# "A COMET STREAMED IN LANGUAGE FAR DOWN TIME": POETRY OF EARTH

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Les Murray declares in the opening line of his poem "From Where We Live on Presence" that "A human is a comet streamed in language far down time",[1] by which I take him to celebrate the human capacity to write (and indeed read) poetry. In general, Murray's image is an appropriate way to trope that human trait, literacy; but in particular, it is a useful way to introduce the Australian poet, Peter Steele S.J. It is appropriate, first, because Steele's propensity to be such a comet "streamed in language" is borne out by his own endorsement of Mandelstam's more earthly dictum that "to speak means to be forever on the road",[2] and secondly, because Steele frequently writes his poetry (and his criticism and homilies) in images, if not of comets, of other scientific or pseudo-scientific, celestial phenomena; and thirdly, Murray's image is appropriate for Steele, because in Steele's oeuvre such pseudo-scientific images serve to depict nothing less than the presence of the glory of God in the universe. (It is no coincidence that Murray dedicates his *Collected Poems* "to the glory of God".)

For Peter Steele, sacred places range in magnitude from the universe itself to any minute point on the planet where tiny particles of stardust descend, troping for him the continuous radiating glory of the divine into the lives of all earth dwellers. For this reason and within the context of this paper, "place" will be construed as planet Earth. The task will be to discover how Steele tropes the presence of God that he discerns pervading the planet and how he images the antithetical situation - the impossibility, in terms of the Hebrew Bible, of the Shekinah's shining forth in the presence of earthly evil.[3]

Introducing his article "The Radiations of Peter Porter", Steele applies the nuances of the nuclear age (with both the positive and negative ramifications of radiation), to his consideration of the poetry of Peter Porter. Steele saliently explains:

> My title is designedly ambiguous. To speak of radiation may be, as in early uses of the word, to indicate that which goes out as radius, spoke-wise. What I have to say of Porter's poetry will, I hope, instance that in his regard. But to our ears radiation is more likely to denote those rayings which we know as dark or light, as malign or benign. What we call "the nuclear age" may be little understood by most of us, but it is big with significance for all of us. A moment's reflection shows us all as siblings of the ray. More than that: we know that controlled exposure to one kind of radiation may make for life,

> whereas uncontrolled exposure will make for death. Associating this with the singular powers of the laboratory, we can with a more ultimate accuracy associate it with the more singular powers of the sun. But whether we think of nature's initiatives or man's, we know that whatever radiates bears in it the potency of its source and the promise or menace of its identity.[4]

This deployment of the radiation image is not unusual in Steele's homiletics or his criticism. Elsewhere, for example, he says aphoristically: "The radiances that do the damage, like many that do the good, are invisible."[5] And of Samuel Johnson he asserts: "[He] carries himself with his usual air of being full of potential for either benign or dangerous radiation...[6] Or yet again, in a homily, he uses the concept to refer to both physical and spiritual damage:

> Perhaps one day we shall get rid of smog or even... of the yet-more-lethal forms of physical pollution with which we surround ourselves. But there could then still remain the smog of half-truths, the tissue-rotting radiation of lies.[7]

What Steele has in mind when he speaks of luminous or benign radiations, on the one hand, and dark or malign radiations, on the other, is an appropriation of quasi-scientific phenomena to depict both glorious and satanic phenomena in the spiritual milieu of the planet. In this he reiterates two very different theologians. The first is Michael Ramsey, who argues for the radiating nature of the glory of God, and who recalls the "Old Testament doctrine" – "that virtue, Israel, the sanctuary and the Law, all bring down God or the Shekinah from heaven to earth, while sin and idolatry remove him".[8] The second is Hans Urs von Balthasar, who stresses both the radiance of the glory of God and the evil radiation of satanic influence. Balthasar speaks of evil in terms of potencies, seductions, threats, illusions, lies and the seeming inevitability "of a whole atmosphere that weighs us down", which he identifies as "radiating innumerably from a single central point".[9]

To present Steele's treatment of these two conflicting types of radiation, here is Steele's poem "August 6th", from the unpublished collection *The Potomac Sheaf*, written at Georgetown University in 1994.

> You put an Ohio Blue Tipped kitchen match
> To the black wick, and they are bonded in
> A momentary fireball, each the catch
> Of the other's fervour. Time now to begin
>
> The daily ritual, bread and wine on the table,
> A tale to be told of murder and its work
> Which, stultified and annulled, the spirit's Babel,
> is overturned by the life it could not burke.

> And you think, as on each such date, both of the one
> Soon to go the gallows-route, but shining
> Briefly to hearten the few who had begun
>
> To catch his version of love's contagion - of him,
> And of the flash-kept moment still refining
> A sea of fire not even the damned could swim.[10]

More than once, Steele reveals his hatred of military nuclear activity and in particular his abhorred fascination with the bitter irony that the bombing of Hiroshima occurred on the Feast of the Transfiguration. The irony that presents itself to Steele is that Hiroshima was transfigured lethally on the date set aside to mark Christ's transfiguration into corporeal luminosity before the dazzled eyes of Peter, James and John. Steele writes in a reflective piece for a Jesuit magazine:

> Every year, when August 6th comes around, I think as many must of the coinciding of two things: Hiroshima Day and the feast of the Transfiguration. They belong on the face of it in different milieux: one is utterly secular, the other a sacred fiesta. But my sense of reality is that the milieux are only intellectually, or imaginatively distinct. I do not believe in a godless world any more than I believe in a rainless Melbourne, though there are seasons to give one pause; and I do not believe in a wordless God any more than I believe in a narcissistic Mother Teresa, whatever reservations I might have about some of her policies. When one gets August 6th, one gets the package.[11]

The extremity of the shock for one so struck with the coincidence of the Transfiguration and Hiroshima is reinforced if it is remembered that Christian thinking about the events on the mountain (Hermon? Tabor?) hails the Transfiguration as proclaiming the glory of the cross[12] and of Christ's resurrected life,[13] but also in signifying that the earthly Jesus already participates in God's glory.[14] Additionally, the event has been heralded as foreshowing the glory expected to be revealed and shared at the Parousia.[15] In his book *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, Ramsey paraphrases Paul's conviction that "in the life, death and Resurrection of the Messiah, the hope of the entry of mankind into the radiance of the world-to-come is brought near, and at the Parousia the hope will be more than answered."[16] And he recalls Paul's further conviction: "But Saint Paul goes on to make a bolder claim. Here and now Christians can see the glory of God, mirrored in Jesus Christ, and can be transformed into its likeness."[17]

Participating in a tradition that upholds the commemoration of the event, Steele has this to say:

> The gospel story is one about Christ's becoming, for an unprecedented moment, radiantly luminous. It is impossible to picture this without theatricality. What is being signalled is, surely, a plenitude of life, just as our sun offers us all the conditions of our vitality in the form of radiant energy. For that one moment, the few disciples are being given access not just to the comrade and the brother and the mentor, but to the Lord – the Vitalizer, the Sun.[18]

Hence the congruence of Hiroshima and the Transfiguration (the fact that the Transfiguration is celebrated within the church on Hiroshima Day, 6th August) emphasises for Steele the force of negative radiation at its worst, literally in the obvious nuclear sense. But also figuratively it appears in the sense of the malevolent intent of one realm[19] towards another, and theologically in the very absence of any evidence that humanity is in the process of being transformed (in Ramsey's phraseology) into any likeness of the glory of God.

Steele's word play in this poem ensures that the contrast is between the "shining" one who radiates a "contagion" of love and the "flash" of the nuclear explosion ("flash-kept" also because Steele's image of it is like most people's, kept in the memory of a photographic still): a contrast which, in being deathly and the obverse of love, is reminiscent of Dante's damned. Ironically, the speaker feels that it is the love, not the bomb that is a "contagion", and that it is a desirable thing to catch: "To catch his version of love's contagion". These are the thoughts running through Steele's (the speaker's) mind as he lights the candles (with Ohio Blue tipped matches) before saying the mass of the Transfiguration on August 6th.

In the poem the speaker (more accurately, Steele himself) is the Celebrant both in the Mass said on August 6th and in the poem about it, of the triumph of God's glory over evil. The drama of the poem can be seen to rely heavily on the concept of the glory of God as a benign radiating force; and this, despite, or in the face of, negative radiation, is what the Celebrant, priest and poet, celebrates.[20]

The secular nature of the range of radiant phenomena attracting Steele's attention suggests an integration of his cultural and religious perception, the secular perceived to have religious significance, the religious depending for its potency on a firm cultural basis. Steele finds God, for example, in the radial design of Paris: "The way of the world, / ... is best drafted / by the spirit's geometricians... /... whose glory / radiates in the avenues / devised for expert cannonade";[21] in the city of Chicago: "ominous, pluriform, seething with chance, / tilting the face of America over the water – / it goes on urging its claim, / darkened a little by distance, radiant still;"[22]

in the longing of Faust, who wants "radiance about him";[23] in writers like Dr Johnson, who has, as we have already seen, a "potential for either benign or dangerous radiation";[24] in autobiographers when, for example, they are represented by da Vinci's "straddling renaissance figure who radiates within his... globe";[25] and in the human mind: "that equivocally radiant entity, the mind".[26]

Steele makes the claim for Seamus Heaney that he "works on the assumption that wherever you turn your eye or ear, significance will rise to meet you";[27] a view which seems to permit a greater frequency of Joycean "epiphanies" than Joyce, himself, would allow. And where Steele turns *his* eye is not only to the poets but to the writings of secular scientists.

Speaking of the twentieth century anthropologist, Loren Eiseley, Steele claims that Eiseley has "a peculiarly unitive mind, in which governing and embracing metaphors preside to a quite uncommon degree";[28] and again with Seamus Heaney in mind Steele says,

> Sometimes, when a poet repeats certain metaphors, we find that this illuminates not only the poems in which they occur, but the writer's whole project... And when... poets also do telling work in prose, there is often a similar effect. A recurring trope may carry the trace of the mind's whole movement.[29]

Both these claims are true of Steele himself, to such an extent that the recurring metaphors of radiance which are frequently not explained to any great extent within their contexts can be seen to endorse Steele's *whole project:* the observation of the presence of the glory of God in the world.

In *The Autobiographical Passion*, where Steele devotes a chapter to Loren Eiseley's *All the Strange Hours*, he turns momentarily to an aspect of Augustine's *Confessions* to preface something that he has yet to say about Eiseley. For Augustine, Steele says:

> the self's fortunes in time are memorable insofar as they mediate God in the present. What is so often referred to, casually, in Christian spirituality as the "presence of God" has in fact to be presented, to be realised: and memory is Augustine's prized mode for this development. It is not just that he is a pilgrim with a memory: memory is the pilgrim. And the self remembering is understood as itself a form of God's self-presentation in time.[30]

Alongside this concept of the self remembering as a form of God's presence, Steele places his impression of Eiseley, whom he dubs "filamental man". Eiseley, Steele says,

> writes as someone for whom pre-historic evolutionary continuities are not only matters of professional, or even of passionate, interest, but are axioms of the sensibility. One may read, as for instance in Richard E. Leakey's *The Making of Mankind*, of ape-like ancestors, of the early hominids, of Neanderthal Man and of Ice Age art: one may read that "the oldest engraved object so far discovered and dated takes us back an incredible 300,000 years, to the site of Pech de l'Aze in France". These things mobilize the imagination. But Eiseley's claim is to have such kinship with humanoid and pre-humanoid beings as a constant feature of his sensibility. It is as if, for him, his own personality and the personality of any and all men is a kind of filament in the natural world, as an organic filament is in its milieu, or as an electrical filament may be, alive in its gases.[31]

Steele, who says "I have never come across anything quite like this", is quick to add that coupled with this sensibility of kin with prehistoric man is Eiseley's erudition, scholarship, and astute appraisal of developments in intellectual history. "It is", Steele says, "as if a shaman's soul were speaking through Goethe's mouth". All of which becomes pertinent the moment Steele continues to embroider what he has in mind by his coinage of "filamental man":

> Filamental man: it is my term, not his, [Eiseley's], but I doubt whether he would have rejected it. Perhaps it does have this advantage, that it can suggest both immense energies - as in those "filaments", flames of gas in the sun's chromosphere, which can flare out to 400 000 kilometres from the surface – and an essential fragility – as in the series of cells in some algae. Eiseley sees man, and in season sees himself, as having a part in both conditions: he always sees man, and himself, as being profiled against the gigantic body of the earth, and as having his tenuous but stubborn reality in the long, the immensely long, coursing of time.[32]

In Steele's consideration of Eiseley, what is taking place is discourse via association. Augustine and Eiseley have something in common, but differ in other respects: Augustine's attitude to the self in time predicates his view of the presence of God, whereas Eiseley's does not. Eiseley, however, has an astonishing sensitivity for prehistorical man. Eiseley is described in terms of the flaring radiance of the sun and the continuum of fragile cellular algae threaded together. Steele is saying, strictly by means of these images, that Eiseley's existence is [has been] lived out in time not only with feeling for the human continuum from prehistory, but profiled against that earth under that sun. The metaphors do not afford the reader of Steele's prose evidence that Eiseley believed or performed this or that; but they allow instead the reader to momentarily share pockets of the perception that is Steele's when he is reading Eiseley. The detail of the flaring gas on the surface of the sun signals that Steele is perceiving a man to be the way he is, to write the way he does, to have his extraordinary feeling for 300,000 years

of humanity, because he is, and they have been, within the ambit and the influence of the radiant presence of God.

Within this "scientific" series of images come more of Steele's *stellar* metaphors. He reports in an article, "Star and labyrinth", that "the International Geophysical Year, 1957-58, disclosed that possibly a hundred thousand tons of stardust is collected daily by our little planet";[33] a phenomenon which he could be said to have in mind when earlier in the article he speculates that "it is likely that they [the stars] irradiate part of your consciousness".[34] One point of these remarks is to be found in Steele's comment that "I suppose that part of the imaginative vitality of the star of Bethlehem, or of the star of David, or even of communism's red star, lies in our latent conviction that we are drawn and swayed by focused forces".[35]

Another reference is to be found separately in Steele's poem "Stardust",[36] where the phenomenon of falling stardust is treated with whimsy, almost flippancy:

> That millions of tons of stardust are falling towards
> our curious planet momentarily
> sticks to the mind like velcro - a tug, and it's off
> with the Gross National Product of
> Liberia, the melting point of copper,
> the Finno-Ungaritic words
> for 'pear-shaped'...

The whimsy gives way as the insistent nature of the phenomenon thrusts itself upon the speaker like a spiritual force: "obtrusive, demanding to be dealt with". There is no explanation that interprets or translates the falling stardust as anything so grand as the radiating glory of God, as there is in the homily in which Steele says "whether it is a mote of dust or a galaxy, one of the electrical discharges in your brain at the moment or the electronic network that webs the world – if it is real, it comes from him..." ["the reality-giver and the life-bringer"].[37] That this is the insinuation in the poem, however, can be garnered from the ironic comment of the last lines, which are written in a way to countervail all that the poet knows to be true.

> Thank God for night,
> when as we know the universe is stilled,
> all motion under prohibition,
> no least particle dancing in our minds.

Not only is the universe not stilled simply because it is night as the poet writes, but the very writing of the poem proves the falsity of the last claim that there is "no least particle dancing in our minds".

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REFERENCES

[1] Les Murray, "From Where We Live on Presence", *Collected Poems*, Melbourne, William Heinemann, 1994, 395.

[2] Peter Steele, "Love and Death on the Longest Journey: Dante's *Commedia*", RLA Proceedings, 1996, 56. Steele cites from Osip Mandelstam, *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. Jane Gary Harris, London, Collins Harvill, 1991, "Conversation About Dante", 407.

[3] Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1949, 20.

[4] Peter Steele, "The Radiations of Peter Porter", *Westerly*, 29, 3 (1984), 65.

[5] Peter Steele, "Candle", 1975, 6, Australian Jesuit Archives Folio, [AJAF] vii.

[6]Peter Steele, *The Autobiographical Passion: Studies in the Self on Show*, Melbourne University Press, 1989, 60.

[7] Peter Steele, "Reveries and Colloquies", 1976, AJAF viii. 12.

[8] *Glorygod*, 20.

[9] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. I. trans, Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed., Joseph Fessio S.J. and John Riches, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1982, 662-663.[*Glorylord*] Balthasar gives as his references *Ephesians* 2.2; *Revelations*, 13; *John*, 14.30 and 16.33.

[10] © Peter Steele. The collection is held at Australian Jesuit Archives, Melbourne.

[11] Peter Steele, "Blinding Lights", *Madonna*, August, 1995, 11-12.

[12] *Glorygod*, 39: "[Saint Luke] says specifically that on the mount 'they saw his glory' [Luke ix,32], and it is he among the evangelists who deliberately makes the connection between the Transfiguration and the Cross explicit...."

[13] *Glorygod*, 117: "Plainly therefore the Transfiguration prefigures a glory that lies in the future.. Many scholars have held that the forward reference is to the Resurrection appearances."

[14] *Glorygod*, 119. Ramsey writing on Mark's treatment of the event says: "On the mount of Transfiguration a veil is withdrawn, and the glory which the disciples are allowed to see is not only the glory of a future event, but the glory of Him who *is* the Son of God."

[15] *Glorygod*, 103. "[G.H. Boobyer] seems to the present writer to make good his main thesis - that Saint Mark regarded the Transfiguration as a foretaste of the glory of Jesus at the Parousia."

[16] *Glorygod*, 49.

[17] *Glorygod*, 51.

[18]Peter Steele, "Blinding Lights", 11.

[19] q.v. Peter Steele, "Realms", (St. Patrick's Church, Washington DC, 1994, AJAF viii), for Steele's views on this militancy.

[20] One must ask if Steele's intuition pertaining to the "package" of Hiroshima and the Transfiguration is one privately indebted to his religious perception, or whether there is a general cultural relationship involved in this juxtaposing of the two.

[21] Peter Steele, "Puny Dragons", poem 51, *Potomac*.

[22]Peter Steele, "The Organ of Nostalgia", *Retrievals* AJAF viii.

[23] Peter Steele, *Expatriates: Reflections on Modern Poetry*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1985, 134. [*Expatriates*]

[24] *Autopassion*, 60.

[25] *Autopassion*, 72.

[26] *Expatriates*, 133.

[27] Peter Steele, "Heaney's tenderness and hope", *Age* (Saturday Extra), 21 October, 1995, 7. [MS entitled "Heaney Displayed".] AJAF viii.
"Tenderness", 7.

[28] *Autopassion*, 47.

[29] Peter Steele, "Taking the Strain: The Prose of Seamus Heaney", *Quadrant*, 37, 11 (November, 1993), 58.
[30] *Autopassion*, 45.
[31] *Autopassion*, 46 Steele cites from Richard E. Leakey, *The Making of Mankind*, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1981, 137.
[32] *Autopassion*, 46.
[33] Peter Steele, "Star and labyrinth", *Eureka Street*, 6, 1 (January-February, 1996), 4.
[34] "Star and labyrinth", 4.
[35] Peter Steele, "Star and labyrinth", 4.
[36] Peter Steele, "Stardust", poem 27, *Potomac*.
[37] Peter Steele, "Ways of Living: Trinity Sunday", 1994, Georgetown, 2 May [1994]1-2: for Newman College.