The Greek myth of Prometheus as a model man of principle has been an abiding fascination for Western poets since Aeschylus wrote his mighty tragedy *Prometheus Bound* in the fifth century B.C. In 1820, Shelley in his romantic-idealistic long poem *Prometheus Unbound* set him free from the cliff. But as recent as 1967, Robert Lowell, one of the most prominent American poets, has Prometheus resist Zeus and suffering again in his adaptation of Aeschylus’ tragedy. If Robert Lowell’s pessimistic attitude can be taken as representative of the Western mind of the twentieth century, how is it going to find its way out of the labyrinth of the age-old conflict? This question, though concerns only some poetic works on the surface, is a vital one, because it involves a universal belief that Prometheus embodies the spirit of Western progress through his domination of nature.

I. Prometheus before Bondage

Prometheus appears in Greek mythology as a wise Titan, who had fought by Zeus as his ally in the cosmic battles against Kronos, Zeus’ tyrannical father, for the supreme rule of Heaven. While the other Titans, siding with Kronos, were hurled from Heaven into the abyss of Tartaros far under the earth, Prometheus did not try to secure the new ruler’s favor either. Moved by the misery of the human race, he stole fire from the gods, and was punished cruelly. This form of selfless sacrifice is itself a progress from brutal force to more intellectual ways of gaining the upper hand.

Another fable says that Man himself was the product of Pro-

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metheus, and that animals were made by Epimetheus, his brother, or After-thought. As it was natural for a creative artist, Prometheus sought to make his creation excel, thus he decided to equip man with the sacred fire--symbol of wisdom and hope. He wished that with so powerful an instrument man could be master of the earth, ruling animals as well as everything that grows there, therefore bringing civilization to the human world.

To most poets since Aeschylus, Prometheus has thus become a symbol of a great soul. His selfless service to mankind and his magnificent endurance of torture have been celebrated as deeds of the sublime—the primary goal of literature as prescribed by Longinus.

Prometheus has also been called a righteous sufferer, because in rescuing man from ignorance and misery, he had fearlessly challenged some inevitable fate, and was tormented for thousands of years as a price to pay.

The spirit of challenge must have been an inborn trend with Prometheus. Atlas, his brother, was punished by Zeus to have the burden of the skies on his shoulders because of his pride and revolt; another brother, Menoetesius, was killed by lightning as a penalty of his strength and haughtiness; his younger brother, Epimetheus, was partly the cause of human misery through his marriage to Pandora. This is the vivid background of Aeschylus’ and Shelley’s hero of progress in a positive sense, and this attitude toward progress represents the perpetual desire (not only Western) for a better human world where man should make the best use of nature instead of being bogged down by the tyranny of nature. Zeus, to be sure embodies ruthless nature in all his mythological splendour.

Therefore, fire is a much more sophisticated symbol in human history. Whatever the motive of Prometheus’ heroism, he has set the pattern of the eternal conflict between man and his destiny. In the tragedy of Prometheus Bound by Aeschylus as well as in the first act of Shelley’s poem, Prometheus, meaning Forethought, is portrayed as the archetypal myth most applicable to man’s fate—a noble conception of the intellectual mind, and a noble struggle.

What makes the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus so convincing is that Olympian gods, including Zeus, are given so many
human qualities, otherwise, the gods' concern with their "future" would sound a little sarcastic; and their indulgence and jealousies would be ridiculous. The turning point of Prometheus' character was when he ceased to be a god. With his sympathy, he has become a friend on earth. For this reason his being chained to the cliff is even more meaningful than his act of fire bringer.

II. A Comparison between Aeschylus' and Shelley's Prometheus

The main difference between Aeschylus' Prometheus and Shelley's is not only in the diversified ideas of fifth century Athens and the early nineteenth century England, but also in the characteristic visions the two poets saw in this image.

Of Aeschylus' Prometheus trilogy, Prometheus Bound is the only play which has survived. Only fragments and remarks made by ancient commentators on Prometheus, the Fire Bringer, and Prometheus Unbound can be found today. In this remaining play, Aeschylus gives the hero a highly dignified character as it was common among the ancient Greek tragedies. He has become a symbol of the conflict between the old and the new, between the oppressor and the oppressed. The gigantic and powerful figure of Prometheus that recalls his defiance of Zeus and his deeds to mankind has set the literary masters of posterity on fire. The creation of the catastrophe can certainly be called sublime in Longinus' term, as it imitates and echoes a great soul, which was advanced far beyond his time.

In spite of its simplicity of theme, as Robert Lowell describes: "this is probably the most lyrical of the Greek tragedies. It is also the most undramatic--one man, a sort of demi-god at that, chained to a rock, orated to, and orating at a sequence of embodied apparitions.", through powerful dramatic presentation Aeschylus raised difficult and complex questions. Since he says in the play, "One must submit to God." and "One must never submit to injustice.", the questions will be, "What will one do if God is unjust?" and "Is there, or is there not justice in the nature of things as controlled by God?"

When Prometheus is dragged to be chained to the rock amid
thundering and lightning, even Hephaestus, the executor, exclaims sympathetically:

........Such fruit is plucked
    From love of man! and in that thou, a god
    Didst brave the wrath of gods and give away
    Undue respect to mortals, for that crime
    Thou art adjusted to guard this joyless rock,
    ...For Zeus is stern,
    And new-made kings are cruel. (1)

Hephaestus represents another kind of conflict—whether he should or should not carry out the new king’s cruel order, or whether he should obey his own judgment and his conscience:

    I lack your daring, up this storm-rent chasm
    To fix with violent hands a kindred god,
    Howbeit necessity compels me so... (2)

How often, how similar to the scene we see in our modern times that men are confronted with such a difficult choice!

    Also vital a question is raised by Aeschylus, that is whether he should have avoided his torture beforehand, since he had known what was going to befall himself as the god of forethought?

    ...I know what is coming,
    All of it exactly, and not a single evil can
    Reach me unforeseen, and I must bear the fate
    Allotted to me as best I may, because I know
    One cannot fight with the power of necessity... (3)

This is an age-old dilemma. In war, in peace, men have often been obsessed with this decision. The Prometheus tragedy is certainly an event terrible and pitiful. Knowing what he was going to meet, Prometheus accepts his suffering heroically. This is what Aristotle describes as a tragedy which has "an air of design". The object of his deeds have "a certain magnitude," because the fulfillment of his ideal in saving man was done in the way things "would be", to use Aristotle’s phrase, "according to the law of probability or necessity," if they were to fulfill their total end and complete their potential form. It was in such a spirit that Prometheus rushed forth to challenge an unconquerable foe.
However, Shelley, as often been accused by critics, being an idealistic, romantic youth, did not believe in the so-called "necessity". He optimistically believed that since Prometheus had done a righteous deed, there was no reason why he should reconcile with Zeus and lose his dignity and principle. To Shelley, neither Zeus nor "necessity" were unconquerable. The world is ours, we are entitled to progress and harmony. With this belief in mind, he wrote *Prometheus Unbound*, as he explains in his *Preface* to the poem:

"...The *Prometheus Unbound* of Aeschylus supposed the reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim as the price of the disclosure of the danger threatened to his empire by the consummation of his marriage with Thetis...Had I framed my story on this model, I should have done no more than have attempted to restore the lost drama of Aeschylus (the last part of his trilogy); an ambition which, if my preference to this mode of treating the subject had incited me to cherish, the recollection of the high comparison, such an attempt would challenge might well abate. But in truth, I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind. The moral interest of the fable, which is so powerfully sustained by the sufferings and endurance of Prometheus, would be annihilated if we would conceive of him as unsaying his high language and quailing before his successful and perfidious adversary."

Confessing that he was possessed by "a passion for reforming the world," and that choosing Prometheus as his subject to express this passion, Shelley aims to imitate the great writers of the golden ages of their literature to "that fervid awakening of the public mind which shook to dust the oldest and most oppressive form of the Christian religion. We owe Milton to the progress and development of the same spirit..." But Prometheus is "a more poetical character" than Milton's Satan or Samson, because, "in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to the omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement..." True to the Aristotelian theory of a heroic figure, Shelley's Prometheus is the type of "the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and truest motives to the best and noble ends."

But it might be strange to say that Shelley's Prometheus, though
an initiative character of his ideal, is comparatively vaguer than Aeschylus' powerful hero. When it comes to the moment of Prometheus' release from the cliff by Hercules, the expected effect is half drowned by chorus, semichoruses, spirits, echoes, Furies, and their vivid and dreamy descriptions of flowers, the winds, the sea and the moon, and all the beautiful signs of Mother Earth and the universe. All of Shelley's own type of intense ethereal meditation, and of lyric after lyric. In them, from the beginning to the end, celebrating freedom, joy, humanity, Nature, and kindness, as winning over oppression, hate, begotry, and all the evil. Crowning all the delightful elements is triumphing Love. This method has been sometimes accused by critics as being too naive and too abstract to be taken earnestly. As Rex Warner in his Introduction to Prometheus Bound and Prometheus Unbound says: "It is an ecstatic poem, which, so it seems to me, should be read for its youthful lyrical fervour and not for an abstruse or difficult meaning... It does not appear to me that Shelley is even aware of the intellectual problem raised by Aeschylus' play."

The problems raised in Aeschylus' play as stated before (p. 4) are "What will one do if God is unjust?" and "Is there or is there not justice in the nature of things which are controlled by God?" These problems are often compared with the problems raised by King Lear, and Brothers Karamazov, which have a similar tragic quality that touches the final doubts. However, Shelley did offer some solution to these problems. He sincerely believed that elements of light and progress, as represented by the revolutionary and patient Prometheus (patient because he could endure the vulture and the cold for so long), did exist and in the end will triumph in a world from which the evil tyrant has been brought to his downfall. If his poetical expression of the exulting universe after the release of the sufferer is somehow out of proportion to the main theme, the best explanation can be found in his own Preface to the poem: "My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealism of moral excellence; aware that until the mind can love, and admire, and trust, and hope, and endure, reasoned principles of moral conduct are seeds cast upon the highway of life."
III. The Voice from the Chasm of Human Suffering

1. Pandora's Box as a Medium of Zeus' Revenge

The interesting fable of Pandora's Box is itself a beautiful creation of art. To find some convincing reasons for the continual obsession of the human race, ancient mythologists equipped Zeus with more weapons than thunder and lightning. He cursed Atlas with the burden of the skies; punished Sisyphus with the rolling stone; and inflicted on the human race misery and woe, as Asia in Shelley's Prometheus Unbound tells Demogorgon what Zeus had done to man:

And now Jove reigned; for on the race of man
First Famine, and then toil, and then disease,
Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before,
Fell; and the unseasonable seasons drove
With alternating shafts of frost and fire,
Their shelterless, pale tribes to mountain caves;
And in their desert hearts fierce wants he sent,
And mild disquietude, and shadows idle
Of unreal good, which levied mutual war
So ruining the lair they raged..... (4)

It was in this condition that Prometheus found man. Spurred by his spirit of self-sacrifice, he announced war against Zeus.

2. Man's Inborn Weaknesses

It seems quite contradictory to Shelley's belief that human suffering was brought upon by Zeus as a revenge on Prometheus, in his poem he also admits that man was somehow born with some evil qualities, which would in a way justify the wrath of Zeus, who did not like the human race. If not for Prometheus' intervention, he would have let it perish and replace it with another race (as Mark Twain might have believed in his Mysterious Stranger that Zeus had been probably right in thinking of making a better human race.)

At the end of Act IV, the Spirit of the Earth says this to Asia:

...among the haunts of humankind,
Hard-featured men, or with proud, angry looks,
Or cold, staid gait, or false and hollow smiles,
Or the dull sneer of self-love, ignorance,
Or other such foul masks, with which ill thoughts
Hide that fair being whom we spirits call man; (5)
Why was man born with such wickedness and weaknesses? Was it a re-
result of Zeus’ snare?
Because of these evil tendencies, “thrones were kingless, nations
panicstricken, served with blood, and hearts broken by long hopes, and
love slain amid men’s unclaiming tears…” (6)
To these men Prometheus brought fire from Heaven, to them he also
brought knowledge and hope. With these gifts he entrusted men with
the mission of establishing civilization in this world. Here is the
greatest difference between Aeschylus’ Prometheus and Shelley’s, not
whether he should be bound or unbound, the former emphasizes the hero’s
dignity in suffering; the latter is more concerned with mankind than
with the hero, only his heroic deeds serve as inspiring element for his
poetic creation. And there is the message: behold, men are living in
a civilized world because countless Prometheus-like people have brought
forth progress. But happiness is not a necessary product of progress.
Could it be that happiness and harmony will forever exists as illusions
in poetical dreams?
In his poem Shelley has the Furies mention several times the
veil before Prometheus’ release from the rock. To tear the veil is
to break the spell that must bend the Invincible. As Earth later says,
“Death is the veil which those who live call life; they sleep, and it
is lifted;” (7)
Near the end of Act I, the Furies cry: “It is torn!” Torn is
also the veil of ignorance, together with fire as the symbol of wisdom,
Prometheus had also given men love:
...And Love he sent to bind
The disunited tendrils of that vine
Which bears the wine of life, the human heart; (8)
To the romantic-idealistic Shelley, if men could grasp Love, the price
Prometheus paid at the rock must be worthwhile. In recent years,
literary interpretation of the Prometheus myth tend to emphasize the
allegory of his eternal struggle against a static order. Shelley’s ro-
mantic optimism is treated lightly. As in the first act of his poem dramatic
climax has already been reached in the symbolic tearing of the veil
and the coming of Morning; the release of the Champion and the po-
powerful downfall of Zeus in the following acts seem to be so colorless that they become supporting themes. Concluding his celebration of a beautiful world which has been made "a lovely place" by Prometheus' victory, Shelley sings through his Demogorgon:

To love, and bear; to hope, till hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
This is alone life, Joy, Empire and Victory. (9)

IV. Conquest or Reconciliation?

But the core of the myth is: Is there glory? Is there victory on Prometheus' side? Has his fire cured man's disease and strengthened man's weaknesses?

We learn from the remaining fragments of Aeschylus' Prometheus Unbound that a reconciliation between Zeus and the rebel was to be the conclusion of their struggle. Zeus was willing to compromise because he was troubled by a dark possibility of his own future downfall in the hand of his own descendant; and only Prometheus knew the secret. At the end they have both softened. Both were subject to a universal law of change. From the beginning of the trilogy there are side by side a fundamental harmony and a fundamental opposition in the creation of the world, on which Aristotle and other great thinkers in human history have based their philosophical contemplation.

Plato, a century later than Aeschylus, also expressed his opinion of this symbolic myth. The Platonic version of Prometheus reflects an evolutionary theory of human society. It claims the value of virtue, and demonstrate the importance of law in progress. The credit for this progress, however, is transferred from Prometheus, now in a subordinate role, to a fixed and stable Zeus. Plato's opinion, of course, is in a minority among those fascinated by the myth of the Fire Bringer. To this minority group of thinkers, order and authority are still the main force regulating the furtherance of human affairs. To them, Prometheus' suffering on the icy rock is applicable to man's destiny. To reconcile with Zeus, or Nature, or whatever representing the omnipotent force of the universe, is the only way for man to find
release from his perennial struggle. Similar to this idea is the Buddhist Nirvana as the only way to find release from the Wheel of Life, and melt into the final harmony of the cosmic eternity. In Chinese philosophies, the idea of harmony is connected more with man's life in this world rather than in the vast universe.

Shelley and most modern writers do not believe that such a reconciliation is necessary. Hercules embodies human strength and virtue. By killing the vulture that fed on Prometheus' liver, and breaking the chains that had bound him, Hercules is performing a justified duty as a conquest of evil forces. Some other modern writers treat Prometheus either as the microcosm of man at his fullest development; or as the hero in continual strife as the Divine Spirit in man for the awakening of all his powers.

In American Literature the greatest echo of this concept of strife for final justification is Captain Ahab in Merville's Moby Dick. What does his lifelong pursuit of the white whale signify? If the White Whale is a modern counterpart of the unconquerable Zeus, why does Merville portray so profound a suicidal challenge?

Robert Lowell's adaptation of Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound appeared in 1967. When the Yale School of Drama presented the play, it was greeted as a breath of fresh air in a stale theatre season. Lowell himself explains: "Half my lines are not in the original. But nothing is modernized. There is no tanks or cigarette lighters. No contemporary statesman is parodied. Yet I think my own concerns and worries and those of the times seep in." (2)

Actually, except the dramatic structure, Robert Lowell's Prometheus Bound is modernized. Gone is the lyrical quality of Aeschylus' play, also gone is the powerful sweep of the original theme. This Fire Bringer is bound, and without hope of release. He is also given a wife, but unfortunately, his wife is neither faithful nor inspiring, who (named Alcyone) "loved you once," but "only wants to remember you in glory." To remedy her loss of a husband, (or to bribe her,) She was given an island, because "Zeus knows well from experience how possession refresh the grief-stricken. He gave Alcyone an island to rule." (2)

In Lowell's version of the tragedy, Prometheus' suffering is modern in spirit, as the sea birds sing at the end of the short play:
"You know that intelligence is suffering. The other great powers are animals." 2 and, "Man is a poor god, too intelligent to hide his unceasing guilt, too stupid to escape. That story trails off in death." 3

This modern version is contrary in tone and attitude to Shelley's optimistic poem. Modern concerns and worries of the 1960s seep into the typical form of disillusionment. Prometheus is bound at the rock, alone and looking forward to life as "An infinite whistling away. The nothingness of our beginning is hard at work to bury us." 4 When Ocean comes to pay him the visit, he frankly comments, "Prometheus, your hopes are only dreams, our hopes were nob exercises for the mind, why did you put them into action?" 5

Even Hermes' departing remark is recognizably modern: "Man wasn't helped, if you could look down on the earth from this rock, you would see man's blackened trail of motion." Uncompromising and disillusioned, the Prometheus in 1967 could only turn to Earth as the sole witness: "...I am burning in my own fire. O Earth, my holy Mother, look, you will see us suffer." 6 This "us" has clearly announced that here Prometheus is no longer treated as a god, nor a demi-god, he is one of the human race, and he suffers in our own fire!

In the foreseeable future, literary fascination with this myth will not be abated. It is for us to find a way that consolidation is possible when it is necessary, and yet no consolidation should or could be permanent. I rather doubt whether the utopian ideal of universal harmony with ever be enjoyed by mankind in reality. It is afraid that as long as there is the duality of good and evil factors in the human world, there will always be illusions and disillusionments. And if we agree with Andre Gide's interpretation of the vulture being our conscience feeding on our soul, who could be confident enough to say that Prometheus has already been released from his rock?

Notes:
1 Aeschylus: Prometheus Unbound, 11. 34-40
2 Ibid. 11. 18-20
3 Ibid. 11. 115-119
5. Ibid. Act III, Scene IV, 11. 39-45
6. Ibid. Act III, Scene IV, 11. 131-134
7. Ibid. Act III, Scene III, 11. 113-114
8. Ibid. Act I, 11. 545-547
9. Ibid. Act IV, 11. 574-578
10. Robert Lowell: *Prometheus Bound*, p. 1 Author’s Note
11. Ibid. p. 6
12. Ibid. p. 57
13. Ibid. p. 25
15. Ibid. p. 17

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