

MUSING IN THE SPIRIT OF THE *SPIRITUAL EXERCISES*: IGNATIUS' GIFT TO A CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM

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In the 1970's Peter Steele S.J. wrote many privately distributed Reflections and Retreat Notes, the result of his 'musing upon a number of poems as someone accustomed to muse in the spirit of the *Exercises*'¹ and likening the practice of Ignatius' *Exercises* to the processes of writing and interpreting poetry. These can now be seen as the fruit of his labours to integrate his religious and secular activities. The concern of this paper is not to examine Steele's own writings on the *Exercises* with regard to poetry, illuminating as they are; but to ask how the *Exercises* provide him with important criteria for the interpretation and criticism of poetry. The procedure of this paper will be to suggest in very general terms the parallels between the important sections of the *Exercises* and the crucial factors of Steele's critical technique, and then to refer to two examples of Steele's writing to see those criteria at work.

The *Exercises* are structured into four Weeks or periods each concentrating on the practise of a specific activity by the retreatant. The First Week asks the retreatant to be aware of God's love for him/her and to examine his or her rejection of that love through sin. The Second Week focuses on the life of Jesus from the Nativity through the public ministry. The Third Week centres on the death of Jesus and the Fourth on his Resurrection. The *Contemplation to Obtain Love* is usually offered at the end of the Fourth Week.

Corresponding to these weeks are the four major critical criteria by which Steele evaluates poetry (and indeed literature and the arts in general). First, poetry should evince a serious element of provocation, of criticism (and self-criticism), of quizzicality, introspection, should in other words be shocking or disturbing, meddlesome, perturbing or prompting and should, to accomplish these things, exploit processes of questioning, dialogue and the dialectic, irony and paradox and humour. Poetry, in other words, should be like the traditional fool or jester - a meddlesome nuisance who provokes introspection and unsettlement in those he [or she] deals with. The expectation that any or all of these quizzical elements - I call them *jesterly* elements - be found in poetry aligns itself with Ignatius' First Week in which the exercitant is asked to examine his/her past and present life, to effect a general examen of conscience, to make a general confession, to obtain a

perspective on personal sin and the sin of the world, all of which call into play self-criticism and scrutiny, introspection and self-awareness, irony, provocation and humour.

Secondly, Steele maintains a theory of poetry of expatriation in which he finds that a large range of poetry exhibits 'the sentiment of incomplete lodgement in any particular psychic zone, and incomplete satisfaction with any formulation however eloquent. Such is the poetry of expatriation, of deflection from an enduring *patria*..² This second criterion for the interpretation and criticism of poetry does not limit itself to thematic matters of expatriation, exile, or travelling. These are relevant but are not so interesting to Steele as the 'divined discontent' which, he claims, animates the yearning and the sense of being exiled and of being *en route* to elsewhere, all of which he looks for in poetry. This mode of criticism is in sympathy with the Second Week of the *Exercises* in which the exercitant is invited through mediations on the gospels to follow Christ's public and itinerant ministry and to engage in a process or journey of personal change.

Steele's third criterion is that poetry must be celebratory. This is not a matter of acclaiming the beauty of the universe, the loved one, the arts etc; for Steele to *celebrate* has a technical meaning of to proclaim that something or someone has been retrieved, salvaged, transformed, that hurt is healed, or that someone or something has, in the words of Seamus Heaney whom Steele frequently cites, 'come through constraint into felicity'.³ This celebratory function of poetry is reminiscent in the *Exercises* of both Week Three and Week Four combined, which require that the exercitant enter into the sorrow of Christ's death (in Week Three) and that he or she in further meditation upon the resurrection and the accounts of the risen Christ, come through from suffering into joy, in the Fourth Week.

A fourth criterion which Steele seeks in poetry (and which is related to the *Exercises*' 'Contemplation to Obtain Love') is the facility to attest either directly to 'the haunting presence'⁴ of God in the word, or indirectly to the haunting presence of God haunting the world, the self, or the other, any of whom might be the subject of the poet's yearning in the poetry. This applies whether the poet is *croisant* or not. This fourth matter and the *Contemplation to Gain Love*, can only be mentioned here in passing.

In his prose tribute to Joseph Brodsky,⁵ Steele looks at the conclusion to Brodsky's poem 'May 24, 1980':

What should I say about life? That's it's long and abhors
transparence.

Broken eggs make me grieve; the omelette, though, makes me
vomit.

Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,
only gratitude will be gushing from it.

In examining these lines Steele deals with all of the jesterly, the expatriate and the celebratory elements in concert. For the purposes of this paper, however, the various elements will be isolated.

These are the jesterly elements that Steele observes in the poem - 'the tension between the big sweep and memorable detail'; 'the interplay of question and response, or retort or riposte'; the poet's 'dramatic character'; his double-sided imagination - 'one where life and death share a frontier'. Steele is also aware of Brodsky's interest in the jesterly elements in the writing of others: He says, for example, that Brodsky observed Osip Mandelstam's 'unpredictable turns and pitches' in his poetry; that Brodsky was 'an admirer of Kierkegaard the ironist and of Beckett the ultra-ironist'. Steele also reports on Brodsky as dissenter: He recalls that Brodsky wrote: 'A song is a form of linguistic disobedience, and its sound casts a doubt on a lot more than a concrete political system: it questions the entire existential order.'

In his poem 'In Memoriam: Joseph Brodsky'⁶ Steele also notes Brodsky's jesterly characteristics: he is 'so outre a figure'; he is 'comedian, chider'. Steele requests in his poem that Brodsky:

Sing for the rest of us, not in a chevronned parade
of angels at canticle, but in your old
perturbed, provocative fashion.

There is evidence in the prose tribute (at least in the typed manuscript version) to suggest that not only is Brodsky provocative in his own use of language but that Steele, in portraying him as such, refuses to behave otherwise himself. In commenting on Brodsky's veneration of language, Steele insists at the same time that 'the last thing this did was reduce him to mere reverential modesty'. And later in the piece Steele shows that, for all the attention he pays to Brodsky's language, he (Steele) also is not reduced to 'reverence'; but quips instead that Akhmadulina once paid Brodsky the compliment of saying that he was 'tragically fulfilled' and that it was a compliment that 'Brodsky, *who was not famous for his humility*, might have accepted...' Curiously, *Quadrant* does not print this adjectival clause, doubting perhaps, (or did Steele have doubts about?) the appropriateness of the jesterly comment in an obituary.

And now to look at Steele interpreting Brodsky in the expatriate mode. Steele's verse tribute to Brodsky also names him as 'exile'. Introducing his book, *Expatriates: Reflections on Modern Poetry*⁷ Steele claims that his selection of poems for interpretation complies with one or both of the senses of 'to expatriate' - 'to drive (a person) away from his native country; to banish'; or 'to withdraw from one's native country; to renounce one's allegiance'.⁸ Moving from the literal to the metaphoric plane what Steele provides in his book is a verification of his observation that the poems 'are variously at home, variously displaced, whether as to the world with which they deal and from which they diverge...'⁹

When in the prose tribute Steele details Brodsky's 'five years' hard labour, in internal exile, [in his twenties] and his 'exile from Russia itself in his early thirties', Steele is proffering biography but suggesting that an appropriate appraisal of Brodsky's verse is to be obtained in terms of the metaphorical basis underlying *Expatriates*. Brodsky, Steele says, 'went there [where 'apt readers' are changed by his 'depth, precision ...'] again and again'; Brodsky 'given what the territory was like' might as well be called 'tragically fulfilled'; 'the zone of Brodsky's imagination was always the one where life and death share a frontier'; '...one of his books is called *To Urania*, she being the Muse of space or of geography...'. Speaking generally of poetry but with Brodsky in mind, Steele adds 'Poetry is ... an art of saying not so much what we have got as where - less of naming ... than of trying to net in words ... where we are lodged'. As expatriate - both literal and imaginative, Brodsky, Steele says, 'knows that all our lodgements are temporary'.

Steele's tributes to Brodsky not only serve as a resume of his theory of poetry of expatriation, and as examples of his technique for the critical appraisal of all appropriately yearning poetry; they show that Steele sees himself exiled, expatriated. Just as Steele plays 'the jester' in observing Brodsky's lack of humility, he also plays the part of the expatriate: while interpreting Brodsky's poetry in terms of 'where we are lodged', Steele lets the reader of his tribute know exactly where he is lodged, in this instant, in grief, not only for Brodsky but, as he says, for Elias Canetti who pre-deceased Brodsky by a 'Little more than a year'. From among the citations from Canetti which Steele selects to word 'a kind of joint epitaph for them' is one which figures Steele's grief by paradoxically depicting the speaker's world not as a place of loss but as a populated and attained place, as home: '... my dead are scattered all over the earth. Thus the whole world is my homeland. There is

hardly a country left for me to acquire, the dead have obtained them all for me already...'

In the verse tribute, however, when Steele writes of Brodsky, imagined in the company of poets he says:

If, in some fluent limestone tract contrived
for Wystan's sake you meet at last
the brilliant rifferaff of your dreams - Dante,
all scowl transformed to song, Marina
nosing eternity's forest like a wolf,
the other Joseph, a throttled goldfinch -

Sing for the rest of us, not in a chevronned parade
of angels at canticle, but in your old
perturbed, provocative fashion. 'Everything has
its limits, including sorrow', you said;
but stand up there, as once down here, to say,
you give us tongues, in God's name.

When it is seen that this is the way Steele is envisaging Brodsky's new milieu, it becomes clear who in Steele's mind is still expatriated, still excluded from the company 'up there'.

Let us return to the conclusion of Brodsky's 'May 24, 1980':

Broken eggs make me grieve; the omelette, though, makes me vomit.
Yet until brown clay has been crammed down my larynx,
only gratitude will be gushing from it.

For Steele these lines indicate Brodsky's capacity to celebrate. He notes that while the whole poem can 'scan the vehement ups and downs of experience', this conclusion indicates an 'elated defiance in the face of odious developments: the touch of swagger brought on... by language's own vivacity'. And much later in the piece Steele makes the further claim that 'There is a depth, precision and irreversibility of speech about [Brodsky's] address to the matters in hand which, once reached, changes the nature of attention, not only in the poet but in his apt readers.'

To investigate the nature of this change in the 'apt reader' let us move to Steele's essay, 'The Contours of Exile: The Poetry of Derek Walcott'.¹⁰ In this essay Steele cites Walcott's poem 'Preparing for Exile':

Why do I imagine the death of Mandelstam
among the yellowing coconuts,
why does my gift look over its shoulder
for a shadow to fill the door
and pass this very page into eclipse?
Why does the moon increase into an arc-lamp

and the inkstain on my hand prepare
to press thumb-downward
before a shrugging sergeant?
What is this new odour in the air
that was once salt, that smelt like
lime at daybreak,
and my cat, I know I imagine it, leap
from my path,
and my children's eyes already seem
like horizons,
and all my poems, even this one, wish to hide?

Regretting that books by and on Walcott have been unavailable from time to time in Australia, lamenting the state of criticism in the country and the lack of attention paid to writers, Steele comes to Walcott's poem declaring that poetry brings 'bad news', but hastens to add 'not as its last word'. Writing elsewhere of Samuel Johnson, Steele claims that Johnson's optimism in the face of the 'bad news' is attributable to his belief in a retrieving God,¹¹ and although Steele makes no such claim on Walcott's behalf in 'The Contours of Exile', he endeavours to stress the poetry's capacity for retrieval: exile is 'by definition bad news' but 'it has precipitated some of the greatest poetry'; he recalls Brodsky dictum that 'Exile brings you overnight where it normally would take a lifetime to go...'; and comments: 'For an artist, that is good news...'. Other bad news - mortality - 'all of us are swaddled in mortality'- is another matter. Steele would endorse Canetti's complaint 'How little genuine hatred of death there is in the literature handed down to us!'¹² And yet it seems that even death, in particular Walcott's treatment of Mandelstam's death, yields something of value to be found in the metaphysical nature of Walcott's poetry. This for Steele is poetry's capacity to transform hurt into healing: 'We want to hear his hurt said in such a way that we know in it something of our own: and, in the good saying of that hurt, something of our healing. What is on offer from Walcott is there on those terms.'

Poetry's capacity to bring the reader through from one state to another, to 'take us into zones of realisation which were also zones of transformation' is for Steele its greatest virtue. He notes in his study of Peter Porter that the metaphors in Porter's (prose and) poetry frequently pertain to 'saving things, or finding them saved from, the wreck';¹³ he claims, reviewing Brodsky's *On Grief and Reason*, that 'Brodsky was to retrieval what Edison was to invention. He loved to get things back from between Time's teeth';¹⁴ and he finds Hopkins, troubled and beset on all fronts, producing 'masterpieces of transfiguration'.¹⁵

What happens to Steele during the course of 'The Contours of Exile' is perhaps the best instance of the transformative powers he hopes to find in poetry. Opening the piece he is bristling at the ineptitudes of publishing industry; the ignorance of the nation; and the fickleness of the academy. Ultimately his sarcasm is levelled at what he sees as institutionalised and subsidised anti-humanist endeavours. He intones: 'In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man will have his eye wrenched out.'

When Steele returns to Walcott's poetry after all the haranguing digressions of the piece, it is apparent that there has really been no digression at all and that the haranguing has really been Steele's imaginative participation in the sombre forebodings of Walcott's poetry about the condition of writing poetry. Emerging from this imaginative at-one-ness with the pain of Walcott's 'Preparing for Exile' and passing through his own despair for a healthy climate of questioning and criticism, Steele concludes his essay transformed from the mood with which he begins it. When, the indictment, irony and satire are done with, and Steele comes to recommend the works of Walcott to the reader of his essay, he feels it incumbent upon himself to signal that change of mood. He says: 'After which, genially, I commend to you the works of Derek Walcott.'

From self-confessed geniality Steele's mood shifts again. This time the shift is to the seriously reverential. By way of conclusion to his essay, Steele describes Walcott in terms of his fourth criterion - the capacity to attest (directly or indirectly) to the presence of God in the world. He says: 'the poems display the insignia of a human being who, when first he entered the world, entered the word: and who found that they are one. As things go nowadays, that makes him an exile indeed.'

This account of Walcott's poetry with its overtones of John's gospel, is Steele's testimony to what he sees as the poetry's tacit attestation to the presence of God and God's gifts in the world. It is an attestation that resonates with greater intensity in Steele's 'Joseph Brodsky: 1940-1996' where he says:

On trial ... and asked who ... had authorised his being a poet, [Brodsky] said that God had - a claim whose reverberations were no doubt lost on his blinking judge. Much later, he made the point constantly that language itself, 'The Word', was playing itself out through its agent or vector, the poet...

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- ² 'The Radiations of Peter Porter', *Westerly*, 29,3,(1984) 66.
- ³ 'Taking the Strain: The Prose of Seamus Heaney', *Quadrant*, November, 1993, 58.
- ⁴ See Steele's 'Haunting Presences: Four Gestures of the Imagination', *Quadrant*, March, 1993, 47-54.
- ⁵ 'Joseph Brodsky: 1940-1996', *Quadrant*, 324, XL, 3(1996)16-17.
- ⁶ *Eureka Street*, 6,2 (1996) 23.
- ⁷ Melbourne University Press, 1985.
- ⁸ *Expatriates*, xi-xii.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, xii.
- ¹⁰ *Eureka Street*, 3, 3, (1993), 35-37.
- ¹¹ 'The Only Johnsonian', *Overland*, December, 1984, (No. 97) 60.
- ¹² Elias Canetti, *The Human Province*, Tr. Joachim Neugroschel, Andre Deutsch, 1985, 244.
- ¹³ *Peter Porter*, Oxford University Press, 1992, 13.
- ¹⁴ 'Big Cat', *Eureka Street*, 6, 4(1996) 36.
- ¹⁵ 'The Case of the Trumpery Priest', *Scripsi*, 8, 1, (1992) 172.