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**JOYCE'S FICTION  
AND  
THE NEW RISE  
OF  
THE NOVEL**

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*edited by  
Franca Ruggieri*

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Geert Lernout, *Cain: but are you able? The Bible, Byron and Joyce*  
(Rome: Bulzoni 2015 – pp. 145, €10.00)

Many of Joyce's works are books of siblings, starting from his first short story, "The Sisters", right down to *Stephen Hero*, where we have the two brothers Stephen and Maurice. Then in *Ulysses* we encounter some imperfect brotherly couples. This is the case of Parnell and Stoker, where only the less important one features, but he is obviously a shadow of the more prominent one. The mentions of John Howard and Sir Thornley, in fact, stand no doubt for an awareness of their better-known brothers.

And yet it is in *Finnegans Wake* that this theory of siblings comes to the fore, in the characters of Shem and Shaun, of course, but also with Mutt and Jute, Butt and Taff, and so on. They are, to be sure, just examples of brotherly couples, which in the *Wake* often include also a female element—see Tristopher and Hilary—or an animal one—see the Ondt and the Gracehoper, or even the Mookse and the Gripes. The presence of such couples in Joyce's fiction is deeply motivated by the fact that in his life brothers, and sisters, played quite an important role, Stannie just being the paramount example.

References to the Biblical epithet that Cain gave to Abel before God, *My brother's keeper*, and which became also the title of Stanislaus's memoir, is referred to in the *Wake* many times. We have it in *bloater's kipper* (FW 316.5), but also more or less transfigured in FW 422.14 and FW 443.4, as well as in many other less well-known places. This is because the story of Cain and Abel is clearly one of the most revealing refrains in the book, and it is quite similar to another *Wake* plot, the foundational myth of ancient Rome—Romulus and Remus being nothing but a secularized replica of the old theme of the fraternal rivalry from Genesis.

Lernout's work does not speak of the Roman successors of the sons of Adam and Eve, but sheds light on how the story of Cain and his mysterious slaying of his brother came to infiltrate the *Wake*, a novel which has rightly been described as a rewriting of Genesis. The book makes critical use of a large bulk of sources in Biblical, Joycean and literary scholarship. Perhaps the most relevant debt is to genetic studies, as the author—especially in chapter four—is keen to provide many revela-

tory insights on the ways in which the story of Cain ends up in the *Wake* through its direct and indirect appearance in the notebooks and in the first draft version.

However, this is not a book for genetic scholars only. It is meant to connect whatever knowledge we can draw from a close study of pre-publication materials and of Joyce's sources, to the bigger picture of his *oeuvre* and also his biography. The filter through which Joyce seems to reread the obscure vicissitudes that led to Abel's death in the Bible is Lord Byron, an old acquaintance of the young Dublin author.

Byron features early in *A Portrait*, where Stephen is ready to be insulted and beaten to defend his fondness for him and his poetry. We also have him massively in *Ulysses*, as Fritz Senn was able to point out quite convincingly in a conference held in Rome many years ago entitled *Romantic Joyce*—the proceedings are now published in volume 8 of the journal *Joyce Studies in Italy*. And of course, we have him in *Finnegans Wake*, where we also encounter a vast array of quotations from his poems.

Lernout is quite convincing in demonstrating not just the general importance of Byron in the *Wake*, but the very fact that it was probably his poetic rewriting of the story of *Cain* in one of his less successful plays—a rewriting considered quite heretical and subversive at the time of its publication—which inspired Joyce's revisiting of the *non-serviam* theme.

The book begins with an analysis of the Cain and Abel Biblical story, and through a very useful survey of the various translations of the Bible, it introduces the reader to the crucial question of how it is possible to interpret Cain's act. Biblical interpretation being itself an old-age discipline, and translation being a mode of interpretation in the first place, it is not surprising that the motivation which drove the first assassin to commit the first murder can be read in many different ways. The Bible is, in fact, quite reticent as to the reason for Cain's decision to kill his brother; even more importantly, God's warning that he should not be punished for his deed is not fully explained. This inevitably creates the conditions for much speculation, also in literary terms. Byron's reading of the whole story, and for instance his much-debated distinction between Lucifer and the snake—the former therefore not being too involved in the tempting of Eve—proved quite influential at the time. The book's second chapter is a useful exploration of the ways in which the Bible was read before him.

After Byron, revisionist attitudes in the interpretation of the Scripture became more and more frequent, especially with the advent of Modernism. The author rightly points out how even Byron's most provocative rendering of the frictions between Cain and God, had become quite innocuous by the time scholars and theologians had started to question in depth, for example, the historical plausibility of the Biblical accounts. Interestingly, such critical positions found little space in Catholic circles, where even at the very beginning of the twentieth century, people involved in the modernist movement were utterly marginalized.

Joyce's interest in Byron's *Cain* seems to stem from a contradictory dichotomy. He appears to be divided between the legacy of his religious upbringing, with a deep influence of the ideological agenda of the Jesuits, and the heretical strain which always attracted him. Lernout rightly traces in the notebooks the development of Joyce's position as regards the implications of the first murder and the motivations of the first assassin, as well as in many of his sources—foremost among them Thomas Josephus Lamy's introduction to the Genesis, but also Frazer's discussions on ultimogeniture.

The book ends with an interesting incursion into Joyce's frustrated attempt to convince composer George Antheil to write an opera based on Byron's play *Cain*. The author reminds us that when Joyce was asked to rewrite parts of the libretto, he kindly turned down the offer, having imagined himself just having the role of a "cut and paste man"—so great was his respect for the Romantic poet. Joyce wanted the opera to be composed so that his friend, the now almost forgotten Irish tenor John Sullivan, might sing in it. He ardently sponsored Sullivan, but sadly seemed to be one of his relatively few admirers.

Lernout's book is a fine example of honest and scrupulous scholarship. It combines incredibly specialized knowledge, such as the insight offered by genetic criticism, with ways of reading Joyce's works that do not aim at being definitive, but "simply" authoritative and reliable, though ineluctably plural. It is exactly when these two trends in Joyce studies meet halfway without being confined to a necessarily limitative horizon, that Joycean exegesis is at its best.

*Enrico Terrinoni*