

the visionary moment

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The Visionary Moment

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Joseph Natoli, *Editor*

The Visionary Moment

A Postmodern Critique

Paul Maltby

State University of New York Press

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for Shirley

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Mystical explanations are considered deep.
The truth is that they are not even superficial.
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

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Introduction

[A]nd suddenly . . . he pronounced, “Mon Dieu! How the time passes!” Nothing could have been more commonplace than this remark; but its utterance coincided for me with a moment of vision. It’s extraordinary how we go through life with eyes half shut, with dull ears, with dormant thoughts. . . . Nevertheless, *there can be but few of us who had never known one of these rare moments of awakening when we see, hear, understand ever so much—everything—in a flash.* . . .

—Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* 111, emphasis added

An old theory of truth still enchants us. According to this theory, truth, in the sense of “higher” spiritual knowledge, can be apprehended in an illuminating instant. The theory has a long history and today remains deeply inscribed in religious, literary, and colloquial discourse. I would surmise there are few among us who have not, at some time, believed in the possibility of the flash of insight that could deliver spiritually redeeming knowledge. Such a belief persists like folklore. Indeed, this theory of truth has survived in spite of wave after wave of antimetaphysical thinking (empiricism, dialectical materialism, Darwinism, psychoanalysis)—and the notion of the illuminating instant is essentially metaphysical. For example, when we recall that Reformed Theology was preoccupied with “the requirement of grace as an instantaneous illumination” (Pettit 13), the idea of the illuminating instant may be seen *inter alia* as a displaced expression of religious belief: a belief in knowledge whose purity and transcendence guarantees its power to transfigure the visionary subject.

This belief is especially evident in much anglophone poetry and fiction of the last two hundred years—a literature haunted by the idea of the salvational moment. We encounter the belief in the common literary practice of plotting narratives around, or at least highlighting, what I shall designate as a “visionary moment.” It is a familiar enough convention: the sudden enlightenment that, at a critical juncture in the life of the protagonist, dramatically raises spiritual awareness to the level of a transcendent and redemptive order of knowledge. To illustrate the extent to which this convention pervades poetry and fiction, I shall quote three of the four authors of the hitherto only published monographs on the topic.¹ (All four have adopted the term “epiphany,” a term whose limitations I shall discuss in chapter 1.) In *The Poetics of Epiphany* (1987), Ashton Nichols identifies epiphany

as “a defining characteristic of twentieth-century fiction,” a convention, moreover, that served as “a standard means of organizing lyric poems during the nineteenth century” (1, 5; see also McGowan, “From Pater” 417). In *Patterns of Epiphany* (1997), Martin Bidney writes, “[B]eginning with the Romantic movement, epiphanies have been crucial organizing principles of modern poetry and imaginative prose” (1). And in *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (1971), Morris Beja remarks on “the astonishing frequency with which sudden moments of intuitive insight appear in twentieth-century fiction” (18; see also 46). In fact, by the late fifties, it was already clear to Richard Ellmann that epiphany was “the technique which has now become a commonplace of modern fiction” (88). Therefore, it comes as a surprise to find that there has been no sustained critique of this convention. For example, the criticism of Beja, Bidney, and Nichols typifies this field of scholarship insofar as it ignores the ideological implications of the convention and does not question its metaphysical presuppositions. Rather, but for a few brief and isolated interrogations, which bear almost no resemblance to the critique advanced here (see e.g. Saltzman 8–28; McGowan “From Pater”), commentary on the epiphany/visionary moment—divided and contentious as it may be—generally adopts the perspectives of a formalist poetics or literary-historical survey. For example, Bidney, who adopts a “neo-Bachelardian approach” (16), aims “to show, first, that epiphanies tend to be composed primarily of *elements, motions, and/or shapes* . . . [and] [s]econd, . . . that any given epiphany maker is likely to present a distinctive, recognizable, *recurrent combination* of one or more elements, motions, and/or shapes. . . . (5).² And Nichols’s aim is to “provide a comprehensive discussion of the origins and defining characteristics of the new literary epiphany . . . , [its] Romantic origins . . . , its development by the Victorians, and its role as a precursor of twentieth-century literary techniques” (*Poetics* 4).

My concern here is to extend the line of inquiry in the light of questions raised by postmodern critique. For, with very few exceptions,³ the convention of the visionary moment has been neglected by scholars trained in postmodern epistemology. Consider, for instance, the most recent publication in this field: *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany* (ed. Tigges, 1999). Of the twenty-four essays collected in this anthology, just seven demonstrate an awareness of postmodern theory (see Boheemen-Saaf, Chapman, Dutoit, Henke, Losey, Nichols, Parke), and only four (Chapman, Dutoit, Henke, Losey) mount arguments that depend on it.⁴ And even here, but for the two essays (Chapman and Henke) in which female writers are read, from a Kristevan perspective, as countering a phallogocentric bias in the conventional use of epiphany, neither the metaphysical preconceptions nor the ideological characteristics of the literary epiphany are *questioned* in the light of postmodern critique. (Emphatically, this is not to suggest that these and the other essays in Tigges’s anthology are in any way deficient, but only to point out the virtual absence of any postmodern interrogation of this literary convention.)

The case for a critique of the literary visionary moment is that it is enmeshed in metaphysical and ideological assumptions—assumptions that, by the standards of postmodern critique, are theoretically untenable and that, in most contexts, are irreconcilable with progressive political thinking. And given the widespread practice of organizing fictional narratives by means of this convention, the moment serves as an effective vehicle for perpetuating these assumptions. Where there is discussion of the visionary moment—which typically focuses on its use by Romantic, Victorian, or high-modernist writers—it is usually in ways that the writers themselves would endorse; that is to say, novelists and poets who employ the convention of the moment are generally taken on their own terms. Commentators may debate the precise narrative function of a writer's visionary moments or their structure or the consistency with which a writer uses them (issues persistently raised, for example, in discussions of Joyce's "epiphanies" or Wordsworth's "spots of time" [see e.g. Bowen; Hendry Chayes; Bidney; Langbaum]). However, other significant questions have yet to be addressed. In particular, we need to examine how the ways in which this convention is mobilized and the premises that underlie it may be construed as politically suspect and epistemologically unsound. In other words, commentary generally stops short of problematizing the visionary moment. Yet, the moment is susceptible to several forms of critique: positivist, psychoanalytic, materialist. The principal aim of this study is to examine the literary visionary moment from perspectives opened up by postmodern critique. For the moment is premised on assumptions about the nature of truth, cognition, and subjectivity, which are vulnerable to the demystifying and deconstructive impetus of this critique. Furthermore, the rhetoricity of the moment often encodes a conservative ideology and a logic of disempowerment (a diminished sense of political agency and historical identity), conditions that also make the moment an appropriate target for postmodern critique.

Insofar as visionary moments typically embody claims to (a) transcendent knowledge, (b) the mediation of occult faculties (e.g. "insight") in the attainment of that knowledge, (c) the instantaneous reception of the knowledge (e.g. the "flash" of insight), and (d) the proximity of redemption by virtue of the transfiguring truth ascribed to that knowledge, we may say they epitomize the pretensions of traditional forms of mystical narrative. Indeed, the literary visionary moment will be seen to stand in a synecdochal relation to the truth claims of mystical experience in its general (nonliterary) forms. Thus, the postmodern challenge to the visionary moment as a credible mode of cognition will also serve as an abbreviated and allegorical way of addressing the larger question of the credibility of mystical truth claims in general. I take the latter to be a legitimate target, especially at present, given the publishing boom in pop spirituality and New Age mysticism: this is the time of Deepak Chopra's vacuous pronouncements on the life of the soul, of shamanistic and millennial cults, of a burgeoning of belief in the supernatural.⁵

This study will also pursue the postmodern interest in the conditions under which meaning is sustained and sanctioned, which, in this case, calls for attention to the configurations of knowledge and the institutional forces that validate the visionary moment as a source of signification. Accordingly, I shall discuss, among other things, the remarkable persistence of the Puritan model of redemption; the Romantic legacy of a nonrational cognitive faculty; the endorsements supplied by literature itself *qua* prestigious institutional practice; and the ratifying force of bourgeois ideology. At issue here is the legitimation of the metaphysical truth claims implicit in the visionary moment.

Inquiry will, with just a few exceptions, focus on texts by North American writers active since 1945, with special reference to fiction by Don DeLillo, Jack Kerouac, Saul Bellow, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Flannery O'Connor, and Raymond Carver.⁶ This choice of writers is largely guided by the opportunity each affords to explore the literary visionary moment in a distinctive context. For example, the implications of the use of this convention vary between a postmodern writer like DeLillo and a Beat writer like Kerouac and black women writers like Walker and Marshall. Moreover, the post-1945 time frame is significant, for the convention of the visionary moment in American fiction since Faulkner has been virtually ignored. One reason for this lack of critical attention is what we might call the Wordsworth/Joyce axis of scholarship. Here, under the rubric "epiphany," is where the discussion of the poetics and history of the visionary moment is concentrated. After all, critics maintain (and with good reason) that the literary epiphany originated in Wordsworth's poetry and was developed by Joyce into a formalized aesthetics (see e.g. Nichols, *Poetics* 12; Langbaum 34; Beja 32–33). Moreover, widely recognized as the most accomplished practitioners of the convention, Wordsworth and Joyce have been canonized as the exemplars of epiphanic literature. Where the discussion of the literary epiphany does branch out, it is largely along the lines of this axis, hence the focus on the English Romantics or the anglophone high-modernist novelists (see e.g. Abrams 385–90, 418–27; Langbaum 33–57; see also Beja; Bidney; Nichols *Poetics*; McGowan, "From Pater" *passim*).

The literary use of visionary moments became a convention in England during the initial phase of industrialization (roughly, 1780–1840), the expansive surge of modernization that radically transformed social relations, cultural practices, and much of the landscape. In particular, *The Prelude*, composed between 1799 and 1805, has been identified as inaugurating the formal and systematic use of the literary moment (see e.g. Langbaum 34; Bidney 25): its autobiographical narrative is frequently punctuated by moments of illumination, which Wordsworth called "spots of time" (12.208). The periodization is important, for the historical premise, to be explored later, is that, as a literary convention, the visionary moment emerges in tension with the most aggressive phase in the development of the forces of production. Subsequently, concurrent with the unre-

mitting process of modernization, the convention has persisted as a defining feature of Victorian and modernist poetry (see e.g. Nichols *Poetics*; Bidney), of the anglophone high-modernist novel (see e.g. Beja) and, as we shall see, of American fiction since 1945. Moreover, in the context of what we may conveniently enumerate as the four *As* of capitalist modernization—Alienation, Anomie, Atomization, Angst—the visionary moment can be read as encoding the fantasy or hope of a whole and spiritually centered life (as intimated in the flash of transcendent and redemptive knowledge). In short, modernization sets the stage for the production and reception of this convention; it is the conjunctural force field that makes the option to write in this visionary mode seem such a compelling one and that makes the public and critical response to it such a sympathetic one.

The literary visionary moment will be seen to perform numerous ideological functions (“ideological,” suffice to say here, in that visionary moments naturalize purely individualist models of human change and knowledge, thereby concealing the political constraints and socio-historical limits of change and knowledge). But it is important to stress that any political analysis of the moment that focused exclusively on its ideological implications would be skewed and one-sided. For we shall see how the literary visionary moment is also mobilized on behalf of a progressive politics; how it can perform a critical function by invoking the image of a postalienated and postanomic subject. Indeed, a key factor in its persistent appeal as a literary convention is its adversarial and utopian potential. Moreover, insofar as visionary moments may affirm or imply utopian ideals, their mystifications of knowledge and temporality are readily embraced. Thus, one and the same visionary moment may be at one and the same time ideological and critical/utopian in character.⁷ Accordingly, in several places (notably, in discussions of Kerouac and Walker), I shall try to give due weight to the critical function behind the use of literary visionary moments. However, my principal interest lies in exploring the ideological dimension of this convention and, in particular, in showing how it embodies a paradigm of knowledge pregnant with ideological implications.

The visionary moment promotes the influential myth that there is a “higher” order of knowledge that can “save” or transfigure the individual by virtue of its singular attributes—that is, knowledge as *inter alia* intuitive, instantaneous, pure, permanent, and universal. This amounts to a paradigm of knowledge that implicitly downgrades “worldly” forms of knowledge that have real transformative potential. The paradigm also assumes the model of a self-sufficient (or atomistic) subject as the private source of knowledge. Ideological effects follow from these assumptions. Thus, in dissociating knowledge from public life and interiorizing it, the paradigm occludes understanding of the socially constituted nature of knowledge. Furthermore, it obscures the role of knowledge in constructing the positions from which the subject makes sense of his or her place in the world. In short, the political implications of knowledge are effaced. The literary visionary moment

also perpetuates the common assumption that knowledge acquired in an instant is likely to be pure and coherent, for instantaneousness suggests the bypassing of the contaminating and obfuscating effects of worldly mediation. Or, to put it another way, the visionary moment presupposes the ideal of a flawless channel of communication, free of the culture's "noise," insulated against the distortions of entropy.

It is in relation to the visionary moment as a paradigm of knowledge that I shall introduce my use of postmodern critique as a counterparadigm. But first, in recognition of a precept of this mode of critique, I must take the preliminary step of a self-positioning.

A protocol of postmodern critique is the inclusion of a statement of its own theoretical limits. By this reflexive gesture, it presents itself as an intervention rather than a voice speaking from outside of theory, a perspective rather than a panoptic judgment. These remarks apply not only to my focus on the convention of the visionary moment (already perspectivized as postmodern critique) but also to what I am calling "postmodern critique." After all, the latter is necessarily a construction, since this or any critique has no existence prior to its theorization. And to say this is not to suggest that there is anything idiosyncratic or contentious about my construction (which is, roughly, a mainstream, almost consensual model) but only that there can be no definitive account of what constitutes postmodern critique; depending on the disciplinary and ideological position of the theorist, the construction will, unavoidably, be selective and interested. Thus, I speak from within the critical-pedagogical enclave of the academy, where educators work to connect learning to the process of social change (of which more later) and where their curricula must reckon with a pervasive neoconservative hostility to "theory" as a desecrating and disruptive force. Moreover, it need hardly be said, this study is made possible largely by virtue of those cross-fertilizing inputs from *inter alia* poststructuralist theory, narratology, and cultural studies, which, since the mid-seventies, have animated literary-critical practice.

By "postmodern critique," I mean a mode of critique that is largely elaborated from the ideas of neo-Nietzschean thinkers (notably Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard) and deployed against hegemonic discourses and practices with the aim of contesting and undermining their authority. Though not always conceived as a mission that translates into a clear agenda for political action, this mode of critique aims to demystify and delegitimize assumptions about, for example, "Truth," "Reason," the "Self," "History," "Culture," language, and gender—assumptions on which bourgeois, Eurocentric, patriarchal, and other ideologies and practices are said to be premised.⁸ Postmodern critique makes no pretence of "disinterested" contemplation of its object; typically, it seeks to effect a radical change within the epistemological field (including the institutional structures that transmit knowledge) in the name of freedom from mystification and ideology. Among the strategies employed to this end (individualized here at the risk of some overlap and expounded at the risk of shifting to a pedagogic register) are