



# STUDIES

IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS

POETRY FOR PRAYER: GOSPEL STORIES AS  
READ BY PETER STEELE, SJ

EDITED BY GERALD O'COLLINS, SJ, AND  
MANFRED CAIN

55/4 WINTER 2023

## THE SEMINAR ON JESUIT SPIRITUALITY

STUDIES IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF JESUITS is a publication of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States.

The Seminar on Jesuit Spirituality is composed of Jesuits appointed from their provinces. The seminar identifies and studies topics pertaining to the spiritual doctrine and practice of Jesuits, especially US and Canadian Jesuits, and gathers current scholarly studies pertaining to the history and ministries of Jesuits throughout the world. It then disseminates the results through this journal.

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## *a word from Jim McDermott...*

I first encountered Peter Steele while I was in tertianship in Australia. A Jesuit of the province gave me “A Mass for Anglesea,” a set of eleven poems that Peter had written about the parts of the Mass. (As an aside, one of my many great things about Australian Jesuits is the way they celebrate one another’s achievements. This *STUDIES* is another example of that care and community.) Peter’s work knocked me out. It had elements of Hopkins’ word play and emotional palette, but there was a quality that was different—a deep rumination going on underneath the work.

About a year later, I spent a weekend interviewing him for a profile for *America* magazine. Good with a shiraz, great with a story, even in his late sixties he delighted in words with the enthusiasm of a kid holding their first cell phone. (As I write this, I wonder if he might prefer an analogy like “Prometheus discovering fire” —Peter loved a literary reference. Then I remember that one of my favorite Steele poems is about him having pizza with a friend in the Carlton suburb of Melbourne. And there’s another where he proposes that Tuesday is Taco Night in Heaven.)

Though I only had the opportunity to interact with Peter a little bit after that weekend, I really cared about him. From the interviewer’s side, the relationship between an interviewer and a subject is often a bit of a love affair, but there also was just something about him. For as erudite and worldly as he was, he made you feel at home—both with him and with yourself.

Knowing of my affection for Peter, the archivist of the province, Michael Head, started emailing me, after Peter had passed away, copies of letters that Peter had written as provincial. (Peter’s archives include over 2,200 written pieces.) I don’t know who had the idea to appoint a poet as provincial. (Actually, I do: it was Arrupe. It was always Arrupe.) But what a wonderful gift.

Chastity, Peter once wrote to his province, was “a rather cold-sounding word for what should be a warm-hearted thing.” Of the Bible, he wrote, “One way of looking at much of the Bible, and of Christian tradition, is to see it as interplay between Salt and Sugar, the prophetic (salt) and the lyrical (sugar).”

In writing about the disheartening effect of diminishing numbers of Jesuits—and doing so decades before others were considering such with this depth—Steele compared the Society’s plight to that of the Rich Young Man of the Gospels. “Whatever changes in the Society—and perhaps much more will change than has ever done so up the present, Suppression included—it is inconceivable that the daily call to die and to be raised up again by God’s sole power will not be normative for a true Jesuit. . . . Apart from it, our solidarity is nothing more than casually gregarious or functional: apart from it, it is mere abuse of language to speak of our fraternity.”

“The hard lesson to learn and re-learn, at least for some of us,” he wrote, “is that what goes for the individual Jesuit goes for the Society: what goes for the individual Australian Jesuit goes for the Australian Province. We cannot substitute for a personal poverty of spirit a collective security. Shared fantasies are still fantasies: just as shared vocations are still vocations.”

I’m thrilled to be able to add this *STUDIES* to my own knowledge and experience of Peter Steele. I found him, as I wrote for *America*, “a man of restless delight.” But he was also a Jesuit who had seen the heat of the day—or, in the idiom of his country, spent time at the coalface. He allowed the world and the Lord to break open his heart. And from it has truly poured forth a wellspring of life.

*Jim McDermott is a freelance writer in New York.*

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# Poetry for Prayer: Gospel Stories as Read by Peter Steele, SJ

Edited by Gerald O'Collins, SJ, and Manfred Cain

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*Peter Steele, SJ (1939–2012), an Australian priest-poet and close friend of the Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, often lectured at Georgetown University, Fordham, and elsewhere in North America. He turned many of the Gospel stories—from the nativity to the Resurrection—into poetry, often as rhyming sonnets. Steele's images and insights can ably inspire one's prayer, as in the context of making the Spiritual Exercises and in daily life.*

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## Preface

In North America and the British Isles, many Jesuits and others have come to know the Australian Jesuit priest-poet Peter Steele (1939–2012). Born in Perth (Western Australia), Steele entered the Society of Jesus in 1957. He spent much of his life at Newman College within the University of Melbourne, taught generations of students in the department of English literature, and in 1993 was named to a personal chair. During his lifetime, he published nine volumes of poems, many of them religious, not to mention works of literary criticism like the Martin D'Arcy lectures at the University of Oxford.<sup>1</sup> He often came as a visiting professor to spend time in Chicago, New York and, above all, Georgetown.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Steele, *The Autobiographical Passion: Studies in the Self on Show* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1989).

Along with three honorary doctorates, Steele was awarded, in 2008, the Philip Hodgins Medal for poetry. Then, in 2011, he received the Christopher Brennan Award, given by the Fellowship of Writers for a “Lifetime Achievement in Poetry.” The poets who most influenced Steele were, apart from Dante, Ben Johnson, and Jonathan Swift, modern authors who lived in Australia, the British Isles, and the US. Steele knew the classical Jesuit poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), but none of this very small group had a particular impact on him. In fact, he was at times irritated by critics who understood or even dismissed him as aspiring to be a latter-day Hopkins.

At Loyola University Chicago, where he spent a sabbatical year in 1984 before becoming superior of the Australian Jesuit province (1985–1991), Steele met the future Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney (1939–2013). They began a remarkable exchange of letters, including thirty-three letters from Heaney and twenty-three from Steele, which lasted until Steele’s death in June 2012. This correspondence reveals the strength of Heaney’s affectionate regard for Steele. Heaney wrote, “having [Steele] in your company was like putting your back to a great tree when the sap was rising.”<sup>2</sup>

Ten years after Steele’s death, the provost of Newman College produced *Raining Angels*, thirty-five poems published by Steele at different points during his lifetime telling the story of Jesus Christ from the Nativity through the crucifixion, Resurrection, Easter appearances, and Pentecost.<sup>3</sup> We did not need to change the order adopted in *Raining Angels*, which already follows the four weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises* and reflects a distinguished Jesuit-poet’s contemplation and *lectio divina*, or prayerful reading of the Gospels.

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<sup>2</sup> Seamus Heaney to Professor Margaret Manion, IBVM, 13 October 2012, to be published with his correspondence. I share fully in what Seamus Heaney writes here about Peter Steele’s “steady, learned, merry, moral self” and his “braiding of faith and intellect.” Many years of contacts with Steele made me, like Heaney, discover in Steele’s poetry, as Heaney writes, a “pure conviction about the seriousness of the art, extraordinary range of reference, wonderful level-toned expositions and illuminations.” —GOC

<sup>3</sup> Peter Steele, SJ, *Raining Angels*, ed. Sean Burke (Parkville, Melbourne, Victoria: Newman College, 2021).

Those making or giving the Spiritual Exercises, as those practicing *lectio divina*, will be nourished by Steele's poems.<sup>4</sup> Here, we ask: what can such poetry do for those engaged with the Exercises? Or, approaching the corpus from a different angle: how might the practice of the Exercises sharpen the interpretation of the poetry? Ignatian contemplation allows for prayerfully "contemplating" a word or some words—found, for instance, in the Scriptures, poetry, and hymns—as well as ruminating discursively on a given word or passage.<sup>5</sup>

Again, the thirty-five poems included in *Raining Angels* emerged from Steele's own contemplation and prayerful reading of the Gospels through his practice of *lectio divina*. For the current issue of *STUDIES*, we have selected twenty of them for commentary. At eleven years since Steele's death, may his words and images continue to stimulate our imagination, activate our prayer, and prompt our own *lectio divina* and contemplation.

Gerald O'Collins, SJ, and Manfred Cain  
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## Acknowledgments

We thank the rector of Newman College, University of Melbourne, for the permission to reproduce twenty poems of Peter Steele. Likewise, we express our deep gratitude to Professor Margaret Manion for making available a letter from the late Seamus Heaney.

Gerald O'Collins, SJ, and Manfred Cain

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<sup>4</sup> For *lectio divina* and its link with the Exercises, see Gerald O'Collins, SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola: A Lived Experience* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2023), 145–53.

<sup>5</sup> For some hymns and poems prompting such contemplation or rumination, see O'Collins, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*, 115–21.

## 1

**Breathing Days<sup>6</sup>**

Between the snuffling donkey and the ox  
given over to rumination,  
he came to his breathing days. An hour ago,  
freighting his mother, word in cartouche,  
he'd waited like the rest of us. Enveloped  
in the tiny lake, fashioned in darkness,  
kin to the knappers of flint, to the coaxers of flame,  
to the star-consultors and the tense bowyers,  
he was framed and primed, as though another Adam  
who'd never known an Eden. He gasped,  
and called out for his life.

It was a putting to sea on the unkempt ocean  
that sings in our lungs, visits the deserts,  
is cragged-about in snowy places, is air.  
It bid for the whirling net of question,  
for the yield of lips and throat and nostrils, for  
our wits' becoming flesh in language.  
You don't, for long, get reverential awe  
where dung offers its sweet reek  
and the ox slobbers its achievement. Still,  
breathing is better, here on the way,  
or as offering at the end.

Christ's birth, air in our lungs, and Christ's death provide the structure for "Breathing Days." Peter Steele presumed that, once born, the child cried loudly, as healthy babies do ("he gasped and called out for his life"). All four Gospels speak of Christ's breathing at his death. Their accounts of the crucifixion encouraged the poet to write of "offering at the end," when Christ died on the cross.

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<sup>6</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 15; based on Lk 2:4-7.

Mark 15:37 (NABRE, used throughout) describes the death of Christ: “[he] breathed his last” (*exepneusen*). Matthew 27:50 writes that “[he] gave up his spirit” (*aphēken to pneuma*), whereas Luke 23:46 repeats what he read in Mark. John 19:30 suggests that Jesus, in dying, imparted to the world the Holy Spirit or Holy Breath: “he handed over the spirit” (*paredōken to pneuma*).

Steele associated the first cry of the infant (“he gasped, and called out for his life”) with “the loud cry” he would utter on the cross (Mark, followed by Matthew and Luke). The life of Christ began and ended with a loud cry. We have never read any other poet or, for that matter, any biblical commentator who alerted readers to the correspondence between these two cries. The newborn Jesus’s loud cry anticipated his cry on the cross.

Being familiar with the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, Steele was predisposed to link the birth and death of Christ—between Jesus’s drawing breath when he was born and breathing his last when he died. On this note, Ignatius’s contemplation on the Nativity encourages us to contemplate what Mary and Joseph are doing—namely, “journeying and toiling, in order that the Lord may be born in greatest poverty; and that after so many hardships of hunger, thirst, heat, cold, injuries, and insults, he may die on the Cross! And all this for me!”<sup>7</sup>

Other modern poets also elaborated this connection between the birth and death of Jesus. In the forty-three-line monologue, “Journey of the Magi” (1927), T. S. Eliot pictures them as approaching Bethlehem and catching sight of “three trees on the low sky” and “hands” at a tavern door “dicing for pieces of silver”—reminders, respectively, of the two criminals who were to be crucified alongside Jesus and “the thirty pieces of silver” given to Judas for betraying Jesus.<sup>8</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> *Spiritual Exercises* 116, hereafter abbreviated *SpEx*; *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. and ed. George E. Ganss, SJ (St. Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources [IJS], 1992), 59. All quotations from the *SpEx* are from this edition.

<sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot, “The Journey of the Magi,” in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, vol. 1: *Collected and Uncollected Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 101–2.

Magi's journey to the Christ Child left them the enduring question: "were we led all that way for Birth or Death" —or both?

Steele's *lectio divina* parallels Ignatius's contemplation of the Nativity as humiliation: "you don't, for long, get reverential awe/where dung offers its sweet reek/and the ox slobbers its achievement." The absence of "reverential awe" ironically understates the lack of recognition and worse that met Christ on his coming into the world.

When announcing the Incarnation, John provides some of the most quoted words from the Bible: "the Word became flesh/and made his dwelling among us" (1:14). Steele deftly echoes this verse: "an hour ago, freighting his mother, word in cartouche,/he'd waited like the rest of us."<sup>9</sup> He depicts Christ as the divine Word enclosed in an ornate human frame, like a cartouche that surrounds a beautiful design or the name of the sovereign. A daring, yet effective image links divinity and humanity in the one person of Christ, who waits to be born into our world.

"Our wits" becoming "flesh in language" recall John 1:14. The Word of God became flesh in the language he was to use, in order that on our part we should find the right words to praise our loving God come among us. The design of the Incarnation envisaged our flesh needing to become word.

The lines about the unborn Christ "an hour ago, freighting his mother" bring to mind another early passage in the Fourth Gospel. After wine runs short at the marriage feast in Cana, the mother of Jesus says to him, "they have no wine." He seems to find his mother "freighting" or burdening him by her implicit request that he remedy the situation. He initially refuses the request: "Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come" (Jn 2:3–4). He appears reluctant to anticipate the hour of glory that will come with his death and resurrection (Jn 12:23). By speaking of "hour" and "mother,"

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<sup>9</sup> By describing Jesus as "enveloped/in the tiny lake, fashioned in darkness," Steele boldly goes beyond John Donne, who addresses Mary in his poem "Annunciation": "Thou'st light in dark, and shutt'st in little room/Immensity, cloistered in thy dear womb." See *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins, rev. ed. Longman Annotated English Poets (New York: Routledge, 2013), 478–80, at 80.

terms used in John's exchange between Jesus and Mary at Cana, Steele prompts readers into thinking of that episode which comes early in the public history of Jesus's "breathing days."

Steele cites people who through the Incarnation become "kin" to Christ: "the knappers of flint," "the coaxers of flame," "star-consultors," and "tense bowyers." While the expression "coaxers of flame" covers almost all human beings, Steele could have intended specific people, such as priests who light fires in sacrificial services. Matthew's Gospel mentions "all the chief priests" (2:4) when "star-consultors" visit Jerusalem (2:1-12).

Certainly, "knappers of flint" remained a limited group—they shaped flint into arrow heads and tools. The same was true of "star-consultors," those ancient magi who directed lives by reading the heavens (Mt 2:1-12). Steele names another specific profession, "the tense bowyers," who made bows for shooting and ensured that their products were suitably "tense."

Steele's *lectio divina* draws on Paul (Rom 5:12-31) and envisages Christ as the new or second Adam: "he was framed and primed, as though another Adam/who'd never known an Eden." Steele recognizes the solidarity between the incarnate Word of God and the entire human race, descended from our primal parents, Adam and Eve.

Steele then introduces an image prompted by the prophet Isaiah. Ancient tradition took some words from Isaiah and applied them to the birth of Christ: "an ox knows its owner,/and an ass, its master's manger" (Is 1:3). Although never entering the Nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke, an ox and a donkey became familiar figures in the iconography of Christ's birth. Frequently facing each other across the crib in which the Baby lay, they provide Steele with his first picture of the Nativity: "between the snuffling donkey and the ox/given over to rumination,/he came to his breathing days."

The donkey disappears, but the ox returns at the end: "dung offers its sweet reek/and the ox slobbers its achievement." The longest, weightiest word in the poem, "achievement," comments slyly on the results of the ox's rumination: the smell of dung. In

an incredible understatement, Steele sets this over against Christ's achievement—what he accomplished during his breathing days “on the way” and “as an offering at the end.”<sup>10</sup>

This poetic *lectio divina* celebrates the air that the newborn Christ came to breathe and that we all breathe. We experience air out at sea, in the desert, and on high, snow-clad mountains. “It was a putting to sea on the unkempt ocean/that sings in our lungs, visits the deserts,/is cragged-about in snowy places.” Air has a dynamic role in the questions we ask, in the lips and other organs used when speaking and in all that becomes “flesh in language.”

Peter Steele understands the incarnation of the Word of God as a coming to human breathing. Occasionally the New Testament names the Incarnation as Christ's “coming” (Mk 1:38; 2:17). “Yes,” Steele reflects, “it was to his breathing days that he came”—the days when he breathed our air.

Some reflections on “Breathing Days,” published by Steele at the end of his life, suggest how he understood what such poems about Christ stood for and how they came about. The ox's “rumination” evoked the rumination of monastic *lectio divina*, in which sacred words were “chewed over and savoured.”<sup>11</sup> Developed in the second century by Origen and used widely by those in the Benedictine tradition, biblical prayer mulls over texts of Bible. The religious poems, especially the Gospel poems of Steele, seem to be his form of *lectio divina*.

Finally, *lectio divina* enjoys the freedom of poetic creation. Put together Steele the pray-er and Steele the poet, and we will find meaning after meaning in “Breathing Days.” Do we move from the word written—“word in cartouche”—to the word spoken—“becoming flesh in language”? Do we leave the loud cry of newborn child “calling out for his life” from the cradle to the “better” breathing with which the dying Christ offers his Holy Spirit from the cross?

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<sup>10</sup> “The way” describes sharing in the company of Jesus before and after the Resurrection (Mk 10:52; Acts 9:2).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Steele, *Braiding the Voices: Essays in Poetry* (Melbourne: John Leonard Press, 2012), 273.



2

Gloria<sup>12</sup>

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.

It was the messenger that broke the spell  
banality had spun for them, his pinions  
gleaming under the drizzle, eyes bright  
with news and laughter, talking out of the glory  
come over them and himself, speling away  
about rescue, and making a king of a shepherd, and signs.  
Even the dog for once recovered his temper.

And then it was raining angels like cats and dogs,  
every last one of them choring of praise and of peace,  
the shepherds gawping, a son et lumière  
put on for nothing, the night aspill with music.  
Heading downhill to the swaddled child in the feed-box,  
giddy with melody, flarelight still in their heads,  
man and boy they loped as if to a dance.

A few days before he died, Peter Steele made this Christmas poem his central text when addressing a group of young Jesuits in Melbourne. "Gloria" joins the evangelist Luke in displaying an angelic army appearing at night to poor shepherds and sending them to visit the newborn king, "the swaddled child in the feed-box." The poem is book-ended by two verbs, both in the past perfect tense: the

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<sup>12</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 13; based on Lk 2:8–15. This poem also appeared in *White Knight with Beebox: New and Selected Poems* (Melbourne: John Leonard Press, 2008), 48, and had been reprinted in *Braiding the Voices*, 106.

shepherds “waited” (second line) and “they loped” (last line). Patient waiting gave place to steady movement.

Before God’s messenger arrived, the shepherds kept awake, glad to have “metalled clubs” to defend themselves and their sheep against jackals who “cried on the hills.” They had one “snarling” and ill-tempered dog for protection. Under the cotton scarves (“keffiye-hs”), their “heavy cloaks” were “rucked high for the wind,” and they were intent on staying awake.

Luke’s Gospel does not press any such details: “there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock” (2:8). Steele’s *lectio divina* imagines what keeping guard was like and how the Christ Child’s birth began bringing “great joy that will be for all the people” (Lk 2:10).

Steele pictures the boredom repeating itself night by night—“the spell/banality had spun” for the shepherds. The men and boys were “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.” Note that the participles “nibbling,” “tossing,” “flirting,” and “stinking” make the scene vivid and active.

Participles continue when the heavenly messenger arrives: “his pinions [feathers for flying]/gleaming under the drizzle” [soon to be replaced by a rain-storm of angels] . . . talking out of the glory/come over them and himself, spieling away/about rescue, and making a king of a shepherd.” In Luke’s words, “in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord,” the shepherd who became king.

Note too that here the poet, in setting his *lectio divina* to verse, has taken a German and Yiddish verb *spielen*, meaning “to play” but also “to sell a product,” and given it an English ending, “spieling away.” The heavenly messenger then runs a line about the “swaddled child” in a “feed-box” who is the kingly Lord of the shepherds. Here, the angel breaks the spell that a marginal existence has spun for these men and boys, whom their religious and economic status has left not “worth a damn” in the eyes of those who administer the law.

Four more participles—"raining," "choiring," "gawping," and "heading downhill"—then produce a breathless sense of activity. The author amplifies this effect with alliteration—"choiring of praise and of peace"—pressing into poetic service words from the Gospel (Lk 2:13–14). God's messenger, his "eyes bright/with news and laughter," then enters a "night aspill with music." Here, Steele chooses an ancient Anglo-Saxon surname, *Aspill*, and turns it into an adjective, to connote "spilling over with" or "full with." The idea is that, where the army of angels is "choiring of praise and of peace," the night spills over with music.<sup>13</sup>

Steele characterizes this vision of a heavenly army of angels as a spectacle—a "son et lumière," but one "put on for nothing"—which is to say, free to the public. Following the show, the shepherds then begin "heading downhill to the swaddled child." Having stared stupidly ("gawping") at the vision of angels, the shepherds, "giddy with melody," in a kind of slow motion "loped [off] as if to a dance," to see "the swaddled child in the feed-box"—the sign of which God's messenger had spoken (Lk 2:12). Steele himself commented on this image:

As to "the man and boy they loped as if to a *dance*," this is an old motif, if not for the glorifying shepherds, then for Christians and, please God, eventually for all others. Streaming in from various sources of the imagination there is a conviction that we are born for concerted jubilation, and that this is not incidental to us but is, though on our comically limited scale, an imitation of the eternal and infinite *dance* in love and joy of the Persons of the Trinity.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See Peter Steele, *Australian Writers: Peter Porter* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6: "music is a mode of grace."

<sup>14</sup> Steele, *Braiding the Voices*, 108; italics added.

## 3

**Flight<sup>15</sup>**

“Fodder and a stick and burdens for an ass” —  
This one too, as he flings the saddle on,  
Touches the shoulder of his dozing lass,  
Bundles the two, impatient to be gone.

Then it's for Egypt, the pricking stars above  
And fear his goad along the beaten way:  
Sick for them all, and outraged in his love,  
He lets the oaths of anguish have their say.

Behind them, busy with the rope and sword,  
Some of their clan will see the darkness through,  
Doing what must be done to keep accord  
Between the many and the burdened few:

Before them, in long nights of exile, stand  
The palms of yearning for a promised land.

Steele's poem "Flight" seems more relevant than ever when the invasion of Ukraine, renewed fighting in Sudan, and other seemingly endless wars have pushed the number of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons around the world over the hundred million mark. "Flight" presents Jesus, Mary, and Joseph escaping into Egypt (Mt 2:13–15). An angel of the Lord has alerted Joseph to King Herod's decision: the national troops will kill all male babies around Bethlehem. That would do away with any newly born King of the Jews whom the Magi have come to find and worship.

Steele refrains from providing any names, not even that of Joseph who holds together the whole (rhyming) sonnet. Readers will supply identification. The poem opens with a ditty that Joseph hums: "Fodder and a stick and burdens for an ass." Joseph sings to himself.

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<sup>15</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 17; based on Mt 2:13–15

Otherwise, as in Matthew's story of the flight into Egypt, he remains silent. He has much to do and feel. He prepares one ass to carry the provisions and saddles another for the Christ Child and Mary, "his dozing lass," as Joseph tenderly thinks of her.

The feelings of Joseph grow stronger. Impatient "to be gone," he "bundles" Mary and her Baby onto the donkey. The "pricking" stars make small holes in the night sky and sting Joseph. "Fear" proves his "goad." He feels "sick for them all, and [is] outraged in his love" for Mary and the Christ Child. In his mind and heart, he "lets the oaths of anguish have their say." Appalled shock, so Steele hints, excuses curses that well up inside Joseph.

Back in Bethlehem, Jewish troops who share the lineage of Joseph and Mary, "some of their clan," spend the night hunting down the babies they have been sent to kill. Seeing "the *darkness* through" to complete a horrible mission matches the "long *nights* of exile" about to be suffered by the Holy Family (*italics added*). Steele echoes here the radio drama of Dorothy Sayers, *Man Born to Be King*, by suggesting motives for the murderous slaughter.<sup>16</sup> The Magi's search for the newly born King of the Jews had alerted Herod to the presence of a seemingly dangerous rival. The king and his soldiers had no choice. They do "what must be done to keep accord/Between the many and the burdened few"—that is to say, the peace that should prevail between the many inhabitants of Palestine and their few rulers who carry the burden of office. Sayers pictured Herod as a king dealing with plots arising from within his own family and with threats from outside forces. He was proud of having kept the borders of his kingdom safe—a pride that many rulers share today.

Steele sums up exile in Egypt by naming "the palms of yearning for a promised land." Yes, Matthew's text recalls the homecoming of the Holy Family as fulfilling God's promise: "out of Egypt I called my son" (2:15). Palms symbolize yearning for the victory and eternal life that come through martyrdom. The return of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph from Egypt thus will lead to the palms greeting Jesus when he moved

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<sup>16</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King* (Camp Hill, PA: Classical Academic Press, 2014). Sayers wrote this play for broadcasting, and it was first performed in 1943 on the BBC Home Service.

towards his passion, crucifixion, and Resurrection. All of that will bring him finally to the Promised Land of heavenly glory.

Steele's *lectio divina* fashioned many sonnets that work their way from the birth of Jesus to his Resurrection and to the sending of the Holy Spirit. Today, none of these poems seem more topical and speak to us more tragically than "Flight." What paintings or other works of art express most vividly its current message? Does the version by Caravaggio in the Doria Gallery in Rome embody the interpretation coming from Steele?

## 4

### Scroll<sup>17</sup>

Closing the scroll and sitting down to preach  
He went to war. His people, tired by the quern  
Or the long slog at the plough, might hope to reach  
A blurred tranquillity, but not to burn  
As the lines did 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.  
He knew a maggot in their hearts, the one  
That eats away at the long hopes, to unman  
Even the boldest. "Nothing under the sun  
Endures," it said. "All is under a ban."  
Now or never, he thought, and made his play,  
His body, a prophet's, out on the line, to stay.

**T**his rhyming sonnet catches the dramatic beginning of Jesus's public ministry. In the synagogue at Nazareth, he announced from the prophet Isaiah:

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<sup>17</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 19; based on Lk 4:16-22.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring glad tidings to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. (Lk 4:18–19)

Jesus then closed the scroll, gave it back to an attendant, and began to preach. What he said enraged the congregation, which tried to kill him but, according to the story, he made his way through their midst and went away (Lk 4:20–30).

The poem recalls what was at stake when Jesus started to preach in Nazareth: “Closing the scroll and sitting down to preach/He went to war.” Images collide violently. Sitting down to preach is not a posture for going to war. Jesus is motivated by love—although never mentioned as such—for his people, who are worn out by grinding stone tools at home and by working the fields with a plough—“tired by the quern/Or the long slog at the plough.”

At most, they hoped to enjoy some dull calm (“a blurred tranquillity”) but not to be fired up by Isaiah (“the old book”), which proclaimed “liberty to captives,” “recovery of sight to the blind,” liberty for the oppressed, and “glad tidings to the poor” (Lk 4:18). Steele rendered those hopes as “every prison should be breached,” “the blind/Drink at the blessed font of light,” “the maimed/Walk tall,” and “the poor be heard when they spoke their mind.” He makes the last two hopes more specific: “liberty for the oppressed” becomes “the maimed/Walk[ing] tall”; “glad tidings to the poor” becomes being “heard when they spoke their mind.” It would certainly be good news for the poor if, when “they spoke their mind,” the ruling oligarchs and the powerful public heard them.

Note that the people’s hopes as Isaiah presents them have been eaten away by a “maggot in their hearts.” That situation took further the classical ban on or denial of everything new: “nothing is new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9). There is not even anything, old or new, under the sun that “endures,” since a maggot always already has eaten the lot.

That oppressed situation prompted a challenge from Jesus: “Now or never, he thought, and made his play.” Like a prophet, he put his body “out on the line”; but unlike the temporary “thongs and yoke bars” of Jeremiah (Jer 27:2), his body would stay out on that line—not least as the figure on the cross. This sonnet thus relies on what Jesus knew of his people’s hopes and the deadly erosion of those hopes. He decides “now or never” to go to war on their behalf and re-affirms his commitment with “his body . . . out on the line, to stay.”

## 5

**Watch**<sup>18</sup>

It cost him nothing, unless you count the time,  
To watch those lilies of the field—the crimson glow  
Of anemones, the ivy’s glossy climb,  
That “rolling thing,” the Rose of Jericho.

Tulips were there in the hills, and chamomile  
To flag the acres: crown daisy, fast to fade:  
And as for lotus, the eye could almost steal  
A heaven from the steady blue displayed.

At intervals between the hammer blows  
And the barley’s tending, the pruning of the vine,  
He’d keep an eye on poppies and their close  
Of scarlet when the evening gave the sign.

Time was, nobody cared what he could see:  
They learned, though, how to watch him, carefully.

*I*nspired by the “lilies of the field” (Mt 6:28–29), Peter Steele’s *lectio divina* has added to the list of flowers that Jesus watched (*tērein*) during his life in Galilee: anemones, ivy, the Rose of Jericho, tulips, chamomile, crown daisy, lotus, and poppies.

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<sup>18</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 27; based on Mt 6:28–29.



Two of these plants, Rose of Jericho and chamomile, have been traditionally used as medicines. Surviving in extraordinarily dry conditions, the Rose of Jericho bears tiny white flowers, while chamomile, which used to “flag the acres” in “the hills,” still provides herbal tea. Jesus looked not only at what was beautiful but also at what brought healing and health.

In addition, descriptions accompany what Jesus watched: “the crimson glow/Of anemones” and the “glossy” ivy that climbed walls and trees. Crown daisy was “fast to fade,” while lotus let “the eye . . . 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.”

“At intervals between the hammer blows” of working as a carpenter, “the barley’s tending,” and “the pruning of the vine,” he watched “those lilies of the field.” Originally, nobody “cared what he could see.” “It cost him nothing,” his watching of the lilies, “unless you count the time.” Later, however, “they”—his threatening critics and enemies—“learned . . . how to watch him, carefully.” For example, in the story of the healing of a man on the Sabbath, Luke uses a compound of *tērein*—*para-tērein*, watch carefully or maliciously—to picture the enemies of Jesus checking whether he would work a miracle in a synagogue in contravention of the Law.

Forebodingly, the language that Steele chooses for his reflections on watching the lilies of the field anticipates a tragically different outcome: after “hammer blows” nailed Jesus to the cross (Mt 27:35), soldiers “sat down and kept watch [*tērein*] over him” (Mt 27:36). Likewise, the evening of Good Friday “gave the sign” for his red blood to be shed (Jn 19:34). Finally, the watching of Jesus reached its climax when “the centurion and the men with him who were keeping watch over Jesus” became shaken by Jesus’s death and said, “Truly, this was the Son of God” (Mt 27:54). And when a glorious angel descended from heaven and opened the tomb of Jesus, those watching as guards “were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men” (Mt 28:4).

Note too that only the words *watch* and *eye* occur more than once—twice each—in Steele’s *lectio divina*. What did people see

when they watched Jesus “carefully”? What do retreatants see when they watch Jesus carefully?

## 6

### Poll Tax<sup>19</sup>

“The Emperor is largely divine” it said  
On the coin they showed him. He flipped it up and down  
A couple of times to see if the laurelled head  
Was apt indeed to wear an immortal crown.

But no, it stayed a punched-out flan, a thing  
To spin upon its edge and lose its face.  
Better to put your money on a king  
For whom mortality was no disgrace.

It was too soon to make the point: just now  
A parlour-game with death was à la mode  
For those in the little circle. He'd allow  
Some leeway to the practice of their code,

But took them all aback in trumping Rome  
With God almighty, here and now, at home.

The titular poll tax (*tributum capitis*) was levied by the Roman Empire upon all subjects of its provinces. It was a per-head tax—“poll” being an archaic word for “head.” Not tested against means or demographics, it instituted a one-to-one relationship between human life and currency and was a marker of submission for those non-citizens under Roman domination. Indeed, it was the poll tax that prompted the Zealot revolt in the late first century which led to the destruction of the Second Temple and the scattering of the Jewish and Christian communities.

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<sup>19</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 31; based on Mt 22:15–22.

The relationship between life and money is one of two relations considered in Steele's sonnet. The other is that between money and divinity, for the power of the coin is justified by appeal to the supposedly immortal personage of the emperor depicted thereon. As such, the coin functions as a material link between divinity and humanity—a misappropriation of the divine consubstantiality of Christ—against which Christ is set. From this perspective, the dichotomy is not emperor versus messiah, but rather Jesus versus coin, where each signifies a respective whole.

The glory represented by the coin is thus exclusive, and the poll tax itself proves that this glory is enabled only by the persecution of the excluded. The tax thus forms a "little circle," wherein the conditions of its existence preclude its endurance. Conversely, Jesus preaches a circle open to all. Furthermore, the emperor—"largely divine"—depicted on the coin wears a laurel as a marker of his superiority, while Jesus wears a crown of thorns—a marker of his mortality and thus a declaration of human equality as fundamental.

Note that the episode in Matthew to which this sonnet responds is that of the famous dictum, "repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (22:21). Here, the preacher Jesus and his apostles, though divinely supported, face the material, rhetorical minefield of the Pharisees' interrogation under the imperial occupation of Judea. Jesus's rhetorical ability is such that he can avoid arrest without concession—and the oppression is understood as temporary, which Steele renders, "He'd allow/Some leeway to the practice of their code."

This brings us to the poem's three temporalities: that of the Gospel episode, that of the poem's speaker, and that of the poet. Gambling imagery is used throughout the sonnet—after all, the formative decision of an early Christian convert is described as the decision "to put your money on a king/For whom mortality was no disgrace."

Then, the speaker of the poem—possibly a witness of Jesus's ministry, then later a source for the Gospel according to Matthew—is vindicated by the persistence of the faith against imperial oppression. This vindication is all the more palpable for the poet-priest

Steele, for whom the tapestry of the church stretches two millennia. And, of course, Christ and his apostles, in the moment, triumph over the snare set by the Pharisees.

The motif of the gamble culminates in the first half of the sonnet's final couplet: "But took them all aback in trumping Rome/With God almighty, here and now, at home." The "here and now" confuses these three temporalities, revealing the uncertainty of the gamble as illusory and declaring faith justified at the very beginning, as it is when the dust has settled and the empire fallen.

Those who prayerfully ponder this passage may continue to face hard questions. What is our relationship to money? Does money mark some false god in our lives? Those who make and direct the Spiritual Exercises might ask themselves: does this Gospel story have some bearing on what Ignatius says about money?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> On this point, see the Meditation on Three Classes of Persons (*SpEx* 149–57).

7

## Born Blind<sup>21</sup>

The hands about his brow and jaw, the smear  
Of dirt and spittle pasted on his eyes  
Came to him in the darkness: also, fear  
That after all the failures, no surprise

Could visit him, no magus usher in  
The blessed light of which his mother spoke  
As if it had the potency to win  
A world that should without it go to smoke.

Obedient, he fumbled to the pool,  
Heart in his mouth, and washed the stuff away,  
Kneeling in shelter. And began to mewl,  
Big-boned as he was, to find the day

Open around him, the people strange and tall,  
The musing healer up against the wall.

**T**his poem emerges from a key contemplation or *lectio divina* of John's Gospel. It conveys the story of a man born blind and passing from darkness to "blessed light" (Jn 9:1-8). His mother had spoken of light, "As if it had the potency to win/A world that should without it go to smoke."

Now he felt "the hands [of Jesus] about his brow and jaw," and "the smear/Of dirt and spittle pasted on his eyes," or what the Gospel of John calls "clay [made] with the saliva" (Jn 9:6). But he was afraid: "after all the [previous] failures" to give him sight, "no surprise/Could visit him," and "no magus usher" light into his life. Yet, obedient to Jesus, he "fumbled to the pool" with his "heart in his mouth." "Kneeling in shelter," he "washed the stuff away" and began to whimper feebly like

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<sup>21</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 33; based on Jn 9:1-8.

a child. Note here that the poem opened mentioning the man's "brow and jaw," and we now learn that he was "big-boned" — a strong man, but crying like a baby when given his sight.

A blind man at Bethesda, healed in stages by Jesus, first said: "I see people looking like trees and walking" (Mk 8:24). But here, in the very Christ-centered Fourth Gospel, the healed man sees at once not other people, but Jesus, "the musing healer up against the wall." The hint of menace in "up against the wall" evokes the threatening situation that emerges: while some Pharisees investigate the healing, they remain spiritually blind and cannot join the man born blind in confessing faith in Jesus (Jn 9:13–41).

## 8

Three parables, found only in Luke and set to verse by Steele, guide our relationship with others: "Man on a Donkey," "Prodigal," and "Lazarus at the Gate." In none of the three texts does the poet interpret the entire parable; instead, his *lectio divina* or contemplation takes up only sections.

## Man on a Donkey<sup>22</sup>

Beaten, still breathing, as awkward as a dog,  
He swags across the donkey, unaware  
Of who's beside them, footsore in the slog  
Uphill for shelter and a kind of care.

Under the bloody bandages, some oil  
Soothes where wine has washed away the dirt  
To leave him clean and mortal. Alien soil,  
Confirming fear, is mingling hope with hurt.

Downslope, the priest is hustling on his way,  
Clean as a whistle, and the levite too,  
Who thought that pausing meant the devil to pay,  
And all the hours awarded them too few.

By the plodding beast, wordless and out of time,  
The stranger braces once more for the climb.

This contemplation preserves much from Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan and imaginatively goes further in four ways. First, Steele identifies the Samaritan's "plodding beast" as a donkey. This opens the way for the title: "Man on a Donkey." It recalls John Simpson, an English-born member of the Australian Army Medical Corps, who used a donkey to carry wounded soldiers to a beach hospital when the allied forces landed in 1915 at Gallipoli on the Hellespont. After a month of rescue work, Simpson was killed by a sniper and is now remembered as "the man with the donkey." Luke writes more vaguely of a "*ktēnos*": an animal used for riding or for carrying burdens, but not necessarily a donkey.

Second, the contemplation or *lectio divina* explores the wounded traveler's feelings—feelings that mingle "hope with hurt," a neat alliteration—and the excuses that the priest and Levite make for

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<sup>22</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 35; based on Lk 10:25–37.

"hustling" on their way. Third, while Luke does not say whether the inn in which the injured man found "shelter and a kind of care" was down or up the slope from where the brigands left him, Steele places the inn "uphill," just as the Samaritan, whom Steele identifies as a "stranger," "braces once more for the climb." Note here that the climb uphill by someone already made "foresore in the slog" alludes to Jesus climbing Calvary. Furthermore, Christian tradition has had Jesus himself stopping to care for wounded human beings. However, unlike the Samaritan, Jesus died for his act of love.

Fourth, by avoiding any contamination, the priest and Levite wanted to remain as "clean as a whistle." For them, their calculating view of ministry in the temple "thought the hours awarded them too few." In other words, they did not want to lose the "too few" hours at their disposal or "to pay" the cost of crossing the road to attend to the wounded man. Awards governed their view of the world—a reasoning that the poet adds to Jesus's parable.

At the same time, the text of the parable explains what prompted the Good Samaritan to intervene: he was "moved with compassion at the sight" of the wounded traveler (Lk 10:33)—a motivation that Gospel readers appreciate. In all of this, note that Steele omits the arrival at the wayside inn, the overnight stay, the Samaritan paying the bill, and the Samaritan's instructions to the innkeeper. Instead, he alludes to the wounded man's being transported to "shelter and a kind of care" and leaves readers to imagine for themselves the details of how the story unfolds.

Here too, present participles pervade "Man on the Donkey" and convey a breathless sense to the narrative. For example, the wounded traveler is "still *breathing*," "confirming fear" but "*mingling* hope with hurt" (my italics). The priest has disappeared down the road, "*hustling* on his way," and so has the Levite, since they "thought that *pausing* meant the devil to pay." And even the donkey kept "*plodding*" along, "wordless and out of time." Or is it the Good Samaritan—"the stranger"—who is "wordless and out of time"? After all, it is he who toils uphill beside the donkey and its wounded burden, just as Christ will climb to his death on Calvary.



## Prodigal<sup>23</sup>

Sick of his father and his brother's claim,  
He lit out for the country, walking tall  
As though impossible to halt or tame:  
Others, he knew, were riding for a fall.

Out there he sluiced the money every way,  
Good as his word, but only for a while:  
Pigs at their pods became his only stay,  
Experts in how to slobber and defile.

Back home his father, now a yearner, saw  
The white nights through and fed the calf a treat,  
Paced at the gate until his feet were raw,  
Kept sandals, robe and ring beside his seat,

Hoping, the boy returned, by some wild chance  
The brooding heir would join them in the dance.

*L*ike the parable which inspires it, this contemplation does not explicitly include love as either noun or verb; but the story implies throughout the father's love for his two sons. Here, the poet refers to the father as a "yearner" who longs for the homecoming of his younger son, passes sleepless nights, and paces "at the gate until his feet were raw." The father also hopes that his "brooding" older son, who puts in a sickening "claim" for the property — or is it a selfish bid to be the one object of his father's attention? — would be changed and "join them in the dance" of loving reconciliation.

Note however that the poem drastically shortens the parable, which is the longest parable to come from Jesus. Specifically, Steele strips away the younger son's opening words to his father (Lk 15:12); the boy's soliloquy when penniless, from having "sluiced" away his money, and caught by a famine (15:17–19); the exchange with his father when he returns home (15:20–24); the words between a servant and the

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<sup>23</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 37; based on Lk 15:11–32.

elder son (15:25–27); and the closing conversation between that son and the father (15:28–32). Steele also omits the workers on the father's estate.

Nevertheless, this shortening leaves intact the heart of the matter: the father yearns for the return of his younger son and hopes that "the brooding heir" would "join them in the dance." But like Jesus, Steele leaves open-ended the next move made by the older brother.

Note too that the poet has the father feeding "a treat" to the calf, perhaps to fatten it for a hoped-for feast as he longs for his son's return and keeps "beside his seat" the "sandals, robe and ring" that eventually he will gift to him. For Steele, then, no servants or slaves bring these when the boy comes home. Finally, and poignantly, when the boy does return, the father will not be able, in Steele's account, to run to meet him, since the father's "feet were raw" from endless "white nights" during which he had "paced at the gate" (Lk 15:22).

### Lazarus at the Gate<sup>24</sup>

(After Domenico Tiepolo)

A stub of cabbage and a heel of bread  
Would keep him on the wrong side of the grave  
A few more shadowy days and nights. Instead,  
By staircase, marble sphinx and architrave,  
A couple of menials haul the brimming trays,  
A couple of guests are hobbling in their haste  
Towards the villa where in purple laze  
His consort and the arbiter of taste.

Down from the barbered trees, by now unable  
To fend away the licking dogs, your man  
Can't bear to think again of the garnished table—  
Of wine and olive, pear and ortolan.  
Bring me, he prays, to the banquet of the dead,  
And feed these others as I have been fed.

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<sup>24</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 45; based on Lk 16:19–31.

The Rich Man and Lazarus is the only parable in which Jesus names a protagonist; in other parables, he simply calls the figures, for example, “a man [who] fell victim to robbers” (Lk 10:30), “a priest” (Lk 10:31), a “woman having ten coins and losing one” (Lk 15:8), or “a man [who] had two sons” (Lk 15:11). Steele follows Jesus by naming Lazarus, here in the poem’s title but not in its body, where he names him “your man.”<sup>25</sup>

The first verse of the poem centers on those who share a daily feast. This group involves “a couple of guests,” the rich owner of the villa, and his “consort,” who seems to function also as “the arbiter” of his “taste.” Unlike Jesus’s parable which describes the wealthy man himself as being “dressed in purple garments and fine linen” (Lk 16:19), Steele pictures the rich man’s “consort” lazily waiting “in purple” for the guests. In addition, Scripture alludes to the rich man’s “five brothers,” who live in the same house (Lk 16:27–28); however, Jesus never mentions guests as such, let alone a couple of aged and disabled ones “hobbling in their haste” (alliteration) to arrive at the dinner table.

The second stanza lists what “menials haul” on “the brimming trays”—namely, “wine and olive, pear and ortolan”—to “the garished table.” Ortolans are small birds that fly each year from Africa across western Europe to breed in Finland and adjacent countries. Caught in nets and fattened for the table, over the centuries they have been eaten by gourmets in a disgusting fashion. While feasting continues daily within the rich man’s home, Lazarus can scrounge only some scraps—“a stub of cabbage and a heel of bread.” These leftovers keep him alive, to endure “a few more shadowy days and nights,” which he spends “on the wrong side of the grave,” away from “the banquet of the dead” for which he prays.

Note that, in the parable of Jesus, when Lazarus dies, angels take him to be “comforted” (Lk 16:25) in “the bosom of Abraham” (Lk 16:22). There, Lazarus enjoys a choice position at the final, heavenly banquet. As such, Jesus’s parable brings in as protagonists angels and, above all,

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<sup>25</sup> The expression “your man” follows the Irish usage of his close friend, Seamus Heaney. In Ireland, “your man” is a familiar way of speaking of oneself, and Steele heard it not only from Heaney but also from other Irish friends.

Abraham, who speaks in the afterlife with the rich man—an exchange that makes up more than half the story and forms the longest dialogue in any of Jesus's parables (Lk 16:22–31). In contrast, Steele ends his contemplation before Lazarus dies and does not render in verse what Abraham and the rich man say to each other in the other world.

Also in the Gospel passage, the rich man dresses in expensive clothing—a detail absent from the poem. But the parable describes the body of Lazarus as being “covered with sores” that dogs come to lick (Lk 16:20), and Steele thinks of the poor man being weakened to the point of being “unable to fend away his licking dogs.” Here, Jesus may have imagined that no one does anything for Lazarus except some dogs: where human beings fail in loving concern, animals do what they can; by licking the sores, they give the poor man some relief.

Another difference between the Gospel text and the poem appears in that, while the parable of Jesus does not include any prayer, thoughts, or words that come from Lazarus, either in this world or in the next, Steele ends by crediting the poor man who has suffered such awful neglect with a prayer of “reversal.” Specifically, the man prays that God “feed these others [who have failed to feed me] as I have been fed.” In fact, the parable announces a different fate for the rich man: he will be burned by fire and endure excruciating thirst rather than desperate hunger.

Note too that, as the subtitle suggests, while the Gospel text triggered Steele's *lectio divina* or contemplation, a sketch of Lazarus by Venetian painter and printmaker Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727–1804) provided an additional source.<sup>26</sup> In the print, on the right of a central staircase, two guests climb laboriously to the feast while above them to the right on either side rise the “barbered trees” of Steele's poem and below them servants carry up trays of food. Meanwhile, two

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<sup>26</sup> Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, *Lazare et le mauvais riche*, Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon, [https://www.mbaa.besancon.fr/les-collections/art-graphique/m0332\\_1659/](https://www.mbaa.besancon.fr/les-collections/art-graphique/m0332_1659/). For a description and printed illustration of the work, see *Domenico Tiepolo: Master Draftsman*, curated by Adelheid M. Gealt and George Knox (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 82–83; George Knox, *Un quaderno di vedute di Giambattista e Domenico Tiepolo* (Milan: Electa, 1974), 83.

dogs lick the ulcerated legs of Lazarus, who sits at the bottom of the staircase, and at the top of the stairs we see the “marble sphinx and architrave.” As such, Steele’s composition belongs as much to Tiepolo’s Venice as to ancient Galilee where Jesus preached his parables.

Of course, the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son also inspired major artists and composers; but their works did not affect what Steele wrote in his Gospel reflections on the other two Lukan parables selected for *Raining Angels*. Only the story of Lazarus did just that.

## 9

### Touch<sup>27</sup>

Touching the bier with its cooling burden, he  
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.

He bent and called the young man from the dead  
And gave him back to his mother. The crowd moved off,  
Back to the souk of Naim, the fresh-baked bread,  
The chickens foraging by the drinking trough,

The melons and the olives. What to say  
Beyond these words of power, here by the gate,  
To these who’d known such darkness for a day  
As even awe could not eradicate?

A driven man, he blessed the call to roam,  
But dreamed that night, and afterwards, of home.

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<sup>27</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 39; based on Lk 7:11–16.

This contemplation takes the reader inside the human mind of Jesus when he met a funeral procession near the town gate of Naim and, quite spontaneously and unasked, restored to life the only son of widow (Lk 7:11–16). From the poet's perspective, Jesus thought of his own mother and how she would react to his death. To develop the scene, Steele picks up words from Simeon: Mary herself "a sword will pierce" (Lk 2:35), which happens when, in Steele's words, she "accepted" "the news of her son's death." According to John, however, she did not, as the poet implies, receive this "news" from a distance (19:25–27), as she was present on Calvary to witness his death by crucifixion. Is the poet suggesting here that, although Jesus now realized that he would be killed, he had no advance knowledge, humanly speaking, that his violent death would involve crucifixion and that his own widowed mother would be present at the execution?

From this perspective, Steele risks the reproach of biblical scholars for confidently suggesting what Jesus thought and even dreamed, as "being driven man, he blessed the call to roam." After bringing back to life the dead son of the widow, he then "dreamed that night, and afterwards, of home." The idea seems to be that his human condition requires us to envisage him thinking, feeling and dreaming, and the poet boldly draws the shape of those thoughts, feelings, and dreams.

Nevertheless, Steele declines to set to verse the full reaction of those who witnessed the miracle: "Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, exclaiming, 'A great prophet has arisen in our midst,' and 'God has visited his people.' This report about him spread through the whole of Judea and in all the surrounding region" (Lk 7:16–17). Instead, the poet simply states, "The crowd moved off,/Back to the souk of Naim," presumably to eat "the fresh-baked bread,/The chickens foraging by the drinking trough,/The melons and the olives." Confronted with what Jesus's "words of power" effected "here by the gate"—Young man, I tell you, arise!" (Lk 7:14)—the people went home and ate food in the local bazaar. The idea seems to be that they had "known such darkness" when the only son of the widow died that "even awe" at what Jesus had done in giving him back alive to his mother could not easily "eradicate" the pain. All they could manage was to move off, "back to the souk."

Note that Luke's account of the raising of the dead man dwells on the crowds at the town gate: "his disciples and a large crowd accompanied [Jesus], and "a large crowd from the city was with" the woman (Lk 7:11-12). As stated, "Fear seized them all, and they glorified God" (Lk 7:16) at the sight of the miracle. In contrast, Steele mentions once "the crowd" but shifts the focus toward what Jesus himself thought, felt, and dreamed when he brought the young man back from the dead.

## 10

### Centurion<sup>28</sup>

A long way this from Spain, he thought, and swung  
From the high saddle, Boar of the Tenth at his throat,  
As though unclean, and doubly so. The young,  
Watching his cane, affected to devote

Mind and heart and body to his will.  
As to the City's, even on alien soil:  
Their blood and wits were his, he knew, to spill:  
Mars of the Legion took them all for spoil.

But here he was with empty hands, his boy  
Riven with palsy, to ask a native's word  
Of healing. How engage him, how employ  
Arguments that his men had never heard?

All at one throw, he gave himself away,  
The three victorious in a single day.

**M**atthew's story of the centurion's "boy" being healed features Jesus's words and miraculous deed, along with high praise for the officer: "in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (Mt 8:10). Steele puts the centurion center stage and merely mentions Jesus as the "native" from whom a "word/Of healing" is requested. This

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<sup>28</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 41; based on Mt 8:5-13.

contemplation teems with items added by the poet. The centurion belongs to the Tenth Legion, originally raised in Spain. Its emblems were a wild "boar" and a warship honoring Neptune and not Mars, the god of war. Matthew knew that the pagan identity of the centurion made him "unclean." Steele thinks of him as "doubly so," through his bearing the emblem of a boar "at his throat."

Matthew's account does not put a cane in the hand of the centurion, nor does it identify the sickness from which his boy suffers as "palsy." It only says that he was "lying at home paralyzed, suffering dreadfully" (Mt 8:6). Nor does Matthew hint that the young soldiers only "affected to devote/Mind and heart and body" to the will of the centurion. Indeed, the Gospel fails altogether to picture them as present when the centurion underlines his authority: "I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come here,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it" (Mt 8:9b).

The poet also notes that the centurion is "on alien soil," distant from Rome, the capital of the empire. Furthermore, the centurion knows his power over the local people: "Their blood and wits were his, he knew, to spill:/Mars of the Legion took them all for spoil." But Steele imagines the centurion "with empty hands," at a loss what to say at his meeting with Jesus: "How engage him, how employ/Arguments that his men had never heard?"

The poet describes what the centurion spontaneously did when approaching Jesus for help: "All at one throw [of dice], he gave himself away." As a result, the tiny group of "the three," consisting of Jesus, the centurion, and his servant, became "victorious in a single day." Steele thus credits the centurion with a splendid victory, shared by his boy, whom Jesus cured instantly of a very painful illness, and by Jesus himself. Finally, note that this was one of the few miraculous healings that Jesus performed from a distance and not through physical contact with the sufferer.



## 11

### Samaria<sup>29</sup>

The day so blistering, and the well so deep,  
He sat down in the dirt for a while in hope  
Of water hauled up by a stranger.<sup>30</sup> Sleep  
Might be his friend until a dripping rope

Could herald life as more than something borne,  
A dance in vein and vessel, a green plain  
Across whose miles the cry of a ram's horn  
Would call good news of mercy and rain.

He woke and asked the woman for a drink  
And got surprise, and would not let her fence.  
Try as she might, in anger, to out-think  
The dry-lipped alien, he slipped through her defence.

The jar forgotten as he talked, she found  
Herself at last, testing the native ground.

Steele leaves much behind in rendering into verse the Gospel story of Jesus's meeting with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. The disciples of Jesus, who have gone to buy food, have not yet returned and remain unmentioned in the story. Likewise, the Samaritans to whom the anonymous woman spoke about Jesus are ignored or at best only implied. The poem ends with the woman finding "herself at last," like the prodigal son "coming to his senses" when he fed some pigs (Lk 15:17). A "dry-lipped alien" helped her forget the jar that she had brought to the well, return to the town of Sychar, and test the "native ground" with her testimony: "He told me everything I have done" (Jn 4:39).

But Steele's contemplation is more than half over before the woman enters the scene, while the first eight lines focus on Jesus. And

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<sup>29</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 43; based on Jn 4:1-26.

<sup>30</sup> The source has a comma, not a period, here.

although John's account merely explains that Jesus was tired and "sat down there at the well" (Jn 4:6), Steele has him sitting "down in the dirt for a while in hope/Of water hauled up by a stranger," and falling asleep until he awakens. A "blistering" day leaves Jesus "dry-lipped," near the "dripping rope" of a deep well from which "a stranger" could "haul up" water and give a drink to an "alien."

For Steele, water "could herald life as more than something [merely] borne" after birth into our world, and life can become "a dance in *vein* and *vessel*" (italics added). The idea is that human beings bear burdens in life but enjoy dancing, which involves their living veins and vessels. Steele then imagines rain creating "a green plain/Across whose miles the cry of a ram's horn [a bugle for Jewish religious ceremonies]/Would call good news of mercy and rain." Through the life brought by rain, the poet here unites "good news" from the New Testament and "mercy" from the Old Testament. Yet the Old Testament also witnesses to the good news, as in the Book of Isaiah, and Jesus's message is nothing if not a message of mercy. As such, the noun "life" and the verb "to live" belong naturally in a reflection on a passage from the Gospel of John, which employs the noun *life* thirty-six times and the verb *to live* sixteen times. Clearly for John and for Steele, Jesus is Life itself come among us.

Note that, while John spends twenty verses (Jn 4:7–26) on the exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Steele summarizes everything in just four lines. These lines highlight surprise when Jesus asks for a drink, incapacity to "fence" — "to out-think" — him, and his slipping "through her defence." Finally, Steele draws the story together in the final line: "she found/Herself at last," where in finding him she finally found herself. Here, we might see a parallel with the story of the prodigal son, who "com[es] to his senses" before he returns to his father (Lk 15:17).

## 12

### Inside<sup>31</sup>

Dante was wrong. You don't go touring Hell.  
It comes upon you when you look inside  
At the cant of lust, the marble gaze of pride,  
The torch of anger turning world to shell.  
Envy is there, the quicksand of the heart,  
While gluttony and avarice will rake  
Into one stinking pit what's left to take,  
When sloth, the dullest curse, has done its part.  
Believe, or don't believe. You may be other.  
But as I look at the darkest and most narrow  
Crevasse, I see, harrowed and to harrow,  
The undespairing one, my lord and brother.

Three sources nourish this reflection: the seven deadly sins referenced by medieval poet Dante Alighieri (ca. 1265–1321) in the *Divine Comedy*, the “harrowing of hell” by Christ, and the passage cited from Mark.<sup>32</sup> Steele brings together Jesus’s teaching about unclean things inside a person, with the schema of the seven deadly sins understood as the root of all other sins. As developed by Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), St. Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604), and Dante himself, the list includes pride, covetousness or avarice, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth. Sloth embodies apathy and a distaste for spiritual matters.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante constructed an ascent of the mountain of purgatory around seven terraces on which sinners were cleansed from the deadly sins. The terraces began with pride as the worst sin and ended with lust as the least serious sin. Dante ordered the sins as follows: pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. The nine

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<sup>31</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 47; based on Mk 7:14–23.

<sup>32</sup> In *Raining Angels*, references to the Gospel of Mark appear only here and in “Hill,” below. For theological commentary on Dante, see Denys Turner, *Dante the Theologian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

circles of hell lead off with the deadly sins of lust, gluttony, greed or avarice, and anger. Then follow heresy, violence (to be aligned with anger?), heresy (to be aligned with pride?), and treachery (in Dante's view the worst sin imaginable). Dante knew the biblical teaching of the Ten Commandments but judged that the teaching of the seven deadly sins communicated better. His *Purgatorio* proved a vivid handbook for Christians examining their conscience. Modern films, such as the 1962 French masterpiece *Les sept péchés capitaux*, show the doctrine of the seven deadly (or capital) sins maintaining its insight and power. Anyone fortunate enough to see the stage version of those sins expressed through the mime of Marcel Marceau (1923–2007) will say the same.

The poem's six lines devoted to the seven deadly sins illuminate Jesus's words about the evils we find "inside." To catch the deadly drift of lust, Steele fastens on what we can hear: the expression of lust in "cant," when hypocritical talk seizes a moral high ground. He finds pride in what he sees: "the marble gaze" of figures immortalized, for example, in busts carved by Italian architect and sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). Our poet dismisses anger for what it does to the world, as obliteration bombing and shelling show anger leaving behind the mere shell of buildings, from Dresden and Hiroshima to towns in Ukraine.

Next, Steele catches onto what envy does to the envious themselves. Far from nourishing life-giving desires and loves, an envious heart becomes a patch of quicksand that sucks us to our death. Gluttony and avarice then are joined together to "rake/Into one stinking pit what's left to take." Here, "rake" evokes the roulette tables in casinos that bring the smell of crime and vice to cities in Australia and other countries, while "what's left to take" is the question, "When sloth, the dullest curse, has done its part."

Finally, note that "Inside" addresses its reader: "You don't go touring Hell. It comes upon *you* when *you* look inside" (italics added). But hopefully, Steele proclaims "my lord and brother" when he sees him in the "Harrowing of Hell." Descending into the underworld, the glorious Christ liberates Adam, Eve, and all those waiting long centuries for deliverance. Opening a passage through "the darkest and most narrow/"

Crevasse," shattered rocks allow the "undespairing one" to enter: "har-rowed" on the cross, the "undespairing" Christ delivers those in limbo.<sup>33</sup>

## 13

### Passover<sup>34</sup>

A batman's whistling as the elbow-grease  
brings out the gleam of a breastplate. Near  
the Temple, doltish and shaggy, the creatures shuffle,  
their time coming, their place obscure.  
At the gates, as though in sleepy expectation,  
watchmen adjust their cloaks.

Upstairs, a man has broken silence to say  
that he loves them, meaning the braggart, meaning  
the one with death up his sleeve, meaning the brooder,  
the sulphurous brothers, the pincer of taxes,  
and those with a good conceit of themselves. He's told them,  
and now they begin to believe.

A slave's work done, or a cherishing wife's, the basin  
sits in the corner: on the table, broken,  
some better-than-usual bread, the lamb, the wine,  
and the bitter herbs. And now he's talking  
of hatred, of courage, of peace, though not of a stripe  
to be had without some begging.

It's late now. In the guard-house, brisk as always,  
a centurion buckles on his armour,  
approving the burnish. A night for special duties—  
though Mars be praised, not to remember  
if ever he makes his twenty years and a farm,  
the wheat and the purple grapes.

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<sup>33</sup> See Gerald O'Collins, "Christ's Descent to the Dead: A Commentary," *Worship* 96 (April 2022): 178–85.

<sup>34</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 53; based on Lk 22:7–16.

This account of preparations for Jesus's final Passover refrains from mentioning the chief priests, Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, and others whom Luke will name. Steele introduces a "batman" whose "elbow-grease/brings out the gleam of a breastplate" for the officer he serves. The poet imagines the lambs to be slaughtered and the watchmen at the city gates while in "the guard-house . . . /a centurion buckles on his armour." This one hopes that Mars, the god of war, will ensure that this "night for special duties"—a euphemism for arresting Jesus—will be forgotten by the time the centurion leaves military service. At that time, in the mind of the poet, the centurion will receive a farm yielding "the wheat and the purple grapes"—a neat hint of the bread and wine used by Jesus when instituting the Eucharist. Here, Steele compares effectively this soldier, who represents power, violence, and foreign oppression, with the "man" who "has broken silence to say/that he loves" the apostles gathered "upstairs" with Jesus for the Last Supper.

Steele describes these latter as follows. First, "the braggart," meaning Simon Peter, who boasted, "Lord, I am prepared to go to prison and to die with you" (Lk 22:33). Next, Judas Iscariot, being "the one with death up his sleeve." Then, "the sulphurous brothers," meaning James and John, who wanted to call fire down upon a village that refused to receive Jesus and his disciples (Lk 9:51–56). After that, "the pincer of taxes," who is Matthew, called "Levi" by Luke, and finally "those with a good conceit of themselves," which could apply to all the apostles, since they had argued "about which of them should be regarded as the greatest" (Lk 22:24).

Note that "upstairs," as the poet writes, Jesus had done the work of a "slave," by washing feet, "or a cherishing wife," by hosting the meal. Recall too that Luke does not refer to the washing the feet of the apostles, which appears in John (13:2–17), and likewise with Jesus's talk "of hatred, of courage, of peace," also in John (15:23–25; 14:1, 27c; 16:33; 14:27; 16:33). Here, in the spirit of *lectio divina*, Steele takes the liberty of listing a passage from one Gospel but introducing material from other Gospels. This prayerful contemplation powerfully contrasts Jesus not only with an individual—namely, the Roman centurion—but also with a group—namely, the apostles who join Jesus for his last Passover on earth.

14

Simon<sup>35</sup>

In from the country, and making for the Feast,  
He found himself impressed, not for a spell  
With a pack of a legionnaire, but like a beast  
Yoked for a death-walk, up the hill to hell.

The other poor devil was only half alive,  
Raked by a flogger who knew his craft and meant  
The World to see it. Even to survive  
To the Place of the Skull would leave him overspent.

He got the man behind him and they dragged  
The head-beam forward, yard by bloody yard;  
The Syrian corporal and his detail slagged  
At both of them to keep the labour hard.

When it was over and the dead thing left,  
He felt, as never before or since, bereft.

The Roman execution squad forced Simon of Cyrene to help Jesus haul the cross to Calvary. Simon found himself like “a beast/Yoked for a death-walk, up the hill to hell.”<sup>36</sup> Steele explains why the Romans forced Simon to join this death-walk: “The other poor devil was only half-alive,/Raked by a flogger who knew his craft and meant/The world to see it.” Mel Gibson’s film, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) indicates just how far scourging could go before crucifixion. As such, it is bitter irony to characterize such brutality as knowing one’s “craft” and wanting “the World to see” what it could produce.

Thanks to Simon, Jesus made it “up the hill to hell.” Simon had moved to the front, and together “they dragged/The head-beam forward,

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<sup>35</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 63; based on Mt 27:32.

<sup>36</sup> On crucifixion, see Gerald O’Collins, SJ, *The Beauty of Jesus Christ: Filling out a Scheme of St. Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 99–118.

yard by bloody yard." Meanwhile, the corporal and soldiers directed insults not only at Jesus but also at Simon: they "slagged/At both of them to keep the labour hard." Steele alludes here to the "hard labor" of penal systems, associating this practice with crucifixion. We may also find here an allusion to "labor" in the medieval poem "Dies Irae" (Day of Anger) included in the 1962 *Roman Missal* as a sequence for All Souls' Day.<sup>37</sup> Remembering how Jesus sat worn out by a well (Jn 4:6), the author of that poem prayed, "*Quaerens me, sedisti lassus:/Redemisti Crucem passus:/Tantus labor non sit cassus*" (Seeking me, you sat worn out. You redeemed [me] by suffering the cross. May such great labor not be in vain).

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<sup>37</sup> *Missale Romanum*, 4th ed., editio iuxta typicam (Boston: Benziger Brothers [1962]), 722.



15

Hill<sup>38</sup>

Getting him up the hill was a long business,  
    however you gauge it. The Roman detail,  
spear-butts in play, worked at the crowd like navvies  
    to keep them out of the way. In the City,  
hatched with invention, a scroll was returned to its jar,  
    a template for entrapment. At the fortress,  
for the tenth time, Pilate tutored his wife  
    on reasons of state, and was not heard.  
In the Potter's field, enigma to the last,  
    the man from Kerioth hung alone.

Uphill, bled-out<sup>39</sup> like a side of beef, that preacher  
    stayed the course and marked the way,  
a man lost for his love. The legionnaires  
    swagged away the robe, the wineskins,  
the not-bad sandals; and the cavalry-man  
    took up the slack on his mount. There was more,  
no end of it in fact, for their attention.  
    As the sword pointed, as the lance sang,  
they'd put their faith in Rome and peace on earth,  
    the high ground theirs for ever.

The poem names only one person responsible for the crucifixion: Pilate. His wife cautioned him: "'Have nothing to do with that righteous man. I suffered much in a dream today because of him'" (Mt 27:19b). Steele imagines Pilate's reaction: "At the fortress,/for the tenth time, Pilate tutored his wife/on reasons of state, and was not heard." Note here that "tutoring" disorients the relationship between the couple, reframing it paternalistically, such that she is a child to be set right "for the tenth time." Also, Pilate offers "reasons of state" to

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<sup>38</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 65; based on Mk 15:16, 20.

<sup>39</sup>The source has an em dash, not a hyphen, here.

justify himself in condemning Jesus; but he had got it wrong “and was not heard” by her. His excuse will recur in the penultimate line of the poem, where Steele references “faith in Rome and peace on earth.”

The poet refers to another individual, Judas Iscariot, “the man from Kerioth” (Mt 27:3–10). Steele interprets the Potter’s Field as the place of Judas’s suicide, a field the chief priests bought as a cemetery for foreigners with the money thrown away by the traitor. Judas “hung alone,” in juxtaposition with “the crowd” that witnessed the death of Jesus. Here, Steele respects the mystery of the treacherous decision of Judas who, unlike Pilate, remains an “enigma to the last.”

Note too that the first stanza of the poem incorporates some puzzling lines: “In the City,/hatched with invention, a scroll was returned to its jar,/a template for entrapment.” Does the poet here imply the involvement of a third man in the death of Jesus, namely the high priest, Caiaphas? Did there exist some written plan for trapping Jesus that might deal with similar cases in the future? Jesus himself enters the poem through its second word, “him,” while Calvary provides the spare title, “Hill,” which returns in the second verse as “uphill” and implicitly in the final line as “the high ground.”

As for the action of the story, Steele explains that the Roman soldiers engaged in “a long business” when working on the crowd with their spear butts “to keep them out of the way.” What happened, of course, proved a much longer business, since despite these soldiers and their successors attempting to control the crowd, thousands and then millions joined the Christian “way” that Jesus “marked.” In presenting the narrative, Steele offers a careful geography: “up the hill,” which hints at the struggle; “in the City,” the latter word capitalized to signify the holiness of its object; “at the fortress,” the word suggesting Roman power; and finally, with pretensions of superiority, “the high ground.” Then, in the poem’s most violent image, “the preacher” — a title that all people could give to Jesus — was “bled — out like a side of beef” as a result of the cruel scourging that he had

received, evoking Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox*.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the poet affirms, Jesus, "a man lost for his love," had "stayed the course."

The poem then switches to "the legionnaires" who "swagged away" their loot while the centurion in charge of the scene remained mounted and, hinting at work to be done, took in the slack on the reins of his horse. The prayerful reflection then moves to the Romans who attempted to complete the crucifixion. While there would be "no end" to what would "call for their attention" following the event itself, the supreme worldly power put its faith in the wrong place—namely, the empire and the *pax romana*. Steele thus leaves the reader with the poignant question: on Calvary, who really took "the high ground . . . for ever"?

## 16

### Moron<sup>41</sup>

It's moron time, so now he's out on the flags  
To get some thorny burnet into his head  
And more than a touch of scarlet, as the wags  
Affect belief in what, a king, he said.

Back-handing's how they do it here, the face  
Worked to a ball of meat and bone, the eyes  
A dullard's willy-nilly as the lace,  
A whipsaw reed's achievement, takes the prize.

It's too soon yet for him to have a turn  
At the bitter posca, or the broken legs:  
And all too late to measure or to learn:  
He is, they need not tell him now, the dregs.

Inside, the governor's reasoning with his wife:  
Dreams, as he knows, have nothing to do with life.

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<sup>40</sup> Rembrandt van Rijn, *Slaughtered Ox*, 1655, oil on panel, 95.5 × 68.8 cm. Louvre, Paris.

<sup>41</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 67; based on Mt 27:27–31.

Steele mastered the ironic tone and persistently deploys it, as in this contemplation on the mockery of Jesus by the Roman soldiers. John the Evangelist had crafted memorable statements shaped by this tone, like the words of Caiaphas to the chief priests, Pharisees, and Sanhedrin about Jesus: "it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish" (Jn 11:50). Likewise, the present poem ends with irony when Pilate reasons "with his wife" that "dreams, as he knows, have nothing to do with life." In fact, her dreams about "that righteous man," Jesus, have everything to do with the fullness of life here and hereafter (Jn 11:50).

But in the "moron time," soldiers mocked Jesus immediately after his being scourged (Mt 27:26–31). Here, the poet looks ahead at what will enter the story of Jesus's passion: "It's too soon yet for him to have a turn/At the bitter posca, or the broken legs," alluding to Matthew's indication that someone on Calvary will offer the dying Jesus a sip of "posca," a mix of sour wine, water, and herbs (Mt 27:48). The reference to the broken legs in turn links the meditation with John's Gospel, where soldiers came to break the legs of Jesus but, finding him already dead, simply stabbed his side open with a spear (Jn 19:31–37).

Returning to the beginning of the poem, note that the opening two verses dwell on the mockery itself, where the soldiers pushed "the thorny bernet" into his head and clothed him with a scarlet cloak. Back-handed blows across his face then "worked [it] to a *ball of meat and bone*" (italics added)—a savage picture which the alliteration amplifies, as what has been done to Jesus's eyes "takes the prize." As a result of the soldier's work, to which Steele refers ironically as an "achievement," the eyes of Jesus, laced by blows from "a whipsaw reed," look out haphazardly like the gaze of "a dullard." As such, the poet effectively increases the impact of his *lectio divina*, using such vocabulary from ordinary speech: "the wags," "how they do it here," "worked to a ball," "takes the prize," "to have a turn/At," and referring to Jesus as "the dregs." I can think of no more tragic reflection on the scene than this.

17

Gardener<sup>42</sup>

If it were England, and later in the day,  
she might have met him, faded shirt,  
scuffed leggings and all, partly shadowed  
by long allees at, say, Chiswick—  
everything turned to vista, seeking out  
the Statue of Cain and Abel, the Domed  
Building, the Rustic Arch, the Doric Column  
Topped by Venus, the Bagnio,  
the Obelisk, and the Deer House, and the rest.

As it was, the heart gone out of her with grief,  
she picked her way through scrubby bushes,  
expecting nothing but the nothing left  
when love's pegged up for the sun to eat.  
It was peculiar, then, to round a rock  
and find some idler, hands pinked  
by spiky work, but the rest of him at ease,  
liking the morning, nestling a crocus,  
his wide mouth practiced about her name.

**T**he present poem, "Gardener," takes up the story of Mary Magdalene meeting the risen Jesus (Jn 20:11–18). Steele's prayerful contemplation contrasts the place and time that the Evangelist provides—"As it was," meaning *in the morning*—with an alternate scenario—"If it were England, and later in the day." As a setting for this hypothetical afternoon encounter, Steele suggests the garden that Richard Boyle, third Earl of Burlington, and his collaborator, William Kent, fashioned between 1726 and 1729 for the neo-Palladian villa Chiswick House.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 73; based on Jn 20:11–18.

<sup>43</sup> For a history and description of this setting, see the copy and links on the Chiswick House and Gardens Trust website, <https://chiswickhouseandgardens.org.uk/our-story/>.

In this alternative vision, the poet describes Christ the Gardener as wearing a “faded shirt,/scuffed leggings and all,” being “partly shadowed” by the “long allees” of hedges. From there, he references features of the garden: the “Cain and Abel” Bird-Cage, the “Rustic Arch,” the “Obelisk” in the Orange Tree Garden, the ornamental “Deer House, and the rest.” By evoking the beauty of a classic, eighteenth-century garden, Steele draws forth a feeling of serenity that the crucifixion had shattered in Mary Magdalene, “the heart gone out of her with grief.”

Rather than walk down stately allees that lead to Jesus’s tomb, however, Mary “picked her way through scrubby bushes.” The poet then describes Christ as “love” itself, in the crucifixion “pegged up for the sun to eat.” Now, given that Mary expects “nothing but the nothing left” after such an event, the poet describes it as “peculiar” to “round a rock” and meet the crucified and risen Christ, whom Mary takes at first to be “some idler.” However, while the effects of the crucifixion appear in his “hands pinked/by [the] spiky work” of the Roman nails, “the rest of him [is] at ease,/liking the morning” and “nestling a crocus,” a beautiful sign of the new spring and fresh life. In all of this, the poet puts Mary Magdalene in first place, as “she might have met him,” given that her search for the body of Jesus has initiated the whole story. But what begins as looking for a corpse ends with finding her living Lord, who resembles a gardener holding an incarnate sign of the coming of spring.

To close the poem, Steele catches the moment when Jesus addresses her by her name, “Mary,” which comes spontaneously to him who has often repeated it with “his wide mouth practiced about her name.” But no one says her name more beautifully, and readers know what comes next, as she runs to bring the astonishingly good news to the disciples. The power of this *lectio divina* thus depends in part on the poet’s use of contemporary language to tell a familiar story: the terrible grief of Mary Magdalene as “the heart gone out of her,” the crucifixion as “spiky work,” and Jesus being “pegged up” on the Cross.

In yet another reference to art history, Steele illustrated this poem in his book *Plenty* with a painting by Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614), a Bolognese artist who, like Mary Magdalene, anticipated future roles of

women.<sup>44</sup> Fontana painted a radiant Mary Magdalene with the risen Jesus a rather somber figure under the large hat of a gardener. As such, the poet's choice of this painting hints at his own hopes for how women would contribute to the world's culture and the church's mission.

## 18

### **Song to the Son of Man<sup>45</sup>**

Show us your hands and say it again,  
As the lake dries and the mud is caking,  
As the guns<sup>46</sup> jerk and the bodies flounder,  
Show us you've nothing to hide or to sell,  
Show us the wounds to match our own,  
Talk about healing when healing is over,  
Show us your hands and say it again.

Show us your hands and say it again,  
As the skin tightens with fear and with age:  
As the blood in our eyes congeals and freezes,  
Show us you're talking with nowhere to go,  
Show us you're poor, and poor for ever.  
Talk about blessing, but do it bare-handed:  
Show us your hands and say it again.

Show us your hands and say it again.  
Peace on your lips and scars<sup>47</sup> on your palms:  
Watch us and wait for us, armored and edgy,  
Show us you mean it, by noon or by night:  
Show us you say it because you believe it,  
Talk about rising, talk about shining:  
Show us your hands and say it again.

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Steele, *Plenty: Art into Poetry* (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 52–53.

<sup>45</sup> Steele, *Raining Angels*, 77; based on Jn 20:24–29.

<sup>46</sup> Source: "gun."

<sup>47</sup> Source: "scan."

In May 1972, Saint Paul's Cathedral, Melbourne held three liturgical services for the Octave of Church Unity. For the occasion, Steele wrote *Five Songs*, including "Song to the Son of Man."<sup>48</sup> Fifty years later, the selected poems from Steele's total work, *Raining Angels*, takes readers from the birth of Jesus to Pentecost. "Song for the Son of Man" appears toward the end, facing a passage from the Gospel of John (20:24–29), which pictures Thomas coming to faith in the risen Jesus. When Jesus met Thomas, he "showed" him his hands and "said again" what Thomas had set as conditions for faith: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (Jn 20:25b).

The introduction to *Raining Angels* quotes what Steele said about the Easter appearance to Thomas being chosen as the biblical setting for the "Song for the Son of Man." Note here that repetition drives the poem, as apparent in the antiphonal opening verse, "Show us your hands and say it again," which opens and closes each stanza, and the partly-antiphonal words "as the" that tie together the first and second stanzas.<sup>49</sup> For Steele, we address the Son of Man out of the ecological tragedy that we have created and the scourge of war to which we constantly have recourse: "As the lake dries and the mud is caking,/As the guns jerk and the bodies flounder." This setting in turn heralds the approach of death: "As the skin tightens with fear and with age:/As the blood in our eyes congeals and freezes."

In addition, a richly significant repetition appears in the words "show us" that open the fourth and fifth lines of all three stanzas and convey that the Son of Man does not come with closed hands that "hide" something or imitate hucksters who have something to "sell." Furthermore, Steele notes that the "wounds" that he shows to us—and not merely the wounds in his hands—"match our own." Also revealed is that, being homeless, he "has nowhere to go" and indeed is "poor" both literally, stripped of his clothing at the crucifixion, and figuratively, with a poverty that left him "poor for ever." Finally, "show us" probes

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<sup>48</sup> Published in Peter Steele, *Marching on Paradise* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire Modern Poets, 1984), 6.

<sup>49</sup> Sean Burke, "Introduction," in *Raining Angels*, 1–2.



the sincerity of all that he says in his ministry: "Show us you mean it, by noon or by night:/Show us you say it because you believe it."

A repetitive, antiphonal "talk about" then opens the penultimate lines of all three stanzas. Here, demonstration of "the wounds" that can "match our own" slips into "talk about healing." Note also that the first two examples introduce two conditions: "when healing is over" and "do it bare-handed," where "bare-handed" reiterates the plea of the earlier entreaty to "show us you've nothing to hide or to sell."

The third example of "talk about" brings us to the "rising" and the "shining" of Easter. Here, Steele deftly places the point of departure, "rising" from the dead, before the permanent state of "shining" in resurrection life. Note here that, in the expression, "Talk about rising, talk about shining," the poet appropriates the colloquial expression *rise and shine* commonly used to tell people to wake up and get out of bed promptly. Steele here imparts new meaning to the expression by contextualizing it in the new setting of an Easter appearance, just as Jesus repeatedly urged people during his ministry to wake up and stay awake. Finally, while the entreaty to "watch us and wait for us" echoes Christ's asking his hearers to watch and wait for him, the poet reverses the direction of the request by reframing it as an expectation that the Son of Man watch and wait for us.

Given that the primary refrain, "Show us your hands and say it again," structures the poem, it does not surprise to find abundant body language throughout: "the bodies" that "flounder," "wounds" for "healing," "skin," "blood in our eyes," "bare-handed," "lips," "scars," and "palms." And to enrich the presentation further, we find alliteration: because we are "armoured and edgy," Christ should "watch and wait for us," "by noon or by night" — language that evokes "the guns jerk and the bodies flounder." Here, the ugly killing moves close to home: it is "we" who are "armoured and edgy" and, by implication, ourselves capable of murder.

What, then, of the text from John that selected to accompany the poem? The passage includes not only the greeting, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19c, 26c), but also two references to the hands of the risen Christ (Jn 20:25, 27). As such, the passage dramatizes the conversion

of a significant individual to accept the meaning of the resurrection of the Son of Man. Specifically, Jesus has shown his hands to Thomas and said again what, while remaining invisible, he heard Thomas himself naming as conditions for Easter faith. Clearly, written fifty years ago, Steele's "Song to the Son of Man" embodied a heartfelt plea to Jesus, and the power of this reflection continues to affect today.

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