AESCHYLUS’ PROMETHEUS BOUND: BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR SUCCESSIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF MAN’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE DEITY AND THE UNIVERSE

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of The School of Continuing Studies and of The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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Reading Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* (460-50 BCE) prompts the following questions. First, how does Prometheus’ gift to man of hope, fire and knowledge affect the relationship of man to the deity and the universe? Secondly what are the consequences of his necessity to act to be true to himself? Vernant and Vidal-Naquet in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* note that the questions dramatized in the play on “the relations between power and knowledge and between the political and technological functions are ones that never cease to be problematic”. The play presents this conflict as a debate between authority and intelligence against a stark background.

My thesis will argue that the only way to address these questions is by opening the text to trans-historical interpretations from different periods and literary styles. With Aeschylus as a starting point, I will direct attention to two later versions of the myth to see how they answer or add to the complexity of the questions. The first, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1818) portrays Prometheus as
a romantic champion of mankind. Shelley’s interpretation will be compared with Robert Lowell’s rebel against a political tyrant in his *Prometheus Bound* (1969). In looking backwards and forwards in retellings of Aeschylus’ play the reader can discover what is distinctive about each and attempt to answer the questions the myth raises.

Vernant proposes that the means to understanding is to open up a classic text through successive interpretations. A framework can be built on words from the texts, how they are used and what meanings can be drawn from them. My thesis will have the following framework; transgressive language, necessity and anger, hope’s evolving complexity and sacrifice sacred and profane.

Opening the text includes examination of the use of words in a poetic setting and in the social, psychological frames of reference. Bernard Williams writes that a reader will recognize “an identity of content, and that recognition goes beyond simply the acknowledgement of a hidden motive that we share with the ancients, the thrill of the nerve touched by the deconstructionist’s probe.” One of the goals of this paper will be to identify that content in *Prometheus Bound* that we share with the Greeks. In that identification which moves from Aeschylus to Shelley to Lowell, we can recognize ourselves.
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Chapter 1

OPENING THE TEXT
OF
AESCYLUS’ PROMETHEUS BOUND

For the ancient Greeks the story of Prometheus was real. Defying the authority of Zeus, Prometheus, neither fully a god or completely human, gave fire and knowledge as a gift to man. Prometheus’ act was his “destined lot” certain that “the power of Necessity is too strong to be broken.” Explaining his actions, he declares, “I only mean to show what good I did them”(445). Prometheus’ goodwill was an ambitious act perceived for man’s benefit regardless of the consequences to himself. For Prometheus the consequence was to be bound to a remote cliff for the rest of his life, his liver repeatedly gnawed by Zeus’ wild eagle. The Chorus will tell him, “It’s wise to bow before Necessity”(935) invoking Zeus as the source of law and power above human understanding. The consequences for man were the greater knowledge and understanding that could cast past beliefs in doubt. The reader can see the opposing forces that greater knowledge can unleash with Prometheus’ actions. These include opposing forces from within his “destined lot” his necessity to act to give knowledge and also the questions and doubts the knowledge might bring.

Reading Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound (460-50 BCE) prompts the following questions. First, how does Prometheus’ gift to man of hope, fire and knowledge affect the relationship of man to the deity and the universe? Secondly what are the consequences of his necessity to act to be true to himself? Vernant and Vidal-
Naquet in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* note that the questions dramatized in the play on “the relations between power and knowledge and between the political and technological functions are ones that never cease to be problematic.” The play presents this conflict as a debate between authority and intelligence against a stark background.

My thesis will argue that the only way to address these questions is by opening the text to trans-historical interpretations from different periods and literary styles. With Aeschylus as a starting point, I will direct attention to two later versions of the myth to see how they answer or add to the complexity of the questions. The first, Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1818) portrays Prometheus as a romantic champion of mankind. Shelley's interpretation will be compared with Robert Lowell’s rebel against a political tyrant in his *Prometheus Bound* (1969). By examining the myth in different literary traditions we can address our own questions of the relation of increased knowledge to authority and to God. Only by looking backwards and forwards in retellings of Aeschylus’ play can the reader discover what is distinctive about each and attempt to answer the questions the myth raises.

Vernant proposes that the means to discovering the keys, the framework to multiple readings, is to open up the text to through successive interpretations. The framework can be built on words from the texts, how they are used and what meanings can be drawn from them. “It is impossible to look for a single interpretation. There is not one single way of looking at the questions for an answer.” It is a way of looking at classic text from the past and from our own time.
There is not a single "primordial " interpretation: it requires more than one perspective.

The reader gets a broader perspective on Prometheus' double character as both human and god by looking at more than one text. The concept of the human and the divine will always be open for study and definition. The paper will look at that relationship starting in 429 BCE, moving to 1819 and finally to 1969.

Opening the text includes examination of the historical context and literary framework. The use of words in a poetic setting and in the social, psychological frames of reference will be reviewed. Bernard Williams writes of the relationship among texts in his study of Greek philosophers and poets. He notes that a reader will recognize, “an identity of content, and that recognition goes beyond simply the acknowledgement of a hidden motive that we share with the ancients, the thrill of the nerve touched by the deconstructionist’s probe.” One of the goals of this paper will be to identify the content in Prometheus Bound that we share with the Greeks. In that identification which moves from Aeschylus to Shelley to Lowell, we can recognize ourselves.

Williams writes on learning from the Greek past:

... our view of them is intimately connected with our view of ourselves ... to learn about the Greeks is more immediately part of self-understanding ... It will continue to be so even though the modern world ... draws into itself other traditions as well. Those other traditions will give it new and different configurations, but they will not cancel the fact that the Greek past is specially the past of modernity. Those other traditions and configurations of Prometheus include Shelley's Romanticism with his belief in Man's limitless possibilities and Lowell's use of 20th century prose with striking images.
Questions of Aeschylus’ authorship are not an issue in this paper. All of the readings will be done in English translations. The translation by James Romm based on Mark Griffith’s text for the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classic series will be the foundation text. Griffith’s commentary is also used as a reference. Other translations will be noted when they provide a path to broader interpretations.

Williams points out the following in reading a Greek text in translation:

We can, to a considerable degree of agreement, translate the poems into English. The firm convictions that we can do this is supported by the historical traditions that link us to the ancient world, by the fact that informed readers today are not arriving at these texts by historical parachute, but have learned Greek from someone who learned Greek from someone . . . 6

Williams continues that this is no guarantee of absolute correctness, but that it does provide the necessary foundation for studying the texts.

Chapter 2 will examine the relationship between setting, text and dialogue. These elements form the foundation for the framework that I will use. That framework will be constructed using the recurring elements of necessity, hope and sacrifice in the succeeding chapters. Using that framework I will address the relationships in Prometheus Bound that test the understanding between men and gods. Words and dialogue against a background of "bare rocks with their steep, rock faces" (5) far from a cultural and political center become a way in which individuals can test boundaries and values to include the boundaries of authority vs. intelligence as exemplified by the dialogue of Hephaestus and Power.

Chapter 3 will focus on Prometheus’ necessity to act to confirm his identity as both man and god. Prometheus has helped establish the autocracy of Zeus,
then he rejects it. Bernard Williams notes that, "Greek literature, above all tragedy, offers us a sense “that what is great is fragile and what is necessary may be destructive.” 7 Prometheus, in his necessity to establish Zeus as the deity and in his gifts to man has prompted his punishment. I will look at the three types of necessity as examined by Williams and show how they relate to Prometheus and Zeus’ necessity.

Hope wanders into all the texts with an evolving complexity. Chapter 4 will look at that evolution as a reflection of man’s relationship with the deity and the universe. I will try to show the existence of the word itself is a sign of hope. This can be seen in the movement of the word and its changing meaning as it develops from Hesiod to Aeschylus to Plato. The movement of the word prepares for the aligning of hope with love by Shelley in a later chapter.

Chapter 5 will examine how Prometheus’ gift of fire and knowledge ultimately maintains or even strengthens the separation of man from the gods as explored by Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant in The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks. I will examine how Prometheus becomes a symbol of sacrifice himself and the emergence of a prayer like litany by Aeschylus.

Chapter 6 will examine how Shelly opens Aeschylus’ play as a lyrical drama in Prometheus Unbound through the use of wide-ranging literary references. I will look at four that open up Aeschylus: the Bible, Milton, Plato and Dante. Prometheus’ gift of speech will be looked at in comparison to the ongoing framework of the importance of words. Shelley sees hope with love and
intelligence as active parts of human life and Man’s freedom transforming the universe.

Chapter 7 will look at why Robert Lowell called his *Prometheus Bound* both “A triumph and a fake.” Lowell opens up Aeschylus by the use of twentieth century prose. He puts into the story his feelings on the Vietnam War, Lyndon Johnson, and the state of the United States of the late 1960s. To Lowell the gifts of hope, fire and knowledge have not eliminated the “shadows of the unknown.” Man’s relation to the authority and knowledge becomes problematic. Lowell will build on the Prometheus framework in his writing for the search for truth.

In Chapter 8 will sum up how *Prometheus Bound* becomes the foundation for a strong framework of concepts that are equally vital in our time: the debate between authority and intelligence, the nature of hope, our relation to the universe and to our understanding of the deity. The play is more than a reflection of fifth century Athens. *Prometheus Bound* looks forward to changes that will come in later works that Aeschylus could not imagine. I will show how, starting with Aeschylus, the reader can take a longer literary journey that continue to this day.
Chapter 2

THE WASTELAND
AND
TRANSGRESSIVE DIALOGUE

O imagination, you who have the power to impose yourself on our faculties and our wills, stealing us away from the outer world and carrying us off into an inner one, so that even if a thousand trumpets were to sound we would not hear thee, what is the source of the visual messages that you receive, if they are not formed from sensations deposited in the memory?

-Dante, *Purgatorio*, XVII.13-18-paraphrased by Italo Calvino

In *Six Lessons for the Next Millennium* Italo Calvino wrote of the “mental cinema.” It existed before the movies. Calvino compares Dante’s use of imagery in the *Divine Comedy* to film projections for your imagination. He distinguishes between two types of literary imaginative process. One starts with the word and arrives at the image. The other starts with the image and becomes a word. When we read, we start with the word and as Calvino notes, “according to the greater or lesser effectiveness of the text, we are brought to witness the scene as if it were taking place before our eyes, or at least to witness certain fragments or details of the scene that are singled out.”¹ The mental cinema is always open and projecting images in our mind and memory.

Aeschylus projects a mental image of the landscape of *Prometheus Bound* with the opening words: “We have come to the most far-flung tract of the earth, to the Scythian road, a wasteland without men”(1). Power is talking to Hephaestus as they bind Prometheus to a rock. The wasteland is a geographic frontier. In *Prometheus Bound* it is also a frontier between god and man. The border and the
edge of the world are both a setting and a description of the dialogue throughout the play. There are borders between men and gods. The setting intensifies that border. Words and dialogue on a border far from a cultural and political center can define the center or challenge its authority. The “steep rocky faces” where “you shall hear no voice, see no man’s form” are far from the stimuli of Athens whose architecture and public places reinforce the role of authority and the gods.

Aeschylus’ characters will repeatedly bring variations of this image to the reader’s mind. The characters emphasize that they are at the end of the earth:

Power: . . . these bare rocks with their steep rocky faces. (5)  
Hephaestus: Here you shall hear no voice, see no man’s form . . . (19)  
Prometheus: This thing that has reached me at earth’s end. (118)  
Chorus: . . . your body stretched out here, backed and withered on this rock. (149)  
Io: . . . who has bound you to this cliff. (612)  
Hermes: My father will smash this rock cliff with thunderclaps. (1019)

The mental cinema is always projecting the image of a desolate landscape to a receptive reader. The landscape becomes the background against which one examines the relation of man to the deity and the questions of authority and power. Knowledge of the universe and your relation to it are called into question when your surroundings are only a rocky landscape at the end of the earth.

Mark Griffith in his commentary notes that Athenians of Aeschylus’ time may have known that the Scythian wasteland existed but most had likely not seen it. The land could include the "whole expanse of to the north of the civilized world." Romm and Griffith note that various locations for the story have been given in later versions most generally in the Caucasus mountains north of the Black Sea as in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound.*
Establishing the exact geographic location is not the focus of this chapter. What is important for this discussion is the establishment of a landscape in stark contrast to the city of Athens against which the debate of power and intelligence can take place. The reader must retain this mental image of a barren wasteland as the play progresses and Prometheus’ punishment builds. The signs of civilization of fifth century Athens have been stripped away.

The stage is set for what Simon Goldhill calls the drama of *logos*. Words – *logos* - were of a critical nature in Athenian society. Public space became a stage for the spoken word. The theater tradition of classical Greece builds on that stage by the significance of the words that are used in drama and in speech.

Calvino closes his discussion of the mental cinema noting the visions before our eyes can only take shape through the use of words which act as “grains of sand, representing the many-colored spectacle of the world on a surface that is always the same and always different . . . .” Key words will take on broader meanings in later versions of the myth. Aeschylus has set the stage in our memory with a clear description of the setting that he will reinforce throughout the play. His words stand out like “grains of sand” against this setting through the use of repetition. They establish a recurring theme through a rhythmic variation of words and the image they evoke.

Richard Lattimore in his introduction to his translation of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* writes of Aeschylus use of repeating symbols. Symbols, to Lattimore, refer to the words that Aeschylus uses to repeat the representation of an idea. Symbols can be related to one another and are not isolated. Following Lattimore’s argument
the symbols that build up in the first eighty lines of *Prometheus Bound* not only reinforce the setting but also the idea of the control of knowledge and submission to authority. Against this “far-flung tract of the earth” Power tells Hephaestus, “to pin this villain to these bare rocks with their steep, rocky faces”. Words of authority enforced by bondage multiply in the first eighty lines. For example here is a selection from their dialogue before Prometheus speaks for the first time.

Wrap him in firm fetters of steely chain. To bind a kindred god, Stake you...with tight-knit bonds. Put the fetters on him, Bridle...put it around his hands, Bind him tightly. Strap firmly, Fasten the restraints, Strike with all your force to lock the shackles.

The images of restraint and bondage of Prometheus emphasize the debate between Power, representing authority and might, and Hephaestus representing intelligence and knowledge, that will dominate the opening of the play before Prometheus speaks. His bondage is a symbol of intelligence and knowledge held in check. A symbol that one who goes too far will be punished and placed in isolation.

Hephaestus’ unwillingness to carry through the demands of Zeus under Power’s authority are established with his outspoken talk with Power,

Hephaestus: But I-I cannot find it in myself
To bind a kindred god to this wintry cliff... (11-12)

Power: That’s enough. Why delay, indulge in pity?
You should hate the god who all the gods hate most,
The one who gave your prize to mortals. (38-39)

In a remote spot one can question what you do and how you do it. Hephaestus is not eager to do his job and is outspoken in his reluctance to bind Prometheus. Hephaestus carries out his job but it is done with thoughtful hesitation. He declares, “But to harm my kin is dreadful, or my comrades” (38). Power is upholding the
authority of Zeus even if he characterizes Zeus’ rule as, "Harsh is the ruler when rule is new-begun" (35). Zeus has only recently taken power and there is a bitter tone toward Prometheus in Power’s words. For example he in implores Hephaestus to hit harder in binding him, "... don’t leave slack. He can devise impossible escapes.” (59). Power also expresses resentment for Prometheus’ intelligence as well as an expression of sarcasm. For example, “Let him learn that all his cleverness cannot outsmart Zeus” (61). Hephaestus responds with, “Such ugly words-they match your ugly form” (79). When you have to carry out a task for which you have little enthusiasm you can always make derogatory comments about your fellow workers.

Power leaves his outpost with words of sarcasm mixed with envy when he addresses Prometheus as follows:

Now go and do your worst-steal from the gods
and give their prize to mortals! Your human friends-
how can they help you drain this sea of troubles?
The gods who called you Foresight named you wrong. (81 - 82)

Power in his authoritarian role under Zeus has nothing but contempt for someone who knows more than he does but is in a powerless state.

Hephaestus and Power’s rapid dialogue from the beginning of the play, stichomythia, establishes a rhythm of the language. The words are brought to life by the short sentences and quick response to each. This rhythm is in contrast to Prometheus’ opening lyrical introduction to nature. Aeschylus establishes a musical contrast and characterization of the speaking styles of the characters.
John Gould writes that it is a mistake to consider *stichomythia* as a general conversation or dialogue. Those are too “everyday” terms for what is more like a “law-court cross-examination, a catechism of the Inquisition even, in *stichomythia* than the casual exchange of small talk: the very ceremoniousness of the exchange serves to create tension and precariousness of mood.” As the play opens the feeling of tension and unease has been created by the setting, the continual references to bondage and the cross-examination between two opposing forces on the fate of Prometheus.

Power and Hephaestus tell Prometheus’ story in their dialogue. Literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the use of language in novels as essentially “dialogic”. The meaning of words could only be understood in terms of one person’s relation to the one they are speaking with “its inevitable orientation towards another. Words were not to be seen as fixed with one meaning in speech. Words could be “modified and transformed in meaning by the variable social tones, valuations and connotations” through the interaction and dialogue of individuals and their concept of the meaning of the word. Bakhtin’s theory of a “dialogic narrative” with many voices applies to *Prometheus Bound*. The language of Power, Hephaestus, the Chorus, Ocean, Io, Hermes and Prometheus reflect their points of view, their place in society and understanding whether god, half-god, or human.

Writing and performing dialogue that transgresses beyond what is expected in normal conversation is a way of testing accepted standards. Bakhtin’s “dialogic narrative” at the end of the world can be transgressive. In transgression one can test the boundaries and values of how a culture defines itself. Power is maintaining
the norm, the understood Greek authority of Zeus. Hephaestus is testing that authority even while he is binding Prometheus to a rock.

To take another example, the Chorus, the three daughters of Ocean, tests the boundaries of what can be said and expressed as they address Prometheus. They ask him, "Uncover all and tell us everything"(195). They are not satisfied as he tells them his story and they want more information. Their dialogue becomes transgressive, wanting information Prometheus cannot give. With the questioning of the chorus the reader can see how groups often respond to events and vacillate in their beliefs. Beliefs can be intensified when confronted with the display of power and the suffering of others.

Chorus: ...You have some holy secret-so?

Prometheus: Let's talk of something else. It's not yet time
That this be spoken of. It must stay hid,
As much as is in my power. If I hide it,
Someday I'll flee these shameful bonds and pains. (520 - 521)

Their desire is not an indication that they will no longer bow to Zeus' authority. They will continue to venerate him with even more intensity as will be discussed in Chapter 5. The knowledge that Prometheus has given them as much information as he is willing to give has only intensified their desire for greater understanding. In a reversal of roles, it is now Prometheus who upholds the cultural norms with, "Let's talk of something else." Prometheus knows the future but does not want to talk about it.

Griffiths notes in his commentary, "In a play having only one human character [Io] the Chorus at times comes close to representing mankind and to reflecting the feelings of the audience." He continues that the Chorus are "timid,
inexperienced girls, accustomed to a domestic life of their father’s house, ignorant of the elemental conflict that has been raging outside.”

On one hand one can agree with Griffith’s comparison of the chorus as representing the feelings of the audience. He elaborates on the characterization noting that they act as “interlocutors for P. . . . marked by a certain formalism and restraint.” As he notes as the play ends they reject the threats of Hermes and express their desire to support Prometheus.

However one does not have to agree with his description of the Chorus as “inexperienced girls only accustomed to a domestic life”. In *Playing the Other*, Froma Zeitlin notes that in Greek tragedy, “No woman speaks or acts for herself and in herself on stage: It is always a man who impersonates her.” On the stage men dressed as women play the Chorus. Their request for more information is at the border of male and female roles in Greek society. Zeitlin comments in a footnote that the development of drama in Athens runs parallel with the distinct “definitions and distinctions of masculine and feminine roles.” The reader is on the border of gender and the preconceived perceptions that go with it when the Chorus questions Prometheus. The Chorus in the simple act of questioning the bound god is going outside their role of young girls only interested in domesticity.

Zeitlin continues that, “Woman speaks on the tragic stage, transgressing the social rules if she speaks on her own behalf.” The Chorus speaks on their behalf as women, the men who play them and the men in the audience wanting more information. Zeitlin argues that “Even when women female characters struggle” and in this case struggle for wanting to know more, their demands to know more
are part of an encroachment or crossing the border into male territory of “men’s claims to knowledge, power, freedom and self-sufficiency.” Prometheus has the knowledge even under restraint. By wanting to know more the Chorus is entering that area of authority and knowledge that they have been denied.

Zeitlin writes that in the Greek culture women were thought to “speak double.” Speaking double involves both generally not speaking out and then speaking out when it is called for. She notes how in Greek tragedy women act as a “catalyst, agents, instruments, blockers, spoilers, destroyers and sometimes helpers or savior for the male characters.” In Prometheus Bound the daughters of Ocean act as a prompter for more information. They frequently express sympathy for him and in the end will declare, “We will share with him that which we must” (1068). The Chorus will make sacrifice to Zeus at the end of the play. Nonetheless they are still standing with Prometheus to find another sympathetic supporter for him with the audience.  

Bernard Williams’ view of the audience allows for another layer of understanding. He notes that Greek playwrights, “...tended to adopt a “high, archaizing, manner” writing in an old style not like ordinary speech of fifth century Athens. He continues that as “direct evidence of the ethical or other concepts of its audience it has to be taken with extreme caution. However it is still true that tragedies had to be intelligible to their audience.” He notes that since, "they were produced in competition to engage, impress and overwhelm an audience it should tell us something about the relations between the ethical conceptual structures of Greek tragedy and the outlook of such an audience.” It is highly likely that the
original audience of *Prometheus Bound* knew one of the versions of the myth. What they would not know is how Aeschylus had adapted it for the stage. Like the Chorus they would want to know more. We want to know more.

The text is directed to us, today’s reader. The dialogue between Power and Hephaestus on authority versus intelligence is directed to us. The questions that the Chorus asks are the questions that we would ask. Oliver Taplin in *Greek Tragedy in Action* makes the strong case that, “the authors communicative intention is a precondition of the existence of his work.”\(^{16}\) *Prometheus Bound* and the argument on the limits of authority and power that open it would not exist if that had not been the intention of the author, whether or not it was Aeschylus who wrote the play. Taplin continues that while the author’s meaning remains unchanged, the audience is always changing “We are now the audience of Greek tragedy. It was others yesterday and will be others again tomorrow.”\(^ {17}\) Today’s audience will bring its own expectations and preoccupations to a reading or a performance.

For today’s reader the mental cinema is projecting a stark wasteland for the background of the debate between authority versus knowledge and man’s relation to the universe and the deity. That debate will be written with Aeschylus’ words. Like Calvino’s landscape of words, Aeschylus’ worlds will always be the same but frequently have different meanings in the successive interpretations of Shelley and Lowell. This landscape of words is the result of Prometheus’ necessity to act and to be true to his nature.
Chapter 3

PROMETHEUS' NECESSITY
AND
ZEUS' ANGER

Bernard Williams has observed, “Greek literature, above all tragedy, offers us a sense that what is great is fragile and what is necessary may be destructive.”¹ For Williams, Greek tragedy does not present human beings who are “ideally in harmony with their world.” Nor does it tell us how to live in harmony with the world. He notes that a fissure exits between the nature of the tragic character and the way that the world acts upon him. Sometimes this is comprehensible and other times it is not. The world contains forces beyond our understanding.²

E.R. Dodds writes that the world of these forces and necessities is “haunted” and “oppressive.” He continues:

Aeschylus did not have to revive the world of the daemons: it is the world into which he was born. And his purpose is not to lead his fellow countrymen back into that world, but, on the contrary, to lead them through it and out of it.³

Prometheus’ actions were meant to lead men out of their world and their destruction under the rule of Zeus. He felt the necessity to act to change their world. Prometheus' actions were true to his nature, “I chose to do wrong, and I won't deny it”(268). Prometheus helped establish the autocracy of Zeus then rejected it. “He...put men first in pity”(238) by his gifts of hope, fire and knowledge to save man from Zeus' plan to “make them vanish, and create a new race”(230).
Terry Eagleton writes: “The ancient Greek word for drama literally means ‘something done’. Characters may lend the action a certain coloring but it is what happens that comes first.” Echoing Aristotle’s *Poetics* he writes that, “what matters above all for Aristotle is the plot or dramatic action. Individual characters are really just supports for this. They exist not for themselves but for the sake of the action, which Aristotle thinks of as a communal affair.”

Eagleton continues, “thinkers like Aristotle are perfectly aware that human beings have an inner life. It is just that they do not typically start from there . . . as much Romantic [Shelley] and Modernist [Lowell] writing does . . . .” Prometheus’ necessity to act to confirm his identity is part of his inner life. When the play begins he has already made the gifts that affect man’s relationships. Man’s inner life will also be affected and he may not be able to fully comprehend how knowledge can become destructive in his hands. The necessity to act has been destructive for Prometheus, bound and isolated at the end of the world. Zeus’ anger, his response to his necessity may bring consequences on how men will perceive him.

Griffith defines necessity as external powers over which a character may have no control. Those powers of the gods and Zeus, affect their actions. Over their actions stand the necessities of “The threefold Fates, the unforgetting Furies” (515). It is the necessity of all of the characters in *Prometheus Bound* to carry out their actions which in the end will impact man’s relation to the deity.

Williams in *Shame and Necessity* describes three concepts of necessity all of which can be examined in *Prometheus Bound*. His first example is the necessity imposed by the application of power by one person over another. Williams notes
that Prometheus is “yoked by these necessities” when he is bound by Power and Hephaestus to a rock. This is the necessity of the two to bind him. “Necessity is too strong to be broken... Such are the bonds by which I’m yoked”(108). Griffith points out that the “yoke of necessity suggests the taming and driving of animals” It is the image of Prometheus’ subservience. Another example can be seen in Hermes, as the agent of Zeus, telling Prometheus, “My father orders you... Don’t give me cause to come back here again... ”(949). Hermes is acting under the authority of Zeus. He is doing what he is told to do.

The second example is the necessity encountered when an individual concludes that he must act in a certain way. This is a necessity based on one’s own identity and how one can live under some conditions but not others. This is an inner necessity. Williams sees this as related to the concepts of shame and guilt. It is possible to feel guilt and shame for the same action. The difference stands between one’s inner life of “disposition and feeling” (shame) and the outer world of harm (guilt) that wrongs others. He writes how the expression, “What I have done?” points in one direction towards how one’s actions have affected others, and in another direction to what one is.” We all have internal limits and feelings of obligations of what must be done. Prometheus has an internal feeling that he must do what he has done. Prometheus knows this. “I choose to go wrong, and I won’t deny it”(273). His gifts have benefited others without his feeling shame. His sense of shame comes from seeing himself punished. “Don’t imagine that pride or self-regard keeps me from speaking. It’s rather the agony of seeing myself misused... ”(439).
Griffith notes how Prometheus past status has now in conflict with his current “humiliation.”

Williams quotes in his own translation Vernant on the tragic perspective which is applicable to Prometheus inner conflicts and feelings:

... being an agent, has a double character. On one side, it consists in taking council with oneself... On the other hand, it is to make a bet on the unknown and the incomprehensible and to take a risk... It involves entering the play of supernatural forces... where one does not know whether they are preparing success or disaster.

As half god and half man Prometheus is an independent agent. His responsibility was carried out with some deliberation. With his foreknowledge he knew what lay ahead for him. His final decision has taken root in his being and with his cries we see the emergence of a description of the inner life of the protagonist.

In the third example, Williams notes that the Greeks in the archaic period and to some extent into the later fifth century and beyond believed that over both these necessities stood what he calls supernatural necessity. Williams acknowledges supernatural is not a great term. He is referring to those things that stand outside nature or what lies outside our conception of nature and the ways that we explain the unpredictability of events.

Williams examines the role of supernatural necessity in the plays of Sophocles. A parallel example can be perceived in Zeus’ punishment of Prometheus. He points to “a difference of belief” between our outlook and that of the Greeks. We should not automatically think we completely understand or can separate our twenty-first century beliefs from the plays in which beliefs of ancient Greece are dramatized. We may understand that in fifth century Athens there was a belief in
supernatural forces that were used by the playwrights to create dramatic incidents. The fifth century audience or reader would understand and believe in the work of the gods. Williams notes, “...once we try to form a more definite picture of what such beliefs involved, we are likely to find that supernatural and dramatic necessity cannot be simply separated. If we feel that we have some definite sense of what such a necessity might involve, we owe that impression...to the operations of tragedy.” Williams sees supernatural necessity as something that we, today, cannot completely comprehend outside of it as an “artifact of a dramatic style”. We can understand the tragedies in that respect and “the ideas are intelligible to us, up to a point.” It is hard to know to what extent the Greek audience would accept the understanding that something was brought about by a god.

Griffith makes a similar point in his commentary regarding the Furies. He observes that it would be “a mistake to seek a systematic theology in understanding their responses and actions.” Aeschylus has created the dramatic necessity of Zeus through his punishment of Prometheus and his anger.

In *Prometheus Bound* the reader may be torn in two directions regarding the behavior of Zeus. Hephaestus questions his belief in the authority of Zeus to punish Prometheus. Power does not question of the necessity of Zeus’ authority. Aeschylus exploits this difference in the story for dramatic purposes. He adds to this by giving Zeus very human qualities that make him problematic as a god.

The Chorus tells Prometheus: “It’s wise to bow before Necessity” (935). And he responds, “Go fawn upon the ruler of the hour.” Ocean will try to convince Prometheus that he should yield to Zeus, “You’ll see that cruel monarchs can’t be
audited "(325). Sommerstein 's translation puts it more graphically with, "… being aware that we have a harsh monarch holding irresponsible power." Holding, irresponsible power and exaggerated flattery are all associated with human behavior. They are not god-like. Those characteristics bring him closer to half man and half god similar to Prometheus.

In *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity*, William V. Harris refers to the commentary of Griffith and notes that the “Athenians, both at this date [ca. 429] and later, would have felt it was wrong to control one’s anger: it would have amounted to unacceptable softness.” He quotes the words of Power to Hephaestus: “It’s not your place to cast insults if I’m strong willed and tough”(79-80). The translation by Sommerstein is even more direct, “You be soft if you want, but don’t make it into a reproach to me that I am implacable and have a harsh temper.”

In Harris’s view *Prometheus Bound* is the “first time in a text from the classical period that anger in a character is shown as a sickness. “*Prometheus Bound* is perhaps more concerned with the angry emotions than any of the dramas so far [he has] discussed.” Harris continues that it is not possible to make a full interpretation of the illness since he believes the play is not by Aeschylus and we do not know the final outcome. As mentioned in Chapter 1, for the purpose of this paper, the play is considered to be by Aeschylus and will be interpreted from that viewpoint.
Harris is referring to the following exchange between Prometheus and his father-in-law, Ocean who tells him, “I grieve your misfortunes” (290). Prometheus will not budge:

Prometheus: As for me, I'll plumb the depths of troubles until such time as Zeus relents from wrath.
Ocean: But you must know Prometheus, that words are healers. They cure the temper of a mind that’s sick.
Prometheus: True— if the time is ripe for hearts to soften. When the tumor of pride still swells, don’t use the lance. (375-380)

Harris suggests that other commentators have made the point that what Ocean says and was not original but more in the nature of proverbial or traditional response that the use of words was a traditional way to overcome anger. However, he writes, “… this is clearest representation to date of anger...as a metaphorical sickness.”

Their exchange notes that the location of the anger is in heart.

Harris notes that the exchange between Prometheus and Ocean has nothing to do “directly” with the concept of anger in Athens. However he identifies it with an anger in Greek known as orge which by the 450s was considered inappropriate. He continues. “And from this time onward the tragic theater often presented spectacles of anger producing appalling effects of individuals for instance in Sophocles’ Ajax... .” Other examples he mentions are Medea and Oedipus Tyrannus.

Harris references Griffith’s commentary on lines 379-80. Griffith refers to the Hippocratic maxim, ”treat when ripe, not raw. . . . P. knows that the critical moment has not yet come. Zeus’ heart is still too young and raw to listen to soothing words “. Harris builds on this by noting that Greek doctors of the time did not distinguish between “physical and psychological health” and that it is a mistake to
confuse what we associate with today’s medicine and doctors with that of the Greece of Aeschylus’ time.²²

Aeschylus’ characterization of Zeus’ madness as a human illness is in keeping with parallel developments in Greek sculpture during the classical period in the depiction of gods with human qualities. Greek sculptors gave the deities an emotional look that indicates they are very close to human. Aeschylus’ depiction of a deity with human qualities of madness and revenge is in keeping with the movement in sculpture of the time. As Julian Bell notes in Mirror of the World during the period 600-400BCE in Greece there was an analysis of the complexity of what we see when we look at a body working from the interior bones and muscles out to the skin. The result according to Bell was a sculpture with a “reflectiveness that slightly turns the sculptures head, as if it were alert to the world around it.”²³ If man could be portrayed as god-like then the reverse was also possible.

Prometheus necessity to act has given Man a new freedom. That freedom has made it possible for Man to live without the constraints imposed on them by Zeus. Aeschylus’ suggestion of Zeus’ anger as a sickness, not simply the necessity of a new ruler, places Zeus in a human context. The emergence in drama and in art of a god with human qualities such as anger, vanity and irresponsibility brings the gods closer to man. If gods can be like human beings with all their traits both good and bad, as well as look like man, doubt is cast on their authority along with an unwillingness to adhere to it. The depiction of Zeus’ anger as dramatized by Aeschylus has placed his wisdom in doubt and added to Man’s confusion about the gods.
Chapter 4

HOPE’S COMPLEXITY

No word in *Prometheus Bound* carries a broader trans-historical interpretation than hope. The evolving definition of hope is a reflection of man’s ongoing conversation on his relationship with the deity and the universe. If we open Aeschylus’ text and look at hope backward to Hesiod and then forward to Plato and later to Shelley and Lowell, with their two opposing views, we gain an understanding of hope that goes beyond one simple definition.

Early in Aeschylus’ play the Chorus asks Prometheus:

Chorus: Did you perhaps do more than what you’ve told us?
Prometheus: I allowed mankind to stop foreseeing doom.
Chorus: What medicine did you find for that disease?
Prometheus: I planted in them hopes that would obscure it. (249 - 251)

Prometheus has not necessarily eliminated doom or man’s problems but he has given them hope and a way to express that hope through his gift of words and language. A sense of doom or foreseeing doom is not necessarily eliminated but it is obscured by hopes placed in man. The use of the word “planted” carries the implication that it will grow and like any number of growing things it can thrive or die. It provides growth for the thoughts of other writers such as Plato who will take the concept of Aeschylus’ hope and for Shelley who will build on it by adding love.

Hope can be ambiguous. It can be upbeat and cheery or it can be fearful. That ambiguity is expressed by the chorus:

Sweet it is to stretch out life
amid confident hopes, and to feed
one’s heart on bright and cheery things.
But looking at your countless wounds
and lacerations, I shudder. (535-540)

The Chorus are optimistic on one hand but when faced with the evidence of
Prometheus’ condition they will eventually maintain their allegiance to Zeus, if
somewhat reluctantly. When faced with Prometheus’ bondage and punishment they
would prefer to look on more cheerful things rather than face the evidence before
them.

Terry Eagleton in *Hope without Optimism* writes that as long as there is a
word for the condition of hope there is hope. I would like to look at Eagleton’s
argument before discussing hope in Hesiod, Aeschylus and Plato.

Eagleton writes, “When tragic art is pressed to an extreme, life either ceases
altogether or begins to stir once more.”¹ As an example he refers to Shakespeare’s
*King Lear* and the dialogue of Edgar, the son of Gloucester who is now blind, with
the Old Man at the beginning of Act IV:

Old Man: How now? Who’s there?
Edgar: [aside] O gods! Who is’t can say, “I am at the worst”?
Old Man: ‘Tis poor mad Tom.
Edgar: [aside] And worse I may be yet. The worst is not
So long as we can say, “This is the worst.” (IV.1.25-27)

As long as Edgar can express the concept of the “worst” the final worst or
disaster has not occurred. Eagleton notes that language gives a voice to hope.

Similarly Prometheus’ hope does not eliminate problems or disasters but it obscures
them so man will stop concentrating on the worst aspects of existence. Eagleton
writes:

The true calamity would involve the extinction of the word. Hope is
extinguished when hope is obliterated. It is not true that language can repair
one’s condition simply be lending a name to it, but it is true that one cannot repair it without doing so. ²

Sudden unexpected disasters and occurrences do not need to be the final word.

Hope would stumble to a halt only when we could no longer identify cruelty and injustice for what they were. To speak of hopelessness must logically presuppose the idea of hope. ³

If something is hopeless then there is a sense of hope. Eagleton notes that when the words and their meanings disappear then the concept of tragedy itself is no longer possible. He points to King Lear, and I would add Prometheus Bound, as stories that continue to be presented and interpreted in various ways. He writes, “they thrive as an artistic event”⁴ and their continued presentation becomes a statement that the “catastrophe cannot yet have come about.”⁵ The successive interpretations of each of these plays over many years builds on Vernant’s concept of multiple interpretations to develop a framework for understanding. That understanding will include a broader definition of hope’s complexity.

E. R. Dodds tells the memorable story of Hesiod and the Muses on the island of Helicon who gave him “facts of a new kind, which would enable him to piece together the traditions about the gods and fill the story out with the necessary names and relationships.”⁶ Filling the story out included the story of Pandora and hope or elpis. The Muses also confessed to him that they were prone to lying. He wrote Works and Days as a gift from the Muse. He hoped it was true. “He in fact interpreted in terms of a traditional belief pattern a feeling which has been shared by many later writers—the feeling that creative thinking is not the work of the ego.”⁷ Hesiod does not claim to have seen the Muses but only to have heard their voices. This is the story they told of Pandora and hope.
Using her fingers, the maid pried open the lid of the great jar, 
Sprinkling its contents: her purpose, to bring sad hardships to 
mankind. 
Nothing but Hope stayed there in her stout, irrefrangible dwelling, 
Under the lip of the jar, inside, and she never would venture 
Outdoors, having the lid of the vessel itself to prevent her, 
Willed there by Zeus, who arranges the storm clouds and carries the aegis. 
(90-96)

Hope is carried in a dwelling that cannot be tampered with. It is inviolable. If it is to 
be opened it has the potential to send multiple miseries to humans and all life. It has 
been willed by Zeus who has the potential to do whatever he wants and there is no 
way to escape him. Hope should be called elpis. It is neither good nor bad. It is 
neutral. Elpis is something that may occur for which man will have no foreseeable 
knowledge. Man may be both afraid and hopeful of that happening. It is the 
expectation that something will occur.

Jean – Pierre Vernant in The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks notes that 
the gods have no need for any form of hope:

For immortal beings such as the gods, there is no need of Elpis ...If 
man...foresaw the whole future as the gods do, if he were entirely 
Promethean, he would not have the strength to live, lacking the ability 
to look his own death in the face. . . . 8

Vernant describes elpis as an illusion of good and an evil simultaneously.

Eagleton has a similar view seeing the description of hope in Hesiod’s story of 
Pandora as having more than one meaning. It is unclear whether Hesiod’s hope is a 
cure or another sickness or possibly both at the same time.9 Vernant sees it as 
putting an end to concentrating on death and all the other evils that beset Man.10 
Griffith writing on Hesiod’s elpis notes in his commentary, “Elpis seems to a blessing 
withheld from men so that their life will be dreary and depressing. “11
For Aeschylus hope is blind. It offers a possibility that things will change.

Prometheus gave man hope so he would stop dwelling on death and go on with his life with some optimism. Prometheus gifts in addition to hope have made it possible for man to live a more optimistic life. Vernant writes as follows regarding *elpis*.

It is not a cure for death, which has none, since death is inscribed no matter what one does, in the course of human life. However, lodged in the innermost hearts of mortals, *elpis* can counterbalance their consciousness of morality with their ignorance of the moment and manner in which death will take them.  

Vernant observes that Plato makes a distinction of Hesiodic *elpis* in *Laws* 644 c-d where he describes two different ideas of human thoughts regarding the future. He notes that *elpis* has the general meaning, not of hope which implies something good is coming, but rather of expectation that something will occur. This section of the *Laws* has to do with the correct use of words and is appropriate to look at in a play where the meaning of words takes on great importance.

Athenian: But one person who has within himself a pair of unwise and conflicting counselors whose names are pleasure and pain?
Clinias: The fact is as you say.
Athenian: He has, besides anticipations of the future, and these of two sorts. The common name of both sorts is expectation, the special name for anticipation of pain being fear, and for anticipation of its opposite, confidence . . . (644d)

Plato is making two distinctions regarding the future and what can be hoped for. One can look forward with either fear or confidence. Plato’s writings point to the dualism of the nature of hope. Eagleton notes how in *Timaeus* Plato warns us that hope can lead us astray:
Plato presents hope as a foolish guide, which can lead to the wrong choices in *Timaeus* and a false confidence in *Laws*. Both are placed in contrast with anger and fear. These emotions are seen in the characters in Aeschylus play. Fear and anger are present in Io and in the Chorus in their response to Prometheus’ suffering. Power shows false confidence in Zeus despite his misgivings. Prometheus does not lack confidence however, his punishment is public and humiliating for him.

Plato continually builds on Aeschylus’ concept of hope. In *Gorgias* 523 Zeus will declare, “The first thing to do is to take from men the knowledge of the hour of their death, for now they foresee it. I ordered Prometheus to stop that.” Vernant points out that Plato is “directly inspired by Aeschylus.” Vernant continues that there is a “parallelism between the tragic poet and the philosopher.” 14 Prometheus has not given Man the *elpis* of Hesiod but a form of blind *elpis* so they will no longer see their death.

To take one more example from Plato. Socrates will tell Protagoras at the end of their dialogue:

I liked Prometheus in the myth better than Epimetheus: so I follow his lead And spend my time on all these matters as a means of taking forethought For my whole life. (*Protagoras*, 361d)

Eagleton writes that tragedy depends upon a sense of the value of “human worth” whether or not it is productive. There can be no sense of tragedy without something better to compare it with. Tragedy to exist must be compared with the opposite and the sense of the value of what it is to be human.15  Prometheus valued
humanity enough to give hope. As he says, "I speak as one who has no blame for 
humans. I only mean to show what good I did them" (445). Eagleton observes,"We 
would not call tragic the destruction of something we did not prize." 16
In addition to the sense of value of human worth there must be an expression for it.
Hope exists with its many variant meanings over the years and to various writers.
The fact that the word is "hope" used to express a feeling of alternative to what 
currently exists itself offers hope.

Man receives hope as a gift but it is something that he must find within 
himself. To be acted upon it must come from within. Prometheus has no need for 
hope since he knows what will happen. Shelley was a great admirer of Plato as we 
will see in Chapter 6. For Shelly the internal mechanism that triggers hope is love.
Hope with love can be seen as a call to action for the future. In Prometheus Unbound 
Asia will say:

(He is god) who reigns
... and Love he sent to bind
The disunited tendrils of that vine
Which bears the wine of life, the human heart: (II.4.63)

Plato translated the Symposium. His translation of 191.d reads, "that reconciler and 
bond of union of their original nature, which seeks to make two, one and to heal the 
divided nature of man." 17 The complex nature of hope as described by Hesiod, 
Aeschylus and Plato, whether in fear, confidence and anger or as a foolish guide is 
triggered by love.

The complexity of hope from Hesiod onto Shelly, and as we will see in 
Lowell, is an illustration of Vernant’s concept of successive interpretations.
Prometheus has given man the means to make those continuing definitions with his
gift of the alphabet and words. The dual nature of hope as expressed so clearly by
Plato based on Aeschylus and then added to be Shelley will color our twenty-first
century interpretations. These multiple meanings can deepen our understanding of
the world of classical Greece and give us a more subtle understanding of how we
regard hope today.
Chapter 5

THE GIFT OF FIRE AND KNOWLEDGE
FROM
SACRED TO PROFANE AND BACK

New political initiatives, new military efforts and annual ceremonial events in Aeschylus’ Athens would include a sacrifice and a ceremonial meal. The Great Dionysia in which Prometheus Bound was first presented, both a religious and political event, included sacrifices. As Marcel Detienne notes, “sacrifice was of critical importance and a necessity ... between the exercise of social relatedness on all political levels.”¹ The concept of sacrifice as part of the political well-being of fifth century Athens contributed to “the social norm, and above all, civilization.”² Sacrifice becomes a form of communication between man and the gods. Walter Burkert writes, Athens is a “sacrificial city.” Protective deities watch over the city and assure its continuing existence. Accordingly both the gods and the citizens are “mutually dependent on each other.”³ To make that dependency work Man will require knowledge.

Prometheus provides the knowledge that might make that dependency work for both man and the city. At this point I will concentrate on Aeschylus’ Prometheus’ gift of fire and knowledge of sacrifice as defining that mediating dependency between the profane secular world and the sacred world of the gods. Prometheus puts that dependency in motion addressing the Chorus:

I showed the mantic arts of sacrifice:
the burning of thighbones wrapped in fat
and great backbone, and how to read the signs
they give when burnt, which used to be obscure. (495 - 499)

The evolution of sacrifice from the ancient Greeks to the early Christians could be a valuable inquiry linking the concept of sacrifice with us to the Greeks but that is not my topic. However, the Christ-like characterization of Prometheus will be discussed. A more detailed examination of the relationship between Christ, not Christianity, will be looked at in the chapter on Shelley where Christ and literary biblical references are significant.

Within the framework of sacrifice as a mediating role between man and god, I will discuss the concept of sacrifice. This includes the dialogue of the Chorus in relation to prayer, the body of Prometheus and importance of the liver and how in the end sacrifice rather than bringing man close to the gods, keeps them apart. Detienne refers to this separation of the profane and secular as Promethean Fraud.⁴

Karl Kerenyi writes how Hermes in the Homeric Hymns, and Prometheus in both Hesiod's Theogony and in Aeschylus' play, are given the credit for the concept of sacrifice. Prometheus is distinguished from Hermes by his bond with mankind through his gifts and also by his nature, his “human characteristics” and his punishment. Kerenyi describes sacrifice as sacrilegious “a cut or break into the world of living growth, which strike wounds in the divine environment.” The wounds are “indispensable to human existence.”⁵ Both the killing of animals to be used as a sacrifice and the use of fire as a sacrificial element are breaks with their natural place in nature. Kerenyi considers this as the reason Zeus saw Prometheus’ gift of fire as theft. ⁶
Detienne notes how Prometheus as half man and half god is in an “ambiguous mediating role between Zeus and Man” and that “a world stressing relationship by distance is inaugurated with a sacrifice offered to seal the agreement between the parties.” In Hesiod’s account the gods will receive the perfumed smoke of the fire. Men will eat the meat of the sacrificial animal.

Detienne does not consider sacrifice against the natural order but as establishing a contract between man and the gods. He describes Prometheus as placed in a “mediating role between Zeus and man”. The relationship between man and god will be kept separately and over the distance from earth to the heavens. Detienne makes the point:

The division is marked on the dietary level: The gods receive the smoke of the charred bones and the perfume of the herbs thrown into the flame, while men receive the fleshy parts of the ox that Prometheus has sacrificed.  

Writing of Hesiod’s Prometheus in *Theogony*, Vernant points to Prometheus’ failure to come to an understanding with Zeus which:

... gives this rupture the character of an irremediable and justified fall whose justice mortals acknowledge every time they sacrifice according to the Promethean mode and enter into communion with the higher powers.

Vernant notes the communion with the higher powers, the deity, involves a respect for justice and rules:

... that govern the relations of mortals among one another and the higher powers. By fully submitting to these norms, men institute a type of communication with the gods that establishes their exact place and at the same time makes them fully men.

That enforcement of justice governing man was dramatized in the opening of the play in the dialogue of Hephaestus and Power. It is seen in the dialogue of Ocean with his son-in-law on his punishment:
But the wages of a too proud tongue, Prometheus
Are the kinds of things you’re undergoing now.(320)

Justice must be maintained in the face of transgressions. Hermes responds to Prometheus’ sarcasm:

More insolence--the same kind as before
That got you anchored in this misery. (965)

The rules that control the relation of the gods to men must be preserved. When those rules are broken there must be punishment and possibly sacrifice to distinguish where man and the gods stand in relation to each other.

Williams points out that it is important to differentiate between Greek ethical thought with our inheritance of a moral sense from the Christian world. He notes that, “Greek ethical thought rested on an objective teleology of human nature, believing that there were facts about man and his place in the world discoverable to reason, that he was meant to lead a co-operative and ordered life.”11 A co-operative and ordered life could include communion with the gods. That communion could be brought about by sacrifice.

Sacrifice may have been a means of dealing with the trials of fortune as it appears in Greek tragedy. Characters are shown with responsibilities. All of the characters in Aeschylus’ play have responsibilities, pride, obsessions or needs whether we are sympathetic to them or not. Those qualities, “lay them open to disaster . . . and they encounter those disasters in full consciousness.”12 In the face of an uncertain future and supernatural necessity, Man will need to establish communion with the gods and sacrifice offers that course of action.
At the beginning of the 20th century French sociologists and anthropologists Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert proposed in *Essai sur le sacrifice* that the act of sacrifice establishes a bond between the sacred and the profane; a sacred realm of the gods and a profane realm of man. Man has never lived up to the gods or cannot aspire to the realm of the gods but sacrifice allows a form of communication between the two different realms which will always remain separate.¹³

Detienne notes how Mauss considers a “self-sacrificing god the ultimate form of the sacrificial process.” Mauss sees the sacrifice to the god as coming first, creating the central focus of “the social system by which society forms itself”. Mauss then takes it further with the sacrifice of the god itself as “defining the highest... ideal limit of undivided abnegation.”¹⁴ The god in sacrificing himself completely renounces his existence for man’s benefit. Mauss then compares the sacrifice of the paschal lamb as an adaptation by Christianity from Dionysiac traditions.

Walter Burkert notes the example of animals worshipped as gods. When the animal representing a god is sacrificed, it becomes a victim and is eaten. He writes that reflecting on this closeness with the Mass in Christian theology has “explosive power....”¹⁵ but does not pursue that contiguous exploration.

Kerenyi is in agreement with Mauss on the role of sacrifice as an “act of world creation or at least as an act establishing the prevailing world order.”¹⁶ However he is not in agreement on its relation to Christian theology. In comparing Prometheus and Christ he writes that the “paradox” of Prometheus is that he has always been mythological. The divinity of Christ in contrast has always been “an intrinsic part of the Christian faith” just as Prometheus’ bond with mankind has
been an intrinsic part of the Greek worldview.”

Kerenyi writes, “Once Christ’s action at the Last Supper took on the significance of a prototypical ritual act, it became a foundation sacrifice, the great sacrifice by which the world of salvation was established.”

Kerenyi continues that the sacrifice of the Last Supper was a “reconciliation, the resolution of a tension, an annulment ...of the difference between God and man.” He sees it quite differently from Prometheus’ concept of sacrifice in which, at least in Hesiod’s account, Man receives the most edible part of the slaughtered animal. Aeschylus would omit this detail. Prometheus is not offering salvation. He is offering knowledge.

The Chorus suggests Prometheus pull back on his benefits to man and put himself first:

But don’t give mortals too much benefit
while you neglect your own unhappy lot. (508)

The implication is that Prometheus is more useful as a god able to give knowledge than the knowledge that he gives which man may not be able to understand or use properly. This is further suggested in a later strophe when the Chorus, frequently thought to represent the thinking of the audience, says:

What can mere mortals do to save you?
Didn’t you see the weakness, the trance
that fetters all of their blind race?
Their plans can never evade the orchestration of Zeus.
(548- 550)

Mortals are blind and will continue to worship Zeus who has the ultimate power over them.

Prometheus’ gifts have led man into sacred places only known by Prometheus, Zeus and the gods. He has felt the inner necessity to make that
knowledge available as an agent of change. How man deals with new knowledge is unclear. One way in which man can attempt to bridge the profane world of man with the sacred world of the gods is through invocation and prayer.

Man has the potential to feel more secure in his unsure world by maintaining the sacrificial protocol and learning to understand what it says to him about the gods. Griffith notes in his commentary that Aeschylus Prometheus “institution of the arts of sacrifice is apparently an unalloyed blessing and an encouragement to piety.” 20 Prometheus is encouraging the worship of the gods through his gift of fire and the knowledge of sacrifice. Griffith continues that Prometheus taught the techniques of sacrifice and not the liturgical elements of worship.

Burkert enumerates “libation, sacrifice and the offerings of fruit as the acts which define piety for the Greeks. Those acts “must be attended by the right word.” 21 The Greeks have not passed on any “liturgical prayer formulae “ to be found in a particular text such as a Book of Common Prayer but elements of prayer can be found in Greek poetry. 22 Among the elements included would be the name of the deity, the deity’s expertise, justification and thanks for past gifts and a promise to abide by the deity’s rules in the future.

Writing about Prometheus’ opening words, Kerenyi comments that they have a particular importance in placing nature as the ultimate witness to his suffering. It is an invocation and a prayer to the powers of nature:

You, sacred air, and you, swift-soaring winds,
. . . all-seeing circuit of sun- I call on you.
See what I suffer, a god, at the hands of Gods.(90-95)
“This is the cry of a Greek when he is persecuted unjustly: martyrromai—You who have seen, I summon you as witness.” Prometheus is testifying to nature to be a witness.

Prayer like elements can be seen by today’s readers in the strophes and antistrophes that Aeschylus has given the Chorus of the daughters of Ocean. Their response upon seeing Prometheus bound to a rock contains the elements that Burkert notes form prayers in Greek religious practice. For example the following strophe praises Zeus the ruler of all. The chorus will make regular sacrifice to him and will not speak unkindly of him. There is a specific request. They will conduct multiple sacrifices. Finally the daughters of Ocean will not forget this prayer but keep it and practice it. In calling on Zeus there is agreement that piety is assured for the future.

This be my prayer: May Zeus, ruler of all, never set his power against my mind. May I not be slow when I make for the gods holy slaughters of oxen By the ceaseless stream of my father, Ocean May I never give offense with my words. May these prayers abide and not melt away. (525-530)

Their prayer and its intercessors will have a life beyond Prometheus Bound.

Approximately 400 years separate Aeschylus’ Prometheus (ca. 429 BCE) from Virgil’s Georgics (37-29 BCE) Throughout those years, Ocean’s daughters have continued to pay tribute to the gods. This is an example of the persistence of prayer delivered from a consistent source. In Georgics, Book IV, Cyrene, mother of Aristaeus “that great Arcadian keeper of the bees” begins a prayer,

Raise up your glasses, let’s drink a Toast of wine to Oceanus. And then to him, of everything the father,
She said her private prayer, and to the sisterhood of nymphs, Guardians of a hundred forests, and a hundred rivers, too. And then three times she sprinkled nectar on the sacred hearth, Three times a flame flared to the ceiling, giving out its light A sign to lift the heart, . . . [ IV. 380]

In his commentary Griffith makes the comparison of Cyrene’s prayer with the prayer of the chorus following Prometheus description of his gifts to Man.24 With this prayer, Griffith notes how the Chorus, Ocean’s daughters, at times appears to be representing everyman.25 This could be the everyman that is in the audience or is reading the text. Everyman would not want to have Zeus treat him as he is treating Prometheus.

Poets like Aeschylus would place nymphs, the daughters of ocean in the world of the gods. Nymphs can refer to both divine beings in trees and brooks, a “bride” or young girls in general. Burkert notes how the character of a sisterhood of nymphs can be “treacherously ambiguous” to define.26 In poetry and drama that their associations with gods and the natural world carries over into their very nature. When Ocean’s daughters speak to Prometheus, they are speaking for all the ocean. They consider the effect of his imprisonment on all of nature across the world:

the waves of the sea shout their grief 
by splashing together ; the depths moan 
the black cave of Hades groans below ground, 
the springs of sacred rivers lament 
for a pain deserving pity (431-435)

The spirit of the gods in rivers and trees, the image of the nymph, ambiguous as Burkert notes, is not one that will go away. Looking ahead to Shelley we can see that he builds on this concept of the nymphs creating Asia, Panthea, and Ione as the
Ocenaides. The Spirit of the Earth, Moon and Hours along with other Spirits, Echoes and Fauns are all drawn from nature. Lowell also will maintain the female chorus calling them Three Seabirds, the Daughters of Ocean. They do not issue any sacrificial prayer to Zeus but at the end of the play state; “We don’t want to share the fate of Zeus, but we admire him as a ruler. He is the best we’ve had. How can he fall?’ To this Prometheus responds, “... nothing new. Zeus will fall as they all do.” Their grief at seeing the binding of Prometheus does not prevent them from making sacrifice to Zeus to maintain a pleasant life:

Man’s relation to the deity has been affected by Prometheus’ gifts but also by Aeschylus’ prayers of Ocean’s daughters to Zeus for a better life. Man’s increased knowledge has intensified his desire to keep in communion with the gods and maintain their relationship. The prayer and its intercessors to “stretch out life amid confident hope and to concentrate on bright and cheery things” is carried forward by Virgil. Both Aeschylus and Virgil as authors have become the voice of those who wish to stay in communion with the deity. In their prayer they have given them a means to maintain that communication.

E. R. Dodds wrote in *The Greeks and the Irrational* that one of the characteristics of the Greek view of the deity from the Archaic Age to the Classical period is a feeling of human insecurity and that the nature of the deity is to hold man down and manage his affairs. He wrote:

> The thought is rather that the gods resent any success, any happiness, which might for a moment lift our mortality above its mortal status, and so encroach on their prerogative.²⁸

Prometheus by his gifts has encroached on Zeus’ prerogative.
Dodds makes the point in a footnote how Aeschylus in his work “is in many ways prophetic of the Classical period, “to interpret and rationalize the legacy of the Archaic Age.” The rationalization will include the retention of Archaic belief in the power of the family as a “moral unit” and the concept of “the son’s life as a prolongation of his fathers.” Such a belief ran counter to the concept of the individual as a person with their own rights and responsibilities. Dodds quotes Aeschylus ‘Agamemnon to illustrate the point of the God’s potential for jealousy and looking askance at man:

This saying, now grown old, has lived among mortals forever:
When a man's great prosperity has reached its prime,
it will be fertile, it will not die childless.
Out of good fortune the shoot
rising is ravenous misery. (750)

The good fortune through Prometheus’ gifts will bring misery, as man cannot escape what Dodd’s calls Zeus’ jealously of Man's success. Prometheus has been the agent of that success. Sacrifice will offer a way to mitigate the feelings that some form of acceptance can be reached with the God.

Prometheus’ body was not injured or lost in heroic combat. He is punished for transgressing the laws of Zeus. He is bound in one stationary position throughout the play visible to all as a suffering human being. Zeitlin writes how, “Tragedy, insists most often on exhibiting this body suffering pain.” She notes “the emphasis in theater must inevitably fall upon the body…”

What interests the audience most in the somatics of the stage is the body in an unnatural state of pathos (suffering) when it falls away furthest from its ideal of strength and integrity. We notice it most when it is reduced to a helpless or passive condition (seated, bound, or constrained. . .). . .
Prometheus body has been bound and constrained since the beginning of the play.

He is in an unnatural state of suffering.

Vernant writes the Greeks viewed the male body as a heraldic coat of arms.

The body’s appearance could be related to deeper values. The appearance of the body was a lasting link to the interior life of the individual.

...each person’s social and personal status is inscribed and can be deciphered: admiration, fear, longing, and respect he inspires, the esteem in which he is held, the honors to which he entitled- in short, his value, ...his place on a scale of "perfection" that rises as high as the god encamped on its summit, and whose lower rungs, ... human beings share. 33

Prometheus bound to a rock may have the appearance as high as any god but in his actions he has been reduced to a punishment that may be shared by other human beings. His punishment is part of the profane world.

Griffith comments that it was not unusual in Greece for birds or wild animals to be used as a punishment for a law-breakers body.34 Prometheus as a law breaker will accordingly be punished. Hermes will tell him,

... Now the eagle
That murderous bird, the winged hound of Zeus,
Will savagely slash tatters from your body,
A daily banqueter who comes unbidden;
He’ll feast upon your mangled, blackened liver. (1020)

Vernant writes on the importance of the liver in the representation of Prometheus as a link between man and god and the relationship of man to god.

Vernant notes that the Greek myths are “unanimous” in the liver as the sacrificial organ that Zeus’ eagle would attack on Prometheus Body. As to the reason for the liver. He continues that the liver,

... seems to be turned toward the divine world because of its divinatory role. In it are reflected, the dispositions of the divinities with respect to
mortal beings and their consent or refusal to come into contact with them by the path of the sacrificial ritual.  

The liver in its metabolic process digesting food and of neutralizing toxins becomes a reflection of what Prometheus was not able to do himself. Zeus was the toxic substance that Prometheus was not able to neutralize.

Vernant mentions Plato in *Timaeos* describing the liver as a “manager” of man’s desire for food and drink in the following:

> God combined with it the liver and placed it in the house of the lower nature, contriving that it should be solid and smooth, and bright and sweet, and should also have a bitter quality in order that the power of thought, which proceeds from the mind might be reflected as in a mirror which receives likenesses of objects and gives back images of them to the sight.... (71B.)

The liver as part of sacrifice becomes a reflection of the relationship of the sacred and profane and man’s relation to the deity. Prometheus’ liver will be eternal. It will be eaten and then be born again with regular frequency. Vernant, notes that the:

> ...the immortality of the Promethean liver corresponds to the mode of existence of these natural phenomena that ...survive because they are periodically renewed. Once eaten the liver grows back and grows back in order to be eaten again.  

Vernant compares the immortality of the liver to man’s own hunger – once one meal is over and you are hungry you are ready to eat again. He makes the point that the founder of the sacrifice and the use of food in sacrifice is made into a sacrifice himself. The repetitive feasting on Prometheus’ mangled blackened liver by the winged hound of Zeus’ becomes a mirror of man’s incessant hunger and the sacrifice that man must make to the gods so they may eat with the help of the fire that Prometheus has given them.
Prometheus’ gifts do not bring Man or even Prometheus closer to Zeus but strengthens their separation. His gifts tried to bring the profane world closer to the sacred and in doing so he strengthens their differences. Prometheus’ punishment can be viewed as profane. It is similar with what was done to criminals of the time. Conversely this punishment can be considered sacred in the isolation of Prometheus’ liver, with the importance that the Greeks placed on the liver as a mirror of man’s relation to god. His punishment can be seen like his own dual nature as dualistic; half god and half man as well as half profane and half sacred. Aeschylus’ play provides what can be interpreted as prayers to the gods. Those invocations will continue in other poets such as Virgil. It is an example of the emergence of a litany coming through drama that is a continuing interpretation of man’s relation to the deity.
Chapter 6

SHELLEY’S LYRICAL PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

The Prometheus of Percy Bysshe Shelley must be unbound. Only by being free can Man reach the highest levels of knowledge and understanding with the hope and love that Shelley championed. In his Preface to the play Shelley describes Prometheus as “the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature”. Shelley had no intention “to restore the lost drama of Aeschylus”. He continues, “I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind.” He would not write of Prometheus showing fear in front of his “perfidious adversary”1 an adversary that he believed would prevent Man from reaching the heights of knowledge and the heavens.

In A Defence of Poetry Shelley wrote:

... the Athenians employed language, action, music, painting, the dance, and religious institution to produce a common effect in the representation of the highest idealisms of passion and power; each division in the art was made perfect in its kind by artists of the most consummate skill, and was disciplined into a beautiful proportion and unity one towards the other.2

Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound incorporates those elements drawn on by the Athenians expanding its reach by the use of vast literary sources, an expansive cast of characters and scenic changes. The reader is transported from the rocks of the Indian Caucasus to the cave of Demogorgon , to the Forest and finally to, "Thou Earth, calm empire of a happy soul, Sphere of divinest shapes and harmonies...” (IV. 520). Italo Calvino’s mental cinema is now projecting Prometheus in IMAX, Technicolor and stereophonic sound with a large cast.
Shelley will open up Aeschylus’ play from one act to four, expand the cast of characters and broaden the concept of the universe. He will introduce new characters of his own creation such as Asia, Panthea and Demogorgon who will question the nature of Jupiter (Zeus) and the direction that the world is heading. Shelley dramatizes the freeing of Prometheus, the overthrow of Jupiter and evokes a harmonious cosmos drawing on Dante’s Paradiso, with a better world for man through knowledge, love, hope and peace.

Shelley creates a compendium of literary sources with an encyclopedic use of all that was available to him up to 1820, the year of publication. This chapter will look at those drawn from Aeschylus, Christ, Milton, Plato and Dante as they relate to the affect of Prometheus’ gifts and Man’s relation to the deity and the universe.

Aeschylus’ Prometheus becomes a pathway for Shelley to show the limitless powers man could achieve when given knowledge with words, speech and thought. Aeschylus’ Prometheus tells the Chorus he will teach man how to use their minds. He shows them the letters to form the words for the new things they are able to do.

\[\ldots \text{until I taught them how to use their minds.} (445)\]

\[\ldots \text{and letters forming words, from which come memory’s power and every art} (460)\]

Shelley takes it further with “and speech created thought.” He extends that when Asia is speaking with Panthea in the cave of Demogorgon on Prometheus’ accomplishments:

\[\text{He gave man speech, and speech created thought, Which is the measure of the universe} \ (\text{II. iv. 72})\]
Speech and thought allow man to measure, understand and describe the universe. Man is able to comprehend the earth as never before. Shelley believes in words and speech leading into thoughts. Thoughts lead to understanding, which stimulates, ‘the harmonious mind /Poured itself forth in all prophetic song...”(II.iv.70) where nothing existed before. Prometheus gives man the means to express himself, his feelings and ideas. From that gift comes the conception of the universe that we will see in Act IV of *Prometheus Unbound*.

Man faces difficulties when the words do not exist to use in speech or in thought to express our feelings and our ideas. Shelley’s belief in the word, speech and thought recalls Eagleton in his view that our mind can only give shape to things when there is a word to express it. Those words act as Calvino’s grains of sand as part of the larger landscape. That landscape includes Goldhill’s drama of *logos*. In Shelley’s magnification of the importance of the word we are moving beyond the public square in Athens to an understanding of the universe made possible by Prometheus’ gift of speech, words and ability to think.

Shelley retains transgressive dialogue at the opening of the play in Prometheus’ invocation to Jupiter. The fast paced debate of Power and Hephaestus has been omitted. Prometheus cries out, "Hast thou made reign and triumph, to thy scorn, O’er mine own misery and thy vain revenge”(I.10). In keeping with his combining of literary styles, Shelley has added songs. As an example the opening of Act IV includes the voice of Unseen Spirits singing:

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Bright Clouds float in heaven,
Dew-stars gleam on earth,
Waves assemble on ocean,
They are gathered and driven
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By the storm of delight, by the panic of glee!... (IV.i.40)

The Unseen Spirits sing of a landscape different from that of Aeschylus’ descriptions of “these bare rocks with their steep rocky faces” (5). The reader has left a wasteland at the end of the earth. The landscape has opened up to take in clouds floating in the heavens.

The transformation of the landscape is one example of Shelley’s Romantic vision. Terry Eagleton’s observations of Romantic writers applies to Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound. Eagleton makes the point that, “...men and women are creative spirits with an inexhaustible power to transform the world”. Shelley’s Prometheus must be set free so that he can transform the world. “Reality is thus dynamic rather than static...” Man’s relationship to the universe and the deity will change. It will always be open for interpretation. That interpretation will be based on Man’s expanded knowledge starting with Prometheus’ gifts. Eagleton continues, “...change is mostly to be celebrated rather than feared.” Prometheus with his gifts of fire, knowledge, hope, speech and thought has given man the means to transform his world. Eagleton continues:

Human beings are makers of their own history, and potentially infinite progress lies within their grasp. To embark on this brave new world, they need simply to throw off the forces which shackle them. The creative imagination is a visionary power which can remake the world in the image of our deepest desires. It inspires political revolutions as well as poems. There is a fresh emphasis on individual genius.”...We should cultivate a generous trust in human capabilities.  

The Romantic’s vision of Man is one of potential genius. Man is to be trusted and not compromised. The freedom to express yourself and the words to make that possible
become the greatest gift. There is no need for any overseeing authority outside of man’s knowledge.

Shelley builds on Aeschylus’ drama by opening up the characterization of the Furies by calling them “Jove’s tempest-walking hounds” (I.331). For Aeschylus’ they are the “unforgetting Furies” (515). Even Zeus cannot escape them. Prometheus tells the Chorus, “He can’t escape from things that are ordained” (518). Shelley’s Furies are representatives of pain and suffering. They tell Prometheus:

Thou thinkest we will rend thee bone from bone,
And nerve from nerve, working like fire within? (I.475)

They speak to him through a Semichorus with allusions to the beginning of the French Revolution of 1789:

See a disenchanted nation
Spring like day from desolation;
To Truth its state is dedicate
And Freedom leads it forth, her mate . . . (I.570)

The Romantic vision of transformation through freedom and truth has begun and is to be celebrated. However, Shelley is also aware of the outcome of the Revolution and that gift of knowledge and expression has another side:

See how kindred murder kin:
’Tis the vintage-time for death and sin:
Blood, like new wine, bubbles within;
Till Despair smothers
The struggling world, which slaves and tyrants win. (I.575)

Shelley will use the French Revolution as an example of when freedom fails and when authority turns to bloodshed. He will resolve it in Act IV with a new vision of the world. In the next chapter we will see how Robert Lowell will use the Vietnam War as background for tyranny and for knowledge that is not infallible. Unlike
Shelley, he will not offer a vision of the universe at the end, which will rise above such conflicts. The French Revolution springing from desolation and then falling back into desolation is an expression of the duality of freedom and knowledge and its potential for good and evil.

Harold Bloom has much to say in Shelley’s Mythmaking on the dual nature of man and his frequent inability to rise above himself. Shelley was involved in his own mythmaking and the creation of a character that would include those characteristics of goodness, power, love, and wisdom. Those characteristics also include the dual nature of Prometheus as half man and half god. The similarity to Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is significant.

Shelley draws on the teachings and imagery of Jesus Christ to show Prometheus’ godlike qualities. Shelley’s use of the imagery of Christ and biblical allusion was not an endorsement of institutional Christianity for which he had no use. His expression of contempt for organized religion is evident in Prometheus Unbound. For example, in Act I Shelley expresses his scorn of organized religion when the Fury tells Prometheus:

> Hypocrisy and custom make their minds the fanes of many a worship, now outworn. They dare not devise good for man’s estate And yet they know not that they do not dare.(I.620)

Fanes are dead temples of worship filled with the hypocritical and tradition bound who are afraid to change their ways for the betterment of Man. In another example from Act I, Christ is referenced standing against the organized church with:

> One came forth of gentle worth, Smiling on the sanguine earth His words outlived him, like swift poison
Withering up truth, peace, and pity....
Hark that outcry of despair!
"Tis his mild and gentle ghost
Wailing for the faith he kindled. (I.550-60)

In Shelley's view, the teachings of Christ were greater than the organized religion that they prompted. He hears the cry of Christ in despair over what has happened to his teachings. Christ’s words on truth and peace will reach an apotheosis into a divine status in the words of the Demogorgon in Act IV.

Shelley's Furies tell Prometheus of the dual nature of man reflecting on the last words of Christ in Luke 23:34, ”Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” Shelley writes:

Many are strong and rich, and would be just,
But live among their suffering fellow-men
As if not felt: they know not what they do. (I. 630)

Harold Bloom points out, “The tormentors are thus equated with the “many” who could help their fellow men, the many who have all the right intentions but who in fact do nothing.” Prometheus’ dual nature of half god and half man is a mirror of man himself. As Bloom points out, “ Man may want to do good, to do the right thing but something prevents him from carrying out the action.” Prometheus has given man the knowledge to do the right thing but as Aeschylus’ Chorus said:

What can mere mortals do to save you?
Didn’t you see the weakness, the trance, that fetters all of their blind race?(549)

In opening Shelley and looking back to Aeschylus, the reader can see that the concept of Man as a “blind race” has a long history. Knowledge could not prevent the most dire consequences of the French Revolution which would end in the victory of bloodshed.
In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley wrote, “The poetry in the doctrines of Jesus Christ . . . outlived the darkness and the convulsions connected with their growth and victory . . . .” Christ’s teachings and that of his disciples are exemplified in *Prometheus Unbound* in Shelley’s concept of love and hope. He continues, “Jesus Christ divulged the sacred and eternal truths” that he felt were contained in the moral and intellectual doctrine of Plato and other Greek philosophers. Christianity to Shelley “in its abstract purity” was the embodiment of “the esoteric doctrines of poetry and wisdom of antiquity.”

Bloom expresses the view that the virtues of love and hope with wisdom were the virtues that most appealed to Shelley. All can be found in the teachings of Christ. Love is combined with hope in I Corinthians 13:6-7, “it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things endures all things.” The love of Christ for all humanity is unequivocal. Shelley builds on that belief. It is for everyone just as Prometheus’ gifts are for all men. Shelley's Prometheus, like Christ will not draw the line. Love, like knowledge, is for all.

Prometheus is the foe of any tyranny. Christ, the Son of God, and a man will be bound and nailed to a cross on a rock similar to Prometheus’ bondage at the end of the known world. Shelley’s Prometheus begins the play by crying out:

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O Mighty God! Of thine ill tyranny, and hung not here
Nailed to this wall of eagle-baffling mountain . . .
Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured: without herb. . . . (I.20)
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and continues:

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Mocking me; the Earthquake-fiends are charged
To wrench the rivets from my quivering wounds (I.39)
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When the rocks split and close again behind;
While from their loud abysses howling throng . . . (1.45)

Shall drag then, cruel King, to kiss the blood
From these pale feet, which then might trample thee (1.50)

He invokes the setting of Christ’s last days in the opening of the play drawing a comparison with the setting of Christ’s crucifixion. Earlier in Act I the Third Voice amplifies that stark setting with:

My still realm was never riven:
   When its wound was closed, there stood
   Darkness o’er the day like blood. (I.100)

Darkness like blood hanging over the day invokes the last day of Christ. Each will have a crown of thorns placed on their head. Shelley’s Chorus cries out:

   And the future is dark, the present is spread
   Like a pillow of thorns for thy slumberless head. (I.565)

Similar to Matthew 27:29, “After twisting some thorns into a crown they put it on his head . . . ” Recalling Mark 15:17, “And they clothed him in a purple cloak: and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him . . . . Then led him away to crucify him . . . ” Returning to Matthew 27:51 “The earth shook, and the rocks were split.” The parallels between Prometheus and Christ on the cross build with each succeeding line in Shelley’s drama; hung, nailed to this wall, earthquake-fiends, wrench the rivets from quivering wounds, rocks split and close behind, howling throng, to kiss the blood from these pale feet.

Shelley creates a dualism of the Christ-like imagery of Prometheus with his reference to Satan and Prometheus in his Preface. Both Satan and Prometheus broke with God’s law and authority. Each acted independently outside of the sacred
world. Satan is the central character in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In Shelley’s words Prometheus lacks the personal ambition that is the characteristic of Satan and his desire for power, status and wealth. Satan is an individual who does harm over a period of time through cleverness and false reasoning. Hesiod and Aeschylus characterize Prometheus as clever and scheming. 11 To Shelley, Prometheus is a different individual and of the highest moral character, lacking in the personal ambition of Satan. Prometheus’ acts are done for the benefit of mankind and are not done over a long period of time. He has been chained to his rock for a one-time offense and not repeating ongoing wrongs. Satan on the other hand is always among us roaming the earth looking for ways to do wrong.

Satan transforms himself into a cormorant and sits on top of the Tree of Knowledge in Milton’s Garden of Eden surveying his surroundings. Milton’s Tree of Knowledge is a reminder that knowledge is both good and bad. He draws on Genesis 2.15-17:

And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat it you shall die.”

Aeschylus’ Prometheus does not dwell on the evil of increased knowledge. Knowledge with the potential for evil is present in Milton and will be seen in Lowell.

Out of the fertile ground he caused to grow
All trees of noblest kind for sight, smell, taste;
And all amid them stood the Tree of Life
High eminent, blooming ambrosial fruit
Of vegetable gold; and next to life
Our death the Tree of knowledge grew fast by
Knowledge of Good bought dear by knowing ill. (IV.215-222)

Milton’s is the attributed author of Christian Doctrine found after his death in 1823.
In which he defines his concept of the tree of knowledge:

it was called the tree of knowledge of good and evil because of what happened afterwards; for since it was tasted not only do we know evil, but also we do not even know good except through evil.12

The individual nature of good and evil cannot be known individually, one from the other. To know what is good one must know what is evil.

In Shelley’s world, nature may contain human qualities just as in the ancient Greek view the gods could contain aspects of nature and earth as in the Daughter of Ocean. Shelley’s Prometheus will transform a frozen earth under a tyrant into a living symbol. Shelley will have Earth tell Prometheus:

To the last fibre of the loftiest tree
Whose thin leaves trembled in the frozen air,
Joy ran, as blood within a living frame,
When thou didst from her bosom like a cloud
Of glory arise-a spirit of keen joy!
And at thy voice her pining sons uplifted
Their prostrate brows from the polluting dust,
And our mighty Tyrant with fierce dread
Grew pale, until his thunder chained thee here. (I.155-162)

Shelley’s earth and trees have come alive like man with new blood running through his veins thanks to Prometheus. Nature as well as Man has benefited from his knowledge and the deity dreads the repercussions. For Milton the Tree of Knowledge was God given. For Shelley the tree, as well as man, was filled with life by Prometheus’ gifts.

Shelley will build on Milton’s concept of the God of contradictions in Paradise Lost. A God who is able to create all things related to man and the universe. This emerges in the dialogue of Asia and Panthea in the cave of the Demogorgon in Act II. The Demogorgon is a creation that in the words of Harold Bloom, is “… an
interpretive problem . . . He is not an allegory . . . Rather is he simply himself, myth for dialectic cannot be allegorized; dialectic is myth.” 13 Notopoulos identifies the Demogorgon with “Platonic and Neoplatonic forces without being . . . precisely identified with any in particular”. Notopoulos points out that the figure is emblematic of Shelley’s ability to mix references and to create something of his own. 14 A more helpful interpretation comes from the comments by Leader and O’Neill noting that Demogorgon stands outside any “allegorical translation” and that the name might be read as meaning people from Demos (people) and Gorgon (monster). 15 This could lead to an interpretation as an unruly mob of people which can create its own monster.

Asia: Who made the living world? Demogorgon: God

Who made all that it contains . . . ? Almighty God
Who made that sense . . . ? Merciful God
Who made the terror . . . ? He reigns
Utter his name . . . He reigns

( II.iv 5-30)

Jupiter is responsible for the world and all thought, passion, reason and imagination that it contains as well as terror, madness, crimes and remorse. He is a God of contradictions. Jupiter is a god and does not need to be justified by man.

Michal Wood in On Empson discusses William Empson’s Milton’s God. Since Milton was a model for Shelley’s play, I think it is helpful to look at this interpretation to see how Shelley borrowed from Milton and opened up his concept of God. Empson points out that it is ridiculous to think of putting God on trial for the suffering of Christ, His only son, particularly if Milton, regards God, like Zeus, as the “chairman of an unruly board of immortals”. However he continues:
...if God is indispensably caught up in a story about fathers and children, if he loves the world as a person would, if he can become incarnate in a human son, then every detail of his story becomes part of the way we imagine him and many details will allow for different imaginings . . . .\textsuperscript{16}

Then Empson goes to a fundamental issue of a detailed and complex story, such as Prometheus, in all its versions from Hesiod through Aeschylus into Shelley and Lowell. Wood continues in quoting Empson,

\begin{quote}
The fundamental purpose of putting elaborate detail into a story is to enable us to use our judgment about the characters; often both their situation and their moral conviction, or their scales of value are very unlike our own, but we use the detail to imagine how they feel when they act as they do . . .
Understanding that other people are different is one of the bases of civilization . . . .\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

The addition of greater detail to the story of Prometheus by Aeschylus from Hesiod and now by Shelley has made the story and its issues even more complex. We have seen that in the evolution of hope’s complexity and the way that sacrifice has become a dividing line between man and god. Necessity is multifaceted. In the case of Zeus, what was perceived, as his necessary authority may be an illness. His human like qualities make him problematic as a god that stands outside of man’s world and perhaps man’s comprehension. Our reaction and understanding to these increased narrative complexities builds the on the framework for discussion in each one of the myths.

In his Preface to the play Shelley boldly stated, “I am willing to confess that I have imitated.”\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{A Defence of Poetry} he writes of his admiration for Plato:

\begin{quote}
Plato was essentially a poet- the truth and splendour of his imagery and the melody of his language is the most intense that it is possible to conceive. He rejected the measure of the epic, dramatic and lyrical forms, because he sought to kindle a harmony in thoughts divested of shape and action . . . \textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}
*Prometheus Unbound* draws on Plato for imagery and the future condition of Man. His view of freedom and the power of knowledge leading to the harmonious thoughts will culminate in Act IV. Notopoulos in *The Platonism of Shelley* writes that in his view "Shelley is the outstanding Platonist in English literature. He reveals a natural and authentic adventure into the realm of Being, both a direct knowledge of Plato and the interpenetration of the Platonic tradition in the inherited pattern of our thought." In his view, "both the *Prometheus Unbound* and the myths of Plato are a result of the cosmic imagination which makes the soul of man at home in the universe." Many of the Platonic passages in *Prometheus Unbound* are a poetic transcription of the *Symposium*. For example in Act I when the sixth spirit speaks:

...Desolation is a delicate thing:
It walks not on the earth, it floats not on the air,
But treads with lulling footstep, and fans with silent wing
The tender hopes which in their hearts and the best and gentlest bear,
... (I.772-76)

Shelley did his own translation of Symposium with this parallel and similar entry from the above from the *Symposium* 195:

For Love walks not upon the earth, nor over the heads of men, which are not indeed very soft; but he dwells within, and treads on the softest of existing things, having established his habitation within the souls and inmost nature of Gods and men...  

Here is another example from Shelley’s drama from Notopoulos’ commentary when the Fury is talking to Prometheus on the human heart, The wise want love and those who love want wisdom (I.625) He makes the comparison to the *Symposium* 200e with the definition of love as a desire for something one does not have:

...whoever feels a want is wanting something which is not yet at hand, and the object of his love and of his desire is whatever he isn’t, or whatever he hasn’t got . . .
Just as Shelley is able to imitate and adapt, he is also able to invent and to turn around concepts. One example is Plato’s cave from the Republic Book VII:

\[\ldots\ \text{There is a Cave}
\text{All overgrown with trailing odorous plants,}
\text{Which curtain out the day with leaves and flowers,}
\text{And paved with veined emerald, and a fountain}
\text{Leaps in the midst with an awakening sound. (III.iii.10-15)}\]

Plato describes the cave as, "a sort of subterranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width.”(514.a) Men are held prisoners with “their legs and necks fettered from childhood so they remain in the same spot” In the Republic the cave symbolizes ignorance. In Shelley’s drama it suggests a verdant vantage place where Prometheus and his companions sit and plan for the future. 25

Prometheus describes the battle of the titans to Panthea, “This was the shadow of the truth I saw”(I.655). The truth is only a shadow and not the reality. Plato notes that his prisoners in the cave of the Republic, “would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadows of artificial objects”(514.e). Shadows obscuring reality and leading to confusion will be seen in the next chapter on Robert Lowell’s Prometheus Bound.

William Empson in Seven Types of Ambiguity writes that Shelley when not being able to think of a comparison fast enough to write down a word compares it to itself. Empson notes, “he (Shelley) compares the thing to a vaguer or more abstract notion of itself, or points that it is its own nature, or that it sustains itself by supporting itself.”26 In looking for an example from Prometheus Unbound to illustrate Empson’s point, the final words of the Demogorgon at the end of the play regarding hope are a good example. This is not the hope of Hesiod contained in a jar.
It is not the hope of Aeschylus that can obscure doom. It is not the hope of Plato that keeps man from concentrating on death. It is an active hope. The Demogorgon addresses All:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night,  
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;  
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates . . . (IV.570-75)

This is a hope that builds on hope and is alive by its very nature. It is a hope that will come from building on and then vanquishing woes, wrongs and power. It is an explanation through repetition. Eagleton writes, "...hope is not simply an anticipation of the future but an active force in its constitution."27 Not to believe in hope is to ensure that there is no hope. To imagine, to hope for an alternative future may revitalize the present. "This is one reason the Romantic imagination has a link to radical politics. True hopelessness occurs when such imaginings are inconceivable."28 Without the word there is nothing and no hope. As long as there is a word to signify the emotion there is hope.

With the Demogorgon’s speech, Shelley has opened up Aeschylus and made it his own. In these five lines we gain an insight into how Shelley would answer the questions that began this paper. Shelley’s Prometheus’ necessity to act is part of an active hope that man’s abilities can improve the world. Shelley sees this ability in all men. Man’s relation to the universe is changed by acceptance of greater knowledge. Shelley draws allusions in Prometheus to Jesus Christ’s teachings and image and distils them into his protagonist. Man is to forgive wrongs, to defy power, and to replace it with love and hope and from hope create a new vision of the world.
That final vision of the world draws heavily on Dante’s Paradiso.

Dante was to Shelley, “the bridge thrown over the stream of time which unites the modern and the ancient world.” Shelley’s vision is one of harmony, space, music and light. The Spirit of the Hour who is representing the knowledge of the moment declares:

Rushes with loud and whirlwind harmony, A sphere, which is as many thousand spheres, Solid as crystal, yet through all its mass/ Flow, as through empty space, music and light. (IV.240)

It is the music of the spheres in a constant circling and evolution. Dante, the author and the pilgrim, addresses the reader and asks us:  

With me, then, reader, raise your eyes up to the lofty wheels, directly to the part where the one motion and the other intersect . . . (X.7-9)

Both Dante and Shelley will find in the image of wheels and their turning a representation of universal love:

Here my exalted vision lost its power. But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving With an even motion, were turning with the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars. (XXXIII,145)

The Demogorgon, Shelley’s creation, has the last word:

Thou Earth, calm empire of a happy soul Sphere of divinest shapes and harmonies Beautiful orb! Gathering as thou dost roll The love which paves thy path along the skies: (IV.I.522)

The last act of Prometheus Unbound recalls to this reader in its combination of the words love and hope and the implication of faith, Dante’s response to three questions as to the nature of hope, faith and love. To St. Peter’s question, “What is Faith?” (XXIV.53) Dante responds that, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for,
the evidence of things not seen.” We can imagine hope and upon those imaginings we can build greater faith. Things hoped for implies an active hope, a hope that hope creates as the Demogorgon declared. St. James joins St. Peter and questions Dante, “Do tell what Hope is” (XXV.46). Dante responds, “Hope is the certain expectation of future glory, it is the result of God’s grace and merit we have earned” (XXV.67). Again we have the image of an active hope that is based on expectation. St. John asks Dante to “... tell what goal your soul has set...” (XXVI.7). Dante responds that his soul is set on love, the “Alpha and Omega of whatever scripture love teaches me in loud or gentle tones” (XXVI.17). Christ’s teachings and God’s love is the source of all love and “the first love” of all beings.

For Shelley,

Love rules, through waves which dare not overwhelm,
Forcing life’s wildest shores to own its sovereign sway. (IV.410)

For Shelley Prometheus’ actions has created a world where a music of the spheres of earth and man are one with new knowledge and love that paves “thy path along the skies.”
Chapter 7

ROBERT LOWELL’S DIES IRAE
ON
THE STATE OF THE NATION

To open the window of 1964 through 1969 in the United States is to see the context within which Robert Lowell wrote his version of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*. It begins in 1964 with the assassination of President Kennedy, continues through the March on the Pentagon, the performance of *Prometheus Bound* at Yale and the assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1969. Opening the window also allows the reader to open the text of his play and to see what Lowell bring to Aeschylus drama.

In a letter to his friend, the poet, Elizabeth Bishop, following the assassination of President Kennedy in 1964, Lowell wrote: “...found myself weeping through the first afternoon, then three days of television...till the grand, almost unbearable funeral. I guess it had something to do with my crack-up. The country went through a moment of terror and passionate chaos with everyone talking wildly, and deeply fearful and suspicious.”\(^1\) The assassination of a President becomes a moment of violence and emotional chaos not unlike the fate of Prometheus at the end of Lowell’s play. He will cry, “That black cloud is moving toward me...Soon my voice will be lost in the sound of breakage...” (p.67). Lowell’s chorus echoes fear and suspicion upon learning of the downfall of the Titan, “But the peoples of the earth cry out in sorrow at the downfall of those old powers and their long-held
honors”(p.20). A time of national mourning for lost leaders gives rise to a concern for the future of the country and a distrust of fellow man.

The following year, Lowell turned down an invitation from President Johnson to the White House for a Festival of the Arts. In his letter to the President he noted that while he was supportive of Johnson’s domestic agenda he could not support the foreign policy, in particular the war in Vietnam. He wrote: “We are in danger of imperceptibly becoming an explosive and suddenly chauvinistic nation, and may even be drifting on our way to the last nuclear ruin. . . . Respectfully yours, Robert Lowell.” 2 Lowell writes in the Introduction to his play that, “No contemporary statesman is parodied”. However at the end of the play Lowell will present the face of authority with Prometheus declaring, “I used to see unending circle of light . . . But now I see a thunderhead, a false face, blackened crisp, all powerful . . . Blood turns to metal”(p.43). Figures of authority, which were once visible and understandable, are now dark and inhuman.

Lowell began his version of the play in 1966. He had received an award from the Yale School of Drama. Yale had received a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities to produce the play. It was a grant that was rumored to infuriate President Johnson.3 Lowell wrote Elizabeth Bishop, “In the course of the summer, I have finished Prometheus at last- how like him I felt as I labored on Interminably . . .” 4

Lowell looked to Greek, Roman and Latin history throughout his life: “. . . of course you’ve got to learn classics, you’ll just cut yourself off from humanity if you don’t...the literature was amazing, particularly the Greek . . . Our plays aren’t
formally at all like Aeschylus and Sophocles. Their whole inspiration was unbelievably different, and so different that you could hardly think of even the attempt to imitate them . . . .

Lowell did versions of *Phaedra* (1961) and the *Oresteia* (1978) in addition to *Prometheus Bound*. Lowell had a strong identification with the Greek myths that he would reference in his poems and adaptations of the plays. Jameson writes in *Robert Lowell: Setting the River on Fire* that in describing the audacity of Prometheus, Lowell, who had grown up with the Greek myths being read to him by his mother could be describing himself. Lowell’s Prometheus describing the war of the Titans says, “I was guided by the great gods of that day; the most powerful flashes, and later by the steady light of my own mind” (p.50).

Lowell’s view of the Greek past is expressed in the *Tenth Muse*, the Muse of Greek lyric poets, from 1964:

I like to imagine it must have been simpler in the days of Lot, or when Greek and Roman picturebook gods sat combing their golden beards, each on his private hill or mountain.

*Prometheus Bound* was presented at Yale in May of 1967. In October of that year Lowell would march to Washington joining other writers and activists, Norman Mailer, Dwight MacDonald, Noam Chomsky, Alan Ginsburg and Paul Goodman to protest the war in Vietnam. Paul Mariani writes in *Lost Puritan* that Lowell’s reaction to the march was a feeling of “fragility” and “fear before the naked force of American MPs, in spite of which he still believed in heroic action” even in the face of his own increasing health problems.
With the assassination of Robert Kennedy on June 5, 1968, Lowell lost interest in the Presidential race of 1968. He wrote to Jacqueline Kennedy on June 10 including the poem *R.F. K.*:

\[
\ldots \text{Doom was woven in your nerves, your shirt,}
\text{woven in the great clan; they too were more than loyal,}
\text{and you too more loyal to them, to death.}
\text{For them, like a prince, you daily left your tower}
\text{to walk through dirt in your best cloth} \ldots \]

The poem would be included in his *Notebook 1967-68* published in 1969 the same year as *Prometheus Bound*. The impending doom that appears to be hanging over Prometheus is echoed in “Doom was woven in your nerves.” Not only doom but also the willingness to benefit man as in “they too were more than loyal, and you too more loyal to them.” Loyalty at the price of one’s life is comparable to Prometheus loyalty to man and the necessity to act as he did.

*Notebook 1967-68* reads like a diary. In Afterthought at the end of the book Lowell writes how it is not “a chronicle or almanac”. However this is contradicted by a list of dates for the events of 1967 through 1968. The Vietnam War bookends the murder of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, Che Guevara’s death, student demonstrations, the Pentagon March, the Arab-Israeli Six Days’ War and student uprisings in New York, France and at the Democratic Convention in Chicago all of which took place between the years 1967 through 1968.

*Notebook* contains a poem *Dies Irae, A Hope* – two themes from Aeschylus’ play as well as Lowell’s adaptation. Those themes are a day of wrath, a *Dies irae* and hope. The poem, which is one of three sonnets, ends with:

Everything points to non-existence, except existence-
On this day, the day God sees the world was good,
This day of the sinful man who must be judged-
Good reason to pardon him, good reason to pardon.\textsuperscript{11}

The poem’s vision of a man who has done wrong but should be pardoned for his sins in breaking with authoritarian rule points to the role of man’s relation to the deity. However Lowell’s play is a darker vision of man’s relation to the gods.

Writing to Mary McCarthy in 1966, Lowell compared his \textit{Prometheus Bound} to a \textit{Dies irae}, a Day of Wrath, for the United States. Lowell wrote: ‘I’ve just finished a play (I now have the formula for my stuff) a play “based on “Aeschylus’ Prometheus, about twice as long as the Greek, and in prose. And my Dies irae to a PR questionnaire on the state of the nation. It’s getting pretty scary but we with talents and souls seem to like one another better than usual. “\textsuperscript{12} The \textit{Dies irae} is a rhymed sequence of text for a Requiem Mass from the thirteenth century,

\begin{verbatim}
The day of wrath, that day
Will dissolve the world in ashes,
...How great will be the quaking,
when the Judge will come
investigating everything strictly.
\end{verbatim}

The Day of Wrath is an appropriate description of the end of Aeschylus’ play when the earth opens and swallows Prometheus.

\begin{verbatim}
The clashing winds leap madly about,
vying as if in civil war,
all against all . . .
Such is the fearsome stroke of Zeus,
leveled at me, in sight of all(1090)
\end{verbatim}

\textit{Dies irae} becomes a metaphor for what Lowell saw as the “blackened trail of motion”(p.59) and “shadows of the unknown” (p.61) in the nation due to
Prometheus’ gifts to mankind. Prometheus’ gifts have not brought an Arcadian world for humanity but a world in disarray. 13

Lowell’s Day of Wrath and Aeschylus’ earth shaking with flames and whirlwinds become a testament to authority that cannot be understood. There is no reconciliation of Prometheus with Zeus or a change in his condition at the end of the play. With the abrupt ending Lowell has shown his contempt for authority. It is in keeping with the similarly dramatic ending of Aeschylus.

Both Lowell and Aeschylus offer some possibility for reconciliation in the early part of their plays. Lowell’s Prometheus says, “When Zeus no longer knows his mind . . . he will reach for me. And I . . . what can I do but welcome him?” (p. 7) Aeschylus’ Prometheus declares similarly, “. . . he’s destroyed by what’s to come. Then his temper will be soothed, and he’ll look to me as ally and friend. He’ll rush toward me-and I toward him “(195). However, the ending of the play and the subsequent exchanges show little possibility for any reconciliation. As Griffith notes in his commentary on Aeschylus’ play: “As the play progresses . . . we receive few hints as to how the resolution will come about: rather, we see the bitterness and hostility between Zeus and P. continue to grow, and we hear P. repeatedly announce Zeus’ imminent downfall.”14 With the gift of forethought, Prometheus knows what will happen in the future to Zeus. However, neither Aeschylus nor his character will reveal it to the reader.

Writing to the poet Ted Hughes, Lowell remarked that he considered his play, “. . . a version of Prometheus, all my own, that somehow seems like both a triumph and a fake”.15 Lowell probably considered his play a triumph because he could
work into it his feelings on the assassination of JFK, the Vietnam War, Lyndon
Johnson, the Pentagon Papers, and the death of promising leaders. As he
wrote to McCarthy it was his answer to questions on the state of the United States.
Lowell probably considered it a fake because it is not a translation of Aeschylus but
an adaptation that reflects his thoughts.

In the Introduction to the play Lowell makes the point that he does not want
to modernize the story in its setting or with props, “There are no tanks or cigarette
lighters. No contemporary statesman is parodied” He continues that he has let his
own “concerns and worries of the times seep in.” He will express those worries
through his use of the prose of the play. He notes that half of his lines are not in the
original. For Lowell modernity will come through the use of words to form his own
report on the state of the nation.

Robert Lowell expressed admiration for the poetry of Shelley and the way he
could manipulate words. Responding to the interviewer’s question on basing his
poems on older formal poetic models, he said, “Shelley can just rattle off terza rima
by the page, and it’s very smooth, doesn’t seem an obstruction to him-you
sometimes wish it were more difficult.”16 In Prometheus Bound, Lowell will use
twentieth century words and combinations of words that are far from those of
ancient Greece and Rome.

Aeschylus’ Prometheus makes his first appearance in a long, lyrical
invocation of the earth and his condition of over 30 lines. Prometheus cries out:

You, sacred air, and you, swift- soaring winds
You, springs of rivers, you, endless sparkling sheen
Of ocean waves, and you, all-mothering earth
All-seeing circuit of sun-I call on you. (90)
Even at the end of the earth and chained to a rock Prometheus can see the beauty in the world. In his first appearance, Lowell’s Prometheus exclaims:

“Bright sky, bright sky, bright sky! The wind is up, and strikes my face . . . Everywhere below me, the inescapable earth . . . (p.5)

The use of words is direct and brief, almost blunt, even when evoking nature. Bluntness and clipped speech extends to the dialogue between characters. This is apparent in the exchanges of Prometheus dialogue with Ocean at the beginning of the play. Ocean tells Prometheus:

Look at me as the dust under your feet, another stepping stone for your ambitions, another rung in your ladder.(p. 12)

With another rung on his ladder Prometheus is presented as a twentieth century status-seeker climbing the ladder of success. This blunt colloquial prose style is also found in the dialogue with Hermes at the end of the play:

You made a prediction, a very off-hand and desperate one. Your suffering makes you see everything through a yellow and crooked glaze. Still the gods must follow up every clue.(p.59)

Hermes thinks Prometheus cannot see things as clearly and pragmatically as he should. He sees things as he wants to see them. Prometheus’ thoughts hammer away at him:

Each thought was like a finger touching, tampering, testing, and try to give things a little of my bias to alter and advance . . . I never felt bound to keep anything to its original custom, place or purpose. I turned the creatures on their heads and lifted the doors from the hinges of determination.(p.50-51)

Williams describes this need as an act based on our internal limits of what is and is not acceptable to us as individuals. Prometheus has no sense of shame about what he as done. The throbbing in his head has changed man’s relation to the
deity and the universe. The status quo – “the hinges of determination”- have been broken. The gifts of Shelley’s Prometheus led to a heavenly universe of greater understanding and of love, faith and hope:

    despotism and Conquest are dragged through the deep’(IV. 555)
    Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance, -
    These are the seals of that most firm assurance (IV.565)

Lowell’s Prometheus has not dragged despotism and conquest through the deep.

Lowell sees a darker vision of the world.

    Prometheus gives man hope. Lowell compares hope to a drug, “I gave the sufferers a drug. Now they often forget about dying.”(p.10) And to the question of what drug? Prometheus responds:

    I gave them hope, blind hopes! When one blind hope lifts, another drifts down to replace it. Men see much less surely now, but they suffer less-they can hardly draw breath now without taking hope. (p.11)

Lowell’s hope has the transitory effect of any drug which will be gone when its effectiveness is exhausted. Then it is time to take another or change to another medication. The voices of the chorus of seabirds, the daughters of Ocean, refer to hope as “this consoling blindness”. Hope is not built on faith or does not come from love for Lowell. Hope is a drug similar to Hesiod’s Pandora who keeps hope, elpis in a jar, to be let out when necessary but not always in ways beneficial to man.

Lowell wrote to Elizabeth Bishop about his own medications and the pills he was taking to combat his manic depression in February of 1967,

    ... I have another doctor now, and there seems to be real hope that my manic seizures can be handled by a new drug, Lithium, ...At least, this drug is now working with many. 18
Prometheus view that men can "hardly draw breath now without taking hope" is possibly a reflection on the writer himself. It allowed him to maintain his health to write, but like Prometheus’ gift it offered, in the words of the chorus, a “consoling blindness” to possibly deeper problems.

A similarly circumspect view colors Prometheus’ gifts of fire and of knowledge as explained by Prometheus to one of the daughters of Ocean. As to the gift of fire Prometheus says:

... fire can remake, or destroy the earth. Man’s uses, however are limited—a few inches and minutes crawl along a plank sticking out from a cliff.

The plank ends, and near the end, there is always some victim standing fixed like a nail in the wood. (p.11)

For Lowell Prometheus’ gift of fire is both beneficial and destructive. It will be up to Man to decide how to use it. In making that decision he compares it to walking the plank. The plank can vary in strength or length. At some point it will come to an end. You can either stay in place or step into the unknown. The unknown may lead to death.

Later when Hermes confronts Prometheus on the “lawless” theft of fire from the gods, he will cry out, “If you could look down on the earth from this rock, you would see man’s blackened trail of motion” (p.59). It is not unreasonable to consider the blackened trail of motion as the destruction left by war and in particular the ongoing Vietnam War at the time of the writing. Prometheus responds to Hermes with, "Why are you troubling me?“ (p.59) as if to say why are you bother me with th which I already know. Despite his knowledge Prometheus would appear to have doubts himself about his gifts to mankind.
Hermes has no doubts. He tells Prometheus that, “The world has never been better.” But adds as a caveat, “Of course, there are still a few shadows” (p. 61). In other words there have been some improvements but there are still lingering dark and obscure areas of human existence. The state of Lowell’s nation has areas that have not benefited from knowledge. This sense that all is not right, a sense of gloom, harks back to the period in which the play was written with an ongoing war, assassinations, uprisings and demonstrations.

Lowell presents Prometheus as the constant seeker of the truth in dealing with these shadows. His gifts to man are related to that search. He retains that characteristic, even while bound to a rock. He declares:

I was trying to feel my way toward truth. One word led to another. Each one might have hit on something that would have helped Io. I myself might have been helped. No, don’t check me, I have little faith now, but I still look for truth, some momentary crumbling foothold. (p. 49)

His faith in Zeus has been diminished to such an extent that he can only act as he sees fit for himself. The search for and the acquisition of “truth” is the only way he can give security to his existence and gain a foothold in the world of shadows and uncertainty.

In describing how one word led to another in trying to help Io as well as himself, Prometheus is putting forth a model that could be used for by any writer. As you begin to write you are trying to find a way to express yourself to find, if not truth, some sort of understanding. The art is to find the combination of words that lead the way to truth. Each word one following after the other might have helped not only Io but also Prometheus. His speech on her eventual future provides some relief from her current pain. The use of words and their importance as we have seen
from the writing of Aeschylus and Shelley and commented on by Calvino, Goldhill and Eagleton is for the benefit not only of the reader but for the writer or speaker. The encounter with the Three Seabirds, the daughters of Ocean, highlights how Lowell’s Prometheus and possibly Lowell himself sees the relationship of man to the deity and the universe and how that relationship is expressed through words. It is an example of how Prometheus tried to grasp stability in an uncertain world.

Not unlike Shelley, whose Prometheus gave man speech and then thoughts to measure the universe, or Aeschylus’ Prometheus who gave man the alphabet to create words, Lowell’s Prometheus gives man words and the knowledge to use them:

Before I made men talk and write with words, knowledge dropped like a dry stick into the fire of their memories. (p.21)

With all of his new knowledge man has been transformed as verified by the Three Seabirds. Like Aeschylus and Shelley, Man’s relation to the universe and his understanding of it has been changed by how he expresses himself and his thoughts:

Third Voice
You changed man from the highest of animals to the lowest of the gods!

First Voice
Man is a poor god, too intelligent to hide from his unceasing guilt, too stupid to escape. That story trails off in death.

First Voice
This is the wisdom, Prometheus we have learned by looking at you. (p.25)

The hybrid nature of Prometheus as half god and half man is echoed in the words of the third voice of the seabird, “from the highest of animals to the lowest of the gods.” The first voice continues “Man is a poor god too intelligent to hide from guilt and
not smart enough to escape from his current condition ending in death.” The duality of man and god are present in both Prometheus and man but not in equal measure.

It is dangerous to mix the author with his characters. Many can stand aside from their creations. I do not think that is the case in Prometheus Bound based on Lowell’s writings with his own comparison to Prometheus. The frequent references to gods and the Greek past throughout his work reinforce my inclination. Prometheus states, “I myself might have been helped.” Words and their creation become the measure of the universe for Shelley. Words are the way of understanding where the truth was to be found in Lowell’s work and times.

Prometheus’ gift of the alphabet, words, speech and thoughts have allowed man not only to understand the universe, but the writer to express those thoughts one word at a time, one following the other. The ability to express those thoughts gives him something to stand on, a foothold. However, Prometheus faith in Zeus has been diminished to such an extent that he can only act as he sees fit for himself. Prometheus, Seabirds, Ocean and Hermes all express their reservations of Zeus as a leader:

Prometheus: He[Zeus]likes to leave them[his servants] free to repeat their past mistakes(p.19)
First Seabird: . . . his ways are dark and very seldom pleasant.(p.7)
Ocean: Zeus, neither teaches nor wishes to be taught(p.16)
Hermes: You must hunt with the gods, or be hunted down and torn to pieces(p.60)

Lowell’s introduction makes clear that he did not wish to parody present leaders in *Prometheus Bound* in his characterization of Zeus. His letters to friends point to a contradictory interpretation. His view of authority is one of errors continually being made, unpleasant methods, someone who does not want to learn and someone who
demands allegiance at one’s own peril. While man’s relation to the universe has been altered by the creation of words and thought and the ability to communicate, Man’s relation to any authority has been thrown into question.

Like Aeschylus, Lowell’s Prometheus gives man instruction on sacrifice and how to read the entrails of animals to gain meaning:

Their innards would be correctly set on fire to appease the gods . . . They studied the fires whirling and consuming colors, and believed they would some day taste the breath of life. (p. 23)

However, the reader is left with the impression that such sacrifice is transitory and of little effect in the face of gods who are characterized by darkness, tyranny and vengeance.

The view of an authoritarian deity in Lowell’s Prometheus Bound is not always consistent in Lowell’s work as we saw with the poem Dies Irae, A Hope that evokes a potentially forgiving god. But it is true of Prometheus Bound that becomes Lowell’s report on the United States of 1966-67 and its leadership. That leadership is now seen by Lowell’s Prometheus as “a false face, blackened crisp and all powerful.” Lowell has ruled out Shelley’s ending with a universe of knowledge with the music of the spheres. His ending, a Dies irae, is final. Prometheus view of how man has used his gifts is similarly dark. The blackened trail of motion is the product of man, not Prometheus.

In Prometheus Bound, Robert Lowell sidestepped a note-by-note homage to Aeschylus by overlaying his own thoughts and ideas on the myth and using twentieth century English with no attempt to make it sound archaic. It is in language and use of words that I believe he comes closest to expressing his thoughts on man's
relation to the deity and the universe. That relation is not built on sacrifice, a
prescribed litany or an authoritarian god, but on the ability to express one’s own
thoughts and ideas. The writer gains a means of support, a foothold on the truth,
from which he can come to understanding.
Chapter 8

UNDERSTANDING THROUGH SUCCESSIVE INTERPRETATIONS

Prometheus Bound continues to exert power and raise questions that are still open for discussion. We are the audience for that discussion. In the myth we recognize the drama and the conflicts are not in the past. The debate between power and intelligence is ongoing today exemplified by our need to know. The Chorus of fifth century Athens is like all of us, “You have some holy secret-so?” (521) We want to know those holy secrets. They are in the present and we are the audience. To look at Prometheus Bound with a fifth century Athenian perspective in reading the play is “to turn our backs upon ourselves.”

The conclusion of my thesis rests on an intuition that any understanding of man’s relation to the deity and the universe that can be drawn from Aeschylus, Shelley and Lowell will be altered when other versions of the Prometheus myth are added to the cannon. Any text should stand on its own. The author’s intentions should not be the primary consideration, just the results on the printed page. In this way many interpretations can be made of a single work. However in reading a text with such a multiplicity of versions it is hard to not be drawn into those intentions. We recognize what moves from one to another and how concepts are shaped by the times particularly in the case of Shelley and Lowell. We see how Aeschylus builds on Hesiod, Plato on Aeschylus then Shelley and Lowell on everyone. The result is a work and characters of greater complexity. What stands out with such clarity is
the importance of words and the means to express them. This is where my paper began and that is where it will end.

Any language at the end of the earth takes on significance. The writing style changes moving from the poetry of Aeschylus to the lyricism of Shelley and the blunt prose with occasional poetic flourishes of Lowell. Transgressive dialogue in all three texts challenges the authority of leadership and the dangers of tyranny. Values and authority are called into question. Lowell’s chorus will claim that Zeus “aspire to be beyond fear.” While the chorus will condemn Zeus they will later offer him tribute indicating the uncertainty of any protest. Lowell’s Chorus will ultimately decide, “. . . but we admire him as a ruler. He is the best we’ve had” (p.54).

The power of words is intensified in each successive text. As Shelley and Lowell adapt the myth the recurring words take on deeper implications. They are an illustration of Vernant’s point to build a framework on a word or idea and look at it from different sources. Hope wanders from one text to another. From Hesiod through Aeschylus and to Lowell, each has a different use of the word. Shelley’s, “. . . to hope till Hope creates from it own wreck the thing it contemplates” (IV. 575) builds on itself to create something new. Hope is a call for action. For Lowell, hope is a drug. If one does not work another will. The dual nature of hope developed by Plato on Aeschylus’ concept, is a reflection of the dual nature of Prometheus. Hope can be a foolish guide or create false confidence. It can lead to fear or anger.

Greek literature, above all tragedy, offers us a sense of the fragility of necessary actions and their outcome. To act out of necessity may result in the unknown. Aeschylus’ play illustrates Williams’ three concepts of necessity that can
lead to tragic circumstances. The first is the necessity to act by the application of authority as in the binding of Prometheus by Power and Hephaestus. Secondly is the necessity to act to be true to yourself and grounded in your own sense of identity. Shelley’s Prometheus tells Mercury, “Pity the self-despising slaves of Heaven, Not me, within whose mind sits peace serene. . . ” (I.430) As Lowell’s Prometheus says, “I couldn’t help myself. I had to choose between the destruction of my brothers and the betrayal of my own mind” (p.9). Finally the Greeks believed in a necessity that stood outside of the known world. Williams refers to it as supernatural necessity. Zeus’ punishment of Prometheus for saving Man is an example. However, Aeschylus may be building on the concept of what lies outside our knowledge when he adds a dramatic element by indicating that Zeus, like anyone of us, may be sick.

Zeus’ illness is an example of the gods developing human characteristics, also seen in other arts of the time, that put their authority and judgment in question. If the gods are like men then their supremacy and significance is questionable. They can be replaced. Man’s relation to the deity is lessened if the gods are full of human characteristics affecting their judgement.

Prometheus’ gift of fire and greater knowledge ultimately maintains or even strengthens the separation of man from the deity and the universe. It does not lessen it. Sacrifice and tribute to the gods becomes even more codified and viewed as necessary for the welfare of man. The realm of the sacred/deity and the realm of the profane/secular are maintained. The binding of Prometheus can be viewed as profane. It is a punishment the lowest of criminals would receive. The repeated loss
of his liver and then its rebirth, a symbol of man's inner nature reflected to the gods, can be seen as sacred. It is a dualistic punishment for a character that abounds in dualism beginning with his makeup as half man and half god.

Aeschylus in his writing provides a sacred link to the gods with his dialogue that we could today consider a prayer. Litany emerges from drama and is carried along by other poets such as Virgil. This is another example of the power of reading successive texts on the same theme and seeing what is retained and what is added. It is a further example of man's continuing communication with the deity.

The significance of words and their power builds through each successive reading. Aeschylus’ Prometheus allowed man to create words, ”from which come memory's power and every art”(460). For Shelley, Prometheus’ gift of speech and thought has allowed man to understand and express thoughts about the universe. Speech and thought created, ”the harmonious mind” which pours itself forth in “all – prophetic song . . .”(II.iv.78). For Lowell, words become a way to gain a secure footing on the truth and the writer a means to discover himself. ”I still look for truth, some momentary crumbling foothold “ (p.49). Man's understanding of the deity and the universe is built successively from Prometheus and Aeschylus gift of words, memory and thought. In putting those words together man creates an active mind that can give an expression about in each successive telling of the myth of 

*Prometheus Bound.*
ENDNOTES

CHAPTER 1

1. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* translation by Rom, line 105. All quotes from *Prometheus Bound* unless otherwise noted are from Romm’s translation and will be used with their approximate line numbers which will be included parenthetically in the text as in (105).


3. Ibid., 363.


5. Ibid., 3.


CHAPTER 2


9. Ibid., 8.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.


15. Ibid.


17. Ibid., 171.

**CHAPTER 3**

Quotes from Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* are in parenthesis with their line numbers.


2. Ibid., 164-65.


5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 59.


8. Ibid., 105.


12. Ibid., 130 – 131.

13. Ibid., 145.


17. Ibid., 163.

18. Ibid., 340.

19. Ibid., 164.

20. Ibid., 163.


22. Harris, *Restraining Rage*, 342, footnotes

23. Bell, *Mirror of the World*, 63-64
CHAPTER 4

Quotes from Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Plato’s *Laws*, *Timaeus*, *Georgias* and *Protagoras* and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* are in parenthesis with their line numbers.


2. Ibid., 124.

3. Ibid., 122.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


7. Ibid.


13. Ibid., 81.


16. Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

Quotes from Aeschylus Prometheus Bound, Virgil’s Georgics and Plato’s Timaeus are placed in parenthesis in the text.


2. Ibid., 5.


5. Kerenyi, Prometheus, p.53

6. Ibid.


8. Ibid., 8.


10. Ibid., 49.


12. Ibid., 44.


15. Burkert, Greek Religion, 64.


17. Ibid., 3.

18. Ibid., 43.

19. Ibid.


22. Ibid, 74.


25. Ibid. 109.


29. Ibid., 50.

30. Ibid., 34.


32. Ibid., 350.


36. Ibid., 56.

CHAPTER 6

Quotes from Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* are in parenthesis in the text identified by the act, scene if there is one, and the approximate line as in (II.iii.72) Quotes from Aeschylus are designated with an approximate line number as (445).


3. Eagleton, *How To Read Literature*, p.177

4. Ibid.


6. Ibid., 114.


9. Ibid.


15. Leader and O’Neill, endnotes to *Prometheus Unbound*, 746.


20. Ibid., 233.
21. Ibid., 257.
22. Ibid., 435.
23. Ibid., 60.
24. Ibid., 243.
25. Leader and O’Neill, endnotes to Prometheus Unbound, 751.
27. Eagleton, Hope Without Optimism, 84.
29. Hollander all quotes from Dante Paradiso are from the Hollander’s translation. Identified by Canto and line in parenthesis.

CHAPTER 7

Quotes from Lowell’s Prometheus Bound are in parenthesis with a p. in front as in (p.67). Lowell did not use line numbering. If the quote is from Aeschylus, just the line is listed as in (550). These are generally much higher numbers then the endnotes. I regret any confusion.

2. Ibid., 459.


11. Ibid., 150.


13. Robert Lowell was the great grand nephew of the 19th century poet and diplomat James Russell Lowell (1819-1891). He dismissed him as “a poet pedestaled for oblivion” (quoted by Mariani). Destined for oblivion or not, both Robert Lowell and his great-grand uncle wrote versions of the Prometheus myth. Written in 1843, J. R. Lowell’s poem is a poetic soliloquy by Prometheus lamenting his fate. Unlike Aeschylus’ play there are no other characters. J. R. Lowell’s poem was written against a background of the abolitionist movement in the United States.

J. R. Lowell ‘s Prometheus has given man the means to create an Arcadian world. He sees his gifts to man building this “triumphal arch” for humanity through his gifts, “The pippings of glad shepherds on the hills, / Needing the flocks no more to bleed for thee,- / The songs of maidens pressing with white feet/ the vintage on thine altars poured no more...” (155) Sacrificial tribute to the gods is no longer necessary and is no longer a part of man’s relation to god. “Strength is won by love of human kind.” Universal hope and love permeates the world. Man’s hope, faith and love will defeat Jove in the end. Love springing from hope and faith in God will rule echoing St. Paul, “ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (Corinthians I 13:13) Man has reached a state of universal love and faith through Prometheus’ gifts.


CHAPTER 8

Bibliography


