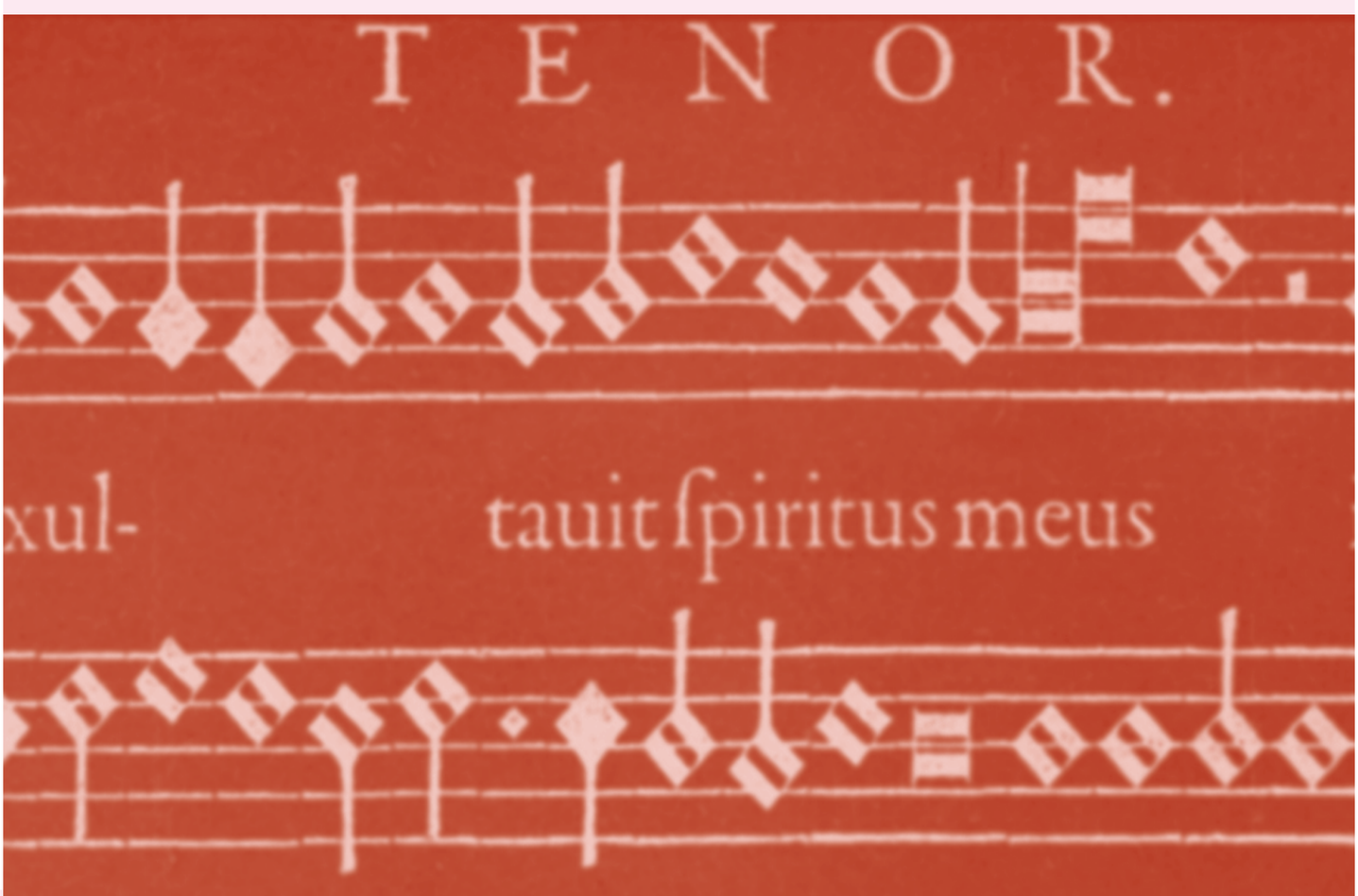

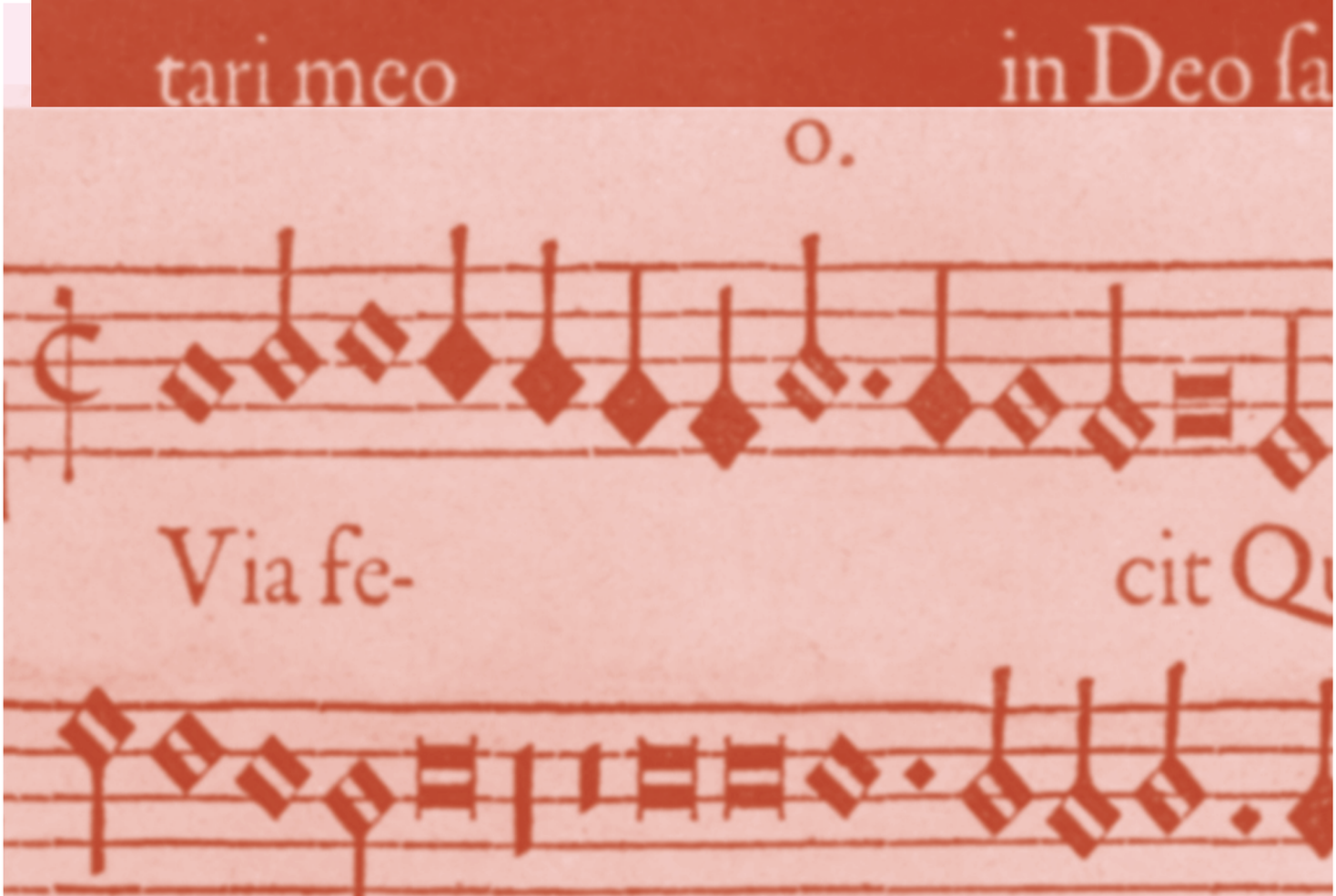

Learning the Tongue, Teaching the Ear

RICHARD HAGUE, FINALIST

It was around the seventh grade—after my boy-soprano voice cracked and I was dumped from the choir, and the first pimples began to erupt on my chin and forehead, and girls ceased being irritating rivals and had become maddeningly interesting problems—that Sr. Mary Ursula demanded I become an altar boy. Calling me brusquely into her office, she commanded, "Report to Sr. Isidore tomorrow morning at 7 sharp, young man. Don't be late." A sliver of smile, thinner and more dangerous than the blade of a shiv, slashed the bottom of her face.

"Yes, S'ter," I mumbled, chewing down part of the word as we all did when in a hurry to obey.

Next morning, I was handed a thin gray hardbacked book. "Learn pages 22 to 25 by Wednesday." Sr. Isidore was a tiny intense woman brimming with Hail Marys and bristling with curt ejaculations: "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" The black of her Dominican's veil contrasted with the stark white of her habit, out of which her tiny, narrow-fingered hands sallied threateningly forth like the claws of a velociraptor. "Twenty-two to 25, mind you. Then I'll hear you recite." I knew I had no choice in the matter; the nuns were divine in their authority, and had secret daily correspondence with my parents. The slightest disorderliness or laxity on my part meant hell to pay at home.

Spurred by fear and duty I returned to my classroom and sat down while the other kids talked before the bell rang. On the cover of the book Sister gave me was a color drawing of a priest, fully robed for Mass in the sacristy, baretta in place, holding his chalice covered by the paten and the cloth. He's wearing a red chasuble—it might have been Pentecost. I congratulated myself on already knowing

the meanings of liturgical colors—although if I hadn't, it was there to be found on page twenty-one. To the red-robed priest's right stood a boy in cassock and surplice, pointing at the clock behind him and laughing. To the priest's left, just entering the picture, was another boy, and I was struck by how much like myself he looked. He was in the very act of ripping off his jacket and glancing up sheepishly at Father, obviously late. The message, obviously, was, *Don't resemble him too closely, son, or you're in deep trouble*.

My father must have been handed a book exactly like that one 25 or 30 years before, because we were never late for Mass, not even once, ever in my entire life at home. My father was incurably premature for every appointment; it was as if he did not trust clocks, believing that they all lied—and that they all lied the same way, getting the time wrong by being terribly slow. So if Mass were at 8 A.M., we'd get there by 7:30. We'd sit silently in the car in the empty parking lot until the congregation slowly made its way up the side church stairs, gazing amusedly into the windows of our car and waving.

The front cover of this book carried the title, *Memories of My Altar Boy Days*. In the same yellow type, below the picture, appeared the date: 1961. Inside the front cover, lined in pink paper, was the motto "*Ora et Labora*,"—"prayer and work." The first page said "Thanks" at the top of it, and contained a printed message: "There are many who are appreciative of your devotion to this duty—not only the priests, the nuns, your family, your friends, but all members of our parish." And the message ended with "When the year ends, place this book among your keepsakes as it will be treasured in the years to come." And after that it is signed, "H. J. Grigsby." Monsignor Grigsby was a kind florid man with a great voice full of power and, as I remember now, a kind of roisterousness to it. He always appeared to be glad. He inspired love and respect in all of us, and I was pleased to have such a message from him, and believed it very much.

The first seven pages consisted of testimony by Cadet John L. Carroll (U.S. Air Force Academy) concerning his privilege of serving Mass at the Academy chapel. (A color picture of a Mass being served by two young men in uniform appeared on the back cover of this book, over the caption "Immaculate Lady of the Air Chapel, U. S. Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Col. Cadets, members of the Acolyte Guild serve regularly, in uniform. Story on pages 3–6.")

But again, I got the message—these boys are fine upstanding fellows who have maintained their devotion to the Catholic faith. You, too, sonny, could be one of them. Learn your Latin, kneel up straight on the altar, and maybe someday you will swoop exhiliratedly in the arms of our Immaculate Lady of the Air.

The real stuff began on page twenty-two (the pages were not numbered with numerals; the whole word, "twenty-three," for example, was printed at the bottom of each in italics. I was impressed by the elegance of this, and touched the leaves lightly, careful not to bend them or fold their corners.)

"Prayers And Deportment For Serving At Mass" it read in bold red letters across the top. A brief description of how to get started, following the priest's lead, followed, then the first response. In regular type, the priest's part: *In nomine Patris, at Filii et Spiritus Sancti Amen. Introibo ad altare Dei*. Then, in bold,

To hear the language, as it were, unlanguaged—to play it primarily as sound and rhythm and texture....

my response, the part I was to memorize and get the pronunciation of right: *Ad deum qui laetificat, juventutem meam* and then, underneath that, in red caps, for those unfortunates completely in the dark about how to pronounce Latin:

AD DAY-OOM QUE LAY-TEE-FEE KAT
YOO VANE TOO TAME MAE-AM.

I could feel my lips and tongue forming the Latin words. The ecclesiastical pronunciation was familiar to me from years in the choir, but I still felt a thrill to be again in the presence of this strange and beautiful language. I spoke the words inwardly, at first, to rehearse their rhythm and movement, getting the accents on the syllables in bold print right. Then I tried it out loud, low, murmuring to myself: *Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*.

About a decade ago, I asked a student to read aloud, the first time she'd ever seen them, the wonderful opening lines of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan."

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
    Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree....

On Liz Allensworth went, making her way through "Five miles meandering with a mazy motion / Through wood and dale the sacred river ran" and then on to...

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

When she had finished, silence. Liz lingered over the words on the page, her long honey hair hanging in the shapes of wings at either side of her face. I finally asked her, "What do you think?" She looked up, a kind of guarded rapture on her face. "I have no idea," she said, looking down at the page again and marveling, "but those words taste good to say."

It was the same way with me and my altar boy Latin. I loved the feel of the words in my mouth, on my tongue and lips, and since there was no translation, they could live as aural entities without any distracting meaning getting in the way of their song. *Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*—what James Agee, speaking of this very same church Latin, called "thrilling brooks of music."

There's a story told about the poet Milton, voracious reader and author of *Paradise Lost*. As his eyesight grew worse, ending in blindness, Milton taught his daughters to pronounce Greek. I said *pronounce*. He did not teach them to understand it; he did not teach them the language. He taught them only the proper pronunciation. For years thereafter, we must imagine the plight of Milton's daughters: They read daily to their distinguished father, droningly, at length, agonizingly and exhaustingly. Aristotle. Thucydides. Aristophanes. And they did not comprehend one word, not one iota of it. It was all Greek to them.

So it was with me and Latin, in the seventh grade at least. And I consider this strange, singularly aural relationship with a language—and its environment of ritual and antiquity, sanctity, and mystery—as the beginning of myself as a poet and writer. Latin was sacred; it was the conveyor of power and holiness—and it sounded beautiful to me. What a thing to be able to accomplish with words.

Many years later, during what were perhaps my most crucially formative years as a poet, I was so enamored of the very sound of language (and so very oddly callous to the sense of it) that I earned in my college writing fraternity the nickname "Vague Hague." And yet I am sure that this "Milton's daughter" period in my development was necessary and valuable; to hear the language, as it were, unlanguaged—to play it primarily as sound and rhythm and texture, separate from meaning, to fly it as the Immaculate Lady of the Air might have flown it—was all. It helped me develop an ear, and to form useful habits of listening.

It's no wonder that the poets I read most avidly and with greatest delight were Dylan Thomas, e.e. cummings, Shakespeare at his wildest, and most of all, Gerard Manley Hopkins:

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,
> in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
> In his ecstasy!

What a fabulous beginning. I wish I could remember the first time I heard those lines, the initial thrill I must have felt as they burst open the doors of my spirit. The movement of them is so remarkable, as are their assonances and alliterations, that I like to think Hopkins must have absorbed them from the Welsh culture he lived in (and that I like to think I, too, have inherited in some part through Maude Mae Davis, my Welsh-American maternal grandmother). It is a performance of language likened by another Welsh poet to "red hot waves of ecstasy."

Yes, a fabulous beginning, matching in its movement the initial wing-flapping then subsequent gliding of the falcon, followed by that long, unparalleled string of adjectives, which might be clearer if you read all the words as one long hyphenated compound adjective: "the rolling-level-underneath-him-steady air." Astonishing. But this is no less fine than the ending, in its almost groaning, grief-filled awe:

> No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
> Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
> Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

If you listen to those last two lines, and all their "ahs"—"ah," "fall," "gall," "gash"—it is as if you have joined the universal choir of woe, chanting some brilliantly awful doomsday.

And then there is this, in "Pied Beauty," in which the speaker catalogues the fresh loveliness and sparkling detail of the world, an emanation of God's glory:

> All things counter, original, spare, strange;
> Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
> With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
> He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
> Praise Him.

These words, also, would have made Liz Allensworth exclaim how good they tasted to say. As would have these lines, from Dylan Thomas:

> All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
> Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
> And playing, lovely and watery
> And fire green as grass.

And for unbridled force, how about Kent's verbal reduction to tatters of the simpering Oswald in *King Lear*:

> ...Knave, rascal...eater of broken meats...base, proud, shallow, beggarly,
> three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave...lily-livered,
> action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, supeserviceable, finical rogue....

But for me the problems of sense remained. Some of my poems, as I look back on those that have survived from college, were as strange as could be, music-pieces mostly, with no connection to the intellect or heart, those impor-

tant seats of poetry. In them, I was engaging in the poetic equivalent of what Wordsworth described as his "glad animal movements" in "Tintern Abbey"—movements through a world solely physical, a world that, though it was literally sensational, lacked the depth of sympathy and understanding that would "chasten and subdue," or that would connect him with the "still, sad music of humanity."

It's a matter of maturity. I see that I may have been at the same time working to master one aspect of poetry while inadvertently ignoring others. Too many balls to juggle for an inexperienced writer. Still, I remember the first time I heard William Butler Yeats. He was recorded late in his life when, the liner notes report, he was "almost tone-deaf." The voice comes high, riding a high uncertain register, but it is confident and steady. "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree." There is hardly any modulation; I can picture the aged Yeats, white-haired, his eyes closed as he chants this poem from his youth, and as he remembers reading *Walden*, which inspired it. The accent is purely Irish, and it sets off native archetypal resonances in me. St. Peter's (originally called St. Pius) was the first Catholic church in Steubenville, and was solemnly blessed by Bishop John Purcell, the namesake of the school, far downriver, in which I have worked all of my teaching life. Purcell was an Irish immigrant whose pronunciation of English may well have been much like Yeats's. My great-grandmother Annie's maiden name was Butler; I imagine, as I listen, that I am hearing an ancestral voice. I am mesmerized, transfixed. I want to make language like that; I want to chant myself and my life as if language were incomprehensibly immortal.

Not long ago, a colleague celebrated his marriage in a local church. It happened to be Trinity Sunday, and one musical selection was the old Latin hymn, "Pange Lingua." Both its melody and its words brought back many memories of old St. Peter's, and the ceremonial grandeur of Latin. To a boy steeped in Catholic ritual in the pre-Vatican II days, it was a moving and detailed remembrance, perhaps not quite as extensive, but certainly as powerful, as the moment when Proust brought that madeleine to his lips, and *Remembrance of Things Past* began. As a boy at St. Peter's in Steubenville, pursuing the Immaculate Lady of the Air, I became an acolyte of the language, and throughout the terrors and beauties and upsets and triumphs of my life, I have remained a servant and server of words.