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## The Father and the Prodigal Son

# A Comparison between Marilynne Robinson's *Home* and Michael O'Brien's *The Father's Tale*

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### Introduction

Of all the parables in the New Testament, the tale of the prodigal son is one of the most important and popular as it presents with the clarity of fiction the intimate relationship between God and man; chronicling sin, conversion, mercy and redemption. A central feature of the story is the description of God as a loving father, who meets his repentant son halfway on the road.

In my paper, I will look into two modern retellings of this parable, namely the novel *Home* by Marilynne Robinson (2008) and Michael D. O'Brien's *The Father's Tale* (2011). In both of these novels, the focus is on the father, and then not a father overflowing with mercy, but troubled and afflicted with his ideal of fatherhood. Thus, it is the redemption of the father that is in focus, not primarily the son.

The character arc of the father provides the "spine" of the story, while it is not important or peripheral to the main storyline, when or whether the son goes through a true *metanoia*. My comparison will be between these two fictive fathers and what understandings they imply of the human divine relationship.

The thesis of my essay is that although both authors seems to have exchanged the divine father for a very human one, these figures of earthly fatherhood, as the biblical parable, still speaks in a figurative way about our understanding of divine fatherhood.

### The Biblical Story of the Prodigal Son

Let us first look at the biblical text in Luke 15:11–32.

The "inciting incident" of the story is when the younger son takes his share of the inheritance and travel to a distant country, where he squanders his fortune, and have to work with feeding pigs. The turning point is when "he came to himself." Upon which we get an interior monologue in which he decides to turn back to the father and confess his sins. The climax of the story is when the father, filled with compassion, runs toward his son on the road and puts his arms around him and kisses him. The son is

reinstated in his social role of son, and in the epilogue with its dialogue between the older envious son and the father, the latter's final words are, "he was lost and has been found."

In the biblical parable, the father clearly represents God who in his mercy welcomes even serious sinners, that is, if they turn back to him with remorse.

However, as we will see, the two novels reverse and problematize this role of the merciful father in several ways.

## Home

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home*, the prodigal son is clearly Jack, the son of the Reverend Robert Boughton. The first difference with the biblical story is that Jack does not come home due to remorse but out of necessity. Still, he is portrayed as a classical prodigal son, as the black sheep of the family at last coming home.

The father tries to forgive Jack, but finds it hard as he admits:

No, no, it isn't how I wanted things to be. I promised myself a thousand times, if you came home you would never hear a word of rebuke from me. No matter what. (Robinson, 2008, 283)

And later as part of the same scene:

Why do I have to care so much? It seemed like a curse and an affliction to me. To love my own son. (Robinson, 2008, 285)

Further on in the novel, it seems that the father has suffered a stroke, as he first does not recognize Jack any longer, but when after scrutinizing his face, he comes to believe that this person indeed is Jack. In this way, the father has a second chance to forgive Jack, but arrives instead at a deeper self-understanding, "Maybe I'm finding out I'm not such a good man as I thought I was" (Robinson, 2008, 286).

Their final words are when Jack comes to say goodbye to his father.

The old man looked at him, stern with the effort of attention, or with wordless anger.

Jack shrugged. "I have to go now. I wanted to say goodbye." He went to his father and held out his hand.

The old man drew his own hand into his lap and turned away. "Tired of it!" he said.

Jack nodded. "Me, too. Bone tired." He looked at his father a minute longer, then bent and kissed his brow." (Robinson, 2008, 331)

In distinction to the biblical story, for Robinson the relationship between father and son does not end in an embrace in which the father's merciful love surprises the son. Instead, in Robinson's version, the

father turns away tired of the attempts at reconciliation, but perhaps even more tired of his own failure to measure up to the Christian ideal of forgiveness.

In an interview with Marilynne Robinson in 2009, which focuses on the theme of the prodigal son in the novel *Home*, she says that,

Again, for me the issue between him and his father is not one of forgiveness. His father cannot absolve him of the pain and difficulty of his life, and Jack does not expect him to. He comes home seeking help in restoring a good life he had made, which has been destroyed by the pressures of law and social custom. I suppose people take the issue to be forgiveness because they think about Jack's youth rather than about his present situation. But really he is bringing judgement with him, and he finds himself continually having to forgive his father and to love *him* graciously, that is, despite all. (Painter, 2008, 488)

As she also says in the same interview, "I have changed the terms of the parable in ways that go beyond the fact that the story continues beyond the prodigal's return" (Painter, 2008, 488).

In fact, Robinson moves away from the theme of the divine father's act of forgiveness to the theme of social justice, as Jack's predicament is due not only to his alcoholism and dissolute life, but also to his interracial marriage, which had broken down before he came home. This is the heart of the final scene where Jack's wife, Della, comes to visit the house after Jack had left, and instead she speaks with Jack's sister Glory.

Secondly, Robinson focuses on the theme of grace instead of forgiveness as the heart of the story of the prodigal son. For her the act of the father running toward his son in the biblical parable is an act of grace irrespective of the son asking of forgiveness. That is, in theological terms she moves toward a consideration of predestination, in which the sinful acts of the son cannot cancel out grace; in a way, *metanoia* is then not required for righteousness. It is instead imputed irrespective of the conversion or absence of it. In the interview, Robinson explicitly brings this up and plays with what kind of argument the reformer Calvin could have made regarding the prodigal son and predestination, "that whom God loves he loves, and no choice the erring son makes or fails to make changes that. [...] Seen from that side, predestination is grace in a very radical form" (Painter 2008, 489).

Robinson, therefore, considers predestination more favorably than as she puts it "harsh" free will, as predestination can console Jack with that although his life seems to be preordained "tending always toward 'perdition'"... "God loves no matter what (Painter 2008, 489)."

According to Robinson, the prodigal son does not need to ask for forgiveness, as his salvation is not dependent upon his actions, that is, judgement is essentially a mysterious decision of God to apply grace against all odds. Then, of course, the problem is shifted to the father, to his interior struggle with welcoming into his home the son who has not repented or essentially changed his life. The father, in this case a very human father, struggles with the Christian ideals and understandings of love, mercy and

justice, and I interpret that as a symbol of the struggle with a traditional understanding of God the father in which justice has a very central place as, for example, in the biblical texts. In her reflections on her own novel and its theme, Robinson sees the son as bringing judgment to the father. It is the father who is judged as not measuring up to the standards of social justice.

In this way, the novel not only highlights the very real struggle of a human father but also our understandings of divine fatherhood. Robinson tends toward the mysterious grace of divine predestination instead of human conversion to God. In a sense, according to her, it is primarily our understanding of God and social justice that needs to change, not the moral failings of the Biblical prodigal son. Indeed, the alcoholic man who left a teenage girl alone with her child and attempts suicide in his Father's home, brings judgement to the house of the Father. For the old man, reverend Boughton, there is no solution, only a kind of redemptive giving up.

Therefore, the final words, "I'm tired of it."

## The Father's Tale

In 1998, the year of the Father according to the scheme put forward by Pope John Paul II for the preparation for the third millennium of Christianity, the Canadian author Michael D. O'Brien began to write a novel focused on fatherhood. It developed during several years and was published in 2011, that is thirteen years later.

In many ways, it is very different compared with Robinson's *Home*. It is a massive book with over one thousand pages, compared to the little over three hundred of *Home*; it spans different geographical locations from Canada, England, Russia to China. The story is about leaving home, going on a journey, experiencing adventure, and then returning toward the end as a changed man.

Robinson's *Home*, on the other hand, is securely anchored in domesticity; travels are mostly handled as backstory, or told in dialogues. The one real outing is when Jack, Glory and their father tour the village in a car.

O'Brien's father protagonist, Alex, instead, leaves home in the beginning of the novel in search of the lost son. In a sense, the whole novel is about the period when the biblical father sets out on the road to meet his son half way on the road, only to find that the son is not really coming toward him, but moving away, ever elusively.

In the end, when the father returns home without the son, the son returns. And the father learns that the son had already returned during the beginning of the father's travels. So in a sense O'Brien's story connects to the main theme underlying the three parables in Luke 15: the search for the lost coin, the one lamb of the hundred that was lost, and thus the younger son.

The story is about the father setting out on a journey, but in O'Brien's version the son and the father miss each other, and the father is thus left alone on a long journey, having to come to terms with his own inadequacy.

The final scene when the son comes home is also in distinction to *Home* focused on forgiveness. The son asks for forgiveness, but the father also asks the son for forgiveness: for not measuring up to the standards of fatherhood. In the novel, the story is told from the Father's point of view, while in the biblical parable, the prodigal son is the protagonist son and it is to his interior thoughts we get access.

O'Brien's novel mostly takes place in foreign lands and the main focus is on Russia. In a way, it is not only a story about the heroic father's search for his lost son, but also a novel about discovering Russia, and its soul. O'Brien made two research trips to Russia in 1999 and 2000, and one of the central experiences during the first trip was when he visited the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg, which exhibits the famous painting of the prodigal son by Rembrandt. In it the son is kneeling, resting his head against the father's robe. When O'Brien went into the exhibition room, he was moved and expected to have a spiritual experience of the meaning of the painting, so he stood there praying. But as he told me in an email interview,

The room was fairly deserted, just myself and another person. Just as I began to pray this young man stepped immediately in front of me and blocked my view of the painting. I waited for him to leave, but he stayed and stayed. He stood before the painting with his head slightly bowed, and his arms dropped to his side, almost a standing at attention—which I later learned was a physical posture of prayer. I grew increasingly impatient as the minutes passed.

I noticed that he was dressed extremely poorly, with ragged clothes and shoes without socks. His skull was shaved and scarred, his face stubbled and unclean. He looked by all appearances to be someone much battered by life. I felt sorry for him, but nevertheless I continued to be irritated that he had interrupted my spiritual experience. Finally he turned to me, looked me solemnly in the eyes, gave a little bow, then departed. Only when he was gone did I realize that he looked exactly like the prodigal son in the painting. And then it hit me that, at the moment, I was very much like the elder son in the parable. And *this*, I realized, was the real spiritual experience: what this providential moment was showing me about myself. (O'Brien 2018)

For O'Brien, Alex in *The Father's Tale* is not an allegory of God the Father, but of human fatherhood in heroic search for the lost son. Still, O'Brien thinks that Alex “lives in Christ, and so the story does reflect some of these aspects—grace and human nature integrated in a co-creative labor” (O'Brien 2018).

The scene of the reunion of father and son in *The Father's Tale* ends with the Rembrandt version of the parable, in which, “On an impulse, Andrew knelt on the floor and put his arms around the father” (O'Brien 2011, 1065).

## Reflections on Human and Divine Fathers

The reworking of the parable of the prodigal son in the two novels under scrutiny is not simply a way of incorporating theological themes into fiction. In a sense, for a Christian, the parable puts forward God himself as a literary author. The story has it all in a very concentrated format: a set of distinctive characters, the inciting incident, the increasing troubles and the lowest of the low, with the turning point, and then the climax with the conversion, merciful love and reinstatement of the protagonist, while the ending of the minor character the older son is left open and undecided. It shows us God at his best in writing fiction, so to speak. Therefore, for a contemporary Christian author to remake such a divine story is, of course, to enter a daring game. For to change the characters or elements of the plot is also to change the theme of the story. In a way, it is a conversation between a human author and a divine in writing and rewriting fiction.

One of the main changes that both O'Brien and Robinson did was to transpose the father from someone defined solely by his generous will to forgive into a very fallible man, troubled by internal conflicts. The father sees himself failing to live up to the high ideal of Christian fatherhood. The old man in both novels is himself in need of forgiveness.

While Robinson even goes to the length of saying that the story is not about forgiveness at all, for O'Brien forgiveness is still important, but, I think, the personal quest of the father is more central.

Why is, then, fatherhood so troubled in both novels, when the father figure in the biblical parable is such a magnanimous figure? Both O'Brien and Robinson are practicing Christians of different confessions, but their literary versions of the divine father are eclipsed by the troubled nature of human fatherhood.

My tentative answer is that the novels primarily focus on the human ideal of fatherhood, on the distorted reflection of the divine father in the modern condition. Both reverend Boughton and Alex are men looking back at their lives with a sense of failure. And both Robinson and O'Brien were born in the 1940s and young in the 1960s. The fathers of the two novels carry with them traditional ideals, but with the changes of society and family since the 1960s to live these has become almost impossible.

For Robinson, the traditional ideal dies resigned in bed, while Jack, the modern father, wanders into the life of liquid modernity where nothing is stable.

For O'Brien, the ideal of the Father is redeemed by confession to the son, by the father making himself in a sense into the prodigal son. The ideal of the father was lost but is now found again. The final pages of the *Father's Tale* promises a new beginning, but the major emotional point is that of the father's last words to his son, "The pain is gone now, Andrew, and I'm home. I'm a different person, and I hope a better person" (O'Brien, 1065).

It is as if Alex had to confess the failures of late 20<sup>th</sup> century fatherhood. The son, then, as in the Rembrandt painting, falls on his knees and embraces him. With this act, the human father regains something of the nature of divine fatherhood.

In O'Brien's novel, redemption becomes possible when the Father comes back to the starting point, to his home, after all the adventures of the quest, while in Robinson's *Home* domesticity is both stiflingly oppressive and lacks redemptive force. Jack must leave; Glory cannot leave; while the Father tired leaves by dying. Traditional fatherhood is gone and the modern father leaves home tired of it all.

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