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IS THERE A NEW TREND IN LITERARY AND CULTURE CRITICISM?

Epiphanic experience has been a typical reward for human attempts to make sense of natural and supernatural phenomena that are perceived, analyzed, and responded to by the mind. The literary epiphany is the narrative reconstruction, either individual or collective, of transcendent moments caused by such intense experience. The reader's response to an epiphanic moment, which is the locus of the literary epiphany, is powerful and the emotion conveyed goes beyond a sum of its quotidian agents. Drawing on recent analyses of epiphany in postmodern British and American fiction and poetry, this essay tries to justify the poetics of epiphany as a useful multidisciplinary approach to contemporary culture.

In a 1997 essay, 'Postmodern Thoughts on the Visionary Moment', Paul Maltby analyzes the use of the visionary moment in postwar American fiction. His definition of the moment shares some features with the epiphanic moment explored in works written in the tradition exemplified by Wordsworth and Joyce. It occurs suddenly, its duration is brief, it cannot be summoned or prolonged at will (is involuntary), and it signifies that a spiritual rebirth either has occurred or will occur (120).

Maltby argues that in American fiction from William Faulkner to Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, 'the visionary moment is susceptible to exposure as a literary convention—contrary to its claim to represent a credible, real-life experience' (122). This moment is a typical focus of narrative structure in realist fiction. Maltby acknowledges the utility of the epiphanic moment which 'can serve as a *structural device*, [. . .], a way of organizing a narrative around an incisively defined endpoint', as 'a *narrational device*, [. . .], a way of accelerating or facilitating the story of a character's development, [. . .], an *aesthetic device*, [. . .], and a *rhetorical device*' (123–4). By contrast, authors of postmodern fiction, when consciously reacting to the tradition of epiphany in writing, prefer to address epiphany through irony and parody. For example, 'the practice of organizing narratives around visionary moments' is ridiculed in fictions like Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Such works question the notion of epiphany as a structuring agent of narrative and carrier of stable and absolute meaning.¹

In poetry, the epiphanic mode of writing is still considered usable. Jay Losey shows that the poetry of Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney presents examples of a 'postmodern version of Frye's "demonic" epiphany' ("Demonic" Epiphanies' 376). The current de-centralization of meaning has come to pose a serious threat to the viability of the Romantic landscape poet, because it promises to 'split consciousness and place', replacing these with non-mimetic language experimentation practiced, for example, by the language poets writing in the avant-garde tradition. Losey argues that the epiphanic mode is still sustainable today. He believes that 'Larkin creates an ironic presence that excludes solidarity' whereas Heaney 'creates [Wordsworthian] solidarity [with place] while excluding irony' (382). For these poets, 'a postmodern notion of epiphany exists,' even though it 'cuts against the grain of postmodernism' (376).

Although postmodernism has weakened the position of grand narratives such as poetry written in the epiphanic mode, the contemporary poet still finds it necessary to anchor his or her imagination in the thematic options provided by ironic versions of the inner and outer landscape. Such grounding generates an authority of structure, voice, and meaning for any poetic manifestations of this self-other dynamism. The epiphanic mode remains a powerful presence as a strategy of poetic composition—even though its philosophy and aesthetics emphasize the shopworn ideal of beauty, truth, and perfection of individual visionary experience. Such representation of epiphany framed in space and time is still necessary for most poets. Maltby claims, however, that it amounts to an 'illusion [. . .] of universal signifieds' (126). This calls attention to the problem of epiphany overused or employed by inept poets. The result in either case is poetry of a failed voice of the author who uses 'just about every cliché associated with mystical experience' (126). Such writing would not meet the poem's rhetorical commitment to credibility, therefore, it need not be considered a problem for the critic of contemporary poetry in the epiphanic mode.

In 'A Shadowy Exultation', a 1999 essay on epiphany in the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, Edward Hirsch gives two more pitfalls of the epiphanic mode:

Since the epiphany is by definition triggered by an ordinary experience, one danger is that the writer will communicate the ordinariness and not the epiphany, thus getting stuck in concrete particulars, in an untransformed matter-of-factness. The other risk is that the ordinary experience will trigger what seems an inordinate or melodramatic response, what Keats calls 'the egotistical manufacture of metaphysical importance upon trivial themes'.²

The first problem highlights the rhetorical failure of the writer to persuade the reader that, based on the decoding of the ordinariness of the original text, epiphany does take place at all and is to be interpreted accordingly. The second warning brings up what Stanley Plumly calls the sentimental form in poetry, a mode of writing in which the speaker's emotion overflows the poem. The projection of fake emotion (either caused by the description of ill-chosen

trivia or suffering from inappropriate tone) renders the rhetoric of the poem insincere.

The position of epiphany criticism at present remains precarious—language has lost the modernist authority to impose an authoritative meaning upon works of literature in particular, and upon human experience in general. All the writer can do is to parody the epiphanic effect of a text by exploring the inherent play of linguistic possibilities. Miriam Marty Clark claims that the modernist tendency to structure short fictions around epiphanic moments has given way, in the work of American postmodern short story writers like Raymond Carver, to narrative indeterminacy, and to language-based subjectivity. Sarah Hardy also points out that ‘epiphany, in its assumed function as the primary organizing structure of a short story, is here being displaced in favor of narratives that redefine or refuse a stable center’ (325). Such destabilization of postmodern texts is typical of recent variations of the epiphanic mode and its flexible interpretation, which, as Günter Leypoldt documents in ‘Raymond Carver’s “Epiphanic Moments”’, may enable the author of postmodern narrative to ‘subvert or reinscribe the tradition of the epiphanic moment in various ways and whenever it suits his particular narrative purposes’.³

In much of contemporary poetry, the epiphanic moment functions as a metaphysics of embrace—a personal story becomes other stories, a process which results in an inclusive reading of epiphanic poems as archetypal stories of personal relevance to anybody. As I have shown above, Maltby points out the difficulty of analysing the epiphanic mode of writing with postmodern critical tools: ‘the ‘moment’ is premised on assumptions about truth, cognition, and the self which, in the light of postmodern accounts of language, discourse, and subjectivity, are open to charges of logocentrism and humanism’ (124). Regardless of one’s position in this matter, the postmodern objections to the authority of the epiphanic mode will continue to shape the writing in this mode.

In spite of the postmodernist accusation of untenable logocentrism and an exhausted literary tradition, there is no dearth of critical support for the epiphanic mode. In a book on the relationship of cognitive linguistics and literary criticism, *Death is the mother of beauty: Mind, Metaphor, Criticism*, Mark Turner criticizes the isolationism of literary criticism, arguing for a closer cooperation of the literary critic with the cognitive linguist, since ‘literature and cognition are doors into each other’ (11). He also attacks the emphasis of deconstruction theorists upon the decentralization of meaning which leads to viewing a text as ‘free play of signifiers’. Turner disagrees with this basic premise, claiming that postmodern texts and their various ‘readings are constrained by our modes of cognition’ (8). By the same token, an epiphanic reading of a text is always conditioned by a finite number of meanings that arise from the subjectivist interpretation of the trivial details described by the author, who hopes to induce epiphany in the reader.

In ‘The Neural Lyre’, Frederick Turner documents the importance of ‘the three-second rhythm of the human information processing cycle or neural present’.⁴ In a follow-up essay, ‘The Inner Meaning of Poetic Form’, he goes even

further to link poetry with cognition and claims that poetry is an evolutionary human reaction, expressed as 'an involuted knot of spacetime':

Poetry becomes an accelerated version of evolution itself, of that miraculous feedback among variation, selection, and heredity which produced the orchid, the sperm whale, the tobacco mosaic virus, the giant panda and the coral reef. (200)

The updated version of epiphany criticism thus calls for joint pragmatic examination of language by cognitive linguists and language philosophers. According to Ashton Nichols, 'modern literary revelation is always mental re-cognition' and language in the epiphanic moments 'strives to record the mind-brain's (author's or reader's) awareness of its own activity' ('Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments' 467). That is, the postmodern epiphany happens exclusively in the mind of the epiphanee, while the medium of epiphany remains language, the dynamic, flexible, and inherently ambiguous medium for human communication. The meaning of this version of epiphany can no longer be determined, yet any definition would share the features of the Romantic and modernist epiphany—illumination, intensity, irrelevance to its mundane agent, indeterminate meaning of ultimate significance and authority.

When the cognitive approach to epiphany criticism is employed in future studies, epiphanic moments may well prove to be, as Nichols conjectures in a recent essay, textual reflections of 'the mind's ability to "mark" or "re-mark" certain cognitive events' (Nichols Cognitive 468). In fact, Nichols equates epiphany with an ultimate manifestation of consciousness whose importance as an object of study transcends the aesthetic purposes of literature: 'If recent cognitive studies are correct, it is likely that secular literary "revelation" records the profoundly complex human mind-brain revealing itself to itself, and then to others, through the medium of language' (469).

Nichols proposes that the emphasis of epiphany criticism should be shifted from a purely literary analysis of the privileged moments to the examination of neural processes of the brain which make the construction of these moments possible. Literary accounts of epiphany like Wordsworth's "spots of time" or Joyce's "epiphanies" are, in this view, too limited attempts to describe 'the cognitive consciousness as the source of literary "meaning"' (468). Nichols compares texts by Pynchon and Heaney, two authors whose work relies heavily on the linguistic deconstructions of epiphany's power to structure lyric narrative. The fiction of Pynchon suggests that 'moments of "revelation" are mental events linked to linguistic artifice, not metaphysical experiences of physical transport' (468). The poetry of Heaney 'appropriates and transforms Romantic epiphany into a modern literary form for the production of lyrical resonance and psychological energy' (468).

One might ask whether there is a way out of this chaos of conflicting theories. The detractors and the proponents of epiphany criticism will agree that the postmodern epiphany is subjectively rooted in the author's playful use of lan-

guage while the meaning of the visionary experience itself (which the epiphanic text traditionally conveys to the reader) is secondary. Epiphany from the Romantics to modernists relies on language to communicate the extra-linguistic moment of secular revelation. The modernist writer is happy to explore the Romantic self. By contrast, the postmodernist starts from the premise that there are no longer any discreet selves to discuss, which makes him or her plunge into the chaotic, de-centered realm of language and work there as an act of ultimate creative sincerity.

The arguments for the interdisciplinary study of epiphany have a logical implication—all theories and practices of the literary epiphany are deemed to remain vague and arbitrary literary shoptalk unless they are related to the explanation of cognitive functions of the human brain. This, however, is a subject for future studies which reach beyond the confines of literary criticism. As Nichols argues, epiphany is ‘a cultural and linguistic construct [. . .] [with] a much wider range of application than mere attention to literary history or literary texts’ (478). Epiphany criticism might thus prove a useful literary tool for further exploration of human cognition.

The socio-cultural role of epiphany is likewise essential. Frederick Turner and Ernst Pöppel have explained the cultural importance of the use of poetic meter. Among the functions deeply embedded in the evolutionary cycle of the human brain are the penchant for poetic meter and the ability to experience epiphany as an aesthetic effect and ideal reception of a work of art.

One more reason justifies the poetics of epiphany as a helpful tool of contemporary poetry criticism. An analysis of the epiphanic moment and epiphanic transformation diverts attention from the fruitless rhetorical debate of two irreconcilable camps of American poets—the majority of free verse poets and the smaller tribe of the formalists writing today—toward a more useful examination of history-proven universals of language, meaning, and aesthetic experience of poetry.

The epiphanic form is a varied manifestation of the epiphanic mode. It conditions the aesthetic effect of a literary text (as a useful if intangible ideal to evaluate the text against). The epiphanic form does not, however, require the presence of rhyme, meter, alliteration, and metaphor. The term not only defies definition but transcends a need for a clear-cut definition—it is any form which allows for epiphanic effect to be reconstructed by the reader. As a concept, epiphany is going to prove even more inclusive than metaphor or any other figure of speech when the postmodern incredulity toward epiphany subsides.

When the lyric form and the rhetoric of the contemporary free verse have grown stale (which they well may have already), emphasis on epiphanic structuring and evaluation of poems will provide a useful way out of the ideological and formal deadlock faced by postmodernist poets and critics alike. Pursued even further, epiphany criticism, once applied to culture at large, may give a fresh, eclectic critical perspective in a time characterized by the elusiveness of textual meanings, by the shortening of reading attention span, by information overload, and by a general distrust of grand narratives and traditions.

Wim Tigges, editor of an authoritative anthology on the epiphanic mode in the arts, *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, rounds off my discussion of the future role of epiphany in criticism:

The pattern created by epiphanic moments in life, which can be recorded and transmitted in art, demonstrates the uniqueness of each human being's experience, as well as the simultaneous universality of this experience. By making ourselves aware of the significance of trivial things, we elevate life into something truly meaningful: a sudden flare, a dance in the centre of the starry universe. (35)

The shift from modernist to postmodernist theory of epiphany in the previous decades has shown that the presence of epiphany in art is likely to require new development in terms of critical reception. The socio-cultural need for epiphanic consciousness is likely to remain a part of human evolutionary survival strategy and an aesthetic experience that is also a useful yardstick for the evaluation of art and life.

There is, however, a pitfall of applying epiphanic terminology without discrimination—English-language periodicals are already full of stories in which the narrator experiences an epiphany ranging from the discovery of a long-lost key to a moment of conversion. Indeed, as a generic concept for the sudden acquisition of intuitive knowledge, epiphany has become hackneyed. Popular overuse of the concept has made it desirable to be careful with large rhetorical gestures and claims both in non-specialist context and in scholarly discourse.

For all its drawbacks, epiphany criticism continues to illuminate the structuring principles of various art genres. Once elaborated, it may serve, despite the well-grounded skepticism of many critics, as an ultimate guide to truth and beauty, as a grand narrative of permanent cultural relevance. Claims about the demise of the epiphanic mode in literature are refuted by the dynamic nature of both epiphany and language. For the critic, the visionary insight into what constitutes a literary text is being both highlighted and marginalized by the symbolic discourse of the present debate.

Notes

¹ For a detailed discussion of epiphany in postmodernist literature, see Jay Losey, "Demonic" Epiphanies: The Denial of Death in Larkin and Heaney', in *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 375–76. Losey gives a ludicrous example of the postmodern epiphany from John Barth's *The End of the Road* (New York, 1969), 74, where the characters are suffering from total vision, 'unable to "terminate the moment"'. As a result, the narrative is deadlocked. Note, however, how ironic epiphany may work well to structure contemporary lyric poetry, as in "The Garden of Earthly Delights", a poem by Charles Simic that features a gallery of losers described by the speaker, whose introspection takes an ironic switch from the lowly thoughts of urinating towards eternity. The parodic effect of epiphany in literature today has been also noted by Martin Hilský, who claims, in *Modernisté*, a study of Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Lawrence, that the traditional,

- Joycean epiphany, as the 'sudden revelation of meaning', is 'no longer viable in a postmodern age—it would sound ridiculous' (249).
- ² See Edward Hirsch, 'A Shadowy Exultation,' *Sewanee Review* 107 (1999): 227–43. Hirsch is a practising poet, and this fact distinguishes his epiphany terminology and angle from the more theoretical analyses by other epiphanists.
- ³ See Günter Leypoldt, 'Raymond Carver's "Epiphanic Moments",' *Style* 35 (2001): 531–47. Leypoldt's is the latest study of epiphany in literature to date. His analysis of epiphanic patterns in Carver is thoroughly interesting, yet he admits to arrive at no conclusive classification of epiphany in the fiction of this writer. Of interest is also Leypoldt's analysis of the ways epiphany and recognition converge in classic realism of the nineteenth century. 'Epiphanic illumination is potentially translatable into clear-cut concepts,' making it an ideal approach for both modernist and postmodernist (both for the ease of its classification and for its semantic elusiveness) critical theory.
- ⁴ In 'The Neural Lyre: Poetic Meter, The Brain, and Time', Frederick Turner and Ernst Pöppel define consciousness as 'the continuous irresolvable disparity between the brain as observer of itself and the brain as the object of observation. The coincidence between the words for consciousness and conscience in many languages point, incidentally, to the relationship between self-awareness and self-reward' (91). The role of consciousness in such two-way communication is crucial—this holds even for its role as the meaning maker of epiphanic experience. The above quote also mentions self-reward, this, too, is an attribute of epiphany—the revelatory experience is a means of the brain rewarding itself for periods of dullness between epiphanic moments.

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