A PRIEST-POET'S *LECTIO DIVINA*

The Example of Peter Steele (1939–2012)

Gerald O'Collins

PETER STEELE, AN AUSTRALIAN JESUIT, spent his academic life as a student and then professor at the University of Melbourne. He belonged with Vincent Buckley, Christopher Wallace-Crabbe and Evan Jones, who created a golden age of poets in its department of English literature. Oxford University Press published his doctoral thesis on the Irish clergyman and satirist Jonathan Swift.[1] Overseas, Steele gave the Martin D'Arcy lectures at the University of Oxford, published as *The Autobiographical Passion: Studies in the Self on Show.*[2] He was particularly attracted by centres of learning in the United States, and regularly went as a visiting professor to Georgetown University in Washington, DC or to Fordham University in New York.[3]

In 1984 when spending a year at Loyola University, Chicago, he met the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who in 1995 would win the Nobel Prize for Literature. They initiated a warm friendship and an exchange of substantial letters that lasted until Steele's death on 27 June 2012. Writing to a mutual friend, Margaret Manion, some months later, Heaney recalled that Steele, 'made a habit of calling in Dublin when he was on his way to Georgetown, and having him in your company was like putting your back to a great tree when the sap was rising'. The same letter spoke of homilies ('nonpareil, a braiding of faith and intellect') and essays that Steele shared with Heaney. What 'came through in the essays' about poetry was 'pure conviction about the seriousness of the art, extraordinary range of reference, wonderful level-toned expositions

1 Peter Steele, *Jonathan Swift: Preacher and Jester* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978).
2 (Melbourne: Melbourne U, 1989).
3 For more on Steele's life, see Gerald O'Collins, *Portraits: Popes, Family and Friends* (Redland Bay: Connor Court, 2019), 231–235.

and illuminations'.[4] As for Steele's poetic works, Heaney acknowledged 'the unswervingly brilliant technique of the poems'.[5] Apropos of some gospel poems by Steele, Heaney assured him that 'those New Testament sonnets are wonderful'.[6]

In 2021 Sean Burke, the outgoing provost of Newman College (Steele's college within the University of Melbourne), gathered in a single volume 35 poems, already published and often republished by Steele during his lifetime: *Raining Angels*.[7] A poem on the third day of Genesis introduces the anthology. Then it takes readers from the birth of Jesus and through his ministry, concluding with the crucifixion, resurrection and pentecost. In the introduction to *Raining Angels,* Burke recalls that he talked with Steele about the collection and also proposed 'attaching a scriptural "clue" or footnote' to them.[8] The anthology witnesses unswervingly to Steele's personal attachment to Jesus.

These poems can be read and used as prayers—specifically by those doing the Second, Third and Fourth Weeks of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, which draw, respectively, on the nativity and life of Jesus, his passion and crucifixion, and the resurrection. Could they also feed and even shape the habit of *lectio divina*? This prayerful and imaginative reading of the scriptures—above all the four Gospels—was developed by Origen (d.*c.*253), practised for centuries and firmly retrieved by the Second Vatican Council?[9]

Did Steele intend that his own experience of *lectio divina* could create vignettes, often in the form of sonnets, that would stimulate and guide a similar experience for others? He wanted to share with readers the personal religious narrative emerging from his 'ruminations' on the gospel stories. In *Braiding the Voices*, a collection of essays published only a few days before Steele's death from liver cancer, his reading of a poem attending to Christ's nativity ('Breathing Days') visualises the traditional ox (see Isaiah 1:3) and its literal rumination as evoking the spiritual 'rumination' of the monastic *lectio divina*. Those at prayer

[4] Seamus Heaney to Professor Margaret Manion IBVM, 13 October 2012, Newman College Archives, Melbourne, Australia.
[5] Seamus Heaney to Peter Steele, 12 June 1999.
[6] Seamus Heaney to Peter Steele, 18 January 2011.
[7] (Melbourne: Newman College, 2021).
[8] Steele, *Raining Angels*, 1 (subsequent references in the text).
[9] See Gerald O'Collins, 'Retrieving *lectio divina* at Vatican II and After', *The Way*, 60/4 (October 2021), 87–100; Gerald O'Collins, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola*: *A Lived Experience* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2023), 145–53, 172–74.

chew over and savour the texts of the Bible. Steele thinks his religious poems to be a poetic form of that scriptural method of prayer.[10] We can understand the gospel poems of *Raining Angels* in this specific way.

Freedom

First, those who practise *lectio divina* do not merely 'transcribe' in their minds and hearts the texts they 'chew over'. They enjoy a *freedom* to reorganize and amplify the texts they select for rumination. Starting from a passage in one Gospel, they may look to material drawn from other Gospels. Christian painters and sculptors have done just this with the parables and miracles they found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Steele, likewise, asserts his right to reconstruct imaginatively and prayerfully the gospel stories by introducing material from different accounts and by suggesting the intentions of Jesus. We meet such freedom in *Raining Angels*.

In 'Lazarus at the Gate' (45) Steele ignores the rich man's five brothers who feature in Jesus' parable and apparently live in the same house (Luke 16:27–28). The poet inserts a couple of aged guests 'hobbling in their haste' to arrive at the dinner table. He had seen them in a print by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727–1804) in a Besançon museum. Unlike the original parable, here it is not the rich man 'dressed in purple and fine linen' but his 'consort' who waits 'in purple' for the guests.

Lazarus and the Wicked Rich Man, ***by Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, eighteenth century***

Steele's personal narrative makes room for remarkable freedom in 'Peter' (55). Verses from Matthew (26:69–75) are supplied to accompany the rhyming sonnet. But it first spends eight of its fourteen lines imagining the attractive figure

[10] Peter Steele, *Braiding the Voices: Essays in Poetry* (Melbourne: John Leonard, 2012), 273.

that Peter cut as a fisherman *before* he ever met and joined Jesus. Apropos of Matthew's account of Peter denying his Lord three times, the poet speaks of Peter being 'at bay', and signals the silent wretchedness into which his troubled conscience drove him after disowning Jesus. By then the poem has abruptly switched to John 21 and another early morning, 'when the boat was beached at cock-crow, and the baskets cried success' at the miraculous draught of fish.

Prayerfully attending to the final two chapters of John's Gospel, Steele had noticed that Peter joins the beloved disciple in visiting the empty tomb (John 20: 2–10). Presumably Peter is present when Mary Magdalene announces to 'the disciples' that she had seen the risen Lord (20: 18), and when Jesus himself appears twice to the disciples as a group (20: 19–23, 24–29). On the first occasion we are told that the disciples—but not explicitly Peter—rejoice when they see the Lord. Likewise, when Jesus shares them with his 'peace', sends them on mission and gifts them with the Holy Spirit (20: 19–23), Peter is seemingly present as one of the recipients. The next chapter names him as inviting six other disciples on an all-night fishing trip ('I am going fishing', 21: 3) which ended at dawn with a huge catch and with Jesus rehabilitating Peter and making him the chief pastor of the flock (21:15–19).

Some readers may question this picture of Peter 'brood[ing] in silence, not to be reached/Wherever he had gone in wretchedness'. Steele's imagination and *lectio divina* led him to this possibility. He did something unusual by pondering on Peter's internal state during the period covered by John 20 and the first half of John 21. Steele's imaginative ability let him raise such questions.

It is likewise with a scene made for the poet's prayerful reading in 'Touch' (39): the raising of the son of a widow in Nain (Luke 7: 11–16). This rhyming sonnet takes readers inside the mind of Jesus when he met a funeral procession near the gate of Nain and, quite spontaneously and unasked, restored to life a widow's only son. Jesus thought of his own mother and how she would react to his violent death. Steele picks up the words of old Simeon announcing, at the presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple, that Mary's heart would be pierced by a sword (Luke 2: 35). Jesus,

> Thought of his own mother, a widow too,
> And what the news of her son's death would be
> To her: accepted, but a piercing through.

Of course, according to John 19:25–27, Mary did not receive this 'news' from a distance. She was right there on Calvary to endure at first hand his death by crucifixion. Is the poet hinting that, when Jesus walked into Nain, he already realised that he would be killed but had no advance knowledge that his violent death would come by crucifixion? Did he imagine that his own widowed mother would be present at the execution?

Steele risks being reproached by biblical scholars for taking us inside what Jesus thought and even dreamed. While being 'a driven man, he blessed the call to roam'; after bringing the widow's son back to life, he 'dreamed that night, and afterwards, of home'. The human condition he had assumed requires believers, to be sure, to make room for his thoughts, feelings and dreams. A *lectio divina* prompts Steele into boldly imagining the shape taken by those thoughts, feelings and dreams. He invites his readers to engage imaginatively and even share Jesus' experience.

To engage imaginatively and even share Jesus' experience

Applying Five Senses to Reading the Gospels

What St Ignatius Loyola called 'the application of the five senses' to biblical themes such as the nativity of Christ overlaps with the practice of *lectio divina* (Exx 121–126). Here Ignatius invites retreatants to see, hear, smell, taste and touch what happened when Christ was born into this world at Bethlehem. Ignatius has just encouraged them, both within the structure of the Exercises and for the future, to read from the Gospels—obviously intending a prayerful and imaginative reading that would coincide with *lectio divina* (Exx 100). A little later he proposes such a 'prayer of the senses' for the flight into Egypt (Exx 131)—one of the subjects found in the Steele anthology as 'Flight' (17). Consciously applying the senses initiates prayer in a simple but effective way.

The spare titles of at least three of the poems in *Raining Angels*, 'Watch' (27), 'Touch' (39) and 'Taste' (51), embed us in the prayerful practices out of which they have grown: the exercise of the five senses and a biblical meditation that consciously applies those senses to the gospel stories. A 'seeing' and 'hearing' pervade the gospel poems gathered in *Raining Angels*. Taking up the account of Jesus preaching in Nazareth, Steele joins the Gospel of Luke in visually setting the scene—Jesus 'closing the scroll and sitting down to preach' ('Scroll', 19). The

poet imaginatively retells what the people have *heard* Jesus announce (from Isaiah 29:18–19):

> … the lines … in the old book when they claimed
> That every prison should be breached, the blind
> Drink at the blessed font of light, the maimed
> Walk tall, the poor be heard when they spoke their mind.

Ways in which *lectio divina* fed Steele's *visual* imagination abound in his sonnet 'Watch' (27). Inspired by a reference to the beautiful 'lilies of the field' (Matthew 6:28–29), he has added other flowers and plants to the list of what Jesus watched during his life at home in Galilee: anemones, ivy, the Rose of Jericho, tulips, chamomile, crown daisy, lotus and poppies. Descriptions accompany much of what Jesus watched: 'the crimson glow of anemones' and the 'glossy' ivy that climbed walls and trees:

> … crown daisy, fast to fade:
> And as for lotus, the eye could almost steal
> A heaven from the steady blue displayed.

Jesus would 'keep an eye on poppies and their close of scarlet when the evening gave the sign'. 'Originally no one cared what he could see'. It 'cost him nothing, unless you count the time'. Later, however, 'they' (his faceless enemies) 'learned how to watch him, carefully' (see Luke 6:6–11). By using the word 'watch' Steele sets alight diverse visionary possibilities for meditative praying—what Jesus could see and what his watchful critics saw him doing.

Deep emotional attachment to the person of the risen Jesus comes through Steele's refrain that blends seeing and hearing in 'Song to the Son of Man' (77): '*Show* us your hands and *say* it again'. Powers of feeling attend that prayerful retelling of Thomas the apostle being brought to faith. Any *lectio divina* of this story would be inconceivable without the inner, spiritual senses of seeing and hearing. The poet drives home this conclusion by appealing to what Jesus *shows* and *talks* about: 'Show us the wounds to match our own,/talk about healing when healing is over'.

When applying the other senses, Ignatius proposes that *smelling* and *tasting* run close together. In presenting Jesus' loving concern for the state of his people, 'Scroll' chooses a suitably repulsive example: 'He knew a maggot in their hearts, the one/that eats away at the long

hopes' (19). 'Breathing Days' appeals to our sense of smell when we incorporate the legendary ox in a prayerful telling of the nativity: 'dung offers its sweet reek/and the ox slobbers its achievement' (15).

Tasting embodies essential meaning for a poem ('Taste') that reflects Jesus' choice of bread and wine when instituting the Eucharist for his disciples: 'they'll know me best/as bread and wine delivered with the rest'.

> His mother's wisdom was to praise their food,
> That benediction from the hand of God,
> And so he found the coriander good
> And blessed the little broad beans in the pod.

Jesus could recite the names of 'almonds, pistachios, mulberries, new cheese', along with 'mustard and lamb, the husbandry of bees, and pomegranate gleaming to the bite'. The poem would be unimaginable without biting and tasting food (51).

Touching supplies the title for the poem ('Touch') that emerged from the poet's rumination on the widow's son at Nain. The sonnet begins by evoking a funeral procession that quickly followed death: 'Touching the bier with its cooling burden'. What was there to be seen and heard follows quickly: 'He bent quickly and called the young man from the dead/And gave him back to his mother' (39). While in that poem Jesus touches a universal symbol of death (the coffin), after his resurrection he is 'at ease,/liking the morning, *nestling* a crocus' when Mary Magdalene meets him risen from the dead ('Gardener', 73). He holds close to himself a fresh flower, a fragile yet beautiful sign that can be touched (though he cannot) and signifies new life.

Steele's prayerful reflections draw readers into the gospel stories by inviting them to appropriate these narratives, from the beginning (in Bethlehem) to the end (in a garden and at the first pentecost). The five senses of Ignatian prayer have engaged the imagination of this priest-poet. Through the gospel poems that he proceeded to create, our senses can do the same when we take up his poetic invitation.

The Composition of Place

What Ignatius calls 'the composition of place' belongs essentially to his instructions for prayer (for example, Exx 103). Before describing how an angelic messenger 'broke the spell/banality had spun' for the shepherds, followed by an army of angels 'raining like cats and dogs', Steele makes

use of Ignatius' scheme by meticulously setting the scene for prayer in 'Gloria':

> Glad that night of the metalled clubs when jackals
> cried on the hills and the dog snarled, they waited,
> shaggy under keffiyehs, the heavy cloaks rucked high for
> the wind, nibbling at olives,
> one of them tossing his pebbles, one of them flirting
> at reed pipes, all of them stinking of sheep,
> in the eyes of the law none of them worth a damn (13).

'Scroll' speaks not only to the setting of synagogue worship but also to people wearied by grinding flour at home or ploughing the fields ('His people, tired by the quern/Or the long slog at the plough', 19). Like most poems anthologized in *Raining Angels*, its composition of place for *lectio divina* remains short and to the point. It aims to place readers and those praying within the event and centred on Jesus.

'Gardener' opens, however, with an elaborate scenario, a vision of Christ the gardener (see John 20:15) wearing a 'faded shirt, scuffed leggings', and 'partly shadowed' by the hedges of 'long allees'. The garden for Chiswick House that Lord Burlington laid out in the eighteenth century creates a fanciful, alternative setting for the crucified and risen Jesus to appear to Mary Magdalene—in the afternoon rather than the morning of Easter Sunday. By summoning up the formal beauty of a classic English garden, Steele draws forth a deep feeling of serenity.

Lord Burlington's Gardens at Chiswick, ***by John Bowles, published*** **c.1840**

Three Characteristics of Steele's lectio divina

Steele's poetry, like all great poetry, operates in mysterious ways. Let me note three individual characteristics nourished by his gospel ruminations.

First, by lovingly naming them, he praises particular things created by God and revealing God. Acting in the spirit of 'show, don't tell', Steele's *lectio divina* remains alert to the divine revelation and to the exuberantly diverse realities through which it makes itself felt. The poem 'Genesis I: Third Day', elaborating the creation on the third day (Genesis 1:9–13), relishes the rich variety of plants: 'Huckleberry, frangipani, monkey puzzle—each is there for the having, given a warrant and a pinch of existence' (11). Steele takes a hint from all that created richness when he moves to Jesus' vision of the Galilean countryside. He goes far beyond the 'lilies of the field' to picture Christ contemplating a medley of flowers and plants in 'Watch' . All created things witness to the greatness and beauty of the Creator.

Irony colours the witness of Steele's *lectio divina*—a second, important characteristic. Dramatic irony famously appears in the Gospel of John when Caiaphas declares that one person should die rather than the whole people perish (John 11:50). The high priest did not grasp the full significance of his words, but readers of the Gospel can. Steele's ironical frame of mind became reinforced by his *lectio divina* and turns up not least in 'Hill', with the 'long business' of Jesus' crucifixion (65). At the fortress Antonia in Jerusalem, 'for the tenth time. Pilate tutored his wife/on reasons of state, and was not heard'. The case for Pilate and the imperial powers he represented returns in the closing lines. 'They'd had put their faith in Rome and peace on earth, the high ground theirs for ever'. But the prayerful reader knows this would not come about. When the Roman soldiers with their 'spear butts in play, worked at the crowd like navvies/to keep them out of *the way*', irony gleams through. What happened on Calvary proved a much longer business than any of them 'gauged it'. Despite these soldiers and their successors, thousands and then millions would join the 'way' (see for example Mark 10:52; Acts 9:2) that Jesus had 'marked' and walked.

Thirdly, the modern narrative ability of Steele's witness to his biblical ruminations provides a complement to the best gospel writing. 'Centurion' (41), 'Hill' (65) and 'Gardener' show his lavish abundance in telling the stories of, respectively, the Roman centurion's son being healed, the crucifixion and Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus.

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The poems gathered in *Raining Angels* may be readily defined as prayers inspired by the gospel stories. We can dive deeper and interpret them as *lectio divina*. They exemplify three distinctive characteristics of such biblical rumination: its freedom, its use of the five senses and its habit of setting the scene for prayer. To these characteristics we add three traits identified in Peter Steele's own poetic practice of *lectio divina*: the naming of particular works of creation, the use of irony and a vivid narrative ability.

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