Romantic Symbolic Poem I: Coleridge

READING 9 ‘THE WANDERINGS OF CAIN’

Composition & publication history:

Prose Canto II, with a verse fragment, composed as part of a writing contest with Wordsworth at Nether Stowey in 1798; first published 1828. The verse fragment was included in a letter to Byron in 1815 as part of Coleridge’s agenda to seek support for the publication of a number of works – this was condoned by Byron. According to the ‘Prefatory Note’ to the 1828 edition, Coleridge and Wordsworth intended to write a 3-part text on the subject of Cain and Abel, inspired by the success of Gessner’s *The Death of Abel*. The effort was quickly abandoned, however, ‘and *The Ancient Mariner* was written instead.’

More details at <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/cain/intro.html>

Biblical context: Genesis 4:9-17 (*King James Bible*)

9And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?

10And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

11And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

12When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

13And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

14Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

15And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

16And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

17And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.

(NB: Coleridge calls the son Enos – in the Old Testament, this is the son of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, born after the murder of Abel and the banishment of Cain; also note that Coleridge does not include or even refer to Cain’s sister/wife, the boy’s mother.)

* The Land of Nod – in Hebrew, ‘Nod’ translates as ‘wandering’; the English pun (‘going to the land of nod’ meaning ‘going to sleep’) was reputedly first recorded by Swift in his Complete Collection of Polite and Ingenious Conversation.

Contemporary context:

Salomon Gessner’s vastly popular *Der Tod Abels* (1758) The 1761 English translation, *The Murder of Abel*, by Mary Collyer, reached an astonishing 40 reprints between 1762 and 1800. A biblical/pastoral elegy, the text evokes pantheism and ample pastoral descriptions of the simple rural life, sentimentality, pathos and piety. The ending emphasizes the importance of family & faith as a redemptive force.

Byron’s controversial play *Cain: A Mystery* (1821) – later printed with an Appendix of Coleridge’s text. Byron dramatizes the story from Cain’s point of view, focusing on the dialectic between Lucifer’s and God’s view of the universe, where God is related by Lucifer as the dogmatic tyrant and Lucifer himself as the worthy dissenter, while Cain is the inquisitive intellectual hungry for knowledge; NB the famous journey through ‘The Abyss of Time’ that Lucifer takes Cain on to prove his point about the nothingness of human existence, the problem of past worlds created and discarded by God, and, in general, the idea that the universe is God’s and Lucifer’s eternal chess board.

A problem:

Then Cain raised up the Shape that was like Abel, and said: — "The Creator of our father, who had respect unto thee, and unto thy offering, **wherefore hath he forsaken thee**?" … But Cain said, "Didst thou not find favour in the sight of the Lord thy God?" **The Shape answered, "The Lord is God of the living only, the dead have another God.**" Then the child Enos lifted up his eyes and prayed; but Cain rejoiced secretly in his heart. **"Wretched shall they be all the days of their mortal life," exclaimed the Shape, "who sacrifice worthy and acceptable sacrifices to the God of the dead; but after death their toil ceaseth. Woe is me, for I was well beloved by the God of the living, and cruel wert thou, O my brother, who didst snatch me away from his power and his dominion."** Having uttered these words, he rose suddenly, and fled over the sands: and Cain said in his heart, "The curse of the Lord is on me; but **who is the God of the dead**?" and he ran after the Shape, and the Shape fled shrieking over the sands, and the sands rose like white mists behind the steps of Cain, but the feet of him that was like Abel disturbed not the sands. He greatly outrun Cain, and turning short, he wheeled round, and came again to the rock where they had been sitting, and where Enos still stood; and the child caught hold of his garment as he passed by, and he fell upon the ground. And Cain stopped, and beholding him not, said, "he has passed into the dark woods," and he walked slowly back to the rocks; and when he reached it the child told him that he had caught hold of his garment as he passed by, and that the man had fallen upon the ground: and Cain once more sate beside him, and said, "**Abel, my brother, I would lament for thee, but that the spirit within me is withered, and burnt up with extreme agony. Now, I pray thee, by thy flocks, and by thy pastures, and by the quiet rivers which thou lovedst, that thou tell me all that thou knowest. Who is the God of the dead? where doth he make his dwelling? what sacrifices are acceptable unto him? for I have offered, but have not been received; I have prayed, and have not been heard; and how can I be afflicted more than I already am?**" The Shape arose and answered, "O that thou hadst had pity on me as I will have pity on thee. Follow me, Son of Adam! and bring thy child with thee!" And they three passed over the white sands between the rocks, silent as the shadows.

* Dualistic interpretation of ‘the god of the living’ and ‘the god of the dead’ – a problem
* Romans 14:9, 'For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living’. – Coleridge’s Abel is manifesting the not-yet-redeemed state of death?
* the ‘Shape of Abel’ – spectrality, psychology of guilt?
* The mark of Cain – not named, but described here as a full-body manifestation
* Father & son – the myth of the child-redeemer who, however, bears the mark of Cain (the squirrels won’t play with him).

Parallels with *The Ancient Mariner* (and *Christabel*):

* the problem of evil, sin and guilt
* the possibility or impossibility of redemption
* the supernatural and the imagination – spectrality, opacity of ‘reality’
* nocturnal/crepuscular settings – ‘moonlight’, chiaroscuro, monochrome contrast
* the wanderer (in the case of *Mariner*, The Wandering Jew)
* naval imagery in the ‘Prefatory Note’: ‘and made some progress in realizing this intention, when adverse gales drove my bark off the "Fortunate Isles" of the Muses; and then other and more momentous interests prompted a different voyage, to firmer anchorage and a securer port.’