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Newman's Literary Empiricism

Joseph S. O'Leary

To what extent is it significant for (Blessed) John Henry Newman's theological and philosophical thought that he was a prose stylist of the highest quality? To answer this question I shall study Newman's most abstract work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), showing that it is impossible to cleanly disentangle the literary and philosophical sides of Newman's intellectual effort. Many have tried to portray the recently beatified Cardinal as a model of rigid orthodoxy, and it is of course true that doctrinal orthodoxy is a major facet of Newman's intellectual profile. But in the hands of a gifted writer orthodoxy can never be rigid, since such rigidity is incompatible with the inherent polysemy of literary language and its subtle play of tone. If the author is rigid and doctrinaire in his views, the style will undercut this; for example, the baroque extravagance of Bossuet's rhetoric can be seen as undercutting the straightforwardness of his formal positions. In Newman's case, this effect occurs when he writes in the key of reactionary provocation. In his great and mature works, in contrast, his historical awareness and literary sensitivity make his presentation of doctrine humane and functional. The suppleness of his theological reasoning goes hand in hand with the rhythm of a warmly persuasive yet constantly reflective style. However, in all great theological writers, one can argue that the writing outruns the logic, that the style conveys a total awareness which exceeds what is formally stated and may even strain against it. The cold, analytical style of Aquinas matches his formal arguments perfectly; but Aquinas has never been acclaimed as a literary figure. In Augustine, to the contrary, even when he is belaboring some precise theological point, the play of his language, with its wide range of intertextual overtones, communicates a rich human and spiritual awareness.

A writerly thinker perpetrates a fusion of thought and style, the one shaping itself in intimate interaction with the other. This means that even when the writer repeats the same thought, there will be a continuous variation in its expression, which will make the thought itself variable, and plural, elusive of rigorous control. Writing always involves a connotative nimbus that consigns the clearest denotative

statement to indeterminacy, for each further utterance, each new clause inserted, adds a new purl to the stitching of the text, so that the full complexity of what is going forward is something that soon lies beyond the mastering ken of either the author or the reader. No one can fully master all the senses being generated in Newman's richer texts, any more than one can finally master the full sense of a novel by Flaubert or Henry James. The sense varies with each reading, for each reader, so that the penned text has a *destinerrance* from context to context as long as people choose to read it. The great text haunts our culture, but in a spectral way, elusively and exhibiting a spectrum of meanings, and remaining alive only in creative readings which are always to an imponderable extent misreadings, so that "the letter creates the recipient, unpredictably, incalculably, by chance or even by error" (Miller, 43). If Newman has been frozen in a conservative posture by his most vocal admirers, this is due either to their not reading his texts, or to their focussing on an ideologically shaped canonical selection from his texts, or to their passive method of reading that pays little attention to nuances and tensions. A creative reading of Newman's corpus may rescue it from his embalmers, as his physical remains eluded those who would appropriate them as relics. (He had ensured their disappearance by specifying that his coffin, of plain wood, was to be mulched.)

Newman writes in the tradition of British empiricism, but it is an empiricism deflected by a literary slant, to its advantage and at times to its disadvantage. There is an openness and sensitivity to Newman's style of thinking that goes beyond strictly philosophical empiricism, and that comes from the habitually literary character of his concerns; that is, he is always conscious of composing a piece of writing, be it in the genre of essay, sermon, lecture, novel, or poem, and his thought is governed by the particular laws of the literary genre rather than by any canon of philosophical, historical, exegetical or theological method. Though the *Grammar of Assent* is in some ways the least literary of Newman's major works, and though the relationship between logical argument and rhetorical persuasion is less seamless and less functional than in *The Idea of a University* (1858) or the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), this offers literary criticism an instructive opportunity to track the uneasy relationship between the two, perhaps finding in it the telltale sign of deeper unresolved conflicts within Newman's entire theological project.

That project can be summed up in a single word: apologetics. Newman presents himself as a defender of Christian faith in an age of growing unbelief,

and more specifically as a defender of Roman Catholicism against others forms of Christian belief that he saw as compromised by the spirit of rationalism or religious indifference. But there are two aspects of Newman's thought that distinguish him from the usual run of apologists. The first is his emphasis on the theme of change and organic development in Christian doctrine throughout history. As a student of the early Church, Newman knew well the details of how the doctrine of the Trinity had come to be explicitly formulated in the later fourth century, as the result of long-drawn-out debates and bitter controversies. Both Anglicanism and Catholicism had become defensive about the reality of change, following the approaches taken by Bishop Bull's *Defensio Fidei Nicaenae* and Archbishop Bossuet's *Histoire des variations*, while rationalists, culminating in Ludwig Feuerbach, were seizing on it to prove that Christianity was an inconsistent teaching that made itself up as it went along. Newman persuaded Catholics that change was a positive good, a sign of life, and that as a living Idea the Christian faith was bound to express itself in unexpected and novel ways as it drew forth from its resources insights to meet the questions of new historical contexts.

The second distinctive emphasis in Newman's theology, which like the first brought about an epochal change in the landscape of Catholic theology, is his focus on the subjective conditions of religious belief. To be sure, theologians had analyzed the act of faith and studied closely its rational and affective dimensions and the role of divine grace and human freedom. But Newman made this more concrete. Instead of "reason" he speaks of the living intellect of contemporary people seeking their way amid a chaos of conflicting opinions. He studies the affective dimension in probing introspective analyses, which acquire subtlety and phenomenological persuasiveness from his sensitive, supple style. As he challenges the will in regard to its cooperation or lack of cooperation with grace, he combines the inspiring appeals of Saint Paul with the insinuating moral irony of Jane Austen. There was a danger that Newman would be written off as too subjective and introspective to be a theologian of real authority, and perhaps it was to obviate this danger that he penned the *Grammar of Assent*, in an attempt to set forth his view in the most systematic form possible.

But a third aspect of Newman's work goes beyond these two features in giving him a singular and unsettling status on the modern theological landscape. I refer to the manner in which he pursues theology as a literary performance. This gives a dialogical character to theology, so that even the most firmly dogmatic pronouncements are put forward in the style of an essay, opening up

a conversation. The essay, since Montaigne, has been a genre hospitable to the sceptical and agnostic spirit, and Newman's style constantly reminds us that he is familiar with that spirit, even if he resists it as a temptation. However much it grips the rail of orthodoxy, living thought has a complexion of open questioning, alert to the constant arising of new considerations. The scholastic format of Aquinas holds the questions and considerations in check by forcing them through their logical paces. Newman's essayistic style, in contrast, allows one to sense the questions pressing in on the mind, as half-formed intimations or as fleeting clouds of uncertainty. Theology has had much trouble absorbing Newman's historically informed sense of change and development in the formulation of doctrine and his psychologically informed sense of existential characteristics of faith. It has not yet absorbed the implications of his literary mode of presentation, which brings consciousness of change and development and of the insecurity of existence at the most basic level of articulation, in sermons or lectures, in the quick utterances of a letter or the pondered reflective summations of his major essays.

The Literary Qualities of the *Grammar of Assent*

Most critical discussion of the *Grammar* has focussed on its idiosyncratic claims about the gap between inference and assent, the indefectibility of certitude, the viability of the notional/real distinction, and the roles given to probability and the "illative sense" (see Ker, in Newman 1985 l-lxx). Literary comment on the text has been sparse. Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote in 1873: "It is perhaps heavy reading. The justice and candour and gravity and rightness of mind is what is so beautiful in all he writes but what dissatisfied me (in point of style) is a narrow circle of insistence and quotation – in a man too of great learning and of general reading – ... and a want, I think a real want, of brilliancy" (qtd. by Ker in Newman 1985 xlix). The openness of the literary mind has become a rather slack allusiveness. It should be recalled that Newman, apart from a youthful essay on "Tragedy," had never undertaken systematic literary history or literary critical reflection. Asked by a Maynooth student for advice on how to proceed with the study of English literature, he seems genuinely at a loss (Newman 1973 44-5). The Greek and Roman classics he knew chiefly as part of his Oxford curriculum or as matter for coaching secondary school students in later life. He found models for style in Cicero and, it is claimed, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. and in all his reading he is alert to the stylistic merits of the authors. But in the *Grammar*,

lacking the stimulus of an immediate occasion, and bent rather on the fulfilment of a long-felt intellectual duty, he does not boldly unfurl his literary sails, or aim at any magisterial demonstration of cultural breadth, aiming only to clarify his thoughts, even at the price of drabness, so that the pickings for the literary critic are scanty. It is true that the work's circle of reference is dowdy – the predictable ideas of a secondary school teacher who reads the newspapers, rather than what one would expect from an Oxford luminary. Indeed, Newman's philosophical culture lies in the past, in the Oriel Common Room of his youth, and there is little sense of his being abreast with contemporary learned debate. Still, the work is not without waves and wavelets of literary eloquence, and it is instructive to see what prompts them and how they relate to the argument, and whether they reinforce or undermine its persuasive force.

As if following Verlaine's advice to "take Rhetoric and wring its neck," Newman begins in the baldest style imaginable. No dedicatory epistle, no preface, no introduction of any kind; only this: "Propositions (consisting of a subject and predicate united by the copula) may take a categorical, conditional, or interrogative form" (25/9¹), followed by dry definitions of each. This is not even the voice of an Oxford lecturer; it is the dry-as-dust language of a secondary school textbook; literary style is at zero point here. It seems that Newman is taking the word "grammar" in its most literal sense, not in the wider sense of Wittgenstein's "theology as grammar." One of Newman's bugbears was John Locke's talk of "degrees of assent," which seemed to him to make the assent of faith merely approximative. The severe grammatical format implicitly promises to put the assent of faith on a sure footing, giving it a necessity comparable to that of the rules of grammar.

He continues in the same dry style to define the mental attitudes of doubt, inference, and assent, correlated with the three kinds of proposition. Then we come to the first paragraph that has a certain stylistic glow:

Many minds of course there are, which are not under the predominant influence of any one of the three. Thus men are to be found of irreflective, impulsive, unsettled, or again of acute minds, who do not know what they believe and what they do not, and who may be by turns sceptics, inquirers, or believers; who doubt, assent, infer, and doubt again, according to the circumstances of the season. Nay further, in all minds there is a certain co-existence of these distinct acts; that is, of two of them, for we can at once infer

and assent, though we cannot at once either assent or infer and also doubt.
(27/11)

As the focus shifts to actual human beings, to the phenomenology of the living intellect, the style stirs into life. Indeed, the concrete complexity of real life lies in wait for Newman's effort to be severely logical; it will lure him into magnificent digressions, or even into some quite desultory and chatty ones, and it will undermine his concern with exactness of definition. Central to the work is the distinction between the "notional" and the "real," which Newman exploits for all it is worth. As a stylist, Newman is cramped in the realm of the notional, and thrives when he broaches the real, and he is not able to keep his observations of the real firmly yoked to his framework of notions. Sometimes he fixes on a rather thin notion – such as the alleged "indefectibility of certitude" (181-208/144-68) – and attempts to shore it up by a long list of illustrations from real life. The effect of this is rather unhappy: the notion does not get any more convincing, while the real life material is spoilt by being dragooned into its service. The notional and the real may be even more at odds than Newman anticipated; and the corresponding tension between logic and literature may be irremediable.

Another slight stirring of style occurs when Newman refers to a child's assent to a statement of its mother: "Her veracity and authority is to him no abstract truth or item of general knowledge, but is bound up with that image and love of her person which is a part of himself, and makes a direct claim on him for his summary assent to her general teachings" (34-5/18). The image of Mother Church is insinuated here. The prosaic expository writing is again enlivened when one of the illustrations takes on the proportions of a short story:

I am in a foreign country among unfamiliar sights; at will I am able to conjure up before me the vision of my home, and all that belongs to it, its rooms and their furniture, its books, its inmates, their countenances, looks and movements. I see those who once were there and are no more; past scenes, and the very expression of the features, and the tones of the voices, of those who took part in them, in a time of trial or difficulty. I create nothing; I see the facsimiles of facts; and of these facsimiles the words and propositions which I use concerning them are from habitual association the proper or the sole expression. (39/23)

This circumstantial and even sentimental passage is not without a function: it illustrates “real apprehension,” a topic which licences and demands warm diction and striking images. The use of the first person singular underlines the effect. Another example: “I can bring before me the music of the *Adeste Fideles*, as if I were actually hearing it; and the scent of a clematis as if I were in my garden; and the flavour of a peach as if it were in season...” (40/23). Of course, the idea of merely notional apprehension will also require vivid style in order to make its significance clear to the reader. Newman tends to present such apprehension negatively, even with a touch of satire: “I suppose most men will recollect in their past years how many mistakes they have made about persons, parties, local occurrences, nations and the like, of which at the time they had no actual knowledge of their own: how ashamed or how amused they have since been at their own gratuitous idealism when they came into possession of the real facts concerning them” (45/28).

“It is in human nature to be more affected by the concrete than by the abstract; it may be the reverse with other beings” (50/31). This basic assumption – which may not be unquestionable – dictates the style in which Newman will evoke real and notional assent respectively. The former will be painted in the most gripping, living colours; the latter treated as pallid and spectral. Here style supplements logic in a manner that could be seen as a covert appeal to empiricist prejudice. Indeed, religious overtones make their appearance, associating real assent with faith, notional assent with skepticism: “No one could possibly confuse the real assent of a Christian to the fact of our Lord’s crucifixion, with the notional acceptance of it, as a point of history, on the part of a philosophical heathen” (50/32). This piece of religious phenomenology, vivid and forceful though it be, risks short-circuiting the argument, preventing a more subtle assessment of the respective strengths of real and notional assent.

The critique of the one-sidedness and limitedness of notions leads Newman to some fine writing: “After proceeding in our investigations a certain way, suddenly a blank or a maze presents itself before the mental vision, as when the eye is confused by the varying slides of a telescope... When we try how to reconcile in the moral world the fulness of mercy with exactitude in sanctity and justice, or to explain that the physical tokens of creative skill need not suggest any want of creative power, we feel we are not masters of our subject. We apprehend sufficiently to be able to assent to these theological truths as mysteries; did we not apprehend them at all, we should be merely asserting; though even then we

might convert that assertion into an assent, if we wished to do so, as I have already shown, by making it the subject of a proposition, and predicating of it that it is true” (60/40-1). The style tenses, becomes nervous and dynamic, when theological points surface; we sense that the author handles philosophical discussion as a necessary chore, but quickens with passion when he scents theological meat. When his account of the limits of the notional segues into tart satire on religious indifferentism, one feels that he is really in his element:

There is in the literary world just now an affectation of calling religion a “sentiment”; and it must be confessed that it is usually nothing more with our own people, educated or rude. Objects are barely necessary to it. I do not say so of old Calvinism or Evangelical Religion; I do not call the religion of Leighton, Beveridge, Wesley, Thomas Scott, or Cecil a mere sentiment; nor do I so term the high Anglicanism of the present generation. But these are only denominations, parties, schools, compared with the national religion of England in its length and breadth... It consists, not in rites of creeds, but mainly in having the Bible read in Church, in the family, and in private. (62-3/43)

There follows an eloquent evocation of the Bible’s role in British culture. Then the satire on notional credence is resumed:

Its doctrines are not so much facts, as stereotyped aspects of facts; and it is afraid, so to say, of walking round them. It induces its followers to be content with this meagre view of revealed truth; or rather, it is suspicious and protests, or this is frightened, as if it saw a figure in a picture move out of its frame, when our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, or the Holy Apostles, are spoke of as real beings, and really such as Scripture implies them to be. (63/43-4)

Some of Newman’s best writing, considered as prose, is in this vein, as in *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* (1850) or *Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England* (1851), though it may be of only minor theological significance.

However, the high point of Newman’s eloquence in the first part of the *Grammar* bears not on theology but on literature. The passage stars (with one omitted comma, two added commas, two altered spellings, and one altered phrase) in Saintsbury’s *History of English Prose Rhythm* (388-9), and its close is cited by

Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

Let us consider, too, how differently young and old are affected by the words of some classic author, such as Homer or Horace. Passages, which to a boy are but rhetorical commonplaces, neither better nor worse than a hundred others which any clever writer might supply, which he gets by heart and thinks very fine, and imitates, as he thinks, successfully, in his own flowing versification, at length come home to him, when long years have passed, and he has had experience of life, and pierce him, as is he had never before known them, with their sad earnestness and vivid exactness. Then he comes to understand how it is that lines, the birth of some chance morning or evening at an Ionian festival, or among the Sabine hills, have lasted generation after generation, for thousands of years, with a power over the mind, and a charm, which the current literature of his own day, with all its obvious advantages, is utterly unable to rival. Perhaps this is the reason of the medieval opinion about Virgil, as if a prophet or magician; his single words and phrases, his pathetic half lines, giving utterance, as the voice of Nature herself, to that pain and weariness, yet hope of better things, which is the experience of her children in every time. (78-9/56-7)

The most striking moments in this passage – the climactic “pierce” in the second sentence, the fleeting glimpse of the Sabine hills in the third, and the magnificent cadence which reprises and universalizes the experience of the boy in the second sentence – certainly convey how poetry wins our “real assent.” Meditation on Scripture has a similar effect, Newman goes on to say: “Let his heart at length be ploughed by some keen grief or deep anxiety, and Scripture is a new book to him” (80/57). If real assent is so signally illustrated by literature, then it appears that literary style, at least as much as logical argument, has a role in producing it. Real assent has less to do with propositions than with recognitions; the great writer, or the divinely inspired one, is more likely than the powerful dialectician to elicit them.

Newman's Empiricist and Literary Resistance to Metaphysics

In championing the real against the notional, Newman at times comes unexpectedly close to theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf Harnack, who sensed the necessity for Christian theology to

resist the dominance of metaphysical reasoning. Studying theology in Rome after his reception into the Roman Catholic Church, he was exposed as never before to the relentless methods of scholastic argument and must have felt somewhat estranged. It is true that in his critique of Protestant discourse on grace and justification, culminating in the 1838 *Lectures on Justification*, Newman had held fast to the writings of Robert Bellarmine, perhaps over-confidently applying logic and ontology to the interpretation of Luther's and Melancthon's biblically grounded language (see O'Leary 1991). But the theologians Newman most admired were the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Fathers, and a review and discussion of patristic arguments and incidents form the staple of his own theological writing. His theology is concrete, occasional, dialogal. It applies the historic wisdom of the Church to questions of the day. Since he grasped Christianity as a historical movement in which wisdom was dynamically unfolded through a series of concrete occasions and controversies, scholasticism may have seemed to him to erase this concrete, historically embedded character of living Christian thought, though he refrains from saying so out loud, being genuinely impressed by the discipline and acuity of scholastic logic. His own theology, for which he modestly disclaims the title of theology, focuses on the assumptions from which human reasoning proceeds, and he considers these in the density of their moral, psychological, historical, and cultural conditioning. This introduces a historicist and relativizing note, and a hermeneutics of growth and progress, which are alien to most scholastic philosophy and theology.

Scholasticism also represents the extreme of non-literariness in theology, whereas the Fathers are genuine literary figures. Newman was fond of commenting on their literary styles, admiring the Greek of Athanasius and the Latin of Jerome in particular. The Caroline Divines and many other Anglican writers also won his admiration for the elegance of their diction. Theological argument without literary grace must have seemed to him to lack full conviction. Even when putting forward steep doctrinal claims, he tries to do so with a literary eloquence that makes them thrilling. Consider this blast of high Christology from a sermon:

The case is the same at this day; mere Protestants have seldom any real perception of the doctrine of God and man in one Person. They speak in a dreamy, shadowy way of Christ's divinity; but, when their meaning is sifted, you will find them very slow to commit themselves to any statement sufficient to express the Catholic dogma. They will tell you at once, that the subject is not

to be inquired into, for [or?] that it is impossible to inquire into it at all without being technical and subtle. Then, when they comment on the Gospels, they will speak of Christ, not simply and consistently as God, but as a being made up of God and man, partly one and partly the other, or between both, or as a man inhabited by a special Divine presence. Sometimes they even go on to deny that He was in heaven the Son of God, saying that He became the Son when He was conceived of the Holy Ghost; and they are shocked, and think it a mark both of reverence and good sense to be shocked, when they hear the Man spoken of simply and plainly as God. They cannot bear to have it said, except as a figure or mode of speaking, that God had a human body, or that God suffered; they think that the "Atonement," and "Sanctification through the Spirit," as they speak, is the sum and substance of the Gospel, and they are shy of any dogmatic expression which goes beyond them. Such, I believe, is the ordinary character of the Protestant notions among us as to the divinity of Christ, whether among members of the Anglican communion, or dissenters from it, excepting a small remnant of them. (Newman 1892:345-6)

The literary element here consists in the way different theological notions are given their vivid affective hue – some are cited as insufficient, with a note of disdain, and the true ones emerge as glorious in their paradoxical excess. The minds of the doctrinal waverers are sketched with novelistic sharpness: "and they are shocked, and think it a mark both of reverence and good sense to be shocked, when they hear the Man spoken of simply and plainly as God." The same paradoxical impact is found in the following lines, which turn dogma into poetry: "O wisest love! that flesh and blood/Which did in Adam fail,/Should strive afresh against the foe,/ Should strive and should prevail;/And that a higher gift than grace/Should flesh and blood refine,/God's Presence and His very Self,/And Essence all-divine" (Newman 1989:721).

In the *Grammar of Assent* Newman is attempting to clarify the philosophy of mind implied and partly articulated in his earlier works. The living intellect of man – or how people really think – is his yardstick for measuring the achievements and limitations of metaphysics. Metaphysics, and the metaphysically conditioned theology of the scholastics, is true, valid, indispensable, powerful, but it is confined to the realm of the notional, which can never overtake or be fully commensurate with the real. This distinction between real and notional, which forms the axis of the *Grammar of Assent*, allows him to honour fully the Church's theological

heritage. He would have subscribed to Leo XIII’s characterization of theology in *Aeterni Patris* (1879):

Its solid foundations having been thus laid, a perpetual and varied service is further required of philosophy, in order that sacred theology may receive and assume the nature, form, and genius of a true science. For in this, the most noble of studies, it is of the greatest necessity to bind together, as it were, in one body the many and various parts of the heavenly doctrines, that, each being allotted to its own proper place and derived from its own proper principles, the whole may join together in a complete union; in order, in fine, that all and each part may be strengthened by its own and the others’ invincible arguments. (#6)

But he would have added that all this is notional and that the true core of faith and of theology is to be found in the dimension of the real, which lies beyond “mere notions” (121/93). Contrasting the “real” elements, warranted by conscience, experience and Scripture, of which theological knowledge is composed, with the notional syntheses of formal doctrine and theological systematization, he introduces a gap between living faith and doctrinal formulations (a gap he does not always locate in the same way) that is distinctively Protestant.

It is of the essence of literary style to complicate and thicken mere notions by infusing into them the life and colour of the concrete real. The initial pages of the *Grammar* led us to expect a bloodless but accurate ballet of finely honed definitions and distinctions, and throughout the work we see Newman striving – or vainly flailing? – to impose logical order on his observations. The rigid structure of the book, with a first part on “assent and apprehension” and a second on “assent and inference,” each with five chapters, of which the fifth deals with the relations of apprehension and inference respectively with assent “in the matter of Religion,” is externally impressive, but is it an organic structure? Does it really guide the reader, or is it better ignored? Newman’s wide-ranging observations on the human intellect in action are not as tightly bound into an argumentative structure as those of Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Mind* or even those of Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*.

As a philosopher, Newman prefers to remain with the observed phenomena of mental life, almost never rising to discussion of the metaphysical underpinning thereof, whether in Aristotelian or in Cartesian style. Metaphysics comes into view chiefly as a particular activity of the living intellect, which he is inclined to

view as an academic pursuit, like any of the sciences, rather than as an essential passion of the being who by nature desires to know (according to the opening words of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*), though it is true that he gives philosophy a particular role in university education; it is the "science of sciences," integrating and surpassing the incomplete perspectives offered by the other sciences (Bottone 23). Metaphysical questions do not haunt Newman, who seems discouraged from the start by the unlikelihood of resolving them by mere reason. The questions that do haunt him are ones arising from the claims of faith, and his resolution of them is by means of a homely reasoning investing heavily in 'analogies' (perhaps under the influence of Joseph Butler). The authorities he quotes to shore up his solutions are never metaphysical or speculative in character (except in the aforementioned appeal to Bellarmine), but are primarily drawn from the most exoteric passages of Scripture and the Fathers. For all these reasons, he cannot be thought of as a systematician in the line of Kant and Hegel, but as an empiricist or proto-phenomenologist he is not systematic either. He can be seen as enacting an empirical or phenomenological turn in Catholic theology, but in an essayistic or divinatory way, leaving it to his successors to carry through his insights in a methodical and comprehensive fashion.

But who were his successors? First came the generation of Modernism, which developed in various styles a phenomenology of faith and a sense of the historical relativity of doctrinal statements that exhibited affinities with Newman: Maurice Blondel, Edouard Le Roy, Alfred Loisy, George Tyrrell, Ernesto Buonaiuti, Henri Bremond, Baron Friedrich Von Hügel. These theological thinkers took seriously Newman's conviction, expressed in his last great theological utterance, the preface to the 1877 edition of *The Via Media of the Anglican Church*, that "theology is the fundamental and regulating principle of the whole Church System. It is commensurate with Revelation," "theologians being ever in request and in employment in keeping within bounds both the political and popular elements in the Church's constitution, – elements which are far more congenial than itself to the human mind, are far more liable to excess and corruption, and are ever struggling to liberate themselves from those restraints which are in truth necessary for their well-being" (qtd. in Barmann 190-1). The Modernist thinkers were conscious of the importance of literary style, as they strove to give Christian faith a subtle, mature profile as it engaged with modern questions.

The mainstream of Catholic thinking preferred to focus on the apologetic usefulness of Newman's thought, notably in its stress on the certitude of assent,

correlated with strong affirmation of the infallibility of the Church: "And I hold in veneration,/For the love of Him alone,/Holy Church, as His creation,/And her teachings, as His own" (Newman 1989:694). Newman, whose "opposition to the definition of papal infallibility was prescient in his own day, and prophetic in ours" (Barmann 197), has been recuperated for a papal monopolization of authority that would have been anathema to him. Though his vision of the Church shone forth at Vatican II, it has dimmed again, overcome by old habits. "One does not find before the nineteenth century popes who issued encyclicals and magisterial instructions every few months on every topic under the sun and intended as frameworks for all legitimate theological discussions among Catholics. Such practice has preempted the authentic theological development within the Church which Newman envisioned, and has created a more or less continual crisis of authority for some of the best and brightest in Catholic intellectual life" (Barmann 199). Yet the new status now given to his writings, including his outspoken private correspondence, ensures their transformative impact in the long term.

Though Newman confined the utterances of infallibility to a minimum, the Modernists were loth to follow him in subscribing to the dogma of 1870, insisting that at most one can speak of infallibility only in the sense of a general trust in the vision of the whole People of God; that the pluralism of confessions and religions makes claims of infallibility seem hubristic; that faith must learn to sit more lightly in its saddle; and that the Church is forbidden to draw on infallibility as a blank cheque. John Milbank objects that for Newman "the overwhelmingly important act of real assent in the religious sphere is to the authority and infallibility of the Catholic Church," and urges against this "crass" subscription to infallibility that "real assent to such authority should rather be seen as indissociable from a certain intuitive insight into the compelling truth of all that the Church teaches" (59). On the whole, Newman does correct the authoritarian positivism of many Catholics of his time (and since), precisely by rooting the "*Credo ecclesiam*" in a full experience of the Christian life in which the trustworthiness of church teaching is amply verified. Something of Newman's empirical grounding of theology lives on in the turn to the knowing subject in transcendental Thomism, and in the *Nouvelle théologie* that returned to biblical and patristic sources, laying the groundwork of Vatican II. There was a spate of books on the psychology of faith after the Council, but we are still far from having a thorough rethinking of Catholic theology on empirical and phenomenological premises. Attention to the witness of modern literature and an effort to think and write in a literary way would be an essential

component in such a theology, even if at some expense to its methodological coherence.

Thoroughness of system and method is inhibited in Newman by the apologetic motive. He offers no disinterested contemplation of the human mind in action, not even in *The Idea of a University*, which is also governed by the idea of measuring the strengths and weakness of the human intellect from a Catholic perspective, stressing the ravages of original sin and the need for the Church's guidance (see O'Leary 1994). The serenity and objectivity of Locke's lucid survey is beyond Newman, whose emphatic insistence on points supportive of his vision of religious assent tends to produce an idiosyncratic vision of how people think. Nor does he espouse the sovereign vision of Leo XIII, who sees the Church as having a responsibility to establish the "solid foundations" of true philosophy so that it can give theology the "nature, form, and genius of a true science." The relation of philosophy to theology is lighter and more tangential in Newman than in the Neothomist vision. He prefers to confine himself to refuting influential philosophical errors that are deleterious to faith, and his concern with the living intellect, and its implicit philosophical and theological investments, aims not at constructing an ambitious philosophy of mind, but at tracing a practical path of faith for sceptical moderns. His correspondence with his philosophical advisor Charles Meynell shows that the more Newman is challenged to develop a metaphysical position, perhaps in dialogue with Kant, the more he retreats to his own broad empirical vision of the mind's workings, to be handled in an essay with no pretence of systematic completeness. It is from this firmly established vantage point that he considers from afar, with respect, but with critical detachment, the labours of metaphysicians and scholastic theologians. The strategic positioning of the Essay allows him to say, "This is how I think, and what I see: can your metaphysics do justice to this?"

Thus ensconced in the mental habits of the literary scholar, Newman is very far from the exclusive privileging of scholastic method that we find in Leo XIII:

For, the noble endowments which make the Scholastic theology so formidable to the enemies of truth – to wit, as the same Pontiff [Sixtus V] adds, "that ready and close coherence of cause and effect, that order and array as of a disciplined army in battle, those clear definitions and distinctions, that strength of argument and those keen discussions, by which light is distinguished from darkness, the true from the false, expose and strip naked, as it were, the

“falsehoods of heretics wrapped around by a cloud of subterfuges and fallacies” – those noble and admirable endowments, We say, are only to be found in a right use of that philosophy which the Scholastic teachers have been accustomed carefully and prudently to make use of even in theological disputations. (#16)

Newman could reply that he has effectively refuted countless heresies, as well as many fallacious and self-deceptive mental habits not even noticed by the scholastics, without ever having had to draw on the philosophy favoured by them. He uses Aristotle more often than he uses Aquinas, but his take on Aristotle is far from speculative; he is uninterested in the metaphysics, and values Aristotle for logical discipline and practical wisdom.

Newman no doubt seeks an integrated view of Christian doctrine, but he ignores the scholastic way of achieving this, in contradiction to Leo XIII's prescriptions: “Among the Scholastic Doctors, the chief and master of all towers Thomas Aquinas, who, as Cajetan observes, because ‘he most venerated the ancient doctors of the Church, in a certain way seems to have inherited the intellect of all.’ The doctrines of those illustrious men, like the scattered members of a body, Thomas collected together and cemented, distributed in wonderful order, and so increased with important additions that he is rightly and deservedly esteemed the special bulwark and glory of the Catholic faith” (#17). Newman gathers patristic lore more empirically, notably in his evidences for the truth of Christianity drawn from the early patristic view of history – with emphasis on the rapid spread of the new religion, the courage of its martyrs, the fulfilment of prophecies and the dramatic fate of the Jews. He never goes on to a tighter logical ordering of this lore. He is closer to the 17th century Jesuit Denis Petau (Petavius), who sought to construct a theology on the basis of the Fathers, turning his back on scholasticism.

Leo XIII struck a note of high-handed judgment on modern philosophy:

For it pleased the struggling innovators of the sixteenth century to philosophize without any respect for faith, the power of inventing in accordance with his own pleasure and bent being asked and given in turn by each one. Hence, it was natural that systems of philosophy multiplied beyond measure, and conclusions differing and clashing one with another arose about those matters even which are the most important in human knowledge. From a mass of conclusions men often come to wavering and doubt; and who knows not how easily the mind slips from doubt to error? But, as men are apt to follow the lead

given them, this new pursuit seems to have caught the souls of certain Catholic philosophers, who, throwing aside the patrimony of ancient wisdom, chose rather to build up a new edifice than to strengthen and complete the old by aid of the new — ill-advisedly, in sooth, and not without detriment to the sciences. For, a multiform system of this kind, which depends on the authority and choice of any professor, has a foundation open to change, and consequently gives us a philosophy not firm, and stable, and robust like that of old, but tottering and feeble. (#24)

Countless Catholic seminaries throughout the 20th century discussed modern philosophy as a sequence of individualistic errors, comparable to the proliferation of Protestant sects, and proclaimed as the antidote a sound ontology, to be found by stepping back to Thomas. A double pronged revisionist development within Neothomism drew blessings from this rigid position, for historians revealed a subtlety in Thomas missed by the Thomist schools, while Joseph Maréchal and his heirs brought Thomas into dialogue with modern philosophy, not only as its corrector, but as one whose thought could be refocused in light of the questions of Descartes, Kant or Hegel. But no Neothomist engaged successfully with modern literary culture, nor did Neothomism ever appreciate the specifically literary positions of Newman's thought.

We can interpret Newman as voicing a thoroughly modern dissatisfaction with a metaphysical and theological rationality that had lost persuasive authority, outstripped by a new sense of the phenomena in a world marked by historical and evolutionary awareness and by a sturdier sense of the autonomy and pluralism of cultural developments. Newman read subtle scholastic disquisitions on the act of faith – Dmowski, Scavini, Amort (quoted, 155-6/264-5) – but his own achievement is to set the act of faith in a thoroughly modern context, showing how it is sustained under modern conditions. Above all, it is the sensitivity of the way he voices this, as “a man speaking to men” (Wordsworth) or “heart speaking to heart” (*Cor ad Cor Loquitur*, his motto as Cardinal), that makes him a convincing witness to the mode of existence of Christian faith under modern conditions. It is interesting to compare this performance with Kierkegaard's, marked by a pathos, an anxious struggle, an abundance of startling metaphor, and a dialectical virtuosity that are out of Newman's ken. Newman is restrained by a calm and balanced empirical outlook, so that even his warmest eloquence remains within a colloquy with the common sense of ordinary people, forswearing the imaginations

of extremists and outsiders.

Empiricism and Phenomenology

John Milbank points out that Newman gives voice to a British empirical tradition reaching back to the Middle Ages. Arguing that Newman puts British empiricism at the service of the miraculous, mysterious and transcendent, Milbank suggests that “the coherence of Newman’s cultural mission lies in a demand that the British genius further realise itself by returning to its Catholic origins” (35). Yet he finds that Newman’s apologetic does not remain sufficiently concrete, but “frequently lapses into an apologia based upon a more conventional empiricism in which, surprisingly, the abstract and the notional reassert their dominant sway” (36). If so, Newman shares the fate of most of those who would “overcome metaphysics,” finding themselves still in thrall to what they are struggling against. But perhaps Milbank misses the concreteness of the divine mission of the Church as apprehended by the early Fathers including Origen; Newman’s vision of this and of how it is supported by the remarkable events of early church history is far from abstract and notional; his proof of it has a rich quality not found in the common apologetics of his time. Clearly he wanted to end the *Grammar* with a literary tour de force comparable to the last chapter of the *Apologia*, but the arguments, even the evocation of the courage of the martyrs, are too old and too stale, and do not connect with modern anxieties as those of the *Apologia* do. The defect of this final application of “the principles of this Essay” (379/315-16) is not a relapse into the notional but an excessive investment in the concrete and factual, even a touch of primitivism, as if the simple but eloquent claims of the early Christians made unnecessary all subsequent and more sophisticated arguments. Newman is naïve about how prophecies are fulfilled and about the evidentiary value of martyrdom, and he really should have known better about Judaism. The most powerful strand in his apologetics is the appeal to Conscience, and this has nothing notional about it, but if anything is too concrete: “The thought of eternal glory does not keep bad men from a bad life now, and why should it convert them then [in early Christian times] from their pleasant sins, to a heavy, mortified, joyless existence, to a life of ill-usage, fright, contempt, and desolation” (356/296).

Milbank draws out a truly radical empiricism in Newman’s reflections: “an ultra-nominalism which discovers that the artifice of universalising is involved in all predication and is unavoidable (since the raw particulars that would provide

genuine foundations are unavailable)" (43). "Just because real assent does not grasp all aspects at once, it must always already to some degree be involved in notional abstraction" (44); analytic philosophy is trivial since "the question of apprehension lies both before and after that of logic or inference" (47); "our primary perception of things is moral, aesthetic and pragmatic as well as detachedly observational" (47); "a phenomenology which is also a hermeneutics and a pragmatism and therefore he avoids a Husserlian foundationalism as much as a Fregean one" (48). But I am not convinced that Newman's empiricism has this radical cast. The idea of "raw particulars" or of a refutation thereof simply does not come up in Newman's discourse; he does not move on that plane of philosophical analysis. His vision of the mind in action does not engage at all with the "foundationalist" efforts of Locke or Hume, much less those of Husserl and Frege. The literary "thickness" of his descriptions rejoins the real more directly than analytical philosophy does, but of course analytical philosophy works on reduced specimens of language and action; this apparent "triviality" is a philosophical strategy that can yield valuable insights, on apprehension as well as on logic and inference. It is questionable if one can play Newman's realism off against philosophical abstractions, for Newman pursued the latter only to a small extent; his view of them as merely notional may have deprived him of a great philosophical adventure.

"Where classical empiricism would wish to isolate basic given elements such as space, efficient cause, appetite, will and so forth, Newman sees only abstracted and conventional notions to which words have been affixed. He even suggests that alternative valid lenses through which we view physical process will necessarily entail incompatible implications, yet still be equally legitimate or even required – this sounds like a premonition of a 'quantum' perspective" (42). The basis for this suggestion is the following sentence: "Notions are but aspects of things; the free deductions from one of these aspects necessarily contradict the free deductions from another" (60/40). But again, is Newman thinking of bedrock percepts and concepts here, and not rather of how notions function in the rich concrete context of discussion and debate? He is concerned with "facts" and how they are discussed. All notional discussions move away from the concreteness of facts in one way or another. Newman does not deny that there are "facts" about space, as a nominalist might. He does say that "a straight line is a notion and nothing more" (59/40), which may have been a banal observation even in 1870. Our notions of space lead to antinomies, as in Kant, but space remains a solid enough reality: "it

is our notion that carries us beyond the fact... what we apprehend of space does not in all respects correspond to the thing, of which indeed we have no image" (59/40). These antinomies indicate "what are commonly called mysteries" – and Newman may be suggesting an analogy between our incapacity to think about space without contradiction and the similar clash at the notional level that our effort to think about the Trinity involves. Indeed, he immediately refers to "the infinitude of the Divine Attributes," observing that "we can have no experience of infinitude as a fact; the word stands for a definition or a notion" (60/40). In consigning mysteries to the realm of the notional, Newman implicitly reverses a common emphasis of Catholic theology, which treated the basic data of Scripture as a lower level of knowledge and saw faith as primarily the embrace of noetically challenging enigmas. But all of Newman's writing on the Trinity and the Incarnation, even in some of his sermons, hovers around the Creeds and the language of dogma; in his handling of scriptural discourse on God, the Son and the Spirit he is rather too conscious of the dogmatic framework, which impedes the biblical narratives from unfolding on their own terms. His literary style is attuned to a high-churchly relishing of the language of dogma, and despite the rather gaunt scriptural sermons of his youth it is not well suited to the imagination and rhetoric of the Bible, and becomes even less so in his writings as a Roman Catholic.

Milbank thinks that Newman failed to develop the metaphysical implications of our knowledge of "aspects" – a word that he sees as anticipating Husserl: "He did not sustain and extend his remarkable adumbration of a radical empiricism because he did not sufficiently realise (unlike, by contrast, Coleridge) that such a view requires an elaboration of its implicit metaphysical assumptions. Thus at the heart of Newman's refusal of algebraicization lies the claim that the mind, not logical processes, concepts or words is the real seat of comprehension... But such a view logically assumes that intelligence and the soul are ontological realities which are the prime sites of the truth of Being and hence in some way intrinsically linked to Being as such" (63). Here is a drastic recall of empiricist and phenomenological inquiry to its metaphysical foundations, the very foundations which it had to put in parentheses to get launched at all. Milbank seems to think that scholastic empiricism was perfectly adequate and that the tradition from Locke to Husserl brought only inessential refinements, and needs to be recalled to its metaphysical roots. It is certainly a sign of Newman's modernity that he abstains from any such recall of the phenomena to their alleged logical basis in metaphysics. Not for a moment does he indulge in anything like Coleridge's metaphysical floundering,

and if he speaks of the soul, it is in the vein of inward experience of conscience and of the hope or joy of salvation: "That calm and joy uprising in thy soul/Is first-fruit to thee of thy recompense,/And heaven begun" (Newman 1989:705). There is nothing here to satisfy the metaphysical thirst of Neothomists, and even when they lace their metaphysics with a misuse of Heideggerian language ("the truth of Being," which has a specifically phenomenological sense in Heidegger), they are still not able to get Newman on board, for he is simply unresponsive to ontological discussion. In Newman, it is literary and historical awareness that takes the role that philosophy filled in scholastic theology. A modicum of philosophy sufficed him and he saw no need for a concrete theological thinker to pursue the vast imponderable questions that fascinate philosophers. This economy of thought has its own coherence and depth, and its resistance to philosophical claims is not just a dogged apathy, but may be profoundly instructive, if it be true that ordinary life resists philosophy in a similar fashion. Literature can espouse the contours of experience in a way that philosophy attempts in vain.

In light of this awareness, Milbank's scolding of Newman is outrageously misplaced: "Should one not think of aspects as being qualities of intelligible forms? Without such a scholastic notion, how can the concrete thing be any more than a random bundle of disparate elements? By failing to endorse the intuition of intellectual form, Newman becomes himself prey to the suspicion that real assent is but an animal and arbitrary habit which requires an authoritarian regulation if anarchy is not to ensue" (64) – falling into positivism of reminiscent of Joseph de Maistre and Carl Schmitt. But Newman is not concerned with "the concrete thing" – the "aspects" that interest him are the aspects of concrete states of affairs that come up in research and discussion. It is hard to see how "intellectual form" is relevant to these.

Newman would have been aware of the scholastic categories Milbank recommends. Charles Meynell wrote to him in July 1869 that Aquinas "admitted the fundamental doctrine of the conceptualists, that nothing exists, objectively, besides the individuals with that ratio of resemblance which is the foundation of the 'universals'" (Newman 1973:281). Newman's refusal to think along those lines or even to enter into a debate on such premises may show not only his empiricist common sense but his true phenomenological mettle. Mainstream Catholic philosophers, such as Thomas Norton Harper, S. J., deplored Newman's attitude to logical argument in metaphysics and theology: "Dr. Newman has studiously avoided... that logical method of treatment against which he has employed the full

force of his refined and unapproachable sarcasm. His object appears to have been to introduce an intellectual realism, which should be independent of the technical laws of thought” (131). While Locke partly anticipated Newman’s illative sense in his recognition that “men can reason well who cannot make a syllogism” (*Essay on Human Understanding* IV 17), he believed that ultimately all reasonings could be reduced to syllogistic form. Newman seems more perceptive on this point. It is true that Newman’s long discussion of the Illative Sense can tumble over into a rather flat, commonsensical set of observations on how people argue or reach conviction in various fields; a more methodical account would be welcome (and it is part of what Lonergan attempted in *Insight*, a work nourished by repeated readings of the *Grammar of Assent*). Of the illative sense, Harper writes: “As I cannot see my way to acknowledge this new faculty and its peculiar inferences, I can recognize no reasons for the existence of a God, which are not subject to the universal laws of thought” (134). The author proceeds to rehearse the Five Ways, in a way that might unwittingly lend support to Newman’s scepticism about the practical value of such arguments, as opposed to the argument from conscience, of which Harper remarks: “I can find in its favour no such authority from Holy Scripture, no such catena from the Fathers, no such mention by the Doctors of the School, as I have been able to adduce in favour of the physical argument” (151). “Its cogency varies according to the ethical preparation of the reasoner” (152), so that it carries little weight for the vast majority. As an argument “unsupported and alone, it is in no sense demonstrative” (153). The confident rationalistic approach taken by Harper has fared ill in modern times, and has cut little ice with a literary culture that broods on religious themes in a more groping and intuitive style. For all his sobriety, one can imagine Newman being read by moderns such as Kafka, Rilke, and Wittgenstein, who would be left quite cold by scholastic proofs. This is not because literati have no head for philosophy, but because they work in a different tradition of thought, to which Newman is better attuned, because he is a real writer, and because when he tries to give categorical form to his thought the concepts he comes up with draw on his writerly experience.

This is particularly true of the notion of the “illative sense.” It is a phrase that reaches out to the texture of thought as a writer would have enacted and explored it throughout his career. The illative sense is “simply the intellect judging” (Horgan 148). This broad meaning coexists confusingly with a narrower one as referring only to “the intermediate judgment that bridges the gap between inference and certitude” (Jay Newman 168). This narrower meaning is also

based on the subtle perception of a literary observer of human behaviour – one could see it as analogous to the hesitation of Hamlet. It does not lend itself very well to being worked out logically. The paradox that conditional inferences can produce unconditional assent is not one that can be ironed out by inventing new philosophical categories. It may be a false problem, based on quirks of some individuals rather than on the structure of human knowing, though Lonergan takes it up and gives it a major, though still rather confusing, role in *Insight* (Lonergan 1957). “Newman is faced with an ‘apparent inconsistency’ only because of his odd views on inference, belief, and certitude. He believes that inference and belief are rival propositional attitudes, that belief is unconditional, that a conditional acceptance of a proposition always precedes an unconditional one, and that inferring a proposition is a continuous activity” (Jay Newman, 166). Again, the oddity comes from observation of the oddities of human thought processes, the kind of observation that intrigues the literary artist yet is of slight use to the philosopher, and that misleads when made the basis of conceptual construction. “In divorcing belief and evidence in the radical way that he does, Newman ends up attaching too much importance to what people actually believe and not enough to what they ought to believe” (104). That diagnosis well captures the split between the philosophical and the literary mentalities; the latter gives pride of place to what is actually observed, the former to what logic demands.

Newman was ill-advised to take issue with Locke on the question of degrees of assent. Assent is not an indivisible mental act but a propositional attitude attaching to our holding of propositions, and very often is it a provisional assent, capable of being undermined by radical philosophical skepsis or better information. On this point, Newman seems to go against his own literary wisdom as much as against philosophical logic. “Where Newman speaks of ‘assent,’ we are more inclined to speak of ‘belief,’ and though we do think of belief as a propositional attitude, we often think of it more as a disposition than a mental act” (105). Newman’s obsessive discussion of certitude goes beyond what is needed for apologetic purposes. Locke already admitted that truths of faith held on divine authority have a certainty not comparable with ordinary rational judgments, though he warns against haste in subscribing to such authority and “enthusiasm” in upholding it. The certitude of faith, which Newman upholds, is ultimately perhaps more a virtue than an epistemological achievement. It is indefectible trust in a relationship rather than utter security about a set of doctrinal claims.

“Informal inferences are not as mysterious as Newman would like us to

think" (Jay Newman, 169). Indeed, they are part of the activity of reflective judgment, discussed by Kant. Jay Newman is sceptical about his namesake's advice that we cultivate the illative sense (171), but all that is meant is that we acquire experience in the art of reflective judgment. This is something more than skill in inference and logical acuteness; it involves every dimension of mental life. Jay Newman's supposition that cultivation of judgment would make the educated person superior to the unlettered peasant misses the point that in the sphere of religious judgment, simple piety can be a guide to good thinking (so that it is not absurd to say that a pious Christian may have a better insight than Gibbon into the nature of Christianity, *pace* Jay Newman, 175).

"The relativistic, historicistic implications of Newman's talk about the assumptions and first principles on which reasoning rests" (Jay Newman 173) are again typical of literary observation. For philosophers, all human beings must think alike, according to the structures of their faculties of knowledge or according to the constraints of logic; for the literary artist, to the contrary, no two people can be imagined as thinking in the same way. "He wants to have his cake and eat it, to both impugn formal inference for its assumptions and associate the illative sense's determination of 'starting-points' with the 'ultimate test of truth' [275/226]" (174). But Newman is speaking concretely, with scant reverence for the real-life effectiveness of formal logic: "what is left to us but to take things as they are, and to resign ourselves to what we find? that is, instead of devising, what cannot be, some sufficient science of reasoning which may compel certitude in concrete conclusions, to confess that there is no ultimate test of truth besides the testimony born [sic] to truth by the mind itself, and that this phenomenon, perplexing as we may find it, is a normal and inevitable characteristic of the mental constitution of a being like man on a stage such as the world" [274-5/226]. The Shakespearian allusion confirms that Newman is not offering an "ultimate test of truth" in the sense of a foundationalist epistemology, but a vision of how people actually think, which throws tidy philosophical expectations into disarray. "Dogmatic though he is, he carries on a risky flirtation with epistemological relativism" (175); this is quite true, and is inevitable in a literary thinker; Newman is never dogmatic about human experience. Newman relativizes formal inference by noting its dependence on assumptions, and he vindicates the necessity of such assumptions – even a bid to get rid of assumptions by universal doubt would itself be a positive assumption (294/243). Any sophisticated hermeneutics must flirt with epistemological relativism; Newman guards against it by his stress on careful examination of

evidence; "we have no right in argument to make any assumption we please" (294/242); he trusts the play of critical common sense, and seeks no further grounding or warrant for it. That sits uneasily with his effort in the final chapter to show that common sense leads straight to Catholic Christianity; but at least he does open up an avenue of apologetic reflection that can be further refined, as needed, in a more pluralistic and open-ended direction, as the Modernists attempted.

Newman's downgrading of the argument from nature and his privileging of conscience bespeak a modern mentality at odds with tradition, or at least a literary mentality at odds with the predominance of philosophical argumentation in the theological tradition. The experience of conscience powerfully brings home to his mind the reality of God, and he seeks to awaken the same awareness of conscience in his readers. The focus is on the phenomenon rather than on the complexities of an argument based on it. Conscience is presented as a primitive phenomenon, well known to children. Indeed, Newman is more warmly disposed toward primitive religions (as he imagines them) than to civilized ones, since they have not tamed and dulled such experiences as the impression of God as Judge. If there is a historicist and relativizing tendency in his thought at some points, it does not come into play where conscience is concerned. The voice of conscience varies with the ethical qualifications of its hearer, but otherwise it is universal. If conscience is sometimes mistaken, this does not trouble Newman nor lead him to suppose that the content of what conscience dictates and forbids is dependent on cultural contexts. He uses his literary skill to trace the ways in which we avoid the clear imperatives of conscience, but he might equally have used it to discover the plurality of voices in which conscience speaks.

Of all the phenomena handled by Newman, conscience is the most elusive. It is an entirely invisible phenomenon, yet it is more real to Newman than anything empirical. It brings out an idealist streak in Newman, who is inclined to treat sense-perception as equally concerned with the intangible and invisible:

This instinct of the mind recognizing an external Master in the dictate of conscience, and imaging the thought of Him in the definite impressions which conscience creates, is parallel to that other law of, not only human, but of brute nature, by which the presence of unseen individual beings is discerned under the shifting shapes and colours of the visible world. (102/76)

His literary powers are drawn on to orchestrate this theme and to body it forth in

narrative:

It is my wish to take an ordinary child... Suppose he has offended his parents, he will all alone and without effort, as if it were the most natural of acts, place himself in the presence of God, and beg of Him to set him right with them... We shall not be wrong in holding that this child has in his mind the image of an Invisible Being, who exercises a particular providence among us, who is present every where, who is heart-reading, heart-changing, ever-accessible, open to impetration... Though he cannot explain or define the word "God," when told to use it, his acts show that to him it is far more than a word. He listens, indeed, with wonder and interest to fables or tales; he has a dim, shadowy sense of what he hears about persons and matters of this world; but he has that within him which actually vibrates, responds, and gives a deep meaning to the lessons of his first teachers about the will and the providence of God. (103-5/78-9)

The story is gripping, perhaps autobiographical, but its claim to universality is advanced by literary means, and in a wider perspective the child in question might not be merely "ordinary" at all, but the product of a particular cultural location.

The Trinity

One passage of the *Grammar*, dealing with belief in the Holy Trinity, has a peculiar fascination for theologians. What Newman has to say on this daunting theme is at first sight a simple, luminous clarification, one that cuts through the thickets of scholastic speculation in a refreshing way. Closer study of the passage brings various problems to light, so that what at first seemed crystalline becomes shadowed by nagging obscurities. Newman's analysis of Trinitarian language bespeaks his long familiarity with the history of its development and also a literary feel for that language. But Newman, though a sure master of the art of writing, did not often reflect on literary theory or attempt to make explicit what he intuitively knew about the varieties of style. He misses a chance to assess the stylistic varieties of Trinitarian language, from Scripture to dogma to theology, and he is further inhibited from this assessment by a somewhat pre-critical esteem for the language of the Creeds. His account of Trinitarian language works with a distinction between the elementary propositions of which the doctrine is

composed, which are correlated with real apprehension, and the complex synthesis of those propositions in the complete doctrine, which is correlated with notional apprehension. A more sophisticated, differentiated approach to the various elements in Trinitarian language – the different layers and styles of discourse even within a single document, such as the Nicaeo-Constantinopolitan Creed – would demand a more undefensive, unblinkered openness to the historical and literary texture of the Creeds than Newman attains.

Of the doctrine of the Trinity he asks “how far the propositions enunciating it are confined to the expression of intellectual notions, and how far they stand for things also, and admit of that assent which we give to objects presented to us by the imagination” (111/84). Note here the contrast of notions and things, and of intellect and imagination. For real assent things must impress themselves on the imagination; it is considered possible that some parts of doctrinal discourse concern only notions that impress themselves on the intellect, gaining only notional assent. God is Personal and “this essential characteristic of His Nature is reiterated in three distinct ways or modes; so that the Almighty God, instead of being One Person only, which is the teaching of Natural Religion, has Three Personalities, and is at once, according as we view Him in the one or the other of them, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit – a Divine Three, who bear towards Each Other the several relations which those names indicate, and are in that respect distinct from Each Other, and in that alone” (111/85). What kind of assent does this summary of the doctrine elicit? As stated, it seems more likely to produce puzzlement than assent. How can “He” have “Three Personalities”? Is this divine “He” then a fourth personality?

Note also the literary style of his concatenation of notions. Newman goes to Scripture for the basic propositions of Trinitarian doctrine, but he does not sufficiently advert to the difference between such propositions as enmeshed in their original Scriptural context and as set forth in the airless text of the Athanasian Creed. He does not reflect sufficiently on the question of the literary genres in which the various Trinitarian statements occur, though he has taken a first step in this direction.

Newman upholds the difficult claim that the doctrine as thus summarized is notional, but that it is a synthesis of nine simple propositions that for their part demand real assent: 1. There are Father, Son, and Spirit; 2. The Son is eternally from the Father; 3. The Spirit is from the Father and the Son; 4. The father is God; 5. The Son is God; 6. The Spirit is God; 7. The Father is not the Son; 8. The Son is

not the Spirit; 9. The Spirit is not the Father.

One of the many questions that could be asked is whether these nine propositions are not also “notional.” And can “The Son is God” be apprehended as really as “the apple is red”? Isolated from the other eight propositions it is incomprehensible (Jay Newman 90). He claims that each of the nine propositions is easily intelligible, and that they also impress the imagination: “Taken, not as a whole, but separately, each by itself, they are not only apprehensible, but admit of a real apprehension” (119/92). Even propositions 7-9 have more than an abstract, logical sense; they are “a declaration that Each of the Divine Three by Himself is complete in Himself, and simply and absolutely God, as though the Other Two had not been revealed to us” (119/92). In fact this supposition is questionable; should believers think of the Son and the Spirit as entities complete in themselves? Should they not always be envisaged as proceeding from the Father and depending on Him for their being? Newman has a very Western model of Trinity shaped by the Athanasian Creed, “the most simple and sublime, the most devotional formulary to which Christianity has given birth” (117-8/90). He has not deeply enough considered the shape of trinitarian doctrine as developed in the Greek Church in closer dependence on the New Testament. Newman may have associated that Creed with the Greek Fathers, unaware that it is a post-Augustinian Latin composition. The Athanasian Creed represents a freezing of the doctrine of the Trinity into formulae that alienate it from its biblical sources.

The propositions taken one by one elicit real assent, taken together they elicit notional assent. This distinction allows Newman to differentiate a primary, biblical level of faith from the superstructure of doctrinal synthesis and still more from theological speculation. However, the merely notional status of the entire doctrine is made a mark of divine transcendence, as Newman indulges in the classical rhetoric of negative or apophatic theology: “Not only do we see Him at best only in shadows, but we cannot bring even those shadows together, for they flit to and fro, and are never present to us at once” (116/89). Now it looks as if the real assents are after all but shadows, which lessens the tension noted above between the real assent given to propositions and the merely notional assent elicited by their synthesis. The shadowy notional status of the synthesis seems to be reacting on its individual elements. We find that our real assents to the divinity of Father, Son and Spirit involve us in a strange realm of contradiction or mystery, so the original status of those assents is revised, marked with an apophatic reserve.

What may attract the contemporary reader is the way Newman upholds firm

dogmatic propositions while he whittles them down to their essential content. This is a kind of doctrinal minimalism, such as he will shortly apply to the Vatican Council's definition of Papal Infallibility in his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875). He reduces the doctrine of the Trinity to its essential biblical components, whisking away any trace of metaphysical language; even the "consubstantial" of Nicea makes no appearance. The respect in which the full doctrine is held as a notional construction would be more impressive if he had admitted that notions, too, can grip the mind with real assent. In French culture "ideas" can have the powerful persuasive authority that "facts" have in British culture.

But Newman may not be entirely consistent. The Athanasian Creed, as a synthesis of the doctrine, should elicit only notional assent. "In that Creed we testify to the Unus Increateus, to the Unus Immensus, Omnipotens, Deus, and Dominus; yet Each of the Three also is by Himself Increateus, Immensus, Omnipotens, for Each is that One God, though Each is not the Other; Each, as is intimated by Unus Increateus, is the One Personal God of Natural Religion. That this doctrine, thus drawn out, is of a notional character, is plain" (112/85). But the transition from real to notional is not at all clearly marked, and Newman will claim that the notional character of the Athanasian Creed does not exclude its being an object of real assent. He asks: "Is it capable of being apprehended other than notionally? Is it a theory, undeniable indeed, but addressed to the student, and to no one else? Is it the elaborate, subtle, triumphant exhibition of a truth, completely developed, and happily adjusted, and accurately balanced on its centre, and impregnable on every side, as a scientific view, 'totus, teres, atque rotundus,' challenging all assailants, or, on the other hand, does it come to the unlearned, the young, the busy, and the afflicted, as a fact which is to arrest them, penetrate them, and to support and animate them in their passage through life?" (112-3/86). The answer, unexpectedly, is yes. "There is nothing in the exposition of the dogma, as I have given it above, which does not address the imagination, as well as the intellect" (113/86).

One sign that the Creed is to elicit real assent is that "there are no scientific terms in it" and all its expressions "have a popular meaning" and "are among the simplest and most intelligible that are to be found in language," and are used in a "plain sense." "That sense is what I have called real, for the words in their ordinary use stand for things"; they are "not abstract terms, but concrete, and adapted to excite images" and they are "embodied in simple, clear, brief, categorical propositions" (113/86-7). All of this reflects the British empiricist tradition, and

it might be called in question from the subtler perspective of phenomenology. In talking of God, it is not necessarily the case that what is popular, simple, plain, concrete, imaged, briefly stated provides the language best suited to the situation. Nor does such a down-to-earth exposition of doctrinal truth avoid the charge of hellenization. The very mode of exposition of the Athanasian Creed comes from a world of notional analysis that is very far from the New Testament. “Accurately balanced on its centre, and impregnable on every side” – these are qualities aspired to in science and metaphysics, and emulated in dogmatic exposition, particularly in the Latin Church. Do they coexist in simple harmony with real assents, as Newman thinks? In real life are real assents commonly mustered together into such neat logical constructions? Does not the neatness of their assemblage make the assents already a little less real?

Newman seems to exclude credal language from the realm of merely notional assent. This comes into play only when we get to formal theology: “It is otherwise of course with formal theological treatises on the subject of the dogma. There we find such words as substance, essence, existence, form, subsistence, notion, circumincension; and though these are far easier to understand than might at first sight be thought, still they are doubtless addressed to the intellect, and can only command a notional assent” (114/87). Yet it may be that many have subscribed to ideas set forth in these terms with far more enthusiastic assent than they give to the bread-and-butter language of the Catechism. Most philosophers are more attracted to talk of the divine couched in these “abstract” terms than to the somewhat peremptory declarations of the Athanasian Creed. When Aquinas speaks of God as the subsistent act of being he is not merely propounding a theme for notional assent; his assent is as real as any that depends on concrete images or plain words used in their plain sense.

If we tried to replace the real/notional dyad with a contrast between an engaged, committed faith-language and the objectifying language of dogma, we would see that Newman cultivates real assent to objectified presentations. He does not make a distinction between real assents to dogmatic utterances such as “there is one uncreated God” and biblical utterances such as “God is our refuge and our strength.” It may be, after all, that for Newman the Trinity of dogma looms larger in his imagination and elicits more committed assent than the Trinity of Scripture; dogma clarifies the “thing” that Scripture is about. And this bias has a correlative in Newman’s literary style, which will not descend all the way to the level of concrete, bodily existence, using more Saxon words, but wants to preserve

a Latinate apprehension of refined consciousness, remaining at a delicate, critical distance from the more primary deliveries of experience. He puts the concrete genius of English, and his own extensive powers of concrete observation, at the service of ecclesiastical schemes of understanding that should be at the service of the concreteness of Scripture but that often fall short of it. Though this is a severe limit of Newman's theology, nonetheless his investment in literary concreteness points the way beyond this limit.

"The thesis 'the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in Unity is mysterious' is indirectly an object of faith. But such an article, being a reflection made upon a revealed truth in an inference, expresses a notion, not a thing. It does not relate to the direct apprehension of the object, but to a judgment of our reason upon the object" (114/87). Here an "object of faith" can elicit notional assent. "I do not put forward the mystery as the direct object of real or religious apprehension; nor again, the complex doctrine (when it is viewed, *per modum unius*, as one whole), in which the mystery lies" (114/87-8). We skate on the edge of paradox here: how can one hold propositions with real assent yet hold the doctrine that is nothing more than the sum of those propositions with merely notional assent? Newman suggests that one can know the streets of London individually but be incapable of drawing a map of it (115/88), but the distance is much less from the alleged real grasp of the individual propositions of the doctrine to the grasp of them as a set. "Strictly speaking, then, the dogma of the Holy Trinity, as a complex whole, or as a mystery, is not the formal object of religious apprehension and assent; but as it is a number of propositions, taken one by one" (115/88). This seems to contradict what he earlier claims, that the doctrine as drawn out in the Athanasian Creed admits of "being held in the imagination, and being embraced with a real assent" (113/86).

Newman "says nothing in defense of his claim that we are capable of giving a notional assent to the dogma of the Trinity as a whole" (Jay Newman, 90-1); Newman "may be unfaithful to traditional Catholic teaching in reducing the 'whole' dogma of the Trinity to the 'inferior' phenomenological and pragmatic status of a notion. Newman realizes that to believe in the dogma of the Trinity is not simply to accept the nine constituent propositions" (91). He "indirectly suggests that no compound proposition can be grasped by real apprehension" (91) an "odd view" (92). He further believes that the complexities of theology are necessitated by the enigmatic character of the doctrine, and these complexities also affect our first level of apprehension:

Our devotion is tried and confused by the long list of propositions which theology is obliged to draw up, by the limitations, explanations, definitions, adjustments, balancings, cautions, arbitrary prohibitions, which are imperatively required by the weakness of human thought and the imperfections of human languages. Such exercises of reasoning indeed do but increase and harmonize our notional apprehension of the dogma, but they add little to the luminousness and vital force with which its separate propositions come home to our imagination, and if they are necessary, as they certainly are, they are necessary not so much for faith, as against unbelief. (116/89)

Here a negative, defensive role is attributed to theology, but he does not explore the possibility that dogma itself has a largely negative role, as a fence around the data of revelation – and that dogma would thus point us back to Scripture rather than replacing it as a more lucid and substantial account of the things revealed. Modernism carries over Newman's reflection on the negative role of the notional to a critique of dogma itself. Notice the subtly sarcastic way in which Newman presents theological discourse here, which is as paradoxical as if a lawyer were to rail against legal jargon. The phrase "arbitrary prohibitions" even suggests resentment, but it is instantly covered over by the clause that follows. Scholastic theology as a whole is consigned here to the shadowy realm of "notional apprehension," to which Newman opposes such nebulously literary quantities as "vital force" and "our imagination."

Milbank insists again that Newman should have been more confidently metaphysical: "While Newman seems to affirm that there must be some glimmer of intuition as to the divine simplicity, he explicitly denies this in the case of the divine trinity. This doctrine is entirely notional and cannot be the object of any act of real imaginative assent, even dimly and remotely"; he "seems to lack the concepts necessary to think a remote participatory insight into the unknown, or an obscure seeing of the invisible" (58). "This appears to render the depths of Christian doctrine unreachable by the ordinary religious imagination" (59). But this criticism implies that the propositions that are objects of real assent do not represent the "depths" of the Trinity. The Mystery is once again erected into a metaphysical ultimate in relation to which the convictions of biblical faith are seen as relatively superficial. Yet what really grips the imagination is the literary presentation of the Trinity (or of themes that would later be drawn on to construct the doctrine of the Trinity) in sublime biblical texts such as Proverbs 8, and the

Gospel of John (the chief source for the doctrine, yet how far the language of the doctrine is from that of the Gospel!). Newman, in true phenomenological style, seems to be overcoming this medieval fetishizing of the Mystery, in order to locate the heart of faith in the *Sache selbst*, the primary deliveries of scriptural experience, or at least their most elementary dogmatic clarification, and consigning the Mystery to a secondary place. The encounter with Father, Son and Spirit in Scripture is of course far more central to the life of faith than reverence for the mystery of their triunity. Going against the grain of Latin theology since Augustine, Newman resolutely turns the doctrine around, bringing its basic elements into the limelight at the expense of syntheses and speculations. In this sense he must be seen as making a key contribution to the overcoming of metaphysics in theology. But he should have taken a further step back from the doctrinally formulated propositions, such as “the Son is God” to a more consciously literary interrogation of the scriptural images and utterances, and general narrative and poetic contexts, from which these propositions were distilled.

Note

- ¹ Page references are to the widely distributed Image Book edition of 1955 and Ian Ker's annotated edition of 1985.

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