

*a depiction of the Writer
as an English Benedictine Novice*

ONE

“Lord open our lips, and our mouths shall announce your praise!”

The monks touched briefly, with their thumb, their lips to unseal them. With the tip of his left thumb, the Novice unsealed his lips. He cut quickly, a curtailed cross across his lips length and horizontally, he remembered himself to Christ. The Novice listened to the authority of the choir. He knew that he must not dissemble; he was wise and tasted first, the silence of the air.

This one voice had broken the sweet of the silence and now began to shepherd them around the Invitatory Psalm. About him, the morning sun was continually bedecking choir in her best lightsome attire, and the choirwood was all yellow gold beneath the dressing sun. He looked and saw the sacred veins of grain, running deeply throughout the holy, white choirwood of the English monastery.

The Cantor spoke with tingling authority. Like a herdsman, the *Hebdomodarius* guided them round the first psalm of the day. The pace was grave and solemn.

The Novice stood with the monks, listening to the beginning notes. He looked quickly again upon the straw-coloured organ wood, rendered honey-yellow in the morning light. The piping organ smoothed sound across the plane of the nave and lower sanctuary. The Monk-Organist touched lightly the stops and made sound. The stream of song swayed upon the air about him. The pipes flashed silver in the light. The various pipes sounded out upon the morning air. He listened as the unlocked organ pipes wine pressed out their first chords of the day. The song swelled, warming the air.

The Novice took up and read, holding the royal blue book loosely in his joining hands. He fingered the dark blue, hardboard psalm book expectantly and it bathed his spirit in delight. In his heart, he lay his finger across his lips and bid himself instructed. The Novice awaited the psalms, athwart the fruiting cedar and the Leban lime.

The Cantors had pronounced their half; the monks joined their reply. The reply began. The Novice attended them; he did not answer. At first, there was a humming of confused talk; the psalm was circling round and round as the Cantors steered the light body of the psalm round lightly. The monks, in drowsy hum, rang morning's yawning peal.

A despondent, raggedness of sound, was shaken off, from the scattered and sparse population of monks; most were weak voiced, for it was still very early. The monks sang in alternation with the Cantors. The body of the monks adjacent him sang across the flowing course of the silent Cantors. The precious sounds of the psalms were being sung, and the Novice marvelled at their words.

Then, when the sound gained shape and fresh familiarity, the sound to accompany the insistence of the chief Cantor, grew as fresh branch adding greening shoots upon an olive tree. The fresh streams of their song ran by him. The sound itself seemed to soften the very stones of the abbey. Their hearts and their faith spoke.

The Novice did not answer.

The body of the psalm continued in soft, insistent, purposeful urgency and gradually, the form of sound added fluidity and solidity to the first solo voice. The tongue of the Novice was silent from disuse and misuse; he trod water within the slow tide of their moving surge.

Pure, soft prayer filled gently the warm atmosphere.

The song was growing and grew steadily about him, stronger. Then, the psalm was concluded and with a terse final note and calm and peace and serenity reigned. The Invitatory Psalm had terminated.

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Two monks from above him and to his right, merged from the morning fresh and glowing choirwood. They carried with them books about their sleeves and at their breaking from the stalls, bowed toward the lower altar and crossing the nave, came to the Cantors' places.

The Cantors for the office arranged their books upon the broad-faced, flat head of the wood, that upon a thick and strong stem was mounted. It dwarfed their figures; upright they stood.

The Novice stood still, upright with the monks. There was a delay then soft piping began to originate at the organ further down below the seat of the stalls. The silver organ pipes gleamed from within their setting. Their silver lines flashed like the antler of deer. They shone from out the yellow honeyed wood of the climbing organ casing. The words of the monks would be tempered to the steel ringing pipes. Below the organ, within the lowest open of the Abbey Church the day was rousing itself to increased warmth. The music began again; he was fresh to it.

Still, the Novice did not answer.

Then, in alternation, sound and silence arranged began to issue and the deep-toned and lovely organ pipes pronounced the name of prayer. The vocal reeds of the pipes hummed and piped forth. A soft flow of air, a gathering tide, reissued from the monks' mouths in antiphonal chorus. Each side the other answered, each, responding to the others alternate silence.

The sound slid smoothly down the glassy way of the nave. The monks drank the air before them as the fruits of their faith enwrapped them, and, as the song rose as rising sap upon fresh branch, the English Benedictine Novice, was mute.

He was all wonder, all amazement.

Hail, Native Language!

The English Benedictine Novice began to answer; he was beginning to learn their language. He forced the tight and unworked cords of his throat to move and work, and felt the sinews of them within his larynx, work and move and warm, until the morning song smoothed out sweetly through his moving lips.

He spoke softly. He talked softly. In quiet joy his parted, fulfilling lips moved and they cooled the air with their reasoned language. He held the psalm book in his joining hands, tracing attentively the times of silence and of song. He sang softly. Their voices had skipped up a little as they warmed to their work. The monks sang the psalms; the Novice sang the psalms. The song was not untimely, no, he not sedulous by nature, no, nor beginning late. With a clear and informed spirit, he, standing, began the newness of that morning's offering. They, the Cantors became his guides.

The Novice's tones tested the air, striving quickly for the credibility of his own part on the warm, morning air. His accent was good; he hit the note of expectation. He did not miscarry the sound. The monks of solemn profession, from custom, from faith and from practice, their song, streamed still more thickly. The Novice's words and theirs hit the air together. His heart spoke. Faith put song in his throat. He sang very soundly. Something had given him leave to speak. The sound grew; it prospered. He spoke like the monks, with the monks; he sang, and would not tender any less. The Novice brought them answer.

The Novice restarted to a slight, clear voice and cradled it in his warming throat. He set to the creation of a humble, chary flute of sound. Like a rushing brook at Siloa, he knew theirs upon the warm and mellow air, and, he joined gradually, the conversation of their prayer. He trod water, waiting until the surge of song had regathered and regained and then rode upon their impulsion and surging sound. The river of the sound was fully swollen, intoned and answered. They stood like trees speaking. The whole, simple glory of their Art glowed. Words of logos-love rose ripe within their throats, and the panelled walls of the choirwood received the graceful words. The monks were well-tuned now.

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They bore all things well, both the words and the psalm tone, they bore both well. They bore the sound very well.

They let it carry far away and down into the wood and the stone of the New Building, the New Abbey Church.

The walls of the holy choirwood renewed in reverberation, the graceful words to Our Father in Heaven. He stood amazed. The Novice had speech with them. The Novice was living now in an English monastic court, no Star Chamber. The Novice had learned to mend his speech. It had become true and he no longer held his tongue, for faith had claimed his tongue.

The Novice spoke their language.

The vines of his song, strove to be inter-woven with that of the monks'. He had learned to mend his most marred speech. It had become true. The monks poured the sweet milk of holy concord out into the gleaming and open way of the nave. Their well-projected voices were gathering to a head. Understanding swelled his song and the decanting tide, filled the wide shores of the Abbey Church's lower bounds. The ark, boat and barque of the song sailed freely, both with stream and wind, and the chant washed richly, the limed-oak, front panels of the choir-barque. He had sung few, slight words, but to effect. His downcast eye turned away and down, and lit upon the altar. The sacred and radiant sight was bright. Then, the monks ceased their singing and the stream shrank to silence.

No, he was not sedulous, no, nor beginning late.