

Newman on Letters and Literature

It is an honour to participate in the activities surrounding this great day. I'd like to congratulate Peter and Myroslaw for their initiative in organizing this local celebration.

I'm going to focus our attention for the next few minutes on the first two lectures in Part 2 of John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University*. However, I find that the first lecture is so dependent on a key idea developed in Part 1, that knowledge is its own end, that I want to linger in this idea as well. Part 1 was organized as a series of Discourses, prepared in 1851 and 1852. Part 2 is called "University Subjects discussed in occasional lectures and essays." These were penned between 1854 and 1858. In fact the two that concern me were at either end of this time period. Christianity and Letters was a lecture first read in 1854, the one on Literature in 1858. Yet they display real unity and clarity of vision, regardless of the tensions and complexities within them.

I know it's not very saintly of me, but I am going to gloat just a little. In the book's final organization, Newman begins his treatment of individual subjects with Letters – which really stem from Homer's poetry – then literature. Literature is enormously important to Newman's vision of a university. As an English prof I really shouldn't be smug, because he has already written that all the disciplines need to be taken together, that they look different when you accentuate one more than another. Still, it's nice to be first among equals. I'm slightly guilty of a historical error, because the English of which I'm so smug only took shape in the last half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth. For instance, C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien had an important difference of opinions over which was more important, language or literature. Newman had a role in *establishing* the importance of English as we know it. I also

shouldn't be smug because the study of literature as Newman imagined it hardly exists anymore. Peter was kind enough to point this out to me...in front of three hundred people in a public lecture....Yet here we are.

When Newman talks about Letters, he does mean Homeric poetry. He also means the seven liberal arts. At St Jerome's, to work under the banner of the liberal arts includes the Math department. For Newman, Math is part of the liberal arts or the Faculty of Arts. The liberal arts tend to enjoyment rather than utility: "'Of possessions,' [Aristotle] says, 'those rather are useful, which bear fruit; those liberal, which tend to enjoyment.'"

Newman quotes this in the discourse titled "Knowledge its own end." Newman would have none of the modern day confusion that reveals itself when administrators try to talk inclusively (if not humanistically) about being a Liberal Arts...and Sciences institution. The descriptor "a liberal arts and sciences university" ambiguously suggests that the arts and sciences are both equally liberal; to accept such a suggestion would indicate that we no longer understand a clear divide in Newman's mind: the liberal arts are an end in themselves, the Baconian sciences are useful.

What distinguishes the Faculty of Arts from most of what dominates thinking in modern universities and the sources of funding that support them is professionalism. Back in the Middle Ages, the schools of Theology, Medicine, and Law were all innovations and prepared students for professions. They threatened to undermine Liberal Arts education. At the beginning of Christopher Marlow's play *Dr Faustus*, Faustus is contemplating the branches of learning and his dissatisfaction with them. One by one he rejects Medicine, Law, and Theology before turning to magic. For Newman, Faustus has already made a pact with the devil if the university is only about such choices.

Professionalism has already won. That's the case with the Harry Potter series too. Harry may escape the world of Vernon Dursley and his widgets, but the world of Hogwarts is also darkly utilitarian. And the *other* Harry Potter story, the one about Rowling's personal transformation from rags to riches, tells us that it pays to follow your literary dreams, it'll be alright materially in the end.

Anti-professionalism is crucial to Newman's ideas about Christianity and Letters. The main point is to contrast a tradition going back to Homer with the Baconian sciences not because the sciences are bad in themselves but because it is their "inexhaustible applications" that have "dazzled" the imagination. Our own situation is so different from Newman's, so much already embedded in the logic of utilitarianism, that we need to imagine a different world to appreciate what Newman is and isn't saying. We cannot assume we share Newman's ideals, that our vision of the liberal arts just needs a little tweaking.

For instance, Newman would not have had in mind "twenty-somethings" taking the time to find themselves before settling into the career-track of their choosing. The ambiguity of life in the liberal arts today does not do justice either to the seriousness of the joy of which Newman spoke nor to its preparatory quality. It does not accord with the former because the (encouraged) solipsism of today's liberal arts education can only with difficulty imagine the desire for self-denying communion with the object of inquiry Newman had in mind as a source of enjoyment. And it would seem that Newman imagined the liberal arts as shaping the course of one's life in a (paradoxically) purposefully useless way.

Part of our difficulty may have to do with ways of imagining time. I think of his liberal arts graduates as actively engaged in public and professional life at a younger age, shaped by and therefore shaping it in ways in keeping with the nature of joy, while utility shapes the progress of their modern-day counterparts, even if they embark upon a leisurely undergraduate career. The latter arrive at their professions having been shaped only by that (government mandated) expectation, even if they were for a while in flight from it. Such progress through university leaves them thinned, a possibility Newman seems to have feared and anticipated in his own day.

As an analogy, I would invite you to think of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (an early nineteenth-century novel) and the character of Mr Darcy. To watch modern day adaptations, one might think that Mr Darcy, at 28, is a reasonably young man, perhaps not long out of university. He isn't. Given his station as heir to Pemberley, at 28 he has been a man of worldly responsibilities for some time. He is an outsider to the young people's world at Merriton. He is a threat. Think Donald Trump rather than Colin Firth, except that he has a solid (if imperfect) training in liberal attitudes, which manifest themselves principally in prudence.

Something like that jarring cultural difference applies to Newman here with reference to "degree expectations." Newman has no problem with people getting professions. He expects it. But before that happens, they have the chance, or need the chance, to get a liberal arts education. That education consolidates a cast of mind. The goal of a liberal arts education is simply the beauty of a good mind: it can keep manifesting its perfection of form as one progresses through life. In a way, the mind itself is like the liberal arts tradition that simply retains pride of place, from the centuries before

Christ through to the Middle Ages and beyond, even though Theology, Medicine, and Law arise in the medieval university and the Baconian sciences attract attention in the era of the Enlightenment. So too a well-trained mind continues to be beautiful.

For us, by contrast, our worry that education should lead to a job and all those wonderful amenities like mini-vans and data plans, vitiates the distinction between liberal arts and learned professions, to the detriment of the former. It doesn't matter that some students may have fairly relaxed attitudes towards the time spent at university and elsewhere before getting into the "real world." We have Victory Laps, gap years, and our standard jokes about cramming a four-year degree into seven years. But our psychic landscape is so dominated by utility that often students who manifest such a relaxed attitude nonetheless have not had the liberal experience at all. For others, getting the B.A. efficiently means that at 28 they really are like Mr Darcy, running great estates like Pemberley. Yet without imbibing the liberal arts they lack prudence and the experience of joy and so end up producing Enron and Entertainment Tonight.

What puts the liberal arts in a privileged position over professional training and the Baconian sciences is that the liberal arts "reiterate an old tradition" that goes back as far as Homer. The majestic lessons of Homer are for "enlarging the mind, cultivating the intellect, refining the feeling." They inaugurate a tradition that enfolds Greece and Rome. More importantly for Newman in a talk entitled Christianity and Letters, they enfold reason and faith. Gregory the Great is said "to have supported the hall of the Apostolic See upon the columns of the Seven Liberal Arts." The integration of faith and metaphysics emerges as a key theme in this lecture: "The grace stored in Jerusalem, and the gifts which radiate from Athens, are made over and concentrated in Rome."

This is the work of society and it produces society. Newman writes that “the Civilization and Society which I have been describing is one organized whole. And, in like manner, Christianity coalesces into one vast body, based upon common ideas.” Newman starts the lecture with an emphasis on society and he returns to it as the natural manifestation of the liberal arts.

When Newman comes to treat literature he makes an important distinction between the way that language functions in literature and in the sciences. Literature, he tells us, is personal and subjective. It is an expression of “one person’s ideas and feelings”; it expresses “not objective truth, as it is called, but subjective, not things, but thoughts.” Given what I’ve just been saying about Newman’s emphasis on society, this description of literature may sound contradictory. However, when Newman comes to talk about literature as subjective, we rightly understand the personal as a dimension of the whole, contributing to how a world, and a society, is built up.

Newman also encourages us to think of literary authors as “representatives of their kind, and in whose words their brethren find an interpretation of their own sentiments, a record of their own experience, and a suggestion for their own judgements.” In fact, in his rhapsodic close to this lecture, he will envision how “by great authors the many are drawn up into unity, national character is fixed, a people speaks, the past and the future, the East and the West are brought into communication with each other.”

The real contrast for Newman is not the personal as atomistic over and against tradition or society. Rather the contrast is between language as personal versus language as symbolic. Language is symbolic in the sciences, which deal with objects more or less manipulable in isolation: “Such objects become the matter of Science, and words indeed

are used to express them, but such words are rather symbols than language.” In the sciences, words exist in themselves and are mere vehicles of things. The sciences in this context are not so much *scientia*, areas of knowledge that give joy in their own right. They are provinces of useful knowledge. Language serves utilitarian ends.

Literary language, in contrast, is personal, holistic. It expresses what is inside of one:

He writes passionately, because he feels keenly; forcibly, because he conceives vividly; he sees too clearly to be vague; he is too serious to be otiose; he can analyze his subject, and therefore he is rich; he embraces it as a whole and in its parts, and therefore he is consistent; he has a firm hold of it, and therefore he is luminous.

Such language involves the individual’s participation in the depths of being. It involves not merely the manipulation of concepts, but the engagement of dimensions of reality not limited to conceptual rationality. A later Catholic thinker, Jacques Maritain, would discuss this dimension as the realm of emotion. Newman prefers the term “personal,” but he hints at emotional depths:

When we can separate light and illumination, life and motion, the convex and the concave of a curve...then it will be conceivable that the vigorous and fertile intellect should renounce its own double [ie speech], its instrument of expression, and the channel of its speculations and emotions.

Newman’s point is not only about the viability of emotional dimensions of reality, but the inseparability of thought and word, despite their difference as a “two-fold Logos.” Actual language has an irreducibly important place in the expression of thought and in the

construction of that which can bring “the past and the future, the East and the West” into communication with one another. Literary language expresses a whole that incorporates the emotions, the inner vision, and the subtle discriminations of good training; it also manifests the whole that is a unified society.

When in literature we study individual authors, we do not treat them merely as a rubric under which are to be found plots, themes, symbols, and the like for enumeration. Rather, there is an intimate relationship between the author’s style and the subject matter they pursue. For Newman, style is the image of the author’s subject and their mind. Style is in exact correspondence to the ideas of which it is the expression. In this way the author tries “to bring out what he thinks or what he feels in a way adequate to the thing spoken of.” Such correspondence differs markedly from the symbolic use of words in the sciences.

If all this is as deeply true for Newman as I believe it is, it should be reflected in *his* style and it is. I close with a long quotation from Newman in defence of literature. I invite you to notice the swelling cadences, the sense of plenitude achieved through piled phrases, which simultaneously invoke sociality and catholic unity. Such writing models the effect a liberal arts education can have, instilling a passion with which one can resonate. I invite you to take pleasure in his prose:

If then the power of speech is a gift as great as any that can be named,—if the origin of language is by many philosophers even considered to be nothing short of divine,—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, experience recorded, and wisdom

perpetuated,—if by great authors the many are drawn up into unity, national character is fixed, a people speaks, the past and the future, the East and the West are brought into communication with each other,—if such men are, in a word, the spokesmen and prophets of the human family,—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 measure the ministers of like benefits to others, be they many or few, be they in the obscurer or the more distinguished walks of life,—who are united to us by social ties, and are within the sphere of our personal influence.

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