I, David S. Berger, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

It is entitled:
Modern Paintings of the Prodigal Son: Depictions by James Tissot, Max Sievogt, Giorgio de Chirico, Aaron Douglas, and Max Beckmann, 1882-1949

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Modern Paintings of the Prodigal Son: Depictions by James Tissot, Max Slevogt, Giorgio de Chirico, Aaron Douglas, and Max Beckmann, 1882-1949

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ABSTRACT

The parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke: 15:11-32) conveys the Christian message of acceptance of sinners who have returned to righteous ways. The theme has been very popular in the history of art since the thirteenth century with scores of artists giving their interpretations. From the 1880s through the 1940s, representations became more modern and secular. Their was a greater emphasis on modern manners, psychology, the perception of time, and individuality. I analyze these factors in case studies of five artists of the period through formal analysis of their works and by exploration of social, historical, and philosophical aspects. I also examine relevant biographical information and iconography.

The first chapter concerns two serial works by James Tissot and Max Slevogt. This serial nature of paintings of the parable was apparently new for the 1880s. In these narratives, Tissot explored modern manners in a near-photographic style of four canvases while Slevogt conceived a psychological portrait about extreme depravation in a triptych. In the second chapter, I argue that Giorgio de Chirico attempted to transcend time by the reanimation of the mannequin and statue, objects integral to his metaphysical art. The final chapter deals with a variation on the theme, the Prodigal Son in scenes of debauchery, taken up by Max Beckmann and Aaron Douglas. Their paintings depict the struggle to be an individual, on the one hand, and the hedonism of 1920s Harlem, on the other. Each of these artists’ depictions of the Prodigal Son are good representations of the period, showcasing its modern complexity and diversity of style. The fact that modern artists continue to work on the theme show that its moral message is still important today.
I gratefully acknowledge the wonderful faculty in the Art History program at the University of Cincinnati. My advisor, Theresa Leininger-Miller, was a pillar of strength, helping me to organize my images and always taking me seriously. She showed me the importance of detail in my writing, and caught every typo and nuance. My mother, Carol Berger, read my drafts and provided a wall against which I could bounce my ideas. My housemate, Mike Fuhrer, allowed me to scatter my books around and turned the television down so I could concentrate. Also, I want to thank the other art history students who took whatever I said honestly. I extend my thanks to Prof. Hirayama and Prof. Nelson of the thesis committee who patiently read through my thesis and provided probing and insightful comments. And my thanks go out to the people who helped with my German translations: Anna-Christian Kramer, Mila Bilkic, Dieter Waeltermann, and our German next-door neighbor, Helmut Vogel.
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INTRODUCTION

“...your precepts into imagination, my chastity into poetry, and my austerity into desire.”

--André Gide (1907)

In 1979 I passed the year as a student in Paris. There I took a course on Medieval Art in which the teacher, Prof. Stirnemann, advised me to read the New Testament. Being from a reform Jewish home, I was familiar with the story of Christ. However, I had never read the Gospels as they were anathema to Jews. I learned that all the suffering of the Jewish people was because of the Christian perception that Jews rejected Christ as the messiah and the savior of humankind. Yet the irony of all this was that Jesus was a Jew himself.

Finally, after many years of practicing the rituals and traditions of Judaism I found myself morally strong and not threatened by a reading of the New Testament which I found at the local library. I found myself armed with questions. How could these writers instill such hate for Jews? Did the Jewish masses actually hand over Jesus to be crucified? And what did the Gospels mean to a Jewish person living in the United States in the twenty-first century, a country where church and state are considered separate, where people of all religions can practice their faiths freely, and where Jews are accepted in all parts of society?

As an art student and a painter I was intrigued by Rembrandt and his great ability to draw from memory. I was captivated by his etching of the Prodigal Son, although I do not remember where I first saw it. The depiction of strong emotion, especially the look of struggle and surrender on the Prodigal Son’s face, made me think of my own situation. I had gone through a period in my twenties where relations with my father were strained. I lived a life of prodigality and confusion. My father, who went to work every day, desperately wanted me to get well and to return to myself and the fold of the family. He thought up many schemes to put me on the road to

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success—medical assisting, elementary education, even ballet classes…But it was not to be. He died in 2006, before he saw me take wing.

When I applied to graduate schools in art history, I found in the theme of the Prodigal Son a way of explaining myself. I was affected by the story’s poignant power, by its economy, and by its abrupt ending. I cannot say that I truly believe in God but I have experienced unconditional love, the value of repentance, and the need for being charitable to others.

In the parable, I was struck by the poetry of the writing as much by the symbolism. Besides Jesus’s doctrine of acceptance of sinners, there is a lesson about the use of property, of right conduct, and of the perils of leaving home. Because of its broad message, the parable has inspired artists of all kinds. There have been movies such as The Prodigal in 1955; poems by Rudyard Kipling, André Gide, and Rainer Maria Rilke; fragments on the theme in Franz Kafka’s works; and a ballet by Diaghilev, not to mention a long history in decorative and visual art. Writers like Henri Nouwen have devoted whole books to single paintings of the Prodigal Son.

The parable itself, written in the 60s A.D., addressed problems of inheritance and gives some perspective on life in Israel during the first century. In those times, when the father died, the oldest son received a double portion of what the other children inherited.² Jewish law did not grant children the right to sell property until after the father’s death.³ Traditional Middle Eastern culture was patriarchal and lavish expressions of deference to elders and parents were of supreme importance.⁴ A request, like that of the Prodigal Son’s, while the father was still alive, was an outrageous concept.⁵

⁴ Keller, 18.
⁵ Bailey, 34.
Identity and solidarity with first the family and then the village were what kept communal memory of land ownership alive.\textsuperscript{6} If the father allowed his son to sell his share of the inheritance, this “horrendous family breakdown (became) public knowledge and the family (was) shamed before the entire community.”\textsuperscript{7} Indeed, prodigality was seen as a breech in filial love.\textsuperscript{8} Furthermore, if the child had lost the family inheritance to Gentiles, the \textit{qetsatsah} ceremony would take place in which there was a total ban on contact with the violator.\textsuperscript{9}

Jesus’s message of forgiveness of sinners, hospitality to the poor, healing of the sick, and the goodness of the kingdom of God are all present in the parable. Through the parable, Jesus illustrates the loving character of God and celebrates the ingathering of those who are repentant. The parable would have been of current moral interest to Luke’s readers who were conscious of the value of property, its distribution, and the destructive effects of avarice on family life. Readers would have seen that the father represented God, the Prodigal Son the poor and the outcast, and the elder brother the temple hierarchy, the Pharisees who supposedly lived by the letter of the law.

The parable also included imagery that appealed to me by its very symbolism. The giving of the ring signified the granting of authority. The offering of shoes was both a bestowal of freedom and an acknowledgement to slaves that this was their master. The granting of a robe signified the adoption of the father’s ways, his magnanimity, and his generosity. The famine was a sign of divine judgment. The Prodigal Son’s working with pigs would have been abhorrent to Jews, and distasteful to Greeks and Romans. The “distant country” would have meant a world where

\textsuperscript{7} Bailey, 34.
\textsuperscript{8} David A. Holgate, \textit{Prodigality, Liberality and Meanness in the Parable of the Prodigal Son} (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press), 207.
\textsuperscript{9} Bailey, 34.
everything considered holy at home is disregarded. Even the feast of a calf was significant because eating meat was considered an expensive delicacy then.

The story of the Prodigal Son in Art History is not completely uncovered territory. Ellen D’Oench published a short study, *Prodigal Son Narratives, 1480-1980* in 1995 for the Yale University Art Gallery. According to D’Oench, artists rarely depicted the parable before the thirteenth century. With Albrecht Dürer’s engraving on the theme (1496), “the narrative assumed unprecedented importance as biblical subject matter in the visual arts.” Sebald Beham produced in his prints for *The Prodigal Son* (1540) one of the earliest series executed in the medium of engraving. Rembrandt did his iconic etching of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* in 1636 and a painting on the theme at the end of his life in 1667-69 which is at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. D’Oench goes on to say that scenes of the Prodigal Son flourished from 1580 to 1612. She notes that in this period, “unless there exists narrative quotation […] there is little difference between generalized prostitution and gambling images and those describing the Prodigal Son’s dissipation.” Often scenes of profligacy were allowed because there was a moralizing message.

In the exhibition catalogue, she focuses on the evolution of Prodigal Son engravings in the mid-eighteenth century, including popular serials in England, 1750-1800. D’Oench traces the growth of engraving from Hogarth’s *Rake’s Progress* (1735) through LeClerc’s paintings of *L’histoire de l’enfant prodigue* (1750) to Larmessin’s publications of copies by five printmakers in 1751. D’Oench’s exegesis ranges from the popular serials of John Raphael Smith (1752-

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11 D’Oench, 4.
12 Ibid., 6.
13 Ibid., 9.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 11.
1812) to the American Amos Doolittle (1754-1832). She discusses James Tissot’s (1836-1902) series of four paintings and the influences of that work on Jean-Louis Forain’s intensely spiritual etching done in 1909. Finally she discusses Max Beckmann’s and Thomas Hart Benton’s (1889-1975) paintings, concluding with the serial photographic work of Duane Michals (b. 1932) whose staged embrace, in the era of AIDS, introduces a redemptive theme.16


There is not very much other literature written on the theme of the Prodigal Son in the visual arts. Theological books and articles, such as Henri Nouwen’s book, The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Father’s, Brothers and Sons, focuses on Rembrandt’s late work and explores the subject from the point of view of each character in the parable. Other important works include “The Pursuing Father” by Kenneth Bailey, which provide historical context for the reading of the parable. He says that the story is Pelagian, meaning that “it teaches that people are not impeded by original sin or depraved wills and can by their own effort, without divine grace, take steps toward salvation.”17 Another source, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son: An Economic

16 Ibid., 26.
17 Bailey, 34.
Reading,” by William Marling looks at the theme in terms of its ideological manipulation of economic and material issues. A third source, “The Foolish Father and the Economics of Grace,” sees the parable in a different light. The author, Susan Eastman, argues that the father was a resounding failure and his relationship with his sons was almost non-existent. Finally, David A. Holgate’s dissertation about the poles of prodigality and meanness, with the liberality of the father as the proper way to solve moral questions, was enlightening to me.

The reason I selected this period, 1882-1949, was that these five artists were modern, introducing modern styles to the telling of an ancient story. I am treating these as case studies because it was not practical, for the sake of breadth, to include every work in the period. I focus on paintings because I am a painter myself, and because it is much easier to view two-dimensional works, while it is much more difficult to be able to view sculptures in person and from every angle.

I am convinced that these case studies demonstrate a new secular approach to the theme. Also, I realized early in this paper that the artists’ approach to the theme of the Prodigal Son was often autobiographical. Their narratives served to convey unresolved angst. Besides this, I tried to understand if and how religion played a part in the gestation of each painting. Henceforth, I read about each specific painter in terms of their relations to prodigality and to modernism. Supporting sources included works on Modernism, readings by Clement Greenburg, essays on the Harlem Renaissance, and background history such as on the Risorgimento.

In terms of analyzing the paintings, I used formal analysis and comparison of relevant works. Investigation of iconographical aspects proved helpful in understanding some works, especially

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de Chirico’s. Certain groupings, such as Slevogt and Tissot, seemed a no-brainer; both introduced serial images of the parable. Giorgio de Chirico’s work seemed to stand on its own because it was the progenitor of Surrealism. I grouped Beckmann’s and Douglas’s work together because they both focused on a scene of the parable that is not treated as much in modern times.

It has been a personal challenge in this thesis to clarify my thoughts about art and religion, to discuss concepts such as time and metaphor, and explain the sometimes esoteric philosophy that contributed to the making of these works. Although I am not ready to convert to Christianity, I have found positive values in this ancient theme and I am exhilarated by how many different interpretations of the parable there are.
Chapter 1: The Prodigal Son in Two Narrative Series by James Tissot and Max Slevogt

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, two artists, James Tissot (1836-1902) and Max Slevogt (1868-1932), created narrative series of paintings about the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is found in the gospel of Luke. Tissot’s series, *The Prodigal Son in Modern Life* (1882), consists of four separate paintings of equal size. Slevogt’s work, *The Prodigal Son* (1898/99), is a triptych with a large painting in the center and slimmer panels joined on either side. The two artists’ narrative format allows the viewer to break the story into distinct episodes. Viewers can then derive greater meaning from looking at different parts of the story. The artists express Christian messages in more secular ways than earlier depictions of the theme. Tissot tries to characterize contemporary English culture through pivotal “snapshots” of the story while Slevogt’s work emphasizes the reunion of father and son which takes place on a stage-like setting. The two works transform time into “calculable and controllable” events.1 Tissot’s near photo-realistic approach conceives time based on the clock and the season, and is punctuated by the representation of material goods. Slevogt, by contrast, conflates psychology with three moments of day and night—bright color and licentiousness with day in the first panel, the turbulent midday confrontation of father and son in the central panel, and blackness and depravation with night in the third panel. The painters also address modernity in different ways. Tissot frames the story in contemporary times and the episodes seem evenly distributed. Slevogt’s approach is more abrupt and abstract as he contrasts the penury of the Prodigal Son with a scene from a modern brothel.

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Tissot’s narrative cycle is more solidly constructed and more naturalistic than Slevogt’s work. This may be in part because he used photography to help him with his painting. Several other compositions in Tissot’s oeuvre have been documented to closely match extant photos taken within Tissot’s family circle. The narrative work examined here covers the major subplots of the Prodigal Son’s story with four scenes set in Victorian England. Every scene is realized on the waterfront with a different action and cast of characters, almost like a modern movie. Although not explicitly stated by Tissot, one might imagine the action occurring in the four seasons. Thus, *The Departure* seems to take place in summer, *In Foreign Climes* in the fall, *The Return* in winter, and *The Fatted Calf* in the spring. The seasons pass rapidly as Tissot jumps between the pivotal moments of the parable. At the beginning the son is having a conversation with the father, in the next scene Japanese dancers entertain him, in a third instance he is embracing his father on a dock, and in the last scene, the elder son confronts the father. Like Slevogt’s work, there seems to be little or no outward reference to Christian morality. For example, the Prodigal Son does not appear licentious in his attitude toward the dancing women but more like a passing tourist. Tissot was brought up as a devout Catholic, however, and the title of the work is clearly biblical.

In the first scene of Tissot’s series, *The Departure* (fig. 1), the Prodigal Son confronts his father in his home on the waterfront, requesting his share of the inheritance. The son is almost too ready to get started on his adult life away from his family. There is a sense of arrogance as he fingers his right lapel with his left hand and sits on his father’s dining table. The son holds a wallet, presumably from his father, in his right hand and waits for his gesticulating father to give

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3 This can be seen especially in his *Renee Mauperin* etchings.
him permission to leave. The light from the window hits the father’s outstretched hands as he motions to the son. His fingertips overlap the son’s right hand but it is unclear whether they are touching. The father’s fuzzy white beard creates a half-halo around his sagacious-looking face. Tissot marks this moment as an important turning point in the son’s life but also in that of his family circle. A tangible tension can be felt from the young man on the far left looking out the open window, his arms propped on the sill, and the woman knitting, seated to his right, who glances surreptitiously at the conversing figures. These apparent family members acquiesce to the power and insolence of the brother, and at the same time they are powerless to affect the outcome of the conflict. This psychological interplay between family members is complex and reflects a modern sensibility.

Tissot’s obsession with detail and with symbolism, as well as a preoccupation with material goods, can be observed in this painting. Outside the window, black smoke pours out of a steamboat’s chimneys and the rigging of a sailing boat can be seen.\(^5\) Inside the room, the waxy-looking window shades are covered with smut. Nancy Marshall observed that bars of the window behind the Prodigal Son suggest the form of a cross.\(^6\) A model sailing boat on the mantelpiece suggests the father’s trade but it is also is a symbol for the Church.\(^7\) Marshall says that “the father’s house itself is an allegory for the true Church from which the son is wandering.”\(^8\) The conch shell on the shelf perhaps refers to Tissot’s own father who was an amateur shell collector.\(^9\) On the table an orange blossom has fallen from the group in the vase and under the table a black kitten with a red ribbon has strayed from its mother, also under the

\(^5\) Christopher Wood, *Tissot* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, and Co., 1986), 20. Several biographers—James Laver, Christopher Wood, and Michael Wentworth—have noted that Tissot had an extensive grasp of marine equipment, having observed boats during his youth in the seaport town of Nantes.


\(^7\) Marshall, 166.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.
table. The lone white teacup that rests in a band of vertical shadow is quite pronounced in this picture and reminds the viewer how important tea-drinking was and is to English culture. Tissot’s incorporation of modern objects and the innovative composition express a modern outlook.

In *In Foreign Climes* (fig. 2), Tissot again shows his obsession with detail, especially in the depiction of the embroidered dresses of the dancing women. As in the other scenes, the light is subdued, and yellow and brown tones are dominant. Five dancing Japanese women advance diagonally into the picture from the left. They are covered in heavy garments with a glossy silvery finish, embellished with red floral patterns, that trail on the floor. The dresses fold open near the feet to reveal sumptuous red layered linings. The first three women all hold the same position with the left hand arched over the head and the right holding a closed fan over the chest. Their faces are turned toward the right and illuminated in the red light of spherical paper lanterns that hang from the ceilings. There also is a pair of rectilinear lamps on the floor, on either side of the dancers, that seem like exact copies of the real things. The painting has a frozen quality. The reason may be that Tissot relied on photographs for the painting of the teahouse.\(^\text{10}\) There are many cases in his oeuvre where Tissot’s photos exactly match compositions of figures and of landscape. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate any photos of the teahouse scenes.\(^\text{11}\)

In *In Foreign Climes*, the Prodigal Son hardly looks like he is wasting away his inheritance. He is suffering from neither hunger nor the debasement of a corrupt lifestyle. Basking in the lantern’s glow, in a fine suit, he resembles a well-coiffed tourist. In this depiction, however, he is a microcosm lost in the festivities of this nocturnal celebration. With his raised cup, he offers a toast perhaps both to the dancers and himself. Tissot also suggests the seedier side of life.

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\(^{10}\) Wood, 115.  
\(^{11}\) It is possible that Tissot relied on woodblock prints for this waterfront scene as many woodblock prints of this era illustrate ceremonial processions on the border of water.
through the depiction of a girl, perhaps a prostitute or a concubine, drowsing on the protagonist’s left shoulder and by a decadent male Westerner to her left. His overgrown brown beard suggests self-indulgence as well as neglect towards his appearance. He wears a dark fedora and his eyes are shut in meditation, while a cigarette dangles from his fingers. It is easy to imagine that he has disengaged from his native culture, only to immerse himself in a shady underworld, as an anonymous voyeur of exotic things. Because of the similar facial features, clothing, and pose of the two men, Tissot, I believe, is making a statement here about the future dereliction of the Prodigal Son.

By the time of *The Return* (fig. 3) a great many things have transpired in the life of the Prodigal Son. He has left his dream world and returned to a life where time is marked in hours and in money. Unlike earlier artists’ depictions of the Prodigal Son, such as that by Albrecht Dürer in *The Prodigal Son Amid Swine* (1496) (fig. 4), where the foregrounded youth is on bent knee surrounded by pigs, this time the pigs are in the background being herded by other men. This scene takes place on the slippery docks where workers unload the animals from a boat. The central image here, like Rembrandt’s etching of 1636 (fig. 5), is the embrace of father and son. Unlike the work by Rembrandt, Tissot’s son’s torso is covered by clothes and his face is obscured by the father’s arm. In Rembrandt’s etching, the son’s craggy and suffering face is in profile. Also, in Rembrandt’s etching a gown completely covers the father’s body, while in Tissot’s version the father wears pants and a topcoat. Although Tissot’s contemporary rendering shows the same economy and grace of movement as that by Rembrandt, the proportions of the father seem more realistic. In this emotional embrace one can identify with the son who reunites with his parent. Although the kneeling son is barefoot, the other figures are dressed for the cold
so that the scene likely takes place in winter. Note, especially, the woman at far right in the fur collar and gloves.

As in *The Departure*, Tissot includes bystanders in his depiction. A man and a woman dressed in heavy garments stand at right. The man has a condescending look on his face which seems to say that the Prodigal Son got what he deserved, and that it was appropriate for him to fall into a state of degradation. The woman, whose face resembles Tissot’s mistress, Kathleen Newton (1854-1882), holds her hands to her face in surprise and sympathy. At the same time, Tissot executes a piece of theatricality by showing the father’s falling top hat. This movement shows a new approach to time. It indicates a tension between the immediacy of the here and now, located in the father’s world of commerce, and the timeless landscape of suffering that the Prodigal Son has traversed during his odyssey. It gives us insight into Tissot’s sense of time where, as Compagnon formulated, “consciousness is centered on the present as present, without past or future, and connecting only with eternity.”

The fourth scene, *The Fatted Calf* (fig. 6), reflects the extent to which Tissot has assimilated English codes of behavior. The Prodigal Son has been accepted back into the fold of the family. He sits at the table sharpening knives in front of a domed metal lid. The imploring look of the man emerging from a boat on the river, according to the parable, designates him as the elder son. The lanky older brother is foppishly dressed in a white cricket outfit. He wears a hat of a black and white ringed pattern that identifies him as part of a team, while his brown and white stylish footwear establish him as a member of a privileged class. The elder son beseeches the father as he extends his bent right leg to ground level, resting his forearms on his knee, leaving his four teammates below on a boat in the river.

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12 Newton was Tissot’s mistress from 1876 until her death from tuberculosis in 1882. See Jane Abdy, “Tissot: His London Friends and Visitors,” in *James Tissot*, 50.
Tissot was not known personally to show a great deal of emotion, but in this theme he finds a subject he can mine for its inherent emotive qualities. According to the parable, the elder son challenges the father for killing a calf to celebrate the return of the younger son. He complains that all the time he has been loyal to the father, the father has not once allowed him to sacrifice a goat to treat his friends. The father replies that the younger son was lost and now found, dead and now alive, and what he owns is shared in common with the elder son. “All that I have is thine.”

At this point in Luke we are left guessing how or whether the story will resolve itself. This is true also of Tissot’s painting. The levels of uncertainty and anticipation are raised by the backlighting of the table which makes it hard to discern the features of the sitters. The father’s face, however, is fully illuminated. Tissot brings out the man’s personality through the stern look on his face and the action of his two arms. His left arm, which points to the younger son, is bent with the decrepitude of age, while the right one grasps a large white napkin, trailing on the ground.

In the dialogue between the father and elder son, Tissot tries to navigate the waters between the status of the gentry, which had inherited a nobility of conscience, and that of the new middle class, which had elevated itself through the acquisition of things. The father’s aristocratic bearing is signified by his formal dress and laissez-faire body language. This is either a self-made man or one who has inherited great wealth. The elder son’s life, however, seems to be defined by things, especially by things that have aesthetic value. The artful way the scarf is tied around his neck, and the manner in which his jacket hangs suavely over his back, as well as the pipe that he fingers in his hands, suggest this. As a participant in bourgeois society and as a critic of class consciousness, Tissot adapted his cycle to fit these topical themes. Thus, the painting is less about religious aspects of the story—repentance or unconditional love—and more about the

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14 Wood, 13. To his contemporaries Tissot was something of a cold fish.
mores of English society. An English sense of decorum is expressed in the painting where there is a push and pull between family obligations and the ambitions of the son. The value of punctuality is also expressed, primarily in *The Fatted Calf*, where the elder son appears to be interrupting and disregarding a meal that has already started.

In the series, the viewer encounters a translation of English empire. It is the wealth generated by English trade and colonialism that enables the Prodigal Son’s rich father to consent to the son’s travel. The upper-class status of the father is symbolized by the accent on leisure, fine clothes, and objects of refinement in *The Departure*. Tissot’s paintings are rich in detail as he records the life of the upper crust and the fads of the second half of the nineteenth century. In this series, we find accurate depictions of ships, references to japonaiserie, exacting renditions of contemporary apparel, and the portrayal of the custom of tea drinking. Tissot was following the trend set by Charles Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1859) of depicting scenes of modern life rather than mythological or historical painting which traditionally had been considered the highest forms of subject matter.¹⁶

Tissot painted two previous pictures about the Prodigal Son. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1862) (fig. 7), is set in medieval times, and *The Departure of the Prodigal Son from Venice* (1863) (fig. 8), takes place in the era of the Renaissance. The theme obviously resonated with him. It is possible that in his difficult chosen profession of artist he was hoping to find support among those who were more pious and affiliated with the Church.¹⁷ Also, these paintings in his earliest style followed that of the Belgian artist, Henri Leys (1815-1869), whose work was full of

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¹⁷ It is equally possible that Tissot may have seen himself in the role of the Prodigal Son. He was the second son and had left home for the Parisian art world against his father’s wishes. As cited in: www.artfact.com/auction-lot/james-jacques-joseph-tissot-french,-1836-1902-14-p-g5n7phis8 (1/18/12).
northern medieval feeling.¹⁸ “Leys inspired an avalanche of teutonic antiquarianism in his follower” and Tissot excelled in the painting of medieval architecture and clothing.¹⁹ Both of Tissot’s paintings were exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1863 and “proved Tissot’s caliber as a painter of historical genre subjects and his ability to orchestrate mood and emotion by gesture and expression.”²⁰ Michael Wentworth, in James Tissot, describes the critical reception of The Return as “an impatience with Tissot’s ‘gothic’ mannerisms.”²¹ Part of the problem, according to Wentworth, was that it had the quality of pastiche of a “worn-out genre,” and secondly, that it exhibited an aspect of archaism whose “naivety” was merely an “aesthetic pose.”²² Wentworth evaluates The Departure as an “ineloquent drama” that tries to duplicate the linear and high-keyed manner of Vittore Carpaccio’s St. Ursula and the Prince Taking Leave of their Parents (1495) (fig. 9).²³ Period buildings and clothing, with bodies posed in harmonic relationships, united with a well worked-out historical composition, characterize these works.

Malcolm Warner argues that Tissot’s The Prodigal Son in Modern Life is an updating of Hogarth’s A Rake’s Progress (1732-33) (fig.10). In both works, the characters “wear the latest fashions, inhabit fashionably decorated interiors, and live their lives à la mode.”²⁴ Hogarth portrayed contemporary society in a way that invited moral judgment and sometimes condemnation. Tissot, however, says Warner, “recorded contemporary mores, but as far as morality was concerned, generally had little or nothing to say.”²⁵ In the Prodigal Son series we are aware of the rupture in the relationship of the father and son without necessarily condemning the son. It seems only natural that the son should break away from his aging father and make his

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¹⁸ Wentworth, 24.
¹⁹ Ibid., 28.
²⁰ Ian Thompson, “Tissot as a Religious Artist,” in James Tissot, 89.
²¹ Ibid., 39.
²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid., 41
²⁵ Warner, 29.
way in the world. Such a depiction expresses a modern attitude. In addition to this, the rather benign portrayal sets the viewer up for the ironic and dramatic third scene. Here the feisty son we see in the first two paintings becomes the ragged and clutching man we meet in the scene of the embrace.

The series of *The Prodigal Son in Modern Life* paintings was received well at their showing at the Dudley Gallery in 1882.\(^{26}\) The *Illustrated London News* praised the exhibit for a “taste in the arrangements that is rarely seen in this country.”\(^{27}\) A set of etchings was made after them and Tissot later sent it to several international exhibitions, considering the group to be among his best and most serious works. According to David Brooke, Tissot had considered with the idea of paintings in series in the late 1870s. In 1877, he exhibited *The Challenge* at the newly opened Grosvenor Gallery, the first of a projected (but never completed) allegorical series, *The Triumph of the Will*. Brooke notes that Tissot was “thinking of creating an environment which would reflect the feelings and states of mind of its occupants.”\(^{28}\) This finally took concrete form in *The Prodigal Son in Modern Life*. In the Prodigal Son cycle, all the four scenes are set in spaces which connect or give a view to the water outside. This setting underlines the British dependence on water travel for its empire. Unlike other artists’ depictions of the Prodigal Son, Tissot portrayed his protagonist as a grown man, with the audacity to demand his inheritance before the death of his father. In ancient societies such a request would be breaking an unwritten law. Here, however, Tissot has updated the customs to match English mores.

The idea of breaking the Prodigal Son theme into serial form is continued by Max Slevogt. Slevogt’s triptych (fig. 11) contains three rather unrelated panels. Their sequence is not read from left to right but rather the side panels, which precede the central panel in time, give clues to

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\(^{27}\) *Illustrated London News* 80 (May 27, 1882): 522.

the narrative of the larger panel. The central panel’s (fig. 12) narrative is straightforward. A young man of about twenty-five is shown entering a room with his left hand on the doorknob. His gaze meets that of his seated father. The father, with dark hair and beard and a flowing orange robe, pivots in his chair to receive this unexpected visitor. The Prodigal Son is half clothed and barefoot. He is emaciated, has facial hair, and his dark unkempt hair falls wildly over his forehead. He enters the light of the father’s room leaving the darkness of the corridor behind him. To the right of the father, bisected by the painting frame, is another figure (likely the eldest son) who dourly observes the action. On the wall behind the father is a collection of antique weaponry—a shield, a sheathed saber, a bow, and so forth—all painted in a realistic academic style.

The panel on the left (fig. 13) is set farther back in space, and the figures are smaller. It is a probable brothel scene without explicit sexuality. It shows a man sitting at a table on the right exchanging glances with a brightly dressed seated woman whose clothes are disheveled and whose back faces the viewer as she straddles a chair backwards. The man’s facial features are not described fully and half of his head is in shadow. He is lifting a glass as if to celebrate this wanton atmosphere. His head is tipped jauntily towards the side as if he is compromised by the drink and/or the debauched company. To the man’s right is another woman, standing with raised arms who faces outside the picture frame and appears to be smiling or pretending to be mirthful. Her gaze takes in the man but she does not look directly at him. Her body and clothing are partially obscured by the forearm of the man whose left elbow rests on the table. However, her right breast appears to show through her transparent clothing. To the left of the seated woman, in the background, is another standing figure shown from the back and without a face, whose purpose can only be conjectured. The top fifth of the painting, the ceiling, appears non-
representative. Its abstract forms, consisting of pale orange, yellow, and brown tones, jut down and hang over the woman with the raised arms, whose fingers are not delineated. Hanging from the ceiling on the left is a large red vaguely Asian lantern. Slevogt’s near abstract technique and the recondite approach to emotional relationships make this painting modern.

The right panel (fig. 14) consists of an almost totally nude figure sitting on a rock with his head bowed forward into a background of total darkness. The man’s facial features are indistinguishable as the head blends into the blackness which surrounds him. Around his waist is a strip of cloth. The man’s thin legs also disappear into the darkness as they are angled away from the picture plane. His long right arm, fully extended, angles slightly backward and crosses in front of the rock on which he is sitting. The arm also crosses the bone-like emaciated right leg which tilts slightly up in space. The man’s right hand is open and touches the bottom of the composition. The whole figure is close to the picture frame which lends it a sense of immediacy. In this panel, Slevogt reversed the direction that this figure faces in an earlier sketch, probably to increase the feeling of alienation. The complicated use of body parts in space and the depiction of isolation show modern modes of expression.

Several art historians attest to the influence of Rembrandt on Slevogt’s *Prodigal Son*. Hans Imiela, Beate Reifenscheid, and Emil Waldman corroborate on this point. Slevogt had studied at Academie Julian in Paris in 1889 and had traveled to Italy in 1890 but remained in Munich, working independently as a painter, until 1901.29 It was in the fall of 1898 that Slevogt and his friend, Karl Voll visited an exhibition of Rembrandt’s work in Amsterdam.30 In this triptych, both the color and the expression follow that of the Dutch master. The color scheme is that of black, red, and yellow while the body language of the figures exhibits a dramatic quality similar

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to Rembrandt’s. This is reflected in the exaggerated hand movements and in the authoritative
stare of the father. The interpretation of the story, however, is unique to Slevogt. Unlike earlier
renditions by other artists, the relationship between the son and the father is not completed by the
proverbial embrace. Instead, the figures are separated by an approximately two-foot space
between the figures which is accentuated by the swinging door whose edge breaks the room into
two halves. This device aesthetically separates the world of the son from that of the father.

Slevogt had also been influenced by the work of Giovanni Tiepolo (1696-1770), whose
frescoes he had admired in the Residenz of his hometown of Würzburg.31 This Rococo art is
manifested in Slevogt’s painting by an old master’s sensibility. There is the figural drama of a
Michelangelo or a Titian combined with a pleasure in delicate colors and curving forms that was
the hallmark of Rococo. In addition, as a student at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich
Slevogt would have learned to copy paintings at the Wittlesbach collection.32 The Prussian
government before the first world war “provided art schools, and it maintained museums, whose
collections were expanded with purchases that had an impact on the country’s artists, critics, and
art public.”33 During the mid- to late nineteenth century the Bavarian circle of Karl Theodor von
Piloty (1826-1886), Franz von Lenbach (1836-1904), and Wilhelm Leibl (1844-1900) all sought
to emulate the Dutch masters.34 In Slevogt’s central panel of The Prodigal Son, Imiela refers to
the dress of the father as being “contemporary;” however, the wide sleeves of the father and the
ornate dress of the figure on the far right would place the clothing in an earlier era.35

32 Robin Lenman, “Painters, Patronage, and the Art Market in Germany, 1850-1914,” Past and Present, no. 123
33 Peter Paret, “The Artist as ‘Staatsburger’: Aspects of the Fine Arts and the Prussian State Before and During the
34 Daniel Adler, “Painterly Politics: Wölfflin, Formalism and German Academic Culture, 1995-1915,” Art History
27, no. 3 (June, 2004): 447.
35 Imiela, 48.
The brothel scene in the left panel is brightly colored with the woman at center wearing a blue chemise and a multicolored skirt. Despite the radiant color and the expressive brushwork, Slevogt created the painting before his exposure to Impressionism at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900, and his change in technique upon moving to Berlin in 1901. His style “evolved from the ‘brown sauce’ polish and sheen of the art academies […] to a recognition of the expressive qualities of the thickly-applied brushwork and bright hues of contemporary French impressionism.”

Slevogt also tends to jumble his forms in the brothel scene. The white tabletop seems to sever the body of the seated woman. The woman’s white dress nearly merges with the white plane of the tabletop, but also the white line of the tabletop appears to show through the woman’s back. The figure to the left (if it is a figure) is ambiguously painted with a dark elliptical head and a nimbus of red pigment. The depiction of the Prodigal Son in the panel emphasizes texture over detail. The robe he is wearing, of gold filigree, is not fully delineated. Slevogt suggests facial features through shadow but leaves much of the interpretation to the viewer. The Prodigal Son’s arm appears to be lifting a glass but the hand is twisted in an unnatural way. This helps to achieve an eccentric quality to the painting. This almost whimsical quality is compounded by the pose of the woman who leans diagonally to the right on a chair which has no back.

In this painting, Slevogt, I believe, is trying to portray an atmosphere of hoopla that does not quite succeed. The woman with the raised arms and a mocking gesture seems at the same time to be attempting to hold up the forms on the ceiling. There is no certainty that the woman in the blue chemise is even a prostitute. The only indication is a slight sliver of flesh revealed on her left shoulder as if her clothes were too loose. The man, by contrast, has a morose mood. He is

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partly a participant in the festivities and partly removed. There is really no indication what is
being celebrated or where this is happening. The only marker of a specific culture or site is the
hanging Asian-style red lantern. The painting of the lantern appears to be after an authentic
model with its gilded calligraphy and tassel at the bottom. It is possible that Slevogt is referring
to a red light district here.

Lighting is a key ingredient in the triptych. In the central panel, the “flesh” tones of the son’s
torso and arms are of the lightest hues in the painting and save the painting from a dissolution
into the brown washes that are found in the son’s clothing and on the walls, floors, and entrance
way. The “flesh” tones also correspond to the sitting figure in the right panel and the arms in the
left panel of both the standing figure and the Prodigal Son. This lighting of the limbs ties the
triptych together. Light also stands for the poles of ignorance and enlightenment in the triptych,
where the son progresses out of the darkness of the loss of family and social supports into the
brightness of his father’s culture and humanity. Although the left panel is full of bright tones,
there is a darker element surrounding the figures that penetrates the apparent merry atmosphere.

The expression of the Prodigal Son’s hands are also quite important and they contrast with
the fingerlessness of the woman in the left panel with the raised arms. As the son enters the door
his right hand is held in a defensive posture. Apparently, he is not sure whether he will be
accepted by the father back into the family. According to the parable, he is willing to be taken in
as a servant and his attitude is therefore submissive. Neither is he sure whether he will be
recognized by the father in his half denuded state. His only clothing is some raggedy knee-length
trousers that are curiously folded, reminding one of an animal skin. The father, meanwhile,
pivots in his chair with hands upraised in surprise. He is taken aback at the return of his son.
Slevogt thoroughly penetrates the psychology of the situation. The son is haggard. The bones and cartilage stand out sharply and show his deterioration. Qualities of isolation and alienation are brought out by the dark shadows surrounding his emaciated body. His brown amorphous clothing hangs over his kneecaps. The father’s world, by contrast, is ordered and well accoutered. His noble status is signified by his flowing orange robe with its ample sleeves. The long beard here may signify wisdom, and the hair is dark, so the father, in comparison to other artists’ renditions, is youngish. The weapons and shield on the wall signify an interest in military or hunting items, and a history of warfare. The fact that these weapons are displayed as decorative items attests to their anachronism. The samovar, loosely painted in dark brown hues, is an attribute of the father’s “civilized” world. The academic realism of these implements contributes to the secular aspect of the narrative.

The moment Slevogt has chosen for his depiction occurs just in the middle of the father’s work at a desk. The realm of business is thus interrupted by the realm of family. This is an important dialectic in representations of the parable. One of the factors of the Prodigal Son’s return is the fact that he has run out of money in a land which is experiencing drought. He is forced to accept employment as a swineherder, a job that would have been abhorrent to Jews. Feeling the weight of his solitude and the hunger in his belly, he recognizes the advantages of family life and the security of submitting to his father’s generous practices. His conscious decision, although based on his material situation, reflects a changed attitude.

In Luke’s parable, at the sight of his lost son, the father leaves all his temporal responsibilities and runs to engage the body and the sight of the son. The act of vision between father and son is an important component of Slevogt’s painting as both father and son size up each other. As Slevogt said: “The eye is not an instrument, it is not a mirror—it is a conduit to
life in us as organisms. It is probably always inhibited, trained as it is to one purpose—it is a sieve that lets an entire hodgepodge of other things in with it.”^{38} This word “inhibited” is central to Slevogt’s representation for even though the Prodigal Son has the courage to return to his home and father, he is afraid he will not be accepted.

There is an improvisatory quality to Slevogt’s triptych. However, the subject matter was evidently planned as Slevogt left behind a primitive sketch (fig. 15).^{39} The schematic sketch differs from the painting mainly in the right panel where the Prodigal Son faces back and to the left in a kneeling position with his arm and head supported by what appears to be a column. In the painting, the Prodigal Son is sitting, while the body’s direction is reversed, facing outside the triptych, which increases the sense of his isolation. The work has a loose painterly style although there are parts that are more definitively painted. For instance, the Prodigal Son clutches at the doorknob with a decisive attitude. The placement of his feet, which seem to drag tentatively on the floor, are well thought out. The loose style is demonstrated in the oriental carpet which has a swirling pattern that is more playful than exact. The free approach is exemplified by the folded tapestry that frames the door. Its purpose is primarily decorative and may have to do with national colors with its tangled embroidery of green, red, and white.

Geometrically, the triptych is constructed with foresight. The edge of the door divides the triptych into two parts, separating the father’s world from the son’s. The vertical strip of light to the left of the Prodigal Son helps to frame his body. The line created by the intersection of brown and blue material on the wall causes the eye to follow the gaze of the elder son towards the figure of the Prodigal Son. There is also a rhythm set up by forearms in the three scenes—sometimes facing up, facing down, or directed to the left or right. At the same time, the father’s

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^{39} Imiela, 48.
body and attitude face the brothel scene, while the son has an imaginative liaison with the somber and demoralized figure of himself in the right panel.

The scene in Slevogt’s right panel is eschatological, and more religious than the other two sections. It is about the doom of humanity, reflecting Adam’s fall from grace. Following the parable, we know that in his deprived state the son must “come to himself” and realize the futility of his life, starving in a foreign land. Slevogt’s portrayal goes beyond hardship to indicate extreme loss and suffering. The hardness of his life is symbolized by the cold stone on which he rests. The blackness that surrounds him accentuates the pale wasted mortality of his body. Like the Prodigal Son of Luke, death is on the horizon; however, the artist has omitted any reference to his surroundings, such as his envy for the seedpods that the pigs are enjoying, or his motivations for leaving this precarious situation. Imiela indicated that he may have felt an outcast because of the recent rejection of some of his work. Apparently, the artist pushed the envelope, and as a consequence, his paintings were seen as a violation of morality by many of their viewers.

The power of the narrative and of the parable is brought forth for interpretation by the viewer who must decide whether the Prodigal Son is truly repentant or whether he is returning to the father for purely material reasons. Slevogt, I believe, offers the possibility of redemption for the Prodigal Son. In the right panel, the extreme depredation of the Prodigal Son is signaled by his near nakedness. However, on close observation, one detects the golden form of a cross in the dirt. With his head bent, one can imagine the son repenting for his profligate ways. While not devoid of Christian references, this image represents the agony of solitude and separation from

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41 Imiela, 50.
the love of family and friends. While the Prodigal Son is punished for breaking the rules of
society, there is the promise of a future life as a beloved son.

Slevogt’s triptych was first shown at the opening of the Berlin Secession in 1899 and well
received. Reifenscheid mentions that Slevogt created The Prodigal Son in the same period as
his Danaë (1895), which was exhibited at the Munich Secession in June, 1899. While Danaë
was quickly taken down because its unrestrained pornography caused such a stir, The Prodigal
Son stayed for the remainder of the exhibition, reflecting its popular response. Emil Waldman
notes that this painting marked a cornerstone in Slevogt’s development toward becoming a true
master. The triptych stands out in Slevogt’s oeuvre because there were not many biblical
references in his early work. Slevogt’s early work included portraits, landscapes, as well as
genre scenes such as Die Ringerschule (1893) and mythic historical scenes such as Scheherezade
(1897). The artist used the brown washes of the Munich Academy but often with a coarse
handling. Towards the end of the 1890s Slevogt became more familiar with Impressionism and
this can be seen in his lighter palette.

Waldman explains that in this triptych Slevogt was going beyond the religious paintings of
Fritz von Uhde (1848-1911). Von Uhde was known for painting genre scenes that transferred
biblical themes to contemporary environments. Imiela notes that in no other paintings by Slevogt
does the influence of Rembrandt stand out as in this one. As in Rembrandt’s Return of the
Prodigal Son (1662) (fig. 16), there is a sensitivity to depth as well as a quality of schwebe or

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42 Erich Hancke, Max Liebermann: Sein Leben und Seine Werke (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923), 394. Hancke says
that The Prodigal Son was the highlight (clou) of the exhibition.
43 Beate Reifenscheid, “Slevogt—von der Akademie zu moglichen Welten,” in Max Slevogt: Gemälde, Aquarelle,
44 “Biographie: Year 1899,” in Max Slevogt: Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen, 504.
45 Emil Waldman, Max Slevogt (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1923), 56.
46 Beate Reifenscheid, catalogue entry in Max Slevogt: Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen (Stuttgart: G. Hatje, 1992),
436.
47 Waldman, 54.
48 Imiela, 50.
“hovering in the air,” leaving the plotline unfinished and not explicitly shown. Obviously, the work is an homage to Rembrandt, but it also is a novel rendition of the parable because we do not know whether the father and son ultimately will connect and resolve the conflict. The subplot of the story of the elder son is not approached in any detail. As it stands, the viewer must be acquainted with the story for the triptych to make sense.

Slevogt’s work also says something about time and modernity. Baudelaire wrote: “By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable...” In the left panel we witness the ephemeral moments of ecstasy which are smothered by the realization that the licentious Prodigal Son is on the verge of losing his soul. This soullessness is indicated by the flat application of paint on the Prodigal Son’s face. In the right panel there is the timelessness of desolation, of defeat at the hands of fate. Slevogt’s vision of the son submerged in the dark seems to last forever. In this depiction, Slevogt diverges from earlier representations, such as Dürer’s, because it does not show the context of the Prodigal Son among pigs or set in a landscape. Then, in the central panel the Prodigal Son enters back into the real time of hours and work in which realism and naturalism take precedence, and expression is contained within the boundaries of the body. Psychology becomes centered around the clock and, as Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) said about the negation of meaning in modern art, “art becomes an allusive indication of something that can be thought but not represented.”

If part of modernity is characterized by secularization then these two works by Tissot and Slevogt introduce a new concept to representations of the parable. Ernst Behler writes in Irony

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49 Ibid., 48.
50 Compagnon, 16. It is quite possible that Slevogt read Baudelaire and was familiar with his idea of creating beauty from depraved or “non-poetic” situations.
and the Discourse on Modernity: “The modern period began when (these) founding narratives were no longer mythical or religious, but became satirical and philosophical, and secured a meaningful procedure not through a god or heroic lawgiver but through the authority of reason.”52 This is not to say that these works are completely lacking in religious subject matter, but rather that Judeo-Christian concepts of forgiveness and God’s love of the sinner are balanced by secular concerns. In Tissot’s work, the rendering of contemporary English society is more important than revealing the importance of values such as repentance. In fact, the scene of the Prodigal Son tending the pigs is merely suggested. In Slevogt’s central panel, unless we know the title, the meeting of father and son in which there is no body contact could hardly be construed as an instance of unconditional love. Both works are permeated with psychological elements, and both works are brought into the contemporary world.

There is no indication that the two artists knew of each other’s work. In both series, however, there is the invention of new realities, reflecting a sense of the preciousness of time and the separation of time from place. The fact that Slevogt’s work appears as if on a stage and Tissot’s paintings exhibit photographic realism is important to this modern interpretation. Slevogt demonstrates the “lack of reality” of reality, while Tissot shrinks the time lag between present and past—in some way speeding up history. In both works, the transformation of the Prodigal Son is mitigated by a modern sense of time based on the clock, but also touching on the transience of human life and the reminder of death and what lies beyond this world. Pascal (1623-1662) wrote that the model for our modern conception of time, seen as the abolishment of authority and the triumph of reason through scientific progress, is “successive, irreversible, and infinite.”53 In these narrative artworks, Tissot and Slevogt have incorporated a new rational and

53 Compagnon, 9.
analytical element that places the events in a time frame of indelible moments, where the present as present is more important than either the past or the future. By employing a narrative series the artists help the viewer make the logical leaps of interpretation, but in a modern way they incorporate the story into our inner life. Although we know the story of the Prodigal Son, the artists introduce new ways of looking at the parable. While making us guess about how the narrative will unfold, they also reinforce universal truths whose existence predates religion, and whose messages are eternal.
Chapter 2: The Dance with the Father: Prodigal Son
Paintings by Giorgio de Chirico

In Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Prodigal Son* (1922) (fig.18), we witness an allegorical dance of a father and his son that is as much about the artist’s return to classicism as it is about dual elements of meaning derived from his study of German philosophy. The artist injects biographical elements into the portrayal as well as picturing and honoring the legendary figures of the Italian Risorgimento. There is a personal element to this dance as de Chirico enshrines the memory of his father and yet holds the father at a distance, and in opposition, as if there is a psychological barrier that prohibits further bonding. De Chirico developed the theme of the Prodigal Son from earlier paintings and drawings in which he explored both the motif of the mannequin and the animated statue. He continued to redefine the nuances of the embrace of father and son in later works in which he altered both color, gestural, and background elements.

In this timeless and imaginary land of *The Prodigal Son*, the artist makes us aware of the forces of history—painted statues of Risorgimento heroes like Camillo Cavour (1810-1861)—but also the development of modern industry symbolized by the mannequin. The work takes a leap from earlier depictions of the Prodigal Son story, Dürer’s or Rembrandt’s, where one is made aware of Christian themes of forgiveness and unconditional love. Christian values here are replaced by an accent on the enigma, a word de Chirico applied to explain the unique qualities of his painting, and by the materialization of the struggle of the artist as he responds to personal revelations and tries to invigorate his art with new forms in a language of symbols and signs. The artist embraces a secular outlook as his art reflects the modern age.

In this chapter, I will analyze Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Prodigal Son* of 1922 as a “crossroads” painting, developing from his early seminal works, its foundations in personal revelation and philosophy, and the importance of the Prodigal Son theme in his life and work. De
Chirico painted many versions of the Prodigal Son and I will investigate the linkages between them. I will demonstrate how this reflects a modern approach.

In *Giorgio de Chirico: The Endless Journey* Wieland Schmied states that *The Prodigal Son* “perfectly captures the moment of transition from erstwhile paralysis to an age of new vitality of the ancient world.”¹ De Chirico’s imagination was stimulated by his early life in Greece learning the myths of the Argonauts who sailed the Mediterranean in search of the Golden Fleece. The artist’s hometown of Volos was the location of the departure of the Argos, the mythical boat, led by Jason and accompanied by the Dioscuri, the sons of Zeus and Leda, Castor and Pollux, whom he compared to himself and his younger brother, Alberto Savinio.² Savinio, who had changed his surname to distinguish himself from his brother, was a talented musician and artist who was also greatly influenced by the same philosophy. In the light of ancient myth, the brothers saw themselves as exceptional beings.³ Following the death of their father, Evaristo, in 1905, the two boys, accompanied by their mother, Gemma, would travel on an odyssey through the cities of Europe in the quest for knowledge and fame.

De Chirico was enraptured by ancient statuary, which can be seen in his early paintings, such as *The Departure of the Argonauts* (1909) (fig. 19). In this painting, two men in classical garb, one holding a lyre, stand at the seashore looking out to a boat in the harbor. On the right is a full-length statue of Athena, a motif which de Chirico later developed into the theme of painted sculptures of the sleeping Ariadne. De Chirico painted Ariadne over one hundred times during a period of fifty years,⁴ inspired by ideas of abandonment and discovery, the world of dreams, and Ariadne’s connection with the mysteries of human existence, symbolized by the labyrinth. In

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The Prodigal Son painting, and in several later versions, he brings alive a statue that had been standing on a plinth, much like the statue of the Commander in Mozart’s Don Giovanni (1787). There is no evidence, however, that de Chirico was drawing on this opera or the many plays about Don Juan.

De Chirico was the inventor of Pittura Metafisica although another artist who had worked alongside him in Ferrara in 1917, Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), also claimed that distinction. In a short period of four months, at the Military Reserve Hospital at Villa del Seminario, where de Chirico was sent by the Italian Armed Services for apparent nervous disorders, Carrà appropriated de Chirico’s style and subject matter. This can be seen in paintings such as Hermaphrodite Idol (1917) (fig. 20) in which Carrà borrows the mannequin motif with its minimalized facial features, its stitched torso, its being propped on boxes, its interior location, and its open door. Carrà had promised to exhibit with de Chirico in Milan in December 1917, but instead kept de Chirico’s paintings in his possession, in order to copy them.

De Chirico had read much work by Friederich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860). He claimed to be the first to truly understand Nietzsche’s concept of the enigma of things. According to Nietzsche “the true mystery of the world lies in its lack of logic, in its non-sense, in the irrationality inherent in thought and communication.” De Chirico believed “the world was an immense museum of curiousness full of ‘odd toys,’ of grasping the

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6 In May of 1915, de Chirico was drafted into the Italian military. After suffering from physical and mental exhaustion, he was sent with his brother to be a clerk in Ferrara. “As the war mounted” Soby noted, “de Chirico’s nervous instability and accompanying intestinal disturbances became steadily worse,” and he was transferred to this convalescent hospital, coincidentally with Carrà, in April 1917. See James Thrall Soby, Giorgio de Chirico (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1955),110.
7 Baldacci, 379.
8 Ibid., 67.
9 Ibid. 95.
enigma of seemingly insignificant things.”

We see this in his paintings of Jewish pastries, his inventions of colorful toys, his imitations of strange objects like fishing bobbers, his copies of topographical maps, and his invention of mannequins.

De Chirico was also influenced by philosopher figures such as Otto Weininger (1880-1903), Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1937), and Heraclitus (535-475 B.C.E.). The artist put these discoveries into the formulation of a new style of painting which sought to reveal the non-sense behind objecthood.

There are clearly things in the world that cannot be explained by humans in which the artist must take notice and offer up to the viewer in its impalpable strangeness. Early on, de Chirico asked in the Latin caption of his self-portrait of 1911: “Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?” The artist so loved Nietzsche that he painted himself in the same pose of chin-on-hand pictured in a photograph of the philosopher by Gustav Schultze, in 1882.

The art historian Paolo Baldacci summed up de Chirico’s metaphysics: “The metaphysical idea grows from a feeling toward things and toward time: it aims to provoke surprise by bringing to life the mysterious spectral-like quality of objects, revealing unexpected aspects of them by way of juxtapositions and dislocations, posing questions as to the meaning of appearance and the mechanisms of intuitive and logical perception.”

The Prodigal Son demonstrates the power of dépaysment, removing objects from their original environments and placing them in odd juxtapositions and relationships. This idea is that of Lautréamont (1846-1870) whose Les Chants de Maldorer (1868) famously describes a young boy as “beautiful as a chance meeting

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11 Both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer introduced de Chirico to the meaning of the “non-sense” or “non-meaning” of life and how this could be transferred into art. (See Gerd Roos, 9).
12 “And what shall I love if not the enigma?”
13 Baldacci, 418.
on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella.”\textsuperscript{15} Just as poetry had taken a leap in depicting abstract relationships, so had the painting of de Chirico.

Keeping to the purity of his vision and philosophy, de Chirico led an original but lonely path that was not helped by critics such as Roberto Longhi (1890-1970) who sought to undermine the foundations of his art\textsuperscript{16} and by his bitter arguments with the Surrealists. In an article titled “To the Orthopaedic God” in \textit{Il Tempo} in 1918, Longhi lashed out at the ideology behind de Chirico’s work that was on view at Bragaglia’s Gallery in Rome. This rejection was even harder to swallow since the artist had opened up himself and confided all his dreams and hopes to Longhi. Breton and the Surrealists greatly objected to de Chirico’s change in style around 1919 which was infused with neo-Classical and neo-Baroque influences. The artist refused to affiliate with the Surrealists, priding himself in his craftsmanship, as he later adopted Renoir’s colorism and painterly brushstrokes. The formerly warm relationship had evolved into an excommunication.

De Chirico would not have produced the Prodigal Son paintings if he had not seriously embraced the idea of personal revelation. In the unpublished “Meditations of a Painter”(1912), he said: “a truly immortal work of art can only be born through revelation.”\textsuperscript{17} There were two important revelations central to de Chirico’s art: one in 1909 at the beginning of his career, and a later one in 1919. In the earliest one, which occurred to him in the Piazza Santa Croce in Florence, he decided that things like architecture speak in a language of signs that are only apprehended by a few artistic temperaments.\textsuperscript{18} This revelation was translated into \textit{Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon} (1909) (fig. 21), a painting in which architecture has been reduced to simple Greek forms; in which a sense of mystery pervades religious structures; in which melancholy is

\textsuperscript{16} Baldacci, 6.
\textsuperscript{18} Roos, 10.
exhibited in the forlorn figures; and in which poetry, symbolized by a headless statue of Dante, seen from behind, looms over the square causing time to come to a standstill.

The fact that the vision for *Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* occurred during a period of convalescence from an intestinal disorder may account for the feeling of claustrophobia. The simplified, idealized form of the church columns is very much different from the actual church and the inclusion of the curtains creates a feeling of mystery. The boat sail behind the wall also signifies the promise of distant lands, while referencing the disorientation of travel. A feeling of dread and foreboding, while not over-evident here, is found in many of de Chirico’s pictures from this period and is attributable to the strange shadows and the depiction of the smallness of humanity in relation to the immensity of the world.

The revelation of 1919, by contrast, followed ten extremely productive years during which the artist fleshed out his ideas of the hidden essence and unknowability of things. By 1919, the artist had exhausted his repertory that included Renaissance architecture with long shadows, trains with white puffs chugging on the horizon, people who acted like gnomons with the sunlight turning them into objects that cast powerful shadows, surrealistic green skies, and other effects such as a perspectival system which ran counter to scientific principles. This second revelation occurred at de Chirico’s viewing of a painting by Titian at Rome’s Villa Borghese when he decided for himself that the key to painting was in its craftsmanship, and the technique of the Old Masters, which had been forgotten.\(^\text{19}\) The two revelations were integral to the approach of *The Prodigal Son* of 1922.

The Prodigal Son theme did not evolve out of nowhere. A pencil drawing from 1917 (fig. 22) is practically identical to the painting of 1922 showing the mannequin and statue embracing on a piazza bordered on the right by Renaissance buildings. However, in the drawing de Chirico

includes an equestrian statue and a boat’s sail in the background. Another pencil drawing from 1917, produced in the journal *Valori Plastici, Il ritornante* (The Return of the Apparition) (fig. 23), shows a seated and headless mannequin adjacent to a father figure whose lower half has the appearance of a fluted column. This was subsequently turned into a painting between 1917 and 1918 (fig. 24), and features a seated mannequin without a head whose insides are exposed. On the left side of its torso a triangular flap of blue material with a series of nail spots is turned up revealing a vertical board of wood.

In *Il ritornante*, a large door in the background is half open. As in the earlier drawing, the mannequin is supported in back by a scaffolding of imaginary architectural drawing instruments. The face of the father with closed eyes, mustache, and bearded chin is reminiscent of an earlier painting called *The Child’s Brain* (1914) (fig. 25) in which the father is also shown with mustache, beard (albeit a tiny one), and closed eyes. The painting of 1914, however, does not have folded arms and the lower half of the body is not revealed as it is blocked by a table. The theme of the fluted column is repeated on the left side of the painting where it is close to the picture plane, cutting off the right arm of the figure. Art historian Willard Bohn believes the father’s features resemble Napoleon III, a political figure whom de Chirico held in high esteem, and who also, as a symbolic descendent of Dionysos, personifies the spirit of creation.²⁰

In December 1919, following his revelation at Villa Borghese, de Chirico created *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (fig. 26), an enigmatic painting which appears to be a resurrection of biblical figures. Unlike de Chirico’s earlier works that lack human presence, the composition is full of figures in Renaissance-era costume. The folds of the clothing, however, are stylized as if they were sculptures. Oddly, the tall Prodigal Son’s head is bald and his face is obscured behind his father’s. The father’s eyes appear sightless while his golden beard contrasts with a crown of

dark hair that may be a head wrap. The Prodigal Son’s lower robe, with its deep, nearly vertical, creamy folds, has a columnar aspect reminiscent of Il ritornante’s lower torso. This refers to the fact that he was once a statue, as suggested by the empty plinth to the right of the father. The mood of this painting is very solemn and funereal, the figures dark and retiring. The sky is overcast while the buildings with their dark interiors have a feeling of melancholy. Incongruous elements include a miniature Dionysian statue at upper left, a naked cupid lying on the ground on the lower left, and the severed head of an ancient statue gazing upward at the scene of the embrace. The painting has the strange effect of a religious offering to a god, in the form of two pears and two clusters of grapes, some of which lay on a cloth, resting on a base block of a stone altar to the right. The painting is also reminiscent of de Chirico’s foray into Neoclassicism with statue-like people standing on buildings and integrated into the architecture. Further, the figures do not seem to be communicating with each other, a feature of many of de Chirico’s works.

James Thrall Soby remarked that this Prodigal Son painting was “a rather heavy-handed pastiche on Renaissance Neoclassicism, though the embracing figures of the father and son retain some of the distraught power of the artist’s earlier periods.”21 He noted that the painting was inspired by Raphael.22 The painting itself exudes balance and expresses a beauty of form. The majesty of the characters is brought out by the solemn embrace of the father and son. Other characters in the background move quietly in shadow, the folds of their cloaks rippling harmoniously as the colors fluctuate from red to blue. Like Raphael, de Chirico uses his artistry to achieve a spiritual state. Soby also states that this work differs from de Chirico’s earlier works

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21 Soby, 154.
22 Ibid.
in both approach and style. The work, he says, has an oily quality like most of his paintings from 1919.  

The setting for *The Prodigal Son* of 1922 is the *piaze d’Italia*. De Chirico began to paint Italian piazzas after his arrival in Paris in 1911. De Chirico, born in Greece, of Italian ancestry, and having studied and lived in such places as Florence, Munich, and Paris, yearned for a place to call home. He seems to have found this in the geography, history, and art of Italy. It was in two short visits to Turin, July 1911 and March 1912, that he discovered a strange metaphysics of light and shadows which he claimed was most pronounced in the months of autumn. The record of his travels, however, shows that he evidently he had not experienced this. De Chirico absorbed an “aesthetic mythology” of Turin: its “square city, victorious kings, big towers, and sunlit *piazzes*.“ De Chirico was also greatly influenced by the writings of Weininger who expounded on the geometric power of arch and arcade, features that are ubiquitous in the artist’s works.

*The Prodigal Son* of 1922 is a reflection of the artist at the height of his genius, fixated on his art and fascinated by Italian history, the memory of his father, and of the dualism present in artistic creation. This dualism grew out of his reading of Nietzsche, specifically *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), in which Nietzsche found that the art of Greek tragedy is a combination of Apollonian, or rational forces, and Dionysian, spontaneous forces. De Chirico applied this analysis to visual art. In *The Prodigal Son*, a mannequin made of wood and resembling a man grasps the figure of a statue that seems to have come to life: its left arm is upraised and its head

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23 Ibid.
24 It is probable that de Chirico learned of the profundity of the autumn months in Turin from Nietzsche’s description of them.
25 Baldacci, 106.
26 Soby, 40.
bows forward. There is a formal dance-like quality as the two bodies seem to circle, their hands touching each other’s shoulders.

The Prodigal Son is in the form of a mannequin blessed with prodigious attributes. His muscular legs and powerful torso represent an athletic youth in his prime. The wooden tools (set squares and stretcher frames) to the left of his head refer to the world of art and craftsmanship. The thin metal scaffold introduces an element of precision, alluding to the world of technology and nascent industry. The open fan at the mannequin’s crotch suggests a female element and indicates a sexual hybridity. De Chirico’s purpose is obscure to us today, but at the time hybridity was seen as a form of richness and wonder. The elliptical reddish head that is slightly tilted to the side presents a theatrical element. The facial features are absent, and there is the feeling that perhaps this character is masked and in costume. The red legs that show their seams and nail construction are spread in a balletic position. The right leg is diagonally placed so that it draws a line from the bottom left of the painting to the fan and the center of the mannequin. The right foot, however, is bent in a way that eludes a strict diagonal line. The feet are abnormally small and deformed, the toes claw-like and the form of the heels exaggerated.

The statue in The Prodigal Son is given the spark of life. Besides being up-to-date in fashion, it takes on the form of human life, which animates the lifeless material. There is a sense of tiredness with the lowered head as well as a stoic and stiff acceptance of the Prodigal Son. This was not the first time de Chirico worked with statues. His coursework at the Polytechnic Institute in Athens included the drawing of plaster casts of the body. His paintings, such as The Song of Love (1914) (fig. 27) and The Uncertainty of the Poet (1913) (fig. 28) include sculptured head and torso, respectively. De Chirico also painted, in 1922, a double self-portrait of himself facing

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28 Soby, 15.
a statue of himself. One of his most important works was the *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire* (1917) (fig. 29) in which he depicted the marble head of a man with balding hair and dark sunglasses, which may be a reference to Apollo, the sun god.

It is obvious that de Chirico concerned himself with the dichotomy of Apollonian and Dionysian creative forces that he drew from his reading of Nietzsche. The philosopher recognized that the success of Greek tragedy was in the melding of Apollonian and Dionysian forces: Dionysian located in the chorus and Apollonian in the dialogue. Apollo was associated with rational harmony, order, and clarity in the visual arts. He was the god of plastic arts, guardian of the oracle at Delphi, god of prophecy and healing, but also the god of death, and god of the world of dreams. The Dionysian pole is spontaneous and intuitive. It is irrational and deals with intoxication, physical love, and the mysteries of life, as well as the artistic-creative force. Its art forms are music, dance, and lyric poetry.

The statue of *The Prodigal Son*, I believe, has a posed quality to it. This lack of movement, along with the frozen quality of the statue, serves to suspend time or even transcend it. De Chirico has a delicate touch. Details such as the two buttons on the back of the father’s coat stand out as does the rim of his left ear and the heels of his shoes. For the most part, the stone of the man is cream-white and smooth. De Chirico’s unconscious desire was perhaps to resurrect his dead father, to show him both dead and alive (in his memory) at the same moment. Because the statue is a sculpture, one might see it as a reference to its rational and Apollonian nature.

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29 Holzhey, 35.
30 Holzhey, 28.
32 Jean Cocteau (1889-1963), on the other hand, describes de Chirico’s canvases as exhibiting “the gestures, the rapid grimaces of being taken by surprise at their immobility without having had the time to place themselves in a pose.” Jole de Sanna, *De Chirico and the Mediterranean* (New York, NY: Rizzoli, 1998), 28.
Other art historians, such as Willard Bohn, have alluded to the statue’s Dionysian aspects which are the polar opposite of the Apollonian.

_The Prodigal Son_ might subconsciously express desire and regeneration. Red is the color of passion, and the mannequin’s calves are abnormally swollen and tumescent like a sexual organ. The inscribed cones or disks on the mannequin’s right shoulder also elicit a phallic property, as if they could expand outward like a telescope. De Chirico obviously had a love for depicting the muscles of the human body. It is unknown whether he himself practiced bodybuilding although a nude full body self-portrait at around age fifty shows a lack of muscle definition and a preponderance of sagging flesh. The overall red color of the mannequin may also be ascribed to illness or inflammation in some way. During his anxiety-laden travels of his youth, the artist was prone to suffer from severe intestinal disturbances.

The piazza itself constitutes a space of culture and power.\(^{33}\) Most piazzas in Italy are in front of churches or municipal seats. The Italian hills in the background of the painting show both dryness and fecundity. In de Chirico’s _Sull’arte metafisica_ (Rome, 1918) the artist writes of Italy’s superior geographical destiny: “from the geographical standpoint it was preordained that the first conscious manifestation of metaphysical painting should be born in Italy.”\(^{34}\) Keala Jewell, on a section from the above article entitled _fatalita geografica_, writes that “the country is cast as a place of superficiality and ease, and therefore as a paradoxical spiritual desert from which greatness can dialectically spring forth.”\(^{35}\)

Isabella Far, de Chirico’s second wife, noted that the artist “found in the architecture of Italian cities and public squares the initial inspiration for his important metaphysical aesthetic.”\(^{36}\)

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\(^{33}\) Jewell, 51.

\(^{34}\) Jewell, 52.

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

Often de Chirico united antique sculpture, contemporary buildings, and medieval, Renaissance, and Victorian architecture in a single work.\(^{37}\) This approach echoes Nietzsche’s perception of modernity in which “all styles, civilizations, morals and habits can be seen side by side.”\(^{38}\) In The Prodigal Son, the buildings to the right, at first glance, seem innocuous. However, de Chirico had read Weininger and Leopardi where architecture was supposed to evoke a symbolic effect. According to Weininger, the arc fosters a sense of uncertainty and expectation.\(^{39}\) Leopardi’s scheme of the “cassa passatoia” was based on spatial partitioning that exploits the poetics of the hidden and unknown.\(^{40}\) Giotto’s highly metaphysical openings, which communicated a sense of cosmic mystery, were also known to de Chirico.\(^{41}\) Baldacci also noted that the closed shutters found in many of de Chirico’s paintings, as in this painting, represent melancholy, derived from de Chirico’s memory of his father’s death when he was sixteen.\(^{42}\)

De Chirico, in May or June of 1914, began to develop the mannequin figure, a symbol which would dominate his work for the next fifteen years. According to Willard Bohn, the mannequin motif ultimately originates from the work of the poet Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). In Apollinaire’s “Le musicain de St. Merry” (Feb., 1914), the protagonist has a phallic form, is bald, without eyes, nose, or ears, and plays the flute.\(^{43}\) Alberto Savinio followed in May, 1914 with “Les Chants de la mi-mort,” a dramatic poem which he intended to form the base of a modernistic opera-ballet. Savinio composed a musical score to accompany the poem but never completed the project. “Les chants” also contained an *homme-chauve*, without voice, eyes, or


\(^{38}\) Braun, 18.

\(^{39}\) Cowling, 73.

\(^{40}\) Baldacci, 119.

\(^{41}\) Soby, *Giorgio de Chirico*, 38.

\(^{42}\) Baldacci, 132.

Unlike Apollinaire’s Dionysian triumphant figure, however, Savinio created in him a “pathetic tragic character.” Apparently, de Chirico was inspired by Savinio’s drawing of the protagonist for his “Les chants de la mi-mort,” “l’homme sans visage.” Auspiciously, the mannequin motif would fit into the metaphysical structure de Chirico had already erected. But it meant something different to de Chirico, possibly belonging to his Dante-Odysseus theme, a symbol of the archetypal Poet, one of de Chirico’s oldest motifs.

In these years of 1913 and 1914, Bohn points out, the mannequin belongs to “a prosperous era known for its stability, self-confidence, and enthusiasm.” He suggests that it was yet another manifestation of “modernism which peaked in France at that time and consisted of artistic enthusiasm for all things modern.” The mannequin theme was one of the most widely imitated elements of de Chirico’s iconography. Willard Bohn notes that, in addition to Carlo Carrà, Mario Sironi and Giorgio Morandi used the motif. In Germany, George Grosz, Max Ernst, and Oskar Schlemmer were influenced by the mannequin. Other artists who worked in France, such as Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy, Rene Magritte, and Paul Delvaux, took up the theme. Bohn notes that following World War I, there was a shift in the collective modern psyche about the meaning of mannequins. Once a symbol of individual creativity, the mannequin came to represent the “anonymity of modern existence.”

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45 Bohn, 155.
46 Ibid., 160.
47 Ibid, 158.
48 Ibid, 164.
49 Ibid, 165.
50 Ibid., 163
51 Ibid., 165.
Maurizio Calvesi recognized in de Chirico’s early “metaphysical” painting “the crisis of modern man—torn between mechanistic automation and the nostalgia of modern memory.”[52] This insight can be applied to the Prodigal Son painting, where the machine in the form of the mannequin is juxtaposed with the heroic figure of the statue. Further, Soby notes that the automaton reflects humanity’s “helplessness and despair in the face of Europe’s disaster.”[53] Although de Chirico did not see action in World War I, it had struck home in the death of Apollinaire, his close friend. De Chirico had to find an art form to deal with the emotions he felt about this tragedy. William Rubin elaborates on this theme: “The pathos of de Chirico’s mannequin is transmitted by its isolation, incompleteness, need for support, its inability to move, and the fact of its being made of stuff.”[54] It cannot be doubted that de Chirico felt isolated and alienated by the lack of understanding of his art and by his failure to affiliate with modern artistic trends. The mannequin is therefore a response to his own depressing situation in the artistic community.

There were, however, other possible sources for the mannequin besides Apollinaire. James Beck saw the mannequin’s source in wooden moveable figurines (known as lay figures) used by artists since the fifteenth century to study poses and movements.[55] Marianne Martin locates other sources which include “Boccione’s sculpture, Brancusi, knights in armor, Marinetti’s hero Mafarka, Diaghilev’s dancers, dressmaker’s dummies, and Kandinsky’s mute figures.”[56] De Chirico was also fascinated by Carlo Collodi’s story about The Adventures of Pinocchio (1883), a puppet that resembles a mannequin who wishes to become a real boy.[57]

[56] Martin, 91.
[57] Baldacci, 83.
The dualities found in nature, such as the dichotomy of creative masculine forces with intuitive female ones, was fascinating to de Chirico. De Chirico was cognizant of the fact that in spring Dionysian forces erupt on earth.\textsuperscript{58} \textit{The Prodigal Son} evokes a feeling of spring. However, one cannot say whether the mannequin or the statue each represents the Apollonian or the Dionysian, only that these forces are symbiotic. In their joining together, a true work of art is given birth. In the painting, De Chirico achieves a monumental quality that transcends time and approaches the dream state. As de Chirico said: “To be really immortal a work of art must be completely beyond the limits of the human, good sense and logic will be missing from it. In this way it will become close to the dream state and also the mentality of children.”\textsuperscript{59} De Chirico wanted to see the world with the freshness of a child. And, just like a child with his toy, de Chirico “wanted his mannequins to be alive; he did not want their images to represent ideas only.”\textsuperscript{60}

Magdalene Holzhey in \textit{Giorgio de Chirico: The Modern Myth} writes that the mannequin is the modern formulation of the blind seer of antiquity.\textsuperscript{61} Like the blind prophet, Tiresias, the mannequin has the ability of clairvoyance and the gift of augury. Despite lacking eyes, the mannequin seems to be sentient, to engage with reality. The fact that he is illusionistically rendered adds to his believability. The mannequin grapples with the forces of history but also leads us into a new age of hybrid beings, of statues that can come alive, and a serene world based on the scientific principles of Renaissance architecture.

At some deep level de Chirico wished to connect with a sense of prehistory that comes to us through cultural symbols, myth, and memory. An early mannequin painting, \textit{Le Vaticinateur}
(The Seer) (1914-15) (fig. 30) has all these elements. Like the painting of 1922, the mannequin is part muse, part artist. The elliptical head is illuminated like the phases of the moon. The moon has always served as an object of poetic reflection through the ages, a stimulant to the creation of art. The mannequin also represents de Chirico, the artist. The artist is a mythical being, part troubadour and part philosopher, at once in the material world and in the world of the imagination. Here, the mannequin’s quiescent inner sensibility, which searches for acceptance, is revealed by a twisting gaze that faces away from the easel and out of the picture plane.

In the background of Le Vaticinateur, the churchlike structure has a feeling of impregnability, recalling a sense of history that both stretches into the past and marches on in a predictable and “fatal” fashion. The conception of “fatality,” as interpreted by the de Chirico brothers, is that it is an invisible force, devoid of logic, and inherent in matter. According to other sources that I’m applying here, “fatality” is the sense of the inescapability of death and the advance of time. From another angle, de Chirico’s memory of his father and of the history of art were both like fortresses of stone, signifying immutable properties that are constant and forever.

The artist’s mathematical mind is reflected in the chalk drawing on blackboard where architectural details vie with a human form that looms over the orthogonal lines. Unlike the 1922 painting, the mannequin has a schematic eye consisting of a circle inscribed by an asterisk and bound to the head by curving lines. According to Bohn, these markings reproduce Cretan symbols for the daemon, a benevolent supernatural being. Bohn explains that such beings are exemplified by the heroes of the Risorgimento but may also be taken from Greek mythology, either gods (Zeus, Dionysos, Apollo) or heroes taken from the Iliad or the Odyssey (Hector,

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62 Baldacci, 223.
63 www.fr.wikipedia/Fatalit%C3%A9. (1/15/12).
64 Bohn, “Phantom Italy: the Return of Giorgio de Chirico,” 134.
Andromache; Odysseus, Ariadne). Bohn states that it was the task of de Chirico’s metaphysical art to reveal the daemon’s presence, to dramatize their existence in everyday life. If we look at the painting in this light we can see that de Chirico used the statue to represent Risorgimento figures such as Camillo Cavour who for him had attained a level of the supernatural. Bohn believes, additionally, that Cavour is a descendent of Dante Alighieri, the statue from an earlier series of de Chirico’s paintings, and that he also embodies the creative spirit. There is no evidence to suggest, however, that the artist believed that godlike beings actually walked the earth.

The secular nature of the painting cannot be refuted, and it is reflected in de Chirico’s espousal of Nietzschean philosophy. “Nietzsche’s philosophy of life opposed Christian thought and values with those he favored and proposed, the Dionysian, which rejected all systematic thinking in favor of self-liberation.” In Nietzsche, de Chirico discovered the doctrine of eternal return, the repeated circular course of all things as well as the understanding that the world is founded on myth. This “mythic vision of the world,” Baldacci explains, “is animated by mysterious forces hidden from the eyes of man…” In the philosophy of eternal return, “time is either no longer or not yet and it is eternal: within itself it encloses past and future.” Nietzsche also defined art, and not religion, as the real metaphysical activity of humans. According to Nietzsche “Art distorts reality for reality is intolerable. The artist, so as to be able to live in the

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Taylor, 82. Nietzsche ridiculed the concept of a Christian God and searched for deeper and more viable foundations for moral values.
69 Baldacci, 92.
70 Ibid.
71 Braun, 93.
world of real contingencies, rebuilds and recreates it by raising up an unknown world of beauty which he enjoys with delight.”

Through his great imagination, de Chirico was impelled by a desire to communicate his dreams. In *The Prodigal Son* he expressed a longing to unite with his dead father, Evaristo. In “Rêves” published in *La Revolution surrealiste* (1924) he recalls a dream about his father: “In vain I struggle with the man with gentle squinting eyes...no matter how tightly I grasp him, he gently frees himself merely by moving his arms apart a little...It is my father who appears to me in my dreams and yet when I look at him he is not at all like when I saw him alive, at the time of my childhood.” Such an exposition expresses an admiration and love for his father whose death surprised him despite the father’s prolonged illness. In de Chirico’s memoirs, he describes an oppressive feeling of melancholy that descended on their family. “The emotional shock following the death of my father, frequent intestinal troubles and the sultry heat of the Athenian July had made me feel tired, melancholy, and discouraged...” His recollections take on a surreal hue as he recounts a walk with his father in which the father informs him that his life is ending while his son’s is just beginning. De Chirico must have revered his father for being an engineer, constructing a rail system in Thessaly, for being a vanguard in the birth of the modern era. He recognized a debt to his father: it was the father’s remunerative work as well as the constant lessons in language and drawing that he provided which made de Chirico’s life, and that of his brother’s, as artists possible.

To emphasize the dreamlike quality de Chirico used architecture and perspective. He said: “Great art is based not on copying nature but on dimensions, lines, and forms of eternity and the

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74 Cowling, 80.
76 De Chirico, 47.
infinite, and these were present in Greek and Roman architecture.” In *The Prodigal Son* there is a hallucinatory quality to the buildings with their vibrant colors and rapid recession into space. De Chirico was known to experiment with perspective and often his orthogonals do not line up. In his earliest paintings, distance is exaggerated with tiny figures extended into deep space, and long shadows hint at ominous and threatening existential forces. In this work, however, the figures are brought to the foreground as if on a stage, and the colors are bright and intense.

De Chirico sought to reveal the enigma inherent in our being and in the objects of the world. An enigma resists any attempt at knowledge and rational understanding. He was passionate about his new art form for he thought he had revealed a new truth about reality. Baldacci writes: “Metaphysics is the absence of logic, the mythical foundation of the world, in which every sign or form is a mystery charged with infinite possibility.” Other artists and writers were entranced by this new way of translating the world. According to the writer, Ardengo Soffici (1879-1964), “metaphysical art is modern yet figurative, harmonious yet producing surprises, expressive of emotion but not religious or sentimental.” Being able to make visible the subconscious world, and a “faith in the poetic impulse of dreams” was also the premise for the Surrealists who were ecstatic over de Chirico’s early work.

*The Prodigal Son* raises questions about the purpose of art as well as what is going on within the painting itself. In *pittura metafisica*, essence lives “within” rather than “beyond” matter. Objects are divested of their context and in so doing reveal unexpected meanings. In *The Prodigal Son*, besides drawing on the feeling of reconciliation between father and son, there is a connection of the mannequin to the industrialized age with its arithmetic relationships and its

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77 Cowling, 72.
79 Baldacci, 95.
modern materials. The choreographed embrace has an emotional stability and a directness that both honors the heritage of the artist and shows his coming of age. The Renaissance architecture further elaborates on the possibilities of the human spirit and alludes to the genius of the Italian mind in solving aesthetic problems. The painting is invested with emotion, an emotion that is less dogmatic than earlier representations of religious stories. De Chirico sought to paint the “look of the miraculous,” which previously, as he explained, “art had enjoyed before easel painting became mainly decorative.”

De Chirico, whom people in the art world portrayed as “the great solitary,” had actually learned a great amount from his predecessors. Beck noted an admiration for Giotto, Uccello, and Masaccio. During his studies at the Munich Academy in 1906, de Chirico was influenced by the nineteenth-century German Romantics, Caspar David Friederich (1774-1840) and Karl Blechen (1798-1840). However, most art historians attribute the greatest influence to the magical realism of Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901) and the “highly troubling dream reality” of Max Klinger (1857-1920). Most sources on de Chirico illustrate Böcklin’s Ulysses and Calypso (1882) (fig. 31) in order to point out the similarities between that and de Chirico’s The Enigma of the Oracle (1909) (fig. 32). Both depict a solitary figure, a meditating hero (possibly Odysseus) surveying the distance out at sea, while being physically and psychically opposed to a more supernatural being sitting in the rocks, or in the case of the oracle, behind a curtain. Böcklin’s technique and approach were ways of “reconciling myth and contemporaneity by way of a transcendent annulment of time and history.” We see the same thing happening in de Chirico’s

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82 Soby, 26.
83 Crosland, 135.
84 Beck, 85.
85 Soby, Early Chirico, 7.
86 Soby, Giorgio de Chirico, 29.
87 Baldacci, 37.
The Prodigal Son. In this painting the statue representing antiquity with its accompanying myths intersects with the contemporaneous reality of the poet/artist and his scientific tools.

Klinger’s etching, *Accorde*, from the series *Brahmsphantasie Opus XII* (1894) (fig. 33) shows an intermingling of fantasy with myth. The work was one of eighteen intaglio prints and twenty-three lithographs, some of which illustrate scores of music, which were dedicated to Klinger’s friend, Brahms. In *Accorde*, there is a powerful sense of the overwhelming majesty of the world. A man playing piano, assisted by a woman who is a page turner as well as a guide to the beyond, sit on a veranda overlooking the tumultuous sea. Below them, at the bottom of some steps, a tormented Triton supports a harp that is molded with the fierce face of a Greek god, while two Nereids pluck the strings. In the water, a sailboat is cast about on the waves, while a shadowy temple lies embedded in the cleft of a distant island. Towering glaciated mountains, obscured by clouds, rise in the air. This mystical aspect of the world, with its hidden forces, and its ambiguous modern perspective, as well as the workings of the subconscious and the dream, were stimuli for de Chirico’s thought. In *The Prodigal Son* we see an equal nostalgia for the legendary ideals of the Renaissance and the Risorgimento combined with the possibilities of the modern poet to make art from his rapport with nature.

Another artist to affect de Chirico’s perception of the enigmatic power of things was Alfred Kubin. Kubin’s *Vision of Italy* (1921) (fig. 34), like de Chirico’s rendering of mysterious piazzas, relies on architecture and the psychology of public spaces to evoke a mood. In the same way that Kubin introduced fantastical elements such as sculptures of winged horses, de Chirico incorporated his headless statues. Besides abridging the time from different eras, the sculptures add a dreamlike quality to the landscapes. It is clear that de Chirico used elements from many earlier artists to conceive formal and conceptual properties of his art.

88 www.wesleyan.edu/dac/view/brahmsphantasie/index.html (1/13/12).
The transformation of de Chirico from a painter of inanimate objects and empty piazzas to more human content is apparent in *The Prodigal Son*. Soby says that, at this time, the artist was “abandoning poetry for the dimmer rewards of scholarship and erudition.” Obviously, de Chirico’s revelation of 1919 was important for it demonstrated to him the importance of métier. The artist began to reaffirm perspectival systems as poetic instruments. Michael Taylor points out that de Chirico faced a dilemma: “Attracted by the pull of classicism and the art of the past he was also conflicted by his ties to Parisian art circles.” At the same time, in 1918, there was also a *rappel a l’ordre* instigated by Jean Cocteau, which called for the return to traditional subject matter. Holzhey points out a change in de Chirico’s art. Now “buildings were inhabited; perspective restored; shadows corresponded to objects; people, statues, and buildings blended harmoniously; and there was an increased treatment of painterly details.” Either the painter had lost his innocence, or the romantic inspiration of his early period was of “an intensity that could not survive his youth.” William Rubin notes that “his psychological security was purchased by a commitment to conservatism and tradition.” After 1914, de Chirico began recycling previously existing imagery. We see recurrent use of the mannequin, statues, the schematic trains and boats, smokestacks, repeating arches, and sunlit piazzas. Nevertheless, he continued to call his painting “metaphysical.”

De Chirico identified himself with Mercury, the messenger who shows us how to see the invisible just as a metaphysical painter does. But at the same time he began styling himself as the artist whose facility with and knowledge of Renaissance and Baroque painting were second

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89 Soby, *Early Chirico*, 89.
90 Taylor, 118.
91 Ibid.
92 Holzhey, 61.
94 William Rubin in *De Chirico: Essays*, 72.
95 Baldacci, 362.
to none in the twentieth century. According to Margaret Crosland, De Chirico had a dual mission: to prove himself *pictor optimus* for eternity, and secondly, to destroy the belief that there was any value in modern art. According to de Chirico, “modernist painters and critics were all useless intellectuals—all failures and they know nothing.” Thus, the artist was establishing a persona—a refusal to conform, an appetite for the universal and the unknown, and an instinctive feeling for “quality.” He was the great outsider of modern art, untouched by the latest avant-garde developments.

The truth, Taylor points out, was that de Chirico appreciated the implications and possibilities of Cubism. There is a collage-like element to *The Prodigal Son* that is much like taking fragments and piecing them together. This is already apparent in paintings such as *Troubadour* (1917) (fig. 35) and *Hector and Andromache* (1917) (fig. 36) in which the materials of the mannequin are splintered, and their thrust into space more developed. What makes *The Prodigal Son* stand out, however, is the melding of myth and autobiography by way of a personal identification with the themes and characters represented.

There are deep philosophical premises to be found in de Chirico’s ideas on art. Paolo Baldacci’s text, which treats the metaphysical period from 1888 to 1919, addresses the theory that leads to the “crossroads” painting, *The Prodigal Son*. Baldacci cites Heraclitus’s mythic vision of the world, which was like that of the metaphysical artist. It was “characterized, on the one hand, by a Nature animated by mysterious forces which are hidden from the eyes of man, and on the other, by a wisdom which speaks with the voice of madness, which neither articulates

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96 Taylor, 138.  
97 Crosland, 137.  
98 Ibid., 119.  
99 Ibid., 135.  
100 Taylor, 26.
nor obscures but signifies through signs.”101 Meaning is ultimately derived from the relations the mind constructs among signs. Writing in Valori Plastici in 1919, de Chirico describes something called the “solitude of signs” in which “every logical possibility of visual or psychic preparation is by definition excluded.”102 By divesting things of their context one guarantees the generation of new unexpected meanings. It may perhaps suggest “inhabited profundity,” the disturbing feeling one may have at seeing an object and not knowing what inhabits it.103 De Chirico was also aware of Leopardi’s Theory of the Infinite: “that that which cannot be seen but only intuited is necessarily more poetic and mysterious than that which can be seen.”104 This understanding allowed de Chirico to work in an allegorical mode, suggesting absolute truths by way of metaphor and obscure references.

Arthur Schopenhauer’s theories, too, greatly informed de Chirico’s philosophy. Baldacci summarized Schopenhauer’s primary idea: “behind the veil of appearances operates an irrational and unifying force which constitutes true reality, beyond the realm of the senses to which he [Schopenhauer] gives the name ‘will’.”105 According to Schopenhauer “only art is capable of providing man with the true perception of the world which he calls ‘object hood of the will.’”106 This search for a truth beyond appearance is a common one for many artists, but de Chirico seems to have taken it to a greater level. His recognition of the inexplicability of human life and its relation to objects or architecture that only redound its mystery parallels the thought of Schopenhauer. For Schopenhauer, “ideal forms appear only to the artist or genius who apprehend them as universal essences as ‘things in themselves’ available to thought and intuition in their

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101 Baldacci, 92.
102 Ibid., 193.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid., 80.
105 Ibid., 94.
106 Ibid.
metaphysical quality, devoid of causal, spatial, and temporal nexuses which rules the world of representation and regulates common knowledge.” 107 These theories led to a process for de Chirico of “denaturalization,” of stripping away the superfluous. 108

According to Baldacci, irony is a key trait of metaphysical art. “If nature hides its true essence beneath the world of appearance, the artist must not accept it as it is but rather capture it through a process of intellectual translation which takes the name of irony and which liberates it from the vestments of appearance, exposing its internal anatomy, its spectrality, its status as sign.” 109 In The Prodigal Son the embrace becomes a kind of sign. Besides standing for the dualities of nature, it speaks of art’s rapprochement with science and modern times, and of de Chirico’s singular relation to his father and his embrace of Italy. According to Baldacci, the artist is a mediator of a recondite truth of nature and he reveals the mystery of things through a “mystical” process. 110 Truth can only be attained through metaphor and by the representation of mythic events.

De Chirico, while searching to explain the enigmas of the world, found in the Prodigal Son parable the means to declaim his view of religion which was primarily a secular one. This painting is not about human’s relation to God or about the moral implications of sin and redemption, but it is a chaste way of asserting his love for his father and his allegiance to the Italian state. De Chirico held a strong belief in the need for mysticism in art but it was a laic mysticism. Baldacci explained: “A painting is a representation that functions in exactly the same way as the spectacle of a rite of initiation as practiced by the mystery cults of antiquity, and the artist conducts himself according to the same procedures used by the ancient sages and earliest

107 Baldacci, 94.
108 Ibid., 96.
109 Ibid., 288.
110 Ibid.
By penetrating into the enigmas of life, which includes the enigmatic relationship of father to son and all its associations, De Chirico was pursuing the mystery of religion in a modern context.

In *The Prodigal Son*, in his desire to illuminate the enigma of things, de Chirico shows a clairvoyant ability to see the invisible. The invisible includes the ability to see the root of human relationships, to take memory and turn it into solid form, to visualize time by a sort of mystical alchemy. Through the parable of the Prodigal Son, the artist revives the memory of his relationship with his father, a man with all the formality of the Victorian age, a man whose reputation he hopes to live up to. In *The Prodigal Son* he creates a new language of living stone and tailor’s dummy that virtually brings time to a standstill. The viewer is anxiously awaiting the denouement of this dance.

De Chirico is granted by his muse, the mannequin, the ability to see the true nature of time. In many of his works de Chirico shows his concern with time by painting clocks over train stations. Time for de Chirico is a sort of perpetual present in which he injects his own personal mythology. In *The Prodigal Son*, the past is brought into the present, inspired by the muse-mannequin who represents both the imagination of the child and the creative impulse. In a way, the artist is giving form to his own soul by linking the inadequate mannequin with the masterful statue. We are led to believe that objects can be instilled with life and meet in an ideal world, which is also the world of dreams.

It is through a re-remembering that the mannequin can unite its enlightened being with the divine essence. Something miraculous is occurring on the surface of the canvas as de Chirico comes to his maturity in this painting. The artist comes face to face with himself, and accepts himself and his history. In the painting, de Chirico remembers his youth, symbolized by the

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111 Ibid.
mannequin, and the complex feelings he experienced about his father. By holding the statue at a distance, he is also reviewing his father’s life and comparing it to his own.

In *I’ll be there…the Glass Dog* (1914) (fig. 37), one of the prototypes of the mannequin paintings, we see a related struggle with corporeality and spirituality. The question de Chirico raises here is where the soul resides. De Chirico paints a schematic heart contained within a rectangular chamber cut out of a nude torso. He juxtaposes this with a chalk drawing of a mannequin that has a seam traced through the center of its back. What is lacking here is the divine spark. The artist searches to explain the origin of life, the cause for the heart to beat, but all he can come up with are some arcane symbols at top center. For the soul to function there must be a connection between the ghost (a form lacking all substance but which is a symbol of personhood) signified by the drawing and the body with all its naturalistic detail. Juxtaposition of such seemingly unrelated subject matter is at the core of de Chirico’s poetic language and sheds light on *The Prodigal Son* of 1922.

The essence of life cannot be captured by a dotted line from here to there or from the arterial connections of the heart. Instead, as Baldacci theorized, infinity is the first and foremost principle of de Chirico’s art. “Infinity is the distilled essence of the work, the ‘spectrality’ that renders it eternal, similar to a dream, an image which, as Leopardi says, does not describe but suggests.”112 In *The Prodigal Son* we feel a cold distance between the embracing figures but also the great distances of the piazza. The feelings engendered by the embrace seemingly cannot be measured; they are in flux. The embrace is more about imagining the defining paradigms of the relationship in order to chart a future course. The viewer feels the immensity of the world, as if de Chirico’s father, symbolized by the statue, was all there was to him in the universe. Death, then is a subtext in this painting, and refers back to the artist’s own prophecy that his father, in a

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112 Baldacci, 148.
sickened state, was soon to expire. The painting is therefore not about a religious response to the parable, but about distances, about indeterminate sensations, about the immensity of the world, and the feelings of presentiment that inspired the work itself.

During de Chirico’s career, he was in a search for a spiritual home just as Italy was a culture in search of itself, for its identity as well as for the capacity to control the heavy burden of its own history. De Chirico and other patriotically inclined artists believed they could contribute to Italy’s unification through art. Camillo Cavour (1810-1861), Vittorio Emmanuel II (1820-1878), Carlo Alberto (1798-1849), and Napoleon III (1808-1873) all belong to a group of historical figures associated with the Risorgimento who are referred to in de Chirico’s paintings. Bohn noted that several of de Chirico’s bald statues (pre-dating 1917) in his paintings have been identified as representing Cavour. “Having become Prime Minister when his small country was struggling to recover from the defeats of 1848-9, he [Cavour] died leaving his king ruler of a state five times as large, able to claim rank as one of the Great Powers.” Jewell writes that “for de Chirico, the question of heroes and the question of the achievement of a “national good” for Italy are logically interrelated.” In The Prodigal Son, the statue which represents the artist’s father also represents the leaders of the Risorgimento—“the sign of a vanished hour for which the artist’s nostalgia is felt.”

While de Chirico was inspired by the ideals of Italy’s famous leaders he also was affected by nature. It was in Turin where the charm of the autumnal light combined with the mystique of the architecture coincided with his vision of the enigma of things. De Chirico set down his sensations: “Turin is a city of apparitions. One enters a square and comes upon a man of stone,

113 Bohn, “Phantom Italy: The Return of Giorgio de Chirico,” 133.
114 Ibid.
115 Derek Beales, The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 76.
116 Jewell, 81.
117 Soby, Early Chirico, 41.
who fixes one with his gaze as only statues can. Oftentimes the horizon is closed off by a wall, from behind which sounds the whistle of a locomotive, the rumble of a train about to part: all nostalgia of the infinite is revealed beneath the geometric precision of the piazza.”\textsuperscript{118} The nostalgia of the infinite, de Chirico would explain, is the all-consuming desire for height and depth that inhabits every work of art.\textsuperscript{119} Turin, too, was the site where Nietzsche, de Chirico’s favorite philosopher, went mad in late 1888.\textsuperscript{120} Nietzsche’s passages (in \textit{Ecce Homo} and in his letters) about Turin’s “serene profundity of October afternoons, its piazzas delineated by the shadow of long porticoes, beyond which ones view extended as far as the surrounding hills…,” Baldacci observes, were probably committed to memory by de Chirico “whose own revelations became an extension of Nietzschean ‘delirium.’”\textsuperscript{121}

De Chirico painted two similar versions of the Prodigal Son in 1924 and 1965. The 1924 version (fig. 38) has more gesture and more feeling than the other two. It exudes melancholy as the figures are located in a ruined landscape covered with stone fragments. The Prodigal Son rests his head on the father/statue’s right shoulder while the father/statue’s left hand reposes on the mannequin’s horizontally extended right arm. The son, this time, has a right arm although it is not clear whether his left arm is intact. The mannequin’s torso is broken up into red and green geometric blocks of wood and metal. The shiny green cone-like volume of material does not necessarily belong to the mannequin himself. The mannequin’s yellow-brown cape seems to consist of rags that curl out in the breeze, patterned by repeating folds. The father/statue’s proportions are heftier than the other Prodigal Son paintings and his hair has ringlets. The Prodigal Son also holds a shepherd’s staff to which a tied green sack is attached, perhaps some

\textsuperscript{119} Baldacci, 148.
\textsuperscript{120} Holzhey, 8.
\textsuperscript{121} Baldacci, 127.
kind of talisman. The buildings to the right are also different in structure and coloring. The painting from 1922 has two stories including a high arcade while the version of 1924 has three stories with a smaller arcade and a reduced-size cubed edifice on top. The earlier version has red walls and grey window shutters while the later one has light-yellow colored walls, light-yellow shutters and the building’s corner faces forward. The stone block which sits on the base plinth on the right is also missing.

The darker mood of this painting is similar to de Chirico’s *Hector and Andromache* of 1924 (fig. 39). In both paintings the gold color harmonies that contrast with darker tints in the shadowed portions remind one of bronze. There is also a romantic feeling derived from the sweep of the clothing where the material’s contours are exaggerated as if caught in a wind. De Chirico has invested greater emotion in these two works. In *The Prodigal Son* we feel the pathos of the Prodigal Son more directly because of his debased posture. In the *Hector and Andromache* the two figures hold each other in an ardent embrace. This painting has a Baroque sensibility because of its intense movement and extreme lighting effects (not to mention the castle turret and prancing horses). Virtually the entire background is painted in dark values. This type of lighting is present in the painting from 1924 but not to as great a degree.

The painting from 1965 (fig. 40) follows closely *The Prodigal Son* of 1922, although the artist has taken the liberty to change many of the colors. Here, the statue consists of a much whiter stone, the son’s head and lower legs are white instead of red, the son’s torso—covered in a coat—is darker colored, and the fan is now white. Everything is sharper and details such as the strip of white shirt with buttons on the mannequin’s torso stand out. The building to the right is now green and black, and black shadows now assert themselves on the piazza. The sky is a cross between the green one of the earliest work and the dark blue of 1924. The small cumulus clouds
of 1922 and 1965 are nearly the same, while the painting of 1924 shows more white cirrus, higher elevation, clouds.

De Chirico produced still more versions of the Prodigal Son theme—one in 1926, two similar ones in 1973 and 1974, and a final one in 1975. De Chirico created a Prodigal Son image (mixed media) for the program cover of Diaghilev’s ballet, *Le Bal*, in 1929 (fig. 41). The composition of this work is very similar to *The Prodigal Son* of 1974. Both works depict an interior space with a tall toga-covered Prodigal Son standing by his father seated in an armchair that faces at a three-quarter angle to the picture plane. The father’s clothing is made up of architectural attributes such as fluted columns with capitals and brick masonry. The son’s head is slightly tilted down to his father and his left hand is outstretched dramatically. De Chirico also produced a lithograph of the Prodigal Son theme for Jean Cocteau’s *Metamorphosis*, in 1929 (fig. 42).  

*The Prodigal Son* of 1926 (fig. 43) demonstrates de Chirico’s interest in classical sculpture as the nude son is set in a contrapuntal position with body and head idealized in proportion and features. Both father and son are in monochrome which serves to emphasize the anatomical features and folds of clothing. The red armchair and the orange-brown stage-like floor are the only elements treated in full color. The son’s huge hand which rests on the back of the chair is mannerist in style, much like the hand of the figure on the right of the later *Archaeologists* (1927) (fig. 44). This plasticity seems to be more pronounced in de Chirico’s later works. As in other paintings by de Chirico, the figures do not communicate but are in their own worlds. The father appears troubled and in mourning while the Prodigal Son’s expression is dolorous and occupied by care.

The Prodigal Son paintings of 1973 (fig. 45) and 1974 (fig. 46) are very similar in coloring and composition. These are domestic scenes in which a partially clad Prodigal Son stands over his father in a lounge chair. In the first version there is an open door in the background with windows on either side of a narrow room. In the later version the artist has centered the corner of the room in the background, a cylindrical column supports a bouquet of flowers, and the right side of the room is bordered by a blue curtain. The artist has varied the positions of the father and son in the two paintings. In one the father is sitting in three-quarter view while in the other he faces directly forward. In both cases the son is standing nearby, to the father’s left side in the earlier painting, and behind him in the later one, with his hand resting on either the father’s shoulder or chair. The abstract quality of these paintings is brought home by the metaphorical treatment of the father with his body made up of architectural attributes. The Prodigal Son seems to be honoring the father’s role as a signifier of civilization and scientific principles. The fact that the rooms are like empty boxes makes one think of spare beach houses on the one hand or the spare economical lines of classic Roman residences on the other. Without nature interfering in these paintings there is less of a monumental statement but more about the intrigue of father and son interacting on a daily basis.

The lithograph for *Metamorphosis* repeats many of the elements from the 1973 and 1974 versions. The mainly nude Prodigal Son stands in close proximity to the seated father who is dressed in a costume made up of architectural elements—bricks, pilasters, columns, and capitals. The top hat of the father has the fluting of a column. In the *Metamorphosis*, like the 1974 version, the father faces forward and his torso consists of parts of buildings and what appear to be the waves of the ocean. We see a similar tumbling out of architectural pieces in the painting of *The Archaeologists* (1927).
In all these similar Prodigal Son works, de Chirico modulates between giving facial features to the Prodigal Son, depicting two dots for eyes, or leaving the face blank. Generally, the father is absent of facial features except for the realistic rendering of the 1926 painting. The color systems of the paintings of 1973 and 1974 are also quite pared down with an accent on bright primary colors. Shading is often streamlined while the modeling of bodies is abbreviated. Disegno seems the most important element. Lines are often uniform in width, delineating the figures or providing, as in the floor boards, an indication of perspective. The angst of these later paintings is also reduced as the father, and even the son, becomes more a thing than a real person.

The Prodigal Son of 1975 (fig. 47) seems to have lost the intensity and emotion from the comparable paintings of 1922, 1924, and 1965. De Chirico has included many of his favorite iconographical subjects. These comprise an equestrian statue, tiny figures in the far distance, flags blowing in the wind, Renaissance architecture, green skies, strange jagged shadows, a plinth made of two rectangular white stones and an upright cylinder, and the father and son combination with the scaffolding of draftsman’s tools behind the son again. The Prodigal Son is nearly the same as the 1922 version, however his body has more seams and nail holes. The head also includes schematic and cryptic bands indicating sensory organs. The whole color scheme is brighter, including such items as the yellow fan in the groin area, and the yellow ground. There is even a bright yellow reflection on the front edge of the father/statue. De Chirico includes his full repertoire of metaphysical objects, however, the emotion is missing. Somehow, everything is too clean (there is no gradation of space in the piazza), and the painting makes you think that it is indeed a copy of an earlier idea—the 1917 drawing--whose aura has somehow worn off.

123Rubin, “De Chirico and Modernism,” 55.
Although de Chirico doesn’t appear to have been religious (when asked whether he believed in God, he said he didn’t know\textsuperscript{124}), the theme of the Prodigal Son apparently meant much to him. De Chirico believed that future painting must bring to life new and unknown sensations. He brought to the old formula of father embracing son a new paradigm which was less about individual qualities and more about dualisms present in nature. The concept of dualisms present in artistic creation came out of his reading of Nietzsche. The phenomena of rational and spontaneous forces meeting, and the male and female poles interacting, developed out of this. The theory of the non-sense of reality and the enigma of things also came from Nietzsche. Both Leopardi and Schopenhauer’s philosophy contributed to de Chirico’s search for the truth behind appearances. But it was de Chirico who brought to his compositions the deep meaning of his revelations, who discovered how a language of signs operates between objects. It was de Chirico’s modern interpretation of time combined with his understanding of Böcklin’s interpretation of myth that established him as a new force in art, and paved the way for such movements as the Neue Sachlichkeit\textsuperscript{125}.

The Prodigal Son imagery has also become a type of cultural symbol that circulates in our memories and dreams. We praise the compassion of the father and we give witness to the penitence of the Prodigal Son. De Chirico taps on the sentimentality people feel for the story and adds his own personal twist: the poignant memory of his own father, his poetic take on politics, and his return to “classicism.” There is a psychological confrontation occurring here. As much as the artist loved his father, De Chirico could not repeat his father’s life, but had to seek his own direction, and in a subconscious way, he was asking for his father’s blessing for the life he led. He saw himself as mannequin, somehow not really prepared for life, but whose artistic training

\textsuperscript{125} Holzhey, 61.
and innate talent allowed him to survive as a person. Accordingly, instead of speaking in the physical language of form and color, his best work speaks in the psychological language of imagery and association.\textsuperscript{126}

Nietzsche said, “only by returning to the dangers of the labyrinth that modern man could explore the enigmas and come face to face with the terrible.”\textsuperscript{127} In the famous myth, fourteen Athenian youths were sacrificed each year as war reparations to King Minos of Crete in order to feed his Minotaur, a creature that lived in a labyrinth and who was half-man, half-bull. In thinking about the Prodigal Son theme, the labyrinth for de Chirico consists of the fear of escaping a threatening world, where any moment you might be devoured by a scathing critic or a friend’s deceit, where the only protection to be found is in the love of a family member. In \textit{The Prodigal Son}, the viewer becomes aware of the awesome and frightful emotions that operate within the drama of the father and son embrace. As the artist embraces his new metaphysical world he also probes the bonds of father and son which are an enigma in themselves.

As de Chirico explores the spiritual essence of relationships, \textit{The Prodigal Son} can also be seen as a response to the altering of the physical world by modern scientific theories—relativity, quantum mechanics, psychology.\textsuperscript{128} The mannequin and its physical supports represent a new wave of knowledge of the modern world embodied in its rational propositions, its industrial mechanisms, and its hope for the betterment of humanity. We can see this contribution in de Chirico’s fascination with arcane chemical-like formulas in his paintings, in the inclusion of steam engine trains and train stations, in his interest in the psychology of father and son. That de Chirico participated and was the initiator of a new school of painting that offered new ways of perceiving the world reflected his hope for the betterment of humankind.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[126] Braun, 116
\item[127] Taylor, 81.
\end{footnotes}
De Chirico’s *The Prodigal Son* “affirmed a humanism of the subconscious—a romantic faith in the poetic impulse of dreams.”\(^{129}\) It was the Surrealists, led by André Breton, who recognized in de Chirico the dream world they had been seeking in visual representation. The surrealist painter Magritte cried when he saw de Chirico’s *The Song of Love* (1914).\(^{130}\) But de Chirico soon moved in an opposite direction from the Surrealists who, in 1926, started to denounce his latest work. De Chirico avidly studied Renaissance painting technique in an effort to change his style. Such works as *Roman Villa* (1922) (fig. 48) signaled his new approach that exhibited an interest in Neo-Classical and Neo-Baroque painting. In his new style, Celia Rabinovitch notes, “he sought a sense of spatial continuity rather than discontinuity, a fluid painterliness rather than the dry flat handling of his early work. He attempted to create a seamlessly illusionistic space that contradicted his previous approach.”\(^{131}\) This seamlessness is apparent in *The Prodigal Son*. The transformation of conceptual elements, however, is harder to discern. One could argue that in *The Prodigal Son*, the element of surprise is still there, but the poetics of time and its annulment are reduced as compared to previous paintings. As Matei Calinescu stated, “the modern artist is torn between his urge to cut himself off from the past—to become completely ‘modern’ and his desire to found a new ‘tradition’ recognizable as such by the future.”\(^{132}\) This seems to be de Chirico’s dilemma, but at the same time he enriched and diversified his later subject manner by including all manner of mannequins, his gladiator series, the colored horses on the beach, the furniture in the valley, the mysterious baths, and so on.

As Roger Friedland wrote “Modernity has brought enormous and increasing changes in the tensions between the immediacy of the here and now, our physical location in space and time,

\(^{129}\) Soby, *Early Chirico*, 93.
\(^{130}\) Hozhey, 67.
\(^{131}\) Rabinovitch, 155.
and the sorts of experiences, actions, events and whole worlds in which we can partake at a
distance.”¹³³ In these paintings of the Prodigal Son there is a new rational and philosophic
narrative that touches on the myth of legendary biblical figures but is secured through the
authority of reason. In this imaginary world, it seems logical that mannequin and statue should
meet, as it were, on a stage. De Chirico has the viewer firmly ensconced in the action, with the
light strongly illuminating the statue and mannequin from the right. And yet we are separated by
the concreteness of the image, by our knowledge of its unreality. The mind of the artist is
reduced to mental processes which we behold within the Prodigal Son dance: innovation inspired
by tradition, subversion of the meaning of being human, together with an oscillating otherness.
This otherness could be a projection of de Chirico’s feeling of outsidership within the artistic
community.

We recognize in de Chirico’s “dance with the father” an appreciation for the value of time.
Since the Renaissance, “there is a new awareness of the preciousness of practical time—the time
of action, creation, discovery and transformation.”¹³⁴ In The Prodigal Son, time appears to come
to a standstill. In the painting, there is a tension between presence and absence. By imbuing
spectral figures with biographical elements, the artist takes part in “a perpetuation of the past that
it tries to negate, and an opposition of the notion of the future that it tries to promote.”¹³⁵
Obviously, modernism is a stage in the history of Western civilization, but it is also an aesthetic
concept. In this second case, de Chirico strives to conceive something that can neither be seen
nor made visible. In a way, the artist’s personal identity, and thus the identity of the Prodigal Son
himself, becomes less important as his solution to the narrative of father and son is a generic one.

¹³³ Roger Friedland and Deirdre Boden, NowHere: Space, Time, and Modernity (Berkeley, CA: University of
¹³⁴ Calinescu, 19.
¹³⁵ Ibid., 68.
The figures in *The Prodigal Son* have a sacred aspect but also a secular one in which many meanings can be extracted depending on the viewer. Issues of human freedom and human destiny are certainly at work here. De Chirico posed the question whether our humanity must remain locked into the form of stone or whether we can break free by using the instruments of reason. De Chirico asserted that through reason we can discover the enigmatic essence of the world. And it is through reason that our modern world is founded. Albrecht Wellmer writes: “Modernity, in whatever eye it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovering of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities.”¹³⁶

In *The Prodigal Son* the viewer must learn to accept de Chirico’s fictions, the reanimation of dead objects, and therefore, the creation of a world of new realities. But this is only accomplished by inserting a personal spark into the painting, that special biographical element. This inclusion of the personal seems to avert the crisis that de Chirico was facing at this juncture in his life, when he had lost his enthusiasm for the metaphysics of his earlier years, and attained a point in his maturity where the old forms and subjects had lost their relevance. At the same time, the work reflects a fundamental change in the conception of knowledge that people were experiencing in this historical time. The painting is a depiction of his period as much as the artist himself would have refuted this idea. The time was ripe for a new secularism, and *The Prodigal Son* is an example of the transition to this new outlook.

Chapter 3: The Prodigal Son in Scenes of Debauchery: Depictions by Max Beckmann and Aaron Douglas

In the gospel according to Luke, 15:13, the Prodigal Son converted his share of his family’s property into cash, left his home, and “went off to a distant country where he squandered his money in reckless living.”¹ It was only after famine reached the land, after he was indentured as a common laborer, and hunger affected his body and spirit, that he decided to return to his father and home and to repent “for his sins against Heaven and [his father].”² In the history of art, many artists have depicted the iconic scene of the return of the Prodigal Son to the father, but many fewer have attempted to show the Prodigal Son wasting his inheritance in dissolute living among prostitutes. In this chapter, I will focus on two works by two stylistically different artists, Max Beckmann (1884-1950) and Aaron Douglas (1899-1979), both of whom treated the theme of the Prodigal Son in scenes of debauchery. Other artists from the period who created Prodigal Son images focused on the scene of “the return.” In this chapter, I argue that the modernism of these two paintings is reflected by formal qualities, as well as by conceptual aspects, such as the portrayal of individuality on Beckmann’s part and the depiction of the Harlem community of the 1920s by Douglas.

Both Beckmann and Douglas were of the same generation, but their lives could not have been more different. Beckmann found early success in his native Germany where he was feted by upper-class society and where he viewed himself as part of the long tradition of European painting. Douglas, an African American, relocated from Kansas to Harlem, New York where his life was shaped by the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance in their search for a black aesthetic. Beckmann and Douglas’s art, however, shares many of the same aspects as well as the

² Ibid., 101.
philosophy that inspired them. The works are both entitled *The Prodigal Son*, Douglas’s a
gouache from 1927, and Beckmann’s an oil from 1949 (figs. 49 and 50). Each artwork provides
a new perspective on the idea of sin. One focuses on the personality of the Prodigal Son while
the other one provides more context for his sojourn in an iniquitous milieu. In comparison to
earlier works by other artists that treat the same episode, the narratives are more modern in their
approach because they deal with psychological issues as well as issues concerning sexuality and
capitalism. Beckmann critiques society’s manners and foibles through the interaction of the
protagonist with a slew of aggressive brothel women. Douglas redirects his thematic interest
away from the individual and more towards the community experience where three silhouetted
contiguous dancers are all given equal attention.

Both Beckmann and Douglas left their birthplaces in order to work with greater freedom
elsewhere and in search of more promising spiritual rewards. In Beckmann’s case, he was forced
into exile by Hitler’s anti-modern artistic policies. Beckmann spent the war years painting in
Holland before moving to St. Louis to teach and work in 1947. 3 Douglas left his Midwestern
homeland in 1925 to learn about the black experience and enjoy the stimulating environment of
Harlem. 4 Both artists were attuned to social developments and moved with the flow, although in
Beckmann’s case his emigration served to save his life.

The politics and the fallout of the two world wars greatly shaped Beckmann’s career. His
work as a medical orderly in East Prussia and Flanders during World War I had a role in
affecting his aesthetic. Despite his early enthusiasm for the war and his constant sketching, he
suffered from a nervous breakdown after observing terrible carnage and death. 5 This exposure

4 Susan Earle, “Harlem, Modernism, and Beyond,” in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle
(Lawrence, KS: Spencer Museum of Art, 2007), 11.
5 Lackner, 13.
was compounded by the brutal treatment by the Nazis who from 1932 until his departure in 1937 caused him to live in internal exile, not being able to exhibit his art or to speak publicly about his it.⁶ One of the most prominent painters of the New Negro Movement, Douglas, with the encouragement of black figures such as Alain Locke and W.E.B. DuBois, developed a new black aesthetic in visual art. According to Cheryl Ragar, during the time of Jim Crow it was unthinkable that a black man would become an artist and reach such prominence.⁷

Both artists recognized the contributions of the common person and a need to uplift the lower classes through art. Beckmann was concerned with the deification of humankind through the revealing of the self. He spoke out against “man’s metaphysical dependence and saw the goal of a free humanity the individual who must accept absolute self-responsibility and must himself become God.”⁸ His many self-portraits show this desire to get to the root of his individuality. Douglas indicated “divine” light rays, but the artist’s message of racial uplift centers on the evocation of the souls of black folk.⁹ Both artists had a sense that they were the demiurges of humanity, using art as a tool for progress.

Beckmann’s *The Prodigal Son* is notable for its bright colors that remind one of stained glass windows. The artist manages to use the whole color spectrum in the painting: from the pink band and yellow patch of background on the upper left, to the green dress of the woman on the left, to the lavender dress of the woman embracing the Prodigal Son. The pure ultramarine of the prostitute’s hat and dress on the right contrasts with the orange table top, the orange-red tulips, and the yellow-orange hair of the woman standing in the lavender gown. The flesh tones are

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⁸ Schulz-Hoffmann and Judith C. Weiss, eds. *Max Beckmann Retrospective* (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis Art Museum, 1984), 239.
exceptionally bright, and although black outlines are ubiquitous, there is strong modeling. An abstract quality is attained through the rectilinear forms of the background and the curved forms of the chair back in the right foreground and the curve of all the women’s arms.

The dense colors of the Prodigal Son’s garment with its dark stripes over a rust base attracts and draws in the eyes of the viewer. A rhythm is set up between the various horizontal arms with their gold bracelets and the vertical arms of the Prodigal Son who props up his head with hands on cheeks. The artist has taken extraordinary liberties in the expression of emotion including a prostitute with a half-blue face and her strangely exposed breasts who tilts away from the Prodigal Son while she grabs him with her long clawlike fingers. Details are important to Beckmann because they add to a sense of believability and heighten the atmosphere. The pinkish flower in the blonde’s hair, the Prodigal Son’s reddish eyelids, and the lavender streak in his hat illuminate the picture’s emotions by a technique of high contrast.

The composition flows from the Prodigal Son’s right elbow (which brilliantly breaks the line of the table top) through the blue drinking glasses, the diagonal of the bracelet of the blonde woman, and into the white scarf of the Prodigal Son. The slanted pinkish column on the right edge of the painting helps lead the eye into the scene. The grey fluted area or column in the right background may link this picture to an idea of antiquity although the characters are in contemporary dress. The faces here are simplified, with strongly defined noses, and black streaks for eyes that lack pupils. The two faces in profile on the right and left of the painting direct their gazes to the Prodigal Son and increase the intensity of the painting. The face on the far right edge seems to be witnessing the action and his features are exceptionally large in comparison to the others. The compression of space, pressing everything towards us, and the unreasonable crowding of figures and objects, are aspects in many of Beckmann’s paintings.
In contrast to Beckmann’s extreme use of color, which borders on Expressionism, Douglas employs a nearly monochromatic palette. This Prodigal Son painting was one of eight gouaches to illustrate James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones* (1927), a series of poems meant to evoke a soulful black Southern preacher. The painting employs Douglas’s signature style of black silhouetted figures with slits for eyes and angular body positions. The three figures here, one man between two women, are linked by layering the silhouettes over each other and by the placement of the man’s left hand on the shoulder of one of the women and his right hand on the back of the other.

In Douglas’s painting, geometry is wedded to different gradations of light. There appear to be four shades of blue which, according to the amount of illumination, starts from a very light blue and descends into gray and then black. The primary source of illumination is a conical light fixture which hangs at a diagonal from a thin black cord that protrudes from the top edge of the painting. The light from the fixture spreads in the pattern of a cone around the figures although it appears to bisect part of the forms of the women who extend beyond the light source. If one looks closely, one can see that the women are made up of two shades of black.

Douglas’s painting captures an immediate moment. Oddly, the feet of the dancers seem to float on the bright dance floor, while the left foot of the man and part of the legs and body of the woman on the right are obscured by the symbolic objects which jut out from the margins of the picture. The grey wedge which spreads out from the left frame and hooks over the spotlight is reminiscent of the “hand of God” which is symbolized in Douglas’s illustration of *The Creation* (fig. 51). This depiction, however, has an urban feel to it: the noise symbolized by the trombones extending from the ceiling, and the sense of the dynamic city interactions by the close proximity of the figures.
The objects that help frame the picture express the feeling of temptations for those living in the city. On the right side, the corner of a dollar bill breaks into the space and overlaps the woman’s head and chest. Below this, a bluish playing card with the sign of a spade angles out from the bottom right, penetrating the floor space. The curvilinear lines on the card, which appear to be the light blue curls of a king or jack, show the influences of Art Deco. In the left bottom corner, the cube of a die juts into the picture plane. In the upper left corner, the letters “G” and “I”, standing for “gin,” enter diagonally into the picture.

Tempering the iniquities of gambling, prostitution, and alcoholism are symbols of music. The pipes of brass instruments with the silhouette of a player’s arm extend down from the top of the painting. To the right of this are some concentric circles in black and gray that are bisected by the picture’s edge and which may symbolize sound. Unlike the work of Beckmann, Douglas’s style does not include any modeling of forms or foreshortening but instead he highlights with color. He introduces and integrates the color of light-yellow/orange into the dollar bill, the playing card, the die, the letters for “gin,” the light fixture, and the slit eyes.

While Douglas’s work was notable for its formal qualities, Beckmann’s work was marked by his quest to understand the self. Beckmann believed “all essential things in art since Ur in Chaldea, since Tel Halaf and Crete have originated out of the deepest feeling for the mystery of Being and this primordial feeling motivated the striving of the soul to become a self.”10 The focus of philosophic attention on the “I” or self had been a matter of concern since Descartes’s insight “I exist as a thinking being.”11 Beckmann revealed an introverted spiritual disposition in his verbal reflections: “What are you? What am I? These are questions that incessantly hound

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11 Sluga, 208.
and torment me but which also perhaps contribute to my artistic efforts.” Beckmann believed that only in the freedom of the city and in the anonymity of the crowd were people able to find their true selves. In the scene of the Prodigal Son, the artist explores how the character’s self becomes a tangible force in the midst of the over-solicitous trio of women.

Beckmann decried any form of collectivization and prized individuality. He said “The only reality is the life of the individual. It is the metaphysical, which exists undivided and in its entirety in every individual, that vanquishes nature.” It is this split between the world and the individual that Beckmann tried to paint. In his essay “Letters to a Woman Painter” (1948) he elaborated: “The visible world in combination with our inner selves provides the realm where we may seek infinitely for the individuality of our own souls.”

This interest in the metaphysics of the self or the individual is bound up with Beckmann’s conception of God and space. “The essential meaning of space or volume is identical with individuality, or that which humanity calls God,” he wrote. God, for Beckmann, was to be found within human beings. “For we are God--by Jove, perhaps an altogether inadequate and pathetic God, but God all the same.” At the same time, after his painful experience in the first world war, Beckmann only had negative thoughts about God: “My religion is arrogance toward God, spite for God. In my pictures I reproach God for everything he has done wrong,” he said in 1919. For Beckmann the creative process also had a religious dimension. Through his art he

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13 Sarah O’Brien Twohig, “Beckmann and the City” in Max Beckmann: Retrospective, 98.
15 Belting, 123.
16 Ibid.
17 Lloyd, 36.
“sought to situate himself in the presence of the Gods.”\textsuperscript{19} His goal was “to fashion types out of our own time that could be to us what the Gods and heroes of past peoples were to them.”\textsuperscript{20} This is exactly what Beckmann did by bringing into the modern world a Prodigal Son whose inner character was demonstrated by his struggle to set himself free from social forces embodied in the women.

Beckmann urged readers to “love humanity, despite its meanness, banality, dullness, its cheap contentment.”\textsuperscript{21} He also felt angry that “God created us that we cannot love one another.”\textsuperscript{22} He believed that the artist was a modern priest of culture and art “the mirror of God embodied by man.”\textsuperscript{23} The artist visualized himself as the spokesperson and conscience of his time. He saw the role of art to help people live their lives.\textsuperscript{24} As Schulz-Hoffmann wrote, “It struck Beckmann that the impossibility of freedom within every individual could only be countered with defiance and contempt.”\textsuperscript{25} It was perhaps this thought and his belief in the potential of the individual--which he shared with Nietzsche—that he formulated his idea of “aristocratic Bolshevism,” a philosophy of social equalization.\textsuperscript{26} Besides calling for a metaphysically sophisticated elite to provide balance and meaning in times of instability, he also suggested, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that the common person should dress up in tuxedos and tails.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{20} Haxthausen, 80.
\bibitem{22} Belting, 8.
\bibitem{23} Ibid., 50.
\bibitem{25} Schulz-Hoffmann, \textit{Max Beckmann: Retrospective} (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1984), 48.
\bibitem{26} Belting, 113.
\bibitem{27} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
Beckmann’s identification with the impoverished and marginalized, as well as with the boundaries of existence, had much to do with his painting. He wrote: “We have to get as close to people as possible [so] that we can give them a picture of their fate.” In the Prodigal Son painting, the artist is identifying with the common person and he is common because of his dress, including his working class hat, but also because of his presence in a brothel. And, it is because of his existence at the edge of society that we recognize his individuality and his vitality.

Beckmann’s personal loneliness and alienation from society is reflected in this work, but the painting also shows there is a way to transcend the temporal. According to the parable, the Prodigal Son “comes to himself” when he begins to envy the carob pods his pigs are eating.

In Beckmann’s Prodigal Son, we also witness a moment of self-consciousness when the protagonist realizes how deeply he has sunk into depravity. According to Beckmann, “art was supposed to testify to life but also to stand above it, indeed to become so powerful that life finally would have to follow its dictates.” With his hands pressed against his face and his eyes sunk in thought, the Prodigal Son wishes to escape the hell of surrendering his flesh to the female heathens. It was Beckmann’s purpose “to capture the terrible thrilling monster of life’s vitality, to confine it, to beat it down, and to strangle it with crystal-clear razor-sharp lines and planes.” In his Creative Credo of 1918 he invented the term “transcendental objectivity” to describe his “quest to capture the deepest register of nature and humanity in a pictorial style that trapped […] volume in the plane, depth without losing awareness of the plane, the architecture of the picture.”

Although the Prodigal Son painting is not entirely representative of Beckmann’s style, it does show “his desire to affirm life in his art, to encounter his negative impulses, and to lead people

30 Belting, 19.
31 Long, 25.
32 Karen Lang, “Max Beckmann’s Inconceivable Modernism,” in Of Truths Impossible to Put in Words, 54.
out of their mechanistic slavery and back to something vital and human in the beautiful sense.”

In many of his paintings we are faced with the problems of human coexistence, but somehow the artist is able to overcome his fetters, and reach a place of contemplative peace. As in The Prodigal Son, his art was supposed to bring people face to face with their situation so that they would be moved to overcome or change it.

In his writing, Beckmann often used metaphors of the curtain or the veil to describe how he searched behind reality for a deeper truth: “Art resolves through Form the many paradoxes of life and sometimes permits us to glimpse behind the dark curtain which hides the spaces unknown and where we shall be unified.” In the painting of The Prodigal Son the veil is removed, and we gain insight into the character of the son and a reflection on the artist’s own preoccupation with moral issues, as well as how he confronted aesthetic problems. “My heart is attuned to a rougher more vulgar art. Not the kind that lives in dreamy fairy tale moods in a poetic trance, but which gives direct access to the frightful, vulgar, spectacular, ordinary, grotesquely banal in life, an art that can always be immediately present to us where life is most real.” According to Beckmann, the cause of people’s anguish is located in their conception of space. In addition to space being equal to individuality and God, Peter Selz noted that Beckmann also equated space with death.

For Beckmann, art as well as ideas about God, love, and country were necessary in order to hide “that sinister black hole.” He struggled to define and fill up “an infinite space which one

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33 James Van Dyke, “’Max Beckmann, Sport and the Field of Cultural Criticism,’” in Of Truths Impossible to Put in Words, 220.
34 Kruszynski, 97.
36 Schultz-Hoffman, 18.
38 Selz, Max Beckmann (1996), 88.
must constantly pile with and kind of junk so that one must not see behind it the terrible depth.”

This outlook translates in *The Prodigal Son* into a very shallow space that, like many of Beckmann’s compositions, is filled with figures, practically a *horror vacui*. Beckmann’s compression of space here compares to other modernist art, such as Cézanne’s *Card Players* (1892-93) (fig. 52) in which there is also a “tension between opposites” and a “suppressed storytelling.”

One of Beckmann’s major statements was that “if you wish to get hold of the invisible, you must penetrate as deeply as possible into the visible.” Hans Belting spoke of Beckmann’s path to a higher reality through the understanding of the individuality of one’s soul. Beckmann’s interest in the nature of the soul was evidenced by his extensive reading in philosophy, poetry, and Theosophy and works belonging to the Hermetic tradition. The Hermetic tradition includes Alchemy, Gnosticism, Kabbala, Neoplatonism, Rosicucianism, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy. Beckmann agreed with Gurdjieff’s teaching of self-revelation by means of opposing forces. Beckmann’s early work also drew on the study of primitive art and faith in “a renewed Christianity that might prove a crucible for the emergence of new collective values.” This materialized in such paintings as *Descent from the Cross* (1917), *The Woman Taken in Adultery* (1917), and *Adam and Eve* (1917) (figs. 53, 54, 55).

The artist started to abandon Christian themes upon finishing *The Night* (1918-19) (fig. 56), a painting about torture and human cruelty that recounts a domestic break-in and reflects the

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40 Heller, 145.
43 Belting, 94.
atmosphere of political murders and disquiet following the aborted revolution of 1918.\textsuperscript{47}

Ultimately Beckmann became convinced of the existence of the soul and believed in some kind of transmigration of the spirit.\textsuperscript{48} He saw no universal solution, only individual salvation.\textsuperscript{49} Anette Kruszynski notes, however, that Beckmann’s notion that “self help was the only way to better one’s situation was replaced by the conviction that people were not in fact in need of salvation because they themselves were God.”\textsuperscript{50} Beckmann saw an ultimate state of freedom reached through and after death. It is possible that Beckmann was imagining his own confrontation with death in this picture because it came one year before a fatal heart attack and he had been suffering bouts of angina and treating himself with nitroglycerine.\textsuperscript{51}

Beckmann’s work was grounded in the tradition of German idealism of Nietzsche and Wagner. It proposed that “an enlightened humanity brought to realization in the aesthetic sphere would eventually transform society.”\textsuperscript{52} Like Nietzsche, Beckmann saw life as “an all-embracing struggle that must be fought and won each day.”\textsuperscript{53} Selz notes that the artist had both a desire to retreat into himself and a need to be a figure of public adulation.\textsuperscript{54} Beckmann had a powerful need to withdraw from the world (perhaps a prerequisite for self-expression)\textsuperscript{55} and he also eschewed identification with any particular school or style. Some historians claim that he was an Expressionist. Stephan Lackner argues “the inner compulsion, the almost demonic drive to formulate his vision, makes Beckmann an Expressionist.”\textsuperscript{56} That his art transcends time and has

\textsuperscript{47} Selz (1996), 28.
\textsuperscript{48} Selz, 88.
\textsuperscript{49} Belting, 101.
\textsuperscript{50} Kruszynski, 104.
\textsuperscript{51} David Ehrenpreis, “Between Heaven and Earth: Max Beckmann’s Last Representations of the Artist,” in Of Truths Impossible to Put in Words, 324.
\textsuperscript{52} Sabine Eckmann, “Max Beckmann: From Space to Place,” in Of Truths Impossible to Put in Words, 271.
\textsuperscript{53} Kruszynski, 97.
\textsuperscript{54} Selz (1964), 61.
\textsuperscript{55} Belting, 19.
a universal quality, says Lackner, also marks him as an Expressionist.\textsuperscript{57} Barbara Buenger writes:

“For all his Symbolist insistence on being hermetic and mysterious, Beckmann was ultimately an Expressionist artist who like Picasso, Matisse, Rouault, Nolde, and Kirchner spoke in loud and emphatic ways.”\textsuperscript{58}

Beckmann himself was opposed to Expressionism and warned his students “against following the dictates of their emotional states directly without transmuting them by acts of reason and formal structure.”\textsuperscript{59} He saw himself as a European painter and not just a German painter and was profoundly affected by the French vanguard. “Beckmann made use of Cubist techniques to subvert space and achieve a sense of suffocation” which is apparent in \textit{The Prodigal Son}.\textsuperscript{60} The artist greatly respected Picasso’s work and found inspiration in the work of Georges Rouault. He also shared Matisse’s attraction for “heavy black outlining, abstract motifs, and sensuous surfaces.”\textsuperscript{61}

Obviously it has been difficult to fit Beckmann’s work, with its extreme individualism, into the pantheon of twentieth-century modernism. The artist had a great admiration for Netherlandish art, its wide range of human expression.\textsuperscript{62} Karen Wilken relates that “Beckmann’s taste for Nordic myths and symbols, his love for the theatrical and the grotesque, his sophisticated palette of jewel-like colors all make his work irreducibly Germanic.”\textsuperscript{63} Beckmann himself considered his work grounded in the “masculine mystique” of the four great painters: Mâlesskircher, Grünewald, Breughel, and Van Gogh.\textsuperscript{64} According to Wilken, Beckmann also

\textsuperscript{57} Lackner, (1977), 9.
\textsuperscript{58} Barbara Buenger, \textit{Max Beckmann’s Artistic Sources} (New York, NY: Columbia University, 1979), 345.
\textsuperscript{59} Selz (1964), 36.
\textsuperscript{61} Stehlé-Akhtar, 28.
\textsuperscript{62} Barbara Buenger, 251.
\textsuperscript{64} Rainbird, 23. Beckmann objected to art that was too feminine or too decorative in nature.
owed a debt to progressive German painting of the generation preceding his—Max Lieberman and Lovis Corinth—“who offered a model of expressive realism in place of the idealized romanticism of ‘official’ nineteenth century German art.”\textsuperscript{65} Because German painting did not have a central position in Modern art, this also had a detrimental effect on the world’s appraisal of Beckmann’s work.\textsuperscript{66}

In the final analysis, Beckmann emerged as a post-Expressionist who defined some of the central criteria of the New Objectivity or \textit{Neue Sachlichkeit}. In 1925 in Mannheim, Gustav Hartlaub curated a New Objectivity exhibition that included work by Beckmann, as well as that by Otto Dix and George Grosz.\textsuperscript{67} The work was manifested by “an engagement with concrete reality, an objective view of the world, and a sobering provocative matter-of-factness.”\textsuperscript{68} Franz Roh, an art critic, proposed the name Magic Realism to refer to the new revolutionary tendency, starting in the 1920s, which “tried to find some firm tangible and meaningful reality in the wake of the confusions and dashed utopias of the immediate past.”\textsuperscript{69} Beckmann was one of the founders of a new realism that would isolate the object in order to create a sense of heightened awareness.\textsuperscript{70} The original theory expresses “a desire to go beyond traditional mimesis and to represent the hidden, hitherto unperceived connections between objects of the quotidian.”\textsuperscript{71} According to Hans Sluga, “the artists of the New Objectivity were interested in processes through which self-conception is constituted and they shared a sense of the alienating character of these processes.”\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{65} Wilken, 1.
\textsuperscript{66} Belting, 11.
\textsuperscript{67} Lackner (1983), 37.
\textsuperscript{68} Sluga, 206.
\textsuperscript{69} Selz (1964), 37.
\textsuperscript{70} Selz (1996), 34.
\textsuperscript{71} www.columbia.edu/cu/english/orals/magic_realism.htm (1/3/12).
\textsuperscript{72} Sluga, 211.
The Prodigal Son painting has a biographical basis to it because Beckmann painted it during his years of exile in America. He left Berlin for good the day after Hitler’s speech on July 18, 1937. The occasion was to celebrate “The Great German Art Exhibition” at the opening of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich. The “Degenerate Art Exhibition” or “Entartete Kunst,” for which several of Beckmann’s paintings were confiscated, was to begin the following day. Rainbird explains, “Hitler set before the artist a set of stark choices: yield to the will of national cultural politics and conform; withdraw into internal exile and suffer the prohibition on working and exhibiting that destroyed the possibility of living from their chosen vocation; or go abroad and continue working.” Beckmann found refuge in Amsterdam where his sister-in-law lived, and because he could not obtain a visa, he spent the next ten years painting in isolation. As Beckmann wrote in an earlier reference to exile, in 1932: “One feels at ease alone, on the island of one’s soul.” Finally, after an offering of a teaching post at Washington University in St. Louis, Beckmann was able to come to the United States in 1947.

According to art critic Carter Ratcliff, “Beckmann was always in exile; self-excluded from ordinary life and the points of view that sustain it.” The artist “identified with Odysseus, the boldest of seafarers, who, condemned to wander for years in exile, far from his homeland, learned wisdom after many encounters with the gods.” In America, Beckmann’s style changed so that he had “bolder colors, his paint was more sensuous, and his arrangements were simpler.” Beckmann was able to create 250 paintings during his exile, including five

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73 Lloyd, 29.
74 Lackner (1977), 28.
75 Sean Rainbird, “Afterward” to Max Beckmann On My Painting (London: Tate, 2003), 36.
76 Lloyd, 45.
78 Stehlé-Akhtar in Beckmann in Exile, 45.
79 Haxthausen, 67.
monumental triptychs. As the Prodigal Son of Luke found himself disoriented in a foreign land, so it was for Beckmann in America, and he shows this in *The Prodigal Son*. Moreover, Beckmann wrote enigmatically in his diary of Feb. 9, 1949: “Beckmann at last moved to a far country, and slowly we saw his figure growing more indistinct. Finally, it disappeared entirely in uncertain distances.”

The subject of the Prodigal Son had interested Beckmann earlier in his career when he completed four gouaches on the theme. These are *The Feast of the Prodigal Son, The Return of the Prodigal Son, The Prodigal Son Amid Swine, and The Mocking of the Prodigal Son* (figs. 57-60), all from 1918. The works have an expressionist feel to them. The subject matter and figures fill the spaces with movement and are pushed forward into the picture plane. The drawing is far from naturalistic and in some cases local coloring is abandoned. The expression of hands on face as a sign of guilt or remorse is a common motif that resurfaces in the painting of 1949. Faces are also distorted and caricatured. In the painting of *The Feast* the artist portrays a cow with horns facing into a landscape with adumbrated buildings and a blue sky filled with stars and a partially eclipsed moon. Beckmann may be commenting on the fact that the fatted calf of the parable had to be slaughtered to welcome the Prodigal son home.

The painting of *The Prodigal Amid Swine* is perhaps the most cynical of the representations. It shows the depressed Prodigal Son, hands on eyes, overwhelmed by the bodies of pigs, in various perspectives, some of which are suckling their mother. This harks back to Dürer’s engraving of 1497 (fig. 61). However, in Beckmann, the viewer finds it difficult to establish where the swine ends and where the Prodigal Son begins. *The Mocking of the Prodigal Son* reminds one of some of Beckmann’s more overtly political works such as *The Ideologues* (1919) (fig. 62), with its

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81 Lackner (1977), 156.
primitive drawing style and its grim accusing faces. The Return contrasts a skeleton-like Prodigal Son with a healthy confident father figure, the son’s expression reminiscent of Edvard Munch’s The Scream (1893) (fig. 63). It seems that Beckmann, at this early date, had grasped the potential for developing the theme of the Prodigal Son, and while these works were not perhaps successful, they helped distill in his mind what would later become his definitive painting of the Prodigal Son.

Wendy Beckett writes that for Beckmann, the Prodigal Son painting was a “road not travelled.”\(^{82}\) The Prodigal Son is a self-portrait that might have been. Beckett explains that Beckmann “resisted the allurements of the flesh though some of his work suggests he did so with difficulty.”\(^{83}\) Temptation does appear as a theme in some of his other works. In the triptych called Temptation (1936-37) (fig. 64) Beckmann shows an artist gazing upwards at his model while chained to his easel. Lackner notes that the bluish-black idol at the center reflects the Chaldean myth concerning the origin of humankind where bisexual beings were split by a sword, and henceforth, craved unification to heal their wounds.\(^{84}\) In the painting Brother and Sister (1933) (fig. 65) the artist elaborates on the conflict between libido and moral law, as he narrates the story of incestuous love between Siegmund and Sieglind which Richard Wagner had adapted from an old Norse legend for his Ring of Nibelungen.\(^{85}\) Separated by a huge dark sword, the nude figures bound together by their desire, the man passionately advances toward the woman who acts coolly seductive.\(^{86}\) In such portrayals, Beckmann, “as creative genius, is the guardian of primal truths and the redeemer of the alienation suffered by man.”\(^{87}\)

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83 Ibid. Beckett does not list specific evidence for this, only that he “steeled his spirit not to waste itself.”
85 Schulz-Hoffmann, 254
86 Ibid.
87 Belting, 53.
In the Prodigal Son painting, the artist “rebels against the passive acceptance of one’s own role as victim.” Beckmann also addresses the central problem of modern people—the anguished feeling of separation from the natural world and the fear of loss of personal identity. These prostitutes are “soul-snarers.” The coquettish women who surround the Prodigal Son are also reminiscent of Man and Woman (1932) (fig. 66) in which the man’s disassociation from the world, signified by his turned back, is contrasted with the lyrical curves of the naked woman whose attention is absorbed by succulent exotic flowers. Beckmann was fascinated by the man/woman dichotomy, two different ways of being human. Beckett says “he credited women with just as much primal force as men.” The women--blonde, brunette, and black-haired—also show diversity which reflects the fact that the Prodigal Son “took his journey into a far country.”

Barbara Stehlé-Akhtar notes that Beckmann’s work became more and more sensual over time. Beckmann brings out the prurient nature of these women through the painting of their raw flesh. The hues undulate from a deep orange to a very light yellow near the nipple of the woman standing. The fact that the women’s breasts are so exposed reveals that he thought that these women’s purpose was solely sexual. At the same time, Beckmann searched through his medium to reveal “the ideal of woman as an elegant and spiritual force.” In some way, in The Prodigal Son, Beckmann is commenting on the contradictions within society concerning the positive uses of the female body, and the morality which must keep intractable temptation in check.

Beckmann’s words from 1946, indeed, show his cynical and pessimistic view of human society.

88 Schulz-Hoffmann, 41.
89 Clark, Sources of Imagery in the Hermetic Tradition, 15.
90 Schulz-Hoffmann, 308.
91 Beckett, 77.
92 Ibid., 80.
93 Lackner (1977), 156.
94 Stehlé-Akhtar in Beckmann in Exile, 48.
95 Buenger, 262.
He spoke of “a boundless contempt for the lascivious bait with which we are repeatedly lured back to take life’s bit in our own mouths.”

Beckmann’s art expresses many dualities that are present in *The Prodigal Son*. The artist viewed the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian forces as an engine of creativity. Here, the intoxication of sex meets up with the rationality of conserving one’s resources. Beckmann thought in terms of dualities: “dark and light, hell and heaven, damned and blessed, sin and guilt on the one hand and redemption on the other.” He saw a metaphysical duality of black and white (white, the substantially beautiful, and black, the ugly, which negates) and felt he had to realize himself in both.

Other dualities exist. *The Prodigal Son* is an opportunity to examine what is moral and what is immoral. It showcases the simultaneity of the contemporary and the archaic. The work is also marked by the classical relation between humanity and nature. The male drive to procreate is subsumed by the need to maintain one’s selfhood. Formally speaking, there is the dichotomy of subjective self-expression balanced against the need for objective imitation of the visible world. This subjective expression becomes a problem for the viewer as Beckmann uses allegory to refer to mythology and historical events, all bound up with his personal experience.

The Prodigal Son painting is a response to the “loss of human wholeness and relatedness to the world” that Beckmann had integrated into his personality through his experience of World War I and his forced exile. At times, during his sojourn in Holland, as bombs exploded around

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96 Schuls-Hoffmann, 47.
97 Ehrenpreis in *Of Truths Impossible to Put in Words*, 326.
98 Selz (1996), 53.
99 Sluga, 215.
100 Heller, 145.
102 Eckmann in *Of Truths Impossible to Put in Words*, 273.
103 Clark, 13.
his residence, he felt he would not survive.\textsuperscript{104} In the painting, the Prodigal Son has his hands on his ears as if to withstand the shock of these bombardments. The Prodigal Son is also full of self-pity, an emotion that Beckmann scorned. “I do not cry for I despise tears and consider them to be a sign of slavery,” he said.\textsuperscript{105}

Balance is a key word in Beckmann’s ideology. The artist saw himself as simultaneously experiencing the world and standing outside of it.\textsuperscript{106} He was the mediator between purely representative art and abstract expressionism.\textsuperscript{107} He expressed himself best in allegory and in the triptych form which allowed him to articulate utopian ideals at the same time as specific truths. His paintings symbolically communicate his world view. His goal was “to create a new mythology from present day life.”\textsuperscript{108} At the same time his paintings, especially \textit{The Prodigal Son}, were some form of self-confession.\textsuperscript{109}

In \textit{The Prodigal Son}, Beckmann synthesized the biblical story with autobiography. Art offered a way out of his human dilemma, an effort to “transcend […] the enticements of the material world.”\textsuperscript{110} This is interesting because Beckmann was known to value physical well-being.\textsuperscript{111} In the U.S., Beckmann received the attention he sought. Besides the admiration from his students, he received an honorary doctorate at Washington University, and his work was exhibited in a large traveling retrospective in 1948, curated by Perry Rathbone of the City Art Museum of St. Louis.\textsuperscript{112} Beckmann also received the first prize for his painting \textit{Fisherwoman} in the exhibition “Painting in the United States” organized by the Carnegie Institute of Pittsburgh in

\begin{thebibliography}{112}
\bibitem{104} Ehrenpreis, 338.
\bibitem{105} Beckett, 42.
\bibitem{106} Ehrenpreis, 326.
\bibitem{107} Ibid., 330.
\bibitem{109} Spieler, “Pictorial Worlds, World Views: Max Beckmann’s Triptychs,” in \textit{Beckmann in Exile}, 58.
\bibitem{110} Ehrenpreis, 325.
\bibitem{111} Selz (1964), 76.
\bibitem{112} Rainbird, “Chronology” in \textit{Max Beckmann}, 280.
\end{thebibliography}
1949. Surely, Beckmann felt redeemed for his self-discipline during the war years, and this is reflected in the attitude of resistance exhibited by the Prodigal Son in this painting.

Douglas was not as prolific as Beckmann; however, his importance to the development of a modern black aesthetic rates him as one of the great innovators of the twentieth century. His murals were the most exemplary part of his œuvre, but he contributed many illustrations to books and magazines, such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. In 1927 he created the gouaches for Johnson’s *God’s Trombones*, which featured sermons on subjects ranging from “The Creation” to “The Judgment Day.” The paintings, rather than focusing on specific verses, provide larger thematic overtones, seen from an African American point of view, and sometimes, in the case of *The Prodigal Son*, seen through the contemporary filter of 1920s Harlem.

Harlem was the Mecca for the modern Negro during the 1920s. During the period between the wars there was a massive movement away from the South toward urban centers in the Northeast, the Midwest, and the West. Harlem became a cultural capital where black peoples from the United States, Caribbean, and Africa encountered each other, producing a change in the global black self-image.114

Douglas, who grew up in Topeka, Kansas, received a B.F.A. degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1922, and was teaching art at a high school in Kansas City in 1924 when some influential people recognized his talent. Ethel Ray Nance of the National Urban League, Eric Walrond, a writer from the West Indies, and Charlotte O. Mason, a white Manhattan dowager, urged Douglas to come to New York where a great cultural efflorescence was taking place.115 After reading the special March, 1925th issue of *Survey Graphic* devoted to Harlem,

113 Ibid., 283.
115 Cheryl R. Ragar in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, 82.
Douglas decided the time was right to seek his destiny. After arriving in Harlem, Douglas found a mentor in the German artist, Winold Reiss (1886-1953), who offered the Kansan free lessons. Reiss believed that the African American community had an aesthetic that could be tapped and that “one should use their life experiences and heritage as a source of inspiration.” Reiss was an excellent draftsman and his sensitive portraits of black people demonstrated his respect for African Americans and Native Americans. Reiss encouraged Douglas to study African art and introduced to him important elements of European and American modernism.

The pillars of the New Negro Movement such as Alain Locke (1886-1954), a writer and philosopher, also encouraged the young Douglas to study the forms of African art in order to develop a new racial aesthetic. Blacks were no longer to be a burden on society but were to determine their own destiny. Ideals such as physical freedom, political power, and the training of brains and hands were paramount. Into the divide came such figures as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Wallace Thurman, Augusta Savage, Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, and Countee Cullen. The idea was impressed on African-American artists that they should be cognizant of new subjects that centered on the life and times of black people. It was also believed that “until art of black folk compelled recognition, they would not be rated as human.”

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116 Ragar, 82.
117 Amy Kirschke, Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 27.
121 Kirschke, 65.
Like Beckmann and modern art, Douglas’s art was never adequately integrated into American modernist art and culture.\textsuperscript{122} Both artists shared an attraction for more primitive art forms. Both artists synthesized elements from ancient sources, traditional painting, and modernist painting and design. In Douglas’s case, he borrowed from Egyptian tomb painting and African Dan masks from Ivory Coast,\textsuperscript{123} as well as from Cubism and Art Deco.\textsuperscript{124} As stated earlier, both artists created away from their homelands, although Douglas relocated for the greater artistic opportunity it promised. The major difference between the two artists is that Beckmann was dedicated to understanding the self and the individual while Douglas’s art demonstrated greater attention to the life of the community, in the expression of racial commonality. These traits can be discerned in the comparison of the artists’ Prodigal Son paintings.

Douglas’s work avoids the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans. His imagery is founded on the silhouette. According to Tania C. Tribe, the “silhouettes signify the New Negro’s visions of themselves, their visions of their ancestors, their ideal collective character, functioning as embodiments of special qualities and characteristics.”\textsuperscript{125} The silhouette form may also have derived from Reiss’s appreciation of folk culture, especially the sharp outlines of woodcuts and \textit{scherenschnitt}, a paper-cutting technique used in German folk art.\textsuperscript{126} My analysis is that the silhouettes transform the body into a sign, which causes the brain to rapidly interiorize and connect the images with phenomenal experience.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[122] Susan Earle, “Harlem, Modernism and Beyond” in \textit{Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist}, 7.
\item[123] Kirschke, 116.
\end{footnotes}
Douglas used the Egyptian form for his figures. The face is in profile with eyes straight ahead, the shoulders are shown from the front, hips are in three-quarter view, and the legs are in profile.\textsuperscript{127} The adoption of Egyptian art is an indication of black America’s association with the African continent.\textsuperscript{128} The faces show African features such as prominent lips, as swell as slit eyes. The slit eyes are taken from African masks that the artist may have seen at the Brooklyn Museum, in Locke’s collection, or at Albert Barnes’s collection.\textsuperscript{129} Richard Powell says that “rather than representing lucid vision, [the eyes] appear veiled, indicating an inner force.”\textsuperscript{130} Susan Earle says that Douglas uses the slit eye “to suggest careful and skeptical scrutiny of the surrounding world and to make the figures both soulful and cosmopolitan.”\textsuperscript{131} Tribe weighs in: “the clearly marked eyes render their silhouettes a little less anonymous, help direct the viewer’s gaze along the main perceptual lines of all Douglas’s carefully structured theatrical tableaux, contributing significantly to the process of reading out the story.”\textsuperscript{132}

Douglas reduced forms to simple geometry to interpret basically realistic subjects, as did the Precisionists, such as Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, Morton Schamberg, Preston Dickinson, and Ralston Crawford.\textsuperscript{133} Douglas was also influenced by the Orphism of Robert Delaunay and Frank Kupka with their series of colorful intersecting circles and disks.\textsuperscript{134} In many of Douglas’s murals, the circles have a transparent quality, being overlaid on more realistic objects. In \textit{The Prodigal Son}, however, a set of concentric disks, which appear on the top border, are more solid. Douglas’s black aesthetic is further affected by the “starkness of old spirituals” and from blues

\textsuperscript{127} Kirschke, 77.  
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 79.  
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 125.  
\textsuperscript{130} Powell, 57.  
\textsuperscript{131} Earle, 27.  
\textsuperscript{132} Tribe, 400.  
\textsuperscript{134} Kirschke, 125.
and jazz idioms both of which derive from African American sources. The sharp angularity of Douglas’s figures in *The Prodigal Son* is both folksy and African-inspired.

There is a collage sensibility to Douglas’s Prodigal Son painting. All the edges of the composition have forms which overlap on the central figures although one of the abstract forms in gray, on the left, is partially created by the cone-like beam of light. Without the three-dimensional development of bodies in space, Douglas depends on the nuances of his blue-gray palette. According to Earle, Douglas said that his “color gradations evoke call-and-response of a black congregation echoing the truth of the preacher’s sermon.” The depiction of light helps to create depth in the picture by the use of diagonals with sharp edges. Rays of light are “a recurrent compositional device in Douglas’s oeuvre helping metaphysically to connote notions of religion, hope, and deliverance.” In the context of the Prodigal Son, the light illuminates the debauched lifestyle of those black folk who choose to live in sin.

Douglas captures in *The Prodigal Son* the racial characteristics of Negro dancing that he observed in the Harlem cultural scene. James W. Johnson writes that:

> the influence that the Negro has exercised in the art of dancing in the country has been almost absolute. For generations the “buck and wing” and the “shop-time” dances which are strictly Negro have been familiar to American theater audiences. A few years ago the public discovered the “turkey trot,” the eagle rock,” “ballin’ the jack,” and several other varieties that started the modern dance craze. These dances were quickly followed by the “tango,” a dance originated by the Negroes of Cuba and later transplanted to South America.

The essence of *The Prodigal Son* is the art form of its dancers. Zora Neale Hurston in “Characteristics of Negro Expression” wrote: “It is lack of symmetry which makes Negro

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136 Earle, 91. From conversations with Aaron Douglas, 1971, personal notes, David C. Driskell Archives.
137 Tribe, 398.
dancing so difficult for white dancers to learn. The abrupt and unexpected changes. The frequent change in time and key are evidences of this quality in music.”

There is an alloy here between dance, music, and the ethnically authentic. In *The Prodigal Son* the figures materialize out of a kind of urban jungle. We become aware of a world called Harlem which is both cosmopolitan and infused with a self-aware primitivism. Douglas deftly revealed a carnal element that he might have gleaned from African sculpture. In *Rediscovering the Harlem Renaissance*, Eloise Johnson identified Freud in his *Civilization and its Discontent* (1900) for seeing the linkage between primitivism and modernity. Freud saw “the primitive lurking beneath the thin veneer of modern man. It was the triumph of instinct over intellect: the primitive became society’s cure-all for the ills of modern civilization.”

Douglas captured the pulse of the city in *The Prodigal Son*. Powell saw parallels with modern German artists like George Grosz who had “a fascination with urban decadence.” Unlike Beckmann’s *Prodigal Son* there is no feeling of guilt for transgressions. Only the woman on the left leans her head back, heedless of her lewd behavior, while she raises her cup like a sacrifice to an absent God. The woman on the right lurches erratically away from the man with a “come hither” look while the man appraises her like an object. As noted earlier, the slit eyes of the man and the woman on the right line up perfectly.

James W. Johnson’s poem is set in a modern Babylon where the Prodigal Son “spent his days in the drinking dens, Swallowing the fires of hell. And he spent his nights in the gambling dens, Throwing dice with the devil for his soul. And he met up with the women of Babylon.” Like the Expressionist Die Brücke artists before him, Douglas was inspired by actual cabarets

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139 Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in *Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*, 228.
140 Johnson, *Rediscovering the Harlem Renaissance*, 97.
142 James W. Johnson, 23.
and music halls, and he may have visited them in Harlem.\textsuperscript{143} Here was the common person. According to Amy Kirschke, “the men and women in Douglas’s art were not Harlem’s aspiring middle and upper classes but the humble working person.”\textsuperscript{144} Douglas always had an appreciation for working-class folk having labored in industry. As a black man working in the steel foundries of Minneapolis in 1918, and in other summer employment, he learned that African Americans were mostly given the worst jobs.\textsuperscript{145}

In Johnson’s poem, “the city was bright in the night-time like day, The streets all crowded with people, Brass bands and string bands a-playing, And ev’rywhere the young man turned There was singing and laughing and dancing. [sic]”\textsuperscript{146} It was through symbolism that Douglas attempted a visual “collective consciousness” using imagery that he believed would resonate consciously and unconsciously with black Americans.\textsuperscript{147} He symbolizes the excesses of alcohol during this age of prohibition by showing the subservience of the woman at left to her drink. Using the letters of G and I for “gin,” he tapped into contemporary consciousness, reflected in this quote by Langston Hughes, glamorizing the common person. Hughes praised “the people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important for themselves or the community or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go by.”\textsuperscript{148} These are the folks, Hughes says, that the black artist should come from and whose beauty they should capture.

Douglas’s \textit{The Prodigal Son} is also about racial pride—the fact that black Americans can be themselves and don’t have to see themselves through the eyes of white people. The Prodigal Son theme allows us to see that black people are really no different than white people, that they can

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\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{143} Johnson, 110. \\
\textsuperscript{144} Kirschke, 43. \\
\textsuperscript{145} Earle, 77. \\
\textsuperscript{148} Langston Hughes “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,”(1926), p. 1 @ www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/hughes/mountain.htm (1/3/12).
\end{footnotesize}
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act in immoral ways too. Significantly, the emphasis in the painting is on group identity.

According to Alain Locke, “the objective of the new art [was] to repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective.” Art was to be a vehicle for social progress. As Charles S. Johnson, research director of the National Urban League in the 1920s, said: “No people that has ever produced great literature or art has been looked on by the world as distinctly inferior.”

Douglas saw that the average African American in Harlem was a critical participant in the Harlem Renaissance, a subconscious source affecting the aesthetic vision of the artist. Douglas would have absorbed the energy and spirit of the people on the street as the culture mixed its heterogeneous elements and became one in purpose. Farah Griffen, writing on the Harlem Renaissance, saw the artist as “a spiritual guide, digging deep into the souls of his people, in order to offer them visions of themselves, their past and their future.”

In *The Prodigal Son*, by portraying anonymous characters interacting on the dance floor, Douglas is demonstrating allegiance to this underclass. As Romare Bearden wrote in 1934, “the artist must enter wholeheartedly into the situation he wishes to convey. [He] must be the medium through which humanity expresses itself.”

Instead of the self as a source for expression, Douglas sought to understand the black soul. The task was to paint the beauty of dark faces as well as “the movement, color, gayety, singing, boisterous laughter, and good talk.” The Harlem Renaissance was really the first chance for

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149 Sims, 11.
151 Vincenti, 12.
154 Powell, 63.
group expression and was the starting point for racial liberation in the U.S. Black leaders believed the reputation of blacks were being maligned by white society and art would counteract the stereotypical images. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Douglas “urged [the poet] to join him and ‘plunge’ through pain, sorrow and hope, to ‘drag forth’ the ‘crude rough [and] neglected’ elements of black culture and transform them through modern visual and literary devices.”

Douglas believed that “African Americans possessed an innate spiritual prowess over that of whites.” Like DuBois, Douglas believed that black people and their arts were crucial to the return of the beautiful to national life. “The Negro was destined to save the soul of America.”

Douglas’s *The Prodigal Son* took part in the revaluation of Negro life and his artistic endowments. As Locke said, the Negro has the gift of temperament: “humor, sentiment, imagination, and tropic nonchalance…” Much of what Douglas was doing was revealing the true character of black folk through a rediscovery of African-American history and culture. Douglas considered the destruction of African religion, languages, and culture a basic cause for the delayed development of black artists and sculptors in America. Coming from Kansas, and not the South, Douglas did not carry the same burden of slavery, discrimination, and oppression as other black artists. Kinshasha Conwill declared that “Douglas’s native optimism and sense

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155 Johnson, 43.
156 Vincenti, 12.
157 Ibid.
158 Johnson, 86.
159 Kirschke, 111.
161 Bearden and Henderson, 132.
162 Earle, 7.
of himself and his art helped ensure that he was decidedly not ‘torn asunder’ despite societal racism.”

Panafricanism, Marxist ideology, and Gurdjieff’s philosophy all influenced Douglas. In reuniting from all corners of the earth, black people were finding spiritual characteristics in common with each other, a drive to articulate these aspects through art, and a belief in social and political liberation. *The Prodigal Son* celebrates a kind of liberation. Douglas, himself, became a Communist Party member following the Depression. Writing in *Fire!!*, a single issue avant-garde journal, in November 1926, he said: “We believe the Negro should be trained and developed rather than capitalized and exploited.” Possibly, he saw African American life through the lens of class struggle, and progress through a kind of social revolution where the working class would be uplifted. *The Prodigal Son* reflects the idea that “society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum relations within which these individuals stand.”

Owing to the silhouette style, the differentiating features of the individuals are toned down in order to emphasize their commonality. Douglas’s critique of capitalism is evident in the representations of dollar bill, playing cards, and die. As DuBois said in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), “to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.”

Giorgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff’s (1877-1949) theories augmented Douglas’s growing interest in expressing a black spiritual essence. A Greco-Armenian spiritual leader, his method was used for achieving advanced states of consciousness. Gurdjieff’s philosophy was steeped in Eastern ideas and found an audience with black intellectuals in Harlem. In study sessions with the writer, Jean Toomer, and the literary editor, Alfred R. Orage, Douglas discussed the existence of a

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164 Griffen, 48.
167 Vincenti, 11.
creative force buried in the psyche, which could be accessed for expression in the arts.\textsuperscript{168} According to Gurdjieff, “‘conscious’” art had the ability to stir others to their spiritual potential.\textsuperscript{169} Douglas’s “conscious” fixation on the unique gestures and body movements in The Prodigal Son indicate an awareness of this methodology.

The modernity of Douglas’s The Prodigal Son is manifested in its formal elements and in its hedonism. The “high voltage, high contrast idiom” captured an atmosphere of optimism, energy, and risk.\textsuperscript{170} While rejecting illusionism, the art is tangible, reflecting multiple points of view and simultaneous images of movement through space and time.\textsuperscript{171} The sharp hard-lined angles of the figures amount to a black aesthetic, identifying racial and gender types without being hackneyed or stereotypical. The painting fragments into small sign-like elements. Douglas acknowledges a hedonistic society but is neither critical nor complimentary of it. According to Clement Greenberg, modern art is an end in itself. “It doesn’t have to teach, doesn’t have to celebrate or glorify anybody or anything, doesn’t have to advance causes. It has become free to distance itself from religion, politics, and even morality.”\textsuperscript{172} Although this is only one interpretation of modernism, it contains many of the characteristics of Douglas’s art.

Douglas observes modernity’s existential isolation and its separation from the “moral resources necessary to live a full and satisfying existence.”\textsuperscript{173} Like Beckmann, he chooses a moment of extremes to make a statement about society. Archibald Motley, Jr. later expanded on the themes of dance and music in his paintings of Saturday Night (1935) (fig. 67) and Blues (1929) (fig. 68). The horns and trombones in Motley’s Blues recall those of Douglas’s work and

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Vincenti, 13.
\textsuperscript{172} Robert C. Morgan, ed. Clement Greenberg, Late Writings (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 31.
conjure up a world of sound and tightly packed dance halls. As Terry Eagleton wrote:

“Modernity signifies a portentous, confused, yet curiously heightened self consciousness of one’s historical moment, at once self-doubting and self-congratulatory, anxious and triumphalistic together.”

Douglas acknowledged the hedonistic desire for pleasure, but his approach stands in contrast to Beckmann’s exploration of lust and sin. Both artists are synthesizing modernity’s new relationship to the arts of antiquity. Beckmann’s women are biblical, almost mythological beings, with the woman in the blue hat reminiscent of Egyptian faces with her left eye facing forward. Bearden noted that Douglas’s rhythmic movement of silhouettes is similar to Greek vase painting, such as The Return of Hephaistos (fig. 69) by Lydos from the sixth century B.C. The “classical starkness, decorum, and balanced compositional elements” are shared by both. By setting the scene in 1920s Harlem, however, Douglas is offering a radical interpretation of the Prodigal Son parable, imagining the story for black eyes.

Locke extolled Douglas’s paintings for God’s Trombones: “the illustrations enhance the book and vivify its message and provide the reader in an entirely sublimated, abstract way a background of sense and feeling in which there is this great, timeless, everlasting primitive quality.” This folk quality was formulated in order to appeal to the masses. In contrast, Beckmann’s painting is about self-realization and self-gratification. Indeed, the head jutting out of the right edge of his work appears to be Beckmann himself. Other interpretations are that it is an illusion to the expectant father and the envious brother, or perhaps the brothel madam.

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175 Bearden and Henderson, 128.
176 Ibid., 128.
178 Beckett, 94.
The demonic shadow of the sharply etched head may refer to the knowledge of a preordained fate. Beckmann’s meaning remains hermetic. While Douglas’s narrative speaks to the signifiers of race and to the common experience of African Americans, Beckmann felt he could only speak to people “who consciously or unconsciously already carry within them a similar metaphysical code.”

The pictorial tradition of the Prodigal Son is long, and in these two works we observe how greatly the genre has developed. A comparison to Gerrit von Honthorst’s Merry Company scene of 1623 (fig. 70) and Rembrandt’s Scene of the Prodigal Son in the Tavern (1635) (fig. 71) can be instructive. Honthorst, who had studied Caravaggio’s work in Italy, combined a softer and more atmospheric light with realistic forms. “It was the new realism that [Honthorst] introduced into candlelit scenes which his contemporaries in Leiden and Harlem were so fascinated by that they added it to their work.” In Honthorst’s painting, the faces of a group of partygoers is illuminated by a single candle that is seen through a goblet filled with a liquid. A repousoir figure, his head relaxing backwards, raises the glass high while he enjoys the companionship of a young lady on the left. The painting is naturalistically painted with all the characters smiling and in an ebullient mood. There does not seem to be a religious theme to the painting and the feeling of guilt is absent. Müller Hofstede, however, pointed out that such activities at night usually represented an immoral action. This idea is supported by the inclusion of an old woman in the upper left who traditionally serves as a procuress in sixteenth and seventeenth century brothel scenes.

179 Schulz-Hoffmann, 308.
182 Judson, 18.
183 Ibid., 220.
Rembrandt’s painting is naturalistic with its characteristic chiaroscuro. The jubilant Rembrandt faces out of the picture in the ostentatious clothing of feathered black hat, sumptuous red velvet mantle, and white lace cuffs. His wife, Saskia von Uylenburg, sits on his lap as Rembrandt appears to lift her satin dress with his left hand. As in Honthorst’s painting, he hoists a voluminous flask of spirits, as he leers with braggadocio. There is the suggestion of loose living and future repentance as the demeanors of Rembrandt and Saskia clash. Rembrandt was celebrating the joys of married life, but also the painting sounds a note of self-criticism.\textsuperscript{184} It is known that Rembrandt lived beyond his means which led him to financial ruin.\textsuperscript{185}

These two works stand out for their naturalism and their freedom from ideology. By the 1630s, the Protestant Reformation had already relaxed some of the strictures of the Catholic Church\textsuperscript{186} and the Eighty Year War for Dutch independence from Spain would end in 1648.\textsuperscript{187} Perhaps these are causes for the feeling of confidence in these two paintings. Already, there exists a secular feeling in the representation of the Prodigal Son. Although moral overtones may be embedded in the works, religious connotations are nearly absent. And though there is a complacent recognition of psychology, it is not as overt as in the works we are examining from the twentieth century. In the modern works, the artists injected their subjectivity and political philosophy into the compositions. Abstraction, both formal and conceptual, have entered the equation along with modern sentiments associated with urban life and with estrangement of the individual within the crowd.

Both Beckmann’s and Douglas’s Prodigal Son paintings are about modern indulgence, the moral degradation caused by slavery to desire. Prodigality is the condition of recklessness and

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\textsuperscript{184} Web Gallery of Art @www.wga.hu/html_m/r/rembran/painting/portrait/rembsask.html (1/3/12).
\textsuperscript{185} In May, 1657, the artist had to apply for cession bonorum, or legal cession of estate in which his property was dispersed at auction. Christopher White, \emph{Rembrandt} (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 172.
\textsuperscript{186} www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_Reformation (1/3/12).
\textsuperscript{187} www.newworldencyclopedia.or/entry/Eighty_Years’_War (1/3/12).
intemperate spending. Beckmann identifies with the Prodigal Son’s situation and has compassion for him. Douglas, however, emphasizes that the divine light of the heavens is missing, replaced by an electric light. As with Luke’s parable, Beckmann realizes that the self is a place of spiritual struggle. In Luke, famine, hunger, and an unjust employer make negative consequences of the Prodigal Son’s behavior plain to him. In Beckmann’s work we feel the Prodigal Son is waking up, having a personal conversion of belief. In Douglas’s work the Prodigal is still alienated from himself.

David Holgate’s thesis that prodigality is an excess of the virtue of “liberality” while “meanness” is a corresponding deficiency can be applied here.\(^{188}\) In Beckmann’s painting we are ready to forgive the son while in Douglas’s work we recognize a lifestyle rampant with desire and wantonness. Douglas subliminally raises the question whether the black man should integrate or remain separate from white society. Brotherhood is not possible if through one’s meanness one resists the sharing of resources. In Luke, after the Prodigal Son’s return to himself, he finds a new concern for healthy relationships.\(^{189}\) We hope this is the case in Beckmann’s portrayal. As for Douglas, the relationships are based on illicit pleasures which may have dangerous consequences. Art for Beckmann is a kind of intoxication,\(^{190}\) but for Douglas it is literally a vice.

Holgate makes clear that prodigality is a curable vice while meanness is not. He says that Luke contends that “liberality”—the temperate approach to giving and receiving wealth—“provides the only path to social justice and harmony in home and society.”\(^{191}\) The Prodigal Son has been foolish but he is foolish rather than evil. According to Holgate, “a good man will not


\(^{189}\) Holgate, 184.

\(^{190}\) Didier Ottinger, “Beckmann’s Lucid Somnambulism” in *Max Beckmann*, 143.

\(^{191}\) Holgate, 227.
only perform acts of virtue, but will feel pleasure while doing so.”\textsuperscript{192} In the Prodigal Son’s case, he is willing to accept a loss of status in return for the relative security of working for a liberal employer. In Beckmann’s work we celebrate the transformation of the son as he is ready to submit himself to the authority of his father. In Douglas’s painting, we fear the destructive effects of the Prodigal Son’s avarice on family life and society.

In Luke 15:24, we become cognizant of the dead-alive antithesis: “for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!”\textsuperscript{193} Luke’s position was based on the human responsibility for sin. In these two paintings we are faced with the saving of one’s soul on the one hand and the loss of soul on the other. Beckmann asserts that it is the individual’s responsibility for ethical behavior while Douglas implies that the community shares the responsibility. In Beckmann’s work we witness the son’s discontent as he strives to discover his true virtue; in Douglas’s, we feel the same meanness as that of the elder son, his disrespect for his father and his refusal to take part in his brother’s rebirth. By these characters’ withdrawal from goodness and wholesomeness, they disturb the harmony of the whole community.

Peter Brooker states that in modernity there is “a new value placed on the transitory, the elusive, the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, and discloses a longing for an undefiled, immaculate and stable present.”\textsuperscript{194} In both these paintings the artists provide a fleeting glimpse of the decadent, which hides behind the facade of society. In Beckmann’s painting there is the rejection of materialism. Following the first world war, Beckmann had realized that the value systems that had led to the conflagration were in fact corrupt. \textit{The Prodigal Son} painting echoes that development in his world view.

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{193} Walter J. Harrelson, ed. \textit{The New Interpreters Study Bible} (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1884.
\textsuperscript{194} Peter Brooker, ed. \textit{Modernism/Postmodernism} (London: Longman, 1992), 128.
For Douglas, ideas such as alienation, nihilism, bohemianism, and anti-materialism were also circulating and found expression in his depiction of moral decay. The scandal of trespassing societal norms and of inhabiting a purgatory of the conscience gives the viewer a certain amount of exhilaration. Douglas obviously took risks in developing his aesthetic and this propounds into a dynamic vision. As Brooker said about modernity: “it is a fascination with the horror that accompanies the act of profaning, and yet is always in flight from the trivial results of profanation.”

Ambiguity and unpredictability of the modern spirit is germane to these paintings. In Beckmann’s painting, the “sallow, sad” face of the Prodigal Son is in stunning contrast to the vibrant red tulips behind him. Similarly, the erotic, almost vulgar-looking woman shows her humanity by comforting the Prodigal Son with her extended arms. In Douglas’s painting, we experience the pride of the defiant central figure but also his estrangement from God. That all these characters are sinners in one way or another is a given. In Luke, Jesus’s message of welcome of sinners to the kingdom of God, I believe, is an undercurrent of the artists’ thought. There is, additionally, the need by the artists to hear the call to repent, to cleave to moral ground, and denounce lives of arrogance and self-indulgence.

The complexity of these paintings mark them as modern. It is a type of modernism that combines the secular with the sacred. In such a modern conception, the possibilities for interpretation are endless. Unlike Honthorst and Rembrandt, Beckmann and Douglas have introduced abstract elements, both conceptual and formal, that communicate feelings in sublime ways, sometimes unintelligible, and yet have a universal aspect which rises above history. As Beckmann said: “Art is creative for the sake of realization, not for amusement; for

195 Ibid.
transfiguration, not for the sake of play." That both artists could focus in a serious way on a biblical story that has been undertaken by a multiplicity of artists is a testament to their artistry. That they chose to concentrate on a scene of the parable that has seen less attention, but which introduces new perspectives, is laudatory.

197 Belting, 118.
CONCLUSION

My main question throughout this project has been why the Prodigal Son theme continues to be compelling to artists throughout history. I think that part of it is in the wisdom of the parable itself. The parable teaches us that transgressions of the son’s sort can be redeemed through honest repentance. Family values and the love of father for son trump material considerations. Even non-Christians can appreciate the ethics of the story. The fact that the father comes running out to meet his son was unheard of in its time, and the image is still poignant today. There is something enduring about the parable that teaches us that “boundaries” are not as important as ethos and action.¹

The argument of this thesis is that within a sixty-year period, 1882-1949, there is a demonstrable turn towards more secular subject matter and modern ways of depicting it. D’Oench states that representations of the Prodigal Son theme declined abruptly in the first decades of the twentieth century. She asserts that there was a lack of interest in religious subjects in general, and diminishing patronage from the Church and lay Christian audiences.² Artists had to reinvent the visual form of the parable in order to adjust to changing stylistic approaches. There is definitely a modern spirit evidenced in the work by these five artists. While the salvation theme is still there, the painters explore new psychological issues, such as individual moral choice. At the same time, they employ elements of modern styles—Cubism, Expressionism, and Impressionism, and we also see the influence of photography.

Another question addressed in the writing of this thesis concerns those aspects of art which make it “modern.” For example, there has been much written about the supposed autonomous aspects of modern art and the proposition that modern art is self-referential. Modern artists

attempt to show the alienating facts of modern existence, the influence of technology, and psychological factors, as well as the complexities of modern culture. In this sampling of work it seems that there is greater attention to secular issues such as politics and urban life. There is also a different view of history and time itself. In some cases, like de Chirico’s, there is an attempt to imagine prehistory by exploring artifacts of human existence, like mannequins and statues.

While De Chirico tried to visualize temporal concepts such as Nietzsche’s eternal return, his work has a futuristic quality, appearing to transcend time. In other works, such as that by Slevogt, time is reduced to a moment of sheer darkness where one cannot chart a path back to virtuous living. Tissot situates the Prodigal Son in a recognizable historical period whereas Beckmann’s renditions appear outside a particular time. Douglas seems the most modern of these artists because he made a unique synthesis of cubism and Egyptian art in order to illustrate the culture of Harlem in the twenties.

Although of an earlier period, Rubens’s painting Return of the Prodigal Son (1618) (fig. 72) is an example of the variations and rewards one finds in the telling of the story. In this painting, three quarters of the space is taken up by the interior of a barn with its livestock and its chaotic human detritus. On the right, in the open air, a youth stripped of his shirt makes a romantic plea for the mash that the farmer’s wife is pouring out for the pigs.

But there is much more to Rubens’s painting. According to the art historian Julian Luxford, Rubens used the Dutch technique of “disguised symbolism.” The ox, a symbol of obedience and sacrifice, may be a metaphor for Christ. The candle was probably intended to symbolize the Lux Mundi, the incarnation of Jesus Christ as the “light of the world.” The pitchfork and its three prongs might be interpreted as the three nails of the crucifixion. The cobwebs may allude to the snares of vice spun by the Devil. The bundled straw may refer to the transience of earthly life.

The dovecote, pigs, and black dog may all relate to the seduction and *luxuria* which, as Luxford states, have “brought the Prodigal Son undone.”4 This kind of exploration of a work is all very exciting and makes one wonder if Rubens had a personal purpose in painting the Prodigal Son.

As artists fashioned modern interpretations of the ancient theme, there is much that demonstrates our humanity and the possibilities of reaching out to those who have been dispossessed or lost faith. Besides deciding how and in which way to envisage the Prodigal Son and his environment, they searched to uncover a moral message and, at times, to incorporate biographical material. There is really a great deal going on in these paintings, and if one is willing to dig, just as in the Rubens painting, one can find treasures.

In this thesis we find a variety of permutations on the Prodigal Son theme which tell us something about modernism. In Tissot’s work there is a narrative on modern manners which almost reaches parody. We find a near cinematographic portrayal through the device of a narrative series. Slevogt uses the narrative series for a different end, which is mainly to contrast the different poles of the Prodigal Son’s story. We see the high life of the brothel juxtaposed in its other wing by the loneliness and depravation of the Prodigal Son in an almost end-of-the-world scenario. In de Chirico’s representation of the Prodigal Son one observes that the painting transcends time by bringing alive inanimate objects that are both from the artist’s personal biography and from the Risorgimento. We find the iconography of mannequins and statues has a history of its own and goes back to de Chirico’s thought process of revelation, his ideas on duality, and his philosophy of metaphysical painting. Beckmann and Douglas, though coming from wholly different social realms, are related by the work they did in large cities: Douglas in Harlem, New York and Beckmann in Amsterdam and St. Louis. Their modernism is expressed

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4 Luxford, 105.
differently—Beckmann with his stress on the individual and Douglas by his interest in community. Both, however, saw the common person as important.

Because of the possibilities of artistic style and symbolism, the Prodigal Son as a theme remains relevant today. Contemporary artists like Elena Figurina, Kazuya Akimoto, and Soichi Watanabe continue to create renditions of the parable (figs. 73-75). Figurina’s work is a stark testimony to the hardships that the Prodigal Son must undergo in a foreign land. In the painting, the son is laid out face down on the ground while a group of red-frocked, gnome-like onlookers stare downward incomprehensibly out into space. Akimoto’s painting is highly abstract, somewhat scribbly, with a hint of Francis Bacon. The three blob-like figures relate rhythmically to each other, their features with a totemic quality. They are covered with feathers of blue, red, and black and highlighted with white. The faces are wizened, and they stare jauntily out of the picture. Watanabe’s work has a spiritual tone. It is spare and graceful with line, filled with harmonic colors, as he depicts the essence of the father/son embrace.

In the modern era, the Prodigal Son becomes a complex thing. Often it combines elements of both the sacred and the secular. After studying these works and contrasting them with more recent pieces by Figurina, Akimoto, and Watanabe, we see that the theme still has relevancy. The relationship of father and son is still deep with significance. In a time of many single-parent homes today, the element of the father mentoring his son holds great importance. The Prodigal Son also teaches us that being penitent can release us of our guilt and absolve us of our sins. To believers, it teaches that God’s unconditional love is available for those who have trespassed and want to return to the home and to righteous ways. There is something enduring about the theme and the potential is there for future artworks to continue to reveal new aspects of this profound biblical narrative.
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**James Tissot**


Max Slevogt


Aaron Douglas


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