

James Joyce

On “epiphany”

He was passing through Eccles’ St one evening, one misty evening, with all these thoughts dancing the dance of unrest in his brain when a trivial incident set him composing some ardent verses which he entitled a “Vilanelle of the Tempress.” A young lady was standing on the steps of one of those brown brick houses which seem the very incarnation of Irish paralysis. A young gentleman was leaning on the rusty railings of the area. Stephen as he passed on his quest heard the following fragment of colloquy out of which he received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely.

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 .

This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies. By an epiphany he meant ‘ a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. 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. He told Cranly that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany. Cranly questioned the inscrutable dial of the Ballast Office with his no less inscrutable countenance:

—Yes, said Stephen. I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin’s street furniture. Then all at once I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany.
(From *Stephen Hero*, 1904-05, Chapter XXV).

(*Stephen Hero* was the early version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, whose hero is renamed Stephen Dedalus. The *Portrait*, after serialization in *The Egoist* from February 1914 to September 1915, was rejected by every publisher in London. Even when *The Egoist* wanted to publish it in book form, the printers refused to print it. The novel was finally published in New York by Huebsch in December 1916. Pound championed the book since his early reading of the manuscript for *The Egoist*, gave Joyce

much encouragement and corresponded with him, and wrote an enthusiastic review in *The Egoist*):

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

The last few years have seen the gradual shape of a party of intelligence a party not bound by any central doctrine or theory.

[...] I would say that James Joyce produces the nearest thing to Flaubertian prose that we have now in English, just as Wyndham Lewis has written a novel which is more like , and more fitly compared with, Dostoevsky than is the work of any of his contemporaries. In like manner Mr. T. S. Eliot comes nearer to filling the place of Jules Laforgue in our generation. (Doing “the nearest thing” need not imply an approach to a standard, from a position inferior.)

Two of these writers have met with all sorts of opposition. If Mr. Eliot probably has not yet encountered very much opposition, it is only because his work is not yet widely known.

(From *James Joyce: At Last the Novel Appears*, February 1917)

On Language in *A Portrait of the Artist* (Chapter V)

(Conversation on aesthetics between Stephen Dedalus and the Dean of studies at University College, Dublin)

— To return to the lamp, he said, the feeding of it is also a nice problem. You must choose the pure oil and you must be careful when you pour it in not to overflow it, not to pour in more than the funnel can hold.

— What funnel? asked Stephen.

— The funnel through which you pour the oil into your lamp.

— That? said Stephen. Is that called a funnel? Is it not a tundish?

— What is a tundish?

— That. The funnel.

— Is that called a tundish in Ireland? asked the dean. I never heard the word in my life.

— It is called a tundish in Lower Drumcondra, said Stephen, laughing, where they speak the best English.

— A tundish, said the dean reflectively. That is a most interesting word. I must look that word up. Upon my word I must.

His courtesy of manner rang a little false and Stephen looked at the English convert with the same eyes as the elder brother in the parable may have turned on the prodigal. A humble follower in the wake of clamorous conversions, a poor Englishman in Ireland, he seemed to have entered on the stage of jesuit history when that strange play of intrigue and suffering and envy and struggle and indignity had been all but given through — a late-comer, a tardy spirit. From what had he set out? Perhaps he had been born and bred among serious dissenters, seeing salvation in Jesus only and abhorring the vain pomps of the establishment. Had he felt the need of an implicit faith amid the welter of sectarianism and the jargon of its turbulent schisms, six principle men, peculiar people, seed and snake baptists, supralapsarian dogmatists? Had he found the true church all of a sudden in winding up to the end like a reel of cotton some fine-spun line of reasoning upon insufflation on the imposition of hands or the procession of the Holy Ghost? Or had Lord Christ touched him and bidden him follow, like that disciple who had sat at the receipt of custom, as he sat by the door of some zinc-roofed chapel, yawning and telling over his church pence?

The dean repeated the word yet again.

— Tundish! Well now, that is interesting!

— The question you asked me a moment ago seems to me more interesting. What is that beauty which the artist struggles to express from lumps of earth, said Stephen coldly.

The little word seemed to have turned a rapier point of his sensitiveness against this courteous and vigilant foe. He felt with a smart of dejection that the man to whom he was speaking was a countryman of Ben Jonson. He thought:

— The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words HOME, CHRIST, ALE, MASTER, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired

speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.

— And to distinguish between the beautiful and the sublime, the dean added, to distinguish between moral beauty and material beauty. And to inquire what kind of beauty is proper to each of the various arts. These are some interesting points we might take up.