

## Interview with Professor Geert Lernout

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“Joyce threw away lots of material, including manuscripts and notebooks”

GEERT LERNOUT TEACHES ENGLISH and Comparative Literature at the University of Antwerp. He has published widely, on Dante, Hölderlin, genetic criticism, philology, the history of the book, and religion, but his main research interest and his greatest passion of all is Irish literature, especially the works of James Joyce. In 1990 Professor Lernout founded the James Joyce Centre in Antwerp, which has now become part of the larger Centre for Manuscript Genetics, directed by Dirk Van Hulle. In the same year he published his first monograph, *The French Joyce* (1990), a theoretical study of Joyce criticism in France. It became the basis for a wider study of *The reception of James Joyce in Europe* (2004), an essay collection edited together with Wim Van Mierlo. Professor Lernout's articles have appeared in all the major journals, such as the *James Joyce Quarterly* and *European Joyce Studies*, of which he is now the general editor. The book that fascinates him the most is *Finnegans Wake*, and he has published critical facsimile editions, with Vincent Deane and Daniel Ferrer, of the notebooks that Joyce used in order to prepare his last and most ambitious novel (2001-current). His most recent monograph is *Help my unbelief: James Joyce and religion* (2010), and he has just finished a book about Lord Byron's play *Cain*. With such a comprehensive *résumé*, Geert Lernout is ideally placed to look back and forward, to the past and future of Joyce studies in particular, as well as the field of genetic criticism in general.

**1. What attracted you, as a student and young academic, to manuscript studies or, as the French call it, *critique génétique*?**

**A:** The term *critique génétique* did not yet exist in my student days. I did very theoretical BA-studies in Belgium. It was the heyday of poststructuralism and I wrote my minor thesis on *Tel Quel* and Joyce. Then I went to Dublin for an MA, where I discovered that all of my theoretical sophistication had little to do with the way that Irish literature was taught in Dublin, and I also discovered that there was an element of Joyce, namely the Irish, the archival, the historical, that I had not sufficiently appreciated from the point of view of literary theory. After I finished my MA I went to the University of Toronto, and again the Centre for Comparative Literature was a very theoretical environment. I now read even more theory than I had as an undergrad but I became more critical, especially when theory was applied to literature. I noticed that some of these critics had not sufficiently understood the texts they were using as examples of the poststructuralist concepts they were writing on.

At the same time I rediscovered the *Finnegans Wake* notebooks. In my second year in Dublin I had taken a course on Joyce and briefly looked at the *Finnegans Wake* notebooks facsimiles in the *James Joyce Archive* (1978), of which the National Library had just acquired a copy. When I had the chance to write a paper for my Joyce class in Toronto I decided to look at something that had interested me in *Finnegans Wake*, that is the presence of Dutch. I set aside a full working week to use an existing list of Dutch words, and then go through the manuscript history, trying to date the introduction of those words into the history of the text. Because Dutch is my native language, I would read it everywhere in the multilingual word puzzle that is the *Wake*, but if I could limit my scope by focussing only on what Joyce might have known and when he learned it – I knew he had had Flemish lessons in the summer of 1926 – everything that he included in the text before that time had to be South African influence, or Old English, and so on. The work was exhausting but it was such a creative rush.

I submitted a paper about it to the *James Joyce Quarterly* – it must have been in 1984 or 1985 – but the editors wrote me a letter saying: “isn’t this very intentionalist?” They insisted that my article needed a theoretical introduction. In the meantime, I had become a secret intentionalist, because I thought that a lot of the problems of literary criticism had precisely to do with the dogma that authorial intention was irrelevant. But while I was thinking about the introduction, I got another note from the *JJQ* saying that they were going to publish my paper anyway. Another article on the genesis of *Finnegans Wake* had been accepted, I believe it was by Daniel Ferrer. They must have thought that if the French do it, it must be theoretically sophisticated, so this Belgian could publish as well. That was my first introduction to genetic studies, even though I came to it from a completely different methodological background. Rejecting theory felt like I was going back to an earlier, pre-theoretical position, which turned out to be the most theoretical decision of all.

**2. You are referring to your first monograph, *The French Joyce* (1990), in which you criticized the way Joyce was being studied by the French. How did the French approach differ from the way his work was studied at the “Antwerp James Joyce Centre”, which you founded shortly afterwards?**

**A:** That book was mostly directed at the non-genetic, theoretical approaches to Joyce. But there was a difference with the way the French approached the manuscripts as well. At first I thought that I was doing the kind of work that David Hayman had done with *A first draft version of Finnegans Wake* (1963), and that there was some continuity between Hayman’s work, the work that the French genetic critics had just started doing, and the kind of work that I knew some people in Dublin were doing, such as Vincent Deane and Danis Rose. We were all studying the manuscripts and the notebooks – although we did not call it “genetic” in those days – but the way in which theory informed our work was very different. The French heavily relied on theory, especially Daniel Ferrer and Jean-Michel Rabaté, but I had distanced myself from that kind of discourse with *The French Joyce*.

Instead, I invented this concept of “radical philology”, which meant going back to the sources, discover how the sources were annotated in the notebooks, and trace how the notes then became part of the text. I called it “the minimalist approach” in the sense that *Finnegans Wake* is not a text about “everything” you can possibly read into it but about “something” more specific. It is more convenient if you can delimit it because if everything can be anything, it means basically nothing. At the same time I noticed that David Hayman was actually more in sympathy with the French and that his initial, more or less philological approach, was heading in a kind of theoretical direction as well. I defended the empirical approach and in that sense I found myself more closely aligned with the Dublin Joyceans than with Hayman’s Wisconsin group or the French.

- 3. You are talking about “groups”, but one has the impression that Joyce studies, especially on *Finnegans Wake*, have become more collaborative in recent years. Take for example the book *How Joyce wrote Finnegans Wake* (2008), which offers a chapter by chapter genetic analysis, written by different critics, all coming from various theoretical backgrounds. The same kind of collaborative effort is behind the *Finnegans Wake notebooks* series you are editing with Daniel Ferrer – from Paris – and Vincent Deane – from Dublin. What is the purpose of this project and how far along are you?**

**A:** The first instalment came out in 2001 but we had been talking about this for ten years or so before. It was always a tough discussion because we had of course exaggerated the differences between us and it had become a counterproductive race to see who would bring out the notebooks first. You also have a very difficult Joyce Estate in the middle, and it just so happened that, at some point, it took over the idea and asked Daniel to do it, but he then asked Vincent and me to join in. It was immediately clear that our theoretical differences had absolutely no impact on the way we were going to do the work. Also, an entirely new generation of scholars had emerged, such as Luca Crispi, Sam Slote, Wim Van Mierlo, Dirk Van Hulle, some of them my own students, some of them Daniel’s, some of them Hayman’s. It turned out that these young people were working together without their theoretical upbringing getting in the way. So it was a happy coincidence of various different movements.

The purpose of the project is to publish all of the surviving notebooks, sixty or so. There are different kinds, categorized as A, B, C, and D. The A notebook is somewhat atypical and it has been published before. For no good reason it got its own separate status. The other “B” notebooks are all in Joyce’s hand. He used to collect material from the 1920s until even after 1939, when the first edition of *Finnegans Wake* came out. The “C” notebooks are another separate collection, written in the hand of Madame Raphael. Because his eyesight had gotten really bad, Joyce asked her in the 1930s to neatly copy all of the material in the existing notebooks that had not been crossed out yet, things that he thought he could later use. For various reasons the production of the notebooks by Brepols has been suspended, but Daniel and I are still working on the project and we continue to publish our findings, for example in *Genetic Joyce Studies*, an online journal hosted by the University of Antwerp.

**4. All of the *Finnegans Wake* notebooks that you have edited were published in paper format. Do you think this kind of work would benefit from the so-called “digital turn” in the humanities?**

**A:** We should have done it the other way around. We published editions on paper before thinking of digital editions and that was basically because of the Estate. Of course, the idea of a hypertext Joyce was around from the start because of the allusive nature of his work. In Antwerp we even made a digital prototype of the so-called “redback” copybook in which Joyce began to write *Finnegans Wake*. Dirk Van Hulle and Vincent Neyt edited the notebook in such a way that it would be very easy to tag all of the material and link it up to the final text, but also to the manuscript end with the notebooks, using a markup language like XML. It is simply because of circumstances that we got dragged into doing our notebook edition in print. It is by nature a digital kind of project but, unfortunately, because of the copyright restrictions, it is impossible to take that kind of work to the next level for the time being. Tragically, the copyright embargo on all the Joyce material has prevented a talented young team of researchers working on Joyce at the University of Antwerp from investing all their time and energy in a research project that would never go public. Dirk Van Hulle, to name just one of them, began studying the work of Samuel Beckett and became extremely successful in that area.

**5. We have mostly been talking about *Finnegans Wake* until now. In what way is a genetic methodology interesting for the study of Joyce’s other works?**

**A:** Well, the thing with *Finnegans Wake* is that it takes up more than half of the *James Joyce Archive*. Joyce threw away lots of material, including manuscripts and notebooks. Before he had notebooks he was in the habit of writing ideas down on little pieces of paper and putting them into envelopes. Sadly, these envelopes have disappeared, so we lack the draft material for most of *Ulysses*, let alone for the earlier works. It is precisely because we have been able to look at the *Wake*’s genesis in such detail that we can extrapolate from it backwards to *Ulysses* and the earlier works. In that sense, especially with the help of the worldwide web and all the secondary material that is now available in digital format, it is possible to see how Joyce is using sources in *Ulysses*, without having his notebooks and sometimes without having the genetic history of the text.

For example, there is a Latin phrase in *Portrait of the artist as a young man* that one of Stephen’s students uses to describe the Dedalus family, namely “*pernobilis et pervetusta familia*” or “noble family”. If you google these two words, the search will take you to a nineteenth-century book on the history of names. More precisely, the reference was made in a Latin document by a Belgian “crook” who is describing the “Joyce” family. The book was published in Dublin and the National Library had a copy. We do not know exactly when, but this is likely the place where Joyce consulted the book, looked up his own name and copied the term into his draft of *Portrait*.

**6. In *Help my unbelief: James Joyce and religion* (2010), you combine your main research interest with another topic that fascinates you, namely the Bible. In what way does the genetic approach contribute to this monograph?**

**A:** It would have been impossible without it. Because, with religion as with philosophy or any other kind of ideology, if you are a catholic, you will consider Joyce as a catholic and you will then read everything that Joyce does or writes about in terms of your own catholicism. My point would be that you have to put Joyce in the context of his own time. You cannot read Joyce from the catholicism advocated by Pope Francis or any of the Popes following John XXIII, because in the early 1960s there was a revolution that completely changed the way catholics think. Joyce belongs to an earlier period and you have to place him in his time. If you do that, you will find him reading books and reacting to events in the catholic church in a way that is very difficult for us to read now because we no longer know this kind of catholicism.

What I discovered is not only that Joyce read works critical of religion in general, and specifically of catholicism, but that they belonged to a particular kind of militant atheism very popular in the second half of the nineteenth century, but which no longer exists today. It was called “free thought”. In *Ulysses* Stephen claims that he is “a horrible example of free thought”, which is also a comment that Joyce makes about himself in a letter to his brother when he goes to a meeting of free thinkers in Italy. Robbert-Jan Henkes and I have discovered many works by this movement that Joyce read and used in the preparation of *Finnegans Wake*, and he must have read some while working on *Ulysses* as well. What makes this kind of research even more fascinating is that Joyce read more orthodox Bible literature in conjunction with the more radical free thinkers material. For example, in her doctoral dissertation Inge Landuyt discovered that Joyce was interested in a Belgian commentator on the Pentateuch. It was a book in Latin that we know he owned because one of the two volumes is still in his personal library at the University of Buffalo, New York. This is where the genetic aspect comes in, at least in my “historical” interpretation of the term.

**7. Is there any chance of new groundbreaking Joyce material to be discovered, for example lost manuscripts or notebooks?**

**A:** It would be nice to find the *Dubliners* story that Joyce said he was going to write on the subject matter of *Ulysses*, which eventually became a full-length novel. It was also called “Ulysses”, supposedly, but we do not know for sure if it actually existed. There are many gaps, especially in the case of early writings, and it would be great to find one of those envelopes with little notes for *Ulysses* or *Portrait*. In the last twenty years lots of new material has surfaced, but it was sold for so much money that if somebody still had the documents, they would have surfaced by now. Greed is always a good motivation for these things to pop up.

I do not believe many new things will appear, but the kinds of possibilities of the web, especially of search engines, are enormous. For example, Mikio Fuse, a Japanese scholar we are working with, is developing a kind of super search engine. Just one or two words will allow you to look up a reference and the search engine itself will then limit the query to the kind of material that Joyce might have read, such as newspapers archives, etc. Groundbreaking new discoveries will probably come from initiatives like these. In a way, the eclectic nature of Joyce's writing drives the humanities to be cutting edge and innovative.

- 8. I suppose all these new discoveries about Joyce's work will have affected your views on Joyce as a writer, or even as a person. So, I must ask, having worked on Joyce for about forty years of your life, how tempting is it to try and write a new biography, more than fifty years after the first edition of Richard Ellmann's famous *James Joyce* (1959) came out?**

**A:** I have been tempted and, over the years, I have started up a biography, but it is not a typical one about Joyce's life. I do not really like Joyce as a person and prefer to write about his work and his writing of that work. There is plenty of material. One of our students developed a timeline for a specific period that shows when Joyce was working on which document. In the case of *Finnegans Wake*, for instance, it is possible, from all the digital data we have collected, to make a kind of day-to-day timeline. It would show you that, on this date, he is reading that book and is making notes from page so and so to page so and so. Then, on the next day, he is probably fiddling with the manuscript because one of the notes makes it into the drafts. If you know that he published that particular draft in the magazine "transition" on that particular day in that year, you can in turn exclude a range of other possibilities. So it would not be your typical biography but a kind of working diary. But because there is so much material now, it has to be a collaborative effort. It would be a powerful adjunct to the digital publication of Joyce's personal library, both preserved and virtual, which is another project we are currently developing at the Centre for Manuscript Genetics.

- 9. In 2016 you will be the president of the International James Joyce Foundation. Can you tell us something about your plans?**

**A:** As a joke, I told the current president that I will change the name to the "International W. B. Yeats Foundation" – and he agrees (Yeatsians and Joyceans do not like each other). No, I do not have a big ambition to change everything. It is more a matter of continuity. The only thing I will attempt as president is try again if we cannot do something about the copyright. But so many different people, some with law degrees and specializations in copyright laws, have tried and failed in the past, so I have no

great hopes. Yet it would be very nice indeed if we could have the kind of relationship with the Joyce Estate that Beckettians have with theirs, where there is at least a direct line of communication and an openness to projects that does not exist yet in the case of Joyce. We have missed so many great opportunities. All the necessary people were present. They were also willing to collaborate and make their work available but could not, simply because the Estate did not like it. It would be wonderful to be around when that finally changes.

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Professor Geert Lernout