Fitting Manifestations:
Epiphany in Alice Oswald, Kathleen Jamie, Liz Berry and Joanne Dixon

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Nottingham Trent University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2017

Abstract

Epiphany in contemporary British poetry has received limited recent critical attention and is perceived reductively by some poets and critics as a uniform, coercive, teleological, and unchallenging literary mode. This thesis intervenes in current debates by asking how epiphany is presented on the page in my own poetry and in that of Alice Oswald, Kathleen Jamie and Liz Berry. Through new critical readings of recent collections published within a decade by these poets, I argue that contemporary poetry can engage with epiphanic modes that are more diverse than those typically suggested. Chapter 1 reviews scholarly definitions of epiphany and recent criticism, explains why Oswald, Jamie and Berry were selected for this study and outlines the creative-critical approach adopted. Chapter 2 analyses Oswald's collection, *Woods etc.*, and demonstrates how individual poems present epiphanies that resist a teleological mode by engaging with uncertainty, the uncanny and liminality. Chapter 3 investigates how Jamie's attentiveness to the non-human world in *The Overhaul*, and the gap between that world and our own, produces epiphanies that embrace 'not knowing' and manifestations of consciousness. The analysis in Chapter 4 highlights how poems in Liz Berry's debut collection, *Black Country*, dissolve boundaries between the human and non-human realms and boundaries of poetic form, in contrast to readings which restrict epiphany to a straightforward and linear mode of writing. The close critical readings of the poems in these poet-centred chapters expand current

thinking on epiphany; the concluding chapter then embodies this thinking. Chapter 5 is the creative conclusion to this thesis, comprising poems that engage with diverse epiphanies and are in dialogue with the different strands of the epiphanic mode explored throughout this thesis: creative, critical, historical and contemporary. The poems in Chapter 5 are not available via Nottingham Trent University's Institutional Repository (IRep); however, they will be published as a full collection, under the poet's name, Jo Dixon, in Autumn 2020 by Shoestring Press (http://www.shoestringpress.co.uk).

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Preface

Skegness Wake

Graffiti on the carcass shouts MANS FAULT
but the woman next to me isn't so sure.

A burgundy membrane drapes from its insides
and a chainsaw settles in the sand

where we toy with a flapping cordon, study
squid scars on the box-shaped head,

the amputated jawbone and conical teeth.
She quizzes the pathologist

leaning on his 4x4, a clipboard jammed
against his hip, green chest-waders up

to his armpits. He can't answer yet
and walks into the sea.

Salt water rinses the blood-spatter
from his face and a Jack Russell sniffs

at fluids pooling beneath the flukes.
An oily odour is binding to the fibres of the gloves

I post later in the bin by Terry's Fish 'N' Chips.
They say there are two more at Gibraltar Point

so I join the column drawn there and back,
calves burning in the back-slide of the shingle.

Jo Dixon

This is a poem of there and back. A poem that Margaret Atwood might describe as a 'negotiation with the dead'.[1] Drawing on literary examples from Dante, Virgil and Gilgamesh, Atwood suggests that the writing process involves crossing thresholds into Other- or Underworlds. In Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, she tells us such a journey is made a 'precondition of being a poet'.[2] On 25 January 2016, I decided to travel to Skegness, where three sperm whales had been stranded on the beach. This was an unfamiliar and unsettling world, its Otherness heightened by witnessing one whale's post-mortem. Atwood explains how, after being in this Other space, it is important to bring something back from your journey: 'it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back […] and allowed to enter time once more – which means to the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers […]'.[3] Stanley Kunitz suggests something similar when he describes poetry as a way of finding out what 'it felt like to be alive at any given moment'.[4] However, he recognises a difficulty for the poet. These moments are 'fugitive', Kunitz says, and 'it is somewhat of a paradox that poets should spend a lifetime hunting for the magic that will make the moment stay'.[5] My visit to Skegness beach had unearthed a difficulty: how to translate into poetic utterance the 'fugitive' sight of the

[1] Margaret Atwood, Chapter 6, 'Descent: Negotiating with the Dead', *Negotiating With The Dead: A Writer on Writing* (rpt. 2002, London: Virago, 2011), 134-161.
[2] Atwood, p.155.
[3] Atwood, p.160.
[4] Stanley Kunitz, 'Speaking of Poetry', in *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*, Stanley Kunitz (New York: Norton, 1997), p.11.
[5] Ibid.

pathologist washing the blood from his face in the sea and the smell of decomposing flesh clinging to my clothes. I had an acute awareness that these moments were significant, yet little understanding of how they might become a poem.

Such moments of insight, or personal transformation, are associated with the term 'epiphany'. The *OED* defines epiphany as a 'manifestation or appearance, of some divine or superhuman being';[6] however, in a secular context epiphany has come to mean any moment of great or sudden revelation[7] and has been absorbed into modern consciousness as a moment when new knowledge or understanding is attained.[8] For this thesis, the definition of epiphany is derived from its Greek origin, 'epiphanaeia', or 'phainein', meaning 'an appearing' or 'manifestation'.[9] More specifically, the prefix 'epi', 'on' or 'fitting', modifies 'phanaeia' to mean a 'fitting manifestation', one that 'builds on the characteristics of a particular situation'.[10] Matthew G. McDonald's explanation of epiphany as a psychological experience identifies an 'antecedent state' of a preceding period

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[6] *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), III, p.333.
[7] In Christian tradition, the feast of Epiphany, which takes place on 6th of January, is a festival which marks the manifestation of Christ to the Magi, <http://www.oed.com> [accessed 30/03/17].
[8] Take 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> [accessed 30/03/17].
[9] Definitions from *Strong's Concordance* <http://www.biblehub.com/greek/2015.htm> [accessed 05/05/17].
[10] *Strong's Concordance*.

of 'anxiety' or 'inner turmoil' which resonates with the etymology of epiphany: manifestations arise from the specific conditions around us.[11] Thus, in the original Greek sense, I experienced a fitting manifestation in the unsettling Otherness of Skegness beach. Yet in contrast to a definition of epiphany as one in which meaning is discovered, the significance of what I had seen remained unclear. 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'.[12] 'Skegness Wake' became the translation of 'the moment of epiphany in nature' into a creative work. What I found on the beach was 'brought back' into the 'realm of the audience, the realm of the readers' in the form of the poem.[13] This then is the paradox at the heart of writing epiphany and the main question of this thesis in relation to, Alice Oswald, Kathleen Jamie, Liz Berry and myself: how can epiphanies be presented on the page?

[11] Matthew G. McDonald, 'The Nature of Epiphanic Experience' in *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 48:1 (2008), p.93. McDonald identifies five other characteristics as suddenness, personal transformation, illumination/insight ('an acute awareness of something new, something that the individual has been blind to'), meaning-making ('deemed significant to the individual's life') and enduring nature ('the personal transformation that results is permanent and lasting').
[12] Sandra Humble Johnson, *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1992), p.78.
[13] Atwood, p.160.

Chapter 1: Introduction

definitions—criticism—the poets—methodology

Definitions of epiphany

James Joyce is frequently regarded as a key figure in discussions of literary epiphany as a mode of writing. David Lodge tells us that in modern fiction Joyce 'showed the way'[1] and in definitions of epiphany as a literary term he is credited with giving 'this word a particular literary connotation'.[2] Wim Tigges also claims that Joyce's writing established the 'critical reputation' of the literary epiphany; however, he also acknowledges its origins in the lyric poetry of the Romantics and earlier.[3] It is clear that epiphany appears in the work of a myriad of writers, even if it is not labelled as such. This chapter introduces a range of epiphanic modes from different periods; working chronologically, it focuses on characteristics that resonate with the work of Oswald, Jamie, Berry and myself. Thus, emphasis is placed on epiphanic modes that comprise elements of liminality, attentiveness to the human and non-human world, transformation, rediscovery of the familiar and the inadequacy of language to represent epiphany.

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[1] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.147.
[2] J. A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (rpt. 1997, London: Penguin, 1999), p.277.
[3] Wim Tigges, *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p.11.

In epic poetry E. L. Risden identifies liminality as a key element of literary epiphany: 'Epic poets have always used *epiphanies* – traditionally meetings with divine beings, crossings of significant liminal boundaries, or encounters with pure manifestations of essential aspects of nature – to provide their characters (and thus audiences) with access to information or power […]'.[4] Liminal, the adjectival form of *limen*, or threshold (Latin), refers to being on the boundary between two states or situations. In the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep the concept of liminality was used to describe the transitional state between different culturally defined stages of a person's life, such as those experienced in rites of passage.[5] More recently this concept has 'passed easily into literary studies',[6] and here, Risden's reference to liminality highlights the transitional nature of the epiphanic experience, of being in-between and moving into other, less familiar and more unsettling realms. Beowulf's encounter with Grendel's mother is one of many examples where epiphanic experience incorporates liminality. Descending below the surface of the lake, Beowulf, the warrior, is engulfed by the waves: 'brim-wylm on fēng / hilde-rince'.[7] In this watery other-world he meets a being of a

[4] E. L. Risden, *Heroes, Gods and Epiphany in English Epic Poetry* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Inc., 2008), p.64.
[5] Liminality, in its anthropological sense, is discussed in more depth on p.71.
[6] Linda Woodbridge and Roland Anderson, 'Liminality' in *Encyclopoedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. by Irena R. Makaryk (rpt. 1993, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p.578.
[7] *Beowulf: With the Finnesburg Fragment*, C. L. Wrenn and W. F. Bolton (ed.), (rpt.1953, Exeter: University of Exeter, 1988), lines 1494-5, p.157; ('brim-wylm on fēng / hilde-rince' = surging of lake seized the warrior).

different nature: Grendel's mother. At the bottom of the alien mere, when he is struggling to defeat Grendel's mother, Beowulf is shown a sword that has the power to overthrow her. Immediately after he takes her life with this sword, a flash of light shining like the sun ('rodores candel': sky-candle) illuminates the water: 'Lixte se lēoma lēoht inne stōd, / efne swāof hefne hādre scineð / rodores candel'.[8] In these moments, the audience are given a glimpse of a hero going beyond assumed natural limitations, crossing boundaries and experiencing liminality, to defeat evil and, in one interpretation, restore light to the world. Risden suggests that this type of epic epiphany 'unveils for the audience […] its culture's wisdom'.[9]

P. B. Shelley's essay 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821) makes similar claims for poetry by suggesting that it reveals what has become unknown.[10] Towards the end of his essay, Shelley describes how poetry has the capacity to transform, to 'transmute', the world around us. In this paragraph, Shelley uses the motif of the veil to describe how the surrounding world has become shrouded in a familiarity that prevents us from seeing the 'the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms.'[11] Shelley implies that without poetry we cannot fully see ourselves and the 'universe', both have been

[8] *Beowulf: With the Finnesburg Fragment*, lines 1570-2, p159.
[9] Risden, p.64.
[10] P. B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry> [accessed 27/09/17].
[11] Ibid.

obscured by over familiarity: 'blunted by reiteration'.[12] Poetry, he declares, 'defeats this curse' and 'purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being'.[13] However, Shelley's emphasis is on a rediscovery of what already exists but has been concealed, rather than crossing into the Other-world depicted in epic poetry. Although Shelley does not refer to this as epiphany, he asserts that poetry can remove the veneer that hides the marvel of ourselves as human beings and 'creates for us a being within our being'.[14] In other words, poetry has the capacity to make manifest, or reveal ourselves to ourselves.

In Romantic epiphanies, the inner life of the poet is the focus of the manifestation. Perhaps the most well-known iteration of this type of epiphany is offered by William Wordsworth in *The Prelude* (1850). An early draft of *The Prelude*, 'Was It For This' (1798), shows Wordsworth's thinking. Addressing the River Derwent of his childhood he wonders if the 'beauteous stream' that provided 'ceaseless music to the day and night' in his infancy has given him 'A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm / That nature breaths among her woodland haunts?'[15] Wordsworth's memory of the river's 'music' takes on new significance in the present; this is the retrospective epiphany that literary critic Morris Beja's later characterises as 'an event [that] arouses no special

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] William Wordsworth, 'Was It For This' (1798) in *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850),* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p.3.

impression when it occurs, but produces a sudden sensation of new awareness when it is recalled at some future time'.[16] Wordsworth suggests that he puts himself 'in the way' of a potential epiphanic experience by creating certain conditions, recalling the etymology of epiphany as a manifestation that 'builds on the characteristics of a particular situation'.[17] Actively creating this way of being is explained in the first book of the 1850 *Prelude*. Wordsworth describes an escape from the 'vast city', in which he deliberately shifts his location and chooses a guide from the natural world to lead his way: 'I look about and should the guide I choose / Be nothing better than a wandering cloud'.[18] Through his purposeful solitary walking and engagement with the natural world, Wordsworth experiences 'Trances of thought and mountings of the mind'.[19] His altered perception is precipitated by conscious action: walking, and later he describes his state of being as 'slackening [his] thoughts by choice'.[20] Significantly, it is away from the city, in a natural environment where this transformation takes place; the non-human world is an important element of Wordsworth's antecedent state. Book XII of *The Prelude* later refers to moments that arise from interactions with the non-human world and lead to new awareness as 'spots of time'.[21] 'Spots of time' have the capacity to

[16] Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Owen, 1971), p.15.
[17] *Strong's Concordance* <http://www.biblehub.com/greek/2015.htm> [accessed 05/05/17].
[18] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book I, p.37.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book I, p.41.
[21] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.479.

reawaken childhood memories during 'trivial occupations' and 'ordinary intercourse', echoing Shelley's description of the 'film of familiarity' being lifted in moments of insight. The effect of such 'spots of time' is that 'our minds / Are nourished and invisibly repaired', leading to improvements in the self or self-awareness.[22] At times, these epiphanies produce disturbing and confounding experiences. In Book XII, Wordsworth describes how as a child out riding he comes across the site where a murderer has been hanged, his name engraved in the turf. Directly after this he sees the 'ordinary sight' of 'A girl who bore a pitcher on her head' struggling against the wind; now the poet claims that he 'should need / Colours and words that are unknown to man / To paint the visionary dreariness' that he perceives.[23] In this sense, the epiphanic moment has a powerful and immediate effect on the recipient that is beyond language, drawing our attention again to Kunitz's description of the poet who 'spend[s] a lifetime hunting for the magic that will make the moment stay'.[24]

The poetry and journals of Gerard Manley Hopkins also document the endeavour to capture moments of consciousness and insight. Hopkins' journals record intense observations of engagements with the non-human world and present the concept of *inscape* as the cornerstone of his poetic

[22] Ibid.
[23] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.481.
[24] Kunitz, *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*, p.11.

process. In a letter to Robert Bridges (1879), Hopkins declares 'what I am in the habit of calling "inscape" is what I above all aim at in poetry'.[25] W. A. M. Peters claims that Hopkins coined this term to describe unique experiences 'not observed by other men […] for which there existed no word, because the need for it was never felt'.[26] Inscape is never fully defined by Hopkins. However, Peters suggests that it is:

> the unified complex of those sensible qualities of the object of perception that strike us as inseparably belonging to and most typical of it, so that through the knowledge of this unified complex of sense-data we may gain an insight into the individual essence of the object […] [I]t needs special concentration of our faculties to bring before the mind an object's distinctiveness.[27]

Peters' definition of inscape as a 'perception that strikes us' and a moment of 'insight' corresponds with the etymology of epiphany as a manifestation and Wordsworth's explanation of 'spots of time' as instances of heightened awareness. Like Wordsworth, Hopkins finds these epiphanic moments in the quotidian: an entry in his 1873 journal tells us that 'All the world is full of inscape […] looking out of the window I caught it in the random clods and broken heaps of snow made by the cast of a broom'.[28] Often these descriptions of inscape coincide with descriptions of the non-human world. For example,

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[25] Gerard Manley Hopkins in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Essay Towards the Understanding of his Poetry* by W. A. M. Peters (rpt. 1948, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), p.1.
[26] W. A. M. Peters, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Critical Essay Towards the Understanding of his Poetry*, p.1.
[27] Peters, pp.1-2.
[28] Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Journal 1871' in *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by Humphrey House and Graeme Storey (London: OUP, 1959), p.230.

his 'study', of the 'spraying of trees' in Spring 1871 reaches a 'pitch' that his eye would otherwise have been unable to 'gather' and reveals a 'new world of inscape'.[29] Crucially 'study' in the form of intense observation, or as Peters describes it, 'special concentration of our faculties', is integral to inscape and frequently, in Hopkins' view, unavailable to many people. Another diary entry declares, in sadness, that 'inscape [is] unknown and buried away from simple people and yet how near at hand […]'.[30] Notwithstanding Hopkins' belittling of 'simple people', his thoughts reinforce one characteristic of the epiphanic mode: that of the epiphany being concealed in the quotidian.

The works of James Joyce, which have become synonymous with literary epiphany, contain resonances of both Wordsworth's 'spots of time', and Hopkins' concept of inscape as gaining 'insight into the individual essence of the object'.[31] Writing between 1901-2, and later in 1904, Joyce collected together a series of brief prose vignettes, which he called 'epiphanies', some of which were later incorporated into *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and its earlier version *Stephen Hero*.[32] These sketches recorded 'fragments of overheard dialogue or personal meditation' which Litz claims are not by themselves revelations: they could only have had significance to

[29] Hopkins, 'Journal 1871', p.205.
[30] Hopkins cited in Peters, p.5.
[31] Peters, pp.1-2.
[32] A detailed explanation of these prose vignettes is provided by A. Walton Litz in James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.157.

Joyce himself.[33] However, when these fragments are integrated into *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Litz argues they gain a 'revealing context'.[34] Therefore, through the creative process these fragments are transformed from moments of singularity to ones of universality. Later, in *Stephen Hero*, where Litz suggests that 'Joyce came to think of epiphanies as moments of artistic radiance',[35] the character Stephen Dedalus explains that 'By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of a gesture or in a memorable phrase of the mind itself'.[36] As Stephen continues, he explains to his companion, Cranly, that even the clock of the Ballast Office is 'capable of an epiphany', that when his 'glimpses' or 'gropings of the spiritual eye' reach an 'exact focus' of the clock they will produce an epiphany through which he will 'find the supreme quality of beauty'.[37] Clearly, an inanimate object does not have the capacity to experience an epiphany, but the essence of this epiphanic moment is that Stephen's extraordinary focus on an everyday object has the potential to stimulate new understanding: he discovers its beauty or, perhaps, Hopkins' inscape. A few pages later in the novel, Stephen adds:

[33] A. Walton Litz in James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.157.
[34] Litz in Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, p.159.
[35] Litz in Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, p.157.
[36] James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p.211.
[37] Joyce, *Stephen Hero,* p.211.

> This is the moment which I call epiphany […] we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.[38]

Again, epiphany is described as a moment in which significance is revealed from beneath an outer layer of appearance. In discovering 'its soul, its whatness', there is a sense of a truth being understood, one that is stable and fixed. Perhaps echoing Shelley's 'film of familiarity', this truth is concealed by an item of clothing, a 'vestment', and is also imagined as a physical movement, leaping towards Stephen: an embodiment of the epiphany.

The character of Mrs Ramsey in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), like Stephen, reflects upon the nature of epiphanic experience.[39] Without labelling it as epiphany, Mrs Ramsey identifies some of its characteristics. At the beginning of Part II of the novel, after putting her children to bed and finding time to be alone, Mrs Ramsey describes how the quotidian moments of her day dissipate: 'All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated'.[40] This is when 'life [sinks] down for a moment', she 'shed[s] its attachments' and her inner self is revealed. She goes on to explain how this antecedent state of 'losing personality, […] the fret, the hurry, the stir' stimulates an altered perception that is felt on her lips: 'there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph'.[41] Although the

[38] Joyce, *Stephen Hero,* p.213.
[39] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (rpt. 1927, London: Grafton, 1988).
[40] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p.60.
[41] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p.61.

substance of Mrs Ramsey's 'exclamation of triumph' is undefined, there is an awareness of something new. Again, an unsettling antecedent state precedes Mrs Ramsey's moment of being and a fitting manifestation develops from 'the characteristics of [her] particular situation'.[42] Woolf articulates similar ideas many years later in her previously unpublished memoir, 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939),[43] and a comparison of the two texts illustrates Johnson's definition of literary epiphany as a two-fold experience: the epiphany in nature and the epiphany recreated in words.[44] In 'A Sketch of the Past', Woolf explains that her moments of being are revealed when she receives a 'sudden violent shock', as if she has had a 'blow'.[45] However, she feels that these blows are always 'instantly valuable', they are significant. More specifically she claims that they 'will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances'.[46] Here the use of the word 'revelation' recalls the etymology of epiphany as an appearing or manifestation and continues the thread of unveiling that has characterised several descriptions of epiphany discussed in this chapter. Woolf then tells us that she 'make[s] it real by putting it into words',[47] she translates the epiphanic experience into a written utterance.

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[42] *Strong's Concordance*.
[43] Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past' in *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind, (New York: Harcourt, 1985), pp.61-161. 'A Sketch of the Past' begins: 'Two days ago—Sunday 16th 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.
[44] Johnson, p.78. See p.8 of this thesis.
[45] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.72.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

Elsewhere in the memoir Woolf both explains and demonstrates how these instances are part of her 'own psychology': her 'moments of being and non-being'.[48] Woolf characterises non-being as day-to-day living: 'One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done'.[49] 'A Sketch of the Past' includes a variety of scenes from her life which originate in these everyday incidents. One instance describes a childhood fight on the lawn. At the point where she raises her fist to strike another child she becomes 'aware of something terrible', gaining insight into her 'own powerlessness'.[50] Another instance, describes seeing a flower in the family garden in St Ives: '[…] it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower'.[51] Woolf's claim that 'it seemed suddenly plain', recalls the descriptions, seen earlier in this chapter, of epiphanies that occur unexpectedly and swiftly and reveal new awareness. Becoming 'plain' suggests also that a change has taken place in her perception of the flower. Echoing Shelley's words, the 'veil' or 'film of familiarity' has been lifted from the non-human world to expose a deeper significance.[52] These flashes are a contrast to the moments of non-being which make 'no dint' on her and become

[48] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.70.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.71.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821).

like 'cotton wool', fluffy wadding that masks the exceptional moments.[53] Woolf explains how 'behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern', a distinction between what lies on the surface and what is hidden in the depths.[54] Like writers that have come before her, Woolf's epiphanic mode is characterised as a moment of unveiling. In explaining how her way of thinking is expressed in her writing she equates moments of being with 'scenes' and although she is keen to point out that they are 'not altogether a literary device', she acknowledges that a 'scene' always comes to the top'.[55]

Criticism

Few studies of epiphany as a literary mode have been published since the late 1990s and scholars writing up to that time often focus on its origins in Romanticism and its development in modern literature. For example, Morris Beja's *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (1971) 'examines the part […] sudden spiritual manifestations play' in the work of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner.[56] However, Beja suggests, at the onset, that it is 'difficult to define precisely' what epiphany might be, or to formulate a 'universally acceptable definition'.[57] As has already been seen in this chapter, many writers use distinct and distinctive epiphanic modes. Thus, this present

[53] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.71.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.142.
[56] Beja, p.18.
[57] Beja, pp.13-14.

thesis and its exploration of epiphany in contemporary poetry will be seen in the context of the poets that it addresses, rather than as a definitive statement regarding the nature of epiphany in all poets. Further study of the epiphanic mode in the contemporary poets selected for this thesis can however suggest new critical readings that build on the scholarly work of critics such as Beja.

Using Joyce's definition as a starting point, Beja defines two types of epiphany. The first, a retrospective epiphany, referred to earlier in this thesis in relation to Wordsworth's poem 'Was It For This', is one in which a memory produces 'new awareness' when 'recalled at some future time'.[58] The second, an epiphany of the 'past recaptured', Beja explains, is distinguished from the 'mere recollection' of the retrospective epiphany by its 'actual recapture' of past experiences.[59] This type of epiphany he suggests is evident in the work of Marcel Proust. In addition, Beja argues that there are also two 'notion[s] present in epiphany: 'the Criterion of Incongruity' and 'the Criterion of Insignificance'.[60] Although Beja admits that these categories 'say much the same thing', in summary he explains, 'if [he] had to commit himself', that an epiphany is 'a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, or event, or memorable phrase of the mind—the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever

[58] Beja, p.15.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Beja, p.16.

produces it'.[61] The influence of a Joycean definition of epiphany is evident in the initial part of Beja's statement.

Robert Langbaum's article, 'The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature' (1983), largely accepts Beja's view of the structure of epiphany.[62] First Langbaum distinguishes epiphany from vision by suggesting that an epiphany must be 'physically sensed',[63] and summarises Beja's criterion. However, borrowing Beja's phrasing, Langbaum then adds four characteristics of his own: 'the Criterion of Psychological Association […] the Criterion of Momentaneousness […] the Criterion of Suddenness […] the Criterion of Fragmentation or the Epiphanic Leap'.[64] Langbaum's analysis draws on the ending of Joyce's short story, 'The Dead', and Wordsworth's Lucy poem, 'Strange Fits of Passion I have Known'; however, his taxonomy also resonates with several poems discussed in subsequent chapters of this study. Firstly, the Criterion of Psychological Association suggests that epiphanies are firmly rooted in real, sensuous experiences. Next, the Criterion of Momentaneousness, which Langbaum defines as 'last[ing] only a moment,

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[61] Beja, p.18.

[62] Robert Langbaum, 'The Epiphanic Mode in Wordsworth and Modern Literature', *New Literary History*, 14:2 (1983), pp.335-358. In this article Langbaum explains how he will be building on his earlier study, *The Poetry of Experience* (1957) which 'show[ed] that epiphanies exist in Romantic and modern literature', Morris Beja's *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (1971) and M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), p.336.

[63] Langbaum, p.341. As already discussed, embodiment is an element of the epiphanic experience in Stephen Dedalus' description of a 'leap', on Mrs Ramsey's lips and in Woolf's physical blows.

[64] Langbaum, p.341.

but leaves an enduring effect', emphasises the fleeting nature but lasting impact of the epiphany. Langbaum also identifies an unexpected change in external circumstances that leads to 'a shift in sensuous perception that sensitizes the observer': the Criterion of Suddenness.[65] Further on in the article, Langbaum adds that 'involved in all epiphanies is both discovery and the shock of recognition – recognition of the self in the external world', suggesting that epiphany is a significant moment of self-awareness.[66] Langbaum's final criterion of 'Fragmentation or the Epiphanic Leap' is more problematic. By suggesting that 'the text never quite equals the epiphany; the poetry as Browning put it, consists in the reader's leap';[67] Langbaum tells us that epiphany is never quite an epiphany until the reader has made it so. Developing this idea, he describes how 'the author plays upon [a reader] as though he were a musical instrument—making him move through a series of associations that will produce the epiphany in *him*'.[68] Thus, epiphany depends on both poet and reader. Langbaum's language here draws attention again to the artificiality of epiphany, and particularly to the controlling hand of the author guiding the reader. As we will see later in this introduction, the coercive nature of the epiphanic mode has become an area of contention in more current discussions of epiphany in contemporary poetry.

[65] Langbaum, p.341
[66] Langbaum, p.354.
[67] Langbaum, p.341.
[68] Langbaum, p.345.

In all the examples considered to this point, 'discovery and recognition', particularly in relation to the self, appear as recurrent elements of the epiphanic mode. Paul de Man's *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984), although not wholly focused on epiphany as a literary mode, provides a definition of epiphany that is pertinent to understanding how it might appear on the page. De Man asserts that:

> an epiphany cannot be a beginning, since it reveals and unveils what, by definition, could never have ceased to be there. Rather it is the rediscovery of a permanent presence which has chosen to hide itself from us – unless it is we who have the power to hide from it.[69]

The notion of epiphany as a 'permanent presence' to be revealed from what is already around us recalls again Shelley's description of poetry. Using the same metaphor of unveiling, de Man asserts that epiphany is *re*discovery, rather than discovery. Thus, the epiphany is not new knowledge or understanding but a reawakening of something already known, something that we may have chosen not to see. As a definition of the epiphany in nature this is useful; however, we also need to ask how that is translated into poetic utterance. Ashton Nichols' monograph *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* (1987) provides some suggestions as to how this might be achieved.[70] Nichols begins his monograph by defining

[69] Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.5.
[70] Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1987).

epiphany in a similar way to de Man and Langbaum by suggesting that epiphanies are 'momentary manifestations of significance in ordinary experience'.[71] In explaining epiphanies in nineteenth century poetry he describes how a 'commonplace event takes on a revelatory quality in the mind of the observer'.[72] Nichols recognises the quotidian as being the site of the epiphany and later adds that it is a moment in which the 'ordinary [is] rendered remarkable by heightened experience'; this heightened state is a sensuous experience.[73] Nichols develops this further by claiming that epiphanies 'strive to go beyond the categories imposed by the five senses'[74] and 'mingle senses that are ordinarily distinct'.[75] Mingling the senses, which can be likened to the technique of synaesthesia, where one sense is used describing terms from another, suggests one way of presenting epiphany on the page.

Nichols also identifies two distinct types of epiphany: *proleptic* and *adelonic*. From Epicurus' use of 'prolēpsis' as the 'anticipation produced by repeated experiences preserved by memory', Nichols defines a proleptic epiphany as 'one in which the mind, in response to a present pre-disposition, transforms a past experience to produce a new sense of significance'.[76] We

[71] Nichols, p.1.
[72] Nichols, p.5.
[73] Nichols, p.28.
[74] Nichols, p.59.
[75] Nichols, p.62.
[76] Nichols, p.74.

have seen earlier how Beja uses a similar explanation to define a 'retrospective' epiphany as 'one which arouses no special impression when it occurs, but produces a sudden sensation of new awareness when it is recalled at some future time'.[77] Here again is the element of pre-disposition or susceptibility discussed earlier in the preface.

An adelonic epiphany is distinct from a proleptic epiphany in emanating from an experience in the present. Nichols describes an adelonic epiphany as 'a non-perceptual […] manifestation produced immediately by a powerful perceptual experience'.[78] For his definition, Nichols again draws on Epicurean philosophy, giving a brief summary of its meaning, but fails fully to explain how he settles on the term 'adelonic'. *Adēlon* in Greek refers to something that is unclear or non-evident. More specifically *adēla* (from *a* meaning not and *dēlos* meaning self-evident) are 'those things that exist but cannot be directly perceived, only demonstrated on the basis of observation—for example, the void'.[79] In using this term, Nichols echoes de Man's definition of epiphany as the 'rediscovery of a permanent presence'. Yet in a later essay (1999), 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney', Nichols develops the idea that epiphanies can be more than a way of conveying meaning. In this essay

[77] Beja, p.15.
[78] Nichols, p.75.
[79] Anthony Preus, *The Historical Dictionary of Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007), pp.33-4.

Nichols does not use the terms adelonic or proleptic to distinguish the epiphanies under discussion; however, the examples selected from Pynchon and Heaney tend to focus on epiphanic moments originating in immediate experiences rather than the recollected past. Nichols employs the context of cognitive studies to explore whether epiphanies also record the 'mind perceiv[ing] itself in the act of cognition'.[80] Nichols' description of epiphanies as a 'product of consciousness' or 'mind-brains in the act of becoming aware of their own activity' offers a definition of epiphany that is less about reaching a universal, stable truth, and more about the human mind grappling with an uncertain world.[81] An example of a similar approach can be seen in the work of contemporary poet Sean Borodale. In his introduction to *Bee Journal,* bee-keeper, Borodale, describes how writing 'at the hive' into a 'journal stained with wax, pollen, bee' became 'a record of erratic language in the uncertain process of its making'.[82] He adds that at moments he would 'swerve into heightened experience or intense incomprehension', writing 'while the image was still on the retina and the sounds hummed in the ear'.[83] Clearly, there would be much to analyse in comparing his journal and the published collection; however, what is pertinent for this present study is the different

[80] Aston Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment,* pp.467-480.
[81] Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment,* p.478.
[82] Sean Borodale, *Bee Journal* (London: Vintage, 2016), p.xiv.
[83] Borodale, p.xvi; p.xvii.

ways in which epiphanies in nature are translated into poetic utterance, whether it be 'writing on site and in real-time'[84] or writing at a desk, distant in space and time from the epiphanic moment.

Nichols' monograph and later essay both consider how proleptic and adelonic epiphanies operate as literary devices in the work of predominantly male writers. In contrast, Johnson's focus is on a single female author: Annie Dillard.[85] Although, Johnson acknowledges her debt to her 'epiphanic family', including Langbaum and Nichols, in *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard* (1992), she seeks to 'verify […] the intuitive patterns' of Dillard as an 'epiphanist'.[86] In chapter three Johnson reproduces a list of criteria of literary epiphany gleaned from her 'epiphanic family'.[87] Yet she remains unsatisfied by the capacity of these criteria to 'explain the pattern which evolves as the epiphanist moves suddenly into another sphere to participate in epiphany', in particular in relation to time. The chapters which follow centre on the operation of time in epiphany and the importance of landscape in Dillard's work.[88] Also, significantly for this thesis, the final chapter of *The Space Between* addresses the inadequacy of language to express the epiphanic moment. The subtitle of the chapter, 'Epiphany On and Off the

[84] Borodale, p.xiv.
[85] Sandra Humble Johnson, *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard* (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1992).
[86] Johnson, p.ix.
[87] Johnson, pp.64-5.
[88] Johnson, p.65.

Page', encapsulates the tension identified at the outset of this study. Johnson claims that

> All literary epiphanists are concerned with the inadequacy of language to achieve epiphany and yet are in constant pursuit of language that can create the illumination on the page which they have experienced in the real world.[89]

Her response, in the context of Dillard's writing, is to suggest that epiphany becomes about what is 'left out in language'.[90] Borrowing a phrase from Richard Pearce, she asserts that the 'holes and discontinuities' in language (for example, ellipses) are essential for an epiphany; they produce the epiphany in the reader.[91] Earlier in this thesis, epiphany was recognised by Johnson as having two levels, the epiphany in nature and the epiphany recreated in words; now Johnson adds a third level – the epiphany in the reader. Through these gaps in language Johnson imagines that the reader is forced to 'search out their own meanings, to dive down into their own psyche for connections to fill out the epiphany'.[92]

Tigges' *Moments of Moment: Aspects of the Literary Epiphany* (1999), published five years after Johnson's study, gathers essays from scholars working in various fields of literature. The poets addressed in Tigges' book range from Wordsworth and Milton to Larkin and Heaney, and few extended

[89] Johnson, p.178.
[90] Johnson, p.179.
[91] Johnson, p.182.
[92] Johnson, pp.182-3.

studies have been published since in relation to literary epiphany in contemporary British poetry, or poetry by women.[93] Tigges, like Beja earlier in this chapter,[94] describes the challenge involved in an exploration of epiphanic modes, suggesting in his introduction that he will 'to *some extent* summarize' the debates and '*try* to arrive at a typology'.[95] Jay Losey begins his contribution to Tigges' book with a similar assessment of the difficulty involved in this endeavour:

> 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.[96]

If, as Losey and his fellow critics suggest, classification of epiphany is problematic, then perhaps an alternative approach is required, one that extends rather than narrows discussions of this concept, looking for similarity rather than sameness and uniformity. Nichols' final essay in Tigges' collection offers a solution. He declares that 'By now it should be obvious that the range of literary epiphanies […] and 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

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[93] Two extended studies have been published on American writers: Johnson, *The Space Between,* and Jiři Flajšar, *Epiphany in American Poetry* (Olomouc: Palacky University, 2003) which focuses on American poets Ricard Hugo (1923-1982) and Philip Levine (1928-2015).
[94] See p.21 of this thesis.
[95] Tigges, *Moments of Moment,* p.11. My italics.
[96] Jay Losey, '"Demonic" Epiphanies: The Denial of Death in Larkin and Heaney' in *Moments of Moment,* p.379.

of related rhetorical practices'.[97] Despite his reservations, Tigges' opening chapter, 'The Significance of Ordinary Things: Towards a Typology of Literary Epiphanies', provides an overview of epiphany with reference to a wide range of writers and literary critics. The 'epiphanic family', including Langbaum and Nichols, are very much in evidence, but significantly Johnson's work on Dillard and the paradox of epiphany is omitted. Tigges' introduction, and many of the essays within, follow a recognisable path, and in his final paragraph he concludes that 'by making ourselves aware of the significance of trivial things, we elevate life into something truly meaningful: a sudden flare, a dance in the centre of the starry universe'.[98] In this closing phrase he identifies familiar themes: discovery of the extraordinary in the ordinary, an uplifting experience, significance, a moment of illumination and an example of embodiment.

This epiphanic approach however, is one that some critics have dismissed. Suggesting that epiphany does not respond to the experience of the late twentieth century, poet-critics such as Denise Levertov, Marjoie Perloff and Lyn Hejinian have rejected the closed epiphanic mode. It is notable that approaches by these women poet-critics open up the potential of

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[97] Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment,* p.474. 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'. From *Fifty Major Philosophers* ed. by Diané Collinson and Kathryn Plant (rpt. 1998, London: Routledge, 2006), p.223.

[98] Tigges, p.35.

the epiphanic mode to instability, ambiguity and incompleteness. Introducing her essay 'The Rejection of Closure', Hejinian begins from the assumption that the world is 'vast […] potent with ambiguity […] unfixed, and certainly incomplete'.[99] Hence, epiphanies that are controlled by the poet and dependant on a universal moment of insight fail to account for the complexities of modern life. So what alternatives do they suggest and how do twentieth and twenty-first century critics respond to contemporary poets who engage with the epiphanic mode? Denise Levertov for instance, drawing on her understanding of Hopkins' concept of inscape, suggests that moments of perception should be presented on the page in a more open form. Her definition of 'organic poetry' as a 'method of apperception […] recognizing what we perceive' and a 'direct expression of the movement of perception'.[100] This movement is not necessarily linear and she describes how different strands of perception within an experience have different 'speed[s] and gait[s], resembling 'seaweed moving in a wave'.[101] Therefore, epiphany might be shown as a more complex and fluid experience, and translated onto the page perhaps by the poet's use of the space between stanzas, lines and words. In a later article, Levertov explains how this might be achieved. To convey a

[99] Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' (1985) <http://www.poetryfoundation.org> [accessed 17/02/15].
[100] Denise Levertov, 'Some Notes on Organic Form' (1965) in *The Poet's Work: 29 Poets on the Origins and Practice of Their Art*, ed. by Reginald Gibbons (rpt. 1979, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.254; p.257.
[101] Levertov in Gibbons, *The Poet's Work*, p.257.

sense of the 'process of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking', a process similar to Nichols' discussion of epiphany as a product of consciousness,[102] Levertov proposes the line-break us an effective tool.[103] She suggests that the 'hesitations between word and word' or 'fractional pauses' created by line-breaks enable the reader to participate 'more intimately' in the experience of the movement of the mind in the act of perception.[104] Returning to Hopkins, she concludes that 'when the written score precisely notates perceptions, a whole—an inscape […] begins to emerge.'[105]

More recently, Marjorie Perloff, has expressed concern that rigidly linear epiphanies have become a mainstay of contemporary poetry, alongside persistent use of 'irregular lines of free verse' and 'prose syntax with lots of prepositional and parenthetical phrases'.[106] Through close reading of the *Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry* (2009, ed. Rita Dove), Perloff identifies a recurring pattern: 'observation—triggering memory—insight'.[107] This linear progression again recalls Beja's definition of the retrospective epiphany as 'one which arouses no special impression when it occurs, but produces a sudden sensation of new awareness when it is recalled at some

[102] Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment*, p. 478.
[103] Denise Levertov, 'On the Function of the Line' in *Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry. An Anthology from Tendril Magazine* (Massachusetts: Tendril, 1984), p.273.
[104] Denise Levertov in *Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry*, p.273; p.275.
[105] Denise Levertov *Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry*, p.278.
[106] Marjorie Perloff, 'Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric' (18 May 2012) <http://www.bostonreview/archives> [accessed 27/02/15].
[107] Ibid.

future time'.[108] Perloff is troubled by what she calls 'a tepid tolerance' for this type of fixed and contained sequence of experience.[109] Lyn Hejinian's concerns go further. Hejinian's description of poems that employ a 'coercive epiphanic mode' suggests that the interpretation of the moment, the insight, is controlled by the poet.[110] Her concern is that epiphany 'serve[s] as a negative model, with its smug pretension to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth' and advocates instead a mode of poetry that 'invites participation' of the reader through its devices.[111] If we look at the work of several well-renowned poets, coercive approaches to epiphany are evident. For example, poems such as 'Dockery and Son' and 'Ambulances' by Philip Larkin, lead the reader to a closed interpretation of the significance of the epiphanic moment. By the end of these poems we are in no doubt as to what has been revealed: in 'Dockery and Son' life is 'first boredom, then fear', in 'Ambulances' there is a recognition of 'the solving emptiness / that lies just under all we do'.[112] These are presented as stable and fixed truths, they are teleological in nature. A similar paradigm is seen in Seamus Heaney's poetry. Heaney identifies poetry as a process of discovery, describing it as a 'revelation of the self to the self', and reflecting on 'Digging' he admits that in

[108] Beja, p.15.
[109] Perloff, 'Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric'.
[110] Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' (1985).
[111] Ibid.
[112] Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (rpt. 1964, London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p.37; p 33.

writing the poem he felt that he had 'let down a shaft into real life'.[113] He adds that the poem 'does no more than allow [a] bud of wisdom to exfoliate'.[114] Here, the verb 'exfoliate' suggests a rubbing away of layers that corresponds to the characteristic of unveiling that permeates through many of the definitions of epiphany cited in this introduction. The poem ends with the speaker telling us that his connection with home is through writing, rather than working the earth like his father and grandfather: 'Between my finger and thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it.'; the tone of the final stanza reveals Heaney's 'single bud of wisdom' and is a moment of such certainty.[115] The insight is firmly controlled by the poet and unambiguous, creating a closed rather than open epiphanic mode. Nichols acknowledges that this has been a characteristic of epiphany for a significant period. He tells us:

> From the spots of time of Wordsworth to the revelatory moments of Heaney, epiphany serves as a fleeting buttress against forms of experience and uses of language that seem increasingly uncertain, indefinite and problematic.[116]

Nichols' generalisation that epiphany provides a defence against ambiguity and open-ended experience is also raised by critics of contemporary poetry.

Reviews and critical studies in the popular press suggest that epiphany is unfashionable in some quarters. The artifice of epiphany, and the authorial

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[113] Seamus Heaney, 'from Feelings into Words', *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose, 1971-2001* (rpt.2002, London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p.14; p.15.
[114] Heaney in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose*, p.15.
[115] Heaney, 'Digging' in *Eleven British Poets* ed. by Michael Schmidt (rpt. 1980, London: Methuen & Co., 1986), p.208.
[116] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.212.

control characteristic of some epiphanic modes, is now often criticised by poet-critics, frequently those who self-identify as being outside the mainstream. For example, Catherine Hales, who values poetry for its power to 'irritate', explains how she juxtaposes 'scraps of languages from different places and registers' to create 'meaning that is not subject to control or definition', and dismisses epiphany as purposeless in our 'messy' world.[117] When David Lodge dismisses 'most modern lyrics' as 'nothing but epiphanies',[118] or Stephen Knight describes British poetry dominated by 'linguistically conservative vignette[s] trimmed with images and closing with a wee epiphany',[119] they reduce literary epiphany to an over-used, unchallenging and unimportant mode of writing.

Similarly, Sandeep Parmar is critical of the perceived uniformity propagated by poets using the epiphanic mode.[120] Like Hales, she rejects a type of poetry that can claim a stable and universal meaning, referring to her early encounters with British post-war poetry as a 'low risk game of truth and meaning' with 'little room for nuanced poetic subjectivities'.[121] Parmar claims

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[117] Catherine Hales in *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by UK Women Poets*, ed. by Carrie Etter (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2010), p.63.
[118] David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p.148.
[119] Stephen Knight, 'Tales from the riverbank: Nature poet Alice Oswald on her own turf', *The Independent* (05/04/09).
<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-enterainment/books/features> [accessed 12/05/15].
[120] Sandeep Parmar 'Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK'
<https://www.lareviewof books.org/article/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk> [accessed 09/06/16].
[121] Ibid.

that in Britain 'both contemporary avant-garde poetry' and the 'mainstream Movement-inspired poem' do not allow for 'expressions of complex identity and difference'.[122] She goes on to assert that 'While the epiphanies of largely, white, middle class male lyric subjects are clearly not universal and personal, lyrical work by black British poets often feels similarly bound up in the perils of anecdote and epiphany'.[123] Parmar recognises the risk of the epiphanic lyric to coerce cultural uniformity, stifling both cultural and poetic diversity.

Ahren Warner objects to epiphanic poetry that finds significance in the quotidian; he condemns poetry in which epiphanies are too easily won through discovering 'pat-profundity in every nook of the personal and everyday'.[124] Warner's description is the antithesis of Nichols' 'momentary manifestations of significance in ordinary experience'.[125] Although, Warner's criticism might be considered justified in the light of poems that rely solely on epiphany, his dismissal of ordinary experience as a source of importance is over simplistic. A review of Carl Phillips' seventh poetry collection *The Rest of Love* (2004) by Ira Sher provides a further criticism. When Sher tells us that he 'wants a branching voice, something to escape the comfortable trope of epiphany, staking itself more dangerously', Sher describes epiphany as a

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[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ahren Warner, 'Implements in their places' (01/10/14) <http://www.poetrylondon.co.uk> [accessed 05/05/17]. The exact source of this criticism is unclear. Warner uses this phrase in his article but in the context of it being a description given by an unnamed poet whom he 'admire[s]'. However, Warner implies that it is a view he supports.

[125] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.1.

secure, and perhaps unsurprising mode.[126] He dismisses the capacity for epiphany to have an unsettling effect.

So, is engaging with epiphany in contemporary poetry perilous? Clearly there are dangers if we dismiss all epiphanies as being uniform in character and unchallenging in nature, because by doing so we also risk a reductive response to the poets who engage with it. For example, when Andrew Duncan identifies epiphanies as 'intense insights brought back from exalted states of consciousness' he limits epiphany to a singular type of experience.[127] This may have become a prevalent paradigm; however, this thesis addresses the imbalance in critical attention and perceptions of epiphany by analysing how epiphanies appear on the page in the collections of three British poets, Alice Oswald, Kathleen Jamie and Liz Berry, in addition to my own work. Concepts of epiphany discussed in this introduction, particularly those presented in the extended studies of Langbaum and Nichols, can be identified in the work of these poets; however, the present thesis illustrates how all three poets, in and across the identified collections, also engage with literary epiphany in *sui generis* ways which expand current thinking about epiphany and counter some of the negative criticism directed at epiphanic poetry. In this thesis, I argue that Oswald, Jamie and Berry often

[126] Ian Sher, 'The Epiphany Machine', *Poetry* (2004), p.388 <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/toc/detail/71408> [accessed 21/02/17].
[127] Andrew Duncan, *A Poetry Boom: 1990-2010* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2015), p.38.

embrace, rather than defend against, the 'uncertain, indefinite and problematic'.[128] But why these poets and why these collections?

The Poets

The three poetry collections selected for this thesis are *Woods etc.* (2005) by Alice Oswald, *The Overhaul* (2012) by Kathleen Jamie and *Black Country* (2014) by Liz Berry.[129] Poems in each of these collections resist a reading of epiphany as a teleological moment of insight and explore the capacity for epiphanies to be disconcerting and problematic, rather than comfortable, particularly when they occur in liminal spaces, both physical and psychological. All three collections were published within a decade of one another and none more than twelve years ago, therefore they can be regarded as both contemporary and contemporaneous. Each collection consists of short meditative lyrics that are broadly personal in tone and address themes that recur in my own poetry which appears in the concluding chapter of this thesis: family, memory, the natural world and liminality.[130] My creative work will be the basis of a forthcoming collection of shorter lyric poems and in this respect, *Black*

[128] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.212.
[129] Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.* (rpt. 2005, London: Faber and Faber, 2007); Kathleen Jamie, *The Overhaul* (London: Picador, 2012); Liz Berry, *Black Country* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014).
[130] However, Oswald's *Woods etc.* does include four longer poems ('Sisyphus', 'Five Fables of a Length of Flesh', 'Tree Ghosts' and 'The mud-spattered recollections of a woman who lived her life backwards') and Jamie's collection *The Overhaul*, one: 'The Gather'. On the whole, these are either narrative poems or more experimental in form.

Country, as Berry's debut collection, is perhaps particularly resonant as an example of how a first collection might cohere to suggest, in Neil Fraistat's words, a 'thematic iteration'.[131]

Jamie and Oswald occupy significant positions in the landscape of contemporary British poetry, appearing frequently in public media, on the festival circuit, on prize-lists and lecture programmes; Berry is a relative newcomer, publishing her debut collection in 2014, though that collection, *Black Country*, has received many accolades and Berry already has a significant profile.[132] Despite the continued labelling of Jamie and Oswald as Nature poets,[133] these are three distinctive poets who do not belong to a particular poetic school or movement.[134] Yet to date, much of the critical discussion in anthologies, journal articles, essays and theses addresses Oswald's role as a

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[131] Neil Fraistat, *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p.7.

[132] *Black Country*'s accolades include: winner of the Forward Prize for Best First Collection (2014), the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Award (2014), a Somerset Maugham Award from The Society of Authors, Poetry Book of the Year in the *Guardian* and *The Telegraph*, and a Poetry Book Society Recommendation for Autumn 2014. Berry received an Eric Gregory award in 2009 and won the Poetry London competition in 2012. In 2016, Berry contributed to 'Railway Nation: A Journey in Verse', a documentary for BBC2, broadcast on 01/10/16.

[133] The titles given to newspaper reviews and interviews conducted with both poets highlight their links with nature. For example, 'Tales from the Riverbank: Nature Poet Alice Oswald on her own turf': Stephen Knight in *The Independent* (2009); 'In the nature of things': Kirsty Scott in the *Guardian* (2005). In addition, Jamie's and Oswald's publications coincide with the rise of New Nature Writing characterised by writers such as Jonathan Bate and Robert Macfarlane.

[134] However, Attila Dósa and Michelle Macleod describe how Jamie might be considered part of a group called the Fife poets: Burnside, Jamie and Paterson, and that 'during Dunn's professorship [at St Andrew's] in the 1990s, a loose grouping of poets became interested in the creative consequences of occupying places in a given ecosystem.' Attila Dósa and Michelle Macleod, 'Contemporary Poetry (1950–)' in *The International Companion to Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Carla Sassi (Glasgow: Scottish Poetry International, 2015), p.92.

poet of the natural world.[135] It is easy to see how this has occurred, for it is a significant subject in Oswald's collections—examples of the predominance of natural subjects can be seen in *The Thing in the Gap Stone Stile* (1996), *Dart* (2002), *Woods etc.* (2005) and *Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009). Jamie's collections, *Jizzen* (1999), *The Tree House* (2004) and *The Overhaul* (2012), and her two non-fiction collections, *Findings* (2005) and *Sightlines* (2012), also feature encounters with the non-human world. However, criticism on Jamie's poetry is perhaps more wide-ranging, and in 2015, the first edited volume of essays on her work was published.[136] In this study, poets and critics engage with several strands of Jamie's work: 'her use of Scots and standard English; her consistent interest in what it means to write about nature; her fidelity to an ethics of listening; and her explorations of nationhood, identity and the experience of living in a

[135] For Oswald, some critical interest has focused on the oral and aural elements of her poetry. For example: Jack Thacker, 'Acoustic Arrangements', *Cambridge Quarterly* (44:2), 2015, pp.103-118; Mary Pinard, 'Voices of the Poet Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter, *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*: *A Journal of Criticism and Theory* (10:2), 2009, pp.17-32. Critical discourses have also addressed Oswald's Homeric interests since her publication of *Memorial: An excavation of the Iliad* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).

[136] Rachel Falconer (ed.), *Kathleen Jamie: Essays and Poems on Her Work* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). Some early critical attention was given to Jamie as a female and Scottish poet. Publications that focus on Jamie's gender and nationality are: *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*, A. Christianson, & A, Lumsden (ed.), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); *Beyond Identity: New Horizons in Modern Scottish Poetry*, A. Dósa (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, B. Schoene-Harwood (ed.), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry*, M. McGuire, and C. Nicholson, (ed.), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*, D. McMillan and D. Gifford (ed.), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); *The Literature of Scotland: The 20th Century*, R. Watson, (2nd edn., rpt.1984, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); *Modern Scottish Poetry*, C. Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*, R.E. Wilson (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1990).

female body'.[137] No comparable book-length study has yet been published about Oswald, though she has been the focus of several unpublished doctoral theses.[138]

These are significant thematic, conceptual and formal connections in the work of both Oswald and Jamie. In 2008 they were brought together for the T.S. Eliot Memorial Lecture under the title 'Conversations with the Natural World'.[139] During the discussion, Jamie described nature as a 'wretched word', and Oswald defined it as 'just a form of being'.[140] Oswald is wary of a nostalgic 'butter packet'[141] view of her writing and claims that she is 'not a nature poet, though […] write[s] about the special nature of what happens to exist'.[142] For example, Oswald's 'Birdsong for Two Voices' is a 'song that assembles the earth' in which the anaphoric phrase 'it gathers', in the final two stanzas, accumulates everyday items from the human and non-human realms: 'the yard', 'scaffolding sound', 'a wet field', 'three small bones in the dark of the

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[137] Fiona Wilson, *Scottish Literary Review* 7:2 (2015), pp.184-6.
[138] Recent examples include: Ellen Cranitch, 'The Metaphor Imperative: A Study of Metaphor's Assuaging Role in Poetic Composition from Ovid to Alice Oswald' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of St. Andrews, 2014); Jennifer Ruth Cooper, '"Into the life of things"': a creative exploration of nature in poetry since Romanticism' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2015).
[139] 'Alice Oswald and Kathleen Jamie: Conversations with the Natural World', T.S. Eliot Memorial Lecture (Royal Society of Literature), Somerset House, London (03/03/08). Accessed at The British Library (cc660/120) on 14/04/16.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Alice Oswald in conversation with Madeline Bunting, 'On Location: Podcasts on Literature and Landscape' <https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2012/jul/13/1> [accessed 31/01/15].
[142] Alice Oswald in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words*, ed. by Clare Brown and Don Paterson (rpt. 2003, London: Picador, 2013), p.207.

eardrum'.[143] This accumulation 'of what happens to exist' alludes to the interdependence between the human and non-human worlds, rather than their hierarchical divisions. Speaking at the Bristol Festival of Ideas in 2015, Jamie echoed this view, claiming that 'livers and spleens' are 'as natural as starlings and hares'.[144] This notion is explored extensively in the essay 'Pathologies', in which Jamie writes about the death of her mother from pneumonia and a conference she attended just afterwards. Papers at this conference addressed 'humanity's relationship with other species' and the need to reconnect with the non-human world.[145] However, the speakers' presentations troubled her, and frustrated by their 'foreshortened definition' of nature she returned home 'grumpy, thinking, "It's not all primroses and otters". There's our own intimate inner natural world, the body's weird shapes and forms […]'.[146] Jamie wants us to see that both the human and the non-human are nature. In the contemporary context, writing about nature can be problematic; Scott Knickerbocker suggests the debate centres around a 'fundamental question […]: Are humans (and their constructions, including language) a part of nature, or are humans and nature distinct categories?'[147]

[143] Alice Oswald, 'Birdsong for Two Voices', *Woods etc*. p.5.
[144] The Coleridge Lectures 2015, Bristol Festival of Ideas, 'Kathleen Jamie: Poetry, The Land and Nature' (17/02/15) <http://www.ideasfestival.co.uk/events/kathleen-jamie> [accessed 3/11/15].
[145] Kathleen Jamie, 'Pathologies', *Sightlines* (London: Sort of Books, 2012), p.22.
[146] Jamie, 'Pathologies', *Sightlines*, p.24.
[147] Scott Knickerbocker, *Ecopoetics* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), p.4.

He concludes 'The answer must be both: humans are distinct yet inseparable from the rest of nature'.[148]

As we have seen in the examples from Wordsworth and Hopkins, interactions in the non-human world are central to the epiphanic moment and this inclination can also be identified in 'Bird', the opening poem of Berry's debut collection *Black Country.* The non-human world is an important theme throughout and animals, particularly birds, are conspicuous in the collection. Although much of the attention on Berry's debut collection has concentrated on her use of the vernacular, for example, Katy Evans-Bush's review praises Berry's celebration of the Black Country dialect, describing the collection as a 'hymn to the Black Country, its landscape and people and above all its language',[149] many of Berry's poems have a similar focus to those of Jamie and Oswald: the interconnectedness of human and non-human beings. Katherine Angel for instance, describes how Berry writes in the 'uncertain realm between human and animal, trading in the dissolution of the boundary between these'.[150] Berry's landscape maybe more urban than Jamie's and Oswald's but it also embraces the natural world and often blurs the boundaries that frequently divide human and non-human realms, the

[148] Ibid.
[149] Katy Evans-Bush, 'Voices of the Country We Live In', *Poetry London*, 80, (2015), p.51. Berry herself often embraces discussions of her work that focus on the vernacular as its prominent thread and has described writing with dialect as being 'like digging up [her] own Staffordshire hoard', *The Author*, CXXVI:4 (London: Society of Authors, 2015), p.127.
[150] Katherine Angel, *Poetry Review,* 104:4, (2014), p.96.

speakers in some poems morphing into animals. For example, in the poem 'Bird', the speaker transforms into an avian form: 'I found my bones hollowing to slender pipes, / my shoulder blades tufting down […] my feet callousing to knuckly claws […] my lips calcified to a hooked kiss […]'.[151] In another poem, 'Owl', the emphasis is slightly different. Here, Berry's speaker from the outset is the bird itself: 'My body wakes with the constellations, / star-by-star in the stifling darkness, I glide'.[152]

David Wheatley mentions a similar theme in the work of Oswald and Jamie; he suggests both 'see the gap between the human and non-human as a zone of artistic possibility'.[153] Like Berry, Jamie and Oswald also bridge, or erode, this gap, including poems in their collections which invest the non-human world with a human form or voice: 'Swifts', 'The Spider', 'Roses' and 'An Avowal' from *The Overhaul*; 'Seabird's Blessing', 'A Winged Seed' and 'Autobiography of a Stone' from *Woods etc.*. An anthropomorphic approach to poetry, like the epiphanic, is also unfashionable and yet all three poets engage with this mode of writing. David W. Gilcrest asserts that the 'trope of speaking nature […] is rather ubiquitous'.[154] Citing examples such as William Stafford's poem 'B.C', which gives voice to a seed: 'Quiet in the earth a drop of water

[151] Liz Berry, 'Bird', *Black Country*, p.1.
[152] Berry, 'Owl', p.30.
[153] David Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Palgrave, 2015), p.138.
[154] David W. Gilcrest, *Greening the Lyre: Environmental Poetics and Ethics* (Reno: University of Nevada, 2002), p.37.

came, / and the little seed spoke: "Sequoia is my name"',[155] Gilcrest claims what is in doubt is 'the degree to which humans may be said to comprehend the interests of non-human entities as well as the ability of humans to "represent" such interests faithfully'.[156] Criticism of anthropomorphic poems often centres on the imposition of a human voice on the non-human, an act which is said to reinforce the traditional hierarchical division between humans and non-humans. Gilcrest suggests that 'from a certain perspective, the attempt to recognize the non-human subject as linguistically competent strikes one as an essentially colonizing move'.[157] However, Scott Knickerbocker is troubled by Gilcrest's view. Explaining that 'metaphor structures the very way we think and perceive', he refutes the idea that 'figurative devices such as personification and apostrophe should be dismissed'.[158] Such devices, he says 'constitute our species' way of experiencing what Merleau-Ponty calls the "flesh of the world", the invisible layer of reality linking the perceiver and the perceived, the sentient and the sensible'.[159] More specifically, George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's study, *Metaphors We Live By*, suggests that 'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action.'[160] Lakoff and Johnson claim that 'because so many of the concepts that are

[155] Ibid.
[156] Gilcrest, p.41.
[157] Gilcrest, p.53.
[158] Knickerbocker, p.5.
[159] Knickerbocker, p.6.
[160] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), p.3.

important to us are either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience […] we need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms […].'[161] Thus, the non-human world, in Western culture, is partially structured and understood in human terms; we make 'sense of phenomena' in 'terms that we can understand on the basis of our own motivations, goals, actions and characteristics'.[162] The poets chosen for this study use, to a lesser or greater extent, anthropomorphism as a way of revealing how we connect with the non-human world, and although the anthropomorphic debate is beyond the scope of this thesis, the poets' interactions with the non-human world are an important aspect of how epiphany appears in their individual collections.

Methodology

The key question of how epiphany is presented on the page is addressed through creative and critical practice. Nicholas Davey suggests one approach for such an undertaking is to imagine that 'theory serves as a midwife to practice'.[163] Thus, he implies that critical practice delivers creative practice. This sits uncomfortably with me in the context of the research question of *how* epiphanies are presented on the page and this project has

[161] Lakoff and Johnson, p.115.
[162] Lakoff and Johnson, p.34.
[163] Nicholas Davey, 'Art and Theoria' in *Thinking Through Art*, ed. by Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p.21.

adopted Jeri Kroll's suggestion that 'creative writing research can be […] rhizomatic'.[164] Kroll derives the idea of a rhizomic approach from the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*.[165] Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy, based on the rhizomic structure of a plant's subterranean stem system, offers an alternative philosophy on ways of knowing and thinking. The rhizome, 'a prostrate or subterranean root-like system',[166] is significant in Deleuze and Guattari for its structure, particularly its multiple, non-hierarchical entrance and exit points. Crucially, 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.'[167] Rather than viewing the creative and critical elements of this project in a hierarchical relationship—such as that of a 'structure, tree, or root'[168], or the midwife in Davey's analogy—this project takes a rhizomic approach, privileging neither the creative or the critical as a way of knowing. This has meant 'mak[ing] rhizomes […] grow[ing] off shoots': writing poems that communicate with the poetic epiphanic mode in its different manifestations, both creative and critical, and contemporary and historical.[169]

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[164] Jeri Kroll, 'The Creative Writing Laboratory and its Pedagogy' in *Research Methods in Creative Writing*, ed. by Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.117.
[165] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (rpt. 1988, London: Continuum, 2004).
[166] *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), XIII, p.864.
[167] Deleuze and Guattari, p.7.
[168] Deleuze and Guattari, p.9.
[169] Deleuze and Guattari, p.27.

Deleuze and Guattari also describe how the writing process involves asking 'which other machines the literary machine can be plugged into'.[170] The literary machine of the book, or perhaps in this case the present thesis, can be said to consist of multiplicities and connect with multiplicities. Brad Haseman's defence of performative research explains a similar process as researchers 'reach[ing] beyond their own labours to connect with both earlier and contemporaneous productions […]'.[171] Thus, this thesis incorporates creative and critical multiplicities which might appear as close readings of iterations of epiphany in poems from different periods, or critical readings of epiphany as a poetic device, or critiques of epiphany in contemporary poetry and my own poems. Deleuze and Guattari further compare writing to 'surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come' and encourage making a 'map' that 'fosters connections between fields'.[172] In my research connections are made between the fields of contemporary poetry, the poetry of Oswald, Jamie and Berry, concepts of literary epiphany, current literary criticism, psychology, biography, anthropology, and my own creative practice. By engaging with these fields, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, 'an assemblage' is formed that 'necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections', thereby developing new critical readings of epiphany.[173]

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[170] Deleuze and Guattari, p.5.
[171] Brad Haseman, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Media,* 118 (2006), p.105.
[172] Deleuze and Guattari, p.5; p.13.
[173] Deleuze and Guattari, p.9.

Christopher Frayling's descriptors of 'research *for* art and design' and 'research *into* art and design' have also been applied to the organisation and presentation of this thesis.[174] Frayling explains that a project which culminates in 'the end product as an artefact' is a one in which 'thinking is […] *embodied* in the artefact'.[175] This is the purpose of the creative work which concludes this thesis: to embody thinking on epiphany. However, Frayling acknowledges the 'thorny' nature of a solely creative research outcome, and at the time of writing his article in 1993 explained that the Royal College of Art did 'not offer research degrees entirely for work where the art is said to "speak for itself"'.[176] Frayling suggests that there is a place for 'research *into* art and design', a term which corresponds with the contemporary, historical and critical context of epiphany explored in the early chapters of this thesis. In other words, what versions of epiphany exist and with which traditions and critical frameworks do my chosen poets' collections intersect? Therefore, the following three chapters of this thesis respond to this question by analysing how iterations of epiphany are presented on the page in the selected collections and how those iterations challenge the notion of epiphany as a comfortable, coercive and teleological mode. Chapter 2, '*a tear in the veil'*, considers how Oswald's poems encompass epiphanies which are an unveiling of the unseen in liminal spaces

[174] Christopher Frayling, 'Research in Art and Design', *Royal College of Art Research Papers*, 1:1 (1993), p.5.
[175] Frayling, p.5.
[176] Frayling, p.5.

and in the non-human world, and the ways in which they resist the coercive epiphanic mode. In Chapter 3, '*slipping through the net'*, Jamie's poetry is seen through the lens of epiphany as an escape into the everyday and the uncertain navigation of the human/non-human relationship. Chapter 4, '*a new kind of flight'*, considers how Berry's epiphanic mode incorporates boundary crossing, transformation and the hidden vernacular. Each chapter comprises close readings of individual poems that also illustrate how more open forms can be used to present alternative iterations of epiphany on the page in contemporary poetry. The thesis then concludes in Chapter 5 with my own creative work, prefaced by a note on the organisation of the poems and a creative-critical piece, 'Mesh-work' which introduces my poems and their relationship to new critical readings of epiphany.

Chapter 2: Alice Oswald

'a tear in the veil'[1]

Alice Oswald has forthright views on writing about nature. Oswald explains to journalist Madeline Bunting how she is 'continually smashing down the nostalgia in [her] head' and endeavours to avoid 'bringing in advertising skills' to her work.[2] One of her strategies, she says, is to 'force [her] eye behind the flower'.[3] In some sense, this was also Gerard Manley Hopkins' thinking when he declared *inscape* the aim of his poetry.[4] His hope was that through periods of intense observation of the natural world he would be able gain new awareness of the spirit of the flower or tree being studied. Although it is difficult to comprehend what forcing an eye behind a flower might look like in a poem, Oswald provides some clarification of her view in an interview for the *Poetry Review*: 'The Greeks [. . .] thought of language as a veil which protects us from the brightness of things. I think poetry is a tear in that veil'.[5] Echoing Shelley's motif of the veil,[6] Oswald suggests that poetry can reveal the 'brightness' of natural phenomena: its 'realness' or *inscape*. Paradoxically

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[1] Alice Oswald in an interview with Deryn Rees-Jones, 'Face to Face: Alice Oswald', *Poetry Review*, 103:4 (2013), p.31.
[2] Alice Oswald in conversation with Madeline Bunting.
[3] Ibid.
[4] An explanation of *inscape* in relation to Gerard Manley Hopkins appears on pp.14-16 of this thesis.
[5] Alice Oswald in an interview with Deryn Rees-Jones, p.31.
[6] Shelley's description of the capacity of poetry to remove the veil of familiarity has been discussed on pp.11-12 of this thesis. P. B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821).

language is both the veil and the tear: it can conceal and reveal. This explanation of the nature of poetry resonates with the characteristic of epiphany as an illumination of something that already exists explained in de Man's definition of a 'rediscovery of a permanent presence'.[7] This chapter analyses how a range of poems in Oswald's third collection, *Woods etc.*,[8] become, through choices in content and form, 'tear[s] in the veil', offering distinctive iterations of the epiphanic mode.

Oswald's poems in this collection focus predominantly on natural phenomena such as trees, stones, leaves, birdsong, seeds—the 'things' that Mary Jacobus claims inhabit Romantic lyric poetry: things 'that sound, float, or fall […] things both visible and invisible; seen and unseen, felt and unfeeling'.[9] These are the *adēla* at the root of Nichols' definition of an adelonic epiphany as 'a non-perceptual […] manifestation produced immediately by a powerful perceptual experience'.[10] From the Greek, *a* meaning not, and *dēlos* meaning self-evident, the *adēla* are defined as 'those things that exist but cannot be directly perceived, only demonstrated on the basis of observation—for example, the void'.[11] Oswald's poem 'Ideogram for Green' also begins with the *adēla*: 'In the invisible places'.[12] This poem considers what is unseen, to

[7] de Man, p.5.
[8] Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.* (rpt.2005, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2007).
[9] Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: a tree, a rock, a cloud* (rpt. 2012, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p.2.
[10] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.75.
[11] Preus, pp.33-4.
[12] Oswald, 'Ideogram for Green', *Woods etc.*, p.26.

create a sign or symbol for the colour green. Immediately, the poem challenges our perception of colour by being a manifestation of what green *does*, rather than what it *is*: 'Green breathes growth', 'Green hides roots, lights flowers', 'Green shines rain'. Later 'the wind tunes green by moving its shadows'. Oswald's poem accumulates the activities of greenness in a series of synaesthetic similes: green oscillates through the senses, extending beyond sight into sound. This resonates with Tim Ingold's suggestion that we should consider materials as 'hive[s] of activity' rather than 'dead matter', his example being that the 'wind *is* its blowing' and 'the stream *is* the running of water'.[13] He goes on to draw a connection with Alasdair Reid's poem 'Growing, Flying, Happening'.[14] The opening stanza of Reid's poem warns against 'naming' an animal rather than perceiving its activity: 'Say the soft bird's name, but do not be surprised / to see it fall / headlong'. Similarly, 'Ideogram for Green' uses verbs to expose what green does, and yet green is seemingly uncontainable within its own lines, being compared to 'something struggling to be held'. Nonetheless, its final simile describes green being trapped: 'Like through each leaf light is being somehow / Put together in a rush and wedged in a narrow place'. When green is 'wedged' in this 'narrow place' it is constricted, perhaps hidden again: we can no longer see its essence,

[13] Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p.17.
[14] Alasdair Reid, 'Growing, Flying, Happening', *Weathering: Poems and Translations* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1988), p.3.

its inscape. To an extent the poem cannot be a manifestation of green: language will always be inadequate. As Wordsworth tells us in *The Prelude*: 'It was, in truth, an ordinary sight; but I should need / Colours and words that are unknown to man / To paint the visionary dreariness'.[15] This is the artifice and dilemma of Oswald's 'tear in the veil'. The translation of epiphany into poetic language can never quite match the epiphany.

The title poem of *Woods etc.* struggles with this paradox.[16] The first word of 'Woods etc' draws attention to the everyday act of walking: 'footfall'. In this routine movement, the sound of the speaker's footsteps 'beat constantly'. This constant steady sound is underscored by the regular abab rhyme scheme and is compared to a wandering through the mind. Like de Man's 'permanent presence',[17] that hides from us or us from it, this footfall is 'unnoticed'. As the speaker moves further into the wood other sounds are collected, and accumulate to create the 'unnoticed' backdrop of the speaker's walk in the woods; an awareness of what already exists develops. However, in the next stanza these commonplace sounds precipitate a memory: 'I remember walking once into increasing / woods'. This moment has the characteristics of Nichols' proleptic epiphany as 'one in which the mind, in response to a present pre-disposition, transforms a past experience to produce

[15] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.481.
[16] Oswald, 'Woods etc.', *Woods etc.,* p.7.
[17] de Man, p.5.

a new sense of sense of significance'.[18] But in contrast to Perloff's paradigm of 'observation—triggering memory—insight',[19] this memory moves the poem on to a point of crisis, likened to a 'widening wound'. The speaker's remembered crisis is caused by the 'ceasing' of sound around her: a descent into silence.

The crisis appears to deepen in the third and fourth stanzas in what appears to be a failed attempt to reach epiphany:

> that my feet kept time with the sun's imaginary
> changing position, hoping it would rise
> suddenly from scattered parts of my body
> into the upturned apses of my eye
>
> no clearing in that quiet, no change at all.
> in my throat the little mercury line
> that regulates my speech began to fall
> rapidly the endless length of my spine[20]

The poem is on the cusp of an epiphanic moment, yet the sun that the speaker looks towards is 'imaginary', only bringing the hope of illumination. The wood's density keeps the sun from her view, but the speaker's 'scattered' body, her disconnected self, is expectant and her eyes hope for a clearing, both physically and psychologically. She appears to be disappointed: there is no clearing or transformation, only quiet, and there seems to be no certain meaning. Even her ability to break the silence with speech fades. Janne Stigen

[18] Nichols, p.74.
[19] Perloff, 'Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric'.
[20] Oswald, 'Woods etc.', p.7.

Drangsholt interprets this moment as one of 'forlorness'.[21] She explains that the 'subject is hoping for vertical illumination that will link the eyes, or the various elements of the self, with the movements of the sun in the heavens' but instead 'finds the opposite taking place'.[22] Certainly the words that stick in the speaker's throat and fall down her spine to be retained inside her body could be an indication of a moment of failure. This final moment is ambiguous and the insight uncertain: it is not a 'comfortable epiphany'.[23] Language seems incapable of articulating the 'tear in the veil': there is 'no clearing in that quiet, no change at all'. However, there is silence. It is present beneath all sound, beneath her footfall, the sounds of the wood and her voice; it is a return to a permanent presence, a movement into silence. This movement is emphasised by the enjambment of the penultimate line, dislocating 'fall' from 'rapidly', verb from adverb, and in doing so highlighting the speaker's fall into silence. Langbaum notes that 'involved in all epiphanies is both discovery and the shock of recognition – recognition of the self in the external world'.[24] As the speaker's words catch in her throat, there is a recognition of the silence and her position in the external world, and perhaps the inadequacy of her words to define that moment. The poem does not quite match the expectations of a

[21] Janne Stigen Drangsholt, 'Sounding the Landscape: Dis-placement in the Poetry of Alice Oswald' in *Crisis and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Anne Karhio, Sean Crossan and Charles I. Armstrong (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.173.
[22] Drangsholt, p.172-3.
[23] Sher, p.388.
[24] Langbaum, p.354.

teleological epiphanic experience, but it does engage with the paradox underlying epiphany as a poetic approach: the artifice of translating a psychological experience into a literary mode.

Echoing both 'Ideogram for Green' and 'Woods etc.', 'Birdsong for Two Voices' takes a cumulative approach to revealing the 'brightness of things'.[25] It begins:

> A spiral ascending the morning,
> climbing by means of a song into the sun,
> to be sung reciprocally by two birds at intervals
> in the same tree but not quite in time.
>
> A song that assembles the earth
> out of nine notes and silence.[26]

Line five is reminiscent of Jonathan Bate's renowned study of poetry and the environment, *The Song of the Earth*,[27] and his claim that we should keep a place for the 'song that names the earth'.[28] Yet Oswald's song reveals the earth by gathering sounds and silence instead of labelling it with names—an approach discussed earlier in relation to 'Ideogram for Green'. The speaker describes a song which involves 'letting the pieces fall where they may', evoking the words of the stonewaller in *Dart*, who tells us he's 'a gatherer […] just wedging

[25] Alice Oswald in an interview with Deryn Rees-Jones, p.31.
[26] Alice Oswald, 'Birdsong for Two Voices', *Woods etc.*, p.5.
[27] Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (rpt. 2000, London: Picador, 2001). Bate explains how his title is an 'echo' of Heidegger and also an 'expression of allegiance to the long tradition of Romanticism which embraces Gustav Mahler's setting of ancient Chinese poems, 'Das Lied von der Erde', p.302.
[28] Bate, p.282.

together what happens to be lying about at the time'.[29] The speakers in both poems suggest there is merit in being attentive to the ordinariness of the world around us. This is an approach we will see later advocated by the speaker in Jamie's poem 'Materials' who suggests that the left-overs or the overlooked objects, 'a bit o' bruck' is 'all we need to get started'.[30] In the penultimate stanza of 'Birdsong for Two Voices', and in the lines either side of it, the accumulative effect is augmented by the use of repetition and anaphora to gather together sound: non-human and human, exterior and interior, heard and unheard—in other words, the *adēla*:

> as the sun proceeds so it gathers instruments:
>
> it gathers the yard with its echoes and scaffolding sounds,
> it gathers the swerving away sound of the road,
> it gathers the river shivering in a wet field,
> it gathers three small bones in the dark of the eardrum;
>
> it gathers the big base silence of clouds
> […]
> seeking a steady state and singing it over till it settles.[31]

In 2011, Oswald wrote passionately about her aforementioned admiration, 'since the age of 16', for Homer.[32] Her 'fixation' is rooted in Homer's patterns. One pattern that holds a particular attraction for Oswald she likens to a 'cairn'

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[29] Alice Oswald, *Dart,* (rpt. 2002, London: Faber and Faber, 2010). *Dart* is pertinent to this discussion in that Stephen Knight explains how *Woods etc.* 'includes poems written before, during and after' *Dart*. From 'Tales from the riverbank: Nature poet Alice Oswald on her own turf' (05/04/09) <http://www.independent.co.uk/artsentertainment/books/features> [accessed 12/05/15].
[30] Kathleen Jamie, 'Materials', *The Overhaul*, (London: Picador, 2012), p.50.
[31] Oswald, 'Birdsong for Two Voices', p.5.
[32] Alice Oswald, 'Unbearable Brightness', *New Statesman*, 17 October 2011, pp.40-41.

of 'cumulative' but 'separable' clauses that 'never [lose their] essential singleness'.[33] In these cumulative lines there is, in Nichols' definition of an epiphany, a 'momentary manifestation of significance in ordinary experience'[34] that reveals the 'singleness' of these sounds. However, in contrast to 'Woods etc.', the 'steady state' and 'settl[ing] in the final end-stopped line seems to move the poem towards a more 'comfortable epiphany' and a moment of closure that, in abstract terms and as we have seen, many critics of epiphany are keen to dismiss. Yet this is still not a teleological insight: the significance of the manifestation of birdsong to the speaker's life is not shared. The epiphanic mode here privileges the growing awareness in the speaker of sounds that already exist around her.

Notwithstanding the partial closure at the end of 'Birdsong for Two Voices', *Woods etc.*, as a whole, is a formally eclectic collection that resists the coercion involved in writing epiphany that Hejinian suggests is prevalent in contemporary poetry.[35] Hejinian's preference is for an 'open text' which is 'formally differentiating',[36] and in her choice of lineation Oswald's poems become more open iterations of writing epiphany. 'A Winged Seed', a manifestation of the distinctiveness or essence of an ordinary natural object,

[33] Oswald, 'Unbearable Brightness', p.40.
[34] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.1
[35] Lyn Hejinian's description of the 'coercive, epiphanic mode' is discussed on p.35 of this thesis.
[36] Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' (1985).

suggestive of Hopkins' inscape and Joyce's epiphany, is an example of how line breaks can create a less controlled epiphanic mode on the page.[37] As we have seen, Hopkins describes how he finds 'a new world of inscape' through being attentive to the non-human world that is 'near at hand'. Joyce's narrator in *Stephen Hero* claims that 'exact focus' on the everyday reveals new understanding[38] and in this poem the epiphanic experience fixes on the predictable seasonal shedding of a winged seed from an unspecified species of tree. Unusually, Oswald anthropomorphises[39] its falling to the ground as a birth of self-confessed confusion: 'I was born bewildered / at dawn when the rain ends'.[40] At its inception the winged seed has a flimsy ('thin as a soap film') sense of its identity and its subsequent descent is an unsettling experience; it complains: 'I couldn't put myself / at rest, not even for one second'. At this point the line break after 'myself' holds our attention and creates a slight pause that scores the discomfort of the experience. The final stanza which begins with 'I was huge' is lineated to emphasise the progress attained during the seed's uncomfortable journey: it is no longer 'flimsy'. Next, the caesura helps to slow the pace of the line and raises the prominence of the word 'huge' and

[37] Alice Oswald, 'A Winged Seed', *Woods etc.,* p.10.
[38] Hopkins' and Joyce's epiphanic modes are discussed on pp.14-18 of this thesis. The quotations here are from Gerard Manley Hopkins, Journal 1871, *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins,* ed. by Humphrey House and Graeme Storey (London: OUP, 1959), p.230; p.205; and James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p.211.
[39] Debates surrounding the use of anthropomorphism in contemporary poetry are briefly considered on pp.46-48 of this thesis.
[40] Oswald, 'A Winged Seed', p.10.

the seed's increasing confidence. Yet the confidence in this line is soon undercut by the longer closing lines that leave a lingering sense of mystery and puzzlement:

> I was huge,
> like you might sow a seed guitar,
> a cryptic shape of spheres and wires.

This final simile is a surprising turn towards comparing the seed to the shape of a guitar. This might not be an altogether convincing comparison, being difficult to reconcile with the more recognisable helicopter shape of a winged seed 'spinning' to the ground; however, in Hejinian's term, this comparison 'invites participation': the reader speculates as to the nature of the seed's transformation.[41]

Surprising turns, like those in 'A Winged Seed', are also characteristic of 'Walking past a Rose this June Morning'.[42] In this enigmatic poem we join the speaker grappling with a sequence of comparisons, trying to understand the essence of her heart, reaching for a potential epiphany. She begins:

> is my heart a rose? how unspeakable
> is my heart a rose? how unspeakable
> is my heart folded to dismantle? how unspeakable
> is a rose folded in its nerves? how unspeakable[43]

[41] Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' (1985).
[42] Alice Oswald, 'Walking past a Rose this June Morning', *Woods etc.*, p.20.
[43] Ibid.

The question and answer format of this poem and the repetition of 'unspeakable' recall Ted Hughes' 'Examination at the Womb-Door' from *Crow*. On the cusp of his birth, Crow answers a series of questions about his origin before he is released into the world:

> Who owns these scrawny little feet? *Death*
> Who owns this bristly scorched-looking face? *Death*
> […]
> Who owns these unspeakable guts? *Death*[44]

Unlike Hughes' poem, the answers in Oswald's are more problematic. Instead of the response being the anticipated 'yes' or 'no' the closed questions prepare us for, 'Walking past a Rose this June Morning' implies that the answer cannot be put into words: 'how unspeakable'. Language is an inadequate medium for the insight sought. As the poem progresses the lines also veer from one association to the next. Nicholas Royle identifies veering as a distinct 'theory of literature' and in relation to this poem it can be a fruitful way of thinking about Oswald's epiphanic mode. Royle considers different definitions of veering and how it appears in a variety of literary works, but veering as 'an experience or event of difference, of untapped and unpredictable energy' is particularly relevant to this poem.[45] The anaphora and repetition in each stanza swiftly moves the speaker and reader from one manifestation to the

[44] Ted Hughes, 'Examination at the Womb-Door', *Selected Poems 1957-1981* (rpt. 1982, London: Faber and Faber), p.115.
[45] Nicholas Royle, *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p.4.

next and raises complex philosophical notions until they become overwhelming. In fact, the instruction 'pause' is inserted into each stanza like a stage direction, seemingly to relieve the relentless pressure of the thoughts in the poem about the nature of the speaker's heart. Aside from the opening couplet, no question or statement appears twice, so that each line turns towards a slight variant, a slightly different manifestation of her heart. Each of these arise from attentiveness to the rose, or perhaps as Peters' suggests in his definition of Hopkins' *inscape,* from 'special concentration of our faculties to bring before the mind an object's distinctiveness'.[46] Throughout the poem the focus of the comparisons veer between the heart and the rose, flipping from one to the other: 'is my heart folded to dismantle? […] / is my rose folded in its nerve? […]' In this agitated poem, nothing is resolved. A sense of lack, or absence, indicated by the prevalence of the 'un' prefix, dominates this experience: the speaker's encounter with the rose is 'unspeakable', 'unbreathable', 'unthinkable', 'unworkable', and finally 'unbearable'. Language seems to be inadequate and her experience intolerable. So where does such a poem fit with epiphany? Perhaps its veering is its epiphany? The poem presents a series of manifestations and uncertainties, making the reader feel as if they are constantly 'tipping', one comparison veering into another.[47] Royle's chapter 'Reading a Poem' reminds us how writing can 'illuminate the

[46] Peters, pp.1-2.
[47] Oswald, *Dart*, p.34.

strange materiality of language, the capacity that words and letters have to slip and slide and turn into something alien. Sense can veer, even within the apparent unity and punctuality of a word.'[48] In such veerings transformations occur, language becomes 'alien' or other. This more adventurous iteration of the epiphanic mode leaves the epiphany undefined: the manifestations of the speaker's heart are multivaliant and indeterminate, and the otherness of this encounter with the non-human world unsettling.

Oswald identifies another type of veering in her short essay written during her Poetry Society residency at Heale Gardens.[49] In the essay, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', Oswald claims to 'build poems out of discrete blocks of sound and grammar with huge gaps in between them' in the hope that the 'temptation to read without sound, headlong down a page to find meaning, [will] be thwarted'.[50] Oswald appears to have an aversion to a particular type of meaning-making, one where meaning is fixed and certain. Oswald hopes that through gaps and discontinuities in the language readers will search for their own meanings; we have seen earlier in this thesis how Johnson's study of Annie Dillard describes epiphany as a mode that engages with what 'is left out in language'.[51] Poet-

[48] Royle, p.35.
[49] Alice Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise' in *A Green Thought in a Green Shade: Poetry in the Garden* ed. by Sarah Maguire (London: The Poetry Society, 2000).
[50] Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', pp.41-2.
[51] Johnson, p.17.

critics such as Levertov, Perloff and Hejinian also advocate an approach that resists the coercive epiphanic mode by using more open forms of poetry and several poems in Oswald's collection reflect this sense of expansion in comparison to the closure, some critics say, that writing with epiphany has the potential to create. One way that Oswald creates an expansive effect on the page is through the omission of capitalisation and end stops in the shorter lyrics such as 'The Stone Skimmer' and 'Field', but also in her series of unorthodox sonnets set in the woods: 'Owl', 'Woods etc.', 'Leaf' and 'Wood Not Yet Out'. Charles Bennett forthrightly criticises Oswald's approach to punctuation in *Woods etc.*, labelling it a trope of the '"Fancy-foot" school of contemporary poetry'.[52] Borrowing Seamus Heaney's term, 'Fancy-foot' for 'the way certain poems dance over the page', he suggests that 'in an effort to make poems fresh and new and disturbing, typography and dysfunctional punctuation are (forgive me) relentlessly foregrounded. The medium becomes not the message but replaces the message entirely'.[53] In contrast, Oswald has spoken often of her decision to eschew conventional punctuation and explains how she 'loves etc and dot dot dot. I feel the universe is constructed with an etc. I am really happy starting a sentence, it is finding an ending that is difficult'.[54] For Oswald, punctuation reflects a way of thinking in her poems.

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[52] Charles Bennet, 'Current Literature 2004/5. New Writing: Poetry', *English Studies*, 87:6 (2006), p.679.
[53] Bennet, pp.679-680.
[54] Alice Oswald in conversation with Kate Kellaway, 'Into the woods' <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/19/poetry.features> [accessed 12/05/15].

The last line of each of her woodland sonnets continue unpunctuated ('two matches in the wind', 'the endless length of my spine', 'meeting the wind and dancing' and 'leaves that aren't yet there'), implying an unending. Oswald's resistance to teleological forms, alongside her preference for a more expansive and veering form of writing, illustrates this study's assertion that epiphany can move beyond traditional closed and coercive paradigms. Unlike Nichols' description of the epiphanies of Wordsworth and Heaney as a defence against ambiguity and openness, Oswald's epiphanies often embrace 'forms of experience and uses of language' that are 'uncertain, indefinite and problematic'.[55]

For example, the poem 'Leaf', which might be read as a metaphor for the unborn child in the womb, presents the speaker in simultaneous states of uncertainty and joy, suspended 'mid-air' between the two.[56] 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 concerns the *adēla*: those things that are present but often remain unseen. In this poem it is 'the leaf that now lies being made / in its shell of scale, the hush of things / unseen inside, the heartbeat of dead wood'.[57] What is unseen is, in fact, sound: 'the hush of things', foregrounded by the alliterative consonant sound and the

[55] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.212.
[56] Alice Oswald, 'Leaf', *Woods etc.*, p.8.
[57] Ibid.

onomatopoeic 'hush'. Nichols identifies synaesthesia as a trait of Wordsworth's epiphanies and in this aspect of the poem we can see Oswald's alliance with one aspect of Romantic epiphanies. Nichols suggests that this technique is employed because epiphanies 'strive to go beyond the categories imposed by the five senses' and 'mingle senses that are ordinarily distinct.'[58] Equally the use of synaesthesia might be linked to Royle's notion of veering as language which 'slip[s] and slide[s]' or the 'veering and vanishing of one word or thing into another', or one sense into another.[59] By dispelling the boundaries between the senses, Oswald expands the epiphanic experience of the poem into an uncanny realm, disturbing the familiar. This uncertainty increases as the leaf grows in concert with the progression of the poem, until in the penultimate stanza when the hand unfolds, we are jolted into an unsettling moment:

> into that hand the entire
> object of the self being coldly placed
> the provisional, the inexplicable I
> in mid-air, meeting the wind dancing[60]

The coldness shocks the speaker out of the warmth of the leaf being slowly formed 'inside' and takes her physically outside in 'mid-air': it is a typically sudden and abrupt epiphany. The enjambment that places 'I' prominently and uncomfortably at the end of the line emphasises a feeling of vulnerability. This

[58] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.59; p.62.
[59] Royle, p.35.
[60] Oswald, 'Leaf', p.8.

feels like Langbaum's description of the epiphany as 'the shock of recognition – recognition of the self in the external world'.[61] But this is not the 'comfortable' or secure epiphany that we have seen Sher object to earlier in the thesis.[62] This epiphany is temporary ('provisional'), rather than enduring, unsettling and incomprehensible. Yet at the same time there is a feeling of elation, and an awareness of something new as the speaker dances in the wind above the ground where the leaf grows, reminiscent again of Tigges' metaphor of epiphany as a 'dance in the starry universe'.[63]

Uncertainty is established from the outset of this collection through its title: *Woods etc.* From the Latin, *et cetera* means 'and the rest of such things', suggesting that there will be more than just the woods to consider; more perhaps than can be encompassed by this collection. There is a sense of the universe being an opening to elsewhere. This is reflected throughout the collection by the prevalence of present participle verb forms and adverbs. At times the environment of *Woods etc.* is unconfined by boundaries, rather it is a collection of 'ever widening circles' ('A Stone Skimmer'), 'a world beyond this room' ('Owl'), 'increasing woods' ('Woods etc.'), 'through-flow, fleshing out' ('Leaf'), 'releasing branches' ('Wood Not Yet Out), 'undistractedly listening' ('Sisyphus'), and 'endlessly upward' movement ('Autobiography of a Stone').

[61] Langbaum, p.354.
[62] Sher, p.388.
[63] Tigges, p.35.

However, paradoxically, the visual end-stop of Oswald's 'etc.', which could have been avoided with the use of the full phrase *et cetera*, foregrounds closure, and certainly not all Oswald's poems end unpunctuated. Therefore, in this collection, it appears that being present on thresholds between boundaries and limitlessness, and experiencing antecedent states of uncertainty, are often conditions for finding 'the tear in the veil.'

The opening couplet of 'Owl' is set on the threshold between night and sunrise and begins with 'an owl's call':

> last night on 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[64]

The 'joint' of the first line draws attention to the speaker at the junction of night and day. This joint, also a point of connection between two temporal states, acts as a threshold in the transition from night to day. Anthropologist Arnold van Gennep points to the significance of what he calls the limen, from the Latin threshold, in his study *Rites of Passage* (1908). The threshold, he suggests, is where the subject 'waver[s] between the two worlds'.[65] However, here the 'owl's call open[s] the darkness' and transports the speaker 'miles

[64] Alice Oswald, 'Owl', *Woods etc.*, p.6.
[65] Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (1908), (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1965), p.18. In this study Van Gennep describes the series of passages that an individual will travel through in his or her life, such as coming of age. Each passage is marked by an initiation rite.

away more than a world beyond [her] room'. This place is another world and separated structurally in the poem on an isolated line. Yet the speaker is returned to a seemingly familiar location: to the 'woods again' and to the memory of a previous visit there. The woods are uncanny: simultaneously otherworldly and familiar, recalling Hélène Cixous' description of writing as 'travelling in the unconscious, that inner foreign country, foreign home […].'[66] Although the darkness has opened and light has been admitted, this moment of 'new awareness' is not one of teleological understanding but an awareness of the uncanny. Oswald describes how she stands 'poised, seeing my eyes seen, / hearing my listening heard'.[67] The doubling effect of seeing and hearing herself over again intensifies the senses and creates a hypersensitive experience of consciousness using synaesthesia to expand its limits. This condition can be compared to the antecedent state identified in epiphany as a psychological mode, and the etymology of epiphany which highlights the susceptibility of the speaker to a potential epiphany.

But this is a frightening encounter with the natural world at first, and is dominated by a 'huge tree' that is 'improvised' or created by her fear. This potential crisis is averted at the sight of a shooting star, the symbolism of which is ambiguous. It may be that the star is a remembered one, part of the

[66] Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellars (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p.70.
[67] Oswald, 'Owl', p.6.

memory triggered by the owl's call, or one in the present moment. Tigges, in his survey of epiphanic precedents, identifies the star as an 'epiphany-raiser'[68] and here a star appears over the wood and the town:

> dead brush falling then a star
> straight through to God
> founded and fixed the wood
>
> 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[69]

The appearance of the star has a divine quality, seemingly a creator of the wood, and augments the owl's call and its otherworldliness. A strange elsewhere becomes the focus of the epiphanic experience but it is a fitting manifestation; one that derives from the uncanny antecedent state of the speaker.

In this irregular sonnet the volta comes at the final couplet. The turn is emphasised by the weight of the heavy sounding 'ed' of 'questioned' and the stanza break which suggests a pause and foregrounds 'twice'. After the turn, the 'elsewhere' moment of the star and the owl's call is compared to the striking of two matches. These two moments of light, however fleeting, are similar to Tigges' definition of an epiphany as 'a sudden flare'[70] and Oswald's

[68] Tigges, p.26.
[69] Oswald, 'Owl', p.6.
[70] Tigges, p.35.

'brightness of things'.[71] Yet the poem's closing illumination is not one of knowing or understanding, consequences that are often expected of an epiphany. Instead it is an uncomfortable epiphany whose meaning is undefined; its significance to the speaker is not revealed. Nichols describes a modern epiphany as the 'product of consciousness' or 'mind-brains in the act of becoming aware of their own activity',[72] and talking about the poems in her earlier collection *The Thing in the Gap-Stone Stile* (1996) Oswald suggests a similar idea: 'the poems are just a short hand record of the mind trying to work out its position in the world'.[73] In 'Owl' the speaker seems to be aware of this 'becoming' or 'working out'; she is aware of the ongoing process of her own senses ('seeing' her 'eyes seeing' and 'hearing' her 'listening heard') and the uncanniness of a state of being that is both familiar and unfamiliar, or Cixous' 'inner foreign country'.[74] This final simile of the struck matches perhaps seems too quotidian a comparison for the heightened and uncanny character of these manifestations of the non-human world, and yet by drawing the heightened moment back towards the everyday experience of striking a match there is an awareness of the ordinary and extraordinary existing in the same moment: the 'foreign home'.[75] Cixous description of a 'foreign home' embodies Freud's

[71] Alice Oswald in an interview with Deryn Rees-Jones, p.31.
[72] Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment,* p.478.
[73] Alice Oswald in an interview with Deryn Rees-Jones, p.25.
[74] Cixous, p.70.
[75] Ibid.

definition of the uncanny in his essay of the same name. Freud's exacting analysis of *unheimlich* and *heimlich,* meaning unhomely and homely, concludes:

> what is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich* […] In general we are reminded that the word "*heimlich*" is not unambiguous but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed.[76]

The epiphanic experience of the speaker in 'Owl' takes place in the realm of the uncanny, she becomes aware of what is both familiar and unfamiliar. However, that is not to say that all uncanny experiences are also epiphanic. Certainly, in 'Owl' the uncanny is evident but the poem is also, in Beja's term, an epiphany of the 'past-recaptured'.[77] Hearing the owl's call, the speaker tells us she 'was in the woods again'.[78]

'Sonnet', like 'Owl', has a sense of the uncanny in its manifestation of winter plants flowering in chalk. The poem begins with a movement 'towards winter': the constant current of the seasons and the regular processes that winter entails.[79] Here the flowers only bloom for 'maybe one frost' but they are embedded in 'chalk drifts' deposited 'through billions of slow sea-years'.[80] Within the solidity of the chalk the winter flowers are transitory. Oswald

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[76] Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (rpt. 1955, London: Vintage, 2001), p.223.
[77] Beja, p.15.
[78] Oswald, 'Owl', p.6.
[79] Alice Oswald, 'Sonnet', *Woods etc.*, p.21.
[80] Ibid.

compares the petals of the flowers to 'wings' being held out 'at the ready' and uses the metaphor of flight to imagine the moment, after one frost, when they will die. A few lines later the flowers are said to 'be founded on breath', rather than the water contained in the chalk face; an image which emphasises the life-giving quality of the chalk face that 'open[s] its wombs' to the flowers. This defamiliarising encounter between the flower and the chalk face, where 'both [are] closing towards each other', is another threshold, this time temporal, where solidity and transience momentarily co-exist. Like 'Owl', the final line of the sonnet suggests that the epiphanic moment involves 'entering' the unfamiliar:

> burrowed into and crumbled, carrying
> these small supernumerary powers founded on breath:
> chalk with all its pits and pores,
> winter flowers, smelling of a sudden entering elsewhere.[81]

The rare introduction of a colon encourages us to read the final two lines as an explanation of the epiphanic moment, and may be 'coercive', in Hejinian's terms, but these lines retain a sense of the uncanny that permeates Oswald's collection.[82] This epiphanic moment is signalled by a scent of chalk and flowers, perhaps not unexpectedly; however, the flowers and chalk also smell of 'entering'[83] into an undefined space: the synaesthesia conveys more than

[81] Ibid.
[82] Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' (1985).
[83] Oswald, 'Sonnet', p.21.

one sense impression—smell becomes movement, recalling Royle's description of the 'veering and vanishing of one word or thing into another'.[84]

The abruptness of the moment is not untypical of the traditional epiphanic paradigm or, as Langbaum defines it, 'the Criterion of Suddenness'.[85] This is a jolt that sensitizes and unsettles the speaker. Yet this sudden jolt is followed by a present participle giving the impression of a continuous movement, not a completed action, echoing the opening word of the poem: 'towards'.[86] The poem progresses from this first word towards the concrete detail of the flowers and the chalk face and then towards an 'elsewhere' that is never entirely entered. The speaker is on the cusp, in the process of entering or wavering, in Van Gennep's terms, between two worlds: those of the flowers growing on the chalk face and the undefined elsewhere. The significance of this manifestation is not explained by the end of the poem and concludes in an undefined space: an 'elsewhere'.[87] 'Else' with its meaning 'other' suggests this is a place of difference, perhaps one of unfamiliarity.

Oswald's essay 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise' hints at the importance of encounters with the elsewhere. While sawing a fallen birch tree after the gales of 1990, Oswald notices the 'unhomelike look' of its bark. She explains:

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[84] Royle, p.35.
[85] Langbaum, p.341.
[86] Oswald, 'Sonnet', p.21.
[87] Ibid.

> it was like a third mind opening, a mind for detail, for thickness, uncanniness, variability – in all places something infinitely distant from myself. I began to want to read poems that could offer an equivalent grace – an encounter with something wholly other.[88]

It is an epiphany for poetic possibility and perhaps her own poetic development. Oswald seeks an elsewhere that is beyond herself, something that is other and undefined. Recalling Freud's concept of *unheimlich* she points to the strangeness of the familiar bark. Freud tells us that 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality'.[89] While sawing the fallen birch, 'something wholly other' becomes apparent. Similarly, Nichols defines epiphany as the 'ordinary rendered remarkable by heightened experience',[90] and in both contexts Oswald's approach to writing is epiphanic. By comparing the experience of looking at the bark to a 'third mind opening', Oswald is also suggesting a different way of perceiving this natural object, resonating with her insistence at the beginning of this chapter that when she writes she must 'force [her] eye behind the flower'.[91] Maybe this is seeing with the third eye: sensing the bark or flower's potential, its hidden connections; or maybe it is an experience of a third dimension: sensing a heightened reality or vividness

[88] Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', p.38.
[89] Freud, p.243.
[90] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.28.
[91] Oswald in conversation with Madeline Bunting.

in the bark. It is difficult to be entirely sure what Oswald might mean by the 'third mind'; however, perhaps the stonewaller in *Dart*, introduced earlier in this thesis, can provide some guidance.[92] When the stonewaller describes the river as 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', he refers to his heightened experience as one of difference—the 'elsewhere' of *Sonnet*, or the 'something wholly other' experienced by Oswald in the 1990 gale. Being on the water knocks him off his balance and the world around him transforms: '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'.[93] As the stonewaller is driven by the current, he moves into a liminal space experiencing a 'wobbly' state. Johnson suggests epiphanies require 'unsettling' and this seems to be apparent here and in many other poems in this collection, such as 'Owl', 'Leaf', 'A Winged Seed', 'The Stone Skimmer', 'Sonnet', 'Field', Marginalia on the Edge of the Evening', 'Hymn to Iris'. The extract from *Dart* also confirms the importance of liminality as an antecedent state in Oswald's epiphanic mode. Victor Turner, in response to the anthropological studies of Van Gennep, describes the

[92] Oswald, *Dart*, p.34.
[93] Ibid.

liminal period as a 'time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another'.[94]

The opening two stanzas of 'Field' also place the speaker 'betwixt and between' on a temporal, physical and psychological threshold. 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'.[95] On this limen a star is sensed: 'Some star let go a small sound on a thread'. The use of synaesthesia means that the star is heard not seen, and in this uncanny disruption of the senses the poem places the reader in unfamiliar surroundings—another elsewhere. Sound takes prime position again; the senses are unsettled, and the moment is perceived in the body. Langbaum suggests that being 'physically sensed' is what distinguishes an epiphany from a vision.[96] The elsewhere quality of the moment is maintained in the following stanza. Again, the senses are exchanged: the darkness of the night is felt rather than seen, darkness is a 'soaking' that 'squeezes' around the speaker; midnight is described not as time but a 'spasm'. Dan Chiasson claims that Oswald is a 'remarkable, often very odd describer'.[97] He suggests that her choices are 'intentionally inapt, unsettling or excessive' and, in relation to

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[94] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), p.113.
[95] Alice Oswald, 'Field', *Woods etc.*, p.25.
[96] Langbaum, p.341.
[97] Dan Chiasson, 'Alice Oswald's Natural Terrors', review of *Falling Awake* <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/12/alice-oswalds-falling-awake> [accessed 06/09/16].

Oswald's version of the Iliad: *Memorial*, Chiasson believes through such mismatched comparisons a 'submerged mental landscape comes to light'.[98] Using the language of Freudian psychoanalysis, Chiasson draws attention to the presence of the uncanny in Oswald's work. 'Field' is another poem which engages with epiphany in an uncanny realm and at 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

Here is a momentary limitlessness, a 'tear in the veil', which exposes the speaker's world. Like other poems in this collection the closing lines are isolated through stanza breaks, creating a fragmentary effect of jarring images that resist a teleological reading. It is difficult, as Oswald herself suggests, to read 'headlong down [the] page to find meaning'.[99] Instead, the reader searches for connections, and as Langbaum suggests in his taxonomy of epiphany the reader is 'move[d] through a series of associations that will produce the epiphany in *him*'.[100] The penultimate line of the poem introduces an abstraction. The use of verbs and adjectives which are difficult to connect with the previous lines echo a modernist approach of trying to capture

[98] Ibid.
[99] Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', pp.41-2.
[100] Langbaum, p.345.

consciousness: 'let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness', as Woolf put it.[101] In this final line, day to day objects come vividly into sight, or into the light: 'docks, grasses, small windflowers, weepholes, wires'.[102] The focus on the weepholes (the drainage gaps in mortar between bricks along the bottom of a building) and wires return us to the house at the beginning of the poem, and perhaps to home. This is an epiphanic experience of an uncanny elsewhere and home being present simultaneously. Again, Oswald's epiphanic mode is reminiscent of Woolf's descriptions of moments of being as 'scaffolding in the background […] the invisible and silent part […]',[103] or as a hidden pattern 'behind the cotton wool of daily life'.[104] There is a sense that the manifestations in the poem are an uncertain reawakening of the constant, but concealed, backdrop that constitutes the speaker's way of being.

'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening' also begins with home and moves disconcertingly through epiphanic experience. This poem, like others in the collection, such as 'Woods etc', 'Walking past a Rose this June Morning', 'Sonnet' and 'Field' employs an epiphanic mode that embraces the ambiguity

[101] Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series* (rpt. 1925, London: The Hogwarth Press, 1984), p.150.
[102] Oswald, 'Field', p.25.
[103] Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.73.
[104] Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.72.

and uncertainty of manifestations experienced in the non-human world. Often these are uncanny moments that occur in liminal spaces. In the opening lines, the speaker positions herself on a limen:

> and I'm still here/not here
> at the very lifting edge of evening
>
> and I should be up there. Bathing children.[105]

At home, in the midst of bath time, she appears to be on the cusp of the evening, yet paradoxically both present and absent. The threshold is visually signalled by the oblique stroke, and the speaker's position is echoed temporally by the 'lifting edge of evening'. This liminality is again an 'elsewhere' of 'here/not here', Turner's 'betwixt and between',[106] the 'joint of dawn' in 'Owl', or 'wedged / between [the world's] premise and its conclusion' in 'Field'. Jack Thacker suggests that Oswald's approach to language is one of co-ordination rather than subordination'[107] and here the oblique stroke plays a similar role, drawing together the 'here' and 'not here'. 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—an antecedent state that is psychologically associated with epiphany—the speaker's first manifestation is

[105] Oswald, 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', *Woods etc.*, p.27.
[106] Turner, p.113.
[107] Jack Thacker, 'Alice Oswald's Acoustic Arrangements', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 44:2 (2015), p.106.

of the 'evening's underside', where fields try to cling on to sunlight by 'slackened lines' slowly loosening from the earth.[108] Evening begins to take the place of day and the sun vanishes in a moment compared to the speed at which a spider might disappear from our view. This is a heightened moment where, in Van Gennep's words, the speaker seems to 'unite [herself] with a new world'.[109] She sees:

> […] the luminous underneath of a moth
>
> I saw a blackbird
> mouth to the glow of the hour in hieroglyphics . . .

The speaker experiences an epiphany: a manifestation of the non-human world fitting of her liminal state. Like the star in the darkness and the 'high field unhorizoned / hung upon nothing' in 'Field', here too is Oswald's 'tear in [the] veil' to the 'brightness of things'.[110] Yet this is a distinctive epiphanic experience. 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;[111] in another, hieroglyphs are

[108] Oswald, 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', p.27.
[109] Arnold van Gennep, p.20.
[110] Alice Oswald in an interview with Deryn Rees-Jones, p.31.
[111] *Oxford English Dictionary*, III, p.213: 'a figure of some object […] standing for a word or a figure, device or sign having some hidden meaning, a secret'.

purported to have the power to communicate with the divinities;[112] and in another, the term is used more informally to refer to undecipherable writing.[113] Taking these multivariant definitions into account Oswald seems to suggest that the blackbird is connecting with a world that is 'wholly other',[114] hidden, or difficult to grasp, in relation to the speaker. Whatever the blackbird is mouthing is interrupted by aposiopesis and a deliberate moment of silence is created. Johnson tells us that 'Richard Pearce stresses the importance of ellipsis when he writes that modern art "is distinguished by its acceptance of, or insistence on *holes*—discontinuities, disruptions, dislocations, leaps in perspective, absences …."'.[115] Here we accept that there is an act of communication by the blackbird but that the speaker, or us, may not be able to fully understand. Language cannot wholly capture the epiphanic experience and silence, as in 'Woods etc.', remains. We cannot truly know the blackbird's song. Its significance to the speaker is not revealed. This disruption to the poem and the speaker's experience is followed by an unanswered question that compounds the uncertainty: 'who left the light on the clouds?' The poem, similarly to 'Waking past a Rose this June Morning' is moving further away from the secure meanings expected of the traditional teleological

[112] In etymology hieroglyph is derived from the Greek *hierós* meaning sacred, and *glýphō* meaning carving. Hieroglyphics were used by priests for prayers, texts for worshipping the gods, and written on tombs and sarcophagus to help guide the dead through the afterlife.
[113] *Oxford English Dictionary,* III, p.213: '*humorously* a piece of writing difficult to decipher'.
[114] Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', p.38.
[115] Richard Pearce cited in Johnson, p.168.

epiphanic paradigm. The poem then stalls at what resembles a stage direction: the instruction 'pause' is isolated on the line below. It feels as if the experience is frozen and silence imposed again. The pause draws our attention away briefly from the words of the poem into the silence that surrounds it.

The title of this poem encourages us to read it as one taking place on the edges of experience by identifying the lines of the poem with a reader writing marginalia. Helen Jackson in her survey of marginalia explains how it became a common practice with readers from the Middle Ages onwards.[116] However, the word itself, derived from the Latin 'marginale' meaning 'in the margins', was brought into common use by Coleridge who published his 'marginalia' on Sir Thomas Browne in Blackwood's magazine in November 1819.[117] Marginalia are now recognised as the notes, embellishments, scribbles and comments that a reader adds to the margins. The act of adding these marginalia reveals something of the reader's own thoughts and character, or draws attention to something in or outside of the text. When other readers come to that text, its marginalia draw them from the text in a way that also stands to illuminates it. Oswald's poem operates in a similar way, taking us to the edges of the evening and oscillating between manifestations of heightened awareness, the everyday and uncertainty. After the pause, the poem takes us

[116] Helen Jackson, *Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
[117] Jackson, p.7.

further away from the intense manifestation of the blackbird back to the commonplace activities of the human world: 'the man at the wheel signs his speed on the ringroad'.[118] This surprising line, seemingly unrelated to the speaker's previous experience of the non-human world, shifts to another sphere of experience. No longer do we feel as if we are with the speaker in what Woolf might describe as the 'exceptional moment' of the setting sun.[119] 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. What does it mean when the driver 'signs' his speed? Is it a reference to the reading on his speedometer or a sign by the side of the ring road, triggered by his driving, displaying his speed? In an undated journal entry Stanley Kunitz writes:

> Poetry as a meta medium—
> metabolic, metaphoric, metamorphic—
> articulating shifts of being, changes
> and transfers of energy.[120]

In this last two lines there is a sense of poetry as a movement 'elsewhere', a movement that we have seen is also an important element of Oswald's epiphanic mode. Perhaps this way of thinking about poetry and epiphany can account for the way Oswald's speaker collects together the marginalia of the oncoming evening, shifting between moments of being and non-being in the

[118] Oswald, 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', p.27.
[119] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.71.
[120] Stanley Kunitz in *The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden* by Stanley Kunitz (with Genine Lentine), (New York: Norton, 2007), p.105.

human and non-human worlds: the sound of the trees, bath time, a bike, the setting sun, a moth, a blackbird, a fluorescent cloud, a driver on the ring road. In this poem, the reader is asked to make a succession of associations rather than to arrive at a defining moment, instead experiencing, in Kunitz's words, 'shifts of being',[121] and the transformation of the speaker.

Like other poems in *Woods etc.*, Oswald's epiphanic mode in 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening' appears to be 'a shorthand record of the [speaker's] mind trying to work out its position in the world'.[122] At the direction 'pause' on line 15, both speaker and reader perceive this process. This poem moves self-consciously through a wide range of realms of experience: global, domestic, quotidian, natural, urban, temporal, suburban and astronomical, in a way that is again suggestive of Nichols' definition of epiphanies as 'mind-brains in the act of becoming aware of their own activity'.[123] The speaker is constantly re-positioned. However, after the ring road we are returned to within reach of the speaker's outstretched arms and the heightened moment we thought had 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

[121] Ibid.
[122] Alice Oswald in Deryn Rees-Jones, 'Face to Face: Alice Oswald', p.25.
[123] Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment,* p.478.

to the moon[124]

The final 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. The speaker balances between the two similes, as she does between the 'here/not here' of the opening, but can achieve neither in yet another moment of displacement. There is no teleological insight or revelation. Instead a further interruption returns the speaker to the everyday: someone 'pushing his mower home'. But the poem remains here only briefly. The next stanza break propels us to 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.

'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening' encapsulates key elements of Oswald's epiphanic mode found throughout the collection. The poems discussed resist teleological epiphanies directed by the poet, instead inviting the participation of the reader and withholding the significance of the manifestations to the speaker; no indication is given of their enduring effects.

[124] Oswald, 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', p.27.

Crucially, these are epiphanies of consciousness: a 'tear in the veil' of the familiar, that begin with an antecedent state of unsettling liminality and anxiety that leads to manifestations of the often-unnoticed commonplace non-human world. Engagement with the non-human world is commonly associated with the epiphanies of poets such as Wordsworth and Hopkins, and yet for Oswald, writing in the twenty-first century, these types of encounters are equally significant. But is this an important source of epiphanic experience for other contemporary poets? As we have seen in the introduction, Wheatley suggests that both Oswald and Jamie are driven by their desire to 'see the gap between the human and the non-human as a zone of artistic possibility'[125] but how does this appear on the page? Thus, in the next chapter Jamie's collection, *The Overhaul*, is analysed for the versions of epiphany that it presents in relation to the non-human world. Like Oswald, Jamie demonstrates how writing with epiphany in contemporary poetry can move beyond traditional paradigms; Sher's call for a 'more branching voice' is evident in both poets.

[125] Wheatley, p.138.

Chapter 3: Kathleen Jamie

'*slipping through the net*'[1]

'Do you consider yourself a nature writer?' This is Andrew Kelly's first question to Kathleen Jamie.[2] She bristles at the label, replies with a determined, 'ach no', and complains about her categorisation as a Scottish writer, a woman writer, and now a nature writer. The interview moves elsewhere until Kelly draws her back to environmental issues; this time he mentions 'activism' in relation to her work. She is insistent in her response: 'I'm not an activist, I'm a writer.' Waving towards her prose collections on the desk in front of her, Jamie explains that 'this peculiar way is [her] way of relating to these issues.' She continues by suggesting that we all experience despair at times and that the most 'frightening changes' are taking place in the natural world. Apparently, increasingly agitated by Kelly's line of questioning, she finally deflects him with a shake of her head and a curt exclamation: 'I don't know, I just write it!'

Despite Jamie's discomfort at being labelled in this way, the poems in *The Overhaul* do respond primarily to encounters in the natural world and draw on nature as an important element in epiphanic experience. Like

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[1] This phrase is used by Kathleen Jamie in a piece published on the Scottish Poetry Library website. In 'About "Glamourie"' Jamie compares her poem, 'Glamourie', with 'Touch Me' by Stanley Kunitz, which appears in *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected* (New York: Norton,1997), pp.158-9. Discussing a line from 'Glamourie', Jamie tell us 'it's about escape, slipping through the net'.
<http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/glamourie> [accessed 11/05/17].

[2] The Coleridge Lectures 2015, Bristol Festival of Ideas.

Wordsworth's solitary walks in the Lakes referred to in the introduction,[3] Jamie's poems in *The Overhaul* create altered perceptions: 'momentary manifestations of significance in ordinary experience' within the non-human world.[4] Yet this collection comprises poems that offer epiphanies, in both content and form, which feel like an 'escape, a slipping through the net'.[5] This chapter demonstrates how the epiphanies of *The Overhaul* slip 'through the net', not to escape the ordinary but to escape *in* ordinary experience, finding astonishment through being attentive and navigating the liminality between human and non-human worlds.

Matt McGuire has suggested that the 'snatched moments' of Jamie's poems are a 'contrast to the more contrived and orchestrated epiphanies which poetry often offers us'.[6] Yet 'The Beach', which opens *The Overhaul*, employs a seemingly straightforward epiphanic mode.[7] The poem presents a beach in the aftermath of a storm, a 'big westerly' having blown itself out. Throughout the poem, the third person plural positions us with the speaker on the beach searching amongst unremarkable debris deposited on the shore:

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[3] See p.13 of this thesis.
[4] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.1.
[5] Kathleen Jamie, 'About "Glamourie"' <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/glamourie> [accessed 11/05/17].
[6] Matt McGuire, 'Kathleen Jamie', in *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Matt McGuire and Colin Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.151.
[7] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Beach', *The Overhaul* (Basingstoke: Picador, 2012), p.3.

'driftwood / the heaps of frayed / blue polyprop rope'. The poem ends with two stanzas which suggest that storm debris is not what we are looking for:

> What a species –
> still working the same
> curved bay, all of us
>
> hoping for the marvellous
> all hankering for a changed life.[8]

This first line quoted is ambiguous. The em dash, unlike a question or exclamation mark which might suggest exasperation or wonder, implies a space for contemplation, leaving the subsequent lines uncertain in tone: is our continual yearning for the extraordinary amongst the unremarkable ('debris') a source of exasperation or wonder? This contrasts with the tendency to control meaning that Hejinian claims is characteristic of the 'coercive, epiphanic mode'.[9] As discussed in the introduction, she suggests that the epiphanic mode 'serve[s] as a negative model, with its smug pretension to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth.'[10] However, in these lines the openness that Hejinian favours is evident. The initial consonant sounds of 'hoping' and 'hankering', the use of present participles and the repetition of 'all', emphasise that the epiphany—the 'marvellous' and its resultant change—is still to come, nor is it guaranteed. The poem implies

[8] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Beach', p.3.
[9] Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' (1985).
[10] Ibid.

that as a species we will continue 'Hoping for the marvellous' in the seemingly unremarkable, yearning for change or escape.

This sense of the potential of the everyday is also acknowledged in 'Ospreys', the first sonnet of the 'Five Tay Sonnets'.[11] 'Ospreys' describes the return of the migrating ospreys to the 'self-same riverside / Scots pine' to 'possess again the sticks and fishbones of last year's nest'. There is a routine to their migration and the lives of the people who watch for them: they're all 'still here' and these two worlds are connected in their weariness. Life has 'battered' both avian and human worlds, but the ospreys carry on: similarly to the people in 'The Beach' 'still working the same / curved bay […] hoping for the marvellous'.[12] In particular, the ospreys bring a sense of security; an indication in a changing world that the patterns of the natural world persist. After all, the ospreys have survived 'blizzards and 'raw winds', and the precarious 'tilt / across the A9'.[13] However, there remains a sense of wonder in this cyclical return from the 'beating up from Senegal', where 'beating' evokes images of the ospreys' wings and their conquest of the elements, to the renewal of their nest, which arouses feelings of home, belonging and intimacy expressed in Scots' dialect: 'So redd up your cradle'. As the ospreys prepare last year's nest there is an echo of the collection's title: the nest is overhauled

[11] Kathleen Jamie, 'Five Tay Sonnets: 1. Ospreys', *The Overhaul*, p.5.
[12] Jamie, 'The Beach', p.3.
[13] Jamie, 'Ospreys', p.5.

for a new brood. In the final line, the significance of this moment is conveyed in the voice of one of the town's inhabitant's: '*that's them, baith o' them, they're in*'—a conspiratorial whisper that spreads round town that highlights the reassurance of the pattern of the bird's migration. By revealing the impact of the manifestation of the migrating ospreys, Jamie's poem appears to conform to the traditional teleological paradigm of epiphany as a universal and fixed insight.

Both these poems, 'The Beach' and 'Ospreys', might also be accused of being 'the poetry of minor epiphany, the finding of pat-profundity in every nook of the personal and everyday', in Ahren Warner's words.[14] Warner condemns epiphanic modes of writing that find significance in the quotidian, however Jamie's poems demonstrate the importance of valuing the everyday and rediscovering astonishment for a world that is often taken for granted or previously unseen. Tim Ingold's concept of living in a 'world of becoming', in which he claims that 'even the ordinary, the mundane […] gives cause for astonishment', resonates with the epiphanic poems of Jamie's collection.[15] Astonishment is present from the very first poem when the speaker suggests we are all 'hoping for the marvellous'.[16] The adjective *marvellous*, from the French *merveillus*, is defined as 'such to excite wonder or astonishment […].[17]

[14] Ahren Warner, 'Implements in their places'.
[15] Ingold, p.64.
[16] Jamie, 'The Beach', p.3.
[17] *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Yet *The Overhaul* also acknowledges that insight can, as Warner suggests, be found too readily, particularly in the non-human world. At the beginning of 'Highland Sketch' the speaker is exasperated by the familiarity of her environment.[18] The opening lines of the poem introduce a predictable and uninspiring picture of the Highlands, a laconic counterpart to stereotypical Romantic notions of landscape and insight:

> Another landscape,
> another swept glen,
> more roadside wildflowers
> breezing through their season
> and round the next bend
> – lo! another sea-loch
> shot with nets of aquamarine . . .[19]

The initial anaphora used here intensifies a feeling of weariness at the speaker's surroundings, the list of non-specific natural features (what wildflowers? which glen, loch or bend?) conveying tedium rather than appreciation. The interjection of 'lo!' interrupts the speaker's indifference, raising the expectation of a significant moment, but this is immediately undercut by further repetition of 'another'. This opening sketch of the Highlands then peters out in aposiopesis, the ellipsis hinting at the speaker's agitation rather than the elation of an epiphanic moment.

The speaker and her companion looking on this landscape seem to be familiar with their view and do 'not need to explain' it to each other; there are

[18] Kathleen Jamie, 'Highland Sketch', *The Overhaul*, p.17.
[19] Jamie, 'Highland Sketch', p.17.

'sufficient years between them' not to have to engage with each other or the landscape. The stasis in these relationships is confirmed when the speaker reveals an unexpected intimate detail of their personal life: '– We don't make love'; intimacy is achieved instead by reading and then 'leaf[ing]' through a book of nineteenth century photographs where the subjects appear as statues with 'hands like stone'. However, this almost casual flicking through the pages stirs the couple and the faces in the pictures 'admonish' them. Like the antecedent state identified in the psychological mode of epiphany, their anxiety precipitates an insight. In response, the speaker suggests that they need to go outside and make a connection with the natural world:

> We really ought to rouse ourselves
> to greet some weather –
> now westlin' winds, now shrouded bens
> now a late sklent of sunlight to the heart.[20]

The verb 'rouse' implies a need to wake themselves from the inertia that is affecting their relationship, and initiate an escape, or as Jamie describes it, a 'slipping through the net'.[21] The closing lines imply that this wakefulness can be achieved by being present in nature.

By borrowing the phrase 'now westlin' winds' from Robert Burns' poem 'Song Composed in August',[22] Jamie inserts an echo of an intimate walk

[20] Jamie, 'Highland Sketch', p.17.
[21] An explanation of the origin of this phrase is provided on p.91 of this thesis.
[22] Robert Burns, 'Song Composed in August' <http://www.robertburns.org/works/31.shtml> [accessed 11/05/17].

between two lovers among the 'charms of Nature', and a stark contrast to the image of the tired relationship presented earlier in the poem. The speaker of Burns' poem invites his companion Peggy to 'stray' alongside him with the 'skimming swallows' so he can declare his love for her:

> We'll gently walk, and sweetly talk,
> Till the silent moon shine clearly;
> I'll grasp thy waist, and, fondly prest,
> Swear how I love thee dearly[23]

In the final four lines of 'Highland Sketch' the physical intimacy that the Burns' couple demonstrate as they walk seems within reach, yet Jamie's speaker is tentative in her suggestion that they act: 'we really ought to rouse ourselves'.[24] The qualification of adverb and conditional imply an element of caution, maybe reluctance. The final couplet returns to the anaphora of the opening stanza but with a contrasting tone and resonance that diverts our attention to the importance of nature's restorative potential. Don Paterson explains how poetry should 'stop people in their tracks, offer them some brief moment of illumination or wakefulness in their lives'[25] and with the insistence of the repeated 'now' the poem declares that engagement with the natural world has this potential.

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[23] Burns, 'Song Composed in August'.
[24] Jamie, 'Highland Sketch', p.17.
[25] Don Patterson in *Beyond Identity: New Horizons in Modern Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Attila Dósa (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p.162.

Wordsworth's suggestion that 'spots of time' affect 'our minds' so that they are 'nourished and invisibly repaired' is also echoed in these final lines.[26] In particular, the Scots dialect word 'sklent' with its meaning of slope, a sideways movement, swerve, twist or suggests that an epiphanic moment is within reach and, in the sense that an epiphany 'builds on the characteristics of a particular situation',[27] is attainable through an engagement with nature. Here 'sklent' calls to mind Royle's theory of 'veering as sort of pivot for thinking about literature', and its connection with Oswald's poems in the previous chapter.[28] Royle suggests that veering 'involves a moving body or force' and a 'psychological' move 'away from some goal […] or between one thing and another'.[29] Thus the 'sklent' of this poem is a physical and psychological movement by the speaker towards greater intimacy with her environment and her partner. Royle adds that veering 'impels us to think afresh and otherwise about the borders or opposition between interior/exterior or inner/outer'—it is transformative.[30] By the close of the poem the speaker has recognised the urge to act, or 'veer', yet we are left in doubt as to whether she will take this step and escape from the inertia to achieve her transformation. James J. Gibson, cited by Harriet Tarlo, explains

[26] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.479.
[27] From the etymology of epiphany in *Strong's Concordance* <http://www.biblehub.com/greek/2015.htm> [accessed 05/05/17].
[28] Royle, p.1. See also pp. 64-66 of this thesis.
[29] Royle, p 4.
[30] Royle, p 7.

that 'We must perceive in order to move but we must also move in order to perceive'.[31] As we have seen in *The Prelude*, 'Highland Sketch' implies that physical interaction with the natural world are conditions that can precipitate epiphanic experience. The mundanity of the environment at beginning of the poem, the 'everyday' of the epiphanic mode that Warner is so keen to dismiss, is hesitantly rediscovered and recast: 'a late sklent of sunlight to the heart'. The everyday natural world has the potential to reinvigorate.

'A Raised Beach' is set in a similar environment.[32] A shelf of stones on the beach is described as 'plain', conveying a sense of its physical composition and its unremarkable quality. However, in contrast to the sequence of a 'powerful experience'[33] in nature leading to an epiphany, this poem's first line is an immediate and unexpected utterance of realisation:

> – of course, that's what –
> a plain of stones, perfectly
> smooth and still
> showing the same slight
> ridges and troughs
> as thousands of years ago
> when the sea left.
> – It *is* a sea – even grey
> stones one can
> walk across: not
> a solitary flower, nor a single
> blade of grass – [34]

[31] James J. Gibson from *The Ecological Approach to Vision Perception* (rpt. 1979, Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986) cited in *The Ground Aslant* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), p.17.
[32] Kathleen Jamie, 'A Raised Beach', *The Overhaul*, p.18.
[33] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.75.
[34] Jamie, 'A Raised Beach', p.18.

By beginning in *medias res* Jamie opens the poem in the midst of an unspecified epiphany and makes us feel as if we've missed something and that it's all too obvious for her to expand on anyway. We feel as if we should know already. The framing em dashes in this line encourage us to consider what precipitated this realisation and then in the second line we are shown the raised beach of the title. This grey bank of stones, which has endured through time, is described as a sea 'one can / walk across', an allusion to the Biblical myth of Jesus walking on water, hinting at overcoming a seemingly impossible task. The poem draws attention to this metaphor with italics, telling us that this '*is*' a sea of 'even grey / stones': one that feels solid under foot, but is also fluid, moving as the speaker traverses its lifeless landscape: plants cannot grow here, whether we perceive the ridge as stones or sea. The poem moves as the speaker walks and the fluctuation is underscored by the punctuation: just as we seem to have a grip on its 'truth', its shape shifts with another prominent em dash or ellipsis, interrupting or ending a thought. Johnson suggests that if 'language is left open, if spaces are left between word meanings, the moment can occur'.[35] The punctuation of this poem opens these spaces and the reader participates in the fluctuation of meaning, unable to settle, like the speaker on the significance of the stones. Despite the syntactic clarity of the lines, in Royle's words, 'sense can veer, even within the apparent unity and

[35] Johnson, p.182-3.

punctuality of a word.'[36] In contrast to Hejinian's criticism of epiphany as a 'coercive' mode, Jamie herself explains how poetry can be 'a place of engagement rather than consumption'.[37] However, the reader is jolted from this state when the speaker firmly tells us: 'I know this place'. Yet what is it that she knows?

The adolescent spat with the moon and the sea that closes the poem maintains Jamie's 'place of engagement'. We might expect a revelation of what is known, or why this is significant to the speaker, but the final lines of the poem shift in tone and style, prolonging the uncertainty. Nichols explains how 'as epiphany closes in on the determinate moment of verbal power, it opens out onto multiple manifestations of meaning'[38] and in 'A Raised Beach' this is evident in the imagined verbal exchange across human and non-human boundaries. Unusually, the moon is anthropomorphised as it rejects the speaker: the moon turns its 'dark side' towards her and declares: *'Our friendship lapsed*.' Next the sea, humanised as her 'dear mother', pulls away with a curt dismissal of her off-spring:

> – And sea, dear mother,
> retreating with long stealth
> though I lie awake –
> *Ah, you're grown-up now*
> *I've sung to you*
> *quite long enough*[39]

[36] Royle, p.35.
[37] W. N. Herbert and M. Hollis, *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p.278.
[38] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.xii.
[39] Jamie, 'A Raised Beach', p.18.

By anthropomorphising the moon and the sea, the dismissal of the speaker takes on a desolate and uncanny note: the familiarity of the natural world is disturbed. The nurturing and life-giving symbolism of mother earth is reversed, and the poem takes on the form of a proleptic epiphany in the shape of the recaptured memory of a broken familial relationship. These lines appear to return to a time past when a child was soothed by her mother's singing. The speaker accuses the sea/mother of sneaking away, withdrawing her comfort. Replying in the mother's voice, the sea tells her she will no longer be there. The 'quite' in this concluding line suggests the ties must now be cut, after all that is what it means to be 'grown-up', and although not an escape necessarily of her making, the speaker hints at a movement into a different stage of being. E. L. Risden suggests that epiphanic moments in epic poetry involve 'encounters with pure manifestations of essential aspects of nature' that impart 'information or power'[40] and in part 'A Raised Beach' intersects with this tradition. However, in contrast to Parmar's perception of the epiphanic mode as 'less nuanced', the knowledge received is incomplete and the poem veers through a series of enigmatic manifestations.[41]

Like 'A Raised Beach', 'Excavation & Recovery' begins in *medias res*.[42] When the poem opens with the narrative marker 'Then', we are encouraged

[40] Risden, p.64.
[41] Parmar, 'Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK'.
[42] Kathleen Jamie, 'Five Tay Sonnets: 4. Excavation and Recovery', *The Overhaul*, p.8.

to imagine events that have occurred before the poem starts; we are inserted into events that unfold before the rescue operation takes place. Next the poem switches to the river and to those who might have sailed the boat being recovered. The poem uncovers, in de Man's phrase, 'a permanent presence',[43] an excavated Bronze Age log-boat from the Tay estuary: 'it was floated to the slipway, swung high / in front of our eyes: black, dripping, aboriginal'.[44] The log-boat is an underworld treasure from 'deep time': a self-confessed love of Jamie's,[45] which as it is exposed from the mud, and brought in front of the onlookers' eyes, reveals its origins. A question is asked about the relationship between the river and its past inhabitants: the speaker wants to know how the Tay was spoken of and what it was called by people who answered in 'a long forgotten tongue'. Up to this point the poem perhaps does little to challenge the pejorative notion of epiphany as an unadventurous mode. However, the final stanza makes an unexpected turn in tone. The introduction to this thesis draws attention to how Wordsworth recognises the inadequacy of language to wholly capture what he sees; he tells us that he should 'need / Colours and words unknown to man',[46] and although the speaker here is not lost for words, she offers diverse possible explanations for what the river might have meant to the men who worked the ships:

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[43] de Man, p.5.
[44] Jamie, 'Excavation and Recovery', p.8.
[45] Kathleen Jamie, The Coleridge Lectures 2015, Bristol Festival of Ideas. In response to a question from the audience Jamie replies, 'I love the sense of deep time […] layers of time.'
[46] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.481.

an estuary with a discharge of 160 cubic metres of water per second
as per the experts' report
or Tay/Toi/Taum – a goddess;
the Flowing (?), the Silent One (?).[47]

First there is an italicised incongruous definition in a scientific register that jars with the informality of 'hi-viz jackets', the poetic alliteration of 'an axe-hewn hollowed-out oak' and the Scots vernacular of '"Ca' canny lads!"', next is the river's name in different dialects, then a mythical description, and finally two metaphorical epithets. The question marks inside the parentheses are puzzling. Without these the lines would be a continuation of the list of monikers for the river. One function of parentheses is to add extra information, so what are they adding here? Are they adding doubt about the names given to the river? Is the existence or plausibility of the names being questioned? Or are they inserting the voice of the speaker, the poet, or another, asking whether these might not be suitable names too?

Another poem which engages with ambiguity and epiphany is 'May', also part of the sequence 'Five Tay Sonnets'.[48] Jamie's choice of vocabulary is arresting. She writes about the blossom in anthropogenic terms: 'Again the wild blossom / powering down at dusk'. This is an extraordinary manifestation of the blossom falling from the branches as if charged with electrical energy: it is, by Nichols' definition, the 'powerful experience' of an

[47] Jamie, 'Excavation and Recovery', p.8.
[48] Kathleen Jamie, 'Five Tay Sonnets: 3. May', *The Overhaul*, p7.

adelonic epiphany.[49] In the next three lines a blackbird enters 'telling us / what he thinks to it, telling us / what he thinks . . .'.[50] The blackbird's song appears to bring a message, and despite his insistence, highlighted by the repetition, the ellipsis leaves the message unfinished and the speaker of the poem questions our ability to 'bear' not knowing what he is telling us. The poem then raises another fitting manifestation, or an epiphany: a 'fire-streaked sky, a firth/decked in gold'. Yet the speaker again feels frustrated at being unable to 'say' something about the epiphanic moment and shares with the blackbird an inability to perform:

> What can we say
> the blackbird's failed
> to iterate already? Night calls:
> the windows of next door's house
> crimson, then go mute

This is where the poem turns. 'What can we say' is pushed towards the right-hand margin separating it from the body of the poem in a way that isolates the first part of that question, and hence our inability as humans to communicate. A question is raised: if the blackbird has failed to 'iterate' the moment, why do we assume that we can succeed? The inclusive 'we' embraces the reader in this breakdown and a sense of futility is implied in both the human and non-human worlds. Then as the sunset makes the neighbour's greenhouse windows 'crimson / then go mute', a moment of light becomes

[49] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.75.
[50] Jamie, 'May', p7.

voiceless, as if the poem is enacting an alternative epiphany: one that both reveals and conceals. Louise Gairn recognises a similar mode in other poems by Jamie. She describes how 'Jamie […] sets out to negotiate the borderline between nature and human, questioning the limits of poetic representation in […] 'The Dipper' where a bird's song cannot be replicated in words: "it isn't mine to give."'[51] Language seems powerless to convey what these manifestations of the non-human world might mean, and yet the poem 'May' also infers that language is affected by what is seen at springtime: the uncertainty of 'what can we say' is juxtaposed with powerful imagery that is characteristic of an epiphany. Wallace Stevens suggests that 'the feeling or the insight is that which quickens the words, not the other way around'; therefore, although 'May' does not fully satisfy the expectation of a teleological insight, the 'quicken[ing]' of language in the poem is suggestive of an intense awareness of a new experience.[52]

Andrew Duncan has identified epiphanies as 'intense insights' and although this perception has become a prominent paradigm of epiphany, it is a reductive view in the context of *The Overhaul* and other work by Jamie.[53] Jamie's essay, 'The Woman in the Field', reiterates the idea that an epiphanic

[51] Louise Gairn, 'Nature, Landscape and Rural Life' in *The International Companion to Scottish Poetry*, ed. by Carla Sassi (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2015), p.143; Kathleen Jamie, 'The Dipper', *The Tree House* (Basingstoke: Picador, 2004), p.49.
[52] Wallace Stevens, *Adagia* (1956), in *Strong Words*, ed. by W.N Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p.64.
[53] Duncan, p.38.

moment does not always encompass understanding.[54] Writing of her experience on an archaeological dig as a young woman of seventeen, Jamie recalls working on the site of a Neolithic henge. During a thunderstorm, she is involved in the excavation of a cist and finds that the following winter she is inspired to write a poem about the incident. In an example of a proleptic epiphany, Jamie intentionally invests this past event with new significance by equating the moment with her writing process:

> The opening of the cist under that thunderclap was thrilling, transgressive. So, in its quiet way was writing poems. The weight and heft of a word, the play of sounds, the sense of carefully revealing something authentic, an 'artefact' which didn't always display 'meaning', but which was a true expression of – what? – a self, a consciousness. This was thrilling too.[55]

Jamie suggests that poetry might not always be about a fixed truth but that it can reveal consciousness. This moment is one of astonishment and, in the original sense of the word via the Latin attonāre, strikes with a thunderbolt. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Langbaum describes epiphanies as 'both discovery and the shock of recognition – recognition of the self in the external world'.[56] Jamie's shock, or thunderbolt, comes from a heightened awareness of how words, as something material with 'weight and heft' can reveal the external world to ourselves. Yet in contrast to critical readings of poetry as a revelation of the unconscious, Jamie explains her epiphany as a

[54] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Woman in the Field', *Sightlines* (London: Sort of Books, 2012), p.43.
[55] Jamie, 'The Woman in the Field', p.66.
[56] Langbaum, p.354.

manifestation of what is around her and of herself in the external world. This difference can be seen if we also compare Jamie's episode with that of Oswald's reflection of sawing a fallen birch tree in her essay 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', discussed in the previous chapter:

> it was like a third mind opening, a mind for detail, for thickness, uncanniness, variability – in all places something infinitely distant from myself. I began to want to read poems that could offer an equivalent grace – an encounter with something wholly other. [57]

Oswald's experience, is in the main, one that describes an experience of the mind, an interior awareness. In contrast several poems in *The Overhaul* focus on the significance of the external world. Jamie is often concerned with what is present but not always seen, in other words, the *adēla*, 'those things that exist but cannot be directly perceived'.[58] For example, in 'Springs' from 'Five Tay Sonnets', the force of the Spring tides and winds burst the banks of the Tay and the previously hidden contents of the river are delivered to the town:

> but river –
> what have you left us? Evidence of an inner life, secrets
> of your estuarine sole hawked halfway
>
> up Shore Street, up East and Mid Shore, and arrayed
> in swags all through the swing-park: plastic trash and broken reeds,
> driftwood, bust TVs …
>
> and a salmon

[57] Oswald, 'The Universe in time of rain makes the world alive with noise', p.38
[58] *adēla* (from *a* meaning not and *dēlos* meaning self-evident); Preus, pp.33-4.

dead, flung beneath the see-saw, the crows are onto at once.[59]

The river leaves behind the 'secrets' of its 'estuarine soul': or 'its whatness', in the words of Joyce's protagonist in *Stephen Hero*.[60] Scattered around the streets and the swing-park is the essence of its being: the non-human and human gifts are displayed side by side decorating the village in swags of celebration. The storm has revealed 'evidence' of the Tay's 'inner life' that would otherwise have remained unknown in an echo of Woolf's concept of 'moments of being': privileged instances distinct from 'moments of non-being'.[61] Towards the end of the memoir in which she explores this concept in her writing process, Woolf compares them to 'little corks that mark a sunken net' and the subsequent revelation as 'pull[ing] that net, leaving its contents unsorted, to shore'.[62] Here the contents of the net-like river are deposited around the town also 'unsorted'. Thus, the closing lines of 'Springs' are not revelations of meaning, rather they are manifestations of astonishment: one that presents the *adēla* as a list of items both natural and man-made, echoing Paul de Man's explanation of epiphanies as the *adēla*, revealing what 'could never have ceased to be there'.[63] Epiphany as a 'rediscovery of a permanent presence',[64] rather than

[59] Kathleen Jamie, 'Five Tay Sonnets: 2. Springs', *The Overhaul'*, p.6.
[60] 'This is the moment which I call epiphany […] we recognise that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance.' Joyce, *Stephen Hero,* p.213. See p.18 in this thesis.
[61] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', *Moments of Being,* p.70.
[62] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.135.
[63] de Man, p.5.
[64] de Man, p.5.

Warner's reductive 'finding of pat-profundity',[65] characterises Jamie's epiphanic mode in this poem.

In a further statement about the writing process, Jamie also suggests that writing involves 'mediating between various worlds and bringing messages back and forth between them'.[66] As seen in the preface to this thesis, Margaret Atwood describes a comparable chthonic descent; the poet takes a 'risky trip to the Underworld […] to bring something or someone back from the dead'.[67] What is brought back, she suggests, is either riches or knowledge.[68] Similarly, several of Jamie's poems present a speaker mediating between the non-human and human worlds. Initially, the speaker is immersed in the non-human realm but soon comes to a realisation of the significance of the co-dependence of both. 'Gloaming', from *The Tree House,* captures this idea of negotiation in its evocation of a flight, possibly home, to 'the North'.[69] Using the third person plural Jamie brings us in to land on the runway. First we move 'toward a brink. A wire-thin rim of light', until that 'swells' to reveal the land. In this liminal space, we are in the position now of being able to name the rivers and towns below us. Arnold van Gennep's anthropological studies on rites of passage acknowledges the potential of liminality: a state where we

[65] Warner, 'Implements in their places'.
[66] Kathleen Jamie in *Beyond Identity: New Horizons in Modern Scottish Poetry* ed. by Attila Dósa (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p.142.
[67] Atwood, p.140. See also p.6 of this thesis.
[68] Atwood, p.155.
[69] Kathleen Jamie, 'Gloaming', *The Tree House* (Basingstoke: Picador, 2004), p.20.

'waver between worlds', and this limen, or threshold, reveals potential.[70] As the plane comes to a standstill on the runway 'it's not day, this light we've entered, but day is present at the negotiation': day and night cooperate in the same moment. Rania Maria Rilke, with whom Atwood and Jamie connect,[71] describes a similar negotiation as an 'interchange of our own essence with world-space' and in this exchange of human and non-human worlds the poet 'absorbs' both to reveal both: 'Do you recognise me, air, full of places I once absorbed?'[72] Another poem from *The Tree House*, 'The Whale-watcher' also encapsulates this iteration of an epiphany, one where liminality is the antecedent.[73] The poem shows the speaker both separating herself to 'absorb' the non-human and returning later to the human world restored, or in Wordsworth's phrase 'nourished and invisibly repaired'.[74] The poem begins: 'And when the last road, / gives out, I'll walk –'.[75] Disrupting the sequence of observation, memory and insight common in proleptic epiphany, this poem begins, like 'A Raised Beach', in *medias res*: it places the speaker in the centre of an experience and then propels her to a time in the future. By beginning in

[70] Arnold van Gennep, p.18.
[71] In 'Negotiating with the Dead', Atwood draws on passages from Rilke's *The Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923) and Jamie declares her admiration for his poetry in The Coleridge Lectures 2015, Bristol Festival of Ideas.
[72] Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Second Part: I', *The Sonnets to Orpheus* in *Dunno Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus,* ed. and trans. by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 2009), p.135.
[73] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Whale-watcher', *The Tree House*, p.25.
[74] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.479.
[75] Jamie, 'The Whale-watcher', p.25.

medias res Jamie's poem gives the sense of a mind in the midst of its thought process, much like Nichols' explanation of how 'literary epiphanies […] offer us mind-brains […] in the act of becoming aware of their own activity'.[76] There is a sense of relief that she has reached the edge of human influence and as she walks beyond this threshold the speaker leaps forward to a time when she will immerse herself entirely in the non-human world: she will 'hole-up' in 'some battered caravan'.[77] In this escape from the human world – a 'slipping through the net' – she will pay close attention to the whales, 'quartering', or dividing, the waves with the intensity of her stare, until her eyes 'evaporate'.[78] As the speaker detaches herself from the human world she immerses herself in the non-human world. This immersion involves, in Van Gennep's terms, 'cross[ing] the threshold […] to unite with a new world' and in the process something of her *self* disappears in a personal transformation.[79] However, after having absorbed the whales' movements of 'breach, breath, and dive' in a 'glare' that echoes the epiphanic trope of illumination, she will be able to make her return to the human world and 'deal herself in'; this can be likened to Van Gennep's stage of post-liminal incorporation in which the subject is re-incorporated into society as a new self.[80] In this poem the speaker returns to

[76] Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment*, p.478.
[77] Jamie, 'The Whale-watcher', p.25.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Van Gennep, p.20.
[80] Van Gennep, p.11.

the human world, but her transformation is ambiguous. The simile at the close of the poem compares the movements of the whales to stiches that can mend a hole that is 'almost beyond repair'. By absorbing the sight of the whales, something or someone is, in Wordsworth's term, 'invisibly repaired'.[81] However, the poem leaves this epiphany open-ended: maybe the speaker is restored, maybe us, maybe our relationship with the non-human world, or the division between the worlds, and the significance of the manifestation is not fully revealed.

In the introduction to this thesis, critics such as Warner and Sher were seen to warn against secure and predictable epiphanies. Above all Sher requests poems that 'escape the comfortable trope of epiphany'.[82] 'Hawk and Shadow' from *The Overhaul* is a poem in which epiphany takes on a more ambiguous and surprising character.[83] This poem, like 'The Whale-watcher', focusses on detachment. The hawk's shadow, watched by the speaker, is likened to dead prey, becoming a double or second self—an act which Freudian thinking associates with the uncanny, one that here is also symbolic of death.[84] The hawk seems to grip its doppelganger, its own dead self, in its talons: 'her own dark shape / in her talons like a kill'.[85] Yet as the hawk falls in the air, it detaches from its shadow, which runs on 'like a hare', with the

[81] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.479.
[82] Sher, p.388
[83] Kathleen Jamie, 'Hawk and Shadow', *The Overhaul*, p.15.
[84] Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), pp. 217-256.
[85] Jamie, 'Hawk and Shadow, p.15.

vitality of a living being. In this moment of apparent escape and freedom, the speaker sees herself and current state. There is an ambiguous sense of the speaker's detachment from her soul. All at once she feels 'out of sorts' and 'part unhooked', but with her shadow-self 'on parole' she is also reckless and 'play[ing] fast and loose'. On the one hand her frame of mind demonstrates the concept of the antecedent state that McDonald explains precipitates the psychological epiphanic mode: she is experiencing both 'anxiety' and 'inner turmoil';[86] yet equally 'played fast and loose' describes an elation at being freed from some form of constraint. Victor Turner, in developing the work of Van Gennep, suggests that 'liminality may involve a complex sequence of episodes […] and may also include subversive and ludic episodes'.[87] These episodes, both 'subversive' and 'ludic' (with its meaning of playfulness from L. *ludus*, game), resonate with Jamie's experiences of opening the cist and writing poetry as being 'thrilling' and 'transgressive', seen earlier in this chapter.[88] In 'Hawk and Shadow' the speaker slips away from one part of herself, she is freed to experience in Jamie's words something 'thrilling' and 'transgressive'.[89] Although it may be difficult to maintain sight of both versions of the hawk, the speaker implies that it is her choice to abandon either the hawk or its shadow; however, she is also escaping, never revealing which

[86] McDonald, p.93.
[87] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982), p.27.
[88] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Woman in the Field', *Sightlines*, p.66. See p.108 of this thesis.
[89] Ibid.

she abandons. As the hawk continues to rise in the air, the shadow on the ground, now described as her 'mate' begins to fade. The shadow is soon lost and so too is the hawk, and it is now that the speaker is 'afraid'. Momentarily, the speaker is invigorated by the detachment of the two selves, daring and playful, but ultimately the loss of connection between the self and its mortal shadow induces fear: both parts of the self must co-exist.

In Sonnet XIII from *The Sonnets of Orpheus*, Rilke writes of an interconnectedness that resonates with 'Hawk and Shadow', implying that both death and life reside in the sensory experiences at the root of epiphanic moments:

> Plump apple, smooth banana, melon, peach,
> gooseberry … How all this affluence
> speaks death and life into the mouth …
>
> […]
> Instead of words, discoveries flow out
> from the ripe flesh, astonished to be free.[90]

Rilke considers the everyday experience of eating fruit and how this 'speaks death and life into the mouth'. The speaker both senses [*Ich ahne*] and observes [*Lest*] this clearly in the 'transparent features' of a child 'while he tastes'.[91] In the next line, Mitchell's translation of the poem expresses this is a 'miracle happening' in the mouth. In the original text, the unexplainable nature of the

[90] Rainer Maria Rilke, 'First Part: Sonnet XIII', *The Sonnets of Orpheus* in *Dunno Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus* p.107.
[91] Rilke, 'First Part: Sonnet XIII': 'Alles dieses spricht/Tod und Leben in den Mund', p.107.

experience is foregrounded by the adjective 'namenlos', meaning nameless or unutterable, reminiscent of the paradox of epiphanic experience.[92] This is consolidated in the next line: 'Instead of words, discoveries flow out / from the ripe flesh'.[93] Discoveries and words are two separate entities. There is something almost indescribable in the experience, language is inadequate, and in the final two stanzas Rilke 'dares' us to 'say what "apple" truly is'. Perhaps we can never know what it truly is. Yet Rilke then attempts to describe it:

> This sweetness that feels thick, dark, dense at first;
> then, exquisitely lifted in your taste,
>
> grows clarified, awake and luminous,
> double-meaninged, sunny, earthy, real–:
> Oh knowledge, pleasure–inexhaustible.[94]

The sweetness of the apple leads us to wakefulness and the illumination of an epiphanic moment—like Jamie's speaker in 'Highland Sketch' who attempts to 'rouse' herself to 'greet some weather' and experience a 'late sklent of sunlight to the heart'.[95] Although there is a hint of the heavenly in the diction of Rilke's poem, the moment is '*doppeldeutig*': it has a double-meaning.[96] In the context of the sonnet's opening stanza, this then refers us back to the presence of life and death in the epiphanic moment. The speaker becomes conscious of

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[92] Definitions taken from <http://dictionary.reverso.net/german-english> [accessed 3/11/15]. This portal uses Collins German Dictionaries, 5th edn., 2004.
[93] Rilke writes 'fließen Funde'.
[94] Rilke, 'First Part: Sonnet XIII' in *Dunno Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus* p.107.
[95] Jamie, 'Highland Sketch', p.17.
[96] <http://dictionary.reverso.net/german-english>, [accessed 03/11/15].

the interdependence of life and death in the external world, it is an epiphany, in de Man's terms, that constitutes a 'rediscovery of a permanent presence'.[97]

Jamie's autobiographical essay 'Pathologies' also considers the co-existence of death and life in the external world.[98] While sitting at her dying mother's bedside Jamie had felt death as 'almost an animal presence' in the room—the vitality of a living presence had revealed itself at this moment of death and entered her consciousness. Bewildered, Jamie decides to go in search of some answers and contacts a clinical consultant in Pathology at Ninewells Hospital in Dundee. The remainder of the essay recalls her time spent with Professor Frank Carey examining organs from post-mortems. Like the poet Orpheus, Jamie undertakes a journey to the Underworld of the dead in the pathology labs, which are, she tells us, 'inevitably downstairs, in the lower reaches, the bowels of the building',[99] in contrast to the more traditional elevated sites of epiphany as 'the mountain-top, the island, the tower, the lighthouse, and the ladder or staircase'.[100] During this journey she looks at organs, cells and infections, often describing them as landscapes that are both part of the quotidian and evidence of the 'marvellous' that is being sought at the beginning of *The Overhaul*. Looking at the cells of a cancerous liver under

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[97] de Man, p.5.
[98] Kathleen Jamie, 'Pathologies', *Sightlines* (London: Sort of Books, 2012), pp.24-41.
[99] Jamie, 'Pathologies', *Sightlines*, p.24.
[100] Northrop Frye, 'Theory of Myths' in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (rpt. 1957, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p.203. The idea of elevated sites of epiphany is discussed in greater detail on pp.155 of this thesis, in relation to Berry.

a microscope Jamie describes how they 'were doing as nature intended, unconsciously getting on with tasks quotidian and marvellous', suggesting that nature encompasses the everyday and the astonishing simultaneously.[101] Woolf writes about a comparable state when describing 'how separate moments of being' are 'embedded in many more moments of non-being', or 'a kind of nondescript cotton wool', meaning that a 'great part of every day is not lived consciously', or is overlooked.[102]

Jamie's 'The Spider' portrays a similar thought. Evoking the nursery rhyme of Little Miss Muffett, a spider descends on his thread, making the 'you' of the poem, or us, 'shriek / so prettily'.[103] In antithesis of the Christian meaning of epiphany as a revelation invested with God's presence, the spider explains that he has not come from heaven, but from the walnut tree. Neither does he come with an 'annunciation'; he has no special divine message. Instead he merely hangs like a lump in a piece of fabric, an earthy sounding 'slub', swaying in the 'air's weave': a metaphor which invokes the unseen texture of the atmosphere that the spider creates. Aingeal Clare might view the anthropomorphism used in this poem as an imposition that stresses the 'otherness' of the spider, rather than that 'we are all animals';[104] however, the

[101] Jamie, 'Pathologies', *Sightlines*, p.31.
[102] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.70.
[103] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Spider', *The Overhaul*, p.20.
[104] Aingeal Clare, *Edinburgh Review*; 135, (2013).

closing lines encapsulate an affirmation of co-existence and co-dependence that goes unnoticed:

> – had you never considered
> how the world sustains?
> The ants by day
> clearing, clearing,
> the spiders mending endlessly –

Like de Man's definition of epiphany as 'rediscovery of a permanent presence',[105] Jamie's poem is attentive to what Gilcrest describes as the 'web of interdependent and interanimating entities' – the constant cycle of non-human activity that enables us to live.[106]

Jamie claims that the writers she 'like[s] best are those who attend'.[107] To attend can mean to be present, give care or to pay attention. Poems like 'The Spider' and her non-fiction writing suggest the importance of such an undertaking. In the essay 'Fever', in her prose collection *Findings*, written about her husband's illness,[108] Jamie is troubled but the fact that she doesn't pray for her husband as he lies dangerously ill, Jamie observes how she had:

> noticed, more than noticed, the cobwebs, and the shoaling light, and the way the doctor listened and the tweed fleck of her skirt […] Isn't that a kind of prayer? The care and maintenance of the web of our noticing, the paying heed?'[109]

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[105] de Man, p.5.
[106] Gilcrest, p.38.
[107] Kathleen Jamie in an interview with Kirsty Scott, 'In the nature of things' <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/18/featuresreviews.guardian/review15> p.5, [accessed 10/06/15].
[108] Kathleen Jamie, 'Fever', *Findings* (London: Sort of Books, 2005), p.101.
[109] Jamie, 'Fever', *Findings*, p.109.

In this personal epiphany, again focused on spiders, Jamie understands that the act of paying attention might have a spiritual quality and that it is an important way of being that needs to be maintained. Jamie's poems are meticulous in their attention to the human and non-human worlds. For example, in 'The Whales', the antecedent epiphanic state is not just a period of anxiety but also a period of attentiveness.[110] Attentiveness creates the susceptibility implied by the etymology of epiphany as a fitting manifestation[111] and in the poem this enables the speaker to discover a connection with the non-human world. 'The Whales' is a concise poem in which the speaker yearns for immersion in the non-human world by 'paying heed' but is conditional on the speaker's ability:

> If I could stand the pressures
> if I could make myself strong
>
> I'd dive far under the ocean
> away from these merfolk

Her desire, intensified by the anaphora in these first two lines, is to escape the human world, dive deep into the ocean and 'discover a cave / green and ventricular'. The adjectival form of ventricle implies that the cave is shaped like the chambers found in the heart and the brain, and therefore a site vital for living. Here 'with tremendous patience' she will 'teach' herself 'to listen':

[110] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Whales', *The Overhaul*, p.46.
[111] A full explanation of the etymology of epiphany appears on p.7 of this thesis.

she will hear what the whales hear.[112] By being wholly present in the moment the speaker experiences, in Woolf's words, 'an exceptional moment'.[113] Rilke spoke of the potential of a similar type of immersion when he considered how we look on flowers in Sonnet XIV from the second part of *The Sonnets to Orpheus*:

> If someone were to fall into intimate slumber, and slept
> deeply with Things–: how easily he would come
> to a different day, out of the mutual depth.[114]

He suggests that we could be altered in some way through this act of communion. In the final stanza, Rilke claims it might be possible stay with the flowers, yet the speaker in Jamie's poem knows she cannot remain in this underwater realm as 'it's impossible to breathe', she must be brought back by her 'love' to the human world:

> But oh my love,
> tell me you'd swim by
>
> tell me you'd look out for me
> down there it's impossible to breathe —[115]

As Atwood suggests of writing: 'it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm

[112] Jamie, 'The Whales', p.46.
[113] Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p.71.
[114] Rilke, 'Second Part: Sonnet XIV', *The Sonnets to Orpheus* in *Dunno Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus* p.161.
[115] Jamie, 'The Whales', p.46.

of change'.[116] This appears to be one of the pitfalls of attending so carefully. There is a danger that the poet becomes so engrossed in the detail of the manifestation that nothing else comes of her journey but the detail, and as Warner claims, she begins to 'find pat profundity in the personal and the everyday'.[117]

Clare Pollard's review of *The Overhaul* suggests that some of Jamie's poems have this weakness; 'looking has limits' she declares.[118] Pollard criticises some of the poems (in particular 'The Study' and 'The Roost') for failing to engage our imagination beyond the manifestations they present. 'Moon' is also problematic for this reason.[119] 'Moon' is an intensely realised and anthropomorphic poem in which the moon is imagined as a contrary traveller casting her attention over the objects in the room. But where do her wanderings lead? Towards the end of the poem the voice of the speaker enters the poem to draw a comparison between herself and the moon: '*we're both scarred now'*.[120] In the final stanza her complaint becomes personal: the moon just like her mother is incapable of uttering any 'words of love'. Yet the connection feels contrived, bolted on to the end of a vivid description of the

[116] Atwood, p.160.
[117] Warner, 'Implements in their places'.
[118] Claire Pollard, *Poetry Review,* 103:1, (2013), p.111.
[119] Kathleen Jamie, 'Moon', *The Overhaul*, p.39.
[120] Jamie, 'Moon', p.39.

moon. There is an echo here of Perloff's concern that contemporary lyrics too often follow the paradigm of 'observation—triggering memory—insight'.[121]

In defence of Jamie however, many of her poems transcend this pattern. For example, '"Doing Away"', from 'Five Tay Sonnets', an unsettling poem that enacts a disappearance, presents a distinctive iteration of epiphany.[122] The poem begins with the speaker immersed in her 'daily rituals' and everyday commute along a quiet hillside above the river. She claims she has 'Nowhere to go, nowhere [she'd] rather be / than here, fulfilling [her] daily rituals'. However, the tone of these opening lines is ambiguous. Followed by the obligation to maintain a routine, the repetition of 'nowhere' becomes unconvincing and has an ironic tone that implies a desire to be elsewhere, or in Jamie's words 'slipping through the net'.[123] In addition, the enjambment that foregrounds 'here' on the next line hints at the disappointment of her 'daily rituals'. Further confusion arises in the following lines which question the need to leave this path: 'Why would one want / to absent oneself, when one's commute / is a lonely hillside by-way, high above the river?' A sense of anxiety fills these lines. Then, from her familiar position on the road the speaker describes the firth below:

> like a lovers' bed with the sheets stripped back
>
> baring its sandbanks, its streamy rivulets,

[121] Perloff, 'Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric'.
[122] Kathleen Jamie, '"Doing Away"', 'Five Tay Sonnets', *The Overhaul*, p.9.
[123] An explanation of the origin of this phrase is provided on p.91 of this thesis.

—the whole thing shining
like an Elfland, and all a mere two fields'
stumbling walk away . . .[124]

This simile is closely observed and intensely sensuous: there is nothing banal about the firth. John Burnside suggests that the 'banal is what we make of the quotidian when imagination fails'.[125] This is hardly the case here. When the tide is out, the firth looks like a 'lovers' bed with the sheets stripped back / baring its sandbanks' and the contours of the sandbanks and the 'streamy rivulets' hint at entwined bodies, implying a new awareness of her environment. The verb 'baring', with its meanings of showing, exposing and uncovering is language typical of an epiphanic moment.

Next, though, the poem travels further beyond this simile and its revelation of the firth as something of astonishment in the human world: the firth now becomes an 'Elfland': '– the whole thing shining / like an Elfland, and all a mere two fields' / stumbling walk away …' The poem shifts with this subsequent simile to a fairy-like place and the capitalisation Elfland now gives the firth the sense of being a country in its own right. Again, there is a distinctive doubling effect in this poem. Jamie's speaker imagines escaping into the firth which is described simultaneously as a domestic and fantastical place, recalling discussions in the previous chapter concerning the uncanny,

[124] Kathleen Jamie, '"Doing Away"', p.9.
[125] John Burnside, 'Travelling into the Quotidian: Some Notes on Allison's Funk's 'Heartland' Poems', *Poetry Review*, 95:2 (2005), p.64.

and in particular Freud's concept of *unheimlich* and Cixous' description of that inner foreign country, foreign home […].'[126] The first simile compares the firth to a sensuous but recognisably homely space. This comparison continues across the stanza break and therefore is held in close proximity to the second simile which describes a magical world incongruously within reach, just two fields away. In another turn, the enjambment that foregrounds 'stumbling' draws attention to the potential loss of balance of the speaker. Then as the line peters out in aposiopesis, uncertainty replaces the feeling of possibility established earlier by the adjective 'mere'. This is a 'stumbling' and uncomfortable reaching for an imaginary place within the known landscape, rather than a defined moment of understanding typical of a traditional teleological epiphany. The poem ends mysteriously, the car engine running with no sign of its occupant, and the speaker drifts away in the unpunctuated final two lines. In contrast to Nichols' description of epiphany as a 'buttress against forms of experience and uses of language that seem increasingly uncertain, indefinite and problematic', the poem embraces rather than defends against uncertainty.[127] Whether the speaker escapes to the Elfland of the firth is unclear – her destination is left unnamed; however, her disappearance certainly appears to be a 'slipping through the net', or a 'doing away', as the title suggests, with her existing way of life that hints at the

[126] Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), p.223; Cixous, p.70. See p. 72; p.74 in this thesis.
[127] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.212.

possibility of personal transformation. The firth reveals new awareness, an important element of the epiphanic experience, but unlike traditional epiphanies, the speaker does not disclose its enduring effect. The 'someday' of the speaker's disappearance in this poem is vague and open-ended, much like the speaker's admission in 'Highland Sketch' that she really 'ought to rouse' herself.[128]

'Glamourie' also speaks of an escape in the landscape.[129] In Scots dialect 'glamourie' refers to enchantment and spells, and in its adjectival form describes something which is bewitching or dazzling. The poem begins by conjoining two contradictory states: being found and lost: 'When I found I lost you –'. After discovering her loss, the speaker waits for her companion but then walks on alone, into an ordinary wood. We are told that this is not the 'Wildwood', the capitalisation again suggesting that this would have been a separate other world in its own right, similar to Elfland. Instead, the wood she finds herself lost in is 'just some auld fairmer's shelter belt' protecting a field. Nor is this a locus amoenus; she is drawn to a quotidian place. As she continues to stroll through the wood, her sense of reality is destabilised and soon she doubts her life in the world as she knows it, suggesting that her life is the illusion and that this present moment in 'the wood's good offices' is reality. In this antecedent state, only her 'hosts' can 'touch' or affect her. She

[128] Jamie, '"Doing Away"', p.9; 'Highland Sketch', p.17.
[129] Kathleen Jamie, 'Glamourie', *The Overhaul,* p.42.

describes herself as the guest of the light and the spiders and the ellipsis at the end of this line leaves space for the many other natural elements of the wood that have the power to enchant her. This poem seems to be more than Nichols' epiphany of 'significance' in 'ordinary experience';[130] it is an escape in and rediscovery of ordinary experience. Writing about this poem Jamie explains how it is about 'forgetting and absence',[131] yet the speaker's escape is precipitated by her physical presence in the 'shelter belt' and the heightened awareness it brings. Her delight at this moment in the wood is effusive, she appears to lose track of time, exclaiming her fleeting moment of escape might be extended: '*I might be gone for ages, / maybe seven years!*'[132] Robert Langbaum explains how modern epiphany is always 'physically sensed'[133] and here, as she shouts her exclamation, she jumps across a ditch 'without pausing to think'. The speaker's realisation at the significance of her communion with nature in this ordinary place is embodied in a leap, rather than language; it is a somatic manifestation. When she leaps 'blithe as a girl' she also appears to rediscover her childlike self. In contrast to Warner's dismissal of finding significance in the 'everyday', this poem shows its importance; the source of her epiphanic experience is the bewitching human and non-human world that is both in plain sight and quotidian. Tigges also points out the value of

[130] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.1.
[131] Kathleen Jamie, 'About "Glamourie"' (2008) <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/glamourie> [accessed 11/05/17].
[132] Jamie, 'Glamourie', p.43.
[133] Langbaum, p.341.

'making ourselves aware of the significance of trivial things' and imagines this attentiveness resulting, metaphorically, in 'a dance in the centre of the starry universe'—an epiphany.[134]

The Overhaul closes with a poem that encapsulates Jaimie's epiphanic mode. Returning us to the beach, the site and title of the collection's opening poem, the speaker of 'Materials' converses with her companion, (and us), as they walk along the shoreline:

> See when it all unravels – the entire project
> reduced to threads of moss fleeing a nor' wester;
> d'you ever imagine chasing just one strand, letting it lead you
> to an unsung cleft in a rock, a place you could take to,
> dig yourself in – but what are the chances of that? [135]

This time the escape has become an unravelling and the focus of the poem feels self-reflective: Jamie considers a 'project' that could refer to a poem or another piece of writing. The poem fixes on single threads of moss blown across the beach by the wind, perhaps like lines flying across a page. Attentiveness to 'one strand' guides you to an 'unsung' place: an unacknowledged permanent presence, where like the speaker in 'The Whale-watcher' who 'deal[s] [herself] in,[136] one can immerse oneself in the everyday of the human and non-human world: 'dig [yourself] in'.[137] However, the speaker leaves us in doubt as to whether this state of being can be achieved:

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[134] Tigges, p.35.
[135] Kathleen Jamie, 'Materials', *The Overhaul*, p.50.
[136] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Whale-watcher', *The Tree House*, p.25.
[137] Jamie, 'Materials', p.50.

'but what are the chances of that?' The question is soon answered when our attention is drawn to the birds. Pushed to the right-hand margin of the page, the non-human world is present in our peripheral vision:

> Of the birds,
> few remain all winter; half a dozen waders
> mediate between sea and shore, that space confirmed
> – don't laugh – by your own work.

In these lines the birds wade in the space between sea and beach, the shallows, a space which the speaker tells us is defined by words. Writing occurs in this liminal space, a space that we have seen elsewhere in the thesis closely associated with epiphany. Engaging in liminality, Van Gennep suggests, involves 'unit[ing] with a new world'.[138] Now the poem shifts angle to focus on man-made 'scraps of nylon fishing net' strewn across the beach, recalling the 'frayed / polyprop rope'at the start of the collection. [139] What appears to be rubbish, and might be overlooked, is scavenged by gannets to make their nests. The prolepsis in this stanza then disrupts the immediate moment of the experience and propels us forward to a time when the gannets have gone and the cliff is 'left / wearing naught but a shoddy, bird-knitted vest'.[140] This debris becomes a comforting, homely sight. Although the aforementioned 'Materials' and 'The Beach' are similar in subject matter, this concluding poem is a stark contrast to the collection's first, employing an open form with organic, lengthy

[138] Van Gennep, p.20.
[139] Jamie, 'The Beach', p.3.
[140] Jamie, 'Materials', p.50.

lines instead of clipped tercets.[141] This lineation gives the impression of less authorial control, conveying a sense of being closer to the thoughts of the speaker, and as the poem progresses, her uncertainty about the significance of being attentive is exposed:

> And look at us! Out all day and damn all to show for it.
> Bird-bones, rope-scraps, a cursory sketch – but a bit o' bruck's
> all we need to get us started, all we'll leave behind us when
> we're gone.[142]

The exclamation and first line suggest that this engagement with the natural and man-made world is futile: what she collects is nothing more important than left-overs and a hurried, perhaps superficial sketch—seemingly nothing of worth. This feels like Warner's 'pat-profundity' again, and yet the left-overs (the 'bruck'), the often-overlooked, the *adēla* have a purpose: they are a starting point and a legacy, evidence of the significance of the commonplace in the human and non-human worlds. 'Materials', like other poems discussed in this chapter, is allied to an epiphanic mode that engages with revealing a new awareness of ordinary experience, the left-overs of the human and the non-human worlds.

For the most part, *The Overhaul* is a collection that coalesces around epiphany as a rediscovery of what already exists. Often Jamie's poems are fitting manifestations, or epiphanies, precipitated by attentiveness to, and

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[141] This more open form is used extensively in Jamie's subsequent collection *The Bonniest Companie* (London: Picador, 2015) and particularly in the poem 'Fianuis' (p.38).
[142] Jamie, 'Materials', p.50.

sometimes escape in, the familiar. However, these are not always comfortable or certain experiences – epiphany does not appear on the page as teleological insight. Instead, Jamie's writing in *The Overhaul* embraces the ambiguity of the moment and not knowing — not 'always display "meaning"' but revealing 'a self, a consciousness'.[143] Jamie achieves this through a process of immersion in the non-human world. However, ultimately, her poems remain in the human realm, for as the speaker explains in 'The Whales', 'down there' in the ocean, 'it's impossible to breath —'.[144] In the next chapter, this thesis asks how epiphanies that cross the boundary into the non-human realm are presented on the page.

[143] Jamie, 'The Woman in the Field', *Sightlines,* p.66.
[144] Jamie, 'The Whales', *The Overhaul*, p.46.

Chapter 4: Liz Berry

'a new kind of flight'[1]

In an interview with Jonathan Morley, Liz Berry explains how her debut collection *Black Country* 'couldn't have been written if [she] hadn't moved away [from home] at some point'.[2] Berry talks passionately with Morley about the creative energy generated by the tension of 'wanting to be in a place and wanting to pull away from it and become something new and try a new kind of flight', echoing the feelings of many poets who suggest that moving away from home enables you to see it afresh. Her words recall Royle's description of veering, referred to earlier in this thesis as a process which 'involves a moving body or force' and a 'psychological' move 'away from some goal […] or between one thing and another'.[3] Such a move can create new awareness, an effect characteristic of epiphanic experience. Royle adds that veering 'impels us to think afresh and otherwise about the borders or opposition between interior/exterior or inner/outer'—veering is also transformative.[4]

Paul Batchelor suggests that, 'Like many first collections [*Black Country*] is drawn to moments of declaration and revelation'; however, Berry's poetry,

[1] Jonathan Morley interviewed Liz Berry as part of the Brave New Reads promotion organised by the Norwich Writers' Centre (Cambridge Central Library, 01/07/15) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oD3-jpcHaSE> [accessed 02/06/17].
[2] Ibid.
[3] Royle, p 4.
[4] Royle, p 7.

similar to Jamie's and Oswald's, also challenges the expectations of the traditional epiphanic paradigm.[5] While moments of teleological revelation are sometimes characteristic of Berry's epiphanic mode, this chapter shows how a selection of her poems also enact a much more complex and surprising epiphanic experience, perhaps the 'branching voice' that Sher is keen to encourage in contemporary poetry.[6] Often Berry's poems involve veering or crossing the boundaries between the human and non-human worlds through shape-shifting and flight. When Katherine Angel suggests that Berry's poems operate in 'the uncertain realm between human and animal, trading in the dissolution of the boundary between these',[7] she identifies a feature not dissimilar to Risden's definition of epiphanies in epic poetry that involve 'crossing liminal boundaries'.[8] As discussed in the previous two chapters, *The Overhaul* and *Woods etc.* incorporate poems that go beyond assumed natural limitations; however, this chapter explores poems which dissolve boundaries: the boundary between the human and non-human, the boundary of poetic form and the boundary between vernacular and Standard English. In doing

[5] Paul Batchelor, 'Hide and Seek: New Poetry by Rowan Williams, Liz Berry and Vona Groarke', *New Statesman* (23 January 2015) <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/01/hide-and-seek-new-poetry-rowan-williams-liz-berry-and-vona-groarke> [accessed 11/02/17].
[6] Sher, p.388.
[7] Angel, p.96.
[8] Risden, p.64.

so this chapter presents the poems discussed as a contrast to Sher's perceived 'comfortable trope of epiphany'.[9]

Natalie Sajé uses the word '"gesture" (from Latin "to carry")' to describe the organisation of a poetry collection.[10] She suggests that it is important 'how the book *carries* itself to a reader, and how the reader responds to that gesture'.[11] Whether a reader experiences the poems in a collection in the order they were intended, it is likely that she will read the first poem in a collection, therefore the opening poem of *Black Country* is an important initial 'gesture' to the reader. Berry opens her collection with a 'new kind of flight' that crosses the boundary between human and non-human worlds. The poem 'Bird' announces a transformation from human to animal that becomes an extended metaphor for an adolescent rite of passage, a translation of a psychological epiphanic mode into a literary one, and instantly establishes a touchstone for many of the poems that follow.[12] The poem thus begins with an epiphanic experience which goes beyond Nichols' 'momentary manifestations of ordinary experience', instead presenting an uncanny manifestation in the non-human realm.[13] The reader is asked to make an instant imaginative veer into a metamorphic scene which describes the

[9] Sher, p.388.
[10] Natalie Sajé, *Windows and Doors: A Poet Reads Literary Theory* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), p.157.
[11] Sajé, p.157.
[12] Liz Berry, 'Bird', *Black Country* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014), p.2.
[13] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.1.

speaker's transformation from human to bird, flying over places that symbolise her childhood self: 'Wren's Nest', her 'grandmother waving up from her fode', the infant school'. Both shape-shifting in myth and folklore, and epiphany in its religious context, are associated with divine intervention, and in the first few lines of this poem the transformation resonates with religious terms and imagery:

> When I became a bird, Lord, nothing could not stop me.
>
> The air feathered
> as I knelt
> by my open window for the charm –
> black on gold,
> last star of the dawn.[14]

Although, 'Lord' may be simply a colloquial interjection, it also hints at a divine presence within this moment of transformation, and the use of litotes in the phrase 'nothing could *not* stop me' highlights the fervour she feels for her change. The girl begins her transformation in a state of zeal by an 'open window' kneeling in a prayer-like position, where she is looking at the 'last star of the dawn', which Tigges might describe as a 'potent epiphany-raiser'.[15] This opening locates traditional epiphanic elements, the divine, the star, and 'heightened experience',[16] within a surreal metamorphosis. In this distinctive

[14] Liz Berry, 'Bird', p.2.
[15] Tigges, p.26.
[16] Nichols, p.28.

epiphanic mode, the notion of a traditional religious epiphany is combined with an uncanny morphing which takes her into the non-human realm.

Next, the birdsong of the 'throstles / jenny wrens / jack squalors' surrounds the speaker and her 'heart beat[s] like a wing'. In a mode reminiscent of the Romantics, this experience of the natural world seems to invigorate her heart, echoing Wordsworth's description of the effect of 'spots of time' which have a 'renovating virtue'.[17] However, this traditionally epiphanic moment is followed in the subsequent couplet by a more radical change. Rather than Langbaum's epiphany as a 'recognition of the self in the external world', the speaker goes beyond this moment to one focused on recognition of a new self in a non-human world.[18] Like a snake shedding its skin during moulting, the speaker discards her human outer garments, 'shed[s] her nightdress' and shoes, and becomes another being morphing from human to avian form:

Bared
I found my bones hollowing to slender pipes,
my shoulder blades tufting down.
I spread my flight-greedy arms
to watch my fingers jewelling like ten hummingbirds,

She is metaphorically finding and spreading her wings, transforming from girl to woman. However, her metamorphosis is also represented, in Van Gennep's

[17] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.479.
[18] Langbaum, p.354.

words as an act of ''cross[ing] the threshold […] to unite with a new world'.[19] Similar to Jamie's poems 'The Whale-watcher' and 'The Whales', the speaker is immersed in the non-human world.[20] Here, the speaker, is vulnerable and exposed, as indicated by the isolation of 'Bared', centred on its own line. A similar instance of forming a new shape also appears in Oswald's poem 'A Winged Seed', discussed in Chapter 2.[21] In that anthropomorphic poem a winged seed voices the experience of falling from the tree for germination. At this moment of 'seeking shape', the seed is in a state of crisis: 'bewildered' and 'uniquely no one in particular'. However, this in-between state is one of doubleness: the seed is simultaneously unique and no one. Berry's speaker feels a similar sense of vulnerability and celebration at her transformation. Although 'bared' when she transforms into a bird, the experience of becoming another being is also joyous and romantic. She describes how she discovers her bones, 'spreads' her arms eager for flight ('flight-greedy arms'), and watches her fingers 'jewelling', becoming precious stones. In this epiphanic moment the speaker discovers a new self by crossing the boundary into a realm beyond the everyday.

In Greek mythology, voluntary shape-shifting often symbolizes an escape or liberation, and discovering this new form has a freeing effect on the

[19] Van Gennep, p.20.
[20] Kathleen Jamie, 'The Whale-watcher', *The Tree House* (London: Picador, 2004), p.25; 'The Whales', *The Overhaul* (London: Picador, 2012), p.46. These poems are discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis, p.112; p.121.
[21] Alice Oswald, 'A Winged Seed', *Woods etc.* p.10. See pp.61-63 of this thesis.

speaker that is highlighted by the spacing between the words on the fourth line of this stanza, spreading the line visually and slowing the pace of reading with longer pauses. This type of organic form, in the words of Denise Levertov, 'imitate[s] […] the feeling of an experience'.[22] In this poem Berry uses an open form, rather than a formally restricted one to convey the 'veerings' of this transformative experience.[23] For the final stage of the transformation her lips are 'calcified to a hooked kiss' and set in a loving gesture. But then there is uncanny silence. The moment is interrupted, and like Oswald's use of the word 'pause' in 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', there is a hiatus in the poem.[24] The cue 'silence', reminiscent of a stage direction, is presented as a single-word stanza, holding the poem in stillness, lengthening or delaying the epiphanic experience. In contrast to the criteria of 'momentaneousness' and 'suddenness' in Langbaum's definition of epiphany, the speaker's epiphany in 'Bird' endures beyond the moment.[25] The poem 'Bird' stretches the epiphanic experience over time, complicating the traditional paradigm of a 'momentary' epiphany. Later in the poem, the epiphanic ending is disrupted again. As the speaker spreads her wings over her hometown, a period of distance and time is inserted into the experience. Her flight is described as 'Lunars', hinting at lunar distances (a measure of the

[22] Levertov, 'Notes on Organic Form', p.257.
[23] Veering is used here in that sense that Royle explains as 'an experience or event of difference, of untapped and unpredictable energy'. Royle, p.4.
[24] Oswald, 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', *Woods etc.*, p.27.
[25] Langbaum, p.341.

distance from the moon to the sun, a planet or a fixed star) or lunar years (periods consisting of twelve lunar months). Epiphany in 'Bird' is not a *moment* of great revelation, rather it is stretched over time and distance.

Next the silent gap is overcome by a chorus of larks who, in a further transformation, adopt the voice of the speaker's mother encouraging her to escape, to migrate: '*Tek flight, chick, goo far fer the winter*'. This is the trigger for a further stage in the speaker's metamorphosis and it is here that the nature of her transformation is fully revealed. The speaker is undergoing a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood:

> So I left girlhood behind me like a blue egg
> and stepped off
> from the window ledge.

Here she no longer 'wavers between two worlds' but crosses the limen of the window ledge, leaving behind her the detritus of her other and former self.[26] Similar to the nightdress she sheds like a skin, the egg is an outer protection that she discards as she grows. Stepping off the ledge, or moving away from 'girlhood', feels fraught with danger and yet in the next line she describes how 'light' she was as 'they', the birds, lifted her. Again, the line-breaks and spacing are indicative of Levertov's suggestion that lineation can 'reveal the process of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking'.[27] As the poem moves through the process of thinking and feeling in the speaker's transformation the

[26] Van Gennep, p.18.
[27] Levertov, 'The Function of the Line' in *Poetics: Essays on the Art*, p.273.

lineation signposts these shifts: content and form combine in a way that recalls Kunitz's description of poetry as 'metabolic, metaphoric, metamorphic— / articulating shifts of being, changes / and transfers of energy',[28] translating the psychological epiphany into a literary mode.

Now, having morphed into an avian form in flight, she is both physically and symbolically light. Tigges describes epiphany as 'a dance in the centre of a starry universe'[29] and although in 'Bird' the speaker flies rather than dances, she is moving through the sky in a celebratory fashion. In separating herself from girlhood, she rises above the aptly named place of 'Wren's Nest' on the outskirts of Dudley, thus flying the nest and escaping over the 'edgelands' of her town, over her grandmother's yard and 'out to the coast'.[30] Earlier in this thesis, the escape to 'Elfland' in Jamie's poem '"Doing Away"' was explored in the context of being a movement into an uncannily domestic and fantastical space.[31] Similarly, 'Bird' contains a sense of the unfamiliar in the familiar: a girl is transformed into a bird flying above her home, her 'grandmother waving' from her yard, and the infant school and factory fading as she escapes 'out to the coast'. However, at this point her experience loses its 'jewelled' sheen: in this new flight she becomes 'battered and tuneless'.[32] Her song, unlike that of the birds earlier in the poem, is 'tuneless': it lacks a

[28] Kunitz in *The Wild Braid,* p.105.
[29] Tigges, p.35
[30] Berry, 'Bird', p.2.
[31] See Chapter 3, pp.124-127.
[32] Berry, 'Bird', p.2.

melody or, worse, she produces no song. The epiphanic moment in its traditional sense of a sudden revelation has stalled and is unstable — secure meaning is not achieved. The previous epiphanic moments, when her 'heart beat like a wing', when she 'found' her new shape and flew 'light' over her hometown, were only provisional. Now her transformation seems to lack clarity and also becomes a drawn-out process of acute suffering: she is 'battered', 'turned inside out' and 'there wasn't one small part of [her] body didn't bawl' in pain.[33]

However, the final section of the poem, seems to reach a moment of epiphany in the traditional sense:

> Until I felt it at last the rush of squall thrilling my wing
> and I knew my voice

New knowledge is gained in the form of a physically sensed epiphany as the speaker declares she 'felt it'. Langbaum claims that a somatic reaction is what distinguishes epiphanies from visions which are 'not physically sensed'.[34] The speaker knows her voice when she feels a strong wind in her avian body. 'Squall', with its meaning both of a violent wind and a loud cry, becomes the physical manifestation of the epiphany; her transformation becomes tangible and she is conscious of the effect in her body. Similar to Jamie's essay, 'The Woman in the Field', which describes the 'thrill' of opening a cist and the

[33] Berry, Bird', p.2.
[34] Langbaum, p.341.

'weight and heft of a word',[35] the speaker in 'Bird' is aware of the externality of the epiphanic experience, its 'rush', its physical force.

In one sense this moment of concrete expression appears to be traditionally epiphanic: the phrase 'at last' suggests that the epiphany has been achieved and the speaker gains knowledge of her voice. However, the paradigm is subverted again in the closing lines:

> Until I felt it at last the rush of squall thrilling my wing
> and I knew my voice
> was no longer words but song black upon black.
> I raised my throat to the wind
> and this is what I sang …[36]

The speaker has come to understand that her voice is more than words, more than spoken or written language, it is also 'song'. Song has the meaning of a combination of words and music, the characteristic sound made by the birds and poetry. Through the process of transformation, the speaker has come to understand that her voice is more than language, but its meaning is still obscured. As we have seen earlier, Wordsworth hints at the inadequacy of language to recreate the epiphanic experience when he tells us that it requires 'Colours and words that are unknown to man'.[37] In Berry's poem, however, the speaker tries to convey the essence of her song by describing it as a colour rather than sound: 'black upon black'. Berry's use of synaesthesia creates an

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[35] Jamie, 'The Woman in the Field', *Sightlines*, p.66. See p.108 of this thesis.
[36] Berry, 'Bird', p.2.
[37] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.481.

uncanny feeling of a colour being unexpectedly heard while also being un-seeable and hidden. Her song is alluringly mysterious, perhaps a secret, layered and suggestive of depth rather than surface. Nor can her song immediately be understood. Even when she raises her voice to sing the reader is left with the question of 'what' she sang. Both Jamie and Oswald write about birdsong in their collections, particularly the songs of blackbirds. In Jamie's poem 'May' and Oswald's poem 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', the blackbirds' songs can never be fully known:

> and a blackbird telling us
> what he thinks to it, telling us
> what he thinks …[38]

and

> I saw a blackbird
> mouth to the glow of the hour in hieroglyphics …[39]

The aposiopesis in all three poems ('Bird', 'May', 'Marginalia […]') breaks the completion of the epiphanic moment, leaving them open and unfinished, in a contrast to Hejinian's concern over the predominance of the 'coercive epiphanic mode'.[40] Royle's description of the potential that language has 'to slip and slide and turn […] and veer, even' resonates with Berry's approach and poems by Oswald and Jamie discussed earlier in this thesis; all three poets

[38] Jamie, 'May', *The Overhaul*, p.7.
[39] Oswald, 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', *Woods etc.*, p.27.
[40] Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure'.

share to an extent this fluidity in meaning and form.[41] Uncertainty in 'Bird' is underscored throughout by the open form of the poem, its indented lines and spacing within lines. As Johnson suggests, if 'language is left open, if spaces are left between word meaning, the moment can occur',[42] and in this respect epiphany in Berry's poem 'Bird' is a participatory and evolving process of opening and expansive meaning rather than a closed, controlled and sudden moment of revelation.

Although this poem is focused on a rite of passage from 'girlhood' to womanhood, a transformative event, our attention as readers remains in the non-human world. Unlike Jamie's speaker in 'The Whale-watcher' who is 'willing again / to deal [herself] in', or the speaker in 'The Whales' who knows 'down there [under the ocean] it's impossible to breathe',[43] once this poem crosses the boundary into the non-human world the speaker does not re-integrate into the human world of ordinary experience. The poem remains in the realm of an uncanny and uncertain metamorphosis from girl to bird, and thus becomes a far more complex and adventurous iteration of epiphany than the reductive view of the traditional paradigm. Berry's poem subverts the traditional elements of the quotidian, suddenness, revelation and meaning,

[41] Royle, p.35.
[42] Johnson, p.182-3.
[43] Jamie, 'The Whale-watcher', *The Tree House* p.25; 'The Whales', *The Overhaul*, p.46.

creating an epiphany that can be differentiated from Sher's notion of epiphany as a 'comfortable trope'.[44]

'The First Path' appears initially to work in a similar way to 'Bird'.[45] Its open form and the adoption of non-human characteristics by the speaker connects the two poems. Berry has explained how 'The First Path' is an ekphrastic poem inspired by a series of paintings by George Shaw: 'Scenes from the Passion', and a night 'spent trying to rescue a little Staffie bitch who had been abandoned and locked in the allotments in the falling snow'.[46] Berry describes being drawn to the 'liminal places' in Shaw's paintings of Tile Hill housing estate in Coventry, which reminds her of the Black Country. Her title echoes those of some of the paintings in the series: 'The Path Out', 'The Path in the Middle of the Woods', 'The Path on the Edge', 'The Path In', and 'The Path to the Path'. Shaw's paintings, however, are in Berry's description, 'unpeopled'.[47] They are also devoid of animals. One of the most well-known ekphrastic poems, Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo', is a transformative experience that closes with a blunt epiphany: 'You must change your life'.[48] However, Berry's ekphrastic approach in 'The First Path' is to reveal what is

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[44] Sher, p.388.
[45] Liz Berry, 'The First Path', *Black Country*, p.18.
[46] Liz Berry, 'On underpasses, edgelands, woods and the "utterly rapturous"' <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/publications-section/the-poetry-review/behind-the-poem/liz-berry> [accessed 11/01/17].
[47] Berry, 'On underpasses, edgelands, woods and the "utterly rapturous"'.
[48] Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' <https://www.poets.org/poetorg/poem/archaic-torso-apollo> [accessed 05/06/17].

not there in the artwork by inserting her speaker's personal experience into the scene. Berry explains how she wanted the poem, like Shaw's work, to 'make the ordinary and uncelebrated into something beautiful and redemptive'.[49]

Similar to 'Bird' this poem begins with a declaration that the speaker has crossed over into the non-human realm:

> When you found me there was nothing beautiful about me.
> I wasn't even human
> just a mongrel
> kicked out into the snow on Maundy Thursday
> when all the world was sorrow[50]

In contrast to 'Bird', this transformation takes on a diminished form, rather than that of the elevated and revered bird; the speaker reflects on a time that she compares to becoming a mongrel: a dog of mixed or unknown breeding, less valued by some. The speaker belittles her self-description further with the qualification of 'just' and the lower indented line contrasts her mongrel form with the human form above it, perhaps drawing attention to this inferiority. The sense of despair is heightened when we see the mongrel 'kicked out into the snow' and rejected during the Christian celebration of Easter. Maundy Thursday commemorates the Last Supper and takes its name from the commandment (L. *mandatum*) given by Jesus to his disciples: 'And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must

[49] Berry, 'On underpasses, edgelands, woods and the "utterly rapturous"'.
[50] Berry, 'The First Path', p.18.

love one another'.[51] Here, love seems to have been withdrawn from the speaker who continues to denigrate herself: 'I was filth', and runs away 'from God-knows-what'. As her metamorphosis develops she describes haunches covered in bruises and a 'ruin' of a coat, 'ruin' suggesting that she has been corrupted, and following her through the town we see both animals and children shy away from her: the horses bow down their heads toward the 'donkey-bite' (small patch of wasteland) and a 'boy in the bus shelter' turns to catch a snowflake on his tongue as if he were receiving a 'wafer' at Holy Communion. The juxtaposition of religious imagery highlights the shame that she speaks of in the subsequent stanza:

> Lord help me
> I did things I would once
> have been ashamed of.

Here the phrase 'would once' at the end of the line marks this moment as a proleptic epiphany in which, Nichols claims, 'the mind, in response to a present pre-disposition, transforms a past experience to produce a new sense of significance'.[52] Thus, in describing her past behaviour, the speaker reveals that she is no longer ashamed of her actions, just as earlier she dismisses the source of her 'ruin' as 'God-knows-what', suggesting it had lost its significance. Like 'Bird', a divine presence pervades this poem and is suggestive of the religious origins of epiphanic experience. However, as the

[51] John 13:34
[52] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.74.

poem progresses her transformation takes on a more visceral tone. The mongrel is described as a wounded animal dragging itself away, leaving 'bloodied paw prints' until she 'sank into the midden / behind the factory'. When she sinks into the refuse heap she appears to be beyond redemption and a 'wreath of ash' settles on her, confirming her metaphorical death.

At this point the poem becomes predictable and less adventurous in its epiphany than 'Bird'. The second half of the poem is an archetypal rescue and the speaker is saved from herself by one who 'dared follow' her into the edgelands of the town:

> You touched me then,
> when I was nothing but dirt,
> took off your glove and laid your palm upon my throat,
> slipped the loop of the rope,
> lifted me
> into your arms and carried me home
> along the first path.

A healing hand untethers and frees the speaker. At the end of this stanza, isolated by being indented towards the right margin, is 'the first path' of the poem's title. Its positioning and the repetition of the title foreground its significance and could allude to a line in Canto XII of Byron's *Don Juan*, 'Adversity is the first path to truth',[53] suggesting that her suffering was necessary in order for her to find meaning. This seems particularly resonant

[53] Lord Byron, *Don Juan* <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/21700/21700-h/21700-h.htm> [accessed 05/06/17].

when the speaker's rescue is hailed with a chorus of 'alleluia[s]' from the foxes on the bank and she sees a reflection of herself in her rescuer's eyes as a bride:

> The blizzard tumbled upon us like confetti
> and I, little bitch, blue bruise,
> saw myself in your eyes:
> a bride.[54]

The conventional wedding celebration signals that the fairy-tale is complete and adversity has been overcome: the speaker transforms from mongrel to bride and her future resolved in a 'happy ever after'.

This poem would seem to confirm Hejinian's concern about the 'coercive epiphanic mode'[55] and Sher's plea for something beyond the 'comfortable trope'[56] of epiphany. It follows a well-used paradigm; yet there are elements of the poem which save it from what Carol Rumens might describe as 'the sort of poem that wholly relies on an epiphany, the celebration of the wonderful moment'.[57] 'The First Path' is not an epiphany based in the revered non-human world. Unlike Wordsworth's epiphanies, which occur away from the city, in a natural environment this is a visceral moment of significance in an urban, liminal landscape. The speaker's therianthropic form combines the human and the animal, but not within the realm of fantasy or myth; this uncanny metamorphosis occurs in a quotidian urban landscape.

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[54] Berry, 'The First Path', p.18.
[55] Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure' (1985).
[56] Sher, p.388.
[57] Carol Rumens, 'Poem of the Week: Showing Me by Sam Gardiner' <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/apr/04/showing-me-sam-gardiner-poem> [accessed 03/05/16].

Although by the close of the poem the speaker returns to the human world as a bride, in Van Gennep's term, she appears to 'unite [herself] with a new world',[58] that of the non-human. Even at the moment of her re-entry to human society she has not yet shed her mongrel form; her reflection in her rescuer's eyes is of a bride but still 'a little bitch'. She sees herself as both animal and human.

During the Birmingham Literature Festival in 2016, Berry is keen to point out that she is 'fascinated' by sensuality in 'its broadest sense', not in the sense of 'candles and the romantic moment' but in the way that our senses are sharpened, revealing the animal within us, or in Berry's words our 'less tidy selves'.[59] Jamie's poem 'Hawk and Shadow' also considers the animal within the human. As the speaker in that poem watches the flight of a hawk she equates her sense of being with the split between the bird and its shadow:

> Being out of sorts
> with my so-called soul,
> part unhooked hawk,
> part shadow on parole[60]

This experience, though, is one of freedom as she 'played fast and loose'. The speaker relishes the escape, not unlike the speaker in another of Jamie's poems, the previously discussed '"Doing Away"', which compares the firth to

[58] Van Gennep, p.20.
[59] Liz Berry in conversation at Birmingham Literature Festival (11/10/16) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFc0ytmRVGY> [accessed 02/06/17].
[60] Jamie, 'Hawk and Shadow', *The Overhaul*, p.15.

an Elfland and 'a lovers' bed with the sheets stripped back / baring its sandbanks, its streamy rivulets'.[61] Sensuality is prominent in these moments. Talking about a poem in progress in 2015, Berry also suggests 'we feel closer to our animal selves' during 'sensual moments, or intensely physical moments like sex, or when we're in pain, when we have children, when we feel afraid'.[62] Berry's explanation resonates with the psychological characteristics of epiphany, explained by McDonald, of an antecedent state ('periods of anxiety, depression, and inner turmoil' which precede the epiphany), and of subsequent insight ('an acute awareness of something new').[63]

'The Silver Birch', another ekphrastic poem inspired by Shaw's work, also focuses on sensuality and describes sexual experience:

> Let me tell you about the sex I knew
> before sex
>
> in the beginning when I was a creature
> when I took the bit of your hair
> between my teeth
> and pushed your face to the silver birch
> while you whimpered
> at the fur of me[64]

In these first lines the speaker is caught between a time of knowing and not knowing, between adolescence and adulthood, looking back on her sexual encounters, indicated throughout the poem by the temporal connective

[61] Jamie, '"Doing Away"', *The Overhaul*, p.15.
[62] Liz Berry interviewed by Lily Blackwell (August 2015)
< http://www.praccrit.com/editions/edition-four/> [accessed 06/06/17].
[63] McDonald, p.93.
[64] Liz Berry, 'The Silver Birch', *Black Country*, p.24.

'when'. This jarring paradox of 'sex / before sex' spreads out over the first two lines, mirroring the open form used in both 'Bird' and 'The First Path'. As we have seen earlier, Levertov explains how organic form in poetry can 'imitate […] the feeling of an experience, its emotional tone, its texture'.[65] In this poem open form is used to translate the psychological mode of the epiphanic experience into a literary mode. The effect of lengthening the breath here is to delay the contradiction of 'before sex', isolating it on a separate line closer to the right-hand margin. This dissonance is unsettling. The poem continues with the same feeling in the subsequent line: 'in the beginning'. This reassuringly familiar phrase carries religious connotations of the creation myth;[66] however, the slight hesitation created by the space inserted in the line is followed by a disconcerting metamorphosis: the speaker is a creature covered in fur. Next the speaker reveals the animal inside herself in a violent, humiliating sexual encounter where she is the instigator. This visceral moment is a stark example of Heaney's suggestion that poetry is 'revelation of the self to the self'.[67] The speaker looks back on this time with what seems to be nostalgia: 'yes those days', and this refrain is repeated later in the poem with slight variations ('days pale as the silver birch', 'days days wet as cuckoo spit') as if we are catching the speaker in the act of remembering.

[65] Levertov, 'Notes on Organic Form', p.257.
[66] Genesis 1:1.
[67] Seamus Heaney, '*from* Feeling into Words' in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, p.14.

Earlier in this thesis, Woolf's theory of writing was discussed in relation to the form of Oswald's poem 'Field'; here, a similar comparison could be made with 'The Silver Birch'. Woolf's contention that all writing should 'record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall' is an apt description of Berry's approach in this poem.[68] More specifically, Nichols describes epiphanies as 'mind-brains in the act of becoming aware of their own activity'.[69] The spaces that Berry places between words in this poem, her use of line-breaks and open form highlight the speaker's awareness of the disconcerting nature of the epiphanic experience.

This poem is an uncomfortable epiphany and in the next stanza liminality and doubling intensify this unsettling aspect of the epiphanic experience:

> when I was neither girl or boy
> but my body was a sheaf
> of unwritten-upon paper
> now folding unfolding
> origaming new
>
> days pale as the silver birch[70]

Here the speaker of the poem seems to shed her animal form and becomes human again, but of indeterminate gender. In this liminal state her identity is unstable: an ongoing process of forming and un-forming, and of fluidity

[68] Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series*, p.150.
[69] Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment,* p.478.
[70] Berry, 'The Silver Birch', p.24.

unrestricted by gender expectations. First the speaker's body is transformed from a flat and blank sheaf of paper into a three-dimensional sculpture by folding, and then returned to flatness by unfolding. This metaphor compares the development of her identity to origami that can be made and remade, emphasising the potential and instability of sexuality. Liminality is also present in Oswald's and Jamie's collections. Rather than the elevated 'points of epiphany' identified by Frye,[71] thresholds become sites of transformative experiences, for example Oswald's 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening' begins on the threshold of the 'here/not here' on the ground floor of a house and Jamie's 'Materials' occurs in the space 'between sea and shore'.[72] Most often these thresholds are earthly. In contrast, Frye's essay 'Theory of Myth' suggests that in 'poetic symbolism' the 'point of epiphany' is represented most commonly by 'the mountain-top, the island, the lighthouse, and the ladder or staircase'; this is, he suggests, due to the 'original connection between heaven or the sun and earth'.[73] Frye's explanation draws on the religious context of epiphany as the 'manifestation or appearance of some divine or superhuman being'[74] and he continues by suggesting that the mountain-top 'just under the moon, the lowest heavenly body' has been the 'natural place for the point of

[71] Frye, p.203. Frye's explanation is also referred to on p.118 of this thesis.
[72] Oswald, 'Marginalia at the Edge of the Evening', *Woods etc.*, p.27; Jamie, 'Materials', *The Overhaul*, p.50.
[73] Northrop Frye, p.203.
[74] *Oxford English Dictionary*, III, p.333.

the epiphany'.[75] In contrast the natural point of epiphany in Berry's poem is associated with the speaker's bodily connection with earthly sites — 'the silver birch', 'dens and copses', 'unwritten-upon paper', 'the pond', 'the woods'. By the end of the poem, at the point of epiphany, the speaker is at her closest to the earth, laying on the ground, poppies bending down towards her:

> when I lay skin-bare in the field
> each insect jack-in-the-hedge
> every bowing poppy touching me[76]

The earthly limen becomes in all these poems, a place and an antecedent epiphanic state where the speaker experiences uncertainty but also potential.

In the middle section of 'The Silver Birch' the significance of this transformative experience intensifies:

> when sex was a pebble thrown
> into the pond of me
> rippling out

In the pond metaphor, the speaker becomes recipient rather than instigator, sex disturbing her calm surface in ripples that radiate outwards, and in the spacing of the lines towards the right-hand margin the experience seems liberating, 'incorporat[ing] and reveal[ing] the *process* of thinking/feeling, feeling/thinking' that Levertov suggests is indicative of organic form.[77] The energy of this sexual moment is sustained in the subsequent stanza:

> when I held your fingers in my mouth

[75] Frye, p.204.
[76] Berry, 'The Silver Birch', p.24.
[77] Levertov, 'The Function of the Line', p.273.

as the woods hummed electric with sensation
now they sang now

When the speaker retakes her position as instigator, the surrounding woods reflect her elation and heightened sensuousness and, as if invested with human attributes, encourage her. 'The Silver Birch', consistent with other proleptic epiphanies, looks back at a time past to see it anew. The temporal connective 'then' in the next stanza emphasises this characteristic of the epiphanic experience. The speaker tells us how 'everything was sex then' but reflects on the fact that at the time she was unable to name it as such. Instead she defines sex by two images that remain with her from the time: 'the scar upon your shoulder / an arrow of light through the beeches'.

At the close of poem the speaker describes her vulnerability. Like the speaker in 'Bird' who finds her avian form when she is 'Bared', the speaker in 'The Silver Birch' experiences a somatic connection with the non-human world when she lies naked in a field:

when I lay skin-bare in the field
each insect jack-in-the-hedge
every bowing poppy touching me

oh my body was a meadow then
and you could lie in me forever
and still not be done

Echoing Wordsworth's recollections of childhood, the speaker acknowledges the significance of these adolescence sexual experiences and the awareness of what has been lost in adulthood. By foregrounding the adverb 'then' at the

end of the first line in the closing tercet, Berry emphasises that the speaker has gained new awareness of past experience, using Nichols' terminology she is experiencing a proleptic epiphany.[78] Although this is a teleological epiphany, perhaps similar to Hejinian's 'coercive' mode where the poet controls meaning, the way that this epiphany is presented on the page calls into question the disapproval that some critics, referred to in the introduction of this thesis, have directed at this mode of writing.[79]

A more open form could also be said to be particularly compatible with translating an adelonic epiphany to the page; an adelonic epiphany being in Nichols' terms 'a non-perceptual […] manifestation produced immediately by a powerful perceptual experience'.[80] 'In the Steam Room'[81] presents an adelonic epiphany that illustrates how form can be used to record, in Levertov's words, 'movement of perception':[82]

> Here any body
> might give you pleasure:
> feet, shoulders, stomachs jewelled with veins
> are sexless
> in the fug
>
> which softens muscles to plasticine, slickens
> freckled city skin,
> liquefies flesh
> until shapes shift,
> and we are all vapour

[78] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.74.
[79] See Chapter 1, pp.32-38.
[80] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.75.
[81] Liz Berry, 'In the Steam Room', *Black Country*, p.41.
[82] Levertov, 'Notes on Organic Form', p.257.

This poem is an intense manifestation of 'vapour' as it moves around, over and into bodies in a steam room. The spacing within the lines indicate longer or shorter breaths between perceptions, mimicking the weaving progress of the steam and perceptions coming in and out of focus at different times in the poem and in different positions on the page. In this way Berry's poem seems to adhere to Olson's 'principle' of projective verse, borrowed from Robert Creeley: 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT'.[83] The spacing in between words is also significant in the opening line. 'Any body' is clearly distinguished from 'anybody' to emphasise the physical presence of the discrete human bodies in the steam room that could 'give pleasure'.

Again, this poem focuses on Berry's idea of our 'less tidy selves', exposing what might otherwise remain unspoken.[84] Individual body parts are undifferentiated by gender: they are 'sexless' and Berry uses synecdoche to represent the complete bodies. Although the adjective 'sexless' could suggest a lack of sexual desire, in the context of this poem and its evocation of the steam caressing individual bodies, this reading seems incongruous. The vapour that fills the steam room is described as 'fug', and in comparison, to the sibilance of 'steam', this creates an earthy tone. The 'fug' begins to

[83] Charles Olsen, 'Projective Verse' (published in *Poetry New York*, 1950) in *A Charles Olsen Reader* ed. by Ralph Maud (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), p.40. Uppercase is as it appears in the text.

[84] Liz Berry in conversation at Birmingham Literature Festival, 11/10/16.

transform some bodies in the steam room into vapour, including that of the speaker, included by the pronoun 'we'. This uncanny metamorphosis disperses their corporeal shapes into ghostly 'boundary-less' apparitions. They are freed from the limitations of solid entities, able to caress the bodies of others as vapour: 'nuzzling the neck / of the fat man'. Through these perceptions of the vapour that circulate around the steam room, Berry reveals inner sexual desires, such as 'easing beneath the breasts of the beautiful girl.' Her poem is epiphanic in the way that Shelley's essay 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821) claims that poetry 'purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being'.[85] As the poem progresses the tone becomes even more visceral:

> every pore an invitation
> every mouth, ear,
> nostril, arsehole, rich anemoned seabed of cunt
> a place for joy

In this stanza the language intensifies, becoming cruder. Everything seems to be unravelling, even individual cells are breaking down: 'loosening and yielding in the heat / slackening'. Form continues to reveal content as the cells and the poem move towards even greater diffusion, to the moment before atoms combined to create human form. Hilda Morely explains how organic form 'molds its phrasing and spacing to conform to the pressures of the poetic

[85] Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821).

content'.[86] Therefore, as the poem sinks 'deeper' into the pleasure of this ultimate moment the lines also sink down the page:

into pleasure
deeper
then deeper

These stepped lines descend towards the instant of pre-creation: 'to that bodiless moment / when atoms met.' This resembles the void referred to as an example of the *adēla* defined throughout this thesis as 'those things that exist but cannot be directly perceived, only demonstrated on the basis of observation—for example, the void'.[87] The poem exposes the regression of the body from its completed physical form in the opening line to its moment of conception when 'life gasped / *I'm coming, I'm coming* / in the darkness'. The metaphor of the orgasm in these closing lines is evident: the poem reaches its climax, linking intense sexual excitement with the creation of the universe. Life speaks, announcing not that is has arrived but that it is on its way. The poem has moved a great distance: from perceptions about bodies in the steam room to a perception of creation; from microcosm to macrocosm. This is an epiphany in which an ordinary moment has been, in Nichols' words, 'rendered remarkable', a new awareness of a commonplace activity has been revealed.[88]

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[86] Hilda Morely, 'Organic Form' in *An Exaltation of Forms: Contemporary Poets Celebrate the Diversity of Their Art* ed. by Anne Finch and Katherine Varnes (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p.325.
[87] Preus, pp.33-4.
[88] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.28.

Other poems in this collection use the vernacular, the language spoken by those who live in the eponymous Black Country, to translate the ordinary into something celebratory. The language of the Black Country is prominent in this collection with many poems integrating the Black Country dialect with standard English, often foot-noting their translations and enriching the experience for the reader.[89] Berry speaks often in interviews about how much she treasures accent and dialect, describing these elements of language as her 'own Staffordshire hoard',[90] and characterising this language as a 'discovery' of something 'beautiful […] we'd been hiding away'.[91] Berry's description resonates with the words of de Man's definition of an epiphany as a 'rediscovery of a permanent presence', and in using the vernacular her work 'unveils what, by definition could not have ceased to be there'.[92] Berry's use of a language she recognises as marginal and hidden is another characteristic of her epiphanic mode.

[89] Referring to the influence of Jamie in her work, Berry explains how the vernacular is the 'ordinary used in a different context'. Jamie's collection *The Overhaul* resonates with the language of her Scottish home and includes three poems in Scottish dialect: 'Tae the Fates' and 'Hauf o' Life' (which are translations of Holderlin) and 'The Widden Bird'. Like Berry, Jamie also enriches the landscape of her poems with carefully positioned dialect words. In 'The Dash' the 'breeze course[s] from the same airt' (the same direction), in 'Ospreys' the birds face a 'teuchit' storm to 'redd up [their] cradle' (prepare and tidy up their nest) and in 'The Bridge' the reader hears the voices of street sellers and a children's skipping song: '*Caller herrin'! Ony rags! On the mountain'.*

[90] Liz Berry in *The Author*, CXXVI:4 (London: Society of Authors, 2015), p.127.

[91] Liz Berry in conversation at Birmingham Literature Festival (11/10/16).

[92] de Man, p.5.

In 'Sow', Berry uses the vernacular in a poem seemingly about a subversive pig.[93] The poem again dissolves the boundary between human and non-human realms and defies gender expectations. Before reading 'Sow' at the Birmingham Literature Festival, Berry explained its origins in witnessing a young girl weighing herself on scales at the swimming baths.[94] Berry reported how, in an exclamation of self-loathing, the girl cries out 'you fat pig!' Consequently, Berry tells the audience she set out to write a poem that would transform this girl into something 'naughty and rebellious', but it is the way she expresses this rebellion that is important in the context of this thesis. We have already seen in Chapter 1 that literary critics and writers, other than de Man, emphasise epiphany's role in removing 'the film of familiarity' and unveiling what has become obscured[95] and this occurs from the first stanza of 'Sow'. The eponymous sow uses Black Country vernacular to defy the expectations established by Standard English in Eliza Sell's *Etiquette for Ladies*. The epigraph stipulates that the correct footwear for 'a young lady' should be 'dainty' and that through wearing this type of footwear she will become an 'altogether more beautiful creature'. In a voice which combines the Black Country accent, dialect and colloquialisms, the sow confronts these assumptions about beauty. Proudly, she declares:

Trottering down the oss road in me new hooves

[93] Liz Berry, 'Sow', *Black Country,* pp.26-7.
[94] Liz Berry in conversation at Birmingham Literature Festival, 11/10/16.
[95] Shelley 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821).

> I'm farmyardy sweet, fresh from the filth
> of straw an swill, the trembly-leg sniff
> of the slaughter wagon. A guzzler, gilt.[96]

Here, Berry plays with meaning and sound in the voice of the sow: the verb 'trottering' is not too dissimilar, on the eye and in the ear, to 'teetering' or 'tottering'—verbs associated with women walking unsteadily in high-heeled shoes. Also 'new hooves' introduces, through inferred rhyme, an image of 'new shoes'. This linguistic playfulness in the opening line is a celebration of the sow and the vernacular. The language used by the sow about smell is also creative and lively: she describes herself as 'farmyardy sweet', using a neologism to create a new conception of the smell of the farm yard. In the next line she describes the smell of death with a metaphorical compound expression: 'trembly-leg sniff / of the slaughter wagon.' This is followed by a description of the sow highlighted by alliteration: she is 'A guzzler, gilt'. The first word of this pair evokes the sow greedily devouring her food; however, the next word is more ambiguous. Gilt is gold, or a young female pig (from Old Norse), as well as being a homophone of guilt. This word carries all three meanings. Berry's use of the vernacular and word play removes the 'film of familiarity'[97] enabling us to see different versions of the sow and what it means to be a woman, in a language that is often marginalised, much like the

[96] Berry, 'Sow', p.26.
[97] Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821).

sow/woman herself. The poem challenges the expectations placed on a woman and language when the final line of the stanza revels in the sexuality of the sow: 'Root yer tongue beneath / me frock an' gulp the brute stench of the sty.' The final stanza of the poem combines accent, dialect and colloquialisms in a striking manifestation of the speaker's triumph over those who have dared to 'scupper' her or tip her over. These men and women ('the fancy-arse bints') will no longer be able to overwhelm her. She has broken down the barriers and is now gleefully 'out of [her] mind wi' grunting pleasure', sticking up two fingers of defiance at the self-righteous and prudish who are represented by the cockerel 'prissy an' crowing on 'is high church spire'.

The vernacular as a mode in contemporary poetry, like epiphany, and anthropomorphism, as discussed in the introduction, can be negatively received by some critics. Such an emphasis on place and dialect sometimes raises accusations of a limiting regionalism and nostalgia; however, Berry uses dialect judiciously, playfully and viscerally, to reveal a hidden language. Often this involves connecting dialect to the landscape, the people and its language in a symbiotic relationship. Even when writing about the suppression of her grandmother's Black Country tongue by 'hours of elocution' and 'the teacher's rule across [her] legs' in 'Homing', there's an evocative sense of the granddaughter's understanding of the connection between language, place and the body. Her grandmother's dialect is not

something she just wants to try on for size, she wants to consume the words so that they become part of her being:

> *bibble, fettle, tay, wum*
> vowels ferrous as nails, consonants
>
> you could lick the coal from.
> I wanted to swallow them all: the pits,
> railways, factories, thunking and clanging
> the night shift, the red-brick
> back to back you were born in[98]

The vowels and the consonants of the Black Country contain the landscape they describe and her grandmother, and the speaker wants to take both these inside herself. Berry's collection demonstrates the potential of the vernacular to create her own version of home and she describes how discovering that the 'language was thrilling: sometimes tough and muscular […] other times soft and delicate'.[99] The adjective 'thrilling' recalls Jamie's epiphanic moment at the cist;[100] and for Berry words also have a corporal quality. Where Jamie describes words that have 'weight and heft',[101] Berry depicts the vernacular as having 'muscles', strength and tenderness. Whichever tone the vernacular takes, Berry sees the potential of the language of the Black Country as a 'shape shifting' and evolving entity, and her aim is to 'engage with that playfulness

[98] Liz Berry, 'Homing', *Black Country*, p.4.
[99] Berry in *The Author*, p.128.
[100] Jamie, 'The Woman in the Field', *Sightlines*, p.66.
[101] Ibid.

and willingness to make new'.[102] In this respect, the use of the vernacular to reveal a hidden language becomes an essential part of her epiphanic mode.

The dialect poem 'Birmingham Roller'[103] brings the vernacular and its subject, the tumbler pigeon, together in another distinctive iteration of epiphany. Before reading this poem to the Birmingham Literature Festival audience, Berry introduces the tumbler pigeon as an 'ordinary grey looking bird hiding a very spectacular trick under its wings'.[104] Again, the poem reveals what is hidden and in this epiphanic moment, the 'ordinary', as Nichols suggests, 'is rendered remarkable by a heightened awareness' of this bird.[105] 'Birmingham Roller' feels particularly significant as it appears to be joined to the collection's opening poem, 'Bird', through the aposiopesis of that poem's final line: 'I raised my throat to the wind / and this is what I sang …'[106] The ellipsis is an imaginative space left open for the reader to make a connection with the poem which follows on the next page, 'Birmingham Roller'—a poem which sings through its Black Country dialect, establishing an intimate relationship between landscape, language, human and non-human worlds.[107] Although 'Birmingham Roller' begins with an epigraph that introduces a voice in Standard English praising the transformative effect of

[102] Berry in *The Author*, p.128.
[103] Liz Berry, 'Birmingham Roller', *Black Country*, p.3.
[104] Liz Berry in conversation at Birmingham Literature Festival, 11/10/16.
[105] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany,* p.28.
[106] Berry, 'Bird', p.2.
[107] Berry, 'Birmingham Roller', p.3.

the tumbler pigeons—'We spent our lives down in the blackness […] those birds brought us up to the light'—this idyllic view of the pigeons is contrasted immediately with the spirit of the bird revealed by the vernacular voice of the first stanza. Like 'Sow', the language of the Black Country supersedes Standard English, and the remainder of the poem celebrates the interconnectedness of the human and non-human worlds. Rather than bringing light to the 'blackness', in the opening stanza, the tumbler pigeons absorb the colour and texture of the town, symbolising a connection between townspeople and birds:

> Wench, yowm the colour of ower town:
> concrete, steel, oily rainbow of the cut.
>
> Ower streets am in yer wings,
> ower factory chimneys plumes on yer chest
>
> yer heart's the china ower owd girls dust
> in their tranklement cabinets

The repetition of 'ower' (our) and 'yowm' (you are) and 'yer' (your) emphasise a relationship in which the tumbler pigeon seems to have taken the town into its own body. As we have seen earlier in Jamie's poem 'Gloaming'[108] and its link with Rilke's description of the interchange between the non-human and human worlds, both realms are revealed through the other. Berry's speaker could be answering Rilke's question: 'Do you recognize me, air, full of places

[108] Jamie, 'Gloaming' *The Tree House*, p.20. See Chapter 3, p.111 of this thesis.

I once absorbed?'[109] The interchange continues, the hands of the men who breed the pigeons growing 'soft as feathers', like the speaker in 'Bird' who morphs into an avian form. In one respect, this poem is unsurprising. Joining the speaker as she stares intensely at the phenomenon of the pigeons in their tumble, the reader experiences a conventional epiphanic effect: our spirits are uplifted: 'w'em winged when we gaze at you'. Those studying the pigeons, those who are attentive also become winged and take flight. This moment has a similar effect to Wordsworth description of 'spots of time', or epiphanies, that 'enable us to mount / When high / more high and lift us up when fallen'.[110] The 'acrobats of the terraces' in 'Birmingham Roller' are just one example of the striking manifestations of Berry's Black Country home. Throughout the collection epiphanies are 'taking a new flight' by crossing boundaries in content and form, particularly in the metamorphic poems. Berry shows us, in a 'branching voice',[111] what she discovered by moving away from herself. In this distinctive antecedent state, the poems present fitting manifestations, or epiphanies, on the page that are a 'rediscovery of a permanent presence' of the vernacular and the significance of ordinary things.[112]

These new critical readings of Berry's work suggest that epiphany is a more diverse mode than typically suggested. Earlier chapters also revealed

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[109] Rilke, 'Second Part: I', *The Sonnets of Orpheus* in *Dunno Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus,* p.135.
[110] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book XII, p.479.
[111] Sher, 'The Epiphany Machine', *Poetry* (2004), p.388.
[112] de Man, p.5.

how the poetry of Oswald and Jamie engages with an expanded understanding of epiphany. Now, the final chapter of this thesis asks how epiphany is presented on the page in my own poetry by introducing a selection of poems that intersects with some of these new critical readings and embodies my thinking on epiphany.

Chapter 5: Poems

author's note—preface—poems

Author's Note

This final chapter addresses the question of how epiphany is presented on the page through my creative practice. In this creative conclusion to the critical enquiry, I have arranged my poems to generate dialogue between the different strands of the critical component of the thesis. The poems that follow are gathered into two parts: the first focuses on family and memory, the second on the natural world—themes which are also central to the poetry collections of Oswald, Jamie and Berry, as has been shown in previous chapters. Some poems could be seen to belong in both groups; however, their resonances with poems around them decided their final position. All three poets present varied iterations of epiphany across their collections; similarly, the separate parts of the creative element of this thesis also comprise diverse ways of engaging with epiphany. As, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, 'any part of the rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be'.[1] By creating these 'off shoots'[2] this thesis suggests ways in which contemporary poetry can combine traditional epiphanic paradigms, both proleptic and adelonic, with new readings of epiphany, such as those offered in the analysis of the three collections by Oswald, Jamie and Berry.

[1] Deleuze and Guattari, p.9. See p.49 of this thesis.
[2] Deleuze and Guattari, p.27.

Drawing on the 'family resemblances' and 'cluster of rhetorical practices' identified by Nichols[3], some of the poems here engage with the historical paradigms discussed in Chapter 1. For example, 'Diapause' reflects the linear paradigm described by Perloff as 'observation—triggering memory—insight',[4] 'Dead Ringer' contains elements of Beja's definitions of the retrospective epiphany and the past-recaptured,[5] and the closing lines of 'In Miniature' recall epiphany as a teleological process. In particular, poems like 'Overture', 'Moonstone Beach, CA', 'sky is its beauty' and 'To the Fates' connect with de Man's definition of epiphany as a 'rediscovery of a permanent presence',[6] or Oswald's concern with the 'special nature of what happens to exist'.[7] In addition, the creative process that culminated in poems such as 'A Showing', 'Skegness Wake', 'Overture' and 'Swirling Petals, Falling Leaves' interrogates de Man's assertion that 'we […] have the power to hide from' this 'permanent presence'. These poems are the result of immersing myself in, rather than hiding from, the non-human world: putting myself 'in the way' of an epiphany. Wordsworth explains how he slacken[s] [his] thoughts by choice' while wandering in the Lakeland countryside[8], Oswald how she tries

[3] Nichols, 'Cognitive and Pragmatic Linguistic Moments: Literary Epiphany in Thomas Pynchon and Seamus Heaney' in Tigges, *Moments of Moment,* p.474.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Beja, p.15. See p.12; p.22 of this thesis.
[6] de Man, p.5.
[7] Oswald in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words*, ed. by Clare Brown and Don Paterson (rpt. 2003, London: Picador, 2013), p.207.
[8] Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1850), Book I, p.41.

to 'force [her] eye behind the flower',[9] Jamie how she 'noticed, more than noticed',[10] and Berry how she treasures the vernacular as a 'discovery' of something 'beautiful […] we'd been hiding away'.[11] As we create a new way of being, an old way of being is forgotten, bringing new significance to what already exists, or as Nichols' suggests in his description of an epiphany, the 'ordinary [is] rendered remarkable'.[12]

However, the poems in this concluding chapter also resist the traditional rhetorical practices associated with epiphany by connecting with the alternative readings of epiphany in the poetry of Oswald, Jamie and Berry discussed in Chapters 2 to 4. Deleuze and Guattari describe how writing 'fosters connections between fields'[13] to become an 'assemblage' that 'necessarily changes in nature as its expands its connections'[14]. In this research project this has translated into writing about epiphany in the work of other poets, and writing new poems that engage with the epiphanic mode, and thus expanding current thinking on epiphany. One of the ways my creative work illustrates this is through its focus on liminality, the spaces 'betwixt and between'[15], and an unsettling crossing of boundaries. For example, in 'Grand Canyon' and 'Ter Coantus' both speakers find themselves in earthly and

[9] Alice Oswald in conversation with Madeline Bunting.
[10] Jamie, 'Fever', *Findings*, p.109.
[11] Liz Berry in conversation at Birmingham Literature Festival (11/10/16).
[12] Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany*, p.28.
[13] Deleuze and Guattari, p.13.
[14] Deleuze and Félix Guattari, p.9.
[15] Turner, p.113.

underwater realms. Importantly, many of the poems presented here are also non-teleological in nature, employing 'holes and discontinuities' to produce the epiphany in the reader.[16] Johnson highlights the importance of the role of the reader when she describes the three stages of literary epiphany: 'the moment of epiphany in nature, as perceived by the creative artist', […] the moment epiphany is recreated […] by the written word'[17], and finally, the epiphany in the reader as she 'search[es] out [her] own meanings […] div[ing] down into [her] own psyche for connections to fill out the epiphany'.[18] In poems such as 'Perching at the back of a RIB', 'South Bank Catch-up', 'Grand Canyon', 'Pick It Up, Put Elsewhere', 'Overture', 'Stopper on the Poacher Line', 'Moonstone Beach, CA' and 'Swirling Petals, Falling Leaves', I have attempted to use more open forms, repetition and fragments to, in Hejinian's words, encourage the 'participation of the reader'[19], and in doing so hope to move these poems beyond the coercive mode so often reductively associated with epiphany.

The poems in this chapter are also preceded by a preface, 'Mesh-work', a creative introduction connecting epiphany with the voices from speakers in the poems of Oswald, Jamie and Berry and my own writing. These voices impinge on my poetry as lines from poems explored in the close reading of

[16] Johnson, p.182. Johnson borrows this phrase from Richard Pearce. See p.30 and p.85 of this thesis.
[17] Johnson, p.78.
[18] Johnson, pp.182-3.
[19] Ibid.

the poets' collections, reflecting the way that epiphanies, or fitting manifestations, encroach on consciousness, and thus embodying my thinking on epiphany. The citations for these lines are presented in the right-hand margin, adjacent to the lines quoted, and separated by a solid vertical line. They appear in this position, rather than footnotes, to echo ideas of liminality explored earlier in the critical enquiry. The formal shape of this piece of writing also borrows from Oswald's book-length poem *Dart*, but differs in its purpose. In the prefatory note to *Dart*, Oswald explains that her notes in the margin show 'where one voice changes into another';[20] however, the citations in 'Mesh-work' reveal the origins of the voices and draw attention to strands of epiphany present in the work of the three poets, while also providing a link to the following poems of mine in relation to the question of this enquiry — how is epiphany presented on the page?

[20] Oswald, *Dart*, n.p.

Mesh-work

mesh(n): a network; net; an open space between the strands of a network; (often plural) the strands surrounding these spaces

I pick one
keep it in my pocket
a puckered brown half-oval
of seed-shapes pushing
at the leathery case
it's a November morning
and I have been lured away

Kathleen Jamie, 'May'

outside, beyond the garden
where the ground slopes down
past the broom poking at my legs
all its pods swerved by the wind
the same way

the sand underfoot is almost firm enough
my cells are loosening and yielding

Liz Berry, 'In the Steam Room'

a parcel of oystercatchers
white stripes on black wings
reaches the strand first
drops to probe for mussels and cockles
    where summer spades engineered forts

    a line of four: one stooping,
    one bending, one down on his knees,
    the youngest trying to scrape the sand
    into a wall, goading the tide together

    waves doubling back on the otherside
shades on the surface shifting with the clouds
deep-grey, grey, grey-blue, sky-blue, sky

where the oystercatchers' wings
jimmucking in the breeze
arrange more strands in the air, unseen

Liz Berry, 'Birmingham Roller', *jimmucking:* shaking

I drift about seeking shape — Alice Oswald, 'A Winged Seed'
in the shoreline
the wind amplifying in my hood
the clouds sinking to meet the sea
hiding something behind

imagine chasing just one strand — Kathleen Jamie, 'Materials'

or the imperceptible growth of a shell — Paul Valéry, *Sea Shells*
flesh-pink and cream arcs, a sklent — Kathleen Jamie, 'Highland Sketch', *sklent:* a gleam, a twist, a swerve
in the water, I pick one up
keep it in my pocket

back in the garden
away from edges
no change at all — Alice Oswald, 'Woods etc.'

then I hear the contours of a blackbird
tilting his head towards the soil
listening for worms, Orpheus
lingering on […] singing still — Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, First Part: Sonnet XXVI
in his throat
I bump into myself there
in the darkness
where he opens his beak
telling […] me / what he thinks … — Kathleen Jamie, 'May'

see the words [and] the ink — Tim Ingold: *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*

the brown half-oval
ripped, twisted, (it wouldn't snap)
black seeds on the page

the flesh-pink and cream shell faded scratches
visible
peeling like skin inside
letting the pieces fall

until I felt it at last — Liz Berry, 'Bird'
his whole hand gripping my thumb

deposited by a current of air — Alice Oswald, *Dart*

Poems

The poems in Chapter 5 are not available via Nottingham Trent University's Institutional Repository (IRep); however, they will be published as a full collection, under the poet's name, Jo Dixon, in Autumn 2020 by Shoestring Press (http://www.shoestringpress.co.uk).

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