

“Enthusiast”: a response to the responses

Article

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“Enthusiast”

Shortly after his introduction, Leopold Bloom visits Dlugacz a “ferretheaded porkbutcher” to buy some sausages and kidneys for breakfast.¹ Dlugacz is of supposedly Hungarian-Jewish descent, like Bloom’s father, and has obvious Zionist sympathies. In the butcher shop he wraps Bloom’s sausages in a page which advertises a “model farm at Kinnereth on the lakeshore of Tiberius.”² Bloom reads the advert and, echoing Marlow’s version of European colonialism in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), surmises, “Nothing doing, still an idea behind it.”³ Later on in the chapter, Bloom remembers some of the other Zionist propaganda sheets which are used to wrap up his meaty breakfast: “*Agendath Netaim*: planters’ company. To purchase waste sandy tracts from Turkish government and plant with eucalyptus trees.”⁴ But, at this point in *Ulysses* (1922), Bloom’s mood changes and he dismisses Dlugacz as an “enthusiast.”⁵

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¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses* [1922] (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 57.

² *Ulysses*, 57.

³ *Ulysses*, 58 and Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1899] (New York and London: Penguin Classics, 2007), “The conquest of the earth is not a pretty thing...What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it.” 7.

⁴ *Ulysses*, 58.

⁵ *Ulysses*, 66.

In a letter to Padriac Colum, concerning the Celtic Revival, James Joyce stated that “I dislike all enthusiasms.”⁶ As Joyce knew better than most, “enthusiasm” had a particularly long history as an insult. An “enthusiast”, historically, mistakes the volatility of human emotion for the timelessness of God’s message. Dlugacz’s “planters’ company”, from the Hebrew, was actually *Agudath Netaim* but Joyce preferred to enclose Dlugacz’s Zionist “agenda” (as well as his sausages and kidneys) in the pun “*Agendath*.”⁷ All enthusiasts have an agenda.

I realise that by starting with Joyce’s *Ulysses* I may be accused of promoting a “literary-centred analysis” as if the imagination were mere “rhetoric” (contra Steven Robins).⁸ But what we learn from even a cursory reading of *Ulysses* is just how deeply imbricated Joyce was in the politics of his time. Joyce understood better than anyone the dangers and subtleties of European racism and anti-Semitism which was why he rejected a nationalist response to English colonial rule. He was well aware that Irish nationalism, drawing deep from its European roots, was profoundly suspicious of national outsiders (often figured as “Jews”) which merely replaced one form of (colonial) racism with another. Joyce’s response to the impasse of anti-colonial nationalism was to engage with the kind of Mediterranean Jewish diasporic experience (Trieste rather than Marseilles) which, as Nils Roemer notes, contained “Europe, Asia, Africa” just as Molly and Leopold Bloom did.⁹ For

⁶ Cited in Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland: From earliest times to 1910* (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1972), 184.

⁷ *Ulysses*, 58 and 66.

⁸ Steven Robins, “Beyond Hierarchies of Suffering: Response to Bryan Cheyette,” xxx.

⁹ Nils Roemer, “Response to Bryan Cheyette”, xxx. For this argument in full see Cheyette, *Constructions of “the Jew” in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations 1875-1945* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), chapter six.

Joyce, the diasporic Blooms, the very embodiment of ambivalence, transgressed the certainties of sexuality, race, religion and nation. What was left, after such transgressions, was the messiness of Leopold Bloom's consciousness which moved from "an idea" that might resolve such uncertainties to the suspicion that such too easy resolutions could only be the work of an "enthusiast".

Mood affects politics. Michael Rothberg's response ends with a call to "bridge those spaces in our own thinking actionism and activist thought:" "We need to be in the streets, in the classrooms, and in the libraries" which I can only describe as a form of activist sublime.¹⁰ To be sure, "enthusiast" in sceptical Europe has a different meaning to that of the United States where "enthusiast" has never been an insult. Adorno might well have been the most pessimistic of thinkers, who focuses on failure (Stalinism, Nazism, US globalism) as Vivek Freitas notes (after Frederic Jameson).¹¹ But Adorno also regarded an unresolved theory/praxis as a marker of "humaneness". My essay focuses on this all too ordinary "humaneness" in contrast to a range of binaries which diminish the human.¹²

The work of Edward Said, as global humanist, enriches greatly the dialogue between Jewish and postcolonial studies. Why else did Said evoke Adorno in his much-quoted final interview where he described himself as the "last Jewish intellectual"? "You don't know anyone else. All your other intellectuals are now suburban squires. From Amos Oz to all these people here in America. So I'm the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it

¹⁰ Michael Rothberg, "For Activist Thought: A Response to Bryan Cheyette," xxx.

¹¹ Vivek Freitas, "Writing in Inclement Weather: The Dialectics of Comparing Minority Experiences in Threatening Environments: A response to Bryan Cheyette," xxx.

¹² "Against Supersessionist Thinking: Old and New, Jews and Postcolonialism, the Ghetto and Diaspora," 425.

this way: I'm a Jewish-Palestinian."¹³ That is why Said's late work turned or returned to other "last Jewish intellectuals" such as Freud in *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), Erich Auerbach in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), and to Adorno in *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2006). Auerbach, Adorno and Freud are all radically unhoused from a European culture that has been destroyed. Here the affiliations with Said, exiled from Palestine, are obvious. In foregrounding these Jewish intellectuals, all in the name of exilic singularity and dissidence, Said highlights those aspects of postcolonial studies, especially the histories of European fascism and anti-Semitism (and by implication their impact on the Palestinian people), which had hitherto been missing. But the journey from the "last sky" in Palestine to the "last Jewish intellectual" in New York is not straightforward.¹⁴

Said's self-designation as a "Jewish-Palestinian" rather than "new [Palestinian] Jew" refuses a supersessionist narrative precisely because such a narrative would reinforce the primacy of Jewish history. Aamir Mufti's use of "fascist" (following the "German" model) as applied to Israel (as Jewish State) could not be further from the spirit of late Said. It is a form of supersessionism *tout court*. Rothberg does not address the "fascist" question directly except to argue that it is part of a wider critique which includes the Palestinian leadership and accounts for the asymmetrical and overweening power of the State of Israel. But the German model of

¹³ "My Right of Return," Interview with Ari Shavit, *Ha'aretz Magazine*, Tel Aviv (2000), in *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Pantheon Books, 2001), 443-458. Viswanathan has confirmed (in conversation) that Edward Said insisted on this being the last interview (and last word) in her collection.

¹⁴ For an extended version of this argument see Bryan Cheyette, "A glorious achievement: Edward Said and the last Jewish intellectual," in Tobias Döring and Mark Stein, eds. *Edward Said's Translocations: Essays in Secular Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), chapter four.

“fascism,” as applied to Israel (as Jewish State) is not critique.¹⁵ At his weakest, Rothberg notes that “Mufti’s responses” are, “after all, in an interview and not an essay or book” as if this matters when “thinking actionism and activist thought” are supposedly one and the same.¹⁶ My focus on the interview is precisely because it is a form of actionism and is in stark contrast to Mufti’s and Rothberg’s exemplary scholarship.

The politics of Joyce’s Leopold Bloom and Edward Said’s subtly political late work both demonstrate, in their very different ways, what has been called the “powers of diaspora.”¹⁷ As John McLeod rightly notes, diaspora can be deeply conservative and imbricated in historical narratives concerning a timeless exile from an autochthonous “homeland.” But, as my longer work shows, “diaspora” can also be understood as a disruptive state which challenges fundamentally categorical thinking.¹⁸ What is at stake here is the extent to which “*diaspora space*” (after Avtar Brah) is permitted to both Jews and postcolonials in the “colonial present”

¹⁵ The use of the term “fascist” is ubiquitous in the United States after the election of President Donald Trump with openly White Supremacist and neo-Nazi supporters. But “fascism” remains a word that signifies everything and nothing as can be seen, for example, in two recent misguided accounts: Jonah Goldberg, *Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the Left from Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) and Hamed Abdel-Samad, *Islamic Fascism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2016).

¹⁶ Rothberg, “For Activist Thought,” xxx.

¹⁷ Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002). For a compelling reading of Joyce’s politics see, Andrew Gibson, *James Joyce* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006).

¹⁸ John McLeod, “Response to Bryan Cheyette,” xxx. See also Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish/ Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), chapter one.

(*pace* Derek Gregory). McLeod expresses succinctly why diaspora is contested as a consequence of “privileging the frame of the nation as the proper concern of a politicised postcolonialism”.¹⁹ The potentially revolutionary nation leaves little room for diaspora which is always already deemed politically deficient. In stark contrast to the mass national uprising against colonialism, which characterizes nationalist anti-colonialism, those in the diaspora are perceived as elitist, detached from the fray, and unable to engage with revolutionary politics. Such deracinated diasporic figures were part of the history of anti-colonialism as can be seen in Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). As I argue in *Diasporas of the Mind*, Fanon was haunted by the (self-) image of the rootless cosmopolitan which he contrasted with reborn intellectuals who were to lead the anti-colonial revolution. In contrast to Robins’s rather reductive reading of Fanon, this meant that Fanon always had deeply ambivalent feelings towards “the Jew” and was himself Judaized by others.²⁰

I do not believe that a lack of political clarity and moral certainty are virtues in themselves. But the search for political clarity and moral certainty does, I argue, tend to lead to moralized and binary thinking. Rothberg, for instance, cites Primo Levi’s understandable disavowal of Liliana Cavani’s sensationalist film *The Night Porter* (1974) which relativizes murderer and victim. But that is not the end of the story. Levi’s “ethical uncertainty” was a product of the camps. He understood, from the very beginning, that even he, in his memoirs, was

¹⁹ McLeod, xxx and see also Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) and Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²⁰ Robins, “Beyond Hierarchies of Suffering,” xxx and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 167. See also Cheyette, *Diasporas of the Mind*, chapter two for a longer version of this argument.

forced to work within the very categories which decide who is, and is not, human. At one point in *The Periodic Table* (1975) he views himself again from a "distance of thirty years":

I find it difficult to reconstruct the sort of human being that corresponded, in November 1944, to my name or, better, to my number: 174517. I must then overcome the most terrible crisis, the crisis of having become part of the *Lager* system, and I must have developed a strange callousness if I then managed not only to survive but also to think, to register the world around me, and even to perform rather delicate work, in an environment infected by the daily presence of death.²¹

The "strange callousness" that Levi needed to survive as part of the "Lager system" also enabled him to write his memoirs. For that reason, he tells the story of someone who understands, only too well, his own potential to dehumanize which is why Levi does not assign a "moral code" to survival: "the worst survived— that is, the fittest; the best all died... we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses".²² This does not make Levi a potential "murderer", as Rothberg rightly notes, but it also does not make Levi (in his own understanding) a victim devoid of the "Lager system" however "guiltless".²³

²¹ Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table* trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 139-40.

²² Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 63.

²³ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 32 and Rothberg, "For Activist Thought," xxx.

As Roemer reminds us, the history of Jewish Studies and the history of the diaspora are one and the same. It is a history, as Robins notes, of power and powerlessness.²⁴ Jews, not unlike all humans, both collude with state power and (in historically smaller numbers) actively oppose it. Robins is particularly indebted to Enzo Traverso's *The End of Jewish Modernity* (2016) for the linear narrative of non-whitened, progressive Jews becoming (over the twentieth-century) mainly westernized colluders with the worst kind of state power (colonial Zionism and apartheid racism).²⁵ One of the ironies of this supersessionist narrative is that it reinforces an extreme Jewish nationalism which thinks of itself as redeeming a destroyed European diaspora where the hopeless utopianism of misguided left-liberal Jews led only to their deaths. As all of the respondents have pointed out, diaspora Jews are under renewed threat in the United States and Europe and, for this reason, need to show solidarity with other victimized groups under even worse threat (not least Muslims in the west, African-Americans, and the millions of global refugees from Africa and the Middle East).²⁶ In these dark times, supersessionist narratives of all kinds also need to be opposed.

²⁴ David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

²⁵ Enzo Traveso, *The End of Jewish Modernity* trans. David Fernbach (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

²⁶ I am aware that although many of the subjects in these responses concern the lives of women this is a discussion among men. For an alternative discussion see Sarah Casteel, *Calypso Jews: Jewishness in the Caribbean Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Anna Guttman, *Writing Indians and Jews: Metaphorics of Jewishness in South Asian Literature* (London and New York: Palgrave 2013); and Isabelle Hesse, *The Politics of Jewishness: The Holocaust, Zionism, and Colonialism in Contemporary World Literature* (London and New York: Bloomsbury 2016).

As Rothberg states, “our difference[s] ...may be more one of emphasis than essential opposition” and I certainly believe that I have much more in common with all of my interlocutors than not.²⁷ I have been deeply moved by Catherine E. McKinley’s story of transracial adoption in McLeod’s response; by Christina Sharpe’s experience of lethal racism in the United States in Freitas’s response; by the multiple narratives of French colonial racism in Rothberg’s response; by the diasporic encounters in Marseilles in Roemer’s response; and by Robins’s transnational family history in his response. All have thwarted a reductive supersessionism with an enriched lived experience that straddles the academy and the public sphere. I am most grateful for their time and critical engagement.

Before entering the academy, I was a political activist for more than a decade. I look back on these days with mixed feelings (rather too many un-thought through enthusiasms for my present taste). But this experience has meant that I have always attempted to bridge the academy and the public sphere and am all too aware today how this gap has widened in the twenty-first century.²⁸ To be sure, it is no longer an option to rely on the liberal embrace of the academy and of disciplines that know more and more about less and less. Civil society is under concerted attack globally and I can only hope that our current dialogue will inspire others to defend those individuals and institutions (inside and outside the academy) which work for peace and justice. Neither a sublime goodness nor an irredeemable badness will help us in this task but, rather, a messy, contradictory humaneness trying, as best as it can, to straddle the differing spheres of theory and praxis.

²⁷ Rothberg, “For Activist Thought,” xxx.

²⁸ See, for instance, my recent intervention “English Literature Saved My Life” in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* ed. Robert Eaglestone (London and New York, Routledge, 2018).