THE SHAPELINESS OF THE SHEKINAH: ¹
STRUCTURAL UNITY IN THE THOUGHT OF
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ABSTRACT

Peter Steele S.J. is a highly significant figure in contemporary scholarship, religious sensibility and poetic achievement. His work is available in a very wide range of writings, some published, much in archival
situations. He matters by virtue of being a distinguished Australian academic, being widely published as a poet, and having theological and religious significance in at least three continents as a central figure in the Society of Jesus in Australia and New Zealand since the 1970’s.

The challenge of addressing Steele’s achievement lies in the fact that his religious insights form the basis of his poetic, academic and ethical imagination. The thesis investigates Steele’s unifying vision as it is expressed by him in the many ways he encounters the contemporary world. It attempts to identify his position as expressing itself in his perception of the Divinity, particularly in terms of the concept of radiance. God is seen in Steele’s writing to radiate into the world as Jester, Pilgrim / Expatriate, Celebrant, and Word or Witness.

To a certain extent each chapter follows a similar pattern of development. A radiant pattern is identified in and as of God, of Christ, of the Scriptures, of the saints (represented by the Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion) and of the writings of Ignatius Loyola. The *Spiritual Exercises* Steele regards as a guide and source of the relevance of the radiant character of God in the contemporary world. Importantly it is this radiant pattern that Steele also recognises in the work of other writers where he sees the presence of God in their poetry and prose.

Each chapter also has variations within this arrangement. These variations are appropriate to each chapter’s subject matter and to the genre of Steele’s writing under investigation. Chapter One describes these patterns basic to the thesis. Chapter Two, which investigates “the Jester”, gives special attention to Steele’s critical work on Swift. Chapter Three, which is concerned with the Pilgrim / Expatriate figure, compares the concept of exile and journeying within Steele’s homiletics and his poetics. Chapter Four, “The Celebrant” is more concerned to examine some of Steele’s own poetry; and Chapter Five, which treats “The Word or Witness”, considers Steele’s work on Peter Porter in some detail. The thesis offers a study of a modern Australian religious talent operating intellectually, academically, imaginatively and spiritually and finding expression in many genres of writing. It also offers an interpretative perspective on these issues.

Peter Steele belongs to a community of writers internationally recognised for their classicism and contemporary sophistication. He shares with writers such as Peter Porter, Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott a global perspective while remaining deeply committed to the significance of his own national, religious and cultural origins.

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Professor Steele (as he became some few years after), has assisted me not only by giving his assent to the project, but also by continually providing access to new writing, by his personal accessibility, and by his pedagogic kindness over the years. I am considerably in his debt.

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² Way, 28, 2 (April, 1988), 118-126.
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3 *Quadrant*, 40, 3 (March, 1996) 16-17.
4 *Age* (Saturday Extra), 21 October, 1995, 7. MS is entitled “Heaney Displayed”, AJAF viii.
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6 AJAF viii.
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7 *Quadrant*, 37, 3 (March, 1993), 47-54.
ABBREVIATIONS

Australian Jesuit Archives Folio

AJAF

[The AJA organises Peter Steele’s material into six folios with a supplement: [AJAF i-vi and Supplement]. Materials provided by members of the Society have been collected as Folio vii; and unpublished materials sent by Professor Steele have been collected as Folio viii. Both AJAF vii and viii have been sent to the Archives during 1997.]

Jonathan Swift : Preacher and Jester

Swift

The Autobiographical Passion: Studies in the Self on Show

Autopassion

Expatriates: Reflection on Modern Poetry

Expatriates

Oxford Australian Writers: Peter Porter

Porter

Word from Lilliput

Lilliput

Marching On Paradise

Paradise

The Potomac Sheaf

Potomac

“Singing for Supper”

“Singing”

“Why Stay?”

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“Shifts of the Spirit”

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“The Poem of the Mind: (Variations on a Spanish theme)”

“Poemind”

“Before the Silences”

“Silences”

“A Spirituality of Change”

“SpChange”

“Going After the Eagle: Reflections on John’s Gospel”

“Eagle”

“Love and Death on the Longest Journey: Dante’s Commedia”

“Love/death”

“Going Steerage in the Ark: Notes for a Priest’s retreat”

“Steerage”
“Haunting Presences: Four Gestures of the Imagination”  “Presences”
“The Radiations of Peter Porter”  “Radiations”
“The Shaft of Belief”  “Shaft”
“The Choices of Edmund Campion”  “Choices”
“Humour in Dissent”  “Humour”
“Circus Maximus: The Greatest Show on Earth”  “Circus”
“Three Christian Comedies: The Divine Comedy, the Spiritual Exercises and the Mass”  “Christian Comedies”
“Between the Lake and the El: Two Ways of Keeping Faith”  “Lake/El”
“Poetry and the Hunger for Change”  “Hunger”
“A Week in Winter: Lines for a Snow Man”  “Snowman”
“Joseph Brodsky: 1940-1996”  “Brodsky”
“The Hopeful Exile: A retreat for an intellectual”  “Hopeful”
“In the Pen: 500 Hours”  “Pen”
“28th October 1984: 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time: Oxford University Catholic Chaplaincy: The Old Place, St Algate’s”  “28th October”
“Images Fortunate and Unfortunate”  “Fortunate”
“Red Lights, Green Lights, Prophets and Universities”  “Red Lights”
“Derek Walcott: Prizing and Appraising”  “Walcott”
“Leaning towards the lyrical”  “Lyrical”

“Heaney’s Tenderness and Hope”  “Tenderness”

“Taking the Strain: The Prose of Seamus Heaney”  “Strain”

“Measures and Pleasures: Ancient Hopes, Modern Poems”  “Measures”

*Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*

*Mysticism*

*The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*  *Constitutions*

*The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*  *Glorylord*

*The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*  *Glorygod*

*St Ignatius’ Own Story As told to Luis González de Cámara With a sampling of his letters*  *Ownstory*

*The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Literal Translation and A Contemporary Reading*  *FlemingSpEx*

*The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience*  *Foolscepter*

*Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ’s Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality*  *Perfectfool*

*Opportunities For Faith: Elements of a Modern Spirituality*  *Opportunities*

*Letters of St. Ignatius Loyola*  *Letters*

*Peter Porter: Collected Poems*  *Porter Collected*