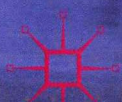
Literary Epiphany in the Novel, 1850-1950

Constellations of the Soul

Sharon Kim



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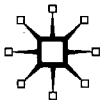

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To my parents

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Introduction: Epiphany and Enquiry

In the trivial, ugly, sordid, and vulgar, a young James Joyce noted sudden perceptions that he called epiphany. The chatter in a pub, fake condolences, a bit of seaweed on a girl's thigh—such negligible things unexpectedly lit up in the mind and sparked the writing of texts. Joyce wrote his epiphanies into a notebook then later spun them into poems and novels. Although he experimented with them for decades, casting them into a startling verbal pyrotechnics by *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Joyce never defined epiphany except through the manuscript *Stephen Hero* (1904–1906).

In this early version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Stephen walks down the street with a friend and remarks that he has often passed the Ballast Office clock, time after time, noting it simply as part of the scene. Then one day, in a flash, he sees the clock: "[W]e recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany" (*Hero* 213). Such radiance belongs to the literal object, "*that* thing which it is." Although Stephen rejects any supernatural dimension to this event, along with mysticism, idealism, and symbolism, he still uses words like "soul" and "spiritual" to describe it. As the narrator explains, Stephen understood epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" (*Hero* 211). He calls it "spiritual" because epiphany reveals the pure "whatness" or "*quidditas*" (213) of the object. For Stephen, these radiant epiphanies become the basis of the work of art.

Curiously, Stephen had looked at the Ballast Office clock many times and had referred to it as a commonplace of Dublin, yet when he describes his epiphany, he speaks as if he had never seen it before. Similarly, when Stephen points out the clock to his friend, Cranly just looks at it blankly. Stephen cannot explain his experience by pointing at the clock. Epiphany is neither optical nor ocular, nor is it the

object alone. In epiphany, both the clock and the ability to see it become clear, simultaneously unhidden in a luminosity that Stephen describes as an "esthetic pleasure" and an "enchantment of the heart" (*Portrait* 213). This unique perceptual event effects the manifestation of character, since the gap between Cranly's and Stephen's perceptions reveals an excess beyond the clock: subjectivity, the luminous trace of a singular being.

This book studies literary epiphany as the revelation of such "being" within the British and American novel, with particular attention to why such realization of character is often attended by the language of spirituality. Epiphany has long been understood as a central trait of modern fiction, in works by Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, William Faulkner, and Katherine Mansfield, among others.[1] M. H. Abrams identified it as an outgrowth of lyric poetry, with origins in Wordsworth's spots of time; others have also placed epiphany in relation to Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud.[2] In *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), Northrop Frye first described epiphany as an archetypal literary moment, and handbooks now include it as a standard literary term, although its popularity among critics has waned. In the field of philosophy, Charles Taylor explains modern epiphanic art as a reaction against the emergence of a modern "commercial-industrial-capitalist society" (422), while Jacques Aubert and Karl Heinz Bohrer both suggest that *Stephen Hero* makes "suddenness" the "'*mode* of appearance of meaning'" not only in modern fiction but in modern art and intellectual experience (Bohrer 216).

Like the philosophers, literary critics have approached epiphany primarily in terms of time, emphasizing the suddenness of the "sudden, spiritual manifestation" and its temporality. From Theodore Ziolkowski to Maurice Blanchot, time saturates all major approaches to epiphany to the extent that Leon Edel calls epiphany a "slice of time" (147), and many discuss it not only as the descendent of Wordsworth's spots of time but also as the collision of two different forms of time, *chronos* and *kairos*.[3] In his *Epiphany and the Modern Novel* (1971), Morris Beja classifies epiphanies almost entirely in relation to time, with chapter headings such as "The Present of Things Present" and "The Present of Things Past."

While suddenness can create an opening for manifestation to take place, the chapters in this book shift the kaleidoscope from the "sudden" to the "manifestation," considering epiphany more as a form of being than as a form of time. When viewed as a manifestation, epiphany presents an unusual form of vision that does not rely upon a metaphysical mechanics of perception. It does not automatically conflate the eye, the mind, and knowledge, nor require a mind-body dualism. As the mutual

visibility of both the revealed and the perceiver, epiphany offers a gaze that does no harm to the other and does not predicate being upon objectification or a transgressive form of knowledge. The rarity of such a gaze attracts the language of spirituality.

In Joyce's definition of epiphany, the adjective "spiritual" and its contribution to the concept of manifestation have remained underexplored by critics, in part because Joycean epiphany is expressly nonsupernatural and post-Christian. Yet, a significant part of epiphany's power in relation to character resides in this quality, because the same dark matter that links the rhetoric of spirituality with epiphany also energizes its mode of generating and revealing character in the novel. Since few terms can be as slippery and vague as "spiritual," each chapter in this book seeks a critical means to understand the different contexts and modalities of the "spiritual" as it shapes epiphany in various texts. Epiphany thus presents a practical case in a methodological question raised in several academic disciplines: under what conditions can the "spiritual" become an object of intellectual inquiry? If literary epiphany is "spiritual," in what way is it so, and what methodologies enable us to speak of "spiritual" experience in literary terms?

Ultimately, what separates epiphany from the slice-of-life technique, or from the sudden realization that one has forgotten to buy groceries, is a character's sense of encountering what Stephen calls "the truth of the being of the visible world [...]" (*Hero* 80). Although Joyce keeps an ironic distance from this undergraduate's claim, his irony works hand in glove with his placement of Stephen as a character in a novel, the third-person deflection enabling the visibility of epiphany in prose. Stephen's epiphanies become spiritual because he recognizes them as profoundly true, to the extent that he shapes his identity and consciousness as a writer around the task of gathering them into a manuscript, just as Joyce also shapes Stephen and the novel that contains him according to his own epiphanies.

In the literature beyond Joyce's writing, throughout a range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, epiphanies present the shining points around which characters and narratives accrue like constellations. But, under what conditions will these forms appear, invisibly drawn in the mind, and named after myths and gods? What elements can illumine the constellations of the soul?

THE PROBLEM WITH EPIPHANY

Understanding epiphany as a spiritual manifestation helps to address two perennial difficulties in its critical study. Stephen encounters one problem when he tries to write his epiphanies down, or when

he tries to explain the experience to Cranly. More delicate than a light-fugitive hue on a painting, epiphany fades fast into the nondescript because it literally looks like, and is identical to, the unepiphanized thing. In the case of Stephen's Ballast Office clock, the clock looks like the clock. The clock *is* the clock. Epiphany evaporates into tautology.

This peculiarity poses a problem for readers, since literal accounts like Joyce's never look epiphanic. The famous bird-girl epiphany is an anomaly: "She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. [...] But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face" (*Portrait* 171).[4] When Stephen sees the girl in the water, his soul cries "Heavenly God!" (171), and words like "ecstasy," "glory," "worship," "holy," and "angel," along with "flame" and "aglow" fill the scene (*Portrait* 171–72).

Most of Joyce's epiphanies, however, lack such helpful signs. When his dying sister's navel begins to extrude some stuff, Stephen's terrified mother asks him what she should do:

> —What ought I do? There's some matter coming away from the hole in Isabel's ... stomach ... Did you ever hear of that happening?
> —I don't know, he answered trying to make sense of her words, trying to say them again to himself.
> —Ought I send for the doctor ... Did you ever hear of that? ... What ought I do?
> —I don't know ... What hole?
> —The hole ... the hole we all have ... here. (*Hero* 163)

Joyce identified this moment as an epiphany, one he had originally written about his dying brother, Georgie. But without this note, the scene might be impossible to discern. It is like, and may in fact be, the hole in Isabel's stomach, which evokes ignorance (What ought I do? Did you ever hear of that? I don't know) and lack of vision, since Stephen cannot see what is meant by the hole. The hole is a spot of blindness: a round gap punctuated by ellipsis. His twice repeated answers of "I don't know" create a ring structure around it, circling the space of disorientation when he is trying to make sense of his mother's words. The scene then disappears into the text without a ripple: no stated effect upon Stephen, no allusion in subsequent narration: silence.

Critics have thus noted "the generally formless character of [Joyce's] epiphany" (Noon 74), which has left them wondering what they were supposed to see, or even if there is anything to see. Catherine Millot calls it "the problem of the epiphanies" that while Joyce "often described this experience as ecstatic, it is difficult for his readers to see anything other than the mere transcription of some insignificant incidents. [...] The triviality of the epiphanies borders on nonsense" (207–08). Similarly, Richard Ellmann remarks that epiphany "makes the reader feel uneasy and culpable if he misses the intended but always unstated meaning, as if he were being arraigned rather than entertained" (84). By locating epiphany in the banal and trivial, Joyce places his interpreters in a dilemma reminiscent of the emperor's new clothes.

Sublimity or fraud? Teasing the line between the two, epiphany intrigued Joyce scholars for decades as a favorite interpretive key to Joycean texts.[5] The mania for epiphany hunting, however, drew some delightfully grumpy strictures from Robert Scholes, who portrays it as a form of mass delusion, the result of breathing "heady vapours" in an enclosed space ("Labyrinth" 77). Scholes insists that critics were using "epiphany" in a way that Joyce did not intend, turning it into "an arid formula for cranking out unnecessary interpretations" (Scholes and Walzl 154). This accusation stung his colleagues and led to tart quarrels in the *PMLA*.[6]

The problem of detecting epiphany thus became the problem of defining it. Despite Stephen's definition, the Joyce scholars could not agree on what an epiphany is, much less whether or not they had found one. The situation became worse when "epiphany" became a popular term in literary studies, used to analyze a wide range of moments, spanning from classical texts to symbolist poetry. In response, some critics tried to restrict epiphany to its Joycean sense for application in modern texts. As Robert Langbaum states, "The concept of epiphany is useful only to the extent that we recognize epiphany as distinctively modern. Otherwise we may as well scrap the term and speak only of *vision*" (43).

Morris Beja has made the most careful effort to distinguish modern epiphany from moments like *anagnōrisis* (recognition), conversion, mystical vision, literal visions of a divine being, and revelations that follow logically from direct statements of fact. Beja suggests the criteria of incongruity and insignificance, noting that epiphany takes place within "so-called trivia" (*Novel* 21) and is "*out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it*" (*Novel* 18;

original italics). In epiphany scholarship that focuses on poetry, critics also emphasize subjectivity and its role in the poetic process. These traits have distinguished literary epiphany in its specialized sense, and they form the starting point for my own study of epiphany.

Yet the problem of definition and usage has continued, not least because several picky epiphany scholars cannot resist contradicting their own definitions. Langbaum, for example, describes Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" (the whole sonnet) as an epiphany. He admits that this reading "raises a problem" for his definition of epiphany (58), but he still calls the sonnet an epiphany. In a more striking indulgence, Langbaum writes that Hopkins's "The Windhover" transforms the falcon into "an emblem of Christ" at the point of epiphany (57), yet an emblematic reading of a literal windhover would have left Joyce appalled. Similarly, Wim Tigges, editor of a comprehensive volume on epiphany, seeks to avoid "the limitations of a catch-all term" (19) that would include "religious conversion," the "*coup de foudre*" and "déjà vu" as epiphanies, but the 24 essays in his volume include all of those moments, plus a few more. Yet who can blame Tigges, Langbaum, or any number of other scholars? Something about epiphany inspires a sort of critical greed or generosity, the desire to include more and more of these radiant moments. Whenever one epiphany appears, others glow out of the dark. Wherever a line is drawn, a critic recognizes a flash just over the boundary and cannot help but move his own line.

The incitement to greediness or largesse comes from the fact that epiphany is a manifestation described as spiritual. In epiphany scholarship, the adjective "spiritual" has brought confusion instead of clarity, since it invites an unusual level of ambiguity. As a word associated with the intangible and incorporeal, as well as the prelogical and antiinstitutional, it eludes objective categorization or analysis. Further, because "spiritual" has a mystical tag, critics have mistaken Joyce's concept as something mystical, religious, or moral, when it expressly denies each of those vectors. Some have even criticized it for those traits, while others note the postmodern skepticism toward the "felt ultimacies" implicit in epiphany (Saltzman 498; Maltby; McGowan; and Salgado). As Herbert Tucker observes, "*Epiphany* may have fallen under theoretical suspicion and into academic neglect because currently popular definitions violate the postulates of much advanced scholarship" (1209); epiphany had its "heyday" with New Criticism, but theoretical shifts created by deconstruction and New Historicism have made it unfashionable in the late twentieth century and occluded its visibility in current discourse.

The "spiritual" is notoriously difficult to pin down and the most elusive, vague, annoying, and pesky in critical terms. Its qualities explain the difficulty of reading or employing "epiphany" as a consistent literary concept. Rather than restricting this aspect of epiphany, I wish to give it more room to emerge. I am interested in precisely those elements that have made epiphany suspect in contemporary criticism, what some critics have viewed with a sort of embarrassment, like the recurrence of six toes in a family: the various impulses toward a depth-dimension, an unquantifiable "spiritual" dimension in subjective experience that bears a resemblance to religion. This likeness is a family resemblance, embodied in both the Greek and the French-Latin-Catholic genealogy of the word "epiphany" and remembered in communities often centered outside of the domain of critical theory.

Instead of separating epiphany from its religious provenance, I suggest that exploring that origin brings into view more fully how modern epiphany works as an ironic mode of manifestation. A study of this lineage also helps to limn why literary epiphany accumulates the adjective "spiritual" even in a postreligious context, providing a starting point for reaching a less amorphous sense of what it means for modern epiphany to be spiritual. As a spiritual manifestation, epiphany becomes definitive for a character and thus becomes a significant form of characterization in the novel.

EPIPHANY AND MANIFESTATION

The ancient Greek *epiphaneia* meant an appearance or manifestation, literally a "'coming into light' or 'view'" (Liegbregts 252). If Joyce had looked up "epiphany" in his well-worn copy of Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, he would have found the Greek words whose extensions compose it, from "*pha*" (to shine) to "*phanein*" (to show; to cause to shine) to "*epiphainein*" (to manifest, to bring to light), along with a web of cognate words in English: phantasia, diaphanous, phantom, photograph, phosphorus, emphasis, phenomenon (447, 208). *Epiphaneia* most often describes a deity showing itself plainly to human eyes. So, Antiochus IV, the Seleucid ruler who provoked the Maccabean revolt, called himself Antiochus Theos Epiphanes: the manifest god or image of god, the shining one. Historians Istrus and Phylarcus (200 BC) chronicle epiphanies of Zeus and Apollo, and temple inscriptions record epiphany in the form of divine military intervention on behalf of a city or temple under attack (Lau 222). In classical Greek drama, it became conventional for a god

or goddess to appear near the end of the play, often to resolve conflict. Such epiphanies occur in works like *The Eumenides*, by Aeschylus, and Euripides's *Hippolytus*. Playwrights staged epiphany by suddenly revealing an actor on top of the skene building or by lowering him by crane onto the stage, showing the descent from the heavens through a literal deus ex machina.

As classicist D. S. Carne-Ross explains, words like *epiphaneia* and *phainesthai* (to appear) "may have a stronger sense in earlier Greek than we usually allow, standing as we do on the other side of the great divide after which appearance dwindled into mere appearance, not full presence. Athene's dreadful or wonderful eyes do not simply appear to Achilles in *Iliad* 1.200 [...]. They burst forth in radiance" (251). The ambivalence about "mere appearance" stretches from Kant's "phenomenon" to Baudrillard's "simulacra." An appearance may be purely external or even a deception, hiding a true essence or masking the absence of one. With *phainesthai*, however, appearance meant full presence, the same claim that Stephen makes for his epiphany as the thing in itself. The radiance comes from a charged fullness of being, a saturation of being.[7]

Such appearance was not without hazards. When Actaeon sees Artemis bathing in the woods, she turns him into a stag, and his own dogs tear him to pieces. A lightning bolt consumes Semele when she sees her lover Zeus in his divine form. Destructive as it was, the meaning of this immolation has been unclear: was it divine punishment for seeing Zeus, or was it a consecration, the apotheosis of Semele? These opposing views reflect the two categories of "lightning epiphanies" in Greek literature (Brenk 354–63): retribution from the gods, or a setting apart as sacred. The dangerous power of the Greek radiance appears more tangibly in *epiphaneia*'s Latin equivalent, *manifestus*, which includes the original sense of "to strike with one's hand, to slap, and particularly to slap to awareness or attention" (Ryba 169).

For Joyce, *epiphaneia* was mediated through the Christian feast of Epiphany, which marks the revelation of the Christ child to the Magi and takes place on January 6, the Twelfth Night of Christmas. While Joyce ironized divine epiphany by applying the word to profane Dublin life, his usage closely resembles the ambiguity of Christ's manifestation. When Athena appears in *The Eumenides*, everyone can tell that she is the grey-eyed goddess. But in the Epiphany event, Jesus was born in a stable to impoverished parents. His unrecognizable divinity differs from that of the Greek gods taking on humbler forms, like the scenes in *The Odyssey* when Athena appears as a young girl (Book IX), a shepherd (XIII), a tall maiden (XIII), a sparrow (XXII), and Mentor (XXIV). Unlike Athena, Jesus did not discard

his human body at will, since it was his actual body, not just the semblance of one. He was subject to all of its physical limitations, including the necessity of development over time, and the vulnerability to pain, mockery, and death. In a paradox described by Kierkegaard as the "absurd," the baby Christ was really a baby but simultaneously the transcendent God Most High. The Magi who recognized Jesus did so despite the child's existential appearance, and similarly, those who "see" a Joycean epiphany must do so despite the trivial elements of the scene.[8]

So then, in what way was Christ "manifest"? The origins of the Epiphany feast show the foment of early Christian thought on this question, as the Greek *epiphaneia* was inculturated and thus recontextualized across the Mediterranean church world. Anatolian and Syrian churches celebrated both the nativity and the baptism of Christ on the feast of Epiphany, because they believed that the baptism was the first clear manifestation of Jesus's divine identity. The early church in Egypt emphasized the baptism on Epiphany but also connected it to the wedding at Cana (where Jesus performed his first miracle), while the fifth-century church in Northern Italy celebrated the visit of the Magi, the baptism, and the transfiguration of Christ on January 6 (Talley 123,142). In the New Testament epistles, the word *epiphaneia* often occurs in connection with Christ's second coming (I Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim 4:1,8; Tit. 2:11,13), the final manifestation of his divinity.

By the fourth and fifth centuries, the Byzantine church used the paradox of Christ's first manifestation to question the nature of human vision, an inquiry inherent to modern epiphany. Dionysius, also known as Pseudo-Dionysius, explains:

> The superessential has proceeded out [of] hiddenness to become manifest to us by becoming a human being. Yet He is also hidden, both after the manifestation and, to speak more divinely, even within it. For this is the hidden of Jesus, and neither by rational discourse nor by intuition can His mystery [*mysterion*] be explained, but instead even when spoken, it remains ineffable [*arreton*], and when conceived, unknowable [*agnoston*]. (Golitzin 22)[9]

Dionysius's concept of the hidden goes beyond the distinction between "seeing" and "perceiving" that Frank Kermode has explored in *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979). Kermode discusses the early Christian distinction between the spiritual and the carnal senses of Scripture, a binary mode that became the foundation for a dominant form of interpretation. This classic distinction enables a type of epiphanic reading in which one level of the text (the carnal) gives way to one

more hidden but more true (the spiritual). Discussing the second- to third-century Alexandrian interpretations of Mark 4:11–12 as the origin of a privileged hermeneutics, Kermode explains that the "insiders" are given the secrets of the kingdom of God, while the "outsiders" are excluded from the secret, doomed to hearing the parables but never truly understanding them, to always seeing but never perceiving. Dionysus, however, redescribes the "perceiving" of the insider. Whatever the human perceives, something still remains outside of that perception or the understanding constructed from it. For Dionysius and the subsequent tradition of "negative theology," the common metaphor for spiritual enlightenment is not light but darkness, a cloud of unknowingness that Gregory of Nyssa describes as a "luminous darkness" (95), the darkness around God.[10] Such theory implies that even when Jesus is fully presented to human perception, the human gaze will yet occlude him. The "hidden of Jesus" means that he can be hidden in plain sight.

That something can be hidden in plain sight is one of the best jokes around. Edgar Allan Poe exploits this humor in "The Purloined Letter," when a state minister who has stolen letters from the queen hangs them up on his mantel, effectively concealing them from the police who search the most obscure places in his room, yet miss the most obvious clue. In a darker form of the joke, the gods in Euripides' *The Bacchae* tell Pentheus of his own destruction in lines of double meaning that he does not understand, even though he thinks he does. Such irony reveals divine contempt, a laughter at the expense of the human pretension to knowledge. For Joyce, seeing epiphanies in the most vulgar scenes of Dublin life gave him a great pleasure, which may very well include an adolescent amusement at his readers' expense.

Yet, the concept of epiphany has a peripatetic component that works against the sense of superiority or contempt. Like the dark spots left on the retina by a light, epiphany reveals the state of *not* having seen and intuits that there is something that yet cannot be seen. When Stephen describes his epiphany with the Ballast Office clock, he admits that he had been looking at it for years without seeing it. Epiphany recasts what had previously passed for vision as a false or insufficient perception, a form of *méconnaissance.*

The crossing from one form of vision to another reveals a limit, the boundary that limns the subject and makes it contingent. That our vision is circumscribed into a field, that both the right eye and the left contain a blind spot, that we must blink and therefore miss something, is the condition of being human, the reminder that the God's-eye or panoptical view is impossible for human flesh. Twentieth-century