

HURSTIANA [DRAFT]

Brother Ronald Hurst and I were discussing informally the characteristics of epic poetry with several students, after a lecture on why the Romantic poets really couldn't have much luck with writing epics. I remarked that even though the story dealt with heroic rabbits rather than with heroic human warriors, Adams' *Watership Down* was about as close to the traditional epic as we could come nowadays. Ronald remarked that he knew *Watership Down* because it had been read to the Benedictine monks of Saint Martins Abbey at a series of meal-times. I must have gasped or something of the sort. I knew that the monks were not to engage in conversation at meals and that novices would take turns in reading aloud while the Brothers ate. I assumed that they would be working through theological tracts and saints' lives, some of which can be pretty racy. But I hadn't expected *Watership Down*. "Oh, yes," said Ronald, "you'd be surprised at some of the things we've had read to us in recent years." He went on to tell about how, in the middle of *Watership Down*, one of the older monks had been moved to the infirmary and could no longer take meals with the community. When asked how he was getting along, he answered, "Not too bad – but I sure do miss those rabbits." And I miss Ronald.

Brother Ronald Hurst, O.S.B. first hove into view when musical acquaintances suggested that he might be interested in participating in our first summer program dealing with Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, 1975. I had heard of Ronald's accomplishments at and beyond Saint Martins Abbey and College as a composer, a flutist, a Jungian thinker, and a student of theology. He had presented a lecture on the symbolism of Wagner's *Ring* to the Jungian Society of London, and I asked him to make a similar presentation as part of our program. He gave a valuable lecture and continued, when time allowed, to function as an expert auditor in our program. He was fascinated with the interdisciplinary emphasis at Evergreen and about what might be accomplished in combining studies of the arts, of the humanities, and of psychology.

Earlier in 1975, Evergreen had received a Program Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities which was to support one specially funded advanced coordinated studies program in each of the next three years. Serving as project director for the grant, I also was planning in 1975-76 for the second of these three programs, which was to be titled "The Roots of Our Romanticism." I was to serve as coordinator and lead the work in literature. For such an enterprise, it would also be necessary for the faculty team to include expertise in cultural and political history, the history of visual art, and the history of music. Gil Salcedo was to fill the first slot; Hiro Kawasaki, newly hired, was to begin his Evergreen career in the second slot; Bill Winden was to fill the third. But in the spring of 1976, Bill was elevated, or relegated, or exiled to the Academic Deans' Office and would not be able to participate in the "Roots" program of 1976-77. He suggested that Brother Ronald Hurst would be a fitting substitute, and so I had to pry Ronald out of his normal teaching assignments at Saint Martins.

The task wasn't all that difficult. You may never have the occasion to address a formal letter to the Abbot of a Benedictine monastery, but if you do, the correct form is: "Most reverend and my dear Father." Ronald was enthusiastic about joining the Evergreen faculty for a year, the Abbot was supportive, and the deal was done.

Part of the deal, made possible by the NEH grant, involved having the faculty team of the "Roots" program engage in intensive planning in late August and early September, before the regular faculty contract-year would begin. Because Hiro and Ronald were both new to Evergreen, and because our program was to be ambitious, breaking new academic ground, the four of us needed the early planning period and used it, I believe, well. We got off the blocks fast in the first week of the fall quarter and kept up the pace through the year. Brother Ronald distinguished himself as an energetic colleague, a wise counselor to the students, and a dynamic lecturer, especially on the Jungian analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the connection between the whole modern mythology surrounding Victor Frankenstein's Monster and the medieval traditions of alchemy. As a memorable example of his dedication and his ingenuity, after Gil Salcedo, on a Monday, had shown and lectured upon Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, Ronald became worried that the students would mistake the pseudo-Wagnerian sound-track of the film for the genuine article and asked that the week's schedule be reorganized so that he could make a presentation on Thursday of Wagner's music and of how it had been exploited, especially by film composers. The result, pulled together in two days, was a powerful lecture-with-musical-excerpts, making the necessary points and going resolutely into uncharted territory. Benedictine or no, Ronald was a Greener.

Much could be said about the intellect and wide-ranging interests of my late friend. But I wish to recount some of the lighter moments to suggest his wittiness, his abundant sense of humor, and his humanity.

Among the vows he had taken was the vow of poverty. He never saw a salary-check for his teaching at Saint Martins. The College automatically transferred to the Abbey whatever professional compensation he received. Indeed, he would have to stop by an office before coming over to Evergreen to make sure that he had the pocket money to pay for his lunches and his cigarettes. He did have an annual entertainment allowance, but one of the other monks passed on to Bill Winden and me that he had spent it all on a lavish dinner to celebrate his connection with Evergreen – on the Windens, some Portland friends, his closest Saint Martins acquaintances and me. I don't know how or how much he expected to be paid for his teaching at Evergreen, but in our first months together the issue didn't come up.

On the last day of November, 1976, I mentioned that I would have to go down to the Cashier's Office to pick up my monthly salary check. At that time, all faculty members were paid on the last day, and the workers in the Cashier's Office were used to seeing some desperate, hungry, and temporarily penniless faculty members showing up, very much in the vein of the forlorn prospector dragging himself across the desert and pleading for "Water ... water" When I mentioned the Cashier's

Office, Ronald said, "Oh, is that where the checks are? I suppose I must have something waiting for me."

Indeed he did. He had started working for Evergreen in mid-August and hadn't bothered to ask about money. When he appeared at the Cashier's window, he did not look at all monastic. Instead of his "clericals," he was dressed in a white dress shirt open at the collar, and his favorite canary-yellow cardigan, unbuttoned to show the chest of someone who obviously was not starving. He said, "I believe you may have a check for me." The staff-member sorted through the pile of checks and said, "Yes, here's your November check ... and your October check ... and (with growing wonderment) ... your checks for September and half of August." I don't believe she had experienced anything like this in her dealings with Evergreen faculty members, and she must have assumed that this new faculty member must be independently wealthy. As fate would have it, when Ronald's parents died some ten years later and his father's will was probated, my friend – vow of poverty and all – became a multi-millionaire. But at this time, Ronald simply wadded up the checks and accompanying financial statements and stuck them in his pants pocket.

As he told me the sequel, several days later he was in the Abbot's office, urgently requesting that the Abbot authorize an expenditure of thirty-five dollars for the purchase of a new diamond stylus for the phonograph in the Saint Martins music classroom. The Abbot hesitated – "thirty-five dollars ... thirty-five dollars ... hmmm." While the Abbot was mulling over this substantial figure, Ronald stuck his hands in his pockets and discovered the wadded up Evergreen materials. "Oh, here, Father Abbot," he said and laid checks for thousands of dollars on the Abbot's desk. The Abbot stopped mulling, and Ronald got the stylus for the music room.

Later in our year of full-time teaching together, Ronald told me of some doings at the Abbey. Beside the number of masses said in the Abbey and Abbey Church themselves, those monks who were also priests serving other congregations also had to say mass frequently. As a result, the Abbey tended to go through large amounts of red wine. Periodically, for the sake of economy, a team of monks would drive a Saint Martins station-wagon down into the Oregon vineyards and bring back wine in bulk for the community. This season's wine run was about to start. Ronald heard one of the older monks ask, "Who's going to get the booze?" When he was told the names of the brothers making the trip, he said, "Talk about putting your monkeys in charge of your bananas."

Though Ronald went back to his teaching duties at Saint Martins in the next year, he stayed close to Evergreen and gave frequent service in courses on composition and music theory. He also appeared as a guest lecturer. On one notable occasion in the winter of 1978, I had to ask his help for the program offered by Betty Ruth Estes and me. The program was titled, "Formation of Modern Society: Sacred to Secular," and we were getting into a collection of writings on medieval scholastic philosophy and theology. The students were asking questions which Betty Ruth and I couldn't answer, and I asked Ronald to come over and sort things out.

Rather than give a formal lecture, he took the issues previously raised by the students and wove them into an authoritative but cordial discussion.

Among the questions following the main presentation, one of the students asked, "What about the Jesuits?" Ronald answered that the Society of Jesus was formed much later than the period which we had been reading about and that the Jesuits, organized about a thousand years after the founding of the Benedictine Order were "Johnnies-(or) Jebbies)- come-lately." Still, he wished to answer the question and asked the student, "Well, what about the Jesuits?" The student replied, "Are they as sly and conniving and intriguing as people say they are?" Ronald sighed and said, "You must never ask a Benedictine that question." Perhaps he could make the distinction between the two orders clearer by telling a story.

At a conclave of American Catholic leaders in the mid-twentieth century, the Abbot Provincial of the Benedictines and the Provincial General of the Jesuits got into a discussion of the relationship of smoking to prayer. They could reach no conclusion but agreed that each independently would submit the question to the Vatican so that the canon lawyers could provide an answer. At another conclave a year later, the two leaders met again, and the Jesuit asked, "By the way, did you ever put that question about smoking and prayer to the Vatican?" "Yes," said the Abbot, "and we got the answer 'Certainly not'." "That's odd," said the Jesuit, "The Vatican answered our question, 'Of course.' How did you ask your question?" The Benedictine said, "Is it permissible to smoke while praying?" "Ah," said the Jesuit, "we asked if it was permissible to pray while smoking."

Ronald, however, did wince a bit when he passed on to me another story. Because of friction among the various Roman Catholic orders, a meeting was arranged in a major cathedral, for the purpose of making peace and settling doctrinal and territorial disputes amicably. But the arguments broke out again, even though the meeting was being held in the nave of the church. Suddenly, a shaft of light pierced through the ceiling over the high altar, and in the light there appeared a piece of paper, thin as gossamer, which floated down and came to rest on the altar. One of the priests went to get it and read to the assemblage what was written on it: "My children, it grieves me to witness your bickering. Please do not harden your hearts, but put away your petty differences and love one another. Above all, know that you all are equally beloved in my sight. (Signed) GOD, S.J."

Though I associate these and other stories with Brother Ronald, they probably have been told and retold in Catholic circles for quite a while. I shall close this collection, however, with a punch-line which I believe Ronald improvised on his own. Whether or not it is his alone, it feels authentic and is worthy of him. While we were teaching together in the "Roots" program, I ran into Mark Levensky in the hall. Mark said, "You're teaching with that monk. I'm curious about what monks do." I said, "Well, they spend a lot of time in services, they chant, they pray, some of them teach at Saint Martins College and in other programs, some of them do the maintenance work and supervision to keep the Abbey going, and some of them are

priests serving other congregations.” “I know that,” Mark said, “but that doesn’t take up all their waking hours. What do they do?” I told him that I would ask Brother Ronald, and I did. Ronald started with the answers about duties which I had already given. But I persisted, “All very well, but Levensky wants to know what monks do.” Ronald pondered for a moment and then said, “Tell him they watch other monks.”