

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Readers are aware, when reading Patrick White's novels, of his frequent use of illumination and epiphany in his characters' journeys through life. Often these experiences are associated with light. The word 'epiphany' is derived from the Greek root, *epiphainein*, meaning 'to manifest', and it refers specifically to the Christian festival celebrated on January 6th in the Orthodox Church. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, first edition, the word 'epiphany' is confined to 'a manifestation or striking appearance of some divine or superhuman being.'¹ The core religious association comes from the viewing of the Infant Christ by the Magi or three wise men, as described in the Christian Bible.² This Biblical description is preceded by a revelation to the men advising of the infant's birth and then to a summoning of them to see God in the human form of Jesus.

In Matthew's narrative this revelation is assisted by the movement of a bright star.³ In the gospel according to Luke, an angel, advises the Magi. In both descriptions the revelation is accompanied by a great light. The association of illumination and of light are an integral part of the concept of epiphany. Thus, although the three wise men experience an epiphany at the

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. iii, 1933, p. 243, and cp. 2nd edn, vol. v, 1989, pp. 333-334.

² See Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1-12, and Luke, chapter 2, verses 8-20. In the latter description the three men are described as shepherds rather than wise men.

³ The star has been identified, by Kepler, as the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in Pisces in May, October, and December of the year 7 B.C. See A. J. Grieve 'The Chronology of the New Testament', in *A Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Arthur S. Peake, Thomas Nelson, London,

sight of the Divine Infant, they had already undergone a profound spiritual illumination prior to their journey. What is communicated in the story by this illumination is both a knowledge of the birth of Jesus, and also a particular form of spiritual enlightenment, that is deemed to be both revelatory and inspirational. It is important to comprehend this since the knowledge fated to have been imparted by the illumination is a necessary prerequisite for an understanding of the significance when they sight the infant.⁴

'Epiphany' is first used in the Christian sense by St. Paul⁵ who made use of it to describe both the first and final comings of Christ. Then the word soon came to be used of the miracles of Christ as manifestations of divine power. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Feast of the Epiphany is observed to celebrate the baptism of Christ. In liturgical use, therefore, the word has a number of associated meanings, with the manifestation of a divine or superhuman being the most common. In the standard volume, *A Catholic Dictionary*,⁶ these manifestations are held to include the adoration of the Magi, Christ's baptism, the moment when the voice from heaven proclaimed Him the Son of God, and the miracle of the water changing into wine. For water in this instance becomes not just the sustenance of life but is henceforth associated with personal sanctification. Earlier religions, for example that of the Greek Orthodox Church, had recognised an epiphany of the deity, the Great Mistress

(1919), rep. 1952, pp. 652-653.

⁴The bodies of the three Magi are said to rest in St. Peter's Church in Cologne. See David C. Fowler, *The Bible in Early English Literature*, Sheldon Press, London, 1977, p. 18.

⁵See the Bible, New Testament, 2 Timothy 1:10.

⁶William E. Addis and Thomas Arnold, eds., *A Catholic Dictionary*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, revised 17th edn., 1960, p. 311.

of Life, and their poetry describes epiphanies of the gods.⁷

The secularisation of the theme of epiphany was utilised most effectively in modern times and for English language literature by James Joyce, who, in a fragment of unpublished manuscript entitled *Stephen Hero*, first outlines his ideas, as to the importance of epiphany for the artist.⁸ He would later collect many such moments together in a book of epiphanies, subsequently known as the Epiphanies. By an 'epiphany' Joyce meant a sudden spiritual showing forth, or manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of physical or observed gesture, or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies or showings of character in a particular instant with extreme care and sensitivity, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent, yet most revelatory, of moments. Thus, in *Stephen Hero*, Stephen tells Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. Cranly then questions the inscrutable dial of the Ballast Office with his own no less inscrutable countenance:

'Yes, said Stephen. I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin's street furniture. Then all at once I see it and know what it is: epiphany.'

'What?'

'Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus.'

⁷ See the entry 'Epiphany', by J. Krümm, in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, 1967, pp. 480-481.

⁸ The manuscript was sold by Miss Sylvia Beach, the publisher of *Ulysses*, in 1935. It was bought by Harvard College Library in 1938 and first published in 1944 by Jonathan Cape, in London. The manuscript is incomplete being pages 519-902, the rest apparently destroyed by fire, probably by Joyce himself. This fragment is the basis of the later work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and differs substantially, especially in the description of places and people. See the 'Introduction', by Theodore Spencer, editor, *Stephen Hero*, by James Joyce, Jonathan Cape, London, 1944.

The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanized.⁹

There are several clearly important issues arising from Stephen's definition and from Joyce's use of the term epiphany. Of central significance is its dual meaning: the inherent truth or essence of the person or object as then observed, and the state of mind or spiritual elation that is to be associated with the insight-filled recognition of the revelation. The first of these emphasises the object or person, the second the observer or receiver. Particular stress is laid upon the ordinariness of the object or person so that any manner of circumstances, including dreams, are maybe potential sources of epiphany.¹⁰ Since the revelation is one of truth, it is followed by an intimate knowledge either of the object, of the person, or of the self. Thus it is clear from the quoted passage that the observer must be receptive and able to interpret these flashes of illumination. In that particular case, Stephen, (as the artist), has deduced something from the clock at the Ballast Office that has not been seen by Cranly. What is revealed, therefore, is a form of subjective truth, a form of new perhaps secular knowledge acquired by intuition, but with a spiritual dimension clearly derived from the intimacy of the moment and from the ecstasy which it evokes.

In *Stephen Hero*, Joyce has Stephen define 'epiphany' as 'a sudden spiritual manifestation'. The reader is told that the commonest, most trivial objects are capable of epiphany for irreligious modern man. Epiphany is seen to be identical with 'radiance' in the liberating aesthetic theory which Stephen

⁹ *ibid.* pp. 188-189.

¹⁰ This is the area emphasised by Northrop Frye in 'The Archetypes of Literature', *Kenyon*

expounds to Cranly in *Stephen Hero* and to Lynch in *A Portrait of the Artist*. When we have perceived the 'wholeness' (unity) of an object and the harmonious relation of its parts, the final stage in our aesthetic appreciation of it and of its meaning is radiance:

We recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.¹¹

Joyce's particular and illuminating worldly use of the concept underlies all his fiction. It is the philosophical foundation for his fiction and its structure.¹² However others, such as Crashaw, Wordsworth, and de Quincy earlier, as well as contemporaries such as Proust and Woolf, had all included similar concepts in their work, albeit sometimes under different terms.¹³ What is important about the way Joyce used the theme is his incorporation of it as a universal condition which all men and women may potentially experience, given appropriate sensibility. Additionally, his aesthetic theory has expanded and extended the definition of epiphany, not just taking it out of the usual and largely restricted religious sense but, from thenceforth and for writers associating the perception of it with light ('radiance') and illumination of the spirit.

Review, xiii, 1951, 92-110. Wordsworthian 'joy' is somewhat akin to Joyce's 'epiphany'.

¹¹ This is the critical part of Joyce's epiphany - he makes it a secular idea, which other writers have then used in a similar manner. Joyce elaborates the idea in both *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait of the Artist*. James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer, *op. cit.*, p. 210; James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, repr. Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1966, pp. 212-213.

¹² The uses Joyce makes of the theme of epiphany in the structure of his novels is not part of this thesis but it is expanded in Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Reading the Book of Himself: Narrative Strategies in the Works of James Joyce*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1989.

¹³ For further discussion see William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce*, Thames &

This sensibility is essential for the recognition and reception of the experience, and for Joyce it is the artist who has that unique mind capable of sudden expansion. He makes this clear when the character, Stephen Dedalus, describes how, when viewing a lone girl on the beach, he realises in an instant of attained knowledge that he is to become an artist. Within the dramatic and galvanising vision of the girl is his life's very destiny. His past and his future are henceforth encapsulated in that truth. Joyce writes movingly of the effect of the revelation upon Stephen:

Heavenly God! Cried Stephen's soul, in an outburst of profane joy.

He turned away from her suddenly and set off across the strand. His cheeks were aflame; his body was aglow; his limbs were trembling. On and on and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him.

Her image had passed into his soul forever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory.¹⁴

In the later novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the word 'epiphany' is not used, but Stephen instead elaborates an aesthetic theory in which the final stage of a work of art is '*claritas*'.¹⁵ It is an idea he has some trouble in rationalising, but it is closest to epiphany¹⁶, and it is specifically associated by him with sudden transforming radiance. It is this radiance, a

Hudson, London, 3rd printing, 1970.

¹⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *op. cit.*, p.172.

¹⁵ *claritas* Lit., to the sight, brightness, clearness, in D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, Cassell Publishers Limited, London, 1959.

state shared with epiphany, that stops the two from becoming mere symbols,¹⁷ but, although the brilliance of the revelation is ecclesiastical, the significance of the symbol is secular. The ecclesiastical nature of the transfiguration of the mundane, evoked by the idea of epiphany, thus serves to reinforce its universal nature and applicability, elevating it above the level of a moral imperative. It is this brilliance Patrick White seeks in 'the extraordinary in the ordinary', as when his character, Stan Parker, saw God, in a 'gob of spittle'.¹⁸

A recent lexical extension of the term 'epiphany' has been evolved to accommodate modern literary theory, so that 'epiphanic' is defined as 'of the nature of or characterised by an epiphany: especially in Literary Theory, constituting or containing a significant moment of revelation'.¹⁹ For the literary critic and theologian, Northrop Frye, epiphanies have long had their source in dreams and they are also the components of folk tales, proverbs and of popular and oracular literature.²⁰ Temporality is only important in the accretion of such flashes as they build into total structures, and even then they may become subsumed into myth, a structure which Frye sees as archetypal. Furthermore, he identifies the 'quest myth' as central to Western literature. In this mode, the status or experience deemed heroic can assume omnipotent power and, therefore, be a further source of revelation to the listeners or readers.

However, it has to be said that the word 'epiphany' outside of the

¹⁶ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-213.

¹⁷ Arnold Armin, *James Joyce*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., New York, 1969, pp. 10-13.

¹⁸ Patrick White, *The Tree of Man*, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1956, p. 495.

¹⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary Additions Series*, eds., John Simpson and Edmund Weiner, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993, vol. 2, p. 45.

²⁰ Northrop Frye, *op. cit.*

dictionary definition, does become vague, a matter recognised by Morris Beja in his 1971 study of *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*. He offers the following definition:

I would call it a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind - the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it.²¹

Others have seen a solely secular definition for epiphany, for example literary critic, Noel Macainsh refers to it as a form of 'release'. Macainsh views White's fiction in the same aesthetic credo as Nietzsche, with the horrors of disintegrating civilisation and its nihilism relieved only by these epiphanic moments, and even then only as illusions.²²

A more expanded approach is to even view moments in sport for post-moderns as epiphanic 'markers', in which the spectator recalls positive experiences in 'great and illuminative detail',²³ and is able to nostalgically and dynamically relive them; however, these two rather broad uses of the term are rooted in a secular world and so the resultant experience cannot be seen as spiritually inspirational or transforming.

Another approach was considered by the Australian poet and critic, Vincent Buckley, in his book, *Poetry and the Sacred*.²⁴ He referred to the writings of Mircea Eliade,²⁵ who drew on the earlier work of Rudolf Otto, *Das*

²¹ Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1971, p. 18.

²²Noel Macainsh, 'Patrick White's Aesthetic', *Literature in North Queensland*, University of Townsville, 12, 1984, pp. 55-70.

²³ Robert E. Rinehart, *Players all - Performances in Contemporary Sport*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998, pp. 69-83.

²⁴ Vincent Buckley, *Poetry and the Sacred*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1968, pp. 12-15.

²⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harper Torchbook Edn., New York, 1961, p. 8.

Heilige, in which 'modalities of religious experience' were investigated. Eliade suggests the term *hierophany*, for 'anything that manifests the sacred.'²⁶ The *Oxford English Dictionary* includes the helpful word as *hierophancy*,²⁷ the 'capacity of expounding mysteries'. Eliade also elaborates on his idea, which appears very close to that of Joyce:

We must get used to the idea of recognising hierophanies absolutely everywhere, in every area of psychological, economic, spiritual and social life. Indeed, we cannot be sure that there is *anything* - object, movement, psychological function, being or even game - that has not at some time in human history been somewhere transformed into an hierophany.²⁸

It would seem, then, that this definition, like that given by Joyce, is an incorporation of both the spiritual and secular components of revelation, and therefore offers little additional information.

The close influence of James Joyce upon Patrick White - particularly of *Ulysses* - is obvious in the plot of his first novel, *Happy Valley*. It is also more ubiquitous especially in regard to the idea of epiphanies, as can be seen in the following example. In August 1904, Joyce had written to his future wife Nora Barnacle.

While I stood there [Grafton St., Dublin] I thought of a few sentences I wrote some years ago when I lived in Paris - these sentences which follow - 'They pass in twos and threes amid the life of the boulevard, walking like people who have leisure in a place lit up for them. They are in the pastry cooks, chattering, crushing little fabrics of pastry, or seated silently at tables by the café door, or descending from carriages with a busy stir of garments soft as the voice of the adulterer. They pass in an air of perfumes. Under the perfumes their bodies

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷ *OED*, 2nd edn., vol. VII, p. 214.

²⁸ M. Eliade, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

have a warm humid smell'.²⁹

The important phrase, 'garments soft as the voice of the adulterer', with its unexpected and arresting simile, causes the reader to pause and consider the implications of the association. Amongst these associations are sexuality which is reinforced by the mention of the physical body in the next sentence and the sensation evoked by the smell of perfume. Additionally, the garments and perfumes are interchangeable so that in a sense the women are naked to the *flaneur*, thus heightening the sexual reference. Also, the women descend from a carriage, a form of metaphorical confinement but also literally a private space, in which illicit liaisons may occur, conversation take place, and even sexual acts may be performed. Patrick White uses the same (Joycean) carriage metaphor in both *Voss*³⁰ and *A Fringe of Leaves*,³¹ in order to emphasise the (symbolic) restricted space in which women of the time operated, or from which they escaped, and for the closed mind of some sections of society. Joyce in his letter mentions 'a busy stir of garments', thereby suggesting some physical and mental movement to freedom from the confined space of the carriage, but White does not allow any relief from his condemnation of such narrow-minded attitudes.

Epiphany is a central theme in the novels of Patrick White; and it is used both in the spiritual sense of the revelation of a deity, as in *The Tree of Man*, and also in the secular sense of moments when knowledge is suddenly revealed, as in *Voss*. In the earlier novel the revelation is limited to Stan

²⁹ *Letters of James Joyce*, ed., Richard Ellmann, The Viking Press, New York, 1966, vol. II, p. 49.

³⁰ Patrick White, *Voss*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1986 (1957), pp. 72 and 353.

Parker, but in later novels, and particularly *Riders in the Chariot*, the number of characters so involved is greater and the personal revelations more overt.

White's frequent use of the concept of epiphany is essential to any deeper understanding of his writings; not merely is it present in the novels but also in his drama and his occasional utterances, including public statements and interviews. Similarly, many of the epigrams of his books speak of the painful and essential searching by man for the infinite and the unknown, of their quest for both spirituality and hope, through universal love and redemption. When White says:

Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God,³²

he is speaking out for so many of his characters, for 'All the characters in my books are myself, but they are a kind of disguise.'³³ But White is not in all of his characters, and it is noteworthy that those who do seek and who are granted glimpses are often on the periphery of society, are physically or mentally handicapped, or might seem the least deserving. These are the flawed or 'burnt ones', those with whom the author identifies and sympathises when he says:

I have the same idea with all my books: an attempt to come close to the core of reality, as opposed to the merely superficial.³⁴

³¹ Patrick White, *A Fringe of Leaves*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1985 (1976), p.16.

³² Patrick White quoted in *In the Making*, ed., C. R. M. McGregor, Nelson, Melbourne, 1969, pp. 218-221.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 221.

³⁴ *ibid.*

Again it is also noteworthy that the consequences of these empathetic revelations are unpredictable: not all those who 'see' do so with the same insight, or utilise the knowledge in the same way.

It will be the aim of this thesis to focus upon the idea of epiphany in four of Patrick White's novels and to elaborate upon the fate of those affected, particularly after the epiphanic/delicate moment(s) when the veil is lifted, the burden of life's mystery and unity laid bare, and the ultimate secret of things made manifest. Presumably, too, we are to realise - with Joyce and White - that such moments are in store for all of us if we but discern them, despite the distintegrating forces so rampant in modern European society or (post-)modern Australian culture.