

## Joyce's Dialogue Epiphanies

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### *Abstract*

Although the definition in *Stephen Hero* includes “the vulgarity of speech or of gesture,” critics have focused almost exclusively on the “memorable phase of the mind itself,” the subjective rather than the social epiphany. Yet of the forty epiphanies that survive from the original manuscript, almost half are dialogues in which Joyce is often an active participant-observer rather than a solitary introspective artist. These dialogues record with linguistic precision the accidental revelation of someone's true self in a social situation, but Joyce leaves their meaning open rather than intellectualized as in the subjective epiphanies, a technique that suggests a critical re-examination of the dialogues in his fiction.

### 1.

Out of the approximately seventy epiphanies that Joyce wrote, forty have survived, although they tend to be neglected perhaps because they seem “less attractive in their denuded manuscript state than when decked out in the heavy robes of myth, religion, and aesthetics”<sup>1</sup> that Joyce supplied in his later fiction. Of the forty surviving epiphanies almost half are dialogues, demonstrating the importance of the genre from the earliest stage of his literary development. Both types—the dialogue epiphany and the subjective epiphany—are given equal weight in Stephen's definition of the epiphany as “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (*SH* 211). Yet in the many articles and books that have been written on the Joycean epiphany, critics have focused almost exclusively on the subjective type, overlooking the dialogue epiphany that dramatizes the accidental exposure of someone's true self in a social situation. By tracing the epiphany back to its broader definition I hope to challenge our basic assumptions about what one Joyce critic has called “the original building blocks of his creative system...”<sup>2</sup> For in these dialogue

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epiphanies Joyce is the active participant-observer rather than the solitary, introspective artist that critics have posited for the subjective epiphanies. This reorientation also suggests the potential for a new and revealing interpretive focus on the dialogues as social satire in Joyce's later fiction.

In *Stephen Hero* Stephen explicates the epiphany in subjective terms that emphasize the "gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus" (*SH* 211). Most critics have followed his lead in narrowing Joyce's notion of the epiphany to an instantaneous, subjective insight, often expressed in visual metaphors. Beja is typical in finding Joyce's emphasis is usually "on the perceiving consciousness."<sup>3</sup> Stasis, he affirms, "encourage[s] the frozen moment conducive to epiphany."<sup>4</sup> Kenner does note that "the phenomena he grasps before seeking appropriate words are themselves so largely linguistic,"<sup>5</sup> but he goes on to paraphrase Stephen's definition of the epiphany as "a spiritual eye seeking to adjust its focus to what is there." Scholes recognizes the two different kinds that focus on "either the sensitive mind of the young artist or the vulgarity of those around him," yet he still defines the epiphany as the "revelation of the soul through the vestment of the body,"<sup>6</sup> what Tucker calls a "moment of sudden illumination,"<sup>7</sup> and Dettmar "the breaking forth of the mysterious through the dull veneer of the everyday."<sup>8</sup> Yet if the dialogue epiphanies are derived from social interactions, the critical problem becomes one of how to interpret them epiphanically, first by themselves since Joyce initially circulated them in manuscript form, and second as he adapted them to the contexts of his later novels. Assuming their "vulgarity of speech or of gesture," what is their "sudden spiritual manifestation" or self-exposure? To address this problem we must first re-examine the evidence of Joyce's intent—the examples and explanation that he (that is, Stephen) offers in *Stephen Hero*. Our next step will be to offer interpretations of a range of dialogue epiphanies—from the child's to the adult's, both satirical and serious— independently and as altered for their fictional contexts.

Stephen's definition of the dialogue epiphany establishes a creative tension between the "spiritual" and the "vulgar." To grasp the meanings of these terms it helps to recall their other uses in Joyce's early fiction. For example, in *Stephen Hero* Stephen notices "the vulgarity of [Emma's] manners" (*SH* 158); in the *Dubliners* story "The Boarding House" Bob Doran admits that Polly was "a little vulgar" (*D* 66), and in "A

Little Cloud” Chandler finds Gallagher’s manner of speaking “vulgar” (*D* 77). Thus, the meanings of “vulgar” range from unsophisticated and uneducated to common or crude, a spectrum that fits the surviving dialogue epiphanies. In the secular context of *Stephen Hero* the term “spiritual” is even harder to pin down, although Beja rightly notes that Joyce’s use of the term is more figurative than religious.<sup>9</sup> Instead of turning to Stephen’s aesthetic theory for its elucidation, more relevant clues can be found in the passage that precedes his definition. Upset and angry after being sexually rejected by Emma, Stephen wanders around Dublin, and “in every stray image of the streets he saw her soul manifest itself and every such manifestation renewed the intensity of his disapproval” (*SH* 210). The “manifestation” of her “soul” refers to her actual self as reflected and revealed in the pretense and coarseness of Dublin street-life, as Stephen views it.

This “spiritual manifestation” only Stephen can discern because he “strove to pierce to the significant heart of everything” (*SH* 33) including everyday chat. His mind “was often hypnotized by the most commonplace conversation. People seemed to him strangely ignorant of the value of the words they used so glibly” (*SH* 26). As James told his brother Stanislaus, he wanted above all to show “the significance of trivial things”<sup>10</sup> that others had overlooked. Unlike those with romantic temperaments, his own classical spirit chose “rather to bend upon these present things and so to work upon them and fashion them that the quick intelligence may go beyond them to their meaning which is still unuttered” (*SH* 78). Yet to a publisher Joyce maintained that only a foolhardy writer would dare “to alter in the presentment, still more to deform whatever he has seen and heard” (*Letters II* 134), emphasizing the recording rather than the refashioning of experience.

## 2.

Joyce’s invention of the dialogue epiphany soon became a topic of conversation among his contemporaries who were naturally wary of his secret transcribing. Both his brother Stanislaus and his friend Oliver St John Gogarty later offered their own understandings of the epiphany. Significantly, both focus on the dialogue rather than the subjective type. Stanislaus emphasized that his brother “always had a contempt for secrecy,” and therefore his epiphanies were initially “ironical observations of slips, and

little errors and gestures —mere straws in the wind— by which people betrayed the very things they were most careful to conceal,”<sup>11</sup> adding that even in those pre-Freudian times, “the revelation and importance of the subconscious had caught his interest.” As Beja comments, at that time only Freud matched Joyce’s “unusual fascination with apparently irrelevant details of speech and gesture.”<sup>12</sup> (By analogy the dialogue epiphany could even be called a Joycean “slip.”) Stanislaus understood “the significance of unreflecting admissions and unregarded trifles, delicately weighed, in assaying states of mind for what is basic in them.”<sup>13</sup> And in his own opinion “no writer in English since Sterne has exploited the minute, unpromising material of his immediate experience so thoroughly as my brother did...”<sup>14</sup> Joyce “has put himself into these [epiphanies] with singular courage, singular memory, and scientific minuteness...The keen observation and satanic irony of his character are precisely, but not fully, expressed”<sup>15</sup> —all comments that point to the dialogue rather than the subjective epiphanies.

While Stanislaus defensively insists that their subjects “were never people of any importance,” Gogarty would surely have disagreed, for he admits to being an “unwilling contributor” to Joyce’s collection. In his understanding Joyce’s epiphany was “any showing forth of the mind by which he considered one gave oneself away,”<sup>16</sup> especially in casual conversation. According to their contemporary testimonies, Joyce’s dialogue epiphany is suddenly noticing the accidental verbal exposure of someone’s (or even your own) true self in a social situation.

Assuming that the epiphanies would somehow be intelligible to his readers on their own, Stephen decides to collect “many such moments together in a book of epiphanies” (*SH* 211). Scholes and Kain note that “by the end of 1902 they had attained the status of a manuscript collection, to be passed around to admiring friends or shown to literary figures such as George Russell, who had been given a set before Joyce left for Paris.”<sup>17</sup> In sharing them with Yeats Joyce announced that “he had thrown over metrical form...that he might get a form so fluent that it would respond to the motions of the spirit” (*JIII* 102). Stephen’s youthful literary project is confirmed later in *Ulysses* by his ironic thought: “Remember your epiphanies on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world...” (*U-G* 41). Although Hayman optimistically suggests that as a complete sequence they “might have combined to

approximate a self-sustaining artifact,”<sup>18</sup> the fact that they were initially circulated without the theoretical explanation in *Stephen Hero* makes it difficult to imagine what his Dublin literary friends made of these puzzling fragments of their own everyday conversations.

Their lack of context that leaves the “discourses [to be] determined in their situation by the reader”<sup>19</sup> has even been celebrated by post-modern critics, writing more generally of the Joycean epiphany. Tucker, for example, finds the epiphany as a genre to be “underdetermined in origin and indeterminate in significance.”<sup>20</sup> Dettmar sums up Joyce’s epiphanic method as a “resolutely decontextualizing, disorienting, discomforting technique.”<sup>21</sup> Rejecting the tradition of reading *Dubliners* epiphanically, he contends that the stories likewise “resist our desire for closure, for interpretation, for Meaning.” The later adaptations of dialogue epiphanies for *Stephen Hero* and *A Portrait* may supply narrative contexts, but they do so without thereby superseding our interpretation of the free-standing originals, Joyce first intention.

### 3.

For our first example I want to examine the dialogue that Stephen uses to illustrate his own definition of an epiphany. As trivial as it seems, the conversation in front of “one of those brown brick houses which seem the very incarnation of Irish paralysis” made “an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely...” He doesn’t explain why, assuming that readers will instinctively share his own reaction and intuit the “spiritual manifestation:”

The Young Lady—(drawling discreetly) . . . O, yes. . . I was . . . at the . . . cha . . . pel  
 The Young Gentleman—(inaudibly) . . . I . . . (again inaudibly) . . . I . . .  
 The Young Lady—(softly) . . . O . . . but you’re . . . ve . . . ry . . . wick . . . ed . . . (SH 211)

Stephen insists with a touch of irony that “it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.” And he has, in fact, recorded with a linguist’s precision not just their words but the tones, pace, audibility, and even the pauses in their conversation, (although he does omit their gestures and appearances). In fact, Stephen’s “codifying impulse is frustrated by his incomplete observation.”<sup>22</sup> Given the Young Lady’s slow speech, this exchange must have lasted at least ten seconds, so the reader may wonder

how Stephen could have overheard so much of their conversation “as he passed on his quest” walking down Eccles Street, while the couple remain standing in front of a house. The discrepancy suggests that he was likely a participant-observer of their exchange.

The Young Lady had been to church, so she must be an observant Catholic, yet her dalliance with the Young Gentleman is obviously seductive. Her first speech apparently confirms the Young Gentleman's (unrecorded) suggestion about where she had been earlier. She speaks with a deliberate slowness, “drawling discreetly,” her pace and pauses marked with spaced periods (“...O, yes...I was...at the...cha...pel...”) although there is nothing about her reply that would call for discretion. Perhaps because his back was to him, Stephen can't hear the Young Gentleman's response except for the assertive first-person pronoun. The Young Lady's response indicates that what he said was mildly shocking in religious terms (“...O...but you're...ve...ry...wick...ed...”).

For Stephen to find this brief, trivial exchange revealing shows that it must have been directly relevant to his own situation. In his earlier approach to Emma, he was obviously in the Young Man's position. Unsurprisingly enough, Emma's response was unfeigned shock and rejection. Yet in a previous conversation she only pretended to be shocked when he asked her to confess her sins to him (*SH* 154). And Stanislaus records an exchange his brother had with one of the Sheehy daughters in which he compared the moon to “the chubby hooded face of some jolly fat Capuchin.” Evidently amused, she responded with “I think you are very wicked,”<sup>23</sup> a biographical reason for Stephen/Joyce to make the connection.

After overhearing and recording this scrap of conversation he decides to make a collection of them —seemingly an unpromising plan for a young writer. More promising is his report that this “trivial incident,” fueled by his own anger over what he regards as Emma's sexual hypocrisy, also motivated him to write “some ardent verses which he entitled a ‘Villanelle of the Temptress,’” a far cry from the original scene. In his obsessed state of mind he sees the anonymous Young Lady as the archetypal temptress — apparently the “spiritual manifestation” or true self that he discerns in her “vulgarity of speech,” according to his own definition. His intense reaction also suggests that, in addition to her dialogue, the Young Lady's physical attractions also made an impact.

## 4.

Turning next to the manuscript collection, the first epiphany in the sequence established by Scholes and Kain was also the first to be inserted into *A Portrait* where its “spiritual manifestation” becomes quite different. As he does for most of the dialogue epiphanies, Joyce records the original setting in brackets, local details that would be meaningless to anyone except Joyce and his closest friends. They do, however, anchor his memory to a particular place—a city, a house, and an address—with the same precision that he brings to transcribing the dialogue itself. Oddly enough, he usually omits the date, so in this first epiphany the reader must gather from his behavior that Joyce is still a child.

[Bray: in the parlour of the house in Martello Terrace]

Mr. Vance—(*comes in with a stick*). . . O, you know,

He'll have to apologise, Mrs Joyce.

Mrs. Joyce—O yes . . . Do you hear that, Jim?

Mr Vance—Or else—if he doesn't—the eagles'll  
come and pull out his eyes.

Mrs Joyce—O, but I'm sure he will apologise.

Joyce— (*under the table, to himself*)

—Pull out his eyes,

Apologise,

Apologise,

Pull out his eyes.

Apologise,

Pull out his eyes,

Pull out his eyes,

Apologise.<sup>24</sup>

Typically with the dialogue epiphanies the reader starts it somewhere in the middle and must guess the topic, or in this case the incident that led to James running inside to seek his mother's protection. Despite the stick that he carries, Mr. Vance's tone seems casual (“. . . O, you know,”) yet he directly confronts Mrs. Joyce about her son's behaviour. Not that she disagrees with him—he must already have told her what her son did. Her saying “Do you hear that, Jim?” shows that he remains at a distance. While his hiding under the table is the setting for the scene in *A Portrait*, here it is unspecified until the rhyming. Mr. Vance then completes his own statement with the mock-scary alternative: “Or else—if he doesn't—the eagles'll come and pull out his eyes.” Some readers have connected this

folk saying to the myth of Prometheus, but as a Bible-reading Protestant Mr. Vance alludes relevantly enough to Proverbs 30:17: "The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it." The boy's brave flaunting of adult authority is the central "spiritual manifestation" in this scene.

In the later *A Portrait* version Eileen Vance and her family are mentioned in the previous paragraph without an explicit link to this scene, and there is no threatening figure of Mr. Vance invading the Joyce family's parlour to punish Stephen for some boyish misdeed. In the *A Portrait* version (*P* 8) the same threat is made in more formal English (and without the stick) by Dante, a familiar figure in their household. In both contexts the repeated rhymes are the same, but in the original epiphany James speaks them quietly "to himself," while in *A Portrait* the rhymes are italicized like his two earlier songs, leaving the reader to assume that the boy repeats them defiantly to Dante and his mother. In both settings the reader is left in suspense about the boy's apology, doubting that he can defy two adults, yet the narration stops short of his submission. The epiphany's exposure of true selves shows that even as a guilt-ridden young child Stephen had the courage and imagination to neutralize adult commands by turning them into his own rudimentary poetry. In contrast to his own defiance, we see his mother's passivity when confronted by the male authority of Mr. Vance.

In another dialogue epiphany that Joyce later adapted for *A Portrait*, the older boy visits his great-aunt's house at Usher's Island, this time as a detached observer of adult behaviour rather than as a victim/rebel. Joyce introduces it with an atmospheric sketch unusual in the dialogue epiphanies, and the dialogue format omits the speakers' names as in a novel:

High up in the old, dark-windowed house: firelight in the narrow room: dusk outside. An old woman bustles about, making tea; she tells of the changes, her odd ways, and what the priest and the doctor said . . . . . I hear her words in the distance. I wander among the coals, among the ways of adventure. . . . . Christ! What is in the doorway? . . . .A skull—a monkey; a creature drawn hither to the fire, to the voices: a silly creature.

—Is that Mary Ellen? —

—No, Eliza, it's Jim—

—O . . . . O, goodnight Jim—

—D'ye want anything, Eliza? —

—I thought it was Mary Ellen. . . . . I thought you were Mary Ellen, Jim—<sup>25</sup>



The perceiver is not mentioned at first, and since Joyce has already set the scene, the place is left unspecified. The anonymous old woman's report is merely summarized to suggest the narrator's preoccupation, his imagination focused so intently on the fire that he seems to wander "among the coals, among the ways of adventure." Distracted as he is, Eliza's sudden, grotesque appearance at the door is doubly shocking —his own fantasy "adventure" has turned frightening. Initially, he cannot even identify her as human but as a primitive "creature drawn hither to the fire, to the voices." Her dialogue shows this creature to be "silly," (that is, feeble-minded), and the boy does not respond either to her greeting or to her final comment, perhaps due to the shock. Taken thus by surprise, Jim is exposed as living in the world of his own imagination, perhaps the "spiritual manifestation" of this epiphany.

In adapting the epiphany for *A Portrait* (P 67-68) Joyce expands on his original description, emphasizing vocal tones that flesh out the dialogue: the old woman spoke "in a low voice," and the now attentive boy "sat listening to the words" while he stared into the fire. Ellen's voice is characterized as "whining," whereas the old woman "answered cheerily." The epiphany's present-tense imagistic sketch is also filled in with explanatory details in the past tense. So the terse notation "dusk outside" is expanded to "a spectral dusk was gathering upon the river." The generalized "firelight in the narrow room" becomes "firelight flickered on the wall..." The boy who "wander[s] among the coals, among the ways of adventure" now follows those ways farther into the more romantic "arches and vaults and winding galleries and jagged caverns." Compared to the epiphany's abrupt stream of consciousness style ("Christ! What is in the doorway?") Eliza's appearance is much less shocking ("Suddenly he became aware of something in the doorway.") Significantly, the brief dialogue itself remains unchanged, but when Ellen greeted Stephen, the boy "answered the greeting and saw a silly smile break over the face in the doorway..." In *A Portrait* Ellen's final comment "I thought you were Josephine, Stephen" leads to her "repeating this several times, [and] she fell to laughing feebly," which makes her mental deterioration more explicit than in the original epiphany. She is near the end of her life, and he is near the beginning of his; thus, they both wander in their fantasies, but for very different reasons. Like the previous example, this epiphany is not integrated into the overall plot of the novel.

## 5.

The previous two examples are vivid memories from Joyce's childhood, whereas most of the surviving dialogue epiphanies are from later in his life. Their "spiritual manifestations" or self-exposures occur among equals rather than from a child's perspective. For instance, Joyce recorded four dialogue epiphanies from social gatherings at the Sheehys, a Dublin family that had monthly open houses for their children's friends. In Epiphany 17 Joyce records his friends satirizing his own literary pretensions:

[Dublin: at Sheehy's, Belvedere Place]

Hanna Sheehy—O, there are sure to be great crowds.

Skeffington—In fact, it'll be, as our friend Joxax would say, the day of the rabblement.

Maggie Sheehy— (*declaims*)—Even now the rabblement may be standing by the door!<sup>26</sup>

As Scholes and Kain point out, both Skeffington and Maggie parody the final sentence in the essay "The Day of the Rabblement," which Joyce had published in 1901 together with an essay by Skeffington.<sup>27</sup> In Joyce's essay the sentence "Even now that hour may be standing by the door" (*CW* 72) refers to the young writer—obviously Joyce himself—who, disdaining the mob, stands ready to carry on the lofty mission of the aged Ibsen, the meaning that Maggie has cleverly reversed. Her declamatory tone also parodies Joyce's superior literary stance. In the epiphany Hanna refers matter-of-factly to some public gathering, but the other two exhibit a literary sophistication that Joyce (as Stephen) had found sadly lacking in his conversations at previous Sheehy parties. Since he doesn't speak himself, he must be the amused observer of their friendly but pointed satire—an implicit act of self-exposure.

Joyce's friends make further fun of his literary pretensions in another epiphany (No. 18) that involves Dick Sheehy. This scene takes place not in the Sheehy parlour but nearby "on the North Circular Road: Christmas."

Miss O'Callaghan — (*lisps*) —I told you the name, *The Escaped Nun*.

Dick Sheehy — (*loudly*) — O, I wouldn't read a book like that . . . I must ask Joyce. I say, Joyce did you ever read *The Escaped Nun*.

Joyce—I observe that a certain phenomenon happens about this hour.

Dick Sheehy —What phenomenon?

Joyce — O . . . the stars come out.

Dick Sheehy — (*to Miss Calahan*) . . . Did you ever observe how . . . the stars come out on the end of Joyce's nose about this hour? . . . (*she smiles*) . . . Because I observe that phenomenon.<sup>28</sup>

Sheehy and Miss O'Callaghan seem to have been talking about what Scholes and Kain identify as a pornographic novel, a racy topic for a proper young lady. So when Sheehy “(*loudly*)” denies that he would ever read such a book, his tone must be ironic, as it is when he asks Joyce about the book, knowing his advanced literary tastes. (Joyce was apparently nearby but had not heard their first exchange). Joyce's wonderfully irrelevant response to his pointed question neatly skirts the novel itself. When Sheehy questions him further, he cites not their silly mood but a nightly natural event: “O . . . the stars come out.” Sheehy, who is carrying on two separate conversations, turns to his more appreciative auditor to parody Joyce's ironic answer. She smiles at his crudely surrealistic image of Joyce's nose, but the reader is not told Joyce's reaction. Only that since the epiphany ends there, he obviously resists the temptation to top Sheehy's amusing parody of his intellectuality. As in the rabblement epiphany neither Sheehy nor Miss O'Callaghan take Joyce seriously —and Sheehy certainly gets the best lines. This uncovering of true selves in these epiphanies shows that Joyce's friends have the intellectual confidence and wit to tease him about his literary pretensions —and that Joyce can appreciate a joke, even at his own expense. Significantly, neither humorous epiphany found a place in the sober pages of *Stephen Hero* or *A Portrait of the Artist*.

On the other hand, Joyce often does feel superior to his friends, as in Epiphany 11. Obscure on its own, the reader cannot know who they refer to or what question Joyce answers, although the context of a guessing game is implicit:

[Dublin: at Sheehy's, Belvedere Place]

Joyce—I knew you meant him. But you're wrong about his age.

Maggie Sheehy— (*leans forward to speak seriously*). Why, how old is he?

Joyce—Seventy-two.

Maggie Sheehy—Is he?<sup>29</sup>

In this exposure of true selves we see Joyce overplaying the male authority, and Maggie playing the admiring, uninformed woman. In *Stephen Hero* he fills out its original context of a parlour game called “Who's Who.” When it was Stephen's turn to guess, the playful company turned serious and made the obvious choice of Ibsen —Joyce's current

obsession— but they didn't know enough about him to answer Joyce's questions. Of course, as soon as "Norway" was mentioned, Stephen immediately guessed the answer. The game over, he sat beside one of the Sheehy daughters —she had a "rural comeliness" and "large handsome eyes"— and "waited quietly for her first word which, he knew, would destroy his satisfaction" (46) in her beauty. He thought that she was "about to trust him," until she said:

—How did you guess it so quickly?

—I knew you meant him. But you're wrong about his age.

Others had heard this: but she was impressed by a possible vastness of the unknown, complimented to confer with one who conferred directly with the exceptional. She leaned forward to speak with soft seriousness.

—Why, how old is he?

—Over seventy.

—Is he? (*SH* 46)

As in most of the novelistic adaptations of his epiphanies Joyce keeps the original dialogue intact. Now Maggie initiates the exchange with her obvious question. Instead of acknowledging her implied admiration of his literary expertise, Stephen criticizes her publicly for not knowing Ibsen's age. Her embarrassment is then countered, or so he imagines, by his public reputation, ironically exaggerated in the narrator's description (although Joyce did write an admiring letter to Ibsen and received a reply, *JIII* 85-87). These two sentences of omniscient psychological insight have been added to the bare dialogue of the original. In the epiphany she "*leans forward to speak seriously*" with no reason given, while in the adaptation she speaks with "soft seriousness" to avoid being overheard by the others. With no response from Stephen the adaptation concludes as abruptly as does the original. This unilluminating exchange is for some reason the last straw for Stephen, and he vows to avoid the Sheehy's parties in the future.

As Hayman observes, although the original epiphany is "not permitted to speak for itself, the potential for such expression is there in the dialogue..."<sup>30</sup> The interpretive problem remains one of elucidating the "spiritual manifestation" implicit in these dialogues.

## 6.

While the party scenes are humorous and satirical, some of the other dialogue epiphanies present serious events, and their self-exposures are correspondingly more

critical. For example, No. 19 takes place during the fatal illness of Joyce's younger brother Georgie, a traumatic scene that was later reworked as the conclusion to Chapter XXII of *Stephen Hero*. The setting is the Joyce home at evening:

Mrs. Joyce—(*crimson, trembling, appears at the parlour door*) . . . Jim!  
 Joyce—(*at the piano*) . . . Yes?  
 Mrs. Joyce—Do you know anything about the body? . . . What ought I do? . . . There's some matter coming away from the hole in Georgie's stomach . . . Did you ever hear of that happening?  
 Joyce— (*surprised*) . . . I don't know . . .  
 Mrs. Joyce—Ought I send for the doctor, do you think?  
 Joyce—I don't know . . . What hole?  
 Mrs. Joyce— (*impatient*) . . . The hole we all have . . . here (*points*)  
 Joyce— (*stands up*)<sup>31</sup>

As shocking as this must have been for him, the young Joyce records the scene with detached accuracy. Taken by surprise, his own role is a passive one. Yet his mother's frightened appearance as described by the narrator calls for more of a response than just his slow "Yes?" Also, her first anxious question about the body allows enough time for an answer that doesn't come. Joyce's delayed response of "I don't know" seems to answer her second question "what ought I do?" When she repeats her question, adding the practical option of calling the doctor, she gets the same bland answer, followed by the delayed question "What hole?" At this point the reader can understand the impatience that motivates her final gesture. (She either doesn't know or delicately avoids the word "navel.")

That the epiphany ends with Joyce standing up from the piano suggests his shock and may even signal his taking some action, but he says nothing to confirm his concern. The "spiritual manifestation" of the young Joyce's unfocused reactions reveal him to be either slow to grasp the realities of the family tragedy or eager to evade them, while his mother is panicky, indecisive, and naïve about the human body.

The interpretive context Joyce supplies for this epiphany in *Stephen Hero* creates a very different overall impression on the reader. In their "hopeless house" where Stephen felt that he "breathed an air of tombs," he sat silent at the piano while around him "hung the shadow of decay." While in this depressed mood "a form which he knew for his mother's appeared far down in the room [and] . . . a voice which he remembered as his mother's voice, a voice of a terrified human being, called his name." As if viewing her through the wrong end of a telescope, he sees her as just another example of the hopeless human condition. Not that he

exempts himself from her seeming unreality, since “the form at the piano answered.” When she asks him if he knows about the human body, “he heard his mother’s voice addressing him excitedly like the voice of a messenger in a play.” By its artificial terms the simile conveys his detachment. His simple response of “(*surprise*)” in the epiphany is now developed far more sympathetically: “trying to make sense of her words, trying to say them again to himself.” His emotional distance gradually decreases, but there is no final gesture of standing up to express his shock. The scene and the chapter simply end with his mother’s emphatic statement: “— The hole . . . the hole we all have . . . here,” leaving implicit her pathetic gesture and her impatience with her eldest son. Thus, by adapting the epiphany to the context of *Stephen Hero* Joyce generalizes it as an example of Stephen’s attitude to life at this time. What seemed to be James’s slow, unfeeling response to his mother’s terror is now sympathetically presented as Stephen’s coming back to earth after extended introspection. Yet as Hayman suggests, the adaptation adds “a new kind of surprise and even vague amusement at the mother’s ultimately touching reticence and perhaps even at Stephen’s pathetic self-importance,”<sup>32</sup> at this tragic time for his family.

Joyce’s emotional response to his brother’s death appears in another epiphany that takes place in the National Library where Joyce and his fellow university students studied and socialized:

Skeffington — I was sorry to hear of the death of your brother. . . sorry we didn’t know  
in time . . . to have been at the funeral . . .  
Joyce — O, he was very young. . . a boy . . . .  
Skeffington — Still. . . . it hurts. . . .<sup>33</sup>

While Skeffington’s expression of sympathy is conventional, his final comment sounds sincere. Yet Joyce’s own reply is odd, as if his brother’s youth or gender somehow made his death less painful. Either Joyce does not have a conventional reply ready, or he refuses to provide one. At any rate, until it has been contextualized the meaning of the epiphany remains as obscure as Joyce’s final silence.

In *Stephen Hero* the context of the funeral and its aftermath show Stephen’s impatience with the “network of falsities and trivialities” surrounding the death. Friends all expressed their sympathy in “the same listless unconvincing monotone” (*SH* 169). McCann (Skeffington in the epiphany) seems different, however. Joyce shifts the setting from the National Library to a street where Stephen stood examining ties in a haberdasher’s window.

McCann “shook hands briskly with Stephen,” and after he expresses his regret about not attending the funeral, “Stephen released his hand gradually and said: “—O, she was very young . . . a girl.” McCann then “released his hand at the same rate of release, and said: — Still . . . it hurts.” Apart from the child’s gender, their dialogue remains the same. Although it is unclear why, Stephen concludes that “the acme of unconvincingness [was] reached at that moment.” Nothing about their handshake appears in the original epiphany, yet this precisely described gesture becomes the “spiritual manifestation” of their exchange in the novel.

Another precisely described but ambiguous gesture occurs in Epiphany 40, the last one in the Scholes and Kain collection. It is exceptional because it is a rough draft with Joyce’s own corrections. The setting is precisely noted: “Dublin: in O’Connell St.: in Hamilton Long’s, the chemist’s” — that is, not just any Dublin chemist shop. (I have placed the crossed-out words in brackets.)

Gogarty — Is that for Gogarty?

The Assistant — (*looks*) —Yes, sir . . . Will you pay [take it with you?] for it now?

Gogarty — No, [send it] put it in the account; send it on. You know the address.  
(*takes a pen*)

The Assistant — [Yes] Ye—es.

Gogarty — 5 Rutland Square.

The Assistant — (*half to himself [as] while he writes*) . . .5 . . .Rutland . . . Square.<sup>34</sup>

Although Joyce must have silently observed this scene, memorizing the dialogue to add to his collection, his presence is nowhere indicated. Gogarty’s first statement implies pointing at the bottle, and then the shop assistant repeats the address in time with his much slower writing process, that familiar but complex interaction between speech and gesture. He repeats it “*half to himself*,” a subtle distinction of address. Joyce’s few corrections seem to increase the accuracy: the vocal extension of “ye—es” precisely implies the clerk’s polite uncertainty, while “pay” for “take it with you” may just be to correct his memory of this unmemorable scene. For Gogarty Joyce’s epiphanies were “any showing forth of the mind by which he considered one gave oneself away,” and what Gogarty reveals here is the unconscious social authority that comes with affluence.

In conclusion, Joyce, like Stephen Hero, was “hypnotized by the most commonplace conversations” (*SH* 26), and sometimes found in them the accidental self-exposures that he called epiphanies. Given the plethora of possibilities in his everyday experience, how he

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selected them for that honour remains a mystery. The fact that he recorded them implies their “vulgarity of speech or of gesture,” but the “sudden spiritual manifestation,” the revelation they dramatize, tends to be left radically open in intent and meaning, even after Joyce interprets some of them contextually in his later fiction. That Joyce never published his epiphanies as a collection, circulating them only among his friends, suggests that he relied on their insider’s knowledge of the people and places to contextualize them. But to later readers they can seem pedantically precise records of insignificant exchanges, in the words of one critic, “blind and useless witnesses of the inexpressible.”<sup>35</sup> Yet they remain “the original building blocks of his creative system...”<sup>36</sup> By their original definition the dialogue epiphanies encompass not only an individual’s subjective insight, but also the act of observing the accidental revelation of someone’s true self in a social situation. In this process Joyce is a participant-observer—often one half of the dialogue—not the introspective solitary artist of the subjective epiphanies long favoured by critics. And the secret self exposed in public is often his own. This dialogical reorientation of the Joycean epiphany places it where the “story of the essential self meets the accidents of historical contingency,”<sup>37</sup> connecting Joyce’s lifelong passion for realistic precision with his equally strong passion for meaning. That for Joyce they were also epiphanic should draw a new critical attention to the dialogues in his novels.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Vicki Maffey, "Joyce's Shorter Works," *The Cambridge Companion to James Joyce*, ed. Derek Attridge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004) 211.

<sup>2</sup> David Hayman, "The Purpose and Permanence of the Joycean Epiphany," *JJQ*, 35.6 (Summer-Fall, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Morris Beja, *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1971) 77.

<sup>4</sup> Morris Beja, "Epiphany and Epiphanies," *A Companion to Joyce Studies*, ed. Zack Bowen and James F. Carens, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984) 708.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Kenner, *Dublin's Joyce* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1987), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Scholes, *In Search of James Joyce* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1992) 141, 137.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Tucker, "Epiphany and Browning: Character Made Manifest," *PMLA* 107.5 (Oct. 1992) 1215.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin J.H. Dettmar, *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1996) 85.

<sup>9</sup> Beja, *Epiphany* 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ellmann, first ed., 169.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 124.

<sup>12</sup> Beja, *Epiphany* 76.

<sup>13</sup> Stanislaus Joyce 127.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>15</sup> Stanislaus Joyce, *The Complete Dublin Diary*, ed. George H. Healey (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971) 10.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Scholes and Richard M. Kain, *The Workshop of Daedalus: James Joyce and the Raw Materials for A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1965) 7.

<sup>17</sup> Scholes and Kain 5.

<sup>18</sup> Hayman 651.

<sup>19</sup> Colin McCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 28.

<sup>20</sup> Tucker 211.

<sup>21</sup> Dettmar 85, 104.

<sup>22</sup> Joshua Jacobs, "Joyce's Epiphanic Mode: Material Language and the Representation of Sexuality in *Stephen Hero* and *Portrait*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 46.1 (Spring 2000) 23.

<sup>23</sup> Stanislaus Joyce, *My Brother's Keeper: James Joyce's Early Years*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking, 1958) 150.

<sup>24</sup> Scholes and Kain 11.

<sup>25</sup> Scholes and Kain 15.

<sup>26</sup> Scholes and Kain 27.

<sup>27</sup> Scholes and Kain 27.

<sup>28</sup> Scholes and Kain 28.

<sup>29</sup> Scholes and Kain 21.

<sup>30</sup> Hayman 640.

<sup>31</sup> Scholes and Kain 29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 642.

<sup>33</sup> Scholes and Kain 32.

<sup>34</sup> Scholes and Kain 50-51.

<sup>35</sup> Catherine Millot, "On Epiphanies," *James Joyce: The Augmented Ninth*, ed. Bernard Benstock (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1988) 207-8.

<sup>36</sup> Hayman 636.

<sup>37</sup> Tucker 1211.