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The First Murder: The Myth of Cain and Abel in Modern Poetry

Art takes advantage of its ability to revise and re-establish the myths that, as such, root their reasons in the time in which the “*storia del genere umano*,” to say it with Giacomo Leopardi, was narrated, rather than made. After Dante and Shakespeare, the myth of Cain and Abel received an ethical fixation in Christian morality that persisted into the eighteenth century, when the first signs of dissatisfaction regarding the fratricide’s condemnation, and indeed of empathy towards his ultimate condition, were felt. In Italy Leopardi is one of the first revisionists of the narration of Genesis in general, and of Cain in particular, in the “*Inno ai patriarchi, o de’ principi del genere umano*.”¹

This hymnologic revision, while still respectful of the narration in Genesis, starts a tradition in modern Italian poetry, which from Leopardi first moves to Ungaretti’s “*Caino*” (inserted in the section *Inni* in *Sentimento del tempo*) and then comes down to its counterpart, Mario Luzi’s “*Abele*,” and the poems David Maria Turoldo dedicated to the first murder: “*Il segreto di Caino*,” “*Vita di Caino*,” “*Come te Abele*.”

However, well before the head-start given by the poet from Recanati to the meditation on the founder of the city, the myth of Cain had inspired some essential moments of Romantic literature, beginning, even before William Blake, with Lord Byron, who established the reading founded on the affinity felt with that sinner, according to the *maudit* attitude, which was then adopted by Charles Baudelaire in “*Abel et Cain*” and Gérard de Nerval in *Voyage en Orient*.²

I will first explore the shift in the interpretation of the myth of Cain and Abel that took place in the eighteenth century; then, I will consider the main texts that revised that myth in the nineteenth century, before concluding with a discussion of some poems of the twentieth century. I will also refer to the

¹ As known, the subtitle of this canzone is recovered in the very title of the first of Leopardi’s *Operette morali*.

² It is worth recalling at least some masterpieces of world literature that share motives of inspiration from the first fratricide: Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*; Hermann Hesse’s *Demian*; H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*; Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer*; Miguel de Unamuno’s *Abel Sánchez*; John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*; Henry Vaughan’s *Abel’s Blood*. On some of these works see Quinones. *Annali d’italianistica* 25 (2007). *Literature, Religion, and the Sacred*.

theoretical approach to the sacred by René Girard. For, even though the eminent critic deals only tangentially with the myth of Cain and Abel, some of his main studies will prove quite useful in my reading of that myth and its transformations in modernity.

The Genesis of the Myth

The recounting of the first murder in humankind according to the Judeo-Christian tradition comes down to us in Genesis 4:1-15: it is a fratricide, because of which the name of Cain became forever bound with that of his victim, Abel. However, even before the conclusion of chapter 4 of the first book of the Pentateuch, the roles are inverted: Yahweh brands the figure of Cain with some marks that reveal his ineluctable assumption to scapegoat, the sacrificial victim not in the literal sense (a function that remains the prerogative of Abel), but in a symbolic one, according to the interpretation that has been given to the myth since the eighteenth century.

In the story of Cain and Abel, among the textual signals that become immediately evident are the preference Yahweh presumably shows for the sacrifices Abel offers (Genesis 4:4-5) and the divinity questioning Cain about the reasons for his anger and sadness (Genesis 4:5-7). In the analysis of Cain's psyche that Yahweh outlines for him, the would-be murderer immediately assumes the role of the assigned victim, or at least that of the hero before the ordeal: it is a challenge that sees him defeated from the start, both because such must be his destiny (as though the divine project had assigned him to such a role) and because Cain himself is in fact the prototype of the sinner as rebel to the laws of God and humankind.³

The other evident signal that Cain receives from Yahweh and that distinguishes him as a kind of scapegoat is the mark that God lays on him so that he would be recognized and avoided, rather than being in turn killed (Genesis 4:15). Such a sign, to which Yahweh resorts in the Old Testament for the first time in this episode of Cain and Abel, has at least one important recurrence during the tenth plague that God sends against the Egyptians, which coincides with the sacrifice of Passover. That last and decisive plague causes the death of the first-born sons of Egypt by the hand of the angel of God. By contrast, what allows the first-born sons of the people of Israel to be spared is the shedding of the sacrificial lamb's blood which is splashed on the two doorposts and the lintel of every Jewish household to ensure that the divine wrath will spare them. Yahweh, therefore, repeats Cain's homicidal act, but he grants protection by sparing the children of Israel, marking them in a manner comparable to what he

³ This is a fundamental distinction vis-à-vis the pagan myth of Prometheus that had so much importance in the classical age and that is somehow the myth corresponding with Cain. Prometheus, however, rebels against Olympian egoism on behalf of humankind's progress, whereas Cain raises his outrageous and sacrilegious act against his own brother.

had done with Cain, and making them untouchable even to the angel of destruction Yahweh himself had sent.⁴

The literal sense of the tale of Abel's assassination wants him, the shepherd of flocks, to be the sacrificial lamb.⁵ This is, however, a senseless sacrifice performed by the farmer brother because it is founded on the brother's murder and because it is not offered to God, but rather to Cain's own wounded pride. One is almost tempted to argue that, in Cain's gesture, there is the attempted murder of God himself, perpetrated on the favored brother, given Cain's impossibility of attacking Him who scorned his sacrifices. Cain's sin is not controlled, as the divine voice may arguably invite Cain to carry it out (Genesis 4:7), but is instead welcomed and performed by the older brother in all its fierceness. At this point, though, Yahweh himself provides the change of the existential condition of the fratricide in one perpetual holocaust through the very mark that Cain carries on himself so that he may be recognized and shunned by everyone. In other words, Cain is the victim the divinity appoints, forced to wander until he ends up settling down in the country of Nod, the unknown land whose name recalls the Hebrew word *nad*, "wanderer." If his parents were exiled from Eden, Cain is the nomad *par excellence* before becoming the founder of the first city; he lives with no hope of recovering the yet degraded condition of Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the Earthly Paradise.⁶

⁴ One should not forget the destruction of Jerusalem brought about by the six messengers in Ezekiel's vision (9:1-11). One scarcely need recount the other episode in Genesis (22:1-19) in which Yahweh requests the sacrifice of Abraham's only son. In this case, the Angel of God arrives in time to stop the father's hand and the avoided holocaust grants the renewal of God's promises of prosperity to the patriarch. In this episode the Fathers of the Church saw the figuration of Christ's sacrifice by the Father, as it was solemnly announced at the time of Christ's baptism, administered by John the Baptist with the water of the Jordan river (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22). Accordingly, Abraham's test is fulfilled in the gratification God feels in Christ. The concept of the scapegoat is exposed in Leviticus (16:1-10) when Yahweh talks to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons; furthermore, the instructions given to the patriarch focus on the sacrifice of two kids, one to be immolated to Yahweh and the other to Azazel. Finally, in Paul's Letter to the Hebrews (12:22-24), Christ's sacrifice is favorably compared with Abel's.

⁵ See Girard, *La Violence et le sacré (Violence and the Sacred)*, especially the chapters "Sacrifice" and "The Sacrificial Crisis" (1-38; 39-67) and *Le Bouc émissaire (The Scapegoat)*. In the former study Girard refers directly to the myth of Cain and Abel (4). See also Girard, *Je Vois Satan tomber comme l'éclair*, at least the chapters on "Satan," "Sacrifice" and "Le Meurtre fondateur" (61-80; 115-31; 133-51); the last mentioned chapter is dedicated to Cain as founder of the city.

⁶ In this respect, the etymologies of names are enlightening, regardless of the symbolic hoarding: Abel, from the Assyrian *ablu*, means "son"; but it could derive also from the Hebrew *hebel*, "breath," and, as trope, "transitoriness." Cain, instead, is significantly linked with the Hebrew *Kayin*, "blade," and, as trope, "smith." By the same token, the

Furthermore, Cain takes upon himself the two meanings of *sacer*: after violating the threshold of good and evil, of life and death, he is himself claimed untouchable by his very sin, as the mere contact with the murderer stains those who pursue that contact. The crime discriminates.⁷

Revival of the Myth in the Eighteenth Century

When Byron published *Cain: A Mystery*, he specified in the accompanying preface that he had not read Vittorio Alfieri's *Abele*, the "tramelogedia" that was still unpublished in 1798, when the Piedmontese poet listed it among his completed works, and that in fact was published only posthumously. Yet, Byron must have been aware of other Italian works on the myth of Cain and Abel, besides the 1758 German epic poem *Der Tod Abels*, by Salomon Gessner, to be followed two years later by the English composer Thomas Arne's oratorio, *The Sacrifice, or The Death of Abel*.⁸ The titles that Gessner and then Arne chose for their works are significant in that they reflect the moral emphasis on the good brother Abel sacrificed by the envious brother Cain.

Gessner's version of the first murder was soon translated into French as well as Italian. In 1760 Gasparo Gozzi published some passages, translated from the French, in the *Gazzetta veneta*; in 1776 Gian Domenico Stratico published the integral translation, also attempted by Carlo Berni degli Antoni (1778) and by the abbott Mugnozzi (1782, that is, in the year in which Alfieri was planning *Abele*); finally, a version by Aurelio De' Giorgi Bertola remained unpublished (Horloc and Lühinger). The English translations of Gessner's *Der Tod Abels* inspired a number of emulations in that language, especially in the United States.⁹

fratricide's name is related to another Hebrew word, *Kanah*, that is, "obtained," "conquered," to indicate "possession": one thinks of Eve's sentence at the birth of her first son (Genesis 4:1). Thus, the very names already reveal the roles of the two brothers: through the homicidal ritual that ends Abel's life's breath and his short existence, Cain possesses his brother, shepherd and therefore nomad. In turn, after digging the blade of his misdeed into his brother's flesh, Cain must abandon his sedentary activities and accept his role of nomad through his mark of identification, possessed by God, before recovering a semblance of existential stability through the foundation of the city.

⁷ That which discriminates is also the distinction between divinity and humanity.

⁸ See the short, but incisive, study by Blumenthal; Quinones 87-108.

⁹ The most relevant ones are *The Death of Cain: in Five Books; After the Manner of The Death of Abel. By a Lady* by Mary Collyer (the author of the most popular translation of Gessner's work); P. St. John's *The Death of Abel: An Historical or Rather a Conjectural Poem, Relating Many Things Which Might Probably Take Place Both Before and After That Barbarous Fratricide*; R. Cotton's *Cain's Lamentations over Abel: in Six Books*; E. Brown's *The Trial of Cain, the First Murderer: in Poetry by Rule of Court; in which a Predestinarian, a Universalian, and an Arminian, Argue as Attorneys at the Bar; the Two Former as the Prisoner's Counsel, the Latter as Attorney General*.

Byron, however, who at the time of the composition of *Cain* was living in Venice, must have been familiar with a number of other literary, figurative, and musical works that, from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, Italian artists had produced, especially in Venice. In that city of lagoons, there are the paintings by Titian (1542-1544) and Tintoretto (1550-1551) of *Cain's Murder of Abel* (Church of Santa Maria della Salute and Accademia, respectively); in Venice, Alessandro Scarlatti composed the oratorio *Cain, ovvero il primo omicidio* in 1707, on the same year of his first known opera, *Gli equivoci del sembiante*, which Byron may have enjoyed in the Carnival season. Finally in Vienna, two years after leaving Venice, Pietro Metastasio wrote *La morte d'Abel* (1732), an oratorio which was put into music several times in the eighteenth century.¹⁰

The novelty, then, was not in the topic Byron chose, but in his different, indeed opposite, approach vis-à-vis his seventeenth- and eighteenth-century predecessors. One need only consider the occasion for which Metastasio's *La morte d'Abel* was written: "Azione sacra, scritta dall'Autore in Vienna d'ordine dell'Imperator Carlo VI, ed eseguita la prima volta con musica del Reütter nella Cappella Imperiale la settimana Santa dell'anno 1732" (*Oratori sacri* 105).

It is unknown for which occasion Scarlatti composed either the 1707 (printed in Venice) or the 1710 (printed in Rome) versions of his oratorio librettos. It is certain, however, that he was familiar with two lost oratorios: the 1699 oratorio *Agnus occisus ab origine mundi* by Francesco Scarlatti (one of Alessandro's brothers) and the 1703 oratorio by Mattia Lumelli. Although these two works are lost, it is known that Francesco Scarlatti's oratorio was performed for Holy Week. Furthermore, Alessandro Scarlatti knew oratorios on the same subject produced in the seventeenth century; namely, the ones by Bernardo Pasquini (1671) and Alessandro Melani (1678). In these oratorios, the emphasis is on the conclusion, which always announces the coming of the Redeemer, in agreement with the Augustinian notion of *felix culpa*, as it plays a fundamental role in the ritual of Holy Week, an exegetical strategy to which Metastasio also

¹⁰ Besides the work by Giorgio Reütter — the only one recalled by Charles Burney in his *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio in which are incorporated translations of his principal letters* (3.333) — many compositions are titled *Cain* all the way to Byron's time: Leonardo Leo (Naples, 1732), Innocenzo Gigli (Bologna, 1737), Domenico Valentini (Venice, 1740), Carlo Ambrogio Meli (Florence, 1748), Giuseppe Zonca (Cologne, 1750), Nicola Piccinni (Naples, 1758), Giovan Battista Costanzi (Rome, 1758), Giuseppe Callegari (Florence, 1769?), Pietro Guglielmi (ca. 1780), Pietro Avondani (Naples, ca. 1780), Giovanni Antonio Kotzeluch (ca. 1780), Giuseppe Giordani (Jesi, 1785), Stefano Cristiani (Bologna, 1788), Luigi Gatti (Mantua, 1788), Gian Agostino Perotti (Bologna, 1794), Giovan Battista Borghi (Loreto, 1800), Giovanni Amedeo Naumann (Dresden, 1800), Francesco Seydelmann (Dresden, 1801), Carlo Federico Rungenhagen (1810?), Francesco Morlacchi (Dresden, 1821), Luigi Bringeri (Rome, 1823).

referred. One of the reasons Byron focuses on Cain rather than Abel and subtitles his work *A Mystery* must be found in the shift of interest from the victim to the murderer, giving a new sense to the notion of scapegoat. The difference between oratorio and mystery, then, is not only important from a formal viewpoint, but it contains an opposite understanding of the sacred.

To be sure, Scarlatti's oratorio *Cain, ovvero il primo omicidio*, already focused on Cain and his murderous act in its title. The composer is also responsible for inserting Satan next to God who talks with a voice that seems to evoke the overwhelming figure over the killing scene in Titian's painting.¹¹ In fact, in this painting God is not seen, but only perceived by the beholder as well as Cain, while the murderer's foot pushes down Abel's body. The gesture seems to be the combination of two moments in Genesis: that of the murder and that of God's questioning Cain, thanks to the foreshortened perspective that the beholder enjoys and that is emphasized by the painting's placement on the ceiling. In fact, the opposite torsion of the bodies of the two brothers invites the gaze to explore beyond Cain's hidden face, beyond his lifted arm ready to strike again, because the gesture suggests a challenge to God himself. In turn, the beholder is placed on the same plane where Abel is about to fall, so that Titian invites identification with the victim. Tintoretto's painting, instead, while forcing the beholder to be an impassible, albeit terrified, spectator, eliminates the suggestion of the presence of God. The head of the animal placed in the lower right corner of the painting, which had to be sacrificed to God, highlights the symbolic identity of Abel.¹²

Returning to Scarlatti's oratorio, the presence of God's voice invites a moral consideration of the Genesis episode and makes the subtitle "Il primo omicidio" resonate throughout the oratorio. The insertion of Lucifer tempting Cain offers an important precedent for Byron's *Cain*:

¹¹ Titian's painting *Cain Killing Abel* (1540) is now in the Church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice, but it was painted for the Church of Santo Spirito, along with the *Sacrifice of Abraham* and *David and Goliath*.

¹² Tintoretto's painting *Cain Killing Abel* (1550-53) is now in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice. As Zucchi's engraving shows, the right size has been cut. March Phillips writes: "He [Tintoretto] attains that triumph of which M. Hourticq speaks in the 'Death of Abel,' in which the execution is so charged with emotion, that subject and technique are inseparable, and it becomes the most vehement and terrible piece of work he ever produced. The contrast is keen between the young elastic Abel, with balance lost, and leg and arm thrown out in a desperate effort to recover equilibrium, and the powerful, muscular Cain, vibrating with concentrated hate and determined purpose. The expression of the hand, vainly grasping and finding nothing, makes an appeal that is like a cry for help. The gloomy cypresses and the lurid night-clouds have a wildness, such as might act upon a wild nature and drive it on to fierce and passionate deeds done in the scorn of consequence, and the sure and impetuous brushwork is almost as responsible as the design for the sense of overpowering energy which it conveys" (45).

Voce di Lucifero.

Cain, che fai, che pensi? Anima vile
De tuoi scorni t'appaghi, e ti compiacci,
Soffri l'oltraggio, e taci?
Sei pur d[e]l Rè del Mondo
Primogenita prole?
E chi nacque secondo
Già ti medita al piè nodo servile;
Il Ciel, che ti prescelse, il Ciel t'esclude,
Dunque il Ciel ti delude;
Sprezzalo, s'ei ti sprezza, uccidi Abelle.
Morto ch'ei sia, che ti faran le stelle?
Poche lagrime dolenti
Sù l'estinta amata prole
Spargeranno i Genitor;
Ma poi solo, come il Sole
Saran tutti gl'armenti,
Sarà tuo tutto l'amor.

(*Parte prima* 20)

This scene describes one of only two instances in which Lucifer addresses Cain, a circumstance all the more striking since, in Metastasio's oratorio, neither God nor Lucifer is present; they are replaced by an angel and the chorus, respectively.¹³ To be sure, the replacement is not as symmetrical as it may seem at first. In fact, even though the chorus intervenes only twice at the end of each part, in its second intervention (which also ends the oratorio) it clearly functions as the Christian conscience :

Coro. (Parla l'estinto Abelle, e colle chiare voci del sangue il parricida accusa.)
Mortali, a noi si parla. Ognun di noi
ha parte nel delitto;

¹³ Metastasio himself remarks: "[...] benché tutto ciò che qui dirà l'Angelo, nel sacro testo comparisca detto dal Signore medesimo, conviene più seguitar col rispetto l'opinione che tutte le apparizioni, rivelazioni ed illuminazioni divine, così nella legge di natura, come nella scritta e in quella di grazia, siano pervenute agli uomini per mezzo degli Angeli" (*La morte d'Abel*, in *Oratori sacri* 105-06n5). Regarding the notes that Metastasio inserted in the oratori, the editor Sabrina Stroppa writes: "Le note forse più interessanti sono quelle apposte all'*Abele*, perché lasciano intravedere il processo di strutturazione di un dramma gravitante su un nodo fondamentale dell'esegesi veterotestamentaria: il livello base delle citazioni è tratto dalla Glossa ordinaria alla Bibbia (attribuita a Walafrid Strabone, cui si aggiungono le postille morali di Nicolò di Lira; [...]) [...] A questi riferimenti Metastasio ne aggiunge altri, tratti da opere che egli legge (spesso per intero) e traduce: buona parte dell'*Abele* è tolta di peso da due omelie di san Giovanni Crisostomo" (Metastasio, *Oratori sacri* 50).

ma non l'ha nel dolor. Detesta ognuno
le vie degli empi, e v'introduce il piede;
abborrisce Caino, e in sé nol vede.

(*Oratori sacri* 128)

Metastasio himself, besides adding many annotations referring to passages of the Bible and the Fathers of the Church, explains the exegesis of the oratorio in his address to the reader: "Nella morte d'Abel, soggetto del presente sacro Componimento, riconoscono i Santi Padri delineata, più chiaramente che altrove, quella del Salvatore. Né poco sarà giovevole a far comprendere la grandezza del Mistero, che in questi giorni si celebra, una occasione di riflettere che sì gran tempo innanzi, e fin dal principio de' secoli, sia piaciuto all'eterna Provvidenza di prepararlo, figurarlo e prometterlo" (*Oratori sacri* 105).¹⁴ The mystery to which Byron refers is the exact opposite: the blasphemous reversal of the one contemplated by Metastasio.

On the other hand, in pointing out the sacrificial event, the title places Cain at the center of the tragic action insofar as he is the *actor* according to the human ability to express free will, as the Angel reminds him.¹⁵ In the first exchange between the Angel and Cain, the former first interrupts Cain's monologue and then invites the envious brother to confess and thereby free himself of his rage:

Angelo.

Qual ira è questa? E qual cagione atterra
il tuo volto, o Cain? Parla, rispondi,
giustifica te stesso
narrando il proprio error. Comincia il giusto
dall'accusarsi il suo parlare; e parte
di penitenza è il confessar la colpa,
conoscerla, arrossirne. Ancor non sai
forse, che ben oprando

¹⁴ In her edition of Metastasio's *Oratori sacri*, Stroppa points out: "[...] nelle note in calce all'*Abele* comparivano, nel libretto e nell'edizione Bettinelli, molte indicazioni — sopresse a partire dall'edizione di Torino del 1758 — relative a Caino ('typus est Synagogae infidelis', 'Judaeorum incredulitas praefiguratur') e a Eva, che continuamente sovrappongono alle loro vicende 'storiche' la filigrana della tipologia: e una di esse, quella relativa a 'Eva typus Ecclesiae', è annotata in margine ad espressioni di tenerezza materna (vv. 308-10) che sarebbe più corretto interpretare come speranze ecumeniche in una riconciliazione fra cristiani ed ebrei" (Metastasio, *Oratori sacri* 42).

¹⁵ Stroppa states: "Solo in considerazione della distribuzione delle arie si può dire che Abele ed Eva siano i personaggi più importanti di questo oratorio (Brumana 259); tutto il dramma si gioca, in realtà, su Caino, che resta quasi sempre in scena (esce solo per compiere l'omicidio [vv. 418-65] e per la fuga finale [vv. 579-642])" (*Oratori sacri* 245-46).

il tuo premio otterrai?

(*Oratori sacri* 110-11)

After predicting the horrible aftermath of guilt for the doubting Cain, the Angel explains that human beings are now the makers of their own destiny, because they have free will:

Angelo.

So che vuoi dirmi.

No, non è vero: il tuo peccato è sempre
soggetto a te; tu dominar lo puoi
con libero poter. L'arbitro sei
tu di te stesso; e questo arbitro avesti
perché una scusa al tuo fallir non resti.

Con gli astri innocenti,
col fato ti scusi;
ma senti che abusi
di tua libertà:
e copri con questa
sognata catena
un dono, che pena
per l'empio si fa.

(*Oratori sacri* 111-12)

The gift of freedom, which becomes suffering for Cain, is the necessary companion of the doubting attitude that he adopts toward his brother: Abel, strong in his belief in God's goodness, is never in doubt except once, when he does not understand his brother's words: "Qual nuova è questa, / insolita favella? Ah non lasciarmi / dubbio così" (*Oratori sacri* 112).

After Metastasio, the myth of Abel and Cain did not receive any major treatment in poetic form in Italy despite the popularity of this oratorio; as noted earlier, there was indeed a proliferation of oratorios on the subject.¹⁶ Gessner's epic poem, *Der Tod Abels*, had the important function of reviving interest concerning the ethical question deriving from the first murder.

It took Alfieri fourteen years, from 1782 to 1796, to reach the final stage of the only "tramelogedia" he wrote, *Abele*. Yet in the plan Alfieri first jotted down in 1782, the title appears to be radically different: *Caino / Tragedia / Musicale*.¹⁷ By 1786, when he wrote the work in less than a month (January 27-February

¹⁶ On Metastasio's popularity, see at least Astaldi 325-39.

¹⁷ On the left margin of the "Alfieri" 7 (cc. 1-3) manuscript in the Laurenziana Library in Florence, one can read: (*Caino e Abe[le]*).

23), the title refers to the victim of the murder.¹⁸ However, in 1790 and again in 1792, Alfieri prepared the versification, perhaps influenced by the performance of *La mort d'Abel* by Gabriel-Marie Legouvé. In Alfieri's version, the title focuses again on Cain, whereas the frontispiece corrects it into *Abéle* / *Tramelogedia* / *Sola*, probably added in 1799, when Alfieri had decided that he would not write the other five works he had planned.¹⁹ Yet, when in 1796 he wrote the preface in London, Alfieri had already adopted this title, which makes the victim, rather than the murderer, the hero of the tragedy. In light of this focal point, one understands the distance Byron wanted to maintain from Alfieri's work. But the Italian writer had also other intentions that *Abéle* was supposed to fulfill.

First of all, it is worth mentioning the trouble Alfieri went through to explain his coinage of the term *tramelogedia*. After stating the reasons why *Abéle* is not a tragedy, or a comedy or a drama, even less so a Greek tragedy, which might be called "Melo-tragedia," Alfieri concludes:

Opera-tragedia sarebbe dunque il vocabolo che più esattamente verrebbe a deffinire una Tragedia mista di melodia e di mirabile, qual è questa. Io perciò, volendole dar un titolo, che dignitosamente spiegasse la cosa, ho intarsiata la parola *melo* nella parola *tragedia*, in maniera ch'ella non ne guastasse la terminazione, non badando alla radice del nome. [...] ma ho voluto, che la stravagante parola a bella prima interpretasse la stravagante intenzione dell'autore, di voler innestare nella Tragedia la Cantata Epica, senza pur togliere, massimamente al quinto atto, la totalità del tragico effetto.

(*Tragedie postume* II.18-19)

The writer established that the "tramelogedia" was a concession to the deplorable fashion of the time in order to revive interest in the theatre. Yet, he did not bother to explain why, of his six projected works, only *Abéle* was completed with the perseverance that always marked his literary achievements.²⁰

¹⁸ For a brief description of the differences between the original plan and the actual draft, see De Bello, "Nota," in Alfieri 2.4-5.

¹⁹ Alfieri added a second frontispiece (c. 25 of the "Alfieri" 7 Manuscript in the Laurenziana): *Abele* / *Tramelogedia* / *in versi* / *e* / *Abbozzo dell'Ammonimento* / *per un'altra volta alle potenze* / *italiane*. But later he renounced pairing the two works (*Vita* 322 of the Edizione Astese). The dates are conveniently represented in Alfieri 2.11. Legouvé's work was performed in Paris on March 6, 1792, before Alfieri left the French capital.

²⁰ It is not by chance that *Abéle* was planned the same year in which *Saul* was written. Consider also the following annotations included in Alfieri's *Vita*: "E queste occupazioni di second'ordine sempre più mi insterilirono il cervello, e mi tolsero di non fare più nulla del mio. Talchè, di quelle tramelogedie, di cui doveano essere sei almeno, non vi potei mai aggiungere nulla alla prima, l'*Abele*; e sviato poi da tante cose, perdei il tempo, la

Nel tempo ch'io scriveva (o credeva scrivere) delle vere tragedie, non volli ad esse frammischiare questo genere spurio, per non nuocere a quelle: onde di questo *Abèle* io feci l'ossatura soltanto: e cinque altre Tramelogedie ideai, riserbandomi poi, a tragedie finite, di eseguirle. Varie circostanze mi disturbarono questo mio disegno in appresso; sì che questa sola, che io mi trovava aver già abbozzata, impresi a finire.

(*Tragedie postume* II.20)

It is possible, however, that Alfieri attached to this work not only the esthetic and literary mission of reviving the theatre, but also the ethical and social one of awakening the conscience of the Italians. The story from Genesis was helpful as a deposit of the necessary "mirabile" for the successful "tramelogedia":

I culti religiosi degli antichi Egizj, dei Persiani, degli Ebrei, Caldei, Arabi, ed Indiani, dei Celti e Scozzesi, dei Greci stessi: e fra i moderni popoli, quelli dei Messicani e Peruviani, come rimoti molto di luogo, possono prestare ampia materia a questa specie di Dramma, essendo tutti a dovizia forniti di quel mirabile che qui si richiede; e lo possono somministrare sempre nuovo e diverso, ed egualmente efficace. Il campo, come poesia, è vastissimo.

(*Tragedie postume* II.22)

But the story of the first murder was also a patent contradiction of the tenets of the French Revolution, an event that the aristocratic Alfieri always condemned. It is not by chance that in the second act the first family is still united, with the two brothers competing with their own father and with each other in complimenting the other and emphasizing the brotherhood that unites them:²¹

ADAMO

O figli,

In voi mi beo: l'udir quei puri accenti,

Fraterni tanto, immensa gioja spande

Nel mio paterno cuore. O tu, che tanta

Del tuo minor fratello cura prendi,

Benedetto sii tu! Così prendeva

Di te, quand'eri fanciullino, io cura.

Nei campi e boschi, il tuo fratello, o Abèle,

È il tuo padre secondo.

ABELE

E tale io 'l tengo:

gioventù, il bollore necessario per una tale creazione, e non lo ritrovai poi mai più" (1.287).

²¹ In II.1, 174, Cain even addresses Abel as "Fratellino," while offering him his own portion of a meal.

E il sa ben egli. Ah, se sapessi, o padre,
Quanta fatica egli ha per me, per questo
Lascivo gregge mio! Mi scoppia il core,
D'esser costretto a sturbarlo sì spesso.

CAINO

Taci, via: che siam noi, se non sol uno?
Tu crescerai; s'imbrunerà il tuo mento;
S'inforzerà il tuo braccio; e allor nel duro
Campo a me pur soccorrerai; mentr'altri
Fratelli nostri (che assai ne speriamo,
Come il Padre ci disse) al gregge allora
Attenderanno.

(II, vv. 124-32, 137-43)

As they go to sleep, Adam blesses them both in the same terms, as they get ready to share the brotherly alcove:²²

ADAMO

O figli,
Già s'inoltra la notte; ite al riposo.
Vi benedice il padre: in Dio felici
Dormite voi. Su la nascente aurora,
Io desterovvi dal fraterno strato.
Dormite or queti nel sonno profondo
Dell'amena innocenza.

(II, vv. 233-39)

But after the intervention of Envy and Death, Cain speaks much like that character in Metastasio's oratorio:

CAINO

Oh quale,
Qual gel di nuovo entro mi scorre! orrendo
M'agita un dubbio...

L'INVIDIA

È manifesta cosa,
Non dubbia omai: tuoi pensier tutti io scerno:
Adamo, sì, tutto al suo Abél svelava,
Quanto a te nasconde...

(IV, vv. 164-69)

²² It is interesting to notice that Alfieri thought of having Cain lament his destiny of labor in order to support his father. The moment is replaced by an instance of harmony between the two brothers, as Cain saves Abel's favorite lamb and prepares "un caldo impiastro" and even "di viminetti un guinzaglio" for the animal (II, vv. 11, 118, 120).

The reason for the contrast between the two brothers is here constructed by Envy around Adam's supposed sharing of the secret of Eden with Abel, leaving Cain in the dark. Thus the irony, which for some exegetes pervades the Bible story, increases in Alfieri's recounting inserted in the context of the eighteenth-century cult of Arcadia. *Abéle* is, then, "l'idylle impossible" in the aftermath of the French Revolution (Starobinski 139). At the beginning of the fifth act, "schietta tragedia," as Alfieri himself calls it in the Preface, Cain pulls Abel by his hair because "quel bene / Che a me spettava, e ch'io non ebbi, no, / Nè tu pur lo avrai. [...]" (V, vv. 5-7). The oblique reference to an economic view of the world that is responsible for the tragedy that shakes and replaces the idyll of the second act is emphasized by Adam at the discovery of Abel's body, for he cannot believe what his eyes witness:

ADAMO
Oh figlio! ...
Oh giorno! ... Oh vista! ... Oh, qual profonda e vasta
Piaga spaccò quest'innocente capo!
Ah, rimedio non havvi. Ma un tal colpo
Chi dietti, o figlio? e qual fu l'arme? ... Oh cielo!
Vegg'io, ben veggio di Caïn la marra
Là giacer sanguinosa? ... Oh duolo! Oh rabbia!
E fia possibil ciò? Caïn ti uccise?
Il fratello il fratello? Armarmi io stesso,
Io stesso vo' dell'arme tua, trovarti,
E trucidarti di mia mano.

(V, vv. 171-81)

In Adam's words and in the light of the New Testament law of love, Cain's act of murdering his own brother is repeated any time a human being murders one of his kind: the death of Abel foreshadows Christ's death. In the years from the French Revolution to the Terror, as Alfieri thought of the resurrection of theater through the "tramelogedia," he wondered about the admonition pronounced by God's voice toward the end of *Abéle*: "'Uom, lasciato a te stesso, ecco qual sei'" (V, v. 281).

Byron and Baudelaire: Cain's Dialogue with Satan.

In 1822 William Blake, by then at the apex of his artistic career, prepared an engraving, *The Body of Abel Found by Adam and Eve*, followed by two pages of illuminated print, entitled *The Ghost of Abel: A Revelation in the Visions of Jehovah Seen by William Blake*. He dedicated it "to Lord Byron in the wilderness," because, at the time, Byron was at risk of being tried for immoral conduct because of his play, *Cain: A Mystery*, published the previous year and considered a true blasphemy against morality. Blake himself marked the difference from Byron's assumption, according to which imagination always

participates in the realm of the diabolic, with the consequence that the poet himself must live no other existence than one in exile and crime.

Thus, whereas the title of the engraving devotes all the attention to Abel's lifeless body mourned by the desperate mother and the astonished father, Cain in the foreground, followed by Adam's gaze, is captured in a posture of torsion that recalls Michelangelo's sculptures, while running away, his head pressed between his hands, as though he wanted in turn to smash it. Cain feels remorse possessing him, lighting him up like the flames that seem to spark from his own body and rise to heaven in a cloud of smoke as black as the shadow of the ditch next to Abel's body. The detail clearly takes inspiration from Byron's *Cain* (III, vv. 380-443).

Byron's play is called a mystery, in the sense this term had acquired in the Middle Ages to characterize those representations with a moral background which proposed adapted versions of episodes from the Bible, especially the New Testament. For Byron, Genesis and Milton's *Paradise Lost* become one with no specific intention, as the writer points out in the short preface, following the wave of the recent popularity of Solomon Gessner's *Tod Abels*. The Manicheism outlined, especially in Act II, in the long conversation between Lucifer and Cain, is the way of thinking on which the interpretation of the fratricide as victim in his turn is founded. Thus, Cain is the scapegoat so that the necessity of the fall, after the expulsion of Adam and Eve, may reach its completion and fulfillment. Cain does not want to immolate to Yahweh because, as he justifies himself (II, vv. 28-29), he has nothing to ask, since he ought to die. Indeed, Cain is convinced that the snake did not betray his parents:²³

The snake spoke *truth*: it *was* the tree of knowledge;
It *was* the tree of life: — knowledge is good,
And life is good; and how can both be evil?

(I, 36-38)

Cain admits to Abel's face that he is "sick at heart" (I, v. 58) because he cannot accept that he must pay for his parents' mistake with his death (Act I, vv. 64-79):²⁴

And this is
Life! — Toil! and wherefore should I toil? — because
My father could not keep his place in Eden.
What had *I* done with this? — I was unborn,
I sought not to be born; nor love the state
To which that birth has brought me. Why did he
Yield to the serpent and the woman? or,

²³ On Byron's *Cain* see Glasgow; Hudson; Steffan.

²⁴ The expression "sick at heart" recalls "A Voice from within" (III, v. 466).

Yielding, why suffer? What was there in this?
The tree was planted, and why not for him?
If not, why place him near it, where it grew,
The fairest in the center? They have but
One answer to all questions, 'twas *his* will,
And *he* is good.' How know I that? Because
He is all-powerful must all-good, too, follow?
I judge but by the fruits — and they are bitter —
Which I must feed on for a fault not mine.

(I, vv. 64-79)

To Cain, power and goodness are not reconciled in Yahweh's will, and Lucifer has an easy job convincing him of the need for the eternal strife between the fallen angel and the creating divinity. Lucifer and Cain, in the words of the former, are "Souls who dare use their immortality — / Souls who dare look the Omnipotent tyrant in / His everlasting face, and tell him, that / His evil is not good!" (I, vv. 137-40). For Lucifer, men and demons share the same misfortune of the divine creation, which, in order to live on, needs to destroy as well. According to Lucifer's reasoning, Yahweh needs humankind's mortal state in order to affirm His own immortality. Thus Lucifer ends up conjecturing that [Yahweh] "he'll make / One day a Son unto himself as he / Gave you a father — and if he so doth / Mark me! — that Son will be a Sacrifice" (I, vv. 163-66).

Byron's language is charged with irony in these lines. Lucifer takes advantage of hindsight knowledge of his own artistic demiurge in order to present to Cain the apotheosis of the human condition in God's sacrifice of his own Son made flesh. Lucifer turns upside down the value of the theological sublime. The burden of the carnal condition into which sin precipitates humankind since its origins may be redeemed only by the attitude of resignation that Cain's parents show in front of the mystery of their own fall into mortality.

The fratricide, instead, devoured by the murderer's thinking process, creates in his soul a much heavier burden than that of the flesh. Lucifer's request for attention, with the imperative that is so attractive in the demon's rhetoric ("Mark me!"), announces the tragic irony of Cain's destiny: it will be the fratricide who will be distinguished, marked forever with a stain that will be much more visible and indelible than the original sin.

In turn, Cain undertakes the journey through the abyss of spaces led by Lucifer, therefore parodying the temptation that Christ will undertake in the desert (Matthew 4: 1-11; Mark 1: 12-13; Luke 4: 1-13). Thus, the parallels between Cain and Christ become too close for the destiny of designated victim to escape the reader, a destiny that the fratricide must fulfill through the murder itself:

— And I must be sire of such things!
The beauty of thy love — my love and joy,

The rapturous moment and the placid hour,
 All we love in our children and each other,
 But lead them and ourselves through many years
 Of sin and pain — or few, but still of sorrow,
 Intercheck'd with an instant of brief pleasure,
 To Death — the unknown! Methinks the tree of knowledge
 Hath not fulfill'd its promise: — if they sinn'd,
 At least they ought to have known all things that are
 Of knowledge — and the mystery of death.
 What do they know? — that they are miserable?
 What need of snakes and fruits to teach us that?

(I, vv. 450-62)

The mystery which gives the title to the drama is both that of Cain and the inscrutable one of death. Indeed, with his criminal act Cain becomes the owner of death, after having in vain invited his brother to stay away from him, according to another gesture parodying an episode of the Passion, this time the memory of the prayer that Jesus addresses to the Father so that He may remove from Him the chalice of the sacrifice. After the murder, Cain is aware that he has acquired that knowledge; however, he now wishes he did not have it:

And who had brought him there? — I — who abhor
 The name of Death so deeply, that the thought
 Empoison'd all my life, before I knew
 His aspect — I have led him here, and giv'n
 My brother to his cold and still embrace,
 As if he would not have asserted his
 Inexorable claim without my aid.
 I am awake at least — a dreary dream
 Had madden'd me: — but *he* shall ne'er awake!

(III, vv. 371-79)

Cain's knowledge sadly triumphs when he admits that both his brother Abel and above all Death will never awaken. Cain, who objected to the equation of power and goodness in God's work, recognizes himself as the *a contrario* evidence of that theological truth, albeit against his will. In vain Cain invokes the deletion of his crime through the reversal of Abel's and his own destiny:

That which I am, I am; I did not seek
 For life, nor did I make myself; but could I
 With my own death redeem him from the dust —
 And why not so? let him return to day,
 And I lie ghastly! so shall be restored
 By God the life to him he loved: and taken

From me a being I ne'er loved to bear.

(III, vv. 509-15)

By now, however, the “*storia del genere umano*” has begun and proceeds inexorably to the detriment of the very knowledge its protagonists claim they have acquired, albeit in such a sorrowful fashion. Cain’s sentence, which (like the one Lucifer previously uttered, “I seem that which I am,” II, v. 88) models itself on the divine tautology revealed to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:13-14: “I am who I am”), and unveils the trap in which the fratricide is now caught forever. Not even at the time of repentance is he able to erase the stain of his sin, or that of the crime, or that of human arrogance.

In other words, Cain corresponds to Prometheus in Greek mythology, with whom he shares the rebellion against the divinity and the active understanding of his own being, expressed in action, in rationalizing attitude, and in cleverness. The substantial difference is that the outrage of Prometheus’s theft of fire is directed against the gods and in favor of human emancipation.²⁵ Cain, on the other hand, sins against his brother even before sinning against God; that is, against his brother who is, like him, made according to the image and semblance of God. Byron, who had written the poem “Prometheus” in the summer of 1816 and who had drafted *Cain* at the end of his work on the other great myth of *Don Juan*, shares the ethical concern not only with Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, but also and especially with Coleridge, Leopardi, and Baudelaire.²⁶

Baudelaire is the poet who continues the revision of the myth of Cain. In *Les Fleurs du mal*, in the section knowingly entitled “Révolte,” he inserts three poems intrinsically linked by the motif of rebellion according to the reflections Byron elaborated: “Le reniement de Saint Pierre,” “Abel et Caïn,” and “Les litanies de Satan.”²⁷ The first poem gains strength from the personal rendition of the memory of the episodes in the Gospels. The last lines of this poem proclaim the necessity of the rebellion through the rhetorical gesture of negation: this is the train of thought that leads Baudelaire to “Le gouffre.” In the meantime, the statement of the last line (“Saint Pierre a renié Jésus ... il a bien fait!” v. 32) aligns the rebellion of the apostle to that of the “fils de Caïn.”²⁸ Upon them both

²⁵ Frye entitles “The Thief of Fire” the chapter in which he discusses William Blake’s *The Ghost of Abel*. See also Bloom who states: “Byron’s entire poetic career at its most serious — here [“Prometheus”], in *Manfred*, *Cain*, *Don Juan*, *The Vision of Judgment* — can be understood as an attempt to justify the theft of fire by creating with its aid, while never forgetting that precisely such creation intensifies the original Promethean ‘Godlike crime’ ([“Prometheus,” l. 35])” (246).

²⁶ Bloom writes regarding *Manfred*: “A spirit song is sung over him, which marks him of the brotherhood of Cain” (249).

²⁷ Quotations are from Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* 121-25.

²⁸ This is the title of the initial section of the chapter “La Révolte métaphysique” in Camus’s *L’Homme révolté*.

falls the same malediction that the fratricide had already cast upon himself at the moment of his criminal act.

The poem, dedicated to the two brothers, is built on a quite thin structure through the alternation of distichs focusing either on the “Race d’Abel,” or on the “Race de Caïn.” Yet, just like the poem dedicated to Satan — “Père adoptif de ceux qu’en sa noire colère / Du paradis terrestre a chassés Dieu le Père” (vv. 43-44) — this poem supports itself on the blasphemous invocation ““Ô Satan, prend pitié de ma longue misère!,”” repeated after each distich, so Abel and Cain continue their everlasting struggle in the flesh of their lineage:

Race d’Abel, ton sacrifice
Flatte le nez du Séraphin!

Race de Caïn, ton supplice
Aura-t-il jamais une fin?

(“Abel et Caïn” vv. 5-8)

The rhyme often contributes to the enrichment of the meaning of the distichs, as is the case of the semantic contrast between “sacrifice” and “supplice”: the former aiming at undermining, rather than glorifying, God; the latter, instead, mildly comforted by the rhetorical question of the prayer, which leaves one to imagine the labor of Sisyphus suffered by Cain’s race.

The immolation is no longer only Cain’s as a consequence of his misdeed, but it is also to the detriment of an entire race. The universal dimensions dilate themselves further in the following lines, in which Baudelaire proceeds to modify the narration in Genesis as far as the characteristics of the two brothers are concerned:

Race d’Abel, vois tes semailles
Et ton bétail venir à bien;

Race de Caïn, tes entrailles
Hurlent la faim comme un vieux chien.

Race d’Abel, chauffe ton ventre
À ton foyer patriarcal;

Race de Caïn, dans ton antre
Tremble de froid, pauvre chacal!

(“Abel et Caïn,” vv. 9-16)

These are the lines that more convincingly invited the critics to read the poem with an eye to social polemic, consequence of the socialist sympathies the poet expressed between 1847 and 1851. Abel is a peasant and a shepherd,

whereas Cain is left to suffer hunger and cold. But if one follows more closely the rhyming network that Baudelaire weaves in these lines with a special semantic reverberation, Cain's race is described as a stray animal. The "foyer patriarcal" of Abel's race resonates with the bark of the "pauvre chacal," just like the "ventre" of Abel's race prefigures the metaphorical overturning of the "antre" in which Cain's race finds shelter. Regarding this last and complex structure of the scene, the "entrailles" of Cain's race become a crucial image: not only do they contrast with the brilliance of the "ventre" of the other race; not only, thanks also to the cry that echoes in them, do they anticipate the cave in which the very race of Cain runs to find shelter; but they are also the very object of the sacrifice of immolation, the only one now possible. The "coeur qui brûle" (v. 19) is that of Cain's race in perennial expiation of the guilt that may be erased, according to Baudelaire's vision, only after it has fulfilled the poem's final incitement: "Race de Caïn, au ciel monte, / Et sur la terre jette Dieu!" (vv. 31-31).

Leopardi and Italian Hermeticism: The Foundation of the City

Unlike Baudelaire, both Coleridge and Leopardi must have gotten tired quite soon of the motif of the first murder. The cause, perhaps, may be found in their traditional reading of the event, without any hermeneutic intention that would go against the established exegesis of the biblical episode. Coleridge did not go beyond the prose draft of reflections on the topic of the poem and a fragment of the poem itself, in two versions entitled "The Wanderings of Cain" and "Cain," respectively. However, his project is enlightening regarding the elaboration of the figure of Cain as fundamental within the context of evil and human redemption.

Leopardi planned the writing of the *Inni cristiani*, drafted in the second half of 1819, but only the "Inno ai patriarchi, o de' principii del genere umano" was completed in 1822, when "Alla primavera, o delle favole antiche" was also composed. Both canzoni share a nostalgia for the lost golden age, as the poet himself remarked by placing the two poems one after the other in the definitive edition of his *Canti* (Napoli: Starita, 1835). In the draft of the "Inno ai patriarchi," Leopardi pins down the figure of Cain in a paragraph: "Caino. Ingresso della morte nel mondo. La società figlia del peccato, e della violazione delle leggi naturali, poiché la Scrittura dice che Caino, vagabondo e ramingo per li rimorsi della coscienza, e fuggendo la vendetta e portando seco la maledizione di Dio fu il primo fondatore della città."²⁹ According to this meditation on the contrast between society and nature in which humankind finds itself entrapped, Leopardi's paragraph is founded on a circularity of intents, in which the initial reference to the "Ingresso della morte nel mondo" does not refer only to the

²⁹ Both the canzone and the draft are quoted from Leopardi, *Poesie e prose* I.36-39; 676-80.

fratricide, but also to the metaphysical sanction of the finiteness of human existence. Furthermore, the final annotation that focuses on Cain as “primo fondatore della città” looks also at the civic function, albeit in some respects one of redemption, that Cain performs after his murder. The fratricide is, then, he who, having dared to venture in the territories of mortality, is forced to explore “vagabondo e ramingo” the abyss of his own conscience, before he can placate it with the fictitious reconstruction of the Lost Paradise in the shape of civilization. However, it will be, in Leopardi’s vision, a further and inexorably definitive estrangement from the Edenic origin. In this respect, the canzone elaborates the vision of Christian ethics on which Leopardi reflects in these years:

Trepido, errante il fratricida, e l’ombre
 Solitarie fuggendo e la secreta
 Nelle profonde selve ira de’ venti,
 Primo i civili tetti, albergo e regno
 Alle macere cure, innalza: e primo
 Il disperato pentimento i ciechi
 Mortali egro, anelante, aduna e stringe
 Ne’ consorti ricetti: onde negata
 L’improba mano al curvo aratro, e vili
 Fur gli agresti sudori; ozio le soglie
 Scellerate occupò; ne’ corpi inerti
 Domo il vigor natio, languide, ignave
 Giacquer le menti; e servitù le imbelli
 Umane vite, ultimo danno, accolse.

(“Inno ai patriarchi” vv. 43-56)

Cain’s adventure is told according to an amphibologic modulation that enwraps the whole syntax of the narration (ruled by the hypotactic shift in v. 50). Even more distinctive, however, are both the correlative construction (vv. 43-45) and above all the distribution of the attributes related to either Cain or his psychological condition: “il fratricida” is described not only as “errante,” but also as “trepido,” which characterizes Cain’s humanity after the supposed courage of the crime has made room for the fear of God and the trembling it causes. Like Adam, Cain was “primo,” although not in the contemplation of the “errante / [...] / aura” (vv. 25-26), but in the raising of a quite different altar: “i civili tetti, albergo e regno / Alle macere cure,” where in the adjective “macere” one is tempted to read Leopardi’s desire to define very human concerns as ruins. That sense of tragic priority is also rendered through his “disperato pentimento,” further emphasized by the two adjectives that describe Cain’s physical and moral chagrin (“egro, anelante”), caught in his contrasting attempt at unifying “i ciechi / Mortali,” albeit not for peace but for a deeper degradation.

“L’improba mano” of Cain thus replaces the “negletta mano / Dell’altrice natura” (vv. 17-18). About this reflection, the beginning of the long series of

pages of thoughts in the *Zibaldone di pensieri* comes to mind, which Leopardi dedicates to the Christian religion. There he takes his cue, however, from the first two chapters of Genesis:

Il mio sistema intorno alle cose ed agli uomini, e l'attribuir ch'io fo tutto o quasi tutto alla natura, e pochissimo o nulla alla ragione, ossia all'opera dell'uomo o della creatura, non si oppone al Cristianesimo.

1. La natura è lo stesso che Dio. Quanto più attribuisco alla natura, tanto più a Dio; quanto più tolgo alla ragione, tanto più alla creatura. Quanto più esalto e predico la natura, tanto più Dio. Stimando perfetta l'opera della natura, stimo perfetta quella di Dio; condanno la presunzione dell'uomo di perfezionar egli l'opera del creatore; asserisco che qualunque alterazione fatta all'opera qual è uscita dalle mani di Dio non può esser altro che corruzione. [...]

2. Io ammetto anzi sostengo la corruzione dell'uomo, e il suo decadimento dallo stato primitivo, stato di felicità; come appunto fa il Cristianesimo. S'io dico che l'uomo fu corrotto dall'abuso della ragione, dal sapere, e dalla società, questi sono i mezzi, o le cagioni secondari della corruzione, e non tolgono che la causa originale non sia stato il peccato.

(sheets 393-94, December 9-15, 1820)

This page from the *Zibaldone* would suffice to understand why, to Leopardi, Cain could not become the tragic hero that this figure is in the same years to Byron. If "La natura è lo stesso che Dio," when "L'improba mano" of Cain replaces the "negletta mano / Dell'altrice natura," death, until then still unknown protagonist of the human vicissitude, succeeds to life. Cain's act strengthens Leopardi's idea that corruption always happens by humankind's hand; it is an ironic revision of the concept of *homo faber*, as what man builds is his own end. However, this concept once again crystallizes itself not only in the literal sacrifice of Abel, but also in the symbolic one of Cain, who, after Adam and Eve's first step toward the fall, finds himself victim of the (by now) irremediably necessary "ragione." Cain's foundation of the city opens the path to the redemption of humankind that may pretend to recreate the Edenic condition through the same fallen state, which is its negation.

In the twentieth century, marked by hermeticism, Leopardi's lesson was most appreciated and even his interpretation of Cain was registered by some poets, such as Ungaretti, Luzi, and Turoldo, all animated by the strong religious spirit of a marked Catholic source.³⁰ However, especially concerning Ungaretti and Luzi, they also remember Baudelaire's revisions of the story.

³⁰ One must recall some plays that revised the myth at the beginning of the twentieth century: Lodge, *Cain, A Drama*; Acevedo Hernández, *Cain. Tragedia en dos actos*.

Cain is the biblical figure on whom Ungaretti meditates after his return to the Catholic Church.³¹ Cain is the sinner *par excellence*, he who sacrificed himself and his soul because of the mortality brought about by sin. Thus the foundation of the city equals the beginning of the registration of history as a finite event, in which human existence oscillates. On the one hand, history is the endless deposit of memory of which the city becomes the emblem. On the other, just as humans, through history and memory, seek to recover the innocence of the origin, recoverable only potentially, so the city (as the altar of the offering built on the place of martyrdom, of the constantly renewed sacrifice) is founded and develops from that nucleus of lost virginity, in vain sought through the immolation of human nature and in vain pursued through the babelic architectonic construction. The city is a sort of paradoxical celebration of memory (history piles up in the layers of the city) and origin. The city requires foundation and in turn becomes the origin to its inhabitants.

Cain is the architect of Ungaretti's poem. The fratricide is a builder despite himself, because he sacrifices himself, unable to forget and run away from his own crime, on behalf of that community from which he was expelled and to which he returns to be its founder. "Corre sopra le sabbie favolose / E il suo piede è leggero": Cain's immediate presentation recalls some characteristics of Echo, the heroine of Greek mythology who gives the title to another poem from *Sentimento del tempo*, in its story offering the allegorization of Aurora: "Scalza varcando da sabbie lunari / Aurora, amore festoso, d'un'eco / Popoli l'esule universo e lasci / Nella carne dei giorni, / Perenne scia, una piaga velata" (*Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie* 137). Cain's running also takes place in a desert, the fabulous connotation of which invites one to consider it both as belonging to an inhuman world like the moon (according to a legend to which Dante already refers in *Inferno* 20.126 and *Paradiso* 2.51) and as unreal vis-à-vis the condition that used to be Edenic. Cain also comes back to populate "l'esule universo" with his "piede leggero," with the "corpo allegro" of him who is aware that in order to redeem his offspring one must immolate oneself, even though this action means that Cain's very progeny must keep living with the disgraceful brand of the criminal stain. Because of this condition, Ungaretti turns with trepidation to his own soul in the second half of the poem ("Anima, non saprò mai calmarti? // Mai non vedrò nella notte del sangue?" vv. 20-21), before appealing to the "Figlia discreta della noia, / Memoria, memoria incessante" (vv. 22-23). The "memoria" hinders the return to "innocenza" because it loses itself in its own sacrifice while working in the "incessante" construction of the city as the altar on which one immolates one's own earthly existence for the redemption of guilt.

³¹ The poem was written in 1928 and first published in *L'Italia letteraria* (April 24, 1932) together with two more poems, "La pietà" and "La preghiera." Inserted in the first edition of *Sentimento del tempo*, it can be read now in the section *Inni* of that collection in *Vita d'un uomo. Tutte le poesie* 172-73.

Only then, perhaps, will the poet's wish come true: "Gli occhi mi tornerebbero innocenti, / Vedrei la primavera eterna // E, finalmente nuova, / O memoria, saresti onesta" (26-29).³²

Published in Mario Luzi's first collection, *La barca*, "Abele" is only apparently a poem on the murdered brother.³³ To be sure, Luzi speaks and addresses his assassin with hints that recall Ungaretti's poem, as well as Leopardi's and Baudelaire's: "Sangue sparso in viaggi terrestri, / luce consumata dal tuo cammino" (1-2). In the metaphors that open the poem, the drama of the brother sacrificed by his brother's anger does not find life, but rather that of the fratricide who, forced to venture not "su sabbie favolose," but "in viaggi terrestri," spreads the earth itself with his own blood. Abel describes the "passo fuggitivo" of his invoked brother with the help of images that are at once liquid and cyclical. It "risuona / or come la nota voce d'un rivo / ne' paesi dell'infanzia" (vv. 5-7), whereas Abel's very "voce" goes toward him "esulando tra i rami / ondosi" (vv. 9-10), yet it runs away from him "nell'onda che rapisce la natura" (v. 16), (the wave of wrath transgressing the ethics of life) before the arrival of the news of the final reconciliation: "il mio cuore tremerà in un'acqua serena / lavando le tue mani tristi" (vv. 19-20). The ritual of purification will be possible only when one brother will go back to the other, when the killed one will abandon himself to the embrace of forgiveness ("Tutto l'ultimo sangue s'asciuga / desiderandoti / [...] // e quando le mie membra faranno / intorno a te più rosso l'autunno" vv. 13-18). This utopistic condition leaks out in the use of the anagram, so that the "ritorno" of the brother invoked by Abel happens already in his desire, in going toward ("incontro" v. 10) Cain, in stretching out "le mie membra [...] / intorno a te" (17-18). In this very last mortal embrace Abel transforms Cain into the sacrificial victim; the murdered brother's embrace becomes the very embrace of death that, by way of osmosis, engulfs both the victim and executioner, further confusing the boundaries between the two brothers.

The first book by David Maria Turoldo, *Io non ho mani*, tackles also "Il segreto di Caino," returning to that reflection in the following collections in such poems as "Vita di Caino" and "Come te, Abele."³⁴ "Il segreto di Caino" is that of being "uomo senza mistero," now that "ho visto il volto di Dio." By inflicting death upon his brother, Cain has gained the revelation of the divine identity, without, however, reaching the knowledge of God. Indeed, Cain recognizes himself as "vacuità assoluta; / deserto orrido serale" (vv. 7-8), going on to define

³² One must recall Ungaretti's "Memoria e innocenza," published in three versions in 1926, now all gathered in Ungaretti, *Vita d'un uomo. Saggi e interventi* 129-38.

³³ It is now included in Luzi, *Tutte le poesie*.

³⁴ "Il segreto di Caino" was published in *Io non ho mani*; "Vita di Caino" in *Udii una voce*; "Come te, Abele" in *Il sesto angelo*. All these collections are now in Turoldo, *O sensi miei... Poesie 1948-1988* 30; 128; 403.

himself as wanderer (“ma con lena cammino ancora / solo a lasciare orme / sull’arsa duna” vv. 13-15). However, in a turn of phrase, the rationalizing spirit of the sinner willingly sacrifices his own salvation in order to satiate his own thirst for knowledge (“un’unica sete amo / che mi allunga la vita” vv. 20-21):

Ma se tra i campi
restavo coi bruti che più amo
a far solchi e poi stanco
dormire roco su qualunque
selciato, questo
m’avrebbe forse
fatto pago?

Cain’s “torture del cuore” become an act of “pietà” toward Abel: “la voluttuosa pietà di provare / cos’era l’uccidere” (vv. 32-33). Although the murderer is here evoked after the crime, he recovers the romantic heroism, before returning within the more properly biblical description:

Urlando
per sopraffare l’assurdo silenzio
che m’inseguiva
dalle selve fuggii
a costruire città.

(vv. 41-45)

Yet, the relationship with God remains crucial in Cain’s confession: he first denies having challenged divine omnipotence (“Non ho ucciso / per gelosia di Iddio” vv. 46-47) and then he admits the ultimate power of God: “ora io cerco l’infinito silenzio, / e attendo che dentro mi getti / Qualcuno” (vv. 73-75). In turn, Cain is the conscious victim who will be immolated by a mysterious will; in fact, the divinity only knows how to be the being.

For this reason Cain’s life changes itself into an attempt to “Aderire alla terra” to return to it while “cercare fuggendo l’Ombra / che ti incombe” (“Vita di Caino” vv. 1, 56). The assassin, just because he has experienced death in the other’s flesh, understands that he is near that threshold: “amare, odiando, invocare / tu, vivo cadavere, la morte” (vv. 7-8). Hendiadys and oxymoron help emphasize an exemplary adventure of the executioner’s metamorphosis into the necessary victim. Unknown to him, Cain has become the necessary sacrifice for the redemption of his sinful existence and, in it, of that of his own offspring. The apostrophe addressed to Cain ensures that this time, in a mirror-like game, he

himself is the victim of his own experience of sin so that his own children may take advantage of his going astray.³⁵

Thus, the twentieth century witnesses a return to Abel, considering his sacrifice as the authentic one; however, the viewpoint of the poetic voice does not forget Cain and indeed assumes his position, as though the poetic voice were at once participating in the sacrificial murder of the brother and yet felt the guilt for such a death. Unquestionably, the fact that the three poets — Ungaretti, Luzi, and Turollo — are all Catholic (Turollo is a priest) helps us to understand the emphatic return to a reflection on the murdered brother, which is apparent not so much in Ungaretti, but in his followers. In the case of Turollo, it may be crucial to consider the time when the poems on the topic were written: they all date from after World War II. In fact, to complete the picture of references, Edith Sitwell and Hermann Hesse also dedicated poems to the myth of Cain and Abel.³⁶ A rethinking of the myth of Cain and Abel started at the time of the Enlightenment and ran throughout the periods of modernity, from Romanticism to Modernism. That rethinking became more subdued only in the aftermath of the collective sacrifice of World War II, in the hope that such sacrifice would be the last.

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³⁵ The same mirror-like game, although this time directed at Abel, is in "Come te, Abele."

³⁶ Sitwell, *The Shadow of Cain*; Hesse, *Das Lied von Abels Tod*. The title of Hesse's poem seems an invitation to reconsider Gessner's interest in the myth.

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