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Fragments of theatrical revelation: James Joyce's *Epiphanies*

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Remember your epiphanies written on
green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to
be sent if you died to all the great libraries
of the world, including Alexandria!

(J. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 3: 141-3)

1. One wonders if Stephen Daedalus' auspices have been fulfilled, that is, if the newly founded Library of Alexandria (or, New Bibliotheca Alexandrina, inaugurated in 2002) hosts such "green oval leaves". The quotation from *Ulysses* displays Stephen's mind engaged in a monologuing mood, musing over a number of fragmented topics, such as the reading of books at Marsh's library, in St Patrick's close, compared to a "stagnant bay", evoking the heretic mystic Gioacchino da Fiore and the wise, rational horses of *Gulliver's Travels*, associating liturgical objects (monstrances) and legendary beasts and monsters (basilisks, also traditionally interpreted as the devil and the anti-christ). The monologue extends past 40 lines (*Ulysses*, 3: 105-46) in the form of five paragraphs, and the mention of written epiphanies and the library of Alexandria falls nearly at the end of it. Blamires summarizes the content of the monologue in two paragraphs:

Nor could he find it [what he is seeking] in intellectual study, as he discovered when he forsook the family circle for Marsh's library, where he read the prophetic books of "Abbas" Joachim of Fiore... Stephen recalls his early piety, also his early sexuality which clashed with it; then his early ambitions to be a dedicated artist, leaving behind him a series of books, beautiful, profound, mysterious, which scholars in ages to come would treasure and ponder. (Blamires 1966: 15)

In Stuart Gilbert's re-phrasing, "Stephen once aspired to write 'deep' books, epiphanies, manifestations of Himself, which would be apprehended only after the great cycle of a *manvantara* had rolled its course" (Gilbert 1930: 114) ¹.

What has caught my attention is the fact that this monologue is preceded by some "imagined dialogue", which strongly resembles what critics have collected under the label of "dramatic epiphanies":

—It's Stephen, sir.

—Let him in. Let Stephen in.

[...]

—We thought you were someone else.

[...]

—Morrow, nephew.

[...]

—Yes, sir?

—Malt for Richie and Stephen, tell mother. Where is she?

—Bathing Crissie, sir.

[...]

—No, uncle Richie...

—Call me Richie. Damn your lithia water. It lowers. Whusky!

—Uncle Richie, really...

—Sit down or by the law Harry I'll knock you down.

[...]

—He has nothing to sit down on, sir.

—He has nowhere to put it, you mug. Bring in our chippendale chair. Would you like a bite of something? None of your damned lawdeedaw airs here. The rich of a rasher fried with a herring? Sure? So much the better. We have nothing in the house but backache pills (*Ulysses*, 3: 72-98).

The scene depicts an imaginary, though not too far-fetched, visit of Stephen to Uncle Richie (his mother's brother), where Stephen is offered a malt drink he tries to refuse. The dialogic situation is simple: three speakers, cousin Walter, Uncle Richie Goulding and Stephen himself, are at play; the dialogue follows the sequence A(Walter)B(Richie)BBABAC(Stephen)BCBAB. If one looks at the distribution of quantity and size of conversational turns, then

¹ Mahamanvantara is a term used by Stephen at the end of the paragraph quoted, to describe an astronomical period of time in Hindu philosophy.

one will conclude that the dominating speaking position is held by Uncle Richie: he is the one who gives commands, launches threats and oaths, keeps the floor for at least one lengthy turn. While cousin Walter is in a dominated condition, trying to comply with his father's requests and orders, Stephen, the visiting guest, is allowed to speak for two turns only, when he tries to refuse the drink without avail.

The resemblance between the dramatic epiphanies and the dialogue pictured by Stephen is structural, since they are both verbal interactions opening up on character exploration. What is missing in the above dialogue is the narrator's intervention: the interaction recorded in the novel, in fact, is "surrounded" with the narrator's voice, which illustrates the event and adds comments. The novelistic context transforms a piece of "real" conversation into a fictional object, where the features of natural interaction are toned down. On the contrary – as we shall see – the dramatic epiphanies, meant as dialogue written to be spoken, tend to preserve the maximum of "non-fluency" features².

2. "Epiphanies" was the name given by Joyce himself to "little character-revealing dialogues and various impressions" he started jotting down since 1900, according to his brother Stanislaus (Joyce 1950: 15). The debate whether the Epiphanies we now find collected in volumes (Scholes and Kain 1965; Groden *et al.* 1978) are to be studied as "shorter works" of their own, or raw material for later writings, as Vicky Mahaffey writes³, is far from finding a definitive answer. Giorgio Melchiori collected the writings under the title *Epifanie* in an Italian edition, complete with the English text, that gives a numbered order to them and separates the dramatic epiphanies from the narrative ones (Melchiori 1982). He claims that they are "espressioni autonome del genio creativo di James Joyce" (Melchiori 1982: 9)⁴, thus fully endorsing the need of an independent study of Joyce's juvenile sketches.

On the other hand, Epiphanies have been studied either as pre-compositional materials to form "genetic dossiers" of later works, or as a base (that is, raw materials once more) to explore the concept of "epiphany" with-

² For the conversational analysis of dramatic dialogue that is hinted at here and develops at point 3., reference is to Aston *et al.* 1982; Hermans 1995; and Short 1996. For the so called "non fluency" features, cf. Short 1996: 176.

³ "It is only by an exercise of the imagination that the epiphanies and *Giacomo Joyce* can even be called "works"; Joyce published neither in its original form, choosing instead to loot them for the more ambitious undertakings that followed, and neither received the painstaking polish that Joyce lavished on his more ambitious productions" (Mahaffey 1990: 185). Cf. Attridge, ed. 1990, Chapter 9, 185-211, in particular 190-3.

⁴ "autonomous expressions of James Joyce's creative genius".

in Joyce's personal framework of an aesthetic theory⁵. There seems to be a permanent conflict between the two perspectives. Back in 1990 Mahaffey claimed that: "...the epiphanies have seemed less attractive in their denuded manuscript state than when decked out in the heavy robes of myth, religion, and aesthetics" (Mahaffey 1990: 193).

In this essay I will try to follow Melchiori's line and analyse the "denuded manuscript", that is, the linguistic and dramatic features of the Epiphanies collected by the Italian scholar under the label of "Epifanie drammatiche"⁶.

3. Melchiori opens the Italian edition with the sixteen epiphanies in dramatic form, since he presumes that they were written before the narrative ones. The sequence follows the order shown in the original manuscripts, the only variant being the microsequence of the two set in Mullingar (Melchiori 1982: 20).

After a quick survey of their contents, it is clear that most of them are to be read as fragments of imaginary (dramatic) scenes, whose settings vary from different private houses in Dublin, to public places in Dublin, such as streets, squares, the National Library, and a pub; one is set in London, two in Mullingar (*Table 1*).

Alongside with Melchiori's reading of them as biographical memories of Joyce and Joyce's family members⁷, the dramatic epiphanies can be read not simply a recording of fragments of "real" dialogic exchanges, but can be analysed as scripts to be delivered orally in the context of a stage and therefore they can be dealt with as "minimal promptbooks"⁸.

⁵ The most recent study in this line of genetic studies is Ilaria Natali's book (2008: 31-48), which explores the genetic processes of Joyce's *Portrait*.

⁶ It is clear that the editorial work done by Giorgio Melchiori needs to be taken as an implicit interpretation, which does not represent the "true" text. In a brilliant contribution to the Conference "Early Modern English Studies in Italy", held in Bologna, 23rd April 2010, Carlo Maria Bajetta maintained that it would be mere illusion to consider a critic's editorial work as the exact representation of the true text: "...considerare il volume che si ha di fronte come il testo. Ma questo è semplicemente un'illusione: ogni edizione è un'interpretazione delle vicende di un'opera, non la rappresentazione "oggettiva" di uno scritto. Per comprendere appieno una qualsiasi narrazione, dobbiamo invece analizzare la storia del testo, avere la pazienza di seguirla nella sua genesi e nel suo sviluppo. Il risultato è molto spesso [...] quello, ben più rilevante, di scoprire i reali contenuti e significati dell'opera letteraria". (cf. C.M. Bajetta, "Angosce da traduttore: le poesie 'inglesi' di Sir Thomas More", ms version).

⁷ The biographical reading is, of course, corroborated by the fact that a character named "Joyce" is among the speakers in eight out of the sixteen Epiphanies (while the real, biographical Joyce is evoked once by the name of "Jocax", and again by the quotation from Joyce's essay *The Day of Rabblement*, E10).

⁸ For the sake of both analysis and intelligibility I will use the shorthand En to indicate the number of each epiphany as indicated by Melchiori in the Italian edition.

*Table 1**

N.	SETTING [STAGE DIRECTIONS]	TURNS	SPEAKERS	CONVERSATIONAL FEATURES
1	Bray: in the parlour of the house in Martello Tower	6	3 Mr Vance, Mrs Joyce, Joyce	Speech act: THREAT Nursery rhyme
2	Dublin: on Mountjoy Square	3	2 Joyce, Aunt Lillie	Turn-taking: Adjacency pair + Follow-up Non-fluency features: Suspension points
3	In Mullingar: an evening in autumn	5	2 the Lame Beggar, the Two Children	Non-fluency features: Suspension points Speech act: THREAT
4	Mullingar: a Sunday in July: noon	1	1 Tobin	False monologue Non-fluency features: suspension points
5	Dublin: in the Stag's Head, Dame Lane	3	2 O'Mahony, Joyce	Turn-taking: Adjacency pair + Follow-up Non-fluency features: Suspension points Speech act: THREAT
6	Dublin: at Sheehy's, Belvedere Place	4	2 Joyce, Maggie Sheehy	Turn-taking: Adjacency pair + Follow-up
7	Dublin: at Sheehy's, Belvedere Place	4	2 O'Reilly, Hanna Sheehy	Non-fluency features: Pause, Silence, Suspension points

* Numbered Epiphanies follow Melchiori's edition.

N.	SETTING [STAGE DIRECTIONS]	TURNS	SPEAKERS	CONVERSATIONAL FEATURES
8	Dublin: at Sheehy's, Belvedere Place	5	3 Fallon, Joyce, Blake	Non-fluency features: Pause, Suspension points
9	Dublin: at Sheehy's, Belvedere Place	7	3 Dick Sheehy, Mr Sheehy, Fallon	Non-fluency features: Suspension points
10	Dublin: at Sheehy's, Belvedere Place	3	3 Hanna Sheehy, Skeffington, Maggie Sheehy	Turn-taking: Adjacency pair + Follow-up uttered by a third speaker
11	Dublin, on the North Circular Road: Christmas	6	3 Miss O'Cal- laghan, Dick Sheehy, Joyce	Non-fluency features: Suspension points
12	Dublin: in the house in Glengarriff Parade: evening	8	2 Mrs Joyce, Joyce	Non-fluency features: Suspension points
13	Dublin: in the National Library	3	2 Skeffington, Joyce	Turn-taking: Adjacency pair + Follow-up Non-fluency features: Suspension points
14	London: in a house at Kennington	1	1 Eva Leslie	False monologue Non-fluency featu- res: Suspension points, pause
15	Dublin: at the corner of Connaught St, Phisborough	4	2 the Little Male Child, the First Young Lady	Non-fluency features: repetition
16	Dublin: in O'Connell St: Hamilton Long's, the chemist's	6	2 Gogarty, the Assistant	Non-fluency features: pause, filler, repetition

They begin (and most of them end, as well) *in medias res*, that is, as elusive fragments of conversational interaction, often using deictic forms that refer to something uttered off-scene. They all use (and manipulate) the mechanics of spontaneous conversation; for example, they make large use of the insertion of those small silent pauses, fillers and unnecessary repetitions, the “non-fluency” features that usually occur in daily conversation. Such are the cases of E2, E3, down to E16: altogether eleven Epiphanies show a dense and consistent use of pauses and such “non-fluency” features, sometimes declared in the stage directions, other times expressed with suspension points. The maximum of naturalistic effect is thus gained in the construction of verbal interaction that aims at miming real conversation.

The dialogic structure of the dramatic epiphanies vary from a single turn (apparently a monologue: there are two of them) to an eight-turn exchange. Three interactions out of sixteen show a basic three-turn structure with two parties, Speaker A asking a question or giving an order, Speaker B answering or executing the order, and Speaker A following up with an evaluation turn (adjacency pair+follow-up). Nine of them use a two-speaker verbal interaction (duologue). This type of dyadic exchange represents the format that will be privileged in Joyce's only play, *Exiles*.

Two Epiphanies are presented as monologues, in that they indicate one speaker only. But they fail to comply with the conventions of theatrical monologues when we look at their discursive organization. At least another dramatic character, that is, one (silent) listener, is implied in the conclusive utterance, which we read in E4: “My advice to every young fellow that can afford it is: marry young”; and all the more so in the second case is a silent listener implied – or, one might say, prescribed – by the use of the interrogative utterance: “yev ’eard of Fred Leslie?” (E14). The use of false monologues hints at the special attention paid to what will be developed as interior monologue in Joyce's later novels.

A special microsequence is represented by the five Epiphanies that are set at Belvedere Place, E6 to E10. Here a public context, the monthly cultural meetings at Sheehy's house, as we learn from biographical reconstructions, is devised to dramatize social situations where different speakers deal with various literary, social, and political topics, from Ibsen's age (E6) to a fake parliamentary debate (E9). In E8 a character named “Joyce” is speaking and a reference is made to the “real” Joyce as having performed as an actor: he is being persuaded by another character not to get on with such a “terrible” career. And while biographical evidence of an early interest in theatre, acting, and playwriting would support a speculative joining of the dramatic character and the “real” Joyce, the dialogue in itself seems to remark a self-ironic attitude of the biographical would-be actor (Ellmann 1982, 53, 56). E10 plays

on two allusions to the biographical Joyce (the name of “Jocax”/Joyce and the quote from *The Day of Rabblement*). The microsequence, therefore, because of the public sphere evoked, seems to be a portrait of public Joyce.

Threats, as speech acts conveying a speaker’s radical, violent, and aggressive attitude and character, together with a general sense of disruption in both interpersonal communication and social harmony, are used in two Epiphanies: the one that opens the collection, E1 and E3. Both play on interpersonal conflict where the character who threatens is dominant, while the one to whom the threat is addressed suffers, but without reacting, or rather, at least in the first case (E1), the one threatened responds in a mitigating, and childishly self-protective way by picking up and repeating to himself the topical words of the previous turns (“apologise”; “pull out his eyes”) to build up a sort of nursery rhyme.

Smoother forms of disruptive behaviour in the conversational cooperation among speakers are represented by E11 (a participant is requested to answer a question, but diverts attention from the request by moving to another topic and speaking of an astronomical phenomenon, instead; eventually he is teased by his two interlocutors), by E5 (first speaker says: “...writes poetry...”; second speaker replies “...has written verses”; first speaker follows up with: “Verses, yes ...that’s the proper name for them”, thus ironising upon an analogy between writing (bad) poetry and the calls and cries in animal communication; the ironical pun might be based on the word “verso”, which means both “poetical line” and “animal cry” in Italian), by E15 (speaker asking a question twice but does not get any pertinent answer, just a rejection, “Na.o”, that unexpectedly starts the exchange and is repeated once).

Elusiveness of reference to a specific contextual framework is shown by E2, although the exchange structure is clearly defined as an adjacency pair, followed by a comment reinforcing the first speaker’s participation in the exchange, but not a participation in the topic raised (profitable marriage aspirations).

The longest exchange is E12, where the two speakers, “Mrs Joyce” and “Joyce”, are engaged in a painful duologue over “some matter coming away from the hole in Georgie’s stomach”. One cannot avoid referring to a tragic biographical occurrence in Joyce’s life, the death of his fifteen-year old brother George (Ellmann, 1982: 95-6). The duologue develops for eight turns, four assigned to each speaker, although the concluding turn is silent. The alarmed atmosphere of uncertainty is fully underlined by pauses, suspension points and, above all, interrogative forms, which do not wait for an answer, thus constructing a profound sense of urgency and distress. E12 forms a microsequence with E13 which follows, where we come across a character we have already met in the context of Belvedere Place, Skeffington. He

starts the exchange with a tentative talk of apologies about not being present at George's funeral. The answer (given by the second speaker, "Joyce") avoids accepting them and impertinently refers to George's adolescent age. Skeffington's follow-up insists on the painfulness of the circumstance. The whole exchange is, therefore, marked by the ambiguity created by the impertinent answer.

4. We can begin to sum up with the question: what is revealed by the "denuded manuscript" of the dramatic epiphanies? The most obvious revelation, after this brief analysis, regards the author's keen observation of realistic verbal interaction, the firm grasp on what nowadays are called "conversational rules", and their re-use in a dramatic context. Moreover, the exploration of the turn-taking system in its varieties, and combinations of quantity and size of turns is developed, no matter how faintly depicted the topic chosen for each epiphany might be. Secondly, there is the attention given to the construction of interpersonal relationships, from the most tragic and threatening to the most formal and conventional. And finally, we see how elusiveness, irony and self-irony are used as a sort of trademark of their author.

Leaving aside as far as possible any indulgence on biographical matter, the dramatic epiphanies can be read as minimal theatrical interactions, whose stuff is drawn from ordinary familiar life and ordinary social occasions. The reader is allowed to intrude into these minimal dramatic sketches, although deprived of one or more extensive co-texts which might give reason for fully developed dramatic characters or dramatic plots. This notwithstanding, he or she can dig meanings out of them, thanks to skilled creation and disposition of ordinary materials.

One calls to mind some of the contemporary dramatic productions staged recently at the Royal Court Theatre, where very short dramatic actions have been performed. As an example, Caryl Churchill's *Seven Jewish Children* (premiered on 6 February, 2009) might be mentioned, where the members of a Jewish family debate on how they could describe the political and historical conflict between Israel and Palestine to a young girl. The play, a ten-minute *pièce*, is organized in seven "cryptic" scenes, developing the theme of conflict and how to narrate it. One of the militant critics that reviewed the performance applauded the work as a manifest expression of the ability of the theatrical medium to deal with contemporary issues and "to react more rapidly than any other art form to global politics" (Billington 2009).

A century ago, back in 1900, a master in language, James Joyce, was starting his personal exploration of the issues of his own times through the dramatic form.

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ABSTRACT

The essay proposes an approach to the *Dramatic Epiphanies*, Joyce's early works, as self-contained pieces of dramatic writing. The tools of conversational analysis are applied to the texts, which reveal the author's grasp on dramatic dialogue, his exploration of the turn-taking system in a dramatic text, and his ability to construct minimal verbal interactions, no matter what the topics are. Irony and self irony are also detected as features of the *Epiphanies*, later to become the trademark of *Exiles*, his only extant play, and of Joyce's later narrative works.