

Moment of Truth: the Newman reference

"In demonstrating the power of the apparatus constituted by the mytheme in analysing mythogenic transformations, which at this stage seem to become established [s'intituer] in a synchrony simplified by their reversibility, Lévi-Strauss does not presume to deliver up to us the nature of the myth-maker [le mythant]. He simply knows here that his informer, while able to write the raw and the cooked - though lacking the genius whose mark has been left there - cannot do it, however, without checking at the cloakroom, i.e. at the Museum of Man, a certain number of operative instruments, otherwise known as rituals, which consecrate his subject existence as myth making; in checking them, what in another grammar would be called his assent is rejected from the field of structure. (C.f. John Henry Newman's Grammar of Assent (published in 1870), somewhat powerful, albeit written for execrable purposes - I will perhaps be led to mention it again).¹⁶" p11 Science and Truth

Introduction

In Seminar XI, Lacan asks what are the fundamentals of psychoanalysis through asking what grounds it as praxis. In searching for an answer to this question, he introduces two terms between which to hold the question: the terms of *science* and *religion*.

In approaching these terms, Lacan considers the nature of *research*. While dissociating psychoanalysis from the form of research in which the phrase '*you would*

not seek me if you had not already found me' is used, he nevertheless comments on the *hermeneutic demand* which emerges "as it were, beneath the feet of whoever finds"¹. The way of developing signification offered by hermeneutics "is confused with what analysts call *interpretation*. Interpretation is not hermeneutics, although hermeneutics makes ready use of interpretation"². The relation to religion is through understanding the nature of this asymmetry. This is one thing that the Newman reference casts light on.

The relationship to science lies through what specifies science: "having an object". If science is specified by an object of experiment, what is the object of psychoanalysis? The subject is at "the nexus [*noeud*] of difference": "a split between a notion of reality that includes psychic reality, and another that makes reality the correlate of the perception-consciousness system". The reality principle is "the strain of experience sanctioned by the subject of science", so that "the subject upon which we operate in psychoanalysis can only be the subject of science".³ But if the subject of science is the necessary condition for the practice of psychoanalysis, what is the sufficient condition? What is constitutive of the object of psychoanalysis?

The difference to science emerges through the difference between the enunciated and the enunciation:

¹ p7, Seminar XI

² p8, Seminar XI

³ pp 5-7, Science and Truth

the impact of the subject who speaks. Gödel's incompleteness theorem shows the impossibility of any theory saying everything. This remainder speaks the impossibility of the suturing of the subject of science, and is taken by Lacan as the point of difference: whereas science is defined by "the deadlocked endeavour to suture the subject", psychoanalysis is defined by the opposite: the internal exclusion - the extimacy - of the subject from its object.⁴

It is this internal exclusion which leads to a dialectic which the reality and pleasure principles are doomed never to resolve, which the religious ideal offers to religate⁵, and which science seeks to suture. In the pursuit of his purposes, the other thing that Newman casts light on are the limitations of this suturing strategy.

⁴ pp9-10, Science and Truth

⁵ The position of the saint, and of the *via negativa* in religion indicates that this is not the whole truth. "A saint's business, to put it clearly, is not *charité* [charity]. Rather, he acts as *déchet* [left-over]; his business being *décharité*. So as to embody what the structure entails, namely allowing the subject, the subject of the unconscious, to take him as the cause of the subject's own desire. In fact it is through the abjection [*destitué*] of this cause that the subject in question has a chance to be aware of his position, at least within the structure.... " Television p15.

Newman and the legacy of Scepticism⁶

John Henry Newman (1801-1890) ultimately became a cardinal of the holy Roman Church, although he spent nineteen years of his life as an Anglican clergyman. In 1830, he was turned out of the secretaryship of the Church Missionary Society at Oxford because of a pamphlet he had written expressing his dissatisfaction with its constitution. He thought that there was no principle recognised by it on which churchmen could take their stand. He found that "Calvinism was not a key to the phenomena of human nature, as they occur in the world." In 1833 he preached a sermon on national apostasy which he considered the founding moment of the Oxford movement, which was to continue his work. Created cardinal in 1879, his testimony of himself at that time was that:"he had resisted, to the best of his power, the spirit of liberalism", meaning "the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another".

⁶ I am indebted in this section to *Religious Thought in the Reformation* by Bernard M.G. Reardon (Longman 1981) and *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. by Richard H. Popkin University of California Press 1979.

The parting of the ways

A major consequence of the Protestant Reformation, which in the sixteenth century tore western Christendom apart, was that the old church of papal obedience, besides losing vast territories north of the Alps, itself underwent profound internal changes, partly in the reform of administrative abuses long recognised and widely deplored, but partly also, and more importantly, through a spiritual and moral revival.

The type of spirituality which resulted, and which the Jesuits best represented, was characterised as 'activism in grace': divine grace as unconditionally necessary for the soul's health, but which was expressed through a subdued and disciplined will, in works of charity and social service.⁷ Moral effort, fortified by a spiritual *ascesis*, was the keynote, while the source of grace itself was judged to lie less in inward conviction of salvation than in the sacraments, notably the eucharist and penance more frequently and consistently used, and in assiduous prayer.⁸

⁷ I took spiritual direction as a form of practice which showed something of the differences constitutive of psychoanalytic practice in *What's the good of psychoanalysis: Zizek and the vanishing mediatrix*. CFAR paper July 1992.

⁸ Lacan speaks of this *ascesis* in relation to psychoanalysis itself in *Function and field of speech and language* (Ecrits p105): "Of all the undertakings that have been proposed in this century, that of the psychoanalyst is perhaps the loftiest, because the undertaking of the psychoanalyst acts in our time as a mediator between the man of care and the subject of

This direction was crystallised in the rulings of the Council of Trent, in which the Roman sacramental-sacerdotalist conception of the church was wholly rejected by the Protestants, while the principles of justification by faith alone and the priesthood of all believers found no acceptance with the Roman Catholics.

It was this direction that Newman's Grammar of Assent sought to articulate in relation to the Anglican tradition. It argued for the particular importance of ritual in the religious process, but, in doing so, as Lacan points out, rejected assent itself from the field of structure. This parallels the Lévi-Straussian graph which extracted the subject from the structures of kinship.

But before examining the Grammar more closely, it is instructive to take a closer look at the relation of Newman's "execrable purposes" to the legacy of scepticism.

The legacy of Scepticism

One of the ways in which the sceptical views of antiquity entered later Renaissance thought was through a central quarrel of the Reformation, the dispute over the proper standard of religious knowledge. The problem of finding a criterion of truth, first raised in theological

absolute knowledge. This is therefore why it requires a long subjective *ascesis*, and one which can never be interrupted, since the end of the training analysis itself is not separable from the engagement of the subject in its practice.

disputes, became raised with regard to natural knowledge, leading to the *crise pyrrhonienne* of the early seventeenth century.

Luther set forth a new criterion of religious knowledge, that what conscience is compelled to believe on reading Scripture is true. To Catholics, asserting that a proposition stated a religious truth meant that it was authorised by Church tradition, by the Pope, and by councils.

In the battle to establish which criterion of faith was true, a sceptical attitude arose among certain thinkers, primarily as a defence of Catholicism. The defence that was to dominate the French Counter-Reformation was offered by Erasmus. Luther was positive that there was a body of religious truths to be known, that these truths were of crucial importance to men, and that the rule of faith - what conscience was compelled to believe from the reading of Scripture - would show us these truths.

For Erasmus, what was important was a simple, basic, Christian piety, a Christian spirit. The rest, the superstructure of the essential belief, was too complex for a man to judge. Hence it was easier to rest in a sceptical attitude, and accept the age-old wisdom of the Church on these matters, than to try to understand and judge for one's self. We find this direction echoed clearly in Newman's *Grammar of Assent*. Newman argued that it was not so much that the doctrine of the Trinity was too complex, so much as that its truth was unknowable to one's self in any direct sense. It is the nature of this 'unknowability' which is of interest.

Whereas Newman advocated that this unknowability could be religated through ritual - a hermeneutic solution, Lacan argues that we can learn from the Fathers about the structure of the subject's relationship to truth as cause. "If there is fantasy therein, it is in the most rigorous sense of the institution of a reality which covers over the truth. The fact that Christian truth had to formulate the untenable notion of a Three in One God does not strike me as inaccessible to scientific investigation...." For Lacan, the Christian 'truth' is taken as an interpretation.

Through a topologising of the Augustinian *De Trinitate*, Lacan argues that the Freudian "*Wo es war, soll Ich werden*" takes us not to assume our own causality, but to a Spinozian self-cause which can take on the name of God, but still is "some-Thing Else" [Autre Chose].⁹ For Spinoza, Erasmus's solution led to a cop-out which encouraged ignoramuses¹⁰. Spinoza's solution was that the very act of understanding as such made one aware that he knew and knew that he knew. Though the sceptic claimed that such a person could be mistaken, Spinoza insisted that this would be impossible if the person had a clear and certain idea. It would be its own

⁹ pp 21 and 13, *Science and Truth*.

¹⁰ Ecumenicalism appears as an organising principle for this position, in which everyone is left to find their own resolution to their own private doubts. For Lacan, the implications of this are clear: "Ecumenicalism only seems to have a chance if it is grounded in an appeal to the feeble-minded" p22 *Science and Truth*

criterion. Here is the precursor to Lacan's "anticipation of a certitude" in the subjective moment of conclusion, rooted in an impossibility.

So Newman made a botch of the legacy which passed on through Spinoza and Lacan by giving hermeneutic status to an interpretation. Can we locate the basis of this in Newman's purposes?

***Newman's execrable purposes*¹¹**

The Anglo-Catholic successors of Newman, members of the Oxford Movement, collected and published William Laud's works. William Laud was in power for the eleven years of the personal rule of Charles I, and was the last Archbishop of Canterbury to hold high political office (1629-1640). Laud led an attempt to reassert, as orthodoxy, the original 'Erasmian' movement.

Erasmus had met Thomas More in 1499 - Thomas More was satirised by Erasmus in his 'Praise of Folly'. More had no sympathy with Luther's opinions, and supported Henry VIII's position by later attacking all the Saxon reformer's main positions. This original Erasmian impulse had been the intellectual inspiration of the English Reformation, at least as it was seen by the educated elite.

Neither Luther nor Calvin had intended to split the Church: they had sought to reform it, and to reform it whole. After 1603, the episcopal Church of England was seen by moderate Protestants and Catholics as the truest realisation of the old Erasmian ideal which had foundered in the destructive wars of religion.

Laud, from his position as Archbishop, set about a long-deferred programme of restoration which implied a frontal challenge to some of the most powerful interests in the country: landlords who would resent the attack on their lay-patronage, common lawyers whose jurisdiction would be threatened, corporations denied their right of election, and vocal Puritan clergy whose whole programme would be put in jeopardy.

Laud set about returning beauty and dignity to Church services so as to enhance authority, order and hierarchy. Candles, candlesticks, copes, surplices, organ music and stained glass windows were external symbols which served as the means to encourage the devotion of ordinary men, while the appeal to the elite came from claiming the Church's legitimate descent from the apostolic Church, the Church of the Greek Fathers.

Laud believed that individualism had run riot, encouraged and sanctified by radical doctrines which made every man his own priest, responsible only to his own conscience. Hence arose heresy, which was individualism in religion. Hence also economic individualism, the disruption of society and its traditional communities by private greed. Laud, with the support of the King, would return patrimony to the Church,

¹¹ I am indebted in this section to *From Counter-Reformation to Glorious Revolution* by Hugh Trevor-Roper (Pimlico 1992), *Catholics Anglicans and Puritans* by Hugh Trevor-Roper (Secker & Warburg 1987), *Newman: The Contemplation of Mind* by Thomas Vargish and *Newman and the Common Tradition* by John Coulson (Oxford Clarendon 1970).

recovering alienated patronage and the tithes that went with it, thus enabling these problems to be overcome by re-establishing a proper relation to the religious.

It was this direction that Newman stood for, although he saw the failure of the Oxford Movement in its pact with the State.¹² For Newman, what verified was Christ (not the Church as a purely social presence); and Christ 'vivified' the Church to the extent that it lived sacramentally.

In 1841, Newman "had occasion to write against a dangerous doctrine maintained by two very eminent men of that day, Lord Brougham and Sir Robert Peel. That doctrine was to the effect that the claims of religion could be secured and sustained in the mass of men, and in particular in the lower classes of society, by acquaintance with literature and physical science, and

¹² In this critique of the social form of the Church, Lacan follows Newman, although it leads Lacan to very different conclusions: "As for religion, it should rather serve us as a model not to be followed, instituting as it does a social hierarchy wherein the tradition of a certain relation to truth as cause is preserved. Simulation of the Catholic Church, reproduced whenever its relation to truth as cause spills over into the social realm, is particularly grotesque in a certain International Psycho-analytical, owing to the condition it imposes upon communication". p24 *Science and Truth*. In *Television*, Lacan seems to refer to this tendency as PIPAAD - a professional insurance plan against analytic discourse (p15) which could perhaps be called the discourse of the movement, or of the Establishment as Bion referred to it in writing about the disruptive effects of the mystic in *Attention and Interpretation*.

through the instrumentality of Mechanics' Institutes and Reading Rooms, to the serious disparagement, as it seemed to me, of direct Christian instruction."

"Science gives us the grounds or premises from which religious truths are to be inferred; but it does not set about inferring them, much less does it reach the inference - that is not its province. It brings before us phenomena, and it leaves us, if we will, to call them works of design, wisdom, or benevolence; and further still, if we will, to proceed to confess an Intelligent Creator."¹³

What Newman most feared in the new society he saw to be inevitable, was not the defeat of religion in open dialogue, but the closing up of the dialogue in the supposed interests of social and intellectual progress. The *Grammar of Assent* was written to prevent this 'closing up'. Here was a critique of the suturing of the subject of science presenting religion as acting against this, not as a social institution, but as a sacramental practice.

What were Newman's execrable purposes? Lacan saw in Newman's purposes the same PIPAAD tendencies which had led to his own excommunication, and which he saw as a hermeneutics leading inevitably to its own Establishment.

¹³ *The Grammar of Assent* by John Henry Cardinal Newman. Longmans Green & Co 1895. pp 91-92

The Grammar of Assent

In the Grammar, Newman's chief concern was to correct Locke's assumption that the mind could accord the precise degree of assent warranted by the evidence for each inference. Newman argued that mental acts of whatever kind presupposed their objects, so that his criticism of Protestant worship was "its subjectivity, the perpetual scrutiny of feelings, its emphasis on our faith, not on the Object of faith. In contrast, the strength of Roman Catholic worship was its objectivity, its steady contemplation of God as revealed in the Incarnation."¹⁴

Newman argued that "an act of inference includes in its object the dependence of its thesis upon its premises, that is, upon a relation, which is an abstraction; but an act of assent rests wholly on the thesis as its object, and the reality of the thesis is almost a condition of its unconditionality. Thus, while apprehension strengthens assent, inference often weakens the apprehension."¹⁵

Newman went on to argue that there was a difference between *real apprehension* based on the experience of the concrete (correspondence truth), and *notional apprehension* based on things as they stood in relation to each other (coherence truth). The difference lay in the relation to objects, with the former being a taking hold of objects from 'within', and the latter from the outside.

¹⁴ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England, Vol IV: From Newman to Martineau*. (Princeton, 1962) pp35-36.

¹⁵ pp40-41 The Grammar of Assent

But Newman had a problem, because, while he held that the doctrine of the Being and Attributes of God were accessible to real apprehension, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was only accessible to notional apprehension. A real assent is not possible because, "though we can image the separate propositions, we cannot image them altogether. We cannot, because the mystery transcends all our experience; we have no experiences in our memory which we can put together, compare, contrast, unite, and thereby transmute into an image of the Ineffable Verity."¹⁶

Newman's way out was the Illative Sense. He observed that science reached truth in the abstract and only achieved probability in the concrete. But 'what we aim at is truth in the concrete'. In Newman's epistemology, the entire complex of faculties by which we were able to judge truth in the concrete operated collectively as the Illative Sense.

Illative Sense

"Certitude is a mental state: certainty is a quality of propositions. Certitude is not a passive impression made upon the mind from without, by argumentative compulsion, but in all concrete questions it is an active recognition of propositions as true..... the sole and final judgement on the validity of an inference in concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I

¹⁶ pp124-130 The Grammar of Assent

have called the Illative Sense."¹⁷ The Illative Sense, then, was a private means to truth.

Newman distinguished this Illative Sense from judgement, the faculty which guided the mind in matters of conduct. "The philosopher refers us to no code of laws for answers to what it is to be virtuous, how we are to gain the just idea and standard of virtue, how we are to approximate in practice to our own standard. Because no science of life, applicable to the case of an individual, has been or can be written."¹⁸

So Illative Sense was the individual's response to undecideability, the source of particular truth. Newman's critique of the Protestant position was therefore that the Rule of Faith led to a demand to resolve any controversy on a point of faith by reference to the Scriptures. "It matters not whether or not they only happened to come right on what, in a logical point of view, are faulty premises.... the popular feeling of the sixteenth century saw the Bible to be the Word of God, so as nothing else is His Word, by the power of a strong sense, by a sort of moral instinct, or by a happy augury. That is, the act of the Illative Sense acting on mistaken elements of thought."¹⁹

¹⁷ p345 The Grammar of Assent.
¹⁸ p354 The Grammar of Assent
¹⁹ pp380-381 The Grammar of Assent

Sacramental practice

Natural religion depended on real assent, while revealed religion rested on notional assent. "Natural religion is based upon the sense of sin; it recognises the disease, but it cannot find, it does not look out for the remedy. That remedy, both for guilt and for moral impotence, is found in the central doctrine of Revelation, the Mediation of Christ."²⁰ This mediation, through the sacramental practice which was the Church, was the way to notional assent to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. In these terms, the way to the perfection of the Illative Sense was therefore through the sacramental practices of the Church.²¹

²⁰ p487 The Grammar of Assent
²¹ J.L. Austin was White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford University, and it is tempting to speculate that his notion of "illocutionary force" was an objectification of Newman's Illative Sense. In *How to do things with words* (OUP 1962), Austin distinguishes between "a locutionary act, which is roughly equivalent to uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference, which again is roughly equivalent to 'meaning' in the traditional sense; and *illocutionary acts* such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking etc, i.e. utterances which have a certain (conventional) force." Perhaps in order to include the effects of the Other as other than an Illative Sense characteristic of the nature of human being, Austin included a third "*perlocutionary act*: what we bring about or achieve *by* saying something, such as convincing, persuading, deterring, and even, say, surprising or misleading."

At the heart of Newman's Grammar, therefore, lay a strategy for dealing with an impossibility - the impossibility of a real assent to the doctrine of the Trinity. This strategy was a form of sacramental practice built around an Object of faith.

Moment of truth

Contrast Newman's impossibility with Luther's legacy, in which "what lies at the heart of man's destiny is the *Ding*, the *causa*. For Luther, God's eternal hatred of men is correlative of the relationship that exists between a certain influence of the law as such and a certain conception of *das Ding* as the fundamental problem and, in a word, as the problem of evil."²²

Luther gave us the beyond of undecideability, that in which truth is grounded through speech; and Newman gave us the structure of the subject's relationship to truth as cause, if we are to extract something of it through a topologising of the Augustinian *De Trinitate*.

For Lacan, the undecideability rests on a division of the subject which is the subject of science. This subject is a knot which he formulates as Borromean.

Science offers us a suturing of this subject, while religion offers us its religation.

Lacan offers us another way: the phallus, as nothing but the site of the lack [*point de manque*] it indicates in the subject.²³

He gives it to us in a dual formulation which reflects the dual impossibilities to which the Protestant and Catholic traditions are a response: "Let us, on the one hand, extract the (no) [*pas-de*] from the (no-penis) [*pas-de-pénis*], to be bracketed out; and transfer it to the no-knowledge [*pas-de-savoir*] that is the hesitation step/no-hesitation [*pas-hésitation*] of neurosis. Let us, on the other hand, recognise the subject's efficacy in the *gnomon* he erects, a *gnomon* that constantly indicates the site of truth [*point de vérité*] to him."²⁴

²² p97 The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar VII of Jacques Lacan 1959-1960. Tavistock 1992.

²³ Lacan considers four modes of "the cause's refraction" which can be related to Aristotle's four causes and which lay the foundations for the four discourses: magic, religion, science and psychoanalysis. Each of these forms of discourse are constituted by their own relations to truth as cause. pp 23-24 Science and Truth.

²⁴ pp24-25 Science and Truth.