

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 30 (2014)

**Artikel:** Joyce's transcendental aesthetics of epiphany  
**Autor:** MacDuff, Sangam  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583888>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 02.02.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Joyce's Transcendental Aesthetics of Epiphany

Sangam MacDuff

The modern literary epiphany is usually regarded as a subjective, secular experience, but I argue that Daedalus's theory of epiphany in *Stephen Hero* constitutes an aesthetics of transcendence. Epiphanies traditionally present divine apparitions, and Daedalus's definition of epiphany as a "sudden spiritual manifestation" strongly suggests a transcendental event. In contrast to traditional theophanies, though, his theory draws on the poetics of Wordsworth and Shelley, who reimagine the epiphany as a rapturous, but immanent, experience of the sublime. In doing so, they internalise the epiphany, but from an Idealist perspective, the Romantic revelation remains a transcendental moment in which the God-like infinitude of nature and/or the mind is shown forth. Indeed, Wordsworth's epiphanies have all the hallmarks of the Kantian sublime, so that Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime" can be used to understand a Romantic aesthetics of transcendence. If Daedalus's theory is essentially Romantic, it follows that Kant's aesthetics also illuminate *Stephen Hero*, but I argue that they do so in a different way to Wordsworth, by opening up the possibility of a new transcendence, not in the wonder of the starry heavens or the moral law within, but in the sublimity of language itself.

In contrast to the transcendental nature of classical and biblical epiphanies where deities appear directly, the modern literary epiphany is usually regarded as a subjective, secular experience. In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, Morris Beja argues that there is a shift "from divine revelations, purely religious experiences, to [modernist] epiphanies, for the most part regarded as secular" (46). Ashton Nichols develops a similar argument in

*Emotion, Affect, Sentiment: The Language and Aesthetics of Feeling*. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 30. Ed. Andreas Langlotz and Agnieszka Soltyk Monnet. Tübingen: Narr, 2014. 143-161.

*The Poetics of Epiphany*, tracing a change of emphasis from the inspired seer of biblical revelations to the Romantic interpreter of oracular epiphanies (13-34). Both Beja and Nichols, like Abrams and Langbaum, see the beginnings of this movement in Wordsworth and its culmination in Joyce; Wordsworth's "spots of time" (1805 *Prelude* 11.258) are frequently compared to Joyce's Epiphanies (Abrams 418-22; Beja 33-34; Nichols 5), while the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, with its valorisation of "incidents and situations from common life," is typically read as the starting point for Joyce's aesthetics of epiphany – "The Bread of Everyday Life," as Beja puts it (Beja 32, 71-111; cf. Nichols 104-5). Building on his own *Poetry of Experience*, Robert Langbaum formulates the critical consensus concisely: "the epiphanic mode," derived from Wordsworth, "is to a large extent the Romantic and modern mode – a dominant modern convention" whose defining characteristics are "psychological association, momentaneousness, suddenness and fragmentation" (336, 341; see also Tigges 37-84).

Wordsworth's importance in shaping the modern epiphany is indisputable, and Langbaum's criteria are certainly relevant to it, but at the same time, they have little in common with the traditional, *transcendental* manifestations of epiphany, so that their application to Wordsworth overlooks the revelatory aspect of his poetics, just as it ignores the theological significance of the term Joyce devised.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Daedalus's definition of epiphany as a "sudden spiritual manifestation" (*Stephen Hero* 216 [hereafter *SH*]) strongly suggests a transcendental experience, and in this paper I will argue that his theory of epiphany constitutes an aesthetics of transcendence.

Transcendental aesthetics covers a multitude of things, from heavenly beauty to the grounds of sensory experience, and both senses of both words are relevant to Stephen's theory, since it is framed by a disquisition on beauty which is simultaneously a philosophical enquiry into the "mechanism of aesthetic [empirical] apprehension" (*SH* 217). These terms indicate that Joyce's aesthetics have a strongly Kantian flavour,

---

<sup>1</sup> Epiphany is a recurrent term in the liturgy, referring not only to the feast of the Epiphany on January 6, but to the entire epiphany season which concludes on Joyce's birthday, Candlemas, when Jesus is presented in the temple as a light and revelation. According to the OED the word has two meanings: the first refers to the Catholic festival; the second to divine manifestations in general, but Webster's adds the following senses: "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." 3a corresponds closely to the definition in *Stephen Hero*, while 3b corresponds to Joyce's literary forms.

but they are also connected, via Wordsworth, to the classico-biblical origins of epiphany as a divine manifestation. As M. H. Abrams has shown, Wordsworth's "Prospectus" to his projected masterpiece, *The Recluse*, is a poetics of revelation (Abrams 21-70), and Joyce's aesthetics owe as much to this aspect of Romanticism as they do to his veneration of the ordinary in unexpected moments of heightened experience. This connection becomes apparent when we see how closely Stephen's theory resembles the poetics of Wordsworth and Shelley, who reimagine the epiphany as a rapturous, but immanent, experience of the sublime, in which the godlike infinitude of nature and/or the mind is shown forth. Thus, from an Idealist perspective, the Romantic revelation remains a transcendental experience insofar as it reveals the pure ideas of unity, the infinite, and God. It follows that if Daedalus's theory is essentially Romantic, then Kant's aesthetics in the *Third Critique* also have a bearing on the aesthetic theory in *Stephen Hero*, which is precisely what I intend to show. Yet I argue that they do so in a different way to Wordsworth, by opening up the possibility of a new transcendence, not in the wonder of the starry heavens or the moral law within, but in the sublimity of language itself.

### *The Romantic Roots of Daedalus's Definition*

In *Stephen Hero*, Stephen defines epiphany as

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.

(216)

The classico-biblical origins of this "spiritual manifestation" are obvious, but Stephen's emphasis on the delicate, ephemeral nature of these moments, and the fact that they occur in ordinary words and gestures, or in our own minds, rather than divine apparitions, sounds characteristically modern. At first glance, this secular, immanent experience seems far removed from traditional theophanies, confirming the view of Morris Beja and Ashton Nichols, but if we retrace the Romantic roots of Stephen's definition, it becomes apparent that Daedalus's theory in *Stephen Hero* remains a transcendental aesthetic.

Most obviously, there is a striking parallel between this passage 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)

It is clear from this that 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" which "Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called the enchantment of the heart" (Joyce, *Portrait* 231). Ashton Nichols shows that these parallels run right through Stephen's aesthetics (in both versions), suggesting that "Joyce imported Shelley's ideas directly into his own theory of epiphany" (104). Although Nichols ascribes Stephen's theory to Joyce himself and makes no distinction between the theory in *Stephen Hero* and the aesthetics in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (where the word "epiphany" does not occur), the parallels 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* (Nichols 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" (Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads* 244). There can be little doubt about the importance of the "Preface" to both Shelley and Joyce, but Nichols's focus is too narrow. As M. H. Abrams argues, Wordsworth's poetics of epiphany are most powerfully expressed not in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but in the "Prospectus" which 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" (*Selected Letters* 62); his next letter judges between them: "I think W[ordsworth] of all English men of let-

ters best deserves your word 'genius'. Read his poem to his lost son in 'Excursion'" (63).<sup>2</sup>

In the 1814 preface to *The Excursion* Wordsworth compares *The Recluse* to the tripartite body of a great gothic church to which *The Prelude* was to be "the ante-chapel" while his lyric poems would form "little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses" (Wordsworth, *Poetical Works* 589). In this context, the lines he intended for the end of Book 1 form "a kind of *Prospectus* of the design and scope of the whole poem" (*ibid*) so that its programme can be applied to Wordsworth's poetry as a whole, and if we accept Abrams's assessment of Wordsworth as "the great and exemplary poet of the age" (14), then the revelatory quality of his poetry is characteristic of Romanticism. Abrams traces this revelatory aspect to two key metaphors from Apocalypse – the New Jerusalem as heaven on earth and the marriage of Christ with humanity. Thus, when Wordsworth announces the subject of *The Prelude* as "Creation and Divinity itself . . . for my theme has been /What passed within me" (3.172-74), he is simply internalising the "spiritual sense" of the Bible (Blake to Robinson in Bentley 312) which Winstanley calls "the light and life of Christ within the heart" (*The New Law of Righteousness* 214; qtd in Abrams 53). For Wordsworth, like Blake and Winstanley, God is to be sought in "the Mind of Man" ("Prospectus" 40, in *Poetical Works* 590), whose "discerning intellect,"

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

Wordsworth'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). Christ's words at the crucifixion, "*consummatum est*" in the Vulgate (John 19:30), were traditionally interpreted as signifying that Christ's Passion was the consummation of his marriage with humanity

---

<sup>2</sup> The reference is elusive. Joyce goes on to quote "Where are thou, my beloved son," the first line of "The Affliction of Margaret" (1804). Although book 1 of *The Excursion* consists largely of the tale of "poor Margaret" (I 503), whose provenance is detailed in the Preface (which may account for Joyce's confusion), the lyric itself forms no part of the poem. And the reference is more mysterious still since Joyce appears to read "The Affliction of Margaret" biographically ("*his* lost son"), perhaps confusing the lost son with Wordsworth's abandoned daughter, Caroline (born 1792), or (anachronistically) with his son Thomas (died 1812).

and Wordsworth's image of "love and holy passion" surely recalls Christ's symbolic union with mankind, as the following lines make clear:

I, long before the blissful hour arrives,  
 Would chaunt, in lonely peace, the spousal verse  
 Of this great consummation. (56-8)

Here "the blissful hour" is again the holy marriage, but in Wordsworth's version, "the Lamb and New Jerusalem are replaced by man's mind as the bridegroom and nature as the bride" (Abrams 56), so that the "great consummation" is transposed from the indefinite future to the present moment. Wordsworth's "high argument" (*Prelude* 3.182), then, is that we, through our "discerning intellect," are capable of experiencing paradise through everyday events – "the simple produce of the common day." The reason this is possible is that Wordsworth conceives of "Mind" and "World" as "exquisitely . . . fitted" ("Prospectus" 63-8), and, both, he thinks, have a divine aspect. The question of how exactly they are related is complex, but it is this notion of the spiritual content of ordinary experience which gives rise to Wordsworth's epiphanies as the moments in which the spiritual nature of mind and/or the animating intelligence of nature is revealed.

### *Revelation and the Sublime*

Thus, while Wordsworth's epiphanies are immanent experiences, the Apocalyptic (*apokalypsis*: revelation) metaphors behind Wordsworth's poetics suggest that they are also transcendental revelations, just as their secular subjects do not preclude spiritual significance. This is a traditional aspect of revelation, but the Wordsworthian epiphany also provides a new form of transcendence, which Joyce takes up and develops in *Stephen Hero*. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the famous Snowdon epiphany near the end of the *Prelude*, where Wordsworth fuses the sublime imagery of full moon, mist and mountains with the deep chasm and thundering torrents into the sound of "one voice" roaring, a "universal spectacle" in which "Nature lodged / The Soul, the Imagination of the whole" (60, 64-5).<sup>3</sup> Meditating on this vision, the poet inter-

---

<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth's interest in the sublime can be traced back to the *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), which include a long note on the sublime (*Prose*, II, 349-60), while his *Guide to the Lakes* contains many passages contrasting beautiful and sublime vistas (e.g., 21-6, 36, 99, 102).

prets it as “the perfect image of a mighty Mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity” (69-70). And as *The Prelude* draws to a close, Wordsworth begins to sound again the keynotes of the poem: “an underpresence, / The sense of God” in “Nature. . . most awful and sublime”; or again, those “sublime and lovely forms” which give rise to “the one thought / By which we live, Infinity and God” (72-6, 183-4). In these passages, Wordsworth relates his epiphanic “spots of time” (11.258) explicitly to the sublime and the infinite, celebrating not only the grandeur of nature, or the majesty of its creator, but also the power of the mind. Thus, like Kant’s “Analytic of the Sublime,” Wordsworth’s epiphanic visions reveal both the unity of space and the transcendental nature of the mind, because they awaken our *a priori* concepts of God, unity, and the infinite.<sup>4</sup>

These moments are clearly transcendental in the Kantian sense, but they are also transcendental in the biblical sense, as God’s revelation. Both these aspects are evident in book six of *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth describes descending the steep Simplon pass in a series of tumultuous and vertiginous oppositions: an “immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decayed, [. . .] at every turn / Winds thwarting winds” and “torrents shooting from the clear blue sky.” This “giddy prospect” disturbs the poet, becoming a “sick sight” in which the “stationary blasts of waterfalls” from the towering cliffs are personified in “[t]he rocks that muttered close upon our ears, / Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side / As if a voice were in them.” Wordsworth is seemingly unable to reconcile the contradictions in his description; his field of vision is insufficient either to apprehend it in its totality or to describe its full terror and majesty, except by recourse to the overwhelming imagery of the sublime where antitheses are yoked together:

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;

---

<sup>4</sup> Whether or not Wordsworth actually read Kant is a vexed question, but he was familiar with Kant and German Idealist philosophy, at least in a general sense, through Coleridge. Owen and Smyser note a series of correspondences, both in general ideas and specific phrasing, between Wordsworth’s fragmentary essay, “The Sublime and the Beautiful” (1811-1812) and Kant’s Third *Critique* (see *Prose* vol. 2 349-60, esp. ll.254-55, 263-66, and *CJ* 245, 250). This may be explained by Coleridge’s intensive study of Kant when he stayed with Wordsworth at Allan Bank during 1809-10 (Coleridge 12.3.26) and may not imply that Wordsworth actually read Kant (see Wu 261-62).



Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
 The types and symbols of Eternity,  
 Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.  
 (6.634-49)

In Kant's terms, Wordsworth presents a manifold of intuition too vast to be assimilated in its totality, so that the mind, being unable to perceive the object in its entirety, must fall back on an *a priori* intuition of totality, which affords a transcendental glimpse of the infinite (*CJ* §§25-26); but it is also evident that Wordsworth draws on Revelation for the imagery of clouds and heavens, darkness and light, the first and last end.<sup>5</sup> This connection is irrefutable when he calls these contradictory aspects of nature "Characters of the great Apocalypse, / The types and symbols of Eternity," explicitly invoking typological and allegorical hermeneutics to read nature as the revelation of God. But Wordsworth goes much further than the traditional Enlightenment metaphor of nature as God's book because the revelation he represents is a phenomenological experience, "half create[d]" (*Lyrical Ballads* 116) by the perceiving subject, and recreated by the poet in his epiphany. This is apparent at the point at which all the contradictory images Wordsworth uses simultaneously to describe an extraordinary natural phenomenon and the overwhelming effect it has upon him – its "tumult and peace" – are finally resolved into "the workings of one mind," sustaining an exquisite ambiguity between the mind of God and the mind of the poet.

This ambiguity is central to Wordsworth's epiphanies, where the Godlike infinitude of *both* nature *and* the mind are manifest together. As such, the Wordsworthian epiphany is a Kantian revelation, in which the pure idea of unity is awoken by an experience of the sublime, thereby affording a transcendental glimpse of the infinite. Thus, although epiphany becomes a subjective experience for the Romantics, it remains a transcendental experience in the Kantian sense that it reveals the pure ideas of God, unity, and the self.

Like Wordsworth, two of the most powerful lenses with which to focus Joyce's aesthetics of epiphany are the Book of Revelation and Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime." Joyce copied the entire Book of Reve-

---

<sup>5</sup> Compare Revelation 1: 11: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last." See also Revelation 1: 8, 17-18; 21: 6. Wordsworth may also be recalling Adam and Eve's aubade in book 5 of *Paradise Lost*, where they praise the "Power Divine" of "him first, him last, him midst, and without end" (153-65). Max Wildi points out that descriptions of Alpine sublimity were a standard topos in eighteenth-century travel writing, but the density of Wordsworth's apocalyptic imagery is unusual.

lation by hand from the King James Version between 1903 and 1905 – that is, at the time he was writing his Epiphanies, *Dubliners*, his 1904 essay entitled “A Portrait of the Artist,” and the early chapters of *Stephen Hero* (Scholes and Kain 264). Since this manuscript, entitled “The Apocalypse of St John” (Cornell 4609 Bd. Ms.3), also includes three Epiphanies, there seems to be an obvious connection between them, contradicting the standard interpretation of the modernist epiphany as a fundamentally secular form. Indeed, if we take Joyce’s title seriously, the Epiphanies “record” a series of revelations, “whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (*SH* 216),<sup>6</sup> just as in the Wordsworthian epiphany heaven is found in the “simple produce of the common day” (Prospectus 55), revealing “the rapture of the Hallelujah sent / From all that breathes and is” (13.262-63). It is evident from this that for both Wordsworth and Joyce, epiphanies show forth the spiritual content of ordinary experience, so that whatever irony there may be in *Stephen Hero*, Daedalus’s account of “a sudden spiritual manifestation” in ordinary words and gestures is certainly a transcendental experience.<sup>7</sup>

### *Joyce's Aesthetics: A Kantian Interpretation*

As well as their link to Revelation, Joyce’s aesthetics are transcendental in the Kantian sense, but, surprisingly, both connections have been overlooked. Joyce himself cited Aristotle and Aquinas as the sources of his aesthetics, but numerous commentators have shown that the reflections he noted in the Paris and Pola notebooks of 1903-1904 bear little relation to Aristotelian or Thomist doctrine.<sup>8</sup> Although Joyce pro-

---

<sup>6</sup> Stanislaus Joyce’s view of the Epiphanies is also revealing: “they were in the beginning ironical observations of slips, and little errors and gestures – mere straws in the wind – by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal”; later, he says, “[t]he epiphanies became more frequently subjective and included dreams which he considered in some way revelatory” (*My Brother's Keeper* 125-26).

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the epiphanic nature of Revelation underscores Joyce’s conception of *Dubliners* as a series of *epicleti* (referring to the moment of transubstantiation in the Orthodox mass – *Selected Letters* 22); and Stephen’s vision of the artist as a “priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life” (*Portrait* 240).

<sup>8</sup> The best account of Joyce’s debt to Aristotle and Aquinas is Fran O’Rourke’s essay, “Joyce’s Early Aesthetic.” O’Rourke demonstrates that Joyce’s aesthetics are based on a few isolated quotations from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*.

claimed himself an Aristotelian (Stanislaus Joyce, *Complete Dublin Diary* 53) and characterised Stephen's aesthetic theory as "applied Aquinas" in both *Stephen Hero* (77) and *Portrait* (209), Stephen relies on "only a garner of slender sentences from Aristotle's poetics and psychology" (*Portrait* 176), and the same is probably true of Joyce's early aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> Yet Joyce's "inspired cribbing" (Ellmann xv) brings a hodge-podge of philosophical ideas to bear on these fragments, thereby transforming them into the complex and original aesthetics of *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait*.

This "inspired cribbing" has proved immensely fruitful in propagating a wide range of critical interpretations. For instance, Morris Beja compares Stephen's aesthetics to Schopenhauer's Romantic rereading of Kant, which "does away with the dualism between subject and object" (30), and later to Bergson's "intuition," which affords "absolute" knowledge when one "places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible" (Bergson, *Metaphysics* 1, 7, qtd in Beja 55; see Beja 30-32, 54-57). James Caufield explores the connection to Schopenhauer in greater detail, arguing that "Stephen's use of Schopenhauer's aesthetics" can be explained by the fact that "Post-Kantian German Idealism and its Romantic reverberations in *fin de siècle* letters [. . .] were a part of the critical medium in which Joyce's aesthetic sense developed" (714). In the same vein, Robert Scholes and Marlena Corcoran derive Stephen's aesthetics "from the tradition that includes Lessing, August and Friedrich von Schlegel, Kant, Schelling and Hegel" (691). However, Caufield's Schopenhauerian parallels, like Beja's are tenuous, while Scholes and Corcoran provide no evidence for their claim that Stephen's aesthetics are "explicitly indebted" to Hegel, Schelling and the younger von Schlegel, so that these readings are not fully convincing as explanations of Stephen's theory. Nevertheless, they are of interest insofar as they open up new approaches to Joyce's epiphanies, just as an understanding of Bergson's philosophy greatly enhances our understanding of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. And it is with this aim in mind that I propose to reread Stephen Daedalus's aesthetics through Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime"; in doing so, I am not claiming that Joyce's or Stephen's theories are deliberately Kantian, but rather that Kant's approach to aesthetics offers an

---

<sup>9</sup> In *The Aesthetics of James Joyce*, Aubert argues that Joyce was acquainted with Aristotle through Bernard Bosanquet's *A History of Aesthetic*, but it is more likely that Joyce relied on Boedder's *Natural Theology* and Rickaby's *General Metaphysics* – the theology and philosophy textbooks at University College Dublin. See C. P. Curran, "James Joyce Remembered" (36-37, qtd in O'Rourke 118).

illuminating insight into the aesthetics of *Stephen Hero*, and perhaps Joyce's as well.

In fact, Joyce seems to have regarded the aesthetics in the Paris-Pola notebook not as "applied Aquinas" or Aristotle, neither as Idealist or Bergsonian, but as his own, for he signed and dated each entry with a flourish.<sup>10</sup> In *Stephen Hero*, Daedalus tells Cranly that "[n]o esthetic theory [. . .] is of any value which investigates with the aid of the lantern of tradition" (217). His point is that beauty is relative ("Greek beauty laughs at Coptic beauty and the American Indian derides them both" [217]), but it also indicates his desire to formulate a new aesthetic theory with a universal criterion for beauty. This is a recurring theme in the notebook, where Joyce draws on the Greek roots of "aesthetic" (of or relating to sensory perception), in order to equate beauty with apprehension:

every sensible object that has been apprehended can be said in the first place to have been and to be beautiful in a measure beautiful; and even the most hideous object can be said to have been and to be beautiful insofar as it has been apprehended. (Scholes and Kain 81; cf. 82-83)

Daedalus makes the same equation between beauty and apprehension in *Stephen Hero* when he says:

It is almost impossible to reconcile all tradition whereas it is by no means impossible to find the justification of every form of beauty which has been adored on the earth by an examination into the mechanism of esthetic apprehension. . . . The apprehensive faculty must be scrutinised in action.  
(SH 217)

Thus Daedalus's aesthetics, like Joyce's, are founded on "the mechanism of esthetic apprehension," by which he means sensory perception. Of course, Kant is widely regarded as having originated this sense of "aesthetic" when, at the outset of his revolutionary "Transcendental Aesthetic," he criticises Baumgartner's "science of taste" on etymological as well as philosophical grounds (*Critique of Pure Reason* [hereafter *CPR*] A 21). Hence, there is a fundamental similarity in what Kant, Joyce and Stephen actually mean by "aesthetics," and although Stephen analyses the "apprehensive faculty" in relation to Aquinas's criteria of beauty –

---

<sup>10</sup> The notebooks are held by the National Library of Ireland (MS 36,639/2/A). See [http://catalogue.nli.ie/pdflookup.php?pdfid=vtls000194606\\_02](http://catalogue.nli.ie/pdflookup.php?pdfid=vtls000194606_02) (17-19).

“integrity, . . . symmetry and radiance,” as Stephen translates them (*SH* 217) – his theory shares a number of similarities with Kantian aesthetics.

First, Stephen asks Cranly to:

[c]onsider the performance of your own mind when confronted with any object, hypothetically beautiful. [. . .]To apprehend it you must lift it away from everything else: and then you perceive that it is one integral thing, that is a thing. You recognise its integrity. Isn't that so? [. . .]That is the first quality of beauty: it is declared in a simple sudden synthesis of the faculty which apprehends. (217)

This “simple sudden synthesis” is similar to Kant’s “synthesis of apprehension” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where a manifold of empirical data are “gathered together” in a single “moment” (*CPR* A 99). Of course, for Kant, this intuition of an object, such as a house, is never a conception of “a thing in itself at all but only an appearance, i.e., a representation, the transcendental object of which remains utterly unknown” (A 190). Indeed, the fundamental premise of Kant’s first *Critique* is that we can never have access to the transcendental object, the noumenon; what the synthesis of apprehension reveals is the *a priori* idea of unity which structures spatio-temporal experience itself (A 100). For Kant, “[t]he synthesis of apprehension . . . constitutes the transcendental ground of the possibility of all cognition in general. . .”; Stephen’s phrase, which seems to echo Kant’s, makes the “sudden synthesis of the faculty which apprehends” the necessary precondition for all aesthetic experience.

In the second phase of Stephen’s aesthetics, analysis, “[t]he mind considers the object in whole and in part, in relation to itself and to other objects,” examining its form and structure in detail (*SH* 217). This second stage of apprehension corresponds quite closely to Kant’s “synthesis of reproduction in the imagination,” in which the mind comprehends a given object by comparing a series of sensory presentations, relating part to part and part to whole (*CPR* A101-102). The processes are not identical, since Kant emphasises the temporal sequence of apprehension and the role of memory in facilitating our imaginative recognition of the unity of the phenomenal representation, while Stephen focuses on the formal “symmetry” of the object, “travers[ing] every cranny of its structure” in order to recognise its integrity (217), but there is nevertheless a marked similarity between the basic analytical procedures they describe.

However, the third phase of Stephen's aesthetics, in which the object is epiphanised, seems at first sight to have nothing in common with Kantian aesthetics. After recognising the object as "*one integral thing*" and then, through analysis, as "an organised composite structure, a *thing* in fact," he says that the mind makes "the only logical possible synthesis," discovering "that it is *that* thing which it is" (218). This is the moment Stephen calls epiphany, when the soul of the object, "its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance" and seems "radiant." Ostensibly, Stephen is reinterpreting Aquinas's *claritas* as *quidditas*, but we could easily replace both terms with the noumenon, which shines forth from the vestments of its phenomenal appearance. On this reading, Stephen's third phase amounts to a revelation of the noumenal object, but of course this is unequivocally barred in Kant's doctrine, which may help to explain why Stephen is forced to concede that the Ballast Office clock "has not epiphanised yet."

If Kant's proscription is taken as final, then perhaps there is nothing transcendental about the theory after all, but Stephen's "yet" expresses a certain hope, one that the reader is invited to share, at least to the extent that Stephen's aesthetics are framed as a revelation of truth, and not just any truth, but the truth of their own textual production – that is, the aesthetics of *Stephen Hero*. If we search for a transcendental signifier to unlock the meaning of the novel, then we will be as frustrated as Stephen is by the failure of the clock to epiphanise, but there is another sense in which both Stephen's aesthetics and Joyce's text are transcendental. Again this quality comes from Kant, because the revelation of the immanent truth of our own minds through the categories is central to Kant's transcendental idealism, and this awakening of the pure ideas of reason produces a sublime moment which can be regarded as a subjective epiphany, for Stephen and/or the reader.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime," which Derrida convincingly places as the centre of the *Critique of Judgement* (Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* 37-82). As is well known, Kant follows Burke in distinguishing between the beautiful and the sublime. For Kant,

[t]he beautiful in nature is a question of the form of an object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of *limitlessness*, yet with a super-added thought of its totality. (CJ 245)

The first thing to note here is that although beauty is a formal quality, consisting in limitation, the sublime is not necessarily formless: a more literal translation of “*das Erhabene ist dagegen auch an einem formlosen Gegenstande zu finden*” is “the sublime can *also* be found in a formless object” (see Pillow 69). Hence, although the sublime is frequently found in objects which appear formless (e.g., a storm, a vast mountain range, the starry heavens), it also refers to objects which are too large to perceive in their totality. When confronted by objects such as these, “our imagination, even in its greatest effort to do what is demanded of it and comprehend a given object in a whole of intuition (and thereby to exhibit the idea of reason), proves its own limits and inadequacy, and yet at the same time proves [. . .] itself adequate to that Idea” (CJ 257). In other words, although the imagination is unable to unify vast or complex manifolds of intuition, revealing our finite capacities, this same inadequacy reveals the pure idea of totality supplied by the understanding. This applies most obviously to the “mathematical sublime” (248-50), where the mind submits vast or formless objects to the idea of totality. Since space and past time are infinite, Kant reasons, this totality “does not even exempt the infinite,” and our “ability even to think the given infinite without contradiction, is something that requires the presence in the human mind of something supersensible” (254).

Kant argues that nature “is sublime in such of its phenomena as in their intuition convey the idea of their infinity,” and these phenomena reveal not only our ideas of totality and the infinite, but also our own freedom, because in the “dynamical sublime” (260-64), when we are confronted by overwhelming forces of nature (hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, tempests, and so on), we first cower in fear and then, provided we are at a safe distance, recognise “the soul’s fortitude,” a “power to resist [. . .] which gives us the courage to believe that we could be a match for nature’s seeming omnipotence” (261). Thus, the dynamical sublime reveals the transcendental concept of freedom (211), just as the mathematical sublime reveals the transcendental concepts of totality, unity and the infinite.

While Kant’s examples of the sublime are typical of eighteenth-century aesthetics – cliffs, thunder, lightning, stormy seas, the Milky Way, and so on – suggesting vast, powerful, or formless natural phenomena, there is nothing to prevent smaller objects, even elegant and well-formed objects, including works of art, from being sublime. This is because, in addition to the mind’s regress to infinity in the mathematical sublime, Kant argues that “[t]he power of imagination is limited by a maximum of comprehension which it cannot exceed” (Pillow 74). This

limitation applies not only to phenomena of great magnitude, but also to our inability to comprehend all the parts of a sufficiently complex object as a whole: "Imagination runs into difficulty in trying to comprehend an object as a unity [. . .] whenever it faces something vast, elaborate, or *complex* enough to overwhelm its powers" (*ibid.*). That this complexity applies not only to physical structures, but also to the ideas of reason is evident from the fact that Kant links judgements of the mathematical sublime to the ideas of God, freedom, immortality, eternity, and even to "aesthetic ideas" which "evoke much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever [. . .] and which language, consequently, can never fully capture or render completely intelligible," such as "death, envy and all vices, as also love, fame, and the like" (*CJ* 314). These examples, empirical but "transgressing the limits of experience" (*ibid.*), just as their concepts defy the bounds of language, indicate that sublime reflection, as Kirk Pillow calls it, is also to be found in literary texts.

### *The Transcendental Language of the Epiphanies*

I am not suggesting that there is a direct link between Stephen's aesthetics and Kant's, but the similarities between them are illuminating, both for the light they shed on Stephen's theory, and the implications they have for Joyce's aesthetics. With regard to the former, the close parallels between Stephen's phases of integrity and symmetry and Kant's syntheses of apprehension and reproduction suggest a comparison between Stephen's frustrated longing for a transcendental experience in the mystical unity of subject and object and Kant's proscription against the recognition of the noumenal. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that these syntheses, which are themselves transcendental faculties, lead us to the "transcendental apperception" of "the original and necessary consciousness of the identity of oneself" (A107-08), and in the same way Stephen's aesthetics can be read as part of his quest to discover his own identity. Of course, Stephen never has his epiphany; *Stephen Hero* is incomplete, and all Dedalus discovers in *Portrait* is that his identity is in flux: "I was someone else then. . . I was not myself as I am now, as I had to become" (261). As the last phrase suggests, though, Stephen's search for identity is a search to understand the destiny he sees written in his own name, which he scrutinises repeatedly (5, 184-86, 276, etc.). Stephen seems to believe that his mythico-biblical name can answer his originary question, "where was he?" (185), providing a transcendental



apperception of the self before and beyond experience. But instead, the “perpetual weaving and unweaving” of the self (Pater 236; cf. *Ulysses* 9.376-81) makes Stephen Dedalus the cause of sublime reflection, like one of Kant’s “aesthetic ideas” which language can never fully capture. Yet it is not only proper names that occasion this search for original meaning: from the beginning of the novel, Stephen’s reflections on language (“belt,” “suck,” “kiss,” etc.) are transcendental, and even as he formulates his aesthetics, Stephen, like Kant, is apt to meditate on the meaning of words like “love,” “death” and “spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Stephen’s search for the meaning of aesthetic ideas is none other than the search for the transcendental signifier, a search which is mirrored each time the reader seeks a key to unlock Stephen’s aesthetics and complete the analysis of the text. Naturally, the transcendental signifier is no more forthcoming than the noumenal object Stephen seeks; from a deconstructivist perspective, a full analysis of Stephen’s theory, like any of Joyce’s epiphanies, or indeed any text, is necessarily unattainable. But it is just here that Joyce’s aesthetics depart from Kant’s, because in Kant’s doctrine, even a system of infinite play and deferral offers the promise of unity in its totality, whereas for Derrida,

totalisation no longer has any meaning, . . . not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalisation. This field is in effect that of *play*, that it is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite. . . [I]nstead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. (*Writing and Difference* 289)

This would seem to imply that language is not amenable to the mathematical sublime, but Derrida’s absent “center which arrests and grounds

---

<sup>11</sup> “–Love, said Stephen, is a name, if you like, for something inexpressible . . . but no, I won’t admit that . . .” (*SH* 180; cf. P 261). Isabel’s death, based on Epiphany 19, provides the principal occasion for Daedalus to “contemplate the fact of death” (173) in *Stephen Hero*, but compare *Portrait*, where death is a portal “into the unknown and the unseen” (123). On the other hand, in Epiphany 20 and *Exiles* (23), death, not *amor matris*, is the only certainty, and Hugh Kenner, for one, guessed that “death” was the “word known to all men” long before Gabler’s corrected edition restored it as “love” (see Kimball). Stephen’s reflections on “spirit” are more complex still, and they go to the core of his theory of epiphany as “a sudden spiritual manifestation” in which epiphany occurs when “a spiritual eye” adjusts its vision to “[t]he soul of the commonest object” (216-18). Interestingly, for Kant, spirit “signifies the animating principle in the mind,” which is “nothing else than the faculty of presenting *aesthetic ideas*” (*CJ* 313-14).

the play of substitutions” sounds suspiciously like a transcendental idea, one of those regulative ideas of reason Kant postulates as the *a priori* grounds of all experience.<sup>12</sup> And this conjunction of Kant's analytic of the sublime with Derrida's notion of play helps to explain how even texts as complex and indeterminate as *Finnegans Wake* can, at times, inspire a feeling of the sublime. The source of this sublimity is language itself, in its infinite play of *différance*, and Joyce's genius consists in his ability to bring so many of these meanings into play, and so fully, that he gives us a glimpse of their totality, even as his texts open onto the void of infinite deferral.

Does this make Joyce's aesthetics transcendental? Perhaps it does, for his genius is a thoroughly Kantian “genius,” filled with that “spirit” or “animating principle in the mind” which for Kant is “nothing else than the faculty of presenting aesthetic ideas” (CJ 313-14). An aesthetic idea, we recall, “evokes much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever . . . and which language, consequently, can never quite fully capture or render completely intelligible.” But Kant concludes that it is “in the poetic art that the faculty of aesthetic ideas can show itself to full advantage” (CJ 314), because great poets, like Wordsworth and Shelley, awaken a sense of the sublime through their animating spirit, and it is just this that Joyce gives us in his transcendental aesthetics.

---

<sup>12</sup> As Lyotard explains in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, “[w]hat is conceived in the transcendent concept exceeds all sensible intuition and escapes all means of proof” (211). The same could be said of Derrida's notions of play, supplementarity, *différance*, etc.

## References

- Abrams, Meyer Howard. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Aubert, Jacques. *The Aesthetics of James Joyce*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
- Beja, Morris. *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971.
- Bentley, Gerald Eades. *Blake Records*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Caufield, James Walter. "The Word as Will and Idea: Dedalean Aesthetics and the Influence of Schopenhauer." *James Joyce Quarterly* 35 (1998): 695-714.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. 12 vols. Vol. 12: *Marginalia*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1992.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- . *Writing and Difference*. Trans. A. Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Ellmann, Richard. *James Joyce*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- . "Commonplace Notebook." National Library of Ireland MS 36,639/2/A. 18.
- . *Dubliners*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.
- . *Exiles: A Play in Three Acts*. New York: Viking Press, 1951.
- . *Selected Letters of James Joyce*. Ed. Richard Ellmann. New York: Viking Press, 1975.
- . *Stephen Hero: Part of the First Draft of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Rev. ed. London: Jonathan Cape, 1975.
- . *Ulysses: The Corrected Text*. New York: Random House, 1986.
- Joyce, Stanislaus. *My Brother's Keeper. James Joyce's Early Years*. New York: Viking Press, 1958.
- . *The Complete Dublin Diary of Stanislaus Joyce*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- . *Critique of Judgement*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Kenner, Hugh. *Joyce's Voices*. London: Faber and Faber, 1978.

- Kimball, Jean. "Love and Death in *Ulysses*: 'Word Known to All Men.'" *James Joyce Quarterly* 24.2 (1987): 143-160.
- Langbaum, Robert. "The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature." *New Literary History* 14.2 (1983): 335-358.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Nichols, Ashton. *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987.
- O'Rourke, Fran. "Joyce's Early Aesthetic." *Journal of Modern Literature* 34.2 (2011): 97-120.
- Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. London: Macmillan, 1917.
- Pillow, Kirk. *Sublime Understanding: Aesthetic Reflection in Kant and Hegel*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000.
- Scholes, Robert. *The Workshop of Daedalus*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965.
- and Marlena G. Corcoran. "The Aesthetic Theory and the Critical Writings." In *A Companion to Joyce Studies*. Ed. Zack Bowen and James F. Carens. Westport: Greenwood, 1984. 689-705.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2002.
- Tigges, Wim. *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999.
- Wildi, Max. "Wordsworth and the Simplon Pass." *English Studies* 40 (1959): 224-32.
- Wordsworth, William. *Lyrical Ballads*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- . *Poetical Works*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- . *The Prelude* (1805). Ed. Ernest de Selincourt. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.
- . *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. Warwick Jack Burgoyne Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
- Wu, Duncan. *Wordsworth's Reading 1800-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.