The mystery of Newman
Bremond Henri
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Author: Bremond Henri

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THE MYSTERY
OF NEWMAN
THE MYSTERY OF NEWMAN

BY

HENRI BREMOND

TRANSLATED BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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LONDON

WILLIAMS AND NORGATE

14 HENRIETTA STREET, COVENT GARDEN

1907
Ed io a lui: Li dolci detti vostri
Che, quanto durera l'uso moderno
Faranno cari ancora i loro inchiostrì.

Purgatorio, ch. xxvi.
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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Except for one chapter of pure literary criticism, I have no other object, in the present book, than to sketch the portrait and describe the inner life of Newman. The study of his doctrine is relegated to a sort of appendix at the end of the volume, which I should like to have made still shorter. This is not because I take no interest in that doctrine, but because I should fear to deprive it of its true character, if I were to detach it from the moral and religious experiences which it strives to express. Although, as a matter of fact, the personal pronoun is relatively but little used in the books of Newman—preacher, novelist, controversialist, philosopher, and poet—he is always disclosing himself and telling his own story. Nor does he conceal it from himself, but formally recognises that he is unable to act otherwise. He has only the right, he says, in the final work in which he claims to sum up his teaching, to add his personal experiences to the general collection of psychological facts,¹ and, if it were necessary that he should make excuses for being so absorbed in self-contemplation, he would apply to his own case what Mme. du Deffand said of Montaigne: "The 'I' and the 'me' are in every line; but how can we know anything except the 'I' and the 'me'?"

Thus Newman himself fixes the method which imposes itself not only on his biographer, but also, and especially, on the critic of his thought. There is no question either of constructing or of discussing a theory, but of sounding a mind. The enterprise demands a free and respectful curiosity. From the moment that I ventured on this study my first duty was to retain or resume my independence. I feel sure that no one will reproach me with forgetfulness of this watchword, and I hope that none will censure me for having observed it.

I venture to ask those faithful followers of Newman, whom certain of the opening pages might alarm, to be so good as to exercise patience. The portrait which I have lovingly traced in the fourth part corrects and completes these first sketches, which I was obliged to retain in order to be quite sincere. The further they advance in the reading of the book, the better will they understand why I have felt it necessary to insist on what, for lack of a really French word, I have been forced to call the auto-centrism of Newman. Besides, I am not afraid that the perusal of so personal a biography will scandalise any of those who have had sometimes the curiosity to look into their own hearts.

But, if there be some who find this characterisation of a Christian philosopher somewhat disconcerting, I can do nothing in the matter. We must take Newman just as he is, with his sceptical intelligence and profoundly believing soul, on pain of misunderstanding the originality, and of sacrificing the opportunities, of his "message." And then, whatever may be the difficulties of interpreting certain details of his life and work, we shall see clearly that faith always has the victory. A good Italian Father, somewhat frightened by the novelties of the "Essay on Development," said, nevertheless, with reassurance, as he closed the book: "I do not know how it is, but so it is that all these startling things, Mr. Newman brings them round at the end to a good conclusion [sic]."

I hope that the reader, who is good enough to follow me to the last page, will close the book with a similar impression, and will echo this saying of Father Mazio.¹

Paris: December 1905.

¹ This saying of Father Mazio's occurs in a letter of Cardinal Newman's addressed to Father Coleridge, and printed in The Month for March 1903.—Translator.
INTRODUCTION

That a man's worst enemies are those of his own household is true in more senses than one. It may be taken to mean that a hero should dread none so much as his worshippers, that a prophet should tremble for the day when the descendants of his persecutors shall build up his sepulchre. Certainly it is while the saints are among us in all the limitations of their mortality that virtue goes forth from them more abundantly for our healing. In the measure that popular worship lifts them high above our criticism and clothes them with the whole uniform of attributes common to their class, the saving influence that flows from a living human individuality is at an end. Equally does this hold for the mental stimulation afforded by the great teachers of humanity.

Their words are a ferment in the general mind, a power of transformation and progress until the day on which they are canonised and declared to be authorities; until, instead of their spirit and method, the very substance and letter of their doctrine is imposed on the world as a rigid rule of correct judgment. Thus it will happen that one who in some remote century has earned the repute of an esprit fort by a courageous synthesis of the old learning and the new may, through the very reverence accorded to him by a grateful posterity, be the one hindrance to the possibility of such a conciliation to-day. His synthesis, now obsolete, has been canonised at the expense of his synthetic spirit.

We are far, then, from anything like an unqualified sympathy with those more ardent disciples who would fain see John Henry Newman declared a Doctor of the Church to the confusion of his opponents. Doubtless such official patronage might silence the prejudiced, might secure a reverent and careful study of his teaching. But is not such reverence fraught with danger as well as advantage? We
admit that the tardy honour done to him in the late evening of life may have contributed to his immediate prestige and have secured a certain extrinsic honour and authority to teachings previously looked at askance; but for many reasons we could wish that Dr. Newman had chosen to remain Dr. Newman, and that his sun had quietly set behind the clouds rather than gone down in a blaze of scarlet. We feel not merely that such an ending would have been in closer harmony with that life of mental and moral suffering which lends so much spiritual strength and dignity to his character, but that the eminence of his position may perhaps distract a certain amount of attention from the eminence of his personality, and may hasten that process of petrifaction whereby the vitality of his teaching must be imperilled at last. The robe that fits one is too long for another, too short for a third, and to a lesser man such an honour had been all gain. But we have never wished that Shakespeare had received a peerage, or had come down to us as Lord Shakespeare; and if Bacon is not less to us on account of his title, he is certainly not more. It is the man, not the Cardinal, that we would fain preserve in our midst; the living Newman, not the poor "Clothes-Screen" in marble, senile and decrepit, that solicits our tears on the Brompton Road. The function of Devil's advocate, were the advocacy a little more earnest and less ceremonious, would be of immense service to truth and religion, not merely in preventing undeserved or premature canonisations, but in helping towards the formation of a far more attractive and morally stimulating estimate of the saint than is attainable by a monotonous rehearsal of untempered perfections. And so, whatever their spirit and intention, we cannot but be grateful to those like Dr. E. Abbott, who, at a time when the apotheosis of Newman was about to be carried by popular acclaim, broke in with a strident "No" upon the tumultuous chorus of "Ayes." Certainly the adverse bias or prepossession of such men is as unfavourable to a clear and untroubled judgment as is the hot sectarian enthusiasm of professèd Newmanites. For disciple and opponent alike, the "methodic" detachment needed for an objective view is so difficult as to be morally impossible. The ideal critic would be one who having passed from the ardour of discipleship to the stage of