
Prologue

*Prometeo del qual dixieron
los philosophos & los poetas
fabulosament que fazia hombres
de tierra. & que metia en aquellos
spiritu de uida & los fazia ueuir.*

—JUAN FERNÁNDEZ DE HEREDIA (CA. 1385)

Magdalen College, Oxford, November, in the last year of the fifteenth century. Several friends are seated around a table, engaged in a lively discussion while drinking. The prior is one of them; his name is Richard. There are also two other theologians, at either side of the table, and a visitor from Flanders, a brilliant professor of Greek who had arrived that summer. Seated in front of the Greek professor is a certain Philip, a “charmingly humorous fellow.” Presiding is John Colet, the renowned cleric, humanist, and eloquent preacher of Saint Paul’s Epistles. A selective group of learned, sharp, and lively scholars.

The man at the end of the table opened the discussion with an ingenious but provocative statement: if God preferred Abel’s sacrifice to Cain’s—Colet stated—it was because of the former’s humility and the latter’s arrogance. A hard-working man, Cain was confident of his ability to make the land productive and to place on the altar the wheat harvested with the industry of his plough, while his brother humbly brought God sheep fed with the grass that nature

provided. The cleric became enthusiastic as he spoke, literally taken by a *sacro furore*, a sacred enthusiasm in defending the position that Cain was punished for his self-confidence. With the discussion underway, each member exhibited the instruments he knew best—logic for the theologian, poetry for the Greek professor—but to no avail, such as Colet’s fervor. The discussion was getting too heated and serious for a dinner party, so the Dutch guest—a man in his mid-thirties but already an international eminence; his name, of course, was Desiderius Erasmus—took the lead and invited the commensals to take a breath and hear an old story.

The professor from Rotterdam shared with his new friends something he had read in a badly damaged codex he had happened upon while hunting for manuscripts in a library. In the only single folio that had survived the ravages of time—so Erasmus told his friends, not before insisting that his story was indeed no fiction—he had read that Cain had heard his parents comment on the exquisite beauty and immense abundance of the garden they had been forced to abandon. Cain frequently listened to them describe the crops growing on the other side of the wall that protected the sacred garden: wheat that reached the height of trees, rising in a land that knew no weeds, producing seeds that were enormous.

Cain was not only industrious but also rapacious and greedy, as they all knew, and so he headed for the garden. He found the entrance sealed by the angel of the flaming sword, but instead of retracing his steps, he decided to address the messenger of God. These were his words: “What if the Lord were ungrateful for your diligence? What if he wished you to be

deceived and would be more gratified if human beings displayed industriousness [*callida industria*] [rather than] idleness and sloth?” Confident now of the power of his eloquence, Cain continued speaking to the angel. He focused on the unfortunate mandate he had been given, forced as he was to remain at the entrance of the garden, unable to profit from the beauty held within its interior nor from the bounty of the world whence he came. “Whence come I”—said Cain arrogantly to the angel—“dogs are given the task that God has placed on your shoulders.”

Aware, perhaps, of the effect of his words, Cain continued querying the secrets of the Tree of Knowledge (its *scientia*) over which the guard of the paradise watched. Cain claimed that men not all that different from himself had used their diligence to profit from the fertile nature of the world they inhabited: if only with the price of hard work and sweat, they had succeeded in making the world a place of consolation in their exile. Moreover, even if plagues and sickness would continue to threaten their lives, people would overpower those trials through industriousness and knowledge. And one day, maybe Cain himself but certainly one of his descendants would find deep in the entrails of the earth some priceless reward—maybe the secret of immortality—who knows?

Erasmus’s story concluded with the triumph of Cain’s eloquence: the angel consented to give him some seeds from his garden, which the expelled man then planted in his own land. But the abundant fertility of the plot did not go unnoticed by the Maker, who discovered the ruse and, infuriated, turned nature against Cain, ruining his harvest. God also banished the angel from paradise, forced him to dress like the men

he had helped, and put in his place a new custodian (what happened to the angel now dressed as a man was unfortunately not told). And when Cain and his brother later presented their offerings to God, the smoke of Cain's altar "arose not to heaven." What Erasmus told his friends up to then was contained in that single surviving page of the ancient codex.

Erasmus's interlocutors did not need, of course, to be reminded of the fratricide and punishment that followed: condemned to live east of the garden of Eden, Cain became a "restless wanderer" for the remainder of his existence ("vagus et profugus in terra," reads the Vulgate, Genesis 4:14). His life was protected from men's hatred by means of the visible sign with which God had marked him.¹

The above story comes from a letter Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote to John Sixtin—or Sixtinus, a Dutch Doctor in Law, Frisian to be more specific, who graduated from Oxford—during Erasmus's first and unforgettable visit to England. That story, which was shared in the course of a meal (a *convivium*, if not a *symposio*, as Erasmus writes), is arguably *the* wittiest adaptation of the Prometheus myth at the dawn of modernity, presenting *in nuce* (in a nutshell) a modern debate of cultural criticism.² "The disputation," writes Hans Blumenberg, "belongs at the beginning of the epoch whose pathos seemed for the first time to have taken the expulsion from Paradise completely seriously, not so as to acquiesce in it but, on the contrary, so as to devote all its powers to regaining Paradise."³ In the same way that the ancient Titan deceived the gods, stealing from them the fire with which he would give life to the clay figures molded with his own hands, so

the industrious Cain used a different human invention—the power of rhetoric—to seduce the gatekeeper. But just as humanity's ability to appropriate God's wisdom is displayed in Cain's encounter with the angel, so the Creator's remoteness is dramatized: he protects the garden from humankind, permitting their death and sorrow, unwilling to let them eat from the Tree of Life. And, at the same time, the usurpation of his divine attributes leads to a deadly penalty.

The story of the man to whom this book is dedicated falls in between both myths, his legendary life woven with threads derived from the biblical Cain and from the Promethean artisan. A "wrestler wanderer" expelled from the school known as the Garden of San Marco in Florence for punching the face of another young sculptor named Michelangelo Buonarroti, Pietro Torrigiano (1472–1528) spent most of his existence traveling. His life pilgrimage started in Florence; next he went to Bologna and Rome; then he spent several years in the army as a mercenary moving across the Italian peninsula, north to Emilia-Romagna and south to Naples. Subsequently, he traveled to Northern Europe, spending a long time in the Netherlands and many years in England. In the Tudor court, the Florentine developed an extraordinary career as a sculptor, introducing a new foreign antique language that had emerged in Italy into the distant island. Deploying two different media—bronze and, particularly, clay modeling or terra-cotta—Torrighiano gave form to funerary effigies, tomb monuments, and bust portraits. He even participated actively in the funerary rituals of King Henry VII, introducing a new technique he had learned in Florence that would transform the practice of such ceremonies in the time coming.

At least two of the people at the convivium in Oxford, recalled by Erasmus in the above-quoted letter to John Sixtin, crossed paths with Torrigiano in those years—both humanists who had journeyed to Italy and would have appreciated the novelty of his skills. One was Colet, the man presiding at the table. The famous clerical reformer had just returned from Italy in 1496, where he had become an enthusiastic devotee of the Neoplatonic philosopher Marsilio Ficino. “Like a merchant seeking goodly wares,” as Erasmus wrote with elegant irony, Colet had traveled to Italy in 1492 around the time that Torrigiano had to flee Florence.⁴ It does not seem impossible that the two men would have shared old memories when, many years later in England, Torrigiano was making his bust portrait: an astonishing sculpture commissioned by Colet from the sculptor and later placed over his tomb. Coincidentally, it was the same year that the Florentine left England (probably) never to return.

The other person at the meal whom Torrigiano would have met in England was, of course, Erasmus himself. The evidence is rich and no less problematic but still worth exploring for reasons to which we shall return throughout this book. One reason, it could be said, is that both men collaborated in the first large commission that Torrigiano received in England: to furnish the tomb of King Henry VII’s mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort. At the same time that the Florentine was working on the tomb at Westminster Abbey, the Dutchman was remunerated in London for writing the queen’s epitaph that Torrigiano carved in elegant square capitals, which were gilded around the black touchstone on which the bronze effigy would lie.

Both the artist and the humanist had arrived from Italy only two years earlier, almost at the same time; Erasmus appearing after a long trip that had taken him to Bologna, Venice, and Rome. It was a surprising coincidence that both would say farewell in 1510 to the land that had welcomed them a decade earlier, days before Erasmus’s beloved friend of two decades, Colet, passed away. Colet’s death had affected Erasmus the most in thirty years, as he wrote to another friend, John Fisher; it was a gloomy sign of the storm that was about to hit Europe.⁵ If Erasmus, perhaps the greatest public intellectual of his time, would be a primary actor in that struggle, Torrigiano, one of the more extraordinary European sculptors of his generation—as I will attempt to prove in the pages that follow—was one of its infinite victims. Remarkably, among the several portraits of friends and patrons of the Dutch humanist that Torrigiano executed in England, the most intriguing—and also the most beautiful—is one that has been identified alternatively both as the martyr Fisher and Erasmus himself, an opinion that I mostly share.

What matters now is that Torrigiano could not escape the consequences of the great religious debate that was plaguing the old continent. As theologians and learned experts in Scripture from across Europe debated the authority of the Roman Church and the value of all forms of ritual and cultural mediations built across the two gardens—the heavenly and the mundane—the Spanish Inquisition was trying Torrigiano for breaking one of his own masterly terra-cottas. Found guilty of taking for his own artistic glory an honor that only God deserved—so the story goes—“the man who broke Michelangelo’s nose”

died in a Spanish Inquisition jail in the year 1528. It should come as no surprise that Torrigiano's life and death would later be retold as that of a pagan Cain or a Christian Prometheus, nor should it astonish anyone that his work would be celebrated as a relic of artistic resistance.

The next four chapters are dedicated to reconstructing the artist's memory across the intertwined narratives of myth and history in the form of a story.