

## Summary

The purpose of this paper is to shift the focus of the current readings of Joyce's *The Sisters* from discourse to narration, by regarding it as a journey of a voice in search of a truly expressive locutional tonality.

# Paths of Disclosure

## and Discourse:

## Joyce's *The Sisters*

Os Caminhos da Revelação e do Discurso: *The Sisters*, de Joyce

Die Wege der Enthüllung und der Rede: *The Sisters* von Joyce

Luiz Alberto de MIRANDA\*

Centered on the story's process of enunciation, this essay seeks to demonstrate that, in his attempt to domesticate language and make some sense out of his utterance, the subject of the enunciation in *The Sisters* ends up entrapped by/in the very silence from which he tried to set himself free, through narration.

### Resumo

A finalidade deste trabalho é mudar o foco da leitura do conto *The Sisters*, de James Joyce, do discurso para a narração, considerando-o como a jornada de uma voz rumo a uma tonalidade locucional verdadeiramente expressiva. Centrado no processo enunciativo do conto, este ensaio procura demonstrar que, na tentativa de domesticar a linguagem e de impor sentido à sua elocução, o sujeito da enunciação em *The Sisters* acaba preso no/pelo próprio silêncio de que pretendia se livrar através da narração.

The purpose of this paper is to offer one more contribution to the study of the enunciative process of James Joyce's *The Sisters*, the opening story in *Dubliners*. To attain this goal, I shall focus my attention on the overall configuration of the young narrator's utterance, which I regard as a literary rendition of an adolescent's struggle for self-disclosure and apperception developed along the path of discourse. Starting out with the narrative voice's flamboyant display of locutional indeterminacy and undecidability — in the opening sentence of the story and throughout its first paragraph, respectively — I intend to examine four major aspects of the enunciative process of *The Sisters*: the pact adult-writer/boy-narrator, its implications and consequences; the especial kind of epiphany the story displays; the "cleavage" in the subject of the enunciation and his failure in transcending" himself or his own discourse; and last, but not least, the entrapping force of the three key signifiers of the text — *paralysis*, *gnomon* and *simony* — which, emerging from the thematic level of the story, set up a "prison house of language" for the narrator, laying their imprint both on the text's structural configuration and on its narrational effect.

No essay on *The Sisters* can overlook the complexity of the text's first paragraph or the intriguing ambiguity of its first sentence. Like the opening of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the initial lines of *The Sisters* are a stylistic "tour-de-force", and many critics have pointed out the similarities between the two passages. There are, however, striking differences between them, especially in regard to the control each narrative voice has over its material.

In Proust's long first paragraph, the first-person narrator uses the imperfect tense to evoke some of his bedtime rituals as a child, and —

\* Universidade Federal de Goiás

encounters no difficulty in articulating the feelings he used to experience whenever he found himself caught up on the threshold between sleep and alertness. In *Joyce's*, the narrative voice sounds rather hesitant in its choice of verb tenses. Unable to start with a clear-cut view of the incident, it mixes past-perfect and present tenses, that is, thoughts and perceptions occurring at the moment of the narration ("Now I knew... Now it sounded") with actions or attitudes occurred either in a recent ("Night after night I had passed... and studied") or in a remote past ("He had often said... and I had thought"). The end result is a truncated, tentative utterance, which gives us "the pattern of an experience as it actually is to memory or observation."<sup>1</sup>

The locutional tonality of each text's first sentence is also different. "Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure"<sup>2</sup> is an utterance that leaves no doubt as to when and by whom it is produced. The same cannot be said of the first sentence in *The sisters* ("There was no hope for him this time: it was the third stroke."<sup>3</sup> Entirely composed of monosyllables, and fully illustrative of a narrative voice's attempt to overcome speechlessness, this sentence lacks overt specificity in terms of both voice and referent, and constitutes an extremely odd start for a story in which character and narrator are one and the same figure. In contrast to the opening sentence of Proust's work, which definitely points to a past habit and paves the way for a recollection of past incidents, the first sentence in *Dubliners* combines reiteration and finalization, for it consists of the culmination (in the present) of a sequence of repeated facts (occurred in the past). With its two impersonal constructions, its third person pronoun and its deictic reference to time, the opening utterance of *The sisters* brings the immediate situation of both teller and character to the foreground of the diegetic space; and in its ambiguity, narrational in nature, it anticipates one of the basic issues of the story's enunciative project: the relationship be-

tween reporting self and experiencing self.

The first aspect of the enunciation of *The sisters* to be dealt with in this paper is precisely the one raised by the story's first sentence and paragraph: the relationship between reporting self and experiencing self. To analyze this relationship is to refer to the pact between writer and narrator, for it is this pact that determines the place, time and stance from which the story's enunciation stems, as well as the overall design — trace or finality — that its narrative voice performs and achieves.

There is no doubt that, in *The sisters*, narrative action and narrational act are not simultaneous. Narrating self and experiencing self are different subjects, or at least different stances of the same subjectivity. Yet, this is not to say that the subject of the enunciation in *The sisters* is an adult looking back to a childhood experience — which would be a gross misconstruction of the text's enunciative process. It is obvious that there is an adult presiding over the entire composition; but this adult chooses to disguise himself as an adolescent narrator and to become the main character in the story. Therefore, it could be said that the enunciative project of *The sisters* belongs to a mature subject (or self) who chooses to play the part of immature narrator (reporting self) so that the feelings of the thirteen-year-old boy he was (experiencing self) may come to the foreground of the diegetic space.

The disguise adopted is quite effective. Even in the earliest version of the story, published in the *Irish homestead* in 1904, the juvenile tonality of the narrative voice can be promptly perceived.

There, the opening lines of the story read as follows:

*Three nights in succession I had found myself in Great Britain Street at that hour, as if by providence. Three nights I had raised my eyes to that lighted square of window and*

*speculated. I seemed to understand that it would occur at night. But in spite of the providence which had led my feet and in spite of the reverent curiosity of my eyes, I had discovered nothing.*<sup>4</sup>

The "unknowing" position of the narrative voice in the quotation above shows that, as early as the first version of the story, the pact between adult writer and boy narrator had already been established and was already at work. According to this pact, the adult yields to the boy the right to narrate, and does not allow his adult consciousness to intrude in the narration.

The result of this process is a disruption of the conventional narrative norms, according to which a narration must be sparing, straightforward and coherent, so that it can perform its function properly. The boy's narration, however, is neither a straightforward nor a sparing one. He does not spare words, or goes straight to the point. His narration unfolds itself slowly and gradually, as though it were searching for its original motivation, or its remotest root — the sensation of perplexity that assailed the boy when he heard the reticent comment of the priest's sister on her brother's state of mind before his death. Also, the boy's narration lacks coherence, in the traditional sense. *The sisters* becomes coherent as a narration only insofar as it unfolds itself; and it is this very unfolding that provides it with its narrative status and allows it to impose itself as narration.

Therefore, it could be said that, in making the narrative voice of his reporting self that of an adolescent, the adult writer turns himself into an incompetent, almost impotent narrator, incapable of verbalizing the "epiphanic" experience he lived through. The master of diction deliberately becomes a master of inter-diction (of "diction-between", "half-diction") and also of interdiction (diction of interruption, prohibition, paralysis). In fact, as the young narrator of *The sisters* is unable to detach himself from the

emotion in which he has been caught up, he cannot see himself except with the eyes of the sentient self who experiences that emotion. By presenting his image "in immediate relation to himself" alone, he ends up producing a lyrical utterance — an utterance that, seeking to rearticulate an experience not so much to disclose its meaning as to recapture its revelation, suits perfectly Joyce's purpose, which is more to crystallize a vision than to manufacture a plot.

As I used the adjective "epiphanic", I think that, at this point, a review of the Joycean concepts of epiclesis and epiphany is in order, for both are essential to the understanding of Joyce's stories, including the one under consideration.

According to Peter Garret, epiclesis is the invocation the priest makes to the Holy Ghost, at the moment of the Consecration, so that bread and wine may turn into the body and blood of Christ, respectively. The term *epiphany* appears for the first time in *Stephen hero*, where the narrator defines it as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself."<sup>5</sup>

Each of the stories in *Dubliners* is an *epiclesis* — the transformation of a "slice of life" into an art object, a "thing of beauty". And each of them features, at the center of its thematic proposition, an *epiphany* — a moment of clairvoyance or perplexity, involving either character or reader or both. Yet, most of Joyce's "epiphany-oriented" critics<sup>6</sup> fail to emphasize that, in making his notion of *epiphany* the basic thematic component of his early short story collection, Joyce created not only an "epiphany-centered" narrative form, but also an "epiphany-centered" narrational method. The concept of epiphany serves to designate not only the thematic nucleus of Joyce's stories, but also their narrative structure and their narrational effect. It is as though the *epiphany* could "leak" from the thematic level of a story

through the structural to the narrational.

It should be stressed, however, that in some stories, the *epiphany* is characterized by a "hole" or "lack" — and becomes the revelation of an absence rather than the presence of a revelation, either for character or reader or both. This is precisely what occurs in *The sisters*. As the boy narrator fails to verbalize his "epiphanic" experience, the reader is prevented from sharing it; and is led to experience the epiphany of a lack (not a lack of epiphany), of absence, of silence. In this respect, the reaction of the reader to the boy's narration is similar to that of the boy to Elisa's reticent comment.

Now, we shall turn our attention to the boy narrator, the actual subject of the text's enunciation. In *The sisters*, the narrator seems to be speaking from two places/times simultaneously, or oscillating between two stances or stages of his "I". Since his enunciative gesture occurs shortly after the epiphany he experiences, there is a "cleavage" or "split" in the subject of the enunciation. Strictly speaking, the narrative voice in *The sisters* comes from two "I's": The "I" of the moment of the enunciation and the "I" of the moment of the epiphany. The tense fluctuation in the first paragraph of the story illustrates this assertion in full. The "I" of the moment of the enunciation engages himself in an act of narration in an attempt to recapture, through discourse, his other self — that is, the "I" he was at the moment of the epiphany. Self appropriation and apperception is the primary objective of the boy's narration, and the feature that makes it similar to a psychoanalytic session in which only the analysand is present. Opening his way along the path of discourse, he purports to effect a self-disclosure that would take him back to the time/place of his "epiphanic" experience. In other words, he is seeking to link narrating self and experiencing self, the "I" he is now (at the moment of the narrational act) with the "I" he was then (at the moment of the narrative action), to be able to verbalize his

experience in full. In his longing for or nostalgia of oneness and completeness, the boy narrator seeks to harmonize epiphanic perplexity and narrational alertness past sensation and present enunciation, in order to fashion a paradisaical, ideal self, in full possession of an equally paradisaical, ideal "logos".

The overall dynamics of the enunciation of *The sisters* thus reveals an Ego trying to set up an encounter with the Id, according to Freud's prescription in the third of his *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*: "Wo es war soll Ich werden".<sup>7</sup> Yet, even if the Id is, as Lacan would have it, that repository of truth to which the Ego should return as though it were returning home, the idea of a stabilized Ego, impermeable to the "threats" of the Id or totally accepting of its plural structures, is a utopia. The journey "back home" is a doomed enterprise simply because the human subject "can be grasped only as a set of tensions, mutations or dialectical upheavals, within a continuous, intentional, future-directed process",<sup>8</sup> which unfolds itself metonymically as discourse. So, the ideal self the subject of the enunciation in *The sisters* is looking for cannot be found except in the speaking subject he is, and the ideal "logos" he longs for cannot reside outside the signifying chain of his own enunciation. The "dictum" that is, the definitive discourse, lies in the "dicens", that is, the searching, tentative one — which is the only one the boy narrator, as a speaking subject, can ever utilize. Self-appropriation through disclosure and discourse does not go beyond self-acceptance. For the "lack" or "gap" that characterizes the operations of the subject "incapacitates him for selfhood, inwardness or apperception or plenitude; it guarantees the indestructibility of desire by keeping the goals of desire in perpetual flight."<sup>9</sup>

Joyce's *The sisters* has been also related to the theme of "transcendence". The critic Phillip Herring affirms:

Like most of Joyce's work, *The sisters* is about transcendence, in this case, how a young boy wishes to elude the authority of elders who unwittingly inhibit his spiritual and intellectual growth...<sup>10</sup>

My claim is that the theme of transcendence may be present in *The sisters*, but never with this coloration or on this level. I relate it not to the boy as character, but to the boy as narrator. In other words, I prefer to see a gesture towards transcendence on the narrational level of the text, and not on the narrative one. Simultaneously with his attempt to fill in his "gap", to "transcend" the precariousness of his subjectivity, is the effort of the boy narrator to move beyond his own discourse, to surpass its limits (or overcome its limitations), to "transcend" it — in order to attain a higher mode of expression, which would enable him to verbalize his experience in full. But the "transcendence" he longs for, the realm of the transparent, unambiguous "logos", cannot be reached, as long as Ego and Id continue to coexist. To put it differently, the boy narrator seeks to transcend his discourse in that he wants his narration to perform a traditional function, which is to narrate something, to point to a signified. He does not know that there is no signified except in the interplay of signifiers, no "logos" beyond discourse and no narrative except in narration: for he does not know that there is no stabilized selfhood, except in the subject that manifests itself in the mobility of the signifying chain of discourse. For "far from being an epiphenomenon of the signifier, the subject has a relation of interdependence with it... both are characterized by their power of indefinite structural displacement."<sup>11</sup>

This is one of the reasons why *The sisters* remains as "opaque" in its meaning as Miss Flynn's reticent comment on her brother's mental and spiritual confusion. In an attempt to restore his individuality by reconstituting the "sudden spiritual manifestation" that assailed him,

the young narrator can only retrace the steps that led him to the climactic epiphany he experienced; but he ends up by narrating events whose structural disposition reflects the very silence of which he wants to rid himself. *Énoncé* and *énonciation* are thus blended and no meaning is to be found behind the gestures of the narrative voice.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that the three key signifiers of the story — *paralysis*, *gnomon* and *simony* — not only encapsulate its thematic propositions and structural configuration, but also regulate its narrational design.

*Paralysis*, for example, turns out to be not only "the name of a maleficent and sinful being", (9), but that of an infectious and contagious disease, which contaminates even the voices of those who dare to speak about it. In fact, the boy's narration is a paralytic one, in that it stops at the very moment it should disclose a major revelation. What was supposed to be just the prelude to the verbalization of a significant experience ends up replacing both the experience and its verbal rendition; and what was supposed to be just an introduction to the narrative proper becomes the very corpus of the narrative. Also, as the reader is denied the pleasure of a satisfactory conclusion, he becomes as paralyzed by the boy's narration as the boy himself was by the words of the priest's sister. *Paralysis* thus becomes the first regulating force of the text's enunciation.

The second term, *gnomon*, serves to define the structure of the narrative, but it also points to the generating impulse and the end result of the narrational act. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, a *gnomon* is "the part of a parallelogram remaining after a similar parallelogram has been taken from one of its corners."<sup>12</sup> In the same way that "lack" or "gap" is what makes the human subject what he is, it is a lack, a hole (the missing part of the parallelogram) that provides the *gnomon* with its "raison d'être", and makes it what it is. Founded on the gnomonic structure

of a speaking subject, *The sisters* could only be a gnomonic utterance. In fact, the story lacks a conventional ending, and derives its identity as a text from this very detail.

The word *simony* also lays its imprint on the narrational design of the text under analysis. A live gnomon himself, the subject of the enunciation in *The sisters* is also guilty of the sin of simony. Although he does not sell any church goods, pardons or offices, he sells out his narration, misuses the sacred material at his disposition, speaks a lot but does not say much. Like the careless priest who drops the chalice containing the blood of Christ, the young narrator also wastes his blood together with his words.

In conclusion, it could be said that *The sisters* is a moment or place when/where the signifiers *paralysis*, *gnomon* and *simony*, actualizing themselves as narration, make a locution turn in upon itself and become circumlocution. To describe the subject of the enunciation of *The sisters* one could use a modified version of Malcolm Bowie's rendition of Lacan's concept of human subject: as he engages himself in the act of enunciation — a literary version of the process of language acquisition — the young Dubliner, inserts himself into the pre-existing symbolic order of that "hemiplegia or paralysis which many consider a city", thereby submitting his desire to the systemic pressures of that order: in choosing to narrate, he chooses language and allows his free instinctual energies to be operated upon and organized."<sup>13</sup>

In fact, as he tries to "deparalyze" himself by telling a story about (and out of) paralysis, the young narrator in *The sisters* loses control of his discourse and reaches the end of his narration as paralyzed as he was before he started it. The signifier *paralysis* combined with *gnomon* and *simony* — which sound equally strange and prove to be equally powerful — imposes its own pattern of signification on the narrator's enunciative gesture. "

turning his work into a reflection of the "deadly work" he himself longed to look upon. In this respect, *The sisters* is an illustration of the power signifiers have over those who believe to be in full possession and control of them. Oblivious, like most

speaking subjects, of the extent to which words made and continue to make man, the young narrator of *The sisters* ends up entrapped in a "prison house of language" and acted upon by the very words he believed he could domesticate with

his narrational act. This is his misfortune — and, paradoxically, the source from which we, as readers, derive our pleasure and gratification. □

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## NOTES

- 1 David Daiches, *Dubliners*. In *Twentieth century interpretations of Dubliners*. Peter Garret (ed.) Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968, p. 28. For quotations from *The sisters* refer to the 1980 Penguin edition of *Dubliners*.
- 2 First sentence of Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Cf. Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954, p. 3.
- 3 James Joyce, *Dubliners*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1980, p. 9.
- 4 Marvin Magalaner, *Time of apprenticeship: the fiction of the young James Joyce*. London, Abelard Schuman, 1959. In this book, Magalaner presents an extended analytical appreciation of Joyce's revisions of *The sisters*, along with a facsimile of the first version of the story. The reader should refer to Magalaner's work for a more detailed treatment of this issue.
- 5 Peter Garret, Introduction, *Twentieth century interpretations of Dubliners*, p. 11.
- 6 Among these, I include Harry Levin, Anthony Burgess and James R. Baker.
- 7 Sigmund Freud, *The major works of Sigmund Freud*. Chicago; III: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1971, p. 840.
- 8 Malcolm Bowie, Jacques Lacan. In *Structuralism and since*. John Sturrock, (ed.). London: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 131.
- 9 Bowie, p. 134.
- 10 Phillip Herring, Structure and meaning in *The sisters, The seventh of Joyce*. Bernard Benstock, (ed.). Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana Univ. Press, 1982, p. 131-144.
- 11 Bowie, p. 132.
- 12 Cf. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (College Edition). New York, NY: World Publishing Co., 1968, p. 619.
- 13 Bowie, p. 126.

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