THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON
AND REMBRANDT’S CREATIVE PROCESS

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The last major history painting of Rembrandt’s career, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1668-9, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Fig. 1), is one of the most frequently reproduced and widely admired of the artist’s works, eliciting deeply personal responses from viewers who often seem to find themselves and their own private concerns echoed within it. What the painting meant to Rembrandt and why he made it at the very end of his life are intriguing, perhaps unanswerable, questions. Within the context of his career as a whole, however, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* emerges as an intensely retrospective image which crowns the evolution of Rembrandt’s creative process over a long and productive lifetime.

At the softly illuminated threshold of an arched doorway a richly dressed old man embraces a bald, emaciated youth in tattered clothing and worn-out shoes who kneels before him. Four figures quietly observe them. Painted in the assured, roughly summarizing impasto of Rembrandt’s latest style, this extraordinary, life-sized canvas displays a highly visible touch that subordinates textures and details of costume and setting to the juicy substance of the paint itself, applied thickly to the canvas with a palette knife. Whether or not this is an unfinished work, as Bob Haak has suggested, *The Prodigal Son* does suggest that Rembrandt came to approach the act of painting as a boldly open-ended exploration in which the observable process of his work was meant to be a significant aspect of the viewer’s experience.

Indeed, even the composition of this scene, with the two main protagonists off-centered at the left and isolated on a low, stage-like platform, appears unexpectedly spontaneous, even haphazard. More than half of the picture space is occupied by secondary characters: two finely dressed men at the right, one standing and one seated (neither mentioned in the text), a young man in the shadowed doorway (surely the
prodigal’s jealous brother) and an almost invisible female figure (perhaps a maidservant) who emerges from deep shadow at the upper left. Despite its reductive technique and design Rembrandt’s painting can immediately be identified with Christ’s Parable of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel of St. Luke. The conclusion of the story (Luke 22: 54-57), seen here, involves the reunion of a loving father with a profligate, ultimately remorseful son who had left home to squander his inheritance and his virtue only to find that he had lost himself as well. As the following discussion will suggest, a surprisingly varied stream of influences, experiences and responses fed into the formulation of this major work whose narrative and formal language can be connected to far more than the artist’s reading of the text itself.

Dutch artists, from the beginning of the seventeenth century on, seized enthusiastically upon the early part of this narrative which allowed them to moralize about the hazards of self-indulgence while allowing their public to enjoy bawdy scenes of a young man drinking and carousing among bad companions. As a young man Rembrandt, too, had been drawn to the story soon after his move to Amsterdam in 1632 which brought him sudden prosperity and marriage to a young woman from a higher level of society. The so-called Prodigal Son Self-Portrait with Saskia of 1636 (Gemäldegalerie, Dresden) presents the pair as prideful celebrants in a tavern interior with a peacock pie on the table. Saskia is seated self-consciously on her husband’s lap, as Rembrandt toasts the viewer with the kind of tall glass used in drinking competitions. The oddly confessional effect of this scene, in which the couple seems to perform awkwardly for an audience, may suggest that Rembrandt’s obvious delight in his sudden success in Amsterdam was tempered with a touch of uncertainty about the extravagant way of life that was suddenly his. Indeed, it seems significant that he made the decision, also in 1636, to produce an etching of the serious concluding episode in the story (Fig. 2). Taking up the same moment to which he would later return in the St. Petersburg painting, he depicted the prodigal son at the conclusion of his journey—destitute, humiliated, repentant and returning home in hopes of finding work as a servant in his father’s house.

To a seventeenth-century viewer living in the intensely domestic society of the Dutch Republic, the end of this story would have resonated on multiple levels: as a
cautionary tale about the consequences of bad behavior, as an argument for the importance of familial bonds and home, and on yet another theological level as an allegory of sin and redemption. That is, the prodigal's repenant return to his father was long understood to be an enactment of the earthly journey of all human beings in their quest for salvation with the father standing for God, the prodigal representing the sinner, and the house to which he finally returns as a metaphor for the sanctuary of the church. 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. Nonetheless, Rembrandt’s etching, like his painting, must have spoken to a rather general audience regardless of religious denomination because his powerful pictorial language expresses the notion of reunion in the broadest and most personal way.

Throughout his career Rembrandt’s creative process was often stimulated by the example of other artists, as was the case when he first sought an approach to representing the prodigal’s return. A mid-sixteenth-century woodcut by Maerten van Heemskerck (Fig. 3), an artist whose prints are known to have been in Rembrandt’s collection, also situates father and son between an archway leading into a distant vista at left from which the prodigal has come and a house doorway at right, with the top of the broad steps acting as a stage before the threshold. Rembrandt was apparently struck by Heemskerck’s way of isolating the main figures in a fused pyramidal shape so that their meeting can be understood as a close confrontation of opposites, bringing together outsider and insider and emphasizing their proximity to the threshold of the house. Interestingly, although the text specifically states that the prodigal's father recognized his son “. . . while he was yet at a distance. . . and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20), Rembrandt followed Heemskerck in ignoring the authority of the Bible as well as Calvin’s commentary on this parable which argues that “yet at a distance” is its main point because it demonstrates how “God does not wait for long prayer but as soon as the sinner sets out to confess his fault, meets him willingly.” Furthermore, like
Heemskerck, Rembrandt included subsidiary figures, illustrating the father’s command to his servants to slaughter a fatted calf to celebrate the prodigal’s return (the incident in the distance at the far left) and to bring forth the best clothing and shoes in the household for him (the figures descending the stairs in the doorway at the far right).

In his etching of 1636 Rembrandt retained Heemskerck’s central placement of father and son, but diminished the scale of the figures within a more fully developed setting, thus putting more emphasis on the solid sanctuary of the house and on the contrast between father and son. While the old man is warmly dressed in a flowing robe and framed by the wall and window behind him, the prodigal kneels stiffly and painfully (all sharply angled elbows and knees) with a void of distance at his back and his beggar’s staff overlapping areas of solid and space. The father’s giant step forward measures the extent of his welcome for the son he had mourned as dead, even as he recognizes him in this filthy, emaciated, near-naked stranger whose brutally coarsened face, darkened by densely hatched lines, appears hardly human. Through the close juxtaposition of their heads and the enfolding gestures of the old man’s hands, Rembrandt emphasizes how even the dire physical and spiritual deterioration of this long-lost youth—his unsightly otherness—cannot stand in the way of his safe return, once he has come to an internal spiritual recognition of his corrupt life: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee” (Luke 15:18).

In developing a more pointed emphasis on the threshold area of the house in his 1636 etching Rembrandt was practicing a form of architectural synecdoche, using a part of the house to stand for the structure of the whole and, in an even more universal sense, for the idea of home. It is significant that he repeatedly employed variations of the same schema throughout his career for a variety of narratives and genre scenes in which familial reunions or separations, or confrontations between strangers take place. Staging such scenes at the threshold—the liminal area between inside and outside—was an effective way of stressing the distinction between insider and outsider, especially in a narrative such as the Prodigal Son which involves both departure and return, both loss and recovery of home and family.
Rembrandt continued to reflect upon the story of the prodigal son in the years following his creation of the 1636 etching, as indicated by drawings of the same narrative moment that illustrate various ways of juxtaposing the embracing father and son with the house doorway. Perhaps the clearest, yet most subtle example of this *topos* occurs in a late pen and bistre drawing of c. 1655-6, now in the Institut Néerlandais, Paris (Fig. 4), in which the doorway with its vertical uprights and projecting lintel seems to reach out as a parallel to the old man who reaches to embrace his son. A boldly reductive summation, this image was earlier believed to represent the prodigal son returning to his father. Since the young man is neither wearing rags nor kneeling, however, Christian Tümpel has convincingly re-identified the drawing as a scene from another father-son story from the apocryphal book of Tobit. Indeed, Tobit’s son Tobias can be seen as a kind of prodigal son in reverse, since he traveled far from home, not to squander money but to collect it in order to save his destitute family with whom he, too, would finally be reunited. That Rembrandt created such an ambiguous image suggests that the core ideas shared by the two narratives interested him as much as their distinguishing details. It is therefore not surprising that he used similar kinds of settings for other significant incidents of arrival and departure such as *The Good Samaritan Arriving at the Inn* (etching, 1633), *The Dismissal of Hagar* (etching, 1637), and *The Visitation* (oil on panel, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1640). An additional, related group of images includes various incidents from everyday life with itinerant street people or beggars at the doorways of private home, as in etchings of *The Ratcatcher* (1632), *Strolling Musicians* (c. 1635) and *Beggars Receiving Alms at the Door* (1648).

Rembrandt’s practice of observing beggars and homeless wanderers began in his early years in Leiden; he never lost his fascination with their bizarrely disheveled appearance or his sympathy for their isolation and rootlessness. The depth of his connection to this highly visible stratum of the desperately impoverished is particularly evident in an early self-portrait etching of 1630 in which he cast himself into the role of a beggar huddled on a bank and crying out for alms. Although public street begging was banned in the cities of the Dutch republic (with municipal assistance given to those classified as the deserving poor), Calvinism spread the idea that Christian grace belongs
more to the poor and meek than to the rich and powerful and associated beggars with Christ’s own poverty and humility (“on earth we are as beggars, as Christ himself was…”). Robert Baldwin has further pointed out that during Rembrandt’s early years he was producing beggar studies simultaneously with religious images of penitents such as Judas (oil on panel 1629, Normanby Collection, Mulgrave Castle, Whitby, Yorkshire), St. Jerome (etchings of 1632 and 1635) and the Prodigal Son, all of which express a Protestant notion of sinful, fallen humanity raised through repentance and God’s love. Awareness of this theological background greatly enhances one’s understanding of his interpretations of the returning prodigal in his etching and his painting, for in both the artist reveals how the physical strength and refinement of the young man have been brutally eroded by material and spiritual deprivation and that only through lowering himself to kneel before his father may he be restored to grace. Only through being forgiven may he forgive himself.

Despite their presentation of the same narrative moment, Rembrandt’s etching and his painting—made some thirty years apart—are significantly different in style and interpretation. If his approach to the making of images evolved over this extended period, so too did his thinking about the complex blend of emotional, familial and theological associations in this particular story. As a young artist of thirty years, Rembrandt had been most responsive to the corrupted condition of the prodigal son, using the story to emphasize the destructive consequences of his behavior and to reveal his physical and emotional state of ruin and alienation. In the St. Petersburg painting, where an intense process of selection and consolidation has reduced the setting to a small lighted stage and the subtle suggestion of a deeply shadowed, arched doorway at the left, his interpretation of the father and son and their relationship has significantly altered. Rembrandt now repositions the old man, facing him frontally toward the viewer so that his tender facial expression and gesture become more emphatic. Now he gently enfolds the prodigal (seen from the back) with his body and his large hands, a gesture expressing forgiveness, mercy and welcome. No minor change, this shift signals a profoundly deepened response to the implications of the parable, for the father’s arched shape, now framing and enclosing the prodigal, is subtly reiterated in the arch of the shadowed door.
behind him. As a result, the old man has become, in effect, the doorway through whom the prodigal son achieves redemption. Closely fused, the pair can now be recognized as reuniting members of the same family, for despite his shaven head and largely hidden face, the prodigal son is fully and elegantly clothed, even though his shoes and his long golden robe have been worn to tatters during his long journey.\cite{16}

In moving the pair off-center to the left Rembrandt reserved much of the picture space for anonymous onlookers who are unengaged in action beyond their separate, quiet, individual contemplation of the pair before them. This change further intensifies the viewer’s connection and response to the painting, for we are thus encouraged to witness and contemplate this encounter just as they do. Indeed, the fact that the viewpoint of this life-sized scene places the prodigal son roughly at the observer’s eye level, and that the youth faces into the picture space toward his father just as we do makes him a kind of surrogate for the viewer, which may help explain this painting’s powerful effect on its audience. One cannot avoid recognizing that the prodigal son’s quest for forgiveness, safe homecoming and love is also, inevitably, our own.

Works of art develop out of a complex and elusive blend of diverse, often bewildering factors. As discussed above, an artist’s creative process may be stimulated by what he reads, by what he experiences in the milieu of his own time, by what he finds in the example of other artists, or even in his own earlier work. But Rembrandt, more than most, has also been the target of repeated attempts to use events in his life to explain his art. Indeed, his biography, especially its later half, became a virtual melodrama of love and loss, spectacular success, world fame and material luxury, followed by devastating financial reverses culminating in a declaration of bankruptcy in 1656 after which his house was sold and his large art collection and household effects were auctioned off to pay debts.\cite{17} Despite winning a number of major commissions during his last years, Rembrandt never recovered from these financial reverses. In 1662, he sold Saskia’s grave in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam in order to raise money and he lived out his final years on the savings of his daughter Cornelia (born in 1654 to his common-law wife Hendrickje Stoffels). In 1660 his older child, Titus, born in 1641, the year before Saskia’s death, would form a business partnership with Hendrickje in an attempt to protect the
artist from the continuing demands of creditors, but Hendrickje died in an epidemic of the plague in 1663, followed five years later by Titus (at age twenty-seven) in yet another epidemic of 1668. Rembrandt himself was buried the following year in an unknown, rented grave in the Westerkerk in Amsterdam. What, one can only wonder, might the story of the Prodigal Son have meant to him during this particular period?

By the time he painted the St. Petersburg canvas, Rembrandt was more than sixty years of age—an old man by seventeenth-century standards and the father of a grown son whose unexpected death occurred very near the date generally assigned to this work. Even as one strives to find a connection between these events and Rembrandt’s Return of the Prodigal Son, however, the image evades easy answers and transcends any such literal reading of it. In the painting, father and son (role reversals in relation to recent happenings in the artist’s life) are presented in a powerfully reciprocal union in which they play equal and inter-dependent roles—giving and receiving in a way that fills the needs of both, and thereby illuminating a central aspect of human love. Rembrandt’s works have often been called universal because they give visual access to ideas or experiences that surpass time and place. Indeed, his art reveals a constant search to explore and understand the trials and rewards of human existence in its broadest sense. Filtered through a distinctive, highly individual sensibility, it only became deeper as he himself increased in years.

List of Illustrations:

Fig. 1. Rembrandt van Rijn, The Return of the Prodigal Son, c. 1668-69, oil on canvas, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

Fig. 2. Rembrandt van Rijn, The Return of the Prodigal Son, 1636, etching, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

Fig. 3. Maerten van Heemskerck, The Return of the Prodigal Son, c. 1548, woodcut, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1956 (56.644.1).

Fig. 4. Rembrandt, Tobias leaving his Father Tobit, 1655-56, pen and bistre, Fondation Custodia (Collection Fritz Lugt), Institut Néerlandais, Paris.
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Notes

1 The Dutch Catholic priest and writer, Henri J. M. Nouwen, for example, rightly emphasized the deep emotion of Rembrandt’s painting, but unconvincingly (to this writer) saw the scene as an expression of God’s combination of masculine and feminine traits, based on differences he perceived between the father’s hands (the left stronger, the right softer and more gentle). (Henri J. H. Nouwen. Return of the Prodigal Son. A Story of Homecoming, New York, Doubleday, 1992).

2 I am very grateful to Professors Ton Broos (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) and Shelley Perlove (University of Michigan, Dearborn) for inviting me to deliver the 2006 Jan de Vries – Meindert van der Kooy Memorial Lecture at Ann Arbor (“Nothing to Hide: Reflections on Rembrandt’s Creative Process”) from which this essay has been adapted.

3 Bob Haak, who found the secondary figures inferior in quality, hypothesized that Rembrandt never completed this large canvas (a number of unnamed, unfinished works were found in his studio after his death) and that another artist worked on the three figures at the right and the dimly visible one at the left background; indeed, he further noted that the signature “R.V. Ryn f.” is unlike any other known signature by Rembrandt. (B. Haak, Rembrandt. His Life, his Work, His Time, New York, 1969, 328).

4 The Utrecht followers of Caravaggio were particularly drawn to his subject, as in examples by Dirck van Baburen (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1622) and Gerrit van Honthorst (Alte Pinakothek, Munich, 1623).


Torrance and T.F. Torrance, Grand Rapids, 1972, II, 220-225. Later humanists such as Erasmus continued to see the prodigal son as a symbol for all repentant sinners and his father for God. See also Barbara Haeger, "Philips Galle's engravings after Maarten van Heemskerck's Parable of the Prodigal Son," Oud Holland, CII, no. 2, 1988,130-134 and 139, note 3.

7 Christine M. Armstrong relates the popularity of the subject in the sixteenth century both to Reformation debates about salvation and to the fact that rapid commercial expansion during this period elicited moralizing verbal and visual tracts about prodigality. (The Moralizing Prints of Cornelis Anthonisz., Princeton, 1990, 19-20, 88-90).


9 This frequently cited connection between Rembrandt’s and Heemskerk’s prints was first made in 1932 by M. van Rijckevorsel: Rembrandt en de Traditie, Rotterdam, 1932, 135. Werner Busch suggested another source for the motif of a standing father with a kneeling son ("Zum Deutung von Rembrandts 'Verlorenem Sohn' in Leningrad," Oud Holland 85, 1970, 180-81), citing a small engraving by Cornelis Massys of Samuel anointing King David (Hollstein, vol. XI, Massys 21).


12 The pen and wash drawing of c. 1642 in the Teyler Museum, Haarlem focuses closely on father, son and doorway, while the more elaborated composition of c. 1656-57 in the Kupferstichkabinett, Dresden puts more emphasis on the setting. (O. Benesch, The Drawings of Rembrandt, Complete Edition, London, 1954-57, III, fig. 685, cat. no. 519) and V, fig 1296, cat. no. 1017.

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14 Baldwin, R.W., "'On Earth we are beggars, as Christ Himself was': the Protestant background of Rembrandt's imagery of poverty, disability and begging," Konsthistorisk Tidskrift, vol. 54, no. 3, 1985, 122-35.

15 Baldwin, 130.

16 Interestingly, both the early etching and the late painting show the prodigal son wearing at his side a knife in a scabbard. This costly piece of equipment would not have been part of the usual garb of seventeenth-century beggars who often carried a tall staff (as in the etching) and sometimes a wooden clapper to attract the attention of alms-givers.

17 A recent book by Paul Crenshaw discusses the root of Rembrandt’s later financial difficulties in his hopeful but extravagant purchase in 1639 of a large house in Amsterdam, as well as his avid and unceasing acquisition of works of art. By 1653 he was facing a deepening financial abyss because of his unwillingness to address mounting financial obligations. In Crenshaw’s study Rembrandt emerges as a beleaguered figure who suffered crushing reverses in his later years, but who never lost his sense of self or his single-minded service to his needs as an artist. Crenshaw speculates that Rembrandt’s financial difficulties may even affected his ability to buy supplies That he turned to the palette knife for late works such as the St. Petersburg Prodigal Son may have been simply because he wanted to paint in a broader way, or perhaps because he could not longer afford expensive sable paint brushes. (Rembrandt’s Bankruptcy. The Artist, his Patrons, and the Art Market in Seventeenth-Century Netherlands, Cambridge, 2006, 144).
Donahue Kuretsky, Fig. 1
Donahue Kuretsky, Fig. 2