John Henry Newman: The Poetics of Devotion

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I

THE WORKS OF John Henry Newman have virtually disappeared in today's universities with the exception, perhaps, of colleges in Oxford or those associated with the Church of Rome. Clearly the nature of Newman's calling and the fervor of his quest are intrinsically alien to the streamlined functionalism of the modern academy and the mob of technocrats and ideologues who have divided the spoils of the humanities between them. The human spirit, on today's campus, seems irrevocably abandoned to the point where it is almost invisible. Yet the humanities as Newman argued in *The Idea of a University* (1873) serve as a kind of half-way house between man's imagination and an awareness of that supreme reality which can alone appease the restlessness of the human spirit.

It is not, however, with Newman's educational or polemical writings that I am here concerned but rather with that aspect of his devotional life embodied in the *Parochial and Plain Sermons* which he preached at Oxford between 1828 and 1841. These, in especial, though extolled by T. S. Eliot and admired by Matthew Arnold, are likely to arouse in us a peculiar discomfort. This discomfort is the result of Newman's tenacity in following his thought, everywhere animated by an undercurrent of emotion which is never allowed to disturb the crystalline surface of his prose, into recesses of the human spirit that we are loathe to explore and sometimes dismayed to admit. In a word, we instinctively shrink from contacts that threaten our security, especially since that security reposes on illusions of self-sovereignty without which many of us are reduced to a veritable panic. The seductively liturgical murmur of Newman's prose is essentially the bait with which he reels us into the bark of his own spiritual quest—a quest for which many, unaccustomed to its rigors, are left gasping for air. But like his Master, Newman is preeminently a fisher of men.

G. K. Chesterton once observed that it is only by making ourselves small that we can hope to make our universe large. Newman, in this way, can enlarge our universe to the point where it offsets the discomfort of being translated from our workaday element into regions that, if we are to follow Newman, require the abandonment of all pretensions.

It is, above all, the translucence of Newman's faith which is responsible for the translucence of his prose; its accents are inseparable from the convictions that inform and sustain it. Newman, moreover, does not preach at us, but seems to

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be a voice within us; hence, the motto which he chose at the time of his being elected Cardinal—*Cor ad Cor loquitur* (heart speaks to heart)—seems particularly pertinent to his sermons.

The paradox of these sermons is that the more they are imprinted with the stamp of Newman's character, the more they illumine that which is common and universal in man's quest for God. Especially canny is the manner with which Newman searches out those stratagems of evasion, either conscious or unconscious, with which we sidestep an encounter with the sacred. And yet this is accomplished with a tact and delicacy that short-circuits the distance between the preacher and his congregation, so that we never feel as if his works are above us, condescending to our level, but rather, rising like a tide within us, to bring us up to his. Despite the popular notions of the Oxford Movement as a thing of opulent ritual and elaborate liturgy, for Newman the spiritual life begins with a knowledge of self—a knowledge without which our Christian professions are mere catchwords. These catchwords, as Newman observes in *A Grammar of Assent* (1870), "are used by the multitude as war-cries, nicknames, and shibboleths, with scarcely enough...apprehension of them to allow of them being in truth more than assertions" (54).[1] In short they are nothing more than slogans imbibed by osmosis, as it were, from contact with a certain community. They are easily picked up and just as easily abandoned. But as Newman observes in the fourth sermon he preached at *St. Mary the Virgin* in Oxford

> Unless we have some just idea of our hearts and sin, we can have no right ideal of a Moral Governor, a Savior or Sanctifier.... Thus self-knowledge is the root of all real religious knowledge; and it is in vain—worse than vain—it is a deceit and a mischief, to think to understand the Christian doctrines as a matter of course, merely by being taught by books, or attending sermons, or by any outward means, however excellent, taken by themselves. For it is in proportion as we search our hearts and understand our own nature, that we understand what is meant by an Infinite Governor and Judge; in proportion as we understand the nature of disobedience and our actual sinfulness, that we feel what is the blessing of the removal of sin, redemption, pardon, sanctification, which otherwise are mere words. God speaks to us primarily in our hearts. Self-knowledge is the key to the precepts and doctrines of Scripture. The very utmost any outward notices of religion can do, is to startle us and make us turn inward and search our hearts; and then, when we have experienced what it is to read ourselves, we shall profit by the doctrines of the Church and the Bible. (31-2)[2]

For Newman, however, self-knowledge is not an end in itself, but rather the preliminary stage in an ascent towards the apprehension of Christ, issuing in the worship of that which is infinitely beyond the mere self. Newman, however, does not believe that the mysteries of the Christian faith are something to be bruited abroad in a marketplace of ideas that trivializes what is, after all, a matter of personal commitment and pilgrimage. In a word, these mysteries cannot be understood or communicated until the pilgrim is himself prepared to accept their implications. Hence, Newman's emphasis upon "reserve"—a doctrine central to his understanding of the spiritual life and implicit in the quiet, unemphatic accents through which he leads us to realities that cannot be grasped entirely at first hearing. The gradualism of this approach is apparent in a sermon delivered at Oxford on the Fifth Sunday in Lent:

> ...it is only by slow degrees that meditation [on Christ's deeds and suffering] is able to soften our hard hearts, and that the history of Christ's trials and services really moves us. It is not once thinking of Christ or twice thinking of Christ that will

> do it. It is by going on quietly and steadily, with the thought of Him in our mind's eye, that by little and little we shall gain something of warmth, light, life, and love. (1203)

Newman's voice—measured, intimate, discreet—is the verbal counterpart of the Tractarian doctrine of Reserve implicit in the sermons he preached at Oxford's *St. Mary the Virgin*. As a doctrine "reserve" is an application of biblical events to the spiritual growth of the believer. Because, as witnessed by scripture, God's self-disclosure was gradual and incremental—appearing first in the long historical travails of Israel in its growth and decline as an earthly kingdom, and second during the years of Christ's pilgrimage on earth when His full identity was revealed by slow degrees to His disciples—so, according to this formula, the effect of God's pressure upon the soul is not something which happens at once and forever in a triumphant outburst which calls attention to itself, but rather something which proceeds slowly and almost unconsciously through a process hidden from the world and invisible to the eyes of the unresponsive. "Such is God's rule in Scripture," Newman observes in one of his sermons, "to dispense His blessings silently and secretly; so that we do not discern them at the time, except by faith, afterwards only...." (890)

In another sermon entitled "The Cross of Christ The Measure of the World," Newman avers that Christianity bears the same relation to humanity as the heart to the human body. But like the heart, he goes on to say, it is "hidden from view; it is carefully and securely guarded; it is not like the eye set in the forehead, commanding all, and seen of all: and so in like manner the sacred atoning Sacrifice is not one to be talked of, but to be lived upon; not to be put forth irreverently, but to be adored secretly; not to be used as a necessary instrument in the conversion of the ungodly, or for the satisfaction of reasoners of this world, but to be unfolded to the docile and obedient; to young children, whom the world has not corrupted; to the sorrowful, who need comfort; to the sincere and earnest, who need a rule of life; to the innocent, who need warning; and to the established who have earned the knowledge of it" (1233).

Newman's monition, expressed in language of absolute simplicity and with a dominance of Anglo-Saxon words, underscores his antipathy to speak of the Christian mysteries as if they were commodities in the give and take of disputation where the parties are indifferent to the outcome and engaged in the desiccated game of "paper logic."

It was precisely Newman's extraordinary sensitivity to the niceties of the spiritual life—those elements which, though withdrawn and veiled from the world, are completely open and susceptible to that Life which is communicated to the believer in moments of exceptional grace and, above all, in the reception and meditation on the sacraments, that made the ultra-montanists in the Catholic Church (those, that is to say, who emphasized the authoritarian as opposed to the poetic dimension of faith), uneasy and even skeptical of Newman's profession. This paradoxical combination of spiritual passion and urbane understatement which characterizes Newman's utterance made him a bewildering and sometimes suspect figure for Catholics and Protestants alike. Sheer dogmatic assertion and emotional self-intoxication which are often confused with faith were far from Newman's customary apprehension of the Divine. As he wrote, "we should avoid a boastful display of our better feelings and practices, silently serving God without human praise, and hiding our conscientiousness except when it would dishonor God to do so...[the] seasons [of explicit profession]...are comparatively rare. But we are always with ourselves and our God; and that silent inward confession in His presence may be sustained and continual, and will end in durable fruit." Notwithstanding Newman's preference for this inward and meditative approach to God, his life as both Anglican and Catholic was beset with controversy of an often acrimonious nature. His detractors were many and, therefore, before further engaging his sermons, it would be serviceable to recollect some of the salient events and conflicts in Newman's life and the way in which they influenced the evolution of his faith.

II

BORN IN 1801, Newman was a virtual contemporary of Keats and Shelley. Raised in a family of devout Anglicans with an evangelical bias, he was influenced initially by a curious mix of Romantic poetry, a belief in predestination (which he subsequently abandoned), the tales of the *Arabian Nights* (which, as a child, he imbibed with complete credulity), and, of course, the ethos of the English Church. Newman's love of the poetry of Robert Southey and the Far Eastern fables which nurtured his imagination were, as T.E. Hulme would describe it, a kind of spilt religion, whose scattered drops Newman, as an adult, construed as but a foretaste of the living waters to which, he believed, we must accustom our palates.

It was his endeavor, following his ordination at the age of twenty-three into the Church of England, to so accustom the congregation that gathered at the University Chapel, to hear what A.N. Wilson rightfully calls "the most superb pieces of religious prose in the English language." Undergraduates who were unconvinced of Newman's faith were entranced by his voice and manner even when they could not sympathize with his vision. Among these undergraduates, Matthew Arnold, who went on to become one of England's foremost poets and cultural critics, bears eloquent testimony to the effect of Newman's speech upon his hearers: "Who could resist the charm of that spiritual apparition, gliding in the dim afternoon light through the aisles of St. Mary's, rising into the pulpit, and then, in the most entrancing of voices, breaking the silence with words, which were a religious music—subtle, sweet, mournful?"[3]

Arnold, it is clear, chiefly prized the *manner* of Newman—restrained, aloof, at times slightly ironic, though swept with undercurrents of poetic feeling. To the *matter*, except insofar as the Anglican Church was a kind of nebulous poetry of the soul, Arnold remained largely indifferent. It is this that gives some warrant to T. S. Eliot's estimate in his essay on "Arnold and Pater": namely, that Arnold perceived nothing beyond the emotional kick or the moral lesson which he was willing to derive from Newman's faith. Yet, as Newman was to argue in an essay on literature in *The Idea of a University*, a great style is not a decorative patina superimposed on a pre-determined subject matter, but rather an inevitable linguistic overflow of great words which strike us with their sincerity and depth precisely because they are inseparable from great thoughts and hard-won convictions. Only the most deliberate stratagem of avoidance would enable Newman's audience to disengage the unerring rhythm and poetic pace of Newman's cadences from the living heart of his message.

One can feel this message in the inflexions of Newman's prose as he switches altitude from a calm urbanity to a poetic urgency without, however, the least sense of disjunction or incongruity. A palmary instance of this change in altitude is apparent in another key passage from Newman's Oxford sermons:

> We know that even our closest friends enter into us but partially, and hold inter-

> course with us only at times; whereas the consciousness of a perfect and enduring Presence, and it alone, keeps the heart open. Withdraw the object on which it rests, and it will relapse again into its state of confinement and constraint; and in proportion as it is limited, either to certain seasons or to certain affections, the heart is straitened and distressed. If it be not overbold to say it, He who is infinite can alone be its measure; He alone can answer to the mysterious assemblage of feelings and thoughts which it has within it.
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> Life passes, riches fly away, popularity is fickle, the senses decay, the world changes, friends die. One alone is constant; One alone is true to us; One alone can be true; One alone can be all things to us; One alone can supply our needs; One alone can train us up to our full perfection. One alone can give a meaning to our complex and intricate nature; One alone can give us tune and harmony; One alone can form and possess us. (1154-55)

Surely, it is difficult to contravene the awareness to which Newman leads us in the last paragraph without violating the integrity of his prose.

In the worlds of academic and religious debate, however, it is the polemical rather than the poetic side of Newman which is perhaps better known, though, to be sure, it is, at times, hard to separate these. In the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), which he wrote to counter Charles Kingsley's accusation that while Vicar of St. Mary's, Newman was deceitful, duplicitous, and deliberately working as an undercover agent, as it were, for Rome, his response to Kingsley's attack occupies only the last few pages of a book which is otherwise a spiritual autobiography convincing the reader of its author's sincerity and disingenuousness in a quest that becomes a gripping literary narrative of Newman's religious evolution. And that evolution, in its mature stages, at any rate, grew out of Newman's involvement with the Oxford Movement—a movement which fused the pre-Reformational spirit of the Catholic Church with the poetic richness of English Romanticism to which Newman was peculiarly susceptible.

The Romantic poets had been either indifferent to or had largely done without the apparatus of organized religion. For them imaginative insight had replaced religious faith. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth eventually recanted this early faith and turned in their later years, towards a very specific manifestation of Christianity, namely, the Anglican Church.

And, indeed, that Church was destined for renewal in the 1830s through the theological and poetic efforts of John Keble, Isaac Williams, Edward Pusey, and, above all, John Henry Newman. Opposed to the spirit of an age increasingly enthralled by an ascendant materialism, the Oxford Tractarians endeavored to integrate the churchless sacramentalism of the Romantic poets into the continuity of Christian Worship. This is especially apparent in the series of poems which constitute *The Christian Year* (1827), a book by Newman's fellow Tractarian, John Keble, whose influence throughout the nineteenth century was second to none. This marriage of poetry and religion was subsequently defended by Newman in his essay on Aristotle's *Poetics*:

> With Christians, a poetical view of things is a duty—we are bid to colour all things with the hues of faith, to see a Divine meaning in every event, and a superhuman tendency...it may be added, that virtues peculiarly Christian are especially poetical—meekness, gentleness, compassion, contentment, modesty, not to mention the devotional virtues, whereas the ruder and more ordinary feelings are the instruments of rhetoric more justly than poetry—anger, indignation, emulation, martial spirit, and the tone of independence.[4]

Accordingly, Newman and the Tractarians, emphasized the importance of the sacraments, the weight of tradition, the poetry of ritual—since beauty is one of the calculated traps with which God ensnares the human spirit—and, above all, the inwardness of the devotional life. These emphases brought Newman into even closer sympathy with the pre-Reformational spirit of Anglican worship which, after 1832, seemed, in the wake of that crisis which beset the English Church, of the utmost importance if its claims as an Apostolic body were to be upheld.

The assault on the Church of England began on both the political and the scientific fronts in 1832 when the passage of the Reform Bill by Parliament made it possible for dissenters from the Church of England to run for national election. This resulted in the suppression of five Irish bishoprics by fiat of secular authority. The question of whether the Anglican Communion, the fortunes of which had been tied since the time of Henry VIII to the vagaries of the British government, had any independent claim as an apostolic body descending from Christ's original disciples was thus reopened in a particularly galling and uncomfortable way for its professing members. At the same time, Sir Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830) exploded the biblical account of creation—an account further called into question by Darwin's theories of natural selection and, subsequently, by Marx's theories of economic determinism.

Newman who wrote he "could go the whole hog" with Darwin realized that the validity of the Church he represented and the authority of the faith he professed required an approach to the history of the Church which stressed the development of Christian doctrine under the aegis of the Holy Spirit. The Church, too, had evolved by a process analogous to the evolution of the species—though here the evolution involved a deepening awareness of God's purpose and self-revelation as illustrated in the development of both Testaments and the Church's subsequent interpretation of that development in the centuries that followed.

In consequence, Newman began to explore the extent to which the thirty-nine articles of the Anglican Church could be understood in the most universal and catholic sense, so the Anglican body was seen as part of the one true church established by Christ, codified by the early Fathers, rudely buffeted in the Reformation, yet still intact as an organic evolving body whose growth is directed by the superintending pressures of providence and whose authority is ultimately independent of secular rule.

When Newman expressed these ideas in Tract 90, he earned the opprobrium of the Anglican bishops and eventually resigned from his post at *St. Mary the Virgin* in order to retreat to the parish church he had built at Littlemore, six miles south of Oxford. It was after a period of meditation and self-examination that Newman was received by the Italian passionist, Father Dominic Barberi, into the communion of the Roman Church.

But the story did not end there for Newman. For just as Newman was accused by English churchmen of having been a Roman mole, subverting his own church while professing to uphold its creeds, so as a Catholic he found himself suspected by fellow English converts, such as Cardinal Manning, of being insufficiently authoritarian in his adherence to the hierarchical, institutional, and Papal claims of the Catholic Church. The doubts of Newman's critics were laid to rest, of course, in 1879 when Pius IX made Newman a Cardinal.

As for his English critics, Newman himself confounded them in one of the greatest autobiographies of the age—*Apologia Pro Vita Sua*—in which, by way of response to the allegations of duplicity, hypocrisy, credulousness, or sheer calculating opportunism leveled indiscriminately at Newman by Charles Kingsley, the future Cardinal responded by divulging with a candor and ingenuousness which silenced all critics, the circumstances of his spiritual life and the series of events which led to his conversion.

Newman's ultimate embrace of the Catholic Church was, thus, in part determined by his fear of excessive subjectivism in religion—a danger which is especially acute in times of intellectual transition and turmoil. He feared, above all, that "egoism turned heavenward," to use, here, a phrase of George Eliot's, which is the besetting danger of a Protestant inwardness unbalanced by a recognition that the Church is an historical and supra-personal reality and, thus, a necessary ballast to the emotional self-intoxication characteristic of the extreme evangelical temper. Though Catholicism is, conversely, subject to the danger of authoritarianism, Newman realized that the Christianity of the nineteenth century was threatened by distortions which are peculiarly Protestant: namely, an excessive reliance on the "inner light" and an obscurantism which refused to face the realities of modern science and research.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the objective and external world of faith was disintegrating. If one examines, for example, the devotional verse of the seventeenth-century Anglican poet, George Herbert, it becomes immediately apparent that the individual's struggle to conform to the tenets of the divine will occurs in a universe where that will is preeminent and indisputable. When Herbert hesitates in his poem "Love" to enter the presence of God, his hesitation does not call into doubt the priority of that presence or that Love. If he is estranged from God, it is a consequence of his own self-will reacting against a command which is prior to any act of individual apostasy: "Love bade me welcome: but my soul drew back / Guilty of dust and sin...." Love here remains constant despite the dust and sin of the poet. He may draw back out of diffidence, or shame, or fear, but his withdrawal leaves the world of faith untroubled and intact. In the age of Newman, this situation is reversed. In its place there is the iron and fatalistic necessity bequeathed to the believer by modern science, political theory, and cultural relativism. If the worshipper is to achieve faith, he must do so by detaching himself from this world and finding in the depths of his own subjectivity that divine radiance and light no longer recognized by the makers of modern thought. The situation of George Herbert is thus entirely reversed, and hence the doubts, misgivings, and anxieties which bedevil Victorian professions of religious faith.

The dangers, then, of an extreme subjectivism in religious matters could only be counterbalanced for Newman by belief in a church whose authority was sanctioned by the "Will of the Creator." Initially the *Via Media* of the Anglican Church seemed the ideal context in which Christianity could flourish without the opposing errors of subjectivity or authoritarianism to which Protestants and Catholics were respectively liable. But the intransigence of the Anglican bishops regarding Newman's reading of the thirty-nine articles and the putative Erastianism of the Anglican faith (the Church being subordinate to or an extension of the state) left Newman no alternative, in his particular time and place, but to follow the kindly lights that had been given him to the Church of Rome.

The Roman phase of Newman's career bears, from a literary point of view, the same relation to his Anglican writings as Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) and *Aids to Reflection* (1825) bear to the "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or "Kubla Khan." There is no diminution of creative power but a reorientation of energies towards discursive or philosophical subjects as opposed to those that are characterized by an ingenuous lyricism or poetic intimacy. *The Development of Christian Doctrine*, the *Idea of a University*, and *The Grammar of Assent* contain flashes of the visionary gleam that irradiate from Newman's Anglican sermons, but they are, on the whole, thornier and more abstruse than the subtly-cadenced accents which arise from those earlier dramas of Newman's spiritual life, in which we seem to eavesdrop on the churchman in the most rapt and illuminating of interior monologues. To be sure, in *The Dream of Gerontius* (1866), which Newman wrote in his later years, the poetry attains a degree of expressive power unsurpassed perhaps in any of his writings, but this psychodrama on the threshold of death belongs to a category of its own.

It was in prose not in verse (with the exception of *Gerontius* and the ubiquitous "Lead, kindly light") that Newman found the most supple medium for the exploration of the human soul. The reason for this is, in part, Newman's belief that the sermon itself is not the center of faith, but an overture, as it were, to the real act of devotion which manifests itself in a self-forgetful adoration of the Supreme Being. For Newman's sermons, as they take his congregation to the threshold of that devotion, virtually cancel themselves. Indeed, the presence of that numinous reality seems, by way of prefiguration, to flood Newman's words with the uncreated light towards which his attention is directed. It is this light that acts like a conductor or conduit, carrying the listener to regions where, beyond the speaker's voice, there emerges "a real apprehension" of the Holy Mystery. In his *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* (1874) Newman utters words which throw a retrospective light on the sermons he preached at Oxford more than forty years earlier:

> True faith is what may be called colourless, like air or water, it is but the medium through which the soul sees Christ; and the soul as little really rests upon it and contemplates it as the eye can see the air.... As God's grace elicits our faith, so His holiness stirs our fear, and His glory kindles our love. Others may say of us "here is faith," and "there is conscientiousness," and "there is love," but we can only say "this is God's grace," and "that is His holiness," and "that is His glory."
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> And this being the difference between true faith and self-contemplation, no wonder that where the thought of self obscures the thought of God, prayer and praise languish, and only preaching flourishes.[5]

Newman had no patience with the cult of personality which is centered more on the rhetorical flourishes of an evangelizing minister than the quiet meditations that direct the soul to God. In this regard, notwithstanding the benefits that have accrued from the second Vatican Council, and the tendency in virtually all churches nowadays to make Christianity palatable to those for whom the church is less a place of worship than a center for socializing, Newman recalls us to the true reality without which all religious profession is stillborn or self-regarding.

Indeed, it is this sense of the numinous, this awareness of the unconditional claims which the Creator has upon the creature, that distinguishes Newman's sermons from those which, as Rudolph Otto observes in *The Idea of the Holy*, seem like "carefully arranged schemes worked out with the balance and coherence of an essay, but nothing unaccountable, and for that reason suggestive; nothing accidental, and for that very reason pregnant in meaning; nothing that rises from the deeps below consciousness to break the rounded unity of the wonted disposition, and thereby point to a unity of a higher order."[6] This "higher order" informs, transfigures, and illumines Newman's words in a way that induces in the listener's consciousness an almost experiential sense of what is meant by the *Magnum Mysterium*.

As in the music of Mozart (which Newman deeply loved), the profoundest truth and deepest emotions can only be expressed with the simplest economy of means, shorn of ornament or exaggeration. Hence, Newman's style is an extension of the man himself who claimed in his essay on literature that "Homer, or Pindar, or Shakespeare or Dryden, or Walter Scott, were [not] accustomed to aim at diction for its own sake, instead [they were] inspired with their subject, and poured forth beautiful words because they had beautiful thoughts."[7] One may include Newman in this list without hesitation—except that the aforementioned writers were inspired by the history and psychology of the human subject, whereas Newman was inspired by the sacred history of our Lord.

In the last analysis, the Church, for Newman, is not a place where one is lost in the cozy uniformity of a mutual admiration society; to the contrary, it is a place where each one of us, in the depths of one's loneliness, becomes a genuine individual ultimately capable of true communion with others and with God because one understands that nothing less than the Divine can truly satiate that void—that God-shaped hole—which is at the center of every man's being. Hence, in a sermon suggestively entitled "The Church, A Home for the Lonely," Newman addresses his words not to an anonymous mass but to every individual worshipper conscious of his own isolation:

> The world is no helpmeet for man, and a helpmeet he needs. No one, man nor woman, can stand alone; we are so constituted by nature; and the world, instead of helping us, is an open adversary. It but increases our solitariness.... We may be full of sorrows; there may be fightings without and fears within; we may be exposed to the frowns, censure, or contempt of men; we may be shunned by them; or, to take the lightest case, we may be (as we certainly shall be) wearied out by the unprofitableness of this world, by its coldness, unfriendliness, distance, and dreariness; we shall need something nearer to us. What is our resource? It is not in arm of man, in flesh and blood, in voice of friend, or in pleasant countenance; it is that Holy home which God has given us in His Church; it is that everlasting City in which He has fixed His abode. It is that Mount invisible whence Angels are looking at us with their piercing eyes, and the voices of the dead call to us. "Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world...." (848-49)

The "Greater He" to whom Newman here directs our attention is described in what must be one of the most poignant utterances to which Newman ever gave breath—a sermon on the Crucifixion of Christ. The prose is, at first, measured, urbane, and imperturbably exact—beginning with commendations on an individual of faith that induces a sense of security and edification. But when Newman turns from the contemplation of this hypothetical benefactor whom we may have revered as father, teacher, beloved, or friend, "such a one," as he says, "whom we have known," we are suddenly aware that an abyss is opening at our feet as we contemplate, as if for the first time, the full uniqueness of the claims of the Christian faith—the fact that the Son was no subordinate being, distinct from the Godhead, but one who bore in every measure and revealed through every pore the Divine Creator before all worlds, who gave himself over to this world to the point where he suffered the full might of human ingratitude and sustained the most dreaded reaches of mortal pain:

> Let us suppose that some aged and venerable person whom we have known as long

> as we can recollect anything, and loved and reverenced, suppose such a one, who had often done us kindnesses, who had taught us, who had given us good advice, who had encouraged us, smiled on us, comforted us in trouble, whom we knew to be very good and very religious, very holy, full of wisdom, full of heaven, with gray hairs and awful countenance, waiting for Almighty God's summons to leave this world for a better place; suppose, I say such a one whom we...ourselves, have known, and whose memory is dear to us, [was] rudely seized by fierce men, stripped naked in public, insulted, driven about here and there, made a laughing-stock, struck, spit on, dressed up in other clothes in ridicule, and then severely scourged on the back, then laden with some heavy load till he could carry it no longer, pulled and dragged about, and at last exposed with all his wounds to the gaze of a rude multitude who came and jeered him, what would be our feelings? Let us in our mind think of this person or that and consider how we should be overwhelmed and pierced through and through by such a hideous occurrence.
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> But what is all this to the suffering of holy Jesus, which we bear to read of as a matter of course? Only think of Him, when in His wounded state, and without a garment on, He had to creep up the ladder, as He could, which led Him up the cross high enough for his murderers to nail Him to it; and consider who it was in that misery. (1488)

The suggestive suspension, "consider who it was," as if Newman reverently forbears to make explicit the paradoxical fact that it is God himself who was exposed to the violence of his own fallen creation, encourages the worshipper to answer for himself a truth which as Newman says elsewhere can only be hungered and thirsted after. Even without the mesmerizing presence of Newman's entrancing voice, his words of themselves repristinate a story tarnished by years of repetition by those for whom this sacred history has been reduced to a mere formula. Indeed, the sermon bears witness to Newman's distinction between real and merely notional assent. In this regard, he is close again to the Romantic poets who inherited the division between mind and reality from the Age of Reason. It was this which enabled philosophers like Descartes, Locke, and Hume to contemplate the world as so much data to be manipulated or schematized by a mind aloof from the living energies of the created universe. It was through the imagination that the Romantics built a sacramental bridge between the mind and the world of living experience by endowing the most ordinary object or event—a host of golden daffodils, the song of a nightingale, or the tempestuous onset of an autumnal wind—with a sacramental significance that opened onto a world of visionary grandeur.

Newman too grasps reality as a whole, fusing his imagination not with these naturalistic phenomena but with the Gospel narratives in such a way that they are transformed from mere facts or abstract propositions into vital realities into whose depths we peer as if for the very first time. As Newman makes plain in *The Grammar of Assent*, that attitude of mind which regards revelation as so many hypothetical facts to be argued about with the detached indifference of a mind floating above a world of concrete particulars can never grasp or really assent in the true dynamics of faith. "I say plainly," he writes at one point, "I do not want to be converted by a smart syllogism; if I am asked to convert others by it, I say plainly I do not care to overcome their reason without touching their hearts." (330)

Though staunchly opposed to "liberalizing" in theology—the belief, namely, that one religious profession is as good as another—and while affirming that notional assent in theological propositions is the cerebral counterpart to that "real" assent which is a matter of faith, Newman recognizes that it is only those who understand the "wounds of the soul" who come to deal with the issue of religious faith in a manner that reveals the presence of the "Hidden God" who remains veiled from the mere controversialist. It is a fact that many of Newman's Oxford sermons would be unpalatable to a contemporary audience precisely because they explore those "wounds of the soul" which it is presently unfashionable—even in religious circles—to recognize fully. But without this preliminary diagnosis and recognition (which is a very humbling experience indeed) the Christian prescription becomes, for Newman, a matter of mere words.

Revelation, as Newman goes on to say, is like the announced arrival of some "great man" who gratuitously descends into our backward borough to confer upon us an inestimable privilege: "revelation is a boon, not a debt on the part of the Giver." The proper attitude to such a boon is not indifference until such time as the visitor actually knocks at our door. On the contrary, says Newman, "I should send to ascertain the fact, and meanwhile should do my best to put my house in a condition to see him." In other words, the possible existence of such a visitor should induce in us "a deep sense of responsibility," and an openness to his presence without which we remain locked in the prison of superficial disputation. In his sermons Newman pierces "the guarded wit" of such disputation, "and passes," in the words of Shelley, "into the panting heart beneath / With lightening and with music." For as Newman again observes in the *Grammar of Assent*, "Reading, as we do, the Gospels from our youth up, we are in danger of becoming so familiar with them as to be dead to their force, and to view them as mere history. The purpose, then, of meditation is to realize them; to make the facts which they relate stand out before our minds as objects, such as may be appropriated by a faith as living as the imagination which apprehends them." (330-31; 79)

The difference, then, between religion and theology, according to Newman, is the superadded stimulus of the imagination which appropriates the dogma which is merely notional and transforms it into a reality which transfigures the consciousness and conscience of the believer. In short, Newman's words put our house in order so that when we hear that knock at our door we have prepared a place for Him whom we have long awaited.

It is such a transfiguration of the interior man which Newman accomplishes in his *Parochial and Plain* sermons. As Louis Bouyer observes of these extraordinary prose-poems, "nothing can constitute for us, still today, and maybe today more than ever, such an introduction to what Christianity may give to and expect from our surrender to its call in the midst of a world no longer pretending to be Christian, but, indeed, presenting us at last with a full realization of what an atrocious kind of paganism only a world boasting of having become post-Christian could produce."[8]

In such a world as Bouyer describes, Newman, though he is apt to confront us initially with that intimidating strangeness which is the mark of true holiness, has a capacity even in this late day to draw us toward the realities to which his life was a witness. Indeed, his own words from the *Grammar of Assent* describing the disparity we so often feel between ourselves, "light half-believers of our casual creeds," and those men and women of faith who have ventured all for their commitments, have a salient application to Newman himself. "All of us," he writes, "the more keenly we feel our distance from holy persons, the more we are drawn to them, as if forgetting the distance, and proud of them because they are so unlike ourselves, as being specimens of what our nature may be, and with some vague hope that we, their relations by blood, may profit in our person by their holiness." (317)

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1. Edited by Etienne Gilson (Garden City, 1955). Citations in the text are to this edition. **2.** *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, ed. Louis Bouyer (San Francisco, 1987). Citations in the text are to this edition. **3.** *Discourses in America* (London, 1896), 139-40. **4.** *Essays and Sketches* (New York, 1948), I, 76. **5.** Cited in *John Henry Newman: Prayers, Poems, Meditations*, ed. A. N. Wilson (New York, 1990), 23. **6.** London, 1958, 65. **7.** *The Idea of a University* (Notre Dame, 1982), 210. **8.** From Louis Bouyer's "Foreword" to his edition of Newman's *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, xiii.