



'Why will you Jews not accept our culture, our religion and our language?': James Joyce's Jew through the Eyes of Jewish America

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Introduction

Just as James Joyce is the most important writer since Shakespeare, his Jewish-Irish character, *Ulysses'* Leopold Bloom, is the most fascinating fictional Jew since Shylock. All authors must struggle with Joyce's overwhelming legacy, but what of writers who are themselves Jewish? How do they envisage Bloom and relate to his complex sense of identity—as a Jew, as an Irishman, but most fundamentally as a human being?

The three greatest Jewish American writers of the twentieth century, Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Saul Bellow, were all deeply influenced by Joyce. Each of them responded to Joyce's masterpiece by rewriting it from the perspective of an American Jew—just as *Ulysses* itself is an Irish rewriting of Homer's *Odyssey*. What draws these authors to Joyce? Is it their shared heritage of exile and a lost homeland, or Joyce's powerful use of language? When asked how one can tell if a novel is Jewish or not, Roth argues that it was not the characters or themes that make it so, but rather: 'it's that the book won't shut up'. These Jewish-American novels cannot stop talking about, and to, Joyce's compelling fiction. This article seeks to explore this canorous conversation.

Home from Homer

In *The Odyssey*, on his homeward voyage, Odysseus finds himself trapped in a cave by Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops. To escape he must deny his identity, tricking the monster into believing his name is 'Nobody.' Joyce refashions this story by transforming the Cyclops into a belligerent and xenophobic Irish drunk (ironically named the Citizen) who takes exception to Bloom's Jewishness. For the Citizen being Irish is a very narrow category, essential components of which are a strict adherence to both the Catholic faith and the Irish language. Bloom possesses neither of these traits, but considers himself no less Irish than his adversary. Unlike Odysseus, Bloom does not escape by repudiating his

identity; rather he confounds the Citizen by telling him that Jesus, too, was a Jew. The Citizen's reaction is comic—'By Jesus. . . I'll brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name. . . I'll crucify him so I will'—however, Joyce's argument that being Irish transcended language and religion, was serious and, at the time, revolutionary.

A Bellow of Being

Though Bloom considers himself Irish and has a rich multicultural heritage, with a fascinating hodgepodge of Protestant, Hungarian, Jewish, Spanish and Catholic kin, for many Irish he is regarded simply, and derogatorily, as a Jew. Saul Bellow, the Russian-parented, Canadian-born, culturally Jewish, American citizen, thoroughly understood Bloom's predicament. That is why, in his 1953 novel *The Adventures of Augie March*, Bellow reimagines Bloom's barroom brawl with the Citizen. A policeman with a 'one-eyed emphasis'—reminding the reader of Homer's Cyclops and Joyce's narrow-minded Citizen—imprisons the young Jewish Augie March, symbolising the anti-Semitism that pervaded the United States during Bellow's adolescence. So while Bellow was certainly inspired by *Ulysses*, the author did not need to read Joyce to comprehend oppression and prejudice; rather, his life provided ample examples. When applying to study English Literature at Chicago's prestigious Northwestern University, Bellow was told by the head of the department to try something else, as he was: 'not born to it'. Though more subtle than the Citizen's rant, this was no less an attack on a Jew's right to belong to a nation, and thus study its language. Bellow gained revenge not by studying literature, but by writing it. *Augie March* brought Jewish fiction out of the tenements and into the American mainstream consciousness. The opening line is a defiant rejection of those who questioned Bellow's nationality: 'I am an American, Chicago born'. From *Augie March* on, Jewish writers have dominated American literature.

Malamud's Mother Tongue

Out of the eleven American winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature three (including Bellow) have been Jewish. One prominent reason for the incredible success of Jewish-American literature may be the very fact that its practitioners were 'not born to it'. The Yiddish that these authors encountered as children provided them with an innovative vision of how English could be adapted to create new modes of expression. Philip Roth describes the hybrid nature of his mentor Bernard Malamud's use of language as follows: 'English that often appeared. . . to have in large part been clipped together from. . . the least promising stockpile. . . around: the locutions, inversions and diction of Jewish immigrant speech, a heap of broken verbal bones that looked [lost], until he came along. . . to make them dance to his sad tune'. Malamud's 1961 novel *A New Life* makes clear

its debt to *Ulysses* by quoting it in epigraph: 'Lo, levin leaping lightens in eyeblink Ireland's westward welkin'. The quotation is taken from a chapter set in a maternity ward, where Bloom is visiting an acquaintance, and in modern English it means: 'Look, lightning flashes in Ireland's westward skies'. The sentence's archaic nature is the stylistic means by which Joyce highlights the poetic effect the Irish language and Irish artists have had on the development of the English language, as he more plainly argues elsewhere: 'The Irish, condemned to express themselves in a language not their own, have stamped on it the mark of their own genius and compete for glory with the civilized nations. The result is called the English language'. In *A New Life*, Malamud further plays on the term 'levin' which means 'lightning' but is also a common Jewish family name. The protagonist, Seymour Levin, moves from New York to the West Coast—with plans to teach and study English—following in the footsteps of a mysterious Irishman named Duffy, symbolizing Malamud's own march behind, and beyond, the works of Joyce. Like Joyce, Malamud was the midwife for a new type of language, born out of the union of Yiddish and English. Inspired by Joyce's fusion of English and Irish, Malamud jolts to life (as if by lightning) the dying Yiddish tongue, transplanting it into the body of American English speech.

Ignoring the Roth of God

Being of a younger generation than either Malamud or Bellow, Roth has been less inspired by Bloom's all-encompassing vision of *nationality* and *belonging*, than by his remarkably modern vision of *sexuality* and *longing*. Though Roth grew up in an era when the Jews—emulating the Irish before them—moved from lowly immigrants to integrated Americans, he remained very influenced by his Jewish cultural background. In *Ulysses*, Bloom lets neither his Jewish heritage nor the strict Catholic environs of Ireland affect his lusty desires. His day is spent admiring various women around the city, with a stop at the beach to masturbate through a hole in his pocket, blissfully unencumbered by either Jewish or Catholic guilt. Thus engaged, Bloom emits a simple phrase: 'At it again'. Roth has praised the powerful simplicity of these three words, seeing in them a 'combination of resignation, delight, and tolerance' that symbolises all he admires in Bloom; it is, he has recently admitted, his favourite expression in literature. Roth's own ode to onanism—the scandalous *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)—is infused with the sexual chaos of 1960s New York. However, it takes its inspiration from *Ulysses*, a novel written almost a half-century before, and set in the unlikely milieu of turn-of-the-century Dublin.

Irish Roots, Jewish Blooms

That America's most eminent Jewish authors grounded these books in the rich soil of Ireland's greatest novel says much about the parallels between these two cultural groups.

It also brings us full circle to the title of this paper, a question put to Bloom by another Irish citizen: 'Why will you Jews not accept our culture, our religion, and our language?' Why should Jewish authors accept a single national culture or language to the exclusion of their own, when it is a combination of all these elements that leads to fiction intricate and nuanced enough to explore such hybrid identity?

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