

Newman by Himself; New Man, by O'Faolain

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Abstract: John Henry Newman's Apologia Pro Vita Sua (1865) shows the divided self and the search for a spiritual identity. Sean O'Faolain's biography Newman's Way (1952) presents a new man in a larger social context. Self portrait and portrait prove quite different and the examination of the two texts tells much about the frontiers between autobiography and biography.

A man, I believe, meets with many
difficulties in playing even his own character.

Daniel O'Connell

We are here in the presence of a man
whose mind was a perfect onion of worlds
within worlds.

Sean O'Faolain on Daniel O'Connell

As a "matter of history" John Henry Newman (1801-1890) was born in London, studied at Trinity College, Oxford, where he was ordained in the Anglican ministry. He became the leader of the Tractarian Movement with his Tracts for the Times.

By 1842, however, his doubts on what had been his religious certainties grew stronger. He withdrew from the Anglican Church, leading a life of austerity, reflexion and prayer. In 1845 he was received into the Roman Catholic Church and ordained priest in Rome. As Cardinal Newman he influenced hundreds of young clergymen in England. Among his writings, *Grammar of Assent* (1870), his most philosophical work, *An Idea of a University*, and his autobiography *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1869) were read in Europe and in America.

A brief survey of the most significant autobiographical documents in different literatures will indicate attempts at self-definition, self-celebration (*Vive Moi!*, by O'Faolain is an example), self-justification, self-discovery, and so on. Besides this primary concern, and closely linked with it, an autobiography may mirror a cultural moment which moulds the self, or against which it resists; or it may reflect the relationship of the self with the Other. For the last two centuries the notion of self has become central, not only in the autobiographical genre, but in every literary manifestation.

Fiction, again and again, examines the formation of the self, its divisions or multi-

ple aspects, discussing ideas of alienation and reaching even extremes of pathological condition, with or without, the device of fantasy. A recurrence of doubts, shadows, twins, apparitions, change of gender, prove how the fragmentation of the self has become an important motif in the literature of the period (And afterwards: James Joyce, in his autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* illustrate the tendency in the 20th century).

A concern with the self can also be noticed in painting with the successful development of the portrait, a record of certain aspects of a particular human being as seen by another. The sitter may be flattered, deified or satirized by the painter.

The self portrait, believed to be invented when mirrors were invented, is a portrait of a person by herself, mainly concentrating on face, eyes (mirrors of the soul) and hands. If we look at the self-portraits, Picasso's eyes seem to be directed towards an internal search, and Tarsila's impassible face, heavily made-up, seems to be "floating", bodiless; it is a veil or a mask with enigmatic eyes, which, instead of revealing, hide what lies beneath them. The other self-portraits belong to different periods and different schools. Environment is generally not present; in the one exception, Rubens' self-portrait with Isabel Brant, the self is seen in relation with the Other; their attitudes (the way they hold hands), jewels and clothes they wear allow us a glimpse of their world.

As to scenes with many people as Renoir's *Le Moulin de la Galette*, they would be closer to what a novel does, depicting a larger canvas.

The complexity of the modern autobiography can be compared to the "triple self-portrait" (1960) by Rockwell, seen and discussed in Lejeune's *Moi Aussi* (p.77): an artist paints his image reflected in a mirror and also looks at reproductions of famous self-portraits (Durer, Rembrandt, Picasso, Van Gogh) pinned on the canvas: tradition, the intertext. In the process of gazing from the mirror to the unfinished canvas, "unreadings" occur: the painted image is without glasses, the pipe is in a different position and so on.

And what about the painter? Lejeune explains (1986: p.77):

Le peintre et son image dans le miroir se correspondent parfaitement: même taille (le peintre de dos en entier, l'image de face et seulement en plan américain) mêmes lunettes (qui nous cachent le regard). L'autoportrait sur la toile est, lui, beaucoup plus grand que "nature", sans lunettes, agréablement stylisé. La pipe qu'il fume est horizontale, et non pas tombante comme dans la "réalité". En même temps qu'il oppose la "réalité" (fictive) à la fiction, le *Triple Autoportrait* articule les trois "degrés" possibles de l'autoportrait.

If Lejeune stresses the idea of the triple degree (quadruple), since there was a real painter, Rockwell, who produced this scene, I think that in this example the most significant aspects are the deviations throughout the process. They constitute an important issue for both the autobiography and the biography because of the gaze, the mirror and the lenses. Does the mirror show an ameliorated version to the eyes which stare at it? A proof that this may be the case is that we generally try to look our best in the mirror, and at times, unaware of a mirror, we are shocked at our own image, taking some time to recognize it.

Those reflections lead us to accept the fact that "truth" is difficult to achieve in documents of the self, since self-deception is one of the characteristics of the writer of an autobiography or of the painter of a self-portrait. As André Maurois has remarked (MCMXXVIII: p 79):

Certains journaux sont destinés à la postérité; l'auteur y adopte une attitude et se représente avec complaisance l'effet que fera cette attitude sur le lecteur. Même quand le journal est authentiquement destiné à ne pas être lu, il est très fréquent que l'écrivain pose devant lui-même. . . Tout mémorialiste est un auteur, qu'il le veuille ou non; le moi qu'il a fixé sur le papier se détache de lui; il le contemple à la distance.

. . So, it seems, "truth" is problematic in the biography as well.

Although the biographer likes to believe that he is like a historian, basing the study of a life on facts, there are aspects of selection, omissions, emphasis, treatment, attitude, the period in which he writes, which "colour" his narrative. Citing again André Maurois (MCMXXVIII: p.22).

Il serait absurde d'imaginer le biographe moderne comme un être parfaitement impartial.

Back to Newman. The bare facts about him, related in the beginning show a self torn between two approaches to religion, conflict which is central to his *Apologia*, whose subtitle, "Being a History of His Religious Opinions" stress both the focus of interest in this search of the self and an unusual use of *he*, instead of *I*, normally the point of view adopted in an autobiography. Nevertheless, a quick glance through the table of contents reveals a shift in point of view. So we have, "History of My Religious Opinions, Position of My Mind Since 1845, etc". This is a history of his soul and intellect, a spiritual autobiography in the tradition of *Grace Abounding* by John Bunyan, the description of a split self between two opposing forces. In being restricted to the religious battle it omits other important aspects of the multiple self mainly due to the belief in the wholeness of being which can be reached with the help of Divine Being. So Newman thinks of his autobiography as a duty, a contribution he owes to posterity (1947: 1):

It may easily be conceived how great a trial it is to me to write the following history of myself; but I must not shrink from the task. The words "Secretum meum mihi" keep ringing in my ears; but as men draw towards the end, they care less for disclosure.

This is not generally the case with most autobiographies since the writers, as they get older, do want to disclose their secrets, not to keep them for themselves.

Far from being a history of himself, *Apologia* is just a history of a spiritual struggle, leaving all other aspects of human life untouched. We read in the introduction (1947: XI):

Though Newman's *Apologia* has been acclaimed as one of the masterpieces of English autobiography, many readers are nonplused or disappointed on first opening its pages. The reason is not hard to ascertain. Newman's book, like many great masterpieces, is difficult reading.

Besides being difficult reading, what makes *Apologia* less significant in the twentieth century are Newman's statements that from the time he became a Catholic he has had no anxiety of heart whatever, he has been in perfect peace and contentment, he never has had

one doubt. The modern reader loses interest in this self which is not multiple, fragmented, and therefore in his certainties, offers no challenge.

Look at the picture O'Faolain chose from his book's cover. What is there behind this young face? By concentrating on a picture of his mind at work Newman gives us only a partial view of his self (of his self-portrait). One would wish to know more. An attempt to define this New Man, quite different from the one in the *Apologia* is O'Faolain's *Newman's Way* (1952), a biography among others he wrote. His four historical biographies, *Constance Markiewicz* (1934), *King of the Beggars* (1938), *De Valera* (1939), *The Great O'Neill* (1942) are complemented by *The Irish* (1947) in his endeavour to understand and describe the Irish national character. In the words of Maurice Harmon (Sean O'Faolain, 1984: p.3):



This method of concentrating on a particular person as a way of illuminating a time of history is an attempt at understanding how a great figure emerges from his background and calculating to what degree his is the personification of the people's instincts or explicit needs, and at determining the extent and nature of the heritage he created for subsequent Irishmen.

Before discussing *Newman's Way*, which does not fall into the pattern of his historical biographies, let us mention the development of O'Faolain's ideas on biography with the help of *King of the Beggars*, his most successful study of a life. The inclusion of acknowledgements and debts to friends, scholars, the National Gallery of Ireland, and biographers of O'Connell; tables of contents and illustrations; a historical note and an index signal to the author's wish to establish links with history, depending heavily on written record and sometimes on oral tradition in his search of facts which will, hopefully, reveal the "truth". In his *The Great O'Neill*, O'Faolain's concern with the historical documents could almost be called obsessive and excessive. However, biography and history have differences of approach. According to Sir Sidney Lee (1911: p.28):

The historian looks at mankind through a field-glass. The biographer puts individual men under a magnifying glass.

In *King of the Beggars* O'Faolain invokes the assistance of innumerable sources: the first and most important of them are O'Connell's *Diary*, his collected letters and speeches.

If the documents left by O'Connell are a rich source in O'Faolain's attempt at achieving the "truth", the memoirs, letters, travel books, histories, biographies, drawings, pamphlets, and articles in the newspapers, by his contemporaries, may contribute to enhance the picture of Ireland, its people and the rôle O'Connell played in its history.

What about tradition and folk memory? Can history rely on them? O'Faolain's answer is *no*, because they are "filtered" by partisans on both sides.

This word could well be applied to the biographer because all the information received will be filtered through his own mind, which belongs to a different period and environment.

So many sources to consult: the difficulty is to select and interpret. One can sense much doubt in O'Faolain's belief in the documents' power to reveal facts. Some, it is true, he says, are "a matter of history", while others, like some biographies, read already like legend.

Besides portraying the national character in *King of the Beggars*, O'Faolain's main interest lies in O'Connell's complex self, in his incoherence and ambiguity, in his religious and political beliefs, and his relationships with family, friends and enemies, he being "as open as a shellfish".

O'Faolain reminds us that in one of his letters, O'Connell had written that a "man meets with many difficulties in playing even his own character" (1970: p.67) showing his awareness of the different rôles or masks expected of him. The biographer will be concerned with this multiple self, and his difficulties will also be many "in the presence of a man whose mind was a perfect onion of worlds within worlds" (O'Faolain, 1970: p.204). The quotations above, part of which I have chosen for epigraphs of this paper, describe the problems the writer of his autobiography and the biographer have to face.

It is, then, on this labyrinthine personality, a Chameleon or Sphinx that the biographer will focus. From different sources and angles, O'Faolain will expose, but not decipher, this "tortuous mind". For so complicated a man, he says, "we can look at him from the outside, state the problem, and utter an opinion and not a shred more" (1970: p.73). In his attempts to penetrate the enigma, the biographer asks and answers: "what position have we arrived at? Probably as many positions as there are types of readers" (1970: p.86) giving his biography, not a kind of definitive interpretation of his hero, but an open ending, typical of modern fiction.

Is it possible, after all, to get inside the "minds and hearts of these people" through imagination? Is the biographer tied up, and the novelist free, as Virginia Woolf stated?

One should remember that when *King of the Beggars* was written, O'Faolain had already published *Midsummer Night Madness*, (1932) *A Nest of Simple Folk* (1934), *Bird Alone* (1936) and *A Purse of Coppers* (1937); in all those, the complexity of the human heart and mind was one of the main themes, and the building of characters showed his skill and creative power as a short-story writer, mainly.

If O'Connell "had all the joy of the creative artist in his life and work" and "had moulded an Irish Atlas carrying a world in its back" (O'Faolain, 1970: p.232), the biographer will mould his character from infancy to the grave, and after, nor stopping in the years of glory, in order to show how Time (a favourite theme!), old age and illness destroyed the "Old Giant", the homeless Lear, the Minotaur in his labyrinth, a Lion in his cage, his claws cut, the Irish Atlas whose "living muscles [had] held the strain and cracked beneath it" (O'Faolain, 1970: p.232).

Not even Hercules can murder Time, and not even
an O'Connell can evade or circumvent it. . .

(O'Faolain, 1970: p.266)

While the letters and speeches are used as documents to reveal facts, they are also

used as literary devices “disclosing unconsciously” the personality who wrote them.

King of the Beggars is a biography where art has seeped gradually. Although based on facts selected and coloured by his own mind and time, O’Faolain by asking himself how intimately can we know the other’s self (and what a self!) drifted towards literature. His treatment is realistic, avoiding what Stevenson expected of his biographer, “to blush and to draw the veil”. However, his realism, as in his fiction, is mixed with compassion for human frailty, and he also gives his hero the benefit of doubt.

Having briefly discussed O’Faolain’s blurring of the frontier between history and fiction, let us now turn to the last biography he wrote, the one about Newman. It has very little to do with the Irish national mind as in the historical biographies. The aim, not an analogy between a person and a nation, is the individual struggles that may clarify the biographer’s experience. O’Faolain had also many religious doubts throughout his life. He admired and wanted to understand Newman inside the context of his family and 19th century England.

With a distancing (and external point of view) and help of other biographies and documents, he allows us to meet a completely new man.

But the documents in Newman’s Way are not used as explicitly as in O’Faolain’s other biographical books. It is true that countless letters by Newman to his parents, brothers, sisters and friends; his Tracts, diaries, sermons, essays; diaries of friends and relatives (his brother Frank wrote a bitter book about him); registers in Churches and legal documents, all these become the foundation and structure on which the biographer builds the half-real, half-fictional house of Newman’s life. The bridge between facts and imagination is crossed over with the help of expressions such as: “we can guess, one may imagine, one can see, it must have been, leading us to wonder, we may speculate wildly”, introducing passages where imagination predominates. The inclusion of acknowledgements, sources, detailed notes, and a genealogical table of Newman’s family may lead us to consider the biography close to a historical approach; it may be, however, a novelist’s device, as the letters in Richardson’s Pamela.

As soon as the story begins, we realize that the emphasis is in a fluent narrative. The biographer “reconstructs” his sources, and thus enlarges the distance between himself and a historian. As a matter of fact, frequent allusions and analogies with famous novelists and their work remind the reader that real life can be like fiction, and that fiction may portray real life. Titles of chapters as “Hard Times” or “The Quest For Things Past” are certainly echoes of fictional works; a character is described as a Bunyan - type or Newman’s father, “our Père Goriot”.

A few examples:

John II got a wife with a tidy dowry of £ 5000, and we may remember that Elizabeth Bennet, as Jane Austen carefully records, had only £ 2000. (p.5)

Or:

How did he keep going? We may recall Thackeray’s *The Newcomes*. (p.9)

Or still:

Sometimes, nowadays, as when we read Thackeray or Dickens and find them sentimental, we cannot believe that so much continued happiness and pleasure ever existed in the world. (p.13)

Or another illustration:

If we were fixing the Newman children in place, like the Brontës at Haworth, or the Barretts in Wimpole Street, we would speak most aptly of the Newmans of Norwood. (p.20)

And better still:

Dickens would have done the scene beautifully. (p.50)

As in Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, *Newman's Way* describes three generations in a changing world, a typical world of a 19th century novel with its history (1815, Waterloo, the Coronation of a King, the death of a Queen) its thoughts and ideas (in politics, religion, science, art), even its fashion, Finishing Schools for Young Ladies, movements of Emancipation of Women, etc.— a rich background to Newman's story, intermingled with the story of the family. Vivid portraits of father, mother and each child (they were 6) "humanize the whole Newman legend". (IX) We can see him as a boy at home (a fanatically evangelical family) and at school, where he was considered a very strange child:

His sense of reality became weak. . . . At times the world hardly existed for him. "I thought life might be a dream, or I an angel, and all this world a deception" (p.24-25)

His narratives about himself,"schizophrenically third-person" show how he was detached from a "self".

He became so fanatically evangelical that O'Faolain mentions he had irreverently played with the idea of titling his biography "A Genius in the Family", with a subtitle "Or a Blessed Nuisance". As the story unravels, the tragic falls of both the family and Newman, become "real", when this comment is made:

What enormous differences can be produced within a family of identical background and like temperament by the slightest alteration of emphasis!

This wealthy family of the young banker, with a big house in London, and two country-houses, goes down low in the world, the father becoming a tavern-keeper in one of the most sordid streets of the city.

Newman's dreams of wisdom and knowledge, to become an Oriel Fellow in Oxford (they come true, but have to be given up) are changed utterly by the end of his life (so full of conflicts). The allusions to Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* can be detected in many passages, like the following:

Oh, the pleasure of hearing them. It leads my mind to a longing after something, I know not what. . . Such is my feeling at this minute as I hear the evening bells of Oxford.

And:

He would live, for ever, among those golden stones and gleaming lawns,. . . Still, Oxford did not fall into his lap. He had to slave for it. (p. 63)

When he was forty “a bad age for any man to have to begin again” he had been “more alone than he had ever been before, a bad thing for any man in an hour of trial. . . his friends “creeping away from him in his fall”. (p. 301)

The conflict between his previous beliefs and his conversion to Catholicism tears his soul in two.

What in the world am I doing this for except that I think I am called to do so?. . . I have a good name with many; I am deliberately sacrificing it. I have a bad name with more; I am fulfilling all their worst wishes, and giving them their most coveted triumph. I am distressing all I love, unsettling all I have instructed or aided. I am going to choose whom I do not know, and of whom I expect very little. I am making myself an outcast, and that at my age ! Oh, what can it be but stern necessity which causes this?

A lonely old man, without friends, his family circle broken up by death and strong different religious conviction of brothers and sisters, his life’s struggle reaching its end is thus described:

He did not see Oxford again — apart from such glimpses of its spires as one may have from a passing train — until he was an old man of seventy-seven, from whom, by then, the world had taken away almost every desire except the longing to leave it — an old Tithonus — a gray grasshoper, the evaporating mist of a forgotten morning. (p. 315)

With these reflections, which could include so much more about *Newman’s Way* the differences between biography, history and autobiography were touched upon. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* and *Newman’s Way*, two books on the same person, both about the complexity of one’s and other’s self, become different because Newman could only see his spiritual development, and O’Faolain, on his attempt at penetrating in the forest of his mind (“the forest is deeper and the paths more puzzling” than he had anticipated = IX), wrote a wonderful biographical novel with the lonely hero, like Jude, facing conflicts of soul and spirit against the everyday difficult life about him. He wants to be left alone, but what he gets is utter loneliness.

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