I Don't Understand. I Fail To Say. I Dearsee You Too

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Before the nightmare "creaseword" puzzle of Finnegans Wake can dissolve, "and the nightmail afarfrom morning nears" (FW 565.32), "while the dapplegray dawn drags nearing nigh for to wake all droners that drowse in Dublin" (585.20–21), the corpse of Finneggan suddenly sits erect in his coffin, stares about him and cries out, as well he might, "Where are we at all? and whenabouts in the name of space?" To which reasonable demand he himself replies with the semi-mortal words, "I don't understand. I fail to say. I dearsee you too" (558.33–34).

That, at least, was part of the scenario in The Voice of Shem, Mary Manning's fine stage adaptation of extracts from the Wake that I directed for the stage many years ago. At that point in the "continuarration," "dadad's lottiest duaghterpearl" (561.15), having just been married to the strains of "Hym-number twentynine" (234.34) in a setting by Father Blesius Mindelsinn, now dies, with the immortal cry of Mild und Leise. The audience was by now understandably just as confused and flabbergasted as poor old Bygmester Finneggan himself, who was, of course, about to begin again. So the line that I have appropriated as the title for this homily—"I don't understand. I fail to say. I dearsee you too"—coming from Earwicker/Finnegan, by now well and truly waked in his coffin, usually brought down the house.

However, I don't wish to loft the smog from Finnegan, but rather—as we are now rather fittingly gathered in this "waalworth of a skyerscape" (4.35–36), one of the old hearts of Dublin's Jewish community—to conduct a Jewish wake, sit shivah, for Leopold Bloom, meshumed extraordinaire. So "siddle down and lissle all" (432.21–22), and join me on my personal and hopefully not
too incommodious vicus into the heart of this Hibernian metropolis, while I attempt to interweave three strands.

First is the fact that Leopold Bloom, although constantly referred to throughout Ulysses and since as a Jew, is in strict Jewish religious terms a fake, not a Jew at all.

Second, although Joyce has set his masterpiece, for very specific reasons, on June 16, 1904, apart from one small and perhaps questionable reference the book completely ignores the largest anti-Semitic outbreak in Ireland up to that time and indeed since. I refer to the 1904 pogrom in Limerick, when the small Jewish community of that time was subjected to vilification and indeed physical attack, which led within a year to its decimation. Those events were fully reported in both the Irish and London press of the time, and there is little doubt but that Joyce must have been aware of them.

The third strand is made of some personal experiences, provoked perhaps by my own position as an Irish Jew in Catholic Ireland. The anti-Semitism is in no way unfamiliar to me but rather is part of the growing pains and indeed the pains of many grown Irish Jews. There can be few among us, or indeed few Jews in any country in the Diaspora, who have gone through life without some anti-Semitic experience, no matter how mild. I recall as a very young boy not being invited to the annual school Christmas party—not because I was the only Jewish boy in the school (in Limerick, as it happens) but because, as it was pointedly put to my father, it was a party only for “children of the parish.”

One went through unimportant experiences of that nature, but suddenly one day my position as an outsider was indelibly imprinted on me by a remark from an elderly English colleague. We were at the time discussing a television play I was to direct that revolved around events during the Irish Civil War, and in particular the dramatist’s rather watery theme of understanding or indeed misunderstanding between Free Staters and Republicans, when suddenly my colleague said—and I will never forget the moment—“How could you understand, you're not Irish, you're Jewish.” The remark was not meant to hurt but simply to state that, in the context of matters specifically Irish, there were things I could not be expected to comprehend.

Of course, “who has ever heard of an Irish Jew?” It does sound a bit of a joke. Bloom may be a bit of a cod, but I assure you that Gerald Goldberg—the Dick Whittington of Cork—is very much an Irish Jew. It is the only possible label I can give myself as well. And the author of the collection of short stories published under the title, Who Has Ever Heard of an Irish Jew?—David Marcus—is also very much a member of the clan, as indeed are many others.

Irish Jewry may on occasion prefer to bury its collective head in the sand, but many of us stand up for the pot shots. Nevertheless, the title Who Has Ever Heard of an Irish Jew? has a faint aura of truth about it, although not perhaps as strong as the tang of urine in Poldy’s pork kidney. But despite Jewish Lord Mayors of Irish Catholic cities, judges, members of Dail Eireann (three, I be-
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lieve, at the present count), writers, performers, musicians, and even film and television directors for God's sake, and apart from the odd eminent doctor, dentist, lawyer, and accountant, the aptness of Mr. Deasy's anti-Semitic remark in the "Nestor" episode of Ulysses still holds somewhat. Ireland, he says, "had the honor of being the only country which never persecuted the Jews... And do you know why?... Because she never let them in" (U-GP 2:439, 442).

The vitally important word being in—fully in—not half in, or with a foot in the door. My English dictionary defines the word in as, among other things, belonging to, being a member of, having a share or part in. So maybe Mr. Deasy is right after all.

The supposed split allegiance of many Jewish communities is often thrown up as if to say, how can there be such a thing as an Irish or a French or a Swiss Jew, for that matter? Of course there can. I suggest that the question arises only in the minds of those citizens who have some difficulty letting Jews in—in the complete sense. So perhaps Irish Jews should fully support the Maastricht treaty, if for no other reason than that a full European Community would hopefully allow us once again to be considered Europeans.

Leopold Bloom, when questioned "What is your nation if I may ask?" can only reply, as we all would, "Ireland... I was born here" (U-GP 12:1430-31). But the very asking of it begs the question, and though many Irish Jews may be all-arounders like Bloom, until relatively recently, when we wanted to play ball it could only be done in Jewish alleys.

John Wyse Nolan may come to the rescue and ask, "why can't a Jew love his country like the next fellow?" but someone like J. J. O'Molloy is bound to respond, "Why not?... when he's quite sure which country it is" (U-GP 12:1628-30).

I am not being anti-Irish; what I say now is not intended in any way as an attack on a society that has an extremely low level of anti-Semitism. My very personal experiences are not unique to this country. No doubt others will have had their own anonymous mail, such as two letters I received while head of television drama at RTE: one threatening me with the "Irish army" if I as a Jew continued to decide which plays Irish viewers could see; and the other denouncing me for attempting to produce a play that had as its central character a fanatical Roman Catholic, unacceptable in his fanaticism even to his own community, but that in reality dealt with other outsiders, this time Irish/Italian owners of a fish-and-chip shop in a small country town.

So I feel that it is worth asking if there really is any difference between the attitudes and opinions Joyce provides for his acutely observed cast of Dubliners in 1904 and those expressed to me both openly and anonymously more than sixty years later. Do we Jews of the Diaspora, like Leopold Bloom, still exist only in a limbo of alienation? Have we still only cherished expectations? Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

However, let me continue on my vicus and wander with Leopold Bloom on
16 June 1904: Bloom the Yiddishe Goy. Or, if I may present you with a riddle (three aliyaḥs for the first correct answer): When is a Jew not a Jew? Answer: when he is in bloom.

It's an oft quoted couplet: "How odd of God to choose the Jews..." Maybe so, but how very odd of Shem to pen a Jew who is not a Jew and as a jest, or indeed maybe out of ignorance, ironically to give him as wife a Maid Marion who, although brought up a Catholic, is in fact the daughter of a Jewess from Gibraltar. I can find no reference to either mother or daughter having ever converted, so strictly speaking Molly Bloom is a more fully paid-up member of the tribe than her husband.

Joyce, of course, liked to have his little joke, but his knowledge of Judaism was garnered from many sources, some perhaps—as far as the required Halachic law was concerned—not quite the full shekel.

Bloom as a total Jew, not an ersatz one! Why did Joyce carefully set out his genealogy, which states without question that his peripatetic hero was anything but kosher, yet have him regarded without question by all and sundry then and since as a Jew? What would the book have lost or gained had Joyce gone the whole hog? This is not something that, as a casual paddler in the Joycean stream, I am going to dip my tumpty-tum toes into, but rather leave it to the deep-sea anglers. But may I remind you that if your mother is Jewish, then so are you. In this sense your father's religion is totally unimportant.

Let's take a brief look at the Bloom family tree. Rudolph Virag—Leopold Bloom's father, a Hungarian Jew—decides in 1850 or so to emigrate, first to London, then finally to Dublin, where he is no doubt welcomed by his bearded coreligionists. In 1865, after a visit to the society for promoting Christianity among Jews, he becomes a "souper" and is converted to Protestantism. In that year—and the events may not be unconnected—he marries Ellen Higgins, and although there has been a Dublin Jewish family of that name, Ellen Higgins is a Protestant.

Virag now changes his name to Bloom; virag is Hungarian for flower, so that bloom, while having a decided Jewish ring to it, has the added attraction of not being too far removed from the original. Then in 1866 our very own Leopold Bloom is born and promptly baptized a Protestant. To be sure, old man Rudolph passes on to the boy a certain amount of yiddishe, the aleph bet, parts of the Haggadah, the Shema, but Joyce—as if to make assurance triply sure—has Poldy dipped not once but thrice at baptism, again by doubting Irish boys under the parish pump in "Swords," and finally, irony of ironies, in order to enable him to marry his Maid Marion, makes him as Irish as could possibly be and has him finally doused in oil, this time as a Roman Catholic.

You might say that Joyce has done his best for old Bloom: Jewish father, Protestant at birth, Roman Catholic by choice, but still regarded for all time as a Jew. How far do you have to go to be let in?

Both Bloom's children, Rudy and Milly—assuming neither Molly nor her
mother ever converted to Catholicism—are, paradoxically, also Jewish. Joyce deprived Poldy of his only son, Rudy, but Milly, if she hangs in there, will produce Jewish offspring. So in 1904 we have the all-round Bloom, a meshugener meshumed if ever there was one, no less adrift in his own personal odyssey than Homer's Semitic hero.

What a glorious hoax! The most dissected Jewish literary creation of the twentieth century, perhaps of all time—if we fight shy of Shylock—regarded by all and sundry as a Jew, but in fact in strict religious terms not a Jew at all. That, if you don't mind me saying so, is more than a bit of a cod! But is it really of any importance, and if so, why? Why has Joyce chosen to place at the heart of Ulysses—and Bloom surely is its very heart—a wandering hapless citizen, to label him on all sides a Jew, to grant him humanitarian characteristics, thoughts and attitudes that place him apart from his fellow citizens, and yet to deny him the finest cut of all? Is Bloom, like Moses, only to be granted a Pisgah view of his promised land?

Bloom is certainly fully conscious of his Jewish heritage. He carries it with him, not only physically; he knows, remembers, retains, hangs on to threads of Jewish knowledge given him as a boy by his Jewish apostate father. He has as much Hebrew as many Jews wandering around Dublin today. He may start the day with a pork kidney, but he worries about the contents of Plumtree's Potted Meat.

In many ways he takes a Jewish stance, carries a candle, a light to enlighten the gentiles. Joyce grants him his culture—Mozart and Meyerbeer figure among his favorite composers—but I personally find his cultural judgments unreliable and only half assimilated. In this, as in so many other ways, Joyce never permits him to be a whole man; rather he has created a man adrift, Irish only by birth, Jewish only by inclination. Yet Bloom belongs only in Dublin, and it is fitting that he is the chief literary citizen of that city of paralysis. He is a member of the dominant Church, a Jew, yet not a Jew; a Christian, of course not. Mulligan calls him the wandering Jew: a neat label, but in many respects Bloom is more wandering than Jew.

Above all else this wandering Jew desires identity. Bloom's journey through Dublin on 16 June 1904, a journey he will repeat every day of his life, is a search for an identity that will always be denied him. Let me in, he cries; certainly Molly will not. He is even forced to climb over his own railings. No man needed a key more.

Of course all this suits Joyce's purpose admirably. Bloom corresponds to Ulysses, the wandering Greek. Joyce's masterpiece reeks with Homeric allusions; the structure is not only based on but stylistically reflects the Greek hero's adventures. Ulysses is of course a hero on the grand scale; Bloom is anything but. Or could it be part of Joyce's scheme of things that it takes certain heroic qualities to exist in an alien society?

Bloom is pathetically eager to claim himself as one hundred percent Irish.
He is careful not to go about proclaiming his Jewishness. Like Homer’s hero, also a man of many devices, he knows that his modus operandi is to be circumspect; he can but wander and endure, without complaining too much about what the gods may send.

No doubt the incongruity of creating his central Dubliner as a Jew, yet not fully a Jew—moreover a Jew who has sampled three religions without accepting them—attracted Joyce with its satirical possibilities. And, of course, the theme parallels Joyce’s own rejection of Catholicism. Bloom adrift in Catholic Ireland also mirrors Joyce’s own increasing feeling of alienation in Europe, his place there being as ambiguous as that of the Jews in Ireland. Joyce, like Bloom, is not a citizen of no place but no accepted citizen of any place.

Despite his many efforts to be accepted, and except, it would seem, from buying his round, Bloom never fully gets a look in. You get the picture in Barney Kiernan’s pub:

So in comes Martin asking where was Bloom.
—Where is he? says Lenehan. Defrauding widows and orphans.
—Isn’t that a fact, says John Wyse, what I was telling the citizen about Bloom and the Sinn Fein?
—That’s so, says Martin. Or so they allege.
—Who made those allegations? says Alf.
—I, says Joe. I’m the alligator.
—And after all, says John Wyse, why can’t a jew love his country like the next fellow?
—Why not? says J. J., when he’s quite sure which country it is.
—Is he a jew or a gentile or a holy Roman or a swaddler or what the hell is he? says Ned. Or who is he? No offence, Crofton.
—Who is Junius? says J. J.
—We don’t want him, says Crofter the Orangeman or presbyterian.
—He’s a perverted jew, says Martin, from a place in Hungary and it was he drew up all the plans according to the Hungarian system. We know that in the castle.
—Isn’t he a cousin of Bloom the dentist? says Jack Power.
—Not at all, says Martin. Only namesakes. His name was Virag, the father’s name that poisoned himself. He changed it by deedpoll, the father did.
—That’s the new Messiah for Ireland! says the citizen. Island of saints and sages! . . .
—Charity to the neighbour, says Martin. But where is he? We can’t wait.
—A wolf in sheep’s clothing, says the citizen. That’s what he is. Virag from Hungary! Ahasuerus I call him. Cursed by God. . . .
—Saint Patrick would want to land again at Ballykinlar and convert us, says the citizen, after allowing things like that to contaminate our shores.
(U-GP 12:1621-73)

But now let me move on to my third strand: from the world of fiction to the harsh reality of life in Limerick for the Jewish community in 1904. You
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will recall that the Dreyfus affair, which continued until 1906, reached its crisis in 1902, just before Joyce's arrival in Paris.

In 1903 Joyce returned to Ireland just in time for the Limerick pogrom, a virulent and violent outburst of anti-Semitism that decimated that small community. While it was not a pogrom in the Russian sense, Jews were attacked and hurt, and a ruinous financial boycott was imposed on the community. Sides were taken by leading Irish figures, and the sorry event became in its own way a cause célèbre, of which, when he came to write *Ulysses*, Joyce must have been fully aware. He hunted up so much detail for the book that his seemingly deliberate choice not to touch on this event, which impinged on every Irish Jew, bears some consideration.

In June 1904 the Limerick pogrom was in full spate—I could say bloom—and one might have expected some reference to it in *Ulysses*, so specifically set in that same year. However, apart from one possible moment, again in Barney Kiernan's pub, and some oblique references by Molly in her final soliloquy, to which I have referred but which in my opinion fail to connect, it would appear to be absolutely ignored. Certainly, despite some scholarly claims, it never provides the book with any tension whatsoever. The moment in the pub:

—And I belong to a race too, says Bloom, that is hated and persecuted. Also now. This very moment. This very instant.

   Gob, he near burnt his fingers with the butt of his old cigar.
—Robbed, says he. Plundered. Insulted. Persecuted. Taking what belongs to us by right. At this very moment, says he, putting up his fist, sold by auction in Morocco like slaves or cattle.
—Are you talking about the new Jerusalem? says the citizen.
—I'm talking about injustice, says Bloom. *(U-GP 12:1467–74)*

If you examine this passage, what you perceive is a very persistent use of the present tense by Bloom. He speaks of persecution and insults "Also now. This very moment. This very instant." Then we hear, "sold by auction in Morocco." Why Morocco? Why not Egypt? If you substitute the old French name for Morocco, Le Maroc, the line read quickly now reads "sold by auction off in Le Maroc" and acquires much more significance, signaling perhaps that Joyce knew he had to make some reference, no matter how oblique, to parallel events in Limerick. But it does appear to be the only reference in the entire book, if indeed that is what it is. (This fascinating interpretation is not mine, but Dorith Ofri's.) Two words in *Finnegans Wake* may allude to the Limerick events: "limerick's disgrace" (434.21); but in the context of lace, for which Limerick was famous, and knickers, these words may of course be interpreted differently.

I can understand Bloom desperately seeking acceptance among his Gentile buddies, conscious both of his heritage and his present Roman Catholic status, being careful not to bring this contentious subject into the open, but there can be little doubt that Joyce deliberately goes out of his way to avoid it.
To have created Bloom as an all-round Jew would not have suited Joyce's purpose and would certainly not have allowed him to construct *Ulysses* as he did. Bloom as a Jew in the fullest sense must surely necessitate protagonists from the Jewish community, which in turn would have made it almost impossible for Joyce to avoid placing the Limerick events in a prominent position. It's a story worth writing, but not the book Joyce wished to write. Therefore I suggest that Leopold Bloom could be a Jew in every sense but the fully religious one. Otherwise the book could not have reflected, as it so wonderfully does, the triangular relationship and parallels among *Ulysses* the Greek; Leopold Bloom the non-Jew non-Christian just as much at sea in the streets of Dublin, unaccepted by both Jew and Christian alike; and Joyce, who, renouncing his own Catholic upbringing, committed himself to exile.

Some years ago, while working on another television production, I sat for a whole wonderful afternoon with an eminent American Jewish expert on another great Irish writer: there we were, one a Polack and the other a Litvak, both of us examining the *pilpulim* of Sean O'Casey's Protestant background. I suggest that if you ask the average Dubliner in the street what O'Casey's religion was, he will swear he was of course a Catholic. And as for our very own Bloom? You are more than likely to be told "sure that fellow was a Jewman." How wrong can you get.

Poor old Ben Bloom Elijah, doomed to be perpetually hounded by that mongrel Garryowen, and despite—or maybe, indeed, because—of his and our own cries of "Abba Adonai," forever, like the rest of us, to remain suspended "at an angle of fortyfive degrees over Donohoe's in Little Green street."