
Introduction

He desired not to be a man of letters but a spirit
expressing itself through language.

James Joyce

In Joyce's early novel, *Stephen Hero*, Stephen Daedalus famously defines an "epiphany" as

a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed 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. (*SH* 216)

This definition introduced the term "epiphany" to literary studies, shaping all subsequent debates. Indeed, the passage has been interpreted so extensively that one might wonder whether there is anything left to add, but the quotation I have chosen for my epigraph, which Joyce recorded under "Dedalus" in his alphabetical notebook (*WD* 96), indicates how much remains to be analyzed, for there has not yet been a study of Joyce's *linguistic* epiphanies.

In this book, I argue that language is the site of the Joycean epiphany: unlike classical, biblical, and Romantic epiphanies, the "spiritual manifestation" is not a divine apparition or an immanent revelation but "spirit expressing itself through language" (*WD* 96). Stephen's aesthetics of epiphany, the manuscript epiphanies themselves, their role in the genesis of Joyce's works, and the lifelong investigation of language he conducted through them all point to a single conclusion: for Joyce, an epiphany is not a revelation of God, nature, or the mind but of the human spirit embodied in language.

But if Joyce's epiphanies are simply linguistic phenomena, why has their significance been overlooked for so long? From the publication of *Stephen Hero* in 1944 until Morris Beja's *Epiphany in the Modern Novel* (1971), the concept of epiphany was central to Joyce studies;¹ indeed, it became so widespread that some critics believed the term had become a worn-out cliché or meaningless catch-all. Ironically, the most virulent attack came from Robert Scholes,² who edited the first complete edition of Joyce's epiphanies in 1965.³ Having coauthored *The Workshop of Daedalus*, Scholes's objection to "epiphany hunters" was naturally influential, and since the 1970s, the epiphanies have largely been neglected in Joyce studies.

While Scholes's demand for greater precision was warranted, the reaction against the epiphanies was misguided, particularly because there has been so much confusion about Joyce's early texts. In 1941, Harry Levin, one of the earliest and best of Joyce's readers, believed that the "book of epiphanies" Stephen thinks of writing in *Stephen Hero* was *Dubliners* (Levin 1941, 29). With the publication of the manuscript "epiphanies" in Buffalo (1956) and Cornell (1965), Levin's mistake became apparent: by 1904, Joyce had written at least forty short texts he called "epiphanies." Even when these were identified, there was still confusion about their genre: several critics referred to them as prose pieces, despite the fact that Joyce's brief, enigmatic texts alternate between dramatic sketches and prose-poetic vignettes. The latter are highly lyrical but obscure, while the elliptical dialogue of the dramaticules is frequently puzzling; there is rarely, if ever, a "sudden spiritual manifestation." Indeed, Joyce's epiphanies often seem trivial, or even insignificant, rather than revelatory, making it difficult to reconcile them with Daedalus's epiphanic theory. To many commentators, this obscurity and banality seemed to undermine the claims of early critics like Irene Hendry that "Joyce's work is a tissue of epiphanies" (1946, 461), but one could equally argue that it is their "vulgarity of speech"—or ordinariness of language—that substantiates her intuition. Not recognizing the fundamentally *textual* nature of the epiphanies, in the 1970s and 1980s post-structural critics concentrated on *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, with some critics regarding the epiphanies as juvenilia—a notion conclusively disproved by the fact that three-quarters of Joyce's epiphanies are reused in his later works.

These misunderstandings concerning the nature and function of the epiphanies are partly explained by the uncertainty surrounding the texts.

Their date of composition is unknown: the most likely interval is 1901–1903, but Joyce may have begun earlier and continued later.⁴ Their number is uncertain: since an autograph manuscript of twenty-two epiphanies in Buffalo is numbered discontinuously to seventy-one, it has long been thought that more than thirty are missing, and critics have tried to identify the “lost” epiphanies in Joyce’s works; but a typescript of the epiphanies I discovered in 2015 raises doubts about the authenticity of the verso numbering.⁵ The sequence of the Yale typescript and the uncertainty of the Buffalo numbering also call into question the order of the epiphanies: it has been assumed, for instance, that Joyce progressed from dramatic to lyrical epiphanies in his prose works, but close study of the extant manuscripts, including the Yale typescript, shows that this claim rests on false grounds, and that little, in fact, can be said with any confidence about the order of the epiphanies.

Given the uncertainty surrounding the date, number, and order of the epiphanies, I believe it is high time to reassess their significance. In this book, I offer fresh readings of Joyce’s epiphanies, both as distinctive individual texts that question the nature of epiphany as an event and as a genre, and also as an ordered collection or “book of epiphanies.” Since Joyce reused thirty of the forty extant epiphanies, I examine them in the context of his subsequent works, returning to the earliest surviving manuscripts to consider the role of the epiphanies in shaping Joyce’s oeuvre, their relation to other modernist epiphanies, and what this might teach us about modernism as a whole.

The Crucible

The earliest critical commentary on Joyce’s epiphanies is Stanislaus Joyce’s Dublin Diary, begun in September 1903. The diary, which Stanislaus called “My Crucible,” is a key, and familiar, source of information about Joyce’s earliest work, but its crucial, alchemical role as a repository of those works has rarely been recognized. The diary opens with a memorable account of James Joyce’s developing character, lamenting his preference for “the sampling of liqueurs, the devising of dinners, the care of dress, and whoring” over serious artistic endeavor, for Stanislaus recognized his brother’s literary talent to be “very great indeed” (197I, 14). Writing before Joyce had drafted any of the works that were to make his reputation, and with only a handful of poems and epiphanies to go by, Stanislaus proved an