

# Newman's *Callista*: An Apologia for Ritual

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Newman's *Callista* (1855) has been difficult to place: scholars have tended simultaneously to dismiss it for what they perceive as its Gothic melodrama and to criticize its realist lack of sensationalism. I propose that the text has been misread, in part because of misleading assumptions about the nineteenth century historical novel. Rather than simply a religious polemic, I suggest that *Callista* can be read as an apologia for ritual, which is presented as an exploration of the spiritual reach of language itself and its power ritually to transform the historical moment. This involves the deliberate rewriting and dismantling of the 'medieval', Gothic caricatures so frequently associated with the anti-Catholic narratives of the time.

**P**ossessed with mediæval notions, they trace all the faults and follies of our modern social and political life to the decline of Church influence, and their daily labour is to revive it in all its old supremacy. In dogma they are Sacramentarians; in devotional sentiment, Mystics; in habits and tendencies, Mediævalists; in sympathy and aim, strong Romanists.<sup>1</sup>

These scathing words of J. H. Rigg were aimed at the Anglo-Catholic movement, a development of the earlier Tractarianism of which John Henry Newman had lately been a pioneer: the words embody the prevailing nineteenth-century suspicion of sacramental religion as a retrograde "medieval" movement with dangerous Catholic overtones. The association of ritual practices with a Gothic, regressive medieval world was a common feature of anti-Catholic writings of the mid-

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<sup>1</sup> J. H. Rigg, 'The Catholic Revival', *London Quarterly Review* 10 (1867): 33. Cf. Jennifer A. Palmgren and Lorretta M. Holloway (eds), *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism* (London, 2005), p. 147.

nineteenth century, in which, for example, stories about conniving priests who used confession or the poetry and music of the Mass to tempt young, sensitive women away from their male guardians into a life of seclusion in a nunnery, abound.<sup>2</sup> As a Tractarian, Newman deliberately modelled Church ceremonies on an aesthetic and spiritual appreciation of the medieval liturgy, resonating with the Gothic revival.<sup>3</sup> But his understanding of ritual was more nuanced than a fascination with its aesthetic trappings, as is evident in the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, written when he converted to Catholicism in 1845. In this essay Newman emphasises the instinctive, inartificial character of spiritual ceremonies by describing them as the ‘natural means through which the mind relieves itself of devotional and penitential emotions’.<sup>4</sup> He further nuances their historical quality, emphasising the importance of the Christian ‘idea’ that must be preserved across the centuries in the Creed and liturgy.<sup>5</sup> In this paper I wish to suggest that Newman’s most comprehensive defence of ritual can be found in his second and last novel, *Callista* (1855),<sup>6</sup> an historical novel set in pagan antiquity and based on the writings of St Cyprian. I argue that, through a detailed comparison of pagan and Christian rites, the novel deliberately sets out to dismantle Gothic caricatures of Catholic ceremonies, presenting Christian rite as a universal language that transcends and reinvents the historical moment.

### Nineteenth-century depictions of ritual

Catholic ritual in the nineteenth century was commonly portrayed as a theatre, either an absurdly excessive and empty event or a magical performance, redolent of the allure of a remote time and disguising

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<sup>2</sup> Maureen Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature* (Liverpool, 2007), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London, 1845), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> See Nicholas Lash, ‘Faith and History: Some Reflections on Newman’s “Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine”’, *Irish Theological Quarterly* 38 (1971): 224–41 (p. 239).

<sup>6</sup> John Henry Newman, *Callista: A Sketch of the Third Century* (London, 1855). References are to chapter and page number of the first edition.

satanic motivations. In his sensational orations, the ex-priest Father Gavazzi, played to Protestant disdain for theatricality in Catholic ceremonials:

I will now prove by facts that you have nothing of spirit or truth in the Catholic processions, and that the nature of them is pagan ... The procession of Corpus Domini, or the body of Christ, is the greatest in all Catholic countries ... The great square of St. Peter is converted into a great pit, with boxes at the sides; it becomes the greatest theatre in the world, because it is the theatre in which plays the Pope himself. Drapery, carpets, velvet, and silk decorations, citron and orange trees, flowers are arranged with the utmost precision and taste, such as is displayed by good stage managers. What is the spectacle of the Prophet at Covent-Garden to this procession, my dear brethren? Nothing. Boys, priests, bishops, prelates, and cardinals arrayed in dresses, costly with gold and jewellery, and attended by servants in red liveries; and after all comes the Pope himself—the successor of St. Peter (laughter)—carried upon the shoulders of his servants, and adoring Christ in the water. It is all a farce, and therefore the Pope must adore the water in the presence of the people, though I do not think he believes in it ... all, especially the lovely women who are spectators, are very much excited to devotion by the noble guard ...<sup>7</sup>

Gavazzi's words appeal here to the Protestant association between theatricality and debauchery by evoking the world of the stage, which is presented as distinctly irrational, mediocre and superficial.<sup>8</sup> Gavazzi spends a lot of time elaborating on the theatrical details of the scene which have been deliberately and tastefully arranged in order to maximise their effect on spectators: the scene is designed to appeal to emotions, principally affecting women who are assumed to have

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<sup>7</sup> Alessandro Gavazzi, *Six Lectures Delivered in the Round Room of the Rotunda, Dublin by Father Gavazzi; with a Biographical Sketch of the Author* (Toronto, 1853), p. 236.

<sup>8</sup> This is a common anti-theatrical trope among Protestant writers, dating back to the beginning of the nineteenth century: William Wilberforce's tract entitled *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* (London, 1798), p. 316, warns against the theatre as a place of overindulgence and uncontrolled self-expression, which assaults rational thought and encourages immoral and spurious behaviour.

comparatively weak intellectual judgement.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the ceremony is deliberately distanced from the modern, intellectual and objective world of Protestant faith: Gavazzi insists that it is instead ‘pagan’, belonging to a remote, pre-Christian and implicitly unenlightened time of spectacle, lavish materialism and debauchery.

This critique of tawdry ceremonial, which is presented as divested of any authentic spiritual and emotional content, contrasts with some accounts of the liturgy that admit a powerful and dangerous mystical allure. These accounts are heavily influenced by Gothic novels, drawing their descriptions from common anti-Catholic stereotypes such as secluded convents, cult-like pageantries and satanic monks. Sensational anti-Catholic writings are haunted by rituals—particularly confession and the ordination of nuns—that are often associated with the secluded convent environment, the site of horrible crimes and atrocities.<sup>10</sup>

Eliza Smith, in her personal story about the few years that she spent as a novice in a Catholic convent, describes the allure of a Catholic Mass in a way that recalls the horror and allure of Gothic narratives:

The white habits and flowing veils of the sisters, contrasted by the black, monkish costume of the brothers, as headed by the pale intellectual-looking priest, they slowly swept around the church, revived many a glowing imagination of olden time. And when at last, pausing, they all knelt before the altar, and the deep rich voice of the priest intoned one of the church’s anthems, which was immediately taken up by the effective and well-arranged choir, the illusion was at its height; and with a bounding heart and flushed cheek, I mentally exclaimed, ‘Surely this is no other than the house of God and the very gate of heaven.’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Diana Peschier, *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses: The Case of Charlotte Brontë* (New York, 2005), p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive review of the demonized, prison-like, isolated convent space in anti-Catholic narratives, see Peschier, *Nineteenth Century Anti-Catholic Discourses*, 74. Peschier further draws a connection between the description of convents and confessionals, both of which are powerfully associated with the secretive horrors of the mental asylum (p. 103).

<sup>11</sup> Eliza Smith, *The Progress of Beguilement to Romanism: A Personal Narrative* (London, 1850), p. 28.

Like Gavazzi's ceremony, Smith emphasises that the Mass is a theatre, with its actors arranged so as to create a stark visual contrast between the white habits of the nuns and the black costumes of the monks. Indeed, their every action (sweeping around the Church and then dramatically kneeling together before the altar), is designed to have maximal impact on the congregation. These actions are accompanied by the deep singing of the priest and choir—a concert of sight and sound that work together to produce a ritualistic heightening of emotion, confounding logic, so that Smith experiences it as if in a dream, only partly able to understand events. Significantly this display is a deceptive and dangerous illusion, creating the impression of heaven while concealing explicitly satanic motives: at the end of her narrative Smith laments that the Church is full of 'foul abuses', stemming from the 'one source from which all evil springs'.<sup>12</sup>

It is noteworthy that in both examples examined here no direct speech is included: Catholic ritual is presented as a kind of anti-language that defeats clear, articulate thought with an overwhelming flood of sights and sounds. Directly opposed to logical, masculine, Protestant discourse, these ceremonies are furthermore presented as relics from a distant past, with the past's magical, exotic appeal, but also with its assumed chaotic, materialist and morally degenerate qualities. In this way anti-Catholic narratives play to a nineteenth-century narrative of progress, safely separating the Catholic world from the modern Protestant alternative.

### *Callista*

*Callista* belongs to a tradition of religious historical novels that George Eliot approvingly described as 'a very extensive literature [adding] largely to the materials which must be mastered by the future Church historian who would qualify himself for describing the workings of the late controversies on the mind of our generation'.<sup>13</sup> As Eliot's words imply, the historical novel enjoyed considerable favour and authority among Newman's contemporaries, and was associated with the lofty ideals of realism: tasked with the job of justifying and anchoring present beliefs that were increasingly felt to

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>13</sup> George Eliot, 'Religious Stories', *Fraser's Magazine* 38.223 (1848): 150–166 (p. 150).

be unstable,<sup>14</sup> the historical novelist was also supposed to be a master of psychological particularity, using the insight and intuition of the novelist to probe beneath the surface of historical facts in order to represent the totality of experience in all of its variety and detail.<sup>15</sup> Newman himself frequently turned to history to legitimise his religious outlook, opining, for example, in a review of John William Bowden's *The Life and Pontificate of Gregory the Seventh* (1840) that 'it is difficult justly to estimate the injury done to our whole view of Gospel truth by our ignorance of ecclesiastical history':<sup>16</sup> Newman's approach in *Callista* is therefore in keeping with the prevailing belief in the authoritative power of a study of the past, and a fitting choice for a polemic against anti-Catholicism.

But the realist assumptions about nineteenth-century historical fiction have also been misleading with regard to the reception of Newman's novel. This is partly because elevated realist ideals about historical fiction were often at odds with the novels themselves: indeed, rather than remaining faithful to historical verisimilitude, both secular and religious historical novels openly entertained Romantic imagery, sentimental and sensational narratives, and the Gothic ceremonial with which Walter Scott became closely associated.<sup>17</sup> Critics who hold these novels up to George Eliot's standards of historical realism tend to dismiss their medievalism, as is evident in John Bowen's assertion that many of these novels are prone to 'lose their narrative dynamic in stifling scholasticism or romanticization',<sup>18</sup> or the trend among some commentators to suggest that the Gothic elements in Scott undermine the novels' authority and overall effectiveness.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840–1880* (London, 1978), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Neil McCaw, *George Eliot and Victorian Historiography: Imagining the National Past* (London, 2000), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> John Henry Newman, *Essays Critical and Historical* (1871), new edn, 2 vols (London, 1897), II, 250.

<sup>17</sup> See Royal W. Rhodes, *The Lion and the Cross: Early Christianity in Victorian Novels* (Columbus, OH, 1995), p. 4, and Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel*, 120.

<sup>18</sup> John Bowen, 'The Historical Novel', in Patrick Brantlinger and William Thesing (eds), *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Oxford, 2002), 244–59 (p. 245).

<sup>19</sup> Tom Bragg, *Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century British Historical Novel* (London and New York, 2016), p. 9.

But *Callista* has been especially difficult for commentators to place: it has been criticised for its 'crude religious melodrama',<sup>20</sup> and apparent failure to engage with secular and psychological realities,<sup>21</sup> to 'bring the scene to life or allow [the] characters to act easily and naturally'.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, it has simultaneously been lambasted for its apparent ordinariness: Leon B. Litvack argues that in avoiding the sensationalism of Kingsley's *Hypatia*, *Callista*'s death scene is by comparison 'flat', and 'evasive', failing to achieve a spiritual effect.<sup>23</sup> From one angle, it is clear that Newman has gone to a good deal of effort to give the novel the appearance of reality, and that he has consciously chosen to set the action in a notably ordinary provincial town.<sup>24</sup> But the confusion around the novel's reception suggests that it is neither a straightforwardly realist historical novel, nor a Gothic Romance. Newman clearly intends something different, as suggested in a letter to William Oates on 3 July 1872, where he argues that the novel was never intended as 'a mere storybook'.<sup>25</sup> I want to argue that in *Callista*, Newman is not so much concerned with the study of character as he is with the latent spiritual and ritual potential of language itself. In this sense the novel can be read as an apologia for ritual, which, in direct opposition to anti-Catholic narratives, is presented as language at its most heightened and divinely inspired, a discourse that runs counter to and subverts that of secular history.

The novel achieves this effect by dramatising various ritual behaviours, both pagan and Christian, and it is in the implicit contrast between these two approaches that the argument in favour of Catholic

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<sup>20</sup> James Gaffney, 'Newman on the Common Roots of Morality and Religion', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (1988): 143–159 (p. 149).

<sup>21</sup> George Levine, 'Newman's Fiction and the Failure of Reticence', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 8 (1966): 359–373 (p. 372).

<sup>22</sup> Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel*, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Leon B. Litvack 'Callista, Martyrdom, and the Early Christian Novel in the Victorian age', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 17 (1993): 159–73 (p. 169).

<sup>24</sup> Alan G. Hill, 'Originality and Realism in Newman's novels', in Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill (eds), *Newman After a Hundred Years*, (Oxford, 1990), 21–42 (p. 39).

<sup>25</sup> Newman to William Oates, 3 July 1872, in *Aftermaths, January 1872 to December 1873*, ed. Thomas Gornall, SJ (Oxford, 1981), vol. 26 of *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. C. S. Desain et al., 32 vols (Oxford, 1961–2008), XXVI, 129–130 (p. 130).

rites is most powerfully conveyed. Christian ritual is moreover not presented as an isolated event but as a continuous process through which history itself is renewed. The point is made explicitly in the opening chapter where Newman describes the symbols of worship in Agellius's cottage:

... on one side of the room was rudely painted a red cross, with doves about it, as is found in early Christian shrines to this day. So long had been the peace of the Church, that the tradition of persecution seemed to have been lost; and Christians allowed themselves in the profession of their faith at home, cautious as they might be in public places; as freely as now in England, where we do not scruple to raise crucifixes within our churches and houses, though we shrink from doing so within sight of the hundred cabs and omnibuses which rattle past them. (*Callista*, c. iii, pp. 20–21)

Catholics—whether in pagan times or in nineteenth-century England—are defined by their symbols and the ritual profession of their faith, which remain constant despite the fluctuations of history. They are also defined by their secrecy, the fact that their rituals take place in private, away from the noise and rattle of the secular world. For Newman this solitude is far from the threatening confinement of melodramatic anti-Catholic writings: it is not an imprisonment but an escape from persecution and from the noisy distractions of the outside world.

It is notable that the solitude and comparative quiet of these holy spaces does not suggest an empty silence, nor does it confound or obfuscate the senses as is so often the case in anti-Catholic narratives. Rather, it inspires a more intense and consoling type of conversation, suggested when Agellius' rituals help to assuage his loneliness: 'He signs himself with the holy cross, and sweet reviving thoughts enliven him. He names the sacred Name, and it is like ointment poured out upon his soul. He rises; he kneels down under the dread symbol of his salvation; and he begins his evening prayer' (c. iii, p. 23). Rather than meaningless and perplexing, each action constitutes an avowal to which Agellius receives an immediate response: the response is expressed emotionally rather than verbally and powerfully conveys the sense that 'there is One that cares for [him], and loves [him]' because of his 'faith' and 'purity'.



Newman's sense of Catholic rite as language at its most intense is thrown into relief by his dramatization of the supposed falsity of the pagan alternative, the depiction of which ironically recalls and undermines some common gothic anti-Catholic stereotypes. The lurid scenes describing the witch, Gurta, and Juba's ensuing madness, form an interesting counterpoint to Agellius' private worship in his home. Agellius' symbols are all carefully named, and are, moreover coupled with biblical parchment which bears the signs of careful study and thought. The scene is harmonious, orderly and tastefully arranged with the Blessed Virgin Mary placed in the centre (c. iii, p. 21). In contrast to the tidy arrangement of Agellius's Christian home, Gurta's home is chaotic and threatening, a primeval forest that speaks 'of the very beginnings of the world' but 'no longer . . . exclusively of its Maker' (c. xxiii, p. 201). The description proceeds as follows:

Upon the trees hung the emblems and objects of idolatry, and the turf was traced with magical characters. Littered about were human bones, horns of wild animals, wax figures, spermaceti taken from vaults, large nails, to which portions of flesh adhered, as if they had had to do with malefactors, metal plates engraved with strange characters, bottled blood, hair of young persons, and old rags. (c. xxxiii, p. 201)

It is significant that, like the spaces inhabited by the Christians, this is a secret spot hidden from the day to day reality of Roman life; but whereas the Christians' spaces are set apart from the corrupt and worldly Rome, in this case the secluded nature of the place renders it sinister and taboo, its isolation implying perverse and nefarious deeds that are melodramatically embodied by the horrifying presence of samples of blood and hair.

The description is significant for its similarities to the ways in which Catholic Churches were commonly described in novels by Newman's less partial contemporaries. In *Romola*, for example, George Eliot describes a Florentine Church in the following way:

In a chapel on the left-hand of the nave, wreathed with silver lamps, was seen unveiled the miraculous fresco of the Annunciation, which, in Tito's oblique view of it from the right-hand side of the nave, seemed dark with the excess of light around it . . . [S]preading high and far over the walls and ceiling there was another multitude, also pressing close against each other, that they might be nearer the potent Virgin.

It was the crowd of votive waxen images, the effigies of great personages, clothed in their habit as they lived: Florentines of high name in their black silk lucco, as when they sat in council; popes, emperors, kings, cardinals, and famous condottieri with plumed morion seated on their chargers; all notable strangers who passed through Florence or had aught to do with its affairs—Mohammedans, even, in well-tolerated companionship with Christian cavaliers; some of them with faces blackened and robes tattered by the corroding breath of centuries, others fresh and bright in new red mantle or steel corselet, the exact doubles of the living. And wedged in with all these were detached arms, legs, and other members, with only here and there a gap where some image had been removed for public disgrace, or had fallen ominously, as Lorenzo's had done six months before. It was a perfect resurrection-swarm of remote mortals and fragments of mortals, reflecting, in their varying degrees of freshness, the sombre dinginess and sprinkled brightness of the crowd below.<sup>26</sup>

The macabre, dismembered wax images in Eliot's chapel scene are echoed by Gorta's hideous collection of human and animal material. Both spaces are cluttered and chaotic and both represent a horrifying and demonic assault on human dignity. But whereas Eliot's church is a political space, exalting the corrupt 'popes, emperors, kings, cardinals, and famous condottieri' of yore,<sup>27</sup> Newman is at pains to emphasise that Gorta's rituals are ancient and completely removed from Roman civilised society: the evil that is on display here is clearly of a different sort, primal and entirely spiritual in character.

In fact Gorta's meeting with Juba, and the latter's subsequent succumbing to a melodramatic demonic possession, is played out as a psychomachia that occurs outside of the text's social and historical dimensions but nevertheless intersects with them in important ritual ways—it is, after all, only through contact with Callista's martyred body that Juba is freed from his suffering (c. xxxvi, p. 295). Though Newman carefully states that 'it is impossible to determine' whether the 'woman and her traps truly were really and directly connected with the powers beneath the earth' (c. xxiii, p. 201), what happens shortly thereafter would seem to belie any doubt:

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<sup>26</sup> George Eliot, *Romola* (London, 1863), c. xiv, p. 221.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

An animal of some wonderful species ... proceeded to creep and crawl, moeving and twisting as it went, along the trees and shrubs which rounded the grassplot. When it came up to the old woman, it crouched at her feet, and then rose up upon its hind legs and begged. She took hold of the uncouth beast and began to fondle it in her arms, muttering something in its ear. At length, when Juba stopped for a moment in his song, she suddenly flung it right at him, with great force, saying, 'Take that!' She then gave utterance to a low inward laugh, and leaned herself back against the trunk of the tree upon which she was sitting, with her knees drawn up almost to her chin. The blow seemed to act on Juba as a shock on his nervous system, both from its violence and its strangeness. He stood still for a moment, and then, without saying a word, he turned away, and walked slowly down the hill, as if in a maze. Then he sat down ...

In an instant up he started again with a great cry, and began running at the top of his speed. He thought he heard a voice speaking in him; and, however fast he ran, the voice, or whatever it was, kept up with him. (c. xxxiii, pp. 206–07)

The animal from a 'wonderful species' introduces a sense of the uncanny which becomes more insistent as Gurta apparently communicates some spell to it and then bizarrely flings it in Juba's direction. The entire ritual is so fantastic that it unsettles the text's realistic boundaries and shifts into a decidedly melodramatic tone as Juba's terrified escape from the voice inside him unfolds. The episode is important firstly for the way in which it brings ritual behaviours to the fore, rendering human relationships secondary to the spiritual forces that move in and through them. In such a spiritually charged environment 'superstition' becomes a meaningless word and indeed Juba's former arrogant dismissal of both Christian and pagan rites is proved to be an absurd position to take.

But Gurta's witchcraft also fundamentally perverts the ritual language in which it partakes. Whereas Agellius's private worship involves a deliberate action and a response that is clearly understood by the celebrant, Gurta's words are unintelligible and her behaviour erratic as indicated by her suddenly flinging the animal at Juba. The confusion about whether or not Gurta has the power to communicate with these nefarious forces as she believes she does, is important,

for while Juba's experience makes it clear that such forces do indeed exist, they do not necessarily respond to human whims. Indeed their presence in the human realm is chaotic and disorienting and frustrates the potential for true communion: the voice inside Juba does not respond to or engage with him but instead directs him to perform bizarre, threatening and debasing behaviours, such as destroying the god Pan after lapping up the blood of the sacrifices (c. xxiii, p. 211). This is very different from Agellius, for whom ritual involves a reciprocal relationship that, rather than humiliating him, elevates him above his worldly worries while simultaneously affirming his spiritual worth.

### **Roman rites and riots**

In contrast to Gurta's witchery, which happens in solitary, taboo spaces, Roman rites are a public and primarily political affair. Cornelius describes the Secular Games in the following manner:

'Ah! but you should have seen the procession from the Capitol ... There you saw, all in one coup-d'oeil, the real good blood of Rome, the young blood of the new generation, and promise of the future; the sons of patrician and consular families, of imperators, orators, conquerors, statesmen. They rode at the head of the procession, fine young fellows, six abreast; and still more of them on foot. Then came the running horses and the chariots, the boxers, the wrestlers, and other combatants, all ready for the competition. The whole school of gladiators then turned out, boys and all, with their masters, dressed in red tunics, and splendidly armed. They formed three bands, and they went forward gaily, dancing and singing the Pyrrhic ... There was a lot of satyrs, jumping and frisking, in burlesque of the martial dances which preceded them. There was a crowd of trumpeters and horn-blowers; ministers of the sacrifices with their victims, bulls and rams, dressed up with gay wreaths; drivers, butchers, haruspices, heralds; images of gods with their cars of ivory or silver, drawn by tame lions and elephants ... Last of all came the emperor himself.' (c. v, pp. 35-36)

Although the description is given from the approving perspective of Cornelius and therefore lacks the mocking tone of many anti-Catholic tirades such as Gavazzi's, it nevertheless mirrors some of their key features, such as the flashy theatricality of the procession, as well as its immoral worldliness and exaltation of power. The grand procession

is colourful and theatrical, disguising its brutal and inhumane intentions. The chaotic parade of heralds, gladiators, butchers etc. is simultaneously ostentatious and disorienting, so that it is easy to overlook the ministers of the sacrifices with their victims or the fact that the gladiators are being led to their deaths: in fact Cornelius' words lack any sense of moral outrage, and distract his listeners' attention away from the potential meaning of what he witnessed, encouraging them instead to view it as pure political spectacle. The ritual games are undeniably captivating, and their dramatic flavour is presented as an element of ritual behaviours in general, whether Christian, worldly or superstitious. But while both Gorta's secretive rites and the Roman Games have a certain allure that separates them from mundane events, their dramatic magic is distinctly nefarious and duplicitous, enshrining and exalting reckless and depraved behaviour.

In fact, these ceremonies, even that which is proudly endorsed by Rome, are defined as at bottom rash and illogical, perverting the natural ritual impulse that gives rise to them by ignoring or misreading the signs of heaven. This is blatantly obvious in the riot scenes following the terrible plague of locusts:

'O wretched minds of men! O blind hearts!' truly cries out a great heathen poet, but on grounds far other than the true ones. The true ground of such a lamentation is, that men do not interpret the signs of the times and of the world as He intends who has placed these signs in the heavens; that when Mane, Thecel, Phares, is written upon the ethereal wall, they have no inward faculty to read them withal; and that when they go elsewhere for one learned in tongues, instead of taking Daniel, who is used to converse with Angels, they rely on Magi or Chaldeans, who know only the languages of earth. (c. xvi, p. 140)

The rites in which the famished people engage constitute a flagrant misunderstanding of the signs of God. Because they remain deaf to a spiritual language (the signs of which are self-evident), they condemn themselves by turning instead to their 'vain idols' and rites and upholding a 'lie'. This suggests that pagan ritual perverts true conversation: it is a kind of miscommunication, a mistaken response to a message from God. It has recourse only to the 'languages of the earth', rather than to the exalted language of Daniel, who is 'used to converse with Angels'. Further, such practices deny the importance

of the inner life—the private and instinctive spiritual conscience that encourages a true response to symbols of the transcendent. The seeming indifference of the heavens to the people's acts of worship, propels them into more and more bizarre behaviour: they seek out 'old crones' with their 'strange rites, the stranger the more welcome' (c. xvi, p. 142). The rituals are therefore valued not for their truth but for their bizarreness, intensifying the ignorance which initially inspired the rioters.

There is an element of parody to this behaviour that is reflected to a lesser extent both in the description of the Roman Games and in Gorta's spells, a combination of the ludicrous and the violent that echoes and perverts religious practices. The riot both is and is not a religious movement: on the one hand the more respectable religious institutions such as the 'Temple of Mercury, the Temple of the Genius of Rome near the Capitol, the hierophants of Isis, the Minerva, the Juno, [and] the Esculapius' are horrified by the uprising and refuse to associate themselves with it (c. xvii, p.149). On the other hand it subsumes many features of the popular religious practices in a chaotic parade:

the old rites, many and diversified, if separately obscure, which came from Punic times; the new importations from Syria and Phrygia, and a number of other haunts and schools of depravity and crime, did their part in swelling or giving character to the concourse. The hungry and idle rabble, the filthy beggars who fed on the offal of the sacrifices, the drivers and slaughterers of the beasts sacrificed; the tumblers and mountebanks who amused the gaping market-people; dancers, singers, pipers from low taverns and drinking-houses; infamous creatures, young and old, men and boys, half naked and not half sober ... (c. xvii, pp. 149–50)

Here ritual slides into revelry as no distinction is made between worship and entertainment. Both religious and theatrical practices are marked by a lack of control and structure. There is a disorganised mix of secular and religious customs which are all outlets for 'depravity and crime': a colourful array of debauched individuals is attracted to the obscure cults alongside dancers, mountebanks and other dissipated entertainers. There is also a predilection for victimization, symbolized by the priest of the Punic Saturn or child-devourer and his followers. These individuals as well as other religious fanatics are garishly

theatrical, clad in fiery garments, ribbons and rags and 'smeared' with paint (c. xvii, p. 150). In this way the mob invokes and corrupts the power of ceremonial practices: music, dance and costumes become part of a destructive chaos, emptied of meaning, and driven onwards by the single-minded and illogical desire to feed the Christians to the lions.

The theatrical dimension is invoked differently in Christian rituals: whereas these elements overwhelm and distort spiritual meaning in the examples discussed, for Christian celebrants they are an essential part of a symbolic language through which spiritual meaning is communicated. The most powerful depiction of Christian ritual in the novel is the Mass that Agellius experiences for the first time in his life:

By this time they had gained the end of the long gallery, and passed through a second apartment, when suddenly the sounds of the ecclesiastical chant burst on the ear of Agellius. How strange, how transporting to him! he was almost for the first time coming home to his father's house, though he had been a Christian from a child, and never, as he trusted, to leave it, now that it was found. He did not know how to behave himself, nor indeed where to go. Aspar conducted him into the seats set apart for the faithful; he knelt down and burst into tears. (c. xxx, pp. 260–61)

It is notable that Agellius first experiences the Mass through its music and that this sound affects him deeply with strong, spiritual emotion. The emphasis is once again on the secluded nature of the ceremonies, the fact that they are hidden from would-be persecutors. Like Gurt's lair, the secluded nature of the place lends it an air of uncanny magic, but it is simultaneously a familiar environment associated with the sacred privacy of the family: indeed, Agellius may not understand all of the proceedings but is immediately moved to tears, feeling as if he is returning home (c. xxx, p. 261). The proceedings of the Mass are described in scrupulous detail:

The celebrant then advanced: he stood at the further side of the altar, where the candles are now, with his face to the people, and then began the holy sacrifice. First he incensed the oblata, that is, the loaves and chalice, as an acknowledgment of God's sovereign dominion, and as a token of uplifted prayer to Him. Then the roll of prayers was brought him, while the deacon

began what is sometimes called the bidding prayer, being a catalogue of the various subjects for which intercession is to be made, after the manner of the *Oremus dilectissimi*, now used on Good Friday . . . Great stress was laid on the Lord's Prayer, which in one sense terminated the function. It was said aloud by the people, and when they said, 'Forgive us our trespasses,' they beat their breasts. (c. xxx, p. 264)

Unlike the actions of the pagan mob, the celebrant's actions are not arbitrary and are carefully explained: the loaves and chalice are raised as a symbol of God's dominion and a token of prayer to him. These actions are therefore a way of interpreting the Christian message and communicating with the Christian God. The congregation is also swept up in a powerful, symbolic emotion—the way in which they beat their breasts when they call on God to forgive them is indicative of the pain of sin. But it is a co-ordinated action, a sign of communal suffering and redemption, unlike the violent self-inflicted pain of the rabid pagan mob. The expressive actions are also noteworthy for their universality: Newman makes a point of emphasising that the bidding prayers anticipate the Pope's intentions of his own day. Thus the ritual is not inspired by the frenzied emotions of the moment: it is born out of a quiet sense of communal suffering and sin and a universal need to communicate with the divine and the transcendent which extends across time and space.

The effect is poetic but is clearly beyond the power of mere poetry to achieve, as Callista's case proves. Throughout the novel, both poetry and ritual are presented as a language through which the characters make sense of the loneliness of earthly life. But, for all of her artistic talent, Callista's poetry can only ever look backwards, lamenting time lost and unable to break beyond the historical realm into the transcendent, permanent and meaningful space that she craves. Before Agellius asks for her hand in marriage she takes refuge in a song, rather than responding to Aristo's solicitations. She sings a song entitled 'Heathen Greece' which was composed by Newman himself:

Where are the islands of the blest?  
 They stud the Ægean sea;  
 And where the deep Elysian rest?  
 It haunts the vale where Peneus strong  
 Pours his incessant stream along,



While craggy ridge and mountain bare  
 Cut keenly through the liquid air,  
 And, in their own pure tints arrayed,  
 Scorn earth's green robes which change and fade,  
 And stand in beauty undecayed,  
 Guards of the bold and free

For what is Afric but the home  
 Of burning Phlegethon?  
 What the low beach and silent gloom,  
 And chilling mists of that dull river,  
 Along whose bank the thin ghosts shiver,  
 The thin, wan ghosts that once were men,  
 But Tauris, isle of moor and fen;  
 Or, dimly traced by seaman's ken,  
 The pale-cliffed Albion?

(c. x, p. 95)

The song is written in the elegiac tone reminiscent of pagan poetry and expresses Callista's longing for an elusive heaven, a world of permanence and beauty that remains unaffected by earthly concerns or the passage of time. But the world that she now inhabits is shadowy and, like Styx, haunted by the past, by the memory of those who were once alive. The song expresses the pagan preoccupation with *vóσtoς*, the journey back home, while simultaneously foregrounding the hopelessness of such an endeavour, and the elusiveness of what has been lost. In this way Newman is able to emphasise the intensity of Callista's longing which cannot be framed solely in terms of human history and language. It is notable that Newman's echoing of the pagan style accords a certain tragic nobility to earthly experience, while simultaneously foregrounding the need for a new kind of language that would result in the Christian transcendence of this dilemma. In this way Newman deftly shifts the parameters of the argument about ritual away from the gothic preoccupation with theatre and deception and towards a philosophical question of how to find a language that legitimately reconciles earthly and spiritual dimensions.

## Conclusion

Ian Watt argues that Realism ought to be understood as a feature of style rather than of content, for it 'does not reside in the kind of life [the novel] represents, but in the way that it presents it'.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that the realist novel is a hybrid form and does not disregard the seamier Romance, but chooses to present all of the varieties of experience, while stylistically privileging the detailed depiction of setting and its 'particularizing approach to character'.<sup>29</sup> I have argued that the blend of these elements in *Callista* is more complicated than this and that its originality inheres in its style, which has consistently frustrated critics who expect it to conform to the realist standards of a certain class of nineteenth-century historical novel. The realist assumptions of critics have led to some questionable assessments, such as George Levine's suggestion that Newman is unable to reconcile the secular with the divine in *Callista*, and that this interferes with the largely secular virtues of novel writing.<sup>30</sup>

It is clear that Levine misses the ritual language of the text, which is Newman's answer to the temporal dislocation in which his characters find themselves. Indeed rituals are a significant dimension of the narrative, presented not as remote behaviours at variance with the social world of the novel, but instead permeating and according a spiritual value to every aspect of the characters' experience: as I have shown, even the secular, political world of Rome is described as drawn to ritualized displays of its wealth and glory, suggesting that ritual is the most significant way in which the characters respond to their environment, whether worldly or divine. I have argued that, at its most uncorrupted, ritual is depicted as a symbolic language and the principal means through which the characters seek and express a connection with the spiritual dimension. This is consistent with Newman's views about scriptural allegory, expressed in a letter written to Pusey in 1866,<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1957; repr. Berkley and Los Angeles, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Watt, 'Realism and the Novel Form', in Dennis Walder (ed.), *The Realist Novel* (London, 1995), 219–29 (p. 224).

<sup>30</sup> Levine, 'Newman's Fiction and the Failure of Reticence', 372.

<sup>31</sup> John Henry Newman, *A Letter to Rev. E. B. Pusey on his Recent Eirenicon* (London,

Scripture deals with types rather than personifications. Israel stands for the chosen people, David for Christ, Jerusalem for heaven. Consider the remarkable representations, dramatic I may call them, in Jeremiah, Ezechiel, and Hosea: predictions, threatenings, and promises, are acted out by those Prophets. Ezechiel is commanded to shave his head, and to divide and scatter his hair; and Ahias tears his garment, and gives ten out of twelve parts of it to Jeroboam. So too the structure of the imagery in the Apocalypse is not a mere allegorical creation, but is founded on the Jewish ritual. In like manner our Lord's bodily cures are visible types of the power of His grace upon the soul; and His prophecy of the last day is conveyed under that of the fall of Jerusalem. Even His parables are not simply ideal, but relations of occurrences, which did or might take place, under which was conveyed a spiritual meaning.

The writings of Scripture deal in real people, 'Persons' rather than 'Personifications':<sup>32</sup> these figures come to represent wider spiritual patterns of meaning but never lose their essential reality or dramatic presence, which exists over and above any symbolic significance attached to them. The language of scripture is lifted above the language of mere poetry because it arises out of ritual. Like ritual it is dramatic—its power lies in the presentation of real relationships between people and in its invitation to the community of believers to interact with it dramatically through images and prayer. In this way, through dynamic communal participation, the individual is able to enter into a symbolic and finally more authentically spiritual reality.

It therefore would not be true to suggest, as Levine does, that Newman sees the secular world as fundamentally at variance with the divine dimension, for that would deny his sense of the figural presence of the spiritual, acting in and through the historical world. I have shown that the ritual texture of *Callista* brings to the fore the interplay between corrupt forces and spiritual transcendence that forms the backdrop to Callista's conversion and eventual martyrdom. Indeed, by attempting to view the novel as a study of psychology, Levine and others are fundamentally misled. When still a Protestant, Newman wrote of the tendency of the early Christians and Catholics to view the natural world as 'types and earnest of things invisible'

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1866), pp. 63–64.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

opening it up to the interference of spirits both good and evil.<sup>33</sup> Newman was uncomfortable about this view at the time of writing these words but the Juba plotline in *Callista* clearly bears testimony to his later conviction of its truth. Andrew Sanders complains that the novel is too intellectual and reads more like a ‘dramatised thesis’ than it does a Bildungsroman.<sup>34</sup> But it seems unlikely that Newman ever intended to write a Bildungsroman. The dramatic dimensions of *Callista* are not psychological, nor can they be explained in terms of the kind of ethical oversimplification that has been associated with medieval romance.<sup>35</sup> Instead, they are spiritual and ritualized: the novel’s characters are best understood not as fully realized figures but as actors in a spiritual drama who must navigate their way between the sacred and the profane.

This also has implications for Newman’s presentation of history in the novel. As noted at the outset of this paper, the thinkers of the Tractarian movement tended to be associated with the medievalism of the Gothic revival, an impression that Newman himself reinforced in his attempts to refurbish his chapel at Littlemore.<sup>36</sup> But, despite Lytton Strachey’s memorable declaration that Newman was ‘preoccupied with the last enchantment of the Middle Age,’<sup>37</sup> he was in reality not as enamoured of the medieval past as Pusey, and, like his fellow Tractarians, was always cautious of a too-romantic indulgence in fantasies of the period.<sup>38</sup> he certainly did not share with his contemporaries a sentimental fascination with the kind of world romanticized by Walter Scott, or the fictional recreations that this inspired.<sup>39</sup> I have shown that in *Callista* Newman explicitly

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<sup>33</sup> John Henry Newman, *The Church of the Fathers* (London, 1868), p. 193.

<sup>34</sup> Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel*, 143.

<sup>35</sup> Arnold Kettle, ‘Realism and Romance’, in Walder, *The Realist Novel*, 211–218 (p. 214).

<sup>36</sup> James Patrick, ‘Newman, Pugin, and Gothic’, *Victorian Studies* 24 (1981): 185–207 (pp. 189–90).

<sup>37</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (Garden City, 1928), pp. 16–17.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste*, 2nd rev. edn (1950; repr. New York, 1970), p. 137.

<sup>39</sup> Palmgren and Holloway, *Beyond Arthurian Romances*, 1. Despite Lytton Strachey’s claim that Newman was absorbed in the ‘last enchantment of the Middle Ages’, it has since been acknowledged that he was by no means a medievalist. See Graham John

resists Gothic medievalism both by purposely setting the novel in late antiquity and by offsetting Christian ritual against a paganism that distinctly recalls the Gothic medieval qualities of contemporary anti-Catholic writings. In this way Christian ritual is elevated above the remote 'medieval' theatricality with which it was often associated by Newman's contemporaries, and transformed into a powerful, timeless spiritual language.

Criticism of *Callista* abounds for its apparent flatness, its aversion to explicit and lurid portrayals of martyrdom, or what Maureen Moran refers to as the 'shocking portrayal of the brutalised body in Catholic sensationalism';<sup>40</sup> but, far from a sign of bad writing, this forms an important part of Newman's anti-Gothic agenda. Rather than harping on the taboo and the titillating and so foregrounding the horrifying remoteness of his subject matter from the acceptable norms of his contemporaries, Newman purposefully directs the drama beyond a specific historical moment and towards the poetic longing of the human soul, which is caught up in the ritualized conflicts of the spiritual realm. True Christian ritual is presented as occurring in secluded spaces, which enhances its liminal character by setting it apart from worldly activities. In this way Newman resists the horrifying and taboo connotations of the secluded convent in Gothic tradition, an effect heightened by the comparison between Gurtá's perverse rites and Agellius' private worship.

From one perspective, *Callista*'s style and approach is broadly consistent with the historical approach of nineteenth century religious novels.<sup>41</sup> Enlightenment historians such as Voltaire openly denigrated a symbolic approach to history, arguing for example that the figurative language of the Church Fathers was not appropriate to represent

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Wheeler, 'John Henry Newman and the Uses of Antiquity', *British Catholic History* 32 (2018): 129–54 (p. 130).

<sup>40</sup> Moran, *Catholic Sensationalism and Victorian Literature*, 155. Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel*, 146, describes Newman's depiction of *Callista*'s martyrdom in the following way: 'He manages hints at the eroticism implicit in the passions of early virgin martyrs, but he avoids physicality, and quickly passes over any painful details. *Callista*'s death is handled tersely enough, and many Victorian readers must have felt relieved that it was described with such tactful "good taste", but the account is flat, evasive and ultimately both unreal and unspiritual.'

<sup>41</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1973), p. 53.

historical processes, and that poetry, legend and fable could not be accepted as historical evidence. But this approach was challenged by later writers like Thomas Carlyle, who instead emphasized the spiritual qualities of history as prophetic revelation, and privileged the Romantic notion of divine immanence in the natural world,<sup>42</sup> an approach that was especially attractive to Keble and Newman's fellow Tractarians.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, like other Victorian historical novels, particularly those with a religious focus, *Callista* can be read as projecting Victorian preoccupations onto a remote time and place, with a clearly rhetorical purpose in mind.<sup>44</sup> Andrew Meszaros has noted that Newman's 'epistemology is fundamentally rhetorical',<sup>45</sup> and this is superficially in keeping with the Tractarian tendency towards the uncritical use of history in defence of their religious positions.<sup>46</sup>

But *Callista*'s depiction of history cannot be reduced to Romantic Gothic nostalgia or to a mere polemic: indeed Newman himself was at pains to separate history from diatribe in his notebooks for his *Essay on Development*, when he cautioned himself to 'write historically, not argumentively'.<sup>47</sup> Instead of sensational polemical discourse, *Callista* offers a complex exploration of language's spiritual reach, expressing Newman's view that the past is in conversation with the present through a ritual language of symbols. These symbols have historical as well as spiritual authenticity, a belief that is evident elsewhere in Newman's 1866 letter to Pusey where he argues that the 'image of the Virgin and Child' is not 'a mere modern idea' but is instead 'represented again and again, as every visitor to Rome is aware, in the paintings of the Catacombs'.<sup>48</sup> In this way ritual images connect the past with the present by suggesting human time's continued relationship with the

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<sup>42</sup> McCaw, *George Eliot and Victorian Historiography*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Rhodes, *The Lion and the Cross*, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel*, 19.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Meszaros, *The Prophetic Church: History and Doctrinal Development in John Henry Newman* (Oxford, 2016), p. 71.

<sup>46</sup> Rhodes, *The Lion and the Cross*, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Development of Christian Doctrine: Some Historical Prolegomena* (New Haven, 1969), p. 37, citing John Henry Newman, 'Papers on Development', Newman MSS in the Oratory of St Philip Neri, Birmingham, B2.I and B2.II, batch 135.

<sup>48</sup> Newman, *Letter to Pusey*, 59–60.

divine. In Callista this relationship is presented from the perspective of language and explored through a complex set of descriptions encompassing revelry, superstition and secular poetry. The novel traces the gradual progression beyond theatre and literature and into a pure ritual language which simultaneously exists in and beyond time, uniting all believers in communal prayer and understanding.

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