

Modalities of the Visionary Moment

The Concept of Epiphany

While ready-to-hand as an established designation, “epiphany” has, through its indelible association with Joyce’s work, acquired a sedimentation of meaning that makes it inappropriate as a standard term for the convention examined here. Instead, I have opted for the less encumbered term, “visionary moment,” which has its pedigree in near-identical terms used (but with less fanfare) by Joseph Conrad and Thomas Hardy, respectively, “moment of vision” and “moments of vision.”¹

Although writing in the “epiphanic mode” may have originated with Wordsworth (Langbaum 34; Nichols, *Poetics* xi; Johnson 7, 56), the convention of the literary epiphany is widely understood in the terms in which it was expounded and practiced by Joyce. When, around 1900, he transplanted “epiphany” from its theological context into his secular aesthetic, there were already several other terms that might equally well have served to designate the convention of the sudden and momentary illumination: Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” Conrad’s “moment of vision” or, simply, “the Moment,” as variously invoked by, among others, Shelley, Browning, and Pater (cf. Nichols ix; Abrams 385–90; 418–27; McGowan, “From Pater” 417–25). However, it was “epiphany” that beat out the contenders. Among the evaluative processes that enabled the ascendancy of this term, we should note the canonical reception of Joyce, starting in the early forties, from the standpoint of a formalist appreciation of his technical innovations: namely, his use of stream-of-consciousness, mythically patterned narratives, and the epiphany. In 1941, Harry Levin had identified the importance of the epiphany in Joyce’s writing (28–37, *passim*), after which followed a spate of articles on the subject.² Moreover, it is noteworthy that several of the leading Joyce scholars of the fifties, notably Richard Ellmann and Hugh Kenner, were key players in the codification of modernism—an enterprise that defined literary value largely in terms that reflected Joyce’s aesthetics (cf. Perloff 158). Then, in addition to scholarly endorsements of epiphany as an exemplary instance of modernist writing, we must also note the popularization of the term through general education courses, whose literature anthologies typically include a story from *Dubliners* in tandem with an expository account of the epiphany concept (see e.g., Hunt 223–24; Vesterman 6; Meyer 511). Finally, there is an interest in the selection of epiphany over kindred terms:

in spite of its resolutely secular usage, the term can invest a spiritual insight with the charismatic authority and drama of a religious experience. (Recall that, in its Christian usage, the term refers to the manifestation of Christ to the Magi.) Accordingly, Levin finds in Joyce's use of epiphanies, "attempts to create a literary substitute for the revelations of religion" (29).

"Epiphany," then, is the term most often used to designate what, in this study, I am calling a "visionary moment." However, "epiphany" cannot adequately signify forms of sudden and momentary illumination that diverge from Joyce's restrictive definition of the term. Indeed, it would be more accurate to think of the Joycean epiphany as one type of visionary moment, even though it is loosely applied to represent all types. (I shall sometimes use "epiphany, rather than "visionary moment," if that is the term used by the writer under discussion.)

An initial difficulty with "epiphany" is that the term acquired various meanings within Joyce's evolving oeuvre (cf. Walzl 153) and, in particular, his use of the convention shifted from the serious to the ironic. Between 1900 and 1904, Joyce wrote over seventy prose miniatures (Mahaffey 208 n.5; Scholes 152), which he called "epiphanies," and which were posthumously published under the same name. They were, for the most part, meticulously observed moments of street life, often in the form of snatches of overheard conversation, trivial exchanges, which (presumably) resonated with significance for Joyce.³ But these epiphanies are quite different from the visionary "set-piece-of-prose" epiphanies (Gabler 218), which we find in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and where, moreover, the term "epiphany" is not even used. Vicki Mahaffey observes how in *Stephen Hero* (the earlier version of *A Portrait*), "Joyce uses 'epiphany' both to describe his records of moments that blend triviality with significance *and* to designate the revelatory climax of aesthetic apprehension" (190, emphasis added). Accordingly, Joyce's narrator recounts a brief and inconsequential flirtatious exchange between a young couple, "a fragment of colloquy out of which [Stephen] received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely" (*Stephen Hero* 211). The experience inspires the following project:

This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. (211)

And from this passage the standard, aphoristic definition of the literary epiphany has emerged: "a sudden spiritual manifestation," which, moreover, is generally triggered by a mundane, insignificant stimulus. However, Joyce actually uses examples of commonplace objects—a clock in *Stephen Hero*, a basket in *A Portrait*—to illustrate this experience. Proceeding from the aesthetics of Aquinas,

he proposes that the “*claritas*” (or radiance) of an object lies in the perception of its “*quidditas*” (or specific “whatness”) (*Stephen Hero* 213; *A Portrait* 212–13). Hence he explains the process of epiphany: “[A] spiritual eye . . . seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanised.” And “Its [the object’s] 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” (*Stephen Hero* 211, 213; cf. *A Portrait* 213).

There are several epiphanies in *A Portrait*. However, while in *Stephen Hero* Joyce appears to be in earnest about the spiritual truth value of epiphanies, in *A Portrait*, the language of the epiphanies suggests the excesses of Stephen Dedalus’ romantic sensibility (165–66, 211–12, 218–20). We sense an undertow of irony in the effusive rhetoric of the epiphanies and in the almost ludicrous artistic pretensions they inspire in Stephen: “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (247); “a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve . . . the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being” (163). Thus, Zack Bowen has felt prompted to ask: “Are the epiphanies really revelations of truth or character, or do they merely appear to be truth to the consciousness which experiences them?” (104). His answer is that “all epiphanies, some more subtly than others, are really, even if unstated, the epiphanies of the characters themselves. In every case [e.g. the boy in “Araby,” Gabriel Conroy in “The Dead”], the language of the epiphany is the language of the character involved in its formulation . . . and Joyce remains somewhere behind the scenes paring his fingernails” (106; cf. *A Portrait* 209). Therefore, it comes as no surprise when, in *Ulysses*, Joyce has Stephen mockingly recollect the importance he, as a young aspiring artist, had once attached to his epiphanies:

Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria? Someone was to read them there after a few thousand years, a mahamanvantara. Pico della Mirandola like. Ay, very like a whale. When one reads these strange pages of one long gone one feels that one is at one with one who once . . . (46)

There are several reasons why the limits within which Joyce defined epiphany make it inappropriate as the generic term for visionary moments. First, in general, the literary visionary moment, unlike the Joycean epiphany, is not dependent on the catalytic effect of a commonplace object or mundane gesture or snatch of conversation; typically, the stimulus for the visionary moment is a critical situation or incident that upsets a routine mindset. Second, it was an irreligious, anticlericalist Joyce who coopted the Christian concept of epiphany for conspicuously, not to say provocatively, secular ends, that is, spiritually intense “es-

thetic apprehension" (*Stephen Hero* 212; *A Portrait* 209) or else a protagonist's recognition of his or her tragic flaw (as in the catastrophic insights that conclude "Araby" or "The Dead"). However, to insist on the secular status of the visionary moment is to exclude those moments that take the form of a sudden manifestation of the sacred (as in, say, the fiction of O'Connor or Kerouac, as in Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" or Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"). Third, to the extent that Joyce collected many epiphanies and enjoined the "man of letters" to record them, he assumes that, like Wordsworth's "spots of time," they are "scattered everywhere" (*Prelude* XII.224); they are certainly scattered throughout *A Portrait*. In contrast, the typical visionary moment is a singular and rare occurrence, and often a fictional narrative is built around it and the importance of the knowledge it conveys.

A conspicuous feature of commentary on the Joycean epiphany is the tendency to take the claims Joyce makes for epiphanic experience on his own terms. To be sure, the Joycean epiphany is a highly contested concept, but mostly only insofar as critics contest one another's interpretation of it (e.g., Scholes vs. Walzl; Langbaum vs. Scholes) or question the use Joyce makes of Aquinas' aesthetics (e.g. Noon; Beebe). But whether or not Joyce's theory of epiphany is actually valid is rarely raised as an issue. Take, for example, what, for convenience, we may call the *quidditas* doctrine: a specific object is "epiphanised" when "we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance" (*Stephen Hero* 213). The doctrine is invariably cited (e.g. Nichols, *Poetics* 11–12; Beja 77–78; Walzl 442–43; Hendry Chayes *passim*) but the extraordinary claim on which it is premised—the possibility of achieving an insight into the "whatness" of an object—goes unquestioned. And if the resources of postmodern critique may not have been available to many of those who have discussed Joyce's notion of epiphany, other kinds of critique were certainly ready-to-hand. For example, an obvious objection to the doctrine may be derived from Kant's limiting concept of the *noumenon*: the thing that can never be known in itself because of the intervening "regulative ideas" (causality, substance, etc.) that render the percept intelligible in *their* (aprioristic) terms. A second objection is possible when we reframe the epiphanic experience in psychoanalytic terms. Thus, what the doctrine mistakes as the "*claritas*" or "radiance" of the object *itself* (*Stephen Hero* 213; *A Portrait* 212–13) may be explained as the effect/affect of a libidinal investment, when a charge of psychical energy suddenly attaches itself to the object in question, thereby inflating its significance. In Freud's words, it would be a case of "object-cathexis" (*Introductory* 382). Third, as for an instance of postmodern critique, suffice to say at this point that, against any notion of a type of direct (prelinguistic) "insight" into the "intrinsic nature" of an object, we might reconceive the cognitive process as but the operation of an historically contingent language form, which *constructs a perspective* from which to "read" an object, but can never access its individual being. And here we might cite Richard Rorty, who cautions us "not [to] think of our 'intuitions' as . . . more than the habitual use of

a certain repertoire of terms” (22). Finally, in an effort to establish a context for the *quidditas* doctrine, we must ask: why this concern with the epiphanisation of objects? (Joyce speaks of “the commonest object” [*Stephen Hero* 212–13] and cites the examples of a clock and basket.) In his analysis of the commodity structure, Georg Lukács observes how the reifying logic of “rational objectification conceals above all the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things.” He proceeds to quote Marx: “Private property alienates not only the *individuality* of men, but also of *things*” (92, emphases added). Thus, in an age characterized by the universal commodification of the object-world, market exchange-value divests objects of their individual qualities; henceforth, they are understood quantitatively insofar as they must be exchanged on the basis of an abstract medium of equivalence, that is, money. Under these conditions, one can understand the desire for “the commonest objects” to reveal or epiphanise their individual being, their “*quiddity*.”⁴

Anatomy of the Visionary Moment

A visionary moment forms the climax of Flannery O’Connor’s well-known story, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1953). Recall that a grandmother, on vacation with her family in Georgia, encounters a gang of killers on the edge of some woods. The gang, led by “The Misfit,” murders the family one by one, and the grandmother herself is just minutes away from becoming its last victim. At this point, she has a brief conversation with The Misfit, who confesses his spiritual turmoil as one who has struggled with the moral consequences of the possibility that Christ did not raise the dead. For,

“If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house. . . .”

“Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,” the old lady mumbled. . . .

“If I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now.” His voice seemed about to crack and the grandmother’s head cleared for an instant. She saw the man’s face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, “Why you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children!” She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. . . .

. . . [She] half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky. (*Complete Stories* 132)

The grandmother's visionary moment has a number of features that are common to literary representations of this experience:

1. The visionary moment is invariably distinguished by the suddenness of its occurrence. Hence, the grandmother is not prepared for her spiritual transformation.
2. The visionary moment is, precisely, a momentary experience. Accordingly, we read that "the grandmother's head cleared for an instant."
3. The visionary moment has a precarious existence; it cannot be summoned or prolonged at will. Therefore, O'Connor plots her story so that her protagonist is shot at the very instant of illumination, which is her means of securing the otherwise elusive vision.
4. The visionary moment signifies that a spiritual rebirth either has occurred or will occur. The grandmother has a Christian vision of spiritual kinship with her own murderer—"You're one of my own children!" she declares. It is a vision O'Connor invites us to understand as a sign of redemption.
5. The visionary moment is often validated in the name of a transcendent power or force: Grace in the grandmother's case.⁵

Next, consider Tommy Wilhelm's visionary moment in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956). On his "day of reckoning"—when, among other things, he has been rejected by his father and cheated of all his money by a friend-cum-father-figure—Wilhelm reflects on the redemptive potential of a mystical experience in a subway a few days earlier. Preceded by the observation that "the real soul says plain and understandable things to everyone" (84), the following experience is recounted:

And in the dark tunnel, in the haste, heat, and darkness which disfigure and make freaks and fragments of nose and eyes and teeth, all of a sudden, unsought, a general love for all these imperfect and lurid-looking people burst out in Wilhelm's breast. He loved them. One and all, he passionately loved them. They were his brothers and his sisters. . . . [H]e was united with them by this blaze of love. . . .

So what did it matter how many languages there were . . . ? Or matter that a few minutes later he didn't feel anything like a brother toward the man who sold him the tickets?

. . . [P]eople were bound to have such involuntary feelings. It was only another one of those subway things. Like having a hard-on at random. But today, his day of reckoning, he consulted his memory again and thought, I must go back to that. That's the right clue and may do me the most good. Something very big. Truth, like. (84–85)

Bellow's account of a visionary moment closely corresponds with O'Connor's. Hence, we can note its sudden occurrence, its transient and precarious existence. Hence, it promises spiritual rebirth. Wilhelm's recognition of a profound kinship with others prefigures and prepares the way for the novel's final scene where his tears for a dead man he never knew carry him, in the closing words of the book, "toward the consummation of his heart's ultimate need" (118). And finally, as in O'Connor, a transcendent force is invoked to validate the experience. Thus, Wilhelm grasps the significance of his experience as "Something very big. Truth, like," something, that is, spoken by "the real soul [which] says plain and understandable things to everyone."

Our third visionary moment belongs to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Sal Paradise, the narrator/protagonist, reports the following experience on a crowded street in San Francisco:

And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows . . . , and myself hurrying to a plank where all the angels dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness, the potent and inconceivable radiances shining in bright Mind Essence, innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven. I could hear an indescribable seething roar which wasn't in my ear but everywhere and had nothing to do with sounds. I realized that I had died and been reborn numberless times but just didn't remember especially because the transitions from life to death and back to life are so ghostly easy, a magical action for naught . . . I realized it was only because of the stability of the intrinsic Mind that these ripples of birth and death took place. . . . (173)

Once more, we can observe features common to the literary visionary moment: its transient nature, the idea of rebirth, and its validation in the name of a transcendent power, that is, "Mind Essence." Moreover, Paradise's account incorporates other properties typical of visionary experience, including feelings of ecstasy and the sense of being outside of chronological time. The passage quoted is an instance of Beat soul exploration inspired by Zen mysticism and the Gnostic-Romantic writings of William Blake and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The visionary moment is not to be confused with what we might call the "auratic moment." The visionary moment is experienced as a moment of actual, impending, or potential enlightenment, that is to say, a moment whose knowledge can or could be articulated. The auratic moment is experienced as a rich emanation of feeling, a sudden diffusion of affect. The following excerpt from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* may be read as an example of an auratic moment:

There were fireflies riding on the dark air and a dog baying on some low and far-away ledge of the cliff. The table seemed to have risen a little toward the

sky like a mechanical dancing platform, giving the people around it a sense of being alone with each other in the dark universe, nourished by its only food, warmed by its only lights. And, as if a curious hushed laugh from Mrs. McKisco were a signal that such a detachment from the world had been attained, the two Divers began suddenly to warm and glow and expand. . . . Just for a moment they seemed to speak to every one at the table, singly and together, assuring them of their friendliness, their affection. And for a moment the faces turned up toward them were like the faces of poor children at a Christmas tree. Then abruptly the table broke up—the moment when the guests had been daringly lifted above conviviality into the rarer atmosphere of sentiment, was over before it could be irreverently breathed, before they had half realized it was there.

But the diffused magic of the hot sweet South had withdrawn into them—the soft-pawed night and the ghostly wash of the Mediterranean far below—the magic left these things and melted into the two Divers and became part of them. (33–34)⁶

Auratic moments may be commonplace, as in the aestheticized perception typical of characters in high-modernist narratives, for example, Faulkner's Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* or Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant in *Look Homeward, Angel*. This mode of perception is also evident in Henry James's fiction: think of Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors* or Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. Strether's way of seeing can, for example, transform a stretch of French countryside into a painting—"a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before, at a Boston dealer's" (341); it can transform people, like the sculptor Gloriani, into objets d'art (126). Hence, in a discussion of the aesthetic vision of Jamesian heroes, who have the capacity to convert perceptions of the ordinary into art, Richard Poirier observes:

Having, by the very nature of the imaginations that engendered them, only a tangential relation to what is really going on, these moments needn't be *made* into anything else, needn't be organic . . . with anything but the creative vision itself. They are, as it were, pure art in being freed from the pressure of any environment but that of the mind from which they issue. (127–28)

And these remarks should remind us of the striking parallel between James's pursuit of enhanced aesthetic perception and Walter Pater's notion of *aesthesis*, as expounded in his famous "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*.⁷ Pater privileged the "moment" purely for its own sake—that is, for its exquisiteness, vitality, and intensity—and repudiated any *use* for art, in particular, placing it in the service of truth or knowledge. Art is to be valued because it "comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply

for those moments' sake" (qtd. in McGowan, "From Pater" 420). Such moments are conceived as isolated, atomistic, divorced from social history. In short, the auratic moment lacks significant propositional content; it is a source of precious feeling rather than articulable knowledge.

We also need to distinguish the literary visionary moment from conventional forms of mystical experience. Several distinctions will be noted later in this chapter, but there are three that merit attention here. If we may limit the discussion of mysticism to the terms by which it is understood within traditional Christian gnosis, we should begin by noting the three stages in the ascension to spiritual perfection: (a) the purification of the intellect (*via purgativa*); (b) exhaustive knowledge of the noetical world as achieved through contemplation (*via contemplativa* or *illuminativa*); (c) union with God by virtue of his saving grace (*via unitiva*) (see Keller 75, 81). Proceeding from this schema, we should note that, unlike the literary visionary moment in which illumination is effortlessly achieved, the mystic typically achieves illumination only by way of arduous contemplation. Moreover, conventional mystical experience assumes the form of the revelation of something sacred: it is, to borrow Mircea Eliade's term, either "hierophanic" (a manifestation of the sacred in an ordinary object) or theophanic. In either case, the revelation is understood to be the work of divine agency. However, while some visionary moments may be hierophanic or theophanic—as in the fiction of O'Connor or the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins⁸—most moments are not premised on the external force of divine revelation; their spirituality is of a secular type and the source of their visionary power lies within the psyche. And from these distinctions it also follows that union with God, which is the ultimate stage of the mystical ascension, is rarely the outcome, or even the orientation, of the typical visionary moment. Finally, in the visions of the religious mystics, for example, the "shewings" or apparitions experienced by Julian of Norwich or Margery Kempe, nothing is physically sensed; the source of the vision is purely internal and sometimes physically induced by bodily abuse (starvation or flagellation) or illness. On the other hand, the literary moment may be triggered by an external stimulus; for example, an overheard comment, as in Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill," or a smell, as in Katherine Anne Porter's "The Grave."

Last, we need to distinguish between two types of visionary moment, what I shall call "redemptive" and "catastrophic" moments. To be sure, both types have properties in common: they occur suddenly and unannounced; they are of instantaneous duration; they are premised on the mediation of an occult faculty ("insight," "intuition"); they claim the communication of pure and transcendent knowledge. However, while the redemptive visionary moment signifies a transfiguration or regeneration of the subject (although often the change is intimated only as impending rather than accomplished within the time frame of the narrative), the catastrophic moment is marked by a sense of spiritual desolation. The latter may be seen as a descendant of the Aristotelian recognition (*anagnorisis*), that is, the protagonist's discovery of a flaw in his or her character that has or will

have a tragic or destructive outcome. Typically, the epiphanies in Joyce's *Dubliners* (but not in *A Portrait*) are catastrophic visionary moments. Take, for example, Gabriel Conroy, in "The Dead," who suddenly "saw himself as a ludicrous figure . . . idealizing his own clownish lusts," a perception that leaves him with a sense of a moribund soul, a sense of his "own identity . . . fading out into a grey impalpable world" (179, 182). Or think of John Marcher's tragic recognition, in Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle": "he had been the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened" ("The Beast" 282). Neither Conroy nor Marcher will recover from the devastating self-insight.⁹ Unless otherwise stated, all visionary moments discussed in this study are of the redemptive type, which is by far the more common of the two.

The Extratextualized Visionary Moment

As a literary convention, the visionary moment derives much of its credibility from the common belief that such moments are experienced in real life. Indeed, this belief is surely a factor in the survival of a convention which, from a postmodern perspective, looks so archaic. Thus, as a preliminary step in the critique of the use and implications of the moment as a literary convention, we must probe the assumption on which that convention partly rests: Are visionary moments experienceable outside of literature?

It should be said at once that the sudden "insights" that have played such a crucial role in scientific discovery cannot be identified as visionary; in this context, insight entails neither claims to transcendent and redemptive knowledge nor to the operation of some occult or supernatural agency in the acquisition of that knowledge.¹⁰ Neither should we confuse the sudden self-insight—"So this is who I really am!", the "click! of recognition" (Brereton 108)—with the absolute or transcendent self-knowledge typical of literary visionary moments. While a literary character may be privileged with a sudden insight that locates his/her existence within an overarching cosmic scheme (like Ruby Turpin in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" [*Complete Stories* 508] or Sal Paradise in *On the Road* [173]), there are good reasons—postmodern and otherwise—to contest the notion that real-life insight could ever yield the equivalent in absolute self-knowledge. The objections to the notion of a knowledge that fully defines "the self" (i.e., that which is said to lie beyond the local and contingent manifestations of character) require only nominal mention here. Thus, we must reckon with the volatile logic of "différance," in consequence of which there is said to be no stable vocabulary in which self-knowledge can be grasped. We must also reckon with the postmodern dissolution of the self as a biologically given and unitary entity and its redefinition as an aggregate of historically constituted and contradictory subject positions. From this standpoint, self-knowledge could only ever amount to the privileging of one among many subjectivities as *the* Self. Furthermore, we must reckon with the

limits and distortions of self-knowledge that may stem from ideological misrecognition or from unconscious resistance.

One might appeal to experiences reported by mystics as evidence for the credibility of real-life visionary moments. However, we must distinguish between the mystic's suddenly altered state of consciousness (which confers an unfamiliar angle of vision and which resonates with fresh, expansive, and profound meaning) and the mystic's interpretation of that consciousness as visionary by virtue of claims about what type of meaning is experienced and the medium of its delivery. To clarify this distinction, consider an autobiographical account of a visionary moment by Wayne Teasdale, an ecospiritualist:

I remember sitting on a hill somewhere in Sri Lanka watching the wind stirring the trees, and suddenly I realized something, an intuition triggered by the movement of the trees as they received the breezes of the wind. It was as if the wind, like hands, was plucking a harp, the trees. It was then that I understood the relationship of the cosmos to God, that is, the cosmos as His mediated presence. This insight is an example of the Cosmic or Primordial Revelation, and so is an ontological perception of a nature-mysticism, an instance, if you will, of theophanic consciousness. (221, emphases added)

That Teasdale experienced such a phase of consciousness is not in doubt. However, within the radically antimetaphysical terms of postmodern thought, it cannot be admitted that he has been the beneficiary of "the Cosmic or Primordial Revelation" or "theophanic consciousness," or that the experience testifies to the workings of "intuition" or "insight." The deep spirituality of his experience may be freely acknowledged as long as we avoid any sense of spirituality that entails claims to transcendent knowledge, omniscience, redeemability, and supernatural agency.

An examination of Teasdale's visionary moment can reveal the process whereby a mental event acquires visionary status. This is to say that the moment is not intrinsically visionary but, rather, is constituted as such (and not, for example, as aberrant or nonsensical). First, insofar as the moment occurs unannounced ("suddenly I realized"), it is as if it was *received*, its knowledge communicated from a source beyond the subject. Under these conditions, the "revealed" knowledge acquires a kind of oracular or sacred authority. As tradition has it, knowledge delivered in this instantaneous fashion must be highly significant rather than trivial.

Second, the natural phenomenon observed by Teasdale is interpreted as the effect of God's "mediated presence." The phenomenon—"it was as if the wind, like hands, was plucking a harp, the trees"—is read as a fragment from some universal narrative of "the relationship of the cosmos to God." However, the process of interpretation is occluded. The moment seems to speak for itself, to announce its own significance to a passive (noninterpreting) subject. But the moment is always-already interpreted because it is "read" by an institutionally and

ideologically positioned subject. Thus, one would expect an ecospiritualist like Teasdale to encounter his experience in visionary terms. On the other hand, a timber merchant, “sitting on a hill . . . in Sri Lanka watching the wind stirring the trees” is more likely to have “suddenly realized” the value of Sri Lankan lumber.

Third, we are most often acquainted with real-life visionary moments in narrated form. That is to say, we know them less through direct personal experience than through their narration by “visionary” subjects. And just as studies of conversion narratives are often premised on the distinction between the conversion experience and its narration (see e.g., Brereton 14–27; Stromberg 1–16), so we must also reckon with the distortions and secondary elaborations that occur when an experience must (a) submit to the dynamics of the genre in which it is reported and (b) conform to the ideology of the institution or formation within which the “visionary” subject writes. Thus, a formally narrated visionary moment will acquire a high level of coherence and interestedness. Accordingly, Teasdale recounts the story of a pure theophany, an experience which, as told, was remarkably and altogether free of irrelevant and contradictory, ambiguous and ambivalent, thoughts. And his narration promotes the ecospiritualist creed of God’s immanence in nature. Indeed, it is a construction of nature as benign, where the wind gently stirs the trees “like hands . . . plucking a harp.” That the wind can also ravage trees, that all the planet’s ecosystems could be destroyed by a single bolide impact, are facts banished from the narrative by Teasdale’s ecospiritualist subjectivity.

The above points describe some of the factors involved in the process whereby a mental event is (without conscious intention) transformed into a visionary moment. A look at another autobiographical account of a visionary moment can enlarge the postmodern perspective on this process. In an interview, given to the *Paris Review* in 1965, Allen Ginsberg recalled a spiritual experience during his student days (he gives the date as 1948), when he lived in a sublet apartment in East Harlem:

I came [i.e., ejaculated] . . . with a Blake book on my lap . . . and *suddenly I realized* that the poem was talking about me. “Ah, Sun-flower! [sic] weary of time, / Who countest the steps of the sun; / Seeking after that sweet golden clime, / Where the traveller’s journey is done” . . . [T]he sweet golden clime, *I suddenly realized* that this existence was it! And, that I was born in order to experience up to this very moment that I was having this experience, to realize what this was all about—in other words that this was the moment I was born for. This initiation. Or this vision or this consciousness, of being alive unto myself, alive myself unto the Creator. As the son of the Creator—who loved me. . . .

. . . [A]nd a sense of cosmic consciousness, vibrations, understanding, awe, and wonder and surprise. And it was *a sudden awakening* into a totally deeper real universe than I’d been existing in. (302–304, emphases added.)

A radical alteration of consciousness was induced, it seems, by a reading of a poem by William Blake and encountered as a visionary moment. In particular, we should note Ginsberg's dependence on the words *suddenly* and *sudden*, which in the space of barely two pages he uses ten times. This usage works to suggest that his experience was unmediated by the process and constitutive role of interpretation and that, instead, the moment arrived replete with its *own* visionary meaning. It is a condition, moreover, that seems to guarantee the truth of that meaning since it leaves no space for fallible human judgment.

Ginsberg illustrates the account of his experience with so many references to Blake, so many allusions to and quotations from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and the prophetic books, that he renders the experience intelligible first and foremost as a Blakean vision. Indeed, elsewhere in the interview, he speaks of his "Blake visions" (291, 311, 317). We must also consider the possibility that, in the telling (of 1965), the original experience (of 1948) has been inflated by a counter-cultural rhetoric, which privileges Blakean visionary consciousness for its anti-hegemonic value.¹¹ As Theodore Roszak writes in *The Making of a Counter Culture*, "[Ginsberg's] protest does not run back to Marx; it reaches out, instead, to the ecstatic radicalism of Blake" (126). What Ginsberg gives us is a sixties recounting of a forties experience.

Consider a sample of the terms with which Ginsberg recollects the above and other visionary moments: "The total consciousness . . . of the complete universe" (305); "the experience was . . . blissful" (306); "infinite self" (309); "total being" (310); "cosmical awareness" (311). This is the language with which mystics commonly describe the feelings of omniscience and omnipotence and the feelings of ecstasy that frequently accompany mystical experience.¹² And these are feelings that are so readily understood in psychodynamic terms as having their source in a sudden incursion of psychical energy, which floods and overstimulates the mental apparatus and cathects itself on the visionary thought-process. In this way, we may speculate that the entire experience is charged with libidinal affect, a condition that could explain both Ginsberg's massively inflated self-image and the immediately compelling, almost overwhelming force of the idea-complex.¹³

It is not surprising, then, that the mystical subject should presume to have visionary powers and feel himself/herself to be in the presence of Truth. In the experiences reported by Ginsberg and Teasdale we can identify the production of an imaginary self, one that is gratifyingly centered in relation to the cosmos—whence Ginsberg's "this was the moment I was born for," and Teasdale's confident assumption of "theophanic consciousness" in a world he sees as graced by "His mediated presence."

We may conclude, then, that spiritual experience is one thing, the truth claims made on its behalf quite another; in particular the claim that such experience amounts to a visionary moment, that it communicates transcendent or redemptive knowledge or confers omniscience or is enabled by some occult faculty such as insight. To be sure, many visionary moments (autobiographical or literary)

are not as fully crystallized or presumptuous of cosmic awareness as those reported by Teasdale and Ginsberg. However, even where the moment only takes the tenuous form of an intimation or fragment, it is, typically, an intimation or fragment of “higher” knowledge; for, whatever the degree of its narrative elaboration, the visionary moment is generally oriented toward the transcendent and the redemptive.

All this is to say that it is a category-mistake to think of a “real-life visionary moment” as a type of spiritual experience; rather, it is a way of understanding one. If the moment is visionary, it is so only after the fact and in particular, by force of ideological and narrative construction. After all, while one can actually experience awe, wonder, or some other spiritual state, one cannot actually experience transcendent knowledge or the omniscient viewpoint; one can only claim to. The alternative is to believe that an individual, even Allen Ginsberg, can step beyond the historically available configurations of knowledge and thus attain a cosmic knowledge of existence or of one’s place in the Creation. Put another way, to believe in the possibility of authentic visionary moments is to believe, contrary to the conventionalist terms of postmodern epistemology, that there is a presocial order of knowledge, which has always existed in some dimensionless realm. And it is to believe that the subject can acquire this knowledge by virtue of some occult mode of cognition, a channel of understanding—“insight” or “intuition”—that has instantaneous and direct access to the Truth.

Thus, while literary visionary moments are generally offered to the reader as real occurrences (unless the author is mocking the convention, in which case we are to understand that the “visionary” character is deluded), “real-life visionary moments” appear, in postmodern terms, as narrative and ideological elaborations of a subjective experience. And, ironically, while Conrad and other authors may in part justify their literary use of visionary moments by appealing to our belief in the real-life visionary moment, we may well speculate that it is our belief in the real-life moment that is largely derived from the widespread practice of using visionary moments in fiction. For, as I shall argue later, we must reckon with the possibility that literature itself supplies the forms that enable us to encode certain subjective experiences as visionary.¹⁴

The Visionary Moment as a Literary Convention

Visionary moments are represented in fiction as if they could have an extratextual basis, as if we should believe in the real-life possibility of a privileged order of knowledge (“insight,” “intuition,” “illumination”). Yet these representations are premised on assumptions about the nature of truth, cognition, and the subject that appear highly questionable in the light of postmodern theory. An initial postmodern response must be an insistence on the modality of the visionary moment as first and foremost a literary convention.

If we think of the visionary moment as a convention that readers have naturalized as common sense, one means of reaffirming its conventionality is to highlight how literary representations of the visionary moment change in response to the emergence of new literary norms. For example, in two major currents of American fiction in the post-1945 era, broadly speaking, we can identify a break with high-modernist norms: notably, in the renewed mimetic impulse of the “late” realists (e.g., Carver, Bellow, and Updike) and in the radically self-reflexive, anti-totalizing strategies of the postmodernists (e.g., Pynchon, Abish, and Barthelme). Here we shall see how, in the light of Carver’s late realism and Pynchon’s postmodernism, the high-modernist representation of the visionary moment no longer appears natural.

The visionary moment is the showpiece of the literary aesthetics of anglophone high modernism. Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, and others crafted a prose whose emotional and lyric intensity was commensurate with the impact of visionary experience on their characters. In contrast, visionary moments in American fiction of the post-1945 period tend to be formulated in a prose almost devoid of affect. Consider the difference between a visionary moment authored by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and one by Raymond Carver in “Cathedral” (1983). The mystical cast of Woolf’s language frames Clarissa Dalloway’s intuition of her (repressed) lesbian identity as an encounter with an elusive spiritual truth: a fleeting intimation of the healing, transfigurative power of some ultimate (“farthest verge”) Self:

[S]he did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores. Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. (36)

In Carver’s story, the narrator—a self-confessed atheist (372)—has failed to describe a cathedral to his blind houseguest, Robert, though he mentions that men built cathedrals to be “close to God” (372). Robert suggests they draw a cathedral together. He instructs the narrator to close his eyes and, with his hand resting on the narrator’s drawing hand, silently communicates the *meaning* of a cathedral, bringing his host close to God. The narrator declares, “It was like nothing in my life up to now” (374) and the story ends with these lines:

“Well?” [Robert] said. “Are you looking?”

My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn’t feel like I was inside anything.

“It’s really something,” I said. (375)

“It’s really something”—no wonder they call Carver a “minimalist.”¹⁵

The drama of Woolf’s visionary moment (and, indeed, the moments of other high modernists [cf. Joyce, *Portrait* 211; Faulkner *Sound* 81–82]) derives partly from its narrative viewpoint—that is, the impression of experiential immediacy as conveyed by the use of interior monologue—and partly from its Symbolist use of rhythm and richly resonant (e.g., sexually charged) language. By comparison, the language of Carver’s visionary moment does not register the momentousness of the experience described. Where Woolf suggests the texture of the experience itself, Carver conveys only the notion of such an experience (an approach all the more evident in that he depends on two clichés of mystical writing for this purpose: the blindness/insight motif and the de-differentiation of inside/outside to suggest transcendence). And, following Carver, much the same could be said of the representation of visionary moments by the other post-1945 authors discussed in this study, including Don DeLillo, Saul Bellow, Flannery O’Connor, and Alice Walker. Their moments are rendered in largely denotative terms, with a minimal use of literary artifice.

One factor behind this attenuated representation of visionary moments is the recoil of many postwar writers from what (in a rather one-sided reading) they perceive as high modernism’s near solipsistic inwardness and excessive mediation of literary technique: tendencies seen as erecting a barrier between the writer and the world. Hence, if I may generalize still further, the (re-) emergence of a major current of fiction that strives for a less private, more objectively focused viewpoint. Thus, in contradistinction to the Symbolist character of much high-modernist prose (the predilection for allusive and “evocative” writing), the writers I discuss (excepting Kerouac) have purposefully adopted a nonimpressionistic language. Carver has stated: “I’m drawn to traditional (some would call it old-fashioned) methods of storytelling: . . . I believe in the efficacy of the concrete word, be it noun or verb, as opposed to the abstract or arbitrary or slippery word.” He maintains: “For the details to be concrete and convey meaning, the language must be accurate and precisely given. The words may be so precise they may even sound flat, but they can still carry . . .” (qtd. in Lehman 50). Similarly, DeLillo has spoken of his search for a prose of “sun-cut precision,” a prose defined by its “clarity and accuracy” (“Outsider” 60). In short, to write under the sway of such criteria is to eschew the kind of allusive, mystically resonant language that animates the high-modernist visionary moment.

The post-1945 type of visionary moment must also be seen as emerging from a historical conjuncture in which the artist’s sense of cultural placement is different from that of his or her high-modernist predecessor. The conditions for this change may be hastily summarized. The massive and successful expansion of central government power, necessary for mobilizing an entire nation and its resources for war, paved the way for the hypertrophied bureaucracy of the postwar

period. This is the period of the “administered society,” of (following Marcuse and Lefebvre) the technical-bureaucratic organization of production and consumption, which leads to the perception of society as a highly regulated “system.” This is, moreover, a paranoid type of perception, qualitatively different from the modernists’ sense of the oppressive rule and ambience of bourgeois values. It is a perception which, as Tony Tanner has persuasively argued, vitally informs the North American fiction of the postwar era. Tanner’s reading is guided by the premise of “the American writer’s dread of all conditioning forces to the point of paranoia” (16). Put in slightly different terms, the post-1945 writer is haunted by a profound sense of acculturation: the sense that if almost all social practices, including artistic production, are culturally conditioned or institutionalized, then that “semi-autonomous” space, which the modernists could still assume for their art, has been significantly eroded. Under these circumstances, the writer is less likely to assume the confident posture of one speaking from the guaranteed vantage point of a transcendent poetic consciousness; less likely to think of art as a suprasocial activity. Rather, he or she adopts the “worldly” voice of one on the same plane as the reader. Thus, on the one hand, postwar writers follow the high modernists in assigning a crucial place to the transcendent “moment, in which things come together” (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 168). On the other hand, the tempered language in which such moments are recounted may be read as symptomatic of the writer’s feeling that he or she is speaking from an unprivileged, culturally grounded position.

The survival of the visionary moment as a literary practice, its persistence even in the postmodern period, prompts the question: What are the immediately practical advantages of adopting this convention? First, the visionary moment can serve as a *structural device*, that is, a way of organizing a narrative around an incisively defined endpoint. Such a climax can conclusively resolve the complications of the preceding action and supply the narrative with a dramatically decisive destination. Many of O’Connor’s stories offer an exemplary instance of this device. Second, the visionary moment can serve as an *antiproairetic device*. By this I mean that the moment often substitutes for action, for a narrative plotted around events. In this respect, the use of visionary moments, from around 1890 onward, reflects that tendency in stories and novels, and in particular high-modernist fiction, to achieve the effect of a lyric poem. Thus, Robert Langbaum has remarked on the “lyrical structure” and “lyrical stasis” of the “epiphanic poem or story,” in which very little happens; which is “devoted to intensifying an object into radiance rather than to telling a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.” He concludes that “the modern short story is plotless and apparently pointless in order that it may be epiphanic” (42–43). Third, the visionary moment can serve as a *narrational device*, that is, a way of accelerating or facilitating the story of a character’s development. Psychological change is generally a slow, protracted, and uneven process, and if represented as such in fiction would result in cumbersome, unshapely narratives. The visionary moment is one solution to this prob-

lem; the process of change is compressed into precisely a moment, hence it invariably occurs “suddenly.” Moreover, the suddenness of the change has the effect of dramatizing the character’s break with a routine or restricted mindset. Fourth, the visionary moment can serve as an *aesthetic device*; that is, it offers creative latitude in recounting the cognitive processes of a transfigured consciousness; it offers opportunities for releasing language from semantic or syntactic norms. Recall, for instance, Kerouac’s “innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven.” The Beats and high modernists have eminently exploited the aesthetic potential of the visionary moment (while late realists, like Carver and Bellow, have not). Finally, the visionary moment can serve as a *rhetorical device* for forcefully promoting a code of ethics or system of ideas alternative to those that prevail. Thanks to this device, authors need not sermonize or propagandize on behalf of their beliefs. Rather, through the swift, economical gesture of the visionary moment—coming as it often does at the climax of the narrative—an author can all the more effectively dramatize the redemptive or admonitory value of his or her philosophy.

It seems evident, then, that as a convention, the visionary moment finds a measure of legitimacy simply on the grounds of its usefulness, not to say indispensability, as a multipurpose literary device. And it is precisely fiction’s dependence on literary devices that is exposed and questioned by the self-reflexiveness that characterizes postmodernist fiction. No longer is the author seen either as the high-modernists’ godlike artificer or as the naturalists’ documenting observer. Rather, he or she is seen as a crafty manipulator of techniques, a legerdemainist who, far from reflecting reality, conjures up reality-effects. By parodying or flagrantly subverting the processes of narrating, plotting, troping, naming, and *enlightenment*, postmodern self-reflexive writers, like John Barth, Grace Paley, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, draw attention to fiction as a *set of conventions* and thereby undermine its pretensions to mimesis (specifically, the pretensions of those writing in the naturalist or classical realist traditions). This, then, is a tendency in relation to which the visionary moment is susceptible to exposure as essentially a literary convention—contrary to its implicit claim to represent a credible, real-life experience.

Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) is a postmodern self-reflexive text that may be read as a parody of the practice of organizing narratives around visionary moments: it ironically exposes the visionary moment as a literary convention. Oedipa Maas, the novel’s protagonist, is continually tantalized by “some promise of hierophany” (31), by the sense that “a revelation . . . trembled just past the threshold of her understanding . . . [as if she were] at the centre of an odd, religious instant” (24). Throughout the story, she encounters signs that seem to promise revelation but, perversely, the more she probes their significance, the more their possible meanings multiply. Pynchon has contrived a situation that thwarts the possibility of a final illumination. His plotting reverses the conventional narrative process, in which the clues to a mystery are pursued until the

climactic moment of its resolution. And, of course, the reader is also teased as Pynchon mocks our expectation of a revelation that will close the narrative. Like Oedipa, we are “waiting, as if to be illuminated” (152).

Edward Mendelson has discussed how *Lot 49* exploits the metaphor of Pentecost. He reminds us that Pentecost was the day when the Apostles became “filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues” (Acts 2:4), and that “Pentecost” derives from the Greek for “fiftieth.” Accordingly, of the novel’s closing scene, he observes, “The crying—the auctioneer’s calling—of the forty-ninth lot is the moment *before* a Pentecostal revelation, the end of the period in which the miracle is in a state of potential, not yet manifest” (207–208, emphasis added). The novel ends just as that final cry that may prove all-enlightening—“the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night” (*Lot 49* 118)—is about to be uttered. But, within the terms of the novel’s postmodern epistemology, the cry *cannot* be uttered because an all-enlightening “Word” is judged to be inconceivable.¹⁶

To sum up, at the self-reflexive level, *Lot 49* may be read as an extended parody of how we see reality through perspectives inherited from fiction: Oedipa’s quest is largely directed by her literary sense of plot, metaphor, and final enlightenment.