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Newman and the Autobiographical Tradition

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* is now in its 100th. year of publication. By way of tribute, I would like to discuss the *Apologia* as an autobiography, but one of a very special kind- *an autobiography of the mind.*"

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Newman and the Autobiographical Tradition

Thoughts on the Centenary of the *Apologia* (1865-1965)

By JOHN F. ROBBINS, C.S.B.

Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* is now in its 100th. year of publication. By way of tribute, I would like to discuss the *Apologia* as an autobiography, but one of a very special kind— an *autobiography of the mind*.

Joseph Riley in *Newman as a Man of Letters* remarks that "the greatest romance in the world is the romance of an individual's life." Indeed, in the centuries preceeding the *Apologia* there did appear a number of autobiographies and memoirs that recorded an historical epoch through the ambitions, the fears, the triumphs and failures of a single individual. In such stories of the self, we witness not only certain historical happenings but the universal, continuing drama of the human soul, with its inner conflicts, victories, defeats, and dreams. Where, for instance, can one capture so perfectly the spirit and essence of the Renaissance as in Cellini's autobiography? Or the temper of late eighteenth-century France, before and after the Terror, as in Marmontel's *Memoirs*? Or the romanticism of youth and the balance classicism of maturity as in Goethe's autobiography, *Poetry and Truth*? Indeed, Rousseau's *Confessions* inaugurated the Romantic Age by resurrecting the Renaissance cult of the personality. The ego was put into the spotlight, in the middle of the stage, in costume and mask. Rousseau stated that he wished to "make his soul, in a way, transparent to the eyes of the reader." And this he does, as he says, with a Zola-like naturalism, "not as a moralist, but as a botanist would do."

Before the *Apologia*, there had appeared a few autobiographies that raised this genre to a height of greatness. I would suggest that St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* are of special distinction, because they delve the deepest into the human soul.

Why did Augustine write his *Confessions*? He was very much aware of the close unity of the early Christian community and of its close inter-operation in winning God's grace; he had seen the effects of his mother and other Christian friends on his own life. He further realized the value that lay in the public profession of the Christian faith by learned and great men, such as the rhetorician, Victorinus.

Augustine thus recorded his own interior struggle between the flesh and the spirit, and the wide gap between knowledge and doing. The battleground of the action was his soul. Finally, he set clearly before the reader the prin-

ciple by which the war would ultimately be decided: from the age of nineteen, his mind had chosen as its goal the attainment of wisdom.

I prefer to delay my remarks on Rousseau and Wordsworth for the moment; later I shall relate them to developments in eighteenth-century philosophy.

When one turns to Newman's *Apologia*, what strikes one most forcefully is that this autobiography narrates, not the life story of a man, but rather the history of the development of a *mind*. Thus in his preface Newman states:

I will draw out, as far as may be, the history of my mind;
I will state the point at which I began, in what external
suggestion or accident each opinion had its rise, how far
and how they developed from within, how they grew,
where modified, where combined, where in collision with
each other, and where changed.

This purpose, thus set down by Newman, is very close to that of Wordsworth in his autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*. And of all the autobiographies, *The Prelude* is the closest to the *Apologia*.

In discussing the question of the *Apologia* in relation to other autobiographies and memoirs, I would suggest that there are two main considerations which merit some attention: first, the effects of eighteenth-century philosophy and of Romanticism in focusing attention on the human mind as a scene for drama, and secondly—something particular to the problem which Newman faced—that no answer but a detailed history of the formation and principles of his mind could accomplish what he hoped to achieve.

First, then, this interest in the mind is a late eighteenth-century phenomenon, an effect of the interests of the English philosophers Locke, Hume, and Hartley during that century. Locke's speculations on human knowledge in *An Essay on Human Understanding* in 1690 ushered in a whole century of speculation on the human mind. The mind, as I remarked earlier, came to be regarded as a scene for drama: with Locke it was a dark, isolated cottage, a few rooms of which are lighted with stored and associated memories—some strangely associated. Rousseau, for instance, talks of the images in his memory, which have combined with one another to form trains or "successions" of mental states that interplay one with another. Thus, he says, "I always endeavor to develop the first causes in order to make the connecting links understandable."

Moreover, post-Lockean writers such as Rousseau and Newman, were also aware that the images of memory deteriorate with time—and with the conjunction of more recent images and present feelings, suggestive of the passivity of the mind. Rousseau, for example, comments, "By surrendering

myself simultaneously to the memory of the impression received and to my actual feeling, I shall paint a double picture of my state of soul, namely, at the moment the event occurred and at the moment I described it." Wordsworth too was interested in several states of mind, mirrored one within another in a series of mirrors held up to a present moment. Thus Newman asks, "Who can know himself, and the multitude of subtle influences which act upon him? And who can recollect, at the distance of twenty-five years, all that he once knew about his thoughts and his deeds?"

Furthermore, in a more positive way, Wordsworth's *Prelude*, with its description of the powers of the imagination, with its celebration of a mystical inner-outer union, comes as the full sounding of the theme in the final movement of this symphony of fascination with the mind. Even Keats, who had been drawn more towards the non-egotistical objectivity of Elizabethan writers, came at last to place value upon the inner probings that seemed to be a mark of his age. He wrote to a friend, John Reynolds, that he had come to recognize that Wordsworth had a special genius of exploring the dark passages of the mind. "Here," Keats declared, "I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton, . . . [who] did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done." Indeed, Wordsworth subtitles his great epic, "Growth of a Poet's Mind," and writes:

Not Chaos, not
The darkest pit of lowest Erebus,
Can breed such fear and awe
As fall upon us often when we look
Into our minds, into the Mind of Man--
My haunt, and the main region of my song.

Hence, I think, philosophically speaking, that Newman's age in 1864 was well prepared to read with interest and enjoyment the drama of the life of a mind.

I turn now to the second consideration, one more pertinent to Newman's own special situation in which he found himself—why he wrote such a self-revealing book as the *Apologia*? Why would a man of his excessively fine sensibilities and naturally reclusive character make himself, as Chesterton says, "a naked man who carries a naked sword?"

This question itself has two aspects: first, and simply, why did Newman write any type of autobiography, even aside from it being a portrait of his mind? In answer, one may eliminate the reasons that had commonly motivated so many earlier memoirs and autobiographies: Marmontel and Benjamin Franklin's wish to put their experiences to the service of the younger members of their family; Cassanova and Rousseau's wish in a time of acute frustration and growing old age to turn their thoughts to memories of their youth, and a happier time of the spirit; or John Stuart Mill's wish

to share his own triumphant synthesis of the best qualities in two of the movements of his age.

Now, the circumstances surrounding the reason why Newman had to write a defense of himself—the attacks by Charles Kingsley in the book review of *Macmillan's Magazine* and in *What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?* on the veracity of Newman and of the Roman clergy—are a matter of record. Hence, I wish, rather, to dwell on the less obvious aspects of why his *Apologia* took the form of a study of his mind.

In *What, Then, Does Dr. Newman Mean?*, Kingsley did far more than repeat his imputation against Newman's veracity. Perhaps Kingsley's own words will best convey the serious and devastating quality of his accusations: "Dr. Newman had a human reason once," he wrote, "but has gambled it away. I am henceforth in doubt and fear, as much as an honest man can be, concerning every word Dr. Newman may write." With such statements as these, Kingsley, as Newman points out, "has poisoned the wells." By this Newman means that Kingsley had successfully placed the English people, Newman's reader-judges, into a suspicious and mistrusting attitude towards all that Newman might say in reply. Thus, a merely logical and argumentative array of facts would serve no purpose. As Newman himself expresses it,

... the more I succeed, the less will be my success. If I am natural he will tell them, "The true art is to conceal one's art"; if I am convincing, he will suggest that I am an able logician; if I show warmth, I am acting the indignant inucent; if I am calm, I am thereby detested as a smooth hypocrite; if I clear up difficulties, I am too plausible and perfect to be true. The more triumphant are my statements, the more certain will be my defeat.

The "poisoning of the wells," then, is, as Newman states, "the bias of the court," his judges and readers. What was needed, as he rightly expressed it, was to "break through the barrier of prejudices against me, if I can."

But how was this to be done? At last the answer came; he tells us:

I recognized what I had to do, though I shrunk from the task and the exposure it would entail. I must, I said, give the true key to my whole life: I must show what I am, that it may be seen what I am not. I will draw out, as far as may be, the history of my mind.

And thus he begins to retrace the events leading to the great revolution of his mind, his turning towards Rome. He sets forth in Chapter I the im-

planting of those principles by which his mind will work, a rather complex and surprising blend of principles. Moreover, the Oxford Movement itself is raised to a mental movement and is presented only as an influence on the mind.

The stage is his mind; the action is personal, not controversial or argumentative; and thus we watch the inner-outer play of person and event.

Something Other

I dream of Spring
And Summer in the Winter;
And the red-brown leaves of
Autumn and the White that comes later:
 This I dream in the Summer.

I dream of Lotus Land
In hard Winter—
Of easy living when working hard;
And of working when there is easy.
I dream of when things will be better,
And when Better comes,
When Spring and Summer come—
When there is freedom—
Then I realize that
There is no Better
 But only more Dream.

Yellowbrowed, then
White and dirtblack to uglify
And all dissipates into earth again
Whereof comes green again
And something called hope again—
And sometimes. . . Him again—
 Something beyond Dream.

PHIL PARISI