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(Article begins on next page)

Jenny Ponzio

Religious-artistic epiphanies in 20th-century literature: Joyce, Claudel, Weil, C.S. Lewis, Rebora, and Papini

For from the greatness and beauty of created things
comes a corresponding perception of their Creator.

Wisdom 13:5

1 Introduction

The term epiphany has known a broad diffusion in literary studies (Ashton 1987; Bidney 1997), especially after the publication of Joyce's works.¹ According to Joyce, "epiphany" is a moment of sudden illumination, when the poet, through his imagination, contemplates the true being of the world, in all its beauty and splendor. Joyce was inspired by a theological source which had a significant influence on 20th-century culture, namely Thomas Aquinas. In particular, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* explicitly refers to Thomas's aesthetic theory when the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, reflects on "beauty in the wider sense of the word, in the sense which the word has in the literary tradition" (Joyce 1960: 213). According to Dedalus, when the artist firstly conceives the aesthetic image of an object, he feels its "supreme quality," i.e. the "scholastic *quidditas*, the whatness":

The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal. 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 is the luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like

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¹ In particular *Stephen Hero*, a previous version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), published in 1944, and *Epiphanies*, written by 1904 and published in 1956. See Ziolkowski (2014).

to that cardiac condition which the Italian psychologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called the enchantment of the heart.

Stephen paused and, though his companion did not speak, felt that his words had called up around them a thought-enchanted silence. (Joyce 1960: 213)

Moments of illumination analogous to what Joyce—and many after him—call “epiphany” are often experienced in religious conversion and constitute its peak experience.² Ziolkowski (2014: 1) affirms that epiphany is a term with “a mystical theological aura, having been broadly secularized.” In this paper, I will show that a deep connection exists between “secularized” and “religious” epiphanies, and that the border between the two is actually a fine line. I will show in particular how art, and more specifically literature, on the one hand plays a mediating role in 20th-century accounts of conversion to Christianity and, on the other hand, it mediates the apparently immediate experience of epiphany, intended as a sudden revelation or knowledge of a glimpse of divine truth. Indeed, in 20th-century literature it is possible to identify a circular movement between artistic expression and religion: a number of writers describe both paths from poetry or, more generally, from aesthetic experience to religious epiphany, and paths from religious epiphany to literature. Based on works by 20th-century authors, such as Paul Claudel, Simone Weil, C.S. Lewis, Giovanni Papini, and Clemente Rebora, I will explore, firstly, the relationship between aesthetic-artistic experience and religious conversion, and, secondly, the writers' theorization of a direct relationship between the poetic faculty and divine inspiration and grace. Finally, I will point out the main recurring features of the semiotic ideology (i.e. the set of ideas concerning language and meaning) underlying the analyzed works.

2 From artistic to religious experience: Epiphany and conversion

In Christian autobiographical stories of conversion across time, it is possible to identify several recurring mediating factors that foster conversion by opening the protagonist's heart and showing him/her the right path towards spiritual perfection. One of these factors is the example of pious or saintly people, for instance Saint Anthony for Augustine of Hippo (*Confessions*, book VIII), or the good nun

² James (1902) mentions experiences of sudden illumination several times in his work (see in particular Lecture X, on cases of sudden conversion).

for Teresa of Avila (*The Book of Her Life*, chapter III). Another factor is the reading of books. The importance of books in generating epiphanies is well demonstrated by Ziolkowski (2014). Here, I will devote some attention to what kinds of books trigger religious epiphanies and conversion in the 20th century. I will show that fictional literature and poetry, i.e. profane texts with a strong imaginative and aesthetic component, are attributed a positive function in conversion; they are almost equated to theological, hagiographic, and sacred literature and language. I will present three examples: Paul Claudel, Simone Weil, and C.S. Lewis.

2.1 Paul Claudel: Aesthetic experience, conversion, and poetry

Paul Claudel (1868–1955), the French dramatist and poet, describes his conversion to Catholicism in a text entitled “Ma conversion”, first published in 1913. Claudel writes that he had lost his faith in his youth, and that the first glimpse of the truth, his very first conception of the supernatural derived from reading the books of the poet Arthur Rimbaud. As a consequence, the reading having for Claudel a “capital importance” (Claudel 1999: 454) is not a theological or religious book, but a work of poetry. Moreover, Rimbaud was a “poète maudit,” a libertine and transgressive poet, far from the traditional and pious model of a saint.

At the age of 18, Claudel attends the Vespers on the Christmas Eve in Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris, where he experiences an epiphany, a sudden illumination:

There were children from the choir-school dressed in white [...singing] what I later discovered to be the *Magnificat*. I myself was standing in the crowd near the second pillar at the entrance to the choir on the right of the sacristy. It was then that the event took place which revolutionized my whole life. Suddenly my heart was touched and I BELIEVED. I believed with such power, with such force of my whole being [...] that nothing since [...] has been able to shake or even to touch my faith. I was overcome with a sudden and overwhelming sense of the innocence and the eternal infancy of God—an inexpressible revelation. (Claudel 1999: 454)

Four aesthetic components have a primary importance in this experience: 1) Notre-Dame’s architecture;³ 2) the empathy with the crowd, i.e. the sense of

³ On the symbolic meaning of Notre-Dame’s pillars in Claudel’s account, see Leone (2004: chapter 3).

being surrounded by a mass of people attending the same ritual; 3) the visual and chromatic element of the children in white; 4) and, most of all, the chants, which seem to be the most powerful factor triggering Claudel's epiphany. From that moment, Claudel feels questioned by God not only as a man, but also as an artist. The development of his religious identity is strictly connected to the development of his artistic personality:

A new person, making the most terrifying demands on the young man and the artist that I was, had revealed himself [...] the awakening of the soul and the poetic faculty took place in me at the same time [...]. (Claudel 1999: 455–56)

After the epiphanic episode, Claudel gains a better understanding of religion both by reading theological works and by experiencing the dramatic, poetic, and aesthetic character of Catholic rituals, as the words I highlight in *italic* show:

I spent every Sunday at Notre-Dame [...] there the *sacred drama* unfolded before me with a *splendor* which surpassed anything I had imagined—not in the poor language of devotional works, but *in the deepest and most glorious poetry*, the most *solemn gestures* that have ever been entrusted to human beings. I never tired of the *spectacle of the mass* [...]. The *reading of the offices* of the dead and the offices of Christmas, the *ceremonies* of Holy Week, the *sublime chant* of the *Exultet*—beside which the loftiest and most ecstatic moments of *Sophocles and Pindar seemed weak*—overcame me with a sense of awe, joy, gratitude, repentance and adoration. Little by little, [...] the idea that *art and poetry were divine things* made its way into my heart [...]. (Claudel 1999: 456)

Later on, the reading of another “poète maudit”, Charles Baudelaire, who converted in his last years, marks a further advancement in Claudel's conversion process:

I read Baudelaire's *Oeuvres posthumes*, and I saw that the poet whom I preferred to all other French poets had found the Faith in his last years and had suffered the same anguish and the same remorse as myself. One afternoon I summoned up my courage and went into a confessional [...]. (Claudel 1999: 457)

Once more, the example of a nonconformist poet replaces the traditional example of a saint in fostering conversion. The concept of the correspondence between divine grace and poetic inspiration is also expressed in Claudel's poetic work. The ode “La Muse qui est la Grâce” (1913), for example, is structured as a dialogue between the poet and the Muse, who little by little identifies herself with the Grace and wants to have the poet fully for herself, despite his resistance, his attachment to earthly life, and his claim for his artistic freedom. Salvation is a central theme in Claudel, and it comes from two converging sources: the poetic

and the religious source. In this view, poetry and faith form an indissoluble unity.

In the “Lettre à l’Abbé Brémond sur l’inspiration poétique,”⁴ Claudel affirms that poetic language is led by God’s hand and it uses words so as to present the image of the “pure thing.” The “pure thing” is the thing in its whole sense; it is a partial, intelligible, and delectable image of God. As a consequence, according to Claudel, poetry is equal to prayer, because it singles out the pure essence of God’s creation and bears testimony to God. But poetry is also inferior to prayer, because poetry is limited to material things, while human beings must tend to God only, and, Claudel says, although all the paths to reach God are fine, the most direct is the best. Poetry is therefore a medium to arrive to God, and its function is close to that of prayer.

2.2 Simone Weil: The continuum between sacred and poetic language

In 1942, one year before her death, Simone Weil (1909 – 1943) sent her last letter to a Catholic priest her friend. In this letter, Weil describes the gradual birth of her faith. She firmly denies any role to human mediators, but claims instead that she had “three contacts which Catholicism that really counted” (Weil 1999: 502). The first happens in a Portuguese village, where she attends a procession⁵ for the patron saint. As for Claudel, the epiphany is triggered by an aesthetic experience. Weil is stricken by the landscape and most of all by the chants:

It was the evening and there was a full moon over the sea. The wives of the fishermen were, in procession, making a tour of all the ships, carrying candles and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness. Nothing can give any idea of it. I have never heard anything so poignant [...] There the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves [...] (Weil 1999: 502 – 503)

The second experience happens in Assisi, where the architectural beauty of the Chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli deeply moves Simone, who falls down on her knees:

There, alone in the little twelfth-century Romanesque chapel of Santa Maria degli Angeli, an incomparable marvel of purity where Saint Francis often used to pray, something stron-

⁴ First published in 1927, then collected in Claudel (1944).

⁵ On procession as a literary motif, see Ponzo (2017).

ger than I compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees. (Weil 1999: 503)

The third experience happens in Solesmes, in France. During a liturgical service of the Holy Week, thanks again to the beauty of the chants and of the words, Simone Weil reaches a sudden understanding of God's love:

I was suffering from splitting headaches [...] I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, [...] and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction. (Weil 1999: 503)

Weil then narrates how she discovers the poem *Love* by Herbert Spencer, and how this poem has for her the same function of a prayer or a mantra:

I learned it by heart. Often, at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines. I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that [...] Christ himself came down and took possession of me. (Weil 1999: 503)

The recitation of a poem triggers a mystical experience lived as the authentic personal encounter with the Christ: the power of the poem is equal to that of the sacred language of liturgy and prayer. Vice versa, before the completion of her conversion process, Weil says that she had never prayed in her whole life: she had "occasionally recited the *Salve Regina*, but only as a beautiful poem" (Weil 1999: 505). The boundary between poetry and prayer is therefore blurred. Indeed, the initial stimulus that leads Weil to start praying consists in the beauty of the words of the *Our Father*:

I went through the Our Father word for word in Greek. [...] The infinite sweetness of this Greek text so took hold of me that for several days I could not stop myself from saying it over all the time. Since that time I have made a practice of saying it through with absolute attention. If during the recitation my attention wanders or goes to sleep, in the minutest degree, I begin again until I have once succeeded in going through it with absolutely pure attention. Sometimes it comes about that I say it again out of sheer pleasure [...]. The effect of this practice is extraordinary and surprises me every time, for, although I experience it each day, it exceeds my expectation at each repetition. At times the very first words tear my thought from my body and transport it to a place outside the space. [...] Sometimes, also, during the recitation [...], Christ is present with me in person, but his presence is infinitely more real, more moving, more clear than on that first occasion when he took possession of me. (Weil 1999: 505)

The Our Father works exactly like Spencer's poem, just at a higher degree, since it causes a more intense mystical experience. The words' aesthetic quality, more than their content, which is not mentioned or commented on in Weil's account, seems to determine the prayer's power. Like in Claudel, poetic language has less value than sacred language, but it has nevertheless a close relationship with the sacred. Weil explains: "we owe an allegiance to religious truth which is quite different from the admiration we accord to a beautiful poem; it is something far more categorical" (Weil 1999: 504). In this view, therefore, there is not a radical opposition between sacral and poetic language, but rather a continuum.

2.3 C.S. Lewis: Joy as the index of religious truth

"Surprised by Joy" is the autobiographical account of C.S. Lewis's conversion, published in 1955. Before his conversion, Lewis (1898–1963) spent his youth searching for what he called "Joy." Joy is similar to aesthetic pleasure: "It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable longing" (Lewis 1955: 72). The young Lewis experiences joy for example when he starts longing for "Notherness". One day, Lewis casually reads the words "*Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*" (Lewis 1955: 72) in a periodical. These very words trigger an epiphany:

Pure "Notherness" engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer [...] and almost at the same moment I knew that I had met this before, long, long ago [...]. And [...] there arose at once, almost like heart-break, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that [...] I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country; and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss, which suddenly became one with the loss of the whole experience, which, as I now stared around [...] like a man recovering from unconsciousness, had already vanished, had eluded me at the very moment when I could first say *It is*. And at once I knew that to "have it again" was the supreme and only important object of desire. (Lewis 1955: 73)

This description contains features that recur in countless accounts of conversion, such as we can find, for example, in William James (1902): the sense of sudden revelation, of recovering some knowledge lost a long time ago, of returning from exile. This, however, is not a religious conversion: firstly, this experience is aesthetic in essence. Secondly, it does not involve belief: Lewis repeatedly and clearly states that his imaginary world does not imply belief at all (Lewis 1955: 59, 82). This experience is nevertheless similar to religion, as Lewis explains:

Northernness [...] was not itself a new religion, for it contained no trace of belief and imposed no duties. Yet [...] there was in it something very like adoration, some kind of quite disinterested self-abandonment to an object which securely claimed this by simply being the object it was. (Lewis 1955: 76–77)

Lewis affirms that this ability of adoring an object in itself is later transferred from the imaginary Norse gods to the real Christian God. Since that epiphanic moment, Lewis finds Joy in Nordic mythological poems and novels, in Wagner's music and opera. Joy is however spoiled by Lewis's tendency to search for the experience itself, for the thrill, and to focus on this state of mind instead than on its object. For Lewis, this "error" is another thing that aesthetic or artistic experience and religious experience have in common:

It is not blasphemous to compare the error which I was making with that error which the angel at the Sepulchre rebuked when he said to the women, "Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here [...]" The comparison is of course between something of infinite moment and something very small: like the Sun and the Sun's reflection in a dewdrop. Indeed, in my view, very like it, for I do not think the resemblance between the Christian and the merely imaginative experience is accidental. I think that all things, in their way, reflect heavenly truth, the imagination not least. "Reflect" is the important word. This lower life of the imagination is not a beginning of, nor a step toward, the higher life of the spirit, merely an image. (Lewis 1955: 167)

Lewis adds that the life of the imagination can be the beginning of spiritual life, but only if God causes it to be so. In the course of his quest, Lewis gains new insights from friends and teachers, and from books, including fictional books. For example, he understands what "holiness" is by reading a fantasy novel by George MacDonald.

After having searched for joy in many different objects, for instance in sensual love and in occultism, Lewis understands that joy must not be an end in itself, but that it just points to some "external" object exceeding the self. Joy represents the moment of "clearest consciousness of our fragmentary and phantasmal nature" and our longing for the reunion with the Absolute. In the end, Lewis understands that Joy, alias the aesthetic experience, is not important in itself, but only as a pointer to religious truth:

[Joy] has lost nearly all interest for me since I became a Christian. I cannot, indeed, complain, like Wordsworth, that the visionary gleam has passed away. [...] the old stab, the old bitter-sweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life [...]. But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never that kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. [...] When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. [...] But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, [...] we

shall not stop and stare, [...] though their pillars are of silver and their lettering of gold.
(Lewis 1955: 238)

3 From religious to artistic experience: Poetry and grace

As we have seen, Claudel considers poetry as a gift deriving from divine grace, to the point that the religious and the poetic faculties are inseparable. The idea that poetry derives from divine grace is expressed by many other 20th-century writers, for example by Clemente Rebora (1885–1957) and Giovanni Papini (1881–1956).

3.1 Clemente Rebora: Poetry as analogy

The “Thoughts” of the Italian poet and Catholic priest Clemente Rebora (1957) contain reflections about the religious value of poetry:

To make poetry has become for me, more than ever, a concrete way to love God and my brothers. *Charitas lucis, refrigerium crucis*. [...]

Every real poet (and they are very few)—and also every *artist*, or simply author, because we actually should reserve the qualification of Artist to the Divine Creator—is *unitotal*, even though the number of his works is restricted; he has his own, non-communicable, personal genius installed into the perennial and unanimous element of the culture and civilization of his time [...]

Poetry [...] means to discover and establish conveniences [*sic*] and references and concordances between Heaven and earth and in us and between us [...] Poetry [...] intended in a total way, i.e. in a Catholic way, is the beauty that makes the infinite Goodness clear, as an arcane reverberation [...] (Rebora 1957: 9–10, my translation)

Rebora’s perspective makes of poetry a sort of religious practice, which seems based on the theological concept of analogy. As Boulnois (2005: 27) explains, analogy indicates in theology “the gap between human knowledge of God and God himself.” It entails “respect for the absolute transcendence of God, who is ineffable and unknowable, and the preservation of a minimal intelligible pertinence in the discourse of faith.” Thus, “Knowledge of God needs the analogical method: that is, the movement upward from works to the Principle.” The theological concept of analogy can work as an effective interpretative key to gain a deeper understanding of the discourse of all the writers considered herein. In particular, the view of poetry as the mirror of the revelation and as the imperfect

representation of a perfect and transcendent reality owes a considerable debt to the metaphysical thought characterizing neo-Thomism, or neo-scholasticism (Molinaro 1990). Neo-scholastic philosophy, inspired by the theology of Thomas Aquinas, was promoted by the Church in the late 19th century and in the first decades of the 20th century as an antidote to the risks of “modernist” thought. Neo-Thomism knew a broad diffusion in 20th-century Catholic thought, to the point of being echoed in literature, as Joyce’s explicit reference to Aquinas shows (see above). Although the other authors’ more general and implicit concept of analogy between creation and creator cannot be simplistically attributed to a direct influence of the neo-scholastics, it is possible nevertheless to affirm that this kind of “analogic” thought was a common and diffused worldview.

In Rebora’s perspective the creative component of the poetic work presupposes a parallel between the figure of the artist-creator and the deity as the supreme and perfect model of the creator. Moreover, in Rebora’s work, art is associated to the theme of sanctity, in the sense that poetry becomes a way to reach spiritual salvation (Forner 2007; Lollo 1967). The religious role of the poets is also stressed by Papini.

3.2 Giovanni Papini: The poet as a messenger of the Revelation

Il giudizio universale by Giovanni Papini (1957) represents the poets as a category of human beings enjoying a privileged relationship with the divine. This monumental work is set during the Final Judgment. After a prologue that describes the end of the world and the beginning of the Judgment, each of the 329 chapters are devoted to a character, either invented or historical, who speaks his/her soul to an angel. The work also includes collective “choirs” of several categories of characters. The “choir of the poets” begins as follows:

We sing a chant of prayer to You, to You who were the first and most powerful of the poets,
To You who created for the joy of men the hymn of the sky, the poem of the earth, the drama of life,

To You, instructor of the inspired, who gave us the miracle of language, the discovering of beauty, and the revelation of mysteries only to few elected.

Do not forget, in the infinite glory of Your love, these sons of yours who saw the glare of Your light through a tear, who in the breath of the breeze understood the breath of Your breast. (Papini 1966: 1021, my translation)

Poets are “assumed” in God’s grace, and they help innumerable “blind” human beings to see the “ineffable splendor of the universe”:

Those who only saw the stars as the helmsmen's signals, who only saw the fields as crops to reap, who only saw horses and sheep as beasts to burden or to milk [...], thanks to us learnt to see the beauty in the starry skies and in the flowering countries, the airy majesty of the mountains and the woodland beauty of the trees, that reflection of divine origin that shines in the animals and in the innocents' gazes.

If the world, with all its mysteries and splendors, is the first of Your revelations, our poetry was, sometimes, the first disclosure of Your revelation. (Papini 1966: 1023, my translation).

In what we called the “analogic” worldview, which sees the created world as a proof of the existence and as a portrait of the Creator, the arts assume a particular importance, because their prerogative is precisely to catch and point at the relationship between creation and creator, thus being privileged vehicles of a religious message. This idea is common to numerous authors with a Catholic background. For example, James Joyce, who received a Jesuit education, likened artistic creation to the mystery of transubstantiation in the Catholic mass, where the bread of everyday life is changed into something transcendent, and he envisaged himself as a “priest of the eternal imagination” (Kearney 2013: 415).

Thus, we close our circle: for contemporary Christian authors poetry and poetic experience can constitute the first step to conversion and to religion (as we have seen for Claudel, Weil, and Lewis); at the same time, poetry is conceived as a product of grace and poetic inspiration as a divine gift.

4 Conclusions: Outline of a Christian semiotic ideology in contemporary literature

In religious accounts of conversion before the 20th century, the books having the power to trigger religious epiphanies are most often books with a theological or hagiographic character. One of the most influential works prompting this kind of religious experience is Augustine's *Confessions*, which is referenced in a number of autobiographical and literary texts (Courcelle 1963), such as Teresa of Avila's *Life* and Petrarch's *Ascent to Mont Ventoux* (Petrarch 1999). Petrarch used to carry a copy of the *Confessions* everywhere he went, including on the Mont Ventoux, where the reading of a passage of Augustine's book triggered an epiphanic moment of religious consciousness, in 1341. The positive effect of reading pious literature was often contrasted with the deleterious effects of reading fictional and profane literature. For example, in her *Life*, written after 1567, Teresa of Avila describes the bad influence of chivalric novels:

[Because of chivalry books] I started to grow cold in my desires and to fail in everything else. I didn't think it was wrong to waste many hours of the day and night in such a useless practice [...]. I began to dress in finery and to desire to please and look pretty [...] (Teresa of Avila 1999: 293–294)

Thus, chivalric literature is not only useless, but also harmful, because it leads one to commit sins of vanity. On the contrary, reading Augustine's *Confessions* is for Teresa a totally different experience, apparently determined by God himself:

At this time they gave me *The Confessions* of St. Augustine. It seems the Lord ordained this, because I had not tried to procure a copy, nor had I ever seen one. [...] As I began to read the *Confessions*, it seemed to me I saw myself in them. [...] When I [...] read how he heard that voice in the garden, it only seemed to me [...] that it was I the Lord called. (Teresa of Avila 1999: 296)

Similarly, Augustine himself, in his *Confessions* (book 1) deems vain the study of the Aeneid:

I was obliged to memorize the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas, while in the meantime I failed to remember my own erratic ways. I learned to lament the death of Dido, who killed herself for love, while all the time, in the midst of these things, I was dying, separated from you, my God and my Life [...] (Augustine of Hippo 1961: 33)

The same book IV of the Aeneid, narrating the tragic affair between Aeneas and Dido, is described as one of the main temptations leading the young protagonist Amaury to perdition in *Volupté*, Sainte-Beuve's largely autobiographical novel published in 1834.

As these examples show, in stories of conversion prior to the 20th century it is possible to draw a clear distinction between a "virtuous," "pious" or even "sacred" literature leading to conversion and to God, and a literature with a false, imaginary, and vain content, which leads to sin. In 20th-century stories of conversion, however, the barrier between these two kinds of literature becomes much more permeable. Fictional literature and poetry, i.e. texts with a strong imaginative and aesthetic component, are seen to have a positive function: they are accorded a much higher power in triggering religious epiphanies and in fostering conversion. The aesthetic component of religious experience is emphasized and dignified, it is perceived as a divine gift, expressed and reproduced in artworks and poetry.

This bijective relationship between arts and religious experience constitutes a specific instance that reinforces the more general argument for the mediation of mystical experience advanced in recent currents of religious studies. In partic-

ular, Steven Katz (2013: 5) claims that “mystical experience(s) reveal a *necessary* relationship between the prior education of the mystic and their mystical goal [...]. All experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated, that is, pure, experience seems at best empty if not self-contradictory.” While Katz (2013: 16–20) acknowledges the importance of verbal language as the main mediator, the analysis presented herein rather points out the importance of artistic works, both verbal and non-verbal, and of the aesthetic quality of systems of signs (from music to gesture, from architecture to poetry) in fostering and mediating religious experience, and how the contemporary Christian sensibility opens the range of textual genres that it allows to be considered as vehicles of a genuine religious experience.

In conclusion, from our short analysis of 20th-century stories of conversion by Christian authors we can deduce some recurring features composing a specific semiotic ideology:⁶

1. Texts having a strong poetic function—in Jakobson’s (1960) sense—are attributed a great power. They can trigger religious epiphanies.
2. There is a hierarchical distinction between prayer and poetry, but not an opposition. The same is true for the relationship between fictional and non-fictional texts.
3. Works of art and literature are considered analogic “images” of a superior reality. This idea seems to owe a debt to neo-scholastic thought, as well as to neo-Platonism and idealism.
4. The reverse happens as well: there is a propensity to positively evaluate and emphasize the aesthetic component of religious experience and of religious language. Liturgy, prayer, and rituals are performed, appreciated, and evaluated as art.
5. Form, the poetic-aesthetic component of religious language, is attributed a value which is equal, or even superior, to that attributed to content.
6. Poetic inspiration is sometimes associated with divine Grace.

⁶ A semiotic ideology can be defined as a set of “basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world. It determines, for instance, what people will consider the role that intentions play in the signification to be, what kinds of possible agents (humans only? Animals? Spirits?) exist to which acts of signification might be imputed, whether signs are arbitrary or necessarily linked to their objects, and so forth” (Keane 2003: 419). See also Kroskrity (2000); Lambek (2013); Silverstein (1979).

The Catholic Church has recognized the pedagogical role of art at least since the Council of Trent⁷ and has confirmed it during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). In documents such as *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963), the Church states that literature and the arts have to reveal human nature and elevate human life; that they are among the noblest human activities; and that they are “sacred” when their goal is to portray God’s beauty and to turn the mind toward God.⁸ Claudel, Weil, C.S. Lewis, Rebora, and Papini wrote well before the Second Vatican Council. The conciliar Church, therefore, does not set a trend, but rather seems to ratify an existing trend. Furthermore, this tendency is not confined to Catholicism at all: C.S. Lewis was a Protestant, while Simone Weil, despite being close to Catholicism, always refused official affiliation.

The semiotic ideology outlined herein confers a dignity and importance to art and literature such as they probably never enjoyed in the past. In the 20th century, literature, i.e. the product of imagination and poetry, works as a stairway leading to Heaven: it is described as the privileged medium that triggers the epiphanic encounter between the deity and human beings. And this power is attributed especially to its language, to its poetic form, and to its aesthetic character. The kind of thought expressed by the Christian authors considered herein provides a striking alternative to the nihilist tendency often associated with the culture of a century that proclaimed the death of God and the end of literature (e.g. Kernan 1992; Vahanian 1961; McCullough 2008). On the one hand, writers and artists are considered elected individuals; in Papini’s work, for example, poets are the only ones, together with saints, to be allowed to see glimpses of divine truth and beauty. On the other hand, God is represented as an active presence in human life and as a perfect being that can be discovered at least in part and intuitively through art, through the literary “enchantment of the heart.”

⁷ *De invocatione, veneratione et reliquiis sanctorum, et sacris imaginibus* (1563).

⁸ “Literature and the arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. They strive to make known the proper nature of man [...] revealing man’s place in history and in the world; [...] foreshadowing a better life for him. Thus they are able to elevate human life” (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965: n. 62). “The fine arts are considered to rank among the noblest activities of man’s genius, and this applies especially to religious art and to its highest achievement, which is sacred art. These arts [...] are oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray [...] they are directed [...] to the single aim of turning men’s minds devoutly toward God” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1963: n. 122).

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