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## The Bridwell Quill. Issues 36-38: Dante, Reggie, & Gertrude

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# The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



August–October 2021

Issue 36–38: Dante, Reggie, & Gertrude

*Linguae aeternae in the Eternal City: Latin & Italian*

I found Dante in crawdad country. Heading back from a lengthy roadtrip to rural North Carolina earlier this year, I stopped over in the understated, but remarkably versatile, historic, and collegiately energetic rivertown of Shreveport, Louisiana. I had never heard of the Red River, a modestly flowing mud slurry among swampy sloughs, bald cypresses, and crape myrtles just east of this small city. But its presence was part of the town's history as a "port," as well as a remarkably significant water filtration hub. I decided to detour through the downtown area, as I often enjoy exploring old city landscapes and taking in the variegated elements of historical spaces adapting to our present world. In particular, I delight in discovering long forgotten architecture now succumbing to the elements or holding up heroically like Roman era roads; or learning a lost history slightly revealed by a sign, statue, or survey marker; or exploring what cultural offerings middle America has at that moment, usually in the form of an art museum, gallery, or market. I was also in search of a caffeinated beverage to sustain me for the rest of my trip.

That's where I met Dante. On one of the main drags of downtown Shreveport, the Old Sears Building sits on the corner of Texas and Louisiana. Long gone are the crowds of department store denizens, who wandered in on Saturdays for perfumes or trousers, or during the holidays for bundle deals on Christmas tree ornaments, gift baskets, and tin-box sweets. I did find my own treats, though, at the boogie little storefront Rhino Coffee, where I nibbled on a fine peanut butter cookie and sipped a punchy café latte. It was out

front, though, where I stared admiringly at the tall century-old building and its classically-designed and well-built façade. The great Italian poet gazed piercingly across the mostly empty Sunday afternoon, an antique embossment of decoration and ornament. It was a cultural motif for the building's architects, the illustrious and innovative Wiener brothers, who were early exponents of American Modernism. In their more youthful works, they designed structures in the manner of traditional form—like this building—calling back to antiquity, paying tribute to the past, not just in composition, but in the characters cemented into the street-facing stone: the severe and distinguished visages of the medieval poet, accompanied by what appeared to be Julius Caesar, Aristotle, and perhaps even Voltaire. Dante was certainly unmistakable, with his side-ear coif draping down along his mien. It was a rather surprising discovery, and one of many reminders I would have of Dante throughout this year of his *neconversary*—the seldom used term describing the commemoration of a person's death.

Back in 2001, while I was studying Latin in Rome with the late, great Reggie Foster (above)—the papal Latinist extraordinaire—I often spent my listless afternoons in an empty classroom adjacent to Foster's lecture hall at the Gregorian University. I stood on the dais of the classroom, dusty chalk sticks in hand, writing and erasing lines from the *Divina Commedia* on the board over and over, in efforts to memorize parts of the text. "*Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura...!*" Dante most prominently played a part not only in my education while living in Rome, but in the veiled and layered memories I have of the Eternal City. When I think of Rome I think of morning espressos amid the buzz of a



neighborhood café, afternoon walks through cobbled streets, and a palette of colors, shadows, and light contrasted against clouds floating over ancient green pines amid urban paradoxes of space. I also think of trying to learn Dante one moment, while being inculcated with Augustine, Gregory, Leo, Cicero, Pliny, and myriads of other classical writers in Latin the next. Within that cocoon of the mind, Rome was always golden, blue, bright, and full of antique joy; but much of that was buoyed by Father Foster's own presence of mind and what he brought to the *joie de vivre*, of living a life so full, expansive, and ebullient that it was more contagious than any pandemic.

I received an email from my old friend Soren Johnson in Washington, DC a few days after Christmas this past year, with a link to a *New York Times* obituary announcing the death of Father Foster. It was beautifully written, and while I mourned, I also appreciated the cheeky humor of the writer, who said "He was LXXXI." I smiled knowing that Foster himself would have loved that designation. Not 81—but LXXXI. I was still shocked and deeply saddened for many reasons about his death. I hadn't expected it, least of all on Christmas day. The last time I talked to Foster had been in October. I'd driven up through Wisconsin one weekend with my teenage daughters, with the intention of visiting him on our way back from an apple orchard. I told him I'd recently been in a reading group grappling with the writings of Leo XIII and he made one of his witty comments that reading Leo's Latin was like playing Rachmaninoff—something to the effect of: "it's like saying it's easy, but no friend, it is not easy to play Rachmaninoff! Or read Leo in Latin for that matter, no sir! That's some sophisticated stuff!" He always had delightfully clever and rather funny quips like this. And like any good Italian, he'd adapted as an American Midwesterner for nearly half a century to living among Romans, and so he gesticulated with the best of them. He regularly made points with digital punctuations, raised arms, clenched fists, and a vibrant weaving of an imaginary loom or web that was meant to evoke the no-nonsense business of Latin, our need for more humility in the face of the heroic tongue, and the vibrant world that could be so easily



accessed as long as we "got off our a\*\*es and got to work" with the language. "Sit down and *shut up!*" he'd often declare. And we'd listen and take it and embrace his *linguae mugitus ac postulata* ("linguistic bellowing and demands"). At root, though, it was because he cared about the language, about Latin, about unmasking what was hidden from those in the present, who did not know, learn, or generally

think about the past. As much as he wanted to reveal, he wanted even more to equip, and make us independent thinkers, bold action takers, and most simply: good, honest, and empathic human beings. He cared about each and every person in his itinerant classrooms, despite the gritty, gruff persona he was often perceived as having. And his true essence and power to attract hundreds of students and influence thousands over all those years is the greatest testament to his most profound pedagogy of hope. The montage (on the previous page) of still

images from a video I took with him in 2010, where I asked him to speak in Latin, shows his great energy. The characteristic gesticulations convey his boundless enthusiasm and passion for the language—and his tireless love of life that he never betrayed with complaint, distractions of malady, or concern. For a man of declining physical health, he had the heart and spirit of the most empowered and energetic youth that put people a quarter of his age to shame.

He was in quarantine in October and said he was doing well, even though he was at the end of the sequestering from his bout with COVID-19. The announcement of his passing from the virus in December made it all the more confusing though, since it seems he suffered two cases in just a few months before his final days during Christmas. At the time we last spoke, he said "he was never better." He always said that. Life was constantly getting better and better, despite the clear indications and realization that his body was not—and over the last decade as he grew less and less physically healthy and mobile, his mind and spirit seemed to bloom, extend, and flourish, even more than I had known of it twenty years earlier. It was almost mystical in the measure of his aptitude to *infect* others with his own boundless love of the world. But perhaps this all made sense, because in

some ways, his eternal path toward the end of life was just that: the acknowledgement that everything *was* getting better and better, because soon he would literally be meeting his maker, careening on a path toward the Eternal. I could only imagine that at the gates of whatever heavenly pass to which he came, he was itching to correct St. Peter's Latin, because we all know, Foster knew better Latin than Latin itself. The irony of studying Dante in my down time from Foster's classes is that I only realized recently that Dante vigorously defended Italian *over* Latin—the comfortable vernacular, what Foster would likely have called “the easy way out!” When I read Dante's *Convivio*, which in many ways is a not-so-subtle indictment on Latin in favor of a more “luscious” Italian, we see that the stage is set. And now, after Foster's death and our celebration of Dante, two distinct characters come into sharp relief. I now see Dante in many ways as the anti-Foster, and Foster the anti-Dante. How much I wish my old mentor and friend were still alive, so I could ask him what he thought of all this. I'm sure he would have a profoundly colorful answer—much like how he wrote his letters. (Shreveport Dante, above).



I first heard of Foster back on a bus ride in Jerusalem sometime around 1999-2000. I remember the bright clear blue sky above that ancient city that made a clear dome over the camel-tan hills and the ancient sun-bleached stone buildings. I think there were only three people on a nearly empty bus—the driver, me, and a young nun sitting behind me, whose name I now forget. She wore the usual habit and her neck-to-ankle dress was a baby blue garment with white starched fringes and cuffs. We struck up a conversation about ancient languages and I learned that she had studied in Rome. By the time we had arrived at our destination, she'd not only informed me of Father Foster's existence, but had given me his address in Rome. She said he was an amazing person, but also that he was a character, forewarning me of his unpredictable antics in teaching and letter-writing. She was right—I immediately wrote to him and not long after received a letter in return. It was short, pithy, and to the point: *Wonderful to get your letter; glad*

*you're interested in Latin; I would love to have you as a student, but you have to be serious and work hard, and there's a contract. Look forward to seeing you in Rome.* It was a simple letter, but in its steady block letters and realistic expectations there was a warmth I had not yet fully come to know, from a man who changed many lives, including my own. The letter too, perhaps characteristically Foster, was written in several different colored markers! I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into, but I knew that whatever it was would certainly not disappoint.

I arrived in Rome within the year somewhat unprepared—I had just landed at Fiumicino Airport, took a cab to Termini, and settled into a cheap hotel nearby. I quickly picked up a local newspaper that advertised apartments and called around for the best deal. After some searching and a limited budget, I found a crammed hostel-apartment for international students. It was a ragtag group of more than a dozen kids, from New York, Dublin, Paris, Istanbul, and elsewhere. We were living it up, eating, sleeping, and studying all the while indulging in the Roman Holiday of our youths as if we thought we were itinerants frequenting Gertrude Stein's idyll of 1920s Paris with Hemingway, Joyce, Matisse, Pound and others at *27 rue de Fleurus*. The closest thing we had to an Alice B. Toklas or Stein was a bombastic landlady, who threw her “ciao ciao” around like rice sacks at a wedding or Jolly Ranchers to trick-or-treaters on Halloween.

Our hostel-apartment was a second-floor enclave of a place called *Yellow House*, which no longer exists. The unusual housing arrangement eventually turned into a cacophonous torture chamber as it was situated atop a Roman *discoteca* that pounded bass till 5AM, so that the entire flat shook. In the late mornings, I had to find my way to the hallowed halls of the Gregorianum, affectionally called “the Greg,” like the cool elder brother on the Brady Bunch. That is where I practiced my Dante, but more importantly, that is where I came under the tutelage of Reggie Foster.

There was a rowdy bunch of expats whom I spent time with in Rome, many who came to study under Foster as well: the brilliant while simultaneously irreverent and pious Irish priests; the retirees wanting to enrich their senior years with learning, including a lifer name Shirly, who dyed her hair magenta, spoke flawless Italian and cursed like a sailor; the 97-year-old Danish woman who wanted to study Italian and lived in the alcove of a church hostel; the Anglican priest and his partner, who were specialists in 19<sup>th</sup> century art and clavichord music; the American priest who looked like a GQ model and drove a *Vespa*; the midwestern Catholic woman who loved the church more than anything in the world, but had zero time for the clergy; the Canadian high school teacher who loved Rome, but struggled with the confines of canon law; the reticent Balkan woman, who'd been one of the six children at the famous Marian visionary experience at Medjugorje, Bosnia in the early 1980s; and the brilliant mother and daughter duo from New York City, who sat behind me on the first day, and whose whole family ended up becoming some of my closest friends while in Rome.

Foster brought us all together. And none of us knew at the time how a simple Latin class, taught by this “simple” teacher might change the path of any one of those lives in that room that day. But it did for many. He instructed us and introduced us to methods of learning and seeing and made something seemingly impenetrable both alive and irresistible. Even when I took another Latin class in graduate school after studying with Foster, it was not only disappointing, but downright offensive in the way it was taught, including the pessimistic attitude of the professor toward students. I could never have another Latin teacher again.

Foster not only taught us in the classroom, but outside. We took field trips frequently. We sang at locales all over Rome. On holidays or birthdays of famous Latin writers, historians, or orators we would venture out to one place or another. We'd go beneath one statue and read the author's words or put those lines to the music of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* and Foster would announce: “isn't it glorious!?” We read our Latin sheets at bus stops in Largo di Torre Argentina, where Julius Caesar was actually stabbed—under a terminal stop and garbage can, *not* the Coliseum. We went to Cicero's villa, stood near a bifurcating stream, and recited a

letter in Latin that the ancient lawyer wrote about his home and that very river where it split; then went to eat prosciutto and cheese plates and spaghetti with a rotund priest named Padre Carmello. We ventured out into Viterbo, Castel Gandolfo, Gaeta, and elsewhere, playing to the subterranean histories that buoy this place called *Roma*.

Years later, now living in Chicago, I discovered that Foster had become ill and had an accident that brought him back stateside. He was in a nursing facility in Milwaukee—just two hours north of me. For the next decade, I would visit him. We would sit and talk and laugh and remember Rome. We would talk about Latin and music and literature. Sometimes we would even go through some texts like *Lorenzo da Brindisi* with earnestness and joy. He would talk in ebullient tones, chit chat about Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven—“glorious! It's simply out of this world!” he would declare. Shaking his head and pointing his finger upward, as if he knew something divine was upon us all. “People don't get it. They need to know...!”

Many people have memorialized Foster, with great flare and reminiscence. Yes, he was very likely the greatest Latinist in modern times, perhaps even one of the greatest in history. Ostensibly, that is his legacy, but in other ways, I would argue it is more than that. Of the many people I've met in my life he more than nearly anyone else embodied something that was far greater and more profound—he had an unbridled enthusiasm (“god is within”) that manifested in hard work, constant labors, monastic quotidian living (he slept on the floor and woke at 3:30am), piety toward the divine, an honest and healthy criticism of foolish authority, a willingness to do what was good and right, a sheer dedication and devotion to people, and not to the dollar or the wallet, all bundled up in an entirely unique crossroads with power and history. He was, indeed, the nuanced and sophisticated mouthpiece of the Church that tied antiquity to the present and tried to maintain that in this little thing called Latin. He walked among kings, the popes, after all. He corrected *their* Latin—the infallibles' Latin! There was some level of power and trenchant leveling that was contained in his reckoning with the language of the most religiously powerful on earth, that temperament. But his goodness and his intensity toward treating Latin as

a viable tongue, was what drew people to him. In that respect, he had many families—his birth family, his religious community, his church, his students, and his interlocutors of antiquity: Cicero, Leo, Innocent, Augustine *et alia*. Latin was his best friend.

Like some people in my life, and there have been just a few, their presence is still felt deeply long after they have passed on. I lament a deep sadness at Foster's passing. I'd always had a dream of returning to Milwaukee to study Latin with him, to read through *Lorenzo da Brindisi* or some other text, which I had maybe seven or eight years ago. At the time, I recall him playfully correcting a word or line of text, one that was especially vexing because it was one of those thirty-line sentences written by an over-the-top late-Renaissance writer. An unusual word for some kind of *coot* (a bird) came up in the text and I cackled at his interpretation. He in turn threw a Latin joke at me with *cachinnat* ("laugh loudly") like *the coot!* I'd take any correction from him nowadays with delight. Now that he is gone from us, I am thankful for all that he gave to me and so many others. Like the trees in those apple orchards we visited, Foster's legacy proliferates. His inspiration, we hope, will continue long into the future through the children and grandchildren of those of us who had a chance to share the same time on earth with a most remarkable human being.

*A Century of Song: Gertrude's Party*

Not long after Christmas 2010, my mother received a message on her phone. The voicemail was crackly and unclear, but she soon called back to discover a person in her past whom none of us knew or remembered. Sixty years earlier, a group of displaced persons from Germany following WWII had come to the United States sponsored by my great-grandfather. Scores of people were making their way to my family's home in upstate New York at the time, partly due to these sponsorships. A young woman in her early thirties, with advanced degrees and experience as a teacher, had come from Germany. She said that she'd spent time babysitting my mother in the 1950s before going on to work in academia in NYC.

The phone call was from Gertrude Fankhauser, who'd spent the intervening years in NYC and had retired to her apartment on the Upper West Side. She was a quiet, refined, and steadfast woman, with fine taste in food and culture. She invited us, as a thank you to our family all those years earlier, to come to her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party in Manhattan—which was to be held at the New York *Liederkrantz*—a word I did not know, nor an entity I had any idea about.

Blocks from the Guggenheim, situated on E. 87<sup>th</sup> Street, near the heart of the old German District, is the *Liederkrantz Foundation*. The German American singing club was established in 1847 and operates to this day. The building itself is in one of New York's wealthiest neighborhoods and looks like it's out of the Gilded Age. On the appointed evening, my mother and I took the train down to the city from our upstate hometown more than two hours away.

We found our way through the grey January streets that were still icy and cold. Up the short stoop through heavy metal doors flanked by giant ornately tempered iron lanterns and grills, we entered into a hall with a chandelier and into another time and world.

The doorkeeper guided us in through the hallway with high ceilings and Empire era furniture. There were grand and imposing portraits of 19<sup>th</sup> century figures, *maestros* and *Meistersingers* from the old country and new. A formidable bust of Beethoven sat squarely on a credenza dominating the sitting room. We were greeted by the *maître d'*, whom I'd later learn was a wonderful Polish woman named Ewa who had been with the organization for some time. The dining room was set up for the birthday feast, with gold trimmed porcelain plates, tea cups, and napkins folded like origami. The walls had several pictures of German themes, mostly related to opera and the Bavarian countryside—a mixed décor of Bayreuth and Frederick the Great's *Sanssouci*. When Gertrude and a dozen of her friends arrived, we all gathered and talked before sitting down to the meal. We enjoyed a sumptuous 5-course meal, replete with gelatinized *Gänseleber*. We had several rounds of champagne and I rose to toast my new friend in her ninetieth year with a few lines of Schiller (mostly known through the Ode to



Joy, of course) and wished her many more healthy years ahead.

Earlier this year Gertrude—or Trudi as we affectionately called her—died peacefully two days after her one-hundredth birthday in New York City. I had not seen her since 2015, when she made a special trip upstate to visit where she'd first lived when she arrived in the United States back in the early 1950s. Soon after her ninetieth birthday party in 2011, I joined the old singing club, the *Liederkränz*, and spent innumerable evenings skipping across town to rehearse with the small group of diehard singers, under the watchfully superb eye of Maestro Ulrich—a renowned Schubert scholar and tenor par excellence. I also began to accept Gertrude's invitations to the Met for many delightful opera evenings. She had been a member for decades and as she grew older, her eyesight and hearing deteriorated. But she maintained her membership and the joy it brought to the twilight of her worldly senses. We spoke about many things those evenings—about the singers, the operas, the musicians and the history of performances in New York, Berlin, and elsewhere. After the operas, I would accompany her to her doorstep and head home. I left NYC in 2013, but still kept in touch with Gertrude, calling her every few months and on holidays, and sending her cards. But her gesture of kindness and remembrance did not end there.

As soon as I settled in my new job in Indianapolis, where I went immediately after working in NYC, I looked around to see if there were any singing clubs in the area. My departure from New York and leaving the old club behind was lamentable. To my surprise and delight I discovered that Indianapolis at the time had not just one, but several singing clubs—many of them German. And to my astonishment, the biggest of these organizations was the Indianapolis *Liederkränz*. I quickly visited and soon after joined the club and choir. It was far more involved and vibrant a group than the New York branch. There were probably more than a hundred active members, and both the men's and women's choirs had dozens of singers. Over the next five years, the Indianapolis *Liederkränz* became a mainstay, in fact, it was very much a family and center of steady, constant, and lifegiving social activities. Under the outstanding leadership of Cliff and Loesje Chandler, and other marvelous

individuals, the choir and club provided a community and social space for people from all walks of life. And even if there was fun in every festival, picnic, or fair where we ate brats and drank beer, the true joy was in the singing as a group, as a community, and as friends. Now, several years on and in Texas, I no longer sing in a German choir. But I've managed to meet those involved in local *Sängerfests* here in DFW, and through them, many other people with diverse and intriguing interests. Even during my travels in recent months, I've connected with various artists and musicians somehow associated with the *Liederkränz*, each of whom has added a little extra light and goodness to my own life. It is safe to say that I have come to know hundreds of people, a few of them dear friends, all because of an unexpected phone call from a stranger. And for that, and to Gertrude, I am most thankful.

We don't always know where time or life will go ahead of us. And that's what I like about the unexpected nature of this world. For some, it can be unnerving, even frightening. It can bring deep sadness and regret. But it can also be liberating and fulfilling all at once. I never could have imagined two people like Reggie or Trudi would be so impactful on the course of things for me, but they were, and very much still are. Their loss this year was difficult, but also part of life. I have the deepest gratitude for having met and known them. Yet their greatest gift for me is that they taught me how to be grateful, kind, and giving—even *or especially* to those we know little or nothing about. Sometimes those smallest of gestures eventuate in the most profound and influential outcomes, even years after a person is gone. They will not be remembered as famously or importantly as Dante, of course, but in their own ways, they have changed the world for the better, and that's not something we can ever forget.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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