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The Theme of the Artist and Artistic Creation in James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Italo Svevo’s Senilità

Critical work dedicated to a comparison of James Joyce and Italo Svevo has overwhelmingly concentrated on biographical influences, with critics pointing out the importance of their literary friendship which led to Svevo’s recognition as a writer (Veneziani 1976, 82, 100; Ellmann 1982, 271-275; Moloney 1998, 115-156; Crivelli 2006, 176-231). It came late in Svevo’s life and owed a great deal to Joyce himself. But Joyce was also indebted to Svevo: he found in Svevo one of the main sources for his protagonist Leopold Bloom in Ulysses (like Svevo, Bloom is of Jewish descent). Even though a considerable body of criticism has been devoted to the biographical relationship between the two writers, such studies rarely deal with their works in any depth.

This paper makes a departure from existing comparisons of the two writers in arguing not only for the possibility but also the significance of textual parallels between them, and I link Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man with Svevo’s Senilità on the theme of the artist and artistic creation. My contention is that this theme, in both novels, revolves around the problem of the maturation and development of the main characters. Joyce’s A Portrait has been perceived as a text dealing with Stephen Dedalus’s maturation and development, and it has become a commonplace that it is a Bildungsroman, as well as a Künstlerroman in so far as it follows Stephen’s individual and artistic growth, with the latter culminating in the exposition of his aesthetic theory and in his decision to leave Ireland in order to create “the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce 2000, 213; Schutte 1968, 12; Seret 1992, 3; Johnson 2000, 12; Boes 2008, 768). Although Emilio leads a double life of a clerk and a writer, the theme of the artist and artistic creation, at first glance, appears subsidiary in Senilità, with the problem of his “malattia” being central to the text. It is for this reason that critical studies dedicated to this theme have mostly concentrated on the affinities between Svevo the writer and his fictional characters who, just like him, are businessmen and artists (Maier 1975; Barilli 1998, 63). In line with Svevo’s obvious autobiographical impulse, Schächter has correctly pointed out that “Svevo [like his friend Joyce] drew heavily on his own life and experiences, making autobiography the myth of his fiction” (Schächter 2000, 86). Yet, although both Svevo and Joyce are autobiographical writers (but this is, at least to a certain extent, true of any writer), their intentions seem to have been utterly different. While Joyce draws on the experiences that he had

1 Joyce’s brother Stanislaus was the first to notice the obvious similarity between Svevo and Bloom (see S. Joyce 1932, 7).
2 As is well known, all the protagonists of Svevo’s major novels lead a double life. Alfonso in Una vita works in the Maller office and spends hours reading in Biblioteca Civica. Even before he starts writing a novel with Annetta, we learn that “gettava in carta qualche concettino” (Svevo 1993, 121). Even Svevo’s most mature character Zeno Cosini who writes an autobiography in order to cure himself of his illness can be perceived as an artist if we are to understand his confessions as a work of art. All of these characters are similar to Svevo who worked at the Veneziani company and wrote albeit unnoticed and unrecognized.
3 Although Stephen Dedalus is Joyce’s most profoundly portrayed artist (and A Portrait is a Künstlerroman par excellence), a number of other characters cherish artistic inclinations (to mention but Little Chandler in his first major work Dubliners who wishes to express himself in verse). Even Leopold Bloom in Ulysses, an ordinary man with a commercial mind is, at one point, perceived as a person of the same stamp: ‘He’s not one of your common or garden...you know...There’s a touch of an artist about old Bloom’ (U. 10. 193).
lived in order to remain faithful to the Aristotelian belief that art should find its inspiration in reality (he, like Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait*, chooses ‘real life’ as a source of his poetic inspiration)\(^4\). Svevo’s purpose is analytical and confessional and, for this reason, more personal. Svevo writes:

> Io, a quest’ora e definitivamente ho eliminato dalla mia vita quella ridicola e dannosa cosa che si chiama letteratura. Io voglio soltanto attraverso a queste pagine arrivare a capirmi meglio […].
>
> Dunque ancora una volta, grezzo e rigido strumento, la penna m’aiuterà ad arrivare al fondo tutto complesso del mio essere (Svevo, 1968, 818, the emphasis is mine).

As Bruno Maier has suggested, Svevo “scrive essenzialmente imperioso di chiarificazione interna, per un desiderio di risolvere i suoi problemi, oggettivandoli in vicende e in personaggi” (11). And just like Svevo, Emilio in *Senilità* tries to write a novel in the attempt to confide himself in his pages.

I compare Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with Svevo’s *Senilità* on the theme of the artist and artistic creation not only because the two texts reveal astonishing similarities in dealing with this problem, or because the theme was very important for Joyce and Svevo as autobiographical writers, but also because its role is as crucial to *Senilità* as it is to *A Portrait*. Emilio reveals his artistic inclinations primarily during his relationship with Angiolina who, as Baldi has noted, becomes a symbol for him (79). Since the theme of the artist is intertwined with the problem of Emilio’s and Angiolina’s relationship around which the entire narrative of *Senilità* revolves, its role in the novel is not subsidiary. We cannot gain a full insight into Emilio’s and Angiolina’s rapport without taking into consideration Emilio’s artistic attempts which are triggered by their encounter. In linking the problem of the artist and artistic creation with Stephen’s and Emilio’s development, I argue that at the beginning of their process of maturation, both protagonists reveal an inclination to idealize the women inspiring their art. Yet, while at the end of *A Portrait*, Stephen manages to move away from idealization by accepting the physical aspect of womanhood, *Senilità* closes with Emilio’s idealized thoughts about the women who were central to his life. At the end of *A Portrait*, Stephen produces a villanelle for E.C. and is determined to create the “uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce, 2000, 213). Poetic as Emilio’s final thoughts on the important women of his life are, they suggest that he is bound to remain a failed writer. I also contend that, in both novels, the act of creation involves sexual energies, and, further, that the two protagonists, who are both aspiring writers, have the same artistic intentions: prone as they are to the idealization of women, they both aim at representing them realistically in their works. They fail to do it, but the words with which *A Portrait* ends promise that Stephen will one day fulfill his goal and mission as an artist. By contrast, *Senilità* concludes with Emilio’s reconciliation, albeit implicit, that he will remain a dreamer and a failed writer.

The villanelle that Stephen Dedalus produces at the end of *A Portrait* is dedicated to E.C. Yet, not only E.C. but also all other female characters emerging in the novel are incorporated into the poem in so far as they play an important role in his development.\(^5\) Right at

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\(^4\) Ellmann was the first to point out that Joyce’s writings reveal that he studied Aristotle’s *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *the Nicomachean Ethics*, *the Problemata*, *the De Sensu* (See Ellmann, 1974, 13). Not only does the Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait* become aware that art should find inspiration in real life. In the tenth chapter of *Ulysses* “Scylla and Charybdis”, he again proves to be an Aristotelian and challenges the Dublin literati who are all Platonists and idealists.

\(^5\) There are several female characters in the book, but none of them is fully developed or portrayed in the traditional way. We first encounter Eileen at the beginning of the book. She then appears again on two occasions in Chapter I,
the start, Stephen establishes the relationship with Eileen as the first female character emerging in the text, as well as with language as his medium of expression. The novel, in fact, opens with the voice of a storyteller who tells a story to a small child: “Once upon a time […] there was a moocow coming down along the road and that moocow […] met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo […] His father told him that story; his father looked at him through a glass’ (Joyce 2000, 7). In listening to his father telling him a story, Stephen is introduced to the world of language, and this can be seen as the initial step of his maturation as an artist. At the beginning of this process, he absorbs his father’s words. As Seed has noted, at this point, he is an ‘addressee rather than the creator of the story’ (43). His father is not only the source of knowledge for him, but also an authorial voice setting the conditions of the storytelling. Soon after remembering his father telling him a story, Stephen also recalls other members of his family (his mother who has a nicer smell than his father, as well as his aunt Dante whose extreme piousness represents for him the restrictions of Irish Catholicism). He also remembers Eileen. In seeing her, he hides under the table: “The Vances lived in number seven. They had a different father and mother. They were Eileen’s father and mother. When they were grown up he was going to marry Eileen. He hid under the table’ (Joyce 2000, 5). Stephen’s hiding under the table is followed by Dante’s threat that the ‘eagles will come and pull out his eyes” (Joyce 2000, 6), if he marries Eileen who is a protestant. In hiding under the table, Stephen proves that he is shy of women at this point and, more importantly, unable to communicate with them. Only Dante’s words echo in his mind through his alternation of two lines ‘Pull out his eyes’ and ‘Apologize’:

- Pull out his eyes
- Apologize
- Apologize
- Pull out his eyes (Joyce 2000, 6).

The repetition of these two lines suggests that Stephen’s artistic consciousness has created a rhythm out of the words that he has heard. Yet, this repetition also betrays his feeling of guilt and proves that he is still a listener absorbing the authorial voices surrounding him. When Eileen occurs for the second time in the novel, she is presented as resembling the Virgin and is, once again, linked with Dante:

And [Dante] did not like him to play with Eileen because Eileen was a protestant and when she was young she knew children that used to play with protestants and the protestants used to make fun of the litany of the Blessed Virgin. *Tower of Ivory*, they used to say, *House of Gold*. How could a woman be a tower of ivory or a house of gold? […] Eileen had a long white hands. One evening when playing tig she had put her hands over his eyes: long and white and thin and cold

and her emergence is always linked with the same motifs – the figure of Dante to whom Stephen’s father refers to as a “spoiled nun” (Joyce 2000, 29) and the motif of pure, ivory hands (see Joyce 2000, 5-6, 29, 36-6). Throughout the book, Joyce neither describes his female characters, nor follows their development in the linear way. We rather get an insight into them through the repetition of the characteristic motifs which are linked with them and which appear at different points in the novel.

A *Portrait* follows Stephen’s maturation from his early childhood to his adolescence, and is divided into five chapters, with each following the subsequent phase of his individual and artistic development.

Stephen’s individual development revolves around his attempt to break away from his Catholic upbringing which is repressive of sexuality. The novel opens with the description of his schooldays at Clongowes, the Jesuit school that he attends as a boy. He is described as being terrified of the Jesuits, and one of the reasons for his initial idealization of womanhood are certainly the values that they instilled in him. Dante is his aunt who always appears in relation to religion and who because of her religious rigidness represents for him, as small child, a threat.
and soft. That was ivory: a cold white thing. That was the meaning of *Tower of Ivory*. (Joyce 2000, 29)

Eileen’s second occurrence is again followed by Stephen’s reasoning about language. At this point, he ponders the mechanisms and the effect of the two metaphors, linking their tenor (the woman and the hands) with their vehicle (“House of Gold” and “Tower of Ivory”), which leads him to conclude that the relationship between the two produces meaning (“That was ivory: a cold white thing. That was the meaning of *Tower of Ivory*”). More importantly, Stephen’s thoughts about Eileen’s “long” and “white” hands and her “fair” hair suggest that he perceives her not as a girl who plays tig with him and whom he likes, but rather, and primarily, as an elevated being who, in her moral and physical chastity, resembles the Virgin of whose litany “protestants make fun”. Stephen’s idealization of Eileen’s physical elements – of her hands and of her hair – is certainly influenced by Dante’s “preaching”. More importantly, it reveals that he flees and avoids physicality at this point, and cannot accept it.

In Chapter II, he is back from Clongowes, and, once again, listens to his father’s stories during their long walks: “Words which he did not understand he said over and over to himself till he had learnt them by heart: and through them he had glimpses of the real world around him” (Joyce 2000, 52). At this point of the novel, Stephen not only absorbs the words, but also establishes the relationship between them and reality. As the quotation indicates, he creates his own reality out of the words that he hears. This is also true of the female characters who are, at this point, part of his life. He has the habit of reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*:

The figure of that dark avenger stood forth in his mind for whatever he had heard or divined in his childhood… When he had broken up this scenery … there would come in his mind the bright picture of Mercedes … Outside Blackrock on the road that led to the mountings, stood a small house in the garden in which grew many rosebushes, and in this house … another Mercedes lived… and in his imagination he lived through a long train of adventures, marvelous as those in the book itself…towards the close of which there appeared an image of himself grown older and sadder, standing in a moonlit garden with Mercedes who had so many years before slighted his love … The piece 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 … ” (Joyce 2000, 52-54).

In reading about Dumas’s heroine Mercedes, Stephen creates an imaginary woman and dreams about meeting with her. As someone who “slighted” his love, Mercedes is presented as being morally less pure and elevated that Eileen. Yet, her “unsubstantial image”, as well as the idyllic atmosphere surrounding him as he is immersed in his thoughts about his possible encounter with her suggest that she is more detached from physical womanhood than Eileen. Eileen’s “white” hands and her “fair hair” point to her purity and spirituality and prove that Stephen mentally elevates her. Yet, he plays with her and feels the touch of her hands when she puts them above his eyes. By contrast, Mercedes is, for him, “unsubstantial”. She is an imagined woman built upon a fictional character who does not exist.

Stephen’s starts moving away from the idealization of womanhood through his relationship with E.C. We first encounter E.C. in Chapter II on the occasion of their parting on the tram:

It was the last tram … On the empty seats of the tram were scattered a few … tickets. No sound of footsteps came up or down the road. No sound broke the peace of the night when the lank brown horses rubbed their noses … and shook their bells. They seemed to listen, he on the upper step and she on the lower. She came up to his step many times and went down to hers again between their phrases and once or twice stood close beside him for some moments… His heart danced upon her
movements like a cork upon a tide … He saw her urge her vanities, her fine dress sash and long black stockings, and knew that he had yielded to them a thousand times. I could easily catch hold of her when she comes to my step. I could hold her and kiss her. But he did neither (Joyce, 2000, 57-58).

Stephen’s and E.C.’s parting on the tram indicates that that he is still unable to accept physical womanhood. He cannot kiss E.C., although she encourages him to do it as she comes to his step, and as she “urge[s] her vanities”. The occurrence of Eileen and Mercedes in the text makes Stephen create a rhythm out of the words that he hears and ponder the mechanisms of metaphors. After his parting with E.C., he does not think about language and how it works, but tries to write a poem for her. He fails to do it, but the description of their encounter reveals that his artistic consciousness is increasingly maturing. It has become a commonplace of Joyce criticism that the style of *A Portrait* changes as Stephen develops. As Schutte has pointed out, “The style subtly modulates to reflect inevitable changes in the quality of Stephen’s apprehension of the world about him. In a very real sense, the style of any one section is Stephen at a particular point of time (12).”

While the description of Eileen shows that his perception of the world as a small child is reduced to the formation of binary oppositions (Eileen’s hands are “long and white”, “cold and soft”) and that his language is somewhat clichéd (“white hands” are stereotypical symbols of purity), the rendering of Mercedes indicates that, when he comes back from Clongowes, he becomes influenced by the books that he reads. His description of Mercedes and expressions like “the figure of the dark avenger stood forth in his mind” and “the garden in which grew many rosebushes” or “in his imagination he lived through a long train of adventures, marvelous as those in the book” strike the reader as reflecting the sensibility which is prone to excessive linguistic adornment and elevated poetic diction, and are reminiscent of Dumas. The passage describing his parting on the tram with E.C. is different, and it subtly renders the intensity of their feelings. The scene revolves around the contrast between the silence which is broken by horses shaking their bells and the rhythm of E.C’s frequent coming up the step, hoping that Stephen will kiss her. The contrast serves the purpose of reinforcing the rhythm of E.C.’s movements, metaphorically suggesting that this physical movement reflects the emotional excitement of the two characters. Since the scene is filtered through Stephen’s eyes, the metaphorical power of the contrast also indicates that his artistic consciousness is becoming increasingly poetic and less dependent on the books that he reads. Indeed, Stephen’s thoughts about E.C. during the night of the Whitsuntide play, which takes place two years after their parting on the tram, reveal the subtlety of a fine writer, heralding his final conviction that his mission is to become the artist of his “race”:

She was sitting among the others perhaps waiting for him to appear. He tried to recall her appearance but could not... He wondered had he been in her thoughts as she had been in his. Then in the dark and unseen by the other two he rested the tips of the fingers of one hand upon the palm of the other, scarcely touching it and yet pressing upon it lightly. But the pressure of her fingers had been lighter and steadier, and suddenly the memory of their touch traversed his brain and body (Joyce 2000, 69).

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8 Although *A Portrait* is told by the third person narrator, the perspective is for the most part Stephen’s.

9 Dumas’s novel is a dynamic story about love, adventure and revenge, but his style is often exuberant and abounds in excessive metaphors. This is one of his descriptions of Mercedes: “A young and beautiful girl, with hair as black as jet, her eyes as velvety as the gazelle’s, was leaning with her back against the wainscot, rubbing in her slender, delicately moulded fingers a bunch of heath blossoms … her arms bare to the elbow, brown and modeled after those of Arlesian Venus” (Dumas 1998, 34).
The passage is written in simple language, but it masterfully records the feelings of a person who is trying to recall a past encounter with his beloved. Towards the end of the Whitsuntide play, Stephen perceives E.C. as having “alluring eyes watching him from the audience” (Joyce 2000, 71). The compound “alluring eyes” can be read as indicating her seductive ways and refers back to the parts of the description of their parting on the tram where he notices “her fine dress” and “long black stockings” to which he “had yielded … a thousand times” (Joyce 2000, 69). This suggests that Stephen struggles to accept E.C.’s physicality as early as in Chapter II, but is able to do this only after he has rounded off the process of his maturation and development.

A crucial step in Stephen’s movement away from the idealization of women to the acceptance of their physicality is his encounter with the prostitute at the end of Chapter II. At the end of this chapter, he starts rebelling against the sexual repression which was imposed on him through his Jesuit upbringing. After seeing the word *foetus* engraved on the desk of the anatomy theatre that he visits when he goes to Cork with his father, Stephen feels “cold and cruel and loveless lust” (Joyce 2000, 80). For the first time in the novel, he wants to “sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with her in sin” (Joyce 2000, 83). The lines suggest that sexuality is for him linked with sin, and in walking towards the prostitute, he deliberately commits the sin. The description of the physical environment surrounding him as he goes towards his first sexual intercourse serves the purpose of reinforcing his state of mind: “He had wandered into a maze of narrow and dirty streets … He walked onward, undismayed” (Joyce 2000, 84). Yet, he remains immobile in meeting with the prostitute:

As he stood silent in the middle of the room she came over to him and embraced him …. His lips would not bend to kiss her. He wanted to be held firmly in her arms, to be caressed slowly, slowly, slowly … But his lips would not bend to kiss her … He closed his eyes, surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world, but the dark pressure of her … lips. They pressed upon his brain as upon his lips as though they were the vehicle of a *vague speech* (Joyce 2000, 84-5, the emphasis is mine).

The prostitute is the active principle of their encounter. Although Stephen is unable to kiss her, he eventually surrenders to her, in a kind of swoon, and this brings him closer to the acceptance of physical womanhood. Significantly, in his mind, he links the kiss that is pressed on his lips with speech. Referring to the word “speech” used in this context, Jeri Johnson has argued that “Stephen here has become a passive body acted upon by another, not by a person, but by something represented in *linguistic* terms: it seems he is being brutally occupied by language itself” (Johnson 2004, 208, the emphasis is Johnson’s). She goes on to identify the prostitute’s physical invasion through a kiss with the lingual and cultural occupation of Ireland (Johnson 2004, 208). No matter of how we are to interpret the “invasion” that Stephen suffers as the prostitute kisses him, his mental allusion to speech suggests that he thinks about language even at this moment. In perceiving the prostitute’s lips as the “vehicle of a vague speech”, he identifies her kiss with speech. In other words, he replaces the physical act of kissing with the abstract dimension of language, proving that he is still unable to accept sexuality in full.

In Chapter IV, he approaches physicality more daringly. At the end of this chapter, he sees a seabird:

A girl stood before him in midstream… She seemed like the one whom magic had changed into the likeliness of a … beautiful seabird. Her long slender legs were delicate …. Her tights, fuller and softthued as ivory were bared almost to the hips where the white fingers of her drawers were
like the featherings of her soft white dawn. Her slateblue skirts were knitted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. But her long hair was girlish: girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face (Joyce 2000, 144).

At first glance, the image of the seabird can be seen as representing Stephen’s vision of the woman resembling a bird. Yet, it seems to me that the seabird emerging from the sea is a real woman whom he spots as he walks along the seaside. At this point of the novel, he feels psychologically distant from his peers. He perceives them as “collective”: “He recognized their speech collectively before he distinguished their faces” (Joyce 2000, 141). This can be read as an indication that his process of personal maturation and development is coming to an end. The description of the seabird suggests that Stephen still tends to idealize women (the woman whom he sees is transformed into a seabird by “magic”, her tights are “ivory”, and her legs are “slender and “delicate”). Yet, in the second part of the quotation, he perceives her not as a pure, “ivory” being, but rather as a mortal woman (her face is “girlish and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty”) who boldly exposes her physicality (she wears “slateblue skirts” which are “knitted boldly about her waist”). More importantly, we learn that the seabird “[feels Stephen’s] presence and the worship of his eyes”, and that she “suffers his gaze and then quietly withdraw[s] her eyes from him” (Joyce 2000, 144). While Stephen is motionless and immobile when he tries to kiss E.C. and the prostitute, he now boldly gazes at the woman resembling a seabird. Although she first looks at him “without shame and wantonness,” Stephen is the active principle of this exchange of gazes. This time, he does not suffer “invasion”, but rather “invades”, and finally utters a cry which is masturbatory: “–Heavenly God! cried Stephen’s soul in an outburst of profane joy” (Joyce 2000, 144). The passage from Stephen’s initial idealization of the seabird to his final perception of her as a mortal, physical and sexual woman suggests that he has managed to move away from the idealization of women to the acceptance of their physicality. Through this, he has also gained a more complete insight into womanhood. The seabird episode ends with his realization that his mission as an artist is to “live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life” (Joyce 2000, 145). This indicates that he is able to clearly define his main artistic goal – to use life as the main source of inspiration and to represent it realistically – only after he has reconciled the physical and the spiritual aspect of womanhood.

The tension between Stephen’s inclination to idealize the women who inspire his art and his struggle to accept their physicality is also made visible during his attempts at creation. Stephen’s first attempt to write a poem for E.C., which occurs after their parting on the tram in Chapter II, is described like this: “All those elements which he deemed common and insignificant fell out of the scene. There remained no trace of the tram … nor of the tramman … nor did he and she appear vividly. The verses told only of the night and the balmy breeze and the maiden lustre of the moon” (Joyce 2000, 59). The description reveals that as early as in Chapter II, he wants to render the scene as it really happened: by reviving the tram and the tramman, E.C. and himself, he aims at capturing its important details, and the protagonists that took part in it. But he is unable not only to reconstruct the elements that he “deemed insignificant and that fall out of the scene”, but also any of the characters. This is the case because he is still prone to idealization. The only element that he manages to represent in trying to compose his poem for the first time is the image of the night which is described through a line echoing the elevated poetic diction and linguistic adornment of nineteenth-century poetry (“the night and the balmy breeze and the maiden lustre of the moon”). The scene is also idealized, and more importantly, its language and diction reveal Stephen’s unoriginality. It is his propensity towards idealization
and his inability to accept reality as the source of his art that cause his first attempt to create a poem for E.C. to fail.

However, in Chapter V, we are presented with Stephen’s act of creation. After he departs from the seabird and exposes his aesthetic theory to Lynch at the end of Chapter IV, he wakes up at dawn, and starts scribbling the lines of his poem on a cigarette packet. His vision of the seabird ends with a masturbatory cry; by the same token, the act of creation of his villanelle is masturbatory: “Towards dawn he awoke. O what sweet music! His soul was all dewy wet” (Joyce 2000, 182). The poem that he writes for E.C. is given in full towards the end of A Portrait, and the image of womanhood that it conveys is that of a temptress: “Your eyes have set man’s heart ablaze/And you have had your will of him/Are you not weary of ardent ways?” (Joyce 2000, 188). By creating the character of a temptress, through the act of writing which is masturbatory, Stephen, once more, proves to have moved away from his initial perception of women as spiritually and physically idealized. But the temptress of his villanelle is not an ordinary temptress. Her “weary ardent ways”, her “will of him”, “her eyes that set men’s heart ablaze” make her similar to other sexually liberal characters in the novel (the prostitute and the seabird when she gazes at Stephen “without shame and wantonness” Joyce 2000, 144), but the villanelle contains religious references and through them creates a paradox. The poem begins: “Are you not weary of ardent ways?/Lure of the fallen seraphim?/Tell no more of enchanted days” and then continues “Our broken cries and mournful lays/Rise in one eucharistic hymn/Are you not weary of ardent ways?, “While sacrificing hands upraise/The chalice flowing to the brim/Are you not weary of ardent ways?” (Joyce 2000, 188). As we read through the poem, we realize that the poetic persona is addressing a temptress whose ways are “ardent”, but who is also a mythical being for whom an “Eucharistic hymn” is sung and “sacrificing hands” raise a “chalice”. This suggests that the female figure of Stephen’s villanelle does not represent real womanhood. She resembles the Biblical fallen woman and the other side of the Virgin. Moreover, in being a temptress she does not embody womanhood in its completeness in so far as her image does not reconcile the physical and the spiritual aspect of womanhood. Since there is still a disjunction between art and reality in Stephen’s poem, it is obvious that in writing his villanelle he has not yet accomplished his goal to “recreate life out of life”. Yet, the novel ends with Stephen’s decision to leave Ireland, in order to “encounter … the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce, 2000, 213). Although he fails in trying to compose a poem which would “recreate life out of life”, this vow can be read as a promise that he will one day fulfill his mission as an artist. While at the beginning of A Portrait Stephen is an addressee of his father’s story, he now addresses the mythical father Dedalus: “Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead” (Joyce 2000, 213). His father’s storytelling from the beginning introduces him to the world of language, while his final address to Dedalus can be seen as indicating that he has rounded off his personal and artistic maturation. He is not a listener any more, absorbing the authorial voices surrounding him, but rather a creator who has produced a poem, flawed as it is, and who is determined to “forge … the uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce, 2000, 213).

Right at the start of A Portrait, Stephen establishes the relationship with Eileen, as well as with language as his medium of expression. By the same token, right at the beginning of Senilità, Emilio starts his relationship with Angiolina through a wished-for verbal agreement.

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10 Joyce has often been attacked, especially by Feminist critics, for his binary perception of womanhood. As Hanke has argued, “women in [Joyce’s] fiction consistently reflect the Virgin/Whore dichotomy dominant in Western culture” (14).
Yet, while *A Portrait* opens with Stephen’s father telling a story to his son and introducing him to the world of language, *Senilità* begins with Emilio’s direct address to Angiolina: “Subito, con le prime parole che le rivolse, volle avvisarla che non intendeva compromettersi in una relazione troppo seria […] Mi piaci molto, ma nella mia vita non potrai essere […] più importante di un giocattolo’ (Svevo 1993, 400). Emilio, who is, as we learn later, in his thirties and who pursues two careers, one of them being a literary one, assumes the role of a paternal figure here, inviting Angiolina to begin a relationship with him. Stephen’s and Emilio’s communication positions are opposed here – as the small child of the beginning of the novel, Stephen is an addressee of his father’s story and accepts the conditions of his storytelling, while Emilio himself addresses Angiolina, setting the terms of their relationship. Stephen is shy of Eileen and unable to communicate with her when she appears for the first time, whereas Emilio approaches Angiolina directly, openly and with determination. The response that Stephen gets after hiding under the table is Dante’s threat which provokes in him the feeling of guilt and makes him succumb to her authorial voice. By contrast, the response that Emilio gets setting the terms of his relationship with Angiolina is her misunderstanding of and indifference to these terms: “Angiolina aveva capito poco delle premesse, ma, visibilmente, non le occorevano commenti per comprendere il resto” (Svevo 1993, 403). This diminishes Emilio’s dominance as an interlocutor right at the start, and heralds his submissive role in their relationship.

Although Stephen’s and Emilio’s age and communication positions are different at the beginning of the two novels, they perceive the two women in the same way. While Eileen is in Stephen’s imagination linked with the image of the Virgin and seen as being spiritually, as well as physically pure, when we first encounter Angiolina, she is presented as “una bionda dagli occhi azzurri, alta e forte, ma snella e flessuosa, il volto illuminato dalla vita, un color giallo di ambra soffusa di rosa da una bella salute” (Svevo 1993, 401). The description points to her potent physicality and vitality: the colours of her eyes and of her face are bright and intense, her body is strong. She stands in sharp contrast to Eileen whose “white hands” and “fair hair” make her pure, but devitalized. Yet, although throughout the novel, “esaminiamo innanzitutto la presenza fisica [di Angiolina]” (Spagnoletti, 1986, 83), Emilio’s perception of her is different. In the first two chapters, not only does he begin his relationship with Angiolina, but he also immediately learns about her infidelity. This causes him to start idealizing her. When he meets with her after learning from Sorniani that she had an affair with Merighi in the past, he pictures her as having “golden hair” and golden “personality”: “Egli aveva osato una carrezza timida sui capelli: tanto oro. Ma oro anche la pelle, aveva soggiunto, e tutta la persona” (Svevo 1993, 412). In realizing that she also had an affair with Leardi, he feels sorry for her and decides to educate her in sentimentality (Svevo, 1993, 413). More importantly, this makes him idealize her even further: “Per una sentimentalità da letterato, il nome d’Angiolina non gli piaceva. La chiamò Lina: poi, non bastandogli quell’ezzeggiativo, le appiopò il nome francese, Angele e molto spesso … Ange” (Svevo 1993, 416). The more Emilio is hurt by Angiolina and her infidelity, the more he mentally elevates her, and the gradation of his idealization, which implies detachment from physical and sexual womanhood, resembles the one that is present in Joyce’s novel. Joyce’s Eileen is linked with the litany of the Virgin, and this is suggestive of her physical and spiritual purity. Mercedes who is presented as someone who “slighted” Stephen’s love cannot be perceived as being morally elevated. Yet, he idealizes her to the point that she is less physical.

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11 While Joyce’s novel introduces the story of Stephen’s father in *medias res*, in Svevo’s novel, the third person narrator reports on Emilio’s act of approaching Angiolina. Yet, the quotation highlights Emilio’s direct words and immediacy with which he approaches her.
than Eileen. We see elements of Eileen’s body – her “white hands” and her “fair hair” – while
Mercedes is, for Stephen, an “unsubstantial” woman built upon a fictional character who does
not exist. A similar gradation is present in Svevo. Since angels are spiritual beings superior to
humans, Angiolina whose name Emilio turns into “Angele” and than ‘Ange’ is spiritually more
elevated that the one whose soul and the entire personality he sees as “golden”. The second
Angiolina is, however, less physical than the first one. While the first one has the “golden hair”
that he caresses, in existing as an “angel” in Emilío’s imagination, the second one is completely
deprived of physicality and sexuality.

Throughout A Portrait, Stephen thinks about language as a medium of expression. He
creates a rhythm out of the words that he hears, then ponders the mechanism and the effect of
metaphors, and finally builds his own reality upon the stories he listens to or reads. In Svevo’s
novel we do not follow Emilío’s linguistic maturation in the way that we are presented with his
thoughts about language and how it works. Yet, we increasingly become aware that he, just like
Stephen, matures not only as a person, but also as an artistic consciousness. Stephen’s language
modulates as he develops as a person and an artist, and this is also true of Emilío, bound as he is
to remain a failed writer. Before Brentani’s initial idealization of Angiolina, we learn that he is
prone to lyricism: “Fece piovere sulla bionda testa le dicharazioni liriche che nei lunghi anni il
suo desiderio aveva maturate e affinate” (Svevo 1993, 401). This is confirmed and further
clarified when he idealizes her for the second time, and we are told that he does this “per una
sentimentalità da letterato” (Svevo 1993, 416). Emilío’s initial idealizations of Angiolina abound
in clichés. Just as Eileen’s “white hands” and “fair hair” are stereotypical symbols of purity,
Angiolina’s “golden hair” or her “bocca purissima” (Svevo 1993, 412), are nothing more than
clichés. The description of Eileen also reveals that Stephen’s perception of the world as a small
child is made up of simple binary oppositions (Eileen’s hands are “long and white”, “cold and
soft”). By the same token, at the beginning of Senilità, Emilío’s world revolves around the
dichotomy of light and darkness. Angiolina is always presented as being immersed in whiteness
and light: “Raggiente di gioventu e bellezza ella doveva illuminarla tutta facendogli dimenticare
il triste passato di desiderio e di solitudine” (Svevo 1993, 402). In one of the passages describing
her encounter with Emilío, we learn that “nella vicina faccia di [Angiolina], la luce lunare si
incarnava” (Svevo 1993, 417). Even when she walks through Trieste together with Emilío, she is
dressed in “vestito bianco” (Svevo 1993, 434). The whiteness and light surrounding Angiolina is
contrasted with the darkness of Amalia “che era nata grigia” and who is “lunga, sacca e incolore”
(Svevo 1993, 409). This contrast reflects the main psychological tension of Emilío’s life – that of
“heath” and “illness”. As is well known, the notion of “illness”, as opposed to “health”, is very
complex in Svevo’s oeuvre and, as Biasin has insightfully noted, it develops from the
representation of physical illness and death to a representation of illness as a psychological,
onontological and social phenomenon (84). Emilío’s “senility”, as a specific inflection of Svevo’s
notion of ‘malattia’, is best defined by the protagonist himself: “Viveva sempre in un’aspettativa
… di qualche cosa che doveva venire al di fuori, la fortuna, il successo” (Svevo 1993, 401).

Emilío’s main trait and the essence of his senility is his inertia – his inability to live a life rather
than dream or think about it. Together with Amalia who is seen as “più vecchia [di lui] per
carattere o forse per destino” (Svevo 1993, 399), and thus even more “senile”, Emilío lives in his
own imagined and wished-for world built upon the books that he reads together with Amalia
(“aveva letto quel mezzo migliao di romanzi” Svevo 1993, 410). And he perceives himself as
weak and unable to change either himself or the course of his life, as “povero di denaro e anche

12 Angiolina herself is the construct of his imagination.
di qualche cosa d’altro, energina e coraggio” (Svevo 1993, 414). By contrast, Angiolina is “healthy” not only in being strong, confident, vital, sexually potent and surrounded by light and brightness, but also in being devoted to living her life: “Ella camminava con la calma del suo forte organismo, sicura sul selciato …: quanta forza e quanta grazia unite in quelle movenze sicure come quelle di un fellino” (Svevo 1993, 404).

Emilio’s inclination to create reality out of the books that he reads makes him similar to Stephen Dedalus who, in Chapter II, fabricates his own Mercedes in reading The Count of Monte Crisco. Yet, while the language used in the description of Stephen’s experience of reading the book reflects that he is, at that point of his life, influenced by Dumas’s style, we do not know what books Emilio reads and how much they affect his artistic sensibility. The main testimony of it, a failed writer as he is, are, I believe, the descriptions of the open spaces in which his and Angiolina’s love unfolds. In fact, in many of them the motif of light recurs:

La luna non era ancora sorta, ma … fuori, nel mare c’era uno scintillo che pareva … il sole fosse passato da poco e tutto brillasse ancora della luce ricevuta. Alle due parti invece, l’azzurro dei promontori lontani era offuscato dalla notte più tetra. Tutto era enorme, sconfinito … Emilio ebbe il sentimento che nell’immensa natura … egli solo agisse e amasse (Svevo 1993, 412).

Although the description is rendered by the third person narrator, the perception of the night illuminated by the moon is Emilio’s. Langella is right in claiming that “la notte costituisce, per [Emilio], il momento sublime in cui tutto scompare” (101). The overwhelming presence of light reflects again Emilio’s perception of his relationship with Angiolina. Yet, the passage, laden with lyricism, also suggests that his artistic consciousness is very pictorial. In being infused with overwhelming light, the scene is reminiscent of an Impressionist painting. Significantly, in yet another description of the landscape, the devouring light is described as “divisa, tagliata da linee segnate da punti gialli” (Svevo 1993, 417), invoking the Impressionist manner of painting which moves away from traditional methods of representation by using short “broken” brush strokes, in order to capture the changing surface of life and the transient effects of light.

Other descriptions of the spaces in which Emilio’s and Angiolina’s love unfolds are also poetical:

Si fermarono a lungo sul terrazzo di S. Andrea e guardarono verso il mare calmo, colorito nella notte stellata, chiara ma senza luna. Nel viale di sotto passò un carro e nel grande silenzio che li circondava il rumore delle ruote continuò a giungere fino a loro… si divertirono a seguirlo sempre più tenue finché proprio si fuse nel silenzio universale (Svevo 1993, 403).

Once again, the description is rendered by the third person narrator, but the perception of the night, of the sea and of the silence surrounding the two lovers is Emilio’s. D’Antuono has pointed out that “il paesaggio notturno poeticizza l’immagine e la mitopoiesi di Angiolina … lascia intatto il sognio di Emilio e ne solidifica la pregnanza” (40). The lyricism of the passage

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13 As in the case of A Portrait, Senilità is told by the third person narrator whose perspective, however, is not omniscient or objective. As Langella has pointed out, in this novel “Svevo abbandona la prospettiva oggettiva del narratore esterno… l’universo di Senilità presenta confini straordinariamente ristretti” (100). The “restrictive universe of the novel”, to which Langella points, is primarily Emilio’s, and the distance of the third person narrator from Emilio’s perspective varies. In the above quotation, Angiolina is seen through Emilio’s eyes. As part of his idealization of her, he sees her as “gentile”. But her “strength” is contrasted with her “gentilezza” to which Emilio alludes. This is straightforwardly expressed later in the novel: “Camminava accanto la donna nobilitata dal suo sogno” (Svevo 1993, 517).

14 This links Emilio with Balli who was modelled on Veruda who introduced Impressionism into the artistic ambience of Trieste.
certainly and, once more, reflects and “invigorates” Brentani’s poeticized perception of Angiolina and his relationship with her. Yet, it also suggests that he is, just like Stephen, prone to poetic expression. The metaphorical elements of this passage even coincide with those in *A Portrait*. The scene of Stephen’s and E.C.’s parting on the tram, which is seen through Stephen’s eyes, revolves around the contrast between the silence which is broken by the horses shaking their bells and the rhythm of E.C.’s frequent coming up the step, hoping that Stephen will kiss her. The contrast serves the purpose of reinforcing the rhythm of E.C.’s movements, metaphorically suggesting that this physical movement reflects the emotional excitement of the two characters. In Svevo, the landscape is equally immersed in silence. “Il grande silenzio” that Emilio absorbs is also broken by the sound of horses – of “un carro”. Yet, while in *A Portrait* the image of the broken silence is contrasted with E.C.’s physical movement to underline the emotional excitement of the two characters, in Svevo’s novel there is no contrast. The sound which breaks the silence and to which both Emilio and Angiolina listen aims at uniting them. It metaphorically expresses Emilio’s need to be united with the beautiful but unfaithful Angiolina. Towards the end of this passage, Emilio imagines that their union is indeed achieved through the sound reverberating through the night: “Le nostre orecchie vanno molto d’accordo” (*Svevo* 1933, 403). The union becomes even firmer when he transforms the silence into “silenzio universale”.

No matter whether Emilio thinks about Angiolina through stereotypical clichés or in the passages revealing his inclination towards poetic expression, she is, for him, primarily an idealized woman and, through that, a woman whose physical aspect is insufficiently important. Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus starts to move away from his tendency to idealize women when he thinks about E.C. in the night of the Whitsuntide play. He more decisively accepts sexuality during his first sexual intercourse with the prostitute, and completely embraces it when he sees the seabird at the end of Chapter IV. The dynamics of Emilio’s and Angiolina’s relationship suggests that Emilio’s is more prone to idealization than Stephen, but his perception of Angiolina also changes throughout the novel which causes him to break off his relationship with her on two occasions. In Chapter III, Angiolina informs him about her engagement with Volpini. This time, Emilio protects himself from what he hears not by creating yet another idealized image of Angiolina but by starting to pity her: “La donna che egli amava non era soltanto dolce e inerme; era perduta. Si vendeva da una parte, si donava dall’altra … - Poveretta!” (*Svevo*, 1993, 431-432). Yet, in seeing her flirt with other men as they walk through the city in Chapter IV, he, for the first time, becomes aware that the Angiolina he knows is idealized: “Ella aveva nell’occhio per ogni uomo elegante che passava, una specie di saluto … La donna che egli amava, Ange, era la sua invenzione, se l’era creata lui con uno sforzo voluto” (*Svevo* 1993, 435). This realization can be seen as a turning point in their relationship, and it makes him realize that he needs to break up with her: “Avrebbe fatto bene a lasciarla immediatamente” (*Svevo* 1993, 435). Yet, just like Stephen who, throughout the novel, oscillates between his inclination to idealize women and his struggle to accept their physicality, Emilio oscillates between his decision to leave Angiolina and his need to justify her infidelity through further idealization. A decisive step towards Emilio’s decision to break off his relationship with her occurs after Balli’s intervention. Unlike Emilio, Balli elevates Angiolina neither physically nor spiritually: - Cara Angiolina … ella mi guarda .. sperando che’io trovi bello anche il suo naso, ma non serve. Il suo naso dovrebbe esere fatto così” (*Svevo* 1993, 446). Moreover, the name that he chooses for her is Golona which lowers her as a person. Instead of transforming her into an angel, or seeing her as genteel, Balli’s name points to the fact that she is a common woman – “una donna del popolo”. Chapter IV ends
with Emilio’s bitterness because of Angiolina’s relationship with Volpini, and, more importantly, with his altered perception of her: “Insozzata dal sarto, posseduta da lui, Ange sarebbe morta e si sarebbe divertito anche lui con Golona” (Svevo 1993, 450). In Chapter VII, after Balli convinces Emilio that she cheated on him even with the owner of the umbrella shop in front of which they met, he breaks off with her for the first time: “Io non ti bacerò mai più … Non trovava alto e si alzò” (Svevo 1993, 478). After this seemingly decisive act, he experiences a variety of feelings, from his need to vindicate himself (“Quella mattina egli si era mosso risoluto ed energico alla vendetta” Svevo 1993, 483) to his renewed idealization of Angiolina (“Anche sognando la più rude franchezza egli idealizzava Angiolina” Svevo 1993, 484) and his hope that the music he listens to when he and Amalia go to the theatre will heal him (“L’arte forse lo guariva?” (Svevo 1993, 512), to his decision to resume his relationship with Angiolina. When he sees her walking near Giardino Pubblico in Chapter X, he approaches her: “— Buona sera signorina – disse con quanta calma poté trovare nell’affanno del desiderio che lo colse dinanzi a quella faccia da bambino roseo (Svevo 1993, 516). At this moment, he resembles Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus watching the seabird at the end of Chapter IV in A Portrait. Just like Stephen, who in watching the seabird oscillates between his idealization of her and his acceptance of her as a mortal, physical and sexual woman, in seeing Angiolina in Chapter X, Emilio betrays a psychological oscillation which is, perhaps, stronger than before. The quoted line indicates a contradiction in his perception of Angiolina. In seeing her face as belonging to “bambino roseo”, he still idealizes her. Yet, he also feels desire for her, and the word desire – “il desiderio” – is explicitly used here. The vital Angiolina immediately accepts Emilio’s indirect invitation to resume her relationship with him, and leads him towards their first sexual intercourse.

Despite Angiolina’s vitality, in Svevo’s novel, sexuality appears to be less important than in Joyce’s. It also appears to be treated with less liberty, and this is the case primarily because of Emilio’s relationship towards it. Despite his constant inclination to idealize the sexually potent Angiolina, they have some physical contact during their regular encounters at the beginning of the novel. Angiolina, just like the prostitute that Stephen meets at the end of Chapter II, is, for the most part, the active principle of these physical exchanges. She offers herself to him: “Egli non rise e baciò la bocca che gli si era offerta” (Svevo 1993, 412). Although eager to meet with her in the open spaces near the sea, Emilio never reveals himself passionate, preferring to look at her and to dream about her: “Troppo presto si arrivò al bacio, visto che dopo questo primo impulso di sinergia subito fra le braccia, egli ora si sarebbe accontentato di guardare e di sognare” (Svevo 1993, 412). The most physical moments between Emilio and Angiolina occur in Angiolina’s room. Interestingly, when Emilio visits her room for the first time in Chapter III, the problem of religious guilt comes into play. Yet, its role is not the same as in Joyce’s novel. In meeting with the prostitute, Stephen challenges his Catholic upbringing and commits a sexual sin, which enables him to come closer to the acceptance of the physical aspect of womanhood. While the description of the surroundings through which he walks before meeting the prostitute (“narrow dirty streets”) is in tune with his act of committing a “filthy sin”, the description of Angiolina’s room in Chapter III denies the presence of religion and of the notions of guilt and sin. Svevo’s rendering of her room serves the purpose of delineating the social context to which she belongs: “La tappezzeria non era troppo nuova, ma i mobili … quel corridoio e i vestiti della madre … sorprendentemente ricchi … in un canto un vase enorme con … fiori artificiali e di sopra, sulla parete, aggregato con grande accuratezza, molte fotografie. Del lusso, insomma (Svevo 1993, 423). The description of the room reveals that neither her nor her family is rich
although they aspire to a better social position, even the luxury of the bourgeois world. Yet, the most important part of her room are the photographs of her lovers which betray her ability to deal with men, and her moral liberty. Emilio is embittered at seeing the photographs, and Angiolina starts voicing her feeling of guilt: “Ho… tanti peccati sulla coscienza … che oggi mi sarà difficile ottenere l’assoluzione. Per colpa tua mi presento al confessore con l’animo mai preparato!” (Svevo 1993, 425). Angiolina’s allusions to a confession and guilt are ironical here, and so is Emilio’s self-deception that she indeed feels guilty: “In Emilio nacque la speranza. Oh, la dolce cosa che era la religione” (Svevo 1993, 425). As Ioli has pointed out in her notes to the novel, “l’intonazione [di queste linee] è ironica e provocatoria, sarcastica e pungente, come spesso accade quando Svevo allude alla religione” (Ioli 1993, 425). No matter whether we are to interpret this episode as ironical or poignant, it is clear that neither Angiolina nor Emilio link sexuality with sin or feel the burden of religious guilt, and this makes them different from Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus who is tormented by them throughout the novel. Nevertheless, not only in the case of their encounters in the open spaces but also during their meetings in Angiolina’s room, Emilio never expresses or betrays ardent sexual desire for her. After seeing the photographs of her lovers in Chapter III, which greatly upset him, he tries to establish a physical contact with Angiolina:

Eppure egli aveva una soddisfazione completa del possesso incompleto di questo donna e tentò procedere oltre solo per diffidenza per timore di venir deriso da tutti quegli uomini che lo guardavano. Ella si diffuse … i suoi fratelli l’avrebbero ammazzatta … Però ella gli promise formalmente che sarebbe stata sua quando si fosse potuta dare senza espor lui a fastidi né se stessa a danni (Svevo 1993, 426-427).

Yet, as the quotation indicates, he does this only because he is scared that he might be mocked by all those men in the photographs. And, once more, it is Angiolina who decides that the moment is not adequate for them to make love, promising that she would do it when the right time comes. And she does it after their encounter near Giardino Pubblico, taking him to her room. The description of their first sexual intercourse in Chapter X is very short: “Ella aperse la porta, e, per il corridoio oscuro, lo diresse alla propria stanza… Accese una candela e si levò il mantello e il cappello. Poi gli si abbandonò o meglio lo prese” (Svevo 1993, 519). On the one hand, this short paragraph suggests that it was Angiolina who spurred Emilio to make love with her, and, on the other, it hints at Emilio’s relationship towards sexuality. The fact that the narrative very briefly reports on Emilio’s and Angiolina’s sexual intercourse, can be read as indicating that Emilio flees and represses sexuality. After making love with Angiolina, he feels:

Emilio poté esperimentera quanto importante sia il possesso di una donna lungamente desiderata. In quella memorabile sera egli poteva creder d’essersi mutato ben due volte nell’intima sua natura… Il maschio era ormai soddisfato ma, all’infuori di quella soddisfazione, egli veramente non ne aveva sentita altra. Aveva posseduto la donna che odiava non quella ch’egli amava (Svevo 1993, 519).

15 Significantly, Angiolina lives in the old part of the city, just like the Lanucci family in Una vita. And at the beginning of his relationship with her, he concludes: “Doveva essere povera, molto povera” (Svevo 1993, 402). When he later thinks about the possibility of her marrying Merighi, he thinks that through Merighi, “Angiolina doveva diventare la donna borghese ricca e seria” (Svevo 1993, 406). In chapter X, we learn that she has a father who is mad, and it is for this reason that the family depends on her and her mother.

16 This is made particularly evident after his encounter with the prostitute. While Chapter II ends with the description of Stephen’s sexual sin, the entire Chapter III is dedicated to a sermon and ends with Stephen’s confession.
Despite his conviction that “the man in him was satisfied”, the lines point to his aversion towards sexuality. In “hating the woman whom he had possessed”, Emilio demonstrates that he is unable to accept physical womanhood. For him, the most ecstatic moment of their relationship is not the act of their making love, but the moments they share before this, when he takes Angioina near the sea: “- O, cara e dolce! – Mormorò baciandole gli occhi, il collo e poi la mano e le vesti. Ella lo lasciò fare dolcemente e tanta dolcezza era talmente inaspettata che egli si commosse e piane prima con sole lagrime, poi con singhiozzi” (Svevo 1993, 518). In seeing Angiolina repeatedly as “dear” and “sweet” (the words “dolce” and “dolcezza” are repeated several times here), he mentally sublimates her more that ever before, and despite his kisses, denies her sexuality. In accepting his ways, Angiolina also accepts his idealized perception of her, and this makes him cry, making the experience for him the most ecstatic moment of their relationship. In seeing the seabird Stephen definitely moves away from his initial idealization of womanhood to his acceptance of women as mortal, physical and sexual beings. After they have resumed their relationship, Emilio’s passage from one aspect of womanhood to the other is reversed. In meeting Angiolina near Giardino Publico, he experiences desire – “l’affanno del desiderio” – (Svevo 1993, 516), but soon moves away from it through his renewed and particularly strong idealization of the woman he loves. Stephen’s exchange of gazes with the seabird ends with a cry which is masturbatory. The kindling of Emilio’s desire for Angiolina after their encounter near Giardino Publico ends with his making love with her. This, however, provokes his hatred for her, proving that he is not able to accept physicality and sexual womanhood. A similar pattern of behavior is repeated once more at the end of Chapter X, although, at this point, Emilio reveals his masculinity more than anywhere else in the book. As they continue their relationship after making love for the first time, he continues to idealize Angiolina: “Ma presto i baci soli non bastarono … e egli si ritrovò a momorarle nelle orecchie le dolci parole apprese nel lungo amore: – Ange! Ange!” (Svevo 1993, 522). The type of idealization is the same as before. He transforms her into “Ange”, continues to perceive her as “sweet” (“dolce”), and, through this, feels “indissolubilmente legato ad Angiolina” (Svevo 1993, 508). Yet, towards the end of Chapter X, we learn that Angiolina “divenne sempre più rozza” (Svevo 1993, 534) and that she is often late for their dates. Surprised by her “vulgarità” as they have an argument (“stupefatto dalla volgarità della donna amata” Svevo 1993, 534), Emilio becomes violent:

Convinto ormai di non poterla elevare in alcun modo, sentiva … violentissimo, il bisogno di scendere a lei, al di sotto di lei. Una sera ella lo respingeva. Si era confessata e per quell giorno non voleva peccare. Egli ebbe meno vivo il desiderio di possederla che di essere, almeno una volta più rozzo di lui. La costrinse violentamente, lottando fino all’ultimo. Quando, senza fiato, cominciava a pentirsi di tanta brutalità, ebbe il confronto di un’occhiata di ammirazione d’Angiolina. Per tutta questa sera ella fu ben sua, la femina conquistata che ama il padrone (Svevo, 1993, 534).

Emilio’s brutal act appears, at first glance, to be his first expression of sexual desire towards Angiolina. Yet, this is denied as we learn that it was not triggered by his need to “posses” her, but rather by his wish to be “more rude” than she is. What, in fact, provokes Emilio’s violent reaction is not a surge of passion, but rather his inability to mentally elevate Angiolina (“Convinto ormai di non poterla elevare in alcun modo, sentiva il bisogno di scendere a lei, al di sotto di lei”). Significantly, this time, she does not yield to his perception of her and instead of being “lasci[ata] a fare dolcemente” (Svevo 1993, 518) as was the case during their encounter near the sea after their meeting near Giardino Pubblico, she admires Emilio’s rudeness. While for him the climax of their relationship is the moment when he sublimates her most and she accepts
to be sublimated, for Angiolina the moment of Emilio’s rudeness provokes great satisfaction.\footnote{Her allusion to a confession is again ironic because she admires Emilio at the end.} Till the very end of their relationship, which Emilio breaks off primarily because of Amalia’s illness, he keeps idealizing Angiolina, while she finds satisfaction only through physicality. Their last physical encounter occurs at the end of Chapter XI, before the onset of Amalia’s delirium. Emilio again feels “desire” and visits her (“Trattenuto dal desiderio, attese lungamente” Svevo 1993, 548), but since he does not find her at home, he returns in the evening and realizes that she is drunk. Chapter XI ends with the description of her surge of passion as she and Emilio are alone in her room:

Lo baciò e abbracciò come egli aveva fatto sino allora con lei, nella bocca e sul collo, aggressiva come non era stata mai e finirono sul letto, ella col cappellino ancora in testa … La porta era rimasta spalancata, ed era difficile che i suoni di questa battaglia non fossero arrivati fino alla cucina ove si trovavano il padre, la madre e la sorella d’Angiolina … la sua soddisfazione quella sera era perfetta (Svevo 1993, 549).

The passage, once again, indicates that Emilio’s desire for Angiolina can be turned into an ardent surge of passion only when Angiolina acts. She is certainly “aggressiva come non era mai stata” because of her drunkenness, but the quotation ends with the note that her satisfaction was “perfect”. For her, this moment represents the climax of her relationship with Emilio. At the end of Chapter XI, as well as during their first sexual intercourse, Angiolina resembles not only the seabird who watches Stephen without “without shame and wantonness” (Joyce 2000, 144), but also, and primarily, the prostitute who is the active principle of Stephen’s first sexual intercourse. Yet, while he “surrender[s] himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world, but the dark pressure of her softly parting lips” (Joyce 2000, 75), Emilio never completely yields to Angiolina. As we have seen, during their first intercourse he “abandons” himself (“Poi gli si abbandonò” Svevo 1993, 519), but he is, at the same time, incapable of feeling the transformation that this surrender brings, and can only “believe” that the transformation has happened (“Egli poteva credere d’essersi mutato ben due volte nell’intima sua natura” Svevo 1993, 519).

This inability to surrender completely to a woman as a sexual and a physical being is also made visible in his attempts at artistic creation. We learn at the very beginning of the novel that he perceives himself as a failed writer: “Per la chiarissima coscienza che egli aveva della nullità della propria opera, egli non si gloriava del passato, però, come nella vita così anche nell’arte, egli credeva di trovarsi ancora sempre nel periodo di preparazione” (Svevo 1993, 401). Then, after his first break up with Angiolina, we become aware that he had written a novel many years before meeting her:

Aveva scritto il suo romanzo, la storia di un giovane artista il quale da una donna veniva rovinato nell’intelligenza e nella salute. Nel giovane aveva rappresentato se stesso … Aveva immaginato la sua eroina secondo la moda di allora: un misto di donna e tigre …. Del felino aveva le movenze, gli occhi, il carattere sanguinario. Non aveva mai conosciuta una donna e l’aveva sognata così, un animale che era veramente difficile fosse mai potuto nascere… Aveva sofferto e goduto con essa sentendo a volte anche vivere in sé quell’ibrido miscuglio di tigre e di donna (Svevo 1993, 514, the emphasis is mine).

The quotation reveals that Emilio’s first attempt at artistic creation is autobiographical (“aveva rappresentato se stesso”). By writing about himself, he confides himself in his pages, and reveals his wish to meet a woman who would resemble a tiger. However, the heroine that he imagines
and represents is similar to the Angiolina whom he later meets. In embodying “health”, Angiolina, as we have seen, “camminava con la calma del suo forte organismo, sicura sul selciato …: quanta forza … in quelle movenze sicure come quelle di un felino” (Svevo 1993, 404, the emphasis is mine). Both in the novel that he wrote before meeting Angiolina and later, after starting his relationship with her, he imagines her moving like a “cat” (“Del felino aveva le movenze”). Yet, while in meeting Angiolina and in starting his relationship with her, he never accepts her vitality, infidelity and sexuality, which are all aspects of the woman who resembles a tiger, but rather transforms her into an ideal, spiritual being, in his novel, he expresses the wish to live with the woman who is an animal, and a tiger. This can be read as an indication that it is only through his book that he can accept physicality and fully surrender to sexual womanhood.

After breaking up with Angiolina for the first time, he decides to resume his work as an artist:

Riprese ora la penna e scrisse in una sola sera il primo capitol di un romanzo. Trovava un nuovo indirizzo d’arte … e scrisse la verità. Raccontò il suo incontro con Angiolina, descrisse i propri sentimenti … L’uomo non somigliava affatto a lui, la donna poi conservava qualche cosa della donna-tigre del primo romanzo, ma non ne aveva la vita, il sangue. Pensò che quella verità che aveva voluto raccontare era meno credibile dei sogni che anni prima aveva saputi gabellare per veri (Svevo 1993, 514, the emphasis is mine).

Stephen’s first attempt to write a poem for E.C., which occurs after their parting on the tram in Chapter II, proves that he wants to render the scene as it really happened by reviving the tram, the tramman, E.C. and himself. By the same token, the quotation indicates that Emilio is eager to write a novel about Angiolina and himself, and is also determined to convey “the truth” (“scrisse la verità”) in it. Just as Stephen is unable to reconstruct any of the important details or characters in rendering the scene, and we learn that “there remained no trace of the tram … nor of the tramman … nor did he and she appear vividly”, (Joyce 2000, 59), Emilio fails at reviving Angiolina and himself and is surprised that “l’uomo non somigliava affato a lui, la donna poi conservava qualche cosa della donna-tigre del primo romanzo, ma non ne aveva la vita, il sangue” (Svevo 1993, 514). In both Stephen’s and Emilio’s attempts to represent realistically the events that they shared with the women they love, the characters lose vitality, and their artistic endeavors fail. Stephen later realizes that his main goal as an artist is to “recreate life out of life” (Joyce 2000, 145), and we, as readers, conclude that he failed to capture the scene of his parting with E.C. because, in Chapter II, he is still prone to idealize reality, and especially of E.C. By maintaining that “quella verità che aveva voluto raccontare era meno credibile dei sogni che anni prima aveva saputi gabellare per veri” (Svevo 1993, 514), Emilio, as many times throughout the novel, gives preference to his dreams, failing to realize that his artistic attempt, just like Stephen’s, fails because of his propensity towards idealization, and especially that of Angiolina. Since Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus manages to move away from his initial idealization of womanhood to the acceptance of women as physical and sexual beings, at the end of A Portrait, he creates a villanelle for E.C. Although the poem still reveals a disjunction between art and reality and fails to recreate “life out of life”, it proves that Stephen has made the first step towards the accomplishment of his mission as an artist. After Amalia’s death, Emilio withdraws into his solitude, tries to avoid even Balli, and visits Angiolina’s mother only to learn that Angiolina has gone away. The novel concludes with the following lines:

Nella sua mente da letterato ozioso, Angiolina subì una metamorfosi strama. Conservò inalterata la sua bellezza, ma acquistò anche tutte le qualità di Amalia …. Quella figura divenne un simbolo … Quel simbolo alto, magnifico si rianimava talvolta per ridivinire donna amante,
sempre però donna triste e pensierosa. Sì! Angiolina pensa e piange! Pensa come se le fosse stato spiegato il segreto dell’universo e della propria esistenza; piange come se nel vasto mondo non avesse ... trovato un Deo gratis qualunque (Svevo, 1993, 592).

The quotation suggests that the real Angiolina with whom Emilio was in love has been changed in his mind – transformed into an illusion – once more. As Fasciati has pointed out, “questi ‘come se’ with which Svevo’s novel ends, “sembra voler sottolineare la fragilità dell’illusione” (24). This time, however, Angiolina is not idealized as she used to be during their relationship, but has rather become a woman who combines her physical beauty and the spiritual qualities of Amalia. (She is “una donna triste e pensierosa”, una donna che “piange”). In making Angiolina sad and immersed in her thoughts, Emilio, once again, spiritualizes her, denying her physicality, vitality, simplicity and her courageous devotion to life. In creating this illusion, he, once more, fails to reconcile spiritual and physical womanhood, and is, therefore, bound to remain a failed writer. While A Portrait ends with Stephen’s decision to leave Ireland, Senilità concludes with Emilio’s reconciliation to spend the rest of his life alone and in peace so as to heal his wounds: “Rinacque in lui l’affetto alla tranquilità, alla sicurezza, e la cura di se stesso gli tolse ogni altro desiderio” (Svevo 1993, 591). Whereas Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus is, at the end of A Portrait, determined to create the “uncreated conscience of [his] race” (Joyce 2000, 213) and to accomplish his mission as an artist, Svevo’s Emilio Brentani is reconciled to remain a failed writer. Although these final lines strike the reader as being poetic, and certainly reflect Emilio’s mind as “letterato ozioso”, they do not promise that he will ever again resume his work on his novel and thus accomplish his mission as a writer.
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