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# THE EPIPHANY IN *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A ROMANTIC MOMENT*

Carl G. Herndl

There are in our existence spots of time,  
Which with distinct pre-eminence retain  
a vivifying virtue,  
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 11:258-260)

Collected on parchment leaves, extended as stories in *Dubliners*, defined in *Stephen Hero*, and embedded in *A Portrait Of The Artist*, Joyce's epiphanies have a long bibliographic and a confused critical history. Robert Scholes treats the epiphanies as a finite set of texts and argues that after *Portrait* Joyce outgrew them, using only one in *Ulysses*. Irene Hendry, on the other hand, argues in an early essay that Joyce had at least four "epiphany techniques" and that "Joyce's work is a tissue of epiphanies, great and small, from fleeting images to whole books, from briefest revelation in his lyrics to the epiphany that occupies one gigantic, enduring 'moment' in *Finnegan's Wake*, running through 628 pages of text and then returning upon itself" (Hendry 461). While Scholes' view is useful in tracing the development of specific passages, it tells us little about the epiphany as a literary motif. The second definition renders the epiphany and any comment on it vacuous, making any passage, from a line to a whole book, an epiphany. Amid such a welter of opinion it is difficult to construct a context in which to discuss the epiphany in an informative way. Shiv Kumar's analysis of the epiphany as a descendant of Bergson's "L'intuition philosophique" is helpful because he attempts to place the epiphany in a larger literary tradition. The epiphany, as it appears in the *Portrait*, belongs in a more obvious, but still useful literary context, that of the Romantic tradition.

The *Portrait* is a Romantic novel in many ways: the epiphany is a central motif of the modern *Kunsterroman*, as M.H. Abrams says, a type of the Romantic Moment. Joyce's novel is similar to Wordsworth's *The Prelude*; both works are autobiographical accounts of the growth of an artist, and both describe brief incidents, epiphanies or spots of time, that are essential to the development of the artist's imagination.<sup>1</sup> Joyce himself suggests this Romantic heritage both in his discussion of *quidditas* in the *Portrait*, and in his college essay "James Clarence Mangan." In that essay, Joyce criticizes Mangan's sometimes "contorted writing," but finds a redeeming imaginative power in some of his passages. He says:

But the best of what he has written makes its appeal surely, because it was conceived by the imagination which he called, I think, the mother of things, whose dream are we, who imageth us to herself, and to ourselves, and imageth herself in us—the power before whose breath the mind in creation is (to use Shelley's image) as a fading coal.

(*Critical Writings* 78)

Joyce's faith in the imagination as the source of poetry echoes the claims made by the Romantic poets. His parenthetical note refers, of course, to "A Defense of Poetry" where Shelley likens the mind of the poet to a fading coal, fanned to a "transitory brightness" by an inconstant wind. Both the flamboyant language of this passage and the use of Romantic notions of art are common in Joyce. The metaphor reappears in the *Portrait* when Stephen describes the moment in which the poet realizes the *quidditas* of a thing. He says, "The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal" (*Portrait* 213).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the moment of aesthetic or moral vision was the common property of the Romantic movement. While there are a number of important texts between those of Wordsworth and Shelley, and those of Joyce, Walter Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* is, perhaps, the most crucial. In this essay, Pater provides an exuberant discussion of the "moment." He traces the modern tendency "to regard all things and principles of things as inconstant modes or fashions" from its beginning in "the inward world of thought and feeling" (Pater 235). He pursues the idea that perception constitutes reality for the individual, to its conclusions, in which, he says, "Every one of those impressions [which make up experience] is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world" (Pater 235). In this isolation we should be alive to the world around us because, Pater argues,

Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us,—for the moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end.

(Pater 236)

Here, every moment is a potential visionary moment; experience becomes a tissue of Romantic Moments, each distinct and marked by an "awful brevity." To the idea of the powerful but transient moment, Pater adds the isolation of the observer, an addition which is important to Joyce's use of the epiphany in the *Portrait*.

Much of the difficulty in defining the epiphany as it occurs in that novel comes from two sources: the definition given by Stephen in *Stephen Hero*, and the variety of the style and content of the epiphanies in the *Portrait*. In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen defines the epiphany for Cranly in the course of his discussion of Beauty, but his definition is not consistent. He really offers two definitions, one based on an eighteenth century aesthetic, the other based on a Romantic theory of perception. The first is an attempt to define Beauty by identifying the aesthetic qualities of a beautiful thing. *Integritas*, *consonantia*, and *claritas* are each a "quality of beauty," attributes of the external object. Though somewhat different in the qualities it identifies, this analysis takes essentially the same form as the standard eighteenth century attempt to define the sublime and the beautiful of which Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry Concerning the Sublime and The Beautiful* is representative. For Burke, an object is beautiful if it possesses certain identifiable qualities, e.g., smallness, smoothness, variety, delicacy. Joyce's first definition is much the same. When the object possesses the necessary and sufficient qualities of *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*, "Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of appearance" (*Stephen Hero* 213). Possessing these qualities, "The object achieves its epiphany" (*Stephen Hero* 213). "Achieves" is an active verb, and "the object" is the agent in the case relation, "epiphany" the patient. The object is responsible for the epiphany.

Later in this discussion, however, Stephen offers another and conflicting definition of the epiphany. If the first definition is one of aesthetic qualities, the second turns on aesthetic perception. Stephen says that when "the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus" succeed, "the moment the focus is achieved, the object is epiphanized" (*Stephen Hero* 211). "The object" becomes the patient rather than the agent; "epiphany" becomes the predicate; and the spiritual eye is the implied agent. The observer rather than the object is responsible for the epiphany. Now a matter of perception, beauty is subjective and the

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realization of *quidditas* is a function of the observer. Where Wordsworth refers to “all the mighty world/ Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,/ and what perceive” (“Tintern Abbey” 105-107), Joyce’s epiphany has a more radical epistemology. The subjectivity of Joyce’s epiphany is closer to Pater’s “impression of the individual in his isolation” (Pater 235).

Stephen’s subsequent remarks to Cranly, especially the famous discussion of the Ballast Office clock, support the definition of the epiphany as a subjective, perceptual phenomenon. Stephen passes the clock daily, but fails to recognize its *quidditas*. Only when his “spiritual eye” is properly focussed will he experience the moment of epiphanic vision.

It is the second, Romantic definition that seems to fit the epiphany that accompanies this discussion in *Stephen Hero*. In the epiphany of the evening on Eccles’ St., Stephen perceives the scene and the fragmentary conversation between the young lady and gentleman as “the very incarnation of Irish Paralysis” (Stephen Hero 211). It is clear that the power and symbolism of the scene lie in Stephen’s perception. Before the epiphany, Stephen is described as “passing through Eccles’ St. one evening, one misty evening, with all these thoughts dancing the dance of unrest in his brain” (*Stephen Hero* 210). The “dance of unrest” turning in Stephen’s mind transforms the “trivial incident” into a symbol for the very thing against which Stephen chafes.

The relation of these contradictory definitions from *Stephen Hero* to the epiphanies in the *Portrait* is tentative; they are, after all, separate books. Nevertheless, most critics use the first as a commentary on the second, perhaps because of the reappearance of a lengthened and somewhat changed dissertation on Beauty. This discussion is preceded by Stephen’s explanation of pity and terror, and is followed by his discussion of the three forms of art: the lyric, the epic, and the dramatic. This train of argument leads to the famous conclusion that “the artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (*Portrait* 215).<sup>2</sup> There is no explicit mention of the epiphany in the *Portrait*, however. Thus, before we accept either of the definitions of the epiphany from *Stephen Hero*, we must examine the *Portrait*. In the light of the critical debate about the epiphany in the *Portrait*, I will start by adopting Scholes’ more conservative definition, assuming only that the forty passages he identifies in *The Workshop of Daedalus* are epiphanies.

Like the epiphany from *Stephen Hero*, the first epiphany Scholes identifies in the *Portrait* is a description not of an object, but of a brief conversation in which Stephen is warned to apologize, or the eagles will come and pull out his eyes. This epiphany comes in a passage organized by Stephen’s nascent perception; the distorted point of view is that of the child confused by and, perhaps, afraid of the adults. The elements in this passage—the naming of the names “baby tuckoo” and “Betty Byrne,” the making of songs, the symbolism of maroon and green, and the prophesied marriage with Eileen—all reappear in the novel because they shape Stephen’s world. The passage is an inventory of Stephen’s childhood imagination. An epiphany appears here because it, too, is an important part of Stephen’s growth. Not the particular epiphany, but the epiphanic moment recurs as part of Stephen’s psychological and aesthetic growth.

The second epiphany in the *Portrait* is of the same sort, a brief conversation, and Stephen is isolated and alienated from his surroundings as in the earlier passage. As he listens to the nameless old woman by the fireside repeat her mysterious tale, Stephen begins “following the ways of adventure that lay in the coals, arches and vaults and winding galleries and jagged caverns” of the fire (*Portrait* 68). Immersed in this reverie, Stephen is withdrawn from the scene; even the old woman who is speaking remains unnamed, unimportant. This reverie, like the “dance of unrest” in the *Stephen Hero* epiphany, “throws a coloring of the imagination” over the scene. Torn from

his contemplation of the fire with its marvelous architecture, Stephen sees a skull, a “feeble creature like a monkey” rather than an old woman (*Portrait* 68).

Stephen’s withdrawal just before the epiphanies, whether brought on by spiritual and emotional unrest, or imaginative ecstasy, is the cause of their flashing out, of their visionary clarity. The adjustment, or perhaps in some cases the maladjustment, of the spiritual eye creates the epiphany. The terrifying vision of hell during the “retreat,” itself an attempt to remove the individual and alter his perception, is no exception. This is a vision of “his hell,” not a description of an object, or a conversation, or of any external thing whose *quidditas* could exist outside Stephen’s imagination. While the sources of the earlier visions might be mistaken as objective, there is no more subjective or revealing experience than a nightmare, in this case a waking vision. The beshitted, Goatish creatures of the vision are creations of Stephen’s fear and guilt over his sins. Like the other epiphanies, this vision is preceded by a crisis in Stephen’s mind. The dance of unrest, the fireside reverie, are replaced by “bodily unrest and chill and weariness” and the adolescent guilt over sexuality augmented by his consciousness of sin and damnation, by the fear of an omniscient Father (*Portrait* 136). As Stephen approached the epiphany, “his frame shook under the strain of his desire and until the senses of his soul closed. They closed for an instant and then they opened” (*Portrait* 137). Seen through the “senses of the soul” this is certainly an inner, subjective experience.<sup>3</sup>

While the first two epiphanies in the *Portrait* involve conversations and the third is a description of a vision, there is one more important variation in the kind of subject revealed in the *Portrait*’s epiphanies. Stephen is a character in the epiphany scene on the tram car with Emma as in the first two examples, but, while this incident is a real occurrence and not a vision, it resembles the vision of hell in its lack of dialogue. As in all these epiphanies, however, Stephen is removed from his companions when he leaves the party in which he hardly participates. He adopts his “silent watchful manner...withdrawn into a snug corner of the room” (*Portrait* 68). Watching Emma, he hides “from other eyes the feverish agitation of his blood” (*Portrait* 69). The turmoil of his feelings accentuates the empty stillness of the tram, the banal talk of the driver and conductor, the tension in his eloquent minuet with Emma. The *quidditas* of the moment is revealed only against Stephen’s anxious tremblings.

Despite their variation in subject, then, the epiphanies discussed thus far have a psychological and formal consistency. The other epiphanies embedded in *Portrait*, if not exactly the same, conform to the same general pattern; they follow a kind of psychological withdrawal. Stephen’s two recollections of the tram car scene, the first as he recites the *Confiteor* to Heron on the evening of the Whitsuntide play, the second while he composes his villanelle, however, are significantly different: they are memories of epiphanic moments. The fact that the last is a recollection of an epiphany after ten years which occurs while Stephen composes a poem suggests not only the intensity and evanescence of the epiphany, but also its power in shaping the imagination, here the imagination of the artist. Stephen remembers this epiphany as he lies in bed in the morning quiet. His imagination transforms the memory of Eileen into the “temptress of his villanelle,” and he is aroused to the poetic fervor in which the villanelle “flowed forth over his brain” (*Portrait* 223). The setting, the poem and even the language of the description, echo Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as “the spontaneous *overflow* of powerful feelings...recollected in tranquillity” (Stillinger 460, emphasis mine). In this context, the epiphany ceases to be a technique peculiar to Joyce and becomes a modern example of the Romantic Moment of insight or revelation.

In *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams traces the development of the Romantic Moment and

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the “transvaluation” of the ordinary that Wordsworth typifies. He introduces his discussion by observing that:

Many Romantic writers testified to a deeply significant experience in which an instant of consciousness, or else an ordinary object or event, suddenly blazes into revelation; the unsustainable moment seems to arrest what is passing, and is often described as the intersection of eternity with time.

(Abrams 385)

The relevance of this observation to Joyce’s epiphany is clear. The epiphany, as Abrams later argues, is one of the “Varieties of the Modern Moment” (Abrams 418). Even the Ballast Office clock, the most ordinary of things, is the object of an epiphany. As Abrams observes, “The Romantic Moment in which, as Frank Kermode puts it, *chronos* suddenly becomes *kairos*, has had an enduring and multiform literary life” (Abrams 418).<sup>4</sup>

If the epiphany is indeed a variety of the Romantic Moment, the *Portrait*, a romantic novel in so many other ways, belongs in the same tradition of apocalyptic texts that influenced the Romantics. As Abrams’ allusion to *The Sense of an Ending* suggests, the epiphany, like Wordsworth’s spots of time, is a moment of apocalyptic vision. Influenced as the Romantics were by the dissenting tradition with its priority on individual vision, and the growing faith in the imagination’s creative powers, they displaced the traditional apocalypse, making it a personal phenomenon achieved through the imagination. The poet’s visionary moment replaced the heavenly paradise of the apocalypse, creating Abram’s “natural supernaturalism.” In much the same way, the epiphanies serve as apocalyptic moments in which Stephen’s aesthetic vision replaces the religious faith he rejects. There is, however, a crucial difference between Joyce and the Romantics. For Wordsworth and his contemporaries, the visionary moment provided transcendental truth upon which morality rests. But for Joyce, despite Stephen’s use of religious metaphors, the epiphanic moment was primarily aesthetic, his apocalypse is the work of art. Indeed, the epiphanies in the *Portrait* are usually followed by Stephen’s creation of a piece of art.

The first epiphany, in which Stephen is warned that the eagles will pull out his eyes, is itself a poem, Stephen’s first artistic achievement. The vision of hell during the retreat leads Stephen to compose a prayer to the virgin which beseeches her to lead him to salvation in Christ. The apparition of the old woman by the fireside and the epiphany of the tram car are followed by Stephen’s composition of the poem “To E— C—.” He recalls the scene from his childhood when, unable to write a Byronic lyric, he produced the list of names on the back of the second moiety notice. In the narrative present, however, Stephen succeeds, writing the poem of which we see only the title. Even Stephen’s subsequent recollection of this epiphany is associated with artistic creation. Having turned down the offer to join the Jesuits, the Church, Stephen consecrates his artistic freedom by writing the villanelle. Only as an artist can he realize the apocalypse inherent in the epiphanies.

The apex of the apocalyptic movement in *Portrait*, its most powerful moment is, of course, the encounter with the young girl on the strand. Like all the other visionary moments in the *Portrait*, this is preceded by Stephen’s withdrawal from religious and social community. Walking to the Strand Stephen encounters the Christian Brothers on the bridge, a traditional symbol of transition, but he rejects them and passes on. He meets his college friends as they are stripped naked and “drowned,” reborn in the baptism of the sea. Passing beyond his friends, he leaves “the fear...the incertitude...the shame,” and is himself reborn as an artist, the

“cerements shaken from the body of death” (*Portrait* 169). Stephen wanders onto the Strand “alone,” “unheeded, and near the wild heart of life” (*Portrait* 171). When he sees the girl who seems “like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird,” the transforming magic is his own (*Portrait* 171). As in the epiphany on Eccles’ St. in *Stephen Hero* where the scene became the symbol of the Irish paralysis over which Stephen brooded, the girl on the Strand is transformed into Stephen’s image and likeness; she becomes a beautiful seabird as he had become like Daedalus. “soaring and beautiful.”

This passage is not one of the epiphanies collected in Scholes’ *The Workshop of Daedalus*; it originates in *Portrait*. That it is a Romantic Moment, an apocalyptic vision, is, however, unmistakable. Indeed, Wordsworth’s Leech Gatherer on the moor and the girl in *The Prelude* “who bore a pitcher on her head...her garments vexed and tossed” (Wordsworth 11: 305-315), seem to lie behind the image of the girl, her skirt “kilted” around her waist, “gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither” (*Portrait* 171). For both writers the epiphany or spot of time is a visionary moment, but where it has a primarily moral function for Wordsworth, for Joyce it is an augury or type of the artist’s apocalypse.

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### NOTES

- 1 Joyce's epiphany, like Wordsworth's spots of time, transforms "trivial" or "common place" events into powerful moments, and the *Portrait*, like *The Prelude*, is punctuated by epiphanies that mark the growth of the poet's mind. For a full discussion of the relation of Joyce's epiphany and Wordsworth's spots of time, see Abrams *Natural Supernaturalism*.
- 2 Though Joyce took this passage, as Chester Anderson has pointed out, from Flaubert's letter to Mlle. Leroyer de Chantepie, the "indifference" of the artist is much like the "Olympian *serenity*" Benedetto Croce describes at the end of "Intuition and Art." Joyce had read Croce's *Aesthetic*, and Stephen's discussion of the artist's relation to his world and his work resembles Croce's history of intuition and expression.
- 3 The dream-like tone of this scene, like that of the evening on Eccles' St. and the night on the tram, not only marks it as an epiphany, but also suggests another resemblance to Wordsworth's spots of time. According to Michael Friedman's psychoanalytic reading, the "visionary dreaminess" that accompanies the spots of time in *The Prelude* is projected by the narrator to mask repressed feelings toward the father. While it may not perform the same psychoanalytic function, the meditative dreamscape of the epiphany is clearly projected by Stephen in much the same way.
- 4 Pater's fecund moment of experience is much the same as Kermode's moment of *kairos*. But, while the apocalyptic moment of *kairos* interrupts the "waiting time" of *chronos*, Pater's moment of experience is every moment; there is no *chronos*, no uneventful time. Pater collapses the distinction between *kairos* and *chronos*.

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