

The Sacred Mind: William James and Modernist Epiphany

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Abstract. The modernist age in Europe (1890s-1930s) is often regarded as a time of spiritual crisis, yet at the outset of the twentieth century religious sentiment enjoyed a renewed attention fostered by contemporary science. William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-02) proposed a study of religious feeling in a modern psychological perspective that became widely known in England and beyond. This paper considers the substantial affinities between James's description of religious experiences and the critically accepted definition of literary epiphany, suggesting that his work might have inspired the way in which some modernists across Europe conceived and portrayed their ecstatic moments. Two case studies, from the Anglophone author Katherine Mansfield and the Italian Federigo Tozzi, are considered in close reading. Finally, a reflection is proposed about how James's conclusions can illuminate some important reasons for the popularity of epiphanies in modernist times.

Readers who are familiar with the concept of literary epiphany are very likely to have encountered the words of James Joyce: 'by an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture, or in a memorable phase of the mind itself'.¹ Joyce's formula is the most popular definition, but this type of illumination has been independently noticed by other authors before and after him. One of the reasons why the Joycean definition was so successful is that it foregrounds the physiognomic affinity between this type of insight and a deeply rooted aspect of the human psyche: the religious sentiment.

Epiphanic moments are sudden insights, triggered a-logically by commonplace occurrences, which arouse in the subject a sense of truth, often accompanied by the impression of transcending time and space, and by a temporary self-oblivion. Their literary lineage within Western culture is usually traced back to classical antiquity, on the one hand, and Christian theology on the other, and their evolution is understood as a progressive abandonment of supernatural

¹ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero. Part of the First Draft of A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Theodore Spencer (London: Cape, 1960), p. 216.

connotations.² However, authors and critics continue to put a substantial emphasis on the spiritual aspect of the epiphanic experience, leading some to talk of the modernist epiphanic vogue in terms of a quasi-mysticism.³

In light of this, it is striking that William James's psychological study of religious experience, composed at the beginning of the twentieth century, has not attracted significant critical attention.⁴ This article will address this gap, first by outlining how James's study hits the core of the epiphanic question, secondly by suggesting how he might have directly influenced two epiphanic authors who read him, and finally by observing how his conclusions can illuminate some reasons why epiphanies became so popular in modernist times.

James's essay and the epiphanic question

From 1901 to 1902, William James delivered twenty lectures at the University of Edinburgh on the subject of 'natural theology', the field of study that examines religious questions outside their supernatural explanation. The lectures were immediately collected in book form as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and, as Matthew Bradley reports, sold extremely well.⁵ They were translated and discussed widely in Europe, extending their influence well beyond Anglo-American culture.⁶

In his study, James takes religion as a 'total reaction upon life' that goes beyond the specific relationship with a divinity. It is generated by the feeling of going 'behind the foregrounds of existence and reach[ing] down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence [...], which in some degree everyone possesses'.⁷ Epiphanies, often defined precisely as moments of insight into a deeper universal truth, can indeed belong to the realm of religious feeling in this non-institutional and non-divine acceptance.

It is critically acknowledged that epiphanies share their phenomenology with

² For in-depth studies of epiphanic features and their tradition see Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (London: Peter Owen, 1971); Ashton Nichols, *The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987); and Birgit Neuhold, *Measuring the Sadness. Conrad, Joyce, Woolf and European Epiphany* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009).

³ See Ethel F. Cornwell, *The 'Still Point'. Theme and Variations in the Writings of T. S. Eliot, Coleridge, Yates, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and D. H. Lawrence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1962), and Hugo Azérad, 'Epiphany, Aura and Myths in Marcel Proust and William Faulkner', *New Comparison. A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies*, 27–28 (Spring-Autumn 1999), 170–86.

⁴ It is mentioned by Beja, *Epiphany* (p. 54), Neuhold, *Measuring the Sadness* (p. 36), and in Sharon Kim, *Literary Epiphany in the Novel, 1850–1950. Constellations of the Soul* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), but without any development.

⁵ Matthew Bradley, 'Introduction', in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ed. by Matthew Bradley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. xxix. Subsequent quotations from James's work refer to this edition.

⁶ For an overview of the 'transatlantic range' of James's influence, see *Understanding James, Understanding Modernism*, ed. by David H. Evans (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2017).

⁷ James, *Varieties*, p. 35.

two mainstays of religious experience: conversion and mysticism, both of which enjoy a rich literary tradition from the Middle Ages onwards. Conversion has been supposed to be the main religious model for epiphanic experiences, either on the grounds that, unlike epiphany, mysticism requires a mortification of the senses, or that mystical writing does not focus on the contrast with the everyday as epiphanic texts do.⁸ James's analysis of both experiences, however, suggests a reconsideration of this position.

Conversion is described by James as the psychological transformation that happens when an experience is strong enough to change the subject's centre of personal energy.⁹ This change can develop progressively or can mature below the threshold of consciousness for a long time before becoming manifest all of a sudden. It is thus a clear inspiration for epiphany, which can boast St. Paul and St. Augustine as authoritative literary models. In fact, recent psychological studies have applied the word 'epiphany' precisely to instances when a profound and permanent change in personality comes to awareness all of a sudden, de facto proposing epiphany as a modern, non-religious variant of conversion.¹⁰

This analogy is appealing, in literature and beyond, as it allows for a precise narrative of *situation — revelation — transformation* whose focus is on the change and its effects. Unfortunately, however, this reassuringly triadic structure applies to a limited range of modernist epiphanies: in a significant number of cases, epiphanies in modernist texts do not offer any real clue as to the *consequences* of their happening. This is evident in short stories, where the focus on the moment often cuts off its aftermath, but it is also noticeable in novels when instants presented as spiritually momentous do not end up having lasting effects. James's account, in fact, solves the problem of the conversion's unassured permanence by shifting its focus from the importance of the outcome to the relevance of the moment itself: 'that it should for even a short time show a human being what the high water mark of his spiritual capacity is, this is what constitutes its importance, — an importance which backsliding cannot diminish, although persistence might increase it'.¹¹

Indeed, for James, conversion is only one possible outcome of the more primordial form of religious experience constituted by mystical states. It is with the latter, on closer look, that epiphany appears primarily aligned. The medieval obliteration of the senses and renunciation of the self are not listed by James as required identifiers of mystical states. Instead, four markers may justify us in calling an experience mystical:

1. Ineffability: mystical states are states of feeling, difficult to decipher for the intellect, and therefore difficult to articulate in language.

⁸ See Beja, *Epiphany*, p. 25, and Neuhold, *Measuring the Sadness*, p. 40.

⁹ James, *Varieties*, pp. 154–55.

¹⁰ Matthew G. McDonald, 'The Nature of Epiphanic Experience', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 48 (2008), 89–115 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167807311878>> [accessed 21 January 2015].

¹¹ James, *Varieties*, pp. 200–01.

2. Noetic quality: they are also states of knowledge, 'insights into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect'.¹²
3. Transiency: their intensity cannot be sustained for long. They can feel 'unbearable' even when joyful, and usually fade in a matter of hours.
4. Passivity: during the experience the mystic feels seized by a superior power.

Far from being superficial similarities, these sufficient conditions of mysticism are perfectly consistent with those that, in critical literature, identify epiphanic experiences: difficulty to express, sense of insight, momentariness, and involuntariness.¹³ In particular, epiphanies appear as instances of what James calls *sudden* mystical experiences — as opposed to those cultivated through meditation.

The obvious distinction between mysticism and epiphany would be that while mystical experiences are the 'root and centre' of personal religion,¹⁴ literary epiphanies do not usually claim a religious significance. However, through the criteria above, James identifies a whole 'mystical group' of states of consciousness which includes phenomena that are very distant from any sense of the divine.¹⁵ He lists a few examples in order of increasing religious aspiration, from the rediscovery of a familiar perception that leads one to exclaim 'I've heard that said all my life [...] but I never realized its full meaning until now' up to religious mysticism pure and simple, a 'consciousness of the cosmos, that is, of the life and order of the universe'.¹⁶ Many of these examples can be strikingly related to different versions of epiphany explored by modernist writers. By inventorying mystical states as mental experiences independent from an institutional sense of the divine, James was thus also unknowingly offering a typological survey of literary epiphanies.

Two case studies

The physiognomic affinity between epiphanies and mystical states can be best observed in authors who read James, and who may have been inspired by his work. A case in point is Katherine Mansfield, whose acquaintance with Jamesian philosophy can be felt both in her fiction and non-fiction.¹⁷ Her awareness of James's studies on religion, in particular, is indicated by a quotation from his

¹² James, *Varieties*, p. 291.

¹³ For a formal description see Wim Tigges, 'The Significance of Trivial Things: Towards a Typology of the Literary Epiphany', in *Moments of Moment. Aspects of the Literary Epiphany*, ed. by Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 11–35.

¹⁴ James, *Varieties*, p. 290.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 293; p. 304.

¹⁷ See Clare Hanson, 'Katherine Mansfield and Vitalist Psychology', in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, ed. by Clare Hanson, Gerri Kimber, and Martin W. Todd (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 23–37.

early essay ‘The Will to Believe’ in a 1920 review.¹⁸ Mansfield would not have identified herself as religious in an institutional way (‘not a personal God or any such nonsense’).¹⁹ However, her private writings attest to a strong personal spirituality, precisely of the kind James singled out as the primary foundation of religion, which led her to conceive her individual existence as part of a greater whole:

the fact of [...] having suffered, each in our own way *cannot* make Life — the Life of the Universe — what we mean when we stand looking up at the stars or lie watching the ladybird in the grass — or feel — talking to one we love — less marvellous. I think that we — our generation — ought to live in the consciousness of this huge, solemn, exciting, mysterious background. Its[sic] our religion — our *faith*. Little creatures that we are we have our gesture to make which has its place in the scheme of things.²⁰

This is probably part of the reason why she became interested in esoteric doctrines: ‘to get even a glimpse of the relation of things, to follow that relation & find it remains true through the ages enlarges my little mind as nothing else does. It’s only a greater view of psychology. It helps me with my writing’.²¹ James’s idea that the religious feeling of connection with the world is due to the emergence of new fields of consciousness which expand the ordinary waking perception can indeed find an echo in the ‘vastation of spirit’ described in esoteric texts. James himself did not spurn spiritualism as a mean of psychological research.²²

How the combination of these sources helped Mansfield with her writing can be seen in her 1920 story ‘The Escape’. The story’s protagonists are in a moment of tension. Towards the end, the woman drops her parasol and walks away to fetch it, leaving the man alone in the silent countryside:

It was then that he saw the tree, that he was conscious of its presence just inside a garden gate. [...] As he looked at the tree he felt his breathing die away and he became part of the silence. It seemed to grow, it seemed to expand in the quivering heat until the great carved leaves hid the sky, and yet it was motionless. Then from within its depths or from beyond there came the sound of a woman’s voice. A woman was singing. The warm untroubled voice floated upon the air, and it was all part of the silence as he was part of it. Suddenly, as the voice rose, soft, dreaming, gentle, he knew that it would come floating to him from the hidden leaves and his peace was shattered. What was happening to him? Something stirred in his breast.

¹⁸ Katherine Mansfield, ‘Observation Only’, *The Poetry and Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Gerri Kimber and Angela Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 105–07 (p. 106).

¹⁹ *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Vol. IV, p. 76.

²⁰ *Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, Vol. III, p. 261.

²¹ Katherine Mansfield, *The Diaries of Katherine Mansfield: Including Miscellaneous Works*, ed. by Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 399.

²² David H. Evans, ‘Introduction’, in *Understanding James*, p. 7.

Something dark, something unbearable and dreadful pushed in his bosom, and like a great weed it floated, rocked... it was warm, stifling. He tried to struggle to tear at it, and at the same moment — all was over. Deep, deep, he sank into the silence, staring at the tree and waiting for the voice that came floating, falling, until he felt himself enfolded.²³

Mystical traits are prominent: the suddenness of the experience, which at one point becomes unbearable, the unaccountable knowledge (he knew that the music would come floating to him), the passivity of the subject that feels 'enfolded', and particularly the struggle against ineffability. The passage is loaded with expressions of vagueness and paradoxes (the tree growing but motionless, the voice that is part of the silence). In his study, James noticed precisely the abundance of oxymora and contradictions in mystical literature, observing that 'they prove that not conceptual speech, but music rather, is the element through which we are best spoken to by mystical truth'.²⁴ As evidence of this claim, he quotes a passage from Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy:

He who would hear the voice of Nada, 'the Soundless Sound,' and comprehend it, [...] when he has ceased to hear the many, he may discern the ONE — the inner sound which kills the outer.... [...]. And then to the inner ear will speak THE VOICE OF THE SILENCE.... And now thy *Self* is lost in SELF, *thyself* unto THYSELF, merged in that SELF from which thou first didst radiate....²⁵

At this stage, Mansfield had heard of Blavatsky herself, possibly having read these same lines. The man in her story definitely hears a woman's song which, whether or not is the 'voice of Nada', is certainly characterized as an oxymoronic voice of silence, an 'inner sound' opposed to the outer sound of his wife's continuous ranting. We as the readers are not given access to the truth which this sound conveys, but it moves something in the character's soul, and initiates a process of cosmic fusion in which the self becomes one with the silence.

The story, however, does not culminate in a straightforward reconciliation of the self, as the Theosophical text might suggest. Its brief epilogue does not reveal whether the stir in the man's bosom — which seems to bring up to the threshold of his awareness subconscious feelings that he had, until then, repressed — was enough to effect any permanent change in him (a sort of psychological 'conversion'), or whether it only granted him a momentary relief. The focus of the story dwells entirely on the epiphanic experience, rather than on its consequences, thus harmonizing with James's remark that 'the mystical feeling of enlargement, union, and emancipation has no specific intellectual content whatever of its own', and can lead to different outcomes in the mind

²³ Katherine Mansfield, 'The Escape', in *The Collected Stories*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 201–02.

²⁴ James, *Varieties*, p. 321.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

who lives it.²⁶ The epiphany in this story can thus be read as a psychological experience that borrows spiritual features from esoteric mysticism to achieve 'a greater view of psychology', but retains the open-ended character that James attributes to religious experiences as empirical states of mind.

A different example of the way James directly influenced an epiphanic aesthetics is offered by the Italian writer Federigo Tozzi, a peer of Mansfield, Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Tozzi read James passionately from early on, including an Italian translation of the *Varieties* in 1904.²⁷ His friend Giovanni Papini was one of the most enthusiastic promoters of Pragmatism in Italy, but Tozzi encountered James directly, and elaborated his thought in a personal way.²⁸ The Jamesian connection between mysticism and pathology fascinated him, giving him a new key to read his favourite Christian mystics.²⁹ If, however, for James the main psychological effect of faith was constructive, capable of giving coherence and purpose to personality, Tozzi was rather concerned with the alienating potential that lies in the discovery of a 'beyond'.³⁰ Accordingly, his epiphanic moments take particular advantage of James's reference to specific mystical states, typical of youth, in which a subject gains the impression that everything has a sense beyond his understanding. An example can be found in a 1911 story called 'Tregua' ('Truce'):

Emilia voleva andare incontro al marito, che doveva tornare dalla città. Sembrava che il suo essere cominciasse a tremare per una musica nascosta, ch'ella non riusciva ad udire. Era lieta. Poi il senso della musica disparve. Allora la sua anima sembrò una volta colorata di sangue giovanile, un'eco profonda di quella infinità a cui siamo attaccati. Perché la nostra anima si inebria, ad istanti, di ciò che vede attraverso una sua finestra. E tutte le forme pure dello spirito si fanno evidenti. Pare che percepiamo il peso della carne trascinata da esso. Allora abbiamo una violenza nuova di eludere il segreto che ci martella, una voglia di perforare nel di là, da cui ci separa una membrana piena di sangue. E i nostri orecchi non odono più. Ma è sonoro soltanto lo spirito.³¹

Here, as in Mansfield, the metaphor of the hidden music, which the protagonist feels but cannot hear, leads to a mystical experience. In giving shape to his

²⁶ Ibid., p. 324.

²⁷ Martina Martini, *Tozzi e James. Letteratura e Psicologia* (Florence: Olschki, 1999), p. 155.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 29–44.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 170.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

³¹ Federigo Tozzi, *Opere: romanzi, prose, novelle, saggi*, ed. by Marco Marchi (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 1080. 'Emilia wanted to go meet her husband, who must have been on his way from the city. It seemed her whole being was starting to tremble for a hidden music, which she couldn't hear. She was merry. Then the sense of music vanished. Now her soul seemed a vault coloured with juvenile blood, a profound echo of that infinity to which we are connected. Because our soul is inebriated, at instants in time, with that which it sees through her window. And all the pure forms of the spirit become apparent. We seem to perceive the weight of the flesh dragged by it. Now we have a new force to elude our thumping secret, a wish to pierce through to the other side, from where we are separated by a membrane full of blood. And our ears hear no longer. But only the spirit resonates.' All translations are mine.

juvenile poetic prose, Tozzi appears to have treasured James's remark that 'lyric poetry and music are alive and significant only in proportion as they fetch these vague vistas of a life continuing with our own [...] yet ever eluding our pursuit'.³² Emilia has indeed an intuition of a greater law that connects her spirit to an 'other' level: an 'infinity' in which she is held, protected, and to which she is connected, but without being able to understand it. As the imagery strongly suggests, she experiences the condition of a foetus, who is part of the maternal body, joined to a greater life that is the source of its own life and that can be felt but not comprehended from its perspective, a greater body through which the foetus at once exists within the world and is secluded from it. From Tozzi's perspective, this 'membrane full of blood' can equally be our flesh, which encloses the soul separating it from the otherworldly dimension that is the proper realm of the divine.

At this stage, Tozzi had officially converted to Catholicism. The intellectual debate with his future wife, and the circumstances of an eye illness which, in 1904, forced him into darkness and isolation for several months, had prompted him to shelve his juvenile socialist-anarchist ideology and brought out his religious anxiety. Despite officially embracing traditionalist Catholicism, however, Tozzi appears to have conceived God much more as the stern Father-King of the Old Testament, detached and revengeful, than as the forgiving figure of the Gospels.³³ His writings, accordingly, convey a dramatic awareness of fall and damnation rather than a perspective of salvation. The embodied spirit is, for Tozzi, not a condition of wholeness, but a limbo in which the perception of transcendence always highlights the inescapable barrier that separates us from it. His discovery of a beyond does not evoke the reassuring presence of a greater design, but the anguish of being separated from its meaning. This sense of blindness becomes more drastic as Tozzi's later works leave out holistic mysticism:

Bastava che restassi una mezz'ora solo e non avessi niente da fare, perché mi venisse una specie di sospetto che mi faceva paura. Io non ero né meno sicuro di vivere. [...] Lei sognando, qualche volta, ha certamente avuto nello stesso istante una sensazione vaga [...] che le impediva di credere al suo sogno; e avrebbe voluto che fosse stata la realtà, invece. Ma quella sensazione staccava il suo sogno, lo teneva discosto, senza riescire però a fare di lei stesso e del sogno una cosa sola. Ebbene [...] io non sapevo se quel che vedevo era un sogno più vasto, continuo, a cui mi ero abituato; e del quale soltanto poche volte avevo coscienza. [...] il presente stesso era per me il senso d'una realtà convenzionale.³⁴

³² James, *Varieties*, p. 293.

³³ For a study of Tozzi's religion see, among others, Franco Petroni, *Ideologia del mistero e logica dell'inconscio nei romanzi di Federigo Tozzi* (Firenze: Manzuoli, 1984), Luigi Baldacci, *Tozzi moderno*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1993), and Lisa Campigli, 'Tozzi e la Bibbia', in *Il raddomante consapevole: ricerche su Tozzi*, ed. by Marco Marchi (Firenze: Le lettere, 2000), pp. 47-72.

³⁴ Tozzi, 'Tre croci', in *Opere*, p. 238. 'Being half an hour alone, with nothing to do, was enough to give me a sort of suspicion that scared me. I wasn't even sure that I lived. Sometimes, while dreaming,

Here, even the mere desire to cross the boundary that separates us from the beyond has vanished. Loneliness and silence open the way to another possibility in the scale of Jamesian mystical states: the moments of dissolution when space, time, sensation, and self, seem to be obliterated, making room for a realisation of the unreality of reality. The paragon that Tozzi's character establishes with a dream state is not naïve: dreams are precisely moments when the waking consciousness gives way to the deeper states of mind where a connection with the whole can be felt more strongly. Again, however, the perception of this other dimension, perhaps truer than reality itself, does not culminate in a discovery. It is strong enough to put reality into question, but not to provide an alternative centre of personal energy. Thus, Tozzi also denies his epiphanies the status of conversions, granting them the physiognomy of a mystical experience, but not the power to change the life of his characters for the better.

Conclusion

The study of mysticism in the *Varieties* sheds new light on modernist epiphanies, and the work of Tozzi and Mansfield points out some important ways in which James's contributions to the study of spiritual events could have inspired an aesthetics of illumination. The angle itself from which James approaches his quest is a significant starting point. Treating religious experience as a psychological phenomenon in the private dimension, he presents it as a way to get closer to the primary elements of psychic reality. For authors who were using literature to explore the mind, this possibility of a greater depth of excavation into the self was particularly appealing, even if it meant advancing on uncertain ground. Renouncing the traditional interpretive structure of institutional religions means, indeed, also opening a way to ambiguity and doubt. If mystical experiences are felt to be authoritative for their inexplicable sense of reality, whereby 'you cannot help regarding them as genuine perceptions of truth', James is also careful to keep the significance of this revelation personal.³⁵ An individual may realise the presence of the divine just by encountering it, but this experience has no authority over other minds, and like any personal state of feeling is subject to delusions and relapses.

This resonates deeply with the aesthetics of authors like Tozzi and Mansfield, where the desire for transcendence is strongly felt, but an actual unison with the supernatural is presented as problematic and unstable. In their hands, James's mystical experiences lend their phenomenology to ambiguous epiphanies, manifesting an unknown that can be terrifying, and which in no case lays down

you surely have had at the same time a vague sensation that prevented you from believing your dream; and you would have liked it to be reality instead. But that sensation detached your dream, kept it at a distance, without however succeeding in making of you and your dream one thing. Well I did not know if what I saw was a greater, continuous dream to which I had got used; and of which I was only occasionally conscious. The present itself was for me the sense of a conventional reality.'

³⁵ James, *Varieties*, p. 62.

a univocally intelligible revelation. A modernist mistrust of absolutes denies these episodes the neat development and permanence of successful conversions, preferring to detach the importance of the event from the importance of its consequences, as James himself did.

On the other hand, this open-endedness and lack of institutional guarantees do not rule out an equally appealing sense of possibility. “If this is all then Life is not worth living”. But I *know* it is not all. How does one know that? [...] there have been moments, instants, gleams, when she has felt the possibility of something quite other’, Mansfield writes.³⁶ This, in the end, is the deeper significance that James himself attaches to religion: ‘Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse’.³⁷ Even when this love of life is troubled, as in Tozzi, epiphanies still count as genuine mystical experiences because of the sense of transcendence that they bestow on the receiver. Through the formal affinity with a well-known religious pattern, they cling to the perspective of meaning offered by the inexplicably authoritative cognizance of ‘the reality of the unseen’, even if they avoid linking it to a definite interpretation. Whether they inspire an intimate reconciliation or evoke an anguished alienation, what counts is that they respond to our anxiety of meaninglessness by putting us in contact with something ‘more’.

This way, a possibility of traditional religious interpretation is also left open, in agreement with James’s suggestion to reconcile the scientific and the spiritual within the psyche itself: ‘let me then propose, as a hypothesis, that whatever it may be on the *farther* side, the “more” with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life’.³⁸ If a supernatural power really moves us, James suggests, it is likely through the subconscious that its force operates. The instances in which hidden psychic content emerges and seemingly expands our perception of existence enable Tozzi, Mansfield, and their modernist colleagues to explore at once two crucial areas of interest — the obscurities of consciousness and the ‘luminous halo’ of life.³⁹ In this sense, modernist epiphanies can be regarded as the manifestation of a modern, Jamesian mysticism sitting at the intersection between the heights of the spirit and the depths of the subconscious.

³⁶ Mansfield, *Diaries*, p. 436.

³⁷ James, *Varieties*, pp. 383–84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 387–88.

³⁹ Virginia Woolf, ‘Modern Fiction’, in *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), pp. 207–18 (p. 212).