

## ***Forgiveness and Forgiving in Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son (c. 1668)***

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Harmensz van Rijn Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1668) is a famous life-sized oil painting by the artist, 262X205 cm, in the collection of Hermitage, St Petersburg, Russia. It is a history painting, belonging to the last phase of Rembrandt's artistic production and crowning his evolution. The artist illustrates in his own unique way the well known biblical parable of the prodigal son from the Gospel of St Luke (Luke 22: 54-57) working with a palette knife with thick and broad layers of rough impasto, exploiting rich color and the bright-dark factor in order to increase the dramatic intensity of the event. Critics of the painting have pinpointed the popularity of the subject in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands, Rembrandt's debt to a woodcut by Maerten van Heemskerck and his relation to theological disputes between Catholics and Protestants that involved the interpretation of this specific parable. My task in this paper is to investigate the extent to which the problem of forgiveness and forgiving, having to do with Rembrandt's life and career, preoccupied the artist in a way that reflected in the actual architectural arrangement of the painted scene. The set of secondary figures for whose identification there is no agreement among Rembrandt's critics, functions as an auxiliary for the artist's extensive meditation on forgiveness within the horizon of the unforgivable. Rembrandt portrays the meeting of father and son off center to give considerable space to a standing figure looking disapprovingly at the whole event that Christian Tümpel identifies as the older brother. The prodigal son's father spontaneously forgives his son without any

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terms and conditions under the eyes of his older son who rather seems to be unforgiving. I would like to argue that such coupling of forgiveness and the unforgivable by Rembrandt allows a powerful and introspective insight into one of the perennial issues of human existence. I also argue that philosophy of art, which informs my approach to Rembrandt's painting combines philosophy and art history, and may illuminate painting from an angle that enhances its value and contribution to contemporary culture.



(Rembrandt, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, c. 1668, oil on canvas, 262X205 cm, The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg) Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn's

*Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1668) is a famous life-size oil painting, 262X205 cm, in the collection of Hermitage, St Petersburg, Russia. It is a history painting, belonging to the last phase of Rembrandt's artistic production, crowning his evolution and widely admired for its introspective insight into forgiveness, one of the perennial issues of human existence. Therefore, it best represents Rembrandt's reflective stance in life, conveying the spirit of Christianity in its most enlightened form and considered to bear a strong connection to his biography and his years of prodigality when newly wedded to Saskia. Despite the popularity of the subject Netherlandish drama and art in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. (Haeger 1986, p. 129) Rembrandt illustrates, in his own unique way, the well-known biblical parable of the prodigal son from the Gospel of St. Luke (Luke 22: 54-57) exploiting color and *chiaroscuro* in order to increase the dramatic portrayal of the event.

The artist depicts the final and culminating point of the story: the prodigal son is portrayed on his knees, having just returned home and having just met his father, in front of the dimly lit arched doorway of the house. The two main protagonists are placed off-center at the left, while the right part of the composition is reserved for two other figures, one standing and another seated, observing them. The aged, nearly blind father is portrayed frontally, bending over his son and gently placing his hands on his back, while the son is seen from the back, slightly turning his head to the right and resting it on his father's chest, full of repentance and guilt. The father's glowing red cape and rich outfit contrasts with the son's ragged garments full of holes, his worn sandals and his scarred feet. The warm tones in the clothing of both father and son contribute to a harmonious whole but also mark with poignancy the contrast in roles. The father is compassionate, for he is strong and still sovereign despite his age, as the red cloak, a sign of majesty and power, does not fail to indicate. He is thus able to forgive the wounded son who, in his weakness and humility, is asking for forgiveness. The short, expensive sword on the right side of the prodigal son is the only remaining marker of the status he once entertained, as a son of a noble landowner, and a sad reminder of his arrogance that once led him to question his father's rule. It is practically the last and only equipment distinguishing him from common beggars of his time.

Rembrandt seems to wish to give emphasis only to what is essential in the picture. This is the reason why the entire scene is immersed into the dark from which the figures of father and son are emerging, along with the standing figure on the right hand side, looking at the event with disdain while leaning on his stick. This standing figure is almost in the foreground and is carefully painted, particularly with the regard to his facial expression. The standing man is younger than the father but older than the prodigal son and like the father wears rich garments and a red cloak. The rest of the figures can barely be seen. The picture is painted with a palette knife, applying thick and broad layers of rough impasto on the canvas. Bob Haak has argued, also based on the odd signature on the work that the secondary figures are inferior in quality because Rembrandt never completed the painting and another artist worked on them. (Kuretsky 2007, endnote 3, p. 31) In

what follows I shall attempt a philosophical reading of the painting that focuses on forgiveness and forgiving with the hope to illuminate it better and contribute to resolving some of the issues on which literature about this work is divided.

## **Painting and the Bible**

In his *Return of the prodigal son*, Rembrandt departs from accuracy in the biblical parable depiction since, according to the Bible, as soon as the father realizes the prodigal son's return, he runs to meet him halfway to the house. Rembrandt depicts the father just outside his house. Christian Tümpel claims that the elder brother is most probably the standing figure to the right (Tümpel 2006, p. 275) but Susan Donahue Kuretsky identifies him with the young person in the back, looking at the viewer. (Kuretsky 2007, p. 23, p. 24) In any case, whoever, the elder brother is identified with, his inclusion in the picture is also a departure from the Bible as, according to it, he was in the fields at the time of the prodigal son's arrival.

The set of secondary figures in the picture are given a lesser role and are depicted accordingly. A young man sits on a chair with legs crossed next to the standing figure and looks at the scene sympathetically. A woman who also appears to be following the event in the background is either a maid or the prodigal son's mother. However, historians claim that it is part of the pictorial tradition to which Rembrandt belongs, especially in his mature period to have a number of secondary figures unspecified in the painting (Haeger 1986, p. 131)

A great number of sources are listed for Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son. First, the subject of the prodigal son had been very prominent in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands as works by Lucas van Leyden, Peter Paul Rubens and others testify. Then, Kuretsky argues, a 1525 woodcut depiction of the prodigal son's return by Maerten van Heemskerck presents similarities with Rembrandt's work, as the latter possessed a collection of Heemskerck's prints. (Kuretsky 2007, p. 25) It is probably under Heemskerck's influence that Rembrandt ignored the Bible as well as Calvin's commentary on Luke's parable that places an emphasis on the fact that the father met the son at a distance from home, in order to demonstrate God's readiness to meet and forgive sinners. Finally, Barbara Hager claims that the heated Reformation debates of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in Netherlands, depart from the prodigal son's parable in order to preach on the conditions of salvation, the importance of repentance, penance and confession and the necessity of church ritual, from both Catholic and Protestant points of view. Kuretsky briefly delineates the differences of these two religious points of view:

In the impassioned Reformation debates of the later sixteenth century over the conditions necessary for salvation, Catholics used the parable to argue for the importance of repentance and the church Sacrament of Penance, or Confession, while Protestants found it an equally vivid example of God's mercy toward

remorseful sinners, and therefore support for the doctrine of Justification through Faith without church rituals. (Kuretsky 2007, p. 25)

While these points are markedly different if not contrasting in the theological interpretation of the prodigal son parable, in painting, according to Haeger

Representations of biblical themes rarely reflect differences in interpretation. The burden of interpretation rests with the viewer and his knowledge of the subject's significance as defined by his Church. (Haeger 1986, p. 138)

### **The unforgiving older brother**

However, religious disputes, which may have had their share of influence on Rembrandt, will not preoccupy us in this paper. Besides his well-documented biblical interests, Rembrandt must have had a personal interest in the parable of the prodigal son for it had repeatedly preoccupied him in the course of his career. His sudden success after moving to Amsterdam in 1632 was reflected in the famous 1636 oil painting *Prodigal Son in the Tavern. Self Portrait with Saskia*, now in Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, followed by an etching of the return of prodigal son in 1636, a drawing with pen and brush, around 1642, now in Teylers Museum, Haarlem and a pen drawing of the prodigal son among pigs in 1645, now in the British Museum. Considering the 1632 painting with Saskia in the tavern in association with his frequent return to the subject of the prodigal son indicates how Rembrandt cherished the biblical story, probably because he thought it bore a resemblance to his own biography.

What interests me here however is not the artist's biography; I do not wish to show how the artist's biography determines the work but the opposite, namely how the work can illuminate the artist's biography, to the extent of course that biography is important. In Rembrandt's painting, in particular, I am interested in the interpretation that Rembrandt gives to the biblical story of the prodigal son without hesitating to take a distance from the Bible. He specifically gives a great prominence in the composition not only to the two main protagonists, father and son but also to a third standing figure at the right hand side of the foreground, who occupies a substantial part of the picture, is carefully painted and causes a left placement of the main scene of father and son. I agree with Tümpel's identification of the elder brother with the standing figure to the right for he clearly differs from the set of secondary figures emerging from the dark, he is carefully painted and he is placed in the foreground. He is given equal consideration as the two main protagonists of the picture, the father and the prodigal son, for almost the entire right half of the composition is devoted to him. Likewise, the light cast on his face and revealing his expression is the same in quality to the light revealing the father and son and we know that Rembrandt casted light only to the figures he considered essential for the meaning of the picture. He would not have been given such great consideration if Rembrandt had not considered that his role in the picture is somehow equally vital to the other two. His fine and elaborate costume,

his red cape, his hat and stick indicate someone close to the master of the house whom Rembrandt also presents with an ostentatious cape. It is clearly somebody who occupies the second order in rank of authority, after his father and as somebody who contributes to this authority, he shares it with him too. The unforgiving son's expression indicates a disapproval for what unfolds in front of his eyes and perhaps anguish for the fact that he is put in a position to have to disagree with his father's decision to unconditionally accept back his younger brother. If indeed, the standing figure belongs to the older brother who according to the Bible was at the fields the time of his brother's arrival, we have a clear indication by the painter that he wishes to interpret the biblical story in a way that places emphasis on the older brother's role. Thus the biblical story of the prodigal son's forgiveness is becoming a lot more complex in Rembrandt's depiction as it does not really involve two, the one who asks for forgiveness and the other who grants it, but rather three, the third person who denies forgiveness altogether or still judges his brother as unforgivable.

The older son was indeed far from impressed by his brother's return and according to the Bible, he became angry because the father ordered the fattened calf slaughtered for a celebratory meal while he complained he was never given a goat to celebrate with his friends, despite having never disobeyed his father's commandment. The older son clearly thinks in terms of law, merit and reward rather than in terms of love and forgiveness. For Luke himself as well as most theologians he is compared to the Pharisees. For he stays at home and obeys his father, maintaining all proper appearances but is, in fact, self-righteous and resentful, his behavior is uncharitable and he trusts excessively the efficacy of works. (Haeger 1986, p. 129) These are the grounds on which Luther as well as orthodox theologians criticized him. On the contrary, some Catholic theologians present the older brother as "an admirable individual and a model of good behavior." (Haeger 1986, p. 129)

### **Forgiveness and the unforgivable**

Rembrandt chooses to present the older brother as maintaining a disapproving distance from his father's warm welcome to his prodigal son. To his prodigal son's confession of sin "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee" (Luke 15:18), the father responds eagerly and compassionately by running to the son, and by immediately forgiving him, restituting him to the position and standing he enjoyed before running away. The question is inevitable what does the father, by his very gesture, really hope to achieve to the extent that he hopes to achieve something. Arguably he wishes reconciliation with his son and would like to bring him back into the right track of life. However someone could very well argue that he grants his forgiveness without any expectation, without any terms of conditions. The second hypothesis seems to be most likely. For the father runs towards the son without any second thoughts, spontaneously without the slightest concern to check whether the prodigal son has changed his ways. Furthermore,

Rembrandt clearly portrays the father and the older son as holding opposite views. The older son is not ready to forgive his brother. He is as unforgiving as forgiving is his father.

The prodigal son does not offer the viewer any indications of his change or moral transformation. We see him in rags but cannot fail to observe his expensive sword to which he steadfastly held all along his adventure away from home and which distinguishes him from common beggars of his time. Despite his worn shoes and clothes, he preferred his rugged state rather than selling the last item that made him part of the patriarchal authority as a son of a noble landlord and younger brother to the second in rank of the house. He apparently returned home out of despair and excessive poverty but his attitude bespeaks of a person not willing to change his ways or abandon his privileges. This small sword is indicative of the prodigal son's steadfast interest in power and authority running counter to the collective interests of family and seniority which would legitimately ascribe him the status of the third in the patriarchal order. Moreover, the prodigal son's confession of sin is not accompanied by an explicit quest for forgiveness.

The older brother is therefore right to view the whole episode with distrust. In his eyes, his father has committed an injustice and he is probably right for the father has indeed failed to honor him, his hard working son, and most probably because he takes him for granted. It is nonetheless very interesting that Rembrandt chooses to portray the story of the prodigal son in a manner that involves three persons and not just two. His depiction of the unconditionally forgiving father goes hand in hand with the unforgiving older brother and by pairing forgiveness and the unforgivable, he places the viewer in an obvious and tormenting moral dilemma. Nobody doubts about the sincerity of the father but all can also accept and understand the older brother's views as equally justifiable. For what is to take place now, the full restitution of the younger son's privileges and rank he once entertained before quitting the family, is completely unfair and morally inappropriate as Jean Hampton would argue (Jeffrey G. Murphy and Jean Hampton 1990, pp. 14-34). The older brother seems to understand this very well for no conditions were attached to his younger brother's forgiveness, and no forgiveness was asked in the first place.

What Rembrandt seems to wish to articulate in his picture by siding the father's forgiveness with the older brother's unforgivable attitude, by essentially splitting the patriarchal authority into forgiveness and the unforgivable, is that forgiveness is being granted and ought to be granted without conditions. Either it is unconditional or it is not forgiveness. (Derrida 2001, p. 31, p. 32) Moreover, forgiveness never aims that which is forgivable.

If one were only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable, what the church calls "venial sin," then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. If there were something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm. From which comes the aporia, which can be described in its dry and implacable formality, without mercy: forgiveness

forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive: there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. (Derrida 2001, p. 32, p. 33)

In portraying forgiveness along with the unforgivable, Rembrandt seems to claim that forgiveness escapes all conditional logic of exchange, that it is not an economic transaction, that it is not “proportionate to the recognition of the fault, to repentance, to the transformation of the sinner who then explicitly asks for forgiveness” that it even lacks a meaning, in the sense that it cannot really be justified, that it does not amount to reconciliation and finally that it escapes judgment. (Derrida 2001, p. 35, p. 36, p. 41, p. 43) If the prodigal son had explicitly asked for forgiveness, he would have tried to prove that he is no longer the same person as that who abandoned the family home. But he did not. He remained the same person and Rembrandt wants us to keep this in mind and this is the reason why he paints him still clinging to his expensive sword. The prodigal son is not someone else who asks for the past to be forgotten. He is the same person that was found to be culpable; he is still the guilty person and in the eyes of his older brother probably someone capable of repeating his evil, without transformation, without amelioration and without repentance. Do we have reasons to believe that the old father might not share some of his older son’s concerns? Surely to an old and wise man as himself some of these thoughts must have crossed his mind. And yet, he does not hesitate for a moment. He forgives that one who is unforgivable and commits an act that neither his older son, nor us, the viewers, can entirely understand. For “pure and unconditional forgiveness, in order to have its own meaning, must have no ‘meaning’, no finality, even no intelligibility. It is a madness of the impossible.” (Derrida 2001, p. 45)

It is therefore appropriate that Rembrandt devotes almost one half of the picture to the older brother departing from biblical accuracy, if he indeed wishes to procure a reflection on forgiveness together with the unforgivable or in the horizon of the unforgivable. Father and the two sons are there to encourage us to think whether forgiveness is indeed unconditional as Derrida argues or if is inevitably linked with terms and conditions as Grisvold maintains (Grisvold 2007, p. 63, p. 64). We, spectators of the early twenty-first century live in a “culture of apology and forgiveness” characterized by a sheer pervasiveness of the language of apology and forgiveness and a proliferation of scenes of forgiveness in politics and in everyday ethics, on a global level. (Grisvold 2007, p. 63, p. 64) There are obvious benefits in this culture as well as inherent risks and one of these risks is trivializing the concept of forgiveness. It is against this trivialization that Rembrandt’s painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son* works, attempting to restore the dignity and depth of forgiveness, for us, contemporary viewers.

Aesthetics in my view is relevant today only as philosophy of art, in its Hegelian denomination. Its task would be to illuminate the conceptual apparatus of pictures and artworks so that we, contemporary viewers may gain hermeneutic access to

them and value them in the same way as we need to value history and our past. I would even go so far as to say that aesthetics ought to be a branch of art history, provided that the latter has a proper epistemological status aligning it with its great forerunners, Hegel again, Wollflin, Riegl, Panofsky who did not distinguish themselves from philosophers. Needless to say, I agree with the complaints that we often hear about aestheticians, namely that we employ a self-referential language having increasingly less to do with living or past art. Some tendencies in aesthetics seem not to bother about art busying themselves with polishing their conceptual tools as if these were a-historical or irrelevant to artistic practice. Such conceptual tools however need to be historically relevant to art, otherwise they are useless, oversimplified, schematic, coarse and redundant, to use some expressions by John Hyman (Hyman 2006, p. 105). I think that the epistemological status of aesthetics is extremely important today and needs to be carefully scrutinized.

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