

3. TRAITS OF A POET IN THE PILGRIM

An inborn aptitude for literature was a remarkable characteristic of Newman even from early childhood. He started composing verse during play time at school at Ealing. His childhood activities showed that he was a very imaginative child whose happiest refuge was his own mind. Feeling and imagination were two strong elements of his character. He loved music, poetry and drama. The cadences of his prose and the lyrical strain of the poem The Dream of Gerontius bear witness to his fine musical ear. Newman expresses his romantic love of music in the poem "The Isles of the Sirens."¹ Finding the strains from the captain's guitar agonizingly romantic he writes:

Cease, Stranger, cease those piercing notes,
The craft of Siren choirs;
Hush the seductive voice, that floats
Upon the languid wires. (1-4)

An example of that unity of opposites which was a distinctive feature of Newman's mind and character is also seen in the poem. He was both an artist and an ascetic:

Weak self! with thee the mischief lies,
Those throbs a tale disclose;
Nor age nor trial has made wise
The man of many woes. (9-12)

Thus he transports his pilgrim soul from every sensuous pleasure to the adoration of the Ultimate.

On his Mediterranean journey, he speaks about the singing in Roman Churches: "The voices are certainly very surprising, . . . they have the art of continuing their notes so long and

equably, . . . the notes are clearer, more subtle and piercing, and more impassioned than those of an organ." ²

Newman's love of music is also evident in that beautiful passage in the University Sermons where he speaks of music as an outward and earthly judicious handling of doctrine under which great wonders unknown are represented or embodied:

There are seven notes in the scale; make them fourteen; yet what a slender outfit for so vast an enterprise! What science brings so much out of so little? Out of what poor elements does some great master in it create his new world! Shall we say that all this exuberant inventiveness is a mere ingenuity or trick of art, like some game or fashion of the day, without reality, without meaning? We may do so; and then, perhaps, we shall also account the science of theology to be a matter of words; yet, as there is a divinity in the theology of the Church, which those who feel cannot communicate, so is there also in the wonderful creation of sublimity and beauty of which I am speaking. To many men the very names which the science employs are utterly incomprehensible. To speak of an idea or a subject seems to be fanciful or trifling, to speak of the views which it opens upon us to be childish extravagance; yet is it possible that, that inexhaustible evolution and disposition of notes, so rich yet so simple, so intricate yet so regulated, so various yet so majestic, should be a mere sound, which is gone and perishes? Can it be that those mysterious stirrings of heart, and keen emotions, and strange yearnings after we know not what, and awful impressions from we know not whence, should be wrought, in us by what is unsubstantial, and comes and goes, and begins and ends in itself?

It is not so; it cannot be. No; they have escaped from some higher sphere; they are the outpourings of eternal harmony in the medium of created sound; they are echoes from our Home; they are the voice of Angels, or the magnificat of Saints, or living laws of Divine governance, or the Divine Attribute; something are they besides themselves, which we cannot compass, which we cannot utter;— though mortal man, and he perhaps not otherwise distinguished above his fellows, has the gift of eliciting them.³

The pilgrim poet's love of music finds in this passage a beautiful analogy. The poet lingers over the wonders of musical expression and suggests that inspite of its limitations human nature contains within itself elements capable of expansion into infinite and eternal meaning.

Newman was also a keen observer of the world around him. His delicacy of perception enabled him to receive impressions from the outside world and his mental agility transformed them into something beautiful. He had a marvellous power of visualization and portrayed persons and places with unusual realism. His descriptions of the beauties of nature during his Mediterranean journey glow with the colour and shade of the pictures of Turner. Here is a passage where Newman describes to his mother the sensuous glories of the country side in Devonshire:

What strikes me most is the strange richness of everything. The rocks blush into every variety of colour, the trees and fields are emeralds, and the cottages are rubies. A beetle I picked up at Torquay was green and gold as the stone it lay upon, and a squirrel which ran up a tree here just now was not the pale reddish-brown to which I am accustomed, but a bright brown-red. Nay,

my very hands and fingers look rosy, like Homer's Aurora, and I have been gazing on them with astonishment. All this wonder I know is simple, and therefore, of course, do not you repeat it. The exuberance of the grass and the foliage is oppressive, as if one had not room to breathe, though this is a fancy—the depth of the valleys and the steepness of the slopes increase the illusion—and the Duke of Wellington would be in a fidget to get some commanding point to see the country from. The scents are extremely fine, so very delicate yet so powerful, and the colours of the flowers as if they were all shot with white. The sweet peas especially have the complexion of a beautiful face. They trail up the wall mixed with myrtles as creepers. As to the sunset, the Dartmoor heights look purple, and the sky close upon them a clear orange. When I turn back and think of Southampton Water and the Isle of Wight, they seem by contrast to be drawn in Indian ink or pencil. Now I cannot make out that this is fancy; for why should I fancy? I am not especially in a poetic mood. I have heard of the brilliancy of Cintra, and still more of the East, and I suppose that this region would pale beside them, yet I am content to marvel at what I see, and think of Virgil's description of the purple meads of Elysium. Let me enjoy what I feel, even though I may unconsciously exaggerate.⁴

His letters during the Mediterranean tour abound with such sensuous descriptions. The invasion of locusts in his novel Callista is a fine imaginative description.⁵ Newman's poem The Dream of Gerontius portrays his Dantean power of describing supernatural experiences. In his love for the supersensuous and in his love for symbols he is Platonic.

Newman always expressed ecstasy over colour and scent. In The Dream of Gerontius he mentions 'ecstatic odours.' As he got better

in his Sicilian illness and took tea, he wrote of his reaction: "I could not help crying out with delight."⁶

Newman was over and above a student of human nature. His primary concern was that of the whole person, of mind, soul and body forming a unity. This also led him to discern the nature of the world in which man finds himself. His vision of a world made miserable by sin in the Apologia reveals the hidden poet speaking in prose. For Newman, to look upon the world was to be conscious of its very nature:

To consider the world in its length and breadth, its various history, the many races of man, their starts, their fortunes, their mutual alienation, their conflicts; and then their ways, habits, governments, forms of worship; their enterprises, their aimless courses, their random achievements and acquirements, the impotent conclusion of long-standing facts, the tokens so faint and broken of a superintending design, the blind evolution of what turn out to be great powers of truth, the progress of things, as if from unreasoning elements, not towards final causes, the greatness and littleness of man, his far-reaching aims, his short duration, the curtain hung over his futurity, the disappointments of life, the defeat of good, the success of evil, physical pain, mental anguish, the prevalence and intensity of sin, the pervading idolatries, the corruptions, the dreary hopeless irreligion, that condition of the whole race, so fearfully yet exactly described in the Apostle's words, "having no hope and without God in the world,"—all this is a vision to dizzy and appal; and inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution.⁷

These lines communicate the nature and meaning of man. It is the artistic representation of the growth of a soul steeped in the universal emotions of hope and fear, sadness and joy. The simple

words used here are delicately and sensitively adjusted with intense powerful feelings and imagination which is captivating and delightful.

The aesthetic aspects of Newman's temperament left their mark on his style. His interest in the forms of nature revealed to him a constant mirroring of its own moods in the temper of man. This motivated his meditations on the passing away of all things with time and at the same time the continuation of life on earth. His sermon The Second Spring draws a picture of the revival of Catholicism in England pointing out its parallels from nature. The sermon is a lyrical effusion which radiates rare beauty and music:

We have familiar experience of the order, the constancy, the perpetual renovation of the material world which surround us. Frail and transitory as is every part of it, restless and migratory as are its elements, never-ceasing as are its changes, still it abides. It is bound together by a law of permanence, it is set up in unity; and, though it is ever dying, it is ever coming to life again. Dissolution does but give birth to fresh modes of organization, and one death is a parent of a thousand lives.⁸

The long introductory succession of 'r's in the first two sentences enhances the effect of the opening harmonies innate in the sermon. These stand in contrast to the tranquil simplicity at the close of the second sentence which is gentle 'still abides.' Then the theme continues quietly by a chain of phrases of pure, magical beauty:

Each hour, as it comes, is but a testimony, how fleeting, yet how secure, how certain, is the great whole. It is like an image on the waters, which is ever the same, though the waters ever flow. Change upon change -- yet one change cries out to another, like the alternate Seraphim, in paise and in glory

of their Maker. The sun sinks to rise again; the day is swallowed up in the gloom of the night, to be born out of it, as fresh as if it had never been quenched. Spring passes into summer and through summer and autumn into winter, only the more surely, by its own ultimate return, to triumph over that grave, towards which it resolutely hastened from its first hour. We mourn over the blossoms of May, because they are to wither; but know, withal, that May is one day to have its revenge upon November, by the revolution of that solemn circle which never stops--which teaches us in our height of hope, ever to be sober, and in our depth of desolation, never to despair.⁹

The lines have an unusual poetic power and unique perfection. Ordinary words are made use of with rare distinction and harmony. Here we find the poet, the musician and the master of prose blended into one inseparable whole. The poet makes use of analogy, similes, visions and metaphors.

As the poet ponders over man's mortality and on the winter which overtakes him, the poet is transported to a vision of the second temple which rises above the ruins of the old:

Man rises to fall; he tends to dissolution from the moment he begins to be; he lives on indeed in his children, he lives on in his own name, he lives not on in his own person. He is, as regards the manifestations of his nature here below, as a bubble that breaks, and as water poured out upon the earth. He was young, he is old, he is never young again. This is the lament over him, poured forth in verse and in prose, by Christians and by heathen. The greatest work of God's hands under the sun, he, in all the manifestations of his complex being, is born only to die.¹⁰

The sermon enchants with an emotion which runs along all its

harmonies and it is a poem. Like Walter Scott, Newman arrays his thoughts in the most natural language and avoids common place terms of the current usage.

Matthew Arnold has written aptly of the pilgrim poet as a preacher:

Who could resist the charm of that spiritual apparition, gliding in the dim afternoon light through the aisles of St. Mary's, rising into the pulpit and then in the most entrancing of voices, breaking the silence with words and thoughts which were religious music — subtle, sweet, mournful ? I seem to hear him still saying, "After the fever of life, after weariness and sickness, fightings, and despondings, langour and fretfulness, struggling and succeeding; after all the changes and chances of this troubled, unhealthy state, at length comes death, at length the white throne of God, at length the beatific vision." ¹¹

Newman's preaching melted into poetry and its effect was that of sacred music. With the fervour of a prophet and an apostle Newman reproduced the image of this world and the next through his sermons. J. C. Shairp, professor of poetry at Oxford was of the opinion that Newman's "sermons were poems if by poetry is meant the highest and most impassioned thoughts conveyed in perfect melody of words." ¹²

The unique coalescence of the artist, the poet and the musician in Newman crowned the efforts of the philosopher and the theologian as he grew up. The beauty of his soul and his poetic genius are evident in the blessing which he gave to the Congregation of the Church of Birmingham Oratory:

You ask for my blessing, and I bless you with all my heart, as I desire to be blessed myself. Each one of us has his own individuality, his separate history, his antecedents and his future, his duties, his responsibilities, his solemn trial and his eternity. May God's grace, His love,

His peace, rest on all of you, united as you are in the Oratory of St. Philip, on old and young, on confessors and penitents, on teachers and taught, on living and dead. Apart from that grace, that love, that peace, nothing is stable, all things have an end; but the earth will last its time and while the earth lasts, Holy Church will last, and while the Church lasts, may the Oratory of Birmingham last also, amid the fortunes of many generations one and the same, faithful to St. Philip, strong in the protection of Our Lady and all Saints, not losing as time goes on its sympathy with its first fathers whatever may be the burden and interests of its own day, as we in turn stretch forth our hands with love and with awe towards those, our unborn successors, whom on earth we shall never know.¹³

These words convey the beauty and the spiritual aroma which resided in the saintly heart of the pilgrim poet. The very essence of his nature, its cravings, its inner strength, its weariness and its pathos in its trying earthly pilgrimage are summed up here in incomparable music. Thus his poetic genius was not confined to poetry alone. Poetic elements were an integral part of the person and found their outlet in manifold ways.

Though endowed with these qualities which characterize a poet, if Newman did not care for poetic perfection it was because he had other priorities. He preferred perfection of life rather than perfection of art. His poem "The Pilgrim"¹⁴ written in 1831 illustrates his passionate resolve to devote himself completely to his pilgrim ministry:

There stray'd awhile, amid the woods of Dart,
 One who could love them, but who durst not love
 A vow had bound him ne'er to give his heart
 To streamlet bright, or soft secluded grove.
 'Twas a hard humbling task, onwards to move

His easy-captured eyes from each fair spot,
With unattach'd and lonely step to rove
O'er happy meads, which soon its print forgot:--
Yet kept he safe his pledge, prizing his pilgrim-lot.

(1-9)

Thus the rapture Newman felt at the sight of visible beauty, he subordinated to the task of a pilgrim and kept himself safe from the temptation to love dearly what Wordsworth felt he could not but love too well. Hence he did not dwell on earthly things with the warmth of personal affection and he distrusted changing beauties and worldly splendours. The pilgrim in him passed on beyond the delight of the senses and the tangible beauty spread around him in the visible world to the adoration of the Ultimate hidden in the heart of concrete reality.

Notes

- 1 Elisabeth Ann Noel. Diss. 79-80
- 2 Ann Mozley, ed. Letters And Correspondence of John Henry Newman, During His Life in Anglican Church. Vol. 1. (London: Longmans, 1891) 380.
- 3 John Henry Newman, "The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine," Oxford University Sermons (London: Rivingtons, 1890) 346-347.
- 4 Ann Mozley, ed. Letters And Correspondence. Vol. 1. 242-243.
- 5 Cardinal Newman, Callista, intro. Alfred Duggan (London: Burns and Oates, 1962) 94-99.
- 6 Ann Mozley, ed. Letters And Correspondence. Vol. 1. 427.
- 7 Maisie Ward, ed. Apologia pro Vita Sua 162.
- 8 John Henry Newman, "The Second Spring," Sermons Preached on Various Occasions (London. Longmans, 1908) 163-164.
- 9 John Henry Newman, Sermons Preached on Various Occasions 164.
- 10 John Henry Newman, Sermons Preached on Various Occasions 165.
- 11 Matthew Arnold, Essay on "Emerson" Discourses in America (London, 1896) 139-140.
- 12 John Campbell Shairp, "Aspects of Poetry," Lectures Delivered at Oxford (Clarendon Press, 1881) 438-464.
- 13 Qtd. in J. Lewis May, Cardinal Newman (London: Hazell, Watson and Viney Ltd. 1929) 255.
- 14 Elisabeth Ann Noel. Diss. 55-56.