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Ideology and Mythopoeia in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*

and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*

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IN THE NAME OF GOD

Dedication

To my mother

Acknowledgement

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Abstract

From the moment of its genesis in *Prometheus Bound* and *Prometheus Unbound*, the myth of Prometheus has been subject to a range of problematically humanist interpretations which lay all the credit of the plays on Prometheus himself. Due to their focus on the individual, such approaches tend to ignore the non-individual and ideological agents that could have contributed to the rise of the myth in two separate historical eras. This research seeks to balance the mutual relation of the individual and the whole in the literary production by probing into the interaction of history and literature. Hence, the influence the dominant ideology may exert on literary production in general and on the process of the creation of myths, mythopoeia, in particular is of significance here. The role of each writer's personal system of thought in different periods is also regarded necessary in the evaluation of the works. Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism and his key terms (e.g. world vision) which take into consideration the impact of historical structures on literary production provide a theoretical framework for this thesis. The call for equality and freedom in Ancient Greece and 19th century Europe which led to social and economic upheavals denotes a common symptom in the rise of Prometheus in the dramatic literature of the time. The socio-historical spirit of both ages are marked by the emergence of middle classes, the poor's demand of land redistribution, reform acts, economic mobility, etc. The unfulfilled conclusion of some of these movements and their relation with the boundness of conservative Aeschylus' Prometheus and unboundness of radical Shelley's creation are also important in reconsidering the plays.

Key Terms: Genetic Structuralism, Goldmann, World Vision, Mythopoeia, Ideology.

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1 Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 General Back ground

Born in 525/4 BC, Greece, Aeschylus was “the premier tragic dramatist in Athens, and was victorious almost every time he competed” (Sommerstein 33). Aristophanes addresses him as “the first to build the towering words of tragedy” (Storey and Allan 93). He is the advocate of democracy, communal life and the polis (Sommerstein 40). “All his surviving genuine works have strong political aspects” (Sommerstein 40). His plays include *The Persians*, *Seven against Thebes*, *The Suppliant Maidens*, *Oresteia* (trilogy), and *Prometheus Bound*. Aeschylus died in 456/5 BC.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792, Sussex, England, “to a conservative aristocratic family” (Bloom, *Bloom’s Major Poets* 11). From his youth, “it was Shelley’s aspiration to break with the past, and belong, as he conceived it, wholly to the present or the future” (Dowden 24). His major works are “Ozymandias,” “To a Skylark,” “Ode to the West Wind,” “Adonais,” *The Revolt of Islam*, *Queen Mab*, *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley was drowned in 1822.

Prometheus Bound depicts the revolt of Prometheus against supreme Zeus. Prometheus steals fire from gods and furnishes it to man to prevent man’s destruction. Consequently, he becomes subject to exhaustive tortures. Symbolically, Prometheus furnishes to mortal man “the arts of civilization” (Oates and O’Neill, Jr. 125). He teaches “men many useful skills, including architecture, agriculture, writing, medicine, the domestication of animals, the use of ships, mining for metals, and divination” (March 665).

Similar to Aeschylus’ play, *Prometheus Unbound* is the story of Prometheus’ rebellion against Jupiter and his theft of fire. Prometheus is doomed to excessive tortures in the play. Although he is under the most agonizing physical and mental torments, Prometheus never

abandons his resistance. What distinguishes Shelley's work from that of Aeschylus is the final downfall of Jupiter and the release of Prometheus at the end of his play.

1.2 The Argument

Prometheus, due to his heroic resistance against tyranny, has appealed to socialist, humanist critics. These interpreters have centered a humanist essence on the figure with respect to the services he has granted to mortal man. This section, by evading such approach toward the myth, surveys the historical facts that are considered significant in establishing links between the contemporaneous historical structures and their reverberations in the works.

Carol Dougherty, in her book on the history of the artistic creation of Prometheus, observes that the communist nature of Prometheus' revolution has already been acknowledged by Leszek Kolakowski (Dougherty 132-4). For instance, in his 1841 doctoral dissertation, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, Marx salutes Prometheus as the "the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar" (Marx, *Karl Marx Internet Archive*). The Promethean doctrine allures Marx for whom, at the time, the essence of man (the maker of history) is freedom and reason (Althusser, *For Marx* 224). Such an "Enlightenment Philosophy," as Althusser brings into focus in "Marxism and Humanism," is simultaneous with his interest in public theoretical criticism (e.g. freedom of the press) (Althusser, *For Marx* 224-5). In other words, his motto on the figure dates back to his career as a journalist in *Rheinische Zeitung*. Similarly, all philanthropic readers of the myth would agree with Marx in other cases. But have not this instance and other similar humanistic approaches delayed a critical understanding of the myth with due regard for the external, historical factors that could have contributed to its genesis?

The researcher wishes to show that it is feasible to review the historical similarities and contradictions of two eras and their ideological structures that could have caused the birth of

a common myth as a literary production. These circumstances are social, political and economic in nature. The two periods witness the decline in common, public interests and the rise of individual privileges as a consequence of social upheavals and diversifications. In fact, as the researcher will claim, these eras are marked by a division of monopoly in various aspects of life, with symptoms of liberalism and anarchy¹.

The periods in which the works in question are created witness the development of the concept of individual. “In the jaded Alexandrian age . . . the spirit of scientific inquiry, the disintegration of a common faith, the antagonism of the creeds, the rise of philosophical asceticism, enforced an individualism . . .” (Smyth 53). The priority of individual over the communal whole went to the extent which ruined the Greek culture. Bryant links “the ‘collapse’ of the polis with Hellenistic moral philosophy that focused on individual, rather than communal, Greek experience (Roisman 1791).

Without doubt, there is a relation between the abundance of tyrants in 4th century BC and the oppressive presence of Zeus. “Tyrants crop up in cities large and small throughout our narrative histories of the fifth and fourth centuries” (Osborne 61). But interestingly, they paved the way for freedom. Without Zeus the libertarian rise of Prometheus is immature. Such replacement is common in the history of governance. C. A. Robinson believes that “in earlier societies, before the various political possibilities were known, monarchy, or one-man rule, was often a necessary step on the road to democracy. This was true of ancient Greece, although the point is generally missed” (C. A. Robinson 68). These tyrants needed a large body of slaves to balance the social structure. “It is generally agreed that . . . fifth- and fourth-

¹ “The Prometheus Unbound reasserts Godwin’s principle of the extinction of government and law” (Hancock 72).

century classical Athens was indeed a slave society” (Cartledge 159). And as Aristotle says, “the poor were enslaved to the rich” (Kyrtatas 143).

The bodies of slaves were considered a political apparatus in the hand of their masters. Thus, their productive essence does not guarantee only the financial necessities of the rich citizens. “The visible polis constituted by the male citizens rested on an invisible and politically inarticulate body of slaves condemned to labor in private so that their masters might be free to devote time and effort to speech and action in public” (Rahe 271). This type of social structure necessitated a taste for suppression for anyone who wished to climb the social hierarchy. Tyrants own their position “to a large extent to a financial or commercial supremacy which they had already established before they attained to supreme political power in their several states” (Ure 2). Like 18th century prerevolutionary era, “there is evidence, not only from Athens, that land was being leased on a rather large scale . . . and rent was certainly a way for extracting surplus production” (Kyrtatas 152). Thus, the economic considerations of the time “might approximate, more nearly, to those of a capitalist entrepreneur of our day, *mutatis mutandis*” (Cartledge 160-1).

Nevertheless, Periclean Greece is an age of social and political mobility in which the rising proponents of democracy fought against aristocracy. The poor’s revolutionary expectations, such as redistribution of land or abolishment of debts, were “regarded by the ancient Greeks as a political demand” (Kyrtatas 143). This fact intensified social tensions and caused the need for reform. “The aristocrats or oligarchs . . . fiercely resisted the rise to power of the common people This situation led to the formation of political parties which constantly vied with one another for political domination.” And in these parties, “it can frequently be detected . . . an unbridled craving for personal profit and success” (Chroust 287).

But the reforms at the time led to contradictory ends; “the lofty ideals of liberty advertised in [Pericles’ funeral] speech were achieved at the cost of systematic oppression” (Osborne 101). Aristotle “puts most emphasis on tyrants coming to power on the back of popular support, either directly to replace earlier kings or to replace oligarchies . . . (Osborne 62). Tyranny is usually established in a state that has been formerly a republic (Greenhalgh 191). Will not Promethean revolution face the same fate? Prometheus may provide man with the instruments man needs to pursue his personal happiness, making the humanist critic undervalue the fact that once “more men of the city are armed, there is more chance of a single charismatic leader exploiting their discontent in order to put himself in charge” (Osborne 64)².

The society of Solon’s time exemplifies the aforementioned situation. “Solon’s poetry repeatedly stresses his position in the middle of two opposed factions: he is perhaps the first man in western history to boast of finding the third way” (Osborne 66). Nevertheless, the system of governance he utilized is considered a turning point in the Greek path to democracy. His “strength lay in insisting very firmly on restoring minimum conditions of livelihood to the poor, without thereby undermining the distinction between the poor and the rich.” This could have facilitated an economic mobility. “The Solonian classes have often been taken to be the crucial point at which wealth replaced birth as the criterion for access to political power . . .” (Osborne 67). Greek democracy was not as successful in practice, “none of these actions attacked any causes of poverty” (Osborne 68). In fact, “Solon failed to eradicate the chief cause of dissatisfaction at Athens” (C. A. Robinson 71). He “declined at

² Even Shelley is not immune to such misunderstanding: “In ancient Greece he recognized “the mother of the free;” forgetful of the fact that the Greek republics were a congeries of slave states, in which the taste and intellect of a close aristocracy were sustained by the toil and anguish of its myriad victims” (Dowden 373).

least formally to implement” the revolutionary demand of the poor to redistribute the (privately held) land (Cartledge 162).

Prometheus is not a slave but he serves slaves most graciously by performing what they cannot afford. “Slaves, however, are very seldom inventive, and all the most important improvements either in machinery or in the arrangement and distribution of work which facilitate or abridge labour, have been the discoveries of freemen” (Smith 442). He becomes the hero of this age by adopting craft against Zeus. The “Greeks not only acknowledged craft as a valid leadership quality, they often extolled this quality more highly than others because of its effectiveness” (Sarachek 42). “In Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, the hero states that his brother Titans failed to prevent Zeus from becoming ruler of the gods because they ignored Prometheus’ advice to employ crafty schemes rather than brute force” (Sarachek 42). In *Prometheus Bound*, craft, as the opposite of openness and straightforwardness, is superior over valor (Sarachek 42), which is attributed to Zeus and his generation. As the researcher believes, physical dominance is replaced by craft in promethean age; thus fire, which is tied to the concept of craft, acquires significance. Fire is “the master craftsman” (9) (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 307), it is “the teacher of all arts to men” (122) (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 310). The knowledge of things is prior to their physical possession after Prometheus.

Through his futuristic vision, Prometheus feels the necessity of the rise of such ideological age. Prometheus states that Zeus “shall have need of me” 180 (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 311). Only Time can make his prophecies come true. “Time shall teach him [Zeus], gray time, / that teaches all things” 1087-1088 (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 332). This priority advances his position in the competition with Zeus. Zeus is not superior in this sense because he “cannot shun what is foredoomed” 560 (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 320); he lacks Prometheus’ power of foreknowing. Prometheus is the one who taught men “The ways of divination” 521 (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 319). “This is my proof to you

my kind can see / farther than meets the eye. / from here the tale I tell is for you all, / and of the future leaving now the past” 925-928 (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 328).

Prometheus perishes since his, and Zeus', reactions show no sign of agreement. It is noteworthy that in ancient Greece, “Political change was in the direction of radicalism: it meant the substitution of one set of dominant ideas for another set of dominant ideas; for the Greeks did not, like the Romans, comprehend the virtue of concession that assumes the form of compromise” (Smyth 51). On the other hand, “In principle and to a substantial degree in practice, the body of citizens was homogenous” (Rahe 268). Furthermore, classical Greek thought emphasized the fixed innateness of human nature (Sarachek 47) and “no Greek thinker . . . ever elaborated a public-spirited political philosophy grounded in liberal principles” (Rahe 286). That is why, different from the 19th century romantic cry of freedom, Prometheus' vision is not fulfilled here and cannot supersede the lingering might of Zeus.

As the researcher wishes to show, Aeschylus' background is of considerable interest in comparison with Shelley's. Each context leads to a different post-promethean life. Romanticism which is in itself a reaction to the new coming historical changes which are essentially economic: industrialization, colonization, urbanization, modernization, and slavery. Shelley and his Prometheus are born within this reactionary spirit from which the thought of liberty flourishes. The world Shelley experienced in his lifetime witnessed a “wave of revolutions that brought down monarchical regimes across much of the Continent” (Hilton 2).

Similar to their Greek counterparts, the rich, in 18th century England, “deprived labourers of common or shared-use rights;” “agriculture was a sphere in which most of the benefits accrued to the landowners, few to the tenant farmers, and none whatever to the labourers and consumers” (Hilton 9); in this regard, “status could be won through the patient accumulation of wealth (Hilton 3). “This accumulation of profits ahead of population led in the mid-

eighteenth century to surplus wages, increased consumption, upward social mobility, and emulation” (Hilton 4).

The situation caused a series of social conflicts all over Europe which is epitomized in French Revolution. The revolution was “mainly economic” (Sait 333). In France, peasant, under heavy taxation, were uneasy with manorial rights; they only owned “one-fourth or one-third of the mostly sterile land” (Sait 333). It is noteworthy that similar to in ancient Greece, the “rich no doubt occupied the best land and the more modest landowners and the poor would then have had to work mostly the poorer land that required terracing and trenching for maintenance” (Jameson 169).

Thus, social dissatisfaction spread the need for a promethean reform among intellectuals. At the time,

All the works of the so-called "philosophes" tend to destroy absolutist doctrine, the belief in a mystically derived, intangible authority Another revolutionary element in the method of the French thinkers of the eighteenth century was their disregard of tradition, their claim to base themselves on reason, observation and history, and their scientific spirit. The State was no longer confounded with the person of the sovereign, and he ceased to be considered as an end in himself” (See 9).

Before it came to the level of action, the revolution belonged to the domain of idea. “The special quality of the French Revolution, compared with other revolutionary movements in France or other countries, obviously lies in the titanic proportions of this upheaval but also in an ardent passion for thought, for embodying ideas in deeds, and for proposing universal laws” (Peyre 71). Thanks to Promethean energy, “After 1805-1806 the idea of the nation got a deeper grip on individuals and social groups; it lost its merely academic meaning and acquired something of the character of a political necessity” (Briefs 279). And since they had

good reasons for the change in social order, the revolutionary doctrine spread more specially among the bourgeoisie (See 10).

Never the less, liberty, the maxim of revolution, became subject to several interpretations. There were right-wing liberals who affected “to be concerned with freedom generally, but it turns out to be the freedom of only a few business men that they are worried about and not the freedom of those they exploit or those constrained by the enforcement of their property rights” (Waldron 129). The individualist aspirations of the time altered the definition of freedom in accord with the dominant ideology which was concerned with the rise of middle-class. “To talk about my freedom, on the liberal view, is to talk about the role I play in the determination of my actions, where 'I' is understood in the sense of what it is now like to be me; it is not to talk about the thought or decision-making of an entity cleansed of the "false consciousness" that characterizes my present experiences and desires” (Waldron 132). In this sense, “freedom is here only a desire to maintain one's character, to uphold one's own opinions, one's activities, one's attitude, one's total form of life against others” (Briefs 282).

The unfulfilled demands of Greek peasants echoed in history again; “the French people was its own worst enemy, and had simply replaced the despotic and arbitrary methods of the king's officials by those of its own elected representatives” (Ware 360-361). The Consulate had not been designed as a dictatorship, but it soon evolved in that direction . . .” (Woloch 5). “The Revolution is thus the decisive engagement in a class struggle in which, at a crucial moment, the bourgeoisie is able to mobilize the support of the masses in order to achieve victory” (Doyle 744). In this sense, the economic harvest of revolution was confiscated by the middle-class. “The creation of a vast national debt had produced a second aristocracy beside the aristocracy of birth — an aristocracy of moneyed worldlings, subsisting on the taxes of the nation, and lacking the chivalric virtues of the elder aristocracy” (Dowden 376).

As it was mentioned, it is not possible to understand the real conditions of any revolution without considering its infrastructural elements. Similarly it is not feasible to regard Prometheus as a hero apart from the contextual whole he has come from. Prometheus is not the sole mythological sufferer in the classical literature; there are Atlas and Sisyphus. But it is Prometheus who can inspire the hearts of men for centuries to long for liberty. Zeus/Jupiter owned the victim's body; Prometheus wins his soul. Sisyphus pushes the heavy stone, Atlas bears the heavy earth; Prometheus enjoys the tranquil cave and Asia's embrace.

1.3 Objectives and Significance of the Study

1.3.1 Hypothesis

As it was mentioned most interpretations of the myth have emphasized on the significance of Prometheus' character. These approaches have based their judgment on the gifts Prometheus has furnished to man. This section, on the other hand, wishes to focus on the parallel historical facts which could correspond to homologous elements in the works and are significant in the process of myth-making. The researcher wishes to reconsider the former interpretations of the myth that sought constantly to view the myth solely as heroic and humanist ignoring its contemporaneous historical structures; in other words, this research seeks to view the myth, the "towering Prometheus who has so influenced the modern western imagination" (Herington 646), the "touching and noble image of the Rebel and . . . the most perfect myth of the intelligence in revolt" (Camus 26), without sympathy. This is possible through an all-embracing approach which considers not only the internal aspects of the authors' mind but also his external existence. This tendency would not separate Prometheus, as a literary creation, from the historical whole within which it is conceived. As Lucien Goldmann believes, the understating of a work of art is "beyond the range of both purely literary studies and those oriented toward the writer's conscious intentions or hidden motives.

Categorical structures can be found only through sociological investigation” (Goldmann, “The Theatre of Genet” 52).

Lucien Goldmann maintains that, the “true starting-point” seems “to be the epistemological question of the whole and the parts,” (Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant* 65) and, of course, their interaction. For Goldmann, Kant is “the first modern thinker to recognize anew the importance of the totality as a fundamental category of existence, or at least to recognize its problematic character” (Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant* 36). “Kant, Hegel, Lukács, and Lask, according to Goldmann, all perceived an important flaw in modern thought: its inability to unite the general and the individual” (Cohen 123).

In line with that, the traditionally pseudo-Marxist separation of infrastructure and superstructure is a misjudgment either. It is “ironic to remember that the force of Marx’s original criticism had been mainly directed against the separation of 'areas' of thought and activity (as in the separation of consciousness from material production)” (Williams 78). However, Lucien Goldmann’s thought helpfully evades this shortcoming regarding the artistic creation. He holds that,

The relationship between the structure of day-to-day consciousness and the organization of the artist’s imagination—in works that can be most easily studied—is more or less rigorously homologous No longer is there anything contradictory in asserting that a literary work is closely linked to social and historical reality as well as to the most powerful creative imagination. (Goldmann, “The Theatre of Genet” 51)

The separatist, had he occupied himself solely with Shelley’s philosophical prose and poetry, would tend to deal only with the ideal and the individual without considering the role of socio-historical structures. Nevertheless,

Individual experience is too brief and limited to create such structures. They can be produced only within a social group. Individuals within groups experience together a set of problems for which they seek solutions. In other words, mental structures—or, abstractly, meaningful categorical structures—are not individual but social phenomena. (Goldmann, “The Theatre of Genet” 51)

Libertarian claims are as much unsafe at the hand of individual. Goldmann believes “that liberal values, such as individual freedom, tolerance, and equality before the law were historical products of the emergence of market societies” (Cohen 10). The apolitical, individualist nature of liberty is not honest as it seems. As Benjamin Constant states in “The Liberty of the Ancients and the Moderns”, the “danger of modern liberty is that, absorbed in the enjoyment of our private independence, and in the pursuit of our particular interests, we should surrender our right to share in political power too easily” (Constant 81). It is not surprisingly that Goldmann’s master declared that “the more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 84).

It is believed that Lucien Goldmann “presents the story of capitalism as first the triumph of individualism over any notion of the social whole” (Cohen 191). On the other hand, as he puts forward in *In Human Sciences and Philosophy*, “For dialectical materialism, there is no supra-individual consciousness. Collective consciousness, class consciousness, for example, is only the totality of states of individual consciousnesses and their tendencies resulting from the mutual influence of humans upon each other and their effects on nature” (Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy* 127).

Just as the part cannot be separated from its whole, the superstructure cannot be detached from infrastructure. The superstructure, as an ideological domain, plays a significant role in man’s development. In his unfinished work *Lukács et Heidegger*, Goldman states that,

men are just as limited by their mental structures which result from those conditions and are to be found in them. However, these conditions and those mental structures don't only place limits on men, they equally create for them a field of possibilities within which they act and modify reality, all while being modified themselves; consequently, they change their field of possibilities. (Cohen 225)

Thus, a balance must be maintained between internal and external condition of the writer. Goldman is "right in emphasizing the light which can be thrown on a text by a study of the social context in which it was written" (Melchert 127). He believes that a "genuinely great thinker is one who achieves the maximum possible truth starting from the interests and social situation of some particular group, and who succeeds in formulating it in such a way as to endow it with real scope and effectiveness" (Goldman, *Immanuel Kant* 31). A proper way to understand the author, its age and the dominant ideology, it is inferred from Goldman's work, is to trace the presence of ruling world-views in his work.

Goldman defines group consciousness as,

the tendency common to the feelings, aspirations and ideas of the members of a particular social class; a tendency which is developed as a result of a particular social and economic situation, and which then gives rise to a set of activities performed by the real or potential community constituted by this social class. (Goldman, *The Hidden God* 18)

The class consciousness is in turn,

neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class. And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness and not by the thought of the individual—and these actions can be understood only by reference to this consciousness. (Lukács 51)