Newman—A Portrait Restored

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The publication of both volumes of Miss Trevor's *Life of Newman*[1] together with the first two volumes of the definitive edition of his diaries and letters edited by Fr Stephen Dessain[2] has brought much thinking about Newman out into the open. Reviewing Miss Trevor's book, the *Observer* found Newman 'somewhat unappealing', 'ambiguous', 'hard to pin down', and 'self-pitying'; but the most startling judgment was made at the conclusion of the *Times*' review: Newman, we were told, 'was not a lasting force like Fox or Wesley . . . It was his deepest convictions that were most antipathetic to what may broadly be called the English genius'. Miss Trevor has herself been criticized for bringing in too much everyday detail about, for example, Newman's troubles with Faber and Dalgairns, for avoiding much of that treatment of Newman's ideas which is the special feature of the previous and still invaluable *Life* by Ward, and for making it plain that she believes Newman to have been right and Wiseman, Manning, Faber and Co., wrong.

We must remember, however, that in order to print essential new biographical information overlooked or suppressed by Ward, Miss Trevor has had to cut out something; and, if my own experience with the years 1858/9 is any guide, an effort to unite a discussion of Newman's thought to a thorough analysis of the biographical sources would require at least 2,500 pages or some four to five volumes. Nor is this to be wondered at: some writers require this treatment, and in more spacious days received it.

What, then, is the particular value of this new *Life?* In deliberately avoiding much discussion of Newman's ideas, Miss Trevor is able to add a new dimension to our understanding, especially where relations between Newman and the London Oratory are concerned: we realize that throughout his life as a Catholic he had always to fight a war on several fronts; and we learn, more adequately than before, the causes

[1]NEWMAN: LIGHT IN WINTER, by Meriol Trevor; Macmillan, 50s.
[2]THE LETTERS AND DIARIES OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, Volume XI, Littlemore to Rome (October 1845 to December 1846) and Volume XII, Rome to Birmingham (January 1847 to December 1848); Edited by Fr Charles Stephen Dessain; Nelson, £3 3s. each volume.

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of that suffering so deeply etched into Newman's expression in later life: neither merely sad nor self-pitying, it is, in Newman's own words, the evidence of 'a mental burden which consists in the perception of evil with the consciousness one cannot avert it'; and he adds, 'Do you think the *sollicitudo omnium Ecclesiarum* did not waste St Paul?'

One of the uncanniest things about Newman is the way in which he appeared to be a different person to different people, as if he were a mirror in which his critics saw themselves without recognizing their own reflection. The London Oratorians reacted to his charitable silences on their behalf by calling him 'the serpent'; and when he reminded the mad Mgr Talbot that Birmingham people had souls, he was thought to be absenting himself from the corridors of power in a fit of pique.

Newman's eye for detail and motive in human behaviour is worthy of Jane Austen, even of Sherlock Holmes, and his ability to reproduce character with wit and sustained irony makes one realize what a novelist he might have made. The visit of Nardi, an important Roman official, later a Cardinal, to Newman is captured thus: 'He did not speak from flattery – no – he always spoke his mind, even to the Pope . . . I ought to go to Rome myself. It would rejoice the Holy Father. I ought to be a bishop, archbishop, – yes, yes, I ought, I ought – yes, a very good bishop – it *is* your line, it *is*, it *is* – it was no good my saying it was not.'

It is an odd comment on our thinking about the spiritual life that those who have called Newman over-sensitive and scrupulous should forget that it is precisely these intensities of sensitivity and scrupulosity in such novelists as Jane Austen or E. M. Forster that cause us to value them so highly; and is Faber so very different from Mrs Norris in *Mansfield Park* or Cousin Charlotte in *A Room with a view?*

What, however, distinguishes Newman from a novelist is that 'the same clearness which makes me see others' failings makes me see my own'; but it is important to realize that many of his most famous and profound generalizations about the spiritual life arise from prolonged and detailed examination of the behaviour of some individual or correspondent. Take the case of Dalgairns. He once told Newman that Oratorians ought to be glued to their confessionals; and his sermons were famous (or notorious) for their passionate eloquence: he found the Birmingham Oratorians, as did Faber, lacking in keenness – and he said so; but Newman noted that he shirked routine duties, finding them dull, and warned him against a deep self-conceit. A more general reflection followed: 'There seems to be an enormous tendency in our

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subjects to act each for himself, as if he were in a lodging house'. It was this prolonged correspondence and discussion with Dalgairns (and what is this if not spiritual direction?) that produced one of Newman's most brilliant generalizations about the dangers of religion: 'No paradox is truer than this, that the higher we are in holiness, the more we are in danger of going wrong. I have been accustomed to compare the ascent to perfection to the mounting of a higher ladder. As the climber gets higher the ladder dances under him – behold the state of the soul mounting towards heaven. I thus account for the wonderful falls of holy men – the utter shipwreck of ascetics – the heresies of grave and learned teachers – the delusions in which Satan enwraps souls which he cannot on the whole separate from God. This is why saints are so few – they drop off as they get more likely to be saints.'

Newman's direction was given in a manner warm yet intellectually precise; and to have been directed by him must have been both profitable and highly uncomfortable; yet much light is thrown on Newman's dealings with Faber if we see them in this perspective.

Faber was a type which the condition of the Church at this time seemed to favour – one has only to remember Abbot Aelred Carlyle and Fr Ignatius of Llanthony to realize that Ryder's description of Ward as not a theologian but a theopolitician is of general relevance; and it is very hard for us to see anything more in Faber's fiery preaching, magnetic personality, and overmastering spiritual direction than signs of that mental unbalance which, in its political form, has twice plunged Europe into war. Newman thought him simply 'a humbug'; but it was he who was the main source of one of the most damaging of all libels upon Newman: that everything he had done as a Catholic had failed; and, even now, his account of Newman as proud, resentful and cold still imposes upon us.

Newman incisively diagnosed Faber's mood-swings between public gush and private sarcasm as evidence of a cold heart: 'he will study your character, please you, and will end in surprising you'; and nowhere does Faber show himself up more than in his refusal to distinguish between personal and official dealings with Newman in the matter of the London Oratory's formal request to Rome for an alteration in their constitution. Newman strove to make them deal with the issues which their action had precipitated in a business-like way, but was driven to protest to Faber in the end: 'Great confusion arises from going to and fro, beginning formally, continuing informally, and thus dissipating responsibility, as I am sure you will see.' Faber dismissed this appeal as

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cold: 'Why! My dear Father, almost every word . . . seems full of alienation. But I must not be discouraged'. Mrs Norris could not have done better!

Newman took the common sense line that a man who refuses to separate matters of principle from personalities is best left alone, but he noted Faber's 'restless spirit of intrigue which nothing can quench'; and, once again, an important generalization arises from the study of a particular case: 'If only we are patient, God works for us. He works for those who do not work for themselves. Of course an inward brooding over injuries is *not* patience – but a recollecting with a view to the future is prudence.'

Newman's stand reflects the criteria he expected to be applied to those exercising spiritual authority; and he shares with Acton the conviction that a vocation to the priesthood is a vocation to be more and not less honest, more and not less open, and more and not less sensitive, in order that those who by virtue of their secular calling have to bear the full weight of modern infidelity are served as duty requires. Thus, when Archbishop Manning thought it would be expedient to call, Newman remarked to Ullathorne: 'Certainly I have no wish to see him now – first because I don't like to be practised on; secondly because I cannot in conversation use smooth words, which conceal, not express my thoughts, thirdly because I am not sorry that he should know I am dissatisfied with him. Of course his conduct to me is not special – but such as his conduct to every one, but that is a further matter. However, I propose to call on him, that he may not have the advantage of saying I have not done so'.

Most of the material I have quoted does not appear in Ward's *Life*, and Miss Trevor has approached her subject with the interests of a novelist in the revealing minutiae of human relationships, rather than with those of an historian of ideas; but this makes for a new and very profitable approach, in which much that was previously puzzling is clarified. Some critics, however, have complained that Miss Trevor never lets Newman put a foot wrong and is always prompt to comment in his favour; yet many of these comments are very much to the point: of Dalgairns she says that he had learnt merely the theory of humility; of Faber that he interpreted his wish for Newman's approval and affection as love of him; and – most devastating of all – 'It was not Faber or Ward or Manning who *practised* obedience – it was Newman. None of them noticed this.'

Whether Miss Trevor should have let the material speak more for

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itself is, of course, debateable; but it is hard for the reader not to exclaim in the words of Matthew Arnold: 'What a set! What a world!', and as there is so much ground to be covered, it is only fair to remember that comments save space and enable the author to pass on to other topics. As for the charge that Newman took too many notes and showed over-sensitiveness, it is best examined in the light of the counter-assertion: can one ever be sufficiently sensitive to others, especially where one is charged with a priestly vocation to care for them? I am inclined to think that this cricitism reveals too much of that rough and ready attitude to human relationships one associates with muscular Christianity, public schools of the tougher kind, hearty people who despise Conrad, Henry James and Dostoievsky, and all the various Philistine manifestations of that Protestant spirit a convert so gladly abandons when he is made free of that treasure house which is the Church of St Anselm, St John of the Cross, St Philip Neri, St Francis de Sales and other gentle masters of the spiritual life.

Nor must we forget that Miss Trevor's method helps us to appreciate the peculiar force of Newman's reaction in the *Apologia* and the accuracy of diagnosis which reduced one of the foremost ecclesiastical lions of his day, Charles Kingsley, to silence: this was not a lucky hit, but marksmanship achieved by long and enforced practice on Dalgairns, Faber, and others.

Nevertheless, Miss Trevor's *Life* is most profitably read by those who know from other sources that the facts and comments are true; the sceptical will only be convinced by the evidence (if they have the patience to study it) of the letters. These, by their sheer bulk (the complete collection will produce something in the region of thirty volumes) register a different tempo and show, without the necessity for comment, the full richness of Newman's diverse accomplishments. Here is that intermingling of humour and patience, psychological penetration and logical subtlety, pastoral care and philosophical speculation: here, if anywhere, is the real Newman – real, because his inner tranquility is more easily perceived in this infinitely larger and more leisurely perspective: there are no short cuts to great men.

The first of the *Letters and Diaries* to appear (volume XI) deals with the crucial year of Newman's conversion to Rome; and it should be studied by all who have an interest in Newman, if only for the concisely authoritative analysis of Newman's character contained in the editor's introduction. This is surely the place to pay tribute not only to the unceasing generosity and wise advice which Fr Stephen Dessain gives

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to all Newman scholars, but to the exemplary scholarship of his work as editor of this series. It is on a par with Professor Coburn's great edition of Coleridge's Notebooks, but whereas the latter edition is made possible by lavish Trust grants, Fr Stephen Dessain has succeeded almost single-handed.

It is the publication of these letters which will scotch for good and all the most persistent of all criticisms of Newman as being what Abbot Cuthbert Butler called (in order to deny it) 'a hyper-sensitive, a *souffre-douleur*'. Instead, the man his fellow Oratorians had known very gradually (that is the point) takes shape before our eyes as 'natural, energetic, humorous, and practical'. The note of care and sad uneasiness which some have complained of in Ward and even in Miss Trevor becomes in these ampler pages no longer insistent; and in a later volume we shall be able, for example, to see the troubles with Faber in their proper relation to Newman's great undertaking for University education.

Volume XII begins when Newman is still in Rome pondering what vocation he should adopt, and it shows us more fully the reasons for his failure as a preacher in Rome: 'The Catholics who are used to the fluency of the Italians did not understand my manner'; and what had bewitched Oxford was regarded as 'a very lean performance'. Then there is the story of Newman's encounter with one of the Congregation of the Index, who told him how to write theology in an acceptable manner – 'as a whole, and con gusto, not drily and by bits'. In the light of future events, these anecdotes help us to see how inevitably Newman's tragedy within the Church was to move towards its climax. Thus as early as January 1847, he is writing of the Romans, 'I observe everywhere a simple certainty in believing which to a Protestant or Anglican is quite astonishing – but though they have this, they show in a wonderful way how it is possible to disjoin religion and morality . . . the same people, who have a sort of instinctive conviction of the unseen world, which is strange to an Englishman, have not that *living* faith which leads to correctness or sanctity of character'; and in the same letter Newman significantly praises St Philip Neri for realizing that 'the denial of the will was far more difficult than any mortification of the body'.

Even earlier, in volume XI, we can see future events casting their shadow before them: there was a sticky interview with the Bishop of Beverley, Dr Briggs, and Newman counselled patience. The famous metaphor – 'it is like going on the open sea' – makes its appearance.

What the *Letters* bring out is not only the rich diversity of Newman's

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human relationships, but the workaday origins of his prose style: all of a sudden an arresting phrase takes us by the throat, or after a series of letters all saying the same thing about the grief of leaving Littlemore, there is one which puts the matter in memorable prose (Vol. XI, p. 113) because it is more precise and yet more adequate to the feeling than its predecessors. We meet the figures with whom Miss Trevor deals, but the new evidence is, if anything, even more damning. Thus a revealing footnote (Vol. XI p. 148[2]) from Ambrose St John to Dalgairns reads: 'You know too well how much N. loves you to *mean* your postscript'.

What emerges? A portrait restored – that of a master of the spiritual life who because he did not take himself in, was not taken in by others; and who, if he had been as sensitive about himself as some still think him, would, as he said to Dalgairns, have left the Church of England much sooner than he did ('The English bishops have said much worse things about me than the old Catholics'). If we want to reply to the *Times*' reviewer, then we can say that far from being alien to the British tradition, Newman was regarded by his contemporaries as 'intended by God to bridge that bottomless gulph which three centuries of mutual misconception and enmity have set between the Roman Church and her Daughter'.

Newman was one of those rare people who not only insisted upon joining a deeply intellectual religion to a profoundly biblical morality, but succeeded in what he intended; and in doing so he became that awkward challenge to routine piety – neither a little flower nor a South sea martyr – but a strictly contemporary English saint. And if there is a mystery about him, it is, as Fr Dessain reminds us in the words of one of his disciples, 'that he did not give a damn for this world'. Perhaps this is the form that all piety will be obliged to take in the age of the nuclear deterrent.

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