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Indice

A Study of the Catholic Sources in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

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A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) is one of the paramount testimonies to Joyce's molding of religious and artistic discourses, which are threaded throughout the narrative by the establishment of precise intertextual ties with St. John Henry Newman, and with the Christian spiritual tradition. This contribution sets out to offer a detailed study of these intertextualities and their function in the novel's discourse, so as to expand upon and, possibly, problematize further our understanding of Joyce's 'Catholic Literacy'. To this end, the analysis will move from an interpretation of Stephen's overall *Bildung* as an act of real assent, modelled on Newman's notion as exposed in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), to an overview of Joyce's employment of mystical discursive practices in the narrative.

Keywords: James Joyce, John Henry Newman, Real Assent, Mysticism, Aesthetics, Intertextuality, Catholicism, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*

As I see through a mist, One with inexpressible completeness[1]

1. *Introduction*

As is well known, James Joyce made an extensive use of religious discourse and imagery in his work. Both in his letters and in his early theoretical writings, the writer repeatedly established analogies between art, the work of the artist, and religious mysteries and practices[2]. This evident connection has recently been rediscovered as a critical path of enquiry, prompting the appearance of numerous works posing and answering questions on the relationship between Joyce and organized religion. Yet, enquiring whether Joyce was "an unbeliever from the start of his life as a writer", and affirming that his work can only be read

[1] Walt Whitman, *I Sing the Body Electric*, 5, 23.

[2] See, for example, how in *Drama and Life* Joyce had already conceived the image of the artist as a mediator between the Divine and the earthly, as he "forgoes his very self and stands a mediator in awful truth before the veiled face of God" (J. Joyce, *Drama and Life*, in *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writings*, K. Barry ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, p. 26). Also recall what Joyce wrote to Stanislaus Joyce about his writing process: "Don't you think [...] there is a certain resemblance between the mystery of the Mass and what I am trying to do? I mean that I am trying [...] to give people some kind of intellectual pleasure or spiritual enjoyment by converting the bread of everyday life into something that has a permanent artistic life of its own". See S. Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years*, Viking Press, New York 1948, pp. 103-104.

"properly" if that fact is taken into account[3], carry the dangerous risk of oversimplification, along with the rather ambitious endeavor of measuring the unmeasurable: the intimate depths of a man's dialogue with God. Nevertheless, such studies have the unquestionable merit of having drawn a detailed historical picture of the religious institution which, in one way or the other, helped shape Joyce's work[4]. What is more, the actual existence of works devoted to positing Joyce as an atheist is living evidence of the fact that the Catholic doctrine is a framework, if not the main framework, around which the author built his theory of art.

Likewise, the concept of epiphany, though seen by some as a literary device to which Joyce "perversely gave [a] religious name"[5], is elsewhere reinstated in its etymological *milieu* and re-described as "a religious event"[6], in which Joyce "reworked traditional ideas of transcendence, amid a Catholic controversy about nature and the supernatural" so as to craft "a modernist religious experience"[7]. Moreover, what Lernout confidently interprets as a position of stern unbelief was re-defined by Mayo as "Loyolan": "that difficult stance of belief and unbelief [...] that the Loyolan Position demands"[8]. This hermeneutic polarization, while mirroring back to us the fact that Joyce's relationship with religion is all but a linear equation, also accounts for the necessity to shift the focus of the investigation away from a biographical account of Joyce's belief, to a more comprehensive portrayal of the ways in which religion informs Joyce's artistic expressions. In this respect, *A Portrait* is one of the paramount testimonies to Joyce's molding of religious and artistic discourses, which are threaded throughout the narrative by the establishment of precise intertextual ties with the Christian spiritual tradition, and with St. John Henry Newman, an author whom Joyce looked to with respect and reverence[9]. This contribution sets out to offer a detailed study of these intertextualities and their function in the novel's discourse, so as to expand upon and, possibly, problematize further our understanding of Joyce's "Catholic Literacy", *i.e.* the rational, linguistic, and historical-cultural Catholic matrices which inform those English-speaking writers brought up in Catholicism[10]. To this end, the analysis will move from an interpretation of Stephen's overall *Bildung* as an act of real assent, modelled on New-

[3] G. Lernout, *Help My Unbelief: James Joyce and Religion*, Continuum, London 2009, p. 2.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 28 *et passim*.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[6] J. Dudley, *What the Thunder Said: A Portrait of the Artist as a Trans-Secular Event*, "Literature and Theology", 28, 2014, p. 458.
[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 457-458.
[8] M. Mayo, *James Joyce and the Jesuits*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020, p. 209.
[9] See, for example, Ellmann: "his fellow students [...] had envied Joyce his success at themes [...]. Several of them took the same route home as he did, and that afternoon [...] They turned the subject to literature [...]. Then Joyce was asked his opinion. The greatest prose writer, he said, was Newman". R. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, Oxford University Press, New York 1982, pp. 39-40. And Joyce's *Letters*: "As usual I am in a minority of one. If I tell people [...] that nobody has ever written English prose that can be compared with that of a tiresome footling little Anglican parson who afterwards became a prince of the only true church they listen in silence". J. Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce Vol. I*, S. Gilbert ed., Viking Press, New York 1957, pp. 365-366.
[10] E. Reggiani, "*Bellezza cangiante". Cattolici di lingua inglese e letteratura: esercizi critici ed elzeviri*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2018, p. 307.

man's notion as exposed in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), to an overview of Joyce's employment of mystical discursive practices in the narrative.

From a methodological and terminological standpoint, this overview will avail itself of Julia Kristeva's seminal works on the nature of the poetic word, and on intertextuality[11]. In these contributions, Joyce's linguistic experimentations are framed as a means to express the ontological "infinity"[12] of the signifying process, and as manifestations of the author's carnivalesque dialogism[13]. This "critique of meaning"[14] allows for a productive assessment of the ways in which language, in *A Portrait*, is modelled to signify Stephen's spiritual experiences. In particular, at the end of section 2, Joyce's linguistic disruptions will be addressed as a means to anticipate Stephen's epiphanies. Conventionally evaluated as the carnivalesque, subversive element in Joyce's technique, these linguistic disruptions are nonetheless paired, in *A Portrait*, with the textualization of symbols and imagery pertaining to the Christian spiritual tradition. Hence, they will be investigated in relation to mystical discursive practices in section 3, where Kristeva's understanding of Joyce's carnivalesque structures will be weighed against an outline of the signifying means employed by the mystics. Such means, albeit devoted to completely different communicative ends, nonetheless share various *formal* mechanisms of signification akin to the carnivalesque, namely dialogism, the tendency to represent a dialogue with God through bodily or oneiric metaphors, the oxymoronic modulation of discourse, and the overall expression of a marginal sensitivity. In view of these findings, a re-evaluation of Joyce's 'carnivalesque materialism' is proposed. Specifically, the metaphorical, existential, and structural patterns of similarity between *A Portrait* and mystic literary discourse are discussed by a close reading of passages where the Christian spiritual tradition is evoked by precise intertextual references to the Franciscan tradition, by a reiterated use of the body as a complex signifying realm, by the depiction of Stephen's intellectual peripherality with respect to the Church's discourse, and by the portrayal of his spiritual development as a three-part journey of the soul.

2. *Real Assent and the Aesthetics of Stephen Dedalus*

Cardinal Newman is a constant presence throughout *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* which, despite having been examined in a small number of contributions, has not yet been investigated in detail[15]. Newman, whom Joyce evokes at the novel's crucial narra-

[11] J. Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, L.S. Roudiez ed., Columbia University Press, New York 1980; J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Columbia University Press, New York 1984.

[12] "[...] only certain literary texts of the avantgarde (Mallarme, Joyce) manage to cover the infinity of the process, that is, reach the semiotic *chora*, which modifies linguistic structures". J. Kristeva, *Revolution*, p. 88.

[13] "All of the most important polyphonic novels are inheritors of the Menippean, carnivalesque structure: those of Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Sade, Balzac, Lautréamont, Dostoievski, Joyce, and Kafka". J. Kristeva, *Desire*, pp. 79-80.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[15] See J. Muller, *John Henry Newman and the Education of Stephen Dedalus*, "James Joyce Quarterly", 33, 1996, pp. 593-603; J. Pribek, SJ, *Newman and Joyce*, "Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review", 93, 2004, pp. 169-184.

tive cornerstones, regularly marks the unfolding of Stephen Dedalus's coming of age as an artist, accompanying him from puberty to full artistic development: when confronted by a group of bullying schoolmates on his opinion about who the best writer is, a young Stephen replies unhesitatingly, "Newman, I think"[16]; after rejecting a proposal to take office in the Jesuit Order, Stephen reminisces on two sentences of Newman's; finally, "the cloistral silverveined prose of Newman"[17] is the opening note of an intricate movement, made up of various literary and historical references and quotations, which accompanies Stephen's meditation during one of his last morning walks around Dublin. As *A Portrait* ultimately chronicles the development of Stephen's artistic consciousness in search for an aesthetic theory, such anecdotal evidence suggests that Newman may be an important source for the articulation of Stephen's aesthetics[18].

In fact, not only are Newman's words quoted *verbatim* from the *Grammar of Assent*'s[19] Chapter 4, Paragraph 2, "Real assents", they also appear in Chapter IV of *A Portrait*, a narrative turning point where the famous epiphany of the bird-girl on the beach is recounted. This is a crucial experience for Stephen, for it is only as a result of that encounter that he is able to word out his theory and artistic vision, and to choose a career[20]. Shortly before this event, however, we see Stephen making his way home to find his little brothers and sisters around their kitchen table. A particular "note" detected in the spontaneous chant initiated by one of the children prompts Stephen to reminisce about the following passage in the *Grammar*:

> The voice of his youngest brother from the farther side of the fireplace began to sing the air *Oft in the Stilly Night*. One by one the others took up the air until a full choir of voices was singing [...]. He heard the choir of voices in the kitchen echoed and multiplied through an endless reverberation of the choirs of endless generations of children and heard in all the echoes an echo also of the recurring note of weariness and pain. [...] And he remembered that Newman had heard this note also in the broken lines of Virgil, 'giving utterance, like the voice of Nature herself, to that pain and weariness yet hope of better things which has been the experience of her children in every time'[21].

[16] J. Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, B.W. Huebsch, New York 1916, p. 89.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 204.
[18] That Newman might be more than an anecdotal source for Joyce's entire work can be inferred by the centrality which he assigned to Newman's prose while writing *Ulysses*, namely the *Oxen of the Sun* episode, as testified by Jacques Mercanton. During a walk on the Losanna lake, Joyce told the critic that the only style he didn't parody in that chapter was Newman's, because he needed "the grave beauty of his style" as a "fulcrum to hold up the rest". W. Potts ed., *Portraits of the Artist in Exile: Recollections of James Joyce by Europeans*, Wolfhound, Seattle 1979, p. 217.
[19] J.H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Longmans, London 1903, p. 79.
[20] The climatic qualities of such a scene are generally agreed among critics. See E.R. Steinberg, *The Bird-Girl in "A Portrait" as Synthesis: The Sacred Assimilated to the Profane*, "James Joyce Quarterly", 17, 1980, 2, p. 149.
[21] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 190.

A metaphorical reading of the scene would assign to Newman's words the task of stretching out a bridge between Stephen's state of mind and that "tone" of weariness in the children's voices, as Stephen himself, in that moment, is a boy melancholically peering towards adulthood. Yet, such an exact quotation from Newman's *summa* suggests a comprehensive knowledge of the book on Joyce's part and, consequentially, the necessity to investigate it further.

As stated above, the quotation is drawn from the paragraph where Newman exemplifies his notion of real assent. This is the backbone of the whole *Essay* which, as Newman tells us, is devoted to exploring how "we gain an image of God and give a real assent to the proposition that he exists"[22]. Thus, real assent is understood to mean the culmination of a series of cognitive acts where conscience guides the mind to ascertain the Divine: "in real [assent, the mind] is directed toward things, represented by the impressions which they have left on the imagination. These images, when assented-to, have an influence both on the individual and on society, which mere notions cannot exert"[23]. Thus defined, real assent relies on two key-concepts which Newman employed both in his theological and in his literary meditations: that of Conscience as "this Law, which is Himself, in the intelligence of all His rational creatures", "a divine voice, speaking within us"[24], and that of imagination as that faculty which, when activated by "the gift" of Poetry, has the power of "moving the affections"[25]. Newman's theory of literature and his theology are in fact deeply intertwined, as can be observed in his essays and interventions on the subject[26]. Both his theological understanding and his theory of literature rely on the "mystical" or "Sacramental" principle, according to which all that is perceivable by the senses is but a shadow of "real things unseen"[27], or "realities greater than itself"[28]. Thus, all artistic forms,

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[22] J.H. Newman, *Grammar*, p. 97.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[24] J.H. Newman, *A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation*, in *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching Considered: In a Letter addressed to the Rev. E.B. Pusey, D.D., on occasion of his Eirenicon of 1864; And in a Letter addressed to the Duke of Norfolk, on occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Expostulation of 1874*, *Vol. II*, Longmans, London 1900, pp. 246, 255.

[25] See J.H. Newman, *Poetry, with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics*, in *Essays Critical & Historical, Volume 1*, Longmans, London 1907, p. 29: "as the function of philosophy is to view all things in their mutual relations, and its object is truth; and as virtue consists in the observance of the moral law, and its object is the right; so Poetry may be considered to be the gift of moving the affections through the imagination, and its object to be the beautiful".

[26] See, for example, J.H. Newman, *Bearing of Theology on other Branches of Knowledge*, in *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*, Longmans, London 1907, pp. 67-68: "from time immemorial [theology] meets us at every turn in our literature, it is the secret assumption, too axiomatic to be distinctly professed, of all our writers".

[27] "The first of these [intellectual truths] was what may be called, in a large sense of the word, the Sacramental system; that is, the doctrine that material phenomena are both the types and the instruments of real things unseen,—a doctrine, which embraces in its fullness, not only what Anglicans, as well as Catholics, believe about Sacraments properly so called; but also the article of 'the Communion of Saints;' and likewise the Mysteries of the faith". J.H. Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Longmans, London 1908, p. 18.

[28] This theological stance was derived by Newman by his thorough reading of the Church Fathers, such as Clement and Origen, as in *Ibid.*, p. 27: "I understood these passages to mean that the exterior world, physical and historical, was but the manifestation to our senses of realities greater than itself".

literature included, constitute an Economy[29] of the Absolute, *i.e.* a material manifestation of the mystery of Revelation throughout the intellectual faculties of man. Conscience and imagination are two of such faculties which, when employed to recognize the Reality of God's existence, are said to direct themselves towards "images", or "things". In accordance with the Sacramental principle, such images do not indicate anything visible[30], but rather refer to another key-concept in Newman's thought, that of the Idea, that pure Platonic form which the intellect perceives through an act of contemplation[31]. Hence, for Newman an aesthetic experience is what triggers both real assent, and the production of art; a position which Stephen incorporates in his own aesthetic theory when he describes *claritas* as a moment of rational apprehension of the thing as it is in itself, *i.e.* of its 'whatness'. For Stephen, such a "supreme quality" is "felt" by the artist as the "image is conceived in his imagination"[32]. Based on Aquinas's "canon of beauty"[33], Stephen's aesthetics centre around the following definition of *claritas*:

> The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the aesthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony [...] the luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure, a *spiritual state*[34].

Hence, art, as the formalization of a "spiritual state", originates from a type of aesthetic perception akin to what is traditionally known as the spiritual, or religious experience of contemplation[35]. That experience is followed by the "only synthesis which is logically and

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[29] For Newman, the Economy is a Sacramental way of manifestation on behalf of God among men, over which men among their peers should model their own manners of communication and conduct: "As Almighty God did not all at once introduce the Gospel to the world, and thereby gradually prepared men for its profitable reception, so, according to the doctrine of the early Church, it was a duty, for the sake of the heathen among whom they lived, to observe a great reserve and caution in communicating to them the knowledge of 'the whole counsel of God'. This cautious dispensation of the truth, after the manner of a discreet and vigilant steward, is denoted by the word 'economy'. It is a mode of acting which comes under the head of prudence, one of the four cardinal virtues. The principle of the economy is this; that out of various courses, in religious conduct or statement, all and each allowable antecedently and in themselves, that ought to be taken which is most expedient and most suitable at the time for the object in hand". *Ibid.*, p. 343.

[30] "The fact of the distinctness of the images, which are required for real assent, is no warrant for the existence of the objects which those images represent". See J.H. Newman, *Grammar*, p. 80.

[31] See, for example, how Newman comments on Literature as a consequence of a contemplative practice in his lecture on the subject, in J.H. Newman, *Literature*, in *The Idea*, p. 283: "Why should not skill in diction be simply *subservient* to the greatest prototypal ideas which are the *contemplation* of a Plato or a Virgil?". Emphasis added.

[32] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 250.

[33] G. Barzaghi, *Mistica cristiana come estetica assoluta*, "Divus Thomas", 104, 2001, pp. 23-59, p. 36.

[34] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 250. Emphasis added.

[35] See J. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, Continuum, London 1980, p. 330: "an operation in which one experiences the happy blending of the cognitive and the affective powers in an activity providing great delight. The knowledge involved is not discursive but intuitive [...]. Perhaps the best example of natural contemplation is found in the aesthetic experience of the beautiful".

aesthetically permissible"[36], *i.e.* an act of rational scrutiny in which the artist performs his real assent as an "unconditional"[37] act of apprehension where the mind recognizes the Divine in the image it is provided with: in Joycean terms, its "supreme quality". My contention here is that Stephen's "image", what prompts him to assent to his artistic vocation and to perfect his theory, is in fact that of the bird-girl.

Going back to the Newman quote in Chapter IV of *A Portrait*, it must be noted that in the very paragraph which Stephen reminisces on, Newman also describes real assent as a "change in the character of [the] apprehension [of the Almighty]" happening "so often [...] in what is called religious conversion"[38], instancing his argument by a reference to Job 42: 5-6. The biblical reference exemplifies such a "change of character" as the result of trials and tribulations suffered by the faithful, and as a shift in perception –from hearing to seeing:

> And it is strikingly suggested to us, to take a saintly example, in the confession of the patriarch Job, when he contrasts his apprehension of the Almighty before and after his afflictions. He says he did indeed have a true apprehension of the Divine Attributes before as well as after; but with the trial came a great change in the character of that apprehension:—"With the hearing of the ear," he says, "I have heard Thee, but now mine eye seeth Thee; therefore I reprehend myself, and do penance in dust and ashes[39].

It might be useful to recall how Stephen, in the preceding chapters, underwent a spiritual crisis, under the influence of which he rigorously committed himself to Loyola's spiritual exercises[40]. It is after having gone through this process of "purification" (which will be discussed in detail in the following section of the present essay), that Stephen can experience his "change of character" in the apprehension of his own reality. The narrative dynamics surrounding the apparition of the bird-girl are, in this respect, crucial, for they retrace Job's (and Newman's) perceptive progression, picturing Stephen going through two epiphanies after the kitchen table scene, one 'aural' and one 'visual'.

In fact, the passages preceding Stephen's 'aural' and 'visual' epiphanies rely on representational techniques which tend to disrupt the layers of conventional discourse, namely by deliberately deforming significants within the logic of syntagmatic succession. Such deformations are actually traceable from the very beginning of the novel –the famous "moocow"[41], or in passages such as this:

> He sat near them at the table and asked where his father and mother were. One answered:
> —*Goneboro toboro lookboro atboro aboro houseboro*.

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[36] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 250.
[37] J.H. Newman, *Grammar*, p. 28.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[39] *Ibidem*.
[40] For a thorough discussion on Loyola's exercises, even in relation to *A Portrait*, see M. Mayo, *James Joyce*, *Introduction* and *Chapter 2*.
[41] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 1.

> Still another removal! [...]
> He asked:
> —Why are we on the move again if it's a fair question?
> —*Becauseboro theboro landboro lordboro willboro putboro usboro outboro*[42].

In this respect, these passages are an exemplar of the entwining of what Kristeva calls the symbolic, *i.e.* "the establishment of sign and syntax, paternal function, grammatical and social constraints, symbolic law"[43] and the semiotic "*chora*"[44], an "undetermined articulation", a prelinguistic realm that does not imply any reference to a "signified object"[45]. The plastic remolding of the symbolic structures, in order for the semiotic to be seen and heard, is a constant stylistic device employed by Joyce which, while made extremely apparent in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, informs in a more subtle way Joyce's more 'naturalistic' writings, such as *A Portrait*. This is especially evident when one examines closely the interplay that occurs, in the novel's discourse, between the symbolic fabric of phenotext, "a structure [which] obeys rules of communication", presupposing "a subject of enunciation and an addressee"[46] and the semiotic qualities of the genotext, "language's underlying foundation"[47]. In the moments immediately preceding the bird-girl episode, for example, semiotic eruptions of genotextual elements are detectable within the symbolic fabric of the phenotext, functioning proleptically as the portals to Stephen's epiphanies. In that particular scene, the genotext is symbolized in a chit-chat uttered towards Stephen by his fellow students at the beach:

> —Hello, *Stephanos*! [...]
> —Come along, Dedalus! *Bous Stephanoumenos*! *Bous Stephaneforos*! [...]
> —*Stephanos Dedalos*! *Bous Stephanoumenos*! Bous *Stephaneforos*! [...]
> *What did it mean*? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols [...], *a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve [...], a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being*[48].

The repetition of his name, the various combinations and phonemic distortions uttered by his friends, prompt Stephen to gain a sudden insight about himself and realize that his life-purpose was one of a total, spiritual devotion to art. This realization is symbolized by way of an array of bodily perceptions[49], leading to a purification of the body, to the flight of the soul, and to a total communality with the spirit, which are meant to prepare Stephen for the encounter with the bird-girl: "his soul was in flight. His soul was soaring in an air

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 189.
[43] J. Kristeva, *Desire*, p. 7.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 88.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 133.
[46] J. Kristeva, *Revolution*, p. 87.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 86.
[48] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, pp. 195-196. Emphasis added.
[49] "[...] his heart trembled; his breath came faster". *Ibid.*, p. 196.

beyond the world and the body he knew was purified in a breath and delivered of incertitude and made radiant and commingled with the element of the spirit"[50].

Stephen's 'aural' experience is immediately followed by the 'visual' apparition of the girl which, in the economy of the narrative, is arguably the Joycean *anàlogon* to Newman's "image". The girl is indeed outlined as a supernatural apparition, divinely portrayed as "A wild angel [...] an envoy from the fair courts of life"[51], while the whole passage is discursively imbued with literary imagery harking back to Christian spiritual traditions, such as the flight of the spirit, *i.e.* the ecstasy and radiance of the subject raptured in a moment of transcendence[52]:

> —Heavenly God! *cried Stephen's soul* [...]. *His cheeks were aflame; his body was aglow; his limbs were trembling*. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the *advent* of the life that had cried to him.

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[50] *Ibid.*, p. 196.

[51] *Ibid.*, p. 199. Critics widely agree on the mysterious and supernatural nature of the bird-girl. A reading complementary to this, for example, detects a Celtic sub-text in the whole scene, identifying Stephen's experience as a "*fís*, or Vision" from the "Otherworld" (F.L. Radford, *Daedalus and the Bird Girl: Classical Text and Celtic Subtext in "A Portrait"*, "James Joyce Quarterly" 24, 1987, 3, pp. 262, 255). The ability to conceive "images" in his imagination, amidst a burning religious fervor, is cultivated by Stephen from a very early age, so much so that the episode on the beach can be read as a duplication of the Mercedes passage J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, pp. 70-71, which reads as a foreshadowing of the merging of sacred and profane that characterizes the narrative: "He returned to Mercedes and, as he brooded upon her image, a strange unrest crept into his blood. Sometimes a fever gathered within him and led him to rove alone in the evening along the quiet avenue. The peace of the gardens and the kindly lights in the windows poured a tender influence into his restless heart. [...] He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld. He did not know where to seek it or how but a premonition which led him on told him that this image would, without any overt act of his, encounter him. They would meet quietly as if they had known each other and had made their tryst, perhaps at one of the gates or in some more secret place. They would be alone, surrounded by darkness and silence: and in that moment of supreme tenderness he would be transfigured". See E.R. Steinberg, *The Bird-Girl in "A Portrait" as Synthesis: The Sacred Assimilated to the Profane*, "James Joyce Quarterly", 17, 1980, 2, pp. 149-163.

[52] The image of the soul in flight, or the 'flight of the soul' is in itself a Platonic image, later reworked by Origen as the "soul returning like an Eagle to God". See R.A. Greer, *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and Selected Works*, Paulist Press, New York 1979, p. 25. Burns confirms this view: "The idea of the soul flying on its wings is found throughout early Christian literature [...]. The concept of πτερόω, 'the provision of wings', is found frequently among early Christian writers, and is commonly held to be of Platonic origin". See S. Burns, *Divine Ecstasy in Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Macarius: Flight and Intoxication*, "The Greek Orthodox Theological Review", 44, 1999, pp. 313-314. The concept persisted in later spiritual Christianity, for example in Saint Therese's definition of ecstasy, which corresponds both to the flight of the spirit and to the rapture, as stated in the *Libro de Su Vida*, Cap. XX: 'Querrìa saber declarar con el favor de Dios la diferencia que hay de unión a arrobamiento u elevamiento u vuelo que llaman de espíritu u arrebatamiento, que todo es uno. Digo que estos diferentes nombres todo es una cosa, y también se llama éstasi'. Trans. 'I would like to be able to declare with God's favour that the difference between what they call the union or captivation or elevation or flight of the spirit or rapture, is one. I say that those different names are one thing which is called ecstasy'. See Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Libro de la vida*, J. García López ed., Penguin Clásicos (Ebook Kindle Edition). Note that the Spanish "espíritu" translates both 'spirit' and 'soul'. See. Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, https://dle.rae.es/esp%C3%ADritu (last accessed February 17, 2022). If not stated otherwise, all translations into English are by the Author.

> *Her image had passed into his soul* for ever and no word had broken *the holy silence of his ecstasy*. Her eyes had called him and *his soul had leaped at the call*. [...] A wild angel had appeared to him [...] to throw open before him in an *instant of ecstasy* the gates of all the ways of error and glory[53].

Stephen's "instant of ecstasy" is in itself an epiphanic experience in which the spiritual manifestation, while subjected to language in order to be recounted, is by no means granted by language but by the silent apparition of an image bestowed for contemplation and apprehended by the higher perception of the soul.

Given the centrality of the "image" to Newman's description of real assent, and given the explicit intertextuality that *A Portrait* establishes with the *Grammar*'s paragraph where real assent is exemplified, it may be reasonable to suppose that Newman's text figured heavily, at least as a source of inspiration, in Joyce's depiction of Stephen's artistic development. Yet, as any intertextual effort in literature entails the "articulation of a new system with its new representabilty" via a common "intermediary" after the "abandonment of a former sign system"[54], through Stephen Joyce tells us very clearly that his is a brand new articulation: "When we come to the phenomena of artistic conception, artistic gestation, and artistic reproduction *I require a new terminology and a new personal experience*"[55]. In other words, while Newman's concept of real assent refers mainly to religious experiences, and particularly to religious conversion, Joyce's perspective on it implies an amplification of its scope, to embrace artistic vocation, creation, and ultimately a spiritual conversion to the mystery of art.

It can be argued then that the notion of real assent works through *A Portrait* metatextually, *i.e.* as a symbolic framework onto which Joyce constructed the epiphanies constituting the perceptual foundations to Stephen's aesthetics – in other words, Stephen's *Bildung*. It has also been observed how the discourse surrounding such a blueprint is imbued with tropes and images pertaining to the Christian mystical tradition, which will be dealt with in the subsequent part of this essay. In particular, it will be argued that *A Portrait* could be compared to a piece of mystic literature, for the literary expressions of mystics are

> the literature of their methodology. They speak for themselves, not indeed so much about union with the Absolute, as of the necessary preludes to this union; not in analysis of the psychological or ontological aspects of spiritual communion, so much as in an arrangement of veritable rungs of the spiritual ladder by which the soul ascends to perfection[56].

[53] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 199. Emphasis added.
[54] J. Kristeva, *Revolution*, p. 60.
[55] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, pp. 245-246. Emphasis added.
[56] J. Burns Collins, *Christian Mysticism in the Elizabethan Age: With Its Background in Mystical Methodology*, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1940, p. 2.

3. *Stephen's Mysticism*

It can be gathered from Michel De Certeau's studies on mysticism that the figure of the mystic emerged around the sixteenth century. Before then, what we now know as mysticism, a series of contemplative practices and textualizations of the spiritual experience, had the Aeropagite's *De mystica theologia* (V BC) as a guidebook and were indicated as the "*vera sapientia christianorum*", as opposed to the "*sapientia philosophorum*"[57]. With the establishment of rational theology during the sixteenth century, the status of mystic theology within the Catholic system was questioned, ultimately leading to a doctrinal rift that placed mysticism on the fringes of canonical theology[58]. Mystic theology, now presented as "experimental experience or knowledge"[59], was *de facto* nominalized as "mysticism" so as to mark its separation from rational theology, and defined as "a kind of literature"[60]. Not only doctrinally, but socially and historically too, the mystic was relegated to the fringes of society due to his or her economic and social condition: "Saint Therese of Avila belongs to a *hidalguía* devoid of office or goods; John of the Cross [...] to a ruined and downgraded aristocracy, etc"[61]. Such existential marginality also created hostility towards mystic discourse on the part of dominant power structures. As religious men and women, mystics were forced to flee from the hierarchy and take refuge in certain orders[62]; if unaccepted by or unwilling to follow those orders, or even worse, if organized in groups adhering to a certain mystical practice, they were often prosecuted[63].

Etymologically tied to the "invisible", and the "silent"[64], mysticism's literary essence can be defined as a striving to express the subject's perception of the Absolute which, hidden under the layers of the sensible, affects human senses in order to be perceived as the true "real under the diversity of institutions, religions, or doctrines"[65]. With 'experience' as the keyword to such a paradoxical endeavour, the mystic will necessarily recur to the expressive potentialities of poetry because he is entangled in the necessity to generate sense out of an inexplicable experience[66]. Therefore, to testify the Other's presence, that sense is often

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[57] M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2010, pp. 81-82; see also B. McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism. vol. 1. The Foundations of Mysticism*, Crossroad, New York 1992, pp. 157-182.

[58] M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, p. 82.

[59] "[...] esperienza o conoscenza sperimentale", *Ibid.*, p. 83.

[60] "[...] un tipo di letteratura", *Ibid.*, p. 84. B. McGinn confirms this view; see *The Presence of God*, pp. 266-267.

[61] "[...] santa Teresa d'Avila appartiene a una *hidalguía* priva di cariche e di beni; Giovanni della Croce [...] a una aristocrazia rovinata e declassata, etc". M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, p. 161.

[62] Franciscan, Jesuits, among others.

[63] *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

[64] Gr. *myein*: "to close, to shut". See https://etimo.it/?term=mistico&find=Cerca. Last accessed February 17, 2022.

[65] "[...] reale sotto la diversità delle istituzioni, delle religioni o della dottrina", M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, pp. 52-53.

[66] "The mystics are unable to express clearly what they experience in their mystical activities. It is only by means of examples, comparisons and metaphors, or circumlocution that they are able to give some notion of what transpires during these operations. [...] Mystical experiences are intuitive, and as such they can be experienced, but they cannot be expressed in human language". See J. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, p. 334.

mapped onto the depiction of bodily sensations, often erotically tinged[67], whose function is to symbolize the cognitive paradox lying at the core of the mystical phenomenon: the manifestation of an invisible visibility. Thus, mystic discourse re-establishes common semantics around the oxymoronic juxtaposition of corporeal imagery and transcendent, immaterial otherness[68]. This oxymoronic discursivization, with its semiotic drive that counters the intellectual, syntagmatic thought-structure of rational theology, can be considered the testament to the sociohistorical conditions which usually favor the emergence of the mystic in society, and of the mystic's own position within history and society –that of the exile: "they own nothing more than a present exile"[69].

As mystic discourse characteristically strives for the creation of linguistic structures able to signify the inexpressibleness of the spiritual experience, and as it identifies the Real with this experience, it is also compelled to re-work the wording of sensible facts and phenomena as metaphors testifying to such impalpable Realness. Hence, if the Real coincides with an invisible and transcendental power which language concurs to testify or, rather, to signify, mystic literature can be seen as a semiological process entailing a continuous textualization of the "transcendental signified"[70] onto structures of meaning. Essentially dialogic, mystic poetic language sets out to recompose a fragmented subject into divine wholeness and unity by way of a dialogue between the 'I' and the 'spirit'[71]. Such a dynamic implies the subject as an 'empty form'; as a speaker who is passed through by an Other whose dwellings need to be represented through poetic language, and especially by means of paradoxical imagery pertaining not only to corporeity, but also to marginal social figures: the child, the fool, the illiterate[72].

As a reflection of the poet-mystic's socio-historical and cultural peripherality, the dialogic nature of mystic language is strikingly akin to that of "the poetic word, polyvalent and multi-determined, [which] adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture"[73]. Since they initiated a discursive practice which ultimately leads to a re-interpretation of the tradition and to a renewed approach to language[74], mystic poets were often deemed subversive and prosecuted by ecclesiastical authorities[75]. In this respect mystic poetry, though pursuing totally different signifying goals and effects, undoubtedly displays the same formal mechanisms underlying the carnivalesque, where corporeal imagery is equally crucial, namely in "a logic of *analogy* and *nonexclusive opposition*"[76]. In a manner similar to the carnivalesque, then, mystic discourse displays an intrinsic dialogical nature which, along with its experimental

[67] B. McGinn, *The Presence of God*, pp. 118 *et passim*.
[68] M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, p. 54.
[69] "Non possiedono più che un presente di esilio". *Ibid.*, p. 163.
[70] J. Derrida, *Positions*, Athlone Press, London 1987, p. 19.
[71] M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, p. 168.
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 170.
[73] J. Kristeva, *Revolution*, p. 65.
[74] M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, p. 156.
[75] *Ibid.*, p. 199.
[76] J. Kristeva, *Revolution*, p. 72.

approach to language and its use of bodily metaphors, depicts a signifying realm where the symbolic is overpowered by the semiotic; a realm where the subject weaves itself into language, allowing for the pre-logical and the uncommunicable force of the semiotic to disturb and disrupt the symbolic pace of logic and clarity. Mystic discourse, then, once buried under the emergence of rational Enlightenment[77], can be seen resurfacing at the beginning of the twentieth century within the disruptive layers of modernist experimentation, when literature moves beyond realism, to rather express "the subject's dialectic within the signifying process"[78]. This resurgence was indeed recounted by commentators of that age, who observed how there were "signs at the present time of a new awakening of mystical tendencies [...] coincident with the projection of new constructions of speculative thought"[79], variously identified with "the reaction against the overinstitutionalized type of religion that has been growing in vigor during the last two or three generations; the revolt from hard materialism and the arrogance of science; secularization [...], the philosophy of James, Euken, and Bergson"[80]. Hence, a revaluation of Joyce's "agglomerative carnival surreality"[81], a staple of contemporary Joycean criticism focused particularly on his linguistic-political subversiveness and his bodily materialism, is henceforth proposed. To this end, an overview of the textual evidence that in *A Portrait* compares Stephen's cognitive progression to the mystic's journey of the soul will be carried out[82], shaping his development as an experience established in that precise Catholic paradigm:

> Paradoxically, [Stephen's] adopted vocation is bound up with the traditional topography of Catholic religious experience. In the *Portrait* we see this play on the call and the fall [...] seeing the fall into sin as an essential part of the discovery of self[83].

Often viewed as a detachment from the order of established religion so as to fulfil his artistic vocation, "depicting a growth and development away from the church toward art"[84], Stephen's rejection is rather a displacement of the artist-to-be towards the margins of both the Church and society as he says of himself towards the end of the novel: "born to be a monk. [...] A monk! His own image started forth a profaner of the cloister, a heretic Franciscan, willing and willing not to serve, spinning like Gherardino da Borgo San Don-

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[77] M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, p. 156.

[78] J. Kristeva, *Desire*, p. 82.

[79] E.S. Ames, *Mystic Knowledge*, "The American Journal of Theology", 19, 1915, p. 255.

[80] W.P. Downes, *Mysticism*, "The Biblical World", 54, 1920, p. 624.

[81] R. Brown, 'Introduction', in *A Companion to James Joyce*, R. Brown ed., Blackwell, Oxford 2011, p. 10.

[82] The journey is a universally acknowledged literary *tòpos* in Christian spiritual literature to signify the steps to the mystical union with God, for example as in San Bonaventura's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259) and in Saint John of the Cross's *La Subida del Monte Carmelo* (1578-1583). See F. England, *Sacred Texts and Mystic Meaning: An Inquiry into Christian Spirituality and the Interpretive Use of the Bible*, "Acta Theologica", 2, 2011, p. 57: "the three-fold structure of the experience and conversion of the soul who undertakes the journey – a model [...] which has been appropriated by the tradition of the major spiritual writers".

[83] R.J. Barrett, *The Priest as Artist*, "New Blackfriars", 79, 1998, pp. 92-93.

[84] B. Mitchell, *A Portrait and the Bildungsroman Tradition*, in *Approaches to Joyce's Portrait: Ten Essays*, B. Benstock ed., University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh 1976, p. 73.

nino a lithe web of sophistry"[85]. Joyce's interest in the reception of Joachim of Fiore by the spiritual Franciscans of the thirteenth century, among them Gherardino[86], their history of discordance with the Church, as well as Joyce's thorough study of their heresy are well documented and, though much more explicitly textualized in *Stephen Hero*, they nonetheless permeate *A Portrait*, leading recent commentators to identify a "radical spiritualism" in Stephen's existential habits[87].

These passages in the Thirteen Chapter of *Stephen Hero* are especially revelatory of Stephen's inclination towards the position of the Franciscans, which he discovered via "two stories of W.B. Yeats"[88], and which he studied at Marsh's Library. In particular, Stephen is depicted as feeling an existential communality with them, as "He thought, in an Assisan mood, that these men might be nearer to his purpose than others"[89], and as he sees the Franciscans inhabiting a marginal space within the Church: "These inhabit a church apart; [...] they live beyond the region of mortality, having chosen to fulfil the law of their being"[90]. This otherworldliness reflects Stephen's own position in the societal order, a position marked by the unease of a "spiritual activity"[91] which prevents him from fitting "with the order of society"[92], so that "The life of an errant seemed to him far less ignoble than the life of one who had accepted the tyranny of the mediocre because the cost of being exceptional was too high"[93]. Moreover, the Franciscans, whom Stephen compares to "outlaws"[94], fascinate him with an "incoherent and heterogeneous"[95] expression of their spiritual instances, and an "infrahuman or superhuman"[96] morality. While these passages have been removed from *A Portrait*, they are nonetheless perceivable as a palimpsest to the novel, both on a structural level, and in discourse. Structurally, the interplay between the profane and the sacred that marks Stephen's growth is in fact reminiscent of Stephen's fascination with the Franciscans' "so strange a mixture of trivialities and sacred practices"[97], whereas the

[85] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 258.
[86] See A. Donini, *Appunti per una storia del pensiero di Dante in rapporto al movimento gioachimita*, "Annual Reports of the Dante Society", 47/48, 1930, pp. 56-57.
[87] A.M. D'Arcy, *Joachim Of Fiore and 'Joachitism' from "Stephen Hero" to "Finnegans Wake"*, *James Joyce. Apocalypse and Medievalism at Marsh's Library. An online exhibition* (2019), https://www.marshlibrary.ie/digi2/exhibits/show/joyce#629. Last accessed February 17, 2022.
[88] J. Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, New Directions Books, New York 1955, p. 176.
[89] *Ibid.*, p. 177.
[90] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
[91] *Ibid.*, p. 179.
[92] *Ibidem*.
[93] *Ibidem*.
[94] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
[95] *Ibidem*.
[96] *Ibidem*.
[97] *Ibidem*. Stephen's admiration for the oxymoronic discourse of Franciscan literature and mysticism might be taken as an early stage of development of Joyce's overall commitment to the *coincidentia oppositorum*, a paradigm he sought to incorporate in the totality of his writings. The application of such a conceptual structure, while undoubtedly a testament to Joyce's penchant for the Middle Ages (see A. Power, *Conversations with James Joyce*, Millington, London 1974, pp. 90 *et passim*) also encompasses the parodic and ironic dimension of discourse not only in *A Portrait*, but in Joycean textuality in general, which require a separate study. In this

Capuchins' ways and habits are often evoked in discourse to mark parallels and analogies with Stephen's posture with respect to the Church.

In fact, Stephen's "mind, in the vesture of a doubting monk"[98], is represented in *A Portrait* as continuously oscillating between the mundane and the spiritual, in a process of development that ultimately leads it to reach a level of consciousness where it can comfortably wear a monkish vesture. Far from being a categorical expunction of religion from Stephen's existence, this process of growth seems instead to be honoring a religio-cultural *weltanschauung* which will use "silence" and "exile" as modes of "defence"[99] in accordance with the existential conditions of the mystics. It is by tapping into that religious tradition that Stephen sets out to give shape to his theory of art, although painfully aware of the marginality of his artistic discourse:

> it wounded him to think that he would never be but a shy guest at the feast of the world's culture and that the monkish learning, in terms of which he was striving to forge out an aesthetic philosophy, was held no higher by the age he lived in than the subtle and curious jargons of heraldry and falconry[100].

Indeed, this marginality is made evident when Stephen is summoned by the director of the Order to discuss his vocation. The conversation is opened by the Jesuit with a few dry remarks on the outer ways of the Franciscans; in particular, after having commented on "the friendship between saint Thomas and saint Bonaventure"[101] the priest remarks on the inconvenience of the Capuchin's habits being worn in public, giving way to a dialogic representation of the age-old controversy between the established order of the Church and the radically spiritual nature of some of its Franciscan organs: "—[...] Just imagine when I was in Belgium I used to see them out cycling in all kinds of weather with this thing up about their knees! It was really ridiculous. *Les jupes*, they call them in Belgium"[102].

The self-conscious peripherality of Stephen's aesthetic and religious stance, *i.e.* his decision not to partake in the dominant discourse of the Church[103] and his subsequent identification with the priestly figure of the monk, his intention of "forging out" a theory from his "monkish readings", are all indicators that Dedalus's radical spiritualism is indeed established Catholic spirituality. He is in fact defined a "mystic" by Davin, the nationalist, in the

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respect, a worthwhile and more detailed exploration of the influence of Franciscan literature in Joyce would certainly need to focus on the figure of the Holy Fool, which appears to be looming in the shadow of Stephen's tragic character in *A Portrait*, and is possibly developed in a more accomplished way in Leopold Bloom.

[98] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 205.

[99] *Ibid.*, p. 291.

[100] *Ibid.*, p. 209.

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 179.

[102] *Ibidem*.

[103] See F. England, *Sacred Texts and Mystic Meaning*, pp. 61-62: "the location of the spiritual quest always is undertaken in the liminal space between the individual and the institution [...] and in the forging of a personal self in that dialectical exchange".

fifth section of the novel. Having triggered Stephen's notorious refusal of Irish nationalism, Davin tries to persuade Dedalus to think the matter over and put 'Ireland first' instead:

> —[...] When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. [...]
> —Too deep for me, Stevie, he said. But a man's country comes first. Ireland first, Stevie. You can be a poet or a mystic after[104].

Davin's remark is a pointed response to Stephen's depiction of the spiritual/semiotic aspect of existence ("the soul") as opposed to, and restrained by, the cultural/symbolic dominants ("nationality, language, religion"). As a nationalist, Davin urges Stephen to give prominence to the symbolic structures over the semiotic, interestingly associating them with poetry, *or* mysticism. Albeit united by a disjunctive coordination, the two nouns form a hendiadys which suggests a metonymical contiguity with Stephen's insistence on the soul; that is, they establish the exploration of the soul as the domain of poetry and/or mysticism: "Poetry and mysticism [...] both seem to surge from the same trunk, answering to similar impulses"[105]. The word "soul" occurs in *A Portrait* 202 times, many of which characterize it as a sentient entity[106], and it is an extremely common discursive element employed both by spiritual theology[107] and mystic poetry to signify the invisible realm where the dialogue with God takes place; a common literary *tòpos* in mystical literature is that of the "purification of soul and detachment from the world, [...] in cooperation with grace"[108]. The purification of the soul is often metaphorized as a path, or a "Way", marked by a number of steps which, although they "differ with different mystics"[109] usually revolve around the number three[110]. Of course while Newman, along with the spiritual tradition, constitute Joyce's Catholic sources, his literary model for the accomplishment of Stephen's spiritual

[104] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 238.
[105] "Poesia e mistica [...] sembrerebbero sorgere dal medesimo tronco, rispondere a pulsioni non dissimili". See P. Canettieri, *Introduzione*, in *Iacopone da Todi e la poesia religiosa del Trecento*, P. Canettieri ed., Rizzoli, Milano 2001, p. 81.
[106] "He wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which *his soul so constantly beheld*". J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 71. "*It was his own soul going forth to experience*, unfolding itself sin by sin, spreading abroad the balefire of its burning stars and folding back upon itself, fading slowly, quenching its own lights and fires". *Ibid.*, p. 116. Emphases added.
[107] "the experience to which the definition [of spiritual theology] refers is not restricted to the external phenomena of religious experience [...]. Rather, it is a supernatural experience, an awareness of the workings of grace and the Holy Spirit within the soul". J. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, pp. 23-24.
[108] J. Burns Collins, *Christian Mysticism*, p. 190.
[109] W.P. Downes, *Mysticism*, p. 621.
[110] "Most manuals of spiritual theology treat the practical questions within the framework of the three stages: purgative, illuminative, and unitive". J. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, p. 134.

progress is Dante[111], the mystic qualities of whose work, along with its conversional type of narrative, have been only recently highlighted:

> Theologians [...] do not seem to retain the *Commedia* as an excellent material for their specific competence, and the great Dante as [...] a high-profile Christian whose life was marked by a relevant mystical experience. [...] But Dante was just that, a kin to Bernard of Clarivaux, or to Teresa of Ávila, or to John of the Cross, to cite just some of the masters that theology does not doubt to investigate [...]. By making reference to the poet's testimony, we can say that Dante lived a mystical experience which he connects to Easter, 1300. At the peak of his otherworldly progress he attests to have 'thrusted his gaze' in the face of the Christian God [...]. This turning point brought [...] the poet to a conversion, which he recounts in this book he named Comedìa, and which he comes to define a sacred poem. Dante also attests that this conversion entailed a reconsideration of his whole linguistic-literary work, a reconsideration which involved a new direction, actuated in the text of the Poem itself[112].

Indeed, Stephen's spiritual progress towards art can be compared to Dante's conversion, or to the process of religious conversion *per se*, since the structure of the novel is built upon a tripartite framework which mirrors that of the *Commedia*[113], entailing a gradual progress of the soul from a sense of sorrowful detachment "to a joyful and exultant union with God"[114]. This progress begins, for Stephen, once puberty is reached at the end of Chapter 2.

The third chapter is in fact dedicated to Dedalus's descent into the hell of sensuous urgency, recounting his spiritual fall and his attempts to steer away from moral depravation by means of prayer and the spiritual exercises of the Jesuit retreat; in one such moment of concentration, Dedalus experiences one of his first visions:

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[111] A 'mysteric' model Joyce probably sought after Rossetti's exegesis of Dante (see G. Rossetti, *Il mistero dell'amor platonico del Medio Evo* (Taylor, London 1840). See also J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 298: "Asked me was I writing poems? About whom? I asked her. This confused her more and I felt sorry and mean. Turned off that valve at once and opened the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus, invented and patented in all countries by Dante Alighieri".

[112] "Non sembra [...] che i teologi [...] abbiano ritenuto che la Commedia fosse materia eccellente della loro competenza specifica e che il grandissimo Dante fosse [...] un cristiano di alto profilo, la cui vita è stata segnata da una rilevante esperienza mistica. [...]. Dante è stato proprio questo, non diversamente da Bernardo di Chiaravalle o da Teresa d'Avila o da Giovanni della Croce, per citare solo alcuni tra i maestri di cui la teologia non dubita di doversi occupare [...]. Attenendoci alla testimonianza del poeta, possiamo dire che Dante visse un'esperienza mistica che egli lega alla Pasqua del 1300: al culmine del suo pellegrinaggio oltremondano egli attesta di aver "ficcato lo sguardo" nel volto del Dio cristiano [...]. Questa svolta ha comportato [...] una conversione del poeta che ne rende conto in questo libro cui dà il titolo di Comedìa e che giunge a definire sacrato poema. Attesta altresì che questa conversione ha comportato una riconsiderazione dell'opera linguistico-letteraria che aveva occupato la sua vita fino allora e un suo nuovo indirizzo che si attua nel testo del Poema". P. Lia, *La Divina Commedia come attestazione dell'esperienza mistica*, "Divus Thomas" 119, 2016, pp. 396-398.

[113] See H. Helsinger, *Joyce and Dante*, "ELH", 35, 1968, p. 598.

[114] J. Burns Collins, *Christian Mysticism*, p. 186.

> He strove to forget [his sins] in an act of prayer [...]: but the senses of his soul would not be bound and, though his eyes were shut fast, he saw the places where he had sinned and, though his ears were tightly covered, he heard. He desired with all his will not to hear or see. He desired [...] until the senses of his soul closed [...] and then opened. He saw. [...] Goatish creatures with human faces, horny browed, lightly bearded and grey as indiarubber[115].

The above passage clearly shows that Joyce distinguishes the bodily senses from those of the soul, through which the supernatural apparition is perceived. Stephen is therefore making use of his other "intellect, different from that which reasons and is denominated rational"[116], his moral compass: his conscience. This apparition, featured at the end of the chapter, marks the moment when Stephen decides to repent and abandon his excesses in favour of a more righteous contempt, paving the way for his purgatorial phase as described in Chapter 4. Here, Stephen's ascension begins to take place, symbolized in language as the "warm movement" of some "newly born life of the soul itself":

> Gradually, as his soul was enriched with spiritual knowledge, he saw the whole world forming one vast symmetrical expression of God's power and love. [...] Meek and abased by this consciousness of the one eternal omnipresent perfect reality his soul took up again her burden of pieties, masses and prayers and sacraments and mortifications, and only then for the first time [...] did he feel within him a warm movement like that of some newly born life or virtue of the soul itself. The attitude of rapture in sacred art [...] became for him an image of the soul in prayer, humiliated and faint before her Creator[117].

Described as an enrichment of the soul with spiritual knowledge, Stephen's intuition of God's presence is once again bestowed upon his soul which, at this moment, begins its new life, captured in the image of ecstatic "rapture in sacred art". In order to access the last step on the Way, that of the Union with God, Stephen's soul has to take up its "mortification", which entails a conscious "rigorous discipline"[118] of the external and internal senses: passions, intellect, and will[119].

Only after the purgatorial phase is overcome can the soul be prepared for the Union with the Creator that is symbolized, as previously seen, in a 'flight of the soul' while in contemplation of the bird-girl's image, and in an array of bodily sensations pertaining to the semantic field of levity, silence, and holiness. That vision will trigger a further advancement for Stephen's soul in the form of a symbolic rebirth from sleep, and a consequent, uncontainable joy:

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[115] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, pp. 157-158.
[116] Plotinus, as quoted in W.P. Downes, *Mysticism*, p. 623.
[117] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, p. 174.
[118] *Ibid.*, p. 182.
[119] See also J. Aumann, *Spiritual Theology*, pp. 177 *et passim*. Practices of bodily and spiritual purification are a staple of mystic forms of prayer. See M. De Certeau, *Sulla mistica*, p. 65.

> His soul was swooning into some new world [...]. A world, a glimmer or a flower? Glimmering and trembling, trembling and unfolding, a breaking light, an opening flower, it spread in endless succession to itself, breaking in full crimson and unfolding and fading to palest rose, leaf by leaf and wave of light by wave of light, flooding all the heavens with its soft flushes, every flush deeper than the other. [...] He rose slowly and, recalling the rapture of his sleep, sighed at its joy[120].

Only when the spiritual experience is complete will Stephen be able to transcend the material and cultural ties that bind him to "nationality, language, religion", and pursue art. Thus Stephen's artistic development, being inextricably anchored to his spiritual experiences, can be defined as a literary formalization inspired by at least two composite religious sources: Newman's *Grammar*, and the Christian spiritual, or mystical tradition.

4. *Conclusions*

The data gathered in this essay, rather than constituting a systematic and definitive study, aim at problematizing the Catholic sources detected in Joyce's first novel. After observing how Newman's notion of real assent, while working metatextually throughout the diegesis, merges in discourse with imagery pertaining to the Catholic spiritual tradition, Joyce's use of Newman was interpreted as an element of continuity between his own aesthetic conception and Catholic spirituality. These intertextual ties revealed Joyce to be an attentive reader of Newman's texts, a reader who interpreted some of their aspects in seamless continuity with mystical tradition and discourse. In particular, Joyce seems to have assimilated Newman's notion of real assent, along with the 'mystical' or 'sacramental' framework in which it is conceived, as a narrative device via which he could represent Stephen's development of thought, from his spiritual experiences to their rationalization in an aesthetic theory. By incorporating on multiple levels the concept of real assent in *A Portrait*, Joyce also seems to have inscribed it in the traditional three-stage structure of the mystical journey, a staple of Catholic spirituality. The latter, and the Franciscan in particular, plays a pivotal role both in modelling the novel's discourse, and in characterizing Stephen as a 'secular mystic' lingering on the fringes of the institution, rather than as an atheist or an unbeliever. What will be investigated subsequently, as it lies at the intersection between Newman's writings, Stephen Dedalus as Joyce's *alter-ego*, and the Catholic spiritual tradition, is the notion of conversion. Since religious conversion is crucial to the Jesuit's religious thought[121], *A Portrait* is indeed worthy of being read as a conversion narrative whose Jesuit backdrop needs to be further investigated, if only for being the work of an author who had sought to clarify to those who depicted him as a Catholic: "Now for the sake of precision and to get the right contour of me, you ought to allude to me as a Jesuit"[122].

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[120] J. Joyce, *A Portrait*, pp. 200-201.
[121] B. McGinn, *The Presence of God*, p. 283.
[122] R. Ellmann, *James Joyce*, p. 27.

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