

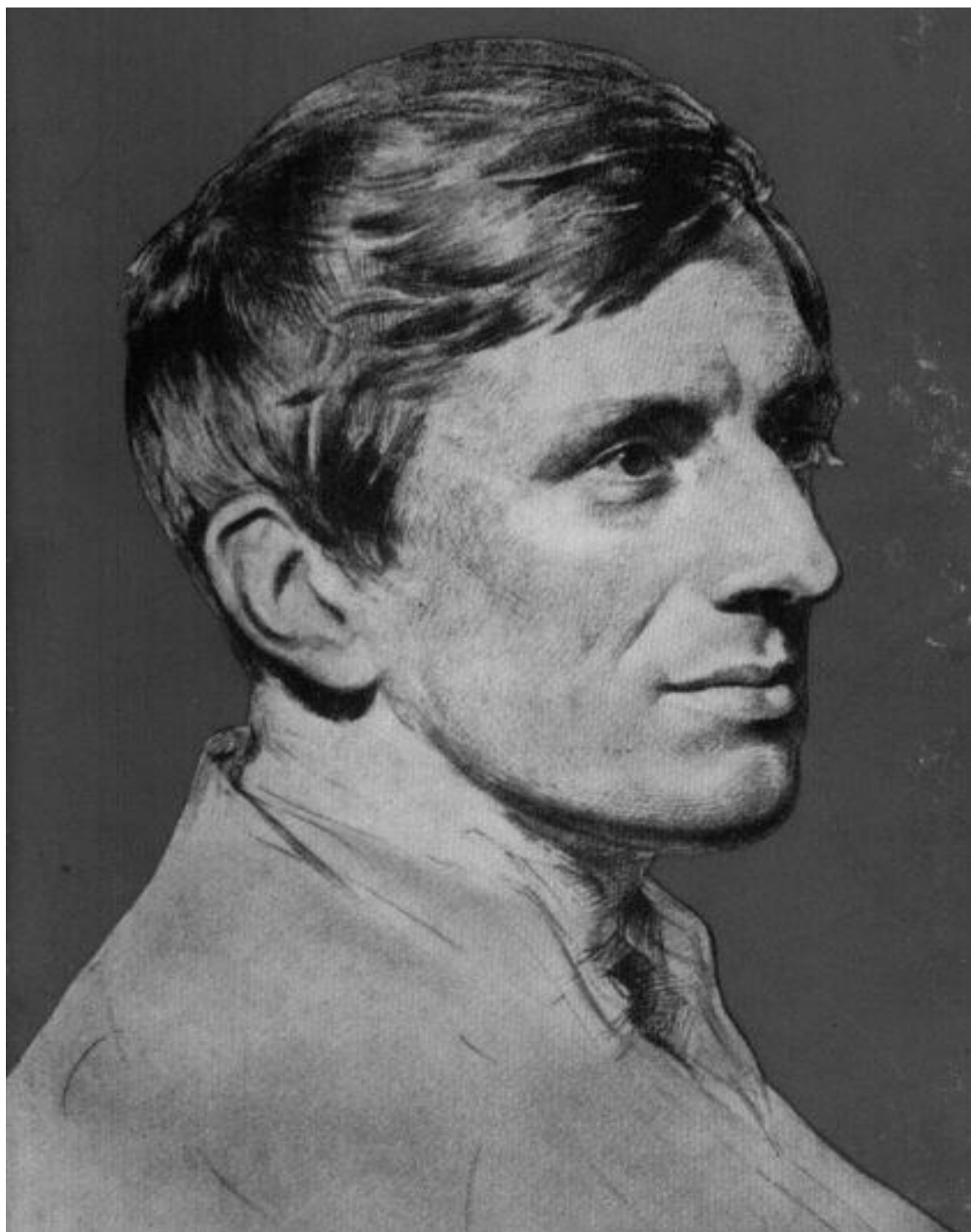
Spring in Sicily

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To a certain Monica







OPEN LETTER

The following is a proposal for a documentary on the Mediterranean travels of a seminal author in the history of Belle-Letters, John Henry Cardinal Newman [1801-1890], today St. John Newman, entitled: Spring in Sicily...

Our tale is about an impulsive decision in Newman's early thirties that sent him out on a commercial steam-liner from Falmouth, England to the Eternal City in search of Classical and Catholic heritage. Here we take readers from his writing-desk in Oxford through the Straits of Gibraltar, along the coast of North Africa to Malta, the Greek Islands and finally, Sicily...

Who is Cardinal Newman? Well, here Newman is simply an innocent Oxonian in the first bloom of his career who is about to see Christendom for the first time in his life. With the advent of affordable steamships and the recent revival of Mediterranean travel, Newman is among a generation of northern talent who ventured south in order to escape the confines of polite society and capitalize on the literary-trade that goes on between far-famed historical places and city-centers of the contemporary arts. In Literature, this generation was sometimes called the "Romantics" and their adventures across the Mediterranean were textbook examples of the "Romanesque." Eminent names from this generation include Byron, Shelley & Keats in English and Chateaubriand, Stendhal & Dumas in French.

But oftentimes I wonder how come Cardinal Newman is mysteriously absent from the portraiture of nineteenth-century travel-writers; his vast overseas adventure is rarely taught in schools. How come? Perhaps because Newman *escaped* death by consumption like Keats, death by water like Shelley and death by medical malpractice like Byron; instead Newman *survives* a violent sea-swell off the coasts of Algiers; he *survives* a fever that is ravishing the impoverished heartland of Sicily; and in a Sicilian village then known as Castro Giovanni *survives* a series of bleedings which almost earned our English poet an early grave; no, instead of coming to an untimely end Newman would *survive* these visitations and go on to become in extreme-age a prince of Vatican City.

Yes, instead Newman would become in the course of his prolific career the man who James Joyce called the "finest prose stylist in English," who Oscar Wilde called an author that he "knew and loved" from reading his collected works in prison, and who, I daresay, would soon become the first spiritual forbearer of a special "Romanizing" tendency in the so-called Fin-de-siecle or Decadent generation in Belle-Letters. Yes, indeed...

II.

But broad-strokes aside, a movie that takes place in Malta, the Greek Islands and Sicily should simply be a pleasure to watch...

Newman's overseas correspondence from these months is one immense, sometimes-comic, sometimes-solemn adventure; it furnishes a variety of Romanesque episodes, picturesque and profitable, like the other sentimental journeymen of his epoch. For instance: the young Newman will write a memorable homage to the ruins of Carthage; then he writes a minute account of Valletta's *civita vecchia* that he believed to be the Roman garrison mentioned in the Book of Acts; then he describes life inside of a Maltese Lazaretto; then he describes a strange soirée in the town of Corfu; then he cruises through the water-course which leads to the Ithaca of Homer; then he observes the great austerity of the Greek communion in Zante; then he recounts his profound emotion amid the ruins of Segesta, Sicily: at the time a wild, almost inaccessible excavation site, now very easily reachable and under the safe protection of UNESCO.

[To better visualize his itinerary, please see the maps above].

Our documentary will be an "essay-in-images" on the Mediterranean then and now. It would involve a small film-crew on a mission to visit a number of spots on Newman's 1832-3 itinerary and once there, shoot a series of on-location lectures. Our movie would be meant for audiences whose idea of entertainment is Baroque cathedrals, Classical ruins, carnival in the Mezzogiorno and the Pantheon of romantic poetasters.

Similar to the successful formula of other educational documentaries, our vision would be to place a minimal Author/Actor, or Presenter, against the backdrop of a sweeping seascape and, from there, present our script on the ills and thrills of Mediterranean travel in the nineteenth century...

And I propose using me for the role...

III.

So I'm seeking to assemble a team of adventurous individuals for this epic endeavor. There, in the footsteps of Cardinal Newman's original route, we would create a magical mise-en-scene in ornate Cathedrals, in piles of Classical debris, in dense, indolent city-streets, in the storied South; there the cameraman would seek to capture a cornucopia of impressionistic images: Madonnas, ruins, horizons, asphodels, trumpery ornaments etc.: I mean, every unctuous thing in eyesight...

Then, over our montage, like music in a melodrama, the Presenter would narrate those passages in Newman's private correspondence that could stand alone in the Oxford Anthology of English Prose; or narrate a selection of those superb stanzas in the Lyra Apostolica, that legendary collection of religious verse, which serve to accentuate a sinew of his poetic vision. In other words, the language itself would be the star of this documentary¹.

Once finished, our film could be sent out for competition in all the international film-festivals and aired on US and UK television: anything's possible. But the prime-mover of investing oneself in an initiative of this scale must be a nascent love for the original subject-matter: Cardinal Newman and the Mediterranean. So, please, follow me...

¹*Reference how Boris Johnson, Simon Schama, or Andrew Graham-Dixon command attention for the duration of a scene by the special eloquence of their tongues.*

Spring in Sicily: A Mediterranean Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Cardinal Newman

1832-3, Newman is only thirty-one. He's still on the threshold of his prolific career as a controversialist.² For the moment it is still unclear that he will become a prince of the Catholic Church. At this time his interest in literature is almost unbounded and he has a date with destiny on the smiling surface of the Mediterranean Sea; and especially with Sicily.

In Sicily, the young Newman finds the countryside of his dreams, a far-fabled island after his own heart. His letters from these eventful months seem to be one sustained salute to the island. Their tone and tempo is perhaps the only indication that Newman entertained the ambition of becoming a "romancier" or a "sentimental journeyman" à la mode in the literary salons of the nineteenth-century. At thirty-one our hero is still very much "the artist as a young man" and many rare personal passages reveal a lighter side of the great author in the morning-glory of his career.

So we take our title from a momentous line in one of his letters when Newman is on the point of embarking from Naples to Palermo, early April:

*Spring in Sicily! The nearest approach to Paradise that sinful man is capable of! I set out Easter Monday...*³

And so we begin...

From the Back-Waters of Oxford to the Cradle of Classic and Catholic Civilization

At Oxford, Newman had compromised his health in the process of completing his first work of epic proportions, **Arians of the Fourth Century**. He recognized that, in all likelihood, he would never be in perfect health again. The infinite pains of composition which he could only liken to bodily torment had exhausted whatever physical strength his slight frame possessed. He had hoped this work would open new doors of opportunity for him on campus: which in time came true; but for the moment, Newman's still up-and-coming; all that will be said and done to earn him the title of Saint with his death is still hid in the vague veil-of-time. Soon a friend from school, a certain R. Hurrell Froude, will come to him with the idea of going abroad together: of seeing the south. He proposed they travel by sea to visit Rome for the first time in their lives.

² To avoid confusion, the word 'controversy' in the following essay will be used in the sense it once held for English audiences: as a genre of polemical discourse.

³ John Henry Newman, The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman: Volume Three, New Bearings, January 1832 to June 1833 (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1979)

After suggesting a number of itineraries, their ultimate route has them setting off from Falmouth, sailing across the Bay of Biscay, entering the Mediterranean by the Strait of Gibraltar, coasting along North Africa and landing for a layover in Malta: and, unbelievably, their steamer would be called the Hermes. With Malta as a base, the Hermes would take them in and around the Greek archipelago. Then these two friends would make their way up through the Strait of Messina and Calabrian coast, to see Messina and Palermo on the north side of Sicily. Yes, Sicily. From there our scholars would head straight for Naples, spend time in the city and make the last stage of the voyage to Rome by land. Ideally they would spend the Easter season over there. By the end they would be ready to track their way across the continent, re-cross the English Channel and return home. Easy...

In his letters we can see Newman considering whether it is the opportune moment to make such a journey. It is surprising to hear such an amiable tone coming from one who will soon stun readers with the majesty of his inner voice. Indeed, even the name Mediterranean seems to be summoning him. He does not foresee himself having another break from work again in his life; such a voyage might be the best way to steel himself in body and soul for the work ahead. Plus, he will have the further benefit of gaining the name of a travelled-man once he returned to England. We will see in his future Catholic controversies how much weight this name will lend to the power of his arguments; but for the moment, listen to his earnest, amiable tone:

"Then what a name the Mediterranean is! And the time of the year, for I think summer would be too hot for me. If I ever am to travel, is not this the time when I am most at liberty for it? My engagements being slighter now than they have been these many years, and than they are likely to be hereafter. And I feel the need of it; I am suspicious of becoming narrow-minded, and at least I wish to experience the feeling and the trial of expansiveness of views, if it were but to be able to say I had, and to know how to meet it in the case of others. And then I think I may fairly say my health requires it. Not that I ever expect to be regularly well as long as I live. It is a thing I do not think of; but still I may be set up enough for years of work, for which, at present, I may be unequal."

For as long as Newman could remember, if he was ever asked where in the world he would like to travel he never said continental Europe like his travel companion who will be all-eagerness to return through France in order to see Sens, Chartres and the other places that appear in the life of St. Thomas Beckett; no, Newman's idea of travel had always been to see Rome and Greece where the lion's share of the earliest martyrs laid down their life for the Church Militant. Once Newman passes through Palermo, Messina and Segesta, he realizes that Sicily was a part of Magna Graecia or in his own words: *Sicily is*

Greece in a way. So, many years later, it will strike the great man that his Mediterranean voyage was as close to his earliest vision of travel as anyone would dare wish for.

From the first mention of their tentative plan to travel abroad, the inclusive list of their itinerary is constantly changing. (In fact, even Alexandria makes it onto one). But after countless revisals, their route covers a good part of what there is to see in the south except the all-important Athens because the passage that lies through the Morea at this time was in such a state-of-anarchy that it was deemed impossible for their steamer to make the tantalizing two-day trip from where they were: a regret that afflicts Newman whenever it recurs to him.

But after a little consideration, Newman will accept this invitation to travel abroad. Soon these scholars are boarding the swift-winged Hermes to see the cities and sites of classical interest that until now they have only known from studying maps and reading books. All aboard...

From Falmouth, England to the Strait of Gibraltar

Since Newman's letters from Falmouth to Gibraltar offer readers little more than the literary equivalent of what sketching is to painters, no biographer could bear to paraphrase what a reader must suffer through himself if such a mirage of impressionistic detail is to have any permanent value beyond the pure delight it must have been for his mother and sisters to receive. No, a reader must go to the source for himself: especially since a recurrent theme of **New Bearings** will be that the "fullness" of foreign scenery cannot be captured in words and the importance of going on pilgrimage for oneself.

So far nothing in their passage to Gibraltar has caused Newman the least foreboding that their voyage will be anything but a single unbroken stretch of smooth sailing. Bear in mind that as their steamer enters warmer water the month is still mid-December and their auspicious weather is unseasonal for this time of year. In fact, seldom is the weather so propitious for a Mediterranean voyage. We learn in the pages ahead that another steamer almost identical to the Hermes left Falmouth not a week before and had to turn off towards Lisbon due to inclement weather. Thus far, we are treated to whole pages describing only the bluest skies at sea: enough to make anyone with a weakness for the thrills of glorious weather wish that Newman's good fortune would go on and on.

Perhaps the only lesson that can be derived from his majestic descriptions of sea and sky (calling their color at noonday a *gentleman's* for being profound and sober without the stain of ostentation) is that a veritable intravenous of reviving spirits are coursing through the young Newman as he cruises south; it allows us to appreciate the salutary effect of leaving a place like Oxford that he suggests is ruinous for the

health; because otherwise are there any two readers in posterity that would see the same symbolism in his interesting studies of light on water? Or a symbol in his fleeting mention of a shark tearing at the flesh of a dead horse? Or a symbol in a sudden aside indicating that a light on the shore off Cape Finisterre is visible from their steamer. No. These opening descriptions give readers a taste of Newman's deeply poetical nature, pure and simple.

Approaching the Rock of Portugal is the first time a note is struck that will resonate throughout his lifework: it is the same note that can be found in many of the best *impressions-du-voyage* of his century. Not even a full week since the Hermes said adieu to Falmouth, the breath-taking coastline of Portugal wrests from Newman this simple guileless sentiment: *how is the North cut off from the South!* How a veritable New World is only a week-long journey from home simply stuns our classicist who has spent his whole life till then only traveling in imagination.

So high spirits reign from Falmouth to Gibraltar; yes they reign despite the fact that the persona he employs in one of his opening poems, Wanderings, depicts a voyager surfeited with wanderlust. Far from surfeiting, there seems to be no check upon his excitement save the sudden perception of how easily a younger person could be carried away with the thrills of overseas travel; no, our wanderer's constant optimism seems to sooner betoken a reviving appetite and a willingness to embrace whatever Fortune brings him. To witness a young Newman riding high on the Hermes and to hear so many tender expressions of a son and brother's thankfulness for this once-in-a-lifetime-opportunity gives readers to understand that by the age of thirty-one the future author is thirsting for an experience of life that northern parts cannot supply.

For admirers of Cardinal Newman a tender love and pity for his younger self soon fills our hearts on hearing him end an eventful letter to his sister with the appearance of a southern constellation low on the horizon; and again in another one to his mother with the stillness that reigns through his first full night's sleep when the Hermes anchors off Gibraltar. How else can we explain this new love and pity for the young Newman if not in virtue of the fact that we can perceive the need for refreshment after so much awful literary work behind his gentle welcome of sea, silence and sun? Yes. Soon the *change-of-air*, the simple expression that Newman uses to ask leave of his superiors, elevates his spirits again; it is literally to the clearness-of-air that he attributes his sudden well-being. For such simple, tender expressions to fall from the pen of England's most accomplished stylist, it must really reflect the depth-of-need, of epic exhaustion, that had overtaken him by 1832.

From Gibraltar to Malta

Waking on the open sea, Newman finds himself in the age-old arena that had called him away from Oxford: the Mediterranean. On this morning he's perfectly disposed to writing travel letters from his physical exercise of climbing the Rock of Gibraltar the day before. Readers, it is important to remember that Newman is for the most part writing retrospectives throughout his travel letters which also include the passing mention of whichever seascape or headland he is presently before: in this case the coast of North Africa. According to the convention, his letters include the sudden mention of places on the horizon, as they appear out his solitary window, to better create the effect of being in the moment with him on the *Hermes*. This convention of travel-writing is enhanced by the special charm of their steamer being able to approach land closer than could be done in other vessels, offering the young Newman a unique front-row seat to the changing scenes and at the same time providing him the necessary stability and security of putting pen to paper. Given this advantage, the sight of famous mountain ranges, now Mount Atlas, soon the Acarnanian, will emerge in his compositions. Countless times he will be called on deck as their strong steamer comes within sight of a new headland. After feasting his eyes on the novel scene, little remains for him to do but to go down to his rooms, enter a travelogue and reemerge in an equally exhilarating part of the Mediterranean next morning.

On this occasion, out the window, Mount Atlas accompanies him in the distance. He can write home verifying the effect its great peaks create with Homer's description of it supporting the heavens: once everyone remembers that the Mediterranean was thought to be the center of the *orbis terrarum*. Here he sights a place in the distance that since youth was the imaginative stuff of his studies; but oftentimes pulling up so close to a place of classical interest, without stopping to delve any deeper or further, will cause our hero to repeatedly disbelieve his eyes; and so his correspondence is as much a literary record of his realizations as his temporary inability to realize that the actual rock before him, whose face has not materially changed since time immemorial, was once the scene of heroic exploits.

All Newman can divine of Algiers, the *Ville Blanche*, from onboard the *Hermes* goes into a long letter to one of his sisters. Reminiscent of his inner-feelings on coming within sight of the Portuguese coastline, Newman lets out a precious expression of delight: *that I should have lived to see Algiers!* This is the kind of exclamation that springs up unexpectedly throughout **New Bearings**. The exclamation point was perhaps the best way of showing everyone at home that he has now undergone a primary rite-of-passage for setting up as a man-of-letters, a travelled-man and finally a saint.

But if letter after letter so far reveals a young Newman in the excitement of first discoveries, it should be said that shining on every page of his correspondence is a hot sun overhead during the days and December nights warm enough to compose in the open air without an overcoat. With long stretches of sunshine to light the way, the calm surface of the Mediterranean seems an open invitation to cruise towards their first ports. So far his travel writing has only here and there revealed any trace of a so-called “serious man” behind his outbursts of enthusiasm. Not until the *Hermes* breaks down off the coast of Algiers and a violent sea-swell throws our protagonist into a bout of seasickness, is there any intimation that their voyage will meet with serious reverses.

Yes, in the same way readers will soon have their view of the long-awaited Greek islands spoiled by pouring rain, a detailed description of Algiers is sadly lost to posterity due to this bout with seasickness. For readers with a pronounced taste for orientalism this would be an inconsolable loss if the approach of Cape Bon did not elicit from Newman one of the most laconic passages in all New Bearings...

At this moment, our hero is writing home how it breaks his heart to leave Carthage in his wake without stopping:

“We neared Cape Bon and saw the track to Carthage. An island lies to the west and the course is between the two. Nothing I had seen so touched me as this. I thought of the Phoenicians, Tyre, of the Punic Wars, of Cyprian, and the glorious Churches now annihilated; the two headlands looked the same then as now; I recollected I was now looking at Africa for the last time in my life...”

Quarantine in Malta and Darting Around the Greek Islands

Christmas Eve, Newman and Froude first arrived in Malta. They came on deck that morning to see the Maltese islands alongside their steamer. At last, Malta herself came within sight. Pulling into St. Paul’s Bay, Newman has his earliest impressions of reading the Apostles’ epistles not only confirmed by his present experience but further reinforced by his newfound respect for the simplicity of scriptural language which belies how arduous and taxing the constant roving must have been; and which nothing but reenacting the smallest portion of it himself would ever have enabled him to appreciate; not to mention their accommodations aboard the *Hermes* were a hundred times more comfortable than anything available to St. Paul in the first century, causing our hero to rue that he can barely continue composing whenever their good fortune of favorable weather runs out.

From a distance Newman calls the island of Malta a literal rock. On approaching closer it becomes the scene of biblical exploits. Imagine his amazement when he realizes that his route right then was going

over the exact tracks of the great apostle. In a similar way that the pages of travel description devoted to his hoppings around the Greek islands will be one ongoing salute to the memory of heathen fame, the sight of St. Paul's Bay, where tradition goes that the bark of the inspired author had shipwrecked, evokes the memory of great Catholic saints. Yes, our hero is simply mystified to be in a place where an Apostle had once been.

Christmas morning, the two friends are locked up in a Lazaretto⁴. See, by deciding to touch down on certain of the Greek Islands their quarantine sentence was doubled without their knowing: a small price to pay according to our holy hero. Every time Newman switches from retrospect to his present surrounding, the Lazaretto is brought to the fore. Theirs is on the waterfront with floor to ceiling windows that open upon the Mediterranean. From being cooped up from some months in the *Hermes*, Newman now finds himself writing home in vast, lofty rooms. We read that sustaining so many buffets off North Africa had so disenchanted him with sea-travel that he could only call their quarantine a welcome imprisonment. In the Lazaretto there was a meeting-place called the *Parlatorio* where our hero would wander through a crowd of Mediterranean inmates. Here he is given a priceless opportunity of doing character sketches of the divers races found in the region. Here in the *Parlatorio* we can form a better image of who is meant when Newman apostrophizes the *Churches of the South*. In times to come these observations of their elegant manners and of their strange slight physiques, will seem to lend added weight to his Catholic controversies; but for now, in early 1833, it is simply wonderful to see our hero in the most unlikely of places.

Not many pages into the Lazaretto episode, Newman will have to part ways with the *Hermes*. Seeing his steamer off, readers hear a plaintive note in his correspondence that has not been struck until now. If ever our hero was under any illusion that he was not far from home with an awful amount of traveling still to accomplish before seeing it again, that comfortable illusion evaporates once the *Hermes* leaves him and his traveling companion to their own devices for getting up to Sicily. Anytime Newman stepped off the steamer to walk the hills of a Greek island he was sure of having somewhere to spend the night back on the *Hermes*. Now, seeing his steamer off, Newman feels himself more thrown back on his own resources than ever before.

⁴A Lazaretto (which takes its name from the biblical leper, Lazarus) was a hospital once used to quarantine Mediterranean travelers if their passports showed them to have touched down in countries thought to be tainted by whatever was the plague of the moment in the nineteenth century.

But never does a thought for his own personal safety seem to enter his thoughts. It was no secret to anyone aboard the *Hermes* that Mediterranean banditti roved the Greek Archipelago, making the coast from Patras to Corinth almost impassable; and these bad banditti also infested the roads, making it inadvisable to travel inland after nightfall; but were the *Hermes* to run into trouble at any point, their escape route was to make for Jannina in the direction of Athens which was considered safe-haven for travelers. Between banditti and cholera it was never quite certain that Newman would make it home unscathed but he says himself that somehow these threats abroad did nothing to dampen his eagerness for travel. If Newman is showing a perfect disregard for his personal welfare, it might well be because at thirty-one, with so much to prove to himself and his contemporaries, our hero is very naturally inclined and easily disposed to feats of daring: anything to be running on the elixir of the early Church Fathers, who in their turn ran on the juice from the wild olive tree! Anything to be in the environs of the land that gave birth to the famous saints of Catholic literature and the memorable heroes of heathen!

That day the weather will take such a severe turn for the worse that it seems for the moment that their voyage to Sicily will have to be delayed indefinitely. Damn. All the amenities that would have made the Lazaretto a pure delight in the summer months, the high, airy ceilings, cool stone and wide windows giving onto the ocean, contributed to bringing him down with a cough that he won't be able to shake for the rest of his stay in Malta. But on looking back at this fortnight of sickness, Newman can say that it seems to have set him up for the next spell of soaring spirits that wafted him towards Sicily, Naples and Rome. Then, of a sudden, his correspondence jumps ahead to the second week of February, his cold gone and arrived in Naples, with stories to tell about his first, life-changing visit to Sicily.

His First Visit to Sicily

Early 1833, Newman has landed on the infamous isle of the Mediterranean where once an innocent Proserpina, in the Classical cult of personality, idle and listless in a field of anemones, was spirited away to the underworld by the filthy strength of Pluto; and where once an adolescent Agatha, in the Catholic communion of saints, wedded to the Eternal Bridegroom in the secret chambers of her heart, was summoned before a tyrannical proconsular to become his concubine on pain of death and whose severed breasts ever since have been sculpted and embossed into the cornerstones of her island-wide shrines: Sicily.

The young Newman privileges Sicily as the finest place in the Mediterranean. Similar to the music of Beethoven, the immense barren landscapes over there seem strangely suited to satisfying the unique

demands of his soul. Yes, something in the singular mixture of grandeur and decrepitude is responsible for his special affection for the place. According to the sharp young poet, there is a rare quality in Sicily not to be found elsewhere in the world.

Palermo is both the filthiest and the noblest city that he has ever seen; it is to Messina that Newman consecrates his most excellent experiment in verse. He tells readers that Sicily was once the theme of nearly every poet and historian in antiquity. Looking back from Naples there is a long passage that introduces readers to its place in history as well as its place in his heart. He deems Sicily the most interesting and profane country after ancient Egypt.

"Its history begins with the earliest times and lasts thro' both Greek and Roman annals, down to the eras of the Saracen invasion and Norman chivalry. In it I read the history of all that is great and romantic in human nature, and the man in all his strength and weakness, with high aims and manifold talents corrupted by sin and humbled by continual failure. What a lesson it is to meditate upon Syracuse, or only the Athenian exploits there as given by Thucydides! Or what deep thoughts are instilled by the sight of the Straits of Messina! In this latter case I speak from experience, having been there. We have also been to Palermo and to Egesta and I am captivated with the scenes I saw, not by a mere fancy which has had no trial. And the extreme grandeur and richness of the country increase the interest I take in it."

Segesta is the first patrimonial site on their map to wrest a powerful homage from our hero; but unlike Malta and Zante where there is some passing comparison between the rival communions, his descriptions of Egesta and its incredible surrounding countryside only mention its natural beauty and classical references. That unforgettable day, on reaching the high ancient spot and finding himself face-to-face with the Doric edifice, our hero lays down an enduring definition of ancient Greek religion.

"Such was the genius of ancient Greek worship – grand in the mist of error, simple and unadorned in its architecture; it chose some elevated spot, and fixed there its solitary witness, where it could not be hid."

"The past and the present! Once these hills were full of life! I began to understand what Scripture means when speaking of lofty cities vaunting in the security of their strongholds. What a great but ungodly sight was this place in its glory! And then its history; to say nothing of Virgil's fictions. Here it was that Nicias came; this was the ally of Athens; what a strange place! How did people take it into their heads to plant themselves here?"

Everything about the countryside is called superb in the most exalted sense of the word. *Majestic*, *imposing* as well as many other choice epithets in his travel-letters seem to sum up Newman's deep

feelings for Sicilian landscape. For panoramas he has experienced nothing quite as powerful as this old solitary spot throughout his whole tour of the region. Here he compares the manner in which Sicilian mountains rise out of the sea, both slowly, gracefully and to an incredible height, with the sudden, precipitous and ultimately low-lying mountains of the Greek islands and says that this might serve to explain Sicily's wonderful power of him.

But over and above the island's natural beauty, for someone of Newman's extensive learning, this Sicily is a place surcharged with classical memory. The force of these memories often causes him to let out phrases such as: *here Phoenician, Carthaginian, Greek and Roman meet!* But perhaps his most alluring statement is one obscure and evocative at the same time; it is the selfsame sentiment that forms the poetical conceit of his sonnet, **Messina**: that Sicily can be likened to a noble record stone over the grave of high hopes. Brilliant...

Once someone has read Newman's lifework from beginning to end he or she will discover a number of obscure allusions to his time abroad in his lectures and sermons. In fact, the whole of his lecture, **The Social State of Catholic Countries No Prejudice to the Sanctity of the Church**, perhaps his most powerful single piece of writing, is one overwhelming testament of what he learned from traveling to the South. This piece of Catholic controversy harkens back to his first tour of the Mediterranean, to this moment when he first laid eyes on the squalid streets of Palermo. Remember, on first setting out from England, one of his main motivations for taking a journey like this was the need for him to have the name of a travelled-man if he were to ever combat worldly opponents, in some distant future, under the banner of Holy Church. Here, readers have a perfect example of how he must have envisioned the use of this spiritual weapon. In this lecture, Newman will produce a memento from his time in Sicily that the people around him would have vaguely known was hard-won from his own experience. Right at the moment his speech reaches its crescendo, a reader is struck by the mention of Sicily:

"This, then, is the point I insist upon, in answer to the objection which you have today urged against me. The Church aims, not at making a show, but at doing a work. She regards this world, and all that is in it, as a mere shadow, as dust and ashes, compared with the value of one single soul. She holds that, unless she can, in her own way, do good to souls, it is no use her doing anything; she holds that it were better for sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions who are upon it to die of starvation in extremest agony, so far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin, should tell one wilful untruth, though it harmed no one, or steal one poor farthing without excuse. She considers the action of this world and the action of the

*soul simply incommensurate, viewed in their respective spheres; she would rather save the soul of one single wild bandit of Calabria, or whining beggar of Palermo, than draw a hundred lines of railroad through the length and breadth of Italy, or carry out a sanitary reform, in its fullest details, in every city of Sicily, except so far as these great national works tended to some spiritual good beyond them.”*⁵

The unexpected mention of Sicily transports us back to his first arrival in Palermo. Newman and his travelling companion could not shake the beggars and street urchins from off their trail. We remember a passage in his letters where the young Newman writes: *The streets are filthy beyond expression. Oh, the miserable creatures we saw in Sicily! I never knew what human suffering was before.*⁶ But aside from his awful amazement at the state of public sewers on the island, Newman saw Sicily as a direct reflection of the image of Paradise that he cherished in his soul.

By the end of his first visit to Sicily the young Newman is outright enamored by this far-famed Mediterranean island. Since his eye-opening visits to Messina, Palermo and Egesta he describes himself again and again as completely smitten with a mysterious love for the place. So after some of the most eventful pages of New Bearings, its account of his walking tours of Naples and Rome, it suddenly seems that Newman will be turning on his heels, parting company with his travel companion and heading down again to Sicily on his own. Yes, making the decision to turn back after Froude decides to return home will turn out to be the single most important decision of his whole trip; returning will give Newman a chance to delve deeper into the one place that has left so indelible an impression on his soul that he could not live with himself knowing he did not make the most of the one and only time he could expect to be within sailing distance.

My Illness in Sicily

Remember, Spring in Sicily is entitled after a momentous line in his correspondence that seems to captures his excitement to be revisiting the island at the best time of year: *Spring in Sicily! The nearest approach to Paradise that sinful man is capable of!*

But, nonetheless, these travel letters will turn out to be anything but a pastel aquarelle of Sicily in the merry month of May. No, Newman will cross the interior of Sicily through a veritable tableaux-vivant of

⁵ John Henry Newman: The Difficulties of Anglicans: *The Social State of Catholic Countries No Prejudice to the Sanctity of the Church*: Sub-Section 4

⁶ *In fact, one of these street urchins on an avenue in Palermo could imaginably have been one of my great-grandparents who emigrated from Sicily to New York City in the mid 1800's.*

brigands, inn-keepers and destitution to the point of wrecking his delicate health and bleeding the poor scholar within a hair's breadth of his life. This strange streak through the Straits of Messina to Taormina, Catania and Syracuse and then across the heartland to Castro Giovanni, or present-day Enna, all takes place in an unfinished work, an unforgettable narrative, entitled, My Illness in Sicily.

Until Newman falls perilously ill at the foot of Castro Giovanni, it is never a question "if" but "when" he will return home. Here, at the highest inhabitable point of Sicily, the name Cardinal Newman was almost "writ in water" much like the untimely death of another expatriating contemporary, the illustrious poetaster, John Keats. Yes. Imagine the non-descript tombstone carved out for our hero: "*Joannes Henricus Newman 1801-1833, Aspiring Author.*" But instead, John Henry Newman will survive this visitation in Castro Giovanni and go on to publish his last piece of controversy in 1885 and give up the ghost in 1890 at the patriarchal age of four-score-and-ten.

For anyone familiar with Cardinal Newman's 1865 memoir, Apologia Pro Vita Sua, here we see unfold that memorable scene when he is seated on the edge of a bed, in tears, homesick. Here Newman casts himself in a momentous scene that seems to betoken the real beginning of the Oxford Movement of 1833. His younger self keeps saying in a state of abstraction: *I have work to do in England...*

It is incredible to think that an intellectual movement which will soon involve so many of the finest pens in this great seat-of-learning can be traced back to a humble room in Palermo; incredible that all the ink that will be spilt in the coming years hangs on an epiphany in Sicily.

And so our story ends on the threshold of the Oxford Movement of 1833 when this fragile bud will face the rude blasts of ignorance and the canker of skepticism until it bursts into full-life a decade later in 1846 on his conversion to Rome. But first, crossing the thin Straits of Bonifacio, in an "orange-boat" bound for Marseille, Newman pens perhaps his most famous piece, the beautiful minor verse, The Pillar of Cloud, popularly known as Lead, Kindly Light, which seems to contain the emotional force of months and months of cruising the Mediterranean:

Lead, Kindly Light, 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...

Parting Words

Newman's near-fatal illness in Sicily is one of those episodes in his much-storied life, like his libel trial, near-imprisonment and exile to Ireland in the 1850's or his ascension to the Cardinalate and future influence over Vatican II that serve to shed a revelatory light on the elusive likeness of this great saint. Here, we have ever tried to trace his career of seventy working-years to this meteoric seven-month streak across the Mediterranean. We hope that this our portrait of Cardinal Newman as a young man at the mercy of wind and wave in the Mediterranean tied to the mast of Faith in order to court and resist the siren-call of overseas travel will serve to highlight new facets of the man and the milieu. So, people, if you see any potential in our proposal, please come collaborate with us on this modern-day Mediterranean pilgrimage...