

Rembrandt and Angels

Michael Rubinstein

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Michael Rubinstein was until 1994 an eminent London solicitor specialising in defending the interests of authors and publishers, most notably Penguin Books for the publication in 1960 of the unexpurgated text of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. He was a man of wide interests, with a special leaning toward music, having been a director of Youth and Music, a governor of the Purcell School, and Vice-President of the Society for the Promotion of New Music. He was a prolific letter-writer to the broadsheet press. His publications include: *Wicked, Wicked Libels* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972); *Malta's Ancient Temples and Ruins* (ICR, 1984, with Rowland Parker); *Music to my Ear* (Quartet Books, 1985); and *Nasrudin on his Toes and other Feats* (privately published, 1999).

Rembrandt and Angels

A week in Leningrad with a party organised by the Contemporary Arts Society made possible, from choice, several long visits to the collection of paintings and other works of art – our Russian guide solemnly told us three million items, but we knew that it was not the statistics which count – at the Winter Palace of Queen Catherine II known as L’Hermitage, ‘The Hermitage’.

Some of our party eschewed all the provided tours of the collection which had been arranged for us and, at the first opportunity, found the labyrinthine way to the impressionist and post-impressionist galleries to see, notably, works by Renoir, Manet, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Derain, Vlaminck, Matisse and Picasso. A number of paintings illustrated in various books as included in the collection were not on display: perhaps they had been removed for restoration or cleaning or were on loan to exhibitions inside or outside Soviet Russia. Anyway the number and quality of the paintings on view were enough to assuage any sense of disappointment unless one had come specially to see one of the missing pictures.

Still these French masterpieces of the last century or so formed only a tiny part of the whole collection. The many other galleries in the vast extended Palace warranted and received as many hours attention as time allowed according to one’s existing interests and the magnetic effects of attractions glimpsed as one passed by. I returned, myself, again and again to contemplate the Rembrandts. Four of them, in particular, I found at first sight indescribably moving. A study of even good coloured reproductions in books or on slides could not prepare one for the impact of the paintings themselves. And as I moved round from one to the other of these four master-works I perceived details too inconspicuous for immediate notice and inevitably lost to those circulating in a party, constantly swept on by their guide to make way for the next group.

It is these four paintings (and two others) which I feel impelled to describe now, as my memory is fresh with the initial awe – *Abraham’s Sacrifice of Isaac*, *Danaë*, *The Descent from the Cross* and *The Prodigal Son* in the order in which one encounters them in the gallery. Just as Rembrandt did not depict precisely the biblical stories with which we are familiar in his paintings of biblical subjects, so I am concerned with what these paintings conveyed to me and barely with the composition, the

historical setting, their dates in relation to Rembrandt's life or the appearance and condition of paint on canvas.

At this point I should declare a personal interest. For years I have commended to publishers and art lovers that a suitable author should be commissioned to assemble a book of reproductions of all Rembrandt's self-portraits with a related historical commentary; I thought it would make an exceptionally fascinating book under the title *Zen in the Art of Self-Portraiture*. It has seemed to me that a form of Zen is what Rembrandt practised from his early years, so that when he came to paint his own image, as he did over and over again, he saw in it, with compassion, facets of all humankind. His peculiar objectivity enabled him to portray with exceptional understanding and sensitivity the essential 'Being' of himself and so of others, whether in studio portraits or in scenes from mythology or from the Bible. Kenneth Clark has supplied my need with a long essay, copiously illustrated with those extraordinary self-portraits, in *An Introduction to Rembrandt*.¹ There are, however, no Rembrandt self-portraits in Leningrad.

In a receptive mood and able to spend virtually as long as I wanted in the gallery in the course of several visits, I contemplated each of the four paintings which had first caught and held my passive glances. As I pondered upon the expressions and postures of their subjects, increasingly I sensed meanings not at first perceptible. What I will record, I recognise, are subjective impressions and interpretations which may not represent what Rembrandt meant to convey, either consciously or subconsciously; and others may be expected to 'read' these paintings differently, no one of us 'right' or 'wrong'.

On the first wall of the gallery where the Rembrandts hung, was his dramatic illustration of *The Angel Preventing Abraham's Intended Sacrifice of Isaac* to give the picture the title it should bear. This I found intensely moving. In his *Rembrandt: Life and Work*² Jacob Rosenberg describes the angel descending upon Abraham 'from the upper left with a whirlwind movement, his left hand conspicuously raised to the sky, his right grasping Abraham's wrist with such sudden force that the knife slips from the old man's fingers. This over-emphasis on the momentary aspect gives the impression that the knife is suspended in mid-air, a theatrical feature which attracts attention as much as Abraham's look of surprise at the angel's appearance.' Could he be referring to the same picture? In the Hermitage painting, there was a most telling suggestion of miraculous power causing Abraham to open wide his right hand and release the dagger by reason of the sudden but *gentle* touch of the angel's hand upon his wrist. From his wrinkled face – he was after all a hundred years old when Isaac was born – Abraham, for good reason, looks startled indeed but with utter

relief dispelling his near disbelief at his, and Isaac's, reprieve, within a second of his executing his beloved son, in trust and in obedience to God's command.

The angel (for whom Rembrandt's first wife Saskia was surely the model) does not look directly at Abraham but stares between him and the recumbent body of Isaac, far beyond them both, as it were into the future generations which were to stem from the Patriarchs. The angel is not on a human time scale. To me the gesture of his raised left hand, relaxed but absolutely authoritative, signals far more than the words attributed to him, 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do you anything unto him: for now I know thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.' The gesture seems to say 'Henceforth let there be no more human sacrifice by anyone who worships God!'

Isaac, uncomfortable on the improvised altar, his hands evidently bound behind his back, with an adolescent boy's tender breasts, sees nothing of these dramatic events, in this painting, and should not even suspect how close he may be to death at the hands of his father; so he cannot know of the divine intervention. His father's left hand is stretched firmly over his face to hold him still and to prevent his seeing the dagger which had been poised to descend on his exposed neck. Isaac's actual anxiety is magically conveyed by his left leg bent with the foot beneath his thigh, ready if necessary to enable him to spring away from an unknown danger (in *The Blinding of Samson* [1636] in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt, Samson's left leg is similarly poised, but too late for use). Isaac, effectively, though only temporarily, blinded in both eyes, must have been longing to say 'What are you doing Father?', or 'What are you going to do?'

The arc of that right hand of Abraham's from which the dagger has just fallen corresponds to the whole arc of his outstretched arms, hinged and focused on his head, pale grey (in the painting though not in all coloured reproductions of it), framed by his white locks and beard. It is as if the message conveyed by the angel's left hand flows all through his head and body through his right hand to Abraham's, through Abraham's head and left hand to Isaac's head. When Abraham will eventually lift his left hand Isaac will see at last and, illuminated, will pass on God's message.

Another painting of the same subject, attributed to Rembrandt in the same year (1635) and of the same dimensions (193 x 133 cm) and described as in the Hermitage collection, is illustrated in Horst Gerson's huge book *Rembrandt Paintings*.³ This is, however, the later version in Munich, which was signed *Rembrandt verandert en overgeschildert 1636*. If I find it far less impressive than the version I saw in Leningrad that may be because I am comparing what I saw and studied there with a coloured reproduction; or

because, like Lorenz's geese, I love best the one I saw first. Gerson's note on the Munich picture which he mistakenly illustrates, mentions the names of three of Rembrandt's pupils suggested by different experts as possibly responsible for this copy, presumably eventually 'changed and over-painted' (to translate the words quoted above) by Rembrandt himself. In Gerson's book it is, inexplicably, reversed – for the Western eye, scanning a painting naturally from left to right, the whole balance of the picture is altered. And anyway, for me, the penetrating 'eternal' look and the vital gesture of the angel, in the Hermitage painting, is lost in the other, where Abraham appears to be only mildly astonished, but where the angel positively grips Abraham's left wrist, like a snake behind the head, above the widely stretched hand and the falling dagger; that grip might restrain Abraham's arm and startle him but could not itself *force* his hand to open; it seems therefore unnecessary and so inappropriate. Above Isaac's knees in the Munich painting is the head of the ram caught in the thicket: I looked in vain for that ram in the equivalent area of the version in the Hermitage, but the varnish was too dirty there for any ram to be visible.

There is one more feature of the painting I saw (it is also in the Munich version) which struck me at the time as strange. In each, Abraham appears to be wearing, on the only foot we can see, over a baggy stocking, two shoes! An inner shoe seems to be secured by jewelled straps, echoing the bands on the empty sheath hanging from his waist: and a rough clog or sabot is worn over it as if to protect it. What is one to make of that detail, inessential to the bare Bible story and to the composition of the painting as a whole, and of no obvious decorative significance? Rembrandt seems deliberately to have depicted a symbol of Abraham's state of mind. With the dagger, Abraham was prepared and about to act out what he believed to be God's will, against his own. The soft, rich inner shoe may represent Abraham's spiritual protection, itself protected by the sturdy sabot against the rough earth, the harsh reality of his life, like that of any man, in the world.⁴

Though Rembrandt in many of his paintings of biblical stories had occasion, indeed for those subjects was bound, to depict angels, in only one of those in the Hermitage Collection on which I can comment now, does an angel appear – that is in the picture of Abraham and Isaac.

Curiously it seems that believers, agnostics and atheists alike take angels in religious and classical paintings for granted – they are depicted deliberately to illustrate the descriptions of them, for Western art chiefly to be found in the Bible. But angels are not exclusive to Judeo-Christian origin and would not be the subject of artistic imagery within the Jewish tradition due to the second commandment, against the making of any graven image

to portray any form in heaven, on earth or in the water beneath the earth. From Islam, notably in the writings of Sufi mystics, and earlier from Hindu and Buddhist sources, legends relate or imply the essential role of angels as messengers of God, sometimes (as in the story of Abraham and Isaac) speaking with the voice of God, in the first person, and as intermediaries between God and mankind, coming and going, descending and ascending.

As concepts, for non-believers, or as Beings, for believers, angels present problems as stark as some of the mysteries of science – quarks, 10 say, or black holes – for which we can gain no guidance from the evidence of our senses even where these are extended and expanded by technology: we still cannot ‘make sense’ of them. As J.G. Bennett put it:⁵

Strangely enough, we can more easily believe in God than in His Angels, although by definition the Essence of Deity must be entirely beyond the reach of human reason. Since Kant, it has been scarcely possible to accept as valid any rational arguments – ontological or cosmological – for the ‘existence’ of God. Only mystical insight can give to any man the direct certainty of a Divine Presence; and the interpretation of mystical experience in forms of language appropriate only to statements of fact must inevitably lead to confusion and contradiction.

Who, having seen an angel, would attempt to reproduce the vision? At little risk of contradiction I would aver confidently that we do not see in all art the likeness of an angel. We see, and artists show us, what we expect to see, conditioned by our environment, conventional descriptions and visualisations. Peter Wilson suggests:⁶

The image of the Angel in art emerges from a creative interplay between traditional canons – based on Scripture – and the personal vision of the artist. To say that a visionary sees what Scriptures and sacred art have prepared him to see is not to accuse him of inauthenticity; vision is real, but it is also influenced by culture. In the resonances created by this paradox, the Angel unveils itself.

Or does it? Transfixed by the conventions of Western art it is hard to visualise an angel as other than a person with feathered wings, if reasonably well-endowed the wings of a large eagle – but of course without the musculature or physical frame to which that would have to be attached, never mind the complication of, effectively, three pairs of ‘limbs’ instead of the more usual mammalian two. No one imagined that angels were vertebrates, rather than Beings with a bare semblance of human beings. Only as they appeared in human form could human beings recognise them

and hope to relate to them in spite of their miraculous capacity for free movement in three spatial dimensions, unencumbered by the effects of gravity as symbolised by their often embryonic wings, like tulle flappers sewn on a vest near the shoulder-blades of pantomime fairies. With a possibly unique exception for a lad over the age of *putti*, Cupid in Correggio's *Leda and the Swan* (Berlin) is seen nude from the side, his left wing an extension of the flesh over his shoulder-blade. Generally angels are depicted in a flowing garment, the sartorial conflict with a winged anatomy completely ignored.

Few artists have attempted to break with tradition. Who but a mystic would know where to start? Peter Wilson quotes an extract from Reynold A. Nicholson's translation of Rumi's *Mathnawi* – it is the scene of the Annunciation.⁷

Before the apparition of a superhuman beauty,
before this Form which flowers from the ground like a rose before her ,
like an Image raising its head from the secrecy of the heart
(Mary is afraid, and exclaims, 'I take refuge in God'. But Gabriel
chides her).

O Mary! Look well, for I am a Form difficult to discern.
I am a new moon, I am an Image in the heart.
When an Image enters your heart and establishes itself,
you flee in vain: the Image will remain with you –
unless it is a vain fancy without substance,
sinking and vanishing like a false dawn.
But I am like the true dawn, I am the Light of your Lord

That, in poetic terms and making allowance for inevitable loss in translation, seems to me to contribute a note of authority to the relevant resonances.

Peter Wilson offers also contemporary testimony in quoting Père Lamy (1853–1921), 'a pious and simple French curé who [claimed that he] regularly conversed with Angels' (my interpolation), as describing them thus:

Their garments are white, but with an unearthly whiteness. I cannot describe it, because it cannot be compared to earthly whiteness; it is much softer to the eye. These bright Angels are enveloped in a light so different from ours that by comparison everything else seems dark. When you see a band of fifty you are lost in amazement. They seem clothed with golden plates, constantly moving, like so many suns.

Obviously it would be an exceptional artist who could do justice to such a vision of one angel, let alone fifty. At least one tried – William Blake artist, poet and mystic. Kathleen Raine⁸ quotes him relevantly: ‘He who does not imagine in stronger and better lineaments, and in stronger and better light than his perishing and mortal eye can see, does not imagine at all. The painter of this work asserts that all his imaginations appear to him infinitely more perfect and more minutely organized than any thing seen by his mortal eye. Spirits are organized men.’

Blake’s understanding of the spirit was no doubt encouraged by his brief flirtation with the New Jerusalem Church of Swedenborg’s British followers: within three years he found the Church certainly not new enough for him. Nevertheless he would often draw angels with impossible wings with which he was undoubtedly familiar from many religious works by acclaimed classical and Renaissance artists as evidenced by a view he expressed of colouring that ‘does not depend on where the colours are put, but where the lights and darks are put; where that is wrong, the colouring never can be right; and it is always wrong in Titian and Correggio, Rubens and Rembrandt’;⁹ and even some he drew with no wings, as in his *Jacob’s Ladder* (c.1800). And again ‘Till we get rid of Titian and Correggio, Rubens and Rembrandt, we never shall equal Rafael and Albert Dürer, Michael Angelo and Julio Ramno.’¹⁰

But in striking contrast are such extraordinary visions as Blake’s water-colour *The Lord answers Job out of the Whirlwind* (in the National Gallery of Scotland – not to be confused with his engraving of the same subject, an illustration for *The Book of Job*, Plate 13, in the British Museum) where the whirlwind is composed of a spiralling of light of angels consisting only (so far as one can tell) of heads and huge white wings; or the water-colour *Raphael conversing with Adam and Eve from Paradise Lost*, 1808 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) in which the Archangel Raphael’s wings resemble the designs used in Indian art, in the form of a *prabhāmandala*, to depict the aura of a Bodhisattva, a Being with an ‘awakened essence’, just as the halo is used by artists universally to symbolize an aura of light emanating from a saint or person of permanently developed consciousness – hence by an error of verbal comprehension the horns on the head of Moses, originally shafts of light in Hebrew.

It is only to be expected, then, that often angels in art have a halo and wings as in Blake’s water-colour *Adam and Eve Sleeping*, 1808, in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts – where the halos of the two angels are jagged not circular as they float motionless over the sleeping Adam and Eve, the only visible wings, of the nearer angel, being folded, as if not needed for hovering, and merging with a diaphanous garment longer than the angel’s

body. With equal artistic licence in another water-colour, *Angels Watching over the Tomb of Christ*, otherwise known as *The Angels hovering over the Body of Jesus in the Sepulchre*, c. 1806 (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), Blake portrayed two angels poised over Christ's prostrate body which forms the base line of an equilateral triangle. This is completed by the angels' adjacent bowed heads, their wings extended upwards to touch at the top, the same length from their points of attachment just above the angels' bodies from there to the tips of their outstretched toes – an exceptional, almost symmetrical design, centred on the glow of light behind the angels' heads and of awe-inspiring tension at the touching wing-tips, echoing as it were in imagined profile, the praying angels' hands. (In this painting Blake has, no doubt intentionally, conveyed an impression that the angel on the left is male and that on the right is female, the former having a thicker neck and slightly coarser features: some twelve years earlier in 1794 Blake depicted a similar pair of angels, male and female, in a relief etching he left uncoloured, copy H [in the Houghton Library, Harvard University] prepared for an illuminated book *Europe: A Prophecy*, where their shorter but still outstretched and pointed wings over their slightly bowed bodies make a quite different pattern, a square of which the upper side is the leading edge of the bat-like wings of the sinister seated figure of Albion's Angel.)

Blake was obviously not immune to classical influence, as his angels seem generally to have patronised the same Samothracian couturier as the Nike¹¹ – the 'Winged Victory' whose statue can hardly be missed in the Louvre even by those who call there only to gaze briefly at the enigmatic smile of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*.¹² But, like Rembrandt, and so many other Masters, he was open to other influences too. For example, for *The Soul Reunited with God* (from Jerusalem):¹³

Blake seems to have borrowed the idea for the figure group from an engraving by Martin de Vos illustrating the story of the Prodigal Son. Not only are the two characters disposed in a strikingly similar manner, but even the halo surrounding the head of God seems to be adumbrated in the hat of the father in the engraving. The choice of this particular model may not be entirely fortuitous, for the theme of the parable is forgiveness, to which Blake attached such importance at this time, and Samuel Palmer tells us that it was a story that Blake particularly loved and 'could not read without tears coming to his eyes'.¹⁴

A comparison of the two pictures to which Sir Geoffrey Keynes' quotation refers is illuminating. Martin de Vos, for all the echo of a halo in the father's hat, sets his scene of the prodigal son's return in a busy urban

setting, with the fatted calf nearly on the point of decapitation. The son kneels, barefoot, grasped clumsily by his father, responding blankly with an equally clumsy gesture of his muscular right arm. By contrast, Blake's Soul is, from his facial expression and his wide flung arms and open up-turned palms, in a state of ecstasy, clasped by God's Hands firmly held against his buttocks in an almost sexual embrace. We shall see later how Rembrandt treats the same theme in his huge canvas in the Hermitage, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

But meanwhile it may be useful to consider some comments of Lord Clark about Rembrandt and of Professor Anthony Blunt about Blake. The former writes that after an etching of 1641 of *The Angel leaving Tobias* for the next twelve years Rembrandt 'continued to brood on the appearance of angels, and came to the same conclusion as the creators of early Christian iconography, that they must have resembled the winged victories on antique monuments. We see the result in a drawing of *The Angel leaving the Family of Tobias* (in the Louvre, Paris) datable about 1656 which is like a classical commentary on the etching of 1641. The angel is a spandrel figure from a triumphal arch. In the original he would have been draped, and would have been carrying a torch in his hands; but otherwise his pose and movement are exactly the same.'¹⁵

In *An Introduction to Rembrandt* (p.122) Kenneth Clark refers to this painting as depicting '.... the moment which Rembrandt loved best in all Bible stories, the moment when Tobias's companion reveals his true status, and swishes up into the sky, leaving the united family (the dog still very much in evidence) prostrate, astonished and adoring.'

Rembrandt's angel who intervened as Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac is flying determinedly, not standing or sitting, imposing by presence alone not floating down (as the cherubs, with large wings extended over their outstretched arms, in Rembrandt's *Holy Family with Angels* which I did not see displayed when we visited the Hermitage) or up as was the *Angel leaving the Family of Tobias*. In his early painting of 1626, *The Ass of Balaam Balking before the Angel* (in the Musée Cognacq-Jay, Paris) the angel wielding a long sword with a vicious expression on his face is actually behind the ass so that it cannot balk at the violent if theatrical threat, while Balaam, seated on the fallen ass, and four travelling companions, two of them on horseback facing the Angel from behind, cannot or do not see or sense the Angel's presence: the Angel's untidy wings are extended but he is standing on a rock. This Angel is unimpressive.

Professor Anthony Blunt comments on the tempera painting (in the Tate Gallery) *Satan Smiting Job*,¹⁶ 'The introduction of bat's wings for Satan is certainly Blake's own idea and had a special significance for him as a

symbol of evil, but the idea of a winged figure surrounded by bands of different coloured clouds is one which he may well have taken from a mediaeval manuscript such as the thirteenth-century Apocalypse at Lambeth Palace which has close affinities with his designs.' Perhaps, however, Blake was familiar with Rembrandt's etching (1638) of *Adam and Eve* in which the serpent resembles a slim dragon with huge folded bats-wings, which Rembrandt may have borrowed from Dürer's engraving (1512) of *Christ in Limbo* (Bartsch K15);¹⁷ or with a 'Recruiting devil at work' from the *Compendium Maleficarium* (1626).

Discussing Blake's *Nativity* (formerly in the Sydney Morse Collection) Professor Blunt refers to 'The Radiance which emanates from the Christ Child in this composition For the first and almost the only time in his life Blake constructs his composition by strong passages of light – almost always of supernatural origin – against a surrounding darkness. In this he might seem to be following the methods of Correggio or Caravaggio, or Rembrandt, to which he was so strongly opposed, but the effect is closer to that of early fifteenth century Flemish examples, some of which he may possibly have known.'

Certainly Rembrandt in a number of paintings conveyed such radiance with dramatic effect (e.g., in *The Resurrection of Christ* in Munich). But this is to describe an artist's 'trick' which is of no significance to convey the awe-inspiring quality of an event as momentous as the experience of a visitation by an angel. Many artists have painted angels over the centuries: few have imbued any of their paintings with that quality. And even those few seem to have relied upon the conventions of their artistic environments, modified only slightly by the promptings of individual imagination, to depict even their most impressive angels. The real existence of angels cannot be inferred from any artistic representation.

* * *

On the wall immediately opposite the painting of Abraham, Isaac and the Angel, in the Hermitage Collection, one turned to a strikingly different subject, *Danaë*. She was the daughter of King Acrisius who was warned by an oracle that he would be killed by the son of his only daughter, so he had her locked away from possible contact with any man. Zeus who knew no barrier to his lust, save his wife's jealousy when he could not evade it, came to Danaë as her lover in the guise of a shower of gold. She duly conceived, and bore their son, Perseus, who *was* eventually responsible for the death of his grandfather. However, alternative subjects have been suggested for this picture – Rachel or maybe Leah expecting Jacob; Venus awaiting

Mars; Hagar awaiting Abraham: or any courtesan about to entertain her next visitor.

Characteristically, Rembrandt did not just paint a nude girl in bed playing a part, posing. I was stunned by the warmth and tenderness of Danaë's welcome to the light streaming through the curtain hanging round her bed, her ripe body self-evidently longing to be caressed and enveloped in love. Rembrandt had portrayed a *real* woman with the adoration of *her* real lover. I was spellbound by her soft, appealing face and her gesture of faintly apprehensive but yet delighted greeting. How could I satisfy myself that this must be Danaë and not another claimant to the true title to the picture? I did not know then, as I have since read, that E. Panofsky in an essay in *Oud Holland* L (1933) had examined the question exhaustively and concluded that the subject was indeed Danaë. I had to reach that conclusion, if at all, from my own observation and intuition.

Elsewhere in the Winter Palace one of Titian's paintings of Danaë, where she is not portrayed as beautiful – his version in the Prado, Madrid, is to my taste certainly preferable – had been pointed out to us for comparison with the Rembrandt, if not for its own sake. In both, Titian painted the old servant-warder spreading her apron as if to make sure that she (not Danaë) would catch every one of a shower of gold coins, an alternative supply thrown perhaps to distract her attention, as she sits at the end of her mistress-prisoner's bed beside the heavy, passive body of Danaë. In the Leningrad Titian Danaë looks not just weary with waiting but vacant, numb: she is a little more interested if hardly more animated in the version in the Prado. Who could fail to prefer Rembrandt's generous princess with her glowing welcome?

It is sometimes objected that there is no gold shower to be seen in Rembrandt's picture. On the floor, below Danaë's shining face and tasselled pillow, a pair of golden slippers almost reflect the wings of the cupid leaning from the bed head above in which he is carved – a cupid frozen with a look of anguish. The cupid's wrists are shackled. This may, traditionally, symbolise chastity; but here it seems also to signify his utter helplessness, his sad inability to play his sacred role or, like Abraham's angel, to prevent the impending tragedy. Zeus did not need one of Cupid's arrows to encourage him to seduce this lovely young woman: he could not be restrained now from sowing, the seeds of the predicted dénouement. That cupid fitted no other scenario.

At first I thought there was a curving stream of gold coins pouring towards the princess' slippers. but on closer inspection I saw that the cloth covering the side of the bedstead was fastened with gold headed studs of which two pairs were evenly placed to the left of the 'stream', towards the

foot of the bed. Rembrandt had depicted the scene a moment or so *before* Zeus entered Danaë's chamber, his light shining in from above, announcing his coming to justify Danaë's confidence that somehow the oracle would be fulfilled: the time for the shower to appear was not yet, since Zeus had not arrived.

Beyond the bed and the curtain, aware of an impending visitation but blind to its source, is an old bearded crone in attendance on Danaë, with a bunch of keys in her hand – for what other purpose than to indicate that she kept her charge imprisoned? I did not need Panofsky to confirm the evidence of my own senses. That was Danaë.

* * *

In the next bay of the gallery in which the Rembrandts hung was his relatively small painting entitled *David's Farewell to Jonathan* but formerly sometimes designated as *David and Absalom Reconciled*.¹⁸ The older figure, comforting, perhaps, the younger, looks like a pensive self-portrait of Rembrandt wearing one of his theatrical turbans. In his arms a youth – how could they be David and Jonathan with that age difference? – his long blonde hair around his shoulders and his quiver of arrows on the ground, seems to have returned, spurred and in his smartest dress uniform with ceremonial sword, from the wars. In the mists behind is a great castle or temple – surely the citadel of King David's City.

Absalom was David's third son, born to Maacah the daughter of Talmai, King of Geshur. He was ambitious and a born leader with high principles. A half brother, another son of David, raped his sister Tamar: so Absalom had him killed. There followed over a period of years a series of skirmishes with David, as each manoeuvred and intrigued for power. After their reconciliation they resumed this intermittent warfare until, against David's wishes, his beloved son was stabbed to death by one of David's men when Absalom's hair caught in the branches of a tree as he rode beneath it. David, crying 'Absalom! My son, my son!', was distraught at the news of Absalom's death. The older man in the painting of their earlier reconciliation had reason, with foresight, to look sceptical.

A similar imposing building to that in *David and Absalom Reconciled* appears in the distance behind the night encampment of the Holy family in Rembrandt's painting *The Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (1647) in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, but it can hardly be on this account that its flat dome has been taken to represent Jerusalem.

A closer view of a more exposed elevation of just such an extraordinary building, with its characteristic plan and flattened dome, is prominent to one

side in Rembrandt's *Susanna Surprised by the Elders* (1647 – the same year as the Dublin painting) in the Gemaeldegalerie, Dahlem Museum, West Berlin. So Rembrandt visualised *that* particular example of this monumental style of architecture where Susanna lived – in Babylon! But Babylon, some four months travel from Jerusalem (see *Ezra* vii 9) would not conceivably have been on the Holy Family's route, in the opposite direction, on the flight into Egypt to escape Herod's murderous decree, whereas Jerusalem in the distance just might have been – if Rembrandt had no reliable map of the Holy Land to consult. At least Rembrandt placed such buildings in the Middle East.

Which brings me to the point of these puzzling observations. Just such a building – or another view of it – is to be found also in the background of the painting, in the Frick Collection in New York, mysteriously known as *The Polish Rider*, who has thick blonde hair (below a furred hat), a grand but non-ceremonial sword and a quiver of arrows slung on his back.

That is the title by which this painting has been known since C. Hofstede de Groot called it 'Polish Rider in the uniform of the regiment Lysowski' in his resume published in Amsterdam in 1899 of works by Rembrandt exhibited in Amsterdam in 1898. For this and much other information concerning the history of the painting in Poland, from about 1793 until 1897 or 1898 (it eventually left Poland for New York when purchased by Henry Clay Frick, in 1910), I am indebted to an essay by Julius S. Held¹⁹ published when he had only restricted access to some possibly relevant sources. Held nevertheless reviews thoroughly earlier publications on the painting and persuasively disposes of the idea of the subject as specifically Polish, by reference to a possible portrait of any Polish visitor to Amsterdam between 1653 and 1656 when it is agreed Rembrandt must have painted it, and to the supposed identification of the Rider's costume as the uniform of the regiment of Alexander Lysowski (there never was such a 'uniform'). The mystery of the true subject of this painting has been enhanced by the misleading title by which it has come to be known since the end of the last century.

Building on Held's analysis, which so helpfully cleared away an accretion of misinformation and unwarranted assumptions, Colin Campbell in 1970²⁰ reviewed a number of subsequent commentaries. But in his paper Campbell is evidently determined to identify the Rider as the Prodigal Son and, to my mind, self-evidently fails. He writes, for example:

It is possible that the building in Rembrandt's landscape background was meant as an allusion to the prodigal son's travels – for the artist, Hagia Sophia [a comparison which Campbell makes from a drawing

(c.1559) of Constantinople by Melchior Lorch, at the University of Leiden by 1595, where Rembrandt might well have seen it] would indeed have been a symbol of the ‘far country’ to which the prodigal son journeyed. On the other hand, both the direction from which the horse and rider appear to have come, and above all the fact that the light effects allude to dawn, show that Rembrandt not only returned but closely adhered to the sixteenth-century tradition of the setting out scene that followed the family farewell, however much he may have enriched the castle motif in a pictorial way.²¹

Yet if this painting depicts ‘the setting out scene that followed the family farewell’ it would hardly have featured the prodigal son in the ‘far country’

Then Campbell relates two minor motifs in an engraving by Martin van Heemskerck of the prodigal son’s ‘Departure’ with like elements in Rembrandt’s painting, as if such similarities, whether unconscious or deliberate borrowing or coincidental, could be reliable pointers to the true subject of Rembrandt’s work. Campbell notes that just as Rembrandt ‘associated “oriental” robes and turbans with patriarchs and kings in the Old Testament, so the type of costume worn by the Polish Rider is similar in character to that worn by youthful figures such as David’, instancing a drawing of *Abigail before David* but making no reference to the Leningrad painting for which I have accepted as correct its former title *David and Absalom Reconciled*, where the assortment of weapons as well as the background reinforce my surmise of its relevance to a dramatic story from *Samuel II* of known significance for Rembrandt.

As I contemplated *David and Absalom Reconciled* the echoes coincided as *The Polish Rider* came to mind. I recalled the warrior’s wiry, hard-worked steed and the expression on the face of the youthful rider – that of an individualist of integrity who was also a confident leader of fighting men. In an instant I felt that the mystery of the true subject of that beautiful picture was solved: the ‘Polish’ rider is – Absalom!

* * *

Almost the last of the Rembrandts one encounters in the Winter Palace is yet another Old Testament painting with alternative titles, that sometimes known as *The Disgrace of Haman* because the King is thought to resemble The King in *Haman and Ahasuerus at the Feast of Esther* (1660) in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow; but in that painting Haman is rightly depicted as shifty and ashamed. Uriah, in contrast, had no reason for shame. In the Hermitage picture the figure in the foreground is a man of stature – a strong

man dismayed not a weak man cringing. It is currently labelled *David and Uriah* on the frame, which I am not convinced is wrong. King David, surely, has just told his general, Uriah, to go home to his wife, Bath-Sheba, with the intention that he should make love to her. The King hoped thereby to deceive Uriah into thinking that he must be responsible for his wife's pregnancy and not David who had seduced her in his absence. Uriah suspected his king's perfidy and slept rough with the servants. Thus frustrated, David arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle to free his widow for marriage, David having fallen in love with her. One recalls the wonderful painting in the Louvre where Bath-Sheba is seen naked after bathing, with her maid drying her feet: there she holds a letter from David which she has just read. She is obviously deeply flattered at his declaration of his infatuation for her and yet forlorn at her disloyalty to her husband, Uriah.

In the Leningrad picture King David looks at the same time ashamed at his treachery and justified because of his infatuation for Bath-Sheba: Uriah, too, in the foreground, is portrayed in the grip of powerful emotions, dismay at what he realises is the king's attempt shamefully to trick him conflicting with his soldier's predisposition to obey orders without question. The third man further back on Uriah's other side cannot be named from the story in the Bible. But, from the expression on his face, he seems to be there as a commentator on the scene, like the appalled cupid in Danaë: he is evidently disgusted by the king's decision and his face suggests that he foresees only tragedy as the outcome of the king's conduct.

It has to be acknowledged that to interpret this painting so as to justify *David and Uriah* as its title a psychological role has to be found to explain the presence of the third figure. In his carefully argued but, in its conclusion, unconvincing essay *Rembrandt and the Feast of Purim*²² H. van de Waal explains why he regards the picture as correctly entitled *The Condemnation of Haman*. The third man is, according to this analysis, Elijah, 'a precursor of the Messiah', in the guise of Harbonah; and Esther is absent from a scene at which she should have been present because Rembrandt would have known of the special significance of Harbonah from performances of the story as a play, to celebrate the Feast of Purim, at a time when no woman might perform and female impersonation was equally forbidden – though van de Waal honourably concedes that Esther does appear 'at the very end as in the final scene of a pantomime. At this point she speaks four times in thirteen short lines, but she takes no active part at all in the actual plot of the play.'

There is unlikely ever to be a 'last word' on the subject but van de Waal usefully if briefly reviews earlier commentaries including essays by Dr. C.

Tümpel, (published or unpublished before 1970). These discounted the original support for *David and Uriah* as the subject by Miss I. V. Linnick who rejected ‘the suggestion made by Weisbach that the painting was intended as a psychological study rather than a literal illustration of the Biblical episode.’ In order to account for this enigmatic figure, however, she has recourse to a similar, free, ‘psychological’ explanation. She identifies the third person as ‘a curious or compassionate witness who helps the painter to intensify the psychologic content of the conflict’.²³

Finally, van de Waal²⁴ discusses views developed by Mrs. Madlyn Kahr and notes that Tümpel ‘while agreeing with Nieuwstraten’s methodical criticism of Mrs. Kahr, supports her interpretation with new arguments, summing it up in a suggested new title: *Haman Recognizes his Fate*’. Mrs. Kahr described the painting’s ‘fundamental concern as the problem of repentance and redemption’, seeing Haman as ‘in a role that parallels that of Christ. He is the sacrifice required for salvation’: she would have expected Rembrandt to have ‘shared the central Calvinist conviction that all men are sinners and that all, even Haman, may be redeemed by the Grace of God.’ While van de Waal joins Nieuwstraten and Tümpel in criticising her ‘untenable opinions’ he considers that she has ‘by very true intuition sensed that deliverance is the central motif of this painting without action’ (*sic*). He considers that Mrs. Kahr had been ‘led astray in using Fraser’s (*sic*) ideas of “sacrificial rites which fulfilled the perennial human need for belief in the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life” to solve the riddle set by Rembrandt’. But Mrs. Kahr in her essay *A Rembrandt problem: Haman or Uriah*²⁵ is referring expressly to J. G. Frazer’s *The Scapegoat* (3rd ed., New York, 1935 – as specified in footnotes Nos. 47 and 48). Mrs. Kahr makes out a fair case for the painting to refer to a scene described in *Esther* vi 10 rather than to the events related in *Esther* vii 1–8: the expression on the face of the central character could indeed be that of a man, whether Haman or Uriah, who, in Mrs. Kahr’s words ‘knew at once that he was doomed.’ But Haman would be expected to have a wicked rather than a noble face. And the look of self-disgust on the face of the King, beside him, is completely inconsistent with the role of King Ahasuerus in *Esther* where he sees Haman, in effect and almost literally, hoist on his own petard after setting him a test of his vanity.

The guidelines are obscure: anyone may be forgiven for being led astray. Rembrandt evidently set several riddles in this painting, though surely unintentionally. Mrs. Kahr saw a representation of the Sacrifice of Christ in the figure whom she regarded as Haman, referring to an article by Edgar Wind in the same journal.²⁶ ‘.... Haman rises again to the tragic role of a forerunner of Christ.’ In the final section of her essay Mrs. Kahr refers to

the juxtaposition in the Hermitage of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, hanging opposite *The Downfall of Haman*, as making 'explicit Rembrandt's preoccupation with the Fall and the Redemption, both of which are implicit in each of these paintings separately. The Fall foreshadows the Redemption, while the Redemption presupposes the Fall. If it is significant to seek or emphasise this particular 'preoccupation' of Rembrandt with these two paintings hung so conveniently or intelligently close together in the Hermitage, then it could reasonably be argued that the story of *David and Uriah* fits the thesis better than *The Downfall of Haman*! Unquestionably the face of Uriah/Haman and the expression on the face of the king as Rembrandt deliberately painted them are right for the former title and wrong for the latter.

Van de Waal quotes the *midrash* (Jewish oral tradition) to support, quite unconvincingly, his propositions that Elijah 'appeared in the guise of Harbonah' to use 'this unsavoury character for his work of deliverance' and that Rembrandt would be likely to have known of this. And van de Waal refers to Elijah 'as a precursor of the Messiah the ever-present prophet, wandering incognito over the earth to aid in moments of distress and danger' – curiously a role associated, in Sufic tradition, precisely with Khidr, the 'Green Man'.²⁷ With such divergent speculations about the significance of two of the three characters in the painting by the supporters of the same title for it, an interpretation to support the Hermitage's title of *David and Uriah* based on the expressions on their faces, their postures and their pose, unified each in his isolation, cannot fairly be dismissed.

* * *

Rembrandt's version in the Hermitage of *The Descent from the Cross* (1634) held my attention for quite different reasons from those which led me to contemplate the paintings just described. Here Rembrandt had applied his insight into human feelings, and their expression, to every person involved in a uniquely poignant drama. As I looked from one face to another, I could sense the excruciating tension experienced by all as the last nail was about to be wrenched from the wooden crosspiece and from the hand of Christ. There was no false or sentimental focus of eyes on Christ's drooping head or sagging body. Each person present concentrated on a single task yet seemed agonisingly aware of the suffering of all.

A boy on a ladder on the right of the Cross holds his hat to protect against a gust the flame from a thick candle which supplies the all important source of light, for it is night; in that light it is as if, with the body, time itself is suspended. Three men bear the weight of Christ which otherwise

would tear his hand from the remaining nail, in the shadow to which his over-stretched arm seems to point. Some of the onlookers tend the Virgin Mother who has collapsed, her face grey, hollow-eyed beyond beauty, with the horror of the vigil now ended. In the foreground women prepare an embroidered shroud in a lesser candle-light; and St. Joseph of Arimathea stands, with his back to us in silhouette, supervising the descent, in one of Rembrandt's fanciful turbans but less anachronistically than, for example, in the Munich version of the same subject where he looks like a stout landowner not deeply affected by the scene.

However, in the Leningrad picture (as, to a comparable degree, in Rembrandt's earlier great version of *The Descent from the Cross* in Washington) it is the *believability* of the event, and the sensation of the conscious participation of all those involved in it, which I found so intensely moving. In another gallery in the Winter Palace there is a splendid, classical painting by Rubens of the same subject. Splendid, that is, until one looks at the facial expressions and postures of those attending to Christ's descent: no one is actually bearing the weight of his body or convincingly attempting to do so. It is a magnificent tableau of cut-out figures where, in contrast, Rembrandt seems to have entered into a true historical experience as if he were there himself, his eye more penetrating than any camera to catch the emotions behind the expressions on the faces of the participants.

* * *

What but an anticlimax could follow such an effect, which is without rhetoric yet of a peculiarly powerful intensity? Only, one felt the moment one saw it, the large canvas in the next bay, *The Prodigal Son*, one of Rembrandt's last Biblical paintings. The father embraces his kneeling son, holding him close with his hands resting on the boy's shoulders as if for ever after, the silent sense of gratitude implicit in that reunion, illuminating the parable without need for words.

To study the painting I moved from one side to the other to accommodate guided packaged groups which, every few minutes, flowed in and away, clouded by countless facts, names of artists, titles of pictures and dates, relayed in various languages mostly incomprehensible to me. Gradually I saw details overlooked at first, and came to an understanding, albeit speculative, of the subsidiary figures as I asked myself what the whole and the parts 'said to me'.

In the upper centre of the picture is the face of a boy peering round the side of a broad pillar; might he not be the prodigal son's older brother? He *must* be! His unfocused expression, so inward, belies an attempt at a brave

smile to hide his envy: he is, above all, bemused as well as hurt at the blessing his errant younger brother's return has evidently conferred on their father. Yet he is not really 'out of the picture' at all: his position in the painting exactly suggests his central though shadowy role in the story, in essential contrast to his brother who occupies the limelight. His depiction here by Rembrandt is masterly. What then of the two old men whose passive but attentive presence, filling the right half of the canvas, directs one always back to the scene of love flowing between father and son in the left half? That these 'silent witnesses to the father's loving forgiveness are borrowed from a woodcut by Maerten van Heemskerck', as Tümpel has discovered (for which information I am indebted to Horst Gerson²⁸ does not tell *me* what I want to know – *why* are they there? If the composition needed figures to provide a human context why did Rembrandt choose to borrow these? To answer that question I must describe – selectively and subjectively as ever, of course, and speculating not pontificating – what I saw.

There seems to be a family resemblance between these two old gentlemen and the prodigal son's father. They could be three brothers. He who stands on the right, closest to us, black bearded (the father's beard is white) clasps a tall vertical stick, its foot on the ground by his feet, and he is notably well-shod: I infer that he is much travelled. In contrast, his seated 'brother', by his side, rests a huge left hand heavily on his right ankle where it crosses over and lies on his left knee; the immobility of his posture is emphasised by the way his right hand grasps his upper left arm – all this, it must be acknowledged, crudely drawn but inconspicuous in the shadow. These motionless observing 'uncles' seem to *know* what is going on before them, unlike the prodigal son's older brother. The standing elder has been out into the world, returned and made good. His older stay-at-home brother has come to terms with and understands the significance of their different roles, as of their nephews' in the parable. That story is not now puzzling to either of them.

And then, on my last fleeting visit to this gallery, in the late afternoon light as always coming, not ideally, from a window on one side of the painting, I saw another figure previously unnoticed by me. In the deep shadow above and behind the father there was the faint outline of a shawl over the head of a woman, perhaps the mother of the two boys. At least her presence universalised a story whose esoteric significance could not validly be confined to men.

There remains one curious feature of this most memorable painting which seems not to have been generally noted. The prodigal son's left foot is bare, a sandal beside it. The other sandal, nearly worn through, is on his

right foot, its sole towards us. But it is the left sandal which he wears on his right foot and the right sandal on the ground beside his left foot! Rembrandt could not have made such an extraordinary mistake inadvertently, or allowed some pupil in his studio to perpetrate it. He must have intended it. Rembrandt's psychological insight and his ability to convey it in his paintings places him in a category beyond others of the greatest artists of any period, so we may confidently seek meaning in this strange detail. Rembrandt seems to be pointing out that it is the prodigal son's relationship with life, as he experienced it on his odyssey, that he got wrong, not the fact of his taking his due fortune, going away on a journey and coming back having squandered his inheritance. The blessing of God which flows between him and his father is the opportunity he will take henceforth to find a right relationship with the world – because his return without the trappings of worldly wealth, even with his head shorn, symbolises his coming at last into a right relationship with his father, representing here his Heavenly Father.

* * *

Leaving aside the painting I would recognise as *David and Uriah* it might seem that the stories depicted in the five great Rembrandt pictures which I have more particularly chosen to describe have little in common with each other. Their assembly in the Winter Palace in Leningrad, instead of any other five fine Rembrandts which could have been acquired in their place, is random. That they caught and held my close attention, against the competition of many other masterpieces of Western art, must be a matter affected by my own taste and psychology, but that was not the result of random selection: I did not just walk past, only glancing at the other great works in the Hermitage Collection.

So what connects my chosen five, apart from their having had lavished upon them Rembrandt's supreme skill in his craft and his objective devotion to the subject matter of each of them? First I would comment on the misfortune of Perseus's unconventional conception (it would not have led to a 'virgin birth', because Danaë had been seduced, before her incarceration, by Acrisius's twin brother, her uncle Proteus which was to result in the death of Perseus's grandfather when a discus he threw rolled against King Acrisius's foot, causing him to die from the bruise). This predicted tragedy on a domestic scale may be compared with the tragi-triumph on a cosmic scale, initiated by the Virgin Birth which came to a climax on the Cross from which the deposition was but a prelude to its culmination in Christ's resurrection. Danaë's only relative innocence is, of course, without the

diffident gravity of the Virgin Mary's, so significant is the difference of scale of the superficially similar events in the two stories. (Why, one wonders, incidentally, did Rembrandt never, apparently, paint the Annunciation? There is a sketch so entitled (c.1635) in the Musée Communal, Besançon with, curiously, the outline of an infant rolling on the floor in the foreground. The awesome mood of the subject is caught to perfection, however, in a painting by Rembrandt in the Gemaeldegalerie, Dresden, *The Angel Ascending in the Flames of Manoah's Sacrifice*: the angel is floating upwards having just told Manoah's barren wife (unnamed) that she would conceive and bear a son – of special significance for the Israelites in their conflict with the Philistines – Samson. Kenneth Clark²⁹ convincingly argues that although dated 1641 this picture is more likely to have been painted in the late 1650s, but rightly emphasises that it is more significant to notice 'how deeply [Rembrandt] felt the moment at which ordinary mortals suddenly realised that there had been a divine presence among them'.)

The five paintings which principally interested me, it will be realised, all share a common factor, the relationship of a parent with a son (in the case of Danaë in anticipation of predicted tragedy). This seems to have been of special interest to Rembrandt but, based on a random selection of so few of his paintings, any surmise concerning his feelings for and about his only son, Titus, may be unsound, a matter only of conjecture.

There is, however, a connection of another kind between the stories told in *Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac* and *The Descent from the Cross*. As I have said, I interpreted the angel's gesture in the former as ordaining an end to human sacrifice as a token of love for God. According to the gospel, Christ was crucified by his own volition for the fulfilment of God's love for mankind. Abraham's only son, in contrast, had *not* to be sacrificed. The drama of the first story is exemplified in sweeps and curves across the canvas, from the angel's upheld hand to Isaac's feet: in the painting of the Descent the focus hangs as it were, from the near vertical of Christ's still impaled hand through the men straining to support the dead weight of his body on them to spread to those gathered around the foot of the Cross, the drama truly imminent though all present may have thought it finished. In Rembrandt's painting, more in a Baroque style, *The Resurrection of Christ* (1639) in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, (which I have seen only in reproduction) the drama could be said to be transcendent: there a brilliantly illuminated angel with outstretched wings has drawn up the huge tombstone, tossing soldiers aside violently, as Christ rises within the tomb, his face in profile almost transparent, coming into himself as from an infinite distance. (Compare Rembrandt's etching in the Ryksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam and a painting in a private collection in California [both illustrated in Gerson's

book] of *The Raising of Lazarus*, in each of which, in similar pose, Lazarus is rising in his tomb as if still dead – or wishing to remain so.)

And so again to *The Prodigal Son* – not a Biblical story to be taken either as historical or as myth, but a parable, a teaching story with a hidden spiritual meaning. The symbolism connected with footwear in this painting as in that of Abraham's intended sacrifice is, in this context, coincidental. Whoever studies this picture will be helped to an understanding of the parable, if open to it: the essence of it is all there. It is emphasised by the contrast between the prodigal son's wretched appearance and that of Absalom in his reconciliation with David. David looks apprehensive, presumably because he surmises that the reconciliation will not last (the Lord, displeased at his taking Bath-Sheba and having Uriah killed, had pronounced curses on him, one of them that 'the sword shall never depart from thy house'). Absalom, to a greater degree even than King David himself, is resplendent in grand attire. He wears his unexpired ambitions on his sleeves; whereas the prodigal son comes near naked to his father's house. From that circumstance as from no other, he can come into himself, into his *unearthly* inheritance.

Finally – though in reality there is no finality in the enlightenment to be gleaned from Rembrandt's masterworks – there is one characteristic, almost a theme, with a message I believe, which notably runs through all the pictures in the Hermitage which I have described: gentleness. The angel's lightest touch on Abraham's wrist is sufficient to cause his hand to spring open, letting the dagger drop; and even the angel's authoritative signal is gentle. Danaë's gesture towards the light streaming into her chamber is a beautifully gentle invitation, assured but yet not demanding. David, even if distracted, clasps Absalom most gently. There is curiously, no violence between David and Uriah, although, not surprisingly, Uriah can barely hide his horror and distress at the implications of David's behaviour. The men supporting Christ as He is about to be released and lowered from the Cross are, under the terrible strain, as gentle as they would be with a sick child. And the father's gentle hands on the back of his once prodigal son's shabby coat, like David's on Absalom's rich one, convey a tenderness that is as devoid of possessiveness as it is of censure. It is to that gentleness that we need always to return.

Note: Since the reference to Kenneth Clark's essay on Rembrandt's self-portraits (note 1) went to press, Gordon Fraser have announced the publication (London, 1982) of a new book, *Rembrandt Self-Portraits* by Christopher Wright, reproducing for the first time every one of Rembrandt's self-portraits with the paintings in full colour: no less!

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6. Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Angels*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, p.28.
7. *Op. cit.*, pp.58 and 62.
8. *William Blake*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1970, p.177.
9. *Ibid.*, p.20.
10. Quoted from his *Descriptive Catalogue*, 1809, by Martin D. Paley in his *William Blake*, Phaidon Press, London, 1978 and in *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes, O.U.P., London, 1966, p. 564.
11. In the 5th Century BC: her wings were conceivably derived, by an imaginative extension, from the statues and reliefs where diaphanous drapery floated out behind the shoulders of earlier warrior women in chariots – or warriors' women so celebrating their men's victories.
12. Curiously reminiscent of the characteristic smile associated with archaic Greek sculpture of the 7th Century BC: but could Leonardo have seen any example which had not been buried to preserve it from destruction?
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17. See *The Hidden Rembrandt* by J. Bolten and H. Bolten, Phaidon Press, London, 1978.
18. Jan Bialostocki (*Burlington Magazine*, 1957, 99, p. 422) gives references to earlier contributions, on both sides, to the controversy over this painting's title.
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22. *Steps Towards Rembrandt*, Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, Amsterdam, 1974, pp. 201–225.
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27. See works by Idries Shah: *Wisdom of the Idiots*, Octagon Press, London, 1969, p. 117, and *The Dermis Probe*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1970, pp. 109-112.
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