

EX NIHILO

ORIGINAL PROSE AND POETRY

HORA MORTIS NOSTRAE

John Dominic Bouck, O.P.

Wrinkled hands and a dull stylus: both were writing for the last day of their lives. Immortal thoughts dropped onto animal skin, man making dead flesh alive through a divine gift. Precise as the thoughts expressed by the most refined thinkers of the age were the letters written by a rude man, refined in the fire of a life of order and discipline. Work, labor, sacrifice, and prayer fashioned his rocky heart into a pliable instrument for a demanding God, and his servant, the Abbot. The daily portion of wine smoothed the rough edges of the sculpture and the stone was vivified by his brothers—friends, enemies, Christ, saints, sinners, the ghosts of his own life—who lived almost all their years in the walls of this building of living and dead stones.

Monk was his name and title, and he had lived by it. Alone yet together. Celibate yet productive. The silent man whose life was spent with words. An obscure thread in the tapestry of mankind. He did nothing that Br. Aelred or Br. Cuthbert could not also do. His patrimony was already given away, the day that rough cowl yoked itself to his back. The days had been dry for the most part, but his simple mind was ravished from time to time by the Spirit of his Master. Since entering the sacred order, he never once considered treason or challenge against his Maker. Loyal was he, as a soldier to a Knight in whose service he had sworn himself, while a life of

independence, success, and freedom had been within reach. Now, though, the great equalizer of mankind was paying a visit to the holy monastery in which he lived.



VASILY POLENOV- PALESTINE MONK

“Kyrie eleison.” The monk breathed raspily, falling to the cold floor. His hands groping for life overturned the page from his scriptorium, and ink soaked his rough habit. Br. Aelred rushed to his side and calmly supported his older brother. Joined by Br. Cuthbert, they led the ailing monk to the room whose walls had witnessed the final moments of hundreds of laborers in the vineyard of the Heavenly Vintner.

“Kyrie eleison.” The calm monk’s eyes burst forth now in wild speculation. Psalms were recited by the stream of brothers now being summoned. Here was the door of heaven and hell, mercy and judgment, present now in a small, simple room. “Kyrie...” Breath. Breath. Stop. Breath. Racing heart. Shivering. Breath. “...E...” Psalm. Shake. Heartbeat. Stop. Heartbeat. “...leison.” Wild eyes racing around familiar, all too familiar faces. Rough steady hands shaking, sweating. Wild eyes staring, guessing. Unknown. Mother of God! We flee to you! Wild eyes!

Calm.

“Christe eleison.” Death was here, but had not yet left the room. The monk now lay with eyes calmly opened, blinking. “Abba . . . Abba!” The stately abbot, his crosier left behind in his cell, came in to nurse his weakened son with the nourishment of the Church. His steady hand held his quaking body. His ear leaned over the mouth of the son of Adam. The whisper of small but eternal rebellions dissipated into the ocean of blood flowing from his Creator’s side. “*Ego te absolvo . . .*” calmly commanded the son of Adam, the Son of God. The host melted in the mouth of flesh. Two fleshs becoming one, a betrothal, the promise of a feast: already and not yet. The oils of anointing drying on his old skin soothed his spirit. The psalms which he had just begun to hear, even now were mixed with the whispers of the Suggestor.

Wild eyes!

The psalms became more fervent for the loyal steward. Abba got down on his knees and calmly interceded. He whispered into his ear, “*In paradisum deducant te Angeli . . .*” The monk’s face writhed in agony. Water was brought to his lips. Suggestions brought to his ears. Promises tested in his heart. The thousands of sunrises that had fallen into sunsets now fused into one moment. Did it take time for Satan to fall, for Michael to conquer? “Kkkkk...”

An eternity now opened up. The thousands of Complines were now realized for the monk. "*In manus tuas, Domine . . .*" The Abbot commanded, "Brothers, stay sober and alert . . ."

The simple and loyal mind of the monk was being asked questions in his state of weakness that he had never before considered. The sheer insignificance of his life now mocked him. He saw the lying mouths of some wicked brothers stain the holy words which proceeded from their forked tongues. Around his head, letters carefully written danced with skeletons. A wretched thought entered his mind. Images dripping with lust came into his heart.

The room went black despite his furious glances. He saw what could have been: his homestead and a wife bearing his child coming to meet him. His strong hands lifting a hunk of choice meat to his mouth, blood dripping on his smooth, clean chin. His son, whom his friends said bore his resemblance, looking on in admiration as his father laid the foundation of a new shrine. His sword running through the infidel who dared encroach on his land. His wife's body warming his own in the marital chamber.

"No!" the letters around his head laughed, "No! We are your legacy!" they screamed. He shook in terror. He saw himself walk through a door, and all went black. A hundredfold of nothing is nothing.

Briefly appearing from the darkness, a woman shed a tear on his cheek. Her young baby, who bore her resemblance, wiped it with her veil.

Now, he was taken to a moment in his youth when he had stared at a prostitute and imagined having her. His heart, if not his whole body, had given in. He confessed it the next day. His old confessor appeared to him and said, "My son! You did not describe it fully! You have little time! Hurry, confess now!" The monk's lips were two stones held fast by a tongue of mortar. Now he was moved to the pantry where as a novice he had stolen a loaf of bread. The bread turned in his stomach. He vomited on himself.

Looking into his eyes, the Abbot wiped his tears and his mouth. “My good son, let the Lord Jesus take your sins. Be still and know he is God.” His old body stopped shaking but his tear-filled eyes fixated on the cross hanging over the heart of his Abba. “Kyr . . . Kyr . . . Kyr . . .”

Suddenly he only felt darkness around him again. Then, a monk who had always mistreated him appeared in his mind’s eye, causing his heart to pound in anger. “Eleison!” The dying monk screamed. He gave his heart to that wicked face and said silently, “*Ego te absolvo . . .*” Peace washed over his feeble frame. Soon though, it gave way to another face. He recognized him, a foolish brother who bumped his elbow once as he was writing. A whole page ruined because of an idiot. When it happened the monk was silent, but he called his brother “Raqa” in his heart. Now, that brother had long since been buried in the earth, but the dying monk pleaded with him for mercy. The face smiled and departed.

The woman returned. She brought her little child close to the old man’s face. He gazed upon it, and noticed he not only resembled the face of his mother, but his own face, the face of a rude hired hand; this boy looked like him. He touched his little hand and the boy looked at him with love. All of a sudden, he became the child, and was held in the arms of his Father.

Still.

The Abbot’s fingers closed the calm vacant eyes of his son, and prostrated himself over his body. “*Requiesce in pace, fili mi.*”

John Dominic Bouck entered the Order of Preachers in 2012. He studied at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota and the Angelicum in Rome.