Prometheus in Suspension: Suffering and the Tragic in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*

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Of all dramatic forms, tragedy is the least realistic, in a sense the most symbolic, and, as such, in its masterpieces . . . the closest neighbor of absolute beauty.

– Ferdinand Brunetiere, *L'Evolution d'un genre: la tragédie*

Abstract

Prometheus Bound (ca. 430 B.C.), Aeschylus's sweeping tragedy of suffering and injustice, has been the subject of critics for centuries because of its episodic structure and unique themes. Though, like much of the rest of Aeschylus's corpus, it does not align with the criteria of effective tragedy according to the standards of Aristotle's *Poetics* (ca. 330 B.C.), Aeschylus achieves the tragic by placing Prometheus in a state of suspension between his own divine nature and his affinity for humankind, a nearly unheard of stasis in a world where the chasm between gods and men was no small one. In receiving his punishment for giving men fire, Prometheus experiences the very suffering which he hoped to spare men, and chained to the edge of a cliff where an eagle descends to consume his daily-replenished liver, Prometheus cries out against the existential anguish to which he is unjustly condemned.

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The rattle of chains and hammer strikes are the first sounds announcing Prometheus's entrance on stage, accompanied by Zeus's minions Might and Violence, and the god of fire and smithy, Hephaestus. With smirking crudity, Might and Violence entreat Hephaestus to assist them in "driving the obstinate jaw of the adamantine wedge" through Prometheus's chest, binding him, immobile, to the cliff at the outer reaches of the Caucasus Mountains. And for what crime?

> PROMETHEUS. I hunted out the secret spring of fire
> that filled the narthex stem, which when revealed
> became the teacher of each craft to men,
> a great resource…[1]

By subverting Zeus and presenting humankind with the capacity to survive, Prometheus is punished swiftly and brutally, and the cosmic conflict between Zeus and Prometheus, along with the other cast of characters, draws our attention to the manner in which we understand tragedy to function. Aeschylus's mastery of dramatic storytelling elicits starling reactions of "pity and fear," and yet eludes a systematic interpretation of tragedy, including that put forth by Aristotle in *Poetics*. Prometheus is the grand archetype of suffering without end and to no end, caught in suspension between his deific nature and his human sympathies; because he is a god, he lives endlessly, but because he also identifies himself with humanity, he suffers endlessly and seemingly without cause. For taking up man's cause, Prometheus is condemned to experience suffering as a man, with

[1] Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. David Grene, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, edited by Richmond Lattimore and David Grene. 2nd edition. Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1991. Lines 109-112. Subsequent citations of line numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

the same tenuous and hesitant belief in the order of the world, but with his desperate "Why?" amplified by his very nature as an immortal god.

The Authority of Aristotle

In the field of literary criticism, and of tragedy in particular, Aristotle's *Poetics* has long been the benchmark. However, the real authority of the *Poetics* has long been questioned by scholars of Greek tragedy. For many, the *Poetics* simply cannot accommodate the different forms of tragedy even among the famed Greek tragedians, no less more modern conceptions of tragic drama (such as Ibsen, Beckett, Miller, and others), and for this reason many choose to investigate alternative methods of tragic development and effect. Most of these involve Aristotle's general criteria in some fashion, using the vocabulary of his work but altering the meanings slightly to fit each individual schema. One continuous commonality with each approach, however, is the search for some type of catharsis, that emotional "ordering" which, to Aristotle, was the point of tragedy altogether. The definitions of catharsis are as varied as the writers who take up the topic, and these nuanced definitions of catharsis are helpful in assisting the audience in finding the tragedy in *Prometheus Bound*.

Aristotle's *Poetics* places plot at the forefront of the tragic agenda. For Aristotle, plot is the most critical dramatic element. In his view, tragedy should not be concerned with individuals; rather, it is "a representation . . . of action and life" in which the characters are included "for the sake of their actions."[2] The events of "action and life" are not arbitrarily selected, but rather follow each other out of "probability" and "necessity,"

[2] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Dover, 1997), 12.

one event leading logically to the next, culminating in the recognition or reversal leading to the downfall of the principal character. This downfall mysteriously results in "catharsis" for the audience. Aristotle explicitly states that "among simple plots and actions, episodic [tragedies] are the worst," since they do not reflect the logical sequence of events he so highly valued.[3] However obscure Aristotle's concept of catharsis may be, it cannot be denied that *Prometheus Bound* achieves, in nearly every sense, the reactions of pity and fear which Aristotle held in such high esteem. So how, despite flouting the standards which Aristotle proposed, does Aeschylus, in writing the *Prometheus*, create such a tense and soaring drama that has captivated generations upon generations of audiences? It is at this crossroads between affective tragedy and the demands of the *Poetics* that we find *Prometheus Bound*, a highly episodic, even "static" tragedy in which a sequential plot is nearly nonexistent.

The structure of *Prometheus Bound* does not adhere to the ideas concerning probability and necessity that Aristotle so pointedly admired. First, *Prometheus Bound* consists entirely of dialogues, with seemingly little connection to one another other than Prometheus's repeated complaint of Zeus's tyranny. Additionally, the dialogues are not placed in a logical or necessary order: as H. D. F. Kitto notes, Io's distraught speeches could easily be interchanged with the smug advice of Oceanus, without significant harm to the thematic development of the play.[4] Aristotle, however, in no uncertain terms,

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[3] Aristotle, 18.

[4] G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, MA, 1957), 446. Quoted in Margalit Finkelberg, "Aristotle and Episodic Tragedy," *Greece & Rome* 53, no. 1: 61. The two plays Else mentions as good examples of Aristotelian tragic theory are Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and *Iphigenia at Tauris*.

expected integration of dramatic events, saying that "a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole."[5] Indeed, some have noted that very few of the extant tragedies by any of the Greek playwrights accurately reflect the criteria set out in the *Poetics.* In discussing the real applicability of Aristotle's matrix for evaluating the perfection of a tragedy, G. F. Else states the matter briefly, noting that as few as two out of the thirty-two extant plays hold together compared to the Aristotelian requirements.[6]

Prometheus Bound, simply because of its highly episodic and apparently arbitrary structure, becomes problematic for the critic: how does a play which so obviously does not meet the standards of the *Poetics* succeed so effectively in arousing the typically Aristotelian reactions of "*eleos*" (pity) and "*phobos*" (fear)? "Tragedies, alas, are not what they're supposed to be."[7] Though there would, inevitably, be some who would insist otherwise, *Prometheus Bound* has been regarded throughout the centuries as a tragedy in its own right, and even in tandem with the reconstructions we can ascertain of its two companion plays, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*, it is still a powerfully moving drama that has elicited various responses from authors across the literary spectrum.[8]

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[5] Aristotle, 16.

[6] Ibid., 62.

[7] Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 181.

[8] For an insightful and thoughtful reconstruction of the two other plays in the trilogy, see Chapter V of Gilbert Murray's *Aeschylus: The Creator of Tragedy*, specifically pages 99-110. Also, Carl Kerényi's *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence* offers significant light into the mythological context of the Prometheus story.

Alternate Approaches to Tragic Understanding

In undertaking any analysis of Greek tragedy, it is important to clarify, given the context of the paper, the approach to tragedy that shapes the undertaking. Critical approaches vary from no clear statement of tragedy, to a systematically defined and defended one. This has been a practice since Aristotle gave his first definition of tragedy in the *Poetics*: "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions [i.e., catharsis]."[9] On first glance this seems a fitting outline of the tragic genre, but when Aristotle continues his discussion, particularly regarding the discussion of plot, it becomes apparent that it is too narrow a definition to account for the number of tragedies which are affective outside the bounds of his critical approach.

There are several other approaches that shed light on the nature of *Prometheus Bound* as tragedy, one of which is H. D. F. Kitto's concept of the "Law of Increasing Tension." In summary, Kitto's position is that in certain of the classical tragedies, the structure of the play is not meant to progress in a plausible series of events; rather, the purpose of the events in the play is to direct the reader's attention toward something different—toward thematic or character development rather than plot development.[10] In *Prometheus Bound*, this is especially relevant, as the seeming discontinuity of the

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[9] Aristotle, 10.

[10] H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy: a Literary Study* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 61ff.

episodes between Prometheus, the chorus, Oceanus, Hermes, and Io proves an unintelligible mess unless there is something other than the plot to hold it together. Under the "Law of Increasing Tension," the dialogues are placed in their order not to move the plot forward, but rather to direct the reader (or viewer) to an upward spiral of symbolic clashes which increase in intensity, culminating, in this case, in Prometheus's vigorous insistence to Hermes that he is unjustly imprisoned and will not disclose his prophecy to Zeus.

The "Law of Increasing Tension," like other various attempts to understand *Prometheus Bound*, deals primarily with matters of form and structure, rather than those of concept and philosophical underpinnings, by answering the question of what we are to do with the episodic structure of the play. Kitto's law assists the audience by giving it an alternate framework to understand the play, and deepens the symbolism to an extent, but does not tell us any more than we already know about why *Prometheus Bound* is such an effective, and *affective*, tragedy. By explaining that Prometheus can be understood on symbolic levels (such as rebel vs. tyrant, etc.) Kitto adds depth to the thematic conflicts, but does not press on to explain the significance of the thematic relationships, nor does he adequately explain why Prometheus is in such a state in the first place.

Another, more broadly defined and open, position, is that of Oscar Mandel, in his work *A Definition of Tragedy*: "A protagonist who commands our earnest good will is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, of a certain seriousness and magnitude; and by that very purpose or action, subject to that same given world,

necessarily and inevitably meets with grave spiritual or physical suffering."[11] The key term for Mandel is *inevitable*. Throughout the rest of his work, he expands on this requirement, saying that it is only when the action or purpose of the protagonist demands a logical sequence of events (inevitable events), that a work can truly be deemed a tragedy. Only when the audience is filled with horror at the outset, knowing the consequences of the protagonist's actions—"the original configuration"—before the action begins, can, in Mandel's opinion, "true" tragedy be achieved. Through literary convention and willing suspension of disbelief, the audience realizes that the protagonist's actions must *necessarily* lead to his (or her) demise.

Even this tragic characteristic, however, must "inevitably" have its caveat, particularly in a discussion of Aeschylus's plays. Though perhaps one may realize, for example, that Prometheus's decision to capture fire would logically lead to Zeus's anger, one may not find the consequence of Prometheus's offense to be inevitable, as Mandel so earnestly suggests. Walter Kaufmann, quoting George Steiner, supports the idea that tragedy may be "irreparable," but does not suppose that inevitability is the key concept to defining a work as tragedy, or at least as Mandel would so thoroughly have it. Rather, Kaufmann presents Aeschylus as a prime example that "we should cease supposing that great tragedies must issue from a tragic vision that entails some deep despair or notions of inevitable failure."[12] Indeed, Kaufmann notes that Aeschylus, as a firm believer in Athens's ability to find virtuous ways to execute justice, points to solutions that would

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[11] Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 20.

[12] Walter Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 165.

prevent tragedy from occurring again: the founding of the court at Athens in the *Orestia* is one such instance.[13] In this sense, though, once a decision is made the outcome may be, in some degree, irrevocable: "For Aeschylus the tragic is remediable and represented as a foil for progress through the use of reason."[14] The freedom of Mendel's definition in regard to the actual content of the drama is helpful, but only understood within the context of completed action. Kaufmann asserts that uncertainty of the necessity of tragic suffering makes it all the more acute:

> Misery is no less great for having been avoidable. One might even argue that the belief in necessity spells comfort, while the sense that a catastrophe was not inevitable heightens our suffering. But Aeschylus does not insist on being metaphysical; he simply pictures suffering with a concentrated power, piling image upon image, overwhelming us with the whole weight of human grief, leaving a mark on our minds that no eventual insight, institution, or joy can wipe out.[15]

This "whole weight of human grief," considered with the philosophical bent of existentialism, is the key to understanding the tragic spirit of *Prometheus Bound*. Unlike Sophocles' Oedipus, or even Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, Prometheus's transgressive act is already behind us as the play progresses. The focus is, instead, on the horrifying amount of suffering to which the unwitting Prometheus is subjected as he takes upon himself the suffering of men with the interminable longevity of a god.

With Prometheus's suffering in mind, we can understand Karl Jaspers when he says, "Tragedy views in tremendous perspectives all that actually exists and occurs; and

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[13] Kaufmann, 177.

[14] Ibid., 181.

[15] Ibid., 183.

in its climax of silence, tragedy suggests and brings to realization the highest possibilities of man."[16] Though the actual events of *Prometheus Bound* are constricted to the fictitious world of myth and legend, the play portrays some of the greatest themes of human existence: the search for the cause and meaning of suffering, and suffering in the face of perceived injustice. Classical translator and scholar David Grene notes Aeschylus's sensitivity to the universality of human experience, in particular that of his Attic audience, for "when the suffering Prometheus cries out in his helplessness and his knowledge, and doubts yet feels certain of the final outcome, the story has been invested with a new [Aristotelian] probability drawn from the community of man's experience."[17] This commonality, this community of experience, leads to what Miguel de Unamuno calls "the tragic sense of life."[18] Aristotle's theory of tragedy simply does not give sufficient credit to Aeschylus's mastery; the "tragic sense" frees us to feel Prometheus's suffering with him. By empathetically suffering with Prometheus, we experience Jaspers's moving and compelling definition of catharsis as "an experience that touches the innermost being of each man. It makes him more deeply receptive to reality, not merely as a spectator, but as a man who is personally involved. It makes truth a part of us

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[16] Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy Is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), 27.

[17] David Grene, "Prometheus Bound," *Classical Philology* 35, vol. 1 (Jan. 1940): 26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/264590 (accessed July 9, 2008).

[18] Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Flitch (London: Macmillian & Co., 1921), 17.

by cleansing us of all that in our everyday experience is petty, bewildering, and trivial—all that narrows us and makes us blind."[19]

Unlocking Prometheus Bound With the Existential Key

It should be here clarified that this paper does not intend to treat the branch of philosophy deemed "Existentialism," but rather the mystery of human existence and suffering that birthed the writings of not only the Greek tragedians, but Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, and others as well. Indeed, one could agree with Unamuno when he says that "every philosophy that pretends to resolve the eternal and tragic contradiction [the reconciliation of "intellectual necessities with the necessities of the heart"], the basis of our existence, breaks to pieces."[20] *Prometheus Bound* is concerned with suffering, and whether it is Prometheus's painful crucifixion, Io's ceaseless goading by flies, or the Chorus's cautious yet empathetic commiseration with Prometheus's pains, the magnitude of suffering is presented in unflinching, intimate detail. Prometheus's suffering, however, lies particularly in his unique status as the bridge, of sorts, between man and gods. Carl Kerényi aptly points out that in the mythogical context of *Prometheus Bound*, the "naïve, philosophical view of the world" whose aherents formulated the myth in the first place "[did] not have man in the center. It [had] two poles, man on earth, the gods in heaven."[21] Tragically suspended in the non-space between the earth of men and heaven of gods, Prometheus possesses the privilege of the

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[19] Jaspers, 36.

[20] de Unamuno, 15-16.

[21] Carl Kerényi, *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence*, (New York: Pantheon, 1963), 21.

gods (immortality) but simultaneously experiences the existential suffering that is the lot of men.

The Divine Predicament: Prometheus in Suspension

Prometheus as a God

Prometheus's status as deity may be taken as a given. Lewis Farnell asserts that "Prometheus is presented to us as a God, and his Godhead was sufficiently attested by Greek mythology, and . . . [e]ven the Olympians recognize that he is a God."[22] According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, the Titans, of which Prometheus (by his parentage) was one, were the children of Earth and Ouranos, and the second generation to obtain power after Ouranos's overthrow by Kronos.[23] When the imminent toppling of the Titans by Zeus's new generation of gods became apparent, Prometheus, warned by his mother that cunning rather than force would obtain power, attempted to communicate this condition to his Titan comrades. When they refused to heed his secondhand prophetic wisdom, Prometheus defected to Zeus and utilized his guile in the triumph of the new Olympian order (201-224). Co-existing with the other gods, Prometheus was an established member of the Olympiad, and had no obvious motive to abandon his privileged position, except for his own affections toward men.

Prometheus's stature as a member of the Pantheon raises significant questions regarding his motives for dealing with man as he did. Though not necessarily guaranteed, Prometheus's assistance in Zeus's deposition of Kronos won him preference in the new

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[22] Lewis R. Farnell, "The Paradox of the *Prometheus Vinctus*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 53, pt. 1 (1933): 40, http://www.jstor.org/stable/627244 (accessed September 10, 2009).

[23] Ibid., 25. See also: Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 207.

order, and it certainly ensured that Prometheus was not hurled into Tartaros with the rest of his Titan brethren.[24] Prometheus had no reason for loyalty to the race of men, and indeed, the Chorus of Oceanus's daughters find his affinity for humankind to be startling, and emphasize man's frailty compared to the gods:

> CHORUS. Kindness that cannot be requited, tell me,
> where is the help in that, my friend? What succor
> in creatures of a day? You did not see
> the feebleness that draws its breath in gasps,
> a dreamlike feebleness by which the race
> of man is held in bondage, like a blind prisoner. (546-551)

The Chorus's bewildered strophe indicates not only surprise at Prometheus's love for man, but also amazement that he would, for such a "feeble" race, sacrifice the goodwill (or at least tolerance) of Zeus.

Additionally, however, in another affirmation of Prometheus's divine nature, the Chorus appears unable to believe that Prometheus would commit an act which undermines his own status as a god. His position entailed no loyalty to mankind until *after* he gave them fire, but by so doing Prometheus enabled man not only to enjoy what had previously been the luxury of only the gods, but also to create their own civilization, complete with agriculture, medicine, and even divination, and essentially giving men the capacity to live without the help and sustenance of the gods. In giving humankind all of these things, Prometheus provided man with the means to disengage from the very "institution" (if Olympus can be so understood) of which he himself was an important part. David Grene, in discussing the background of the narrative, states that Prometheus gives his Foresight to Zeus, but goes one step further, and "out of gratuitous pity, . . .

[24] Hesiod *Theogony*, lines 720-721.

grants a form of this personalized quality (forethought) to the despised other creation, man."[25] For all intents and purposes, Prometheus became a traitor to the Pantheon by identifying himself with humankind, and for this he is condemned to horrific suffering.

Prometheus's Identification with Humans

Though it is unexpected that Prometheus betrayed himself in his status as a god, his simultaneous alignment with the race of men is even more striking. It has heretofore been noted that Prometheus was under no special obligation to men—indeed, Timothy Gantz succinctly notes that "[w]hat the gods give, they give, but on that which they do not give [men] have no claim."[26] The race of men had no claim on Prometheus for any favors, the least of which would have included the gift of fire, and by extension, civilization and all the arts and sciences which spring from it. Prometheus's inappropriate expression of generosity makes him at once the patron and champion of men, but also places him in a position of accountability for his actions on a level exponentially more serious than that of men. In choosing, expressly against the will of Zeus, to present men with fire, Prometheus wordlessly (though the words certainly come later, in the context of the play) states his allegiance to men over his allegiance to Zeus. Indeed, the chorus expresses its frightened surprise when they find that Prometheus has flouted Zeus's plans to destroy men, inquiring "Do you not see that you were wrong?" (261-262). Though they are empathetic towards Prometheus's suffering, they do not hesitate to express their

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[25] David Grene, "Myth, Religion, and Poetry," *History of Religions* 23, no. 1 (Aug. 1983), 7. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062315 (accessed March 18, 2009).

[26] Timothy Gantz, "Divine Guilt in Aischylos," *The Classical Quarterly*, New series 31, no. 1 (1981), 21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/638457 (accessed February 9, 2009).

shock and disapproval at his actions. Later, as Prometheus recounts the various crafts and devices he enabled men to utilize, the chorus expresses simultaneous disbelief and disappointment:

> CHORUS. Bewildered in your mind
> you are astray, and like a bad doctor who
> has fallen sick, you have lost heart not finding
> by what drugs your own disease is curable. (471-474)

In their eyes, Prometheus is misguided and pitiable, victim to the very insufficiency that he attempted to cure for men.

In addition to Prometheus's actions and explicit dialogue with the Chorus, Aeschylus carefully weaves subtle ironies into the play to express Prometheus's status as mirror image of human beings. When the chorus presses Prometheus to find out in what manner he assisted men, Prometheus replies that in order to "stop mortals from foreseeing doom," he "sowed in them blind hopes" (252). James Hogan makes a note that this does not mean that Prometheus suppressed man's awareness of his own mortality; rather, the "blind hopes" which Prometheus gave them caused them to "[cease] working and thinking like [those] whose efforts are doomed to be ephemeral."[27] This casts a different light upon the lines where Prometheus admits the shortfall in his own foresight, as in lines 268-271, when he admits:

> PROMETHEUS. I knew when I transgressed nor will deny it.
> In helping man I brought my troubles on me;
> but yet I did not think that with such tortures

[27] James C. Hogan, *A Commentary on the Complete Greek Tragedies: Aeschylus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 284.

I should be wasted on these airy cliffs. . ." (268-271)[28]

And later, during the chorus's second series of strophes and antistrophes, they offer not only chiding words, but ironical ones as well:

> CHORUS. [*Strophe*] Kindness that cannot be requited, tell me,
> where is the help in that, my friend? What succor
> in creatures of a day? *You did not see*
> the feebleness that draws its breath in gasps,
> *a dreamlike feebleness by which the race*
> *of man is held in bondage, a blind prisoner*. (546-551)

In addition to expressing the chorus's simple wonder at what Prometheus has done, these lines also express a crucial point in Aeschylus's identification of Prometheus with humankind. Just as humans are held in bondage as blind prisoners, so Prometheus the Foreseer, through the failing of his own abilities, is constrained to the same role in an incessant bondage to which he is alert but helpless to protest. In preventing men from "foreseeing doom," and giving them "blind hopes," Prometheus's own foresight fails and he believes that he can help men escape Zeus's wrath with minimal consequence. Indeed, Might's appraisal of Prometheus's suffering at the beginning of the play, though crass, may not be as wrong as one would suppose: "that he may learn to endure and like the sovereignty of Zeus and quit his man-loving disposition" (10-11).

In addition to the textual evidence, Carl Kerényi draws upon the Hesiodic background of the Promethean myth to draw conclusions regarding Prometheus's apparent "deficiency" as a god that formed the impetus for his theft. Drawing upon Prometheus's renewal in the dark, night hours and his torture in the day, Kerényi

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[28] Some (Farnell and others) find this to be a sarcastic response to the Chorus; I hold that the only sarcastic responses in the play are those to Oceanus, whose comic entrance and absurd propositions merit an insincere response.

interprets Prometheus as symbolic of "darkness," or lacking the respect for Zeus's authority that is symbolized by the light, daytime hours. For Kerényi, Prometheus is thematically representative of "darkness" for two primary reasons: first, he is a god keenly associated with Foresight; second, the liver (a tool of divination for the Greeks, supposedly mirroring the night sky) is consumed daily by Zeus's eagle which is "little more than a metaphor for the sun, which Aischylos [sic.] once invokes as the 'bird of Zeus'."[29] In this sense, Prometheus's sufferings can be seen as the oppression of night by the day —only in the night is there respite from the eagle's consumption, and even then, there is still the anticipation of the next day's torments. Prometheus, the god who is by some mythic inferences associated with night, is oppressed by Zeus, the god who is the ruler over all and over the sun/daylight in particular.

Prometheus's "darkness" can be read as deficiency, an ill that he attempts to alleviate by stealing fire and giving it to men. Kerényi makes the point that "[i]n human existence, 'suffering' and 'darkness' are so closely related that all processes in which the darkness plays a part—whether actively or passively—seem to involve suffering."[30] This identification with human existence ties us back to the original dilemma of Prometheus's suspension between gods and men: not only is he condemned to suffer for disclosing the secret of the gods to men, but he also suffers as a representative, an archetype of the human condition: "The darkness of Prometheus signifies precisely the deficiency of one who needs fire in order to achieve a more perfect form of being. In obtaining this higher

[29] Kerenyi, 39.

[30] Ibid., 40.

form of being for man, Prometheus shows himself to be man's double, an eternal image of man's basically imperfect form of being."[31] Prometheus, though divine, is insufficient in and of himself, and seeks, by giving men fire, to accrue to himself the honor and power of other gods (namely Zeus). Despite all his striving, Prometheus attains only suffering and pain for attempting to "complete" himself through assisting man towards a higher sense of being.

A secondary aspect of the play is the suffering of Io, who through no fault of her own became the *amour* of Zeus, and is driven to distraction by jealous Hera's gadflies. Elsewhere in the play, even in Prometheus's most violent indictments of Zeus and his conduct, the language of the play remains measured and precise. When Io arrives on the scene, however, her speech is as strange as her appearance; just as the horns jut from her head, so the words Aeschylus writes for her seem to catapult from her mouth with unbearable urgency and woe. Io becomes, for the audience of the play, the most striking and moving example of the seemingly arbitrary suffering to which humankind is subject. Karl Jaspers points out that "Greek tragedy is a semi-ritual acting out of man's desperate struggle for knowledge of the gods, the meaning of existence, and the nature of justice," and Io's sufferings would seem to be the most poignant and direct statement of this quest for understanding.[32] Io's predicament is perhaps best summed up by Gilbert Murray, when he says that moral man "is at times shocked and bewildered by the behaviour of the external world. He is its slave, and it cares nothing for him: its values are not his values;

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[31] Kerényi, 78.

[32] Jaspers, 29.

and the more he thinks of the world as alive and acting by conscious quasi-human will, the more profoundly he is shocked."[33] Innocent Io, confronted firsthand with the evidence of a world that is seemingly working against her, cries out in frustration and despair (or shock, as Murray would have it):

> IO. Where are you bringing me, my far-wandering wanderings?
> Son of Kronos, what fault, what fault
> did you find in me that you should yoke me
> to a harness of misery like this,
> that you should torture me so to madness,
> driven in fear of the gadfly?
> …….
> ……. I cannot find
> a way to escape my troubles. (576-587)

Though initially hesitant, Prometheus utilizes his foresight to outline Io's traverses for her, even to the point of deep and desperate sorrow for the maid. Even Prometheus, Io's co-sufferant, asks "Again you cry out, again you lament? What then / will you do when you learn your other sufferings?" (742-743).

Some have chosen to understand Prometheus's and Io's indignation at Zeus's cruelty as demonstrating incomplete knowledge of Zeus's omniscient plan, essentially vindicating Zeus from any wrongdoing. Especially in light of Aeschylus's own track record of piety (Farnell names him as a "*par excellence* apostle of Zeus"), it seems unlikely that the playwright would so quickly and completely alter the tenor of his work. Many instead suggest that Prometheus, though understandably infuriated at his own condition, simply cannot see far enough to know that his and Io's sufferings are simply part of the god's great plan. Murray and Lloyd-Jones, among others, read Zeus as an

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[33] Gilbert Murray, *Aeschylus: Creator of Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 91.

inscrutable yet teachable god, one who understands the implications of what he does, yet is not immune to the possibility of mistakes. In this sense, Murray asks "[w]hat if Prometheus and Io herself are utterly mistaken, at any rate in their judgment of what seems like his worst action? . . . Even the things which [Zeus] is doing now are part of a long-distance plan, inscrutable by our mortal minds and therefore unjudgeable."[34] The still-evolving Zeus, as Lloyd-Jones would have it, is somehow to blame in some capacity, but not in the way that Prometheus and Io would seem to think.

The Tragedy of Existence

Prometheus Bound is a troublesome play to the modern reader, and it would not be surprising if it were to the ancients as well. The themes of suffering and injustice, though timeless, are strikingly displayed in one of Aeschylus's many masterpieces. The question is inevitable: why are we so interested in the Promethean myth? Why does this story seem to bear so much immediacy, even for modern readers? The answer seems to lie in the same identification with humans for which Prometheus was punished: Grene notes that "We are also alive in Prometheus's suffering, since it was his pity which gave man a stake in the game (man who sits in the audience) when the other God, Zeus, would have ended it with our obliteration."[35] Because we both identify with Prometheus (because he has identified himself with men), and because we understand that through Prometheus, man was given the very capacity of understanding, we are concerned with the outcome of this myth, as, in a sense, Prometheus's suffering is both one and many –

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[34] Murray, 109.

[35] David Grene, "Aeschylus: Myth, Religion, and Poetry," *History of Religions* 23, no. 1 (Aug. 1983): 6. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1062315 (accessed March 13, 2009).

he suffers individually for his actions, but his suffering is an archetype and model for the seemingly arbitrary suffering to which all humankind is subject.

H. D. F. Kitto is correct when he points out that *Prometheus Bound*, among other plays, is more akin to a "religious drama" focused upon the "divine background" of the tragic action, rather than a "secular drama," which turns its entire focus upon the Tragic Hero.[36] Though perhaps not as Kitto would choose to interpret "religious drama," *Prometheus Bound* does reflect the divine background—indeed, it is almost exclusively concerned with it—and raises important questions as to what makes the play tragic at all.

Søren Kierkegaard believed that human beings are caught up in a crushing tension between an individual's personal and communal self; in a sense each person is a "citizen of this world," but also of society and of the human race as a whole. The difference could also be understood as the dichotomy between the spiritual, or eternal, self, which "he faces . . . as if there were nothing in the entire universe but him and the spirit in himself," and the temporal self, which lives, breathes, suffers, and dies in the company of all other people.[37] Existence as we know it, is only possible in tension of these great opposing, yet equally true and correct, forces: "[e]xistence in society [or temporality] requires that man accept as real the sphere of social values and beliefs, rewards and punishments. But existence in the spirit [the eternal] . . . requires that man regard all social values and beliefs as pure deception, as vanity, as untrue, invalid, and unreal."[38] Since man is

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[36] H. D. F. Kitto, *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London: Methuen & Co., 1956), 231.

[37] Peter F. Drucker, "The Unfashionable Kierkegaard," in, *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 242.

[38] Ibid., 243.

fundamentally incapable of meeting the demands of both the temporal/social and eternal/spiritual simultaneously, tragedy lies in the great crush between two opposing laws or absolutes.

The same is, in a sense, applicable to Prometheus in the play at hand. The play itself makes a direct analogy difficult: the conditions of man torn between eternality and temporality are not necessarily those of a god; yet Prometheus, through aligning himself with humankind, elicits for himself man's troubles. Through so doing, Prometheus entangles himself in the non-space between two absolutes: obedience to Zeus at the cost of humanity's destruction, or disobedience at the price of incredible suffering. He is unable (or pointedly unwilling, or both) to give his full self toward one or the other, and instead suffers the consequences of trying to hold on to mutually exclusive loyalties. Prometheus's first words in the beginning of the play, when he calls upon nature to see his sufferings, are illustrative of his tragic predicament, and merit quoting at length:

> PROMETHEUS. ……I call upon you to see what I, a God, suffer
> at the hands of Gods—
> see with what kind of torture
> worn down I shall wrestle ten thousand
> years of time—
> ……..
> I groan for the present sorrow,
> I groan for the sorrow to come, I groan
> questioning when there shall come a time
> when he shall ordain a limit to my sufferings
> What am I saying? I have known all before,
> all that shall be, and clearly known; to me,
> nothing that hurts shall come with a new face. (91-102)

In this passage, in particular, Prometheus displays his own entrapment in his wavering. He is a god, crucified at the hands of other gods as a man-lover, and he is simultaneously

aware of and yet bewildered by his sufferings. It is almost as if his torment has blindsided him, both in its severity and its haste after the transgressive act, but he cannot remove himself from the comprehension that his status as a god brings. He is crushed between his temporal self as evidenced by his alignment with men, and his eternal self, reflected in his own immortality.

In these lines, as among others, we see the possibility of multiple understandings of the world and its order, something which plays prominently into the tragic approaches of many critics. Some, such as Murray, Lloyd-Jones, and Kitto, argue that the world Aeschylus represents in *Prometheus Bound* is not necessarily a world in disorder, but rather one that is evolving into a better, more comprehensible world. The "zone" of tragedy is, after all, transition.[39] It is possible, however, that the world represented in Greek tragedy (specifically, in this case, Aeschylean tragedy) is not necessarily evolving, but rather that the apparent incongruity is a result of the clashing of two (or more) mutually exclusive absolutes (much like Kierkegaard's eternal/temporal duality). Though disagreeing with Macneile Dixon, Kitto notes that in Dixon's view, "the philosopher wants a fully rational or explicable universe, but the tragic poets know that the Universe is not such, since it will suddenly knock a man down for no just reason. Sometimes, says Dixon, the 'tragic flaw' is in the Universe, and this is a possibility which the philosopher is reluctant to admit."[40] Though perhaps the Universe is not reason-less, as Dixon asserts, it is possible that it could operate on principles that are difficult to ascertain, and therefore

[39] Jaspers, 49.

[40] Kitto, 236.

may seem arbitrary to those suffering under their consequences. Prometheus is situated for what seems like no good reason, in the hinterlands between divinity and humanity—a duality which, for some, is in itself tragic. Additionally, Prometheus represents for the audience the inconsistency of justice, in that there is a possibility of two absolute rights in conflict and contrast with one another. An individual simply opposing authority for the sake of opposing authority is not tragic, but one who opposes authority, and is the "genuine exception" *is* tragic.[41] Scheler makes this point even more apparent when he asserts:

> [t]he tragic appears in objects only through the interplay of their inherent values. . . [and] is apparent only where the strength to destroy a higher positive value proceeds from an object possessing this positive value. . . Those tragedies most effectively portray the tragic phenomenon in which, not only is everyone in the right, but where each person and power in the struggle presents an equally superior right, or appears to fulfill an equally superior duty.[42]

Prometheus, as the "genuine exception" is thrown into a "value" conflict with Zeus, each of the gods pitting his interests and motives against the other. For the viewing or reading audience, the stakes are high since Prometheus represents, to some degree, the preservation of humanity. For this reason, among others, we feel Prometheus's subjection as tragic.

Conclusion

Prometheus Bound represents for us a tragedy which is largely independent of many of the strictures set out by Aristotle, and therefore subject to a unique

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[41] Jaspers, 47.

[42] Max Scheler, "On the Tragic," in *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*, eds. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 30-31.

understanding of what circumstances and actions have the capacity to truly create and sustain tragedy. At the end of the play, nothing is resolved; on the contrary, Prometheus is cataclysmically cast into the depths of Tartarus, pleading earnestly with the natural world to see his suffering: "O Holy mother mine, / O Sky that circling brings the light to all, / you see me, how I suffer, how unjustly" (1090-1093). *Moira* is still upset, and *Dikê* has not yet restored order.[43] Though these are problems supposedly solved in the two succeeding plays, *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus Fire-Bringer*, they do not lose their power and magnificence in this moving tragedy of opposing forces, each somehow in the right and yet coming into terrifying conflict.

Only increasing the depth of the tensions, Prometheus is shown to the audience as aligning himself not only with the interests of man, but with the characteristics of him as well. Though Prometheus is one of the clashing divine forces, he also undergoes suffering as a man would, but is forced to endure it for thousands upon thousands of years. Suspended between divine and human characteristics, Prometheus, though still representing a force against Zeus, comes to the conflict as with a handicap, a limp. Brutally chained and crucified to the rock, Prometheus uses his best weapon against Zeus: his knowledge of the future, or the return of *moira* through the feats of Heracles.

Karl Jaspers makes an important distinction in *Tragedy Is Not Enough*:

> Tragedy is distinct from misfortune, suffering, and destruction, from sickness or death, and from evil. It is so distinct by virtue of the nature of its knowledge; this knowledge is general, not special; it is question, not acceptance—accusation, not lament. Tragic knowledge is further distinct by virtue of the close connection

[43] Murray, 83.

> between truth and catastrophe: tragedy grows more intense as the clashing forces increase in scale and as the necessity of their conflict deepens.[44]

Prometheus and Zeus, and to a lesser degree, Zeus and Io, are all in conflict with one another, but it is not simply their suffering which makes Prometheus's and Io's situations tragic. Rather, it is their recognition of their suffering as connoting injustice, and then accusing Zeus (though both simultaneously voice their laments at their suffering) in order that justice may be restored to its proper balance. Prometheus, in particular, acts on behalf of both himself and man, escalating the conflict to cosmic proportions, while at the same time making it critically meaningful to the human beings which he so seeks to protect from Zeus's wrath.

Tragedy, in this case particularly Greek tragedy, cannot create a full and complete understanding of the world and its functions. Suffering still occurs, and "misery—hopeless, meaningless, heart-rending, destitute, and helpless misery—cries out for help."[45] The world which appears so fickle and flighty is left to the philosopher and the scientist to systematize, though not even Aristotle, that most quintessential of philosophers, was able to create a full and representative account of the mystery of existential suffering represented by tragedy. [46] Perhaps it is because the philosophers are fundamentally limited to the cerebral, and tragedy deals not only with the mind, but as de Unamuno would have it, "the man of flesh and bone."[47] Tragedy cannot be understood simply through a neat critical system; it must be felt, and felt to be true. The poets, like

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[44] Jaspers, 98.

[45] Ibid., 100.

[46] Ibid., 99.

[47] de Unamuno, 4.

Aeschylus, are given the task of assigning meaning to suffering, and though they may not be able to completely answer for it—Aeschylus certainly does not give a complete apology of suffering in *Prometheus Bound*—they are able to give us means by which to process the emotions that are so entangled with suffering and come out at the end seeing the clearer for it.

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