



Peaks and Troughs: Dysepiphany, Antiphany, and Melancholy

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In her new book, *Epiphanies: An Ethics of Experience*, Sophie Grace Chappell defines an epiphany as an (1) overwhelming (2) existentially significant manifestation of (3) value, (4) often sudden and surprising, (5) which feeds the psyche, (6) which feels like it “comes from outside” – it is something given, relative to which I am a passive perceiver – which (7) teaches us something new, which (8) “takes us out of ourselves”, and which (9) demands a response.¹

However, it should be noted that the book is not just about epiphanies. As Chappell rightly points out, ‘if epiphanies are the peaks in our experience, then by definition, to study them must also be to study the troughs’.² In this brief essay I want to look more closely at those troughs. I will first discuss what Chappell refers to as a ‘dysepiphany’ or ‘negative epiphany’. In the second section, I will probe Chappell’s claim that dysepiphanies sap our psychic resources and consider whether epiphanies and dysepiphanies may sometimes co-occur and even reinforce each other. In the third and final section, I try to determine what the opposite of an epiphany might be and argue that anyone with an interest in epiphanies should also be keen to investigate any opposing processes that might be at work.

To support the various claims in this essay, I will draw repeatedly (but not exclusively) on the work of Lev Tolstoy, who is also one of the key references in *Epiphanies: An Ethics of Experience*. In so doing, I happily follow in the footsteps of Chappell who argues very convincingly that adducing and reflecting on examples can be at least as important as detached discursive argument in achieving ethical understanding.³

¹ Chappell 2022: 11.

² Ibid.: 9.

³ Ibid.: 22-26.

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1 Dysepiphany

If a positive epiphany feeds the psyche and ‘makes us glad to be alive’,⁴ a negative epiphany does the opposite: it is ‘profoundly bleak and upsetting, sapping our psychic resources rather than refreshing them’.⁵ Chappell gives the example of realizing that in truth somebody has never loved you, or that you can no longer believe in God. Those are standard dysepiphanic experiences. Later in the book she also discusses episodes of illness, when our body is broken, injured or diseased. These count as a kind of ‘dysepiphany of what we did not already know, and naturally have no wish to know, about pain or discomfort or malfunction’.⁶ Another example she gives is that of seeing a particularly bleak film such as *Amadeus*, which left her deeply downcast when she first saw it.⁷

A dysepiphany is to be distinguished from a ‘failed epiphany’. The latter, Chappell explains, occurs when an epiphany proves only temporarily successful.⁸ For a brief moment you come to have an important new insight, but the vision fades quickly and you return to your old ways, more or less unaffected and unchanged. The notion of ‘dysepiphany’ is also not to be confused or equated with the notion of disruptive epiphany. Negative epiphanies can certainly be disruptive, but so can positive epiphanies. In fact, the great majority of epiphanic experiences described by Chappell are of this sort. They stop us in our tracks and make us reconsider the story of our life. So the category of what Chappell calls ‘non-narrative epiphanies’ – epiphanies that are not so much part of a story as interruptions of it⁹ – contains both positive and negative epiphanies.

If positive epiphanies often manifest themselves as ‘aha’ moments, dysepiphancies could perhaps be characterised as ‘oh no’ moments. They are not uplifting but will rather give you a sinking feeling (think also of the stomach drop that accompanies the tech world’s notorious ‘onosecond’: the amount of time that elapses between the time you click on the wrong thing, and the time you realize you can’t undo the damage). Dysepiphancies, especially when they arrive suddenly, make your blood run cold, as is illustrated in this passage from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* when Ivan finally realizes he is not just sick but dying:

This is not a matter of the appendix or the kidney, but of life and . . . death. Yes, there was life, and now it is going, going, and I cannot hold it back. Yes, why deceive myself? Isn’t it obvious to everybody except me that I’m dying and it is only a question of the number of weeks, days – right now, maybe. Once there was light, now there’s darkness. Once I was here, and now I’ll be

⁴ Ibid.: 3.

⁵ Ibid.: 221.

⁶ Ibid.: 189.

⁷ Ibid.: 222.

⁸ Ibid.: 281.

⁹ Ibid.: 278.

there! Where?" Cold came over him, his breath stopped. He heard only the pounding of his heart.¹⁰

Chappell's remarks on dysepiphanies are rather brief and scattered throughout the book. They supplement her discussion of epiphanies in interesting and thought-provoking ways, but they also raise questions. One might wonder, for instance, to what extent dysepiphanes really are epiphanies? Chappell certainly considers them as such.¹¹ However, it is clear that dysepiphanies do not meet some of the above-mentioned criteria for epiphanies.

Most obviously, they do not meet criterion (5). A dysepiphany, according to Chappell, does not feed the psyche but rather drains our psychic resources. In addition, it seems that criterion (2) and (3) will not be fulfilled, either. For instance, when you suddenly realize that somebody has never loved you, there's no manifestation of value but rather a discovery of the absence of value.¹² Similarly, when you're in terrible pain and discomfort it seems odd to describe that as an encounter with value. (If anything, it might be more appropriate to describe it as an encounter with disvalue.)

Still, the mere fact that dysepiphanies do not meet all the criteria for epiphanies should not preclude them from counting as such. That is because Chappell does not consider these criteria to be necessary conditions for epiphanies. Epiphany, for her, is a focal case concept.¹³ That means that there are clear and central cases of epiphanies, namely those cases in which all criteria are fulfilled. But there will also be less clear and less central cases, when some of the criteria are not met or are met to a lesser degree. So, in that regard dysepiphanies can qualify as epiphanies. But they are not, and cannot be, paradigm cases of epiphanies. They will necessarily be epiphanic to a lesser degree than the focal cases – something that is not explicitly acknowledged by Chappell (though I imagine she would be willing to grant this point).

Moreover, one could accept that something is a focal case concept, with cases that are more or less central, and still insist that there must be some necessary conditions. That is precisely what the 'cluster account of art' advocates.¹⁴ The cluster account lists a number of criteria that count towards something being art, just like Chappell lists criteria that count towards something being an epiphany. But the cluster account also specifies a necessary condition for something to be considered art, namely, that something needs to be an artifact. One may wonder whether there are not also some necessary conditions for something to count as an epiphany?

¹⁰ Tolstoy 2010: 68.

¹¹ Chappell 2022: 221.

¹² Chappell rightly points out that harrowing experiences can sometimes be epiphanic (e.g. being horrified by animal suffering as an inroad into realizing the inextricable value of an animal's life). But this is different from those harrowing experiences that are *dysepiphanic* (e.g. the discovery that no one really loves you).

¹³ Chappell 2022: 9.

¹⁴ See Gaut 2000.

It seems to me that, if any of the criteria listed by Chappell could be necessary conditions, it would be criteria (2) and (3). The manifestation of value is very much at the core of what Chappell thinks an epiphany is. But if one were to take that view – not an unreasonable position to adopt – one would have to conclude that dysepiphanies are in fact *not* epiphanies, since they don't meet these necessary conditions.

Thus, if Chappell wants to insist that dysepiphanies are epiphanies, she appears to have two options. She could either argue that an encounter with value is only a typical feature of epiphanies, but not a necessary one; and/or she could make the case that we do in fact encounter value even in the most dismal of dysepiphanies. Some extra work is needed to make either of these positions compelling, and I'd be curious to know which tack she would take.

2 Melancholy

Dysepiphanies, Chappell argues, sap our psychic resources rather than refresh them. While epiphanies provide food for the soul, dysepiphanies do the opposite. But is this not a one-sided and incomplete picture? Granted, some dysepiphanies simply drain our mental resources and leave us severely weakened. But other dysepiphanies may actually help to make us stronger. Much like a bitter medicine, they may be the first and necessary step in a process of healing. Ivan Ilyich's sudden realization that he is going to die, for instance, shatters not only the lie that he's only dealing with a minor illness, but also the lie that was his life up to that point. He comes to see that for decades he has been going down a soul-destroying path of careerism and hedonism, and it is the dysepiphany that allows him to finally leave that path and move towards love, pity, and reconciliation with his fate. The way it affects his psyche is not in the least enjoyable, but it is vital.¹⁵ It appears to be the shock treatment that his soul needs in order to heal.

Similarly, in Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection*, sometimes also translated as *The Awakening*, the nobleman Nekhlyudov comes to realize that he was responsible for the ruin of his childhood sweetheart, Katyusha. When he visits her in prison he is confronted with a whole world of suffering and injustice that he and his aristocratic friends have been oblivious to. 'And, suddenly, he understood that the aversion he had lately, and particularly today, felt for everybody (...) was an aversion for himself. And, strange to say, in this acknowledgement of his baseness there was something painful yet joyful and quieting.'¹⁶ The shock awakens him and serves as a restorative for his soul.

Do examples like this show that, contrary to what Chappell suggests, dysepiphanies can also feed or nourish the psyche? Perhaps. But there is an alternative way to interpret such cases. Chappell might argue that, while negative epiphanies sap our

¹⁵ According to Chappell, 'food for the psyche needs to be pleasant or delightful or enjoyable.' (2022: 235) But a bleak dysepiphany experience is neither of these things. This again demonstrates that, for Chappell, dysepiphanies cannot fulfil the role of 'soul food'.

¹⁶ Tolstoy 1972: 135.

mental resources, they can precede and pave the way for more positive epiphanies that may then replenish our psychic resources. This is possibly what happens in the examples I listed.

Take the case of Ivan Ilyich. Initially, when he is confronted with impending death, he is overcome with horror and hatred, and he howls and screams on his sickbed. But then, a mere hour before his death, he has what can only be described as a (positive) epiphany:

Just then Ivan Ilyich fell through, saw light, and it was revealed to him that his life had not been what it ought, but that it could still be rectified. He asked himself what was "right," and grew still, listening. Here he felt that someone was kissing his hand. He opened his eyes and looked at his son. He felt sorry for him. His wife came over to him. He looked at her. She was gazing at him with a despairing expression, openmouthed, and with unwiped tears on her nose and cheek. He felt sorry for her.¹⁷

In *Resurrection* Nekhlyudov's dysepiphany, in which he comes to see how much of a scoundrel he has been and how he has acted in a base, cruel and cowardly manner, is followed by a powerful and cleansing epiphany:

But the free spiritual being, which alone is true, alone powerful, alone eternal, had already awakened in Nekhlyudov, and he could not but believe it. Enormous though the distance was between what he wished to be and what he was, nothing appeared insurmountable to the newly-awakened spiritual being. (...) He felt hot, and went to the window and opened it. The window opened into a garden. It was a moonlit, quiet, fresh night; a vehicle rattled past, and then all was still. The shadow of a tall poplar fell on the ground just opposite the window, and all the intricate pattern of its bare branches was clearly defined on the clean swept gravel. To the left the roof of a coach-house shone white in the moonlight, in front the black shadow of the garden wall was visible through the tangled branches of the trees. Nekhlyudov gazed at the roof, the moonlit garden, and the shadows of the poplar, and drank in the fresh, invigorating air. "How delightful, how delightful; oh, God, how delightful" he said, meaning that which was going on in his soul.¹⁸

It is such epiphanies, one might argue, and not the dysepiphanies which precede them, that provide food for the soul. This may be a plausible reading, but it does draw attention to a phenomenon that is perhaps insufficiently acknowledged by Chappell, namely the joint (and sometimes mutually reinforcing) occurrence of epiphanies and dysepiphanies.

Negative and positive epiphanies can co-occur, or alternate, in such a way that they intensify each other and result in a powerful bittersweet experience. A striking example of this we find in yet another work by Tolstoy, *War and Peace*:

¹⁷ Tolstoy 2010: 90.

¹⁸ Tolstoy 1972: 135-7.

After dinner Natasha, at Prince Andrei's request, went to the clavichord and began to sing. Prince Andrei stood by a window, talking to the ladies, and listened to her. In the midst of a phrase he fell silent and suddenly felt choked with tears, a thing he had thought impossible for him. He looked at Natasha as she sang, and something new and joyful stirred in his soul. He had decidedly nothing to weep about, but he was ready to weep. About what? His former love? The little princess? His disappointments? ... His hopes for the future? ... Yes and no. The main thing he wanted to weep about was a sudden, vivid awareness of the terrible opposition between something infinitely great and indefinable that was in him, and something narrow and fleshly that he himself, and even she, was. This opposition tormented him and gladdened him while she sang.¹⁹

Chekhov, who was a great admirer of Tolstoy, would often emulate him in his short stories by evoking experiences in which the bitter and the sweet come to intermingle. Here is a passage from his short story, *The Lady With the Dog*:

Yalta was hardly visible through the morning mist; white clouds stood motionless on the mountaintops. The leaves did not stir on the trees, grasshoppers chirruped, and the monotonous hollow sound of the sea rising up from below, spoke of the peace, of the eternal sleep awaiting us. So it must have sounded when there was no Yalta, no Oreanda here; so it sounds now, and it will sound as indifferently and monotonously when we are all no more. And in this constancy, in this complete indifference to the life and death of each of us, there lies hid, perhaps, a pledge of our eternal salvation, of the unceasing movement of life upon earth, of unceasing progress towards perfection. Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, soothed and spellbound in these magical surroundings - the sea, mountains, clouds, open sky - Gurov thought how in reality everything is beautiful in this world when one reflects: everything except what we think or do ourselves when we forget our human dignity and the higher aims of our existence.²⁰

A negative epiphany – the monotonous hollow sound of the sea speaking of the death that awaits us all and of the indifference of the universe – is coupled with a positive epiphany – the moral progress that humans are capable of and in which may lie their eternal salvation.

Elsewhere I have described these instances (and others like it) as examples of aesthetic melancholy.²¹ What I mean by melancholy is the profound and bittersweet emotional experience that occurs when we vividly grasp (what we perceive to be) a harsh truth about human existence in such a way that we come to appreciate certain aspects of life more deeply.²² Melancholy can be aesthetic in nature when it leads

¹⁹ Tolstoy 2009: 467.

²⁰ Chekhov 1993: 604.

²¹ Maes 2020.

²² Maes 2021: 41.

to a deeper *aesthetic* appreciation. To put it differently, if an aesthetic experience is integrated into the complex emotional process of melancholy (as I've defined it above) we may speak of 'aesthetic melancholy'. Given that an aesthetic experience occurs 'when we value our aesthetic perception of an object for its own sake and are moved in virtue of that perception.'²³ it is fair to say that the characters in the passages I quoted from Tolstoy and Chekhov are indeed experiencing aesthetic melancholy. Prince Andrei appreciates the beauty of Natasha's music and is deeply moved in virtue of it. Gurov is aesthetically savouring his surroundings whilst being in the thralls of melancholy.

Now, while I still think that aesthetic melancholy is as good a term as any for this complex emotional experience, Chappell's book offers us another way to think about this phenomenon. What we have in each of these cases, it seems, is a co-occurrence of epiphany and dysepiphany, resulting in a powerful mix of bitter and sweet feelings.

As I have already indicated, Chappell herself does not address the possibility of such a joint occurrence. This is not entirely surprising. The terminology itself, of course, suggests the two are poles apart – epiphany vs. dysepiphany. Furthermore, Chappell stresses how moods often enter into a feedback loop with matching emotions: 'a depressed mood looks around the world for justifications for depression' and 'elation ... naturally gravitates from feeling to emotion, by looking around itself for justifications for the feeling'.²⁴ However, she does not address that certain moods and appraisals may in fact give way to contrasting emotions. Gurov's grim apperception of reality ('the monotonous hollow sound of the sea' speaking of the death that awaits us all and the indifference of the universe) leads him to a deeper appreciation of his lover and his surroundings. The elation that Prince Andrei feels does not prompt him to seek justifications for this feeling, but rather brings him to face some terrible truths about human existence.²⁵ Bitter and sweet. Peaks and troughs. Dysepiphanies can give way to epiphanies (or *vice versa*) and thus produce some of the most complex and intense experiences humans are capable of.²⁶

Such experiences, I should add, are not as exceptional as one might think. They can be elicited by (and are expressed in) a great variety of art works. From films like *Late Spring* (1949, dir. Ozu), *Barry Lyndon* (1975, dir. Stanley Kubrick) and the *Before* trilogy (1995, 2004, 2013, dir. Richard Linklater), to songs like *Pancho and Lefty* (Townes van Zandt), *Twee Meisjes* (Raymond van het Groenewoud), and *Autumn Letter* (가을 편지, Kim Min-Ki). From choreographies like *Laid in Earth* by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (2020), to compositions like *The Disintegration Loops* by

²³ Jerrold Levinson in conversation with Maes 2017: 28.

²⁴ Chappell 2022: 199.

²⁵ Chappell does note that 'a new emotion ... can encounter both assistance *and* resistance at the level of mood' (2022: 198, my emphasis). But 'resistance' suggests that emotion and mood will work against one another and will tend to even each other out, whereas in the cases I have cited the contrasting affective states reinforce each other and become part of one emotional experience.

²⁶ As Sophie Grace Chappell pointed out to me, John Keats's 'Ode to Melancholy' (1819) provides one of the greatest poetic expressions of this.

William Basinski (2002-2003) or the photobooks of Titus Simoens (e.g. *For Brigitte*, 2017).

Even one of Chappell's key examples of an epiphany can perhaps be better characterized as a combination of epiphany *and* dysepiphanly. I'm referring here to the famous ending of James Joyce's *The Dead* (1914), where we are made privy to the melancholic reflections of the protagonist Gabriel. He has just come to the painful realization that he has not been his wife's one-and-only true love and that she still cherishes the memory of her former lover. But 'as he thought of what she must have been then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a strange friendly piety for her entered his soul.'²⁷ Gabriel continues to ruminate on the events of the day, on his own foolish pretensions, and on sickness and death that will inevitably come upon his family. And then:

'The air of the room chilled his shoulders. He stretched himself cautiously along under the sheets and lay down beside his wife. One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age. He thought of how she who lay beside him had locked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live. Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes.'²⁸

Gabriel's experience is one of aesthetic melancholy. He is not only moved by the beauty of his sleeping wife but his soul 'swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.'²⁹ Moreover, *readers* of Joyce's short story may also be experiencing aesthetic melancholy in savouring these beautiful passages. Much the same goes for those passages I quoted from Tolstoy or Chekhov. When one reads about the 'eternal sleep awaiting all of us' or the world's 'complete indifference to the life and death of each of us' one is invited to contemplate these existential truths. And doing so may put the precarious value of beauty, and particularly the beauty and artistry of the prose one is reading, in sharp relief in such a way that one comes to appreciate it more deeply. The combination of dysepiphanly and epiphany that is described by the author may thus be transferred to the reader.³⁰

3 Antiphany

What is the opposite of an epiphany? We can't say 'dysepiphanly', because the latter still counts as an epiphany (at least according to Chappell). So let's take another look at the nine criteria that Chappell lists. An epiphany, she argues, is an (1) overwhelming (2) existentially significant manifestation of (3) value, (4) often sudden

²⁷ Joyce 1969: 223.

²⁸ Joyce 1969: 223.

²⁹ Joyce 1969: 224.

³⁰ Cf. Chappell's observation on art creating an epiphany of an epiphany (2022: 26)

and surprising, (5) which feeds the psyche, (6) which feels like it “comes from outside” – it is something given, relative to which I am a passive perceiver – which (7) teaches us something new, which (8) “takes us out of ourselves”, and which (9) demands a response.

The opposite of this, I propose, would be a (1) barely noticeable but (2) existentially significant withdrawal from (3) value, (4) often gradual, (5) which starves and dulls the psyche, (6) which can be facilitated and encouraged by one’s environment but for which one ultimately bears some responsibility, which (7) prevents one from seeing the world afresh, which (8) further entrenches existing convictions, habits, routines, and which (9) obstructs the paths to genuine love, pity, and creativity.

For lack of a better word, we could call this an ‘antiphany’. It’s a process that can be characterised as a ‘silting up’ of the soul. For comparison, think of what happened to 15th century Bruges, one of the most vibrant and cosmopolitan cities of the world, until its port started silting up and trade routes were cut off. The city became isolated and closed in on itself, and gradually became poorer economically, intellectually, and culturally, to the point where it became known as ‘Bruges-La-Morte’ (Bruges The Dead City).³¹

Such a fate can also befall individuals. A person may gradually close themselves off from any real encounter with value, anything that might disturb their comfort or consciousness, in such a way that is deeply impoverishing and ultimately soul-destroying. If an epiphany empowers someone to do ‘the right thing in the right way and for the right reasons’³², an antiphany will typically prevent them from doing the right thing in the right way and for the right reasons. It’s a process that leads to a hardening of the heart and a refusal to probe one’s own consciousness – in sharp contrast with epiphanies, which tend to prompt further reflection and produce feelings of gratitude.³³

The life of Ivan Ilyich, before he contracts his fatal illness, serves as a good example. As he is building his career and acquiring more wealth and status, he thinks he’s on an upward trajectory. But in fact the opposite is true: ‘In public opinion I was going uphill, and exactly to that extent life was slipping away from under me . . .’³⁴ Looking back he realizes that there was nothing of real value in his all too comfortable life: ‘But – strange thing – all those best moments of his pleasant life seemed now not at all as they had seemed then. (...) As soon as that began the result of which was he, the Ivan Ilyich of today, all that had then seemed like joys melted away and turned into something worthless and often vile.’³⁵ His was a life full of bitterness – towards his wife, his colleagues, his employees – with little room for genuine love, pity, or creativity (the latter painfully illustrated by the fact that he spends so much time and money in decorating his new house just to end up with a copy of other people’s houses: ‘damasks, ebony,

³¹ Cf. the short but exquisite novel of that title by Georges Rodenbach (1892).

³² Chappell 2022: 5.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Tolstoy 2010: 84.

³⁵ Ibid.

flowers, carpets, and bronzes, dark and gleaming – all that all people of a certain kind acquire in order to resemble all people of a certain kind'.³⁶

The story of Nekhlyudov in Tolstoy's *Resurrection* also fits the description. As a young man he was full of ideals, freshness and purity, open to the world and to new ideas, but when he inherits a large fortune and enters society – a society 'which so carefully hides the sufferings of millions in order to assure ease and pleasure to a small number of people'³⁷ – he slowly but surely settles himself into a comfortable and luxurious existence. And so begins 'a long period of sluggish inner life, a total cessation of its activity'.³⁸ Somewhere, in the depths of his soul, he knows that he has betrayed his former self and his former sweetheart, the poor Katyusha, 'and that the knowledge of this act of his must prevent him, not only from finding fault with any one else, but even from looking straight into other people's eyes; not to mention the impossibility of considering himself a splendid, noble, high-minded fellow, as he did and had to do to go on living his life boldly and merrily. There was only one solution of the problem— i.e., not to think about it. He succeeded in doing so.'³⁹

Such silting up the soul is not just depicted in the works of Tolstoy, of course. One of the most eloquent descriptions of what the opposite of an epiphany may entail can be found in E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*. During a wonderfully adventurous holiday in Florence, a whole world of new experiences opens up to Lucy Honeychurch. She falls in love, is exposed to radical and exciting ideas, discovers new forms of beauty and a range of emotions she had been unaware of. But when she returns to England and to the life mapped out for her, she gradually renounces it all. Forster begins the relevant paragraph with the suitably symbolic sentence: 'She put out the lamp.' He continues:

'It did not do to think, nor, for the matter of that, to feel. She gave up trying to understand herself, and joined the vast armies of the benighted, who follow neither the heart nor the brain, and march to their destiny by catchwords. The armies are full of pleasant and pious folk. But they have yielded to the only enemy that matters - the enemy within. They have sinned against passion and truth, and vain will their strife after virtue. As the years pass, they are censured. Their pleasantries and their piety show cracks, their wit becomes cynicism, their unselfishness hypocrisy.'⁴⁰

In cinema, there is no better illustration of this process – the hardening of the heart, the corrosion of the soul – than what happens to Marcello in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960). Marcello wants to write a novel and has the ambition to become a man of letters. But while he's trying to make ends meet by being an entertainment journalist he becomes further and further entangled in a shallow, materialistic lifestyle. He ends up becoming a mere publicity agent, a sell-out to the celebrity industrial

³⁶ Ibid.: 57.

³⁷ Tolstoy 1972: 325.

³⁸ Ibid.: 135.

³⁹ Ibid.: 87.

⁴⁰ Forster 1990: 172.

complex, leading a life of debauchery. In the moving final sequence on the beach, standing next to a dead fish – a painful symbol of his own inner death – he remains deaf to the call of the angelic girl who wants to remind him of his true calling. He eventually turns away from her, waving goodbye to the purity and openness she stands for, and resumes his drunken stumble along the beach.

Anyone with a keen interest in epiphanies, I want to argue in conclusion, should also be keen to investigate such antiphanyes. Why? Firstly, as Chappell herself points out, to understand epiphanies we need to understand ‘the entire experiential continuum in which epiphanies are the peaks’.⁴¹ This means that we also need to look at what is arguably the opposite of an epiphany. Experiences like Marcello’s or Ivan Ilyich’s will be relevant to anyone with the broader ambition to construct ‘an ethics of sensibility, an ethics of what it’s like to be a human’.⁴²

Secondly, examining antiphanyes may help us to understand why epiphanies are not at all equally distributed among people. They come to some, but not to others, Chappell notes. Some people just are less receptive. And while Chappell acknowledges that one can prepare, wait and hope for epiphanies, she is adamant that no one can *make* epiphanies come to them.⁴³ A quote from the Gospel is meant to illustrate this: ‘the wind blows where it will’ (John 3:8). However, I think there is more to be said here. Some people lead their lives in such a manner as to make genuine encounters with value much more difficult. It is certainly not a coincidence that for so long it seemed impossible for Nekhlyudov or Ivan Ilyich to be touched by the beauty, love and goodness there is in the world. A study of the egocentric and benighted lifestyles exemplified in these characters should give us a better idea of why epiphanies come easily to some but not to others.

Thirdly, some epiphanies will be more impactful than others, even to the point of being life-changing. Especially for someone who has willfully shut themselves off from value, to pursue a comfortable but ultimately deceitful life, an epiphany can be shattering and utterly transformative. Again, this is illustrated by the stories of Nekhlyudov and Ilyich. So, in this regard too, the study of what I have called an ‘antiphany’ can help to improve our understanding of the impact and import of epiphanies.

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⁴¹ Chappell 2022: 10.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Chappell 2022: 151.

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