NOTES ON A QUEST

The next time Umberto Eco (*The Name of the Rose* and *Foucalt's Pendulum*) decides to explore monastic mystery, he might try finding the grave of Dom Joseph Pothier. I had not thought much of returning to Europe, now that the joys of transatlantic passenger ships are past, but there were those nagging bits of unfinished business. A pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella was one, a prayer at the Cur'+e's tomb in Ars another, and perhaps another October 4th in Assisi. Finally, I had always planned, but never with proper time or transport, to pay my respects at the grave of Pothier.

I should have saved a lot of time and rather happy trouble had I not gone to the wrong railroad station in Paris some thirty years ago, when I assumed that Dom Pothier's remains were enshrined at St. Wandrille, where Dom David then kept his work and memory alive. Preliminary investigation last summer rendered that a shaky assumption. To begin with, he had died in exile (1923) at the Abbey of Saint-Cécile in Conques, Belgium, whence he had gone in 1901 when French religious houses were suppressed. Since the monks had not been able to return to St. Wandrille until 1931, I supposed he might be buried in Conques.

A drive to the nearest Benedictine house, a German missionary foundation, was fruitless. No one there even knew who Potheir was. A former abbot primate put his archivist to checking for me, with no result. Father Gerald Farrell at Westminster College seemed to recall that he was entombed in Luxembourg, how or why he wan't sure. That pointed to the Abbey of St. Maur in Clervaux.* I had been to Clervaux before, and visited briefly with Dom Paul Benoit, composer of all those *Elevations*. An altogether charming little city that climbs from the narrow valley of the Clerve high into the Luxembourg Ardennes, it was a scant three miles from my grandmother's village of Munshausen. (I have often wondered how grandma coped with the plains of Kansas, and am minded of a beer-quaffing Brewer fan in Milwaukee's County Stadium who laughed uproariously when he learned that I was from Nebraska. When I asked him what was so funny he said: "My wife's mother was from there, and she was 22 years old before she saw a hill!"

So I would start with Clervaux, one of only a few stops on a lean train that runs from Liège to Luxembourg City. They lock you in at nightfall in the modest Hotel de l'Abbaye which I chose over several resort establishments because it was situated some three or four hundred feet directly below the towering parish church, which one might first take to be St. Maur itself. Hence dawn found me fumbling through dozens of monstrous, mounted keys in the dark entry way. The height of the parish church was rather easily negotiated, but the footpath which led to the abbey, far beyond and out of sight, was both tortuous and treacherous, laid out, I thought, for a gazelle. Surely Monstserrat had nothing on St. Maur.

I arrived in time for lauds, beautifully done in Latin. But I could find no cemetery, not even one locked up for the night. The porter told me that there was a cemetery behind the walls, and indeed it was locked, but that after Mass, as I understood him, I could visit the grave of Dom Pothier. I was made most welcome to concelebrate,

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*Pius X established at Clervaux an association of prayers for the union of Christians in Nordic lands, and an ecumenical apostolate was established in Scandanavia in 1909-1910 by monks from St. Maur. At the request of Pius XI they undertook the revision of the Vulgate at the Abbey of St. Jerome in Rome. That work is now all but completed, and the Via di Torre Rossa facility has lately been turned over to the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music.

and I noted carefully the visage of a kindly monk who straightened out the cowl of my chasuble. I decided it would be he I would consult after Mass.

It said something for the humility of the community that I was entrusted with a choirbook, and I did them the favor of singing in the careful half-voice of which the monks of Solesmes are so often accused. Meanwhile my next neighbor kept me in proper place and posture and off the choir floor, for both floor and choir stalls were slippery-clean. I was deeply impressed with the prayerful and musical quality of the sung Mass. No matter that every possible nuance of the neo-Solesmes manner was carefully observed. It was done not just expertly, but naturally, as with the kind of penchant only the Viennese have for authentically executing Johann Strauss. It was all Latin, of course, except for the readings, the dialogue phrases, and, I believe, the *Pater noster,* which were in French, for beyond the choir there was a scattering of visitors. There was no responsorial psalm, but the gradual was done with a trio doing the *gradus* solo.

My designs on my cowl-straightening friend turned out to be a fine discrimination. Fluent in English, he was a Norwegian monk who had spent "half my life"—35 years—at St. Maur. Whatever his erstwhile pursuits, he had now settled graciously into the full-time care of the community's infirm and elderly, from whom, he said, he learned a great deal. He would be happy to take me to the cemetery, but must first get his non-ambulatory charges back to their quarters. That done, and a great, forbidding black key procured, we set out. Oh yes, he remembered Pothier's grave. He had not known him, of course, as he had so many who lay beneath the simple black crosses in neatly hedged rows. Trouble was, Pothier was not there *any more.* He remembered distinctly when they had exhumed him and given his spot to some other exiled abbot. (His name escapes me, and my confrère's snapshot of the current renter's cross is blurred.)

He supposed that they had sent Pothier off to St. Wandrille, maybe even in exchange, but he was not all that sure. Nor did he have any idea how he got to Clervaux from Belgium to begin with. There had been so much of this exile business. The St. Maur monks themselves had been exiled to Belgium when Hitler over-ran the Grand Duchy. The monastery was used to quarter the Nazi horses, and the proprietor of the Hotel l'Abbaye, who was also *secrétaire* to the surrounding communes, including grandma's Munshausen, had told me that they were not your run-of-the-mill army nags, but the large Belgian ones. "You have them in the States," he said. "They draw that big Budweiser show-wagon."

Anyway, the Father infirmarian marched us straight to the former Pothier grave, for he had witnessed the exchange, and he opined that none of this said much for monastic stability. And while he was not acquainted with the researches of Umberto Eco, Agatha Christe had indeed crossed his mind. So much for Pothier's sojourn in my homeland. He had lain perilously close to the grave of one Father Matthias Schmitt. The picture of *his* cross is marvelously clear, because, I suppose, I would not have fogotten it anyway. It was my father's name.

But it was good to have been in Clervaux once more, and I marveled at what I had forgotten, or perhaps not perceived, about the beauty of the place.

And it was good too, in the bright fall air, to be driving high above the Seine in the hills that escallop it outside Rouen toward the sea. Through the ancient citadel of Saint-Martine-de-Boscherville to the still more ancient Fontennelle, out of which St. Wandrille (and Mont-Saint-Michel) grew. The original foundation dates from the mid-seventh century and has been most recently restored in 1894 by the archbishop of Rouen with monks from Ligugé. Pothier was one of these, having moved from the sub-priorship of Solesmes to Ligugé, becoming its prior in 1893, thence to St. Wandrille in 1895 where, in 1898, he was named its first abbot. All this before any exile,

and it's a wonder that the man found a grave at all.

You would have to know the turn-off from the main road to find St. Wandrille, and even when you get there entrances to the place are not readily visible. Driving past the ruined walls of what I suppose was the chapel of St. Saturnin, one of the oldest ecclesiastical buildings in existence, we debarked near a series of barns in the farm area. Beyond an expansive garden, still green and vigorous in late September, we found access to what appeared to be a still habitable building, and shortly were in a venerable monastic choir, well-stocked with monastic antiphonaries. But no sign of any monks.

Wandering through the light and airy corridors of the quadrangle, we eventually stumbled upon a lone workman who directed us through an undetected passageway, where, at length, monks began to appear. They seemed to be coming from a conventual Mass, though its location was lost on us. One fellow seemed genuinely happy to observe the intruders. He nodded jovially and mimicked a doffing of cap, but without speech. (Come to think of it, maybe they couldn't speak, for the carpenter was the only person in St. Wandrille from whom we heard a sound.) So I cornered him, and in my best French said something like *Padre, volo sepulchrum Dom Joseph Pothier visitare. . .estne possible?* He grinned and nodded (I thought in the affirmative) but only looked to the stone floor. Clearly he did not understand much French! A second try brought another impish grin and a somewhat clearer gesture toward the floor. I finally looked down myself, and there, on the stone at my feet, clear as the day outside, was engraved:

PP JOSEPH POTHIER
1835-1923
SANCTI WANDRILLI
ABBAS

I was standing on his grave! Here beneath a corner shrine of our Lady, with candles and fresh flowers for both, most suitably lay he who had garlanded her with his *Cantus Mariales* (it strikes me that he was born on December 7th, and died on the 8th), robed the Church of her Son with countless chant inventions. How many hundreds of times had we closed our public concerts and private night prayers with the quintessentially simple and moving *Salve Mater* (*misericordiae* —oh, yes, we needed that, and even more especially *veniae*)? One could only kneel and know what it is to feel greatness near. And a kind of happy kinship. And tell at last of his poor high gratitude for so gracious and towering a gift to the pulsing life of the Church.

"And I suppose now we will canonize Cardine," said the nun from whom I had borrowed Dom Pierre Combe's *History of the Restoration of Gregorian Chant.* Well, we do have that tendency, even in the Church, a kind of secular faith in progress. (Henry Adams says some place that the progression from the Lincoln through the Grant administrations gave evidence enough to disprove Darwin.) It is not just that Pothier was vital to my own chant (and musical) formation, and that of many of its champions whom I knew. Or that I have occasionally deemed it appropriate to note that he was sometimes unconscionably lost in the PR shuffle of Gregorian chant in general and that of his native Solesmes in particular. If indeed that very estimable Dom Cardine is to have the last word (though it seems to me that the pretensions of semiology are not a few), then it is also clear that there is now a rather direct line back to the seminal work of Pothier.

But not just Pothier. There is no need to canonize anyone just yet, and there is more than enough glory to go around. There was Dom Guéranger, who desperately

wanted proper chant books for his newly established monastery and who launched a project that had the special blessing of Pius IX. There was the fortuitous presence of Canon Gontier, choirmaster at nearby Le Mans, who noted carefully the manner of Solesmes under Guéranger and whose published *Méthode* (1859) was important to the ventures of both Pothier and his early collaborator, P. Jausions. There are Ferretii and Johner and Suñol and Wagner; and the pervasive influence of the revered André Mocquereau is not about to be scuttled. It is a testimony to the vitality of the subject that it attracts universal independent probing right down to the current issues of scholarly journals.

One cannot review the phenomenon of Solesmes without being stunned at its fertility. Within a span of only a few years there were Ligugé, St. Wandrille, Ste. Marie in Paris, Silos in Spain, Clervaux in Luxembourg. It was the model of Beuron, among whose progeny are Maredsous and Mont César. It is one of the things I hold up against a particular breed of French-Catholic bashers. It may well be that only a small percentage are regular at Mass, but where, outside the communist east, is it much different these days? Sure, there is Lefebvre and Econe, and the equally frightening royalist posture of the Abbé of Nantes, but what does one make of the seminarists at Lucerne who cheered when Lefebvre left the Church? And Solesmes is but a single facet. There were, not all that much later, Maritain and Gilson, Bernanos, Péguy, Claudel, and Bloy and Mauriac. On any given day more trains run into the town of Lourdes than into Grand Central in New York; and the intense, quiet devotion that surrounds sequestered Ars and the waxen cadaver of its Curé does not cease. Respectable crowds attend Mass after work at St. Germain de Près, and at Notre Dame, where they overflow the choir area, and break into the *Salve Regina* when Mass is done.

It is possible, of course, as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* suggests, that the times have passed Gregorian by. But the chant has been rediscovered before, and it may be rediscovered again. Not by today's shrivelled pundits, but perhaps by the youth John Paul is going to Santiago de Compostela to meet. Or their children, or their children's children. It was there I closed my quest last fall. Although it was the eve of Columbus Day, a national holiday, and there were sporadic fire crackers, there was really nothing unusual about the old town's teeming streets at past eleven: boys shouting at soccer, racing skate-boards down the ancient hill. Meanwhile the redoubtable beige Santiago towers pushed their filigree spires up into a darkened space of blue that seemed not at all eternally distant, nor the spindle crosses out of reach of ruddy Mars.

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