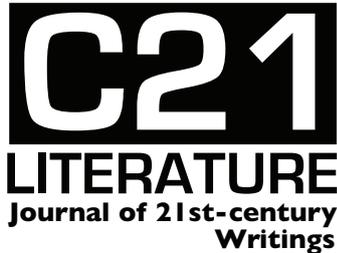




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## Article

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ARTICLE

## *Brightness and Unfixity: reframing epiphany in Oswald's Woods etc.*

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Epiphany in contemporary British poetry is perceived by some poets and critics, often those who self-identify as being outside of the mainstream, as a uniform, coercive, teleological, and unchallenging literary mode. This article intervenes in these debates to show how mainstream contemporary poetry, like its more experimental and avant-garde counterparts, also disrupts the traditional epiphanic paradigm. Through new critical readings of selected poems from Alice Oswald's collection *Woods etc.* (2005), this article argues for a reframing that comprises epiphanies of 'brightness' and 'unfixity' and resists a teleological reading of this deep-rooted literary mode. It proposes that these poems offer a new way of thinking about epiphany as an ongoing process of revelation in contrast to the more familiar and well-established singular moment of insight.

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**Keywords:** epiphany; Oswald; contemporary poetry; *Woods etc.*

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Reviews and critical studies in the popular press suggest that epiphany is unfashionable in some quarters. The artifice of epiphany, and the authorial control characteristic of some epiphanic modes, is now often criticised by some poet-critics. Marjorie Perloff (2012), has expressed concern that rigidly linear epiphanies have become a mainstay of contemporary poetry. In her reading of the *Penguin Anthology of 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poetry* (2009 ed. Rita Dove), Perloff identifies a recurring pattern: 'observation—triggering memory—insight', and is troubled by what she calls 'a tepid tolerance' for this type of formulaic and contained sequence of experience (2012: n.pag). Lyn Hejinian's concerns go further. Hejinian's description of poems that employ a 'coercive epiphanic mode' (1985: n.pag) suggests that the interpretation of the insight is controlled by the poet. She condemns epiphany as 'a negative model' with a 'smug pretension to universality' and a 'tendency to cast the poet as guardian

to Truth' (Hejinian 1985: n.pag). Instead, Hejinian advocates a mode of poetry that 'invites participation' of the reader and rejects the authority of the writer over the reader through structural devices such as the uneven distribution of words and lines on a page (1985: n.pag). Catherine Hales expresses a similar view. In 2010 Hales' poems were anthologised in *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by U.K. Women Poets*, edited by Carrie Etter – an anthology which draws attention to a distinction between mainstream and more experimental and avant-garde modes of poetry. As Etter claims, this anthology gathers together 'poetries not readily found' in mainstream publications (2010: 9). Introducing her poems in this anthology, Hales declares that she values poetry for its power to 'irritate' and to juxtapose 'scraps of languages from different places and registers' to create 'meaning that is not subject to control or definition' (Hales in Etter 2010: 63). From her position within Etter's anthology of 'other' poetries, Hales dismisses epiphany as purposeless in our 'messy' world (Hales in Etter 2010: 63) and an inadequate mode for expressing the disorder and uncertainty of contemporary experience.

In contrast, this article argues that the poetry of Alice Oswald, whose work is often considered within the mainstream,<sup>1</sup> presents epiphanies that embrace the 'messiness' advocated by Hales in *Other Poetries*, and challenges the reductive paradigms identified by Perloff and Hejinian. Through close readings of poems in Oswald's collection, *Woods etc.* published in 2005, it will explore how Oswald engages with an epiphanic mode that resists a teleological reading of epiphany, a reading that casts epiphany as a linear progression towards a fixed endpoint characterised by insight, understanding and new (self-)knowledge. Instead, this article considers how Oswald's work pushes at the boundaries of what epiphany might be and opens-up the potential of the epiphanic mode to unfixity, exploring epiphany as a continual process of things coming to light, rather than as the isolated revelation of a fixed insight.

James Joyce is frequently regarded as a key figure in discussions of literary epiphany as a mode of writing. Wim Tigges claims that Joyce's writing established the

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<sup>1</sup> Oswald occupies a significant position in the landscape of contemporary British poetry, appearing frequently in public media, on the festival circuit, on prize-lists and lecture programmes.

'critical reputation' of the literary epiphany. However, he also acknowledges its origins in the lyric poetry of the Romantics and earlier (1999: 11).<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most well-known iteration of epiphany is offered by William Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (1850). In Book XII of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth describes 'spots of time' as unique moments arising from intense interactions with the non-human world. ([1850] 1995: 479). '[S]pots of time' have the capacity to reawaken childhood memories during 'trivial occupations' and 'ordinary intercourse', with the result that 'minds/Are nourished and invisibly repaired' ([1850] 1995: 479) – the teleological pattern of 'observation–triggering memory–insight' that Perloff asserts is incongruous within the context of contemporary poetry (2012: n.pag). In this paradigm, epiphanies are defined as concluding moments of insight that lead to self-improvement or awareness.

The works of James Joyce, which have become synonymous with literary epiphany, follow a similar theme. Writing between 1901–2, and later in 1904, Joyce collected together a series of brief prose vignettes which he referred to as 'epiphanies' and some of these were later incorporated into *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and its earlier version *Stephen Hero*.<sup>3</sup> These sketches recorded 'fragments of overheard dialogue or personal meditation' which A. Walton Litz claims are not by themselves revelations: they could only have had significance to Joyce himself (Walton Litz in Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*. [1901–2, 1904] 2001: 157). However when these fragments are integrated into Joyce's later writings, Walton Litz argues that they gain a 'revealing context'(159). For example, in the posthumously published novel *Stephen Hero*, Stephen Dedalus explains that 'By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation', telling his companion, Cranly, that even the clock of the Ballast Office is 'capable of an epiphany' ([1944] 1965: 211). Stephen describes how when his 'glimpses' or 'gropings of the spiritual eye' reach an 'exact focus' of the clock they produce an epiphany through which he will 'find the supreme quality of beauty' ([1944] 1965: 211). Here, Stephen's language with its insistence on

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive survey of literary epiphany see Wim Tigges' 1999 edited collection of essays *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

<sup>3</sup> A detailed explanation of these prose vignettes is provided by A. Walton Litz in James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, p. 157.

the 'spiritual' and the 'supreme' — etymologically that which is above him — draws on the Christian significance of epiphany. The feast of Epiphany (6 January) in the Christian calendar marks the manifestation of Christ to the Magi, and although in a secular context epiphany has come to mean *any* moment of great or sudden revelation,<sup>4</sup> Joyce's rendering of Stephen's epiphanic moment highlights an experience of revelation and transcendence marked by the presence of the divine.<sup>5</sup>

An inanimate object does not have the capacity to experience an epiphany, but the culmination of Stephen's extraordinary focus on the everyday object of a clock is a moment of discovery and new knowledge. An insight, similar to Wordsworth's 'spots of time', is achieved suddenly, in a moment. A few pages later Stephen adds that 'this is the moment which [he] call[s] epiphany', a moment when 'we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance' ([1944] 1965: 213). Epiphany is again described as a spiritual moment, one through which underlying significance is revealed. In discovering 'its soul, its whatness', there is a sense of new understanding. Virginia Woolf articulates a similar iteration of epiphany, even if it is not labelled as such, in her previously unpublished memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939).<sup>6</sup> In the essay, she explains that 'moments of being'<sup>7</sup> are revealed when she receives a 'sudden violent shock', as if she has felt a 'blow' ([1939] 1985: 72). The adjective 'sudden' draws attention to the unexpected and swift nature of the epiphanic experience. Similar to the explanations

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<sup>4</sup> The term epiphany has been absorbed into modern consciousness as a moment when new knowledge or understanding is attained, for example, the headline from *Esquire* magazine online: 'The 5 Most Important Epiphanies Every Stylish Man Has: Eureka! Moments on the well-trodden path to dressing well' <http://www.esquire.co.uk/style/fashion/advice/a13233/how-stylish-men-know-how-to-dress-well>.

<sup>5</sup> In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Joyce does not use the term epiphany; however Stephen's explanation of *claritas* (from Aquinas) retains echoes of the language used in its earlier version, *Stephen Hero*: 'The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind [...]' (Joyce, in *A James Joyce Reader*: 481).

<sup>6</sup> 'A Sketch of the Past' begins: 'Two days ago—Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> April 1939 to be precise—Nessa said if I did not start writing my memoirs I should soon be too old', thereby suggesting its date of composition (Woolf: 61).

<sup>7</sup> In 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf both explains and illustrates what she calls her 'own psychology': her 'moments of being and non-being' (Woolf: 70).

of epiphany given in the work of Wordsworth and Joyce, she feels that such blows are always 'instantly valuable'. More specifically, she claims that they 'will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances' ([1939] 1985: 72). Woolf's description echoes the Joycean definition of epiphany, suggesting that both generate significant, beneficial and transformational insights.

Although epiphany is often identified through the work of these three writers and is frequently analysed using comparable language, later literary scholars have recognised the difficulty of defining epiphany. Morris Beja suggests that epiphany is 'difficult to define precisely', adding that formulating a 'universally acceptable definition' is problematic (1971: 13–14). Wim Tigges, like Beja, acknowledges the challenge involved in an exploration of epiphanic modes, suggesting in his introduction to *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany* (1999) that he will 'to some extent summarize' the debates and 'try to arrive at a typology' (my emphasis, 1999: 11). Jay Losey begins his contribution to Tigges' study with a similar assessment:

Whether considered as "moments of being", "privileged moments" or "moments of vision", epiphany appears in the work of major modern writing as a variable trope. Indeed, the variability of epiphany as a concept makes it difficult to define. (1999: 379)

If, as Losey and his fellow critics suggest, classification of epiphany is unwieldy and consensus unattainable, then we require an alternative approach, one that extends rather than narrows discussions of this literary concept. The final essay in Tigges' collection offers a way forward. Ashton Nichols stresses that 'the debate about what "constitutes" epiphany should be discussed in terms of Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance' and that epiphany should be used to refer to a 'cluster of related rhetorical practices' (Nichols 1999: 474).<sup>8</sup> Mobilising Nichols' premise, this article

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<sup>8</sup> Diané Collinson and Kathryn Plant describe how through his investigation of games Wittgenstein finds 'a complicated network of similarities and overlappings that are more like family resemblances than a recurring common characteristic' (Collinson [1998] 2006: 223).

seeks to broaden and reframe understanding of epiphany as a mode of writing by reading the use of epiphany in the poetry of Alice Oswald as a 'rhetorical practice' (Nichols 1999: 474), one with close connections to historic definitions and iterations of epiphany, but also as a mode that expands the concept in distinctive ways.

In conversation with Deryn Rees-Jones in 2013, Oswald recalls how 'The Greeks [...] thought of language as a veil which protects us from the brightness of things' (2013: 31). She goes on to add that 'poetry is a tear in that veil' (Oswald 2013: 31). Oswald suggests that the language of poetry has the capacity to reveal and therefore the 'tear in the veil' is an epiphany. However, it is an epiphany that allows whatever has been concealed to come into the light, in contrast to a moment that reveals insight or understanding or the 'Truth' that Hejiniian fears (1985: n.pag). Oswald's evocation of the veil has further resonance when considered in the context of Martin Heidegger's interpretation of *alētheia*. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger suggests that the Greek *alētheia* is a word which can mean 'truth' but also 'unconcealment' and 'unhiddenness' ([1927] 1996: 202). Heidegger points out that the privative construction of *alētheia* (*a* meaning an absence or loss of a quality and *lēthe* meaning concealment) emphasises unconcealment, rather than simply truth ([1927] 1996: 204). As a result, Oswald's 'tear in the veil' calls to mind an unconcealment of 'brightness', suggesting, from the Old English *beorht*, something shining, vivid, brilliant, and figuratively, hopeful.

The stonewaller in Oswald's book-length poem *Dart* ([2002] 2010) describes just this type of epiphanic experience. For the stonewaller, the river is a place where the 'water just glows', where 'you get this light different from anything on land, as if you're keeping a different space' (Oswald [2002] 2010: 34). He refers to his heightened experience as one of unconcealed 'brightness' (Oswald 2013: 31) and one of difference, adding that the water knocks him off his balance, transforming the world around him: 'you're in a more wobbly element like a wheelbarrow, you can feel the whole earth tipping, the hills shifting up and down, shedding stones as if everything's a kind of water' (Oswald [2002] 2010: 34). In this epiphany, the non-human world surrounding the stonewaller dissolves its boundaries and the natural elements

discard their identities, rather than revealing their 'whatness' (Joyce [1944] 1965: 213). No reassuring or definite insight results from this epiphany, the stonewaller's mind is not 'nourished' or 'repaired' (Wordsworth [1850] 1995: 479); the light experienced by the stonewaller creates uncertainty as opposed to understanding or new knowledge – he is 'wobbly' and 'tipping'. As Oswald explains to Rees-Jones, water taught her 'unfixity' (2013: 25), a mode of instability and change. Oswald's interview with Rees-Jones reveals further evidence of the importance of 'brightness' and 'unfixity' in Oswald's epiphanic mode. Responding to Rees-Jones' question about her first published poem, 'A Greyhound in the Evening after a Long Day of Rain' (*The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* 1996: 4–5), Oswald talks of trying to find a way to end the poem:

But I couldn't quite finish the poem. I was biking back from work (after a long day of rain), when a greyhound ran out of the woods in front of me – a living description of the lightness and strangeness of the weather ... (2013: 23)

Seemingly, this experience has the characteristics of an epiphany – it is a sudden moment of revelation arising from an ordinary experience – yet what the epiphany discloses is not something 'real' (Joyce) or 'instantly valuable' (Woolf); this epiphany instead reveals 'lightness', rather than insight.

The epiphany described here is an epiphany in nature; it is a corporeal, 'living' and breathing epiphany in the form of a greyhound crossing Oswald's path. Sandra Humble Johnson describes how literary epiphanies encompass 'at least two areas of epiphanic experience: the moment of epiphany in nature, as perceived by the creative artist, and the moment epiphany is recreated [...] by the written word' (1992: 78). The epiphany described by Oswald is not (at this point) in the form of a poem on the page. If we look at the published poem, we can see how an epiphany in nature is translated into poetic utterance by Oswald:

And evening is come with a late sun unloading silence,  
Tiny begin-agains dancing on the night's edge.

But what I want to know is  
 whose is the great grey wicker-limber hound,  
 like a stepping on coal, going softly away ... (1996: 5)

In this reiteration of the epiphany in nature, a sense of not-knowing and possibility hang in the air, as does the final line – the epiphany is inconclusive, unfinished, suspended. Oswald's poem, like her oral description of the epiphany in nature disclosed to Rees-Jones, drifts off into silence. Both 'areas of epiphanic experience' (Johnson 1992: 78) retain a key similarity by suspending us in an undetermined space, halting any anticipated insight and creating a sense of 'unfixity' (Oswald 2013: 25). Oswald also draws attention to the unfixity of her writing process. She suggests that the poems are 'just a shorthand record of the mind trying to work out its position in the world' (Oswald 2013: 25) and in the aposiopesis we can see this 'work[ing] out'. Rather than singular moments of insight, Oswald's epiphanic mode is characterised by unsettling fluctuations and suspensions. This process again recalls Heidegger's understanding of *alētheia* as something more than a fixed 'truth', as something that privileges an ongoing discovery that 'let[s] beings be seen in their unconcealment (discoveredness), taking them out of their concealment' ([1927] 1996: 202). In the unusual use of the suffix *ness* with *discovered*, Heidegger highlights a state of *being discovered* as continual, un-ending and non-teleological (my emphasis). More recently, Nichols has described modern epiphanies as the 'product[s] of consciousness' or 'mind-brains in the act of becoming aware of their own activity' (1999: 478), and in Oswald's poetry we see this perpetual process at work: a mind continually recognising shifts in its own thinking. Close readings of the poems in *Woods etc.* illustrate how Oswald's epiphanic mode embodies a non-teleological fluctuating cluster of 'unconcealment[s]', suspensions and hesitations, characterised by brightness and unfixity.

*Woods etc.* is a formally eclectic collection that fosters an alternative mode to the coercion and fixity associated with writing epiphany that Hejinian suggests is prevalent in contemporary poetry (1985: n.pag). Hejinian's preference is for an 'open text' which is 'formally differentiating' (1985: n.pag) and in Oswald's choice of lineation

her poems do become more open iterations of epiphany in both content and form, despite their ostensible mainstream features. 'A Winged Seed' (Oswald [2005] 2017: 10), a manifestation of an ordinary natural object, demonstrates how Oswald's line breaks create a less controlled epiphanic mode on the page. In this poem, the epiphanic experience involves the predictable seasonal shedding of a winged seed from an unspecified species of tree. Unusually, Oswald anthropomorphises its falling to the ground as a birth of self-confessed confusion: 'I was born bewildered/at dawn when the rain ends' ([2005] 2017: 10). At its inception, the winged seed has a flimsy sense of its identity, it is 'thin as a soap film' and its subsequent descent is an unsettling experience of unfixity; the winged seed complains: 'I couldn't put myself/at rest, not even for one second' (Oswald [2005] 2017: 10). The line break after 'myself' suspends our attention and creates a slight hiatus that scores the discomfort of this unravelling of identity and exposes the process of the epiphanic mode as the seed becomes 'aware of its own activity' (Nichols 1999: 478). The poem continues in a state of fluctuation, a feeling described as being 'at all angles', until the final stanza shifts towards a more confident tone:

I was huge,  
like you might sow a seed guitar,  
a cryptic shape of spheres and wires. (Oswald [2005] 2017: 10)

The seed's uncomfortable journey appears to have come to an end: it is no longer fragile. The caesura helps to slow the pace of the line and raises the prominence of the word 'huge' and the seed's increasing confidence and size. Yet the confidence in this line is soon undercut by the longer closing lines that leave a lingering sense of mystery. The final simile of this stanza offers a surprising turn: the comparison between the seed and the shape of a guitar. This might not be a convincing comparison, since it is difficult to reconcile with the more recognisable helicopter shape of a winged seed spiralling to the ground. However, in Hejinian's term, this comparison 'invites participation' (1985: n.pag): the reader speculates as to the nature of the seed's transformation and the confidence of the huge seed is destabilised by uncer-

tainty as to its shape and its identity. This is an epiphany of unfixity, one of instability and potentialities.

In the poem 'Leaf' (Oswald [2005] 2017: 8), which can be read as a metaphor for the unborn child in the womb, Oswald presents the speaker in a similar state of unfixity, suspended by the end of the poem in 'mid-air' (Oswald [2005] 2017: 8). The poem begins with the type of intense attention typical of the epiphanic mode in many of Oswald's poems; the attention of the speaker is on those things that are present but often remain concealed, or as de Man describes them in his definition of epiphany, those things that 'could never have ceased to be there [...] the permanent presence[s]' (1984: 5) that are hidden from us, or from which we wilfully hide:

the leaf that now lies being made  
in its shell of scale, the hush of things  
unseen inside, the heartbeat of dead wood. (Oswald [2005] 2017: 8)

Foregrounded by the onomatopoeic 'hush', what is unseen, as opposed to unheard, is a sound: 'the hush of things'. The poem suggests that the 'hush' can be seen. Nichols identifies synaesthesia as a trait of Wordsworth's epiphanies and by imagining sound as sight Oswald's poem echoes this aspect of the traditional Romantic epiphanic paradigm. Nichols suggests that this technique is employed because epiphanies 'strive to go beyond the categories imposed by the five senses' (1987: 59) and 'mingle senses that are ordinarily distinct' (1987: 62). However, in this poem Oswald moves beyond Romantic paradigms. By dispelling the boundaries between the senses, the epiphany is suspended in a liminal space between the senses, a space where the speaker can see and hear what is normally unseen and unheard. The disconcerting nature of this experience increases as the leaf grows in concert with the progression of the poem, until in the penultimate stanza when the hand unfolds, the speaker is jolted into an unsettling epiphany:

into that hand the entire  
object of the self being coldly placed

the provisional, the inexplicable I  
 in mid-air, meeting the wind dancing (Oswald [2005] 2017: 8)

The coldness shocks the speaker out of the leaf being slowly formed 'inside' and takes her physically outside in 'mid-air', outside of the leaf. This suddenness is typical of the traditional epiphanic paradigm, but the enjambment that places 'I' prominently and uncomfortably at the end of the line emphasises an epiphany of vulnerability, rather than a reassuring and fixed moment of self-knowledge. The epiphany is also temporary ('provisional'), unsettling and incomprehensible ('inexplicable'). Yet at the same time there is a feeling of elation reminiscent of Wordsworth and Joyce as the speaker dances in the wind above the ground where the leaf grows, echoing Wim Tigges' metaphor of epiphany as a 'dance in the starry universe' (1999: 35). Ultimately, despite the 'family resemblance' (Nichols 1999: 474) to Wordsworth and Joyce, this is not a dance of certainty. What initially seemed to be a liberating dance is in fact tinged with doubt and insecurity, and the speaker grapples with her feelings as the epiphany disturbs her senses by revealing what cannot normally be seen or heard. This is not a moment of insight, instead the speaker's own identity, 'the provisional and inexplicable I', is left suspended and unfixed, expanding the concept of epiphany beyond its traditional paradigms.

This 'unfixity' is also evident in Oswald's poem 'Owl' ([2005] 2017: 6), together with a revelation of brightness. The poem's opening line begins on the threshold between night and sunrise, the 'joint' drawing our attention to the speaker at the junction of night and day:

last night at the joint of dawn  
 an owl's call opened the darkness  
 miles away, more than a world beyond this room  
 and immediately, I was in the woods again, (Oswald ([2005] 2017: 6)

The speaker is suspended on a threshold between two temporal states, where the sound of the owl 'open[s] the darkness', letting through the light. When the owl calls, we hear

what is hidden from our sight, it is unconcealed, and the manifestation of this sound transports the speaker 'miles away more than a world beyond [her] room'. This place is another world and separated structurally in the poem on an isolated line. The speaker is returned to a seemingly familiar location: to the 'woods again' and to the memory of a previous visit there, recalling Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and Perloff's sequence of 'observation—triggering memory—insight' (2012: n.pag). Yet when this occurs, the darkness opens up to suggest the coming of light, an epiphany of brightness, not one of fixed understanding. At the point of revelation, Oswald describes how the speaker stands 'poised, seeing my eyes seen,/hearing my listening heard'. The speaker is again suspended in a liminal state, 'wavering between two worlds' (Van Gennep, [1908] 1965: 18)<sup>9</sup> and this doubling effect of seeing and hearing herself creates a hypersensitive experience of consciousness, using synaesthesia to expand the limits of the epiphanic moment and to show the mind becoming aware of its own processes. Victor Turner, in response to the anthropological studies of Van Gennep, describes this liminal period as a 'time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another' (1982: 113), a time of potentiality. In this 'time and space betwixt and between' the speaker experiences an epiphany, a manifestation of herself as double — a rediscovery in de Man's terms, of what 'could never have ceased to be there [...] a permanent presence' of her own being (1984: 5). Yet this is also a frightening encounter with herself, one dominated by a 'huge tree' that is 'improvised' or created by her fear. It is a moment of crisis or a turning point (from the Greek *krisis*: decision) rather than a moment of insight.

The poem's closing stanzas compound this feeling of unfixity when the brightness of a star momentarily reveals the wood:

dead brush falling then a star  
 straight through to God  
 founded and fixed the wood

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Rites of Passage* (1908), anthropologist Arnold van Gennep describes the stages that an individual will travel through in his or her life, such as coming of age. Each stage is marked by an initiation rite. Importantly, for this article, he highlights the significance of the *limen*, from the Latin threshold, in his study. The limen, he suggests, is where the subject 'waver[s] between the two worlds' (Van Gennep [1908] 1965: 18).

then out, until it touched the town's lights  
an owl's elsewhere swelled and questioned  
  
twice, like you might lean and strike  
two matches in the wind (Oswald [2005] 2017: 6)

The poem appears to suggest that a shooting star is falling towards the wood, but the falling precedes the star, which is sequentially separated from it by 'then' and is attached to the 'dead brush'. The poem suggests that epiphany can be read as an ongoing process, one that fluctuates between certainty and uncertainty, delaying, or ultimately denying, a teleological reading. In the short essay written during her Poetry Society residency at Heale Gardens, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise' (2000), Oswald claims to 'build poems out of discrete blocks of sound and grammar with huge gaps in between them' in anticipation that the 'temptation to read without sound, headlong down a page to find meaning, [will] be thwarted' (2000: 41–42). Like Perloff and Hejinian, she appears to have an aversion to a particular type of meaning-making, one where meaning is fixed and certain, and instead creates gaps and discontinuities in language that enable meaning to be suspended.

Alongside this expanded reading of epiphany, the poem 'Owl' also contains a traditional epiphanic marker: the star. In his extensive survey of epiphany, Tigges identifies the star as a 'potent epiphany-raiser' (1999: 26) and in 'Owl' a star does indeed appear over the wood and the town. The appearance of the star has a divine quality, seemingly a creator and determiner of the wood: it 'founded and fixed', in the manner of a traditional epiphany, reminiscent of its Christian significance. Yet this epiphany also fluctuates between the definite and indefinite. When the star's light is extinguished by the lights of the town, we are returned to the owl's call at the opening of the poem and a strange swelling undefined 'elsewhere' becomes prominent. This is an epiphany, one that derives from the uncanny antecedent state of the speaker, but importantly it resides in the word 'questioned'. The owl's call, and its unanswered question, are repeated 'twice', doubled and foregrounded by the weight of the past tense and the stanza break that underscores a break in breath. As

the poem develops, certainty slips away and becomes 'messy' (Hales in Etter 2010: 63). Yet, as we reach the word 'like', there is the hint of an insight, an indication that the subsequent comparison might provide an ending. This is soon confounded again when the 'elsewhere' moment of the star and the owl's call is compared to two cryptic and fleeting moments of illumination: the striking of two matches. Instead of a moment of insight, this is an epiphany of brightness and revelation, yet its significance to the speaker and the reader remain concealed.

Like 'Owl', the opening two stanzas of 'Field' also place the speaker 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1982: 113) on a temporal, physical and psychological threshold, and in the presence of a star. The speaker is in 'visible darkness' on 'Easternight' in the 'mind's midwinter' and in front of her 'lay[s] the world, wedged/between its premise and its conclusion' (Oswald [2005] 2017: 25), an indefinite space suggestive of possibilities. On this limen a star, the 'epiphany-raiser' (Tigges 1999: 26), is sensed: 'Some star let go a small sound on a thread'. The use of synaesthesia signifies that the star is heard, not seen, and that the sound of the star, which might be difficult to imagine, hangs in the air above the speaker. In this uncanny disruption of the senses, the epiphany places the reader in unfamiliar surroundings – an elsewhere, rather than a fixed and known place. Sound takes prime position here: the senses are unsettled and unfixated, and the moment is perceived in the body.<sup>10</sup> The elsewhere quality of the epiphany is maintained in the following stanza as the senses are again exchanged and disturbed. Darkness is a 'soaking' that 'squeezes' around the speaker and midnight is described not as time but a 'spasm'. By the end of the poem we are taken to a liminal elsewhere:

and for a moment, this high field unhorizoned  
 hung upon nothing, barking for its owner  
  
 burial, widowed, moonless, seeping  
 docks, grasses, small windflowers, weepholes, wires (Oswald [2005] 2017: 25)

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Langbaum suggests that being 'physically sensed' is what distinguishes an epiphany from a vision (Langbaum 1983: 341).

This epiphany exposes an experience of extreme unfixity, vulnerability and loss – the field is unfastened from its position within the landscape and on the horizon and is compared to a dog barking for a missing owner. Like other poems in the collection, its closing lines are isolated through stanza breaks, creating a fragmentary effect that resists a teleological reading. It is difficult, as Oswald herself suggests, to read ‘headlong down [the] page to find meaning’ (2000: 41–41), or to grasp any insight readily. Instead, the poem introduces a perplexing series of abstractions through a series of verbs and adjectives that are difficult to connect with the previous lines. Yet, despite this unfixity in meaning in the poem’s final line, day to day objects associated with the home come vividly into the light: ‘docks, grasses, small windflowers, weep-holes, wires’ (Oswald [2005] 2017: 25). The focus on the details – the weepholes (the drainage gaps in mortar between bricks along the bottom of a building) and the wires – return us to the house at the beginning of the poem, and to ideas of home. The epiphany is an uncertain and unsettling reawakening of the constant but concealed ‘permanent presences’ (de Man 1984: 5) of the speaker’s environment, points marked by brightness and unfixity, rather than a teleological moment of insight.

The importance of the limen as a site of unfixity is reinforced by the opening lines of ‘Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening’ (Oswald [2005] 2017: 27), a poem that also illustrates how epiphany can be an ongoing process of revelation and suspension. In the opening lines, the speaker positions herself, like other poems in the collection, on a limen:

now the sound of the trees is worldwide  
 and I’m still here/not here  
 at the very lifting edge of evening  
 and I should be up there. Bathing children. (Oswald [2005] 2017: 27)

At home, in the midst of bath time, she appears to be on the cusp of the evening, yet paradoxically she is both present and absent. The threshold is visually signalled by the oblique stroke, while the speaker’s position is echoed temporally by the ‘lifting edge of evening’. This liminality is an undefined elsewhere of ‘here/not

here', Turner's 'betwixt and between' (1982: 113), the 'joint of dawn' in 'Owl', or 'wedged/between [the world's] premise and its conclusion' in 'Field' (Oswald [2005] 2017: 25). Although this could be a position of potentiality, being on this threshold is uncomfortable for the speaker; a feeling of anxiety, perhaps guilt, is conveyed at neglecting her parental role: 'I should be up there. Bathing children.' From this fretful position the speaker's first epiphany is of the 'evening's underside', where fields try to cling on to sunlight by 'slackened lines' slowly loosening from the earth (Oswald [2005] 2017: 27). Evening begins to take the place of day and the sun, the brightness of the day initially vanishes in a moment compared to the speed at which a spider might disappear from our view. However, the brightness later returns:

I saw the luminous underneath of a moth

I saw a blackbird

mouth to the glow of the hour in hieroglyphics ... (Oswald [2005] 2017: 27).

Here, the speaker experiences an epiphany of luminosity and light, Oswald's 'brightness of things' (2013: 31), and yet it is not what might be expected of a traditional epiphanic moment of insight. The blackbird is mouthing and therefore soundless and whatever he is mouthing is also in 'hieroglyphics'. This is a problematic metaphor for the blackbird's song: in one instance the speaker is comparing the sound she hears to a mode of writing that employs symbols and pictures for words, and usually said to have hidden meanings; in another, hieroglyphs are purported to have the power to communicate with the divinities; and in another, the term is used more informally to refer to undecipherable writing. Taking these multivariant definitions into account, the lines suggest that the blackbird is connecting with a world that is hidden or difficult to grasp in relation to the speaker. Whatever the blackbird is mouthing in the brightness is interrupted by aposiopesis and a deliberate moment of silence is created, suspending any anticipated insight and leaving the poem open. Although there is an act of communication by the blackbird, neither speaker nor reader can fully understand its significance. We cannot truly know the blackbird's song, only its potentiality and brightness.

The unanswered question that follows the blackbird epiphany moves further away from the secure meanings expected of a teleological epiphany, while also highlighting the brightness of an epiphanic moment: 'who left the light on the clouds?' (Oswald [2005] 2017: 27). The poem stalls at what resembles a stage direction, the instruction 'pause' is isolated on the line below, the epiphany is frozen, and silence imposed again. This hiatus draws our attention away briefly from the words of the poem into the silence that surrounds it.

Alongside these hesitations and suspensions, the title of the poem identifies with writing marginalia, encouraging readers to reframe the epiphanic mode as oscillating between experiences, rather than fixing on a singular moment. The act of adding marginalia to a text in the form of notes, embellishments, scribbles and comments, reveals something of the reader's own thoughts or draws attention to something in or outside of the text, its other possibilities, interpretations or readings. Oswald's poem also fluctuates between marginalia, showing us the margins of the speaker's evening and wavering between manifestations of heightened awareness, the everyday and feelings of unfixity. After its pause, the poem moves away from the brightness of the blackbird to the commonplace activities of the human world: 'the man at the wheel signs his speed on the ringroad' (Oswald [2005] 2017, 27). This surprising line shifts to another sphere of experience, seemingly unrelated to the speaker's previous encounter with the non-human world. The line is a flash of a more urban place, and like the mouthing blackbird, it is difficult to reach a full understanding of its meaning.

Throughout the poem, Oswald's speaker collects together the marginalia of the oncoming evening, oscillating between epiphanies of brightness: the setting sun, a luminous moth, a blackbird, a fluorescent cloud. As a result, the reader is asked to make a succession of associations as part of an ongoing process of epiphany, rather than arriving at a defining moment of insight. The epiphanic mode in 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening' is an example of Oswald's definition of a poem as 'a shorthand record of the [speaker's] mind trying to work out its position in the world' (Oswald 2013: 25). This poem moves self-consciously through a wide range of realms of experience: global, domestic, quotidian, natural, urban, temporal, suburban and

astronomical. At the direction 'pause' on line 15, both speaker and reader perceive this process in a way that is also suggestive of Nichols' definition of epiphanies as 'mind-brains in the act of becoming aware of their own activity' (1999: 478). Until the final lines, the speaker is constantly re-positioned in an unsettling experience of unfixity, and even at the close of the poem readers are within reach of the speaker's outstretched arms and the heightened moments once considered passed:

right here in my reach, time is as thick as stone  
and as thin as a flying strand

it's night and somebody's  
pushing his mower home

to the moon (Oswald [2005] 2017, 27)

These lines turn away from the concrete marginalia of the bike, the fields, the spider, the moth, the blackbird, the man driving on the ring road, towards the abstract concept of time. The speaker imagines, paradoxically, that time is both in and out of her reach: being as 'thick as stone' it is impenetrable and being as 'thin as a flying strand' it is elusive. Suspended between the two similes, as she was between the 'here/not here' of the opening, she can ultimately achieve neither state in yet another experience of unfixity. The next stanza break propels us not towards the traditional 'epiphany-raiser' (Tigges 1999: 26), the star, but nonetheless to the brightness of the moon. Isolated on its own line and indented, uniquely for this poem, 'to the moon' is dislocated from the main body of the poem, hinting like a stage direction that might be read as an imperative. In effect, the poem directs us towards the unreachable and unknowable within the realm of quotidian human experience.

'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening' encapsulates key elements of Oswald's epiphanic mode across the poems in *Woods etc.*, a collection which comprises epiphanies of brightness and unfixity, and presents epiphany as an ongoing process of unconcealment and suspension, rather than a singular moment of revelation. Oswald's open iterations of the epiphanic mode, in both content and form, provide us with alternative ways of reading epiphany, readings that reframe and expand this

deep-rooted literary concept in poetry not generally considered to be experimental or avant-garde. In particular, Oswald embraces the messiness that Hales advocates for contemporary poetry and also moves away from the predominant paradigms censured by poet-critics such as Perloff and Hejinian. These new critical readings suggest that to limit our understanding of epiphany in mainstream poetry to a narrow teleological concept can only be reductive and dismissive. Beyond Oswald, the poetry of Kathleen Jamie and Liz Berry also troubles the prevalent paradigm of rigidly linear, contrived and teleological epiphanies. The epiphanic modes of these poets are also disconcerting and problematic and illustrate how epiphany can function as a fluctuating process rather than a sudden and singular moment of insight. Poems within Jamie's collection *The Overhaul* (2012) and Berry's collection *Black Country* while seemingly syntactically clear and un-experimental in approach, nonetheless, present more unsettling, nuanced and enigmatic epiphanies than we might expect.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, even as we take account of the rich literary and critical legacy of epiphany: the 'family resemblance[s]'(Nichols 1999: 474), it is important to consider how poets working in both mainstream and experimental fields are expanding and recasting this literary concept beyond the closed, linear and uniform paradigm it is often accused of being.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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<sup>11</sup> Further discussion of these poets, and other contemporary women poets, in relation to epiphany is forthcoming in a monograph by this author.

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