

John Coulson: Religion and Imagination 'in aid of a grammar of assent'

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An image of the emperor is set up to be venerated in his absence,
(*Summa Theologiae* 3a, 73, 5 *responsio*)

Dr Coulson proffers a thesis which relates *belief* to *imagination* by referring both to *assent*. If he is to make a real assent to the objects of faith, the theologian must "use his imagination", which means undertaking the intolerable wrestle with meaning, since what he seeks to renew "lies hid in language", (p 168). Dr Coulson's thesis is evidently to be substantiated by reference to the languages of T S Eliot and J H Newman. Dr Coulson argues that 'Eliot's method as a poet, and its theological implications', (p 169), are anticipated by Newman in the *Grammar of Assent*. 'Eliot's poetry exemplifies what Newman's theology explains' (pp 5 and 169). Newman is presented to us as a guide in the uses of imagination for our present situation.

Dr Coulson has a gift for civilised conversation. Here he deals familiarly with the great matters, with religion and art, if not with sexuality; he deploys the hint, the echo, the overlap, catching at connections that do not have to be fully expressed; he is not all that anxious to avoid repetitions, and more than content to return some several times to a favourite quotation. He would have us share his enthusiasm for some favourite author, not for Newman and Eliot only, but for Coleridge and several Coleridgeans. He is himself at least like Coleridge in his method which is, as he says of that of the great man, 'the very reverse of the system-building required for a *magnum opus*', (p 13). And Dr Coulson's beginning is the common one of conversation. Things are not what they used to be. Things are worse. 'during the past century, religion has gradually ceased to be part of the literary culture', (p 3). With a revealing reference to those he has chiefly in mind, Dr Coulson speaks of the theologian enduring 'seminary confinement', though I do not suppose he is suggesting that those who work in theological colleges and divinity schools have enjoyed a larger liberty. All have been "un-lettered", (p 3). 'What the study of literature does, particularly that of nineteenth-century literature, is to reveal the *form* of the questions which *should* have concerned theologians, but

did not', (p 4). Dr Coulson has in mind some reform of theological practice. He begins to hint this in the transference to present tense in his next sentence. 'Of our major theologians, it is J H Newman who pre-eminently grasps the form our questions should take if the ancient relationship between belief and imagination is to be restored or realized anew', (pp 4-5). In one of those conversational jumps the listener must take with him, Dr Coulson goes on to say 'But it must be a Newman approached by means of our questions today', (p 5). We are not to decline into newmaniacs. How, then, are we to proceed? The passing of traditional instruments from Newman to Eliot may show us something of the proper mode.

In one of the most interesting and satisfying sections in Dr Coulson's book, (pp 125-6 and 130-1), he demonstrates the likeliest occasion for Eliot's encounter with Newman's understanding of assent. Eliot published an article by Ramon Fernandes, (he of *Key West* fame?), on 'The Experience of Newman' in the *Criterion* for October 1924. In this he was shewn '*the way in which Newman believed or tried to believe*'. Eliot seems to have been led by Fernandez to read, (or read again, perhaps), Newman's *Grammar* on those 'powerful and concurrent reasons' which converge to convince, and quoted that passage in his *Pascal* essay in 1931. And, nicely, it is by some such mode of reasoning that Dr Coulson comes to the conviction that 'it is now, in such conditions, we grow to the explicit certitude of belief that is the subject of *Four Quartets*', (p 127). That 'essay in aid of a grammar of assent' is 'a main source of the theological framework (or grammar) within which T S Eliot achieves the poetry of *Four Quartets*', (p 5). His talk of 'a main source' encourages Dr Coulson to state his thesis in that bolder phrase: 'Eliot's poetry exemplifies what Newman's theology explains', (p 5).

There is a chronological order observable in this statement of relationship which happily reflects the recurring order of disciplines. 'An appeal to imagination is made when an explanation has fallen short', (p 7). That appeal is commonly the prologue to action. Mr Brian Wicker, years since, in this journal, suggested that our response to *Lear* might be an indication of our moral sensitivity. Dr Coulson is suggesting that the play may call us to realize our judgment. We may establish 'whether the text as a whole establishes a particular passage as central, by showing how it is to be read', but if we would know 'whether life is like this or not', we must 'try it', (p 32). Newman certainly understood that.

Dr Coulson presents here one of his many parallelisms between the ways of revelation and of literary communication. Revelation is hid in language 'in a way comparable to that in which Shakespeare's intention is hidden in the dynamic structure of *Lear*', (p

140). We grasp his meaning only as we attend to the play as a whole, 'to the complete range of metaphor it convincingly realizes and orders', (*ibid.*). And such attention is not easily given. There has been between us and Shakespeare, Dr Coulson very much agrees with Eliot on this subject, 'a change of consciousness'. He is sympathetic towards talk of 'disassociation of sensibility' and 'the great divide'. However, we are not at a total loss. Not in the appreciation of Shakespeare's work. Not in the appreciation of Scripture. The revelation having been renewed, 'that is translated, developed, and secularized in ever-new contexts and changing cultures', we may recognise an authentic development, declarative of divine meaning, by a method, 'propounded by Newman as a theologian' and yet 'essentially literary', (*ibid.*). Dr Coulson may be allowed some quick reaching from topic to topic in his conversation, but here I think readers may pause to think whether that method is peculiarly 'literary'.

Dr Coulson is justly esteemed the most sensitive interpreter of Newman for our times. He appreciates Newman's intentions even when they were disappointed, as in the dull realization of his splendid conception of the Oratory as 'creative of an authenticating way of life', (p 79). He is aware, too, of Newman's shifts, developments, and inconsistencies, like his forgetting in a letter his own nice distinction between 'investigate' and 'inquire', (p 62). He is sure enough of his man to risk referring to the lines about 'those angel faces' in *The Pillar of the Cloud* as expressing 'spiritual clichés', (p 117). Impertinence is its own condemnation and punishment, but perhaps I may risk asking whether Dr Coulson writes quite carefully enough about Newman and 'literature'. On p 34 Dr Coulson says that Newman's opponents in the Roman Church deprecated his theology as 'patristic and literary', and on p 73 he acknowledges 'how right Manning was to see his preference for the Fathers as being a "literary" one!'. He considers him so right that at one place he drops the quotation marks and himself talks of 'Newman's very method – patristic and literary – was itself suspect at Rome', (p 35). What does '*literary*' mean here? He cites no source at either place but the first is accompanied by a reference to Mozley's *Reminiscences* which turns out to be concerned with the Tractarians' classical learning, and this would seem to be Newman's own usage in the *Grammar of Assent* when he writes of it being 'in literary examinations' a test of scholarship 'to be able to construe aright, without the aid of understanding the sentiment', and that the primary duty of 'a literary man' is to express clear thoughts in exact language. He seems to be taking 'literary' to refer to the activities of the translator and the critic rather than the creative writer, especially when his remark about

the literary man is set with that about failure in clarity being 'the most pardonable fault in a Poet'. Manning may, then, have been suggesting that Newman took patristic texts to be more authoritative in doctrinal discussion than the witness of an oral tradition. Perhaps this is enough for Dr Coulson's thesis. But Newman sometimes lets him down rather badly. He says some careless things. For example, when, in the *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, Newman is commenting on the relation of christianity and literature in contemporary culture, he acknowledges that 'many are the tales and poems written nowadays, expressing high and beautiful sentiments', and readers may suppose that 'he must be a man of deep religious feeling' who writes so well, but he asks and answers sharply 'Is it so in fact, my brethren? it is not so; why? because after all it is *but* poetry, not religion; it is human nature exerting the powers of imagination and reason; which it has, till it seems also to have powers which it has not'. Newman does not always recognise the *form* that theological discussion must take, he forgets himself long enough to tell a lecture-room of undergraduates that theology may become 'a sort of literature' when 'it takes the shape of Pulpit Eloquence'. He does not always move to suggest we 'try it', remarking in a sermon only that 'literature is almost in its essence unreal; for it is the exhibition of thought disjoined from practice'.

Dr Coulson's convincing demonstration that *Four Quartets* is such an 'exhibition of thought' in which the poet is showing 'how we may still be certain of what is obscurely revealed', (p 110), suggests that Eliot, too, is an explainer. It certainly seems inappropriate to talk of the exemplifier of someone else's notions. Dr Coulson at one place recalls that Wordsworth has been termed Coleridge's masterpiece. It may be argued so. But, while he most properly introduces Newman as a member of the tradition which takes its rise in Coleridge, Eliot cannot be construed, even in the most minimalist fashion, as anyone's Wordsworth. Newman knew literary men at least well enough to remark that literature depends upon 'the personal use or exercise of language'. It is to be appreciated as the expression of individual sensibility. 'I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett . . . and I love you too'. It is to be appreciated as the coming of a particular person. Americans are well aware of this. 'This is no book, who touches this touches a man', Walt Whitman declared. 'A novelist not only puts down a story, he is the story', said John Steinbeck, and, even, 'A novel may be said to be the man who writes it'. Certainly Eliot is an idiosyncratic enough critic to accuse of a disassociation of sensibility the poet who had placed a pun at the end of the very first line of *Paradise Lost*. However, Dr Coulson, as he wrote of 'classical

literary texts' being 'authentic "scriptures" ' which, by requiring an imaginative assent, teach us the nature of such assents, (p 5), and as he chose the Mid-Western Eliot as his exemplar, might have made something from Newman's remarking, again in a Dublin lecture to which Dr Coulson does not refer, that while 'as regards this hemisphere' he supposed 'we have well nigh seen the end of English Classics', he could 'prophesy nothing of America'.

Though Dr Coulson has constructed several pleasing ways of talking of Eliot in Newman's terms, the chief interest of his work resides not in an insistence upon the 'literary' character of Newman's method, but in undeveloped hints of Newman's disturbed interest in the powers of imagination. Dr Coulson has given himself less than required scope to do those things which he could do well and which few others could do at all.

Perhaps I may surpass impertinence by suggesting a starting-place for Dr Coulson's next consideration. It is always, I am learning, the case that what seems to me a piece of irrelevance or foolery or commonplace in a writer whom I hold in general awe, turns out upon investigation to be of significance for a better understanding of all his work. I wonder, therefore, if Dr Coulson might not reconsider those 'angel faces'. If it is unlike Newman to go in for 'spiritual clichés' then perhaps he is not going in for one at this verse. I would not want Dr Coulson to spend much time elucidating the phrase by reference to Newman's old Oxford gang, that oaf Hurrell Froude being amongst them would render all talk of angels somewhat tasteless, but I would like to have him consider the place of the image in Newman's general way of appreciating the world. Dr Coulson thinks it characteristic of those who 'precipitated the crisis of 1870' to conceive of the supernatural as 'even more immediately "real" than the natural order', (p 79). Manning is cited here. But are the two cardinals divided on this matter? It would, surely, be quite in accord with what Newman said at the start of the *Apologia* about his boyish imagination of himself as an angel and 'all this world a deception', his fellow angels 'by a playful device concealing themselves from me, and deceiving me with the semblance of a material world', to take the angels of 'The Pillar of the Cloud' as figures of a recoverable reality? His boyhood fantasy had, Newman averred, 'a bearing on my later convictions'. It came as 'music to my inward ear' when he understood the Alexandrian Fathers 'to mean that the exterior world, physical and historical, was but the outward manifestation (to our senses) of realities greater than itself'. And towards the end of his life, when planning his own memorial stone, he wondered whether his chosen text, *ex umbris et imaginibus*, might be thought not orthodox.¹ There is some puzzle here about 'reality' and 'imagina-

tion', which is intermingled with a question about 'tradition' and 'orthodoxy', and which seems relevant to any consideration of 'belief' and 'assent'.

- 1 I take it that Newman's orthodoxy is assured if not by the hint of *Hebrews* 10:1, then at least by Aquinas' conviction *in statu autem praesentis vitae, non possumus divinam veritatem in seipsa intueri*, and his suggestion *imago pertineat ad novam legem, umbra vero ad veterem*, (1a 2ae, 101, 2 art.) I recall that Stephen Dessain was most pleased when I pointed this passage out to him.

John Coulson: Religion and Imagination

Anthony Cockshut

It is a delicate and difficult matter for me, a professional student of literature, and an amateur of theology, to review a book by a professional theologian and an amateur of literature. *Odium academicum* is usually a much greater danger than the more-publicized variety, *theologicum*. But at least I have the advantage of having already acquired a deep respect for Dr Coulson's work, and of having learnt a lot from him about Newman in reading his earlier volume.

The main thesis of this book is clearly stated as follows:

The argument of this book is that the real assent we make to the primary forms of religious faith (expressed in metaphor, symbol, and story) is of the same kind as the imaginative assent we make to the primary forms of literature.

At first sight this claim is so improbable, and indeed extraordinary, that we feel it cannot mean what it appears to say. If we can appreciate Homer and Dante and Henry James because they all make a powerful appeal to the imagination, it would seem that by analogy we can simultaneously assent to Greek paganism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Imaginatively, if our knowledge is sufficient, and our sympathies are wide enough, no doubt we can enter into all these and more. Those of us who had a classical education can remember (very likely with pleasure and gratitude) entering into the religious ideas contained in the *Oresteia*. But we did not for a moment think of believing them to be true. There are other statements, both religious and secular which we believe to be true, without being able or perhaps wishing to enter into them imaginatively. All this must be quite as obvious to