No More Hugs: Depictions of the Prodigal Son in 1920s Art and Literature

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Abstract
This essay examines the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament and compares it to different visual and literary representations from the 1920s in Europe. The story of the prodigal son revolving around themes such as family, home, resistance, order and restoration will be juxtaposed with texts and art works from the so-called Lost Generation, a generation of artists and thinkers developing and rebuilding new art in a continent shattered by the atrocities of World War I. The essay examines the conflict between generations and worldviews that emerges in the 1920s and the prodigal artists' reorientation in a fragmented world in which it is hard to feel at home.

Keywords*: 1920s, prodigal son, Franz Kafka, Giorgio di Chirico, Max Ernst*

The 1920s is a very interesting decade, with many points of interest for researchers, such as the father-son relationship or the generational conflict in the 1920's. The young generation, called by American author Gertrude Stein *the Lost Generation*, growing up during World War I, tried to deal with what they inherited from the older generations. After having witnessed the atrocities in the trenches during WorId War I (1914-1918), faith in humanity and the belief in traditional structures and customs were lost.

Reacting against the old-world order meant that the new generation of artists had to reinvent themselves. This, in turn, resulted in a great deal of innovation and exciting new stylistic and formal experimentations leading to the avant-garde and movements such as futurism, surrealism, dada etc.

In order to delve into this schism between the old world and the new world, I will select a few literary and visual works of art and examine how they engage with one of the most well-known parables in the Bible: the story about the prodigal son, which can be found in the New Testament

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in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, verses 11-31. The scope of this essay is to explain how the depiction and the interpretation of the prodigal son changed after World War I and how the simple parable with a happy end became reshaped and recontextualized in the depictions created in the 1920s.

To put it briefly, the central story of the parable is as follows: at the beginning of Luke, chapter 15, it is written that tax collectors and sinners gather around Jesus, causing a negative reaction from the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. As a way of correcting them, Jesus tells an illustrative story about a father and his two sons. The father owned an estate and divided his property between his sons. The younger son packs his belongings and leaves for a distant country, while the older son remains at the estate, working for his father. The travels turn out to be of little success, so the younger son returns to his father's estate, penniless and destitute. The father is thrilled to see his son and welcomes him back with a warm embrace, instantly announcing a grand feast in order to celebrate his son's return. The older son is not happy about that, saying his brother in no way deserves that kind of special treatment after living a life in sin that cost a substantial part of the family's fortune. The parable concludes with the father's words: "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'" (Luke 15, 31-32).

The parable has fascinated many thinkers, theologians, writers, and artists throughout centuries. As Dr Alison Jack writes about the prodigal son: "One of the longest and most narratively complex of all of the parables attributed to Jesus in the Gospels, it deals with universal themes of family, home, rebellion, and return" (2019: 2).

The parable has often been interpreted as an image of God's love and forgiveness of our sins. The father is thus universally identified with God, and the two brothers serve an allegorical significance. This has been the dominant hermeneutical prism especially in pre-modern teachings, but these interpretations can also be found today, for example in conservative Christian ministries in the USA (Jack 2019: 6).

Other exegetes have focused on the relationship between the family and the societal context and the "contradiction between expectations of justice and the force of family ties which, for most, naturally tend towards reconciliation" (12). The actions of the father can be interpreted as rather progressive or going against the grain of societal norms. In the honour-

based collectivist culture pervading 1st-century Palestine, which Jesus and his followers were part of, the reception has most probably been very different from contemporary readings. The prodigal son was probably regarded as someone bringing shame upon his family. The father would have been expected to sanction the younger son at his return and not even allowing the son to part with a share of the fortune to a distant country in the first place (Eng 2019: 196).

For contemporary readers it is hard to grasp how radical the father's embrace and forgiveness presents. For the pre-modern readership or for people living today in honour-based patriarchal cultures it might be easier to connect on a personal level with the story. The parable of the prodigal son has been referenced in works of literature and it is a short and illustrative story with a simple home-away-home structure as is common in so many stories all over the world.

Many artistic representations (e.g. paintings by Albrecht Dürer, Hieronymus Bosch, Peter Paul Rubens, Salvator Rosa and Max Beckmann) have either focused on the prodigal son in a distant country living in debauchery or placed emphasis on the return and the father's embrace of the prodigal son and the spontaneous display of affection (such as the paintings by Caravaggio, Barbieri, Esteban Murillo and James Tissot).

Rembrandt van VIjn, 1668: The Return of the Prodigal Son.
Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.

However, the most famous example is probably the Dutch painter Rembrandt van Vijn's painting *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. This very piece of art is an example of Rembrandt's chiaroscuro-technique, the distribution of light and dark tones or variations of light and shade. It has been noted by many beholders of Rembrandt's painting that there seems to be a special warm glow emanating from the father. The Dutch priest and

writer Henri Nouwen spent years analysing and admiring the painting. According to him, the embrace expressed in Rembrandt's painting is not only signifying a parent's love and forgiveness for an unruly child. It is also a representation of the way God shows unconditional love and forgiveness, despite of all of mankind's rebellion spanning the time period Adam and Eve spent in the Garden of Eden until present modern times (2013: 6).

The prodigals of the 1920s

Yet, if one asked the artists of the 1920s, one would probably be provided with a different interpretation of the parable**.** Many novels and paintings in the 1920s do not show a happy return of the prodigal son, but rather versions of the parable that are ambiguous, enigmatic or even traumatic.

Let us begin with the literary representations. Even though there are literary works mentioning the prodigal son at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as in Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* from 1901, Andre Gide's novel *Le retour de l'enfant prodigue* from 1907, Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes* from 1907 and Henry James' short story *The Jolly Corner* from 1908, in what follows, I would like to focus on the representations from the 1920s.

Around 1920, Czech author Franz Kafka wrote the short story *Homecoming* (Heimkehr) – although it was not published until 1936, after Kafka's demise. *Homecoming* has often been compared to the biblical parable of the prodigal son. The traditional definition of the parable is that of a short fictitious story illustrating religious teachings or a moral principle. If Kafka's story is a parable, it is hard to find the morale. Written in the 1st person and without any introductory description of characters or setting, the story recounts a young man's return home.

> I have arrived. Who is going to receive me? Who is waiting behind the kitchen door? Smoke is rising from the chimney; coffee is being made for supper. Do you feel you belong; do you feel at home? I don't know, I feel most uncertain. My father's house it is, but each object stands cold beside the next, as though preoccupied with its own affairs, which I have partly forgotten, partly never known (Kafka 2012: 493).

The young man is too afraid to enter the house. There does not seem to be anyone welcoming the protagonist. He feels alienated and describes the secrecy shrouding the family. The story concludes at the doorstep, omitting the encounter between father and son.

How that encounter may have unfolded we can only surmise by turning to Kafka's *Dearest Father (Brief an den Vater*) written the year before and published posthumously in 1952. It is a letter Kafka wrote to his father consisting of 100 hand-written pages which his father apparently never knew about. It is an extensive account of a deeply rooted father-son conflict and grants insight into the complex feelings Kafka had for his father. As Jattie Enklaar writes in her article *Sohnschaft in Der Krise*:

> The contrast between "father-house", "my father's house" and "distance" shows his desire to return to the father, to tradition, as insinuated in connection with Kafka's well-known letter "Dearest Father", in which coldness, alienation and consciousness of guilt prevail. (2005: 293, my translation).

The original expression for *prodigal son* in German, the literary language used by Kafka (as well as in my mother tongue, Danish) is "The lost son" (Der verlorene Sohn or Den fortabte søn). The English term *prodigal* denotes living beyond your means, being a spendthrift or wasting money and resources but it can also be understood as a morally neutral lavishness, as the original Latin word, *prodigos*, denotes. The German word *verloren*, on the other hand, denotes a loss. Either something or someone is missing or there is an existential loss, which is the context in which Kafka's version of the parable is most often understood. As Enklaar writes: "the worst way of forsakenness is the anxiety of being in the world" (2005: 295, my translation). This was the mood of the 1920s, described by many artists, such as Edvard Munch, Egon Schiele, Franz Kafka etc.: Existential angst, a feeling of being lost in the world. There is no home to return to, because returning home fills you with *Verfremdung* ("alienation"). You are lost and no one finds you again.

The warm embrace of the father described in the Bible (and painted by Rembrandt) - "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" – is nowhere to be found in Kafka's letter to his father. Kafka asks his father why he has been treated so harshly and why the father was never "directing a friendly word my way, by quietly taking my hand or giving me a kind look" (*Dearest Father*).

He recalls a memory from his childhood, when he, a small child, was whimpering in the night because he wanted water, and as a punishment his father, forcefully and without explanation, removed him

from his bed and placed him outside in the corridor. This leads Kafka to reflect upon the aggressiveness of his father, this huge manly authority figure, and how small and inferior he feels in comparison to him, physically and mentally:

> I was already weighed down by your sheer bodily presence. I remember, for example, how we often undressed together in the same cubicle I skinny, frail, fragile, you strong, tall, thickset. Even in the cubicle I felt a puny wretch and not only in front of you, but on front of the whole world, because for me you were the measure of all things. (*Dearest Father* 2019).

Henri Nouwen reflects upon the sons in the biblical parable, i.e. the reckless and irresponsible younger son and the hard-working, tradition-bound and judgmental older son. After lengthy introspection, Nouwen admits that he shares some of the moral shortcomings with them, however, his true calling is to aspire to be like the father in the parable, warm-hearted, striving for peace and full of mercy and forgiveness. This description does not correspond with Kafka's father. The very first sentence in *Dearest Father* describes *fear.* Kafka is afraid of his father and of potential repercussions. This is why he writes the long letter, finally being able to explain himself to his father – although the father was never shown the letter.

The biblical parable of the prodigal son describes an intuitive and clear communication between the father and his sons. The father disregards societal norms pervading the society and, instead, he favours reconciliation and forgiveness. In contrast, Kafka's father is of the conviction that Kafka should build a family to conserve the family name. Kafka feels torn about marriage and twice he breaks off an engagement with a hopeful fiancée, thereby bringing shame upon the tradition-bound Jewish family. This is a deep source of conflict between Kafka and his father. In comparison with the parable, it seems that the father prefers to heed the advice of his older son and adhere to social norms and expectations rather than meet his prodigal son in a forgiving embrace. As Thomas Anz writes in the epilogue to *Dearest Father*, it can be argued whether one can equate Kafka and the narrator in the book and whether it is to be read purely as an autobiography. The sharp contrast between the strong and powerful father and the weak and fragile first-person narrator is rather stylized, so the conflict between the father and the son can be comprehended as

> the standard theme of the Expressionist generation and that of just blossoming psychoanalysis and arises amidst their conflicts with powerful societal representations and institutions. (2006: 84, my translation)

When Kafka comments on his father's disappointment with his son, "if you unconsciously refuse to accept that it is the result of your upbringing, then it is precisely because your method and my substance were at odds with one another," (*Dearest Father*) it can also be read as a statement programmatic for the new generation of artists breaking free from the old-world order. More than just a generational conflict, the young generation in the 1920s was one of broken and wrecked bodies – emotionally, spiritually and physically. Though estimates vary, it is often claimed that 9.4 million soldiers were killed during The Great War and that another 23 million were wounded. In the French and Russian armies, three-quarters of the men were casualties. The civilian losses were considerable and the cities in Europe were full of invalids having survived military service in World War I. After the catastrophic destruction in the war, everything was called into question and the older generations were losing their natural authority. (Tucker 2005: 2) The unbearable confrontation with death and destruction created an atmosphere of gloom and hopelessness for Kafka and his contemporaries during the 1920s. A notable example is Anglo-American author T. S. Eliot, famous for his 1922 ground-breaking poem *The Waste Land*. In his 1920 poem, *Whispers of Immortality*, death takes the form of a crouching jaguar: "And even the Abstract Entities / Circumambulate her charm; / But our lot crawls between dry ribs/ to keep our metaphysics warm" (*Selected Poems*, 42-43). The poets find it hard to maintain paternal ideals and preach mercy and forgiveness when the bodies are piling up around them.

Max Ernst: Pietà or revolution by night, 1923, Wikimedia Commons, Public domain

At a young age, German Surrealist painter Max Ernst was employed as an artillery engineer during the war. He witnessed the horrors in the trenches, which had a devastating effect on him. In his autobiography, he writes: "Max Ernst died 1st of August 1914. He resuscitated the 11th of November 1918 as a magician and to find the myth of his time" (Ernst, Derenthal 2005: 8). Ernst is signaling that working at the front and being a witness to the brutality of the war made him die inside so he had to reinvent himself. He also discarded much of what he used to believe in and rebelled against his staunchly Catholic father and the strictly religious upbringing.

Apart from a critique of religious tradition, Ernst's pictures also show a degree of fragmentation, in Ernst's words "systematic displacement" (Max Ernst Retrospective 8) or perhaps an active rediscovery of the myth of the 1920s. There is displacement at work in the painting *Pietà or revolution by night* from 1923, which is more a reference to the Virgin Mary holding her crucified child than to the parable of the prodigal son. However, the painting corresponds with the overall pattern of 1920s artists problematizing paternal ideals. Pietà is believed to be a self-portrait of Ernst and the man with a hat and a moustache bears resemblance to Ernst's father.

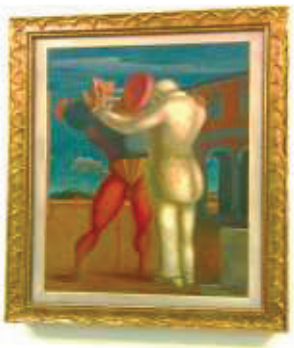
In the parable of the prodigal son, the father anticipates the son's return even from afar and says to the older son that he was lost and has been found. In many interpretations the father is recognizing the returning son from afar with an inner vision rather than with normal eyesight, such as in Nouwen's reading of the Rembrandt painting (2013: 99).

In Ernst's painting it is the other way around. The bodies seem at first immobile and expressionless, but in contrast to the somnambulant and achromatic father, the son has his eyes open and is clothed in vivid colours. In the picture one can observe a faucet sticking out of a brick wall, and in the background, one perceives the contours of a bandaged man walking up a staircase.

What does the picture convey? Is it the father bringing the son, who was lost, back to life? Or is it, as some interpretations claim, a dreamy transition state, Ernst's surrealist vision of a new reality to come? The faucet might be a channel to a new world, and the man in the background can be climbing to a higher degree of consciousness. Commentators have often suggested that the man is either Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, or Guillaume Apollinaire, the French Surrealist poet (Jones, *The Guardian*).

Kafka describes himself as weak and powerless compared to the menacing authority of his father. That is not what I would call the father figure in Ernst's painting. If anything, he is passive, even comical. It can be observed that the son's foot touches the man on the staircase. Perhaps it is a sign of what is to come – that the son breaks free from the constraints of the father's embrace and embarks on a rediscovery tour up the staircase to new horizons?

A similarly enigmatic picture of a vagrant son is created by the Greco-Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, who was also fascinated by the parable of the prodigal son and painted the motif in different versions throughout his career. The first version was revealed in 1922 and that is the one we will have a closer look at now.



Giorgio de Chirico: Il figliol prodigo, 1922, Wikimedia Commons, Public domain.

In de Chirico's painting, the encounter between the father and the son takes the form of an embrace. But, like in Ernst's painting, there seems to be an incompatibility present. It is not entirely clear who is who, but it might be that the white stone figure portrays the father while the son is the figure consisting of different geometrical forms and who appears to have haphazardly undergone reconstruction. The figures are faceless and even more expressionless than in Ernst's painting - hardly human. The figures have a hand on each other's shoulders, and their heads seem to be close to one another. It almost looks as if they are trying to dance.

The large red head facing the viewer is devoid of facial features and there is a fan-shaped object between their legs. Or is it a seashell? The object looks unmistakably like the shell from which Botticelli's Venus emerges symbolizing the advent of *Primavera* (the season of spring).

The location is a wide plain without any vegetation in sight, and a colonnade can be seen in the background, so the mixed associations of nature and culture and of withering and blossoming make it unclear whether the figures are at home or "in a distant country," like the prodigal son at the beginning of the parable.

What is conspicuous in paintings from the 1920s such as Ernst's and de Chirico's is the absence of the Albertian central perspective. The much-revered Renaissance tradition was entirely omitted together with humanist ideals about the genius of man and the perfect human form. Contrastingly, the new artists painted instead hollow impassive figures on a smooth surface, requiring reorientation to discern what was foreground and background, what was front and centre. De Chirico painted mannequins rather than the Vitruvian man.

> In de Chirico's paintings the mannequin is always presented as man's fragmented, dismembered, incomplete alter ego, a disquieting product of memory and an enigmatic cultural construct. Belting also notes how the fragments of statues that populate de Chirico's paintings represent the traces of a lost, irrecoverable antiquity (Storchi 2009: 309).

De Chirico and Carlo Carrà were proponents of *arte metafisica* (metaphysical art), an art form which, similarly to surrealism, strived to create a form of art which represented objects detached from their usual semantic connotations and, in this decontextualization, creating a sense of estrangement and dissonance. But *arte metafisica* was different from other art movements such as surrealism and Dadaism, among other things, because it claimed that in existence there is an underlying mythic world to be rediscovered (Storchi 2009: 299). Rather than portraying existential angst or an irreconcilable divide, examples of which one would encounter in works by Kafka and many expressionist artists, de Chirico and the metaphysical artists of the 1920s were more engaged with the enigma and the inaccessibility, as well as the mystery of the object.

> The relationship between subject and object was one between two completely separate spheres and could only exist as an 'aesthetic' relationship, that is, as a translation between two totally different languages. Such a conception highlighted the fundamental disconnection between subject and object, man and thing; it refused to place man at the centre of the cognitive universe and shifted the emphasis onto the object as a receptacle of deep meaning. In this context man himself was no longer

> conceived as a subject, but rather as an object, a mannequin, a statue. Such a change in perspective was meant to emancipate him from the constrictions of subjectivism and provide a wider cognitive horizon (Storchi ibid.).

Musing on the Rembrandt painting of the return of the prodigal son and the concept of homecoming, Henri Nouwen writes: "'coming home' meant, for me, walking step by step toward the One who awaits me with open arms and wants to hold me in an eternal embrace" (2013: 6).

But that dream was far away and not a dream that appealed to the artists of the 1920s. Hungarian art critic and philosopher György Lùkacs set the tone in his seminal work published after World War I, *Theorie des Romans*. He described a general "*transzendentale Obdachlosigkeit*" i.e. a transcendental homelessness, indicating that there is nowhere to return home to (2008: 12).

Many artists in the 1920s would agree with Lùkacs. They were critical of Christianity and organized religion. De Chirico and Ernst were heavily inspired by German philosopher and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Christian morality and his view of art as a potentiality for life-affirmation and dissolution of boundaries. Another source of inspiration was Arthur Schopenhauer and his idea of the redemptive power of aesthetic contemplation in a world governed by blind forces and fleeting representations.

Conversely, the representations of the prodigal son in the literary and artistic oeuvres of the 1920s exemplified by Kafka, Ernst and de Chirico illustrate that there is either no paternal embrace to return to, or that the embrace is suffocating and claustrophobic. Hence, they aimed for new discoveries in "a distant country".

Perhaps one can even go so far as to conclude that artists in the 1920's did not want to be found again. A famous quote by Max Ernst thus reads: "A painter is lost if he finds himself". Max Ernst considers his sole virtue to be that "he has managed not to find himself." (Ernst, Derenthal 2005: 6).

Conclusions

In this paper, I attempted to shed light on different aspects of the parable of the prodigal son and compared it to visual and textual representations from the 1920s. I described the generational conflict, the schism between

the old world and the new world with the World War I being the primary dividing line.

The Expressionist writings of Franz Kafka are in stark contrast to themes of joy and forgiveness in the biblical parable. Kafka, an exponent of the existential angst of his age, underlines the divide between the authorities and institutions in society and the Lost Generation, hereby implying the impossibility of a happy reunion between a prodigal son and the father - universally generalisable to a whole generation influenced by the war.

The works of Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico also express a generational conflict. They reject traditional aesthetic norms and initiate an artistic and philosophical rebellion. In a state of transcendental homelessness there is no home to return to and all they were able to find was estrangement and obsolete structures. Therefore, the artists leave home and embark upon a spiritual journey of reorientation, decontextualization and rediscovery. Drawing his inspiration from psychoanalysis, Ernst sees dreams and the exploration of the unconscious as a vital vehicle to reach a new reality, whereas de Chirico continues to draw mankind as hollow beings and regards aesthetic contemplation as the main reference point in an inconceivable world of enigmas and fragmentation.

To conclude, the prodigal sons of the 1920s art world did not return to a happy reunion for they discovered that their home, the world around them, and everything they had been told by the older generations to believe in had been shattered in the catastrophic war. As everything had fundamentally changed, they left to find their own paths disregarding the risks of getting lost along the way, outside an order embodied by an all-embracing father on earth (and perhaps in Heaven, too).

This essay is merely a preliminary examination and does, of course, not exhaust the research topic in question. There are many other aspects of the parable I could have dwelled upon, for example the prodigal's experiences with famine, his sexual escapades, the father bringing him his best robes, the role of the older son or the significance of the fattened calf and the feast.

Moreover, I am certain that there are other art works from the 1920s that could bear comparison to the parable of the prodigal son. Admittedly, this examination is quite male dominated. I have not been able to find works of art from the 1920s by female artists thematizing the prodigal son. Furthermore, the focus has been Eurocentric, and I could have included art works from other continents and other traditions. On a positive note, this

means that there is vast space and possibility for complementing future research on this interesting topic.

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