

THE SECOND JOURNEY OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

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AMONG THE MOST PROFOUND Christian thinkers of the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) has lost nothing of his importance more than a hundred years after his death. He steadfastly argued that faith and reason are deeply compatible with each other, and that, in fact, holiness of life is the only real guide to ultimate truth. He repeatedly proposed that experience, when discerned and interpreted faithfully, contributes to our human and religious growth. In this article I want to take up a dramatic episode in Newman's early life; it shows his faith and his reason grappling with an attack of nearly fatal sickness. That experience left Newman attuned to the grace of the present moment. He did not pray 'to see the distant scene', for 'one step' was now enough for him.

The illness which almost ended Newman's life when he visited Sicily in April and May of 1833 can be explained in various ways. A matter-of-fact explanation diagnoses it as a bad case of typhoid fever.¹ A year later, in 1834, we find Newman himself interpreting his illness as a demonic trial that he suffered before starting the work God intended him to do.² I want to suggest the theme of a 'second journey' as another way of understanding and interpreting what happened to Newman in Sicily. This suggestion is not meant to rule out other interpretations; these complement each other and enrich our understanding of a major turning point in Newman's life. Before explaining in more detail, I need to clarify what I mean by a 'second journey'; then I can show how the

¹ See Howard B. Slavin, 'Newman's Illness in Sicily: a Review and an Interpretation', *Wiseman Review*, 238 (1964), 35-54. For further details about Newman's nearly fatal visit to Sicily, see Vincent Ferrer Blehl, *Pilgrim Journey: John Henry Newman 1801-1845* (London: Burns and Oates, 2001), 123-133; Sheridan Gilley, *Newman and His Age* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 100-108; Ian T. Ker, *John Henry Newman* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 70-80; Meriol Trevor, *Newman: The Pillar and the Cloud* (London: Macmillan), 122-143.

² See Gilley, *Newman and His Age*, 106.

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characteristics of such a journey can be seen in Newman's critical experience in Sicily.³

Six Characteristics

In their middle years many people find themselves experiencing what we can call a *second journey*. Human life can be seen as consisting of several journeys, but we need to distinguish one kind of journey from another. A *second journey* is a one that can happen in one's thirties, forties or fifties; it received its classic description from Dante in the opening words of *The Divine Comedy*: 'In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, where the straight way ahead was lost'.

The expression *second journey* obviously presupposes a first journey: the whole movement from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. The first journey involves passing through the challenges and crises of two decades to find a measure of emotional stability and at least some provisional identity. In the light of the values we have been taught and the education we have received, we give ourselves to some meaningful existence, make some more or less firm commitments, and settle down with at least some provisional identity in society. Then, in their middle years, many men and women find themselves launched, often quite suddenly, on a second journey that shows at least six recurrent characteristics.

(1) Second journeys often begin unexpectedly. Those who find themselves caught up in such mid-life journeys do not voluntarily enter upon them; second journeys seemingly begin without the travellers deciding to take the first steps. Often the catalyst of a second journey is something negative: an accident, a serious illness, the death or infidelity of a spouse, or some other harsh and sudden blow that can plunge someone into an unforeseen crisis and leave them at the start of a fresh pilgrimage. Their world comes apart and they find themselves on a strange road. In the case of Dante the catalyst was exile. In his late thirties he was forced to leave his beloved Florence, and he began to write about a journey through hell and purgatory to heaven. He had not chosen his 'dark wood'; he found himself there, with 'the straight way ahead' seemingly lost.

³ For full details, examples and sources see my *The Second Journey* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1995).

(2) Wherever we are going, a powerful crisis of feelings always seems to blaze up as one is swept into a second journey. Emotions that may have been suppressed for years erupt from the depths; they often concern relationships with people and institutions that are close at hand. The second journey of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe lasted two years (1786-1788) and is brilliantly described in his *Italian Journey*.⁴ This work, albeit discreetly, lets one glimpse the tumultuous feelings that initiated his abrupt departure from Weimar and accompanied his journey to Venice, Rome, Naples, Palermo and back to Rome for a long second visit.

(3) Characteristically, a second journey includes an external component, a literal journey that expresses the more significant inner journey. The outer journey may include a real *Odyssey* or *Aeneid* which lasts for many years and takes one around the world. Nevertheless, such lengthy travels as Odysseus and Aeneas undertook in the epic poems that bear their names are neither required nor sufficient. Men and women who wander abroad in their middle years may turn out to be relatively unchanged by their experiences; their wanderings need not become a genuine second journey. Conversely, the outer journey may be slight, just a few miles from one home to another. Of course, it is the inner component which brings about a genuine second journey: the external travelling has only a subordinate function. All the same, some shift from place to place appears to be a regular feature of authentic mid-life journeys.

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(4) Second journeys bring a search for new meaning, fresh values and different goals. The roles by which people have identified themselves no longer satisfy them. Old purposes fade; the values and goals which hitherto gave meaning to life lose their significance. In one way or another people on a second journey want 'more' out of life. They are overwhelmed by questions: 'What have I been doing? Has my life so far been productive or stagnant? Would it be worth doing it all over again? What is the "more" that I want?' A second journey typically marks the birth of new values, or the rebirth of old ones that have been forgotten, or perhaps never properly understood.

⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey*, translated by W. H. Auden and E. Mayer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).



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(5) A fifth characteristic of second journeys is their loneliness, the 'dark wood' of Dante. This loneliness should eventually turn into the aloneness of a quiet and integrated self-possession. But before that happens, those on a second journey repeatedly betray a deep awareness of travelling alone. Their loneliness accompanies a feeling of breaking new ground and of moving in a strange direction with no maps of the road ahead. A second journey may involve the sense of travelling without a guide and being, like Abraham and Sarah, called forth from an accepted place in society to undertake strange adventures.

In many cases the sense of loneliness arises in the context of a group of people or of society in general. The second journey often involves venturing beyond the bounds of consensus or becoming dissatisfied with the ideals of the community, and those who cease to conform to society's normal expectations will hardly find much support from others. Eventually a person who has passed through a mid-life journey may transform the consciousness of his or her community. The hero or heroine of a second journey may even resemble Aeneas, who fashioned a whole new community by leaving his home in Troy and creating the Roman people. However, much loneliness and even some deep suffering at the hands of others may intervene before the individual reshapes, in one way or another, his or her world.

(6) A sixth and last feature of second journeys concerns the journey's end. Ideally such journeys end quietly, with a new wisdom, and with a coming to oneself that releases great power. Second journeys typically begin dramatically: with a cannonball, for instance, sweeping over the ramparts of a castle and breaking the leg of an officer leading the resistance against a besieging force—an officer who was eventually to enter history as St Ignatius of Loyola. Mid-life journeys close so quietly that one cannot always be too positive as to when the journey's end has come. Ignatius' mid-life journey began in 1521 with the wound he received during the siege of Pamplona, and ended, one might argue, with his vision at La Storta when he limped into Rome in 1537.

Second journeys close with the arrival of the new wisdom of a true adult. It is the wisdom of one who has regained equilibrium and stability, and found fresh purposes and new dreams. It is the wisdom that gives some things up, lets some things die, accepts human limitations, and attains a final integrity by which to live. Such mature wisdom involves coming to oneself in a profound act of self-discovery. One has found a new centre, having built on one's past and integrated one's present experience with what has happened, achieving a sense of definitive selfhood for the future. Those who have found a new centre now have a message of confidence to deliver. They demonstrate the paradox of a movement towards themselves which has brought them back to others. These solitaries who have achieved peace can reach out to others and prove astonishingly productive for the world. Their second journeys end with new dreams in which fresh responsibilities begin. They live out what they have experienced for themselves for the benefit of other people.

To talk about wisdom, power and self-discovery in this context may be to over-idealize. Everything turns out well in stories. But for many travellers on a second journey, the sixth point may not be nearly as typical as the other five are. A genuine journey's end may never occur, or may fail to bring final resolution. One cannot ignore the ragged and unfinished quality of many, even many 'great', human lives. Nevertheless, the second journey does sometimes end, and does so with the discovery of a new wisdom and a new power.

This, then, is a vision of mid-life journeys that I find exemplified by many people, including many famous Christians, from St Paul to

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mother Teresa of Calcutta.⁵ Let us see how the six characteristics described above manifested themselves in the case of Newman and his visit to Sicily in the spring of 1833.

Newman's Second Journey

(1) A sudden illness proved decisive in causing, or at least shaping, Newman's mid-life journey. He was thirty-two years old when he collapsed with severe fever in Sicily, recovered, and returned to England to help initiate the Oxford Movement. This retrieval of Catholic Christianity was to have a profound spiritual impact on the Church of England and on other Christian bodies. The Mediterranean trip that Newman took in the winter of 1832 to 1833 was meant to be a long holiday with some friends in the classical centre of their world. But



J. H. Newman in 1845

it became for Newman a profound journey of self-discovery when he nearly died and felt that he had received 'life from the dead'. Obviously Newman did not choose to contract a bad case of typhoid fever. The catalyst of his second journey was thrust upon him; the 'dark wood' of his physical crisis was transformed into a moment of rich grace.

(2) The almost fatal fever forced on Newman a tumult of emotions: a sense of emptiness, a troubling anxiety, feelings of self-reproach over past failures, and a desire to accept the call to repentance. He felt attacked by evil, but also purified and saved from an obstinate presumptuousness that had weakened his obedience and faith. When he

⁵ For a fuller account, see O'Collins, *The Second Journey*.

had recovered from the fever he burst into tears as he was waiting in Palermo for a ship to take him to France. It is not surprising that Newman's experience of deep and challenging feelings prompted him into writing his most intensely personal poem, originally called 'The Pillar of the Cloud' but generally known by its opening words, 'Lead, Kindly Light'.

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on!
The night is dark, and I am far from home—
Lead Thou me on!
Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene—one step enough for me.

I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou
Shouldst lead me on.
I loved to choose and see my path; but now
Lead Thou me on!
I loved the garish day, and spite of fears,
Pride ruled my will: remember not past years.

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on
O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone;
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.⁶

(3) There was a strong link between Newman's interior, spiritual journey and his trip to the Mediterranean. After a first visit to Sicily with his friends, Newman went back there alone because he wanted to experience what it would be like to be a 'solitary and a wanderer'. Through his nearly fatal illness, the wandering tourist became a pilgrim, a mid-life traveller.

Among the books that Newman had brought with him for his Mediterranean journey were Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Like both Odysseus and Aeneas (*Odyssey*, book twelve; *Aeneid*, book six), Newman experienced a kind of descent into the underworld and came up again with a new and providential role to play. The travels of

⁶ The poem would be set to music by a great hymn writer, John Bacchus Dykes. Newman was to be irritated by an unauthorised fourth verse added later by an evangelical bishop, Edward Bickersteth. See Gilley, *Newman and His Age*, 107.

Odysseus and Aeneas took years, while Newman's whole trip to the Mediterranean lasted only eight months. But all three can be seen as mid-life journeys, in which a more important interior journey accompanied the physical movement through space. Newman spontaneously reached for the language of travelling in the poem he wrote on the way home: 'Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, Lead Thou me on!'

(4) The nearly fatal fever burned away, so to speak, something of Newman's past and brought fresh objectives and a development in his religious faith. He experienced himself in a changed way, as enjoying life after an experience of death. New ideals and hopes surfaced when he headed home, trusting that 'God has still work for me to do'.

(5) As with so many mid-life travellers, Newman found himself faced with the challenges of solitude. Even though he had the company of a faithful Neapolitan servant, Gennaro, Newman was far from his friends and from his home in Oxford—by himself for the first time in a foreign country. Newman had to face God and himself in that loneliness—a kind of anticipation of the isolation that he was going to encounter from Anglican friends and others in England. Newman had already failed to live up to others people's expectations of a brilliant young scholar and preacher; in coming years he would do so even more, and many would fail to appreciate the pilgrimage on which God was leading him. His experience of loneliness in Sicily prepared him for the suffering that was to come.

(6) It is uncertain when Newman's second journey could be said to have come to an end. Did it end two months after his illness, when he arrived back in England—or twelve years later when he was received into the Catholic Church? In either case, the second journey associated with his nearly fatal illness conforms to the sixth and final characteristic of such journeys. Newman returned to Oxford showing a new wisdom and strength, and inspired by the conviction that he had a new work to do for God. Very quickly, with the help of others, he launched the Oxford Movement and, through his writing and preaching, set with extraordinary energy about the task of reforming Christian life in England and beyond. He had experienced a profound inner change, and he gave himself prodigally and with renewed strength to sharing with others what he had personally come to know. Newman's mid-life journey issued in a life given over to pleading the reasonableness of orthodox faith and to challenging fashionable attempts to dilute basic

Christian doctrines. His intellectual and religious legacy remains immense, above all his sense that personal prayer and experience can and should hold together the demands of both traditional faith and rigorous reason.

This, then, is one possible reading of Newman's brush with death in Sicily. Beyond question it is not the only way of interpreting what happened to him in the spring of 1833. Yet the characteristics of a second journey seem to be clearly visible in his case, and suggest a way of seeing how the grace of God built on nature—or, more precisely, how the grace which Newman was to bring to others in his middle and later years came through a human experience that has shaped the life of many other great men and women: the second or mid-life journey.

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