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Prometheus Bound

A

An excellent paper with many fine insights
inherent.

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Ernst J. Meyer

On Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound

In choosing an approach for criticism of a work of art, a student must, to begin with, answer the question, why he is writing about this work of art in the first place. What is it that makes a painting, a piece of music, or a drama of permanent interest? Why does a play like Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound enchant generation after generation of readers? What is it about Prometheus that makes him of unmitigated interest for the modern reader, in spite of the changing values of our society?

George Thompson has attempted to interpret Aeschylus' drama in the light of political and social developments of ancient Athens which parallel certain trends of our own society. He sees the significance of Prometheus in the class struggle against power and privilege, of which according to George Thompson Prometheus is a symbol. But George Thompson's interpretation entails certain contradictions. How is it, we may ask, that not only political liberals but political conservatives as well have been drawn to the figure of Prometheus? A work of art, it seems to me, is permanent because it stands above ideological conflicts. Shelley, says Thompson, was attracted by Prometheus because both Shelley and Aeschylus were revolutionaries. But what about Goethe, who was also enamored of the Prometheus figure, and who was anything but a revolutionary? If one interprets Prometheus Bound as a drama whose significance lies primarily in its political and sociological significance, one loses, -- or so it seems to me, -- sight of the very qualities which have made Prometheus Bound one of the finest plays the Greeks have bequeathed to us.

Was it not the universal meaning of Prometheus which has made it lasting? Should our interpretation not remain on a purely human

level without regard for ideological considerations ? This essay is an attempt at illustrating the belief that in the drama itself lies the key for its interpretation, and that this key is accessible to every man by virtue of his humanness. In other words: the significance of Prometheus Bound must be sought above ideological and political conflicts. If this essay succeeds in showing that Prometheus is made by Aeschylus a symbol of human struggles, of human ambitions, of human aspirations, of hopes and sufferings which are common to all men, it will have accomplished its purpose.

The Titan Prometheus is torn between Zeus and mankind. The demigod is the incarnation of human suffering and divine heroism. Prometheus is the fulfillment of Faust's dream, or, stated differently, the nature of Prometheus is the other side of Faustian nature. Faust and Prometheus are both symbols of man's eternal striving for divinity, but while in Goethe's Faust, the hero voices and interprets his own dilemma, Aeschylus' Prometheus is enveloped by the ambiguous mist of mythology.

Prometheus is immortal; he has dealt with Zeus as with an equal, as such he is divine. But in so far as he is subject to the wrath of Zeus, when he is punished, Prometheus is human, and tastes of human suffering. In this duality, I believe, is the real meaning of the Prometheus figure, in the contrast between humanness and divinity which is fused in Prometheus. This duality is the sublimation of man's hopes and fears, his aspirations and dejections, heightened to an ultimate of power in this figure of the demi-god.

Prometheus is human in so far as he, like man, is subject to necessity: "Necessity is strong and ends our strife."⁵⁰⁸ he complains Like humans he must pay for his crimes; pinned to a rock beneath the open sky.⁵⁰⁹ He is ashamed of being humbled so before his enemies:

"Oh had I been sent deep, deep into earth,
to that black boundless place where go the dead,
though cruel chains should hold me fast forever,
I should be hid from sight of gods and men.
But now I am a plaything for the winds.
My enemies exult and I endure."⁵¹⁰

The insults of his enemies are torturous for Prometheus to bear, and discouraging is the advice of his friends. The Ocean nymphs, altogether sympathetic with Prometheus, advise him to submit to Zeus' almighty power. Job's friends came likewise and urged him to repent of a sin he had not committed. The same sense of being innocently punished that embittered Job's suffering burns in Prometheus, and just as hard to bear is the advice of friends who do not know his suffering:

"Your feet are free.
Chains bind mine fast.
Advice is easy for the fortunate."⁵¹³

Prometheus complains.

He had foreseen his suffering, he asked for punishment, and accepted it with determination, with the recklessness and the will to self-chastisement that characterize many a modern hero. Thomas Mann's Dr. Faustus might have said:

"All that has come I knew full well.
Of mine own will I shot the arrow that fell short
of mine own will."⁵¹³
Nothing do I deny.

Like any human being who suffers, Prometheus cries for ears to hear his pain, that though not bearing it themselves his hearers

might be aware of his terrible suffering:

"Come, leave your car
and learn the fate that steals upon me,
all, to the very end.
Hear me, oh hear me. Share my pain. Remember
trouble may wander far and wide
but it is always near."514

The sympathy and the compassion with which the Ocean nymphs bewail Prometheus' suffering is nothing but the understanding of which one human being is capable in another's pain. The chorus in its attitude speaks for the sympathetic audience:

"You cry to willing ears, Prometheus.
I ask to hear your troubles to the end."514

Already at the very beginning of the play, when Prometheus was nailed to his rock by Hephestos, Force, and Violence, pity for Prometheus was aroused in the spectator. Prometheus was the victim of cruelty, he was maltreated, unjustly punished, his freedom was taken. He was condemned to a suffering which promised to be endless, because Prometheus was immortal. Prometheus as the symbol of suffering not released by death penetrates most deeply into the sphere of human emotions. Like the suffering of Jesus, Prometheus' suffering was in no way diminished by his divinity. In the suffering of Prometheus, as in Christ's passion a god becomes wholly anthropomorphic. The vision of the Titan chained like a criminal on a rock is Aeschylus' strongest bid for the emotional participation of his audience in the drama. The cry of Prometheus is directed to the spectator as well as to the ocean nymphs:

"Hear me, oh hear me. Share my pain."514
They are but the words of a suffering man.

His tormentors, who have executed his punishment, have left him to his fate, mocking him with his name as they went. Prometheus

suffers shame in addition to his pain. Like the mightiest of men he has been brought low, and his descent is aggravated, not diminished by the distance of his fall}.

"Behold what I, a god, endure from gods.⁵⁰⁸
 See in what tortures I must struggle
 through countless years of time.
 This shame, these bonds are put upon me
 by the new ruler of the gods.
 Sorrow enough in what is here and what is still to come."

The suffering of Prometheus, unlike the suffering of Racine's Phèdre or of Schiller's Maria Stuart, for instance, is not a suffering of purification. Prometheus has not sinned. He is being unjustly punished. His pain is no release from the world, because he cannot die. It accomplishes no sublimation of his passions, it leads to no purgation of Prometheus' soul. Because he is a Titan, Prometheus can hope for no release by death, he has no vision of salvation through his suffering. His last words are:

"Behold me, I am wronged."

These words give voice to tragedy which is perhaps more true to human nature than the end of Milton's Samson Agonistes or the death of Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus. Samson and Oedipus have been purified by suffering. Not so Prometheus. He was a god; he had no sins to atone for. There was no cause for his suffering but the fierce jealousy of Zeus; there was no purpose in it but to torment him. The end, although in sight, did not soothe the present pain. That is the kind of suffering most human beings bear. For most men suffering is something irrational and senseless. The last half of the nineteenth century would describe again how for most men pain is not purification but torture. That, it

seems to me, was one of the themes of the realistic novel and the naturalistic drama..

The shame that Prometheus was betrayed by one whom he had aided, that his help to Zeus was requited with cruelty, makes the anthropomorphic picture of Prometheus more complete. Such treachery on the part of kings is common human experience. Prometheus had fought on Zeus' side in the struggle against Kronos, and the unjust punishment is made more bitter by the unrequited friendship. Zeus is described as a typical tyrant, and Prometheus is as hapless as any tyrant's victim:

"Terrible are the deeds of Zeus.
He rules by laws that are his own." 518

For the present Prometheus is helpless.

But time shall teach even Zeus, gray time that teaches all things. The immortality which denies him release from his sufferings works ambivalently to raise Prometheus above the stature of men. The aspect of endlessness which Prometheus' suffering has, ^{for him} is limited by the certainty of Zeus' fall; it is balanced by the heroic unbending nature of Prometheus himself. In the final retribution which he predicts for Zeus, the heroic human stature of Prometheus merges with his triumphant stature as a god. Unlike the human martyr, he can foresee the justice that will overtake his oppressor, and he is certain that he will see Zeus' humiliation. Although Zeus can torture him, he cannot destroy Prometheus. The immortality of the demigod realizes the only hope of all suffering, survival. The possibility of reconciliation is in the background. Aeschylus' play deals with finite suffering

against the background of immortality. The balance will tip in the end in Prometheus' favor. Throughout the play we are constantly reminded that Prometheus ~~cannot~~ be vanquished, that Zeus must ultimately cease from his tyrannical ways. The god who suffers like a human being has his most precious secret: that his shame will be avenged. All men who suffer have the same wish, but only a god can have that certainty.

As a demi-god, Prometheus will survive the tortures of Zeus. As a demi-god he symbolizes human hopes, not only in his triumph over suffering, but also in that other side of his character, which gave to mankind the means to civilization. The figure of Prometheus is the ultimate satisfaction of the Faustian search and struggle of mankind. He ^{represents} ~~is~~ the summit of human aspirations in his role as firebringer. His name implies the material and the moral means which have made civilization possible. Prometheus represents, I believe, not so much a struggle between classes, as the divine compensation for the drive in men, the struggle for ever-higher goals which Plato called "Eros", and Goethe called "Streben". The gift of fire is symbolic not merely as the material basis of civilization, but it stands for the very vitality of life, the power that has energized human development. The fire is intellectual and physical as well; Prometheus says:

"Once they (men) were fools. I gave them power to think.
Through me they won their minds.
I have no blame for them. All I would tell you
is my good will and my good gifts to them.
Seeing they did not see, nor hearing hear.
Like dreams they led a random life." 519

Prometheus taught men to tell the seasons, he taught them number and writing, he taught them how to domesticate animals, and how to build

houses. Prometheus gave men the gift of medicine; he taught them augury and divination. He founded their religions, taught them the proper ways to worship the gods. He did for men just that, in other words, which they have in the development of their civilizations and cultures aspired after: development on both the material and intellectual plane of existence. He sums up his own efforts in behalf of men:

"All arts, all goods, have come to men from me."⁵²¹

Prometheus symbolizes a particularly powerful synthesis of the dark and the happy sides of humanity, of suffering and aspirations. Aeschylus shows us the Titan standing between absolute divinity and humanness, embodying the strivings and the accomplishments, the suffering and the pains of mankind, thus giving men a mirror in which they see themselves magnified..

The frame which heightens the effectiveness of Prometheus' character are the other figures in the play. Aeschylus uses Prometheus' enemies to magnify the divinity brought low; he uses the friends to accentuate the heroism of the suffering Titan. The other characters of Prometheus Bound give many clues to the interpretation of Prometheus as a symbol of human suffering and of human hopes, a man among gods and a god among men, whose fall is the price he pays for implanting in men their noblest virtue: the ceaseless striving which is civilization..

The opening scene shows Prometheus being bound by Hephestus and Force. Hephestus appears as a timid henchman of Zeus:

"But as for me, I am not bold to bind
a god, a kinsman, to this stormy crag.
Yet I must needs be bold."⁵⁰⁷

He does not want to nail Prometheus to his rock. He hates the skill of hand that enables him to execute the punishment. He is ashamed of what he is doing, and yet his fear of Zeus compels him to his hated work. He expresses his sympathy as though with words of pity he were justifying himself. Remorsefully he comments on the finality of his own deeds, as if thereby he were asking pardon from Prometheus;

"All done, and quick work too.

This arm at least he will not ever free.

No one but the poor wretch can blame my work.

Alas, Prometheus, I grieve for your pain."⁵⁰⁷

"Violence" does not speak in Aeschylus drama. The character of Force contrasts with the remorse and pity voiced by Hephestus. Cruelty and barbaric brutality are eloquent in Force's words; they indicate that such inhumanity is not peculiar to our own time.

"Seize his hands and master him.

Now to your hammer. Pin him to the rocks.

Still harder. Tighter. Never loose your hold⁵⁰⁷
for he is good at finding out a way where there is none."

Prometheus, says Force, has got what he deserves. "Drive the nails through his flesh." The judge, he says, is stern who passes on their work..

Another representative of Zeus is Hermes, the messenger who enters at the very end of the play. Although not so cruel as Force, like his master Zeus, He would humble Prometheus. Hermes taunts and reviles Prometheus, and scorns him because of his impotence. Hermes'

impudence is based not on courage, but solely on the consciousness of his power. He is the despicable messenger who punctually does his masters bidding. The haughtiness with which he addresses Prometheus he derives from the knowledge of Zeus' strength:

"You trickster there, you biter bitten,
sinner against the gods, man lover, thief of fire,
My message is to you.
The great father gives you here his orders:"

Prometheus' character is emphasized by his proud and dignified answer. Prometheus' words are those of an idealized martyr:

"Big words and insolent. They well become you,
O lackey of the gods.
Young - young - your thrones just won,
you think you live in citadels grief cannot reach.
I would not change my lot
with yours, O lackey." 538

Hermes threatens Prometheus with even greater sufferings that will come unless he divulges his secret. That the lackey should have power to threaten and to make good his threats against the Titanic hero, - that is an ironically tragic reversal of roles. But Prometheus rises above it. He gives voice to what every human sufferer longs to say:

"These tidings that the fellow shouts at me
were known to me long since.
A foe to suffer at the hand of foes
is nothing shameful."

With the courage that befits a god, Prometheus challenges his persecutor:

"Then let the twisting flame of forked fire
be hurled upon me. Let the very air
be rent by thunder-crash.
Savage winds convulse the sky,
hurricanes shake the earth from its foundations,
the waves of the sea rise up and drown the stars,
and let me be swept down to hell,
caught in the cruel whirlpool of necessity
He cannot kill me."

In spite of Hermes' threats the chorus stands by Prometheus. The chorus mirrors the spectator in its professed courage. The leader of the ocean nymphs refuses to leave the suffering Titan. Their constancy proves the sincerity of their greeting to Prometheus earlier in the play:

"Oh be not terrified, for friends are here,
each eager to be first;
on swift wings flying to your rock." 509

The sea nymphs, like the audience, have pity for Prometheus:

"I look upon you and a mist of tears,
of grief and terror rises as I see
your body withering upon the rocks,
in shameful fetters." 510

The ocean nymphs display to Prometheus the touching virtues of true friendship.

Ocean, although he introduces himself with ambitious tenders of sympathy, turns out to be less true a friend. He was hardly designed to be a comical figure. His fickle friendship, I think, was meant to contrast with the constancy of the nymphs. The characterization of Ocean is indeed one of the most vivid descriptions in all of Aeschylus, particularly when compared to the characters of the Oresteia who appear much stiffer, more stylized, and less human. Ocean is depicted as the garrulous fair-weather friend. The shallowness of his character speaks from his words:

"You counsel others better than yourself,
to judge by what I hear and what I see.
But I won't let you turn me off.
I really want to serve you.
And I am proud, yes proud to say
I know that Zeus will let you go
just as a favor done to me.

His observations bespeak conventionality, and his pity for Prometheus is hardly more profound than his words. Ocean's purpose to intercede

with Zeus on Prometheus' behalf is quickly forgotten when Prometheus warns him of Zeus' wrath. Though Ocean is good-natured and affable, his pleasantness is as superficial as the adage he cites to the suffering Titan:

"And yet you know the saying,
when anger reaches fever heat
wise words are the physician." 517

Ocean was not meant to be comical. The levity of his appearance is an ironical contrast to the heroic stature of the suffering Prometheus.

Io is a fellow-sufferer, cursed like Prometheus. Condemned by Hera to wander over the earth, because Zeus fell in love with her, Io approaches Prometheus. Unlike him, she is not the master of her pain, like a mortal, she appears pitifully persecuted. Compared with Prometheus she is unheroic, ^{and} plagued, ~~and~~ chased by Argus, she is ignorant of her fate, ^{as she was} ~~and~~/unaware of her mistake when she made it. Prometheus was conscious of the deed that brought him suffering; he consciously broke Zeus' law. The way of Io is the torturous path of many mortals, while Prometheus' suffering, titanic as it is, is an idealization of suffering.

I believe that Aeschylus was conscious of the contrast between Io's suffering and that of Prometheus. The extensive description of Io's wanderings from Prometheus' mouth is more than a geographical account. It is, I think, an elaboration of the contrast, and as such one of the most effective scenes of Prometheus Bound.

In that account is the contrast of two kinds of suffering. Enacted is the picture of a chained and transfixed demi-god prophesying the painful way of a human being. It is the contrast between suffering that is ignorant of its purpose and ignorant of its end, and suffering that has a knowledge of its origin and end, that was predetermined by the will of its victim. Io asks for medicine to cure her pain. Prometheus would be too proud to do that. With fear and shame Io tells of the grief that overcame her, of the god-driven storm that struck her, changed her, and destroyed her.

Io was the beloved of Zeus. Aeschylus takes another opportunity to drive home the moral of the Tantalus curse; that out of the communion of men with gods only destruction for the human being can come. While Prometheus embodies human aspirations to divinity, Io is the frightened proof that there is an unbridgeable chasm between men and gods, and Io, by her pitiful appearance adds only to the dignity of Prometheus.

When Prometheus tells of Io's wanderings, he is extending her fate over the then known world. Io's curse becomes more meaningful when associated with place names which have not only mythological but purely poetic meaning as well. The suffering of Io is brought into intimate relationship with the world of natural forces, the vastness of the mountains and the width of the rivers she must cross. They give the audience an awe of fear and pity, and heighten the effect of the tragedy told by Prometheus:

"Keep to the shore washed by the moaning sea
Off to the left live the Chalybdiens
workers of iron. There becom your guard.
A rough people they who like not strangers.
Here rolls a river called the insolent,
True to its name. You cannot find a ford

until you reach the Caucasus itself
highest of mountains. From beneath its brow
the mighty river rushes. You must
cross the summit neighbor to the stars."*

Io's parting speech is a summary of the misery and frenzy, the
terror and the madness that are raging within her:

"Oh misery. Oh misery.
A frenzy tears me.
Madness strikes my mind
I burn, a frantic sting
an arrow never forged with fire
My heart is beating at its walls interior.
My eyes are whirling wheels.
Away, away. A raging wind of fury
sweeps through me.
My tongue has lost its power
My words are like a turbid stream,
wild waves that dash against a surging sea,
the black sea of madness."

Prometheus, in contrast, maintains his heroic dignity. If,
as Thompson says, he moans and complains in the second, fragmentary
part of the proposed trilogy, there is no indication of it here.
In the final scene of Prometheus Bound, the Titan defies the tortures
that are to come upon him. He gives the spectator an idealized
picture of suffering, idealized not in the sense that it leads to
purification, redemption, or salvation, but idealized in so far as
its victim has the strength and the power to rise triumphantly above
it:

"An end to words. Deeds now
The world is shaken
The deep and secret way of thunder
is rent apart.
Fiery wreaths of lightning flash.
Whirlwinds toss the swirling dust.
The blasts of all the winds are battling in the air
and sky and sea are one.
On me the tempest falls.
It does not make me tremble.
O holy Mother Earth, O air and sun,
Behold me, I am wronged."

* * *

*For a modern parallel to this travelogue, cf. Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell*:
act V; sc. 3