



**Cardinal Newman's
Dream of Gerontius
as a Revelation of the Destiny
of the Human Person**

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The Creed of Christians includes the statement, "I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." John Henry Newman not only had a vivid sense of that world, a world above and beyond this one, he continually reminded himself and others of the Invisible World or, as he liked to call it, the "**Unseen World.**" The Unseen World held a fascination for him. As a teenager, at the age of fifteen, he had had a profound experience of his Creator and himself. In reading the text of the *Dream of Gerontius*, it is vital to remember that his elegant language is entirely at the service of belief, the belief in the soul's passage through death to judgement and entry into purgatory on course to eternal communion with the God of Jesus Christ and with all those in the communion of his crucified and risen Body.

In this conference, I propose doing the following. First, I will give a brief first report on a recent conference held in London to explore how the idea of Purgatory could work in contemporary psychotherapy. Much common ground was found, particularly in relation to the themes of pride, hope and love.

Then we shall briefly indicate the context in which the *Dream* was written. In the third place, we shall expound the central theme of the **Dream**, the person dying and finding himself on the way to judgement, supported by prayer on earth and the angels at the approach to the throne of God on high.

Fourthly, we shall highlight the 'creedal formula' at the outset of the *Dream*. Newman's was always a faith based on revealed truths and so on dogma. 'As well can there be filial love without the fact of a father, as devotion without the fact of a Supreme Being.' (Apologia, 49) Of course, he stressed the truth that 'creeds and dogmas live in the one idea which they are designed to express, and which alone is substantive; and only necessary because the human mind cannot reflect upon it [the one idea], except piecemeal.' (OUS 331)

Fifthly, we shall return to that London conference which brought together historians, theologians and psychotherapists eager to initiate a

dialogue between faith-theology, on the one hand, and psychotherapy, on the other.

Finally, we shall suggest that this interface of faith and psychotherapy is a good example of what Newman called ‘the power of assimilation’ of dogma. Perhaps the reality of Purgatory can continue to throw guiding light on the aims, methods and therapies offered by psychotherapy, even acting as a critique of this developing human science.

1. The London Conference

In 2014 the London Anna Freud Centre hosted a conference on Religion and Psychotherapy. The Centre did so under the auspices of the Freud Museum. A report on the conference claims that ‘Sigmund Freud’s scepticism about belief in God is waning among psychotherapists and new links are being forged. Purgatory might play a part because therapy itself can be thought of as a profoundly purgatorial experience.’

2. Il *Purgatorio* of Dante Aligheri (1265-1321)

Now particularly instructive here is Dante’s depiction of Purgatory in *La Divina Comedia*. The great poem opens with an awakening:

*Midway along the journey of our life
I awoke to find myself in a dark wood
For I had wandered off from the straight path.*

Dante awakes from his egocentric slumber, discovers that he is lost, and is thus enabled to commence the process of purification. Glancing up and catching sight of a mountain bathed in light, he is filled with hope, realizing that the climbing of that height will be his salvation. He eagerly sets out but is blocked by three beasts: a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf, evocative of three types of sin – unchastity, violence and fraudulence.

The sufferings of Purgatory will be, for the most part, as intense as those of Hell, but with this difference: the former are accepted out of love – and hence become redemptive – while the latter are resisted and thus remain meaningless.

A somewhat surprising feature of the *Purgatorio* is the amount of time Dante is in ‘ante-purgatory,’ a sort of holding area occupied by

those who are waiting to begin the climb of the shining mountain. Now a key theme that runs all through the *Purgatorio* is sounded for the first time in this ante-purgatory: those on the way to salvation pray for and encourage one another. What comes to mind here is Augustine's magnificent definition of heaven as *totus Christus amans seipsum* ('the total Christ loving himself.') Paul told us in First Corinthians that if we do not love we are nothing: Purgatory is a training in love, whose effect is the formation of the Body of Christ. ('Realize that love pains ere it purifies.')

As he enters the purgatorial process, Dante receives the mark of seven 'P's' on his forehead, a sign of the seven deadly *peccata* or sins. These are the principal manifestations of Sin. Eventually Dante enters upon the seven-story mountain of Purgatory.

On the first story, Dante meets the prideful, those who were burdened in life with the heaviest and the most serious of the deadly sins. What, precisely, is pride? Pride, essentially, is self-regard. It is not so much thinking too much and too highly of oneself. Rather it is looking at oneself to the point that one is blind to God and to others. Pride is the self-preoccupation that prevents the exit from self, ecstasy. And so on with the other *peccata*...

A neat Dantean touch is that on each level of Purgatory, the sinners are met by a Marian counterexample. Thus the prideful hear the story of Mary's humble acquiescence in the divine will at the Annunciation, 'Let it be done to me according to your word.' (Lk 1:38)

3. Context of the *Dream*

Blessed John Henry Newman wrote the *Dream* in 1865. Now that was the year after the drama of the *Apologia* in which he had to expose his soul to the nation and provide his 'meaning' in answer to the taunting of Charles Kingsley. At the end of the year, he felt a certain gentle compulsion to write. The result was the *Dream*! Begun on Jan 17 and finished on Feb 7, 1865.

Newman's letters tell us that Miss F. M. Taylor, afterwards Mother Magdalen Taylor, foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, a convert interested in literary enterprises as a means of raising money for her charitable works, founded a periodical in 1864 under the name of *The Month*, the control of which passed a year later into the hands of the Jesuits. Naturally she had a great desire to enlist the author of the *Apologia* among her contributors. Her appeal had its effect: he promised to send her 'verses.': **these verses were the *Dream*.**

Edward Elgar received a copy of the poem in 1889 on the occasion of his marriage. Eventually he finished his now famous Oratorio in 1900. 'It's the best of me,' he wrote later.

4. Central Theme

John Henry Newman employs the language of the Church's Liturgy as when, early in *Gerontius*, the priest prays over the dying Gerontius.

*Go forth upon thy journey, Christian soul!
Go from this world! Go, in the name of God,
The omnipotent Father, who created thee!
Go in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord,
Son of the Living God, who bled for thee!
Go, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who
Hath been poured out on thee! (150-6)*

The God portrayed in the *Dream* is the key to the dramatic movement of soul of the dying Gerontius. This God is the God of Jesus Christ. He draws us. He is the God of immense generosity as shown in the incarnation of Jesus, his very Son. He is "the Incarnate God" "who bled for thee". He is the Holy Spirit 'poured out on thee.' The very being of this God is Trinity. And it is this Trinity that Gerontius has to encounter as love, as Gerontius enters eternity. This God has a face, the very face of Christ, and from this face there radiates the glory of a Love that gave all, that endured all, and that wishes to make all holy. It is a Love that is wiser, more generous and more beautiful than anyone could ever imagine, as Elgar's chorus memorably proclaims.

The soul of Gerontius comes near this great love and immediately feels acutely its own lack of love. The contrast is luminous, and in this setting, stinging, indeed, painful. This lack of love for the Incarnate God generates a pain in Gerontius. This is the purifying pain of Purgatory.

*It is the face of the Incarnate God
Shall smite thee with that keen and subtle pain.*

The accompanying angel had forewarned Gerontius in these words, designed to prepare him for judgement:

*That sight of the Most Fair
Will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too.*

Why this gladness and this piercing? In answering, Newman shows an acute and perceptive psychological insight that is a characteristic of his whole life. The piercing results from Gerontius' vivid realization that he has answered the love of the Incarnate God with cold half-heartedness. Gerontius consequently feels anguish over his lack of love now made clear above everything else.

*Learn that the flame of the Everlasting Love
Doth burn, ere it transform. (592-3).*

The 'Flame of Everlasting Love' is to be the very goal of all our striving. This has been a theme in the whole of Newman's life. He meditated upon it in his private journals. He wrote about it in his theological works. He proposed it incomparably in his sermons. For the vision of that 'Face of everlasting Love' the Father of Jesus Christ created Gerontius, for it the Son of God redeemed Gerontius, and for it the Holy Spirit sanctified him. It is the core of everlasting happiness, and the lasting joy of the human heart. As Gerontius now approaches the Judgement his awareness and longing for the encounter increases.

*And yet thou wilt heave a longing eye to dwell
Within the beauty of his countenance. (732-3)*

This longing, however, is penetrated by a contrasting but real sensation, namely, the realization that Gerontius has loved little and sinned much. He writes.

*There is a pleading in His pensive eyes
Will pierce thee to the quick, and trouble thee.
And thou wilt hate and loathe thyself; for, though
Now sinless, thou wilt feel that thou hast sinned,
As never thou didst feel; and wilt desire
To slink away, and hide thee from his sight. (726-31)*

Newman utilises a piercingly physical parallel to account for the knowledge which the disembodied soul has of its sins. Those who lose a hand or a foot on account of a painful disease often feel the pain of the disease long after amputation as if they still had that diseased hand or

foot. Today one calls it 'the phantom limb syndrome'. So too the disembodied soul.

The pain of Purgatory consists in the meeting, better, in the intersecting of these two sensations: the one, the utter attraction of the Face of divine Love and Beauty, the other, one's piercing awareness of lack of love.

*And these two pains, so counter and so keen, -
The longing for Him, when thou seest Him not;
The shame of self at thought of seeing Him; -
Will be thy veriest, sharpest purgatory. (734-7)*

Gerontius voluntarily and lovingly accepts his condition, which the Angel verbalizes in these terms.

*O happy, suffering soul! for it is safe,
Consumed, yet quickened, by the glance of God.*

Entering into sweet sorrow, the soul accepts his/her condition.

*Take me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be.
There, motionless and happy in my pain,
Lone, not forlorn, -
There will I sing my sad perpetual strain,
Until the morn.*

There is one thing that stands out in particular way in the poem: it is the distinctive identity of each human person. Gerontius is a definite person addressed by the God of Jesus Christ and called, through purification in Purgatory, into an eternal communion of life and love with the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Gerontius is a 'You' before the Eternal, a definite person before the divine Persons. Most wonderful of all, he is invited into the company of the Divine Persons. He is not swallowed into some kind of eternal vortex. Rather, he retains his personal *and* historical distinctiveness in his relation with God. *Cor ad cor loquitur*, [Heart speaks to heart], indeed.



No shades of reincarnation here, where the person loses distinctiveness and suffers absorption into the cosmic flux of animals and things! If reincarnation is a veiled cry for a second chance, a chance to do better the next time, as it were, Gerontius personifies the truth that there is only one opportunity, and that God alone can bring that one opportunity to fulfilment and perfect fruition. He does so by bringing Gerontius to permanent freedom, by giving him, '*a sense of freedom, as I were at length myself, And ne'er had been before.*' Like St Ignatius of Antioch, one of the Apostolic Fathers of the Church whom Newman esteemed, Newman contends that each of us will be fully a man or fully a woman only when we come into sight of the living God.

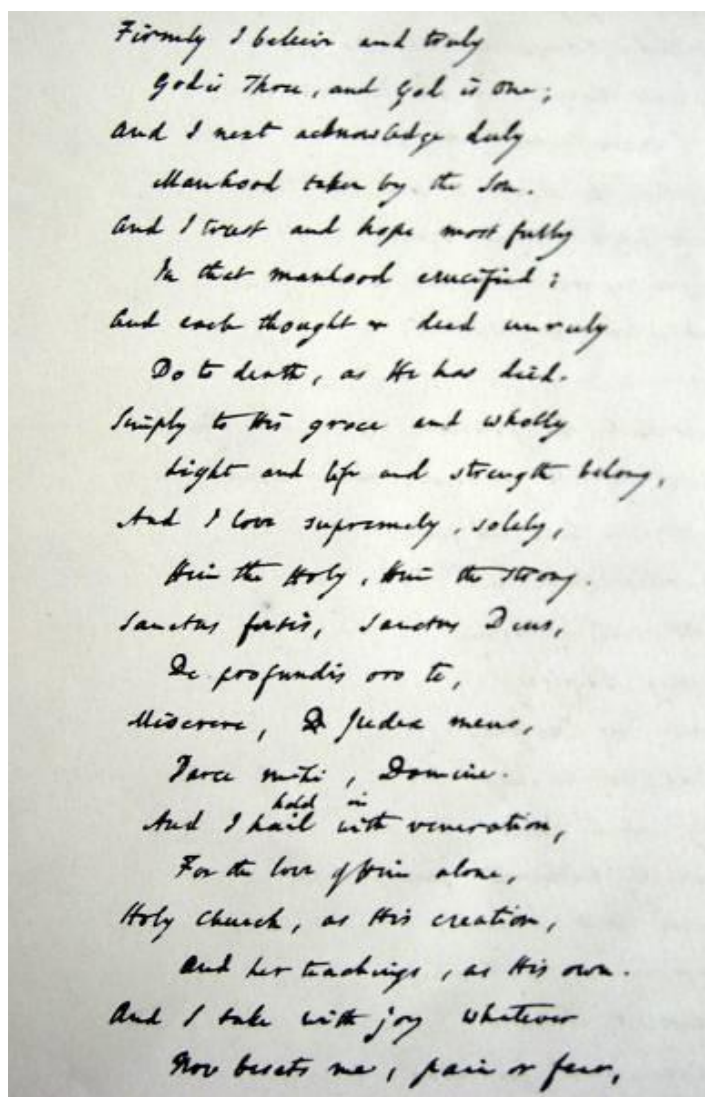
5. The Role of the Creeds

As already mentioned, Newman's faith places great emphasis on what we believe. His is the comment that the very content of faith is a motive of its credibility: *motivum credibilitatis!* Here we will look briefly at the role of professions of faith, or creeds, in the *Dream*.

In the first section, where Gerontius is still in this world but fully aware that he is dying rapidly, Gerontius speaks a very moving Creed.

*Firmly I believe and truly,
God is Three, and God is One;
And I next acknowledge duly
Manhood taken by the Son.
And I trust and hope most fully
In that Manhood crucified;
And each thought and deed unruly
Do to death, as He has died.
Simply to His grace and wholly
Light and life and strength belong,
And I love, supremely solely,
Him the holy, Him the strong.
And I hold in veneration,
For the love of Him alone,
Holy Church, as His creation,
And her teachings, as His own.
And I take with joy whatever
Now besets me, pain or fear,
And with a strong will I sever*

*All the ties which bind me here,
Adoration aye be given,
With and through the angelic host,
To the God of earth and heaven,
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.*



*Firmly I believe and truly
God is Three, and God is One;
And I next acknowledge duly
Manhood taken by the Son.
And I trust and hope most fully
In that manhood crucified;
And each thought or deed unwily
Do to death, as He has died.
Simply to His grace and wholly
Light and life and strength belong,
And I love supremely, solely,
Him the Holy, Him the Strong.
Sanctus factus, Sanctus Deus,
De profundis oro te,
Misereere, Domine meus,
Parce mihi, Domine.
And I hail with veneration,
For the love of Him alone,
Holy Church, as His creation,
And her teachings, as His own.
And I take with joy whatever
God bestows me, pain or fear,*

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And then towards the end of the *Dream* there is that famous Creed written as a doxology, as is often the case with the apostolic writings where creeds are often also doxologies. (see Eph 1:3-10; Col 1:3f)

*'Praise to the holiest in the heights
And in the depths be praise:
In all His words most wonderful;
Most sure in all his ways!*

O loving wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe,
Should strive and should prevail;

And that a higher gift than grace
Should flesh and blood refine,
God's Presence and His very Self,
And Essence all-divine.

O generous love! that He who smote
In man for man the foe,
The double agony in man
For man should undergo;

And in the garden secretly,
And on the cross on high,
Should teach His brethren and
inspire
To suffer and to die.

and now the Assembly, as in former times,
with its glad expression shout
Peace to the Beloved in the light,
and in the light to praise,
In all His ways and
that we should be all wrapped,
that we in all His ways.

O loving Wisdom of our God!
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

O wisest Love! that flesh and blood
Which did in Adam fail,
Should strive afresh against the foe,
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6. The power of Assimilation of Dogma

One of the insights of John Henry Newman was into the ability of Catholic truth to assimilate the truth emerging in the human sciences. We are quite aware of this in relation to the Church's social teaching where the light of revelation culls and welcomes, purifies and incorporates insights emerging in sociology. We may not be quite as aware in relation to psychology where the dialogue of faith and psychology advances.

Only the individual who is able to love can grow. Freud realised this. So too, the soul must remain on Dante's first ledge of purgatory until it can acknowledge its pride and then its need to open up to God's compassionate and merciful healing and therapy. Initially this opening is undesirable, painful and frightening. Think of the conversion story of a Blessed Charles de Foucauld, or a St Augustine or a Thomas Merton!

In fact, the psychoanalytical exploration of our states of pride, envy, rage, revenge and hate can read remarkably like the exploration of the seven deadly sins in the Church Fathers. Yes, psychotherapy and theology enter into dialogue here. And John Henry Newman would be particularly well disposed towards that dialogue. More, he would see in it an instance of the assimilative power of revealed truth: the content of Revelation.

A critic of the *Dream* speaks of "the poetry of doctrine" in Newman's writings. *The Dream of Gerontius* is a shining example of the poetry of belief, the poetry within faith and belief. Poetry is close to music, since poetry underlines the beauty of language, and music underlines the concord of sweet sound. It seems profoundly appropriate that the poetry of the *Dream of Gerontius* became music in Elgar.