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Bernard Malamud's epiphanies

It has often been claimed that any evaluation of two writers which points at differences and similarities between them is oversimplified and artificial. While such assertions may underline the originality and inventiveness of a given author, they tell us little about his creative processes and literary background. How these two overlap will be presented in this paper on the example of Malamud's use of certain of Joyce's ideas such as the epiphany. Although the combination of the two totally different writers may look as a surprising juxtaposition there is a strong reason to believe that not only did Malamud "borrow" Joyce's concept of artistic epiphanies but made some structural and functional changes. Joyce's epiphanies are lyrical in that respect while those of Malamud tend to be rather dramatic.<sup>1/</sup> For Joyce, they are static but for Malamud they are dynamic. Joyce aims at showing a particular moment in a life of his characters; Malamud, on the other hand, approaches closer to telling the story and or setting it with all possible means of stage production. This paper hopes to account for these differences and show the two opposite views on the function of epiphany in a literary text.

Joyce is not the only "source" which the writer acknowledges.<sup>2/</sup> He owes much to Anderson, Chekhov and Peretz but he never attempts to imitate them. The ideas and methods employed by his predecessors are transformed artistically to meet a new environment and face new aims. However, Joyce has not been mentioned either by Malamud or his critics although his impact on Malamud's short stories is clear.

Both writers are interested in the relation between life and art: Joyce in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Malannd in Pictures of Piccolman, a cycle of six short stories. The former is a history of the latter a period of this genre. Instead of sensitive Stephen, a humorous scholar appears, a "self-confessed failure"<sup>3/</sup>. Like Joyce, Malannd deals with art; but while Joyce is fascinated with aesthetics, the moral perspective of art is a predominant motif in Malannd.

However, despite the discrepancies as far as the subject matter is concerned, both writers approach each other more closely in how they present certain decisive moments of their characters' lives. The technique of epiphany as applied by Joyce in Dubliners is therefore parallel to most of Malannd's epiphanies that occur in his short stories of four separate volumes.

2.

Dickens, defined as appearance of a deity in visible form, is an event fairly common in the Bible: e.g. commemoration of the baptism of Jesus when the Spirit of God descended from Heaven upon him, or the revelation of Jesus Christ to the three wise men of the Orient, the Magi. It was this particular event to suggest Joyce the name for what he wanted to introduce into literature. <sup>4/</sup> He assumed that not only deity can be suddenly manifested but also simple human features of character or thoughts. He began by observing ironically signs of the tongue by which people betrayed themselves. The aim of this game was to realize the significance of seemingly unimportant events in assaying states of mind for what is crucial to them, a theory that resembles Freud's handling with slips of the tongue. Joyce thus expanded a relatively limited concept of a "showing forth" / i.e. translation from Greek of the word *epiphany* / into any showing forth by which people showed unconsciously their inner thoughts and feelings.

Joyce propounded this theory of epiphany in Stephen Hero, the first draft of A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man. In a conversation about Aquinas's three requisites of Beauty, Stephen explains the nature of epiphanies:

First we recognize that the object is one integral thing. Then we realize that it is an organized composite structure, a thing in fact; finally when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted.

to the social point, we recognize that it is that which it is. Its soul, its radiance, its whanness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.<sup>5/</sup>

The mythical overtones of epiphany are present in the description of a sudden spiritual manifestation similar to that felt by the Magi. They were guided by the star to arrive eventually at Bethlehem. Joyce's characters have also certain instructions that guide them to radiant, crucial moments of understanding. This can either be a speech, a telling dialogue, a gesture or a piece of news. Led by the star, the Magi realized that Bethlehem meant for the whole world. Involved in Joyce's processes of mind, his characters endow trivial and quite common incidents with strength necessary to evoke deep passionate feelings.

Joyce's epiphanies share some common qualities. In all cases there must exist a trivial incident which will be capable of setting the mind thinking. It may be a conversation of how to court a simple woman / e.g. "Araby"/, a sermon of a commercial character / e.g. "Grace"/, or a piece of news / e.g. "A Painful Case"/ that make people experience a sudden insight. Thus a close contact of a person and the surrounding world is implied. This relation may be parallel in character / the exterior world is in correspondence with the hero's thoughts and feelings/ or contrastive / the description of the physical background brings out the differences between what it looks like and what the protagonist experiences. The epiphany is presented through a narrative situation.

Since it is in the nature of the epiphany to suggest more than can be said, two formal methods are employed to render them in a literary work: either day dreaming, which implies a contrast between harsh reality and beautiful dreams, as in the case of "Araby"; or placing the incident in the spectral world which underlines the precarious balance between the real environment and one's imagination, as in "Sisters". The first method can be called indirect, the other direct.

I shall present similarities and differences in handling the epiphany in two short stories: "A Painful Case" by Joyce and

"The Journeys" by Kalamud. The stories are alike in many respects: they both deal with the problem of death, one of them pertaining to the physical passing out of Mrs. Sinico and the other to the supposed death of Kessler's relatives. There is yet another perspective of death, the moral one underlying dead feelings of compassion, love and friendship. Narrated as tales, they only differ in the final resolution which in both cases is occasioned by the epiphanic revelation in the character's mind. However, while Joyce's characters plunge into greater alienation, Kalamud's Jews regain their psychological and moral balance. This difference can be easily accounted for when one realizes that Mr. Kalamud people experience epiphany to change their life for the better whereas in Joyce's stories they seem to be satisfied with a deeper knowledge and understanding of other people.

3.

James Duffy, from "A Painful Case", lives his life in complete loneliness and sterility. Changelized symbolizes his deliberate escape from the city and from the people: "spiritual life without communion with others". He does not believe in anything. He has "neither church nor creed". He is alone with neither companions nor friends. He talks to himself in the past tense using as a subject third person singular, which already introduces the dominant motif of the story: *d e a t h*. Although it is only mentioned with the tragic case of Mrs. Sinico's death, Joyce suggests more: it is the death of love and all human feelings. "We lived at a distance from his body, regarding his own acts with doubtful side-glances." Unloved and loveless he becomes acquainted with the neglected wife of Captain Sinico, a relation that soon "exalted him, wore away the rough edges of his character, emotionalized his mental life."

Duffy meets Mrs. Sinico only to change his daily routine. She is something extraordinary like his dream of robbing a bank under certain circumstances. Therefore he never opens himself to reach for the extended hand of his companion. Rather he listens to his voice to eventually reject her altogether when she betrays herself and shows excitement, a desire for carnal love expressed by pressing her passionate hand to his cheek.

His return to the previous regular duties is as quick as a sudden insight he experiences over his meal at the restaurant.

This is the place where Joyce introduces a trivial incident that soon becomes charged with revelation. It is a paragraph in the evening newspaper about the sudden death of Emily Sinico at Stoney Parade Station. The triviality of this moment is prompted by a number of factors: the newspaper is probably the one bought regularly by Mr. Duffy; the restaurant in George's Street is the one he regularly frequents, and such is the time of his visit and a set meal he orders. The key word here is the word *r e g u l a r*; it indicates nothing special, nothing even worth mentioning in the daily routine of Mr. Duffy. And yet having read the article twice, he realizes that he has denied her love, thus terminating her life long before she kills herself by train - suicide committed in alcoholic intoxication.

He had sentenced her to *f r o m i n g*, a death of shame. He gnawed the *r e c t i t u d e* of his life, /.../ no one wanted him, he was outcast from life's feast. 6/

The sudden spiritual manifestation occurs, ironically, in the Phoenix Park but instead of resurrecting from the dead, guilt-ridden conscience, Duffy plunges into despair over his loneliness and fading memory of his existence. Joyce handles the epiphany in lyrical terms: the article and the lady's death are important only as much as they can establish a starting point for a deeper analysis of what Duffy goes through in his mind.

Duffy confesses the sin he committed against the will of Mrs. Sinico and what is more - his own - the first moment when cold, intellectual thinking is faced with that coming from the heart. His confession is topical and in the subjective perspective of Duffy's emotions a lyrical situation is evoked. In the darkness he listens to silence alone, a dead soul in the living world. Thus Joyce underlines the contrast between a descriptive level which generalizes the subject of the story and an emotional one which makes it an individual, highly subjective particular event in one man's life.

However, the epiphany could not exist if it were not for these contrastive levels that explain, present the rain the lyrical fields. Mr. Duffy's knowledge that the only reason why whom he met on friendly terms is dead makes him realize, not without difficulties that he is dead too. The description of the park and the coming train to the station is only a pretext to express Duffy's

emotions that somehow imitate nature. This emotional level is dominant here and one can easily get an impression that the epiphany which Duffy experiences resembles a poem with a message that life without love is the life of a vegetable. The melancholic mood, bitter confessions of the protagonist and short, well balanced sentences add to the lyrical character of Joyce's epiphany. The desired meaning achieved is identical with lyrical poetry. As a rule a lyric contains internal tensions<sup>7/</sup> between two categories: that of a lyrical character and that of a presented world. In "A Painful Case" the epiphany works on a similar assumption. The presented world is described from a subjective and highly individualized character's point of view. Thus a contrast is created between the real world and the inner struggle in Duffy's mind. The picture of the world is static and objective while the struggle dynamic and subjective.

There are three convergent organizing principles that govern "A Painful Case". The world of Duffy's emotions after he parted with Mrs. Sinico forms the smallest semantic circle. Then comes nature, against the background of which, Duffy's feelings are presented. The darkness, cold and emotionness of the wood accompany Duffy when he experiences the moment of epiphany. The third circle is a generalization of Duffy's experience into the experience of all people in the world, a paralyzed world as Joyce saw it on the example of Dublin. This exposure of spiritual deficiency, a sort of mental paralysis of a crippled man, as Duffy turns out to be, is a sketch for a greater portrait of Dublin being spoilt by paralysis<sup>8/</sup>. Joyce's idea was to show through the epiphany how this paralysis is comprehended by people in different stages of their life. Thus he organized his epiphanies according to the characters' age: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life.<sup>9/</sup>

This is a characteristic feature of Joyce's use of epiphany. As S. Heisztyvski shows in his essay on Joyce's artistic epiphanies<sup>10/</sup>, their organization is not only restricted to Dubliners. It pertains to all Joyce's works, where the idea of the epiphany develops in ever-widening circles with every new book he produced: from Stephen Hero to Finnegans Wake. The external organization of epiphanies is strengthened by their internal function inside a separate unit in a Joyce's literary text. In the case of Dubliners it is a short story which, as Peter Garnet says<sup>11/</sup>, is complete not because it has presented the beginning, middle

and end of a plot, but because it has achieved its epiphany".

4.  
Almost half a century later since the publication of Dubliners, Bernard Malamud transforms the technique of the epiphany into Jewish short stories of contemporary American literature. His stories are essentially telling and profound though they are not formally organized as in Joyce's case / except for Pictures of Fidelman/. "The Kounimers" is an example of Malamud's use of epiphany. However, it does not exist in a literary text as a highly lyrical, dominant element organizing it and subordinating it to the sudden spiritual manifestation. Structural differences result from the fact that the epiphany in Malamud serves a different function - it helps to regain psychological balance and is a decisive factor in finding a new life, probably the commonest theme in Malamud's fiction.

Kessler, like Mr. Duffy, lives alone unable to be in good terms with other people. "He was a quarrelsome type and considered a trouble maker."<sup>12/</sup> His psychological alienation is borne out by a physical detachment. "Because he lived above so many flights of stairs noone bothered to visit him."<sup>13/</sup> Like Mr. Duffy, he is responsible for his state of affairs. In the past Kessler deliberately left his family and now he sheds people. Closed in his small tenement apartment, he does not search overtly for self-knowledge through a sudden insight. Nevertheless, it comes to him all the more stronger and enables him to assert his humanity. The same moment of revelation affects Gruber, the landlord, who, burdened by financial worries only, lacks sympathy, love and mercy. He too experiences a moment of self-revelation and return to humanity. These are the two major changes that Malamud presents rather than expresses. What counts here is not what and how the characters are torn apart by passionate feelings but what actually happens and how it proceeds. The stress shifts from lyricism to drama of the story.

Kessler, an old tenant of Gruber's block of flats, is dispossessed. Gruber's merciless decision sets Kessler's imagination going. It brings back memories of how he himself mistreated his wife and his children when he left them, showing no interest in who would provide for them. Like Mr. Duffy, he has

neither friends nor aims in life. Inloved and unable to love, he hears bangs at the door of his heart and has prickles of conscience for the suffering he has imposed on his family. "This thought smote to the heart and he recalled the past without end and moaned and tore his flesh with his fingernails." /p.28/

The person who actually bangs at the door is Gruber, who bursts in at that moment and finds Kessler sitting and moaning. Gilt-ridden, he experiences a moment of sudden revelation. Thinking at first that Kessler has received bad news, he suddenly realizes that "something is wrong here". Then comes a more frightening suspicion, that the old man is moaning for him - his dead spirit, his lost compassion and humanity.

Then it struck him with terrible force that the mourner was mourning him: it was he who was dead. The landlord was agonized. Sweating brutally, he felt an enormous constricted weight in him that slowly forced itself up, until his head was at the point of bursting.... At last he could not stand it any longer. With a cry of shame he tore the sheet off Kessler's bed and wrapping it around his bulk, sank heavily to the floor and became a mourner. /p.29/

The epiphany means to Malamud a gradual development of emotions which in turn communicate the meaning of the experience previously hidden by an invisible curtain of spite, injustice and hate.

Kessler and Gruber are an example of s y m b i o t i c r e p r e s e n t a t i o n. One insight in the former generates the insight in the latter. Kessler's epiphany comes to him through conscious remembrances of his misdeeds in life; Gruber experiences it through his senses, through his apprehension of Kessler's mourning. This is what distinguishes Malamud from Joyce, whose characters experience moments of epiphany as if only for themselves.

Malamud focuses his attention on his characters' behaviour. Instead of describing feelings and emotions as in the case of Joyce, he describes gestures and movements on the "scene". His narration functions as an equivalence of scenic acts. The dramatic nature of Malamud's epiphany is qualified also by a number of minor details that resemble stage directions in a play. The whole story seems to have dramatic potential for which the three unities are partly responsible. An exact picture of the tenement house in the

beginning. Some background for the movement of Kessler and Gruber, in the of the event is also sketched. The author's function as a dramatist is evident in the story after which the action is revealed. The dramatic character of the epiphany consists in the ability to give people in fiction more acutely to it, since a new life with the spiritual meaning of Malamud's characters. They become better, they begin to see other people's needs and are not left bewildered and desolate, but knowing what to do next, as are Mr. Jurek and other characters in Pushover.

Malamud's dramatic epiphany ceases to be merely a movement of drama as well as dramatic dynamism understood as the ability to cause movement and changes. The dominant feature is not to show how the character's emotions develop but what is actually happening to him and the surrounding reality. This in turn is often responsible for a contrast between sad and purposeless life before the insight and optimism after it. The epiphany involves a dramatic juxtaposition of hopeful optimism and unexpected sorrow, which, while causing pain and suffering in life, shows possible spiritual growth of all the characters in the story.

5.

Comparing the artistic epiphanies of Joyce with those used by Malamud one has to admit evident similarities both in the way they occur in a literary text and in the impact they have on characters. However, there are some differences which pertain mostly to the function they have and the place they occupy in the whole literary output of the two writers.

The theory of epiphanies put into practice in all successive works of Joyce is central and indispensable to understanding him as an artist. Each work develops the idea of the epiphany and intensifies its role. The epiphany spans the interval of simple human faults, as in Eveline and the multidimensional epiphanic view of the band in the last work of Joyce, Penelope. However, everywhere Joyce's epiphanies tend to present a vertical view of life evoked by focusing the whole fantastic material on one person in a crucial moment of his life.

Malamud, on the other hand, takes advantage of dramatic elements of the epiphany without any attempt to organize it in any way. For him poetic images are only present to justify movement

and the changes of action that result from a new self-knowledge. While Joyce's characters experience the epiphany to stop for a moment and think over their worries, Malamud's characters do not waste time. They get quickly sober plunged into despair over his lost humanity and will probably appear again strengthened morally. Diffy will continue contemplating his loneliness in the darkness taking either a false step or none at all.

Joyce's epiphany serves a specified artistic function. Malamud appears to be more pragmatic and he employs this device to convey certain ideas and attitudes of life. He does not theorize on the subject, nor does he widen the spectrum of meanings attached to a simple thing. Rather he connects epiphany with Judeo-Christian humanism giving it heavy moral aims.

Joyce's artistic epiphanies seem to be naturalistic in that they lead characters to accept harsh reality as compared to happy dreams. Malamud's moral epiphanies stress, on the other hand, the possibility of change even in case of utterly stubborn and vice-ridden characters. In the process of epiphanizing a trivial incident, reprobrates and schlemiels become men of substance.

Indeed, in Malamud's hands, epiphany, like irony, binds human actions and expectations - two opposite things. It connects the real and the ideal. Epiphany divides human lives; it is a natural border between schlemielism and menschlichkeit. Joyce has never reached that far. Epiphany for him is the final point of the story, leaving things as they are but with a better knowledge, in most cases depressing, of a given character. As a unifying force, Joyce's epiphanies focus on parallels in Dublin and Malamud's on the moral issue. This is the biggest contrast between them. While the former stresses what the world is like, the latter propounds changes based on the tireless moral code of love, understanding and sympathy.

By means of epiphany Malamud is capable of creating great moral awakening even in the moments of black despair. His ultimate goal is to achieve, by means of it, a balance between what is strictly Jewish and what concerns the whole of mankind. This finds its expression in an ambiguous claim that "every man is a Jew".<sup>14/</sup>

The epiphany, in both writers, comes usually as something shocking. The reader is left slightly bewildered. Joyce often ends his stories in the middle of a sentence, as long as the desired

object is epiphanized. Such is the end of "Grace"/ an unfinished sermon/, "Clay"/ ironic search for a corkscrew/ and "Counsellors" /an unfinished Neil Kinn prayer/. Malamud ends his stories in a shocking conclusion: two men kissing in "The Lean" or singing Kaddish for the living in "The Magic Barrel". The epiphany can work wonders: a desolate, cold water flat fills itself with grace /"The Fourners"/ or the stark tenement room in the glare of a single bulb becomes reverberant with strange beauty and significance /"The Silver Crown"/. In the end the reader is led to the conclusion that he himself experiences epiphany, that certain unquestionable truths of life are suddenly revealed and as soon as the confirmation for them is found, he recognizes the most radiant of the moments.

The effect of epiphany in both writers is the same: a character comprehends the nature of reality that is beyond its physical significance. Yet, it seems that the ultimate tension which rises in the process of epiphanizing is different in weight. Joyce suggests more, but Malamud does not leave a lot unsaid. He concludes that human nature is ambivalent, that there are possibilities of change in most desperate situations and that eventually a mensch wins over a schlemiel.

Notes

1. the term is used to refer to the ability of creating original characters in characters' actions and to similarities with drama as far as the structure is concerned. see: A. Niccoli, The Theatre and Dramatic Theory / George Harrap Co., London, 1965/.
2. Jan Lindtjard, "The Symbolism of Bernard Malamud" in Fernand Lévy - A Collection of Critical Essays / N.Y. New York University Press, 1970/.
3. Bernard Malamud, "Last Mohican" in Pictures of Fiddlerman / Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1960/ , p.11.
4. for more biographical data see: R. Elman, James Joyce / New York, 1958/.
5. James Joyce, Stephen Hero / New Directions, New York, 1944/p.215.
6. James Joyce, Dubliners / London, 1957/ , p.34.
7. Internal tensions are only hinted here to show the lyrical character of Joyce's epiphanies. For further information see: Ursula Orwin, "O lirice i wartosciach lirycznosci" in Genologia Polska / PWN, Warszawa, 1983/ pp. 272-286.
8. compare: Elman's biography and P. Garret, Twentieth Century Interpretations of Dubliners / Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1968/.
9. Ibid.
10. J. Holaszewski, "Artystyczne epifanie Joyce'a" in Zwrot i Mysl Nr 3-4, 1963, pp. 130-148.
11. Barrett, p. 11.
12. Bernard Malamud, "The Kourmens" in The Paris Barrel / Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1980/ p.21.
13. schliefl - a consistently unlucky or unfortunate person, a fool, a social misfit.  
 - schief - a human being, an upright, honourable, decent person.  
 took from Yiddish; see Leo Rosten, The Joy of Yiddish / Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1978/ pp. 240, 353-354.
14. Bernard Malamud, "Margel Levine" in The Paris Barrel p. 54;  
 Malamud is said to have expressed this opinion in one of his lectures given in Israel in 1968.

LUBELSKIE MATERIAŁY NEOFILOLOGICZNE — 1983

Sabine Kaufmann

Über Kinder, die anders sind  
Gedanken zur Literatur über behinderte Kinder -  
ausgewählte Beispiele der jüngsten DDR-Literatur.

"Von der Überzeugung getrieben, daß es doch  
 irgend jemanden geben müsse, der heilen kann,  
 schleppen wir unsere Kinder über die ganze  
 Erde und suchen den einen, der hilft."  
 Pearl S. Buck

Die Störungen in den normalen zwischenmenschlichen Beziehungen  
 "vervielfachen sich an den Nahtstellen, und gerade Behinderte haben  
 eine besondere Sensibilität für verborgene Risse und mögliche Schlag-  
 seiten."<sup>1)</sup>

In dieser Aussage liegt wohl die Ursache dafür begründet, daß  
 wir unter der in den letzten Jahren stark angestiegenen Anzahl von  
 Debitantliteratur relativ viel Literatur über behinderte Menschen,  
 insbesondere über behinderte Kinder, in der DDR zu verzeichnen ha-  
 ben. Literaturwissenschaftlich ist sie einzuordnen zwischen subjek-  
 tiv-authentischer Prosa und Dokumentarliteratur. Thematisch hoch-  
 aktuell und interessant, ist sie aber nicht immer unbedingt von ho-  
 hem künstlerischen Rang. Einen besonderen Stellenwert nimmt meines  
 Erachtens ein Werk ein, das von einer Autorin geschrieben wurde, die  
 nicht Schriftstellerin ist, sondern Fachärztin für Psychiatrie/Neuro-  
 logie, einschließlich Kinderneuro-psychiatrie und Psychotherapie,  
 Medizinalrat Dr. med. Gerda Jun.

In ihrem Buch Kinder, die anders sind, ein Elternreport, 1981<sup>2)</sup>  
 läßt sie acht Mütter und drei Väter behinderter Kinder über ihre  
 Erfahrungen mit der Umwelt, über Probleme des Zusammenlebens in Fa-  
 milie und mit anderen Menschen im normalen Alltag berichten. Hier