

## EPIPHANIES: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, MODERN FICTION AND THE AESTHETICS OF THE SACRED

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There have been numerous attempts to give a general account of religious experience. According to some accounts, such experiences reveal or convey a sense of God or Ultimate Reality. Some thinkers suggest that such experiences manifest a state of "absolute dependence" or a sense of the ineffable. Kantians might argue that the source is 'ens realissimum' or a noumenal self which is unknowable but which can be made an object of the moral law. Others claim that what we are dealing with are matters which can only be subjects of discourse as "flashings of insight" (Aufblitzen) and not as matters which can be rationally explicated in our language. The first part of this essay consists of a brief survey of some accounts of religious experience. The second part deals with the importance of religious experience to James Joyce's fiction and aesthetics with particular emphasis on his concept of the "epiphany". The third and fourth parts are explorations of epiphanies in the fiction and aesthetics of Dostoevsky and Faulkner.

1.  
"Religious experience" is an ambiguous term at the best of times. "Religious" functions as an epithet generally and primarily within the context of Judaic or Christian beliefs, at least within the western intellectual tradition. "Experience" is a problematic term. When one claims to have had a religious experience, it is usually the case that one has seen an object or a living being, or heard a voice or some sound. Experiences of this kind might also involve dreams, intuitions and feelings. So, there are usually events which the individual or the group lives through and in some cases, later records or states. Ezekiel, Augustine, Pascal, William Blake and Teresa of Avila would be appropriate examples here. What do such experiences reveal? This question has been answered in at least three ways.

The first answer is that these experiences reveal the presence of God or of a "transcendent divine reality" which enters one's consciousness. In these terms, there is an experience - on the part of a

perceiver or perceivers - of a deity or a supernatural being. This type of answer does have some value. It can be used to explain, for example, a wide range of religious experiences, from those of Abraham, Job and Ezekiel to those of St. Teresa, Augustine, Mohammad and Blaise Pascal. And it can be used to explain the content of these experiences to some extent at least. The major objection, perhaps, to this answer is that it cannot be used to explain a wide range of religious experiences which do not presuppose a theistic or deistic framework. Thus, for example, it is difficult to reconcile with an account of satori given by a Zen initiate or with a Taoist monk's experience of the tao.

The second answer is that these experiences involve an "ultimate reality" or the sense that this world is "part of a more spiritual world from which it draws its primary significance".<sup>1</sup> Religious experiences in these terms would reveal what Buddhists call nirvana or some such absolute state of wisdom or insight. Or they would reveal the importance of the links between two worlds or levels of reality. Once again, there is much to be said for these accounts: they are intelligible; they are coherent and they can be used to explain a wide range of experiences. But in a sense they are too broad. It is unlikely that a term like "ultimate reality" will ever be anything but vague. It is unlikely too that any consensus will be reached on its meaning, especially given the, at times, considerable differences between the perspectives offered by the world's religions.

Also, if one grants that Confucianism, to name but one example, is a "religion", then the second answer will clearly be partial and inadequate. Finally, there is Wittgenstein's answer. He suggested that when we are talking about things such as religious experience, we are dealing with flashes of insight (this is a loose translation of *Aufblitzen*). These "flashes" cannot be described rationally; they, Wittgenstein believed, belong in the domain of the "inexpressible". They seem absurd. In Kantian terms, these are matters not so much of knowledge, but of faith and fundamentally, of morality. If they are seen to be nonsensical, it is because their "very essence", like Kant's noumena, cannot be described within the limits of language; that is to say, their essence drives us beyond the concepts and categories of language, and as a consequence, the impression of nonsensicality arises. Kant likewise had emphasised the problems which arise when we attempt to describe whatever transcends the use of language within the bounds of reason.

The major strength, perhaps, of Wittgenstein's response is that it can be used to explain the sense of incoherence and inadequacy that

figures so prominently in attempts to articulate many experiences of a religious kind. And it can be used to account for the fact that there are things which we cannot articulate with precision or with clarity. However, once again, it cannot account for the diversity of religious experiences. To claim that every description in the domain of religion involves *Aufblitzen* is demonstrably untrue. Socrates, Augustine and Aquinas, among others, have shown that some descriptions which belong clearly in the domain of religion are attained or attainable through dialectic, or through a rationally structured dialogue. Also, it is evident that some religious experiences can be described quite adequately - one might think of Augustine's account of his religious conversion and of the description which he gave his mother. There is no hint of difficulty or any sense of nonsensicality in his description.

As general accounts of religious experience, then, these three approaches are flawed: they are either too broad or too reductive. It would seem that the assumption that a representative general account can be given is one that needs to be analysed and evaluated with much greater care and cogency.

## 2.

The importance of such accounts of religious experience cannot be underestimated in relation to the work of James Joyce, in general, and to his concept of "epiphanies" in particular. Like Wittgenstein, Joyce was interested in the flash of insight that often accompanies such experiences; in the fact that the contents of the experience are not always clearly explicable; and in the fact that such moments are sudden and not repeatable. Joyce, however, was not primarily interested in the theological dimension, that is to say, after his rejection of the church he did not affirm the claim that these experiences reveal a supernatural being. He did emphasise the attainment of sudden insights; he rarely commented on these in his novels. Rather, he recorded these moments and allowed them to bear the meaning within the fabric of the fiction.

These Joycean "epiphanies" are probably based on the Thomistic and Scholastic theophanies and their applications to the arts. (Joyce had read various works by and on medieval thinkers at various stages.)<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, for example, had emphasised the *forma dei*, the form that pervades nature and art and imbues it with a spiritual dimension. Art, according to Aquinas, expresses the sacred; beauty comprises harmony and clarity, and the cause of these, according to Aquinas, is God. And it is as the cause of these, Aquinas added, echoing Dionysus,

that God is called beautiful. The discussions of epiphany in *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* are clearly influenced by such accounts. The clearest statement of Joyce's concept of "epiphanies" is in *Stephen Hero*.<sup>3</sup> Stephen explains the concept of the epiphany to Cranly. It, Stephen says, is caused by a "trivial incident": a fragment of a colloquy is heard, the dial of a clock is seen, a woman is seen on the shore, a name is uttered or seen. An impression is given which is sufficient to "afflict" one's sensitivity (p.188). What follows is a sudden "spiritual manifestation" in Stephen's words. Vulgar speech or gestures might convey an epiphany; so too might a "memorable phase of the mind" (p.188). Stephen, like the early Joyce,<sup>4</sup> believes that it is the task of the writer to record such moments with "extreme care" because they are the "most delicate and evanescent of moments" (p.188). They are akin to sudden intuitive insights and cannot be repeated or prolonged. What is required to epiphanise an object or sound, according to Stephen, is the focusing of a "spiritual eye". This "focusing" seems to be akin to the concentration and contemplation which Aquinas linked to the seeing of the inner form of a thing - its essence - rather than its mere outward appearance. Once the focus is complete the epiphany emerges and one sees the "supreme quality of beauty" (p.189).

Stephen then explains Aquinas' theory of beauty. Three conditions must be fulfilled according to Aquinas before one can apprehend beauty: the first is 'integritas sive perfectio', that is, one must apprehend an object, for example, as a unified whole with an absence of defects; the second is 'proportio sive consonantia', or the balance of the parts and an apparent harmony or symmetry; the third is 'claritas' which connotes brilliance of colour, clarity of structure, a wholeness which stimulates contemplation. The sense of beauty, then, is produced by the contemplation of the parts and the whole and a perception of their compatibility and harmony. The epiphany occurs, according to Stephen, when the mind goes beyond the second qualities and grasps the third, claritas, which reveals the essence, the "soul", the "whatness" of the object.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the whole structure appears radiant or epiphanised. Aquinas' forma dei or the eternal image of beauty is grasped. In this way the sacred and the mundane, the spiritual and the physical, are connected in this privileged but fleeting moment which is intended to reaffirm the Thomistic concept of beauty.

### 3.

There are numerous instances in the fiction of Dostoevsky and

Faulkner which a Joycean could identify as epiphanic.<sup>6</sup> Neither Dostoevsky nor Faulkner used the term "epiphany", however. The impact of Dostoevsky's fiction upon Joyce was quite considerable. Joyce believed that Dostoevsky was the writer who "more than any other" created "modern prose" and "intensified it to its present-day pitch".<sup>7</sup> He also praised the Russian for the "explosive power which shattered the Victorian novel"; for his use of violence and desire as motives; and for the combination of exultation and madness - the source, Joyce suggested, of his greatness (p.60). A careful reading of Dostoevsky's fiction would have convinced Joyce that epiphanic moments are crucial elements, especially in *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The attempt to reconcile freewill with a benevolent deity and a divinely-inspired, fixed ethical code in a world in which examples of evil seems to be common is an *idée fixe* in these works. Numerous characters experience crises of faith and belief because of this perceived dilemma. Indeed, Dostoevsky's fiction, in one sense, is nothing less than a grand attempt to solve such dilemmas. Moreover, sudden and intuitive moments of insight play an instrumental role. For example, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha's understanding of the world is transformed in this way on at least two crucial occasions. After Ivan tells Alyosha of the poem of the Inquisitor and departs, Alyosha suddenly notices that Ivan's "right shoulder looked lower than his left" (V, v, p.137).<sup>8</sup> This sudden image of Ivan's deformed gait intensifies Alyosha's desire for renewal, just as it vividly conveys in a moment the gulf that separates the two brothers - Ivan chooses to transgress and Alyosha flees to the hermitage in order to be saved from Ivan and in order to seek redemption. It seems that the two will never be reconciled.

Later in the novel, the vision of the risen Zossima also has an epiphanic effect on Alyosha (VII, iv). The epiphany serves three functions at least: it helps Alyosha to overcome the doubt that Ivan's scepticism has implanted; it conveys to Alyosha a sense of the world's consonance and harmony, in which even evil is overcome; and it generates a profound exaltation which leads him out of the monastery and into the Russian world, where he will fulfil Zossima's task of redemption.<sup>9</sup> Here too, the epiphany involves an intensification of vision and a profound sense of integritas, proportio and claritas. It generates a rapturous sense of his own freedom, commitment and regenerative power.

The novels of Dostoevsky and Joyce were important influences on

Faulkner's fiction. Like Dostoevsky, Faulkner was very interested in the figure of the holy fool - Dostoevsky's jurodiviyi. In fact the parallels between Dostoevsky's Myshkin, for example, and Faulkner's Benjy are undeniable. Like Dostoevsky's holy fools, Faulkner's "idiots" - the term is Faulkner's - endure much suffering, and manifest much tenderness and innocence.<sup>10</sup> Faulkner claimed that he had read *The Brothers Karamazov* at fourteen and he included Dostoevsky among his favourite writers (Karl, pp. 89, 745).<sup>11</sup> Later he read Joyce, and it is not difficult to find signs of influence, especially in works such as *The Sound and the Fury*.

It is in this novel that the importance of the epiphany becomes especially apparent. In the fourth section, it is Dilsey who emerges as the principal figure in this respect. After she hears the preacher's sermon on "de resurrection en de light", with its apocalyptic imagery, Dilsey is transformed. Just as Alyosha sees his mission more clearly after the epiphany in the hermitage, and just as Stephen sees his future more vividly in the epiphany of the "arms and voices", so too Dilsey is convinced that her trials and struggles with the Compsons are elements in an encompassing order that is permeated by a sense of apocalyptic expectation. Significantly, Dilsey is neither able nor willing to explain the nature and content of her transformation to Frony. She too, in Aquinas' terms, now seems to apprehend the world in terms of its symmetry, proportion and claritas - the essence, the Thomistic quidditas or whatness, is manifest in the forma dei which she perceives in the unity of the beginning and the end.

The allusion to the Alpha and the Omega in the Book of Revelation - itself an analogue of Isaiah 44.6 - is probably deliberate, given Faulkner's great interest in the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the structure of this novel and this use of epiphany suggest a profound debt to apocalyptic literature in the Old and New Testaments.<sup>13</sup> Such writings do involve visions and moments of illumination not unlike Dilsey's (and Alyosha's) in some respects; a mysterious agency by which one gains insights into the order of the cosmos and one's place within it.<sup>14</sup> Two of the most striking apocalyptic books are the Books of Daniel and Revelation. In each, a time in the wilderness is superseded by a vision of the imminent kingdom wherein the sacred and the mundane, the origins and the completion of the divine scheme, are clarified and brought together.<sup>15</sup> The imagery is generally cataclysmic. Significantly, in this context, the seer tends to be one who reveres the mystery or the vision of messianic consummation and does not describe or contend.<sup>16</sup> Such elements are evident in Dilsey's experiences.<sup>17</sup>

4.

Each of the three novelists affirmed religious experience and moments of illumination in their fiction and other writings. But there are important differences that one should not overlook. Joyce affirmed epiphanies in order to fashion literature out of passions that create, transform and destroy; out of the depths of experience and subconscious forces, "hidden tides",<sup>18</sup> wherein the wellsprings of madness, apostasy and exaltation have their origins and whereby the "marriage of spirit and matter" (p. 89) could be effected. Through epiphanies, Joyce's protagonists could liberate themselves from soul-destroying ideologies, "misconceived ideals" (p.98) and misguided idealism; through them, Joyce could fathom "the residuum of truth" (p.36) and reawaken the "religious awe" of the "Babylonian star-worshippers" (p.48).

Dostoevsky's epiphanies heighten an apocalyptic view of the world which is predicated upon the expectation of cosmic renewal and the fulfilment of a sacred destiny. His major models seem to include Faust, Lazarus and Job.<sup>19</sup> Epiphanies are used to affirm allegories of rebirth which are rooted in Orthodox creeds and an eschatology which is permeated by a vehement nationalism; they are used to facilitate the surmounting of positivist tendencies and to embrace the idea of suffering and evil as parts of an overarching theodicy which will culminate in the regeneration of a race.

Faulkner's epiphanies are crucial elements in a grandiose attempt to explore the "agony and sweat of the human spirit",<sup>20</sup> and to emphasise love, endurance and compassion. The celebration of such moments is crucial given his repeated criticisms of spiritual bankruptcy and disintegrating social structures. Epiphanies convey truths which will seem, in Faulkner's words, "as true, as moving, as beautiful, as passionate, as terrible",<sup>21</sup> to the reader as they are to the author—through them, an eschatology shaped by profound meditation on suffering and expiation, stoicism,<sup>22</sup> and Biblical apocalyptic traditions, is unequivocally affirmed.

## REFERENCES

1. See Petersen et. al., pp.14-15 and B.R. Hill, P. Knitter and W. Madges, Faith, Religion and Theology: A Contemporary Introduction (Twenty-Third Publications; Mystic, Connecticut, 1992), p.317.
2. There are repeated references to Aquinas and Duns Scotus, to name but two, in Joyce's fiction and prose. See Ulysses (Penguin; Harmondsworth, 1971), pp.24, 47, 214, and Arthur Power, Conversations with James Joyce, ed. Clive Hart (Millington; London, 1974), p.91. Morris Beja also provides an informative account of parallels in the work of other writers such as Conrad, Mann and Proust, in Epiphany in the Modern Novel (Peter Owen; London, 1971)- hereafter cited as Epiphany.
3. See Theodore Spencer's edition (Triad, Panther; St. Albans, 1977), pp.188-190. Subsequent references to this work will be incorporated into the text as Hero.
4. There is some evidence to suggest that Joyce became less overtly concerned with epiphanies in his last works. For example, Joyce included 13 entries in Hero from the workbook in which he recorded "epiphanies", 12 in Portrait, only 4 in Ulysses, and one in Finnegan's Wake. See Morris Beja, James Joyce: A Literary Life (Ohio State University Press; Columbia, 1992), p.30.
5. It is a mistake to claim, as Vicki Mahaffey claims, that the result is a "balance of spirit and matter", in "James Joyce's Shorter Works", The Cambridge Companion to Joyce, ed. D. Attridge (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1990), p.192. In fact, the spiritual element is privileged in Stephen's words.
6. Dostoevsky wrote in his diary of unconscious or unexpressed ideas which are "only strongly felt" and are "fused together, as it were, with the soul of man". See A. Steinberg, Dostoevsky (Bowes and Bowes; London, 1966), p.89.
7. Conversations with James Joyce, p.58. (Of course, one needs to assume here that the conversations are accurately reconstructed.)
8. All references are to Constance Garnett's translation (Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.; Chicago, 1952).
9. It is a mistake to link Plato's metaphysics to Dostoevsky's aesthetics as Steinberg does (p.85). Here, the influence of Orthodox creeds and the concept of Slavism is paramount.
10. In an interview, Faulkner called them "truly innocent", like children. See Frederick R. Karl, William Faulkner: An American Writer (Faber and Faber; London, 1989), p.316. Hereafter cited as Karl.
11. He mentioned the possibility of a "spiritual kinship" with the country that "produced Dostoevsky", among others, in a letter dated May 31, 1958. See Joseph Blotner, Faulkner: A Biography, vol II, (Chatto and Windus; London, 1974), p.1695.
12. For Faulkner's views on the Bible, see Karl, pp.89, 890 and Blotner, vol. II, pp.976, 1213. Also, Jesse McGuire Coffee states that this novel contains more Biblical allusions than his other novels, in Faulkner's Un-Christlike Christians: Biblical Allusions in the Novels (UMI Research Press; Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1983), p.35.
13. Eric Mottram quotes an interview in which Faulkner emphasises the need "to make choices between good and evil" in accordance with a "moral conscience". Clearly, these are among the most salient Biblical themes. See William Faulkner (Routledge & Kegan Paul; London, 1971), p.13.
14. This is all the more important given Faulkner's view: "man is in a state of spiritual cowardice". Selected Letters of William Faulkner, ed. Joseph Blotner (Random House; New York, 1977),



p.261.

15. Cleath Brooks is certainly justified in placing Faulkner "right in the mainstream of the great classical Judaic-Christian tradition", in On the Prejudices, Predilections and Firm Beliefs of William Faulkner (Louisiana State University Press; London, 1987), p. 28.

16. In Deuteronomy, one finds the assertion that some things must remain unspoken (29.29); in Corinthians 2. xii. 4, it is said that God reveals to some persons things which others cannot know.

17. Beja's attempts to distinguish between an epiphany and a "semi-mystical moment of enlightenment" (Epiphany, p.193) is quite unconvincing. Dilsey's moment could be described as either, and no contradiction would result. Also, Karl's claim that Dilsey is "subservient and powerless" (325) needs to be qualified. The novel does not reinforce such a perception of Dilsey. Giles Gunn is closer to the truth when he claims that Dilsey's endurance, "loving-kindness and acceptance" should be "regarded as modes of empowerment and marks of her triumph", in "Faith and Family in The Sound and the Fury", Faulkner and Religion, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (University Press of Mississippi; London, 1991), p.60.

18. This and subsequent quotations, are from Conversations. The page number is in the main text.

19. Victor Terras rightly draws attention to the importance of Job, in A Karamazov Companion (University of Wisconsin Press; Madison, 1981), p.21.

20. From Faulkner's Nobel speech. See Karl, p.815.

21. From an interview quoted by Gunn in Fowler and Abadie, p.162.

22. Brooks (p.124) and John Hunt (whose William Faulkner: Art in Theological Tension is cited by Brooks) are justified in emphasising the importance of stoicism. But it is the apocalyptic types of Roman stoicism

rather than the versions which postulated the eternity of matter and universal Reason that ought to be highlighted here.