The English Catholic Dream of Gerontius: An Aesthetic Synthesis of Newman and Elgar

Tavish Daly

Oberlin Conservatory of Music

Recommended Citation

Daly, Tavish. "The English Catholic Dream of Gerontius: An Aesthetic Synthesis of Newman and Elgar." *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 14, no. 1 (2021): 39-63. <https://doi.org/10.5206/notabene.v14i1.13398>.

The English Catholic Dream of Gerontius: An Aesthetic Synthesis of Newman and Elgar

Abstract

Due to inherent paradoxy and limited sample size, *fin-de-siècle* English Catholic aesthetics are difficult to define, especially in the case of music. At the turn of the nineteenth century, English music and Catholic theology underwent a period of intense development and reconstruction, yet the intersection of theology and musical aesthetics in this era is largely under-researched. This paper identifies one such intersection using two monumental figures in theology and music: John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890) and composer Edward Elgar (1857-1934). Newman's theology provided a basis on which *fin-de-siècle* artists and poets could express their faith; such figures are associated with decadence. For both Newman and Elgar, decadent Catholicism combined with the traditionally Protestant English environment resulted in a complex relationship with their country and the continent. This paper examines this complex and paradoxical relationship between faith and nationality, and thus defines English Catholic aesthetics as they are expressed by Newman and Elgar.

Keywords

Edward Elgar, John Henry Cardinal Newman, English Catholicism, decadence, aesthetics

The English Catholic Dream of Gerontius: An Aesthetic Synthesis of Newman and Elgar

Tavish Daly
Year IV – Oberlin Conservatory of Music

The Dream of Gerontius, a poem written by John Henry Cardinal Newman in 1865, is today rarely thought of apart from Edward Elgar's oratorio of the same name, which premiered at the Birmingham Music Festival in 1900.¹ Cardinal Newman's poem is a product of the Victorian milieu and his own revolutionary brand of Catholicism²; *The Dream of Gerontius* tracks the journey of the protagonist Gerontius's soul as he dies, is judged, and is sent to purgatory. Elgar's *Gerontius*, the second of his four oratorios, was also influenced by contemporary

¹ Charles E. McGuire, "One Story, Two Visions: Textual Differences Between Elgar and Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius*," *The Elgar Society Journal* 11, no. 2 (1999): 75-76.

² Elisabeth Jay, "Newman's Mid-Victorian Dream," in *John Henry Newman: Reason, Rhetoric and Romanticism*, eds. David Nicholls and Fergus Kerr (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 214-15.

movements and was composed within the long-standing tradition of choral music and the genre of the oratorio in England.

Understanding the cultural influences of each Newman and Elgar provides important context for the creation of the poem and the oratorio, as well as the subsequent analysis. Beginning in the eighteenth century, and for roughly two hundred years after, the oratorio genre became synonymous with English music, with performances of Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah* becoming ubiquitous at English music festivals.³ English music and culture were also influenced by changing interests in various aesthetic figureheads. In the early nineteenth century, England experienced a renewed intellectual and aesthetic interest in "German Romanticism, the philosophy of Kant, and the music of Haydn and Mozart."⁴ Born in 1801, Cardinal Newman was thus familiar both with the genre of the Handelian oratorio and with the German Romanticism of Beethoven.⁵ Similarly, on the literary side, John Bunyan and John Milton—two seventeenth-century Protestant authors prominent in the nineteenth-century English canon—shaped Newman's poetic sensibilities.⁶ It was from these aesthetic influences and Newman's conversion to Catholicism in 1845 that his poem *Gerontius* would spring.

Edward Elgar's artistic sensibilities were also shaped by his surroundings. Elgar was born in 1857, shortly after the

³ Charles E. McGuire, *Elgar's Oratorios: The Creation of an Epic Narrative* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), vi-vii.

⁴ Percy M. Young, *Elgar, Newman, and The Dream of Gerontius: In the Tradition of English Catholicism* (Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1995), 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 73, 95-97.

beginning of a reinvigorated effort to produce indigenous English music. Beginning around 1840, just before Elgar's birth, a burgeoning interest in the recovery, scholarship, and performance of English folk-songs and Tudor period (1485-1603) counterpoint became mainstream among musicians and scholars in England.⁷ These movements were part of a conscious attempt to emancipate English music from German and Italian domination and to develop a distinct national aesthetic, an effort which became known as the English Musical Renaissance. Despite his tremendous accomplishments and international renown, Elgar has been thought of as tangential to this movement due to his cosmopolitan compositional style and his Catholic upbringing, with his senior contemporaries such as Charles Villiers Stanford and Hubert Parry affecting more change within England.⁸ However, Elgar was not untouched by the renaissance—he joined the Folk Song Society upon its founding in 1898.⁹ Concomitant with the folk-song revival during this renaissance was the carol revival, which also concerned itself with antique English music. However, carols differed from folk-songs in that they were derived from the church music tradition. The carol revival was popular especially in Tractarian sects of the Anglican communion, thus invigorating the English relationship between faith and nationality in music.

In his early development as a composer, Elgar was not directly influenced by these movements, as he did not intentionally incorporate folk-songs or Tudor music into his

⁷ Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 68-110.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

works. Despite the lack of conscious implementation of these movements into his works, musicologist John Butt identifies a subconscious influence of both Gregorian chant and the “English sentimental style with its roots in foreigners” (such as Handel and Mendelssohn). Elgar’s Catholic influence originated in his upbringing and in his tenure as organist of St. George’s Catholic Church in his hometown of Worcester. Elgar also received foreign Catholic influence from the Pope and Gregorian chant, influences which ran parallel to his aesthetic connection with the indigenous Tudor and Anglican carol revivals while also tinting his work with a continental hue. His connection to continental style is further evident in his aesthetic connection with Wagner. This connection is well-documented,¹⁰ especially with regard to the similarities between *The Dream of Gerontius* and Wagner’s opera *Parsifal*. At the time of Elgar’s birth, another of Wagner’s enormously influential operas—*Tristan und Isolde*, which premiered in 1865—was in the making, and Wagner’s musical idiom would prove influential in Elgar’s oratorios. The absorption of the English sentimental style, a modern Germanic style of composing, and a Gregorian Catholic tinge unconsciously resulted in Elgar composing in an idiom that is, ironically, authentically English in a pre-Ralph Vaughan Williams era.¹¹

¹⁰ See, for instance, Byron Adams’s piece “Elgar’s later oratorios: Roman Catholicism, decadence and the Wagnerian dialectic of shame and grace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, eds. Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹¹ John Butt, “Roman Catholicism and being musically English: Elgar’s church and organ music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, eds. Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 107-9.

However, this atypical mix of influences also produced a distinct style that makes Elgar difficult to classify.

Many musicologists have attempted to place Elgar within various aesthetic categories; Elgar scholar Charles McGuire identifies two schools of thought on this topic in his essay entitled “Edward Elgar: ‘Modern’ or ‘Modernist?’ Construction of an Aesthetic Identity in the British Music Press, 1895-1934.” The first school of thought identifies Elgar as a decadent, populist, and imperialist composer, comparing him with contemporaneous aesthetic figures. By contrast, the second school of thought rejects decadence and imperialism using theoretical analysis and places Elgar among *fin-de-siècle* Germanic composers.¹² This essay will not argue for one school of thought over the other, but will assert that Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius* is a decadent Catholic work which identifies the intersection of Newman’s and Elgar’s respective works within *fin-de-siècle* English Catholic aesthetics.

To analyze Newman’s connection to the decadents, this essay will provide a brief context of Catholicism and Anglicanism in nineteenth-century England, placing Newman as a central figure with tremendous impact on Catholic-themed works of *fin-de-siècle* art and literature. For both Newman and Elgar, to be Catholic in England created a complex tension due to rampant anti-Catholic sentiment. As a result of the surrounding religious climate, English Protestantism also shaped Newman’s theological and literary development, an influence that was more personal for

¹² Charles E. McGuire, “Edward Elgar: ‘Modern’ or ‘Modernist?’ Construction of an Aesthetic Identity in the British Music Press, 1895-1934,” *Musical Quarterly* 91, no. 1-2 (2008): 8.

Elgar, and manifested as social pressure. Despite different circumstances, the aesthetics expressed by both Newman and Elgar can be categorized as English Catholic, a term paradoxically implying the use of traditionally English Protestant media and foreign influence mediated through the Catholic Church in the work of both figures. Such a combination is thus inherent in defining *fin-de-siècle* English Catholic aesthetics.

Newman as Father of the Decadents

English Catholicism in the mid-nineteenth century experienced a rebirth out of the Tractarian Movement. Also known as the Oxford Movement, the Tractarian Movement was a cultural, intellectual, and ecclesiological development in the Anglican Church.¹³ As one of the leaders of the Tractarian movement, Newman in particular was heavily influential both in bringing Catholic sensibilities into the Anglican communion and in the subsequent rebirth of English Catholicism. Newman brought a new regard for antiquity and apostolic succession to both the Anglican and Catholic churches,¹⁴ with his appeal to antiquity proving foundational for the formation of his faith and the faith of the emerging English Catholic Church. In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman identifies a fundamental maxim for his conversion to Catholicism from Anglicanism: “My stronghold was Antiquity; now here, in the middle of the fifth century, I found, as it seemed to me, Christendom of the sixteenth and the

¹³ Peter Nockles, *The Oxford Movement in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110-13.

nineteenth centuries reflected.”¹⁵ Newman’s apprehension of schismatic movements in the early Church led him to believe the Anglican communion to be separate from the apostolic succession he coveted.

Similarly, in his book *A Grammar of Assent*, published twenty-five years after his conversion to Catholicism in 1845, Newman develops a ground-breaking philosophy of faith in which he places an emphasis on the individual conscience and experience as a valid signifier of religious truth.¹⁶ He defines Assent as

in itself the absolute acceptance of a proposition without any condition; and next that, in order to its being made, it presupposes the condition, not only of some previous inference in favour of the proposition, but especially of some concomitant apprehension of its terms.¹⁷

Assent is contrasted with Inference, which he defines as the conditional acceptance of a proposition. The thesis of an Inference is dependent on its premise, an abstract relationship; the conclusion of an Inference is therefore conditionally true (conditioned by its premise), whereas “Assent rests wholly on its thesis as its object.” The real apprehension of a thesis gives rise to Assent, which is by nature unconditional.¹⁸

Newman describes his conversion to Catholicism in his *Apologia*, which can be explained in his terms from *A Grammar of*

¹⁵ John Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1912), 119.

¹⁶ Ibid., 54-63.

¹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

Assent. Newman's membership in the Anglican communion rested on the church's *Via Media* sensibility—meaning the “middle road” between Catholicism and Protestantism. Newman's Assent to the *Via Media* sensibility began to waver as he viewed the Anglican communion as a schism akin to antique schisms. Though Newman's conversion was rooted in the study of historical schismatic movements and his apprehension of Anglicanism and Protestantism as parallel to the Monophysites he believed to be heretical,¹⁹ this intellectual process alone could not move him to conversion. It was only with one of the “prime oracles of Antiquity,” St. Augustine, and his words “securus judicat orbis terrarum” (the world is a safe judge) that “kept ringing in [Newman's] ears,” that Newman declared his Anglican sensibility of the *Via Media* theory to be “pulverised.”²⁰ Prior to this conversion experience, Newman's apprehension of the heresy within historic schismatic movements (the premise) could lead only to Inference that his *Via Media* theory was not tenable (the proposition). This Inference would not move him to belief, conversion, or Assent because the proposition was conditioned by his apprehension of the premise. Newman's experience with the words of St. Augustine, however, moved him to Assent and conversion. His Inference presupposed and was necessary for his eventual Assent, but after the Assent the conditions on which his Inference stood were no longer objects of his belief. In his conversion, Newman affirms a faith rooted in experience rather than reason alone.

It is in Newman's definition of Assent that the groundwork for decadent Catholicism is found. In the journal,

¹⁹ Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 120.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 120-21.

Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens, Claire Masurel-Murray defines decadent Catholicism as “essentially a fantasised, aestheticised faith, reconstructed by art, which is not so much part of the modern world as of literary tradition.”²¹ Scholar Ellis Hanson elaborates on characteristics of decadents, saying they enveloped a “*fin-de-siècle* fascination with cultural degeneration [and] the persistent and highly influential myth that religion, sexuality, art, even language itself, had fallen at last into inevitable decay.”²² Decadents’ suspicious attitude toward the supremacy of logic and reason found validation in some of Newman’s works, especially in regards to his description of Assent.²³

In *A Grammar of Assent*, Newman provides a canvas on which decadents can express their aesthetic Catholicism:

Belief ..., being concerned with things concrete, not abstract, which variously excite the mind from their moral and imaginative properties, has for its objects, not only directly what is true, but inclusively what is beautiful, useful, admirable, heroic; objects which kindle devotion, rouse the passions, and attach the affections.²⁴

Later in the text, Newman affirms the individual conscience: “Conscience has a legitimate place among our mental acts; as really so, as the action of memory, of reasoning, of imagination,

²¹ Claire Masurel-Murray, “Conversions to Catholicism among Fin de Siècle Writers: A Spiritual and Literary Genealogy,” *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 76 (2012): 30, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.528>.

²² Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

²³ Masurel-Murray, “Conversions to Catholicism among Fin de Siècle Writers,” 25.

²⁴ John Newman, *A Grammar of Assent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 64.

or as the sense of the beautiful.”²⁵ Such concepts are not only present in Newman’s Catholic conversion and faith; decadents appropriated Newman’s concepts in order to fantasize and aestheticize their faith through artistic reconstruction. Musicologist Byron Adams asserts in a piece on Elgar’s later oratorios that late nineteenth-century Catholicism provided a “burnished patina” of mysticism for decadent writers; Newman’s philosophy of faith is the foundation for the late nineteenth-century Catholicism he describes.²⁶

Elgar’s Oratorio as Decadent

Elgar’s oratorio, in its decadence that hearkens back to Newman, mystically aestheticizes and fantasizes the Catholic faith. Another decadent composer helps illuminate this connection; as stated previously, Elgar and Wagner share a distinct aesthetic connection, especially evident between *The Dream of Gerontius* and *Parsifal*. Friedrich Nietzsche was among the first to identify Wagner as a decadent, and Hanson elucidates this connection using Wagner’s implementation of sensual and ritualistic conceptions of faith, which play with temptation and repentance, as well as the medieval and mystical tones present in *Parsifal*.²⁷ Similarly, Newman’s *The Dream of Gerontius* includes Catholic ritual and repentance, as well as antiquarian and mystical tones. Though the oratorio is not typically considered a decadent work in itself, Elgar’s use of Newman’s poem in the libretto also contributes to the work’s decadence; though Elgar did not change

²⁵ Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*, 73.

²⁶ Adams, “Elgar’s later oratorios,” 85-86.

²⁷ Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, 29-31.

the poem, he did omit large portions of the text, thus softening some doctrinal edges of the poem and centring the poem on Gerontius's journey specifically.²⁸ This centrality of Gerontius's journey in turn emphasized the decadent characteristics of the work.

Through redaction, Elgar emphasized Gerontius as a sinner and an Everyman whose character is expressed through a Romantic Wagnerian idiom with tinges of "Churchy prayey music" rather than simply "Church tunes."²⁹ Elgar reserved any music heavily inflected with a church music idiom for the choral sections of the work, and he believed only an oratorio steeped in a Wagnerian idiom could do justice to the ritualistic mysticism present in Newman's poem.³⁰ Immediately recognizable similarities between *The Dream of Gerontius* and *Parsifal* include the use of leitmotif within their respective preludes.³¹ Elgar's friend August Jaeger published an analysis of the oratorio as an extended program note for its premiere in 1900³²; this note outlines the motives that recur throughout the oratorio. The recurring motive is a feature idiosyncratic of Wagner, as seen with the grail leitmotif in *Parsifal*. Leitmotif allows for the aestheticization and emphasis of spiritual elements through repetition and development. In *Parsifal*, the holy grail is one such spiritual element, while in *The Dream of Gerontius*, spiritual concepts such as judgement are emphasized and aestheticized, thus contributing to the work's decadence. Thus, according to the

²⁸ McGuire, "One Story, Two Visions," 77.

²⁹ Butt, "Roman Catholicism and being musically English," 109.

³⁰ Adams, "Elgar's later oratorios," 86.

³¹ McGuire, *Elgar's Oratorios*, 140-46.

³² *Ibid.*, 80.

definitions of decadence offered by Hanson and Nietzsche, Elgar's oratorio, alongside Wagner's *Parsifal*, is decadent.

Rife with references to Mary, the saints, and purgatory, Newman's poem and Elgar's libretto are clearly Catholic, but the claim of decadence needs further qualification. Elgar's oratorio begins with a statement of the Judgement Theme, a theme in D major that recurs when Gerontius or his Guardian Angel ponder judgement.³³ Jaeger's characterization of the oratorio's themes (including Fear, Prayer, Sleep, Miserere, Despair, Committal, etc.³⁴) is similarly drawn from the manner in which the music coincides with the text, allowing Jaeger and other analysts of this oratorio to effectively interpret the music. Musicologist J.P.E. Harper-Scott, for example, assigns key centres to the central themes, such as D for Judgement (and major or minor tonalities for positive or negative judgements, respectively).³⁵ Much of Part I of the oratorio focuses on Gerontius's repentance; Gerontius asks Mary and his friends to pray for him as he nears death, and the choir pleads with God on his behalf. In the subsequent "Sanctus fortis" section, Gerontius acknowledges the sacrifice of Jesus for the fallen mankind, pleads with God in a devotional manner, and welcomes pain if it brings him closer to God. Gerontius promises to leave the world behind in pursuit of God,³⁶ and he remains in a repentant and devotional state for the

³³ August Jaeger, "Analysis," in *The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38*, by Edward Elgar (Munich: Musikproduktion Höflich München, 2011), XV-XVI.

³⁴ Ibid., XVI-XLVII.

³⁵ J.P.E. Harper-Scott, *Edward Elgar, Modernist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 14.

³⁶ Edward Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38* (Munich: Musikproduktion Höflich München, 2011), 19-52.

entire oratorio. Consequently, Elgar is able to emphasize the fallen nature of mankind, as well as mankind's interactions with judgement and repentance, and his oratorio is thus decadent in its dramatization of spiritual states of being.

The aestheticization of theological concepts becomes explicitly decadent as it is illustrated on an antique, mystical canvas. Newman's poem incorporates an antique backdrop: Gerontius himself is likely a reference to the fourth-century Bishop Gerontius of Nicomedeia, whom the Church authorities attempted to depose due to scandals arising from the recounting of his dreams.³⁷ Similarly, the Latin text references antiquity, emphasized especially in the Kyrie section of Elgar's oratorio, which Jaeger describes as having a devotional quality.³⁸ Its contrapuntal style is mimicked in an alike passage, "rescue him, O Lord," which contains a similar message and arouses a similar affect. In repentant fashion, choirs of priestly assistants plead with God to rescue Gerontius: "rescue him, O Lord, in this his evil hour/As of old so many by Thy gracious power."³⁹ The choir of priestly assistants subsequently chant a Litany, with Noah, Job, Moses, and David all sung as examples of God rescuing souls from strife. While Elgar was the organist of St. George's he was exposed to a Litany of Saints during Holy Week celebrations around 1886; the Litany reserved for the Catholic liturgy was in the Gregorian chant style, which Elgar mimicked in his own Litany, thus strengthening the oratorio's antique aesthetic.⁴⁰

³⁷ Jay, "Newman's Mid-Victorian Dream," 220.

³⁸ Jaeger, "Analysis," XX.

³⁹ Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, 63-64.

⁴⁰ Butt, "Roman Catholicism and being musically English," 108.

Meanwhile, Elgar's "burnished patina"⁴¹ of mysticism is evident in the work's subject matter: Gerontius dies and encounters angels and demons in a visionary dream of the afterlife, placing the work in the mystical genre of dream literature. Mysticism accompanied by ritualistic Catholicism in the libretto explains Elgar's use of Wagnerian romanticism inflected by the sound of antique music of the Catholic Church, shown primarily through a Gregorian tinge. In this way, Elgar's oratorio becomes decadent in its "fantasised, aestheticised faith, reconstructed by art," as described by Masurel-Murray.⁴²

Decadents also relished in the fallen nature of mankind, a standpoint which manifested itself as a tension between an understanding of morality and a shameful immoral existence. In *fin-de-siècle* England, this tension frequently took the form of homoeroticism. Adams identifies a homoerotic element in the figure of the Guardian Angel for both Newman and Elgar; for Newman, the Guardian Angel was likely modelled on his friend Ambrose St. John, a role Jaeger likely took for Elgar.⁴³ A mixture of Catholicism and homoeroticism is an aesthetic signifier of decadence, pointing to a degeneration of religion and sexuality and resulting in shame.⁴⁴ Elgar similarly focuses the text on the fallen nature of mankind in his excision and redaction of celestial elements in Newman's poem. Gerontius sings after the prayerful "Sanctus fortis" passage:

That sense of ruin, which is worse than pain,

⁴¹ Adams, "Elgar's later oratorios," 85-86.

⁴² Masurel-Murray, "Conversions to Catholicism among Fin de Siècle Writers," 30.

⁴³ Adams, "Elgar's later oratorios," 90.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 91.

*That masterful negation and collapse
Of all that makes me man.*⁴⁵

If the decadents “relished in the voluptuousness of shame,”⁴⁶ the shame which envelops Gerontius in the recognition of his fallen state is the most prominent signifier of decadence within this oratorio. Gerontius sings immediately after his death:

*This silence pours a solitariness
Into the very essence of my soul;
And the deep rest, so soothing and so sweet
Hath something too of sternness and of pain.*⁴⁷

He describes his rest as both sweet and painful, a feeling which is later echoed by the choir singing of God’s generous love inflicting agony upon mankind. At the climax of the oratorio, God glances at Gerontius at the point of judgment, and Gerontius sings,

*Take me away, and in the lowest deep
There let me be,
And there in hope the lone night-watches keep,
Told out for me.
There, motionless and happy in my pain,
Lone, not forlorn,
There will I sing my sad perpetual strain
Until the morn.
There will I sing and soothe my stricken breast,
Which ne’er can cease*

⁴⁵ Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, 55-56.

⁴⁶ Adams, “Elgar’s later oratorios,” 91.

⁴⁷ Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, 82-83.

*To throb, and pine, and languish, till possessed
Of its Sole Peace.*⁴⁸

This passage about the sorrowful state of Gerontius's soul wishing for peace ends in a major key; the major tonality adds to the notion that Gerontius himself relishes in the fallenness of his soul and his reliance on God. The Angel of Agony pleads with God on Gerontius's behalf, appealing to the fallenness of mankind He experienced through Jesus, only mentioning the wretchedness of mankind and how man has tarnished God's beatific vision. The Angel pleads, "spare these souls which are so dear to Thee,"⁴⁹ implying that God himself relishes in the fallen nature of mankind and their need for His grace.

Elgar's focus on Gerontius the sinner and his passage to purgatory thus emphasizes decadent elements that Newman anticipated in his poem. Gerontius's feelings of shame and judgement are similar to Newman's conversion experience; Augustine's words "securus judicat orbis terrarum" were to Newman antiquity brought to life in the form of judgement, and they affected his beliefs and conscience. Similarly, within the antiquarian elements of Elgar's oratorio, Gerontius is judged by a court of demons and by God, resulting in the transference of his soul to purgatory. Simply stated, antiquity and judgement cause change within the soul, thus aestheticizing faith in a Tractarian vein.

The transformation of the poem into the oratorio also serves Newman's philosophy of faith. Again, it is stated in Newman's *A Grammar of Assent* that "belief ..., has for its objects,

⁴⁸ Elgar, *The Dream of Gerontius*, 192-95.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 183, 185-86.

not only directly what is true, but inclusively what is beautiful ..., which kindle devotion, rouse the passions, and attach the affections.”⁵⁰ By Jaeger’s testimony (though he was a staunch atheist), sections of Elgar’s oratorio do just that: the Kyrie and “Praise to the holiest” sections kindle devotion, and the Angel of Agony rouses the passions and attaches the affections in the section “Jesu! By that shudd’ring dread ...” in a way that is “too solemn and too sacred ... to be subjected to cold analysis.”⁵¹ Jaeger asserts that the end of the oratorio paints a “wonderful picture of heavenly peace and beatific serenity; a conception of the rarest beauty” in which we hear “faint echoes of the Divine.”⁵² Thus, the beauty of Elgar’s musical adaptation of Newman’s poem contributes to Newman’s philosophy of faith, moving the audience closer to a divine feeling—one which Newman would argue would also affect the conscience and even be the object of belief.

Consequently, through Newman’s poem, which provides Elgar with the appropriate subject matter to emphasize a sinner’s mystical journey to the afterlife, as well as the Wagnerian leitmotifs which aid Elgar in emphasizing the aforementioned decadent elements, Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius* can be considered a decadent Catholic work. Akin to other decadents’ (Oscar Wilde, for example⁵³) appropriation of Newman’s philosophy of faith, Elgar appropriates Newman’s poem for his own purposes. As Masurel-Murray states, “for *fin-de-siècle* Catholics, he [Newman] was the glorious forebear and fatherly

⁵⁰ Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*, 64.

⁵¹ Jaeger, “Analysis,” XX, XLIII.

⁵² Ibid., XLVII.

⁵³ Adams, “Elgar’s later oratorios,” 84.

reference.”⁵⁴ *The Dream of Gerontius* oratorio is essentially a *fin-de-siècle* Catholic work that not only directly references Newman through the libretto, but aesthetically hearkens back to Newman as a theological foundation through whom aestheticized Catholicism is expressed. Thus, Elgar in his oratorio appropriates Newman’s philosophy of faith in a style similar to other decadent writers. Though the claim of decadence within Elgar’s works is controversial, the Catholic aesthetic nexus of Newman and Elgar can be found within decadence.

English Influences

Elgar’s and Newman’s *The Dream of Gerontius* share Catholicity, but where does England leave its mark? Catholics were outsiders in England, especially prior to the Tractarian Movement, and anti-Catholic prejudice remained strong beyond the end of the nineteenth century. Despite these sentiments, however, Elgar became England’s official composer at the time of his death.⁵⁵ Similarly alienated was Newman following his conversion to Catholicism, which led to his displacement from Oxford (where he had spent most of his academic life). It is clear that the category English Catholic borders on oxymoronic, as it also implies the strong Anglican, Protestant, and continental influence that marked both Elgar and Newman.

⁵⁴ Masurel-Murray, “Conversions to Catholicism among Fin de Siècle Writers,” 18.

⁵⁵ Charles E. McGuire, “Measure of a Man: Catechizing Elgar’s Catholic Avatars,” in *Elgar and His World*, ed. Byron Adams (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3-5.

Though Elgar grew up surrounded by Catholicism, his compositions showed increasingly less Catholic influence as he aged. Even his *The Dream of Gerontius* diminished some of the more Catholic elements of the original poem, which made it more palatable for an English audience.⁵⁶ Though Elgar's Catholic identity is complex,⁵⁷ the fact that he allowed anti-Catholic pressure to affect his work is clear in his later compositions. With Elgar's focus on Gerontius as a relatable Everyman, the audience was able to personalize the story.⁵⁸ However, Elgar also separated himself from his English identity in favor of a Catholic one. In composing his oratorio, he identified himself as an outsider because of his Catholic faith, saying in response to Jaeger's rejection of Catholic elements that

of course it will frighten the low Church party but the poem must on no account be touched! Sacrilege and not to be thought of: them as don't like it can be damned in their own way—not ours. It's awfully curious the attitude (towards sacred things) of the narrow English mind.⁵⁹

Of course, Elgar did change the poem through excision and redaction, which in turn changed the philosophical thrust of the work and made it more palatable for English audiences. Adding one more paradox, Elgar called his act of composing an oratorio a “penalty of my English environment,”⁶⁰ referring to the long tradition of the English oratorio as seen in Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. Elgar's English Catholicism manifested as a

⁵⁶ McGuire, “Measure of a Man,” 6.

⁵⁷ See McGuire, “Measure of a Man.”

⁵⁸ McGuire, “One Story, Two Visions,” 79-87.

⁵⁹ Young, *Elgar, Newman, and The Dream of Gerontius*, 117.

⁶⁰ Adams, “Elgar's later oratorios,” 81.

never-ending tension, sometimes more English than Catholic, sometimes vice versa; it is within this paradox that his English Catholic aesthetic operated.

The nuance of this paradox is illuminated by the parallel case of Richard Runciman Terry, a Catholic convert and contemporary of Elgar. During Terry's career, the Tractarian Movement fostered the carol revival amidst the folk music revival, encouraging the practice of singing carols in church rather than strictly for street performance.⁶¹ Antique folk-carol collections such as Bramley and Stainer's *Christmas Carols, New and Old* in 1865 and *The Cowley Carol Book* in 1900 were published, and the fruits of these efforts to revive such music can be seen in Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on Christmas Carols* of 1912.⁶² With folk music and the Anglican communion at its roots, Vaughan Williams's works represent something purely and straightforwardly English. Terry, as a participant in the Catholic branch of the Tudor revival, stands as both a parallel and a contrast to these developments. Though Tudor anthems were ever present in the Anglican church, which certainly participated in this revival, Catholics in England were the primary proponents of Tudor church music at the turn of the century.⁶³

Terry was the organist of choirmaster of Downside Abbey and later the first director of music at the new cathedral of Westminster.⁶⁴ He developed liturgical music in the English Catholic Church, drawing on the traditional plainsong and

⁶¹ Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 81-82.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 94-95.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 95.

polyphonic music of sixteenth-century English, Italian, and Flemish composers, such as Palestrina and Byrd, to restore their sacred music for its original use. Not only was this revival commensurate with the public taste for traditional sacred music, it was endorsed by Pope Pius X's *Motu proprio* of 1903.⁶⁵ Not unlike Newman, who reappropriated the Tractarian Movement upon his conversion, Terry reappropriated the Tudor revival upon his own conversion to Catholicism. Terry's liturgical music thus offered something new and distinct: Catholic and English with a continental hue, as well as Anglican influence. Similarly (albeit incongruently), Elgar's *Gerontius* contains Catholic influence (Gregorian chant) as well as continental influence (Wagnerian romanticism) and the "English sentimental style" (oratorio). In the words of Butt: "Perhaps, then, part of the very Englishness with which Elgar is so often yoked had its roots in that aspect of his background which was most 'foreign' at the time, namely his loyalty to the Pope and the heritage of St Gregory."⁶⁶ Elgar, therefore, was not straightforwardly English like Vaughan Williams, but was, like Terry, the paradoxical English Catholic whose faith was antithetical to his nationality. Ultimately, the tension between faith and nationality resulted in a complex aesthetic category.

The Protestant mark for Newman was more abstract and deeply ingrained than it was for Elgar. In his early life, Newman first became a Calvinist, then, later, an Anglican.⁶⁷ His conversion to Catholicism took place in 1845, halfway through his life.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 95.

⁶⁶ Butt, "Roman Catholicism and being musically English," 108.

⁶⁷ Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, 30-101.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

Consequently, his formative early religious years, unlike Elgar's, were not lived within the Catholic Church. Elisabeth Jay thus argues that Newman sought to build a Catholic intellectual foundation in England, and that he did so using Protestant bricks.⁶⁹ Jay parallels Newman's *Gerontius* with Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, both from the English Protestant tradition. The character Ignorance in *The Pilgrim's Progress* glimpses a way to Hell from the Gates of Heaven, and then wakes from his dream; Gerontius, similarly, is another pilgrim of the afterlife in a dream, and a sinner.⁷⁰ Jay goes on to explain the English Protestant connection:

Both the syntax and the diction of Newman's *Dream* recall T.S. Eliot's dictum that Milton had 'done damage to the English language from which it has not wholly recovered.' Newman's Angel derives his authority not so much from liturgical or biblical sources as from adopting the register in which Milton's angels sought to educate Adam. Catholic doctrine is being enunciated through a Miltonic mask.⁷¹

Thus, Newman's *Gerontius*, though certainly Catholic, is also a product of an English environment that is traditionally Protestant.

Conclusion

The obscure and complex nature of *fin-de-siècle* English Catholic aesthetics has yet to be systematically illuminated by

⁶⁹ Jay, "Newman's Mid-Victorian Dream," 224-25.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 225.

⁷¹ Ibid., 226.

scholars. Though there exist a number of studies on the Tractarian Movement, Newman, and the development of Catholic life in England, the number of scholarly works studying how these movements interact with other contemporaneous cultural developments is sparse; aesthetic studies in this matter are even fewer. Rhetoric of *fin-de-siècle* English national character and Catholic identity continues to be debated in musicological circles, resulting in an anxiety-ridden gap in English religio-aesthetic scholarship. However, the developing studies of English music have begun to allow for such comparative aesthetic scholarship. The intersection of theology and musical aesthetics in *fin-de-siècle* England is still under-researched, but two monumental figures in Newman and Elgar may now be re-examined through this lens.

The Dream of Gerontius is a monumental and paradoxical work. Simple categorization of the poem and oratorio requires numerous caveats, as they each have one foot in and one foot out of the zeitgeist—such is the nature of *fin-de-siècle* English Catholic aesthetics. Yet, out of the tradition of English Protestantism sprung Newman's unique brand of English Catholicism, which was inherited by Elgar through his English upbringing in the Catholic Church at a time when Newman's work would have reached wide audiences. Through this "penalty" of his English environment, and with contemporaneous decadent Catholic influence hearkening back to Newman, Elgar's oratorio finds itself in the strange category of English Catholic, one that would later be shared by Evelyn Waugh and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Bibliography

- Adams, Byron. "Elgar's later oratorios: Roman Catholicism, decadence and the Wagnerian dialectic of shame and grace." In *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, edited by Daniel Grimley and Julian Rushton, 81-105. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Butt, John. "Roman Catholicism and being musically English: Elgar's church and organ music." In *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, edited by Daniel Grimley and Julian Rushton, 106-19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Elgar, Edward. *The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38*. Munich: Musikproduktion Höflich München, 2011.
- Hanson, Ellis. *Decadence and Catholicism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Harper-Scott, J.P.E. *Edward Elgar, Modernist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Howes, Frank. *The English Musical Renaissance*. New York: Stein and Day, 1966.
- Jaeger, August. "Analysis." In *The Dream of Gerontius, Op. 38*, by Edward Elgar, XV-XLVII. Munich: Musikproduktion Höflich München, 2011.
- Jay, Elisabeth. "Newman's Mid-Victorian Dream." In *John Henry Newman: Reason, Rhetoric and Romanticism*, edited by David Nicholls and Fergus Kerr, 214-29. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991.
- Masurel-Murray, Claire. "Conversions to Catholicism among Fin de Siècle Writers: A Spiritual and Literary Genealogy." *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 76 (2012): 105-25. <https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.528>.

McGuire, Charles E. "Edward Elgar: 'Modern' or 'Modernist?' Construction of an Aesthetic Identity in the British Music Press, 1895-1934." *Musical Quarterly* 91, no. 1-2 (2008): 8-38.

———. *Elgar's Oratorios: The Creation of an Epic Narrative*. Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002.

———. "Measure of a Man: Catechizing Elgar's Catholic Avatars." In *Elgar and His World*, edited by Byron Adams, 3-29. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

———. "One Story, Two Visions: Textual Differences Between Elgar and Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius*." *The Elgar Society Journal* 11, no. 2 (1999): 75-87.

Newman, John Henry. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons LTD, 1921.

———. *A Grammar of Assent*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.

Nockles, Peter. *The Oxford Movement in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Young, Percy M. *Elgar, Newman, and The Dream of Gerontius: In The Tradition of English Catholicism*. Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1995.