

"RIDDLE, QUIZZICALITY, AND QUIRK— TRACE ELEMENTS OF THE POETIC—": THE VALUE OF THE FOOL IN SOME AUSTRALIAN WRITING

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Patrick White and David Malouf in two respective novels and Peter Steele S.J. in various writings place great emphasis on the figure of the "fool". The question which this paper pursues is what does this age-old figure, in its various manifestations, have to offer to Australian literature and to literature with a religious implication?

In Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* the catalyst for the heroine's achievement of self knowledge is the fool character, Ulappi. White calls this former Englishman, ex-convict, and quasi Aboriginal, "a natural clown", and makes a strong point in describing Ulappi's entertaining entrance into the blacks' festivities (and the novel) as follows:

One giant of a fellow, a natural clown by any standards, would twirl, and leap in the air slapping his heels, and entertain those within earshot of his patter. (Mrs Roxburgh) could tell that he was respected and envied. What most distinguished him from his companions was an axe, or hatchet ... It was much coveted by the other blacks, who would stroke it, and some of them attempt to prise it away from the owner.

But the giant was equal to their cunning. He would slap down pilfering hands, and leap expertly out of reach, keeping up the gibberish which made the others laugh.

She admired him for his agility and enjoyed the jokes she could not understand.¹

The fool clearly has a profound effect on Mrs Roxburgh. It may not be as intense a mystical experience as that of Teresa of Avila but it is clear she is set out now on an internal journey. The details of her purgative, illuminative and unitive way are not as significant for present purposes as the role that Ulappi plays in progressing her on that journey. Ulappi/Jack is the catalyst for change in Mrs Roxburgh's journey into self knowledge.

After meeting him Mrs Roxburgh learns to live without illusion. She reverts to her rustic language; she understands emptiness, need and dependence; she acknowledges her unfaithfulness and her unloved and unloving past; she becomes the lover of the convict (whose former mistress has run off with a sword-swallower); she learns to love "without reserve"² and she learns that "she wanted to be loved", in fact that she has a huge capacity to be loved. She enters into Jack's suffering, grieving for Jack's sentence, even for his mistress:³

'Why do you cry, Ellen, when it isn't no concern of yours?'
'Oh, it is! But it is! Mine as well as yours and hers.'⁴

Her sympathy is immense and extends to a person she does not know.

Ultimately, of course Ulappi leads her to the Moreton Bay Settlement where in the rough hewn, amateur and unconsecrated chapel she attains something of the unitive way, a union with God. She considers the legend "God is love", hears her name called, sheds her tears, relives "the betrayal of her earthly loves" and lets "the silence enclose her like a beatitude".⁵

Something similar occurs in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* with another black/white character, Gemmy. He is described by Malouf in the language of the fool: Gemmy Fairley or Farrelly "a plain savage, or marionette or imbecile, jiggled about and played up to them";⁶ "he wasn't all there";⁷ "he's makin' mugs of yous ... You k'n say what you like about 'im. He don't fool me"; "[people are] suspecting that his giggling and sliding and hopping about on one foot was meant to make a fool of them"; "[they are] dismayed by what they called his 'antics'"; "He was a parody of a white man ... He was imitation gone wrong ... [and he made] the whole business somehow foolish and open to doubt"; "it was *him*, grinning in that foolish apologetic way he had".⁸ More importantly he produces strange feelings in those who gaze at him:

... as you meet here face to face in the sun, you and all you stand for have not yet appeared over the horizon of the world, so that after a moment all the wealth of it goes dim in you, then is cancelled altogether, and you meet at last in a terrifying equality that strips rags from your soul and leaves you so far out on the edge of yourself that your fear now is that you may never get back.⁹

Gemmy's most significant effect is caused some fifty years later.

It is when Janet McIvor, who with Lachlan Beattie first found Gemmy, now Sister Monica in her Wynnum convent beside her prosperous beehives, experiences a mystic apotheosis through love as did Mrs Roxburgh in the homely chapel. Janet is seen brooding over and loving her neighbourhood and its children. She loves Lachlan's dead grandson whom she has never met. She loves her deceased mother. She includes in her loving radiance:

the single mind of the hive, closed on itself, on its secret, which her own mind approaches and draws back from, the moment of illumination when she will again be filled with it; and Mrs Hutchence who has led her to this.

Ultimately, however, her love focuses as it has done for years on Gemmy:

and always, in a stilled moment that has lasted for years, Gemmy as she saw him, once and for all, up there on the stripped and shiny rail, never to fall ... overbalancing now, drawn by the power, all unconscious in them, of their gaze, their need to draw him into their lives — love again love — overbalanced but not yet falling. All these, Lord, all these.¹⁰

The characters of Mrs Roxburgh and Janet McIvor at the end of their respective novels achieve some kind of spiritual union either with God or with fellow individuals. Why both White and Malouf use their similar but by no means identical fool characters to promote the spiritual development of their heroines, is of course, inextricably linked with their complex thematic interests. Malouf, for instance, concerns himself with the need to fuse black and white Australia, of which fusion Gemmy is a crude and ridiculous but

nevertheless significant, symbol and precursor. White uses Ulappi/Jack to restore Mrs Roxburgh from her sham middle "classness" to her previous almost classless rustic individuality. Both Australian novelists use the fool fellow to disrupt the status quo within either the community or the individual. Both ultimately use this upset to propel the heroines into a transforming and transcendent journey.

Peter Steele — poet, critic and Jesuit priest — considers, for his part, that the novelist must be a blend of both priest and jester. In his essay "The Novel as Celebration", Steele quotes the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolokowski:

The priest is the guardian of the absolute who upholds the cult of the final and the obvious contained in the tradition. The jester is he who, although an habitue of good society, does not belong to it and makes it the object of his inquisitive impertinence: he who questions what appears to be self-evident.¹¹

While Steele observes that Kolokowski argues for the philosopher to be a jester in the sense of a "joker in the pack", he (Steele) also observes that the novel is, like poetry and all forms of literary art, "a mode of celebration" and claims that:

the novelist as celebrant has to share in the qualities of both priest and jester ...

In this same article Steele refers to William Willeford's *The Fool and His Sceptre: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience*,¹² and finds Willeford contributing to an understanding of fools as more than mere entertainment. "They too", Willeford writes, "have delineated, and in a strange fashion made credible, 'the world'". Steele then explains the dialectic that he looks for in the novel:

... priest and jester ... have to be joined in a kind of dialectic in the novelist if the novel is to be the abounding thing we look for it to be. There is room for an immense amount of comfortable affirmation, of solid, steady accommodation to the traditional spiritual forms: and as much room — in the same novels, almost in the same gesture — for subversion, for

ironic displacement and re-arrangement, for mockery and quizzicality.¹³

This is not only Steele's theory of the novel, it is basic to his poetry and his poetics as well. It invites an investigation of the the fool as a metaphor concerned with a necessary dialectic within literature and additionally within the writer. In an ABC broadcast talk "Creativity Under Handicap", Steele describes the dialectic as it occurs not only within literature but equally within the poet:

If you get into conversation with a practising poet who is in a confiding mood, sooner or later he is going to be sounding as if he believes in contradictory things. He will seem to believe on the one hand that words are more lucid, and lively, and generally powerful things than most people take them to be, most of the time. He seems to find in them the charge of meaning and consequence that is usually thought of as belonging only to occasions like treaty-signings or coronations or wedding ceremonies or goal-sentences. And for that reason he goes on with what one half-exasperated poet calls "that idiot fiddling with the sounds of things". He believes that words are germinal, seminal. But on the other hand he is likely to tell you that the words won't go the distance, that you call a tree a tree and it goes on standing in front of you with its own secret life and being, not caring what you call it, as if amused that you should be making your noise about its giant identity. The very man who stakes his time, his career, sometimes his very life, on putting black marks on white pages, is likely to tell you that he is involved in an airy nothing — that even if he is good at clowning, a clown is what he is.

If that isn't a handicap, I don't know one when I see it. To have divided intentions, divided beliefs, divided feelings at the heart of your work is something that can erode the life out of you.¹⁴

This exploration of the fool in the text and in the author is next perceived in Steele's second collection of poetry, *Marching On*

Paradise, where there are many references to the world's folly. In "Lines to Robert Burton", he says:

All poets are mad, no doubt,
but God knows doctor, you thought all men poised
at best on the lip of folly.¹⁵

These and other hints and suggestive comments seem to imply that for Steele the poet is not so much mad, as a type of jester.

Steele applies this to himself; so that instead of understanding him merely as a priest who writes poetry, it is more meaningful to see him as both priest and jester who together write poetry.

Related to this use that Steele makes of the trope is his willingness to apply it to himself, so that instead of understanding Steele as a priest who writes poetry it would be more meaningful to see him as a priest and a jester who together write poetry. It is like Steele's own assessment of Jonathan Swift's dual roles as preacher and jester.¹⁶ Or as he has said in "The Novel as Celebration":

Personally, I think that the priest too should have a streak of jester in him ...¹⁷

At the very least Steele recommends a necessary collaboration between priest and jester. Writing of such a collaborative effort in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, he says:

It is possible ... to hear priest and jester blending into one complex voice, which transcends them both, in sentences which heighten both the force of our convictions and the unease of our conjectures.¹⁸

This theory Steele practises in the recent poetry written in 1994 in Washington D.C. and collected as *The Potomac File*¹⁹ (though as yet unpublished). A sample of this work will reveal the dialectic of priest and fool, the traditional and the mocking, at work. In "Presidents' Day," for example, the speaker asks himself "what to make of the days?" both in the sense of the title and in a general sense.

Hard to know, ever since Genesis-tide,

what to make of the days. They brim
out of the darkness, each with its own flourish
or onus. The mirror consoles, hectors
confesses itself foxed, puts out its tongue.

So that when the questioner of Presidents' Day tries to know "what to make of the days" this is the jesterly answer that he gets. He gets no better answer in the second stanza from an Australian character who says of the Americans:

'None of my business, this, anyway' says
a truculent Australian voice:
'let them alone with their New World fantasies,
the goggling and the glooming figure,
rumouring liberation from their zone,
Farmer George and Father Abe.'

The answer, Steele's feels, has to come from the side of the poet priest who also does not agree with New World fantasies. The poet priest replies to the "truculent Australian voice":

No contest, if I hadn't come from Mass,
that play of slaughter and its sequel,
teased by the possibility of birth.²⁰

It is as a Christian that he hopes for a new world, a perspective that allows him without hypocrisy, to scorn the Americans' talk of a bright New World, while maintaining a quizzical attitude.

Sometimes, in Steele, there is an imbalance (though not necessarily a defective one) between the veneration of the traditional and the ironical, satirical or mocking from within. In some of his poems, particularly some of the latest work, there is set up a patter, a steady joking, an amused and amusing enjoyment of the words.

In his poem "Suspense", where he is flying en route from Australia to the US, he offers a series of stanzas, the first of which sets the scene that somewhere about Hawaii the traveller must switch from one code of thinking and speaking to another. In the next stanza we see that one of the codes is Australian *argot* and after three stanzas of it, "shags on rocks", "raw prawn[s]" and "brass razoo[s]" we are once again in the plain code of the first

stanza and we are told "It's time to regularize the state of affairs". Then follows an equal three stanzas of American *argot* with its share of "whistling Dixie", "bolliwog", and "retro-chic", all of which concludes with again, a neutral code in which the poet concludes "Good to know where you're going, and how: /and the talking helps ..." but in which he feels the grief (of leaving, of arriving, of being somewhere in between) and where he finds himself wondering like Chekhov, if the "universe is suspended in the tooth of some monster".²¹

Here the jester is calling all the shots. The piece is the performance of a voluble jester; the traditional and or spiritual forms (in this case the speaker's feelings of grief, suspense and expectation) are well below the surface of the patter. A similar sort of jester, although one prone to the use of the Swiftian or Popean mock-heroic, is responsible for other new poems "The Academy of Contempt" and "Charlatans",²² for instance, which satirize respectively mindless films and charlatanism within the universities.

Another new piece, "Praying", also combines the traditional and the mocking on the very material of the Spiritual Exercises. Here the order of things is first for the speaker to depict the mocking and comic hopelessness of praying: "it feels like Jimmy Durante calling /goodnight to Mrs Calabash, whoever /She was or whether"; or "it's the tenth/ hour in the trans-Pacific plane"; or even "it's been known to turn dirty" as for example, "a cutter, back from the peat hag, found/ his ass's panniers loaded with nothing". And only secondly for the speaker to have a glimpse of the traditionally acclaimed value of prayer which he discovers, not by boasting that he has discovered it himself, but by observing the example of the veteran prayers: "a better than Boeing winging their hopes, the laden/ flesh beginning to take fire".²³

The innovative, comic and iconoclastic, but desolate and futile images of what it is like to pray give over eventually as the speaker perseveres, and uneventful prayer gives way to the idea of the fire of fruitful prayer at the hands of the experienced. The jester seems to be sticking out his tongue at prayer in the first stanza and in the second learning to hold it.

Not only the novel and poetry, but also autobiography, that passionate interest of Steele's, all rely on the same desire for a dialectic between the traditional and the quizzical. Autobiography that is not so tensional, that is, autobiography

which is either "tabulation of event, even psychic event" or "an exhibition of the various postures of Narcissus" Steele says "will not get (him) to pay the entrance money".²⁴ Rather he delights in the autobiographical genre because it is the vehicle for showing "our fellow human beings in their motley".²⁵ And in writing the Introduction to his book, *The Autobiographical Passion: Studies in the Self On Show* in which he selects the eclectic group — Boswell, Gulliver, Loren Eiseley, George Herbert and Andrei Sinyavsky, Steele says that

Rereading the chapters about these men [the autobiographers], I see that what emerges often is riddle, quizzicality, and quirk. Good: these are the trace elements of the poetic, without which all literature is lost.²⁶

These "trace elements" that are so vital to literature for the mature Steele were for the younger Steele of "The Novel as Celebration" brought about by the jester's business in his partnership with the priest. For a celebration of life or in literature, whether poetry, autobiography or novel, the jester cannot be far away from the priest or the writer, if the celebration or the writing is not to lack Kolokowski's impertinent questioning of what is self evident in life, or if the writing is not to lack an appropriate and ironic complexity.

In 1985 Steele published *Expatriates: Reflections on Modern Poetry* a book that he sees as interpretative even more than critical, but which often develops in some detail his particular poetics. The heritage of much of this work is the idea of the need for the poet to be, or to include, the jester. The language of the mature Steele compared to his language of the 1970's, seeks to find a metaphor for the jester which by now has for him almost ceased to be a figure of speech, but a reality. Here in *Expatriates* is the mature extension of the thinking behind "The Novel as Celebration":

One tries, reading poetry ... to hear who is speaking quite as much as to see what is being said. And that 'who' is the elusive one — as suasive and as figurative as those voicing birds ... which are such crucial figures in early romantic poetry. Who is who in this poem, [Borges' "Matthew XXV:30"] now? ... There is a wraith of self, part Hamlet's

father and part poltergeist, inhabiting all poetic utterance. There always was, and as far as I can see there always will be. This 'character' is not identical with the 'I' which has become so prominent in the romantic lyric and its progeny, though the 'I' is a fine dramaturgical device for reminding us that he is always there. And the 'character' cannot be reduced to any of, or the ensemble of, the more or less readily identifiable games and tricks he gets up to, moves and manners he adopts. More vexingly still, he cannot be brought out to take his bow, or trotted out for a party in the greenroom, by some actorly reading aloud of the poem, whether by the poet or by anyone else.

It helps too with the realization that the voice can turn, as it were, peculiar — ventriloquial, a masquerade, a joke in poker-face, a sting. Much good criticism of poetry consists in the critic's saying, more decorously, what one voice says to another in *The Goon Show* — "Shut up, Eccles!", when Eccles is too much the ragged idiot even for the others to bear. And much good poetry proceeds, fortunately, as if the poet were, as Eccles does, joining in that chorus, were chiding and containing his own peculiarities and false moves.²⁷

Steele, more than White and Malouf, has self-consciously developed the idea of the fool or jester to its fullest extent in contemporary Australian writing. It is especially significant that he acts the role of jester since in real life he is, in fact, the priest.

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