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On the Distinctness of the Postmodernist Epiphany

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This paper aims at assessing developments in the use of the epiphany in literary postmodernism. To achieve this, it draws on existing accounts of the epiphany in postmodern and contemporary literature, contending that the distinctness of postmodernism's use of the epiphany is indissociable from its preoccupation with the articulation of subjectivity in narrative. Taking a selection of short stories (by Coover, Saunders, and Wallace) as examples, this paper illustrates how the moments of illumination in some contemporary fiction disrupt the established imaginary of the Joycean epiphany. As this article asserts, this results from the inability to fully embrace the relational quality of the revelation, thereby failing to "subject" the postmodernist literary character to the structure of power that endowed its high modernist counterpart with transcendental knowledge and therefore articulated it qua subject.

Keywords: epiphany; postmodernism; short story; narratology; modernism; Coover; Saunders; Wallace

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Sobre la distintividad de la epifanía posmodernista

El presente artículo aspira a evaluar la expresión de la epifanía en la literatura posmodernista. Para tal fin, se vale de los textos existentes sobre la revelación en la literatura anglófona postmoderna y contemporánea, argumentando que el uso distintivo de lo epifánico en la tradición posmoderna es indisociable de la preocupación del movimiento por la articulación narrativa de la subjetividad. Tomando como ejemplo una selección de relatos (de Coover, Saunders, Wallace), se demuestra que los momentos de revelación en alguna ficción contemporánea desvertebran el imaginario establecido para la epifanía de Joyce. Dicha tendencia resulta de la incapacidad de los autores de acoger plenamente la cualidad relacional

de la misma, lo cual impide a los textos "someter" al personaje literario posmoderno a la estructura de poder que proporcionó a su contraparte del alto modernismo conocimiento trascendental, y, al hacerlo, probó su articulación como sujeto.

Palabras clave: epifanía; posmodernismo; relato breve; narratología; modernismo; Coover; Saunders; Wallace

> A "discovery," as the term itself implies, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing either friendship or hatred in those who are destined for good fortune or ill.
> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1452a

1. The Epiphany in Time

Life-altering moments of deep significance have long played a major part in the aesthetic imaginations of literary movements. Writings that could be grouped under the label "manifesto"—aimed at putting forth an understanding of the purpose of literature as it mutates and develops over time—have attested to this tendency throughout the past two centuries, showing a long-standing concern with what might be broadly understood as "the epiphany." For instance, in William Wordsworth's "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads"—a symbolic beacon to the creative deeds of Romanticism—the endeavours of the contemplative poet, when properly executed, are defined as capable of "[describing] objects and utter[ing] sentiments of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves […] must necessarily be in some degree enlightened" ([1800] 2008, 175). The connection between Wordsworth and the aesthetics of the epiphanic is not merely founded on his work's addressing of the spiritual and the sublime, but appears too in his reflections on the nourishing potential of transformative moments in human memory, which he labels "spots of time:"

> There are in our existence spots of time
> Which with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
> By trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
> (Especially the imaginative power)
> Are nourished, and invisibly repaired. ([1799] 1926, 208-210 ff.)

Despite his procedural disagreements with Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* shares the former's view of art as a medium with the potential to reconfigure individuals' approaches to their ordinariness, setting them in intellectual

motion, displacing them from a position of ignorance to one of radical knowledge and understanding. For Coleridge, the poet is one who can trigger these moments of epiphanic displacement in their readership; one who, when "described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity" (1906, 166; italics in the original). The connection between the sublime in the work of the Romantics and the conceptualisation of an epiphanic moment—a vision capable of re-defining the experiencing subject—is indeed apparent. Such a connection, furthermore, may be contended to be a necessity of the worldview that serves as a foundation to romantic poiesis. Indeed, these "[m]oments of insight" have been argued (McGowan 1990, 417) to be crucial for the romantics "because the presentation of knowledge unavailable elsewhere assures art's importance; the artist as seer/prophet presents truths that more mundane perspectives miss and the radiance of the epiphanic moment captures the mysterious […] process by which such truths are reached" (417). Thus, these revelations serve a twofold purpose: that of validating the arts as a medium, and that of elevating the artist to a position from where they may preach about truths necessarily unbeknownst to their readership, unattuned to their learned sensibilities.

However, the notion of the epiphany is most closely tied to high modernism, and has even been argued, albeit disputably, to be "useful only to the extent that we recognize […it] as distinctively modern" (Lanbaum 1983, 341). Following James Joyce's introduction of the term "epiphany" to literary studies in *Stephen Hero*, where he famously defined it as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself" ([1944] 1969, 216), authors writing under the wing of the modern began to show unanimous interest in these moments of illumination and the aesthetics they configured. Indeed, the short story after modernism has even been described as working "toward a single moment of revelation" where either character or reader may transcend the confines of their reality and approach what was once unutterable, unknowable, or sacred (Shaw 1983, 193). The rise to prominence of the epiphany—especially, though not exclusively, in connection with the short story genre—has found justification in the high modernists' own vocabulary, with a wide array of individual takes joining Joyce's: we find the "moment of being" in Virginia Woolf, the "shock" in Walter Benjamin, the "magic moment" in Ezra Pound, the "still point of the turning world" in T.S. Eliot, the "Proust effect," a revelatory explosion of memory triggered by sensory experience, and so on. The connection between the epiphany and the modern betrays a perception of art as a potential source of transcendental knowledge that is widely present across modernist texts. This has been tied to existing accounts of modernity (Clark 1993, 388): the modernist epiphany's concern with the otherwise unknowable implicitly calls attention to Lyotard's conceptualisation of modern art as "the art which devotes its 'little technical expertise' […] to present the fact that the unpresentable exists" (1984, 78).

The contrast between the epiphanies of romanticism and those of modernism is clearly manifold. Whereas the former are aimed at the enlightenment of the poetic

subject, moved by the sublime, and their subsequent elevation to the status of an aesthetic prophet to their readership, the epiphanies of modernism constitute narrative moments where the aestheticizing endeavours of modernity are married with life knowledge, revealing truths about the self, and bringing to the fore potentialities of character that had, before then, remained unconscious. Postmodernism's relationship with the tradition of the epiphany draws on this history, as well as being informed by the movement's rapport with modernity. The shift from modernism to postmodernism, indeed, goes far beyond the etymological, and might be characterised as one that concerns not a radical change in vision, but rather a change in where each places their focus: on as Hutcheon puts it, an "ideologically and aesthetically motivated rejection of the past (in the name of the future)" or an attempt at interpreting these precepts freely while remaining "historically aware, hybrid, and inclusive" (1986, 192-3); on an epistemological outlook on reality versus the possibility of "doing" unlicensed ontology through art (McHale 1987); on the formation of a self versus the suspicion of the diversity beneath it (McGowan 1990); or on the want to face the future versus the plundering of the past in search of a sense of aesthetics (Platt 2016). This article contributes to the inscription of the afterlives of the high modernist epiphany in postmodernist aesthetics. To do so, it builds on Miriam Marty Clark's diagnosis of the postmodernist short story as a genre that has privileged "the language of the labyrinth" over that of the epiphanic (1993, 393) in order to propose that postmodernism's relationship with the epiphany is informed by a concern with—and, perhaps, a movement-wide struggle to unquestioningly articulate—subjectivity in narrative.

The above claim is founded on the subject-centred nature of the epiphany itself, as revelations depend on the literary articulation—and thus, existence—of an *experiencer*. Arthur M. Saltzman has argued that postmodern fiction "more readily lays bare the artifice of epiphany" due to its own self-perceived inability to render the world "hospitable" through literary device (1989, 501). "If epiphany is a focused, stabilized locus of meaning," writes Saltzman, "contemporary reality, at least as it is inferred from recent fiction, is decentered, multivalent, unsystematic, even nonsensical" (501). Much as this contention suits postmodernism's conceptualisation and endeavours quite readily, it also leaves out the subject as the origin and destination of most epiphanies, at least at the diegetic level. If a locus of stable meaning is required for literary fictions to deploy the epiphanic, it is precisely because said meaning needs to be interpreted by—and thus comfort—the subject, who may, through their own subjective world-vision, stabilise it. Indeed, the attainment of self-awareness and a reconsideration of the self's potentialities are recurrent ends for the modernist epiphany. "A bell clanged upon her heart," narrates Joyce at the close of "Eveline," and describes how: "All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her" ([1914] 1993, 34). Eveline's understanding of her surroundings is, in *Dubliners*, changed and enhanced by virtue of the epiphany described above: she arrives at an awareness of what she might do, and thus, too, of what might become of her should she pursue the

course of action that she now envisions with unprecedented clarity. A form of intellectual agency stands at the other end of the experience of being illuminated, however grim the object of the epiphany. Thus, the undergoing of the vision is not merely directed at Eveline's experiences as subjectively filtered, it *depends* on their very articulation and her perception of them to be conceptualised as such. She who apprehends the epiphany, the subject who arrives at *claritas*, is a necessary precondition of the revelation. Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" shows a comparable concern with the apprehension of transcendental truth—the movement from ignorance to knowledge—*in* the subject: "I feel a satisfying sense of reality […]. Here is something definite, something real" ([1917] 2003, 82).[1] Grasping absolute truth in such a way results in movements of and within the self, whilst simultaneously proving the character's articulation qua subject. "If vision is mimetic and requires a correspondence," argues Sharon Kim, "the self that results from Joycean epiphany turns out to be a subject […, on one level] apprehending the object after first separating it from its context […; and on a second level,] in the sense of one who has been subjected to another power" (2012, 36). However destructive epiphanies may become in high modernism, they remain narrative moments that open up possibility for subjects, demonstrating their literary elevation as such and moving the self into some manner of conceptual transcendence.

If postmodernism cannot deploy the revelation in a manner comparable to that of modernism, then the decentred, multivalent, unsystematic or even nonsensical quality that Saltzman rightly ascribed to postmodern reality as conveyed in the arts must, too, significantly inform how the postmodern subject is located in discourse. The shift between modernism and postmodernism in fiction specifically need not concern a crisis of content, but rather one of presentation. Thus, the question "Who presents the story, and to whom?" may prompt more productive inquiry into why stories in the postmodern age have either twisted or (seemingly) discarded the epiphany as a narrative moment. As Derrida discussed in an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy on the matter of subjectivity, "[t]he singularity of the 'who' […] dislocates or divides itself in gathering itself together to answer to the other, whose call somehow precedes its own identification with itself, for to this call I can *only* answer" (1991, 100; italics in the original). Thus, questions on the fall of the subject and the erection of an alleged (post)subject betray the asker more than they do any ontology of the subject as monad. Similarly, discussions on the illuminated characters in the text may best be set aside in favour of discussions on the questioning author projecting a postmodernist outlook onto them. Perhaps, then, the epiphany cannot take place in postmodernist texts as it

[1] In this regard, it is interesting to bring attention to Lydia Davis' "The Caterpillar" (2006), often regarded as a postmodernist reinterpretation of Woolf's tale. What is most strikingly missing in Davis' story is, precisely, the narratively charged moment of epiphany, whose absent-presence is felt throughout by allusion: what Woolf wrote into holding the ability to move the subject, having her transcend into a state where her knowledge of the mundane may be connoted as transformative, Davis silences, showcasing instead a concern with the ordinary for the ordinary's own sake (while, indeed, simultaneously calling upon her story the notion of the epiphanic by means of the intertextual connection between the two narratives).

did in those of high modernism precisely because the subject that may be moved by transcendental knowledge—a Hegelian subject that embraces its own contradictions into an integrated, functional whole—is no longer believed in by the author making its articulation possible, the reader interpreting it into hermeneutic existence, or both.

This disbelief might result in the collapse of the epiphany as conceptualised by the modernists, but its constitutive role in short story writing is not ignored or entirely rejected in postmodernist texts. Such an incongruence between form (the epiphany can be structurally present) and function (it often cannot serve the purpose it used to) is constitutive of an aesthetics of the epiphanic that I contend to be wholly postmodern: the epiphany may still occupy a position in the discursive arrangement of narrative, but when it does take place, the illumination tends to no longer enhance subjective potency due to either the dismemberment of subject, or the articulation of a subject that sees in the epiphany a truth too diverse, overwhelming or expanding for the possibility of action to result from its apprehension. As I will demonstrate below, this reappropriation of the epiphany can, furthermore, be attested to (albeit in evidently disparate ways) in the experimental fiction of Robert Coover, or in the neorealist endeavours of George Saunders and the work of David Foster Wallace, who have sought the integration of the two currents in late postmodern writing.

I will be referring to the work of Wallace and Saunders as indistinctly "late postmodern" in what follows. This lack of distinction is not meant to disregard contemporary developments in literary history, but rather to attest to a partial common ground in how the two authors approach their postmodern legacy. My use of late postmodernism is here vaguely aligned with Stephen Burn's conception of "second-generation postmodernism" (2016), and focuses therefore on the authors' writing showcasing an understanding of—and a desire to converse with—postmodernism after its academic and cultural commodification. The affective turn in much contemporary literature, and the focus on interpersonal connection and community that has ensued (partly, indeed, from the literary ambitions of writers such as Wallace) might result in the epiphany being reappropriated yet again in the hands of contemporary writers and made to serve a different purpose than the one I engage with here. I do not think, however, that Saunders' work does this prominently enough to merit consideration beyond my proposed understanding of the postmodernist epiphany—and hence it is why my endeavours in what follows are, at least in part, wilfully oblivious of its contemporariness and how it might be effectively traced to the tale if approached from a different angle.

2. The Revelation, Reappropriated: A (Very Short) Collection of Postmodernist Moments

The epiphany can be promptly located in many postmodernist texts, both in its seemingly modernist form and as a narrative device that is disrupted, unsuccessful, called upon but textually unfound. The following paragraphs will provide an account of

how some postmodernist epiphanies have toyed with their legacy, drawing on examples from different moments in the movement's history. The array of stories presented here is necessarily limited, but the selection still attests to an ongoing range of tendencies in late twentieth-century and contemporary narrative, all having in common a turn from the Joycean epiphany into something (subjectively) other.

In Robert Coover's "The Elevator," the entirety of the narrative's action takes place in a space of transience. Its protagonist, who repeatedly goes up and down inside a building in fifteen vignette-like paragraphs, is aware of his own stasis, and the narrative voice ponders on it several times throughout the piece: "Martin, without so much as reflecting on it, automatically takes the self-service elevator to the fourteenth floor, where he works. The systematizing, that's what's wrong, he concludes, that's what cracks them up" (1969, 133). This understanding of cyclicality as a life-prison is negatively connoted even further as the story unfolds: "The accretion of tragedy. It goes on, ever giving birth to itself. Up and down, up and down. Where will it end? he wonders. [...] He arrives, alone, at the fourteenth floor. He steps out of the old elevator, stares back into its spent emptiness. There, only there, is peace, he concludes wearily. The elevator doors press shut" (134). Martin's immobilism at once conveys both a diagnosis of postmodern culture and the character's compliance with it, as he connotes it as a locus of, if not true comfort, some form of peace. Hence, the stage is set for the would-be epiphany to free subjectivity from the chains of the automatised, capitalist present, liberating the subject via some form of realisation and, in so doing, reminding them of the potencies within. The potential "demonstration" of a subject through the apprehension of a freeing truth, however, is precluded several times as the story nears its close. This impossibility of arriving at subject-changing knowledge opposes the revelation at the heart of the text to those of modernist literature, and becomes all the more impossible as the story turns to experimentalism. The first diegetic disruption features the interrelation of Martin's sexual drives—directed at the young girl operating the elevator—and the power fantasy that this feeds into. These climactic sections do not provide Martin with any knowledge or form of transcendence, but rather they border on the delusional: "*Here on this elevator, my elevator, created by me, moved by me, doomed by me, I, Martin, proclaim my omnipotence!* [...] *I, Martin, proclaim against all dooms the indestructible seed*" (134-7; italics in the original). The mystification of a mundane moment of heightened significance in modernist fiction here becomes almost parodic, with the character being bathed in a knowledge that is not transformative and/or other-worldly, but could instead be read as a form of neurodivergence. As the story reaches its conclusion, the potential moment of illumination—understood as an enabling force—is again disrupted: Martin is shown having refused to take the elevator as a result of "a strange premonition" and instead walking up the fourteen flights only to hear "the elevator hurtle by him and then the splintering crash from below" (137). The unexplainable knowledge provided to the character, which has done no less than save his life, is entirely detached from his existence and configuration as subject insofar

as he is markedly unaware of both the revelation's nature and its consequences for his individuality. Rather than being changed as a thinking being due to his apprehension of a mystified truth, his character is impervious to the transformative potential of the text's epiphany. He is, what is more, not *subjected* to the power of the revelation; there is no conceptualisation of another force that might condition the articulation of subjectivity, no structure of vision by which the apprehending mind and the apprehended truth may interact. "Inscrutable" is the word Martin finally settles upon, pronouncing it aloud as he continues to walk up the stairs (137). His understanding has not been enhanced in any active, appreciative sense; no emergence of the unconscious has occurred. Contrary to what would be commonplace in modernism, there is no gained consciousness of the thing that has been allegedly understood through transcendental means. Knowledge does not open up possibility, does not reconfigure, and thus neither does it *subject*. Martin's conclusion may even be contended to be further removed from a high modernist enhancement of subject by its taking on of a metafictional dimension, with Coover encapsulating the story's aesthetic purpose through a single adjective, alluding to its (wilful) inscrutability and his awareness of how the language game of interpretation, now set before his potential readers, is not his to contain. The epiphany, then—if there is an epiphany to be experienced in full—is projected outside of the text, left for the reader to experience should their framing and subjective interpretation of it deem the revelation so.

Some late postmodernist literature has made an active source of isolative distress of this malfunctioning of subject. In George Saunders' "The Mom of Bold Action," the epiphany is deployed in a seemingly traditional fashion, only to be problematised as the story nears its close. "In that instant, she saw it: God, she loved her life so much" (2022, 84), writes Saunders as his protagonist, whose husband faces allegations of assault for exploding violently against a man whom—he believed—had pushed his their son, decides not to reveal to them that he might not have been the culprit at all. In a moment of revelation when she comes to appreciate the comforting ordinariness of her existence, she faces this choice, and decides to keep the truth to herself it for the sake of maintaining the uneventful comforts of the life she knows. A few lines later, choice made, the stability of the enlightened subject begins to crumble and she starts feeling guilty in her passivity. She contemplates "the hours of her life she'd spent trying to be good" (86), and finally complains that "[s]he hated this feeling. This guilty feeling. She couldn't live with it" (87). Her thoughts accelerating and the narrative density increasing, the protagonist imagines a celestial beam of light flying over her town, carrying a rebuking voice that asks her to forgive the man who had pushed her son. "*You are trapped in you*," accuses the beam as the story nears its close, only to be met with a universalizing: "Yeah, well, who isn't?" (90; italics in the original). The solipsistic accusation ties in with coming to terms with her choice and its consequences, and the epiphany's aftershock closes as she commits to sacrificing her potentialities for the sake of normalcy and stability: "She was going to have to be kind of a sin-eater on

this one […]. Tomorrow, when, again, she felt the urge, remind herself that she had decided, here in the car, for the good of the family, not to tell him. Ever. Next day, same thing" (90-91). The enlightened subject sacrifices herself by virtue of the revelation; that which she has apprehended in a moment of vision turns her into a prisoner of her own silence. Her knowledge is unvoiced and a source of psychic torment, but cannot be discarded by the subject, or deployed to open up new paths before her. What she discovers by means of narrative transcendence impedes both her action and her honest connection with others. Should she be subjected to another power, then the immediate consequence of her subjection would be her imprisonment in herself: the epiphany is overtly dialogic, but the dialogue only imagined; the possibility of sharing it with others is precluded by the revelation itself. No gesture toward another can be executed, for any such gesturing would betray the apprehended truth, dictating that silence is the only pathway into securing her known comforts. The protagonist's being "trapped in herself" is, as the beam of light readily confirms for her, "the problem" (90).

The same use of the epiphany as a source of psychic agony, resulting in the erasure of subjective potency, can be found across David Foster Wallace's short fiction. In "Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders (XI)," for instance, the story's central character grasps transcendental knowledge in a dream, being moved from ignorance to knowledge by means of the oneiric apprehension of the experience of disability:

> As in all those other dreams, I'm with somebody I know but don't know how I know them, and now this person suddenly points out to me that I'm blind. As in literally blind, unsighted, etc. Or else it's in the presence of this person that I suddenly realize I'm blind. What happens when I realize this is I get sad. It makes me incredibly sad that I'm blind. The person somehow knows how sad I am and warns me that crying will hurt my eyes somehow and make the blindness even worse, but I can't help it. I sit down and start crying really hard. ([1999] 2001, 29)

The epiphany unfolds as debilitating, with the narrating protagonist ending up "exhausted," "incredibly conscious […] of how fragile it all is" through the sublimation of his empathy (29). There is no absolute account of things; no mystified truth beyond the epiphanic that may affect the character's beliefs and his ability to act on what has been discovered. What we find, rather, is a self that is deeply *moved* (and "moved" here retains all its spatial implications; it refers to the subject's emotional life as deeply as it does to his standing in someone else's shoes) by the individual perception of the world of an-other, and one that was not merely apprehended subjectively, but through the intrinsically unverifiable nature of a dreamlike experience. Being "out of oneself" becomes the triggering condition to the epiphany; the epiphany, in turn, is made responsible for the unbearable feeling that takes control of the character. If this is a self that is *subjected* to the pain of a realisation that is too vivid to allow him to continue

functioning as a subject, then the postmodern subject of the story is victimised by his own discovery, and disempowered and disheartened by his findings. The epiphany does not betray the character's subjection, but rather it is the epiphany itself that subjects the character; it is reductive and destructive of the self's sense of possibility. "I can barely keep my eyes open, and when I get home I [...] more or less pass out" (30). Given how absolute empathy cannot be borne nor experienced as anything but a conceptual ambition, the illuminated character must abandon a consciousness that has been saturated by its transcendence, having become less functional as a subject because of the (ill) nature of the knowledge that the revelation has bestowed upon him.

Despite sharing the grim content of many modernist epiphanies, discovery of the epiphanies of postmodernism is recurrently actively destructive to the illuminated character qua subject. What the protagonist of Katherine Mansfield's modernist story "The Garden Party" cannot utter as the story closes—the truth about the nature of living she has apprehended after beholding a dead body—is too great, too significant, too "marvellous" to be shared while the self is still moved by an affective shock ([1922] 2002, 349). This revelation, which is implied to have enhanced her understanding of the human condition, is not conveyed in language, but is shown to be comprehensible to her brother all the same (349). On the other hand, what Saunders' character has sworn to keep to herself, and what Wallace's character has experienced is in essence, untransferable and shall remain unconveyable in language perpetually: the former's conditions of being depend on her silence—what she has understood must remain only hers in order for the knowledge to institute itself as such and for her change in belief to remain attestable; the latter, on his part, has peeked into "absolute" empathy, known the experience of otherness wholly in a way unimaginable to an ordinary subject, and been traumatised and isolated as a consequence. Tim Armstrong typified this shift in the short story by arguing that "modernist stories deal with the fragmentation of individual experience and the imagination of others," whereas in postmodernist tales "madness" and the displacement of the characters' senses of being "become a full-blown narrative mode [...;] a potential pathology" (2012, 95). The melting of selfhood into otherness is pathologized into causing pain to the subject, as we have seen in Wallace's narrative; the very conditions allowing the articulation of subjectivity in submission to the revelation are unspecified, disrupted by the experimentalism of Coover. Even in Saunders' "The Mom of Bold Action"—arguably the most neorealist of the three examples despite its inclusion of a magical-realist element—the epiphany is still conceptualised as a source of inward, individual torment, with the discovery itself preventing intersubjective honesty for—allegedly—the subjects' own sake.

3. The Postmodern, Speaking (of) Itself

The "disruptions" of the epiphany delineated above are not detached from their context, but rather, as I have previously contended, a symptom of a greater concern traversing postmodern fiction: the possibility of articulating subject in narrative. This

concern is not merely narratological in essence, not even artistic, but rather draws on the rich and manifold interplay between postmodern thinking and postmodernist literary practice. Michel Foucault argued that the subject constitutes itself "through a given number of practices that [… are] the truth games, practices of power" ([1984] 1994, 275); Ludwig Wittgenstein contended that existence and truth in language depended on the observation of a series of rules—his renowned "language-games"—which he said functioned "as if meaning were an aura" to be experienced rather than apprehended ([1953] 1958, 117); while Derrida, in his famed *Dissemination* ([1972] 1981), contended that "[a] text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer […; a] text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible" (63). This sense of inescapable indeterminacy, with the subject being inscribed in a language system where meaning is perceived as ever-precarious and bound by forces beyond its control also informs the disruption of the epiphanic as a pathway into agency, autonomy and transcendental—or, in what one might argue to be an equivalent adjective in the context at hand, stable—knowledge in postmodernist literature.

Postmodernism's struggle to arm itself with a manifesto that bears some manner of epiphany-resembling effect at its heart is thus founded on the attitudes outlined above, with the very notions of poietic purpose and literary reception being pluralised and removed from the author-position, and directed instead to the subjects of reading. Any given postmodern author would only be able to articulate a claim for the illuminating potential of art should they somehow succeed in detaching their own creation from its cultural frame, which would render them all too aware that interpretation depends greatly on the individually-mediated experience of their readers. In light of these conundrums, the very idea of the literary manifesto might be perceived to border on the superfluous, with it either taking on a deceptive responsibility as it reflects on the nature of literature itself and the synchronic difficulties before it, or becoming almost parodic by necessity. Attempts at providing a manifesto within postmodernism, in any of its manifold expressions, that do not speak solely to its cultural configuration and instead address the role to be played by artistic creation in it, are indeed very rare. Frank O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto" is easily interpreted as delving into postmodernism's potential for meta-mockery, resorting to a radical embracing of single-entendre principles to put forth a caricatural, implicit contestation between the many manifestos of the avant-garde, pointing at its past without necessarily providing a conceptual map for its present and future. "What can we expect from Personism?" writes O'Hara, as though exploiting art manifestos' prescriptive tendency to validate their creative deeds before factually engaging in any of the doing. "Everything, but we won't get it. It is too new, too vital a movement to promise anything. But it, like Africa, is on the way" ([1959] 1971, 499).

Indeed, it would be difficult, if not altogether impossible, to conceptualise art's ability to deliver "everything," lest it be via giving that everything to a subject in whose articulation they may invest belief. And if there is no subject in which to

invest stable belief, given that the cultural background into which the subject will be inscribed precludes the author's unquestioning articulation of it, then transcendental truth may only feature in the texts as a destructive token of a world where truth itself is perceived to have been epistemologically saturated, if not as an ideal utterly beyond reach. John Barth's renowned diagnosis of postmodern attitudes toward originality in "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1984) already hints at this concern with the subject, arguing that much contemporary art showcases a "tendency [...] to eliminate not only the traditional audience [...] but also the most traditional notion of the artist: the Aristotelian conscious agent who achieves with technique and cunning the artistic effect" (65). These intellectually "destructive" tendencies can be located across postmodernism's statements on its ever-developing purpose. David Antin's parable, entitled "The Theory and Practice of Postmodernism: A Manifesto," closes on a note against the very idea of determinacy, implying that, if nothing is fixed, subject included, if "we dont [sic] know the right anything" (1993, 342), then the pathway to be trodden by postmodernist literature is not necessarily submitted to any form of full-fledged, conscious "choosing" on the part of the author: "with respect to [... our postmodern condition] i believe in taking descartes advice if youre lost in a forest and you have no idea which way to go go for it straight ahead because its not likely to be any worse than anything else" (343; capitalisation and punctuation in the original). Antin's instructions also pervert the manifesto as a claim on artistic intention and firm belief in that it fails to point writers in a specific direction; he suggests, instead, that they do their best to navigate the non-directionality they have been bequeathed. There are no traceable instructions on where to go creatively, no intentions making explicit what postmodernist literature should do, but rather an acknowledgement of the cultural setting's imposition of a sense of uncontrollability and arbitrariness ruling over the artist's deeds. The same indeterminate bind can be traced to Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," in which his directions for young writers—e.g. that they should reject the anhedonia and hollowness of much experimental fiction for the sake of earnest sentimentality and the retrieval of the clichés of old—remain framed by a sense of uncontainable plurality that prevents the manifesto from promising that the creative selves will in fact take part in any such endeavours: "Today's most engaged young fiction does seem like some kind of line's end's end. I guess that means we all get to draw our own conclusions. Have to" (1993, 193).

Certainty is universally absent from all such proclamations. Belief in the artist qua subject—understood as a purveyor of aesthetic truth—is made precarious by postmodernism's own precepts. Thus, the characters of postmodernism face expressions of what might have once been a transformative truth that, despite their best efforts, fails to conclusively subjectivise them. As I have argued, visions coded in the transcendental only hold power over subjectivity to the extent that they prove capable of relationally demonstrating the enlightened subject's sense of self. This change from ignorance to knowledge, this movement within the subject, has historically been equated with

the subject's inscription in the structures and relations of power that condition their very articulation. In light of postmodernism's suspecting approach to both the subject and said structures, the epiphany as a pattern of "truth" or "reality" apprehension is essentially disrupted. If Joycean epiphany is founded on "a gap that is *already present in language*" (MacDuff 2020, 179; italics in the original), a "cornucopian void" that functions as "the site of revelation" (49-50), then postmodernist epiphanies embrace the delineation of such forms of hollowness, losing the character-subject in language's necessary impossibilities rather than suggestively toying with the possibility of finding meaning in its constitutive absences. When Ursula K. Le Guin railed against the near universal correlation of "epiphany" and "climax" in literary studies, stating that she would "be glad when this gladiatorial view of fiction has run its course," her claim was also—however inadvertently—advancing a complaint against the role played by the epiphany in a literary history that was no longer "doing justice" to its original conception, concluding that "[t]his [epiphany] is a pretty hifalutin word for a pretty ordinary narrative event" (1987/1989, 191). Understood in a broad sense, epiphanies may indeed be contended to be ordinary narrative events, resulting from a given writer's arrangement of narrative density, and their directing this density toward literary subjects. The potential extraordinariness of the epiphanic in postmodern fiction—and thus, too, the pertinence of the notion in present-day scholarly inquiry—may spring from the literary disassembly of these events, with postmodern characters being written into their ordinary narrative moments in ways that disclose postmodernism's epistemological struggle to pronounce them subjects.

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