

Interpretation

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Interpretation

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Inquiries: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Freedom and Constraints in *Prometheus Bound*

KENNETH DORTER

University of Guelph

“Cypris, you are no god. You are something stronger than a god if that can be”
—Euripides.¹

When we think of Prometheus, stretched out above us, his arms spread apart and nailed down, a gaping wound in his side, it is hard not to think of this god, who sacrificed himself to save humankind from divine punishment, in terms that are alien to Aeschylus’ conception. Every age has reinterpreted the myth in accordance with its own values, a renewal that is not only inevitable but—in accordance with the implications of Aeschylus’ treatment of the story—demanded by the implications of the myth itself.² Nevertheless, this has the disadvantage that Aeschylus’ own penetrating account is not read carefully enough.

Later ages treat the myth as simple allegory, the terms of which are constantly rewritten: martyrdom versus tyranny, enlightenment versus ignorance, the heroic creative individual versus paternalistic conformity. Today we might easily treat it ironically. The *techne* given to us for our survival becomes the eventual instrument of our technological self-destruction: Zeus merely turns Prometheus’ treachery into “the cunning of reason”; Prometheus’ gift converges with Zeus’ counter-gift of Pandora. None of these uses of the myth as a cultural archetype is inappropriate. But the ease by which we make the story into a symbol of what we already know closes our ears to Aeschylus’ voice and our minds to the subtlety and insight of his thought. In Aeschylus’ hands the myth is less about the relationship between oppression and heroism than about the relationship between will and nature, less about domination and resistance than about freedom and fate. The details of his play have more to teach us than the seductive simplicity of its archetypes.

In the middle of the play the following exchange occurs:

PROMETHEUS: Craft is far weaker than necessity.

CHORUS: Who then is the steersman of necessity?

PROMETHEUS: The triple-formed Fates and the remembering Furies.

CHORUS: Is Zeus weaker than these?

PROMETHEUS: Yes, for he, too, cannot escape what is fated. (514–18)

This notion of necessity and fate is rarely mentioned in reflections on Prometheus. It is not a *deus ex machina*, but rather the key to Aeschylus’ un-

derstanding of the relationship between Prometheus and Zeus. Ultimately the meaning of their antagonism points beyond themselves and beyond human beings.

I

Unnoticed beside the portrayal of Zeus as cruel and tyrannical is the fact that in less obvious ways Prometheus too is portrayed in a not entirely flattering light. In the case of Zeus the negativity is straightforward. Gone is the story of Epimetheus' slow-witted bungling which neglected to reserve any instrument of survival for humankind. Gone too is the deception by which Prometheus tricked Zeus into choosing bones and fat instead of meat as the sacrificial portion of the gods, and thereby infuriated Zeus against humanity.³ Instead of bungling and humiliation we are given a deliberately murderous Zeus:

As soon as he ascended to the throne that was his father's, straightaway he assigned to the several gods their several privileges and portioned out the power, but to the unhappy breed of mankind he gave no heed, intending to blot the race out and create a new. (230–35)

On the most obvious level it may have been Aeschylus' intention to reflect on the rule of Pisistratus, who was tyrant from 561–527, two years before Aeschylus' birth—or, more likely, that of his son Hippias who continued the tyranny for the next sixteen years—but Aeschylus gives the theme a universality that makes its immediate referent comparatively unimportant.

The negative elements in the characterization of Prometheus, on the other hand, are not only less straightforward, but are easier to miss because our sympathy for his situation leads us to look at him less critically than he may deserve. In Aeschylus' presentation he is no mere victim or martyr. That quality is not absent, to be sure, as the chorus' response to his courage witnesses. In the central choral ode immediately preceding the entrance of Io, they rebuke him for his foolhardy defiance of Zeus and sing of the importance of honoring Zeus' rule (526–60). After Io's departure they again counsel obedience, saying, "Wise are the worshippers of Adrasteia" (936). But immediately after this Hermes arrives, and the chorus, after watching Prometheus stand up to Hermes' threats in the name of Zeus, abandon their prudent docility. When Hermes sends them away for their own safety they reply, with their final speech: "How can you bid us practice baseness? We will bear along with him what we must bear. I have learned to hate all traitors: there is no disease I spit on more than treachery" (1063–70).

But if martyrdom is an element in Prometheus' character, it is woven together with less attractive traits. When Hermes says to him, "No one could bear you in success" (979), we might be inclined to dismiss this as the prejudiced

view of an enemy. But the sentiment was already anticipated by his friend and would-be ally, Oceanus: “this is what you pay, Prometheus, for that tongue of yours which talked so high and haughty” (320–21). It is easy enough to judge for ourselves, since Aeschylus gives us ample evidence. We might set aside, as understandable in the circumstances, Prometheus’ insulting manner toward Hermes, when at the end of the play the latter arrives to convey Zeus’ threats, and complains that “You mock me like a child” (985). But his treatment of Hermes is only an extreme form of his treatment of others generally.

Wherever he himself has power over others he lords it over them. With his cousins, the Oceanids, he is at least cordial, but it is always clear that he is the star and they his audience. His very powerlessness, and their answering pity, is used as a means of holding sway over them. They come in answer to his opening words: “Bright light and swift-winged winds, springs of the rivers, numberless, laughter of the sea’s waves, earth, mother of all, and the all-seeing circle of the sun: I call upon you to see what I, a god, suffer at the hands of gods” (88–92). After the Oceanids arrive and, having heard his story, express their sorrow for him, he advises: “But do not sorrow for my present suffering; alight on earth and hear what is to come, that you may know the whole complete: I beg you alight and join your sorrow with mine” (273–77). Their relationship will consist primarily of Prometheus’ explanations and complaints and the Oceanids’ sympathy and praise. When the Oceanids say, “My heart is pained,” Prometheus replies, “Yes, to my friends I am pitiable to see” (247–78). His final words, like his opening ones, are: “O Sky that circling brings the light to all, you see me, how I suffer, how unjustly” (1092–93). The tactic of working on his visitors’ pity is deliberate, Aeschylus shows us. He has Prometheus advise Io, “To make wail and lament for one’s ill fortune, when one will win a tear from the audience is well worthwhile” (637–79). In the absence of power, he uses his weakness to control his relationship with his cousins.

The one character in the play toward whom he is in a formally subordinate position, the well-meaning Oceanus, who is his paternal grandfather and maternal uncle,⁴ he will not allow to be present. Oceanus’ first words are:

I come on a long journey . . . to visit you . . . My heart is sore for your misfortunes; you know that. I think that it is kinship makes me feel them so. Besides, apart from kinship, there is no one I hold in higher estimation. . . . Tell me how I can help you, and you will never say that you have any friend more loyal to you than Oceanus. (286–99)

It is a touching speech, but it puts Prometheus in his debt, and Prometheus replies with anger:

What do I see? Have you, too, come to gape
in wonder at this great display, my torture?
. . . Was it to feast your eyes upon

the spectacle of my suffering and join
in pity for my pain? (300–305)

I envy you, that you stand clear of blame,
and yet shared and dared in everything with me! (332–33)

In fact Oceanus has no intention of standing clear of danger, but wants to intercede with Zeus on Prometheus' behalf. Prometheus will not allow it, however:

OCEANUS: Tell me, what danger do you see for me in loyalty to you, and courage therein?

PROMETHEUS: I see only useless effort and a silly good nature.

OCEANUS: Suffer me then to be sick of this sickness, for it is a profitable thing, if one is wise, to seem foolish.

PROMETHEUS: This shall seem to be my fault.

OCEANUS: Clearly your words send me home again.

PROMETHEUS: Yes, lest your doings for me bring you enmity. (383–90)

This last speech puts Prometheus' behavior in a nobler light, but we must question the purity of the sentiment, for he expresses no such worries for Oceanus' daughters. When he invites them to join him he already knows the torments that will thereby be inflicted on them at the end of the play—"I have known all before exactly (*skethrōs*), all that shall be" (101–2). His first words to Oceanus showed an annoyance which he only gradually tames into the appearance of solicitude. By sending him away for his own safety, Prometheus manages to transform Oceanus' generosity toward him into a generosity of his own toward Oceanus, a reversal of his position of subordination into one of superiority.

If he dominates the Oceanids through pity and rises above Oceanus by an inversion of generosity, his condescension shows its unadulterated form in his relationship to Io, the one figure in the play who is his complete inferior. He vaunts his superiority over her in at least three ways. First, by teasing her (and the chorus of Oceanids) into begging him for information about himself and about her fate. He will later admit that he welcomes such questions: "If anything of this is still obscure or difficult ask me again and learn clearly: I have more leisure than I wish" (816–18). But when Io asks why he is being punished he becomes coy and hesitant:

PROMETHEUS: I have just this moment ceased from the lamentable tale of my sorrows.

IO: Will you then grant me this favor?

PROMETHEUS: Say what you are asking for: I will tell you all.

IO: Tell who it was that nailed you to the cliff.

PROMETHEUS: The plan was the plan of Zeus, and the hand the hand of Hephaestos.

IO: And what was the offense of which this is the punishment?

PROMETHEUS: It is enough that I have told you a clear story so far.

IO: In addition, then, indicate to me what date shall be the limit of my wanderings.

PROMETHEUS: Better for you not to know this than know it.

IO: I beg you, do not hide from me what I must endure.

PROMETHEUS: It is not that I grudge you this favor.

IO: Why then delay to tell me all?

PROMETHEUS: It is no grudging, but I hesitate to break your spirit.

IO: Do not have more thought for me than pleases me myself.

PROMETHEUS: Since you are so eager, I must speak . . . (613–30)

IO: Your prophesy has now passed the limits of understanding.

PROMETHEUS: Then also do not seek to learn your trials.

IO: Do not offer me a boon and then withhold it.

PROMETHEUS: I offer you then one of two stories. . . . Choose that I tell you clearly either what remains for you or the one that shall deliver me.

CHORUS: Grant her one and grant me the other

PROMETHEUS: Since you have so much eagerness I will not refuse . . . (775–86)

The disingenuous disclaimer, that he cannot bring himself to tell Io what awaits her lest he break her spirit, would itself be enough to break one's spirit—like a fortune teller who gasps in horror at her crystal ball and says, "I'd better not tell you this; I don't want to upset you." In fact Prometheus takes evident delight in encouraging and savoring Io's terror at what awaits her. "You groan too soon," he tells the chorus with regard to Io's fate, "you are full of fear too soon: wait till you hear besides what is to be" (696–97). And to Io herself: "Are you crying and lamenting: what will you do when you hear of the evils to come?" (743–44).

Third, not only does he seem to enjoy and encourage her anguish, but he denies her the sympathy which he himself so openly values, and which he had himself encouraged her to solicit (637–39). When she takes his advice, and wails and laments that she might as well throw herself from a cliff if the future holds such suffering for her, she has reason to expect some sympathy from him. What he says to her is, "You would ill bear my trials, then, for whom fate reserves no death" (752–53).

II

Why is Prometheus portrayed so ambiguously? On one hand as humanity's benefactor, martyred by the tyrant who would have destroyed us. On the other, ungracious toward his seniors, shamelessly self-pitying before his peers, insensitive and condescending toward the helpless? One reason (another will be suggested later) is that the characterization discourages us from viewing him simply and exclusively as a martyr, or as "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the

best and noblest ends” (Shelley, Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*). Prometheus’ arrogance suggests to us not merely a victim of injustice, but a *regal* victim of injustice, one who sees himself as the equal of any king and who can “hold court” in even the most adverse circumstances. The play depicts a contest between near-equals which will end, not with Zeus’ overthrow but nevertheless with his compromise.

Prometheus’ near-equality with Zeus lies not merely in his secret knowledge of Zeus’ vulnerability, but in a range of forces which Prometheus represents, opposite in kind to those controlled by Zeus. The polarity is signalled in the first scene. Prometheus “gave honors to man beyond what was just [*pera dikēs*]”, remarks Hephaestus at line 30. But a little later he adds, “No one, save Prometheus, can justly [*endikōs*] blame me” (63). There is an implicit contrast between rival standards of justice. Each will be seen to have a different basis. Unlike the *Oresteia*, however, the contrast will not be between folk and civic justice, but between justice grounded in nature and justice imposed by force.

Prometheus’ opening words invoked the elements—*aether*, air, water, earth, fire: “Bright light [*aithēr*] and swift-winged winds, springs of the rivers, numberless laughter of the sea’s waves, earth, mother of all, and the all-seeing circle of the sun.”⁵ Throughout the play he is associated with the natural elements. He is the fire-bearer whose only immortal visitors are Ocean and the Oceanids. Although his mother is Themis (justice) he twice addresses her as Earth (Gaia, who was Zeus’ mother), and insists: “Themis, Gaia, she is but one although her names are many” (211). But according to Hesiod Themis was Gaia’s daughter (*Theogony* 132–35). This is part of a general contrast between Prometheus and Zeus as the representatives and champions of the natural and arbitrary powers respectively. Unlike Prometheus, Zeus is nowhere in the play associated with nature gods, but rather with the untraditional gods, Strength (Kratos) and Force (Bia), and with Hermes, the instrument of his commands. The contrast is strengthened by connecting Prometheus with the female element (the Oceanids, Io, his mother and grandmother—Oceanus is dismissed) and Zeus with the male. Their relationship as counterparts is reflected in the fact that “most of the characteristics attributed to Zeus by Prometheus are also attributed to Prometheus himself by the Chorus or by other characters in the play.”⁶

Zeus’ realm is that of the arbitrary. “Zeus alone is truly free” (50). “New are the customs by which Zeus rules, customs that have no law to them” (149–50). “His justice is a thing he keeps by his own standard” (189–90), “a despot’s private laws” (404). But force begets isolation. “This is a sickness rooted and inherent in the nature of a tyranny: that he that holds it does not trust his friends” (226–67). If Prometheus is bound in a sense that is the antithesis to Zeus’ freedom, he is also bound in a different sense that is the antithesis to Zeus’ isolation. Where the tyrant forges the bonds of unfreedom, nature forges the bonds of kinship. The mistrust of Zeus inspired by power is answered by

the loyalty to Prometheus inspired by kinship. Hephaestus' first speech contains the words, "I have not the heart to bind by force a god who is my kin. . . . Yet there is constraint upon me" (14–16). "Our kinship has strange power," he adds later (39). Not a word about feelings of kinship and loyalty toward his father, Zeus. Oceanus says in his opening speech, "My heart is sore for your misfortunes. . . . I think it is kinship makes me feel them so" (290–91). He is Prometheus' paternal grandfather and maternal uncle. But he is Zeus' brother and seems to feel no fraternal loyalty toward Zeus' position in the dispute. When the Oceanids say at the end, "I have learned to hate all traitors: there is no disease I spit on more than treachery" (1068–70), it is ironically not Prometheus' treachery toward Zeus that they have in mind. They are denouncing instead the possibility of betraying their loyalty to Prometheus, when Hermes advises them to flee.

III

The weapons made available to Prometheus by his ties to nature are of two kinds, the first implying Zeus' weakness, the second Prometheus' strength. In a general way the limitation of Zeus' power by nature itself is at the very heart of the contest between Zeus and Prometheus. When Zeus "portioned out the power, . . . to the unhappy breed of mankind he gave no heed, intending to blot the race out and create a new. Against these plans none stood save I" (230–36). But how can the comparatively meager gifts which Prometheus bestowed upon humankind enable us to withstand the destructive powers of Zeus? If he wishes to blot us out, how can rudimentary *techné* protect us? His powers evidently are limited to those conferred upon him by *nature*. To blot us out means, for Zeus, to refuse to rescue us from our helplessness against the inhospitability of our environment: severity of weather, scarcity of food, predations of animals. Annihilatory "miracles" of a supernatural order are beyond his powers.⁷

Zeus' limitation by nature goes beyond the fact of nature's setting limits to his powers; he cannot overcome a potentially fatal weakness in his own nature. One deity, Aphrodite, will prove too strong even for Zeus. Love will provide the means both for Prometheus' deliverance "against Zeus' will" (771),⁸ and for Zeus' own downfall, as Prometheus reveals in his final speech to Io (823–76). Zeus' love for Io, and Hera's jealous love of Zeus, were the beginning of Io's ordeal. When Zeus heals her with a gentle touch, the encounter will impregnate her with Epaphus. After five generations the line is about to be wiped out, as fifty women flee to Argos from the incestuous advances of their kin. God (*theos*) forbids this union and the women murder the men in bed. But Zeus' plan (if the god was Zeus) is crucially compromised: "one among these girls shall love (*himēros*) beguile from killing her bedfellow . . . and from her seed

shall spring a man renowned for archery, and he shall set me free.” The advent of Heracles thus depends on two cited acts of love overmastering prudence. Even Zeus, who hears this prediction, will be unable to resist healing his beloved Io, as the unnamed maiden (Hypermnestra) will later be overcome by love for her incestuous pursuer. Beyond that, Zeus will succumb to a third, uncited, instance of imprudent lust. Not only will his passion for Io lead to his fathering of Heracles’ ancestor Epaphos, but his subsequent passion for another mortal, Alcmena, will father Heracles himself.

In describing the incest-murders, Prometheus says, “Even so may love come, too, upon my enemies”—drawing the connection between the means of his deliverance and the means of Zeus’ downfall: “He shall make a marriage that shall hurt him. . . . She shall bear him a son mightier than his father” (764–68). Prometheus’ power over Zeus resides in his knowledge, to be revealed in exchange for his freedom, that the goddess of whom this is fated is Thetis. Knowledge of this is Prometheus’ greatest strength, as Zeus’ extramarital lust is his greatest vulnerability. As his name, Forethought, implies, Prometheus’ strength lies not only in the knowledge of Zeus’ danger, but in his intelligence and knowledge generally. Zeus, on the other hand, is empty-minded (*kenophrōn*; 762). If arbitrary force seeks to impose its will without regard for what we might call the natural order, intelligence is its contrary, bringing about success by discerning and acting upon the possibilities offered by the nature of things. Consequently, just as nature is ultimately stronger than arbitrary force, so too is intelligence. “Not by strength or overmastering force the fates allowed the conquerors to conquer but by guile (*dolōi*) only” (214–15). Zeus’ rule can be broken only by “a device of subtlety” (*palama*; 166–67). It may be true that Thetis is destined to bear a son mightier than his father, but his might is not the only factor: Zeus “shall need me . . . to show the new plan (*bouleum*) whereby he may be spoiled of his throne and his power” (170–72).

Implicit in all this is a cyclical view of history. Whenever the reins of power change hands it must be the work of intelligence rather than brute force. Kronos deposed Uranos not because he was stronger but because of Gaia’s plan that he castrate Uranos during intercourse. But once in power Kronos abandoned subtlety in favor of brute force:

When first the gods began their angry quarrel . . .
 I then with the best counsel tried to win
 the Titans, son of Uranos and Earth,
 but failed. They would have none of crafty schemes
 and in their savage arrogance of spirit
 thought they would lord it easily by force
 . . . [I]t seemed best
 to take my mother and join Zeus’ side:
 he was as willing as we were:

thanks to my plans the dark receptacle
of Tartarus conceals the ancient Kronos. (201–22)

Now Zeus, too, becomes reluctant to favor Forethought, and resorts to mere brutality. It is a universal pattern: “Every ruler is harsh whose rule is new,” says Hephaestus (35). History appears as a series of cycles, a perennial polarity between intelligence and force. Only the intelligence that recognizes the possibilities inherent in the nature of things can create something new. Brute force is merely repressive, prolonging what has been accomplished but bringing nothing truly new into being. The first immediately passes over into the second in order to perpetuate itself as long as possible. The second withers into an empty shell that falls before a resurgence of the first, whether in the form of a revolution (Kronos against Uranos, Zeus against Kronos) or a renewal, such as would occur if Zeus accepts Prometheus as an ally against the phantom heavenly counterpart of Achilles.⁹ The philosophical accuracy of Aeschylus’ presentation is evident from our own experience, not only in politics but in all forms of human creativity. The creative rebels in the arts and sciences in turn become the intolerant conservatives and reactionaries once they triumph. This is perhaps another reason that even in the character of Prometheus the seeds of megalomania are made evident, not only in his treatment of his enemies (Hermes, Zeus) but also in that of his friends (Oceanus, the Oceanids, Io). We sense that were Prometheus himself ever to hold power his yoke would not be light, and that Hermes’ prediction, “No one could bear you in success,” is not unfounded. The inseparability of the natures of Prometheus and Zeus is especially evident in two passages, one of which assimilates Zeus to Prometheus, the other Prometheus to Zeus. In the middle of the play Prometheus refers to Zeus’ power as “*techne*” (514), the term everywhere else associated with Prometheus himself; and in recounting his gifts to humanity Prometheus reveals that he pursued the repressive strategy of Zeus rather than his own tendency toward enlightenment: Forethought took away our foresight (of doom) and replaced it with blindness (blind hope) (250–2).¹⁰

IV

The interplay between the natural and the arbitrary, between intelligence and force, is only one side of Aeschylus’ complex play of forces. An interpretation of the story of how Prometheus rescued mortals is also implicitly an interpretation of the nature of humanity. As has just been noted, Prometheus mentions two gifts which he bestowed on human beings. (1) “I caused mortals to cease foreseeing doom . . . I placed in them blind hopes” (*Tuphlas . . . elpidas*; 250–52). (2) “Besides this I gave them fire . . . and from it they shall learn many crafts” (254–56).

It is unclear what is meant by “foreseeing doom.” In the version of the myth

which Socrates recounts in the *Gorgias*, mortals knew in advance the moment when they would die (523d), and the present passage is often interpreted in that light. But if that were what is meant here, why would the cure be “blind hopes,” rather than a simple erasure of foreknowledge, as it is in the *Gorgias* (d–e)? Doom (*moron*) may refer to death, but in the present context that seems to mean not the moment of death but the fact of death. “Foreseeing doom” would then refer to something like despair at our finitude and ephemerality. (Humans are called *ephēmeroi* [creatures of a day, ephemeral] at 83, 255, 547.) But perhaps not only to that.

Later Prometheus mentions a third gift:

I found mortals witless (*nēpious*) and gave them the use of their wits (*ennous*) and made them masters of their minds (*phrenōn*) . . . Humans at first had eyes but saw to no purpose; they had ears but did not hear. Like the shapes of dreams they dragged through their long lives and handled all things in bewilderment and confusion. (443–49)

Prometheus teaches them to build houses rather than live in caves. He teaches them about seasons and the planting of crops; about astronomy and the measurement of time; calculation and writing; the harnessing of farm animals and of horses for the carriages of the rich; the building of ships (450–68). When the chorus compares him to a doctor who cannot heal himself, Prometheus replies that the greatest gift he gave to humans was medicine. He also taught us the arts of divination and of sacrifice, and revealed the mineral riches of the earth (476–503). The powers he has given to humans are the powers of nature and understanding, not the powers of force. The arts are a kind of knowledge, not a kind of coercion. Only in the references to gold and silver, and to the privileged rich in their carriages (“the crowning pride of the rich person’s luxury”) do we perhaps hear intimations of a politics that may involve artificial values, a reappearance at the human level of the transition from creativity to repression. These intimations become fully explicit when Prometheus tells Io of the three races she will encounter in her future travels. Keep away from the Scythians, he tells her: “they are an armed people, armed with the bow that strikes from far away.” And beware of “the Chalybes who work with iron,” “for they are not gentle, nor people whom a stranger dare approach.” She must go to “the Amazons, the race of women who hate men” (709–24). Prometheus has only just given human beings the crafts, but by the time Io makes this future journey—in the vicinity of the river Violence (*Hubristēs*)—they will already have been turned to the service of warfare. This double edge of *techne* was adumbrated in the opening scene, as we witnessed the champion of *techne* being punished by means of the *techne* (47) of Hephaestus.¹¹

In pre-Promethean days there was no history—neither progress nor cycles—merely a dreamlike marginal existence. We cannot doubt that post-Promethean existence is for us an improvement, since the alternative was annihilation. But

the interplay between creativity and repression appears as much among mortals as among gods. The life of the gods is an alternation between the violence of repression and the violence of rebellion, and we can already see the emergence of the former among mortals, making the latter inevitable in its wake. The beneficiaries of Prometheus' guile, whether divine or human, will discover that its power, like all power, is power that corrupts. But from that corruption will emerge renewed life, like the Phoenix, that other symbol of fire.¹² If the Prometheus story is a political myth, in Aeschylus' hands it is not a myth of liberation but of the pendulum. Perhaps this is why one techne that Prometheus never gives to humanity is that of politics (cf. Conacher, p. 51). There are no definitive liberations but only renewals, and renewals need not be liberating for anyone but their instigator. Kronos was no better than Uranos; Zeus is here no better than Kronos. There is no reason to expect more from a son of Zeus and Thetis, or, for that matter, from Prometheus himself should he ever achieve such power. Aeschylus' characterization makes this all too clear.

What attitude toward life does this recommend? Judging by the hate-filled world that Io will travel through, the lives of all of us might be symbolized by Prometheus' description of Io's future as "A wintry sea of agony and ruin." Io replies,

What good is life to me then? Why do I not throw myself at once from some rough crag, to strike the ground and win a quittance of all my troubles? It would be better to die once for all than suffer all one's days. (747–51)

But she does not do so. She seems to believe that life will somehow be worth living after all. Perhaps she illustrates what Prometheus means by saying that he stopped us from foreseeing doom by placing in us blind hopes. Despite the pain and apparent futility of life, and the repetitive cycles of political disillusionment with liberators turned oppressors, we continue to hope that it is somehow worth while. The evidence is against it—hope must be blind.

What would it take to vindicate these hopes, hopes that may be blind without being false? Is the answer to be found in a here-and-now commitment which, by focusing only on what is at hand, learns to live without reliance on hope—a life such as was advocated by Epicurus in the ancient world, or one such as Camus advocated in ours? Is it to be found in the epochal events of historical renewal, however ephemeral, a historicism which locates meaning within the conditions and values that spawn a particular historical culture in its finite span? Or in some form of transcendence, perhaps in the contemplation of the eternity of the *pattern* of fate which remains constant through all these cycles, or, deeper still, perhaps in the underlying *ground* of that pattern and of everything else that exists? The remaining plays of the trilogy (*Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Firebearer*) are lost, and, with them, Aeschylus' answers. On the basis of his only surviving trilogy, the *Oresteia*, it is tempting to conclude that Aeschylus may have finally portrayed a breaking of the old

cyclical patterns, an ultimate reconciliation of the perennial dichotomies.¹³ It can be taken as a foreshadowing of this that the chorus tells Prometheus, "I am of good hope that once freed of these bonds you will be no less in power than Zeus." But the reply is ambiguous: "Not yet has fate . . . determined these things to be thus" (508–12).

V

There are tensions in the play which make such a solution questionable, for one of the most powerful forces in the play is never brought into the equation. It is a force that is given several names here, and which corresponds to our generalized concept of "love." At the beginning of the play Kratos (Strength) twice identifies Prometheus' "flaw" as his love of humanity (*philanthrōpou* 11, 28). Prometheus later concurs, attributing his suffering to his "excessive love of mortals" (*tēn lian philotēta brotōn*; 122)—the adjective an apparent acknowledgement of error. The chorus uses neither *philia* nor *philotēs* but *sebomai*, "revere": "you revered mortals too much" (544). Just as Zeus' love for Io and later for Thetis will cause him to act against self-interest, Prometheus' love (*philia*) for humanity causes him to go too far, to forget himself, to betray his own nature. "The gods named you wrongly when they called you Forethought," Kratos tells him; "you yourself *need* Forethought to extricate yourself from this contrivance" (85–87). "Know yourself," Oceanos feels compelled to advise him (311). Prometheus himself, who earlier boasted of complete foreknowledge (101–2), seems to have deceived himself about the future consequence of his actions, and even to regret them now:

Willingly, willingly, I erred¹⁴ nor will deny it.
In helping humanity I brought my troubles on me;
but yet I did not think that with such tortures
I should be wasted on these airy cliffs. (269–71)

In Zeus' case the terms used for love are *eros* (*ēroti*: 591), desire (*himeros*: 649, cf. 865), Cypris (650, 864—an epithet of Aphrodite), longing (*pothos*: 654), marriage (*gamos*: 648, 738, 764). This variety of terms and connotations creates a bridge between the weaknesses exhibited by Zeus and Prometheus. They converge within the cluster of meanings from *eros* to *philia*. *Philia*, Prometheus' weakness, can in fact have erotic connotations. In Homer, Euripides, Herodotus, and Aristophanes there are places where *phileō* seems virtually equivalent to *erō* (see Liddell-Scott-Jones, *phileō*, paragraph 3; it is also a common term for "to kiss"). My point is not that Prometheus' *philia* for humanity had anything erotic about it, but that one can conceive of the range between *philia* and *eros* as a single continuum. Our own awareness of a continuity from friendship to romance to *eros* was not unknown to the Greeks, even though they had no distinct word for the middle term. Plato speaks of how

friendship may become transformed into passion, and Aristotle of how eros may become transformed into friendship.¹⁵ No Greek term is as general as our “love,” and this may partly explain the variety of Aeschylus’ terminology in these passages. Zeus’ love for Io is not mere lust, for in the end he confines his impregnation of her to a gentle healing touch (848–49). And while there is no indication that Prometheus’ feelings for humankind are anything other than chaste, the chorus juxtaposes their chastisement of his excessive regard for humans with their recollection of his courtship of Hesione, whom he also won with gifts (544–60).

If Zeus and Prometheus are both made vulnerable by the power of Aphrodite,¹⁶ she appears as a third, almost unacknowledged force together with Zeus and Prometheus (the three of whom foreshadow Plato’s tripartite soul: desire, ambition, reason). Born from the foam of Uranos’ semen-filled genitals plunging into the sea, when he was castrated by Kronos during intercourse with Gaia, Aphrodite also symbolizes one of the major themes of the play: the rising up of the son against the “father” of the gods.

The earlier simple opposition between Prometheus and Zeus, as representative of nature and will, must now be refined. Aphrodite no longer can be subsumed within the power of Prometheus, even though she augmented his power by limiting that of Zeus, for it turns out that she undermines Prometheus’ power as well. If Zeus and Prometheus represent the alternative forms of *self*-assertion—brute force and intellect—Aphrodite represents their mutual antithesis, obsession with an *other*.¹⁷ The obsession may be described as the being concerned about another person to an extent that threatens our intrinsic concern about our self. “Being concerned about” does not necessarily have altruistic implications. It refers as much to Zeus’ selfish obsession with Io as to his (perhaps penitent) curing of her. The fact that such love is self-effacing in the sense of “other directed” does not make it benevolent. Self-sacrifice can go together with injustice to others as easily as self-destructive behavior can go with destructive behavior toward others. We may neglect our own best interests without replacing them with someone else’s. Zeus’ love for Thetis may lead him to assaults on her similar to those on Io, even though they would be destructive to himself since she will bear a son mightier than his father. What is constant in love is the preoccupation with an other, at the price of diminished attentiveness to self-interest. It is a secondary matter whether the preoccupation turns out to be beneficial or harmful, or whether the jeopardy to our self-interest becomes actual damage. Against all reason, intelligence, and forethought, Prometheus puts the needs of humanity before his own well being. Against what is needed to maintain his control over Prometheus, Zeus will put the needs of Io before his own.

To our post-Socratic, Christianized ears it seems paradoxical to regard altruism as a negative form, an irrationality and self-betrayal. Nevertheless, except for the mortal Io (613), no one in the play praises Prometheus for his sacrifice,

and even she seems to contemplate the edge of a cliff with more gratitude than she does Prometheus. The others cannot understand why he would make such a sacrifice for those who can do nothing for him. "What drop of your suffering can mortals spare you?" asks Kratos (83–84). The chorus of Oceanids agree: "Do you not see how you have erred?" (261–62); "Do not benefit mortals beyond what is appropriate, uncaring about your own misfortune" (507–8); "Kindness that cannot be requited, tell me, where is the help in that, my friend? What succor in creatures of a day?" (545–47). Prometheus himself admits that he went too far (*lian*: 122). In passion we are passive, permitting the interests of others to act upon us. In the play's world of power politics, a love by which we allow others power over us (whether pity, lust, or simply tenderness) becomes a dangerous and irrational weakness. It is the same ground that gives rise to Thrasymachus' contemptuous dismissal of justice as a foolish and servile concern with what is good for others (*Republic* 1.343c).

From our Socratic heritage we are accustomed to thinking that reason leads to altruism, but in the world of *Prometheus Bound* is no justice-itself, no Idea of the good, by the contemplation of which we might overcome the standpoint of individuality. There is only the self and the other, mediated in one way by kinship, in another by love. The play ends with the visit of Hermes as Zeus' emissary. Hermes is not only the messenger of the gods, but also the god who "sanctifies" lying, cheating, and stealing. We will not find in this world the same presuppositions as in ours about the relationship among altruism, rationality, and holiness. Justice here means, primarily, self-interested obedience to Zeus the king, tempered only by the weaker obligations of kinship. The latter are quickly sacrificed if they come into too open a conflict with the former, as the examples of Hephaestus and Oceanus show. Only the chorus ultimately embraces familial loyalty against fear of the tyrant, but even this choice is not completely "irrational," for they are "of good hope that once freed of these bonds you will be no less in power than Zeus" (508–10). Reason or intelligence here means achieving one's ends by the power of thought rather than by brute force. It does not render comprehensible the sacrifice of one's own ends. That is simply irrational, error (*hēmartes*: 262) or unreason (*anoias*: 1079). If we think of justice as altruism, the possibility of justice resides here not in the power of thought (as in Plato) but in the power of irrational love, not Prometheus but Aphrodite. This possibility of justice coexists, however, with very different possibilities.

In her extreme form Aphrodite, the irrational, may become the madness of passion. Zeus' indiscretions are not committed with "Olympian" serenity: "Zeus is stricken with lust for you," Io is told in recurring night visions; "he is afire to consummate the union of Cypris with you" (649–51). Io's punishment at the hand of Hera, and with the connivance of Zeus himself (663–72), whom she resisted, echoes the kind of passionate frenzy that Zeus must have experienced in his obsession with her. By means of "the gadfly, the ghost of

earth-born Argos" (567–68), she is driven to a madness suggestive of erotic possession:

Eleleu, eleleu

It creeps on me again, the twitching spasm,
the mind-destroying madness, burning me up
and the gadfly's sting goads me on—
steel point by no fire tempered—
and my heart in its fear knocks on my breast.
There's a dazing whirl in my eyes as I run
out of my course by the madness driven,
the crazy frenzy; my tongue ungoverned
babbles, the words in a muddy flow strike
on the waves of the mischief I hate, strike wild
without aim or sense. (877–86)

VI

Aphrodite, the irrational, may be described in the same terms as the gadfly, who "comes even from within the depths to hound me" (573). Her subterranean nature is echoed by the play itself, where her presence is always felt without her ever being seen or even mentioned, except when her epithet *Cypris* is used to refer to sexual love. But her power is the power that has brought Prometheus, Zeus, and even Io all to their fate.

The reconciliation between Zeus and Prometheus that one anticipates in the final play of the trilogy would be a reconciliation of self-interest. Zeus would perhaps share his power equally with Prometheus, wedding intelligence to force, and neutralizing the antithesis whose tension gave rise to the cycles of power that preceded him and now threaten him. He would benefit by having an impregnable rule; Prometheus would benefit by being recognised as Zeus' virtual equal; and the rest of the gods would benefit by having enlightened rulers. The class warfare between repressive force and creative intelligence would be sublated into perpetual amity.

But what will happen when next Zeus becomes inflamed with passion, or Prometheus with pity (*oiktōi*: 241)? Or when they are inflamed by hatred, which is counterpart to love as Ares is consort to Aphrodite. "Why are you pitying in vain?" Kratos asks Hephaistos. "Why is it that you do not hate (*stugeis*) a god whom the gods hate most of all (*echthiston*) since it was your honor that he betrayed to mortals?" (36-8). Io "set Zeus' heart on fire with love and now she is . . . driven by Hera's hate (*stugētos*)" (590-92). Prometheus is filled with hatred (*echthos*, *stugnos*: 975ff.) for his enemies. And even the gentle and compassionate chorus has "learned to hate (*misein*) all traitors" (1068). Throughout the play, and especially near the end, are references to hatred which balance those to love. Many of the instances have nothing to do with the

enmity between Prometheus and Zeus and would not be dispelled by its conciliation. The races of humans that Io will pass through are already full of hatred. Salmydessos, “the rocky jaw of the sea,” hates sailors (*echthroxenos nautaisi*: 727). The Gorgons hate mortals (*brostugeis*: 799). Io hates (*stugnēs*: 886) the waves of ruin that wash over her. The power of Aphrodite is inseparable from that of her illegitimate consort, Ares, god of war, her counterpart in passion.

We may find an image of the indestructibility of passion in the continuous nocturnal regeneration of Prometheus’ liver—the seat of the passions, as the Greeks believed—after it is daily devoured by Zeus’ eagle.¹⁸ A still more vivid image is contained in a remarkable reminiscence by Prometheus, which at first seems merely a colorful but irrelevant digression (353–74). Along with Typho and Zeus, Hephaestus is mentioned in it. He has been absent since the first scene, but his role in the drama is a provocative one. Strictly speaking, his presence was not necessary at all, since Strength and Force (Kratos and Bia) could have nailed Prometheus to the cliff without his help. But he is a kind of double of Prometheus, a god who works through ingenuity and craft rather than through force, who, although crippled, defeated by means of guile the powerful warrior god Ares (cf. *Odyssey* 8.266ff.); and who, like Prometheus, is prone to pity (14ff.). The two of them, Prometheus and Hephaestus, used to spend their time together, Hephaestus tells us (39). There is even an alternate tradition according to which not Prometheus the potter, but Hephaestus the smith, gave *techne* to humanity.¹⁹ Hephaestus is similar to Prometheus, but not in the matter of defiance. Hephaestus is a conciliatory version of Prometheus—he is a creator god without hubris. It was Hephaestus who recognised the justice of *both* sides: both Prometheus’ injustice toward Zeus (*pera dikēs*: 30) and Zeus’ injustice toward Prometheus (*endikōs mempsaito*: 63). He may be seen as a personification of the possibility of rapprochement between Prometheus and Zeus. If we interpret Hephaestus in this way, then the combined force of Zeus and Hephaestus against the subterranean power of Aphroditic passion would give us some idea of how much stability we might expect from a Zeus-Prometheus alliance of force and reason.

The central character in Prometheus’ reminiscence is the subterranean monster Typho, about whom Hesiod writes:

But when Zeus had driven the Titans from heaven, huge Earth bore the youngest child Typho of the love of Tartarus [the deepest Underworld], by the aid of golden Aphrodite. Strength was with his hands in all that he did and the feet of the strong god were untiring. From his shoulders grew an hundred heads of a snake, a fearful dragon, with dark, flickering tongues, and from under the brows of his eyes in his marvellous heads flashed fire, and fire burned from his heads as he glared. And there were voices in all his dreadful heads which uttered every kind of sound unspeakable. . . . And truly a thing past help would have happened on that day, and he would have come to reign over mortals and immortals, had not the father of men and gods been quick to perceive it. . . . And through the two of them heat took hold on the dark-blue sea, through the thunder and lightning, and

through the fire from the monster, and the scorching winds and blazing thunderbolt. . . . But when Zeus had conquered him [by burning him with the thunderbolt] and lashed him with strokes, Typho was hurled down, a maimed wreck, so that the huge earth groaned. . . . And in the bitterness of his anger Zeus cast him into wide Tartarus. (*Theogony* 820–68)

Prometheus has seen the destroyed Typho and pitied him (his fatal passion). He recalls Typho's failed assault on Zeus, and adds:

 . . . now a sprawling mass
 useless he lies, hard by the narrow seaway
 pressed down beneath the roots of Aetna: high
 above him on the mountain peak the smith
 Hephaestos works at the anvil. Yet one day
 there shall burst out rivers of fire, devouring
 with savage jaws the fertile, level plains
 of Sicily of the fair fruits; such boiling wrath
 with weapons of fire-breathing surf, a fiery
 unapproachable torrent shall Typho vomit,
 though Zeus' lightning left him but a cinder. (365–74)²⁰

Sitting on their mountaintops, Zeus plying his rule and Hephaestus his ingenuity, will eventually be undermined by the primitive raging passion buried beneath them. There is no reason to believe that having Prometheus rather than Hephaestus for his ally would put Zeus in a more secure position. But “not by strength or overmastering force the fates allowed the conquerors to conquer but by guile only” (214–15). Passion alone can never triumph entirely over reason and discipline, although it may subvert their stability and alliance. But if Prometheus' pity for Typho gets the better of him, with whom will he ally himself this time?

However much the *Prometheia* may seem to be a trilogy about Enlightenment ideals, about the triumph of sweetness and light over harshness and ignorance, it continually evokes the autonomy and power of the irrational. Just as the tenuous perfection of Plato's rational “rule of the best” will quickly become destabilized by the irrationality of eros and desire (*Republic* Books 8 and 9, beginning with 545d ff.), so too the seeds of the destruction of any utopian view that might be put forward in *Prometheus the Firebearer* are already visible in *Prometheus Bound*. Driven by unenlightenable passions, by primordial irrationality, the wheel of creative insight and brutal repression cannot stand still for long. To expect otherwise is blind hope.

NOTES

1. *Hippolytus* 359-60. This translation, and most of those from *Prometheus Bound*, are by David Grene. Occasionally I modify his translation or use my own.

2. Even in Plato's day there was a variety of versions of the Prometheus myth (Second Letter 311b). For a sweeping history of the way it was transformed by later ages, see Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, translated by R.M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), especially Parts III–V.

In the present interpretation I shall assume that *Prometheus Bound* was written by Aeschylus. For a discussion of the evidence for and against the play's authenticity, see D.J. Conacher, *Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound: A Literary Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), Appendix 1. More recently C.J. Herington has reaffirmed his earlier book-length defense of its authenticity (*The Author of 'Prometheus Bound'* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970]) in *Aeschylus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 160 ff.

3. Here Prometheus simply says, "I taught of the smoothness of the vitals and what color they should have to pleasure the gods. . . . It was I who burned thighs wrapped in fat and the long shank bone and set mortals on the road to this murky craft" (493–98). The implication is that the sacrificial portions were determined by what gives the gods pleasure, rather than by a trick.

4. Prometheus' mother, Themis, was, like Oceanus, an offspring of Uranos and Gaia. His father, Iapetus, was the offspring of Oceanus and Oceanus' sister Tethys.

5. In a four element scheme *aithēr*—the fiery element of the sky—would be assimilated to fire, and the sun would repeat the fire element in another form, or else be treated as a separate deity. However, sometimes aether was treated as a fifth element, intermediate between air and fire. This might be the most natural, although not the usual, way to read the present passage.

6. Conacher, p. 39, n11. Cf. J.C. Hogan, *A Commentary on the Complete Greek Tragedies: Aeschylus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 290.

7. Once humanity has been given *technē in general*, the latter becomes self-sustaining. Conacher notices that the order in which Prometheus' gifts are mentioned "suggests an evolutionary sequence, as if each new art were discovered in response to the new needs of a higher level of civilization, once the needs at the lower, more pressing level had been met. Such a sequence . . . is normally descriptive of *man's own* ingenuity in meeting each new challenge" (p. 49; cf. p. 83).

8. This is a significant departure from Hesiod, who emphasizes that Heracles' deliverance of Prometheus was "not without the will of Olympian Zeus who reigns on high, that the glory of Heracles the Theban-born might be yet greater than it was before" (*Theogony* 529–31, Evelyn-White translation; in some later passages I modify his translation slightly). Moreover, in Hesiod the deliverance refers only to the slaying of the eagle. Aeschylus here seems to be the first to make Heracles release Prometheus from his chains (cf. Conacher, p. 19).

9. Achilles is the son to whom Thetis gave birth when she married the mortal Peleus. Had she married Zeus, the son destined to be stronger than his father would have been Zeus' son.

10. For these two examples I am indebted to Rebecca Comay and Sam Ajzenstat respectively. Because of the dynamic reciprocity between guile and force, the fact that "neither Zeus nor Prometheus has exclusive claims on the two attributes" does not prove that an allegorical interpretation is misguided, as Conacher argues (p. 41). Conacher is surely right to resist the reduction of so subtle and complex a play to allegory alone, but there is an important allegorical dimension to it.

11. The irony is reinforced in more specific ways: "Prometheus is bound for and with his own device, the yoke; he is the victim of his own disposition; punished for having taught the healing art to men he is himself sick of a rebellious hatred for the gods." (Barbara Hughes Fowler, "The Imagery of the 'Prometheus Bound,'" *American Journal of Philology*, 78 [1957], 173–84, p. 183).

12. Cf. Blumenberg: "Where [humanity] needs and uses fire, where he attributes part of his technical skill and his capacity for culture to it, there arises, as with other things, the suspicion that it would eventually after all have to use itself up, become weaker, degenerate, and require renewal.

This cycle, too, is seen in the perspective of an organic background metaphor: Fire has its vegetative periodicity, its world seasons. How impressive is the idea of fire's self-creation is shown by the worldwide distribution of cults of fire renewal" (p. 300).

13. Some 64 lines of *Prometheus Unbound* remain in fragments, from which one can see that its subject was the freeing of Prometheus by Heracles. Virtually nothing remains of *Prometheus the Firebearer*, not even the complete certainty of its having existed, although not many critics seriously doubt this.

The possibility of a reconciliation of the dichotomies may explain the prominence of medical imagery, for Greek medicine was often conceived in terms of reconciliation of opposites (see Fowler). Related to this is the theme of “limit,” which is pointed out by Hogan (p. 276).

14. *hēkōn hēkōn hēmarton*. Grene’s “I knew when I transgressed” softens it too much.

15. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 255a–e; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.4.1157a6–16. The symmetry is not surprising. For the unerotic Aristotle, eros is an inferior species of friendship, based only on mutual utility. For the less sober Plato, on the other hand, eros is the most potent form of friendship.

16. Since Aphrodite, in her epithet Cypris, is the only divine name among the various terms for love that have been used (erōti, at 591, functions as a simple noun rather than the name of a god), I shall use her name synecdochally for the whole range of terms.

17. Prometheus’ obsession with humanity is called *sebēi* (544), translated above as “revere,” but having connotations as strong as “be in awe of” and “worship”

18. In the wake of the more recent anatomical misconception which ascribes this function to the heart, some modern versions of the story (such as Shelley’s) make the heart rather than the liver the object of the eagle’s feast.

According to Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Unbound* (fragment 193 [Nauck], line 10) the eagle comes only every third day. The present passage could be made consistent with that by taking *panēmeros* (1024) in the sense of “all day” instead of “daily,” but the fragment survives only in a (possibly unreliable) Latin translation in Cicero. Whether the fragment is accurate or not, Aeschylus’ audience would at this point probably assume the ritual to be a daily one, since Hesiod tells us that “by night the liver grew as much again everyway as the long winged bird devoured in the whole day” (*Theogony* 523–25).

19. Cf. the “Homeric” Hymn to Hephaestus: “Sing, clear-voiced Muse, of Hephaestus famed for inventions. With bright-eyed Athene he taught people glorious crafts throughout the world, people who before used to dwell in caves in the mountains like wild beasts. But now that they have learned crafts through Hephaestus the famed worker, easily they live a peaceful life in their own houses the whole year round. Be gracious, Hephaestus, and grant me success and prosperity” (Evelyn-White translation, slightly modified). Also cf. Plato’s *Statesman* 274c: We were given “fire by Prometheus, the arts by Hephaestus and his co-artisan [Athena].”

20. In a variant of Hesiod’s version, Zeus buries Typho under mount Aetna instead of throwing him into Tartarus.