



Date 1877

Technique: Charcoal on paper, 56.7 x 41.4 cm

Illustration for Victor Hugo's "La Conscience"

The famous Cain poem, written in 1853 and appearing in the 1859 first edition of *La Légende des siècles*, is an apt rendering of Victor Hugo's moral preoccupations, in this case, the first recorded Biblical murder, when Cain killed his brother Abel. Hugo's short narrative (sixty-eight lines) traces the itinerary of the fleeing Cain who, with his family, seeks asylum from the powerful wrath of Jehovah. The motif of a long voyage, filled with suffering, already exploited by Hugo in the Mazzepa poem of *Les Orientales* (1829) is here reiterated as a frightening exodus, as Cain, his family, and his descendants seek calm and peace. But for Cain there is none, for he is pursued by the Eye of God. Thus, even when he attempts to bury himself underground, the eye is always there, menacing and judging: *L'oeil était dans la tombe et regardait Cain* (The eye was in the tomb and kept looking at Cain). This poignant and persistent symbol of a bad conscience, hence the title of the poem, is somewhat akin to similar symbolism found in the writings of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). Helmut Hatzfeld in his *Initiation à l'explication de textes français* (Munich: Max Hueber, 1957) speaks of Hugo's success in fusing history and symbolism, making Cain's murder of Abel a very typical Romantic and visionary text.

(John Andrew Frey, A Victor Hugo encyclopedia)

Victor Hugo (1802-1885)

La Légende des siècles (1855-1876)

La Conscience

Then, with his children, clothed in skins of brutes,
Dishevelled, livid, rushing through the storm,
Cain fled before Jehovah. As night fell
The dark man reached a mount in a great plain,
And his tired wife and his sons, out of breath,
Said: "Let us lie down on the earth and sleep."
Cain, sleeping not, dreamed at the mountain foot.
Raising his head, in that funereal heaven
He saw an eye, a great eye, in the night
Open, and staring at him in the gloom.
"I am too near," he said, and tremblingly woke up

His sleeping sons again, and his tired wife,
And fled through space and darkness. Thirty days
He went, and thirty nights, nor looked behind;
Pale, silent, watchful, shaking at each sound;
No rest, no sleep, till he attained the strand
Where the sea washes that which since was Asshur.
"Here pause," he said, "for this place is secure;
Here may we rest, for this is the world's end."
And he sat down; when, lo! in the sad sky,
The selfsame Eye on the horizon's verge,
And the wretch shook as in an ague fit.
"Hide me!" he cried; and all his watchful sons,
Their finger on their lip, stared at their sire.
Cain said to Jabal (father of them that dwell
In tents): "Spread here the curtain of thy tent,"
And they spread wide the floating canvas roof,
And made it fast and fixed it down with lead.
"You see naught now," said Zillah then, fair child
The daughter of his eldest, sweet as day.
But Cain replied, "That Eye--I see it still."
And Jubal cried (the father of all those
That handle harp and organ): "I will build
A sanctuary;" and he made a wall of bronze,
And set his sire behind it. But Cain moaned,
"That Eye is glaring at me ever." Henoah cried:
"Then must we make a circle vast of towers,
So terrible that nothing dare draw near;
Build we a city with a citadel;
Build we a city high and close it fast."
Then Tubal Cain (instructor of all them
That work in brass and iron) built a tower--
Enormous, superhuman. While he wrought,
His fiery brothers from the plain around
Hunted the sons of Enoch and of Seth;
They plucked the eyes out of whoever passed,
And hurled at even arrows to the stars.
They set strong granite for the canvas wall,
And every block was clamped with iron chains.
It seemed a city made for hell. Its towers,
With their huge masses made night in the land.
The walls were thick as mountains. On the door
They graved: "Let not God enter here." This done,
And having finished to cement and build
In a stone tower, they set him in the midst.
To him, still dark and haggard, "Oh, my sire,

Is the Eye gone?" quoth Zillah tremblingly.
But Cain replied: "Nay, it is even there."
Then added: "I will live beneath the earth,
As a lone man within his sepulchre.
I will see nothing; will be seen of none."
They digged a trench, and Cain said: "'Tis enow,"
As he went down alone into the vault;
But when he sat, so ghost-like, in his chair,
And they had closed the dungeon o'er his head,
The Eye was in the tomb and fixed on Cain.

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