

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

### The Visual Image in Epiphanic Short Story

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The most decisive modernist artist in the stamping of the concept of literary epiphany is James Joyce, in the often quoted reference to it as a literary technique in *Stephen Hero* (Current-Garcia & Patrick, 1974: 99-101)<sup>1</sup> and his explanation of the three phases of artistic apprehending— wholeness (*integritas*), harmony (*consonantia*) and radiance (*claritas*)— in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). The use of epiphany in the work of this author guided criticism in a decisive way to the study of the epiphanic moment as a structural technique of modernist literature. Based on the analysis of Joyce, Morris Beja (1971), in his seminal book *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, draws attention to the Criteria of Incongruity— “there is no epiphany unless the revelation is not strictly relevant to whatever produces it”— and Insignificance— “the incident which triggers epiphany must be trivial or insignificant”— in the determination of epiphany, and to the Joycean distinction between an epiphany originating in an ordinary object, event, snatches of conversation or a gesture, or in some “memorable phase of the mind”, materialized in the “dream-epiphany” (Beja, 1971: 14, 15). Also seeking to determine epiphany types, Ashton Nichols (1987), in his study of epiphany in poetry and considering Wordsworth, distinguishes the proleptic, based on memories of the past and the adelonic, in which a powerful experience of perception is immediately transformed through imaginative associations, in a spiritual manifestation. Dream-epiphanies may be considered a subcategory of the adelonic type, as they are triggered by trivial events. Can images be equated with epiphanies? Not completely, but most of the time they are a fundamental part of the revelation process since they work as a stimulus or trigger, producing a special kind of light, a flash over reality or a glimpse of it. The effect of the image operates not just “discursively” but at the symbolic and psychic level of the unconscious. Robert Langbaum (1983) even suggests

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<sup>1</sup> “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 (...) First we recognise that the object is one integral thing, then we recognise that it is an organised composite structure, a thing in fact: finally when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, 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.”

the category of “visionary epiphanies”<sup>1</sup> to account for the modern effect of an internally glowing vision, as in a picture. Within the adelonic type of epiphany, founded on a powerful immediate experience, Wim Tigges (1999), based in a remark of Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, separates those resulting from dreams and those triggered by events. According to Tigges there are epiphanies relating to a place, others occasioned by the encounter with a person and others triggered by an object. The short story, whose length renders it a fitting genre for the use of different types of epiphany, has dealt with the impact of the visual image in this technique to convey various effects and aesthetic aims. However, the relation between the short story structure and these effects is used diversely by different authors. I will refer to Walter Pater, Joseph Conrad, Katherine Mansfield and Clarice Lispector.

Walter Pater (1839-1894) is one of the writers who uses the visual side of epiphany even in the conception of his portraits, which are types rendered in portraiture, expressing a particular mood, idea, or fictionalised characters based on mythic figures. It is important to say at this point that these texts have been viewed by criticism not as short stories but as “hybrids” (Brake, 1994: 45), an almost indescribable genre, very close to the sketch and to ruminative fiction. The connection between his imaginary portraits and painting was emphasised when Pater sent George Grove, the editor of Macmillan’s Magazine, his first prose piece, “The Child in the House” (1878), saying: “I call the m.s. a portrait, and mean readers, as they might do on seeing a portrait, to begin speculating—what came of him?” (as cited in Losey, 1986: 113). Through the epiphanic moments of his characters, which correspond to important moments in their lives, Pater reveals their psychological weaknesses, obsessions or subtle states of mind, always using a mediator, whose partiality is revealed to the audience. It is when trying to explain the process of our brain-building, in the text “A Child in the House”, that Pater uses strong images associated with epiphany. One of them occurs when Florian sees “a great red hawthorn in full flower”. Overwhelmed by the sight and smell of the plant, he recognises the importance of his senses and sensations, associating this sight with the expansion of the soul, with beauty and later with other objects:

*As he walked one evening, a garden gate, usually closed, stood open; and lo!, within, a great red hawthorn in full flower, embossing heavily the bleached and twisted trunk and branches, so aged that there were but few green leaves thereon— a plumage of tender crimson fire out of the heart of the dry wood. (...) Was it some periodic moment in the expansion of soul within him, or mere trick of heat in the heavily-laden summer air? But the beauty of the thing struck home to him feverishly;*

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<sup>1</sup>Although Joyce refers to dream epiphanies and many writers include epiphanic dreams in their fiction, some critics of epiphany object to the term, because in the words of Robert Langbaum “dreams proper cannot, for the most part, be fitted into a workable definition of epiphany (...) unless they arise from physical sensations or body positions” and “Joyce’s dream epiphanies raise problems for his own definition of epiphany; for in defining the term for life or art, Joyce never takes dreams into account (Langbaum, 1983: 342-343).

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*(...) Always afterwards, summer by summer, as the flowers came on, the blossom of the red hawthorn (...) and the goodly crimson, still alive in the works of old Venetian masters or old Flemish tapestries (...) and the longing for some undivided, entire possession of them was the beginning of a revelation to him. (Pater, 1967: 28-29)*

Aiming to portray the impressions of his character, Pater describes every detail of colour, light, and shade, as well as the excitement and other feelings they awaken in the boy, underlining that the later “metaphysical speculations” came from “his way of receiving the world” (ibid: 29).

Another example of a highly charged image, which reveals, anticipates and eventually transforms, occurs in the text “Apollo in Picardy” (Pater 2003) when the Prior in his initial dream-epiphany sees “the very place in which he lay” and “also a low circlet of soundless flame, waving, licking daintily up the black sky”, afterwards feeling the touch of his friend saying “It is hell-fire!” (ibid). As Jay Brian Losey says (Losey, 1986: 10-25), dream-epiphanies involve a subconscious process of collapsing past, present and future time, and this underlines the connection between epiphany and psychological experience.

Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), whose epiphanies are also clearly ingrained in the visual image, uses his “moments of awakening, when we see, hear, understand everything in a flash” (Conrad, 1925: 143) to question and analyse the development of his themes and to engage in introspection, through the recording of both the impressions and actions of his characters, usually merging past and future. In “Youth” (1902), the final epiphany, and specifically, his use of image, is an important element in the structuring of the narrative. After the detailed narration of Judea’s disastrous journey and of the fire that destroyed it, Marlow, the narrator, arrives exhausted at Java in the “mysterious east”. Throughout the narrative “the strength, the faith and the imagination of youth” (Conrad, 1978:12 ) is frequently evoked, as is the age of the narrator (20) and his dream of adventure at sea and of seeing Bangkok and the East. And this vision, the one Marlow will never forget, is the one he had after eleven hours of painfully rowing in a small boat, blind with fatigue:

*We drag the oars with aching arms, and suddenly a puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic wood (...)— the first sight of the east on my face. That I can never forget. (...) The mysterious East faced me, (...) silent like death, dark like a grave. (...) But for me all the East is contained in that vision of my youth. (...) I came upon it from a tussle with the sea – and I was young – and I saw it looking at me. And this is all that is left of it! Only a moment; a moment of strength, of romance, of glamour— of youth!... A flick of sunshine upon a strange shore.(Conrad, 1978: 37-42)*

Conrad’s use of the image in this epiphany is very different from Pater’s. In Conrad, it appears ambivalent and reversible, illustrating a conflict between the

idealization of an image (and, to a certain extent, of a concept and a culture) and the recognition, through the other details of the plot, of its objective inconsistency. This can be seen in the many oppositions between the positive descriptions of the East (“smooth bay”, “night soft and warm” “perfumed like a flower”) and the crude reality (“dark like a grave”, “off the thwart as if dead”, “angry words”, “violence of sunshine”) which Marlow acknowledges. The last part of the quotation shows the seamen’s need for the romantic idealisation of an image, which has been denied throughout the entire narrative, as Brian Caraher (1991) points out. The last paragraph of the text, in which Marlow’s audience, “their faces marked by toil, deceptions, success, by love”, look “anxiously for something out of life that (...) has passed unseen, in a sigh, in a flash— together with the youth, with the strength, with the romance of illusions”, very clearly sums up the central quest of the text, the deceptive illusion on which it is founded from the beginning.

Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) wrote in one of her reviews that epiphany should replace plot as an internal ordering principle, helping to appreciate the importance of one ‘spiritual event’ in the gradual unfolding of the narrative, through a blazing moment (Mansfield, 1930: 29-30). In her journal she explains what happens during a ‘glimpse’: “What is it that happens in that moment of suspension? It is timeless. In that moment (...) the whole life of the soul is contained. One is flung up— out of life— one is ‘held’ and then, down, bright, broken, glittering on the rocks, tossed back, part of the ebb and flow” (Mansfield, 1962: 203). This description fits perfectly the epiphanic vision of the tree in the short story “The Escape”, published in 1920 (Mansfield, 1984: 346-350). After two sequences which show in detail the conflict between the members of the couple, the aggressiveness of the woman, and the frustration of the husband who feels “a hollow man, a parched, withered man as it were, of ashes”, he sees, by chance, a tree beyond a garden gate. This will lead him to peacefulness and happiness, though it does not free him from the suffocating relationship with his wife:

*It was an immense tree with a round, thick silver stem and a great arc of copper leaves that gave back the light and yet were sombre. There was something beyond the tree— a whiteness, a softness, an opaque mass, half hidden— with delicate pillars. As he looked at the tree he felt his breathing die away and he became part of the silence. It seemed to grow, it seemed to expand in the quivering heat until the great carved leaves hid the sky, and yet it was motionless. (...) Deep, deep, he sank into the silence, staring at the tree and waiting for the voice that came floating, falling, until he felt himself unfolded (Ibid: 349-350).*

But the vision of the tree contains in itself shows signs of the opposition which characterises this story: “light”/“sombre”; “whiteness”/“dark”; “woman’s voice”/“silence”; “softness, part of the silence”/ “peace shattered, unbearable, dreadful”; “as the voice rose”/“the voice that came falling”; “he

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became part of the silence”/“something stirred in his breast”. The final epiphanic vision summarises and brings an “escape” for the plot conflict, using a mental and not a material way out. It polarises and amplifies duality and contradiction through the use of a rich and complex symbolic image<sup>1</sup>, the tree, and brings us to an ironic and ambiguous ending.

In the short story “Perdoando Deus” (1971) by Clarice Lispector (1920-1977), the protagonist, living a situation of inner happiness, is walking down Copacabana Avenue when she treads on “an enormous dead rat”— “Mas a imagem colava-se às pálpebras: um grande rato ruivo, de cauda enorme, com os pés esmagados, e morto, quieto, ruivo” [But the image was glued to the eyelids: a great reddish-brown rat, with an enormous tail, its feet smashed, and dead, still, reddish-brown] (Lispector, 1991: 49 my translation). This sight destroys all her inner satisfaction, projects her to the “terror of living”, the fear, and the panic, makes her react violently and in revulsion, and leads to an introspective meditation about existence, God and a new consciousness of herself. The image of the rat, like the cockroach eaten in *A Paixão segundo G.H.*, is so aggressive to the elaborated human world that it causes anguish and nausea, as Sartre wrote. In the rat, the woman faces her own existence in the rough, her own contingency and limits, threatened by Nothingness and by death, without the protection of language or everyday routine. Though triggered by something in particular, the real cause of the nausea is the world, existence, life’s absurdity which no consciousness can overcome. This is why she says: “Porque o rato existe tanto quanto eu, e talvez nem eu nem o rato sejamos para ser vistos por nós mesmos, a distância nos iguala. (...) Como posso amar a grandeza do mundo se não posso amar o tamanho de minha natureza? [Because the rat exists just as I do, and perhaps neither I nor the rat are meant to be seen by ourselves, distance lokens us. (...) How can I love the greatness of the world if I cannot love the size of my nature?] (Ibid: 51-52).

The image of the rat is here an objective correlative of the less beautiful side of existence, as the image of the East was in Conrad a correlative of the most beautiful side of existence. But here we do not find the sight of a place or the ambiguity of a tree; we encounter something which is made of “blood” like the human being. As Lispector says: “De que estava Deus querendo me lembrar? Não sou pessoa que precise ser lembrada de que dentro de tudo há o sangue” [What was God trying to remind me of? I am not the kind of person who needs to be reminded that inside everything there is blood] (Ibid: 49). The image of the rat is used as a way of gaining knowledge of oneself, of finding a meaning for the subject but also as a presentation of the inconsistencies and contradictions of that same subject.

The verbal representation of visual images which do not exist beyond the text is fundamental in the construction of these short stories, structured around epiphanies. This expression makes us think of *ekphrasis* or “notional

<sup>1</sup>The symbolic meanings of the tree include the idea of a living cosmos in perpetual regeneration, ascension to heaven, cyclical evolution, death and rebirth. White is the colour of those who move to another state of evolution, and silence is a prelude to revelation and to important events.

*ekphrasis*". In the epiphanic process, the visual power of a scene or object is one of the most important elements, whether it depends on the detailed description of an image or not. Though the moment of ekphrasis is identified by some of those who study it as spatial, static and epiphanic, "an instant suspended in time, when the artist tries to overcome transiency and ephemerality" (Avelar, 2006: 49), it cannot be simply equated with epiphany. This can be a description structurally, as in Pater, or not, as in Lispector. It undoubtedly uses the immediacy of the visual image, which could correspond to the *enargeia* (vividness) of the traditional *ekphrasis*, but plays with more than this— with the cultural and social meanings of an epoch, the context, as is the case in Conrad, with symbolism, plurality of meanings, and dissonance, as in Mansfield, or above all, with the individual perception and emotive response of the person who has the revelation. This perception, which may go as far as the act of touching, as is the case in Lispector's rat, shows us that in epiphanic short stories there is a specific relation between the viewing subject and the image structure, but at the same time there is a search for a new space of meaning, situated beyond the aura of the image and undermining its own effect. Pater's examples of visual epiphanies show his characters' "way of receiving the world" and Conrad's, the disillusionment originated in the clash of cultures. The use of the visual image, in a broad sense, with the epiphanic process, helps the modern short story to reveal its essence "at one sitting": lyricism and the fragmentary isolation of a momentary impression, where a conflicting reality beyond the social and material world of our actual lives is evoked to produce, as in a photographic flash, a visible explosion, a symptom of other wider and implied facts .

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