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Cain: Figure of Rebellion and Resilience in D. H. Lawrence's "tragic age"

Shirley Bricout

- 1 Throughout his works, Lawrence quarrels with what he terms in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* his "tragic age" (5). He surveys the tragedy of social mutations brought about by economic and industrial changes, a tragedy he believes to have reached a climax with the outbreak of the war. He also considers his personal tragedy, which proceeds from his no longer being able to relate to a country he cared for and his decision to turn to exile. Lawrence's ambivalent feelings for his homeland further stem from his alienating experience in Cornwall where he had for a time been "most happy" (Lawrence 1984, 436), but from which he was expelled with his wife in October 1917. The Defence of the Realm Act voted in 1914 was invoked for Lawrence's eviction on the suspicion that he had attempted to communicate with the enemy. Moreover, military conscription, which entailed distressing medical examinations for Lawrence, had been introduced in January 1916 as the conflict hardened. Against this historical backdrop, the tension between the individual self and the nation, between singularity and solidarity, developed into a personal crisis, which Lawrence, incorporating the episode into his novel *Kangaroo*, described as "one of his serious deaths in belief" (247). This echoes the preface to his play *Touch and Go*, written in 1919, where tragedy is said to "turn upon the poles of belief" (Lawrence 1999, 362).
- 2 My intention here is to study how in *Kangaroo* Lawrence finds in the paradigms of the Biblical figure of Cain the means to formulate his bewilderment at the treatment he was subjected to. Indeed, Lawrence draws on his knowledge of the Bible to articulate the tension between the individual self and the state, and similarly to voice his personal tragedy in modernist terms. I shall first assess the extent to which Cain's story, narrated in Genesis chapter IV, is in itself tragic, asking whether Cain is a tragic hero, in the Greek sense. Then Lawrence's own appropriation of the figure's paradigms will be examined as pertaining to a process of individuation enabling him to come to

term with the shifting relationship to his homeland. Finally I will show how Lawrence and authors before him subvert the canonical narrative, thereby turning Cain into a figure of resilience. Thus, the equivocal figure of the biblical fratricide, which stands as an archetype of rebellion and creation, shapes the individual narrative, *i.e.* Lawrence's own plight, thus set against the backdrop of collective history.

Cain as a tragic figure

- 3 Most scholars agree that the Bible does not qualify as a tragedy, in the Greek sense. This view is sustained of course by the fact that the concept of literary genres originates in Greek and not in Hebrew thought. Ancient Greeks used drama as a means to investigate the world they lived in, to better apprehend their relation to divinity, to make sense of their human condition. Moreover as Northrop Frye states, "the Bible does not accept the Greek conception of the hero, the figure of greater-than-ordinary human size, power, descent, and articulateness, who so often seems to have a divine destiny almost within his grasp" (181). Indeed, the whole theological purpose of the Bible is to prophesy teleological and eschatological outcomes of history, though underlying this statement the debate between free will and determinism, as formulated by Greek philosophers, still rages. The consequence is that there remains an "unmistakable difference between the Biblical and the Greek conception of the divine" (Hirschfeld 15).
- 4 A case in point, The Book of Job is often branded as a tragedy by Bible scholars, but not according to the Greek pattern. The hardships the Biblical character underwent were induced not by Job's committing some terrible hubristic crime, without realizing how his arrogance deserved punishment, but by a quarrel between God and Satan when the latter asked "Doth Job fear God for nought? [...] touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face" (Job I, 9 and 11). Though Job seems to be a plaything in a dispute he has no notion of, his conduct is dictated by duty, faith and love, and not by rites devoted to the capricious deity. This one example attests the complexity that is involved in any attempt to apply the categories of tragedy to non-Greek texts. Therefore, like Frye, we can speak rather of "nodes of tragedy" (181) when "an irreducible division in human experience" upsets an established balance (Quinones 18).
- 5 In the Book of Genesis, Cain's bewilderment at the fact that his offering is denied, without any explanation, disrupts the Biblical divinity-human relationship. Cain is confronted with an absence of meaning which, according to Frye, turns him into a tragic figure (181). The Biblical narrative provides no explanation for the rejection of the offering, and one can only assume, as most Bible scholars do, that Cain's gesture originated from a hubristic impulse. As will be shown, such blanks in the text grant writers a space where they can develop the story's paradigms according to their own struggles. However, given the didactic nature of the narrative, the subsequent murder of his brother places Cain beyond personal redemption and his story becomes paradigmatic in its discouragement of any repetition of his error. Moreover, God's punishing curse endows the murderer with a cosmic dimension since the earth, which has received Abel's blood, "shall not henceforth yield unto thee [Cain] her strength" (Genesis 4, 12).¹ André LaCocque's analysis of this Biblical passage sheds light on this interpretation, "Abel's blood, instead of fertilizing the soil, has actually debilitated its

vitality. Cain's crime thus has cosmic repercussions. Genesis 4:0-12 intimates that cosmic evil is due to human sinfulness" (99).

- 6 In his works, Lawrence musters such archetypal features to convey the cosmic scope of human relationships. As Laurent Jenny points out in his work on intertextuality entitled "Stratégie de la forme," an allusion introduces a meaning, a representation, a story, an ideological content in the text, without their needing to be specified.² Lawrence's first references to Cain revolve around the death of siblings, as in *Women in Love* where Gerald as a boy killed his brother while they were playing with a shotgun; he feels "set apart, like Cain" (172). Moreover Birkin, shirking Mrs. Crich's appeal for him to become Gerald's friend, wonders "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Lawrence 1987, 26) before remembering the accident. The paradigm is also stretched to depict sin and guilt. For instance, *The Boy in the Bush* has been described by William Tindall in *D. H. Lawrence and Susan His Cow* as "an elaborate variation upon the Cain-Abel theme" (18). Indeed, the main character, Jack, believes he was born cursed, "a sinner, a Cain" (Lawrence 1990, 10), the use of the generic "a Cain" highlighting the archetypal usage of a canonical figure, the mere mention of which sets to work in the text an array of meanings.

Biblical imagery

- 7 In *Kangaroo*, Lawrence gives expression to his bitterness in a long analeptic chapter called "The Nightmare," written several years after the upsetting events, as if emotions or trauma were finally ready to surface. George Becker calls this chapter "an extraneous account," stating that "At any rate, placing this material in the novel throws the whole work out of balance" (106). However as I have shown elsewhere, "memories of war are brought back to Somers [Lawrence's *alter-ego*] when *Kangaroo* urges him to rally behind him and thereby become politically committed" (Bricout 128). The narrative coherence thus associates various instances of compulsion that, in *Movements in European History* (263), Lawrence broadly conflates under the heading of "bullying." In a recent article entitled "The Legacy of D. H. Lawrence's Time in Cornwall," Jane Costin reflects on the possibility that "Lawrence tried to suppress his emotions" about the period (144), she convincingly suggests that passages in *Kangaroo* refer "not to the medical examinations, but to the far deeper pain of forcible exile and vocalis[e] Lawrence's eventual realisation that he needs to address his hurt over his expulsion before he could move forward" (149).
- 8 I would further argue that, in *Kangaroo*, Lawrence's distress caused by the order to leave Cornwall is vented in his narrative by means of the tragic figure of Cain. Thus, the archetype of the banished man is once again turned into a generic, as Lawrence's *alter-ego* Somers "saw himself set apart from mankind, a Cain, or worse" (Lawrence 1994, 249). Trauma studies have indeed emphasized the use of myth to overcome the resistance of narration. For instance, Susana Onega points to how
- the resistance of the narration to express the traumatic events in linguistic terms is compensated for by the sustained use of archetypal symbols and the imposition of an all-encompassing mythical pattern that facilitates the transmission of trauma sensorially and empathically instead of logically. (Abstract)

- 9 On being identified as a social outcast, Lawrence further amplifies the fratricidal myth to voice his rebellion. While still in Cornwall, he is at times overcome by fear caused by the military police's constant surveillance. He tries to pull himself together, reflecting

I am degrading myself by feeling guilty, marked-out, and I have convulsions of fear.
- But fear them! - feel in the wrong because of them? Never. Not if I were Cain several times over, and had killed several brothers and sisters as well. (Lawrence 1994, 250)

- 10 In his extensive study called *The Changes of Cain*, Ricardo Quinones dwells on what he calls "the varying pulls of unity and division" and "the interactions of unity and disruption, of communion and the processes of individuation" the myth releases (18). From a psychoanalytical standpoint, the process of individuation acquires a Jungian tinge, since the allusion is rooted in the author's emotional response to banishment (see Watthee-Delmotte 42). Thus Lawrence projects onto the Biblical story his own status as a victim to reassert his singularity in the relationship with his homeland that he is struggling to redefine.
- 11 The book of Genesis also supplies the paradigm of the mark; it reads "And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him" (IV, 15) which is concisely expressed in "the tainted Somers" in *Kangaroo* (247). The conspicuous feature suggests that the life in exile lying ahead of Somers is doomed. Accordingly Lawrence's *alter-ego* has "the feeling of being marked-out, branded, a criminal, marked out by society, marked-out for annihilation" (Lawrence 1994, 250). Indeed, as Véronique Léonard-Roques points out in her study of the myth of Cain in Literature, while Cain first appears as a cursed figure, branded by exclusion, the biblical figure also functions as an "indicator of the destiny" of the character condemned to wandering the earth.³ Harriett (or Frieda Lawrence) is associated with this humiliating fate. She leaves Cornwall with her husband. The text reads, "They drove through the town, where, of course, they were marked people" (Lawrence 1994, 246). Just like the Biblical figure, Somers-Lawrence travels East, a direction associated with wanderings and exile in the Bible. Thus in the chapter "The Nightmare," the pervasive language of absolute injustice and the sense of doom, reinforced by paradigmatic features of the story of Cain, taunt the rational forcing it to better convey incomprehension, individuation and rebellion, which all lead to exile.
- 12 Other Biblical allusions are incorporated into the language of the narrative to reinforce the protagonist's estrangement from his surroundings, though in this case the scenes are more specifically related to the medical examinations for military conscription. Contrary to the figure of Cain, these allusions work in a parodic mode, targeting the very idea that the civilians who have been summoned there must confront the singularity of their bodies to the norm established by the state. The final and most upsetting examination scene develops into a caricature, when the surroundings are pictured by way of apocalyptic phrases such as "Near this Judgment-Day table a fire was burning" (Lawrence 1994, 252). Consistently, when these examinations turn into a humiliating farce, the Biblical text is cited once again. Somers voices his disgust at such treatment by borrowing from the story of Noah of whose nakedness his son made fun. Unquestionably, the sentence "They had exposed all his nakedness to gibes" (Lawrence 1994, 255) refers back to the Biblical episode (Genesis IX, 21-22). In the same way, the words "So he cursed them in his blood, with an unremitting curse, as he waited" (Lawrence 1994, 255) recall Noah cursing his sinful son (Genesis IX, 25). The use of

parataxis and of parallel constructions endows the curse with a typically Biblical rhythm. The Lawrencian parody reads "And because they had handled his private parts, and looked into them, their eyes should burst and their hands should wither and their hearts should rot" (Lawrence 1994, 255).

- 13 Thus this analeptic chapter unfolds around a number of repetitions and details – and in particular the nagging question "why?" – which crystallize in the concision of the allusions to Cain, in the process investing writing with a cathartic value. However having lent itself to many rewritings by previous authors, the myth has broadened its paradigmatic scope. So looking now at works that were known to Lawrence, I will argue that the figure of Cain breaks down the resistance to the narration of a personal tragedy thanks to intertextual resonances and in the process it acquires a creative function which leads to rebirth. This creative function of the tragic figure meets Lawrence's notion, also expressed in the preface to his play *Touch and Go*, that tragedy, "turning upon the poles of belief," is in fact "a creative activity in which death is a climax in the progression towards new being" (362).

An intertextual syllepsis

- 14 The feelings of injustice and of rebellion deploy themselves in the silences of the original text about Cain's motivations, about his brother's or even God's reasons to slight his offering, all of which contribute to the singularity of the story within the Bible. Thanks to such blanks, which ensure what Pierre Brunel calls the "flexibility" of a myth (71-87), Cain has developed into an equivocal figure, whose presence in any literary text "carries increased semantic depth and density" (Attridge 69). Writing with a rebellious streak in the 17th century, the poet John Donne, for instance, questioned Cain's tragic destiny because, although banished, he is said to have founded cities and given man many aspects of civilization. Donne's poem reads:

Let me arrest thy thoughts: wonder with mee,
Why plowing, building, ruling and the rest,
Or most of those arts, whence our lives are blest,
By cursed Cain's race invented be. (147-8)

- 15 Actually, Cain is the only Bible character to rebel outright against God's admonitions, and in *Paradise Lost*, Milton builds on his defiance which, according to the Book of Genesis, runs "My punishment is greater than I can bear [...] I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on the earth; and it shall come to pass, that everyone that findeth me shall slay me" (IV, 13, 14). After Milton, the Romantics, casting aside conventional readings, dauntlessly invert the brothers' features, the story being replete with dualisms, to fashion fluctuating and defiant avatars of Cain and Abel. Lord Byron, in *Cain: A Mystery*, dramatizes the Biblical episode from Cain's point of view, Abel's motives for serving God being thereby demoted (Léonard-Roques 114). Byron's Cain is therefore heroic because, like Prometheus, he defies supreme authority. Charles Baudelaire takes advantage of the Manichean dualisms of the story to transpose the brothers' features. In his collection of poems entitled "Rebellion," Abel's body is depicted as a "fat carcass [that] will enrich the reeking soil," while the poem ends on a hint at the death of God,

Race of Cain, mount to the skies
And down upon the earth cast God! (Baudelaire 127)⁴

- 16 Hence Cain's status as both a rebel and a victim turns him into a hybrid figure which catalyzes the crisis of the modern man. That's how for instance, in *Kangaroo*, the

murder of Abel is transposed onto the Cain figure when Somers, likewise rejected and expelled, is symbolically put to death: "But Somers sat there feeling he had been killed: perfectly still, and pale, in a kind of afterdeath, feeling he had been killed. He had always *believed* so in everything – society, love, friends. This was one of his serious deaths in belief" (Lawrence 1994, 247). Such an appropriation of the myth lends itself to syncretic fluctuations, when images drawn on Christ complete the passage, "So he sat with his immobile face of a crucified Christ who makes no complaint, only broods silently and alone, remote" (Lawrence 1994, 247). The syncretism woven into the text may recall that Abel's fate is believed to anticipate Christ's.

- 17 All this adds up to showing that the allusions to Cain function like an "intertextual syllepsis," a phrase of Michael Riffaterre's that I am stretching here, to convey the idea that the figure no longer refers back to the Bible only, but above all to the multiple meanings it has acquired thanks to its numerous rewritings. Closer in time to *Kangaroo*, the initiation novel *Demian* by Hermann Hesse, which Lawrence read in German as soon as it was published in 1919, introduces a hybrid Abel-Cain figure, marked out to participate in the regeneration of an ailing world. The chosen ones in Hesse's novel remind us of Nietzsche's aristocracy as well as Lawrence's. Also published in 1919, an article by the psychoanalyst and anarchist Otto Gross, entitled "Protest and Morality in the Unconscious," which Lawrence may have known of, opens on the statement that Cain's "*act is the birth of revolutionary protest*. Not eternal hope, as according to the Greek tradition, but eternal discontent had come into the debased world as the only good thing" (105). Thus the "intertextual syllepsis" develops into a means for the evicted author not only to voice trauma and to articulate his singularity through individuation but also for him to build his own resilience within a painful but salutary narration. In Véronique Léonard-Roques' view, revisiting the myth gives birth to "a Nietzschean figure of the sovereign individual, destined to separateness, but replete with promises of renewal."⁵ The symbol, she shows, "gives the representation of a crisis narrative coherence and enables the subject to carve out a future for himself by projecting his plight in an archetypal figure."⁶ Lawrence's cathartic narrative then is both singular and part of a literary tradition.
- 18 In this sense, the figure of Cain is an agent of resilience and consequently of artistic creation. This brings to mind Somers-Lawrence's often quoted modernist creed "Since destruction is part of creation" (Lawrence 1994, 150). A founder of cities and new techniques, in particular of metalwork (Genesis IV, 22), the *homo faber* turns in fact into an emblem of the artist, thereby associating both meanings of the Greek term *tekhne*: production and art or craftsmanship (Léonard-Roques 287). In *Kangaroo*, the narrator, drawing on the symbol of Cain to achieve cathartic regeneration before moving on, eventually embraces the individuation process and acquires resilience, as the closing sentences of the chapter "The Nightmare" attest, in their binary parataxical constructions: "So be it. He was broken apart, apart he would remain. The judgments of society were not valid to him. [...] In his soul, he was cut off, and from his own isolated soul he would judge" (Lawrence 1994, 259).
- 19 The hybridity of this Biblical figure opens up opportunities on narrative and artistic levels. Eventually envisaging new aesthetic orientations as a way to come to terms with his personal crisis, during his many travels in exile, Lawrence would find inspiration notably in the Aztec and the Etruscan cultures to convey his modernist belief in a solution that reaches out beyond the State to the cosmos. This form of resistance to the

tragic leads the reader to give up his/her conventional readings of the Cain story and to welcome, as Derek Attridge describes it, "the *activation* of these unfurling meanings" (69, italics in the original) in what turns out to be a singular but cathartic narrative process.

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NOTES

1. I am indebted to Michael Bell for pointing out to me the cosmic implications of the figure of Cain.
2. The original reads, "L'allusion suffit à introduire dans le texte centreur un sens, une représentation, une histoire, un ensemble idéologique sans qu'on ait besoin de les parler" (Jenny 266).
3. My translation. The critic writes, "Caïn apparaît d'abord comme une figure de maudit, celui que marque le signe de l'exclusion. [...] La figure biblique fonctionne comme un révélateur du destin [du personnage]" (Léonard-Roques 227).
4. An English version of "Race de Caïn, au ciel monte/ Et sur la terre jette Dieu!" (Baudelaire 126).
5. My translation of "une figure nietzschéenne de l'individu souverain, voué à la séparation, mais au potentiel riche en promesses de renouvellement" (Léonard-Roques 233).
6. Léonard-Roques writes: "L'emblème donne une cohérence narrative à la représentation d'une crise [et] permet de créer un destin en se projetant dans une figure exemplaire" (346).

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Keywords: greek, Bible, trauma, myth, resilience

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Shirley Bricout's field of research is D. H. Lawrence and the Bible. The translation into English of her first book was released in 2015 under the title *Politics and the Bible in D. H. Lawrence's Leadership Novels* at the Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée. She has recently guest-edited a special issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* devoted to Lawrence. She has contributed articles and book reviews to *Etudes lawrenciennes* (Paris X), *Etudes britanniques contemporaines* (Montpellier III) and to *The Journal of D. H. Lawrence Studies* (Nottingham, UK).