

## **John Henry Newman: A Man of (Many) Letters**

John Henry Newman: un hombre de (muchas) letras

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The article introduces the life and work of the XIX century British intellectual John Henry Newman. Despite his massive amount of literary, academic and personal writings (novels, poems, diaries, letters, essays, editorials, etc.) his work is still rather unknown in the Spanish speaking world. The paper presents an overview of his work and his style within the socio and political context when they were written paying especial attention to his epistolary. His letters, which fill 32 substantial volumes, are a well of information about his deep inner self and his interpersonal relations; of his fiery spirit and his gentle heart.

**Keywords:** Newman, style, letters.

El artículo es una introducción a la vida y obra del intelectual británico del siglo XIX, John Henry Newman. A pesar de la enorme producción de escritos literarios, académicos y personales (novelas, poemas, diarios, cartas, ensayos, editoriales, etc.), su obra es aún muy desconocida en el mundo hispanoparlante. El artículo presenta una visión panorámica de su obra y estilo dentro del contexto sociopolítico en que fueron escritos, con especial énfasis en su epistolario. Sus cartas, que completan 32 volúmenes, son una valiosísima fuente de información acerca de lo más profundo de su ser y sus relaciones interpersonales; de su espíritu ardiente y vehemente y de su cálido y amable corazón.

**Palabras clave:** Newman, estilo, cartas.

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## **The XIX Century Britain**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain enjoyed the status of the most advanced and powerful potency in the world, standing at the centre of the largest empire ever conceived, where 'the sun never sets'. In this period, the United Kingdom reached its greatest splendour and prosperity, which brought about a thriving economy and an unprecedented scientific and technological development. This booming condition set out a strong impulse for a major industrialization of the nation which enabled it, for the 1<sup>st</sup> time in history, for a mass production, so much so, that the country gained the name of the 'Workshop of the World'. Unlike most developed nations of the times, Britain enjoyed a period of peace and political stability, during which the Parliament governed in harmony with the rule of the Crown. These circumstances brought along a considerable material improvement most citizens and set the appropriate conditions for progress in many other respects.

As well-known though, the system had its drawbacks. Against this scenario of success, was the dejected working class which stood at the backstage of the country's prosperity and at whose expense the country's production and business moved on. These people had to endure miserable living and working conditions and had little or no access to enjoy of Britain's achievements, or to benefit from the progress outlined above. They were the price of the Industrial Revolution.

On a positive note, education became more accessible and a new educated and intellectual class arose. This inspired a rich cultural development and yielded a generation of prolific intellectuals who had great impact in the literature and philosophical thought of the age. This period engendered some of the most renowned thinkers of the modern times, with leading scholars in the sciences and humanities, whose ideas and theories reached far beyond the limits of the island.

Among these, some distinguished literary names resound, with novelists such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy and Walter Scott among others and, for the first time, also some celebrated female writers emerge such as George Elliot, the Bronte sisters, Jane Austin and Elizabeth Gaskell. Likewise, a generation of notable poets sprang, largely inspired by the Romantic and Naturalist current like Alfred Lord Tennyson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Robert Browning and Thomas Carlyle. In the same way, leading intellectuals and social reformers came forward such as Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill, John Ruskin, Charles Kingsley, Samuel Butler and Charles Darwin, just to name a few.

### **Newman the intellectual**

Among these towering figures, the name of John Henry Newman (1801-1890) stands out as one of the notable representative of the 1800's, as a straight Humanist in the deepest sense of the word. He lived and worked in Oxford for over 30 years, where he taught at Oriel College, the most prestigious college of the university then, and the centre of the intellectual discussion of the days.

His passion for the humanities derived from his awe at the mystery and Ineffability of the human being and his ceaseless search for truth, a pursuit which lasted his whole lifetime. In his quest to find to find answers, he explored in every subject area he came across. He was indeed a literary man, an "avid reader of everything from history and theology to science and formal logic" (Newman 7-8) what explains his familiarity with almost every subject matter, among which he saw no clear-cut boundaries and from where he drew partial answers for his inquiring mind.

Newman's mind was world-wide. He was interested in everything which was going on in science, in politics, in literature. Nothing was too large for him, nothing too trivial, if it threw light upon the central question, what man really was, and what was his destiny (Froude 278).

He taught classic history and literature, a period he knew well and loved passionately. Plato and Aristotle were central figures to his teaching, with whom he dialogued in his classes as he also does in some of his writings. For him literature as a passion, since in the great masterpieces, he could catch a glimpse of the profoundness of man with its wonders and flaws, and so he wrote that "the book of man is called Literature" (Newman 219). His devotion is nicely expressed in one of his discourses in the foundation of the University of Dublin:

Literature does not argue, but declaims and insinuates; it is multiform and versatile: it persuades instead of convincing, it seduces, it carries captive; it appeals to the sense of honour, or to the imagination, or to the stimulus of curiosity; it makes its way by means of gaiety, satire, romance, the beautiful, the pleasurable (Newman 234).

As a result of his wide range of interests, he may be regarded as one the most versatile humanists of the modern times, who was a theologian, philosopher, historian, novelist, poet, playwright, essayist, translator, musician, just to name a few. Hence he may be rightly called 'a man of many hats', all of which he wore smartly. "The unifying principle of this extravagant array is its common wellspring of Newman's energetic mind and his tender and sympathetic heart" (Tillman 11). It is not surprising then, that he may be considered one the most influential thinkers of his age, and yet, with the uniqueness of being a Catholic, a most unusual characteristic among the intellectuals in the XIX century Britain.

Due to his position in Oxford he interacted with the then exclusive network of leading scholars, among who he was a highly regarded academic, who dealt with numerous fields of study quite confidently. However, he completely disregarded any credit for his knowledge nor accepted any academic title, a personality trait that was recorded by Henry Tristram, who compiled much of his work, and has argued that:

(H)e was not a theologian, nor a philosopher, nor a historian, nor a preacher, nor a poet at least at not in the front

rank. For himself disclaimed his right to any of "these five great names", as he called them; and we may with him, from one point of view, that he did not 'take and prosecute one line of research, one study, one science'. And yet, if he had become a specialist, English literature would have been the poorer (Tristram 18).

He was also a well-known public figure who featured regularly in the press and the periodical publications of the day with contributions such as editorials, letters, columns and articles on current affairs and a wide range of other matters. In his writings he often raised up his voice against reductionist ideologies, built upon wrong philosophical premises, or against strands of thought based on misconceptions of the human being. Many views concerning these themes were rapidly spreading in the academic world so he would write to disclose their errors with an unfailing commitment for the defence of the natural truths. These disagreements more than once got him into trouble or turned into public debates. Newman contested his counterparts with sound arguments, which were often unwelcome by the opposition. Yet, it needs to be noted that on either side he was respected as an outstandingly clear mind.

In spite of the variety of his interests, it may be fairly said that in essence he was an educator. He devoted his whole life, directly or indirectly, to teaching in a broad spectrum of educational contexts. Such love for education was summarised years later in his diaries where he confessed that "education, in the large sense of the word, has always been my line" (Newman 259). Without considering the education he received himself, his direct involvement dates back to his years in Trinity College in Oxford and later as a tutor in Oriel College in his twenties (1827-30). This period was followed by the foundation and rectorship of the Catholic University of Ireland (1852-59) and later in life, in his sixties, again as a founder and inspiration of the Oratory School in Birmingham (1859-63).

At a time when the country was becoming richer, education was also becoming more affordable although, in its new scenario, it was also adopting a merely utilitarian approach. Much more than providing a proper education the system had tuned into a provider of a useful training for the needs of the industrial context. This was an issue against which Newman fought forcefully. His educational aim was higher than that proposed by this social system, therefore much of his written and oral work spins around this concern. For him, education was a 'high' word, which entailed a holistic approach to teaching, which embraced the growth of the person as a whole. That is, it encompassed the intellectual development, religious growth and ultimately the cultivation of a virtuous and spiritual life. He articulated this principle in the *Idea of a University* when discussing the distinction between knowledge and instruction:

Knowledge is not a mere extrinsic or accidental advantage... it is an acquired illumination, it is a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment... *education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature,*

*and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connexion with religion and virtue (Newman 114)*<sup>1</sup>.

With the occasion of his elevation to the dignity of Cardinal at the age of 79, he received numerous greetings and compliment letters from friends, acquaintances alumni of these institutions and their parents. In these letters his tireless commitment to education comes up recurrently, mostly with thankfulness from those who had benefitted in one way or another from such initiatives. In some of his replies, looking back to his life as an educator, he disclosed a sense of nostalgia for those years and of reward for the work done, which made him feel the effort had been worth it.

It is indeed a satisfaction to me to believe, that in my time, with whatever shortcomings, *I have done something for the great work of Education*; and it is a second satisfaction, that you are able to pronounce, at the end of many years, that my endeavours have, in your judgment, had their measure of success (Newman 183)<sup>2</sup>.

## Newman's writings

Newman's work can hardly be understood unless seen in the light of his personal history. He was in the first and foremost place a pastor and all his work reflects this mission and also irradiates the force of his beliefs. He reacted firmly to the distorted notions and malpractices within the Anglican Church and turned to the teachings of the ancient Fathers in search for the origins and true principles of Christianity. As a result of his tireless and sincere search for the truth, and of his deep prayer, he found the answer to his restlessness in the Catholic Church. His works reflect in one way or another this vital life experience, which pervades and runs across his work.

As a writer, he was renowned for his versatility. He called himself an 'occasional writer', since he wrote little for pleasure. Apart from a few compositions he wrote as single manuscripts (e.g. *Gain and Loss*, *Calista*, *The Dream of Gerontious*, *The Grammar of Assent*), his published work are largely compilations of discourses, articles, columns, letters, sermons, documents, open addresses, diaries, autobiographical notes, etc. which were later brought together and published as unified wholes. Such collections encompass the largest bulk of his work and reveal the wide-ranging discourse genres he wrote in. Newman confessed, late in life, that most of his writings had come up as a need when he saw important philosophical or theological issues were at stake:

I have written according to the occasion, when there was a call on me to write; seldom have I written without call, but I have ever felt it to be an unpleasant necessity,

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<sup>1</sup> Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis added.

and I have envied those who have been able to take and prosecute one line of research, one study, one science, as so many have done in this day, and thus to aspire to the "Exegi monumentum" of the Poet (Newman 190).

He hardly ever set out to write, but mostly responded to these 'calls' which originated in adverse circumstances, often motivated by personal attacks, public discredits or false accusation in the media, to which he would respond stating his personal position in front of the charges. And so he recorded it in one of his diaries, which he wrote in third person.

It has been the fortune of the author through life, that the Volumes which he has published have grown for the most part out of the duties which lay upon him, or out of the circumstances of the moment. Rarely has he been master of his own studies (Newman 245).

Newman has been described as an asystematic writer due to the apparent lack of organization of much of his literature, and this was particularly the case of some collections which took shape along lengthy time lapses with prolonged pauses breaching between one part and another. However, in spite of this feature, when it came to publishing his work, he would take great care in their edition. He revised the texts attentively over and over again to improve their style and to give the whole collection a sense of unity. Yet, he was never satisfied with the outcome of such recurrent revisions, he did so not for the sake of perfectionism but because as he explains in this letter on style to his editor he felt his writings did not communicate what he expected to convey

I may truly say that I never have been in the practice since I was a boy of attempting to write well, or to form an elegant style. I think I never have written for writing sake: but my one and single desire and aim has been to do what is so difficult (...) to express clearly and exactly my meaning; this has been the motive principle of all my corrections and re-writings. When I have read over a passage which I had written a few days before, I have found it so obscure to myself that I have either put it altogether aside or fiercely corrected it; but I don't get any better for practice (...) (Newman 426).

In the 19th century Britain, much of the political and intellectual interaction was carried out by means of printed material such as newsletters, pamphlets or leaflets –an unusual type of publication in our days. These papers constituted an inexpensive and far-reaching manner of collective communication to spread ideas beyond the usual newspapers readership. Naturally, these writings were only intended to serve the purpose of discussion and collaboration among a selected audience, but it may be said that today they comprise an unconventional form of literature, which then was not regarded so.

## A man of letters

Newman is perhaps the most prolific writer of this age. His vast work was compiled by his disciples after his death and assembled into 90 substantial volumes, out of which 32 hold only his correspondence, with over 20.000 of the letters that have remained till today. Thanks to this massive amount of correspondence and diaries, we have come to know his innermost personal feelings and his life has been almost fully reconstructed. Preserving one's letters is a rare habit, but one he fulfilled thoroughly during his life. He valued and kept them from his early youth largely inspired by the affection he held for their correspondents but also because for him they represented a way to stay in touch with them with "the charm of reality" (Newman 73).

However, In addition to these emotional reasons, he held other motivations for his letters safeguarding. He held them in high esteem for he thought they represented faithful custodians and safe records and of the truth. Ann Mozley, his sister in law and close of collaborator, edited his Letters and Correspondence in two volumes (1891) at his own request, very soon after death.

Given the slanders he had been object to and the notorious arguments he had been involved in, he kept them if case he ever had to defend himself against false the charges and accusations that had he had faced. What is more, he even desired such "an opening to defend myself as to various passages in my life and writings" (Ker xiv). Aware of his social and intellectual prominence he also feared that when he passed away, someone who knew him little or nothing could wish to tell his history and that, either by ignorance or bad will, he would draw only from his own accounts or the judgements of others. He thought that a dead man's life could only be retold faithfully from his letters and personal writings, so anticipating to this eventuality he stored them so they would provide a truthful account of his life and thus prevent the writers from misinterpretations of the facts. So he wrote in 1863:

(...) the true life of a man's is in his letters... Not only for the interest of a biography, but for arriving at the inside of things, the publication of letters is the true method. Biographers varnish, they assign motives, they conjecture feelings, they interpret, they palliate or defend... but contemporary letters are facts (Newman 1).

Despite his distaste of the prospect of having his life published, he confided his uneasiness and distrust of biographers to his sister Jemima:

I sincerely wish to seem neither better nor worse that I am (...) it may be said that to ask a biographer to edit letters is like putting salt on a bird's tail <sup>3</sup>how can you

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<sup>3</sup> Proverb meaning to be so close to something or someone that you may catch it easily, implying that you lack objectivity.

secure fidelity? He must take care not to hurt people, make mischief, or get into controversy (Newman 443).

In fact, his letter-keeping proved to serve the purpose he had foreseen, since they turned into his prime source material to write his *Apologia* in 1864.

## **Newman's style**

Newman's literary achievement has generally been underrated, in spite that he counts among the most distinguished prose writers of the XIX century. However, he did not boast of such a talent, but on the contrary, he enjoyed of enough sense of humour not to take himself too seriously and he mocked his own literary style thus.

(T)he unpleasant style in which it is written arises from my habit from a boy to compose. I seldom wrote without an eye to the style, and since my state was bad, my style was bad. I wrote in style as another might write in verse, or sing instead of speaking, or dance instead of walking. Also my Evangelical tone contributed to its bad taste" (Newman 149).

It is difficult to describe Newman's literary style as a whole due to the large spectrum of these works. One reason for this analysis is that it is not possible to identify common stylistic features running throughout his numerous and miscellaneous works which encompass fiction and non-fiction, narrative and poetry, argumentative and non-argumentative discourse, personal and public, written and oral, artistic and functional texts. Another drawback for such an analysis of this kind lies on the fact that his literary work was mostly motivated by external circumstances, what made one text diverge significantly from another written under different circumstances. But above all, because his literary production stretches along a lengthy period of time, spanning over 70 years, in which his style naturally evolved. This evolution is especially noticeable in the variance from his middle aged passion for the themes which filled his mind, to a much gentler and affectionate manner to deal with them in his old age.

Newman's style in his correspondence is somewhat more suitable for description. It is characterised by a distinctive rhetoric, filled with imagery and metaphor, which made his epistles powerful and incisive. Letter-writing was for him a priority and an integral part of his mission, to which he devoted long hours and in which engaged all his mind and heart. Their form and content reveal his strong personality and also his gentle and friendly character.

The wide range of letter in the collection exhibits the depth of his soul and rich array of social relations in his life. While some of these are nothing but short notes jotted down quickly, others expose pondered ideas expressed in a polished style. To a large extent they resemble his own appreciation of literature in the *Idea of a University*:

Circumstances, such as locality, period, language, seem to make little or no difference in the character of Literature, as such; on the whole, all Literatures are one; they are the voices of the natural man (Newman 228).

His accomplished command of the language enabled him to choose a unique tone for each person he addressed. His mastery of a broad lexical repertoire dictated the best choice of words and his instinct inspired him the most appropriate register for the case. This talent allowed him to shift from the intimate and affectionate tone he used with his mother, to a close one with his siblings, and a confiding one used with his closest friends unlocking his heart in absolute trust. Accordingly, on the other extreme of those who were dear to him, when necessary, he adopted and altogether different tenor, firm and direct, with those who had troubled him. Mozley describes this human dimension reflected in his epistolary thus:

There is a distinct tone to each of his familiar correspondents. Intimate as his letters are, there is a separate tone of intimacy, as there would be in conversing with friends. To his Mother he wrote what it would not occur to him to say to anyone else: experiences, sensations, and odd encounters, dreams, fancies, passing speculations (Mozley 1).

Conversely, the written interactions in public spheres, mentioned above, grew 'mediatic' and are considered today as open scenarios where he displayed the very best of his rhetoric and his sharpest insights. In these open letters to the printed media came out to confront erroneous or confusing philosophical and theological issues creeping into the mentality of his age. According to Ian Ker, Newman's most knowledgeable and thorough biographer, these debates practically raised a new literary form; 'the literature of controversy' (Ker 153). He labelled him as "a consummate controversialist of superb gifts, perhaps the most remarkable in the history of English letters" (Ker 153). He got involved into these disputes mostly unintentionally –and even unfairly– while others were provoked by himself when expressing openly his opposition. In fact, in this scenario, he didn't fear to call himself a 'controversialist'.

In this regard, he is recognised as a genius of satire, a feature which is particularly noticeable in these texts. Richard Holt Hutton, a prominent critic, called Newman "not only one of the greatest English writers, but perhaps the very greatest master of sarcasm in the English language" (Ker XIV).

These letters are sprinkled with witty remarks and subtle allusions to his counterparts, who often caused public unrest among those who did not share his views, and who hardly ever dared to write back. When he himself or one of his close friends had been targeted or charged unfairly, he was purposely provocative, and even confrontational, adopting a sarcastic style which today would be labelled as politically incorrect.

Yet, despite the harsh impression these letters may give, Newman "had no ambition to make a career or rise to rank and power. His natural temperament

was bright and light; his senses, even the commonest, were exceptionally delicate" (Froude 279). The letter-writer Newman invited both friends and non-friends to his home intimacies, his frank expressions of feelings and emotions admitted his readers to that inner circle. Newman's letters speak for themselves, and are given to the reader for his judgment.

Even though much of his work had already been published during his lifetime, it has only been recently put together, spread around and catalogued. Much of this massive written production is still waiting for study, yet it constitutes too large a collection to be embraced by a single scholar.

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