

## Variations on the quincunx in “Grace”<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

Among the many mysteries that the silences in Joyce’s *Dubliners* hide, the reference to M’Coy’s joke on the quincunx in “Grace” is one which has eluded critical response because of its cryptic reference. The essay to follow builds on the assumption that the presence of the quincunx in the story opens up a network of relationships with concepts and ideas belonging to a long, but in Joyce’s Dublin necessarily hidden, unorthodox tradition of knowledge and religion, ranging from the Pythagorean to the Kabbalistic and Jewish. Neither the financial nor the religious communities in Catholic Dublin dare accept their dependence on the Jewish community and, as a consequence, hypocrisy, bribery, deceit and fraud seem to be allowed at all levels to maintain the power status of the Irish Catholic culture.

Years before Corinna del Greco Lobner wrote her article “Quincunxial Sherlockholmesing in ‘Grace,’” I had wondered, like many other readers had surely done before me, about the meaning and function of the strange assembly of some of the characters in “Grace” in the shape of a quincunx. Del Greco quotes Umberto Eco to provide her “abductions” with a theoretical starting point and suggests a game “to demonstrate that an uninformed, ‘sensitive reader’ can turn *ignorantia* to profit by relying on clues significant enough to lead to further association. The sign thus obtained will also afford glimpses into Joyce’s system of misinformation to force the reader’s attention to a closer examination of textual clues” (Greco 445). Her purpose, she explains, is to discern and trace “textual clues ec(h)oiing Umberto’s invitation to discover virgin paths in the plurabilities of the fabula” (Greco 446).

Of course, she mentions the links in “Grace” to the *Divine Comedy*, but these seem to be “hardly the stuff conjectures are made on” (Greco 447). Yet, it is hard for any reader, except perhaps the newcomer to Joyce, to ignore that the structure of “Grace” has been assumed to correspond to that described by Stanislaus Joyce in *My Brother’s Keeper*:

‘Grace’ is, so far as I am aware, the first instance of the use of a pattern in my brother’s work. It is a simple pattern not new and not requiring any great hermeneutical acumen to discover —inferno, purgatorio, paradiso. Mr. Kernan’s

fall down the steps of the lavatory is his descent into hell, the sickroom is purgatory, and the Church in which he and his friends listen to the sermon is paradise at last. In 'Grace' the pattern is ironical with a touch of suppressed anger. . . (228)

Most readers cannot as of today ignore the complex tables of allegorical religious relationships that have been built on this assumption, the most famous of which is no doubt the one Robert Boyle's offered in his 1969 "Swiftian Allegory and Dantean Parody in Joyce's 'Grace.'" Whether Joyce meant such a wide-ranging structure to evidence his rejection of the Catholic Church can be effectively argued although I will leave the irony in such a pattern for the reader to determine. As I have maintained elsewhere, what the story evidences is a set of protocols —at the pub, at Mr Kernan's and at the church— that resemble ritual and that seem to hide legal "dispositions" and social and economic debts rather than spiritual ones to the divinity (and perhaps not only within the pale of the Catholic Church).<sup>2</sup>

Del Greco, knowing this and much more quite well, continues with her detective-like quest for clues, realizes the repetitive presence of the number 2, and wonders whether it is only a trick to make the reader think that the two gentlemen who help Mr Kernan in the lavatory are the same as those with whom he spends the night drinking. She then poses a series of questions that her "Sherlockhomesing" does not seem to answer: do the people in the pub really overlook who the two gentlemen in the lavatory were? Or did they "find it expedient to be silent"? Why are those in the pub unable to help the unfortunate Mr Kernan? Why cannot even the Constable help? Perhaps some of the questions cannot be answered because del Greco assumes, for example, that "Mr Power had been in the pub all along" (448), while there is no evidence of this and, whether we believe a narrator that continuously tries to exonerate his male characters or not —"Mr Power was careful to explain to her that he was not responsible, that he had come on the scene by the merest accident" (*D* 155)—, he might well have entered the place on seeing that there was a little crowd gathering outside the window. His silence is easily explained not because he likes to plot but rather because the crusade he undertakes with his friend will —hopefully— result in returning Mr Kernan to the Catholic debit system and out of the Jewish one. After all, Mr Kernan's debts may have been the cause of his fall on the floor of the lavatories, since there is a possibility that Harford and one of his cronies might have pushed him down the stairs to encourage him to pay back the debt in due time.<sup>3</sup> And do not forget that Mr Power

is another creditor of the Kernans, at least for what Mrs Kernan calls “many small, but opportune loans.” (D 155)

Del Greco tries to solve the problem by assuming a “truncated quincunx” in the arrangement of the five friends at St Francis Xavier in Upper Gardiner Street: a 2+1+2 placement. She still sticks to her number 2 principle, a number, she says, that “shadows” Mr Kernan (448), and she truncates the quincunx but finds it insufficient to “keep the plot moving” (449) and in need of the number 1, around which another number 2 needs to pivot. She then states: “the quincunx gained completion at the end of the story . . . by an act of verbal incarnation” (449). I find that del Greco’s text raises as many questions as Joyce’s story, to wit: in fiction, I understand, anything that is bound to gain completion does so by means of an “act of verbal incarnation.” In addition, why does she truncate the quincunx, only to find a few lines later that such a division needs a reconstruction? What is the “numerical mission” that the quincunx has “fulfilled,” as she sees it? And what is the “dynamic role played by the number 2” (449)? Why should we add gentlemen to curate and minutes to get a 2+1+2 arrangement (a non-truncated quincunx in any case)?

Three years after del Greco’s article (in 1994), Bernard Benstock, in his *Narrative Con/Texts in “Dubliners,”* supported the idea that it was the number four that Joyce used and played with throughout the whole collection, as a logical consequence of his use of the gnomon as a narrative technique that removes many “squares” and fourfold formations from the major narratives that “reflect . . . the absence of climactic instances, deleted resolution of plot, inconclusive closures, inexact overlays of perception on the part of the participants, [and] insufficient information about them” (Benstock 56). He therefore reads the quincunx as “the only way that five can conform to a quadrilateral shape” and qualifies M’Coy as “of course the odd man out” (Benstock 56). Benstock does not assign special significance to the Pythagorical meaning of the number four.<sup>4</sup> The presence and recurrence of the number five in the story, however, as I hope to show, adds to Benstock’s number four. At the very least, within the ironic system of “Grace” it would not have been difficult to interpret the presence of the quincunx as a cryptic joke on the fourfold and enigmatic parallelogram-gnomonic pattern that is certainly at work in all the stories.

I do not promise any definite answer to any of the questions posed above, especially because my method does not essentially differ from del Greco’s (although rather than a Sherlockhomesing game, the metaphor describing mine would be that of scratching a surface or one of pulling a long thread to reach nothing but the cylinder of the roll) and I do agree with her in her conclusion: in Joyce’s texts, “the shortest distance between two

points” (*D* 158) is hardly ever the straight line. Joyce’s labyrinth, like the ancient one in Crete built by Daedalus in the shape of a quincunx, is meant to deceive. Furthermore, one must always be ready to become “the victim of a plot” (*D* 157) by some inconsiderate narrator, which in this case, as in many before (consider “Eveline,” for instance) is able to offer through art and rhetoric the perfect experiential reconstruction of the event suffered by the protagonist. In this respect, as Margot Norris brilliantly argues, “Grace” exposes the failure of “stylistic grace,” both Kernan’s in his concern with clothes and pompous language and the narrator’s in his graceful attempt to exonerate the protagonist (197-215). Yet, I invite the reader to peruse the same evidence del Greco was looking at under a different perspective, a more visual or graphical one, if you like, as the final arrangement of the five good Christians attending the retirement in order to balance their “spiritual accounts” is not hard to imagine after the following depiction:

In one of the benches near the pulpit sat Mr Cunningham and Mr Kernan. In the bench behind sat Mr M’Coy alone: and in the bench behind him sat Mr Power and Mr Fogarty. Mr M’Coy had tried unsuccessfully to find a place in the bench with the others and, when the party had settled down in the form of a quincunx, he had tried unsuccessfully to make comic remarks. As these had not been well received he had desisted. (*D* 172)

That the arrangement is catalogued as a quincunx is not surprising, were it not for the fact that the word itself is a little exotic yet perfectly appropriate —although the narrators in *Dubliners* reveal to the reader their taste for this type of word from the very first of the stories. Nonetheless, this is no explanation for the disposition, and the reader has no clue as to whether M’Coy’s comic remarks were on the quincunx or not. Let us recall that a quincunx is the arrangement of any five objects so that four are placed at the corners of a square or rectangle and one at the centre (or five things that resemble such a disposition) and that in astrology a quincunx is the arrangement of planets at a distance of five zodiacal signs or 150 degrees, and that it signifies an “inconjunct.” The colourful floor of the Jesuit Church of St Francis Xavier, the third setting for the action of the story, contains more than one quincunx.

### **Variation 1**

As any protocol demands the exact disposition of individuals in space (because of rank, authority or relevance), the protocol —or ritual— taking place inside the church suggests that the spatial distribution of the attendants in the form of a quincunx may confer

on them some special meaning. Of course, other distributions in the story may in turn become significant. “Grace” opens with one that reminds me, rather than of a descent into Hell (which no doubt the lower setting of this first image of the triptych also justifies), of a descent from the cross in any of the many versions in our Western culture, such as “The Descent from the Cross” by Fra Angelico, or those by Ambrosius Francken, Nicolas Poussin, Peter Paul Rubens, the exquisite one in the Reial Monestir de Santes Creus in Aiguamurcia, Tarragona, or even the “Pietà” by Lorenzo Lotto. Consider the opening passage in which perhaps part of the irony lies in the fact that the two men unsuccessfully try to lift Mr Kernan from Hell, rather than bring him down into it:

Two gentlemen who were in the lavatory at the time tried to lift him up: but he was quite helpless. He lay curled up at the foot of the stairs down which he had fallen. They succeeded in turning him over. His hat had rolled a few yards away and his clothes were smeared with the filth and ooze of the floor on which he had lain, face downwards. His eyes were closed and he breathed with a grunting noise. A thin stream of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. (*D* 150)

The picture of the three men as described is closer to any of those pictures mentioned above than to Dante’s *Inferno*. The small thread of blood from Mr Kernan’s mouth may not exactly correspond to Christ’s from his side, but Gifford in *Joyce Annotated* reminds us that the quincunx is “associated to the pattern of the five wounds which Jesus received on the cross” (109).

The second paragraph of the story takes us slightly away from religious concerns, but its iconography is shared both by the Catholic religion and other unorthodox beliefs. It shows us Mr Kernan upstairs in the bar, lying on the floor and surrounded by a circle of curious onlookers. The visual disposition of the characters in this scene reminds me of Dante’s mystic rose in his *Paradiso* (at least of the most popular of its representations, by Gustav Dore) rather than of the circles of his *Inferno*, perhaps simply because the protagonist signals a focal centre, or because at this centre there is a “dark medal of blood” (*D* 143) and the elastic ring of onlookers is mentioned four times (the five circles adding a new quincunx). The image, in addition, does not differ very much from that of the rose of the Rosicrucians.<sup>5</sup> The scene develops to include, at a first moment, the curate and the constable within the circle, the young man in the cycling suit and a Mr Power: five characters within a circle that make up the first quincunx in the discourse. It is also tempting to see this as a quincunx within a mandala (a geometrical model that is a metaphysical and symbolic representation of the cosmos or, in other words, a microcosmic representation of the universe from a human perspective). Obviously, the centre of the

mandala is what gathers attention, since all representations are radial. That any reader with the quincunx in mind establishes connections with pictures is only natural, since the base, horizon and lines of distance of classical perspective can easily be described as a rhomboidal intersection or decussation.

## Variation 2

The quincunx is also related to the social status of the characters in the story. There is, for instance, an earlier quincunx in the story that might explain why Mr Kernan has been bereft of his friends in the lavatories. It is not difficult to visualize the five-dot arrangement at the beginnings, ends and intersecting point in the social trajectories of Mr Power and Mr Kernan as one more “crossing”: “The arc of his [Mr. Power’s] social rise intersected the arc of his friend’s [Mr Kernan’s] decline” (*D* 154). Without social prestige, there are no friends in the Dublin of the story, and perhaps that is why the anonymous character in the cycling suit becomes so relevant. It is widely agreed that his role as a good Samaritan separates him from the other characters in the story (and Dublin?), but it has not been mentioned that the iconography of this biblical passage insistently includes one or several Jews who abandon the scene after having denied any help to the unlucky traveller.<sup>6</sup> Seen in this light, the presence of the cyclist highlights the absence of those characters that should have helped the unorthodox (because he is a Protestant-born Catholic) Mr Kernan, rather than guarantee any real salvation since, after all, all he does is demand some more alcohol to add to Mr Kernan’s already saturated body. It is Mr Power who takes him home and worries about his physical and spiritual well-being.

Although one must be cautious when assuming that “a Jewish sounding name automatically meant the figure was Jewish” (Nadel 145), one of those missing friends of his drinking bouts, Mr Kernan lets us know later, is Harford, a money-lender who is well-known for his usury as an Irish-Jew, although to be fair with him, the narrator comically emphasizes, “he had never embraced more than the Jewish ethical code” (*D* 159). This Mr Harford is a partner of Mr Goldberg, who works for the “Liffey Loan Bank” (*D* 159), with a clearly Jewish last name, and is short and fat, fitting thus one of the stereotypes of the wealthy European Jew through the apparent association of his name with money. Mr Kernan’s Catholic friends would prefer the loans to stay in Irish Catholic rather than in Jewish hands. Yet, in a further turn of the screw, the least Jewish of all the names, that of

Mr Power, coincides with one of Joyce's Jewish friends in Dublin, John Wyse Power, a clerk at the *Evening Telegraph*.

### Variation 3

Visual arrangements seem to work in the same direction as numbers in "Grace." If numerology is conspicuously used in both *Ulysses* and the *Wake*, as has been demonstrated by many (Guy Davenport, Clive Hart, Sheldon Brivic), it might not be completely foreign to the earlier work, the more so if "Joyce's awareness of Jewish life," as Nadel argues, "began in his youth" (188). While Benstock, as already mentioned, finds the number four significant in *Dubliners*, Joyce associates another character's fall, Bloom's in *Ulysses*, to the "golden number 5" (*U* 17.97-98). The golden number is a Pythagorean proportion and also a method that the Catholic Church used as a means to calculate the exact date of Easter Sunday, which determines the rest "of the liturgical calendar of the Christian year . . . [in] an elaborate effort to avoid the coincidence of Easter and the Jewish Passover" (Gifford *NU* 568). Bloom's fall is linked to Kernan's through a complex web of associations with the unorthodox Pythagorean tradition and the competing religious and other ways of life of Christianity and Judaism. The characters in "Grace," not only those in the second scene in Kernan's room but also Father Purdon in the last one, ironically claim knowledge of a Catholic tradition and authority they insistently and, occasionally even funnily, make mistakes about. It is the rhetoric disguising this faulty knowledge that signals the narrator's consciousness of an over-elaborated style as a defrauding pretence of grace. One is even tempted to argue that the disposition of the "two gentlemen" that opens the first scene of the story and the accumulation of the same word ("gentlemen") in the opening paragraph of the last scene at the church build up a sort of chiasmus, a rhetorical quincunx that places apart those who are non-Jewish, although they might belong to the clan ("gentle" and "gentile" share the same Latin root), because, after all, all these gentlemen do not seem to belong to the narrator's religious community or to commune with him in any way. In other words, the chiasmus suggests that the two men in the lavatory, although not necessarily the Jewish creditors of Mr Kernan, belong to the loan and debt system under the control of Jewish moneylenders. The joke may lie in Joyce's consciousness of the misunderstanding of Jews by the Irish, epitomized in the anecdote Edward Ralph Lipsett included in his "Jews in Ireland" of 1906 and that Nadel quotes as

follows: "an Irishman doing business with a Jewish shopkeeper . . . interrupts to ask him if he is a 'Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew'" (Nadel 195).

Nadel records the possible parallels that Joyce found between himself and the Jews and his sympathy for them thereafter (see especially 77-78), particularly as involving self-exile, an obsession for the written word, and his own creative method:

in Dujardin's reading of Jewish history [*The Source of the Christian Tradition, a Critical History of Ancient Judaism*], he [Joyce] found not only a structure of historical precedent of borrowing and absorption but a literary form suitable to his current efforts at writing. 'A new work', Dujardin explained, 'needed the authority of an older work; the work of a contemporary had to borrow the authority of some venerable name' (122). . . . Joyce found in the history of the Jews confirmation of his own personal experiences with Jews and a viable literary technique. (Nadel 81)

Joyce's scrupulous attention to words may then allow other games. Talking about the phlegm that comes to his throat, Kernan feels as if he "wanted to retch off" (*D* 150), and M'Coy answers: "Yes, that's the thorax" (*D* 151). Mr Kernan feels bad when instead of alcohol he gets phlegm, which for alchemy is one of the five principles of matter equated to distilled water. Of course, phlegm is also mucus, and M'Coy's answer takes us away from all the intellectual impropriety that can be found in the conversation of the others into the exactness of the medical term. Yet, the precision of the word is misplaced if "retching off" comes from the stomach, and it hides another misleading arrangement, since "thorax" also spells out a "torah" plus an "x" or a quincunx. That the written Torah goes along with the number five is almost taken for granted since it is contained in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.<sup>7</sup> The choice of *thorax* for *chest* may not signal an innocent inadequacy, since all the characters in the story are religiously adrift, either null or ambiguous or incapable. No matter how wise or blunt the discussions about popes and mottos, no matter how hard they try to turn Kernan into a "God-fearing Roman Catholic" (*D* 170), there is in this story a whole world of Judaic, Kabbalistic and Pagan doctrine that the Irish Catholic Church would classify as satanic. Even M'Coy's shaking of his head and his not-so-innocent "double intention" (*D* 159) question the highly praised greatness of Leo XIII.

Nadel believes that

not only do Joyce's later texts physically and conceptually embody the Talmud, but his entire perception of the text is Rabbinic. Not only does he share the general Rabbinic belief in the meaningfulness of every vowel, letter and word, each element subject to interference and interpretation, but Joyce applies such specific Rabbinic practices as *gematria*, the method of interpretation based on computing the numerical values of words. (121)



I argue here that in such an “early” text as “Grace” there is something of this method at work. Thus, besides the two quincunxes mentioned above, the number five also calls the reader’s attention elsewhere, at least in five more instances throughout the story, the final quincunx not included. Insignificant instances may be those in the five-letter title for the story, or in Mr Cunningham’s preference for the Latin “Credo” to the English “*I believe*” of Mr Fogarty (*D* 170), but there might be others whose presence can turn out to be meaningful for a Sherlock Holmes.<sup>8</sup> Mr Power’s “That’s a sure five” (*D* 169) refers, according to Gifford, to “an arrangement of billiard balls which all but guarantees the player a five-stroke, the top score for a single stroke in billiards” (107). Mr Kernan is clerk for a tea-merchant in Belfast, and his working tools are four or five china bowls out of which he tastes his teas (*D* 154). Unfortunately, having bitten off a bit of his tongue in the fall, he will not be able to work for a while. The Kernans have five children (three boys and two girls), but their connubial life is not to be envied, although Hesiod named number five the “Conjugal or wedding number” (Browne 206), but not the number of marital bliss. The number five seems to signal here something like an incompleteness, an unhappy ending, and thus it foretells the outcome of the fifth of these instances: during Kernan’s convalescence, we find five characters in his bedroom.

#### Variation 4

While the friends are pouring out now and then five small measures of whiskey (one of the causes of Kernan’s fall), the picture of the four of them surrounding Kernan’s bed reminds me of a Sephardic (Judeo-Spanish) night prayer that includes five characters in another perfect quincunx. Its origin is in the Jewish *Sh’ma* (or *Shema*): “May Michael be at my right hand, Gabriel at my left, before me Uriel, and behind me Raphael, and above my head the divine presence of God.” Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt record the following variant in their *In Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women*:

Kuatro kantonadas ay en esta kaza,  
 Kuatro malahimes, kuatro anjelines,  
 Ke mos guadren de fuego, i de flama,  
 I de palabra mala, i de muerte subetania. Amen.<sup>9</sup>

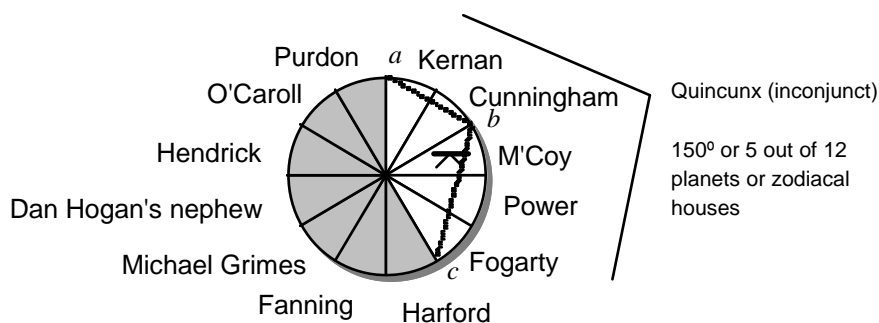
The arrangement seems to follow an ancestral magical distribution that Western culture has retained in Christian cruciform churches where the central dome is higher than the rest to exemplify the hierarchical order of celestial powers. The prayer must be repeated without

altering the text as part of the Jewish Lesser Pentagram, a magical Kabbalistic ritual to protect the place where magic is to be performed. The *Sh'ma* is

the prayer affirming commitment to one God which possesses a cycle of creation, revelation and redemption. This is the most important prayer in the Jewish liturgy and consists of three sections from the Pentateuch (Deut. 6:4-9; Deut. 11:13-21; Num. 15:37-41). It is the only prayer consisting of Biblical passages whose recitation is scripturally required. The purpose of the three sections is (1) to accept the authority of God; (2) to recognise the authority of Biblical law; (3) to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt. (Nadel 105)

Of the three, the first two are easily translatable into the plot of “Grace” (the declared aim of Kernan’s friends is to bring him back into the Catholic Church). The third, hard to apply to twentieth-century Dublin, can be read metaphorically as an ironic progress from the lavatory (Egypt/inferno) through Kernan’s room (desert/purgatory) and into St. Francis Xavier (the promised land/paradiso).

Due to Joyce’s recondite concern with words, further evidence of unorthodox knowledge may be at stake in the story. The astrological relevance of this quincunxial distribution is evident in the word itself, *quincunx*, from the Latin *quinque*, five, and *uncia*, a twelfth; so numbers begin to play a part again: the twelfth story to be written, “Grace,” contains among those attending Father Purdon’s service only enough characters with a proper name to complete the 12 zodiacal houses and perhaps some cryptic astral and Kabbalistic design:



As these are the only names we have, we may consider them sheer representatives and metonymically assume that the retreat has brought together many other men from the whole circle of the debit system in Dublin, including politicians and, obviously, at least one member of the Church itself, but all of them, in Margot Norris words, “constitute a rogue’s gallery of financial dereliction and moral ineptitudes” (203).

Thus, metonymically, all Éire is represented by this small group. Five, the number of the provinces of Ireland, may be read as a symbol of the whole country and Meath, also

called *coiced* (literally, “the fifth”) lies, like M’Coy, in the middle (see Chevalier 292). We can then find men in debt at all levels and from all affinities. Mr Kernan, of course, focuses the narrator’s attention, but the gallery includes several others such as: “poor” O’Caroll “who had been at one time a considerable commercial figure” (*D* 172-73); M’Coy, who borrows his friends’ “valises and portmanteaus to enable Mrs M’Coy to fulfil imaginary engagements in the country” (*D* 160); Mr Power himself, whose “inexplicable debts were a byword in his circle” (*D* 154) and who is also a moneylender; Mr Fogarty, another moneylender whom Kernan might have already defrauded; usurers such as Mr Harford; pawnbrokers such as Michael Grimes; corrupt and nepotistic politicians such as “Mr Fanning, the registration agent and mayor maker of the city” (*D* 172), who has not paid his canvassers from “Ivy Day in the Committee Room” yet, and “who was sitting . . . beside one of the newly elected councillors of the ward, Mr Richard J. Tierney” (also from the earlier story); “Dan Hogan’s nephew, who was up for the job in the Town Clerk’s office” (*D* 172). Mr Hendrick, the representative of the press, “the main reporter of *The Freeman’s Journal*” (*D* 172), also plays his part in the justice and the moral building system, as shown in “A Mother,” by allowing himself to be bribed by the charms of Miss Healy (*D* 145) while Mr Cunningham, who deserves Mr Kernan’s respect “as a judge of character and as a reader of faces” (*D* 164) and is therefore appointed “the very man for such a case” (*D* 157), is really a fiasco in both respects since he was unable to judge his own wife’s character or to redeem her from alcohol: “an unrepresentable woman who was an incurable drunkard. He has set up house for her six times; and each time she has pawned the furniture on him” (*D* 157). Among all these men, the Jesuit Father Purdon, who caters for the upper classes, is clearly exchanging spiritual happiness in the afterworld for financial support in this one. Fraud, hypocrisy and bribery (“I suppose you squared the constable, Jack, said Mr M’Coy” [*D* 160]) are as much the tenants of the laity of Dublin as of this particular instance of spiritual transaction. The only way “to square” the five men is to arrange them “in an act of verbal incarnation,” or stylistically, in a quincunx, but while he should have denounced all these practices, Father Purdon refuses to criticise them and aligns himself with his men of business in his particular attempt to be foursquare with them.

Within the biblical context of Purdon’s sermon and by calling on numerology and typology, one is tempted to relate the twelve attendants to the twelve apostles or to the twelve tribes of Israel, or even to link them to the twelve-pointed Occitan cross (erroneously called the Cathar cross which, in turn, was called the “empty cross”), but

these assertions are too risky, although the story clearly censures and condemns the usury of the Irish Catholic Church (which Joyce identified as an economic institution) and the characters in the story, both Irish-Jews and Catholics, and suggests nostalgia for the “pure” and original religion the Cathar heresy claimed to practice.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it has turned out to be an easier task than I originally thought to relate Father Purdon’s sermon to the apparently distant traditions of the Kabbalah, the Zodiac, numerology or the Jewish religion. Father Purdon’s sermon of doubtful Catholic orthodoxy praises Mammon, a Syrian god that never existed but that Milton consecrated in his 1679 *Paradise Lost* turning him into one of the devils whose name translates as “riches” or “money.” Apparently the sermon has nothing to do with the arrangement of the five friends on the benches, but there is a story, either semi-legend or semi-truth, about someone called Flamel that could suggest that it does.

Nicholas Flamel, a Parish attorney, demanded the help of the Spanish Rabbi Alejandro Canches to decipher the *Liber Rosa* or the *Book of Abraham the Jew*. In his attempt to find the philosopher’s stone he was helped by the Quincunx, an incredibly beautiful lady who taught him the secrets of how to transmute base metals into gold and commanded him to create the Order of the Rosicrucians.<sup>11</sup> Flamel’s goal, however, was not philanthropic, but coincided in all respects with that of a character in Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, the knight Epicure Mammon, whose last name is that of the God mentioned by Father Purdon in his sermon. Both Flamel and Epicure Mammon had planned to become enormously rich with the secret of the philosopher’s stone. Yet, Mammon, as might have been expected as much in the England of Jonson’s time as in the Ireland of Mr Kernan’s, did not pursue study as a means to achieve it, but preferred to purchase it, for he could not borrow it. The quincunx, Mammon, the Kabbalah, the Zodiac, numerology, are all culturally associated with greed, with usury and, from now on, with Mr Kernan’s Dublin. No doubt the encyclopaedic Joyce made this and possibly many more connections with Father Purdon’s “Mammon of iniquity.”

### **Variation 5**

It cannot be a sheer coincidence that in astrology the quincunx is designed by a symbol that looks exactly like the tilted capital letter in Mr Kernan’s name (see diagram above), an equivalence in the equation to the fallen protagonist. In the Kabbalah as well as in astrology, this symbol marks an incongruity or inadequacy. The intersection or decussation explicit in the “x” of an equation also appears in Jimmy’s “last equation to the

bows of his dress tie” (*D* 37) in “After the Race,” and his is a case of “inadequacy” among his rich and cultured friends as much as Kernan’s is among his Catholic ones.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the fallen “K” in the name is a symbol of the chaos and of the void that characterize Mr Kernan’s life, and perhaps, by metonymy, Joyce might have intended to make the quincunx a symbol of the spiritual emptiness that the Catholic Church manifested in representatives such as Father Purdon and the Dublin financial net so closely associated with him. Paradoxically, the solution to the shaky status of both institutions seems to lie in imitating its very enemy: the destabilizing Jewish system.

If we consider again the visual aspect of all these coincidences and apply the associations the Gematria establishes, the Hebrew letter that most resembles this tilted “K” is the “he” or “hey,” the fifth letter in the alphabet that consequently represents the number five. The pictogram associated with this letter is that of a man with lifted arms, as in prayer, and according to the mystics, the letter represents divine breath, revelation, illumination (“grace”?). In the physical world, the five dimensions, the five senses and the five fingers of the hand correspond to it. In the spiritual world, it is linked to the five stages of the souls: the instincts, the emotions, the mind, the bridge to the transcendental, and the union with divinity (the ascent from *inferno* through *purgatorio* into *paradiso*?). Sir Thomas Browne asserts that “ancient Numerologists made out [number five] by two and three, the first parity and imparity, the active and passive digits, the material and formal principles in generative societies” (206). In fact, the intersection depicted by the letter “X” or “χ” not only corresponds to Christ (“χριστο ὁ”), but Browne (205) also derives it from the Egyptian hieroglyph for “stork,” beak and legs open, a sacred animal associated with resurrection, fertility and creation, the qualities he argues that Kabbalistical accounts associate with the number five (206).

Yet, according to other sources,<sup>13</sup> as is usual with symbols and their occult meanings, the connection to the number five turns the “hey” into a symbol for division, links it to the five origins of language in the mouth (Kernan loses a bit of his tongue in the fall), the five visible planets of the solar system and the five vanities of the opening verses of Ecclesiastes: vanity, wealth, power, justice and pleasure. However far we want to stretch the thread, the fact is that in astrology the quincunx is an unfavourable distribution in which the involved planets, 150 degrees apart, cannot conjoin in any way, their zodiacal signs faced against one another and without sharing elements, quality or gender. Unable to harmonize their energies they generate a tension that is hard to understand and explain by using the conscious mind. Sir Thomas Browne recalls that “this number [five] be oftener

applied unto bad things and ends than good in holy Scripture” (208).<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is not hard to see the decussation in the final quincunx as a deletion or a striking out of the very figure of Christ and of the Catholic moral system, or even a scoring through or blotting of the spiritual and economic accounts of the Dubliners.

Perhaps not another sheer coincidence is the fact that a second name for the astrological quincunx is that of “yod” or “yud,” because of the design made up by linking the three planets that mark such an arrangement (*a*, *b*, and *c* in the diagram above). The Hebrew letter “yod” (י), when written in italics (tilted?), is identical to the apostrophe (’). The narrator’s transcription of Mr Kernan’s faulty speech after the fall is full of these apostrophes signalling omissions and inadequacies (*D* 143-45). Consistent with this rule, M’Coy being the only one among Kernan’s friends with such a diacritic in his last name, he should be Benstock’s “odd man out.” Yet, according to John Parson in his *Hebrew for Christians*, the Kabbalah considers the “yod” the primal letter from which all others grow, and therefore is associated with divine creation and God’s omnipresence. Although the “yod” corresponds in the Gematria to the number ten —“a number deemed perfect” in del Greco’s words (449)— Joyce must have noticed the similarity between the Gaelic “M’Cóig” and M’Coy’s name. “M’Cóig” can be read as “the son of (number) five.” So, if only because he is the fifth in discord, Joyce must have placed him where he is. However, he is in fact only one among the three plotters, since Fogarty plays his part quite inadvertently. Being the smallest letter in the alphabet, the “yod” is characterized by its humility, and I wonder whether this is another casual coincidence with M’Coy’s name to signal the character’s pretence of modesty, hiding his features as instigator and his reticent and backward personality.

Parson also writes about the “yod” that “the letter somewhat resembles a man in prayer,”<sup>15</sup> allowing us to return to Joyce’s text where, with M’Coy in the centre, Kernan remains displaced and no longer the focus of attention. Although in no way superior to the rest, M’Coy has been earlier introduced as someone special: he is a tenor of a certain reputation (like the young Joyce); his wife is a soprano very much like Molly Bloom will be in *Ulysses*; and his curriculum vitae records working as canvasser for the *Freeman’s Journal*, just like Leopold Bloom (*D* 158). His isolation in the middle of the quincunx can be interpreted as one more indication of the disdain the other friends have shown towards him along the story.<sup>16</sup> Mr Power does not like M’Coy to address him by his Christian name and feels offended because he thinks himself the victim of a deceitful trick he suffered when M’Coy borrowed a few valises and portmanteaus for his wife’s inexistent musical

tour. M'Coy has to pretend he has never heard the joke on soldier 65 and the cabbage in order to enter the conversation and belong to the group, something Mr Kernan is also terribly sensitive about (152-63).<sup>17</sup>

Nadel extensively illustrated Joyce's attraction for the Jewish world and culture, and his work, which conscientiously mentions all the instances in *Dubliners* in which the narrators refer to them, allows us to see the story in the light of the 1904 anti-semitic outbursts in Limerick. But when looking again at the quincunx, I contend that the other joke in the story, M'Coy's at St Francis Xavier, can be rebuilt if provided with a context that knits together the quincunx with Mr Kernan's (and everyone else's?) social and spiritual decline through a complex network of unorthodox references that shake the assumed religious and social standards with a strong ironic focus on the Jewish religion, the one that the story seems to catalogue as the theological and financial enemy of the Irish. Father Purdon's invitation to the attendants to "tally their accounts" (*D* 174) has surely brought to the minds of all the attendants a new number five, because no Irish Catholic is in a position to ignore that when in debt with "the Mammon of iniquity" one must stand by the Israelite law in which "the Tresspaser was to pay a fifth part above the head or principall, . . . and implied no more than one part above the principall; which being considered in four parts, the additionall forfeit must bear the Name of a fift" [sic] (Browne 207). M'Coy's joke is unsuccessful because it reminds his audience of the interest they are to pay. The quincunx thus extends the irony of the Catholic doctrine that Stanislaus Joyce described in his letter and certifies the vacuum to which the retreat is destined.

And I might go a bit further yet: Mr Kernan's job, family and marriage are all linked to the number five, and no matter how gracefully the narrator depicts his hat, he is a drunkard who spends his scarce wages on alcohol, who comes home drunk enough to provoke quarrels that need external intervention, who borrows money that he also probably spends on drink, who defrauds his Jewish moneylenders and also his grocer and friend Mr Fogarty, caring little about his marriage and his children's education, and whose larder is so empty that Mrs Kernan has nothing to offer Mr Power. Such a character as the pseudo Protestant-Catholic Mr Kernan, marginal and ill-adapted, is left to one side (at one end of the quincunx), no matter how much of a protagonist he might claim to be, and is replaced by an up-to-now secret or non-disclosed Irish-Jew, "a Mr M'Cóig"<sup>18</sup> who, set in the middle of the action, may suggest that Joyce was already considering in 1905 —the date when "Grace," originally conceived as the last of the stories in *Dubliners*, was created— the

possibility of making an Irish-Jew the protagonist of his next short narrative to be added to the collection, for which he had already chosen the name of "Ulysses."

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> See the chapter on “Grace” in José M<sup>a</sup> Tejedor, *Guía a Dublineses de James Joyce* (Sevilla: Kronos, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Margot Norris infers this is the case, although there is, as usual, no final evidence (see Norris 197).

<sup>4</sup> The Pythagoreans called the number four the “key-bearer of nature.” As a cosmic symbol it represents the universe as chaotic matter before being informed by spirit. The cross made by the intersection of the vertical line of spirit and the horizontal line of matter represents spiritual man crucified in the flesh, while the four-pointed star is a symbol of the animal kingdom. Yet, in Medieval and Renaissance Europe it came to signify, as part of the tetrad, equilibrium and justice.

<sup>5</sup> One is also reminded of the riddle of the “five Brethren of the Rose,” a solution to which can be found in <http://www.ou.edu/cas/botany-micro/ben/ben275.html> (January 14, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Consider, for instance, Domenico Feti’s *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, c. 1623 (Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice).

<sup>7</sup> Other names for the Torah, or “Teaching,” are the five books of Moses, Chumash or Pentateuch (respectively Hebrew and Greek for “five”); the Pentateuch is composed of five books: (1) Genesis (Bereisheet), (2) Exodus (Shemot), (3) Leviticus (Vayikra), (4) Numbers (Bemidbar), and (5) Deuteronomy (Devarim); to complete the series, the Hebrew book titles come from the first words in the respective texts, except the title for Numbers, which comes from the fifth word of that text. Benstock’s fourfold system playfully enters the fivefold pattern of the quincunx.

<sup>8</sup> Applying the digit summing method of Pythagorean numerology to the standard English letter numerical value system, “grace” becomes 5 ( $7+18+1+3+5 = 41 = 4+1 = 5$ ); if the method used is the Chaldean, the result is also 5 ( $3+2+1+3+5 = 14 = 4+1 = 5$ ).

<sup>9</sup> There are four corners in this house,

Four angels (in Hebrew), four angels (in Judeo-Spanish),

May they protect us from fire, and from flame,

And from evil speech, and from sudden death. Amen.

There are many versions of this prayer, among them a lullaby version called “The Angel’s Blessing” by Debbie Friedman. I have also tried to find connections between the four archangels and the characters in “Grace” with no success.

<sup>10</sup> According to James McDonald, “some believe the origin of the Cathar cross may have been a twelve-ray solar wheel, such as one found in Saint-Michel-de-Lanes not far from Toulouse. The twelve discs may have symbolised the twelve houses of the zodiac” ([http://www.languedoc-france.info/1901\\_cross.htm](http://www.languedoc-france.info/1901_cross.htm); accessed February 1, 2006). On Joyce’s thoughts about the Irish Catholic Church see Cheryl Herr, 245.

<sup>11</sup> Readers of the Harry Potter saga might recognize the character. The historical data is that a Nicholas Flamel really existed, was born near Pointoise (France) in 1330 and his death is said to have taken place in 1418. He was a Paris attorney who became a millionaire and latter a popular character for his generous donations to the church. The legend begins when he swore that he had dreamt about a mysterious book that he would eventually find and decipher with the help of a Spanish Jew —since he did not know any Hebrew himself. The Jew was the Rabbi Alejandro Canches, from León, an expert on the Kabbalah. Sometime after his study of the book Flamel held that on January 17, 1382, he had achieved the great work, that is, the philosopher’s stone or the ability to transform any base metal into gold. In exchange for this precious knowledge he had to return the *Liber Rosa* or *Aesch Mezareph*, or *The Book of Abraham the Jew* (it went by the three names) that the angel had mentioned in his dream. It had taken him many years of hard toil to find and interpret the work, but he was obliged to give it back to the Quincunx, an outstandingly beautiful lady whose substance was ether and the product of many and complex alchemical

concoctions. This lady, who had introduced herself as the “quintessence,” was the necessary element to turn metals into gold. This quintessence (or *quinta essentia*) was the name given to aether, (also spelled ether). Aether, or the Void, is a concept historically used in science as a medium and in philosophy as a substance. The *aether* was believed to be the substance which filled all space. Aristotle included it as a fifth element (also called quintessence, from the principle that nature abhorred a vacuum. For a fuller account of the legend see Olivia Peyton’s “Quincunx.”

<sup>12</sup> The “x” after the form of an Andean or Burgundian cross differs from the “Tau” cross of Christ, which contains no transversion. The labarum symbol, the X (Chi) and the P (Rho), yielding “everlasting Father Sun,” had been a Chaldean symbol of the sun, and an emblem of Etruria ages before the advent of Christ, the Constantine and the Christian era. The Jewish High Priests were “annointed decussatively or in the form of a [sic] X” (Browne 167).

<sup>13</sup> *The Hebrew Letters: The Mystical Significance of the Hebrew Letters*, <http://www.inner.org/hebleter/hei.htm> (January 16, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> In the shape of the “pentangle” (pentacle or pentagram, a five-pointed star) the number has ancient literary associations. King Solomon established it as symbol of loyalty, as shown on Sir Gawain’s shield (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll. 619-139), but while pointed upwards the star symbolizes individuality and spiritual aspirations, when point downwards it symbolizes witchcraft and black magic. For the Pythagoreans the pentagram was the symbol of man, not only of physical man (the four limbs and head) but also of his consciousness and thinking qualities, and they associated the number five with the fifth element, ether.

<sup>15</sup> John Parson, [http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit\\_One/Aleph-Bet/Yod/yod.html](http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_One/Aleph-Bet/Yod/yod.html) (January 16, 2006). Remember also the pictogram associated to letter “hey.”

<sup>16</sup> Literary criticism has also despised M’Coy. David G. Wright, for instance, in his *Characters of Joyce*, does not mention him. The quincuncial disposition could reinforce the discrimination of the other characters if the arch in St. Francis Xavier is designed quincuncially, since such arches have a special quality: “the voice delivered at the *focus* of one extremity, observing an equality unto the angle of incidence, it will reflect unto the *focus* of the other end and so escape the ears of the standers in the middle” (Browne 203).

<sup>17</sup> The gematria (the digit summing method), renders the number 65 as a 2 ( $6+5 = 11 = 1+1 = 2$ ), coinciding with the English letters in M’Coy ( $13+3+15+25 = 56 = 5+6 = 11 = 1+1 = 2$ ), since the apostrophe is disregarded as a letter.

<sup>18</sup> Only when we add the Jewish yod (= 10) to M’Coy’s calculation in the gematria we find a combination of the 2 + 3 generative liaison ( $13+3+15+25+10 = 66 = 6+6 = 12 = 1+2 = 3$ ).