

John Henry Newman's Art of the End

REBEKAH LAMB
University of St Andrews
St Andrews, Scotland

In *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* (1849), John Henry Newman pastorally approaches the question of divine providence by envisioning the purpose or “end” of each life as a dramatic role which unfolds within the theatre of history and which, in turn, has a heavenly destiny, lying within but far beyond the world as we know it, within but beyond the play of the sensible and immediately discernible. In Newman’s homiletics, we frequently find him turning and returning to the Christian belief that each life is an unduplicable manifestation of the divine plan, a plan enfolded into the eschatological realization of a new heaven and a new earth.¹ In meditating upon this fundamental aspect of the Christian creed and its attending doctrines, Newman appeals to St. Paul and the idea of the world as a theatre, of Christians as spectacles on the world stage of history (1 Cor 4:9; Heb 10: 32–33), in which each person is part of the drama of salvation history:

St. Paul on one occasion speaks of this world as a scene in a theatre. Consider what is meant by this. You know, actors on a stage are on an equality with each other really, but for the occasion they assume a difference of character. . . . Is it not his business, and nothing else, to act his part well? Common sense tells us so. . . . We are all but actors in this world; each has his special part at present, each has his work,

¹ John Henry Newman, “God’s Will the End of Life,” discourse 6 in *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* (London: Longmans and Green, 1907), 112.

each has his mission not to indulge his passion, . . . not to be selfish and self-willed, but to do what God puts on him to do.²

Here, we see Newman yoking together eschatology and the everyday through the image of the stage as soteriological microcosm. Throughout his writings, Newman frequently appeals to the arts, to their forms in particular, to flesh out the implications of eschatology in daily life. Paradoxically, he often concludes with the conviction that, however profound and however beautiful, the arts are always already most instructive in pointing to that which transcends or overcomes them. That is to say, the arts are as instructive, as beautiful in their insufficiencies as they are in their capabilities. The arts, in Newman, incline after not only incarnation but also an overcoming, a consummation fully realized through, with, and in beatific vision.³

This essay therefore examines Newman's developing perspective on the place of the arts within the Christian life and, by extension, the degree to which his view of the aesthetic is end-driven or eschatological in character. It therefore draws from his poetry and sermons, since, for Newman, the literary is a distinctive mode of theologizing, as opposed to an alternative to it. In so doing, it offers one of the most sustained accounts of Newman's poetic and aesthetic appraisal of daily life in light of eternity. The few extant works touching on Newman's aesthetics have focused on liturgical theology or the devotional imagination, especially as found in Guy Nicholls's *Unearthly Beauty: The Aesthetic of St. John Henry Newman* (2019) and Ian Ker's *The Catholic Revival in English Literature: 1845–1961* (2003). Drawing from these scholarly precedents, my essay also highlights the inextricable links between prayer, liturgical worship, and aesthetic philosophy in Newman's thought. However, it also widens out to consider, among other things, Newman's assessment of the instructive insufficiencies of aesthetics for the spiritual life; the links between aesthetics and doctrine in his thought; and the degree to which Newman's theological aesthetics engaged with the emerging decadent aesthetics of his time. In so doing, this essay offers new directions in engagements with Newman's aesthetics, placing in view the degree to which his end-driven or eschatological imagination enlivened and integrated his considerations of beauty not only in light of history but also in relation to its ultimate unveiling—which lies within yet beyond the historical plane, within yet beyond the veil of sensible things, and in the time

² Newman, "God's Will the End of Life," 112.

³ See John Henry Cardinal Newman's, "Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 1 (London: Longman and Green, 1907), 1–14.

of the Second Coming, when, as Isaiah prophecies, “thine eyes shall see the King in his beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off.”⁴

Given all this, my essay will also consider how Newman's view of art in light of the eschaton, or in light of “the end,” dovetails with his devotion to the saints, a devotion which widens out into a vision in which the saints are said to serve as living works of art, as examples of agapic love who transcend the emerging, Victorian conceptions of the artist as aesthete, decadent poser, or epicurean. In this respect, Newman's aesthetics—like the aesthetics of Christina Rossetti, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and George Eliot—witnessed, as Michael D. Hurley observes, to the belief that “verse craft and [the] ‘impletive rite’ of creation” is the means “by which faith might be . . . forged.”⁵ For Newman, the subjective expression of the artist—when reflecting the objective truth revealed by the person of Christ and transmitted by his living body, the Church—serves as a witness to the splendor of the truth, within but beyond the world. Or, as Jacques Maritain would quip, the artist is a “poor god” whose “creative insight . . . depends on the external world,” and who even more importantly must wait upon that which is granted by the divine.⁶ Understood from a spiritual vantage point, the poet is, for Newman, the one who by necessity looks forward to the eschatological transformation of the cosmos when “we shall mount up to Eden's long-lost gate.”⁷

Art's Instructive Insufficiencies

In his sermon “The Thought of God the Stay of the Soul,” Newman preached that “human happiness consists in the contemplation of God.”⁸ “The soul of man,” he says, “is made for the contemplation of its Maker; and . . . nothing short of that high contemplation is its happiness; that, whatever it may possess besides, it is unsatisfied till it is vouchsafed God's presence, and lives

⁴ Newman draws from this passage of Isaiah (33:17) to elaborate upon an eschatological vision of Christ's beauty, a vision which is most significantly pronounced during periods of waiting, like Advent and Lent, within the liturgical calendar. See “Worship, a Preparation for Christ's coming,” in vol. 5 of *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 1–13.

⁵ Michael D. Hurley. *Faith in Poetry: Verse Style as a Mode of Religious Belief* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 8.

⁶ Jacques Maritain. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry: A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts* (New York: Pantheon, 1953), 113.

⁷ John Henry Newman, “Hope,” in *John Henry Newman: Collected Poems and the Dream of Gerontius* (Kent, UK: Fisher, 1992), 54.

⁸ John Henry Newman. “The Thought of God, the Stay of the Soul,” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 5:322.

in the light of it.”⁹ While this sermon comes from the period following his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Newman’s Anglican sermons were also shaped by an abiding, eschatological sensibility, and scholars have already picked up on this. However, what has not received sufficient attention is the degree to which Newman’s linkage of art and the eschaton are evident with remarkable consistency throughout his long life of writings, and beginning in his early adulthood. Scholars tend to look to Newman’s *The Idea of the University* (1852) and *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870) for his aesthetic philosophy, but it is already evident in his early writings from his years as an Oxford undergraduate. Some of Newman’s clearest and earliest theological work on aesthetics is expressed in his undergraduate verse, although it widens out and matures in his later devotional poems, sermons, and essays. From his youthful poems until his final letters and prayers, composed in anticipation of his death, Newman is always already inclining toward the eschatological and, as we shall see by the end of the essay, toward a Eucharistic vision of the cosmos.

Writing out his wishes “in prospect of death” on March 13, 1864, Newman shared that his prayer remained that God would “bring us all together again in heaven, under the feet of the Saints” and that “after the pattern of Him, who seeks so diligently for those who are astray,” he asks for “mercy on those who are external to the True Fold, and to bring them into it before they die.”¹⁰ Such visions of the communion of saints as a dynamic community of persons bound together in Christ and spanning the centuries animate Newman’s aesthetics. To Newman, art is a humble mode of theology, and most especially for the Eucharistic structure of existence. In art, like the Real Presence, the whole is far greater than the apparent sum of its parts: “There are seven notes in the scale; make them fourteen,” Newman marvels, “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! [?] . . . As there is 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.”¹¹

Art, however, also instructs us, according to Newman, through its inability to fully realize, let alone access, that which it proclaims. Across his life and range of writings, we see a central paradox operative in Newman’s aesthetics:

⁹ Newman, “Thought of God,” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 5:316.

¹⁰ John Henry Newman, “Written in Prospect of Death,” in *Meditations and Devotions*, ed. W. P. Neville (London: Longman and Green, 1907), 439.

¹¹ John Henry Newman, Sermon 15 in *Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1966), 346–47.

namely, he turned to the arts to express their instructive insufficiencies to satisfy the transcendent longings of the human person. This paradox animates his novels, especially *Callista*, and at one level, *The Dream of Gerontius*, like Dante's *Commedia*, aims to describe in language and image that which, by necessity, exceeds both. While Newman's later writings obviously tilted towards the eschatological, there is a wealth of early and unexplored material from his early-to-mid-Oxford days which show that his abiding interests in art and aesthetic philosophy were already informed by his keen sense that the earthly should be viewed in light of "the end." We find this modeled in his lengthy poem "Art and Nature," composed in 1826, in which the young Newman combines an intensity of feeling with an intensity of purpose, stressing the insufficiencies of art through the unique mode of thinking which poetry supplies. In drawing on the resources of poetry to explain poetry's limits, Newman models a kind of art of the end—specifically, a practical outworking of the end or nature of life, on the one hand, and the end or nature of creativity, on the other.

An inheritor of the Romantic sensibility, Newman, not unlike John Keats, was all too aware that art could never escape the end of life, the end of all things. That said, one of its powers is to point beyond itself, to ameliorate the fact of death. However, Newman longed after more than amelioration. He wanted an answer to the problems of death, purpose, and pain in human life. His searching verse, like his searching conscience, takes no prisoners as it explores what might be the "end" of all things. To get a sense of the way Newman recasts Romantic sensitivities in the light of Christian eschatology, it is helpful to quote at length from "Art and Nature":¹²

Man goeth forth with reckless trust
 Upon his wealth of mind,
 As if in self a thing of dust
 Creative skill might find;
 He schemes and toils; stone, wood and ore
 Subject or weapon of His power.

By arch and spire, by tower-girt heights,
 He would his boast fulfil;
 By marble births, and mimic lights,—
 Yet lacks one secret still;

¹² John Henry Newman, "Art and Nature," in *Verses on Various Occasions* (London: Longmans and Green, 1903), 16–20.

Where is the master-hand shall give
To breathe, to move, to speak, to live? . . .

Art's labour'd toys of highest name
 Are nerveless, cold, and dumb;
And man is fitted but to frame
 A coffin or a tomb;
Well suits, when sense is pass'd away,
Such lifeless works the lifeless clay.

Here let me sit where wooded hills
 Skirt yon far-reaching plain;
While cattle bank its winding rills,
 And suns embrown its grain;
Such prospect is to me right dear,
For freedom, health, and joy are here.

There is a spirit ranging through
 The earth, the stream, the air;
Ten thousand shapes, garbs ever new,
 That busy One doth wear;
In colour, scent, and taste, and sound
The energy of Life is found. . . .
A soul prepared His will to meet,

Not laboured into sudden heat,
 But inly born anew—
So living Nature, not dull Art,
Shall plan my ways and rule my heart.

Here, Newman adopts features of Romanticism to upend them. Instead of finding in poetry a supplement to, or indeed a replacement for, religious faith and fervor, Newman adheres to a medieval hierarchy of values in which art is superseded by nature, and in which, unlike the Lake School of Romantic poets, enjoyment of nature is superseded by the beatific vision, by the transformative power of divine grace which makes the poet “inly born anew” and finds its fuller support in “living Nature, not dull [inanimate] Art.”¹³ Newman is not praising the natural world as the source and summit

¹³ Newman, “Art and Nature,” 16–20.

of meaning and value—a practice often found in British Romanticism, especially as typified in the Lake School and the early editions of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*.¹⁴ Rather, he celebrates “living Nature,” finding in it the great “fix'd work” of God. This poem models Newman's detached aesthetics, his understanding that the artistic beauties of this world are passing away. As “Art and Nature” proclaims, the gift of human life, of the “soul prepared His will to meet,” is for Newman the ultimate art form. Consequently, it is in the lives of the saints, and Christ's redemptive work, that Newman locates the fullness of the artistic and artful. (More on this shortly). All that noted, it is important to consider how deeply Newman cared for the arts. He discerned in their various modes and forms unique ways of thinking which could be put in service of spiritual aims and ends. As Hurley reminds us, Newman and other devotional Victorian writers were convinced that certain art forms—poetry in particular—could “say and do things that could not otherwise be said and done.”¹⁵

In fact, Newman discerned in the arts an invaluable road to seeking and finding truth. He possessed a profound detachment from human achievement, artistic or otherwise, and viewed the arts as particularly instructive in their insufficiencies or limits, as especially modeling a humble subordination to the higher-order value of grace. Yet Newman also understood that there was an inherent relationality within the making and sharing of art. This relationality speaks to the inner depths of what it means to be human and part of the great theatre of the world. In a deeply touching moment in his *Apologia*, for instance, Newman praises the poetry of John Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827), saying that his early encounters with devotional

¹⁴ As Kristen Drahos reminds us, Newman had limited “patience” for Romanticism. However, Newman and his fellow Tractarians shared many of the key philosophical principles of Romanticism but drew very different conclusions. For Newman, the acting person is a moral agent, called to communion with God and not, as many of the Romantics would have it, with a pantheistic divinity or vague natural supernaturalism (as Thomas Carlyle would later term it in *Sartor Resartus* in 1834). Drahos clarifies the links between Newman and the Romantics, saying that nineteenth-century Roman Catholics and Romantics, “beyond their differences, . . . shared many common traits. First and foremost, they concerned themselves with the vitality and incomplete nature of the human spirit. Unlike Hegel's *Geist*, whose self-completion was a matter of time and historical progress, the Romantic idea of spirit mirrored much more the journey of Augustine's restless heart with its press into the infinite that extends ever beyond human achievement” (“Reason's Shadow: Romanticism's Impact on Catholic Thought,” *Church Life Journal*, June 11, 2018, churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/reasons-shadow-romanticisms-impact-on-catholic-thought/).

¹⁵ Hurley, *Faith in Poetry*, 1.

verse during his Oxford years helped integrate aspects of his emotional and intellectual life, which in turn assisted him in directing both toward a view of history in which the eschatological—those things silently unfolding, those things “unseen”—offers past, present, and future a meaning within and beyond them. Tellingly, it was Keble’s theology-in-verse which first made Newman alive to the sacramental system, and which prepared him for an ever-greater detachment from the material world in favor of the eternal one. It is, paradoxically, Keble’s art which pointed Newman beyond the artful and gave him his first appreciation of the sacramental system. Newman recalls the influence of Keble’s devotional verse in the following way:

The Christian Year made its appearance in 1827. It is not necessary, and scarcely becoming, to praise a book which has already become one of the classics of the language. When the general tone of religious literature was so nerveless and impotent, as it was at that time, Keble struck an original note and woke up in the hearts of thousands a new music, the music of a school, long unknown in England. Nor can I pretend to analyze, in my own instance, the effect of religious teaching so deep, so pure, so beautiful. I have never till now tried to do so; yet I think I am not wrong in saying, that the two main intellectual truths which it brought home to me, were the same two, which I had learned from Butler, though recast in the creative mind of my new master. The first of these was what may be called, in a large sense of the word, the Sacramental system; that is, the doctrine that material phenomena are both the types and the instruments of real things unseen,—a doctrine, which embraces in its fulness, not only what Anglicans, as well as Catholics, believe about Sacraments properly so called; but also the article of “the Communion of Saints” [in its fulness]; and likewise the Mysteries of the faith.¹⁶

Newman likens Keble’s poetry to a “new music” which effects in its hearers a rousing of the heart, bringing home intellectual truths. It is no coincidence that Newman associates a taste for poetry with his newfound appreciations for a sacramental system which maintain that “material phenomena are both the types and instruments of real things unseen.”¹⁷ The two are in sympathy or inclined towards each other. As Maritain notes in *Creative Intuition in Art*

¹⁶ John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London: Oxford University Press, 1913), 121.

¹⁷ Newman, *Apologia*, 121.

and Poetry (1953), there is a profound harmony between the arts and divine revelation as they both tend, by necessity, toward the incarnate. That noted, Maritain writes that poetry is always already a derivation, a response to a higher, pre-existing metaphysical reality. "Metaphysical myths are needed by poetry," Maritain concludes, "but they cannot be provided by poetry."¹⁸ This is, in one sense, a remarkably Newmanian insight, since Newman discerned in the arts the ability to show—according to specific agreements among idea, form, and desire—the concrete or *incarnate* reality of the truth which is within but far beyond the cosmic theatre.

It is clear, then, that Newman's aesthetic sense is akin to his writings on Christian doctrine. This is clarified and advanced in his commentary on poetry "with reference to Aristotle's poetics," in which he proposes that the most poetical mode of expression is that of Christianity, of "Revealed Religion," because its incarnational "disclosures have an originality in them to engage the intellect [but] they [also] have a beauty to satisfy the moral nature," and thereby "present us with those ideal forms of excellence in which a poetic mind delights, and with which all grace and harmony are associated. It brings us into a new world—a world of overpowering interest, of the sublimest views, and the tenderest and purest feelings."¹⁹ For Newman, creedal assent to divine revelation, like poetic receptivity, is a humble assent to that which is beyond (through not in contradiction to) human rational powers. Great works of art, like great works of charity, are, in their distinctive ways, derivative responses to a higher revealed splendor. Newman's own developing taste for poetry during his early Oxford years opened the sacramental system to him, and by extension cultivated his growing eschatological sensibility, one which saw the moral life as modeled in the lives of the saints, as the most thorough manifestations of the poetic this side of the veil. This point leads to the second and final half of this essay, in which I explore how Newman's attention to the "end" translates into an "art of the end" in his own work.

Literature and the "hope for better things"

For Newman, the promise of transformation, guaranteed by the doctrines concerning the last things, is often uniquely communicated through the arts. He believes that, for all their dangers and insufficiencies, the arts carry motive powers of persuasion and inspiration which could be put in the service of

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, "Poetry and Beauty," in *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, 33.

¹⁹ John Henry Newman. "Poetry, with Reference to Aristotle's *Poetics*," in *Essays, Critical and Historical*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans and Green, 1907), 24.

higher things. As importantly, they are enjoyable in and of themselves, often encouraging finer feelings, deeper sympathies, and wider understanding between persons. While a consummate violinist himself and someone who cares deeply about sacred music, Newman is nonetheless most often found expounding upon the value of literature and why it matters. This is partly due to his own personal circumstances, inclinations, and formation. From a young age, we see Newman devouring literature and commenting on it in his diaries. He was deeply moved by the powers of speech, and as Ian Ker reminds us, Newman was himself a prolific and “occasional” writer; he discerned in events the pastoral duty to respond through various forms of writing.²⁰

In his novels, letters, editorials, newspapers, magazines, sermons, poetry, hymns, and public discourses, we find Newman carefully laboring to offer the kind of reflection appropriate to the task, person, or need at hand. In this, as Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, we find the attentive Newman carefully discerning the moral ends and aims of his daily activities, often drawing from the creative resources of writing to communicate higher-order truth. “Appealing to our awareness of our own inner experience” and “discern[ing] God’s presence” in daily life were, as MacIntyre puts it, ways in which Newman refined his natural theology of the conscience (especially his understanding of the duty of the moment) while, derivatively, building a remarkably varied yet consistently Newmanian body of writings, spanning several decades.²¹ For instance, in the second part of *Idea of a University*, Newman writes at length on the ways in which literature uniquely serves as an aid to, and revealer of, the moral life in its nature, operations, and effects. The imagination, at the service of contemplation and charity, is for Newman a gift to be shared and one that can be put in the service of spiritual and corporal works of mercy:

The power of speech is a gift as great as any that can be named . . . if by means of words the secrets of the heart are brought to light, pain of soul is relieved, hidden grief is carried off, sympathy conveyed, counsel imparted, experienced recorded and wisdom perpetuated. . . . It will not answer to make light of Literature or to neglect its study; rather we may be sure that, in proportion as we master it in whatever language, and imbibe its spirit, we shall ourselves become in our own

²⁰ Ian Ker, introduction to *Apologia pro Vita Sua* by John Henry Newman (London: Penguin, 2004), xx–xxiii.

²¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2009), 141.

measure the ministers of like benefit to other[s] . . . who are united to us by social ties, and are within the sphere of our personal influence.²²

As we can discern in Newman's apologia for literature, here, the arts—and especially, in this instance, the literary arts—serve as a kind of corollary to the communion of the saints. Attuned to the intrinsically communal or social dimension of individual persons, Newman was known to repeatedly highlight this reality throughout his long life of preaching, philosophical writing, and pastoral service. For instance, in *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (1839), Newman emphasizes the indispensable importance of the doctrine of the communion of the saints. While he gives due attention to its essential ecclesiological and eschatological character, he also focuses, with pastoral sensitivity, on this doctrine's direct implication for history. This doctrine, he says, offers "inspiring thoughts for the solitary, the dejected, the harassed, the defamed, or the despised Christian; and they belong to him, if by act and deed he unites in that Communion [of ecclesial faith] which he professes."²³ Newman's description of the purpose of the communion of the saints uncannily parallels his defense of literature's salutary powers. He notes that the articles of faith concerning the communal character of the Church are meant to encourage in the Christian an attitude of charity toward others. The Christian, he concludes, "joins the Church of God, not merely who speaks about it, or who defends it, or who contemplates it, but who loves it. He loves the unseen company of believers, who those who are seen. The test of our being joined to Christ is love; the test of love towards Christ and his Church, is loving those whom we actually see."²⁴ Here, Newman teaches that the objective content of Christian doctrine is meant to inspire the individual subject towards an other-centered (or agapic) love not only for the "unseen company of believers," but just as crucially, for "those whom we actually see."²⁵

For Newman, the unseen and seen, the exterior and interior, the objective and subjective are inextricably linked, grafted upon the person of Christ, the "living body" of the Church, and those persons who witness to the unseen realities underpinning daily life do a great act of charity for those

²² John Henry Newman, "Literature," in pt. II of *The Idea of a University* (London: Longmans and Green, 1907), 293–94.

²³ John Henry Newman. "The Communion of Saints," in vol. 4 of *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 184–85.

²⁴ Newman. "Communion of Saints," 4:185.

²⁵ Newman. "Communion of Saints," 4:185.

they encounter.²⁶ Newman's deep sense of the inextricably communal or corporate dimension of the Church shaped his critiques of the emerging hyper-individualism accelerated, on the one hand, by the burgeoning industrialization of life and labor in Victorian Britain, and on the other, by what Cyril O'Regan calls the "low drip of Locke's arguments for the mind as static and passive and for the person as intrinsically atomistic."²⁷ As importantly, Newman's emphasis on personal participation in one's local community is one which repeatedly (re)surfaces in his art criticism, especially his literary criticism. Reading, interpreting, discussing books, debating about books, and determining legitimate authorities from false prophets are all acts of discernment and attention which Newman highlights in his defense of literature and which, by extension, easily transfer to his ways of theologically reading and pastorally serving throughout his long life.

There are a growing number of accounts of how Newman's practices of reading and interpretation informed his faith; Reinhard Hütter's *John Henry Newman on Truth and Its Counterfeits* (2020), Thomas Pfau's account of Newman in *Minding the Modern* (2013), and Matthew Levering's *Newman on Doctrinal Corruption* (2022) are recent examples of such accountings. For instance, Pfau notes that Newman's poetic sensibility helped further confirm in him, over and against Enlightenment hyper-rationalism and individualism, that the "sense of relatedness and obligation to the other is sanctioned by the vertical rapport (however latent, tenuous, and/or susceptible to misconstrual and neglect) that all persons have with the divine *logos*."²⁸ However, what has not been considered is the degree to which Newman's initial childhood sense of this "vertical rapport" between the self and a wider world, between the self, other persons, and spiritual beings primarily occurred through his absorption of Romantic tales and romances. Moreover, while scholars have frequently noted the importance of writing and reading in Newman's life, their tendency has been to focus on Newman's engagements with philosophers and theologians, particularly Athanasius and the Anglican Divines. Newman's abiding passion for poetry and novels, for tales of adventure and comical caricature sketches, has been almost entirely overlooked—even though he, himself, stresses the formative influence of

²⁶ Newman, "Communion of Saints," 4:171.

²⁷ Cyril O'Regan, "Newman and the Affliction of Interiority" in *Church Life Journal*, October 7, 2022, churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/newman-and-the-affliction-of-interiority/.

²⁸ Thomas Pfau, *Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 53–55.

such works in his spiritual life, as well as in the development of his imagination and aesthetic sensibilities.

For instance, in his *Apologia*, Newman remarks at length that literature both “high” and “low” played an invaluable part in awakening in him an earnest religious search. As importantly, the reading, debating, and sharing of literature with friends deepened in Newman his Aristotelian view of friendship—namely, that the deepest friendships are end-driven, rooted in common pursuit of higher things, of the highest good. In his *Apologia*, Newman continually turns and returns to examples of different books he read and conversations he had which led him to his assent not only to a definite creed but also to his growing belief in the sacramental system, Marian dogma, and eventually those articles of faith belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. Across his letters, we also find that Newman’s literary tastes are far more wide-ranging than most Newman scholars have so far led us to be expect. Gothic romances and biblical literature both found a home in his heart. For all his particularities about the arts (and he was known to be idiosyncratic at times, e.g., taking excessive issue with the Pugin School, for example), Newman was not elitist about his interest in the arts, let alone literature. He could be remarkably democratic, holding the ethical potential of art as its highest value.

Deeply sensitive to the different ways in which persons arrive at the one truth, Newman admitted that a wide range of popular art forms could hold legitimate sway over the imagination and to the good. From Gothic romances to newspapers, from tracts to educational manuals, Newman discerned in the Victorian world of quick print an abiding metaphysical hunger for transcendent reality. He was also equally willing to admit that moral edification and a desire for God could emerge from unsuspecting sources, often working on us without our notice and yet speaking to an inner longing deep within our mysterious hearts. At times, his artistic preferences even went against the grain of critical opinion. For instance, he preferred the playful yet didactic writings of Thomas Carlyle over and against George Eliot’s sprawling, searching novels. There was enough playfulness in Newman for him to confess to his friend Gerard Manley Hopkins that Virgil, Shakespeare, and Scripture were not the only kinds of works that moved him. As a young boy he devoured not only Virgil, but Anne Radcliffe and the Arabian tales of romance and adventure.

For example, in the opening of his *Apologia*, Newman recounts how his adolescent love of Romantic Gothic literature helped initiate the

development of his earliest “thoughts and feelings on religious subjects.”²⁹ In particular, this love confirmed in him an eschatological expectation—a hope that the world is part of a divine plan and alive with spiritual influences, with agents and powers, with angels or hidden ministers of divine providence operating beyond the play of the senses. In reading the Arabian tales, for example, he discovered in himself the deep wish that angels were true. “My imagination ran on unknown influences, on magical powers, and talismans,” he recalls. “I thought life might be a dream, or I an Angel, and all this world a deception, my fellow-angels by a playful device concealing themselves from me, and deceiving me with the semblance of a material world.”³⁰ A steady diet of Gothic romances, including Scott, Porter and Radcliffe, also led Newman to unconsciously absorb something of a Roman or Catholic, aesthetic interest. I say “unconscious” because he, himself, suggests the term in a crucial passage, early in the *Apologia*.

Recalling his period of discernment at Littlemore just before he was received into the Roman Catholic Church, Newman meditates on the significance of returning to his childhood verse books. In them, he found traces of a religious sensibility inclined toward Roman Catholic aesthetics, which he unconsciously absorbed by virtue of their mysterious beauty. In one particularly telling passage, Newman reflects upon the significance of rediscovering one of his “copy-books” from his “school days,” saying that, to his own surprise, he was reminded that, at the age of nine, he had decorated the front page of his “first Latin verse-book” with a detailed sketch of a rosary (Figure 1). He describes this rediscovery, which “took [his] breath away with surprise,” at great length and in detail:

I [had] . . . written in the first page, in my school-boy hand, “John H. Newman, February 11th 1811, Verse Book;” then follow[s] my first Verses. Between “Verse” and “Book” I have drawn the figure of a solid cross upright, and next to it is, what may indeed be meant for a necklace, but what I cannot make out to be anything else than a set of beads suspended, with a little cross attached. . . . I suppose I got these ideas from some romance . . . or from some religious picture; but the strange thing is how, among the thousand objects which meet a boy’s eyes, these in particular should so have fixed themselves in my mind, that I made them thus practically my own. I am certain there was nothing in the churches I attended, or the prayer books I read, to suggest them. It

²⁹ Newman, *Apologia*, 23.

³⁰ Newman, *Apologia*, 23.

must be recollected that Anglican churches and prayer books [were] not decorated in those days as I believe they are now.³¹

As Newman reminds his readers, the Tractarian Movement played a pivotal role in renewing and enriching the liturgical and devotional life of the Anglican Church. During his childhood, Newman could not enjoy the kind of devotional art and practices that came to characterize the liturgical life of High Anglicans from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Moreover, as Ker reminds us, Newman's "intellectual conversion [to Roman Catholicism] did for the most part precede a more experiential and imaginative discovery of Catholicism."³² Ker elaborates: "While Newman knew a very great deal about the early Church, he knew extraordinarily little about contemporary Catholicism, apart from its formal doctrines and teaching. In 1835 [for example], two years after the [formal] beginning of the Oxford Movement, [Newman] had admitted to wanting 'to fall across a Romanist to get into their system,'" but there were various social and political obstacles involved, and for a time, that desire remained unmet.³³

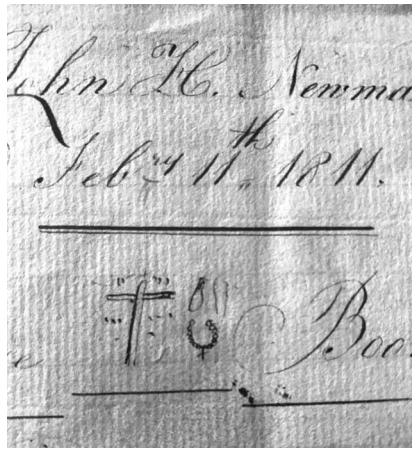


Figure 1. Newman's Rosary (© Newman Archive, Birmingham Oratory)³⁴

³¹ Newman, *Apologia*, 25.

³² Ian Ker, "Newman's Post-Conversion Discovery of Catholicism," in *Newman and Conversion*, ed. Ian Ker (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 37–58.

³³ Ker, "Newman's Post-Conversion Discovery," 37–58.

³⁴ I am grateful to the Newman Archive at the Birmingham Oratory for granting me permission to include this rare image of Newman's rosary sketch here.

That noted, scholars have not sufficiently acknowledged the degree to which the motive powers of verse and Gothic tales worked on Newman's imagination throughout childhood and into adolescence, confirming in him strong impressions of the supernatural and inclining him toward Italianate and especially Roman Catholic devotional images and forms. The rosary sketch which Newman made shows the degree to which he had absorbed the Roman Catholic devotional aesthetic, incorporating it into his childhood exercises before he began to seriously and intentionally engage with the theological and creedal claims they made, and as importantly, the claims they made on practices of personal devotion. While such confirmations were insufficient to bring him to a position of creedal faith, they certainly helped steer him away from growing flirtations with materialism and atheism and affirmed his instinct for the eschatological and his hopes for a heaven. Newman stresses this point in the *Apologia*, recalling how, at the age of fifteen, he was particularly intrigued by aspects of David Hume's thought, especially as found in his critique of miracles, and would brag to his father that he was copying out "French verses, perhaps Voltaire's, in denial of the immortality of the soul."³⁵ In doing so, Newman shares that he often debated with himself, saying something like, "How dreadful, but how plausible" (that the soul might not exist), as he copied out French, proto-existentialist verse.³⁶ That said, the point remains that the deep impressions which "romance[s]" and tales of historical fiction left on Newman's imagination helped keep him from turning toward the agnostic if not atheistic.

Of course, Gothic tales, or the force of Romantic fictions, or even great Virgilian poetry, were not sufficient in and of themselves to confirm or affirm for Newman the nature of reality, let alone delineate the divinely revealed mystery of the eschatological dimensions of reality. Nonetheless, they were flickering shadows, intimating images, which suggested that reality was beyond sense experience alone and that a spiritual reality spoke to the innermost desires of the human heart. In *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Newman argues at great length that the sympathetic, searching, discerning, and dialogical modes of thought which the literary affords (and encourages) are essential for the development of the notional category of "credence," a category which is required for acts of faith and tested by lived experience. If credences withstand robust testing, they widen out into assent to truth or real assent. For Newman, credences (our opinions, suppositions, etc.) can be true only if they can withstand the ethical—namely, if, as ideas, they can translate into, build up, and support reality. Newman defines credence in the

³⁵ Newman, *Apologia*, 25.

³⁶ Newman, *Apologia*, 25.

Grammar as those “opinions and impressed facts . . . by which, . . . in the man of the world and in the recluse, our bare and barren nature is overrun and diversified from without with a rich and living clothing.”³⁷ In an Augustinian vein, Newman proposes that credence is that which ensures that “we become possessed of the principles, doctrines, sentiments, facts, which constitute useful, and especially liberal knowledge. . . . [They] keep us up to the mark in literature, in the arts, in history, and in public matters. . . . They supply . . . the standards of thought and action; they are our mutual understandings, our channels of sympathy, our means of cooperation, and the bond of our civil union.”³⁸ However, until these ideas touch our lives, our personal experiences, their truth remains presumed but neither tested nor verified. Newman elaborates, saying that even the great classics are “but rhetorical common-places, neither better nor worse than a hundred others” until the powerful truths of certain stories or pieces of art “come home” to us.³⁹ To illustrate his point even further, Newman contrasts the experience of reading as a child with the experiences of adult readers:

Let us consider . . . 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 common-places, 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 if 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.⁴⁰

³⁷ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Longman and Green, 1903), 54.

³⁸ Newman, *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 54.

³⁹ Newman, *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 78.

⁴⁰ Newman, *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 78–79.

Here, Newman propose that real life—with all its concomitant hopes, fears, and desires—is that which tests the wisdom of different kinds of literature and is that which tends to influence what kinds of stories stay with us. We can discern literary influences only retrospectively, as it were, and this is a remarkably Romantic idea. Poetry, Wordsworth tells us, is “emotion recollected in tranquility.”⁴¹ Literature—and by extension the various arts accordingly—inspire “hope of better things.” However, in a move that qualifies certain Romantic preoccupations with individual genius and poetry as a substitute savior, Newman sees literature as testifying instead to its own inability to grant the very hope to which it testifies, and for which it cries out with a voice full of profound, psalmic longing. The truly “better things” lie beyond art’s power to grant, and therefore Newman concludes that the hope of which literature speaks lies beyond the veil and will find fulfillment only when Christ returns to establish a new heaven and new earth.

The Art of the End

As we have seen, art in and of itself, as profound and striking as it is, remains remarkably insufficient for Newman. And this is, paradoxically, part of its motive power. Art that communicates truth about reality is, for Newman, teleological or end-driven. It can encourage a greater depth of intellectual searching after the truth, a widening of the heart, and a desire for deeper personal encounter with the divine. Even more specifically, art which affirms and deepens perceptions of reality will, for Newman, be inevitably eschatological in character—that is to say, it will deepen our sense of the insufficiencies of this world in its current state. It seems to carry within itself the latent sign that our world needs redemption from a source within yet beyond the world stage. Interestingly, Seamus Heaney has a very similar view in *The Redress of Poetry* (1995), where he writes that art seems to inherently clamor after redemption. The poet seems motivated, he says, to try to balance the scales according to justice and, more than that, to recover or uncover some aspect of the Eden we wish to regain.⁴²

Newman’s own poetry enacts this clamor after redress, this eschatological longing. Of course, *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865) is a marked example of eschatological longing—especially when we find Newman drawing upon

⁴¹ William Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” in *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, Harvard Classics (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910), 301.

⁴² Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (New York: Farror, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 17–18.

the forms and images poetry can afford in order to meditate on the fullness of revelation which can only be found after death, and which supersedes all forms and images as we know them. This is made clear when the soul of Gerontius encounters an angel and hears it singing a melody which could not be heard properly before the event of dying. As this unearthly music erupts, Gerontius and the angel begin a dialogue in which Gerontius exclaims exultantly that it is only upon dying that he can see, hear, and perceive things which artists can intimate only through shadows and images. Moreover, he supposes that it is only in dying that he can properly value the splendor of God's creation: "Now know I surely that I am at length / Out of the body: had I part with earth, / I never could have drunk those accents in, / And not have worshipped as a god the voice / That was so musical; but now I am so whole of heart, so calm, so self-possessed, / with such a full content, and with a sense / So apprehensive and discriminate, / As no temptation can intoxicate."⁴³ In dying, Gerontius has been liberated from attachment to lesser goods and can therefore appreciate things in right relation, giving them their due. Throughout *The Dream of Gerontius*, Newman is focused on what is required for the human person to see things clearly. Ultimately, it requires death and entrance into the beatific vision. Across his writings, we see him understand art as an aid in detaching from lesser goods and preparing for the beatific vision—that is, preparing to live well so as to die well. Several of his poems and novels turn on, and return to, this theme, either implicitly or explicitly. At one level, *Callista* is an exposition of the theological conviction that even the most beautiful artistic gifts of the classical world are incomparable to the gift of resurrection, and so, however remarkable they are, the arts become most instructive when they point beyond themselves, clamoring for a hope which they may express but which they cannot realize.

This view is brought to a dramatic pitch when Newman describes the existential weariness felt by Callista, a gifted artisan who understands that her artistic work can, at best, intensify her hope for redemption. At worst, it aggravates her, announcing its inability to redeem, to satisfy the transcendent longings of the human person which are felt in the depths of the searching conscience: "She was absorbed in her own misery, . . . in a keen consciousness of the bondage of nature, in a despair of ever finding what alone could give meaning to her existence, and an object to her intellect and affections."⁴⁴ In all of Newman's writings on the arts, there is, then, an

⁴³ John Henry Newman, "The Dream of Gerontius," in *Verses on Various Occasions*, 323–70.

⁴⁴ John Henry Newman, *Callista* (London: Longmans and Green, 1901), 79.

interest in the degree to which the desire for the beautiful is not attained by the making and beholding of remarkable art. It is, rather, more fully encountered in prayer, in acts of charitable service. However, it is important to reiterate here that Newman discerns in the arts, and the desires of the artist, a restless search for the truth. As importantly, he sees the arts as, more often than not, the most frequented and suitable place for expressions of the search after truth, after meaning, after hope, and that in all of this there is something inherently Christian about the artistic faith in form, expression, incarnation. As Giuseppe Pezzini has recently shown, Newman views the truth-seeking impulses of the artist as both implicitly and inherently Christian. That is to say, the genuine and searching restlessness of the artist (from any background) shares in the characteristically Christian search for meaning-made-flesh. "It is Callista's dissatisfaction with any human-made image," Pezzini observes, "that makes her a Christian in *potentia*, generating her actual interest in Christianity and eventually paving the way to her conversion. To 'vividly' express a desire for beauty that can be quenched only by God is, already, one could say, walking on the Christian road—at least according to Newman."⁴⁵ Art as an aid to, or at the service of, these activities is especially praised by Newman but art for art's sake is roundly critiqued and rejected throughout his writings, and rather explicitly at times in his letters and sermons.

Newman discerned in the wider Aesthetic Movement of the mid-to-late Victorian period certain moral problems since it advanced the creed that art was for the sake of art only and, to Newman's mind, earthly beauty possessed a certain danger. In *Idea of a University*, he warns of beauty which "leads to nothing beyond itself." He elaborates on this warning at length, noting that the arts can be dangerous for "they are apt to forget their place, . . . and instead of being servants, will aim at becoming principals."⁴⁶ He advises caution when enjoying "the creation[s] indeed of high genius, of intense, and dazzling, and soul-absorbing beauty, in which, however, there [is] nothing which subserve[s] the cause of Religion."⁴⁷ His focus on art is ethical and relational, rather than aesthetic only. He views the attractions of earthly beauty as limited and limiting if they distract from the "other" and, more importantly, from the teleological purposes of things. In other words, Newman seeks, in *Idea of a University* and elsewhere, to

⁴⁵ Giuseppe Pezzini. "Newman on Art, Imagination, and the Classics: Callista Revisited," in "John Henry Newman: Reading the Times," ed. Michael D. Hurley and Rebekah Lamb, special issue, *Religion and Literature* 55, no. 1 (2023): 133

⁴⁶ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 78.

⁴⁷ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 80.

emphasize the metaphysical dimension of aesthetics, a dimension which underpins and animates the study of the beautiful within the long Christian tradition. His aestheticism stands in marked contrast, then, to emerging aesthetic theories of the decadent aestheticism which characterized the final decades of the nineteenth century and persisted into the twentieth. In *The Renaissance* (1873), for instance, Walter Pater advanced a creed for the Aesthetic Movement which threw the metaphysical dimensions of beauty into doubt, principally by questioning whether moral standards could be part of the criteria through which we discern beauty's nature as well as its attending qualities and effects. Whereas Newman views beauty as a shining out of the good, Pater severs questions of ethics and "the good life" from his philosophy of beauty. His position is remarkably proto-existential, as is seen when he recommends that we come to terms with the fact of death by immersing ourselves wholeheartedly in the beauty which the always already fading pleasures of life afford, here and now.

Drawing from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, Pater proposes French decadence as an example of how to stand up to, or pose in the face of, death: "We have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest in art and song. For our one chance is in expanding the interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time." He concludes: "Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."⁴⁸ Pater promotes what Charles Taylor would call the "imminent frame," proposing that a suspension of metaphysics, ultimately even of ethics, affords the creative artist the wide expanse of space and time in which to revel in the passing beauties life affords before death has the final word.⁴⁹ Taylor views the "imminent frame" as the condition within late modernity in which "the idea of spirits, moral forces, causal powers with a purposive bent" is found to be "close to incomprehensible."⁵⁰ Whereas Newman, and Taylor after him, finds the immanent frame a secular wound, as it were, and one to be healed, Pater luxuriates in radical immanence, proposing that the powers of the present and its immediate pleasures are all that can be enjoyed, let alone hoped for. For Pater, death is the last word. For Newman, death opens us up to the beatific vision, to the realm of the truly beautiful.

⁴⁸ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2010), 120–21.

⁴⁹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 539.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 539.

Mindful of this emerging aestheticism, of which Pater was the principal representative, Newman offered an alternative which acknowledged at once both the depths of earthly beauty and its limits to satisfy the longings of the human person. Newman clung to art as an insufficient splendor, one which instructs in its failure to satisfy the human person, who remains interminably restless and on the search for what Pfau calls “the vertical rapport . . . that all persons have with the divine *logos*.”⁵¹ In fact, it was Newman’s careful and generous appraisal of the powers and dangers of earthly beauty, in light of Christian doctrine, which led Pater and other members of the Decadent Movement, such as Oscar Wilde and John Gray, to revisit and expand their philosophy of art in light of the vision which Christian revelation uniquely offers. In addition to his admiration for Newman’s “musical” style and his “perfect handling[s] of . . . theory” in *Idea of a University*, Pater was also fascinated by Newman’s appeal to lived experience in the pursuit of truth.⁵² Pater retained reservations concerning the theological conclusions which led Newman to his conversion to Roman Catholicism; however, he nevertheless maintained a respect for Newman’s approach to philosophical questions as ones which, in the last analysis, have implications for both belief and behavior.

Newman did far more than critically engage (albeit implicitly) with emerging decadent aestheticism; ever equal parts philosopher and priestly pastor, he offered an alternative to it, especially through his emphasis on the inextricable link between art and ethics, between the study of the beautiful and the pursuit of the “end” or purpose of such study. In *Idea of a University* and his later writings, Newman especially shows preference for the simplicity, piety, and moral clarity of paintings in which the very limitations of human powers in the face of the divine mysteries shape the aesthetic itself. He preferred pre-modern art forms which “shadowed out the invisible,” functioning as an “instrument of reverence and modesty” through simplicity of form and dependency on ecclesiastical rubrics.⁵³ According to Newman, as painting grew “into the fulness of its function as a simply imitative art,” it turned from its earlier, clearer teleological perspective, gaining “an end of its own, and that of earth: Nature [became] . . . its patterns, and the object it pursues is the beauty of Nature, even till it becomes an ideal beauty, but a natural beauty still. It cannot,” he concludes, “imitate that beauty of Angels

⁵¹ Pfau, *Minding the Modern*, 53–55.

⁵² Walter Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (Edinburgh: MacMillan, 1889), 1–10.

⁵³ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 79.

and Saints which it has never seen.”⁵⁴ In the modern turn toward mundane or exclusively natural themes, painting became, in Newman's estimation, an art form which “rather subjected Religion to its own ends than ministered to the ends of Religion, and in its long galleries and stately chambers, [art] did but mingle adorable figures and sacred histories with a multitude of earthly, not to say unseemly forms.”⁵⁵ In all of this, Newman does not deny the aesthetic values of modern painting, but he does stress that they have become increasingly distanced from their highest applications—namely, their incorporation into the life of prayer and contemplation. Art's severance from a teleological or eschatological outlook loses the capacity to clearly witness to, or prophecy concerning, the things of ultimate value. To reorient art and the artist, Newman proposes Fra' Angelico as an artistic witness to the mystic sense (which Keats, the Romantics, and Pater so admired) who, at the same time, resisted the transvaluation of this mystic sense into a secular domain. Fra' Angelico, unlike Pater and the nineteenth-century Aesthetes, was not seeking to become a personality or posing celebrity whose art reflects (or interminably replicates) his own image and interests.

As Guy Nicholls has recently observed, Newman held that beauty is dependent on the invisible truths which sustain the world, and which give the material world its meaning and ultimate coherence. Artists like Fra' Angelico are dedicated to expressing the analogical relationship between the natural and supernatural and, as Nicholls puts it, provide for Newman models of how to discern “truth from falsehood in interpreting the beauty of the material world.”⁵⁶ The interpretive key is supplied by divine revelation, for it alone “guides us to the truth towards which earthly beauty should direct us.”⁵⁷ According to this logic, the greatest works of art are acts of charity as found in the lives of the saints. Across Newman's writings, we find that friendships between persons, acts of service, and receptivity to grace are manifestations of a supernatural beauty which animates and ennobles. Prayerful meditation and care for the truth become, in Newman's work, the ways in which beauty shines forth through Church history. Although this idea develops in the latter half of his life, following his conversion to Roman Catholicism, we already see early inclinations of his philosophy of living in *The Legend of St. Gundleus*, found in the third volume of the collaborative project *Lives of the English Saints* (1843–1844), which Newman edited and

⁵⁴ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 79–80.

⁵⁵ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 80.

⁵⁶ Guy Nicholls, *Unearthly Beauty: The Aesthetic of St. John Henry Newman* (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 2019), 292.

⁵⁷ Nicholls, *Unearthly Beauty*, 292.

for which he contributed various writings. In *The Legend*, which scholars attribute to Newman, we find stress placed on the Christian calling to be salt and light throughout history. Christians, according to Newman, are meant to already absorb and participate in the heavenly reality which can be fully enjoyed only in life after death. Therefore, he concludes, Christians are meant to serve as eschatological witnesses, or historical witnesses to the heavenly realities, embodying a Christian way of seeing and behaving in the world which is brought to beautiful fruition through prayer and contemplation:

The Christian lives in the past and in the future, and in the unseen; in a word, he lives in no small measure in the unknown. And it is one of his duties, and a part of his work, to make the unknown known; to create within him an image of what is absent, and to realise by faith what he does not see. For this purpose he is granted certain outlines and rudiments of the truth, and from thence he learns to draw it out into its full proportions and its substantial form,—to expand and complete it; whether it be the absolute and perfect truth, or truth under a human dress, or truth in such a shape as is most profitable for him. And the process, by which the word which has been given him, “returns not void,” but brings forth and buds and is accomplished and prospers, is Meditation.⁵⁸

A fruit of this meditative approach to life, shown in the lives of the saints, is the shining out of a life of service, of care and concern for the other. It signals an agapic turn, a conversion or movement from the self toward God. Newman's greatest counter to the Decadence movement is found in his writings on the lives of the saints, particularly his meditations on the examples we find in the life of Mary, God's mother. Surely Joseph Ratzinger had Newman in mind when he wrote in “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty” (2002), that we are brought into closer “contact with the beauty of Christ himself” when the “world of beauty created by faith and light that shines out from the faces of the saints, through whom his own light becomes visible,” is made manifest throughout history.⁵⁹ Ratzinger learned from Newman the importance of life as a kind of artful witness to the truth, an artful approach which is genuine as opposed to performative, but which

⁵⁸ John Henry Newman et al., “A Legend of St. Gundleus,” in *Lives of the English Saints*, vol. 3 (London: S. P. Freemantle), 1901.

⁵⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty”—Message of His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the Communion and Liberation (CL) Meeting at Rimini, August 2002.

becomes a kind of work of beauty, a kind of artwork, through the transformative power of divine grace working on human nature.

For Newman, service, prayer, and liturgical worship have, throughout Church history, encouraged yet also transcended the arts. In the life of charitable service, art is not only enjoyed but put to highest use for the sake of the sanctuary. At the heart of the sanctuary, in which the Eucharist is housed, Newman held that an entire habit of living is learned and made available, a way of living that allows the believer to inhabit heaven while on earth. It is the Eucharist which, for Newman, is the source and summit of the beautiful, and that which satisfies the deepest desires of the heart. In his devotional writings, we find Newman turning and returning to meditations on the Sacred Heart. In these meditations, Newman adores Christ's Sacred Heart: "O most Sacred, most loving Heart of Jesus, Thou art concealed in the Holy Eucharist, and Thou beatest for us still. Now as then Thou savest, *Desiderio desideravi*—'With desire I have desired.' I worship Thee then with all my best love and awe, with my fervent affection, with my most subdued, most resolved will. . . . O make my heart beat with Thy heart."⁶⁰ Within and beyond the world, guaranteeing the already and not yet of history, the Eucharist is the sacrament of redemption, of the "end" of the cosmos.

The Sacred Heart is also the center of the great theatre of the world which Newman reflects upon in *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* and throughout his extensive body of devotional poems, hymns, and sermons. The Eucharist in Newman's writing, and especially in the writing of others he influenced, including the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, is the analogical measure of art and of life more generally. Within and beyond the world, Christ in the tabernacle—or, as Hopkins would put it, "Christ from cupboard fetched"—reveals the dignity of the daily and its promised, full transformation when Christ comes again.⁶¹ For Newman, the celebration of the Eucharist and the hearing of God's word not only encourage the arts but also reveal a particular way of being and moving in the world that is end-driven, directed toward praise and intercession. Newman marveled how certain spaces and kinds of ecclesiastical art within the Roman Catholic tradition could help reflect this higher reality. For instance, he was known to especially love the Italian Gothic as exemplified in the duomo of Milan. In his praise of the place, he ponders how it serves as a microcosmic representation of the entire business of being, the dramatic unfolding of daily life which, when interpreted

⁶⁰ John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*, 413.

⁶¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Bugler's First Communion," in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 82.

according to the lights of divine revelation, is a kind of artful play, a holy game with eschatological stakes:

[A] Catholic Cathedral is a sort of world, every one going about his own business, but that business a religious one; groups of worshippers and solitary ones—kneeling, standing—some at shrines, some at altars—hearing Mass and communicating—currents of worshippers intercepting and passing by each other—altar after altar lit up for worship, like stars in the firmament—or the bell giving notice of what is going on in parts you do not see—and all the while the canons in choir going through [their hours] matins and lauds, and at the end of it the incense rolling up from the high altar, and all this in one of the most wonderful buildings in the world, and every day lastly, all of this without any show or effort, but what every one is used to every one at his own work, and leaving every one to his.⁶²

Thronging around altars, “lit up for worship, like stars in the firmament,” the vibrant, varied life of worship in the duomo represents the life lived in hope of the second coming—which is enjoyed as already and not yet through the liturgical life of the Church. From this liturgical life, according to Newman, flow (as derivatives) friendships, worship, charitable service, and all of those component parts which make up what he calls, in *Idea of a University*, the “science of life” which, as we can see from Newman’s thought, could also be called the “art of the end.”⁶³

“We cannot compass”: Art’s Eschatological Intimations

Preaching in 1843 at St Mary the Virgin on the feast of the Purification Mary, shortly before permanently withdrawing from Oxford to Littlemore, Newman reflected not only on Mary as the pattern of faith and the paradigm for doctors of the Church, but also on the eschatological character of human limitations, especially limitations in understanding and communication as shown through music and the arts more broadly. Even more specifically, he supplies a sustained meditation on the degree to which divine revelation, communicated through Sacred Scripture, draws from and uses limitations and insufficiencies. The limits of language (which Jan Plug has called the

⁶² John Henry Newman., *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. C. S. Dessain (London: Clarendon, 1961–2007), 3:253.

⁶³ Newman, *Idea of a University*, 258.

“border of the lip”) and, by extension, art’s inability to supply access to the eternity after which it clamors witness to a greatness which transcends the powers of representation.⁶⁴ However, it is this very yearning which exceeds art’s bounds and language’s wide and ranging remit, that paradoxically and generatively attests to the transcendent. It is in the splendor of the arts, Newman concludes, and especially in the marvels of music, that we often gain a deeper sense that there must exist “realities distinct from ourselves.”⁶⁵ It is helpful to quote at some length from Newman’s reflection on the generative limitations of music (and the arts more broadly) and how these very limitations witness to that which is greater, to the beatific vision:

Let us take another instance, of an outward and earthly form, or economy, under which great wonders unknown seem to be typified; I mean musical sounds, as they are exhibited most perfectly in instrumental harmony. 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. . . . 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 the living laws of Divine Governance, or the Divine Attributes; something are they besides themselves, which we cannot compass, which

⁶⁴ Jan Plug, *Borders of a Lip: Romanticism, Language, History, Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

⁶⁵ John Henry Newman, “The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine,” in *Oxford University Sermons* (London: Longmans and Green, 1909), 347.

we cannot utter,—though mortal man, and he perhaps not otherwise distinguished above his fellows, has the gift of eliciting them.⁶⁶

Here, Newman extensively meditates upon the seemingly endless variety of creative play musical composition affords. In so doing, he emphasizes that this variety is dependent upon the very limits that art acknowledges in its paradoxical striving after the everlasting, the eternal, the satisfiable. This, in turn, reveals the dynamics of desire, of a kind of longing after heaven, which, to Newman's mind, is at the heart of artistic creativity and which in history is most fully satisfied through participation in the sacramental life, and, to a far lesser degree, art's wondering over and at creation. That is to say, Newman understands creating and enjoying art as part of the divine call to Sabbath-keeping, to a glorying at creation and creativity while, at the same time, awaiting the eternal Sabbath of the beatific vision.

The collective impoverishments, contingencies, and humble conditions of the cosmos, especially reflected in human activities and in the creation of art, are, to Newman's mind, a series of approximations, humble witnesses to truths which far transcend the human capacity to express them. In their own way, the arts, by virtue of their splendid insufficiencies, their beautiful approximations, their straining searches, their remarkable and playful resourcefulness, and their inclination toward incarnation, witness to the doctrine of eschatology, to the doctrine of the beatific vision, to that which Newman calls the longing for the "true sight of Almighty God ... reserved for the world to come."⁶⁷ However, Newman concludes that, in the time of history, in the time leading to the eschaton, "we are allowed such an approximation to the truth as earthly images and figures may supply us."⁶⁸ Thus, the arts seem to incline in some small and humble way toward the Eucharistic sensibility saturating Christianity in its doctrine and forms of worship. In this, we see that art's insufficiencies are, for Newman, part of its beauty, part of its role, part of its witness to that which "we cannot compass, which we cannot utter."⁶⁹

In all this, we see that Newman's aesthetics is eschatological as opposed to mundane or secular in character. As importantly, he thought of aesthetics very often in terms of ecclesiology, of the ministry and life of the Church throughout history and especially in his present day. The eschatological and the ecclesiological are inextricably linked in Newman's thought, and this

⁶⁶ Newman, "Theory of Developments," 346–47.

⁶⁷ Newman, "Theory of Developments," 340.

⁶⁸ Newman, "Theory of Developments," 340.

⁶⁹ Newman, "Theory of Developments," 347.

goes a long way to explaining his end-driven approach to pastoral ministry and the careful, thoughtful style so characteristic of his writings—as seen, for instance, in his *Apologia*, in which the unfolding drama of his own life is explained (and, indeed, is found meaningful) in terms of conversion. In Newman, Christian doctrine, and especially the eschatological vision it articulates, illuminates his anthropology. By extension (and indeed by necessity), it illuminates a whole series of related concerns and topics which constellate around the nature of the human subject in relation to objective truth and in relation to others. Among these concerns and topics are the arts and the category of the aesthetic. In contrast to the growing decadent aesthetics popular among his contemporaries, Newman held to, and indeed advanced, a Christian understanding of aesthetics in which the capacities of imaginative expression are as limited as they are meaningful. To Newman's mind, the arts serve a uniquely spiritual purpose in their glories and limitations: they announce the splendor of the created world even as they sharpen the appetite for a transcendent reality which is within and yet far beyond it.

N.V.