Panepiphanal World

MacDuff, Sangam

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When Joyce called his early prose poems and “fragment[s] of colloquy” (SH 216) “epiphanies” (LII 35), he gave new meaning to an ancient theological term. Originally restricted to illumination in its literal sense, epiphaineia means a “manifestation” or “striking appearance,” especially the apparition of a divinity (OED). Greek literature records many such manifestations, often using the verbs phaino or epiphaino to do so, and the New Testament uses the same words to refer to the first and second comings of Christ.¹ The oldest canonical gospels, those of Mark and John, begin with Jesus’s baptism, while Matthew and Luke commence with the Nativity; in each case Jesus’s birth and spiritual rebirth are presented as epiphanies. No wonder the Eastern Church, which teaches that Jesus was born and baptized on January 6, adopted the Greek term for the Feast of the Epiphany. There was considerable controversy over what to designate as Epiphany among early theologians, however, which is reflected in the range of manifestations celebrated, including the baptism, the miracle at Cana, the Nativity, and the visit of the magi. In his sermons on Epiphany, Augustine focuses primarily on the Matthean account, strengthening the Catholic association with the spiritual illumination that led the magi to Christ. These sermons form part of the liturgy of the Epiphany cycle, which runs from January 6 to Joyce’s birthday on February 2, celebrating four major manifestations: the apparition of the star, Christ’s baptism, Cana, and Candlemas, when Jesus is presented in the Temple as a “light” and “revelation.”²

The OED distinguishes two meanings of “epiphany”: the first refers to the Catholic festival; the second to divine manifestations. References to the Feast of the Epiphany are found in Middle English texts, while the first recorded use in a non-Christian context is Gale’s Court of Gentiles
Both meanings can be used in figurative senses: Crashaw’s dedicatory poem “To the Queen’s Majesty, On Twelfth Day,” in which he consoles the exiled queen, Henrietta Maria, that “all the Yeare is your Epiphany” employs the former; De Quincey extends the second meaning in Style, describing the “revelations” of Attic literature as “two manifestations or bright epiphanies of the Grecian intellect” (Brewster 1905, 129).

This citation is dated 1859 in the OED, although De Quincey’s essay was serialized in Blackstone’s from 1840 to 1841 (Brewster 1905, 27), and in 1838 Emerson had already written: to the “aroused intellect . . . a fact is an Epiphany of God” (qtd. in Abrams 1971, 413). Nichols notes that a draft version of Emerson’s December 19, 1838, lecture expands on the journal to show how these “dull, strange despised” facts “have no value until they take their order from conscious intelligence,” while to the seeing soul, “the least fact . . . is full of meaning” (1959, 3.47–49; Nichols 8–9). There is no evidence that Joyce knew Emerson’s lecture, but several critics have noted the similarity between Emerson’s use of the term and Joyce’s: “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” (SH 216).

While Emerson’s journal provides a first citation for the figurative application of “epiphany,” Joyce’s definition gives us its contemporary meaning:

3 a (1): a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something (2): an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event) usually simple and striking (3): an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure
b: a revealing scene or moment. (Merriam-Webster)

Internet searches confirm that 3a, which corresponds to Stephen’s definition, is now the dominant contemporary sense, while 3b, corresponding to the genre Joyce called “Epiphany” (LII 28), has become a common literary term. Since Stephen Hero wasn’t published until 1944 and the first epiphanies until 1956, Joyce could not have known how widely his neologism would be adopted, but even in Stephen’s seminal definition, his novel use of “epiphany” epitomizes the view that language is constantly being created through every act of communication in its “continuous affirmation of the spirit” (CW 83).

As a “complex coherent organism” that both “remember[s]” and “mutate[s]” (Kenner 1972, 96), language evolves in time, and it is striking
that the origins of Joyce’s coinage contain the seed of his linguistic epiphany. According to Walter Skeat, whose *Etymological Dictionary* Stephen Daedalus reads “by the hour” (SH 32), “epiphany” is derived from the Greek *epi* (“upon, to, besides”) and *phainein* (“to show”). Thus, the “appearance” or “manifestation” (*epiphanea*) may be shown forth upon the site of epiphany or beside it. The former suggests both traditional, transcendental apparitions above the site of revelation, such as the star of the magi, and the immanent epiphanies of the Romantics, which appear in nature and/or the mind. The latter reveal something hitherto unrecognized, but when the transcendental is figured above and beyond, there is a displacement, and this gap in the epiphany is made clearer by the horizontal axis of “besides.” Although Joyce’s epiphanies occur in language, they stem from the same roots, revealing both the silences that give rise to signification and the extraordinary nature of the most ordinary signs.

The next chapter analyzes Joyce’s early aesthetics and epiphanies in detail, showing how he developed this notion of the linguistic epiphany. Despite its novelty, however, Joyce’s use of the word “epiphany” makes it clear that his concept is founded on a tradition dating back to the Greeks. Critics have underestimated the significance of this history, declaring that Joyce’s “secular” epiphanies have little in common with classical and biblical evocations while overestimating their similarity to Wordsworth’s “spots of time”; but the tale of Joyce’s epiphanies is “the same told of all” (FW 18.19–20): “history repeating itself with a difference” (U 16.1525–26).

**Classical and Biblical Epiphanies**

Critical opinion is divided over the nature and significance of epiphanies in classical literature. Nichols notes that “Greek literature and religion commonly recorded appearances of gods and goddesses, which were described as ‘epiphanies,’” claiming that divine visitations can be traced back to the earliest Greek myths, such as Dionysius’s “manifestation” in Magnesia (5–6). Beja, on the other hand, contends that the tradition of epiphany begins with Paul on the road to Damascus: “the moment of vision is a Christian phenomenon, with only a few real antecedents in Classical and Hebraic literature” (1971, 24). In a sense both are right, for there is no doubt that Greek literature is replete with epiphanies, but it is also true, as Beja argues, that these moments of divine intervention are different from Christian visions.
The *Iliad* begins with the descent of Apollo and Athena (1.47, 1.195), while Hera and Zeus send thoughts and dreams to the Greeks. Gods frequently intervene on both sides of the battle for Troy, interspersing the epic with a series of epiphanic intercessions. Likewise, the *Odyssey* begins with Pallas Athena pleading Odysseus’s case before the gods. She frequently appears in human form, as a young girl, a shepherd, a maiden, or mentor to guide Telemachus, and Joyce incorporates this apparition into his schemata for *Ulysses*, where Pallas Athena (as Mentor) corresponds to the milkwoman in the opening episode. Joyce’s charts, which introduce the customary titles assigned to his chapters, continue this Homeric interchange between gods and mortals: Nestor appears as Deasy; Proteus is manifest as primal matter; and later episodes claim correspondences with Jove, Hermes, and Orpheus.

Euripides was also fond of presenting gods on stage. Like the *Iliad*, *Alcestis* begins with an apparition of Apollo, who predicts the eponymous heroine’s return, and the play ends with Heracles bringing her back from the dead. Similarly, *Electra* concludes with the deified Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux, appearing from the deus ex machina to counsel Electra and Orestes on the libations they must perform to atone for their matricide. In *Finnegans Wake*, “castor and porridge” (FW 489.16), the “heavenlaid twin[s]” (177.21), are recast as the eternally warring brothers, Shem and Shaun, while “Dyas [a Vedic equivalent of Zeus] in his machine” (55.34) reappears as the “god of all machineries” (253.33).

If Aristotle is right that the deus ex machina is rather a contrived way to resolve the plot, its relatively common occurrence in the extant tragedies bears testimony to the frequency and importance of divine apparitions in Greek literature. Indeed, Phylarcus’s *On the Appearance of Zeus* and two lost works on the epiphanies of Apollo and Heracles by the Alexandrian author Istros indicate that the manifestations of a single god could fill a treatise. Unfortunately, these works have not survived, but there is evidence that both were composed around 200 BCE, roughly the same time that Syriskos recorded “the *epiphaneiai* of the Parthenos” (Platt 148–49).

Divine manifestations were common in Greek literature, but it is rarer to find examples of personal revelation. Birgit Neuhold suggests Plato lays the groundwork for the Romantic moment in the *Symposium*, where Diotima instructs Socrates in the ascent of *erotomachia*, from love of the body to beauty in general, thence virtue, and finally knowledge. “[W]hen a man has reached this point in his education in love,” Diotima says,
“[t]hen suddenly he will see a beauty of a breathtaking nature” (Plato 210; see Neuhold, *Measuring the Sadness*, 18–20). Neuhold argues that this passage is “transitory, intense, privileged and replete with rhetorical markers” (21), all features she identifies with epiphany, but Diotima’s vision is “eternal” and absolute, not transitory (210–11). Moreover, Plato describes an abstract ideal through the mouthpiece of a mouthpiece, rather than giving a record of personal experience, which is quite different from Emerson’s dull facts or Joyce’s vulgarities of speech and gesture.

The same point can be made about revelations in Hebraic literature. Although there is no exact equivalent of the word “epiphany” in Hebrew, there are literally hundreds of examples of God appearing in the Pentateuch, often in a dream or in the guise of an angel. In Genesis alone, God appears to Abram (12:7, 17:1), Abraham (18:1), Isaac (26:2–4), and Jacob. In Jacob’s dream, a visitant angel is revealed as God (31:11–13). In honor of the manifestation, God instructs Jacob to build an altar at Bethel, before blessing him (35:1–9). Indeed, it is possible to read the first chapter of Genesis as God’s original epiphany, so that the world itself becomes a divine manifestation, a sacred text celebrated throughout the scriptures.\(^6\) This association between the Word and the world is explicit in the Gospel According to Saint John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1), a text that haunts the imagination of Stephen Dedalus. The reason it does so, I shall argue, is that when “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (1:14), John provides the prototype for a literal epiphany in which language embodies spirit.

Christians view the Incarnation as “the glorious Epiphany of God our Saviour” (Irving 342), which “derives its full force” from the contrast between “God and man, lowly and sublime, *humilis and sublimis*” (Auerbach 1973, 65). Epiphanies are often considered as paragons of the sublime, and the archetypal Christian epiphany, manifesting the divine in the ordinary, provides a prototype for Romantic revelations, but Joyce’s epiphanies are quite different, for he makes no distinction between “lowly and sublime.” There is no room for the sublime (< sub + limis: below the limit) in Joyce, because in his epiphanies the ordinary is the limit of experience. Put differently, the Romantics venerate the extraordinariness of the ordinary, whereas Joyce never veers from its ordinariness. As textual manifestations, his epiphanies don’t reach for anything beyond themselves; they are fully materialized in literary form.
Returning to the Old Testament theophanies, it is notable that in each case the patriarchs hear the voice of God; Yahweh may appear as an angel or in dreams, but there is rarely any doubt about the significance of the message. In Ezekiel’s grand “visions of God” (1:1) fire unfolds in the clouds of a whirlwind, taking on the form of four living creatures that become lions, oxen, and eagles before morphing into wheels within wheels (1:4–16). The profusion of imagery makes it almost impossible to imagine the intertwined wings of the creatures or their multifaceted heads, but when the prophet returns to their appearance in the cloud as “burning coals of fire, . . . lamps” and the “flash of lightning” (1:13–14), the nature of the illumination is clear. Again, it is difficult to envisage how the wheels of beryl and crystal contain the living spirit of the creature and the simulacrum of the firmament as they rise up into the sky (20, 22), but when Ezekiel hears “the voice of the Almighty” and sees a throne surrounded by the brightness of rainbows, he knows that he has seen “the likeness of the glory of the Lord” (24, 28). Immediately after, he hears God’s voice, is converted, and becomes a prophet (2:1–3).

Revelation 4–5 recalls Ezekiel’s imagery in the throne surrounded by rainbows, where lamps of fire burn and flash lightning before “a sea of glass like unto crystal” (4:2–6). In the midst of the throne, four beasts (or “living beings” in Joyce’s holograph copy), “full of eyes within,” are likened to lion, calf, man, and eagle (4:7). But where Ezekiel hears the one voice of God, John hears “the voice of many angels”—a chorus of “ten thousand times ten thousand” praising the “Lamb that was slain” (5:11). Like the multiplying angels, the symbols of Revelation concatenate continuously, adding layer upon layer of imagery, so that the whole book becomes one grand vision of Apocalypse (< apokalypsis, “revelation”). But just as Ezekiel’s vision begins and ends with the voice of God, so too the book of Revelation is framed as “[t]he Revelation of Jesus Christ,” God-given and sent by an angel to John (1:1). At the very end of Revelation, Jesus returns: “I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things” (22:16). Thus, the truth of Apocalypse is guaranteed by Christ, in the same way that Hebraic visions, even those as recondite as Ezekiel’s, were given absolute, determinate meaning by Yahweh. It is evident from these examples that biblical epiphanies, whether in the Old or New Testament, record transcendental experiences in which God is manifest directly.

However, the way that John of the Apocalypse develops and expands upon Ezekiel also demonstrates how the first Christian scribes reinterpreted
Hebraic Scripture. In some of the last words of the Bible, immediately following the verse quoted above, Jesus says, “I am the root and the offspring of David, [and] the bright and morning star” (22:16), establishing his royal Jewish lineage while looking back to Matthew.

The New Testament begins with the most famous of all epiphanies: the star of the magi. Preparing for the apparition, Matthew recounts a typical Old Testament genealogy, tracing the fourteen generations from Abraham to David and thence the royal line of descent to Joseph (Matt. 1:1–17). This is of course key to establishing Jesus as “King of the Jews” (Mark 2:2), assuring continuity with Hebraic Scripture. Both Brown and Beare suggest that Matthew was a Greek-speaking scribe with knowledge of Hebrew living in an area of Judeo-Christian conflict or interchange (Brown 46; Beare 10); it is natural therefore that Matthew draws heavily on Old Testament visions and prophecies to narrate the coming of Christ. In addition to the five formula citations that structure chapters 1–2, there are obvious parallels between Moses escaping the Pharaoh in Egypt (Ex. 2) and Herod’s massacre of the innocents, just as Joseph, dreamer of dreams and sojourner in Egypt, can be seen as a “reapplication of the patriarch Joseph” (Brown 72). But to indicate the full significance of Jesus’s coming, the evangelist turns to Old Testament epiphanies, reinterpreting them as prophecies of the Christian epiphany. For instance, when Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant and considers how she might be delivered in private, “behold, the angel of the Lord appeared (epháni) unto him” (1:20), telling him of the immaculate conception. This dream visitation, the first epiphany in the New Testament, is frequently compared to Judges 13:3: “And the angel of the Lord appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou [art] barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son,” just as Jesus’s birth is seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Emmanuel (Mark 1:23). In Judges, this son of the Holy Ghost is Samson, and in the Lucan account, Jesus, like Samson, is a Nazarene, although in Matthew Jesus is born in Bethlehem. Even the star that leads the magi to their Davidic Messiah echoes Balaam, an eastern magus, who saw “a vision of the Almighty” and foretold that “there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Num. 24:16–17; Trench 34; Brown 190–96).

These parallels illustrate why the Matthean narrative needs to be read in relation to its scriptural forbears, both in the hermeneutic tradition of typological interpretation and as a dialogical text. Indeed, there is good
evidence of Matthew rewriting and reinterpreting Mark, as well as the Torah, suggesting that literal, typological, anagogical, and allegorical exegeses are written into the gospel. For example, Balaam provides an Old Testament type of the magus, but since he is frequently seen as a false prophet, anagogical readings quickly arise, particularly in relation to the parable of the ass (Num. 22), which has led several interpreters to view the magi as sorcerers (Trench 8–9). The magi are more commonly represented as the three kings or wise men from Babylonia, and allegorical interpretations of their gifts are widespread, although Matthew tells us neither how many they were nor where they came from. Recent scholarship favors the more literal interpretation that they were astrologers, arguing that astrology was practiced extensively in the ancient world and often regarded as a kind of science. The exact time of a star rising was of critical importance to the accuracy of astrological predictions, hence Herod’s concern for precise information to ascertain the location of the newborn king (2.7). Christian apologists go further, suggesting that Matthew refers to a new star, such as the nova said to herald the birth of Mithridates, or perhaps to Halley’s Comet, which was visible from Palestine in 12 BCE (Beare 75).

Thus, over and above the textual difficulties of the Greek, or the relationship between the gospels and other apocryphal sources, there are significant hurdles in the way of interpreting the epiphany. I have indicated these in terms of the fourfold medieval exegesis: literal, typological, anagogical, and allegorical interpretations. Modern Bible studies show that the Bible is open to critical interpretation in the same way as any other text, but what makes it such a powerful test case is the Catholic doctrine of inerrancy, which states that the sacred texts “have God for their author” (Second Vatican Council, 3.2; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Biblical epiphanies explicitly claim this status as a revelation of God, no matter how ordinary the manifestation. In Matthew, the magi rejoice the moment they see the star, as though they know its portent (2.10). They follow it directly to the infant Jesus and bow down before him, though there is nothing extraordinary about the “house” of Mary and Joseph, and they have been led to expect a king (11).10 This direct access to God’s revelation links the epiphany to the Old Testament theophanies where God spoke to the patriarchs. Indeed, immediately after delivering their gifts, God warns the magi not to return via Jerusalem, and in the following verse, “the angel of the Lord appeareth [phainetai] to Joseph,” bidding him flee to Egypt (2.12–13).
Interpreting the Epiphany

Post-Enlightenment evocations of epiphany are usually opposed to the divine manifestations of the Bible, but it is clear that biblical revelations are subject to the same problems of interpretation as any other text, while Romantic epiphanies make similar truth claims as their scriptural counterparts. With the exception of Hopkins’s “theophanies” and Eliot’s later poetry, modern literary epiphanies are usually regarded as secular. In Epiphany in the Modern Novel, Morris Beja observes that, despite a “general disillusion with religion” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is “a continuing need . . . for meaningful, unifying, ‘spiritual’ emotions or experiences” (21). This leads to a shift “from divine revelations, purely religious experiences, to epiphanies, for the most part regarded as secular” (46), as modernist writers, no longer confident of receiving God’s truth, search for their own answers. For Beja, this accounts for modernists’ fascination with highly charged but ephemeral moments: “Doubtful of immortality, they turned against it and cherished mortality; afraid of death, they worshipped life” (50). Beja suggests that as well as a loss of faith in orthodox religion, a concomitant loss of confidence in rational enlightenment provides further impetus toward the “instantaneous, intuitive illumination” that epiphany idealizes (21).

Ashton Nichols develops a similar argument in The Poetics of Epiphany, tracing a change of emphasis from the inspired seer of biblical revelations to the Romantic interpreter of oracular epiphanies. Whereas the Old Testament prophets are literally inspired with the spirit of God, as in the coal that touches Isaiah’s lips and makes him an agent of truth, ensuring that “the total meaning of the event is contained in its telling” (13), “the epiphanies that begin with Wordsworth leave their ultimate meaning unstated” (16), and therefore demand interpretation. As I have shown, though, biblical epiphanies require interpretation like any other text. The only qualitative difference is the source of meaning: whereas for Matthew God was the author of the word and the world, Wordsworth describes a phenomenological experience governed by “the language of the sense,” a world we half perceive and “half-create” (1986, 149).

This transference of authority from the Logos that self-evidently manifests its own truth to the witness of revelation who must interpret its significance leads to an increased focus on subjective experience and opens
the door to doubt. Beja cites St. Paul’s vision on the road to Damascus—
“and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven” (Acts
9:3)—as the first Christian conversion, but he doesn’t note its variants.
Neuhold argues convincingly that there is a distinct difference between
the biographical narratives in The Acts of the Apostles (probably writ-
ten by Luke), which present the epiphany as a “light from heaven” (9:3,
22:6, 26:13), and the autobiographical accounts in the Pauline Epistles
(Neuhold, Measuring the Sadness, 22–25). For instance, 1 Corinthians 9 be-
gins: “Am I not an Apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our
Lord?” Paul’s rhetorical questions are probably intended to assert author-
ity, but they open up the possibility of doubt and self-questioning, par-
ticularly in light of his repeated claim that he is “the least of the apostles,
unfit to be called an apostle” (24).

In the same way, Augustine’s account can be read as “the archetypal pat-
tern of the conversion” (Beja 1971, 26)—a long search for truth, frequently
beset by doubts despite moments of illumination like the “flash of one
trembling glance” that reveals “THAT WHICH Is” (7.22), until finally, after
hearing of two soldiers who find faith in the life of St. Anthony, Augustine
despairs and rushes out to the garden, where he hears a voice chanting
“Tolle lege” (“Take up and read”: 8.28). Here Augustine opens the Bible
at Romans, and “instantly at the end of this sentence [13.13–14], by a light
as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt van-
ished away” (8.28).

This would seem to indicate that Augustine’s conversion lies in a sud-
den illumination that dissolves doubt, but when he first heard the com-
mandment to read, Augustine’s “countenance altered” and he “began to
think most intently, whether children were wont in any kind of play to
sing such words.” Unable to recall them, Augustine tells us: “I arose, in-
terpreting them to be no other than a command from God to open the
book, and read the first chapter I should find” (8.28).

Thus even at the moment of revelation, Augustine is filled with doubts
and it is only after exhausting the explanations his intellect supplies that
he concludes he is hearing the word of God. Unlike Ezekiel’s absolute
conviction in divine revelation, for Augustine “the perceptual experience”
of hearing the children chanting “is merely the raw material for an inter-
pretation” (Nichols 16). Comparing himself to Anthony, who heard God
speaking to him in the words of the gospel, Augustine interprets a poten-
tially everyday experience as a divine revelation.
It is significant that the mysterious voice Augustine hears, even if it is a transcendental theophany, has to be interpreted as such, because this heralds a shift toward the immanent experience of the Romantic epiphany. At the center of this shift is the locus of truth. Both biblical and classical epiphanies typically make an absolute claim to truth through the manifestation of a divine being, but whereas for the Old Testament prophets, the epiphany is ontological, for the evangelists, epiphany must be interpreted in relation to Scripture. This means that the epiphany becomes an epistemological experience, even when the illumination is as dazzling as St. Paul’s conversion (Acts 9.3–9). Far from being blinded by the light, Augustine’s initial doubts and his focus on ordinary sensory experience as the trigger of revelation suggest that the truth of the epiphany is to be sought in the individual who perceives it, or in everyday events themselves—characteristic sites of the Romantic epiphany. Indeed, Augustine, a professor of rhetoric, has a remarkably modern approach to Scripture. Reflecting on the multitude of interpretations of Genesis that already existed in the late fourth century, he concludes that “the truth which those words contain appear to different enquiries in a different light” (12.24). Although Augustine never doubts that Genesis is the word of God, his willingness to sanction innumerable interpretations as potentially true marks an important step toward the modern literary epiphany.

Phillip Cary goes so far as to claim that Augustine “originates medieval and modern semiotics” (143; see Neuhold, Measuring the Sadness, 25–36). I can find no evidence of Joyce using Augustine’s “semiotics” directly, but “the ruah of . . . Hippo” (FW 38.30–31)—or spirit of Augustine—certainly shapes the vision and language of the Wake. In May 1927, Joyce wrote to Weaver, explaining a passage from the first chapter of Work in Progress, glossing the opening phrase, “O foenix culprit!” (23.16), as follows: “O felix culpa! S. Augustine’s famous phrase in praise of Adam’s sin. Fortunate fault! Without it the Redeemer wd not have been born. Hence also the antecedent sin of Lucifer without which Adam wd not have been created or able to fall” (SL 321). Of course, “foenix” is also “Phoenix park” (SL 321), the “culprit” is HCE (or Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, in one of his avatars), and without his crime, the book would not exist as we know it. This motif runs right through the Wake: “O fortunous casualitas!” “O happy fault!” “O felicitous culpability” (175.19, 202.34, 263.29), and given that the fall is also the fall of Babel, this “Fortunate fault” is the sin that brings the plurality of languages into being.
Another famous phrase of Augustine’s, “Securus iudicat orbis terrarium” (“the verdict of the world is secure”),\(^\text{13}\) also echoes through the *Wake*. In 1.4, it is quoted verbatim in defence of “our hagious curious ancestor,” HCE, whose original sin is compared to Adam and Eve “uncover[ing] the nakedness of an unknown body,” and the fall of Babel, since when “the sibspeeches of all mankind have foliated”; in each case, the “framing up of such figments . . . bring[s] the truth to light” of our happy fall into post-lapsarian history (96.26–36). In fact, Augustine’s phrase “is not too high a motto for all human artwork,” Joyce states in “Drama and Life” (*CW* 42), and his last work includes two dozen variations on it, bringing the very notion of sin into question, as *Finnegans Wake* offers its all-redeeming vision of the world. Although the *Wake* is riddled with uncertainty, Joyce’s language rests secure in its indeterminacy, celebrating the endless foliations of a happy fall into babelian polyglossia.

**Medieval Manifestations**

The origins of Wakese can be traced back to the epiphanies, but the interwoven text that constitutes his “chaosmos of Alle” (*FW* 118.21) is in important respects a medieval illumination. Unfurling this scroll to its beginnings, we find that Daedalus’s theory of epiphany in *Stephen Hero* is ultimately derived from a series of aesthetic reflections that Joyce recorded between January 1903 and November 1904.\(^\text{14}\) Initially, these were prompted by his reading of Aristotle in Paris (*LII* 28, 38), which proved influential enough for him to proclaim himself an “Aristotelian” (S. Joyce 1971, 53). In “The Holy Office” (1904), Joyce names his persona “Katharsis-Purgative,” bringing the “mind of witty Aristotle” to tavern and brothel, before affirming the medieval mettle of his soul, “[s]teeled in the school of old Aquinas” (1–6, 81–82). Following this scholastic tradition, both *Stephen Hero* (77) and *Portrait* (209) characterize Stephen’s theory as “applied Aquinas,” even though the “lore” Stephen relies on is “only a garner of slender sentences from Aristotle’s poetics and psychology and a *Synopsis Philosophiae Scholasticae ad mentem divi Thomae*” (*P* 176). These are often slighted as textbook selections, but Stephen tells the Dean of Studies he “can work on at present by the light of one or two ideas of Aristotle and Aquinas,” since they illuminate his thinking with “the lightnings of intuition” (176). As Fran O’Rourke has shown, Joyce too based his aesthetics on a few isolated quotations from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics,*
translated from the French, and Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, probably quoted from memory; consequently, his aesthetics bear little relation to Aristotelian or Thomist doctrine, but the ideas Joyce garnered from the angelic doctor (along with another medieval theologian, Duns Scotus) provided the springboard for his definition of epiphany.

Stephen’s definition undoubtedly has roots in Romanticism, but Umberto Eco argues convincingly that “Joyce remained medievally minded from youth through maturity,” seeking to re-create “the universal rules of cosmic order” in his microcosmic works, where “[e]very word embodies every other because language is a self-reflecting world” (1989, 6–7). For Eco, this “Order . . . is the mechanism which permits epiphanies,” and although his definition of epiphany as “the living symbol of something” (7) is vague, when Eco’s axiom is applied to language, it leads to a brilliant insight: that Joyce’s “medieval mind” creates a linguistic epiphany through the semiotic web of the *Wake*.

The paradigm for Joyce is Dante, whom he loved “almost as much as the Bible” (JJ 226). Mary Reynolds argues that the complex poetic structure of the *Commedia* with its subtle patterns of interweaving imagery “became a central poetic principle in Joyce’s own work” (175). For instance, Reynolds shows how Dante’s imagery of light, first announced by the reflected sunrise in *Inferno* 1.17, continues through to the final cantos of the *Commedia* (119–48). This luminous epiphany seems to have dazzled Joyce: reading “Dante tires one quickly,” he said; “it is as if one were to look at the sun” (JJ 430). Of course, Dante’s divine apparition is never presented directly; “*l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle*” invites us to imagine the primum mobile manifest as love—but love, like light, is a metaphor with an unspoken tenor. Lucia Boldrini contrasts this mystical silence of the unsayable with Joyce’s linguistic void, distinguishing Dante’s leaps from Joyce’s gaps (149–62), but the underlying structure remains the same. Similarly, as Reynolds argues, Joyce’s patterns of repetition and variation are structurally equivalent to Dante’s *entrelace*, and in both cases they are employed to create epiphanies, whether in Dante’s heavenly rose or Joyce’s “immense system of . . . correspondences” (*CW* 221).

In fact, there are close correspondences between Dante’s “*candida rosa*” (*Paradiso* 31.1), whose “*trina luce*” (trinal light, 31.28) splits the white light of heaven into three colored circles reflecting each other like rainbows—a vision words are inadequate to describe (33.115–23)—and Joyce’s “prism of a language manycoloured,” refracting Dantean rhymes into three distinct
hues \((P\, 181; \, U\, 7.713–24)\), before figuring language in the *Wake* as an infinite spectrum of light, reflected in Issy and the rainbow girls. For Dante, words can never express this conception of “l’alto lume,” just as the circle can never be squared \((33.116–38)\), which is why God is never named; likewise, Archdruid Berkeley’s “hueful panepiphanal world” is merely a “photo-reflection,” for the “true inwardness of reality,” the “gloria of light actually retained,” is invisible \((611.13–24)\). Yet, in both the *Commedia* and the *Wake*, figures of negation combine with interlacing motifs such as light, extraordinary verbal innovation, and complex literary structures to make language a vehicle of revelation, revealing both poets’ underlying reverence for language.

Lucia Boldrini shows how Dante gives ordinary language the same status as sacred Scripture by extending traditional biblical exegesis to literary texts in his *Convivio* and *Epistle to Can Grande* \((Boldrini\, 27–37)\). This fourfold interpretation implies polysemy, and Boldrini argues that Joyce’s polysemy can be compared to Dante’s, but whereas for Dante it offers a means of adding and ordering multiple levels of meaning, for Joyce it becomes a means of including and distorting all possible meaning. Boldrini pursues this analogy in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, where Dante sifts through Italian vernaculars to combine the best of each into a “vulgare illustre,” or radiant language \((103)\), just as Joyce combines seventy-plus idioms into the hybrid form of the *Wake* \((102–16)\). In this context, the synthetic language of the *Divine Comedy*, grafting a dozen dialects, as well as Latin and Provençal, onto a Florentine base, provides a compelling model for the multilingualism of the *Wake*. Moreover, Boldrini’s argument for the origins of Dante’s polysemy and polyglossia in scriptural revelation may apply to Joyce. Estimates vary as to the number of languages in the *Wake*, but Laurent Milesi points out that the text hints at seventy, a doubly significant figure: “It is the traditional number of peoples said to have inhabited the earth, and the Talmud states that each commandment which issued from God’s mouth in the gift of the Law on Mount Sinai was divided into 70 languages, so that each people could hear the divine revelation” \((Milesi\, 2004,\, 153)\).

**Dante. . . Rousseau. Wordsworth. Joyce**

“In Dante dwells the whole spirit of the Renaissance,” Joyce told Francini Bruni \((JJ\, 226)\). He also said he would take Shakespeare over Dante as
his desert island book (Budgen 183), so we shouldn’t read too much into these pronouncements, but when it comes to the development of Joyce’s epiphanies, it makes sense to pass directly to the Romantics. This is not to deny the importance of Renaissance writers for Joyce, but he was not primarily interested in those authors for moments of epiphany. As Beja, Langbaum, and Nichols have argued, for a direct literary model we must look to Wordsworth, but before turning to Wordsworth’s “spots of time,” I want to show how the key developments I have outlined were extended by Rousseau. To recapitulate, there are three key developments in the history of the literary epiphany from Genesis to Joyce: first, a gradual process of internalization as literary epiphanies move from object to subject, transcendence to immanence, ontology to epistemology; second, as epiphanies become experiences requiring interpretation, they are increasingly susceptible to doubt; and third, as writers begin to scrutinize both the experience of epiphany and its literary representation, the focus of epiphany turns to language.

Birgit Neuhold demonstrates this growing skepticism from Augustine’s *Confessions* to Rousseau’s. As she shows, there are striking parallels between Augustine’s conversion and Rousseau’s “illumination de Vincennes”: in both revelations the context is the visit of a friend (Alypius; Diderot); both are triggered by reading a fragment of text (Romans 13; the *Mercure de France*); and both writers exhibit intense physical reactions: Augustine casts himself down under “a certain fig-tree, giving full vent to [his] tears” (8.12.28), while Rousseau collapses under a tree to find his shirt wet with his tears. These similarities indicate that Rousseau is consciously reworking Augustine’s seminal moment in his account to Malesherbes, and when Rousseau rewrites this scene in Book 8 of his *Confessions*, the parallel to Augustine’s conversion (*Confessions* 8) is unmistakable.

Both writers also draw on St. Paul for their road and prison motifs, and, like Paul’s conversion, Rousseau’s epiphany is recounted twice. Although the situation in Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1769–70) is almost identical to the letter of 1762, the moment of revelation is transformed. In his letter to Malesherbes, Rousseau described the incident as a revelation that led him to his vocation as a writer, for “[a]ll that I was able to retain from the flood of great truths which . . . engulfed me in light as I lay beneath that tree, is scattered all too sparsely through my three principal works” (6–7). By contrast, looking back on the same experience seven years later, Rousseau describes his state as an agitation approaching delirium (476); and whereas
the central insight of Rousseau’s 1762 illumination is the natural goodness of man, in the *Confessions*, Rousseau is surprised by his naive enthusiasm for truth, liberty, and virtue (477).

I am not sure whether Stanislaus Joyce was thinking of the young idealist or the mature skeptic when he hoped his brother would “become the Rousseau of Ireland” (1971, 3); in either case, Rousseau’s progression from epiphanic ideals to retrospective skepticism bears comparison with Stephen’s aesthetics of epiphany, developed through *Stephen Hero*, *Portrait*, and *Ulysses*. Doubt, confession, and revelation are central to both writers, but Joyce goes far beyond Rousseau, for his epiphanies are never flashes of light or moments of vision; rather, they offer mundane snapshots of ordinary life, voicing a fundamental skepticism toward the notion of truth.

This growing doubt gradually permeates the text, until language itself becomes the site of epiphany. Paul de Man’s reading of the Romantic moment illustrates this shift. In “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” de Man compares three passages from Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Hölderlin, each describing a journey through the Alps that culminates in “a moment of spiritual revelation” (de Man 1984, 10). For de Man, these texts represent more than an ascent from earthly, material nature to a mental and celestial world; in them, he traces a shift from the objective world to the imagination, from the pure language of nouns in Hölderlin’s “Brot und Wein” to “Heimkunft,” where “the poetic word has become an offspring of the sky” (14, 15). This poetic revolution leads de Man to claim that the Romantics “put into question, in the language of poetry, the ontological priority of the sensory object” (14, 15), a radical claim that might lead to false conclusions. Yet with the emphasis on questioning rather than negation, and on poetic language rather than imagination, this process of self-reflexive interrogation leads from Romanticism to Modernism.

Untethered from referential objects, language itself becomes an object of scrutiny (in its material form and its signification), opening the door to doubt and revelation. There are glimmers of this linguistic reflection in the Romantics, but broadly speaking, Rousseau’s doubts concern the veracity of his epiphanic experience, whereas Joyce’s epiphanies put language itself into question. Likewise, Wordsworth’s revelations are imaginative experiences, whereas Joyce’s are linguistic. There can be no doubt about the connection, though, particularly when we compare Wordsworth’s Apocalyptic imagery and aesthetics of the sublime with Joyce’s.
Both the sublime and revelatory aspects of Wordsworth’s epiphanies are evident in his celebrated description of the descent to Gondo:

The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (6.566–72)

Wordsworth creates a sublime vision of rock and sky, woods and waterfalls, through a series of striking antitheses: “woods decaying, never to be decayed, . . . Winds thwarting winds,” “torrents shooting from the clear blue sky” ([556–61]), culminating in “Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light” (567). But Wordsworth also draws on Revelation for the imagery of clouds and heavens, darkness and light, the first and last end, likening these contradictory aspects of nature to “Characters of the great Apocalypse, / The types and symbols of Eternity.” While explicitly invoking typological and allegorical hermeneutics (“types and symbols”), Wordsworth goes beyond the traditional Enlightenment metaphor of nature as God’s book, for the revelation he represents is a phenomenological experience, “half create[d]” (1986, 116) by the subject, and re-created by the poet in his epiphany. When these contradictory images, simultaneously describing an extraordinary sight and the overwhelming effect it has upon the speaker—“Tumult and peace”—are finally resolved into “the workings of one mind,” Wordsworth creates an exquisite ambiguity between the mind of God and the mind of the poet. Indeed, this ambiguity is central to Wordsworth’s epiphanies, where the godlike infinitude of both nature and the mind are manifest through a Kantian revelation, in which the pure idea of unity is awoken by the sublime, affording a transcendental glimpse of the infinite (Critique of Judgement §§25–26).

Arguably, the most important study of the literary epiphany is Natural Supernaturalism, where M. H. Abrams shows how two key metaphors from Apocalypse—the New Jerusalem as heaven on earth and the marriage of Christ with humanity—profoundly shaped Christian thought. Since the biblical narrative is composed of a few key events with a definite beginning, middle, and end, and given the strong exegetical tendency to
read the Bible either typologically, as prefigurations and postfigurations of the defining moments, or allegorically and anagogically, as symbols of an esoteric truth, biblical eschatology is readily extended from the day of reckoning for the human race to the individual’s final judgment. This leads to the tradition of spiritual autobiography heralded by St. Paul and Augustine, a mode of interpretation carried much further by Inner Light Protestants, such as Jacob Boehme and radical Puritans such as Gerrard Winstanley. For Winstanley, “Adam is within every man and woman,” while the spirit “is the light and life of Christ within the heart” (176, 214, qtd. in Abrams 1971, 53). Blake develops the same theme in *Jerusalem* when he asks, “Is the Holy Ghost any other than an Intellectual Fountain?” and “What are the Pains of Hell but Ignorance, Bodily Lust, Idleness and devastation?” (77). Joyce in turn saw a “glorified humanity” stamped in Blake’s work, suggesting that “the visionary ecstasy of the seer” in “a poor London room” marked “the first time in the history of the world that the Eternal spoke though the mouth of the humble” (*CW* 218–21). Joyce’s emphasis on the humble medium is significant, for his “sudden spiritual manifestation” in “the vulgarity of speech or of gesture” follows in the same tradition, carrying the process of internalization into language by conceiving of literature as “the continual affirmation of the human spirit” (*CW* 83).

In *The Prelude*, too, divinity is found within:

> Of Genius, Power,  
> Creation and Divinity itself  
> I have been speaking, for my theme has been  
> What passed within me. . . .  
> This is, in truth, heroic argument. (3.171–74)

Indeed, in the “Prospectus” to *The Recluse* (to which *The Prelude* was to form the “ante-chapel”), Wordworth announces that

> the discerning intellect of Man,  
> When wedded to this goodly universe  
> In love and holy passion, shall find [heaven]  
> A simple produce of the common day. (52–55)

Wordworth’s metaphor recalls the nuptial imagery at the end of Revelation where Jerusalem, as the new heaven on earth, is “prepared as a bride for her husband” (21.2), for “the marriage of the Lamb is come”
(19.6–7)—although in Wordsworth’s version, “the Lamb and New Jerusalem are replaced by man’s mind as the bridegroom and nature as the bride” (Abrams 1971, 56), so that the “great consummation” is transposed from the indefinite future to the present moment. Wordsworth’s “high argument,” then, is that paradise is no “mere fiction” or “history only of departed things”; through our “discerning intellect,” we can experience it here and now through “the simple produce of the common day,” because “Mind” and “World” are divinely and “exquisitely . . . fitted” (Prospectus 63–68).

As a young man, Joyce copied the entire Book of Apocalypse by hand, frequently echoing its imagery in his subsequent works. He, too, internalized Revelation; but whereas Wordsworth uses Apocalyptic metaphors to chart the growth of the poet’s soul, Joyce constantly returned to the language of Revelation in his search for the revelation of language.

There is a similar transposition between Wordsworth’s neo-Kantian aesthetics of the sublime and Joyce’s aesthetics of epiphany. In the Prelude, privileged moments evoke sublime experiences, such as the climactic view from Mount Snowdon: “The perfect image of a mighty Mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity” (13.69–70). Indeed, by the end of The Prelude, all things have “an underpresence, / The sense of God,” for nature is filled with “sublime and lovely forms,” giving rise to “the one thought / By which we live, Infinity and God” (72–76, 183–84). This sublime “Power” of nature “Thrusts forth upon the senses”—“a genuine Counterpart . . . of the glorious faculty / Which higher minds bear with them as their own” (85–90). For Wordsworth, this “glorious faculty” that sees and partakes of “the mighty unity / In all which we behold” (254–55) allows us to see the infinite power of nature in every experience: “This is the very spirit in which [higher minds] deal / With all the objects of the universe” (91–92).

With its biblical origins, sublime aesthetics, panoramic scope, and everyday language, this “rapture of the Hallelujah sent / From all that breathes and is” (1805, 13.262–63) has much in common with the Joycean epiphany. But as I show in the next chapter, while Joyce followed Wordsworth in viewing all experience as potentially sublime, his aesthetics of epiphany embody their own theory, revealing the sublimity of language.

A final correspondence worth commenting on is the connection between Wordsworth’s “spots of time” (1799, 1.288) and Joyce’s elegiac epiphanies. Both deal with death, although in each case, loss is figured differently. In each of Wordsworth’s “spots” of time, death is elided, but this
absence becomes the nodal point for a complex emotional and perceptual experience that transforms the narrator, and these heightened moments provide key scenes for the two-part *Prelude* of 1798–99, whose epiphanic structure Wordsworth expands upon in the later versions. The first of these moments is occasioned by a drowned man dredged from Esthwaite lake, where the “breathless stillness” of the “beauteous scene” is shattered by the shocking image of his “ghastly face” as his body rises “bolt upright” from the water (258–79). The second is an early memory, from “the twilight of rememberable life,” when the young poet “through fear / Dismounting” led his horse down a steep descent to discover the remains of a gibbet where a man was hung for murdering his wife (296–313). Here, Wordsworth’s description of the “long green ridge of turf. . . . Whose shape was like a grave” bears comparison to “The Thorn,” and just as the stonelike thorn and grave-like moss of the lyric are invested with mystery by the tale of Martha Ray, Wordsworth’s spot of time is given epiphanic significance not by the horror of the gallows but by the mysterious girl he sees as he climbs back to the summit of the beacon, “A girl who bore a pitcher on her head / And seemed with difficult steps to force her way / Against the blowing wind” (317–19). Looking back, the mature poet recognizes that “It was in truth / An ordinary sight”; and yet, he says, it invested the whole scene with a “visionary dreariness” (319–22).

This ability to color ordinary events with visionary significance is the essence of the modern epiphany, allowing revelation to be found in, or ascribed to, the most commonplace experiences. This point seems contradicted by the dramatic encounters with death Wordsworth describes, especially the last, dealing with the death of John Wordsworth when William was thirteen. However, the significance of this event is expressed not in the death itself, which is narrated matter-of-factly (“he died, / And I and my two Brothers, orphans then, / Followed his body to the grave” [351–53]), but by the excursion that precedes it and the reflections that follow.

Shortly before their father’s death, the speaker and his brothers, Richard and John, had climbed a crag above a crossroads, seeking an early sign of the horses that would bear them home. Perched on the highest vantage point, on a “Stormy, . . . rough, and wild” December day, when the wind whistled through a hawthorn and they had only a solitary sheep for company, the speaker peers through the gaps in the mist at the “intermitting prospects of the wood / And plain beneath” (348–49). This sublime vision is juxtaposed with the bare account of John Wordsworth’s death, which
appears to the poet as a “chastisement” (355) when he thinks back to the “anxiety of hope” and “trite reflections of morality” he recently felt on the crag, causing him to bow down “[t]o God, who . . . corrected [his] desires” (360). Thus, the moment of death is retrospectively reconfigured as a manifestation of divine judgment,

And afterwards the wind, and sleety rain,
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
. . . and the mist . . .
All these were spectacles and sounds to which
I often would repair, and thence would drink
As at a fountain. (361–70)

As this passage makes clear, the “spot of time” is not an isolated moment; the death of the father is intimately bound up with the elements and experiences that precede it, just as the sight of the gibbet is associated with the difficult descent and the girl with the pitcher, or the vision of the drowned man is connected to the boy’s confusion upon seeing a “heap of garments” by the lake. To the speaker, these memories gain in power each time they are recalled, transforming the shock of the initial experience into a source of strength, for they “impressed [his] mind / With images, to which in following years / Far other feelings were attached” (283–85). Indeed, Wordsworth’s “spots of time . . . retain / A fructifying”—or “renewing” (1805)—“virtue, whence, . . . our minds / (Especially the imaginative power) / Are nourished, and invisibly repaired” (288–94), just as his memory of the wind and rain, the “single sheep and the one, blasted tree,” soothes his pain and refreshes his spirit.

As I have shown, death is also the most important theme in Joyce’s epiphanies, and the structure of the epiphanies bears close comparison to Wordsworth’s “spots of time.” This is as true at the microscopic level, where Wordsworth’s spots confront death as a temporal and existential limit while Joyce’s epiphanies encounter the limits of language, as it is at the macroscopic, for Joyce’s works, like Wordsworth’s, are structured around a series of epiphanies. There are numerous similarities between their respective moments of revelation, from the formative role of the book of Revelation to neo-Kantian aesthetics of the sublime and a deistic vision of the all-manifest epiphany. But there are also significant differences between Wordsworth’s epiphanies and Joyce’s: for Wordsworth, any
experience may occasion a “spot of time,” but such incidents always lead to privileged moments, revealing the extraordinary in the ordinary, whereas Joyce’s epiphanies manifest the ordinariness of the ordinary and therefore seem banal. Consequently, there is rarely any doubt in Wordsworth’s moments of insight, which typically present a triumphant revelation, whereas incertitude is central to Joyce’s manifestations. Epistemological differences have tonal reverberations: Joyce’s epiphanies are characterized by irony, with occasional flashes of humor, both of which are sorely missing in Wordsworth. And finally, while for both writers the epiphany is a literary artifact, Wordsworth emphasizes the referential experience of epiphany, whereas Joyce shows forth the epiphany of language.

Joyce’s Epiphanies “in a Wordworth’s”

Ashton Nichols’s *The Poetics of Epiphany* traces Joyce’s aesthetics back to Wordsworth and Shelley. As Nichols shows, there are striking parallels between Daedalus’s definition:

> 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 that 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. *(SH 216)*

and Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry,” where in “the best and happiest of moments,”

> We are aware of evanescent visitations of thought and feeling sometimes associated with place or person, sometimes regarding our own mind alone, and always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression. *(532)*

Stephen’s “most delicate and evanescent of moments” are remarkably similar to Shelley’s “evanescent visitations”: both arise unexpectedly from ordinary places, conversations, or moments of reflection, affecting “those of the most delicate sensibility” and leading us back to “the wonder of our being” when poetry touches “the enchanted chord” *(532)*, “a spiritual state” that “Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley’s, called the enchantment of the heart” *(P 231)*. Nichols demonstrates how these
parallels run through Stephen’s aesthetics, suggesting that “Joyce imported Shelley’s ideas directly into his own theory of epiphany” (104). Although Nichols ascribes Stephen’s theory to Joyce and makes no distinction between the theory in *Stephen Hero* and the aesthetics in *Portrait* (where the word “epiphany” does not occur), the similarities are undeniable, showing the extent to which Joyce drew on Romantic poetics both for his theory of epiphany in *Stephen Hero* and his conception of the artist in *Portrait*.

This Romantic influence goes beyond “The Defence of Poetry.” Nichols argues that Shelley’s and Joyce’s theories “derive ultimately from Wordsworth,” specifically the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (104–5), where the poet’s “lively sensibility” is affected by “absent things as if they were present,” throwing over “incidents and situations from common life” a “colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect” (244; see Nichols 104–5). There can be little doubt about the importance of the “Preface” to both Shelley and Joyce, but Nichols’s focus is too narrow. As Abrams has shown, Wordsworth’s poetics of epiphany are expressed most powerfully not in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* but in the “Prospectus” that concludes the preface to *The Excursion*, a poem Joyce cites as an example of Wordsworth’s genius. In a letter of May 1905, Joyce’s “history of literature” awards “the highest palms to Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Shelley” (*LII* 90); his next letter, dated June 6, 1905, judges between them: “I think W[ordsworth] of all English men of letters best deserves your word ‘genius.’ Read his poem to his lost son in ‘Excursion’” (2.91).

Wordsworth is frequently regarded as the founder of the modern literary epiphany. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, Abrams notes striking similarities between Wordsworth’s “spots of time” and the “Modern Moment,” especially Hopkins’s theophanies and Joyce’s epiphanies (1971, 418–22). Robert Langbaum is more explicit: “The epiphanic mode,” derived from Wordsworth, “is to a large extent the Romantic and modern mode—a dominant modern convention” (336). Ashton Nichols develops this thesis in *The Poetics of Epiphany* (1987): “Wordsworth’s spots of time bear comparison not only to Joyce’s epiphanies but to Coleridge’s ‘flashes,’ Shelley’s ‘best and happiest moments,’ Keats’s ‘fine isolated verisimilitude,’ Browning’s ‘infinite moment,’ Arnold’s ‘gleaming’ moments, and Tennyson’s ‘little things . . . that strike on a sharper sense’” (5). Nichols convincingly demonstrates that epiphany is characteristic of nineteenth-century poetry
and that it continues to play a crucial role in the poetry of Yeats, Eliot, Stevens, and Heaney. In Nichols’s account, Browning “becomes a central transitional figure, in whose increasingly narrative monologues the new epiphany begins the movement from lyric poem to novel” (5). However, I believe Baudelaire’s *Petits Poèmes en Prose* had a much greater effect on Joyce’s formal experiments in the epiphanies (more than half of which are prose poems), while Pater’s hedonistic atomism, memorably expounded in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*, provides perhaps the strongest link to the modern narrative epiphany.

According to Stanislaus Joyce, “Jim’s . . . ambition in life is to burn with a hard and gem-like ecstasy” (1971, 43), a phrase that deliberately echoes Pater’s conclusion,22 and in *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja points out striking similarities between the little vignettes Marius records in his notebook (Pater 1873, 284–86) and Joyce’s early epiphanies (Beja 1971, 39–40). More recently, Jay Losey has shown that there are important similarities between Pater’s “imaginary portraits” and the epiphanies, while John McGowan demonstrates how Pater’s emphasis on maximally charged moments of experience leads to a tension between the traditional concept of the “soulful self” and the “dispersed, transient” subjectivity of the modernist epiphany.

In his seminal study, Morris Beja leaves little doubt about the relevance of Romantic notions of epiphany to twentieth-century fiction. Beja emphasizes not only the frequency of epiphanic moments in modernist fiction but also the importance of epiphany as an aesthetic ideal to the artistic aims of its novelists. For instance, Henry James spoke of converting “the very pulses of the air into revelations” (1962, 31–32); Virginia Woolf describes “moments of being”—“little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” when “a whole vision, an entire conception, seemed contained in [a] moment” (1935, 259–60); Thomas Wolfe tries to “fix eternally in the patterns of an indestructible form a single moment of man’s living” (551); and Joseph Conrad stresses that the task of the writer is “to make you hear, to make you feel . . . before all, to make you see” an epiphany so complete that “behold!—all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest” (xv–xvi).23

Clearly epiphanies do not begin and end with modernist fiction. Wim Tigges’s *Moments of Moment* collects essays on writers as diverse as Ann
Radcliffe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, George Moore, Elizabeth Bowen, Samuel Beckett, Philip Larkin, Seamus Heaney, and Thomas Pynchon. Elsewhere, critics have discerned epiphanies in the work of Shakespeare, Sterne, Eliot, Wetherell, Dickens, Hardy, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Wharton, Proust, Mann, and Pasternak, to name a few. In the same way, Joyceans have often been tempted to apply the term to Joyce’s work as a whole. In an influential early study, Irene Hendry proclaims that “Joyce’s work is a tissue of epiphanies . . . from the briefest revelation in his lyrics to the epiphany that occupies one gigantic, enduring ‘moment’ in *Finnegans Wake*” (1946, 461). William Tindall calls *Dubliners* “an epiphany of epiphanies,” taking the same approach to Joyce’s other works, each of which he portrays as a series of epiphanic moments, including an epiphany of Dublin itself (1951, 11, 34). Maurice Beebe, Hugh Kenner, and William T. Noon also made epiphany central to their analyses of Joyce, so that by 1965 Florence Walzl could write, “It has long been recognised that Joyce’s writing is a texture of epiphanies” (436).

Yet this very profusion provoked a reaction against the term. In “Joyce and the Epiphany: The Key to the Labyrinth?” (1964), Robert Scholes regards “Epiphany-hunting” as “a harmless pastime” that “ought probably to be condoned, like symbol-hunting, archetype-hunting, Scrabble, and other intellectual recreations” (66), although as a critical term he is adamant that the phrase should be used only to designate “those little bits of prose which Joyce himself gave the name to” (76). Riled by Walzl’s failure to heed his proscription, Scholes set out a ten-point corrective, asserting that “the term ‘Epiphany’ as all too commonly used in discussion of *Dubliners* and Joyce’s other fiction has nothing to do with the term ‘Epiphany’ as Joyce himself used it” (1967, 152). Although contentious, Scholes’s view was naturally influential, since he had edited the epiphanies in *The Workshop of Daedalus* (1965). His sideswipe at epiphany-hunters in general, and Walzl in particular, for using Joyce’s term “to gain a spurious authority for many a tenuous aperçu, which might seem much less impressive if not cloaked in the borrowed raiment of Joyce’s phraseology” (1967, 152) provoked a heated correspondence in *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*. Scholes continued to maintain that “epiphany” had become a “cliché” in Joyce criticism, “an arid formula for cranking out unnecessary interpretations,” while Walzl rightly pointed out that the notion of epiphany is central to Daedalus’s aesthetic theory and that Joyce
was familiar with epiphany in the liturgy, legitimating a broader use of the term that “tends to illuminate, rather than obscure, his definitions and to clarify his own later practices in fiction” (1967, 154).

If Scholes was justified in querying the overenthusiastic use of “epiphany” in early Joyce studies, where it is often applied indiscriminately to Joyce’s use of symbols, leitmotifs, the revelations of character or reader, and virtually any climactic moment, it is nevertheless the case, as Feshbach and Beja (1972) have argued, that epiphany remains central to Joyce’s work.25 Scholes’s admonition that the term should only be applied to the manuscript epiphanies is too stringent, but he was right that it needs to be circumscribed. At the same time, given its rich literary, theological, and philosophical tradition, it is difficult to arrive at a strict definition. Beja attempts to do so in Epiphany in the Modern Novel, provisionally defining epiphany as “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, event, or memorable phase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it” (18). While Beja’s emphasis on suddenness, triviality, and irrelevance is helpful, his definition is caught between the demands of generality and specificity. The first phrase is drawn from Stephen Hero, but because Beja also wants to account for epiphanies in Proust, Woolf, Faulkner, and modernist fiction as a whole, he first broadens the scope of epiphany (to “some object, event or memorable phase of the mind”) and then limits its effect (to the disproportionality between the significance or logical relevance and origin of the manifestation). Subsequent theorists have been led down the same path, attempting to identify further criteria of epiphany, such as Langbaum’s “psychological association, momentaneousness, suddenness and fragmentation” (in Tigges 1999, 44) or to classify them according to type. For instance, Nichols distinguishes between the “proleptic” epiphany, “in which the mind, in response to a present predisposition, transforms a past experience to produce a new sense of significance” (74), and the “adeolonic” epiphany, which “refers to a non-perceptual manifestation produced immediately by a powerful perceptual experience” (75). Wim Tigges adopts this distinction, identifying three subcategories of proleptic epiphanies (those in which a past event is later seen in a new light; moments when the past is recaptured, as in Proust; déjà vu) and five types of adeolonic epiphanies, triggered by place, person, language, an object, and the “ultimate moment,” death (27–30).
While these taxonomies encourage reflection on the variety of moments we may wish to call epiphanies, as definitions they are unsatisfying because each category or subcategory is open to interpretation: in Tigges’s scheme virtually any literary event or encounter could be interpreted as an epiphany. This highlights important questions about the locus of epiphany: Are objects (or events) epiphanized, or do subjects experience epiphany; and if the latter, are they perceived by literary characters or by the reader? These questions, which continue to inspire lively debate among Joyce scholars, arise directly from Stephen’s theory of epiphany; unless they can be answered, it will be impossible to arrive at a comprehensive and tenable definition.

Therefore, I will begin with Joyce’s definition in *Stephen Hero*, arguing that Stephen’s “sudden spiritual manifestation” is a significant act, “whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind” (*SH* 216). Focusing on the language of the epiphanies and the way they are reused in Joyce’s later works, I will endeavor to bring Joyce’s epiphanies to light as purely linguistic phenomena.

As such, they are quite different from classico-biblical and Romantic evocations of epiphany, albeit with important similarities. Despite a gradual shift from traditional, transcendental apparitions to the immanent revelations of the Romantic period, Joyce’s epiphanies, like Wordsworth’s, are steeped in the language of Revelation. Indeed, for Joyce, language itself becomes the revelation, sublating distinctions between transcendence and immanence, objectivity and subjectivity, ontology and epistemology. By relocating the epiphany in the word, Joyce departs significantly from its earlier loci: divine apparitions, the universal book of God, or the perceiver. At the same time, his move follows a historical trajectory of interpreting the logos, continuing the overall trend toward internalizing experiences of epiphany (increasingly subject to doubt) from biblical prophets to Romantic poets. Since the epiphanies come into being through, and exist wholly within, the Symbolic order of language, a Lacanian reading might track this internalization back to the origins of the subject in the recognition of self as other. For Lacan, the insatiable desire to bridge that schism promulgates the Symbolic order, providing an apt analogy for Joyce’s epiphany of language, whereby a “deep wound of doubt” or “void” of “incertitude” (*E* 144; *U* 9.842) leads to an absence of determinate meaning in the epiphanies and their endless capacity to signify, inscribing “absence
[as] the highest form of presence” (WD 144). This central absence, or silence, is the major difference between Joyce’s epiphanies and those of his precursors, which are manifestations of presence, whether transcendental or immanent; yet Joyce’s representation of absence also connects his epiphanies to the literary tradition I have outlined, because when language is figured as a cornucopian void, it becomes the site of revelation.