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Tractarians and Metaphysicals: The Failure of Influence

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Anglican scholars have long acknowledged the debt of the Tractarians to the Anglo-Catholic divines of the seventeenth century. According to F. L. Cross, there was "nothing new" in the doctrines of 1833, though such doctrines had become less prominent in the early nineteenth century. John Keble and his followers represented the Catholic teachings of the Church of England—and were followers of a tradition that represented Anglicanism "in the best sense," or what a recent scholar has called "classical Anglicanism."[1] In their effort to show the validity of a tradition derived from the great theologians of the seventeenth century, editions of the work of Bull, Sanderson, Andrews, and a host of others were published and appealed to in the Tractarian argument on behalf of the Catholic principle of Anglicanism. From this vast body of Caroline theology, John Henry Newman created a model for the English Catholic church, a church that was neither Roman nor Protestant, but truly Catholic and reformed. Newman's church represented a *Via Media* occupying a middle ground between Rome and Geneva. As he later wrote in the *Apologia*, The Oxford Movement was to have been a "second Reformation—a better Reformation, for it would be a return not to the sixteenth century, but to the seventeenth."[2]

Given such a concern for the ideals and doctrines of the Caroline divines, it is curious that none of the poets or critics in the Oxford Movement expressed any interest in the Metaphysical poets of the same period. Owen Chadwick has described a close affinity between the Oxford writers and the ecclesiastical views of Donne, Herbert, and the seventeenth-century theological writers.[3] Newman, according to another scholar, used a style of language ("fiduciary") that was common to the Donne-Herbert tradition.[4] Newman was certainly an enthusiast for other poets and writers of that period. He described Hooker, Hobbes, Dryden, and Milton as "classics" of English literature and included them in the reading curriculum of his students at Dublin University. Yet he never mentioned any of the Metaphysical poets in his

criticism, and seems to have been generally opposed to many of the more popular aspects of Metaphysical poetry.

Keble's silence on this matter is even more difficult to explain. His biographers frequently describe him as the heir of a tradition of Anglo-Catholicism that had survived (in the person of his father) through the eighteenth century.[5] Keble, moreover, briefly professed his admiration for *The Temple* in his correspondence.[6] Yet he seldom discussed either Herbert or his poetry. The technical innovations in *The Temple* bothered Keble, but Keble was silent mainly because Herbert's poetry appeared to him so directly religious that it was "above" criticism. The poetry had not been written for publication, nor did Herbert write to exhibit himself in his work. The real importance of Herbert was in his life of dedicated holiness. Only a church that was truly Catholic, whatever its critics might say, could produce such a saint.[7]

Modern scholars have attempted to explain the Tractarian neglect of the Metaphysical tradition and Keble's apparent failure as a poet by suggesting that he and Newman were influenced by a different tradition of poetry. Keble's enormous popularity in his own age has been explained by several recent critics who suggest that he was the disciple of Wordsworth, while Newman was the disciple of Coleridge. The Oxford Movement itself was a phase of English Romanticism, and a Romantic approach to religion was even more important for the later developments in the Ritualistic phase of the Catholic revival.[8]

Such an explanation, however, does not take into account the published expressions of contempt by Keble and Newman for Romantic theories of poetry, politics, and religion. Keble, in fact, was quite severe with many of the central ideas in the *Lyrical Ballads*. His objections to the Romantic ego were extended to include a condemnation of all poetry that was deeply personal or "egotistical." Newman was also severely critical of any ideology that was excessively subjective and, as we will see, he attempted in both his literary and religious theories to offer an apologetic that could be verified by more than a personal appeal. Newman's silence on the Metaphysical poets, then, is not merely a lapse in taste. In what follows I will attempt to offer reasons for the Tractarian hostility to the Metaphysical tradition. I will also suggest that the differences between Keble's and Newman's approaches to religion and poetry were so great that the phrase "Tractarian poetics"[9] is really not a useful one in evaluating their conflicting achievements as critics or religious thinkers.

I

In his "Advertisement" to *The Christian Year*, Keble wrote that the purpose of his poetry was to assist the reader in "bringing his own thoughts and feelings into more entire unison with those recommended and exemplified in the Prayer Book." The feature of the Prayer Book that he found so appealing was its "*soothing* tendency," a quality which stood in obvious contrast to the "unbounded curiosity" and "excitement" of his own period. In these few comments Keble expressed one of the primary themes in his literary theory. Later, in the Oxford *Lectures on Poetry* (1831-1841), Keble enlarged on this idea: one of the basic functions of great poetry was to be found in its "soothing" or quieting effects upon the reader. It was this quality that Keble found most attractive in Walton's *Lives*. In the first poem of *The Christian Year* he paid tribute to Walton's portrait of George Herbert:

> O who can tell how calm and sweet,
> Meek Walton! shows thy green retreat,
> When wearied with the tale thy times disclose,
> The eye finds thee out in thy secure repose.

"Meek Walton" served to remind the reader of the presence of love and hope in the church during one of its most troubled periods by raising the life of George Herbert to the level of inspiration. The poetry of George Herbert, in a similar way, served to nourish the interior world of the imagination. According to Keble, religious poetry and perhaps all great poetry ought to inspire the reader with hope, or a "green retreat," by enabling him to escape from problems of the moment and fix his mind on eternity.

It is tempting to regard Keble as a Romantic poet and critic, especially if we remember that many of the poems in his first volume are about Nature, that he later dedicated his *Lectures on Poetry* to Wordsworth, and that he selected one of Wordsworth's poems ("Stock Dove") as the very model for religious poetry in his essay of 1825, "Sacred Poetry." Wordsworth was, said Keble in his Dedication, the "Champion . . . of the poor and simple" and he had portrayed the life of the rural poor in an "almost celestial light."[10] Yet the dedication ought not to be misunderstood, since Keble would never have praised any poetry that seemed to promote social or political change; rather Wordsworth's achievement was in his ability to calm the minds and emotions of his readers.

The Christian Year, moreover, was written over a period of time that went back to 1811, when Keble was writing critical essays for the

Quarterly Review. In several of those essays Keble suggests a strong hostility to much that is popularly associated with Wordsworth's poetry and Romanticism in general. In the *Apologia* Newman provides one of the best insights into what I will argue is one of the major themes in Keble's poetry and literary criticism: "What he hated instinctively was heresy, insubordination, resistance to things established, claims of independence, disloyalty, innovation, a critical, censorious spirit."[11] Newman is describing Keble's religious and political views, but the passage also applies to his literary theory. In *The Christian Year*, we find numerous calls for a "reform" of poetry and those who were to be reformed were Romantic poets. As Newman suggests in the above passage, and as all who knew Keble as a friend have attested, Keble was an arch-Conservative. That conservatism especially applies to his literary theory, for it was Keble's argument that all the greatest poets were conservatives. Thus, Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Shakespeare were "Tories," and gave their support to institutions like monarchy and a state-religion. On the other hand, the suitors of Penelope and the Romantic poets were radical in their proposals for change via a series of "untried nostrums" of reform.[12] Keble's Tory aesthetic led him to pass over quickly most of the great satirists in literature and to maintain a general silence on poetry that was original, skeptical, or "ribald."

Keble went even further in his "political" criticism. The sacred function and pleasure of poetry could only be appreciated by those of a quiet (conservative) temperament. In one of his early lectures, Keble argued that the proper emotion of poetry was an *ethos* by which the reader is calmed:

> Emotion is of two kinds: The Greeks call the one *pathos*, which we may fittingly render, feeling; the other *ethos*, a word which . . . has no precise equivalent; *mores* we call it, or character. . . . The former they have called passionate feelings, the latter mild and gentle; by the one men are vehemently excited, by the other they are calmed.[13]

Balaam was cited as one who represented the violent emotions, while Job "has bequeathed to us the poetic expression of an *ethos*, or noble character." Keble's insistence that the poet's function was to calm the reader but also to induce a noble character accounts for his belated praise of Wordsworth and his statement that *The Faerie Queene* was the greatest of all Christian poems.[14] Spenser, like all great poets, hid his deepest feelings beneath the veil of allegory, and his ideal of forming the

Christian gentleman was almost identical to Keble's ideal of poetry's function of promoting a refined and even saintly *ethos* in the reader.

Keble's Tory aesthetic extended to his judgment on the proper forms of poetry. A poet who was deeply studied in the conventions of his art would tend to express himself in those forms, for it was by the traditional forms of poetry that its function of soothing, rather than perplexing the reader, was achieved. Such an *ethos* included the idea of reserve in poetry. Job was generally silent amidst his difficulties (as was the Red Cross Knight). His faith was never shaken, nor did he publicly grumble or question his destiny, much less speak out in his own person. For Keble, it was bad taste and bad poetry to write about oneself, and it was a form of gross impiety to question the ways of God. Keble's theory of poetry, therefore, may be viewed as an implicit criticism of many of the most distinguished features of both Metaphysical and Romantic poetry.

In one of his earliest essays, Keble was more explicit in his criticism of every form of egotism in poetry. The subject of his essay was Wordsworth's second volume of poems, *The White Doe*, along with his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads*.[15] Keble praised Wordsworth's subject matter (Nature), and argued that Wordsworth had the potential to become a great poet. Yet Wordsworth was too much concerned with a "delineation of himself and his own peculiar feelings," and such feelings were "tuned much too high for the sobriety of truth." A poet ought to express himself as "other men express themselves," since they were really no different from the rest of humanity. Wordsworth was chiefly concerned with his own "theories and eccentricities," which were of limited value to his reader. Although Wordsworth was right in his effort to restore simplicity to the language of poetry, he attained that goal only by sacrificing intelligence. Keble did not expect the reader to be interested in the poet's theories about nature, poetry, or himself: "The fact obviously is that people do not resort to poetry for metaphysical instruction." Keble, of course, did change his mind about Wordsworth and his poetry, and one of the factors in that change was that Wordsworth's conversation was less laden with metaphysical problems than Keble had anticipated.[16]

One other note might be made about Keble's early opposition to Romantic theories of poetry. One of the code words in the later Oxford Movement was "peculiars," which referred to the Evangelicals within the Church of England. Throughout the Tractarian correspondence and in the *Autobiography of Isaac Williams*, we find references to the Tractarian hostility to the use of feeling as the criterion of religious truth or any other kind of truth.[17] Such an animus against public expression of feeling does qualify the now established tradition that Keble and his

colleagues in the Oxford Movement are to be described as Romantics. This animus also explains Keble's silence on the poets under discussion. Even without the expressed dislike of "metaphysical" subjects, Keble opposed poetry that seemed to be removed from the common understanding. Thus Keble was led to apologize for Herbert's poetry, which his correspondence suggests he deeply admired. The "precious conceits" in *The Temple* did seem to be "inappropriate, not to say chilling and repellent." But Herbert's poems were not written for publication, and his "deep love of God" was the reason for his elaborate metaphors. Moreover, Herbert was trying to hide himself "behind a cloud of precious conceits," and "the elaborate metrical devices" of his poetry were the result of the period in which he lived and his efforts to conceal his deepest affections within his poetry.[18]

There is one final theme in Keble's literary theory that should be recognized as a major reason for his silence on the Metaphysical poets and large portions of English poetry in general. In his essay "Sacred Poetry," Keble remarked that any poetry which raised the mind to a contemplation of eternity was religious poetry, and at the end of the *Lectures*, Keble virtually identified the aims of poetry with those of religion. A poet ought to raise the mind of his reader above the troubles of the present to a contemplation of eternity and the eternal laws of morality. Those laws proved the existence of God, according to Keble, and all the great poets in their choice of subject matter had demonstrated an intense personal piety which "soothes" the reader. Job, Oedipus, and Hamlet served Keble as witnesses to the fundamental laws of morality, whereas poetry which seemed to question the operation of those laws was unworthy of consideration. Erotic or "ribald" poetry, which apparently denied such laws, was even worse. An example of Keble's theory is to be found in his discussion of the poetry of Robert Burns. *The Cotter's Saturday Night* was almost sacred poetry in its portrait of the life of the poor, while Burns' descent into "ribald abuse" suggested that there were several poets in his poetic character.[19] In fact, poetry which perplexed the reader's innate moral standards was scarcely poetry at all.[20]

II

It is tempting to regard Newman's various writings on literature as an extension of Keble's theory. But Newman's most extensive commentary on literature was written during his term as rector of the newly founded Catholic University in Dublin. Newman did agree with Keble on the origins of literature—that it was the result of a "fire within the author's

breast which overflows in the torrent of his burning, irresistible eloquence,"[21] but his similarity to Keble ends there. The idea of eloquence eliminated the possibility of reserve, which Newman used only when discussing religious matters.[22] And with one important exception, Newman held an absolute distinction between literature and religion.

One especially useful illustration of the difference between Keble and Newman's literary theories appears in their conflicting descriptions of the "gentleman." Keble's gentleman was almost a saint, whereas Newman's gentleman was in himself morally neutral and required instruction in all varieties of literature. The gentlemanly *ethos*, according to Newman, was largely a social construct rather than a moral or religious one, and the educational ideal of forming the gentleman went no higher than itself: "Liberal education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman," as he said in the *Idea of a University*. Since the gentleman was largely measured by externals—"one who never inflicts pain . . . never speaks of himself"[23] etc.—it was impossible to know his motivation or associate him with any specific religious features. Indeed, Newman argued that the qualities of the gentleman might be found as readily in one who was a steadfast enemy to all religion as in a saint. By contrast, Keble's theory of literature, and by extension his theory of what is required in educating a gentleman, gave precious little recognition to any of the vital elements in the "natural" man, most notably his chronic sinfulness. Newman was almost vehement in his insistence that literature could not be literature without recognition of those characteristic features of humanity. "You cannot have a sinless literature of sinful man," he wrote; and without the "sweetness and the rankness of the natural man," there was no literature. Newman's defense of literature derived from its illustrations of the natural man; after all, the function of a university was to prepare its students for the world. Without a background in sinful (and Protestant) literature, the world itself would become the student's "university."[24] Thus, it was not the satiric or naturalistic elements in Metaphysical poetry that bothered Newman. His objections were, as we shall see, much deeper than Keble's.

Newman insisted that the greatest books—those which deserved to be called "classic" and were worthy of a student's attention—had qualities that were at once personal and representative. Such qualities eliminated any kind of triviality, sophistry, or mere cleverness on the part of the poet. Above all, Newman was opposed to any kind of elitist doctrine in poetry or religion. Writers like Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, or Swift made their appeal to generation after generation of the "common reader."

The greatness of such writers and their works was the result of overwhelming consensus; their writing had endured by reason of its personal and representative characteristics:

> Literature, then, is of a personal character; it consists in the enunciations and teaching of those who have a right to speak as representatives of their kind, and in whose words their brethren find an interpretation of their own sentiments, a record of their own experiences, and a suggestion for their own judgment.[25]

The relevant aspect of this passage is Newman's insistence on the correspondence between writer and reader. A great poet or novelist interprets the natural sentiments of mankind. In the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman provides a better example of the consonance between a great poet and humanity.

> Let us consider, too, how differently young and old are affected by words of some classic author, such as Homer or Horace. Passages which to boy are but rhetorical commonplaces, neither better nor worse than a hundred others 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, 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 . . . 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.[26]

The reader could enjoy a classic as a young man but appreciate it even more when he is older because such a work is "true." A classic endures on its own merits because of its realistic or representative description of the perpetual condition of mankind, not because of virtuosity, or idiosyncrasy. Popular literature or literature that was sustained by some topical or specialized interest can never expect to endure without the artificial support of the academy.

Newman's remarks on the enduring qualities of a classic suggest reasons for his silence on the lyric poets of the seventeenth century. He may be said, however, to have actually attacked such poets in the same

way that he attacked his one-time mentors in the Anglican church: on the grounds of elitism, that is, their non-representative character. The best-known expression of Newman's post-1845 hostility toward the Carolines appears in the *Apologia*:

> We all know the story of the convict, who on the scaffold bit off his mother's ear. By doing so, he did not deny the fact of his own crime . . . but he said that his mother's indulgence when he was a boy had a good deal to do with it. . . . I was in a humour, certainly, to bite off their ears. I will freely confess, that I was angry with the Anglican divines. I thought they had taken me in; I had read the Fathers with their eyes. . . . I had thought myself safe, while I had their warrant for what I said.[27]

During his years in the Oxford Movement, Newman appealed to what he thought was a "living" system of Anglo-Catholicism that had endured in the laity and formularies of the Church of England. Such a system existed "behind" the popular Protestantism of the day. In the course of twelve years, he discovered that his church was a fantasy and that the system he had invented—the *Via Media*—was no more than a "paper theory" of a church.[28] His church had no reality, whereas Protestantism and Catholicism represented real or "classic" systems that had an existence outside the mind of their professors. A great book, idea, or religion could stand on its own history and was sustained by an overwhelming consensus in its favor.

In his lectures of 1850, Newman proceeded to challenge Keble's arguments in favor of staying in the Church of England despite the problems of erastianism and the increasing hostility of his Protestant brethren in the Church. Keble had appealed to the example of Herbert, Ken and other great saints in the English church. Such saints demonstrated to the uncritical eye the gift of holiness in the English church. Newman, on the other hand, argued that every religion could provide instances of persons of great spirituality, including many religions that Keble despised. The great deficiency in the Anglican *ethos* was its absence of any example of "apostolicity," or venturing everything for the sake of a belief.[29] By way of illustrating his premise, Newman invoked the examples of Wesley and Bunyan as illustrative of true "apostolicals"; the English church had never been able to provide such witnesses.

But Newman's most powerful argument was against the conscious elitism of Keble and his followers in the mid-Victorian church. Surely, he argued, there was something insane about a small number of Anglican clergy setting themselves up as adherents of a creed, calling that creed

Catholic, and then attempting to engraft that creed on the Church of England, when every agent of authority in the church opposed such teachings.[30] In his challenge to the arguments on behalf of what has recently been called the "Catholic principle" of Anglicanism, we find an echo of Newman's arguments against every form of conscious disdain of the "consensus," including literary, as well as religious, elitism.

III

In this paper I have tried to illustrate some of the basic themes in the literary theories of John Keble and John Henry Newman and account for what appears to be a positive hostility to the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. The silence of both men on the subject of Donne's poetry in particular was neither accidental nor a lapse in taste. Keble never used the word "metaphysical" except as a term of disparagement. And even without the convenience of having a word to sum up all that he found distasteful in English poetry, Keble's aversion to all poetry that was removed from the common experience of mankind would have prevented him from admiring a style of poetry so different from his own and which contradicted his theory of what poetry ought to do for the reader. Poetry, especially religious poetry, ought to soothe or comfort the reader by its faithful witness to the eternal laws of right and wrong, thus raising the reader's mind and imagination to a contemplation of eternity.

Newman's opposition to the Metaphysical tradition apparently went even beyond that of Keble. It is noteworthy that he never mentioned any of the lyric poets of the seventeenth century. Newman certainly opposed Keble's identification of the function of poetry and religion as well as his belief that poetry and religion had a common bond in the soothing effects they produce upon the reader. Newman was better able to accept "naturalistic" elements in literature, and it might be said that he insisted upon the presence of such elements in novels, poetry and drama. His one requirement for great literature was that it be representative; a characteristic best determined by the public's reception of the work.

One final illustration of Newman's theory at work is to be found in his repeated praise of Keble's first volume of poems, *The Christian Year*. In his first essay as a Roman Catholic, he declared that Keble had done for the English church what none but a poet could do: "He made it poetical."[31] Keble had succeeded in creating an image of the national church that was completely removed from its reality. On the strength of that

image he had inspired several generations to profess a faith and confidence in the church that was even more removed from its reality. Yet *The Christian Year* was a "classic in our language," as Newman remarked in the *Apologia*, for the work had been reprinted some eighty times since its first appearance in 1827 and had inspired several generations of religious poets. The common reader, according to Newman, had clearly decided in favor of Keble's volume.

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Notes

[1] F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Movement and the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933); Owen Chadwick, *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1960).

[2] *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, ed. A. D. Culler (Boston: Riverside Press, 1957), pp. 61-62.

[3] Chadwick, p. 18.

[4] John Coulson, *Newman and the Common Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), pp. 4-13.

[5] For a survey of this material, see J. Griffin, "John Keble: A Report from the Devil's Advocate," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 48 (June 1979), 219 ff.; also Griffin, "John Keble," *The Oxford Movement: A Revision* (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1984).

[6] Cf. J. T. Coleridge, *A Memoir of the Rev. John Keble*, 5th ed. (Oxford: J. Parker, 1880), p. 173.

[7] John Keble, "Munro's *Parochial Work*," in *Occasional Papers and Reviews*, ed. H. P. Liddon (Oxford: Parker, 1877), pp. 357 ff.

[8] G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981); S. Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976); B. Martin, *John Keble, Priest, Professor and Poet* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), pp. 73-89; J. Coulson, *Religion and Romanticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981).

[9] Tennyson, pp. 12-71.

[10] *Lectures on Poetry*, tr. E. K. Francis, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), I, "Dedication."

[11] *Apologia*, pp. 272-73.

[12] *Lectures*, I, 1 ff.

[13] *Lectures*, I, 88-89.

[14] "Sacred Poetry," in *Occasional Papers and Reviews*, p. 105.

[15] Cf. "Wordsworth's White Doe," *Quarterly Review* 15 (1816), 209-25; for a discussion of Keble's authorship, see John Griffin, "Keble and the *Quarterly Review*," *Review of English Studies* 29 (November 1978), 452-56.

[16] Cf. J. Griffin, "Keble and the *Quarterly Review*," pp. 454-56.

[17] Cf. *The Autobiography of Isaac Williams*, ed. G. Prevost (London: Longman's, 1891), pp. 63 ff.

[18] *Lectures*, II, 99.

[19] *Lectures*, II, 95.

[20] Cf. "Lectures XL," *Lectures*, II, 465-84.

[21] See note 17.

[22] Cf. R. Selby, *The Principle of Reserve in the Writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

[23] *The Idea of A University*, ed. Martin Svaglic (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, 1968), pp. 136-61; for commentary on Newman's "Gentleman," see T. Vargish, *Newman; The Contemplation of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), pp. 135-37; also J. Griffin, "In Defense of Newman's 'Gentleman,'" *Dublin Review* 239 (June 1965), 245-54.

[24] *Idea*, pp. 173-77.

[25] *Idea*, p. 210.

[26] *Grammar of Assent*, ed. E. Gilson (New York: Image Books, 1955), pp. 78-79.

[27] *Apologia*, p. 196.

[28] *Apologia*, pp. 196-97.

[29] *Difficulties Felt by Anglicans*, 2 vols. (Christian Classics, 1969), I, 32 ff.

[30] *Difficulties*, p. 126.

[31] "John Keble," in *Essays, Critical and Historical*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Green, 1878), II, 421 ff.