

INTRODUCTION

I

IF YOU put a gun to my head and asked me to describe *Abel and Cain* in three sentences, this is what I would answer: Murder. Murder. Murder.

First-, second-, third-degree: premeditated, unpremeditated, involuntary.

Fratricide, sororicide, parricide.

Genocide, historicide, deicide.

Every *cide*, all the violence of the *ides*, suffuses every aspect of this grimly remarkable book, from its title that memorializes the victim and perpetrator of the first murder on biblical record, to its recurrent evocations of Nazi death camps and German cities under Allied bombardment. Then there are the book's myriad less literal killings, its *Gedankenmorde* or "thought murders," such as: the "murder" committed by writers when they write their family and friends into their books, and the "murder" of writers and books committed by their agents, editors, publishers, and introducers . . .

Not to forget the "murder" of books by their screen adaptations, and the "murder" of literature itself by film and television . . .

I could go on and on, but Gregor von Rezzori already has in this massive novel that might be two novels that contradict each other so brutally and so brilliantly that summarizing them should be a crime—or maybe it's just my punishment for loving them.

An attempt at summary, come to think of it, is what triggers the very existence of these pages:

At a Paris café on the eve of 1968, the *annus counterculturis*, a Galician Jew turned American literary agent named Brodny meets an initially unnamed German-language novelist and asks him for “his story,” which the novelist takes to mean “the story of his life,” but told in the Hollywood style: short enough to be sketched on a napkin, quick enough to be pitched in an elevator.

In the film business, the suggestively psychoanalytic term for this type of synopsis is a “treatment,” and the writer is resistant, to say the least.

Meanwhile, the agent’s not asking anymore, he’s yelling, “Tell me the *story* in three sentences!”

The writer is so insulted by this demand for abbreviation, abridgement, encapsulation, etc., that he ditches the agent, dashes off to his hotel, and, forgetting his writer’s block, dashes off this book, or books—in which he calls himself “Aristides Subicz,” though it’s unclear whether that name is his “real” name, or a pseudonym assumed for his script-writing hackwork, or a survival identity assumed during wartime.

(Aristides was an Athenian statesman. Subicz was the name of an ancient ruling house of Dalmatia, which spanned present-day Croatia and Bosnia.)

Of course, the more the writer Subicz explains to the agent Brodny why “his”—Subicz’s—life can’t be condensed for film, the more he ends up recounting that life itself: He narrates his birth in 1919 in Bessarabia, just after it had become annexed to Romania; his Austro-Dalmatian mother, who drags him around the Côte d’Azur as she flits between lovers, whom he calls “uncles” (“Bolivian tin-mine owners, Argentine cattle breeders, Irish beer kings, Dutch petroleum magnates,” and a Romanian nobleman with Ottoman roots—Uncle Ferdinand—who might, but might not, be the boy’s father); his mother’s suicide and his subsequent adoption by his mother’s estranged family in squalid, disembourgeised interwar Vienna; his schooldays rivalry with chronic masturbator-cum-convinced Nazi Cousin Wolfgang; his affair with a Jewish woman named Stella and his friendship with her husband, John, a British diplomat and spy, who introduces him to haute society just as it’s collapsing.

The anecdotes don't stop, not even for the Anschluss: Subicz keeps stuffing them in wherever he can—in body text, in dialogue, in parentheses—like he once had Aunt Selma stuff a cluster of oak leaves into the muzzle of Cousin Wolfgang's gun:

1939: I was already in Romania to be a soldier myself, thus could not say good-bye to [Cousin Wolfgang] when he was loaded onto a train to storm into the land of the Poles. . . . But I had asked Aunt Selma to put a cluster of oak leaves in his rifle barrel (as is customary in Germany in historic hours), and, touched by my tenderness, she had obediently done so. Cousin Wolfgang took the train straight into his baptism of fire. He had no time or chance to pull the oak leaves out of the rifle barrel. He probably didn't even recall they were there. All he knew was that the train stopped, out in the open somewhere, and he was surrounded by splintering and crashing. He thus realized he was being shot at and that it was his duty to shoot back at whatever he could see with his purblind eyes. So he shot back. And since my oak-leaf cluster was stopping up his rifle, the bullet flew back out and tore the bolt off the chamber and the thumb off his right hand. . . .

Cousin Wolfgang was sent back to Vienna with a transport of wounded soldiers on the very next train. En route, he was bitten by a rat, which had snuck (unscheduled) into the railroad car meant to hold eight horses or forty (damaged) men. By the time he arrived in Vienna several days later, Wolfgang was dying.

Subicz deserts the Romanian army fairly immediately after conscription and attempts a crazy reunion with Stella—who's found refuge in Switzerland—in Berlin. He waits for her, but she never comes; the SS has dragged her off to the gas and ovens.

The end of the war finds Subicz in Hamburg, a city that had just been leveled in what was then the heaviest assault in the history of aerial warfare.

In Hamburg, Subicz sets to work as a novelist, but with Reichsmarks

worthless and Deutschmarks scarce—and a wife, and a son, and mistresses, and a prostitute habit—he takes on sideline gigs scribbling scripts for the “piglets” of the German film industry, eager to revive the glory, if not the aesthetics, of Weimar’s Ufa.

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How many Abels are we up to by now? Definitely Cousin Wolfgang, definitely Stella. Didn’t Hollywood request a third sentence, though—a third death sentence?

Schwab.

The major postwar presence in Subicz’s life is a man named Johannes Schwab, who like Subicz is a frustrated writer, but unlike Subicz isn’t cheap enough for film, and so he goes to work as a book editor. Pity the earnest German, he thinks he’s being honest.

Schwab, in fact, is Subicz’s book editor—meaning that he vouched for Subicz’s talent and got his author a series of advances. Needless to say, not a single page has ever come in.

Schwab, who also lives in Hamburg, though the name marks him as a Swabian, is the German “brother” to Subicz’s errant “Austrian.”

Schwab’s first appearance is more like a diagnosis: “He was wearing a heavy turtleneck sweater (not a Hanseatic outfit but, with corduroy slacks and a beret, the guild costume of German intellectuals in the fifties, which costume he carried on into the sixties—typical of people who are behind the times but consider themselves avant-garde!).”

Two decades of waiting for Subicz’s pages have taken their toll: Schwab arrives in Paris to meet Subicz (like the agent Brodny, earlier in the book, but years later in terms of chronology, meets Subicz) and Schwab confesses as much, between room-temperature gin and tonics, cigarettes, and pills: He’s not on board with the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the Federal Republic’s Economic Miracle, but he needs its salary and perks; neither is he down with the burgeoning student movements, but he needs their excesses and purpose. Subicz should

be worried, but men who've survived mass slaughters tend not to worry too much about substance abuse and certainly don't stage interventions—at best, they get wasted themselves and pick up the tab, which is exactly what Subicz does. Schwab returns to Germany and binges to death. Subicz calls it a suicide, which is just the polite society term for another homicide he's gotten away with.

Indeed, in Subicz's narration, which takes up the two sections or folders labeled A and B, Schwab is presented as the Abel to Subicz's Cain: Subicz "kills" Schwab by abandoning him for the movies, or by failing to write a book that brings Schwab back into esteem at his publishing house, which is under increasing pressure to make profits as its media-conglomerate parent becomes a global hegemon. As folder C is approached, however, it becomes increasingly feasible that the roles can be reversed, and that Schwab might be the Cain to Subicz's Abel: Schwab "kills" Subicz by becoming too dissolute to edit him, or by having also championed Nagel, a famous but plodding German writer whose success has stymied Subicz (Nagel is a composite, but also the Nobel laureate and Waffen SS member Günter Wilhelm Grass). Another way to read the titular brothers is through nationality: Subicz's Austria-Hungary is Abel, murdered by Germany's Cain, which fostered Nazism and foisted it on Europe. Or else: Schwab's Germany is Abel, murdered by Austria-Hungary's Cain, Hitler's native land.

It doesn't ultimately matter which role any of them plays, however: At the end of the book, all of these characters, and all of these nations, are dead.

Schwab, as has been reported, dies of his habits, and Subicz dies in a car crash with a French starlet just outside Avignon, on the road from Paris to Cannes. Germany and Austria, meanwhile, have been reduced to mental habits, superstitions—because all of their cities have essentially become outposts of America, whose energy requires italics:

*Already built into the trashy boxiness are the ruins of tomorrow,
the tin-and-concrete wasteland of secondhand Americana, with*

mangelbelts of rust and mortar, seething and teeming with ever-swelling, ever-swarving masses of more and more colorless more and more dissatisfied more and more demanding more and more hopeless more and more evil supermarket consumers in ever swifter, tinnier, more hastily glued-together, more and more perilous automobiles: highway rest stop eaters with empty gazes over munching chewing kneading swallowing mouths . . .

As the folders unfold and Subicz's recounted conversations give way to dialogue from scenes from Subicz's abandoned novels, then give way to dialogue from scenes from Subicz's abandoned screenplays—all of which are interspersed with Schwab's own editorial notes—the border between the “brothers” is all but effaced, like the border between Austria and Hungary, whose wall came down half a year before the wall in Berlin, as if the grand old Empire were making one last bid to restore itself and reassert its standards before Coca-Cola and Levi's took over.

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When Gregor von Rezzori died, in 1998, he still wasn't finished with this material. In 1976, he'd published what he called the introductory pneuma (which is framed by the two Paris meetings, the interview with Brodny and the bender with Schwab), and folders A and B, in a book called *Der Tod Meines Bruders Abel*, which was translated in 1985 as *The Death of My Brother Abel*. Folder C was published posthumously in 2000 as *Kain* (Cain) and never translated. Here, both volumes are together in English for the first time, and the effect is to make the give-and-take between Subicz and Schwab into something closer to a forking or branching: They're the two lives, or deaths, that might've been von Rezzori's.

Gregor Arnulph Hilarius d'Arezzo, known as Grisha, was born not after the First World War, like his two “brothers,” but just at its start, in 1914—in Czernowitz, then the capital of the Duchy of Bu-

kovina, later a major city in the Kingdom of Romania, and now a provincial city in Ukraine. His family were Sicilian aristocracy from Ragusa, who served as Habsburg officials. Grisha inherited their cosmopolitanism and became fluent in seven languages. His war was spent initially with the Romanian army, and then on false papers in Berlin, where he repeatedly tried to write about what he was witnessing. But every attempt at documenting his present led him to the past, and he eventually produced a distinguished oeuvre of cruel, beautiful autobiographical novels about his Empire childhood and teen years. Predictably, they were mostly ignored in Germany in favor of the lighter fare he wrote to pay the bills (his four-volume *Idiot's Guide to German Society*, and, yes, his scripts for film and television). German letters didn't know what to do with him: He wrote in German but wasn't German; not even the Austrians would claim him (not that he wanted to be claimed *by them*). His foreignness—indeed, his official statelessness, for a period—along with the *splendeurs* of his style alienated him from the *Trümmerliteratur* movement (Rubble Literature, the direct and even rudimentary immediately postwar German literature that tried to objectively describe, not subjectively evaluate, the contemporary scene, as a way, perversely, of mitigating its readership's war trauma), and he was too much of a nostalgist for the Vienna of Hermann Broch, Robert Musil, Joseph Roth, and Stefan Zweig to take part in the explicitly experimental Gruppe 47 (a group of novelists, poets, and playwrights that met between 1947 and '67, and included Ingeborg Bachmann, Heinrich Böll, Peter Handke, and Uwe Johnson).

It was a mixed blessing that Grisha's nostalgia—rather, his extreme alternation, or juxtaposition, of warm sentiment and violent incident—was most appreciated in America, which perhaps also appreciated how much he relished denigrating America, calling it stupid, crass, incurious, and puritanical. He enjoyed blaming the fact that he had to support himself with hackwork on the Americanization of postwar European culture; but then he always had a sly sadist's understanding of the American intellectual's appetite for masochism (perhaps because it was appropriated from the émigré Jewish intellectual's appetite for

masochism). Almost all of his other books were set in memory, but this book—or books—is *about memory*, how it's made and remade, sequelized and enkitsched; how memory, as it passes out of the family, out of the community, out of the nation, and then finally out of the age, inevitably is generalized and broadened for mass consumption. He was a keen believer that the larger the audience for something, the dumber that something becomes—and the more ideologically correct it becomes too. Whether we believe that dictum or not, we keep proving it truer and truer in the third millennium of Christ—with our partisan “news” as much as with our anti-literary “media properties,” and especially with our online interactions.

Abel and Cain is of a different tradition. It's one of those vast masterpieces for the chosen few, like *Journey to the End of the Night* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Von Rezzori is a Céline with a conscience. He's a Pynchon who has outgrown the movies.

—JOSHUA COHEN