exist only in its momentary and various uses. Some texts are so repeatedly appropriated and in such clearly routinized ways (Shakespeare in classrooms and the Bible in churches being two instances) that we even cease to see that they have been appropriated, and (by association) we cease to see how such cultural activities are associated with responding to sublime and catastrophic events. Presumably this routinization of cultural appropriation was the reason for McVeigh’s quotation of Henley’s poem—a poem long associated with educational institutions and memorization—without quotation marks or attribution.

In appropriating “Invictus” for his final statement, McVeigh was acting as the speaker at his own death (ironically so, in the light of his verbal silence prior to his execution), a moment otherwise marked by silence or the officialese of the state (another form of obscurity) and the noise of the press. Given that the reading of poetry—which we can designate a discourse of extremity—is especially common at funerals and memorial-ization ceremonies, the quotation of poetry for McVeigh’s “Final Written Statement” has, as ever, an uncannily double element to it. McVeigh’s act of using a poem as a final statement is both utterly singular and completely generic, grossly inappropriate and deeply conventional. Either way—singular or generic—his appropriation, as I have been demonstrating, radically unsettles our usual notions of “poetry” and “terrorist.” McVeigh’s turn to poetry was prefigured by ordinary citizens

⁵⁰ Tiffany, *Infidel Poetics*, 90.

responding to McVeigh's and his coconspirators' crime. As Linenthal relates in *Unfinished Bombing*, directly after the Oklahoma City bombing, people not only sent poems to the Oklahoma City Council, but even called to read them over the phone to council staff. Linenthal writes that judging from the massive collection in the [Oklahoma City National] Memorial Foundation's archives, poems were one of the most popular forms of memorial expression:

“The Day Oklahoma Cried,” “Why?” “We Will Always Remember,” “I’m in Heaven,” “And the Angels Came,” “God’s Day Care,” “Loss of the Innocents,” “A Rescuer’s Lament,” “Rise Up, Gallant Heartland,” “A Time to Heal,” “Heartache in the Heartland,” “Let the Angels Close Their Eyes,” “Tim’s Dance with the Devil,” “The Day the Building Came Down.”⁵¹

As this suggests, poetry, despite its apparent cultural marginality, has a curiously powerful position in vernacular culture when it comes to moments of crisis. A similar observation was made about the importance of poetry after 9/11.⁵² However much we may wish to separate their intentions, presumably what both McVeigh and the citizens who wrote these poems held by the Oklahoma City National Memorial Foundation sought was a language that was of enough import to contain a particular, traumatic moment. They sought a language that was both public and a “discourse of extremity.” “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” is disquieting partly because it seems to link symbolically and improperly—through a common cultural technology and language known as poetry—the victims, onlookers, and perpetrator of a terrible crime.

The commonality of this technology is not coincidental, as a brief consideration of *lyric address* might show. In William Waters’s study of lyric address, *Poetry’s Touch* (2003), he focuses on second-person poems (that is, lyric poetry that addresses a *you*) to show that lyric poetry, contrary to traditional ways of thinking, is a mode profoundly concerned with intersubjective *contact* rather than the presentation of a singular, self-absorbed *lyric-I*. Although “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” does not employ the second-person pronoun, the nature of its “composition,” dissemination, and reception makes it impossible not to see it as a poem addressing a large, public audience, in contrast to most lyric poems that exist without such a “disambiguating context,” to use Waters’s term.⁵³ Approaching “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’” in terms of intersubjective contact may seem at odds with my earlier discussion of it in terms of Tiffany’s study of lyric obscurity. Granted, Tiffany is concerned with lyric obscurity as a social act, but his attention to the negative sociability of the monad (which expresses but

⁵¹ Linenthal, *Unfinished Bombing*, 114.

⁵² See Liedeke Plate, “Bearing Witness: Gender and the Poetry of 9/11,” *Women’s Studies* 37, no. 1 (2008): 1-16.

⁵³ William Waters, *Poetry’s Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 5. Although it is unlikely that McVeigh was aware of it, the elegiac, dedicatory nature of Henley’s poem (as it appeared in “Echoes”) also complicates the apparently simple first-person nature of the text.

does not communicate) suggests that we are tracing another paradoxical feature of “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus,’” since it is a work that both connects and disconnects, communicates deeply while merely expressing.

The relevant elements of Waters’s study for our purposes are his concern with the poem as spell and the poem as monument or epitaph. The *poem as spell* is one that, like the Sphinx’s riddle discussed earlier, “pursues, pins, or holds in deadly fascination the one spoken to,” which is often the reader.⁵⁴ As Waters notes in his reading of a poem by the nineteenth-century German poet Eduard Morike, such poems work the *memento mori* tradition into a portent of “something bearing down upon a *you*. In this case the approaching figure is the grave itself.”⁵⁵ The text of “Invictus” engages not only the language of mortality (the black night, the “menace of the years”), but also the figure of mortality as something “bearing down” upon the speaker: “Beyond this place of wrath and tears / Looms but the Horror of the Shade.” One might argue that this has little to do with a *you*, since the perspective of the poem is unambiguously first-person.

But read as “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus,’” one can’t help but see the poem as one that (silently) addresses a *you*, drawing that audience into a consideration of mortality by dint of both the poem’s text and its context, especially when conceived in terms of social effects. Inasmuch as an individual physical text generally has one reader, the poem becomes one especially concerning an individual reader’s *own* mortality. Read in this way, “Invictus” (which is to say “Timothy McVeigh’s ‘Invictus’”) becomes, especially in its concluding two lines, a kind of dare to the reader, reading a poem *by* a recently executed man. This dare could be phrased as something like “how do *you* view your soul?” or, more tellingly, “how would *you* view your soul just before your appointed death?” Such daring could, in part, be the source of the discomfiting intimacy of McVeigh’s last statement, since death—that most improper of things—is ultimately what links McVeigh and his victims. It is also what links McVeigh with his readers, since (as Waters puts it) “[t]he confrontation with death . . . pins the listener to a limit she will be able not to avoid or overcome but only to expect.”⁵⁶

The poem as *monument or epitaph* also leads to the theme of mortality, which Waters describes as “the unexpected but logical result of trying to sustain a focus on a communication between someone present and another (the poet) who is always absent.”⁵⁷ “Timothy McVeigh’s Invictus” is, again by dint of its context, clearly auto-epitaphic. Given the limits available for a man condemned to death, writing one’s own epitaph is, to return to Sturken’s point, a form of agency. But as Waters makes clear, a poem’s context also raises important issues regarding poetry as a form of *contact*: “Where the continuance of readers and the cessation of the writer occupy the same

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 79.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 16.

ground, poetry's touch, and so poetic address, matter the most."⁵⁸ Set as it is at the moment both *before* and *after* death (since it was written by McVeigh prior, obviously, to his execution, but designed to be read after that event), "Timothy McVeigh's 'Invictus'" is a poem profoundly concerned with both mortality and immortality. Presented to an audience as the (self)epitaph of a dead man, it represents both cessation and (self)memorialization. No doubt these epitaphic and memorial elements of "Timothy McVeigh's 'Invictus'" are also sources of readers' anxiety or distaste. The perpetrators of crimes, especially crimes as singular as McVeigh's, are not given epitaphs or memorials. But, as Waters's study shows, McVeigh's use of poetry is scandalous for deeper reasons, reasons to do with poetry as a communicative act that brings together poet and audience: the ways in which "literature presses for a close relation with those into whose hands it may fall."⁵⁹ It is precisely this "close relation" that most readers will find disquieting about "Timothy McVeigh's 'Invictus,'" a poem that claims a literary status even as the circumstances of its "composition" make it most unliterary. One more paradoxical feature of the poem, then, is the way in which it engages in formal language as a way to instigate intimacy with its readers.

Another, perhaps accidental, index of commonality—as well as an indication of *touch*—is that "Timothy McVeigh's 'Invictus'" is handwritten. One of the things that McVeigh's statement expresses is McVeigh's handwriting and thus his bodily existence,⁶⁰ something soon to be eliminated by the state. By offering an example of his "hand" (to use an old-fashioned term for someone's writing), McVeigh again draws attention to the fact that the "other" is actually "one of us," just as the Sphinx's riddle showed that a monster (which has in turn two, three, or four legs) is in fact a human. But it is also, like Keats's famous fragment or poem "The Living Hand," the hand of a dead man who wishes to haunt his future readers.

We may like to think that readers cannot simply make of a text what they want. Certainly there are various everyday cultural and legal constraints on what can be done with a text. Such constraints range from social opprobrium to copyright law. But, in this instance, such constraints seem to be singularly inapplicable. From the execution chamber—which is also a disturbing cultural echo chamber—the language of the dead, as found in the special paradoxical language of poetry, can make its way into mainstream culture, however little we might want to hear it. By speaking *from* the dead and *through* the words of the dead, McVeigh turns himself into a ghost so as to haunt the nation that he both sprung from and turned against.

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⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁰ I am indebted to the Australian poet Michael Farrell for pointing this out to me.

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