Long Paddock

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Peter Steele, *The Gossip and the Wine*
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Dan Disney, *and then when the*
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Peter Steele's *The Gossip and the Wine* is imbued with Christian story and ritual, and simultaneously with dailyness and the ordinary world. A praising of the things at hand is always a praising of a Christian grace. With this, Steele aims precisely at showing the indefinable: the richness of being and the extraordinary creation that everything is taken to be. As is well known, he is a Jesuit priest. This is a voice with priestly virtues: erudition, wisdom and more than a little wildness.

One of the challenges facing a reviewer of this slender book is that the poems become more and more voluminous in re-readings. The only way to address this problem in a limited review form is to catch at some things that are intrinsic to the poetry as a whole and to leave aside so much else.

The book opens with 'Rounding a Year', a complex sequence of twelve poems that celebrate the Church seasons and feast days of the Liturgical Year. This is followed by a mix of individual poems, including a number of finely crafted, rhymed sonnets. Yet there is continuity of exchange across all poems – a verbal joy that focuses both the world's multiplicity and its mystery.

In 'Rounding a Year', poems such as 'Cavalcade for a Child', 'Star Man', 'Green Man', 'Passover' and 'Hill', meditate the distinctive stories, prayer, ritual and vestment colours of Catholic liturgy. But the sequence also arcs across history, drawing on an immeasurable horde of classical, biblical, literary, scientific and

painterly sources. ‘Contemplation with Ashes’, for instance, pivots on violence and atrocity in human history, from ancient European and Eastern epochs to:

> the abattoirs that live by inhalation.
> Come Ash Wednesday, I’ll think again of Dresden,
> the whole place become a pyre:
> and come the feast of Christ’s transfiguration,
> remember Hiroshima and its lethal flash.

Tantalisingly, the liturgical sequence also draws in current mass cultural references, often with a celebratory eye on comic irony: ‘Three Faces’ picks up Balenciaga, Armani, Patek Philippe and Scrooge McDuck. Above all, the poems are steeped in time and at their heart is the poet-observer who is ‘charged as ever / with making out the vestiges of glory’ in the world around him (‘Reverie in Lygon Street’).

Pauses for a serious playfulness are plentiful. Liturgically, the splendid final poem in the sequence, ‘Reverie in Lygon Street’, represents Ordinary Time, resonating with the lengthy part of the Church year that reveres dailyness – the time between the end of the Easter story and the cyclical return at Advent. The poet is charactistically wry and solemn:

> Believing Him here, as in my folly I do,
> the once and risen mortal, prompts me
> to ask about the old days. Were the leeks
> as good in Galilee as the fleeing slaves
> remembered from their time in Egypt? Did
> the pomegranates delight the mouth
> as well they did the Solomonic eye
> that culled them for his temple carvings
> and gave him glory along with God?

These lines pile layer upon layer of imagery and question, collapsing the normal boundaries between biblical history and a wandering through a contemporary supermarket at Lygon Street in Melbourne. Throughout this book,

a vital continuum is enacted between the sensory – indispensible to the self in time – and the spiritual. The play of the senses is made, in a sense, sacramental.

Steele catches at the ineffable through indirection, holding to a reverence for divinity with a resolve to authenticate the sacred as accessible, even if elusive, as in 'Rehearsal': 'each breath a gift, each glance a blessing'. Unsurprisingly, dance is a recurrent metaphor. Its movement comes readily into 'Hearing It For The Hand':

> But God forbid that the last word be given
> to gravitas, that old pretender:
> for here's the hand at play upon the brush,
> brisking about the painter's house
> like Smart's cat, devilling for the divine,
> a world still there for the making.

So too, in many a poem, comes the idea of *Poiesis* and the poet as maker. Steele's own masterly brushstroke reveals an interplay of the reflective and the quirky, but perhaps more strikingly, a gesture to poetic art as fabrication. Yet even Smart's cat keeps reaching for the inaccessible and the dance continues.

Steele is meticulous in his crafting of verse, always using formal structures in his poetry, whether rhymed or unrhymed. Apart from the sonnets, all the poems in this book are in unrhymed, alternating five- and four-beat lines (whatever the length of the stanza). This form seems to be unique to Steele. He counts only beats that are firmly stressed, which become energetic drivers of the poetry amid a surfeit of spare syllables; often the expansiveness is into laconic tones. The exceptions here are his sonnets, which are in traditional pentameter and sonnet-rhyme. The sonnets that are dotted through the book are all gospel moments and they provide an intermittent counterpoint to the liturgical Passion traced in the opening sequence.

Returning to the multifaceted 'Reverie in Lygon Street', with its patience and praise:

It's well and good
to give a hearing to the old notion
of Christ as pattern for a yearning cosmos, poet
of galaxy and cell: but here's
the shambles of a face, which might be his,
and might be God knows whose. In a moment
the lights will change, the feet move, the planet
inch as it must, and the charged heart
wait, as it hopes with passion.

Immense mystery is conveyed by delicate phrase – 'Christ as pattern', 'yearning cosmos', 'of galaxy and cell', 'the planet / inch' – and the shambled human face is taken up into it. I am reminded of one of Steele's pensive essays, 'Chasm, Hope and Poetry' (unpublished):

> That a thing can be *so*, that a thing can be *at all*, may impinge on one's consciousness with a kind of leonine fierceness. . . . The sheer thereness of what need not have been there, and one day will not be there, may have the character of a thunderclap. Art, as I take it, hears that thunderclap, and attests it memorably.

'Rehearsal' is an elegiac, leave-taking poem, and is perhaps Steele's most intensely personal. It brims with gratitude and awe at the 'sheer thereness' of being. The speaker begins, 'Upright again, fritters of mint in my fingers', and as he steps through a series of farewells, one cannot help but notice that this is an imagination that observes, shapes and sustains the temporal and the sacred in the act of experiencing it. *The Gossip and the Wine* is a self-portrait of the poet at work contemplating time.

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Dan Disney's poems in *and then when the* insistently and shrewdly put pressure on 'reality', and whatever reality might be – testing it, reflecting on how it works and if it works, and what shapes it might take in differing human and geographical landscapes. The poet – any poet – has to mediate a reality that is of the imagination and the world, and essentially one that is composed of words and thought. Disney's poetry orbits the same basic questions as Steele's, but at a

ninety-degree angle, or perhaps leaning a little further. Reality as a trope takes on a rhythmic and innovative vibrancy in poems such as “Standing among the philosophy class”, “How to see inside machines”, ‘Toward a unifying theory of non-coincidence’, “Man with missing antithesis”, the nine short “(epigraph poems)”, and others.

As an example, the verbal economy and freshness of the “(epigraph poems)” is striking. Each poem begins mid-sentence and seemingly mid-thought (so too does the book’s title). And each of these poems spins the reader with deft line turnings and mainly simple words (with some arcane ones dropped in), into spaces that may offer momentary glimpses at reality, but with no attempt at definition. Is it by breaking away from the world of facts that we can make contact with what might loosely be called reality? Plato thought so. Take, for instance, ‘reality is a sound, you have to tune in to’, which incidentally is an epigraph-title: it is a quote from Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*. Here is the entire poem:

thus we are

gigantic. We outgrow nearly ourselves.
Did you not hear? *Sh-sh-sh!* The alarum of bells
the calibration of psyche.
Go thither into fields of GE pigs
and robotniks
and when you do go (close door) into that outward
try to leave quietly . . .
everything’s full of quivers

I should mention that the epigraph-titles from each of the nine poems is a quote from an influential writer or thinker, among them Orhan Pamuk, Buddha and Horace. The metatextual references add to the density, rather than clarify anything.

In the poem above, the speaker gestures to the enormity of scientific endeavour and, in turn, to a fragile state of mind. The conjunction of noise and fear (“Did you not hear? *Sh-sh-sh!* The alarum of bells”) amidst the request for

stillness ('try to leave quietly'), leaves the poem unsettled. This is a recurring pattern in the other '(epigraph poems)', and a bountiful one. Clatter is ubiquitous: 'everywhere / the knell of dogma!'; 'The doorbell of every atom ringing'; and

eh?

That lo-ing from the yards? Hoist. Stun. Earplugs.
Next. What commotion? Slit. Next!

I have omitted the lengthy titles of these three poems: curiously, unpacking their meaning may very well add to a sense of hubbub, yet equally to an appeal to contemplation. The same can be said of the poems. They are fascinatingly open-ended, as if presenting realities that will never be fully worked out.

Interestingly, the title of "(epigraph poems)" is in brackets, as if an afterthought, and this title is not printed above the poems in the text. Moreover, the individual titles of the '(epigraph poems)' are not listed in the contents, and while this may be a stylistic decision due to their length, or playful intentional, it is also a pity, particularly given their beguiling wordplay, among them: 'and pour a torrent of light into our dark world' (Mary Shelley); and 'here Superman keeps his robots, completely faithful copies of himself' (Umberto Eco). (The titles of the poems in 'Smalltown études' are also not given in the contents.) I am one of those readers who enjoys savouring a book's contents page and dipping in at random before reading from cover to cover. However, perhaps habits of this kind are being held up to scrutiny. The poems play jubilantly, yet they also have more than a hint of thoughtful decorum.

Some may want to slot Disney's poetry into postmodernism. Yet, to me, it does not seem to foreground much linguistic anxiety, or play with surface. The frivolity is a conviviality and the poems hark back to an older avant garde: a modernist passion. Try, for example, the stangeness of 'Illogos' and the mysterious '*Vir Heroicus Sublimis*'.

Amidst all the flux is the brief 'Epyllion', which appears real, with the body and imagination suddenly alive with love and sex. Here is the full five-line poem:

> I am knocking
> the table clear, skinning the room, in either hand
> her rosy arse
> Hell's Kitchen through the window a snowing postcard, moonlight falling
> on our backs in four panes.

This brief romantic narrative (an epyllion is a short epic) is traditional in its directness, yet is there any certainty of understanding? Possibly. But, if so, this is only because the genre is recognisable and the poem itself feels familiarly tangible. In reality, 'Epyllion's' beauty and energy does not let go of the flux that is posited throughout the book.

Disney's frequent long lines have elegance. They are superbly shaped to catch the cadences and tempo of the visual imagery, and the ebb of thought. In fact, a highlight for this reader is the two poems whose text is turned counter-clockwise on the page: 'How to hunt March hare' and '. . . never come to thoughts. They come to us'. These poems are rotated ninety degrees to accommodate very long lines. I tried counting the syllables and found an inordinate number of twenty-four and twenty-five in each line. This is the sort of activity that Disney makes one do, to what purpose I hardly know – perhaps to disturb 'the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves'. But a careful craft of making is inherent to Disney's questing.

'Smalltown études' are reflections on time's dominion over towns along the Omeo Highway. The reader is given pared-back sketches of landscape and country town life, as in 'Bairnsdale', 'The sky is starling-filled granite'; and in 'Swifts Creek', 'A bus draws in to school, freckled generations / at its windows'. This kind of spare, condensed language, laden with surprising metaphors, is one of Disney's strengths. So too is his need to observe the world – which he is keen not to over-interpret – as in poem ii from 'Still lifes': 'Orphan monks are pedalling the horizon orange, beside the glimmer of machete and militia.' These poems, so redolent of swift passing, are about solid presence in their saying.