Rembrandt’s Etched Angels: Traces of the Divine

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Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.1179/0309656415Z.00000000073

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Rembrandt’s treatment of angels in his etched works is inherently paradoxical. In these prints the artist’s choice of subject and medium directly addresses the fraught relationship between the material and the spiritual, between reason and imagination, issues at the heart of Rembrandt’s artistic enterprise and central as well to the long reformation. Indeed, Rembrandt’s etched angels complicate our understanding of two subjects—the Reformed attitude toward angels and the association of printmaking with the rationalization of sight—that have traditionally been assumed to mark a cultural and religious watershed. For Rembrandt this subject matter directly addresses the artist’s ability to mediate between the material and immaterial worlds of creation, concerns that are seminal to his experimental etching technique. Consequently, the role of imagination, so crucial to Rembrandt’s printmaking, resonates as a theme throughout his angelic imagery. These concerns are also at the heart of Faust in his Study where Rembrandt pushes the limits of just what etching might encompass.

The innovative aspects of Rembrandt’s deliberative approach to etching reveal his own understanding of that technique as a reflection his creative processes and virtuoso abilities. Of necessity, though, it also takes for granted a subtle understanding of printmaking among his contemporaries. Writing in his Optics of 1637, René Descartes’ (1988: 62-3) description of a printed line to convey the processes of visualization assumes a sophisticated distinction between an image and its representation that suggests that he, too, could take for granted this nuanced understanding of printmaking as a given for his readership.

And if . . . we prefer to maintain the objects which we perceive by our senses really send images of themselves to the inside of our brain,
we must at least observe that in no case does an image have to resemble the object it represents in all respects, for otherwise there would be no distinction between the object and the image. It is enough that the image resembles its object in a few respects. Indeed the perfection of an image often depends on its not resembling its object as much as it might. You can see this in the case of engravings: consisting of a little ink placed here and there on a piece of paper, they represent to us forests, towns, people and even battles and storms: and although they make us think of countless different qualities in these objects, it is only in respect of shape that there is any real resemblance. And even this resemblance is very imperfect, since engravings represent to us bodies of varying relief and depth on a surface which is entirely flat . . . . Thus it often happens that in order to be more perfect as an image and to represent an object better, an engraving ought not to resemble it.

Putting aside the issue of perceptual representationalism, Descartes’ analogy presupposes a complex understanding of image making intrinsic to printmaking, that is the need for an artist to work out a system of graphic forms to represent a given object. This graphic vocabulary is most obvious in the work of reproductive engravers but must have equally preoccupied an artist such as Rembrandt who sought his own more idiosyncratic set of graphic marks (MacGregor 2000: 390-403).

Even when discussed in terms of the rationalized graphic vocabulary of reproductive prints any description of the printed line assumes the fragile relation of the ink line between the cut metal plate and the paper. That ephemeral relationship is all the more evident in etching, a technique which is noted for its demands on an artist’s openness both to unremitting labor and luck, to experiment and to reflection. Each stage of the labor intensive etching process—the
preparation of the copper plate, the immersions in acid, the inking, the wiping of the plate, and the choice of paper—is subject to craft and chance. Christopher White (1999: 3) conveys what is at stake, “in calculating his effects the artist has to rely on inspired guesswork and sheer good luck . . . . With all the skill a professional may command there still remains an element of wizardry. The etcher resembles an alchemist, closeted with his dreams and his chemistry, hopefully waiting for the day his riches will materialize.” Given the contingencies of etching as practiced by Rembrandt, this fugitive impression would take on increased importance as a record of the ongoing dialogue between reason and imagination, technical control and chance. Implicitly, this interplay allows for the significance of changing papers and inking as well as the reworking and afterlife of copper plates. Most importantly, it recognizes the ephemeral nature of the printed line pulled from an etched plate.

If we accept that artistic materials have artistic meanings, etchings’ interplay of plate, paper, and ink embodies a uniquely complex figurative surface where the plate becomes a site of experimentation and performance as well as the record of a process. By their nature etched marks are a direct response but they are also a tacit acknowledgment of an unfolding process, of floating lines but also of the scarred metal plate. Etched lines, then, are ephemeral traces but also provide an “archaeology” of the image. Such traces which mark that which is gone even as they provide a vestige or sign that we have to re-imagine and possibly track provide an elusive effect appropriate for evoking immaterial creation. For Rembrandt, they seem as well to be part of his creative process.

Rembrandt’s reuse of plates embodies the complex interrelationship of subject, material, and meaning that characterize his prints. He may well have created his splendid landscape The Three Trees, 1643 on a discarded first version of the Death of the Virgin, 1639. (Campbell 1980: 9-13) Despite the marked difference in technique between the fluent if scratchy linearity of the
angels and clouds in *The Death of the Virgin* and the textured and tonal drypoint that creates the *Three Trees*’ crepuscular rays (or Jacob’s Ladder effect) both works exploit etching’s ability to use material means to depict the insubstantial and transient. Moreover, as Colin Campbell (1980: 19-30) argues, Rembrandt’s reworking of the plate might be seen as an artistic dialogue in which the residual lines of the first image helped to inspire the second. Traces, here, act like pentimenti which were long viewed as stimuli for creative imagination. Leonardo da Vinci points out that such pentimenti could inspire a draftsman and for that reason ought to remain on a drawing. (Sell 2001: 66) In the present case, this palimpsest goes beyond formal inspiration. The play between material and immaterial creation evident in the contrast between the cozy domestic interior below and the angelic light above in the earlier print plays out in a more muted way in the *Three Trees* where worldly creation evokes both the creative power of the artist and of God. As Susan Kuretsky notes of this print, “the sheet of rain at the left literally unveils the scene like pulled curtains for the observer’s contemplation, revealing it in a physical sense, but also signaling that meanings or ideas exist beyond the surface of what is visible.” (Kuretsky 1994: 173)

Rembrandt’s radical reworking of Hercules Segers’ *Landscape with Tobias and the Angel* into a *Flight into Egypt* (1653) provides an even more powerful example of a forceful and explicit artistic dialogue, an engagement with the plate that goes beyond using an earlier composition to provoke new ideas. Rather the difference between Segers’ image and Rembrandt’s unfolding response lays bare an agonistic struggle that ended only with the wearing out of the copper plate. Segers, whose work had been important to Rembrandt for a number of years, was an artist for whom trace images and images made by chance were crucial to his process of print making and for the meaning of his prints (Van der Waals 1988: 148-156). Rembrandt collected Segers’ paintings and prints. He even reworked the foreground of a landscape painting by Segers now in the Uffizi. Most importantly, Rembrandt was inspired by Segers as an artist whose printing technique which was uniquely centered on the manipulation of every aspect of print making and for whom the plate was itself a locus of creation.
Segers’ importance for Rembrandt is most directly to be observed in his reworking of the *Tobias and the Angel*. Segers’ print was already a free interpretation of Hendrick Goudt’s engraving after a lost painting by Adam Elsheimer. (Hinterding 2008: 123-24) So the dialogue Rembrandt joined was already a complicated one. Rembrandt, though, radically changed the terms of the debate. He reworked the landscape to make for a more open vista and a more rugged foreground. Most dramatic, however, is his transformation of the scale and identity of the figures. The heroically scaled figures of Tobias and the angel Raphael have been scraped away and replaced with the Holy Family and their donkey, figures who are half the size of the originals. The laborious scraping, burnishing, and polishing of the copperplate to rework the print must have provided ample time for Rembrandt to meditate on his changes. The subject matter retains the longstanding associations with exile and journeys but moves to a scene where the sacred is more embedded in creation both as sacred figures but also in scale to their surroundings. And, of course, for one who knew the history of the plate and could view the sequence of states the relationship between the subjects is inextricably linked with the relationship between the artists. Such thoughtful changes are entirely characteristic of Rembrandt’s works—such as the *Three Crosses* (1653) and the *Ecce Homo* (1655)—created in this period (Carroll 1981: 585-610).

In all their variety Rembrandt’s reuse and reworking of his plates, draws attention to the distinction between the etching (on the plate) and the print (on paper). Relatively recent study of the plates as themselves objects of inherent worth recaptures, I think, some of their significance for Rembrandt and his artist contemporaries (Hinterding 1993-94: 255-57). Indirectly, this consideration of the plates points up, by way of contrast, how the paper provides an unstable and fragile surface particularly suited to convey unsteadiness of all earthly things. Rembrandt’s preoccupation with the dialogue between plate and image is evident in his manipulation of any aspect of the procedure subject to change; a tacit acknowledgment of the role of the imagination in the apprehension of the relationship between the two—a space of possibilities especially evocative of the immaterial suited to angelic imagery.
The implications raised by this space of possibilities are eloquently developed in Rembrandt’s *Sacrifice of Isaac* (figure 1) of 1655. In this etching the angel, larger and more fully realized than any of his predecessors, is an active presence physically grasping Abraham. The angel’s grip which stops the sacrifice embodies the complex interplay of embrace and recoil, unity and opposition, material body and angelic presence. David Smith (1985: 291-92) considers the print as embodying a Protestant aesthetic with an emphasis on a personal biblical typology. For such a viewer—as Smith (295-96) points out—Calvin’s emphasis on “blind faith” and on “things not seen” is made manifest. The artist, praised by his contemporaries for conveying speech, is uniquely sensitive to a biblical text which only mentions the angel’s voice.

What David Smith refers to as the problem of seeing takes on a keener edge in light of the underlying theme of Abraham’s blind obedience to the incomprehensible power of God. The emphasis on blind faith is at one with the reformed perspective as set forth in the Statenbijbel’s translation of Paul’s Letter to the Hebrews—“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”(Smith 1985: 295) Calvin’s commentary further emphasizes the gulf between the human and divine—a situation in which faith must be tried . . . flesh subdued. The varieties of light effects in the print—the bright rays that beak through the clouds and spotlight the darkened eyes of Abraham while daylight illuminates the background vista—suggest levels of divine illumination. These concerns with the problem of seeing and with laborious transformation are pertinent to the technique no less than the narrative of this print.

The implications of the etching technique in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* are even more pointed in *Abraham Entertaining the Angels* of 1656 (figure 2). Given the shared subject matter and similar size of both prints, Martin Royalton-Kisch suggests that they might be related. (Hinterding 2000: 315) If that is the case, the second print takes a somewhat different approach
to the relation between angels and man, the corporeal and the spiritual. An older white haired figure, usually identified as God, sits with two men distinguished by their beards, receding hairlines, and wings. Rembrandt’s interest in specificity—most often discussed in relation to his use of his copy of a Mughal miniature now in the Albertina—is also evident in his treatment of the subject. Not only do his angels eat; they seem to eat flat bread or pita.

This question of angelic appetite is important in theology. Eating and digesting food indicates the humanity of mankind and the potential creatureliness of angels. For Thomas Aquinas food is a metaphor for spiritual sustenance. Eating evokes the transformation of the material from the corporeal to incorporeal, the gradual transitions in matter to a more spiritualized form. Rumination has a long tradition, as well, in monastic literature. Angelic appetite, though, took on a particular significance for seventeenth-century Calvinists. John Gaule’s meditation on Abraham’s entertainment of the Angels describes how God stoops to our nature---accommodates himself to us. This doctrine of accommodation justifies imaginative representation of the spirit world; it ensures that representation of the invisible does not involve fiction or deceit if it fits a pattern of accommodation (Raymond 2010: 170). Accommodation, food, and angelic digestion are important themes for a reformed artist since accommodation, according to Calvin, allows man some limited understanding of the divine (Raymond 2010: 169, 172). Likewise, representation would be feigning if it weren’t accommodated to human capacities (Raymond 2010: 169, 172). As both incorporeal and nonmaterial angels test Protestant theories of representation. Such instances exemplify the ability of visual simulacrum to impress or imprint their thoughts on fleshy imagination. Finally, too, the transformative implications of angelic appetite embody the graded transition in matter associated with digestion and that are also reminiscent of the processes of etching—the polishing, application of dark
varnish, and especially the “biting” and “eating” of acid, as well as the final inking and choice of paper—a complex series of procedures and transformations which lead to an impression. (Rassieur 2003: 48-52)

If on this reading, the angel in the Sacrifice of Isaac conveys action, and the angels in Abraham Entertaining the Angels recall digestion, then the angelic vision in the so-called Dr. Faust of the 1650’s (figure 3) might be understood to embody sight and seeing. Suitably this enigmatic print has elicited diverse interpretations among them the figure as alchemist, Faust, a cabbalist, a rabbi, and as Saint Paul (Van der Waal 1964: 7-48; Henry 1989: 8-19; De Vries 1989: 34). Despite their obvious differences all these interpretations admit the centrality of a wise man in the midst of some kind of revelation that addresses the fundamentally incorporeal nature of the Divine. The figure—a scholar who stands between a skull and the angelic vision—does not look at the angel or the disk but at the mirror held in the angel’s hand. The three aligned motifs—skull, scholar looking at mirror, and figure with shining disk pointing at the mirror—might suggest corporeal, spiritual, intellectual understanding. Lyckle de Vries (1989: 84) aptly associates the imagery with Saint Paul (1 Cor. 13: 12):

We see now through a mirror in an enigma: but then

face to face. Now I know in part: but then I should

know as I am known.

Historically this passage is closely entwined with Augustine’s “rhetoric of aenigmata” and is a key passage in his commentaries and in Calvin’s (1577: 152-158). The ambiguity inherent in aenigmata becomes explicit in this print that is about shadows and mirrors (and, I would argue, the printmaking process). Angelic vision is an important theme for seventeenth-century ideas of the created world—for natural philosophers no less than theologians. For Jan Amos Comenius—
Angels who are denizens of the invisible and immaterial world (but still part of that created world)—see more clearly, nothing obscures their sight (1651: 228-238). Likewise, Joseph Hall suggests that angels do not look through the horny spectacles of the senses, or understand by the mediation of phantasms: but rather, as clear mirrors, they receive at once the full representations of all intelligible things (Raymond 2010: 293). His opposition of the mirror and the lens evoke the ways of seeing set forth in Rembrandt’s print.

This emphasis on the partiality of sight and the role of enigmatic vision is especially associated with the writings of Saint Augustine. In the *City of God* (1968: 811-12) he particularly addresses Angelic vision:

> As then [angels] see, so shall we also see; but not yet do we thus see. Wherefore the apostle uses the words cited a little while ago; “now we see through a mirror in an enigma, but now then face to face”.

By face of God, here, we are to understand his manifestation; that which can only be intuited by those predisposed to understand. Active and ambiguous works, as John Onians points out, demand the viewer’s imaginative engagement and a willingness to tolerate ambiguity (1980: 14-17). Such works develop the implications inherent in Augustine’s “rhetoric of aenigmata.” The *Faust* suggests an Augustinian sensitivity to different levels of vision that describe a view beyond corporeal vision to a higher level of seeing. In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (1982: 215-221) Augustine explicitly describes three types of vision: corporeal vision is the apprehension of physical forms through the eyes of the body; spiritual seeing covers the sight of incorporeal images including memories and divine visions; and intellectual vision which is purely of the mind and through which one can perceive God. Aenigmata allow for limited
spiritual sight since they provide imperfect knowledge and emphasize what can only be dimly understood. Everything must be puzzled out and interpreted in a path to spiritual knowledge by way of obscure and fragmentary signs. Since no one can know God through reason, signs that teach but reveal their inadequacy are exemplary visual images. As such, the linear schema and conventions of etching are uniquely suited to stimulate the viewer’s imaginative response to fragmentary pictorial effects. From this perspective, such aenigmata evoke the incomprehensible power of God—they encourages imaginative viewing even as they allow for the kind of accommodation consistent with Calvin’s emphasis on the limits of human understanding of the divine.

The strangest element in Rembrandt’s enigmatic print is the burnished disc with etched letters which have been identified as cabbalistic names of God intended to invoke the nature of the supreme being, creation, and angels as well as the origin of the universe (Henry, 1989: 15-16). The inclusion of the cross and INRI at the center suggest a Christian appropriation of the imagery—perhaps, though not necessarily, the millenarian Protestantism described by Shelly Perlove and Larry Silver (2000: 91). More to the point, the lettered disc, an aniconic reference to an unknowable creator, exemplifies a reformed view of the limits of representation. If, as Lyckle de Vries asserts, this is a Protestant Allegory of Faith it is also—I think—a justification of artistic representation and a sly assertion of the artist’s role as a creator (De Vries 1998: 35-36). After all, the enigmatic mirror—a burnished plate with etched lines—parallels the worked plate of the print. The disc presented to the viewer purports to be God’s engraving. On one level then the mirror with incised lines is about making—a mirror of creation.

In the so-called Faust, Rembrandt creates alternative perspectives—the scholar looks at the mirror while the viewer looks at the disc and at the etching as a whole. These distinctions are furthered by the play of contrasting techniques—meticulous finish and sketch, light and shadow (Dickey, 1986: 254-56;
Effects which, taken together, provide a complex palimpsest rather than a straightforward contrast. Rembrandt, here, utilizes to the full intaglio’s technical superimpositions to embody multiple interpretations. The role of the artist as creator is both asserted and delimited. From this perspective Clement de Jonghe’s title of ‘Practiserende alchemist’ takes on a new resonance (De Groot, 1906: 408). For Rembrandt’s contemporaries chemical processes pushed the limits of man’s mastery of nature. John Hale, for example, warns young exegetes not to “deal with scripture as chemicks deal with natural bodies torturing them to extract that which God and Nature never put in them” (Hales 1617: 4). In contrast, Rembrandt tortures the plate and utilizes the full technical possibilities of etching to expose its limits.

No one—not the wise man of the print and not the viewer—can know God through reason alone. Hence the need to distinguish carefully between description or representation and semblance, that is counterfeit or feigning (not figurative) delineation. Representation would be feigning if it weren’t accommodated to human capacities. Rembrandt’s etched angels allow him to develop this distinction. Rembrandt’s printed lines are neither arbitrary schemata nor rational translations. They are, in these instances, traces that mark that which is gone, what we have to re-imagine and possibly track. A vestige or sign for those who reflect. Rembrandt’s etched lines allow us to intuit objects that don’t exist. They evoke—as through a mirror dimly—the transcendental quality of imagination by means of a veil of lines and ink that disclose meaning through concealment.
Figure 1. Rembrandt *Faust in his Study*, 1652 etching, drypoint, and burin, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.9067
Figure 2. Rembrandt, *Abraham's Sacrifice*, 1655, etching and drypoint, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.7161
Figure 3. Rembrandt, *Abraham Entertaining the Angels*, 1656, etching and drypoint, Rosenwald Collection, 1943.3.7160


