

Intertextuality, shared language, and the many transformations of Cain

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1 Introduction

biblical story of Cain and Abel: archetypal story, frequently rewritten in literature

description of the murder and its cause very brief in the Bible – Cain sacrifices fruits of the ground, Abel sacrifices an animal; God accepts Abel's offerings but not those of Cain (no explicit explanation):

And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

(*Genesis* 4.5–12; King James Bible)

God then curses Cain to be a fugitive and a vagabond

features:

- only three characters – God, Cain, Abel; Abel has no linguistic presence of his own
- conflict between two events: God's accepting Abel's sacrifice and God's rejection of Cain's sacrifice – no direct conflict between Cain and Abel and Cain and God
- conflict between Cain and Abel generated by Cain's metonymical substitution of the conflict between the events with the different participants of the events (God being constant)
- only dialogue between Cain and God – direct connection

adaptations do not necessarily differ – mystery plays such as the *Chester Cycle* (2nd play, lines 425–705) from the Middle English period extend the story only as much as necessary (adding the characters of Adam and Eve, more dialogues but Abel still minimally present in terms of speech)

Lord Byron's *Cain*: famous instance of foregrounding the negative hero (cf. Butler 1990: 65, 76) – subtitle calls the text a mystery but altogether different text from a traditional mystery play

Christoph Ransmayr's *Der fliegende Berg* [The Flying Mountain]: using the archetypal story of Cain and Abel (but not a strict adaptation) – conclusion regarding the two brothers' relationship differs

question: how the adaptations of Cain's story are related to language

proposal:

- both cases: extreme existential situation in which the protagonist is disconnected from his usual socio-cultural (and hence linguistic) environment
- in *Cain*: journey of Cain without his brother – further alienation
- in *Der fliegende Berg*: journey taken together by the brothers – reconnection

2 Cain as a Byronic hero

Byron's Cain a prototypical "Byronic hero" – revolt transgressing certain conventions (see Butler 1990: 66, Beatty 1990: 131, McGann 2002: 158) – negative reception by contemporary audience (Barton 1990, Knight 1957, McGann 2002)

Byron introduces new characters – apart from Adam and Eve (who are partial towards Abel), the wives of Cain and Abel, Lucifer; crucially: God does not appear

→ most important dialogues take place between Cain and Lucifer; no dialogues between God and Cain

Cain's questions are essentially existential in nature – cannot receive answers from his family (parents and Abel essentially dogmatic) or from God (no immediate dialogue possible) → only possibility is Lucifer

Lucifer takes him on an extraterrestrial journey – Cain has to confront his own smallness and is thus further alienated from God but his questions essentially remain unanswered by Lucifer as well (who uses Cain for his own purposes)

returning to earth: Cain even more alienated from his family; no dialogue possible at this point, as Cain tells Abel what he saw:

The dead,
The immortal, the unbounded, the omnipotent,
The over-powering mysteries of space
The innumerable worlds that were and are
A whirlwind of such overwhelming things,
Suns, moons, and earths, upon their loud-voiced spheres
Singing in thunder round me, as have made me
Unfit for mortal converse : leave me, Abel.

Abel registers the change:

Thine eyes are flashing with unnatural light –
Thy cheek is flushed with an unnatural hue –
Thy words are fraught with an unnatural sound –
What may this mean?

Cain respects Abel – sacrifice: initiated by Abel, Cain tries to avoid the situation (act of love towards Abel)

Abel's sacrifice (he kneels): language of devotion and identification

Oh God!
Who made us, and who breathed the breath of life
Within our nostrils, who hath blessed us,
And spared, despite our father's sin, to make
His children all lost, as they might have been,
Had not thy justice been so temper'd with
The mercy which is thy delight, as to
Accord a pardon like a Paradise,
Compar'd with our great crimes: Sole Lord of light!

Cain's sacrifice (he stands upright): language of alienation and scepticism

Spirit! whate'er or whosoe'er thou art,
Omnipotent, it may be and, if good,
Shewn in the exemption of thy deeds from evil;
Jehovah upon Earth! and God in Heaven!
And it may be with other names, because
Thine attributes seem many, as thy works:
If thou must be propitiated with prayers.
Take them! If thou must be induced with altars,
And soften'd with a sacrifice, receive them!
Two beings here erect them unto thee.

hence: contrast between the brothers is expressed linguistically, too – different languages

conflict not only reflected by but also caused by language – language reveals their inherent differences, Abel abhors Cain’s speech and Cain refuses Abel’s language

Cain includes a choice for God in his speech: whether God likes a bloody sacrifice or mild fruits – ambiguity:

- referring to the specific sacrifices (of Cain and Abel)
- referring to whether God generally requires blood as a sacrifice (Cain’s fundamental problem regarding death)

→ God’s accepting the sacrifice of Abel also ambiguous, and crucially not using a linguistic code

slaying Abel: answer to God (this time not just on a linguistic level) – Cain destroys the source of devotional language preferred by a supposedly blood-thirsty God: paradox (Cain abhorring death the first human to cause death, and satisfying the supposed request of a bloody God)

God does not appear even after the murder – Angel does (dialogue essentially the same as in the Bible); Cain’s question (“Am I then my brother’s keeper?” also directed at the Angel)

curse of Cain: loss of his brother, outcast/cursed by family (except for his wife, Adah) – life becomes impossible in the original home, experience in the extreme existential situation does not bring answers

3 Cain and reunification

Christoph Ransmayr’s *Der fliegende Berg* [The Flying Mountain]: two brothers from Ireland, the narrator and his elder brother Liam –both trained mountain climbers, Liam used to be favourite of father

journey together to Nepal – narrator has lived in several places, finds his love (Nyema) in the mountain tribe; Liam: stayed in Ireland, single (secretly gay) – first shared experience since childhood

properties of Cain and Abel distributed between the brothers: Liam elder and more melancholic (similar to Byron’s Cain), but narrator more reason for jealousy (childhood)

also: narrator will utter Cain’s sentence (“Am I then my brother’s keeper?” – directed at Chinese authorities)

story of two brothers: archetypical – free verse form (Flattersatz, fliegender Satz ‘flying sentence’ – see ransmayr’s note) also an archaic form (closeness to speech) – see also Ransmayr’s essay *Der Sänger* in his volume *Gerede: Elf Ansprachen*

climbing various mountains, more and more difficult

first death: narrator – brought back by Liam (and later Nyema): Liam tells him to stand up (*Steh auf!* – reminiscent of Jesus resurrecting Lazarus)

narrator brought back by his brother's speech (chapter 1):

Vielleicht sah mein Bruder an meinen Augen,
daß es vor allem sein atemloses Reden war,
das meine Aufmerksamkeit gefangen nahm
und mich Satz für Satz in unser Leben zurückzog.
Er sprach so eindringlich und hastig,
als wären seine Worte die letzte Möglichkeit,
mich zu erreichen,
und ich müßte für immer verschwinden,
wenn er verstummte.

translation:

Perhaps my brother saw from my eyes
that it was primarily his breathless speech
that captured my attention
and sentence for sentence dragged me back to our life.
He spoke as forcefully and hastily
as if his words were the last chance
to reach me
and as if I had to disappear forever
if he fell silent.

hence: extreme existential situation shared by the brothers, they are brought closer to each other by the experience

second death: Liam – narrator cannot find him on the “flying mountain” (mysterious, not directly available), no dialogue possible and hence no bringing back to life (no murder but narrator feels responsibility; denial of responsibility before the authorities – they do not understand the biblical reference)

no real curse of Cain: narrator loses his brother (but Liam may have found peace), partially outcast role chose for both brothers – life becomes impossible in the original home for the narrator (plans to go back to Nyema), experience in the extreme existential situation brings not only failure but also reunification

4 Conclusion

archetypical story of Cain and Abel:

- original story: gaps, direct communication with God
- Byron's *Cain*: lack of direct communication and shared language results in disaster
- Ransmayr's *Der fliegende Berg*: dialogue functions between the brothers best in the extreme existential situation, language able to bring one back to life but the lack of dialogue (when no opportunity) deprives one of the poetic power to do so

→ archetypical story not only in terms of brothers' relation but also in terms of language

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