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## “Panel of Grace”

### Guide to reading Panel 74

Seminario Mnemosyne, edited by Elizabeth Thomson

The leading theme of plate 74 is Grace in the form of healing, miracles and compassion. The choices included in the composition of the montage immediately announce some of the elements of form and content that are woven into its itineraries of meaning; the vertical arrangement of three large images from works by Masaccio (fig.2), Raffaello, (fig. 5), Rembrandt (fig. 8); and the opposition, in the opening image (Saint Peter healing with his shadow fig. 1) and in the closing image of the plate (The Chastity of Scipio fig.12), of two images portraying the bequeathal of Grace. The succession of figs. 2, 3, 4, suggests that the miracle - the healing or the call to follow Christ - occurs in front of the temple (fig. 2) or, indeed, close to the door of the temple (Acts 3, 12: figs. 3, 4) a space that in an etymological sense is profane.

The preference afforded to these three artists by Warburg despite the geographical and temporal distance that separates them from each other can be explained by the stylistic composure and the focus on the essential and the simple that is evident in their works, and by their failure to be enticed by the ideal of ‘all’antica’ style in rendering the rhetoric of power. This composure (P1) is expressed in the perfectly balanced use of light and shade (A) in the pictorial effects that are employed for the visual elucidation of the principal theme of the plate. Light and shade are loaded with the semantic value of Grace understood as *salus* (health/salvation).

The opening and closing images of Saint Peter healing with his shadow (fig. 1) and the Chastity of Scipio (fig 12) are the two extremes of the itinerary which exposes different ways of depicting grief: the rigorism of the figure of St. Peter (fig. 1), whose very presence, in the shape of his shadow (Acts 5.15), heals - a pictorial representation of his physicality but also a symbolic representation of the bequeathal of Grace (B); the powerful gesture of Christ’s hand (figs. 2, 5, 8: Gf1, GF2); and physical contact in the depiction of the Chastity of Scipio (fig. 12: Gf4).

The miracle depicted in Masaccio's fresco is noteworthy. According to the Acts of the Apostles 5.15, the power of Peter is such that incorporeal contact with the saint's shadow has thaumaturgical properties; the faithful carry the infirm along the route taken by Peter in order to be cured simply by being touched by his passing shadow, regardless of the apostle's intentions. His shadow heals as a counterpoint to divine light, itself a medium of salvation (A). The singularity of Peter's powers - shadow as protagonist and agent of miraculous events - leads Masaccio to a formal invention. For the first time in 15th painting, shadow is painted as a form rendered in colour. In the same cycle of paintings, the scene depicting the banishment from the Garden of Eden, in which shadows have no semantic value, portrays Adam and Eve projecting their shadow on the earth of paradise rendered merely as a shaded area. It is precisely on the subject of restoring light and shade to the real ms of painting in the artistic development which begins with Masaccio, and becomes the essence of painting in the manner of Rembrandt via the example of Piero della Francesca, that Warburg writes also some notes in his studies.

Researching the effects of light and shade, Warburg makes a speculative but theoretically convincing observation. He identifies a stylistic continuity between the early Renaissance examples of the two Italian artists and the achievement of Rembrandt's pictorial output that keeps pace with the refusal of many other artists to emphasise expression using the language of rhetorical gestures.

Elsewhere, Warburg, once again with reference to Rembrandt, refers to the eternal problem faced by Shakespeare's Hamlet, of the conscience divided between reflex action and reflection. The thematic development of the argument concerning the bequeathing and receiving of salus, is in fact reflected in the semantic value of gesture.

The same gesture of the hand with pointed index finger (Gfi) performed by Christ and by Peter in fig. 2 is loaded with contrasting value, especially when compared with the image which appears below it, Raffaello's Consignment of the keys (fig. 5). In Masaccio's fresco, the apostle answers Christ's call confirming his signal with a gesture which is purely indicative (Ger), whereas Christ's gesture on the other hand is at the same time eloquent, indicating where the miracle is occurring, and authoritative, signalling Peter as the instrument of the miracle (Gfi).

Without any intervening stages, the gesture becomes the true vehicle of Grace in the other images portraying salvation that appear in the plate. In fig. 5, the extended hand of Christ beckons to Peter to become a shepherd of souls; in Rembrandt's print (fig. 8) Jesus, his left hand raised and his right hand extended towards the woman with a child, gathers to himself the infirm and heals them.

The 'one hundred florin print' (fig. 8) in which Rembrandt concentrates various miraculous events performed by Christ in one image has an important position in the montage of the plate and opens a window through which to view the connection between the leading theme of healing and Warburg's lived experience. Warburg gave a reproduction of this work of Rembrandt's to the psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger on leaving the Kreuzlingen clinic where he had been receiving treatment between 1919 and 1924. The therapist, who cured the suffering of the soul with the non-material drug of physical presence and words, is assimilated into the figure of salvation par excellence; the patient, with this significant token, repays the 'gift' he has received. Its contiguity with the print *Three crosses* (fig. 7) not only highlights the discourse of style relating to light in the works of Rembrandt; it also reconfirms the evidence of the theme of grief and pain.

Peter, the Lord's vicar, is also the instrument for the bequeathal of *salus* via the detached demeanour that characterises him in Masaccio's fresco (fig. 1), and also, in Rembrandt's engravings placed immediately below it, (figs. 3, 4), via the emotional involvement expressed by his arms opened out (Gf2) to receive and heal the cripple at his feet.

In the same way, the figure of the man receiving Grace, interpreted as the healing of the body and the salvation of the soul, is loaded with differing values that range between the true *Pathosformeln* of the kneeling male figure with arms crossed over his chest (fig. 1, F1) and the figure with hands clasped in the eloquent gesture of devotion, prayer and supplication (figs. 1, 5, 8, Ge2).

In the works assembled on this plate gesture is exposed for its non-communicative value (of "eloquent gesture" Ge), but also for its active value (of "effective gesture" Gf), so a non-rhetorical reading of gestures is privileged.

The emphasis placed on composure and equilibrium, undisturbed by gesticulations, is consistent with the inclusion of Raphael's work (fig. 5) in the



plate. It is justified not merely because Warburg acknowledges the Italian master's formal influence on Rembrandt's compositional style.

The syntax of the plate appears to be characterised by the detachment and the spiritual demeanour of the central figures (P<sub>2</sub>), the agents of grace. The guiding thread that links works and artists distanced from each other reflects the choice of a balanced painting style that restores a sense of austere grandeur. The motionless force of these authoritative figures (Christ, the saint, the prince) produces miracles without contact (b) whereas the necessity of contact appears to be meant as a reduction of power and authority, and the gift becomes an exchange or a privilege (figs. 2, 12).

Only the figures representing infirmity and inferiority, cripples, the sick and the grieving at the foot of the cross, surrender to pathos. They are dishevelled and, overcome by physical or spiritual suffering, lose control of their bodies. They are not yet, nor will they ever be, active figures of Grace. The images of the dwarf, the diseased man, the slave, indeed all the figures placed in a position of inferiority (D), act as counterpoints to the auctoritas of the character conferring Grace.

The demeanour, composure, and Apollonian awareness of the power to bequeath salvation belong to Christ but also, in imitation (E) of him, to Peter and the prince, whether Christian - Gianfranco Gonzaga in fig 6, and the knight in fig. 9 - or pagan - Scipio in figs 11, 12. In the case of the Prince, whereas in Pisanello's medal (fig. 6), his grace derives as much by the contrast between the dwarf's deformity as by being a courtly knight rather than a condottiere and violent conqueror, in the paintings of Jan Steen (fig. 11) and Jan Lievens (fig. 12), Grace is something that is authorised rather than given by Scipio to the slave and her husband.

The king's authorisation occurs via the touch of a hand (Gf<sub>3</sub>) that sanctions an agreement, whether nuptial or of Salvation. Returning to the vertical axis that joins fig. 12 and fig. 2 of the plate, the image of a king and young girl their hands touching (Gf<sub>4</sub>) is mirrored in the figures of Peter and the tax-collector in Masaccio's fresco, joining only the scenes portraying "bequeathal by contact" in the plate. The gift is not evidence of Grace or Salvation, an offering that demands the spiritual token of faith in exchange (C). The gift is coins, the pledge is converted into money, symbol of substance and reality.

In this complex interweaving of semantic itineraries, the central position of the prints of the Three crosses (figs. 7, 10) is for thematic as well as compositional reasons. The portrayal of the Crucifix focuses on all the themes of the plate (suffering and salvation, light and shade). The dialectics of light and shade, enhanced by Rembrandt's late engravings, express Christ's sacrifice, the greatest gift of Grace carried out not for the salvation or the healing of a man but for the redemption of humanity.

The solitary figure of the knight, whose unequivocal exemplar can be found on the obverse of Pisanello's medal (fig. 6), is prominently visible at the feet of the crucified bodies between the figures that are referable to the traditional postures of the compassion (F2 - cfr "the theatre of death", plate 42 link please if is possible). In the plate, the medal is juxtaposed with the engraving. However, this is no simple game of recognition of source and borrowing. As Gombrich has already noted, Warburg was very struck by the fact that Rembrandt had borrowed a figure from one of Pisanello's medals for the Roman general on mount Golgotha in his late engraving, Three Crosses. Rather than use the formula of expressive gesture that had given rise to the figure of the weeping figure of Magdalene, "the Maenad beneath the Cross", Rembrandt took an isolated image of her. Locked within herself, she underscores the spiritual aspect of her conversion, the pause between impulse and action that Warburg considered the most distinctive mark of the civilised world and saw signified in Rembrandt's religious paintings.

The figure of Christ is the archetype and model of human suffering (H). Christ on the cross is at the same time a Pathosformel and a Statusformel, a human body worn-out by suffering, a dead body hanging from the cross - comparable in this sense with the death agony of the thieves. He is the symbol of Grace by means of his posture - the powerful gesture of arms thrown wide, and nailed to the cross, that has become a convention, a Statusformel, of his supreme sacrifice.

The idea of sacrifice is also interwoven with the structure of plate 75. It presents two further works by Rembrandt compared with prints and paintings that are coeval or otherwise. The ritual sacrifice carried out by the will of God (75.2), becomes the source and origin of medical anatomy, carried out on the body of an animal (75. 3), and of man (75.5, 75.10, 75.12) - the same body laid out on a plank-bed and desperately mourned in funeral scenes ((75.4, 75.7). The stylistic composure of the Flemish artist in *The anatomy lesson of Doctor Tulp* is the language of pure contemplation and scientific curiosity devoid either of spiritual value or religious undertones. The inter-

nal search is on the other hand a stylistic choice that underlies Rembrandt's illustration of Jan Six's *Medea* that opens plate 73 (73.1). *Medea's* tragedy is drawn entirely from a moment of psychological tension, the wedding of Jason and Creusa, at which she is present concealed in the deep shadows rendered by gradations of tone in the etching. Plate 73 - that consists not solely of these observations - offers a further point of comparison with plate 75: the depiction of the pact between *Civilis* and *Cerealis* (73.7, 73. 8. 73.15, 73.16), a covenant sanctioned by the exchange of gestures between the two brothers.



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