The Priest Who Chuckled in Poetry:
In Memory of Father Peter Steele, SJ, 1939-2012

There will be second thoughts I guess as when,
glutted with manna, the fugitives pined
for Egypt's leeks and garlic. Decorum beckons,
in French cuffs and Mont Blanc
and a dog-whistle for Saturday mornings. But still,
the dream's toxin eats my flesh,
and I stumble on, liberty's reek attending,
snared by the flag on the Big Top.

(Peter Steele, "Which Way to the Circus?")

Halfway through my first year of studying Literature at the University of Melbourne, my regular teacher for "Literature, Culture and History" being away on a conference, the class was taught for two weeks by a man whom I knew only as one of the other tutors in the subject, Professor Peter Steele. He lectured, I remember, on *Pride and Prejudice*, though there was little actually about the text in his lecture. What I do remember was a fairly rhapsodic reflection on the nature of chess-playing. I suspect I left the lecture early. My undergraduate mind had struggled to compute the words that Professor Steele bombastically delivered, and I had failed altogether to see their relation to the essay that was due in a week or two. I suspect I went home to write the essay instead of listening to what seemed at the time to be nothing more than some enthusiastically proclaimed ramblings.

It would not be until the fourth year of my degree that I would encounter Professor Steele again, and by that time my mind would be a little more ready for what he had to say. The subject was entitled, "Poetry: The Versatile Imagination", and I had chosen it in a last minute shift from a fairly turgid postmodern kind of course that I had originally been enrolled in for my final semester of Literature. I do not remember what motivated me to take the poetry course, having decided

early on that I was fairly disinterested in Professor Steele's lecturing style and having only ever enjoyed the most mediocre of successes when either writing about or composing poetry. It seemed a highly subjective form, perhaps confirmed by the title of Professor Steele's fourth-year course, and I had made the assessment, early in my degree, that High Distinctions came from things that were more concrete than poetry. If you wanted to write on poetry, I reasoned, you had to be prepared for randomness in assessment practices.

Why, in the last semester of my Honours year, I decided to risk randomness, I do not know; but, for whatever reason, I did. And so, almost exactly three years after my first encounter with Professor Steele, I found myself seated in a classroom of tables arranged in a circle, with that very same red-nosed Jesuit priest and poet leading a discussion that ranged from the reasons why we should not feel the need to do any secondary reading for his subject through to goodness-only-knows-where-else.

A seminar with Professor Steele was a little like a jolly tramp through a strangely comical and surreal wood. Over hill and poetic dale we would wander, uncovering an assortment of amusing titbits which assumed the status of rare truffles; troubling and spellbinding images that loomed like goblins; and, at key points along the way, good friends of his who served as our guides and, it turned out, were also poets whom we would study throughout the semester. We learnt about the martini-making skills of Anthony Hecht ("Tony", we learnt to call him, though only ever from afar) or the fact that, "at some riotous occasion with Seamus [Heaney]", religious poetry had been decreed that which begins with "O".

His was a lecturing style so easily parodied, and one girl in my course (the Dux of our year, in the end) ranted after one seminar about how homophobic, racist and generally patriarchal he was. If he was, I never noticed, though perhaps I was just as complicit in the hetero-normative machine that she decried; I'm not sure. For what it's worth, I suspect that, had she offered her criticisms to his face, Peter would have laughed – not a mocking, scornful laugh, but one so jolly that I doubt anyone but the most hardened of critics of his could fail to laugh with him. After

all, I had been one of those critics when I began my degree, and now I had become one of his most fascinated fans. He was a difficult man, in the end, to hold out against.

What was it about his style that so fascinated me? A few stories might get us somewhere towards understanding it. I once found a book of his essays which I had borrowed from the Baillieu Library in, perhaps, a cynical bid for extra marks on my essay. He had advised us against secondary readings but surely, I reasoned, his own work could hardly count as secondary? In the end, I did not use the book at all in my essay but found it an enthralling read nonetheless. I do not really remember much of what he said except that there was a wonderful moment in which he discussed Edwin Muir's "One Foot in Eden" and suggested, from memory, that we all had one foot in and one foot out, and it had all come to me that somehow poetry was an attempt to get both feet in at the same time. Though I did not cite his work in my bibliography, I should have done so, since I internalised the essay even if I did not make any reference to it.

As a matter of fact, I internalised much of what he taught me, some of it knowingly, some unknowingly, and it's for this reason that I come to be writing this essay in the week of his death, at age 72, from a long struggle with cancer.

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Only a few weeks ago I found myself quoting Peter, as I do most years, to my Year 12 Literature class who are engaged in studying T.S. Eliot's poetry. The quote comes from the topic for the end-of-semester paper I wrote all those years ago for "Poetry: The Versatile Imagination". It was one of several statements – at the time I called them "Steele-isms" – which he had given us as options for our 5000-word responses. I call them "statements" because they were not exactly topics, not the way we think of essay topics. They ranged from statements as seemingly ludicrous as "Poetry is a sea creature living on the land that longs for wings", or something to that effect, through to the one which I chose for my paper and quoted two weeks ago to my students: "*To hell with poetry that has no*

more interest beyond the mere miserable prose meaning of it." There is something about that statement which so perfectly captures the way he taught me to think about poetry that I am tempted to say it sums up the entire course he taught; but that would be a mistake to suggest, since anyone who has been taught by Peter would know that very little of what he said could ever be even shoddily "summed up". Nevertheless, just as his statement about one foot in Eden and one foot out remained with me, this other statement also lingered and helped me make more sense of poetry than anything I had heard before or have heard since.

When I try to teach students today what poetry is, I always have the difficult task of moving them beyond the pat belief that poetry is nothing other than rhyming verse or something which, once they have encountered more modern and "free" versions of poetry, they instinctively consider to be what G. Burns Cooper once called "prose chopped up into lines". For some of my students, the discovery that poetry does not have to rhyme is as destabilising as if they had been told that the earth is flat or that there is no such thing as gravity. *If it does not have to rhyme*, they seem to ask, *then what makes it any different to prose?* Well, Professor Steele might have suggested, look at the prosaic hell that is made of repulsively dull poems and you might be on the right track to understanding poetry.

The essay I wrote on that "topic" was, I remember, the most playful thing I ever wrote at University. Inspired by the meandering jollity of Peter's lecturing and writing style I found myself going so far as to quote Hilaire Belloc's "Henry King" in describing the manner in which one of the poems that I was analysing "expire[d]". (Always the good sport, Peter marked that sentence with three exclamation marks and three ticks. I'm not sure if it boosted my mark at all, but I'm fairly sure he gave it a good belly laugh nevertheless.) What stands out for me most about that essay was the way that, while writing it, poetry lifted itself out of the confines of prosaic analysis and, for the first time in my studies of Literature, suddenly came to life. Recognising that poetry was, at its heart, about transcendence, I no longer looked for it to make rigid sense the way I had done in the past. I could talk about the language of poetry for once because I saw the point of its language. If it didn't stir something more than "mere miserable prose"

could stir, then it wasn't poetry. If it did stir you, then there was something which the language did, be it in the metre, the rhyme, the lack of rhyme or something else altogether, which gave it that stirring quality. Poetry analysis was suddenly no longer about trying to get what it was "about" – an exercise which Peter would have relegated to hell along with the poetry such a mentality produced – rather, getting what it did to you as its reader. Having always seen poetry as the thorn in the flesh of my success as a writer and student of literature, I now found myself receiving the highest result of my course thus far for an essay written on nothing other than poetry. When, the following year, while training to become an English teacher, one of my lecturers gave us the task of writing a poem which used all five senses to convey an emotion, I was ready. Professor Peter Steele had prepared my imagination to become versatile. I would never look back.

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Towards the end of my fourth year, I e-mailed Peter with some questions about my final paper. He was a particularly generous and jolly correspondent, and I remember meeting up with him one morning – he had deliberately come in early that day and remained in his office on the off-chance that I received his e-mail in time to come in to meet him. I suspect we spent more time discussing my thesis on John Updike and what I thought of Updike's poetry than on the actual topic of my essay, but this imbalance did nothing to damage my success in that essay. In truth, the questions I had were easily answered and the other topics of discussion much more interesting to us both.

Another e-mail that I sent to him that semester – I'm not sure what it was about, the original thread to the discussion being lost now – met with this warm reply:

Dear Matthew,

I've just replied to your message, and it occurs to me that you might like to see a few of my own recent productions, for the hell of it as they say. Here they come then -- or should.

Attached to the e-mail were around six of his own poems, sent purely for good measure. At the time, I remember a little arrogantly assuming that the poems had been sent out of some kind of cynical act of self-promotion. In retrospect, I think it was nothing of the sort. Already a published and respected poet, Peter surely had no need for the affirmation of an undergraduate student who had only recently started to get his head around what poetry actually *was*. The poems, however, had been more than a little lost on me at the time and so, not knowing how to reply or what to say, I had said nothing. If he had indeed sent them through for my affirmation, he certainly did not receive it. It's probably fortunate that he was far hardier than I was then or am today; I would have been devastated had my own work never received a reply. I doubt Peter minded, though. He was probably too busy playing chess in the woods with Seamus to notice.

Returning to the poems now, I must admit they still bamboozle me more than a little. Replete with images and references too vast-reaching for anyone with less than the most gymnastic of minds to handle, they amaze me with their mastery yet leave me quite confused as to what they actually *mean*. And there is that question again, that demand for a prose summary which Peter decried nearly a decade ago. So I return to them and try to let their words and images wash over me and remain, still, a little undergraduate in my inability to "get them". Perhaps there is nothing much to get, or perhaps they are, just like much of what Peter said in class, wonderful, fascinating, and make up for what they lack in coherence with sheer vigour and playfulness. I'm not sure.

But one of the poems has remained in my mind much more than the others, primarily for its title and opening lines. It is called "Which Way to the Circus?", and begins with this captivatingly immediate line:

Running away of course as aren't we all…

It's a statement which captures perfectly that way he had of drawing you somehow into a world which he believed made perfect sense and which you

were ever-so-willing to pretend you understood yourself just for the fun of joining him in the journey. Having never had anything resembling a desire to run away and join the circus, I felt, on first reading that poem, distinctly as if I had. Certainly I could picture him as a child "casting about for directions", looking a little like he did when he taught me: rosy-faced, plump and jolly, only less weary and with fewer ailments to surmount. If he still embraced that childlike abandon as an adult, it was now in a wiser manner than he'd perhaps had as a child, conscious that "there will be second thoughts…as when/glutted with manna, the fugitives pined/for Egypt's leeks and garlic". Yet it is telling that the desire to give up on the circus and return home was likened to Israelites' nostalgic longing for Egypt, a land not remotely like home though at times taking on an illusion of homeliness. It says much about the playfulness of Peter's mind, even if it leaves me still a little uncertain as to what it *means*.

I never managed to quite grab a hold of what Peter's faith in Jesus constituted for him. A Catholic, he had a very different manner of expressing his faith to me, and there was something of the laughing humanist about him which I could never quite assume myself, nor – I must admit – do I necessarily want to. Perhaps, knowledgeable though he was, he needed, as we all do, to learn to tell the circus from the Promised Land. Perhaps he did not mind, enjoying all meanders a little too much to care if he was in Canaan or the wilderness. In truth, I only caught a glimpse of who he was, and cannot profess to know him any more than slightly. Anything that I could say on this topic would at the very least fail to do him justice.

Nevertheless, little though I came to know him, to this day when I think of poetry there is a face which comes readily to mind. It is a fairly round face, with a red nose suggesting that Tony Hecht's martinis were a little too enjoyable. And there is plastered all over that face a smile which reminds me, years later, that much as we want to understand poetry, it's all meaningless unless we enjoy it, unless we find it within ourselves, at least from time to time, to chuckle at it, and to chuckle at life, and to find, in our poetic minds, if not the way to the circus, at least the signs of something joyful and marvelous decking the nature strip along the way.