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The Political Prometheus

A LONG TIME BACK, OR SO IT SEEMS, I SPENT the free spaces of a half-dozen years in quixotic pursuit of the multiple avatars of Prometheus among the students of comparative myth, religion, and anthropology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Without question, the prominence of Prometheus among the numerous theorists or apologists or disputants in some cause or other went beyond his relative importance in classical mythology and served in some large manner to explain the appeal of the figure throughout the romantic period, and particularly within the British tradition of Shelley and Byron. And yet, paradoxically, what I learned from this investigation was that Prometheus, for all intents and purposes, might as well have been Proteus. The language Newman Ivey White once used to subtitle an essay on Shelley's lyrical drama—"or Every Man His Own Allegorist"—is essentially characteristic of the titan of syncretic mythology: the brunt of this massive scholarship is that Prometheus always stands for something else—character, principle, idea—never for himself.[1]

By the time, a few years later, I began to share the confidence of Thales in Part II of *Faust* that I could catch this Proteus as well as anyone, fortunately I was finishing my chapter on representations of Prometheus among syncretic mythographers and, in recognition of having just escaped becoming what I beheld, borrowed an ironic chapter title from Casaubon's unfinished *magnum opus* in *Middlemarch,* "The Key to All Mythologies."[2] Without belaboring the false etymologies, the slipshod and selective learning, and the hidden but still fervent ideological tendentiousness that contributed to a reduction of all myths into one another, we can leave it to George Stanley Faber (one of the lucky divines

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1. White's essay was directed toward critical quarrels over Shelley's drama long before we might suppose there were any: *PMLA* 40 (1925): 172–84.

2. I am referring to Chap. 2 of *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis: The Maturing of an Epic Vision* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1975).

to receive a copy of "The Necessity of Atheism," on the strength of his having preached rather often to the adolescent edification of Shelley's co-conspirator, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, in the family's parish church at Norton), Faber, who came at the very end of the pre-scientific study of syncretic mythology, to represent its practices in their full luxuriance of off-hand invention:

> Suffice it to say . . . that, according to the orphic poet, Protogonus or the first-born, Planes, Priapus, Titan, Helius or the Sun, Jupiter, Pan, Herades, Cronus, Prometheus, Bacchus, Apollo, Pean, Adonis, and Cupid, are all one divinity: according to Sophocles, Titan or the Sun is the same as that Prometheus, whom the Orphic poet declares to be Cronus.

In sum, "both Prometheus, Cronus, and the Orphic Jupiter, are all most certainly the great-father; that is to say, Adam reappearing in the character of Noah."[3] Assuredly, the various legends surrounding Prometheus—as creator, prophet, educator, benefactor, and self-sacrificing savior—implicate major religious themes spanning time and cultures, and thus it is probably inevitable that the titan should be drawn into a syncretic harmony with Judeo-Christian scriptures.

Yet in the timeless abstraction of this mythic distillation, where names are construed as representing attributes of a structural paradigm of human thought (even if one that at this time was considered a solemn truth of revelation lost through the dispersal of Noah's family), there is discernible a fundamentally conservative impulse. The protean reformations in Faber's catalog, like all typological constructions, simply lend variety to an inherent sameness; they are roles for a single actor who always ends up playing himself. All religions are one, which in Faber's case speaks with the voice of angels (that is to say, the Book of Common Prayer) and sings to the tune of the Anglican hymnal. Although such a formulation is intrinsically laughable, the efforts of the syncretic mythographers, at least as they involve the figure of Prometheus, do reinforce major attributes of the literary portrait we can extract from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound,* in, for instance, their acknowledging a oneness of human experience and desire, but even, more narrowly, in Prometheus' representation (through his links with Noah and thus, in

3. George Stanley Faber, *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry ascertained from Historical Testimony and Circumstantial Evidence* (London: Rivington, 1816) II: 214; I: 267. Not only is Hogg's father listed as a subscriber, but so is a supposed member of the parish simply identified as "Peacock, Esq. Norton." It is very likely that this is Thomas Love Peacock through the agency of the younger Hogg, who by this time was his frequent correspondent and fellow enthusiast for Greek classics.

the etymological cognate insisted upon by Jacob Bryant and all who followed him, with Nous) as the One Mind.[4] Yet, what is absent from such formulations is arguably more important as a basis for understanding the romantic Prometheus: the resolute humanism of Goethe's conception or the defiant and universal refusal of Byron's or the anarchist liberation inscribed in Shelley's. Looking back at this investigation from the vantage point of many years, I see the clear paradox that escaped me in its fascinating midst, which is that, however the syncretic mythographers contributed to a climate of mythmaking and even accentuated the character of Prometheus as an exemplary figure within it, at least in England their instincts were directly opposed to those of Byron and Shelley, who saw not an august patriarch but a spokesman for the oppressed, not an agent in God's design for the earth but a revolutionary denier of all divine right to it. The romantic Prometheus is a fundamentally political icon. And as the example of Goethe a generation earlier indicates, the Younger Romantics in England did not fabricate it out of air.

Syncretic mythology may have provided this culture an atmosphere of remythologizing, a renewed awareness of the values and uses of allegory, and certainly an expanded gazetteer of place names with mystified associations and volumes overflowing with curious divinities, but the political context for the figure of Prometheus had to come from elsewhere. Although I will endeavor here to indicate some of the forms it took, forms well known in their time and with distinct political resonance, and to suggest in all but one case the presence of associations soon to be adopted as well in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound,* I do not want my effort here construed as a mere identification of direct sources. To narrow one's sights to a question of an indisputable source is to reduce to a mechanical relation what is a far subtler operation, for it ignores why the relation should exist in the first place, what gives the purported source its residual power, what in the culture pronounces it worthy of being appropriated. It also reduces to a question of personal authorial choice a decision that is an aspect of a larger cultural determination, what Hans Robert Jauss has termed the "horizon of expectations" within which any author first lives and then, secondarily, writes.[5]

4. Bryant, *A New System, or an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (London: Payne, White, and Walter, 1774–1776) II: 202–3. Earl Wasserman argues at great length for the definition of Prometheus as the One Mind, a rubric derived from Shelley's philosophical speculations but even there conditioned by notions of contemporary mythography, in *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971) esp. 256–66, 275–77, 359–73.

5. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception,* tr. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982) 23–26.

But on the other hand, I am confident in using *Prometheus Unbound* as my reference point for political contexts independently raised by other writers of the romantic period, including Byron, since its form is by nature syncretic and it aspires to be inclusive in its symbolic applications. Also, and perhaps most important, Shelley was raised in a household professionally committed to political causes of a liberal bent and attuned, whatever Sir Timothy's own unadventurous tastes, to the oratorical and propagandistic application of classical authority to those causes. *Prometheus Unbound* is unrivalled in conceiving its subject as a reservoir into which pour numerous cultural tributaries, and they converge from low as well as high. Although it also bears the distinctive ideological imprint of its author, one that runs directly counter to Byron's conception of Prometheus, Shelley's approach was more systematic than Byron's, more scrupulous in its scholarship and use of authorities, even (as the activities of his Marlow circle would indicate) more dependent on the broad knowledge and at times quirky conceptions of his friends.[6]

I

The most obvious place to locate the inherent political dimensions of the figure of Prometheus is in its major classical embodiment, the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus. Mythographers could placidly assimilate Prometheus to the Orphic Jupiter, constituting some super-divinity who merged the generations of titan and god, but in Aeschylus there remains only an implacable and primary opposition. Moreover, not even those accustomed to a scholarship of apologetics could easily dismiss the dual focus on unmerited pain and victimization summed up in Prometheus' ringing last cry: "See how unjustly I suffer." More precisely, the necessity of having to beg the questions attributable to traditional apologetics made the very exercise seem specious. In the romantic period there is no repetition of Thomas Morrell's claim, in the introduction to his 1773 translation, that "many extraordinary passages will occur to the Chris-

6. On Shelley's conception of Prometheus as answer to Byron's, see Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and The Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) chap. 6. It is apparent that Peacock's refined neo-Hellenism was a constant impetus to Shelley's thought and writing: how hermetically sealed, even precious, this world could be can be gleaned from the correspondence of Peacock and Hogg contained in *The Athenians, Being Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson Hogg and His Friends Thomas Love Peacock, Leigh Hunt, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Others,* ed. W. S. Scott (London: Golden Cockerel, 1943). Who in this circle earned the nickname Demogorgon it is unlikely we will ever discover, but it suggests the level of intellectual play within the circle as well as the existence of coterie referentiality in the writings, including *Prometheus Unbound,* of its members.

tian reader, if at all acquainted with the Scriptures; relating to the destruction and renovation of mankind, [and] the fall of Lucifer and his angels."[7] If silence on that ground may be presumed as a recognition that it little served the cause of theology to present Aeschylus's Jupiter as a gentile redaction of Jehovah, there is, one supposes, ample reason for silence to prevail on another count as well. Forty years later, it would have been imprudent for any author in the British Isles to interpret Aeschylus's purposes with the candid language represented by Charlotte Lennox in 1759: "It is not impossible but that the subject, which, to use Dacier's expression, appears monstrous to us, is an allegory upon kings, and perhaps upon Xerxes or Darius, which must necessarily be extremely pleasing to a republic."[8] Yet, leaving questions of prudence to the side, it is equally hard to imagine that this conception of the tragedy's political implications was not almost universally shared in the romantic period.

One reason it is so is that Aeschylus for the first time became widely available to a British readership. Fielding's endearing portrait of Abraham Adams forever lost in the intricacies of his Aeschylus depends for part of its effect on a general ignorance of Geek drama among all but the most highly educated of his readers. Lennox's translation of Brumoy nearly two decades after *Joseph Andrews* made available the plots of the seven surviving tragedies, but Morrell's *Prometheus in Chains* of 1773 is actually the first appearance of an Aeschylus drama in English. He was followed by Richard Potter, who in 1777 presented the whole of the corpus in prose. In the four decades intervening before Shelley decided to supply the lost final play of the trilogy, the reputation of Aeschylus shifted diametrically: within a generation the notoriously difficult and obscure primitive had become the crowning glory of the Athenian stage. As is indicated by its being the first of the plays to be translated, *Prometheus Bound* held a privileged position. In dedicating his translation to David Garrick, Morrell saw it as particularly fitting that he inscribe to "Indisputably the *First* Actor in this (perhaps in any) Age, the Translation of this the *First* Play Extant." Potter neatly conjoins tragedian and tragic hero in an encomium typical of the veneration of the later eigh-

7. *Prometheus in Chains, Translated from the Greek of Aeschylus* (London: Longman, 1773) sig. A3. Indicative of the problems confronted by apologetics, an exactly opposite view of the drama as a foreshadowing of the martyrdom of Christ is contained in a serially printed essay, "On the Prometheus Vinctus of Aeschylus," *Gentleman's Magazine* 66 (1796): 66, 188–90, 306–7, 397–98, 490–91; signed E. E. A.

8. *The Greek Theatre of Father Brumoy,* tr. Charlotte Lennox (London: Millar, Vaillant, Baldwin, 1759) II: 136. This conclusion is Pierre Brumoy's and not Charlotte Lennox's interpolation.

teenth century: "like his own Prometheus, [Aeschylus] not only gave [tragedy] being and form, but animated it with the brightest ray of ethereal fire; leaving posterity to admire the force of his genius, and to doubt whether he was ever excelled, or even equalled, till our Shakepeare arose blessed with an happier invention and more extensive powers."[9] On such a lofty pinnacle had Aeschylus been raised that between 1795 and 1825, as Christian Kreutz notes, there were seven collected editions of his surviving works made available in England, as well as fourteen editions of individual dramas.[10]

But such numbers scarcely indicate the dimensions or the import of this reconception of Aeschylus. It peaked at the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, about the time the adolescent Shelley finished his tutelage at Eton College and transferred to University College, Oxford, where he immediately met Hogg, more moonstruck with Greek classics than with Humean skepticism.[11] In 1809 and 1810 Great Britain was inundated by Aeschylus, with the unannotated text of C. G. Schütz being printed in Oxford both years, the first half of Samuel Butler's effort to revivify the antiquated seventeenth-century text of Thomas Stanley being issued from Cambridge in 1809, reprints of the Potter translation in both 1808 and 1809, and Charles J. Blomfield's attempt to establish a new text of *Prometheus Bound,* aided by the notes of his mentor Richard Porson who had died in 1808, being published at Cambridge in 1810. Before Blomfield's edition appeared, it was used by a close associate, Peter Elmsley, to savage Butler's recension of a useless text in two numbers of the *Edinburgh Review,* which in turn prompted a lengthy defence by Butler, *A Letter to the Rev. C. J. Blomfield . . . containing Remarks on the Edinburgh Review of the Cambridge Aeschylus,* a pamphlet of seventy-eight blustering pages. However much this duel of pedants may have reduced to what the *Gentleman's Magazine* characterized as a "comedie larmoyante," the hapless Reverend Butler was no match for Porson's successor in British classical scholarship.[12] Blomfield's emergence on the scene was heralded with an enthusiasm hard to imagine today. His edition of *Prometheus Bound,* for instance, was a

9. R. Potter, Preface (1777) to *The Tragedies of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Bliss and Baxter; London: Rivington, Longman's, 1812) xv.

10. *Das Prometheussymbol in der Dichtung der Englischen Romantik, Palaestra,* no. 236 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1963) 20–31.

11. One presumes some prior acquaintance on Shelley's part with Thomas Morrell's textbook of *PROMETHEUS DESMOTES. cum variis lectionibus, Stanleiana versione . . . in usum studiosae juventutis,* published at and for Eton by M. Pote and E. Williams in 1798.

12. The attack on the Butler edition was published in the *Edinburgh Review* 15 (1809–10): 152–63; 315–22; the bemused account of the scholarly controversy may be found in the *Gentleman's Magazine* 80, ii (1810): 241–43.

major subject of the newly formed *Classical Journal,* where it was meticulously reviewed in five issues over three years. Some indication of its felt importance can be gleaned from the reviewer's remark that "Mr. B. has enjoyed an honor, we believe unprecedented in the annals of English editors of Greek authors, of finding such a demand for his publication, as to warrant a re-impression in the course of twelve months."[13]

Ancient textual debates, with both sides stoutly defending spurious principles, are, of course, not the point here. What matters is that a work already privileged in the canon of Aeschylus and, indeed, of world drama as first even among equals should, through endeavors to establish a more secure text, attain such an unusual intensity of popular interest. In such an atmosphere it seems not only natural, but almost inevitable, that in 1810, when the newly matriculated Shelley reported to his tutor at University College, Oxford, the first work recommended for his reading was *Prometheus Vinctus*.[14] There were other, and to our purposes perhaps more significant, representations of Prometheus in these same years, ones in which the political implications of the figure are directly emphasized. In contrast to these, to which we now turn, the scholarly editions no less than the commentary on them avoid introducing any vulgar topicality upon those apparently sempiternal concerns of textual emendation, indeed, appear to take refuge from contemporary realities of tyranny and suffering in the problematic syntax of their representation. Still, however resolutely scholarly authorities might look the other way, the unparalleled interest in *Prometheus Bound* cannot help but signal a relation to those geopolitical realities, whether in the test of European systems being waged in the Napoleonic Wars or as a reflection of a dogged national perseverance through long years of painful adversity. The recommendation of Shelley's tutor, "a little man [with a] small voice," is in this sense emblematic of the process of cultural transference, as his "almost inaudible whisper" in later years became, in Shelley's voice, "to unawakened earth / The trumpet of a prophecy."[15]

13. Edmund Henry Barker, *Classical Journal* 5 (1812): 299; see also: 3 (1811): 271–85; 4 (1811): 209–22; 425–36; 5 (1812): 299–309; 6 (1812): 197–201; 7 (1813): 169–71. There was as well a review of the Butler recension in the first issue of the *Classical Journal* 1 (1810): 16–36, and an account of the recent history of Aeschylus editions, with particular attention to *Prometheus Bound,* in the second: (1810): 461–72.

14. See Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Humbert Wolfe (London: Dent, 1933) 1: 70. There is no evidence that Shelley did as he was told. Two years later Aeschylus was one of the Greek authors Shelley ordered, in original and translation, from Clio Rickman: see *Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) 1: 344.

15. "Ode to the West Wind," lines 68–69. All quotations from Shelley are from *Shelley's*

II

> It is an observation of professor Schütz, that the objects which Æschylus appears to have had in view when he wrote his patriotick tragedy of Prometheus, were to confirm the Athenians in the ardent love of that liberty which they so enviably enjoyed, and to inspire them with an utter detestation of despotism, and a determined resistance to oppression. In the voluptuous monarchy of Persia the poet saw enough to disgust him with tyranny; and the contrast exhibited between the miseries attendant upon such a form of government, and the happiness arising from Athenian freedom, was a cause sufficiently powerful to raise to an exertion almost more than human the genius of the Shakespeare of Greece. Such too is the object of the author of the present work.

These might be thought unexceptionable sentiments with which to begin a preface, except that the title of the work—*Washington, or Liberty Restored*—shifts the context sharply from the pious verities of the schoolroom to an implicit analogy between England and the decadent despotism of ancient Persia and between George Washington and the unflagging political commitment of Prometheus.[16] The analogy between Washington and Prometheus is openly broached before the end of the first book of Thomas Northmore's ten-book epic:

> Not jealousy, nor envy, nor defeat,
> Nor rancorous malice, nor unjust abuse,
> Not traitorous friendship, nor internal foes,
> Not misery itself in every shape,
> Famine, disease, and pestilence, and feuds,
> Can shake his soul's fix'd purpose; e'en his evils
> Serve but to raise him in the people's love,
> And for their liberties, Prometheus-like,
> He'd stand unmov'd amid the wreck of worlds.
>
> (I.264–72)

Northmore claimed that the enthusiasm of his celebration of Washington was "if not caused, yet aggravated by the proclaimed increase of the influence of the crown, and the gigantick strides of modern corruption" (iv). It is, however, not an easy task to trace such themes through his

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Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977).

16. Thomas Northmore, *Washington, or Liberty Restored* (London: Longman's [alternate title-page, Clarke, Westley & Parrish, Miller & Pople, and Anderson], 1809) [iii].

epic, partly because he would have faced a legal risk in pursuing them openly and therefore concentrates on Washington's virtues rather than Britain's vices, partly too because he drives his epic machinery with reckless abandon. The main agent in denying independence to the Americans, it appears, is not the British army but Satan, who is discovered at one point squatting by the ear of Cornwallis and giving him what turned out to be very bad advice. The attention Northmore lavishes on his Satanic crew is worthy of Milton in a different (and obviously better) epic poem, and it results in something of a confusion of ideological purposes. Almost two-hundred lines in the eighth book, for instance, are devoted to a set piece, following Homer, describing Satan's shield. The conflict between Jupiter and Prometheus, "the benefactor of mankind" (VIII.223), is recalled at length, without, however, discriminating between them (as Shelley feels called upon to do in the preface to his lyrical drama) in motivation or morality.[17] Yet, if Northmore is less refined in his distinctions than Shelley will be a decade later, he does share, and uniquely as far as I can see in the history of mythography, an essential conjunction with Shelley. The description of Satan's shield begins thus:

> On its huge boss, a vast and solid rock,
> Sat dreaded Demogorgon; and around
> Pursuit and Flight, and Fear, and Uproar wild,
> And dire Confusion, mix'd with fiends from hell,
> Whose name the Muse disdains to bring to light.
>
> (VIII.169–173)

17. The association of Satan with Prometheus is as obvious as it is traditional, and by their very silence on the subject clearly a main impetus to the attempts of Christian apologists to shift the typological values they endeavored to extract from Aeschylus' play. Like Shelley, Elizabeth Barrett, in the preface to her translation of Aeschylus' tragedy, argues that the superficial resemblance conceals a profound difference: "Prometheus stands eminent and alone; one of the most original, and grand, and attaching characters ever conceived by the mind of man. That conception sank deeply into the soul of Milton, and, as has been observed, rose from thence in the likeness of his Satan. But the Satan of Milton and the Prometheus of Aeschylus stand upon ground as unequal, as do the sublime of sin and the sublime of virtue. Satan suffered from his ambition; Prometheus from his humanity: Satan for himself; Prometheus for mankind: Satan dared perils which he had not weighed; Prometheus devoted himself to sorrows which he had foreknown"—*Prometheus Bound. Translated from the Greek of Aeschylus. And Miscellaneous Poems, By the Translator* (London: Valpy, 1833) xiv–xv. This was Barrett's first publication, a woman's daring, if anonymous, entry into the male classical kingdom, intended to be the first poetic translation of the Aeschylus drama in English. The honor was, however, snatched from her by no less than Shelley's cousin, Thomas Medwin, who, claiming in his preface an exemplary education in Greek at the hands of Shelley and Prince Mavrocordato, published his inferior verse translation the previous year with William Pickering.

At the center of Shelley's lyrical drama, in line count no less than conception, is the same raw and revolutionary power.

There is, of course, no record of Shelley's ever having read Northmore's epic, and certainly it is an unlikely item to have been lying about Maria Gisborne's house in Livorno, or even the Palazzo Mocenigo Byron rented in Venice. And it goes without saying that it is not the kind of book that Sir Timothy would have recommended to his headstrong son. But on the other hand, it is by no means beyond credibility that such a poem could be encountered by an intellectually ambitious student in his final year at Eton or in his even more radical incarnation a few months later at Oxford. The very excesses of Northmore's gothic machinery would have appealed to this devil-ridden adolescent, and the celebration of Washington would certainly have been congenial to the author of polemical poems like "To the Republicans of North America." A direct connection to the side, Northmore's association of Prometheus with political liberation should be seen as the development of a stereotype, and it is one with attendant linkages of imagery that the mature Shelley would exploit over and over again. The final lines of *Washington, or Liberty Restored,* a parting tribute to the Spirit of Liberty, resonate with the same image patterns, the same association of liberty with Promethean fire, with poetic creation and social love, that permeate poems like "Lines Written among the Euganean Hills" or the "Ode to Liberty":

> Hail! Spirit divine! All hail! nor 'sdeign to hear
> The voice of gratitude. To thee the Muse
> Owes her best fires; to thee all nature owes
> Her varied blessings; for where thou art not
> Nothing is good, or beautiful, but all
> A dreary wilderness, where vice and sin
> Sport with the human feelings. But no more
> Shall these pollute the earth; thy sacred orb
> Shall far dispel them into outer dark;
> And in their stead shall mirth and love abound
> With virtue ever pure; the vales and hills
> Impregn'd by thee, shall teem with new delights,
> And e'en the depths of ocean laugh with joy.
>
> (x.762–774)

This entire complex, extended and refined, and even more directly centered on the mythical base of Prometheus, appears in the same year and the same form as Northmore's epic. And in the case of Joel Barlow's *Columbiad,* it is hard to believe that Shelley did not silently claim a

pronounced debt.[18] Any British reader could be forgiven for missing Northmore's perverse attempt to rub his country's nose epically in its political failings, but Barlow's poem was of a far different order, and it was hard to avoid contact with it. The most elegant book printed in America to this point (1807), its sheets were transferred to London, where *The Columbiad* was published under the imprint of Richard Phillips in 1809 and reviewed with customary condescension by Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*. Its impact is almost immediately discernible in a poem like Samuel Roger's *Voyage of Columbus,* published in 1810. Given Barlow's extensive contacts with the Aristocratic Whigs in the 1790s and his renewed diplomatic activity as a representative of the United States, it is even conceivable that such a work might have found its way into the library of Field Place. With its visionary projection of a new world order established on libertarian principles, it is unquestionably the kind of poem that would have attracted Shelley.

Barlow's opening invocation to liberty touches the same chords as Northmore's paean and implicitly raises the Promethean paradigm it will later return to exploit.

> Almighty Freedom! give my venturous song
> The force, the charm that to thy voice belong;
> Tis thine to shape my course, to light my way,
> To nerve my country with the patriot lay,
> To teach all men where all their interest lies,
> How rulers may be just and nations wise:
> Strong in thy strength I bend no suppliant knee,
> Invoke no miracle, no Muse but thee.
>
> (1.23–30)

America, in Barlow's striking conception, is a world waiting to be invested with myth. The ancient paradigms, with their attendant ideological thrust, do not fit its lineaments:

> Celestials there no sacred senates hold;
> No chain'd Prometheus feasts the vulture there,
> No Cyclops forges thro their summits glare,
> To Phrygian Jove no victim smoke is curl'd,
> Nor ark high landing quits a deluged world.
>
> (1.346–350)

18. I suggest the evidence for the impact of this work on *Queen Mab* in particular, as well as its importance for the romantic libertarian epic at large, in *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 171–72.

Through the logic of fit analogy Barlow returns to the figure of Prometheus as bestower of the "holy fire" which is "The sense of liberty" (IV.439). As a figure for the self-educating force of the human intellect, Prometheus is originally engaged in the accumulation of scientific knowledge (IV.443–470). But in the context of the reformulation of human ends that is America, the role of Prometheus in human development is itself reconstituted, as Hesper, the guardian spirit of America, testifies in Columbus's dream of the visionary future.

> But when he steps on these regenerate shores,
> His mind unfolding far superior powers,
> FREEDOM, his new Prometheus, here shall rise,
> Light her new torch in my refulgent skies,
> Touch with a stronger life his opening soul,
> Of moral systems fix the central goal,
> Her own resplendent essence. Thence expand
> The rays of reason that illume the land;
> Thence equal rigors proceed, and equal laws,
> Thence holy Justice all her reverence draws;
> Truth with untarnish'd beam descending thence,
> Strikes every eye, and quickens every sense,
> Bids bright Instruction spread her ample page,
> To drive dark dogmas from the inquiring age,
> Ope the true treasures of the earth and skies,
> And teach the student where his object lies.
> Sun of the moral world! effulgent source
> Of man's best wisdom and his steadiest force,
> Soul-searching Freedom! here assume thy stand,
> And radiate hence to every distant land.
>
> (IV.471–490)

These Enlightenment couplets have something of a deadening effect on our realizing Barlow's underlying import. He saves one implication for the next book of his epic, where Lafayette and Kosciusko are seen as harbingers of the unavoidable revolution in European states, bearing the flame of freedom "Prometheus-like" (V.675) to France and Poland. But even more directly Barlow is marking the kind of distinction Shelley will later embed in the complementary monologues of Asia in Demogorgon's cave and Prometheus in describing the regenerate cave of the human mind in which he and Asia serve as united impulses, between the gathering of knowledge to serve basic human needs and the moral responsibiltiy for its uses. It is less refined, perhaps, than the memorable formulation of the *Defence of Poetry,* but essentially congruent.

> We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. (502–3)

Even clearer is the link with the intellectual colonizing of the universe envisioned in the fourth act of Shelley's lyrical drama: "We will take our plan / From the new world of man / And our work shall be called the Promethean" (IV.156–58).

The larger significance of Barlow's employment of Prometheus in *The Columbiad* should not be lost in remarking specific extensions of the figure as an exemplar for intellectual and political revolutions. Barlow's initial attempt to cast these materials, *The Vision of Columbus* of 1787, had systematically demythologized the New World, conceiving its primary virtue as residing in its very freedom from the constraints of traditional European paradigms. *The Vision of Columbus* is a fervent, even dogmatic, embodiment of Enlightenment rationalism. But its reconception is in remarkable accord with a shift in Zeitgeist, and the representation of Prometheus is its surest indication. It is not enough to see through the old superstitions, the outmoded institutional facades, the inherited shells of ideologies. They must be replaced with a new mythology, one invested with a libertarian ethos, a form without constraint or closure that energizes rather than tyrannizes the mind. It is this spirit that empowers the sublime propaganda of *Prometheus Unbound,* which in its conceptual reach beyond the vision of *Queen Mab* may be said similarly to outdistance *The Columbiad.* Barlow's epic is assuredly a cultural document of genuine significance, for Britain as well as America, but its mythology is ultimately only Jeffersonian, and the contradictions of its model, even in its own time, made it suspect—perhaps even itself a facade for tyranny like the traditional myths it would replace.

It is possible, indeed, that in 1809 the time was propitious, despite a wary British censorship, for publishing two epics celebrating American liberty from a repressive monarchy. America's fatal flaw was all too obvious to Great Britain, which in 1807 had climaxed a parliamentary struggle of at least a generation by abolishing the slave trade in its dominions. To celebrate that achievement and particularly the perseverance of its leading agitators, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharpe, and

William Wilberforce, a memorial volume, as grandly done up as Barlow's *Columbiad,* was published in 1809.[19] *Poems on the Abolition of the Slave Trade,* with lengthy contributions from three poets identified with the liberal Dissenting tradition—James Montgomery, James Grahame, and Elizabeth Benger—was organized by the publisher Robert Bowyer, dedicated to the Duke of Gloucester, and clearly intended for a readership of means and political commitment. One such candidate on both scores would have been Sir Timothy Shelley, who clearly cast his vote in the Commons on behalf of Abolition. Again, it is tempting to picture his son, in the summer hiatus between his graduation from Eton and his matriculation at Oxford, reading through this volume in the library at Field Place. And again it is just as likely that, if not at home, he would have encountered it during his early months at Oxford, if only through the booksellers Slatter and Munday.[20] Wherever Shelley might have come upon this volume, he would have opened it to a remarkable mythological vignette by Robert Smirke (*fig.* 1), depicting the British Hercules freeing the African Prometheus from his long durance. Turning the page, he would have read the following poem, which one presumes was written by Bowyer:

Lines explanatory of the Vignette in the Title-page

PROMETHEUS DELIVERED

'COME, Outcast of the human race,
'Prometheus, hail thy destined place!
'This rock protects the dark retreat,
'Unvisited by earthly feet;
'We only shall thy mansion share,
'Who haunt the chamber of despair!
'The vulture, here, thy loathed mate—
'Rapacious minister of fate!
'Compels life's ruddy stream to part
'With keenest torture from thy heart.
'Yet not to perish art thou doomed,

19. *Poems on the Abolition of the Slave Trade; written by James Montgomery, James Grahame, and E. Benger. Embellished with Engravings from Pictures Painted by R. Smirke, Esq. R. A.* London: Printed for R. Bowyer . . . by T. Bensley: 1809. This is the date of imprint, but the illustrations bear an 1810 date. I have not found a copy with a subscription list and therefore assume that none existed.

20. There can be no doubt that Byron, whose departure for his eastern tour appears to have just predated publication of this volume, would on his return and entry into Lord Holland's Whig establishment in the House of Lords have become familiar with it.

'Victim unspared, but unconsumed;
'Death shall not sap thy wall of clay,
'That penal being mocks decay;
'Live, conscious inmate of the grave,
'Live, outcast, captive, victim, slave!'
The Furies ceased; the wrathful strain
Prometheus hears, and, pierced with pain,
Rolls far around his hopeless gaze,
His realm of wretchedness surveys;
Then maddening with convulsive breath,
He moans or raves, imploring death.
Thus hours on hours unnumbered past,
And each more lingering than the last;
When lo! before his glazed sight,
Appears a form, in dauntless might.
'Tis he! Alcides, lord of fame!
The friend of man, his noblest name!
Swift from his bow the arrow flies,
And prone the bleeding vulture lies.
He smites the rock, he rends the chain,
Prometheus rises man again!
Such, Africa, thy suffering state!
Outcast of nations, such thy fate!
The ruthless rock, the den of pain,
Were thine—oh long deplored in vain,
Whilst Britain's virtue slept! at length
She rose in majesty and strength;
And when thy martyr'd limbs she viewed,
Thy wounds unhealed, and still renewed,
She wept; but soon with graceful pride,
The vulture, Avarice, she defied,
And wrenched him from thy reeking side;
In Britain's name then called thee forth,
Sad exile, to the social hearth,
From baleful Error's realm of night,
To Freedom's breath and Reason's light.

Only within a literary atmosphere as momentarily dominated by Aeschylus as this was, it might be argued, could there be conceived such a remarkable conflation of *The Eumenides,* with this black Orestes assaulted by vengeful Furies, and *Prometheus Bound.* The fact that Shelley makes the same conflation in the first act of *Prometheus Unbound,* though ob-

viously remarked, has, as far as I can determine, essentially never been queried in the numerous commentaries on Shelley's uses of Aeschylus. But the coincidence that he there invokes the Aeschylean Furies to a more extensive exposition of a similarly interiorized dynamics of despair strongly suggests that this vignette and poem were seen by him at some point and made an indelible imprint on his mind. The supposition is materially strengthened by two other elements in the characterization, the repeated identification of Prometheus as a human rather than immortal figure and the concentration on what Shelley calls "the wingless, crawling Hours" (1.48) of his torture. On the other hand, the self-congratulatory portrait of Britain as Hercules, in line with an early liberal ideology of British imperialism, is not, one presumes, the way the youthful Shelley conceived his world. Certainly, the endnotes to *Queen Mab* are clear in their notion of imperialism as an extension of capitalism into domination by the state.

That, too, is Blake's vision of the imperial mission, even when invested within a nominal independence on the part of the colonists. His representation of a female Prometheus being tortured by the male American eagle in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (*fig.* 2) is a striking instance of his use of illuminations to establish oblique contexts for his poetry. Even so early in his career (1793) Blake has already abandoned a poetic reliance on traditional forms of mythology, but the iconography of Prometheus serves pictorially to invoke the negative connotations of the later Promethean figures we have just surveyed. The "soft American plains" (1.20) are equally a virgin land being converted to ownership, a native people transported from primeval freedom into capitalist slavery, and a gender systematically denied freedom through a double standard of sexual morality. Oothoon's vision of free love, though couched within an impassioned rhapsody, is the lament of a prisoner denied freedom under multiple charges and without hope for parole. And it is small comfort, as Blake represents this complex, to see her as distanced by an intervening ocean and blatant American hypocrisy. She is a "Daughter of Albion," her condition the product of British civilization and an extension of its imperial values. Those sisters who lament her state reside in England, and the world they decry is as manifest in Jamaica as in the Carolinas—even, through a slight transmutation of terms into the subtler extensions of this morality, in the "London" of the *Songs of Experience,* where the alternatives for woman, marital submissiveness and sexual exploitation, are simply mirror images of each other.

In the case of Blake, undoubtedly, it would stretch credence to suggest that his multivalent icon was in any way available to Shelley. And yet it is at least fitting that "Visions of the Daughters of Albion" is an implicit tribute to Mary Wollstonecraft and the feminist publications of

Joseph Johnson.[21] There is, however, one further extension of the Promethean myth into the political consciousness of England's Regency, and it too is more an allegorical icon of despair than an avatar of liberation. Byron easily embraces it in the final stanza of his "Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte," as well as later in "The Age of Bronze," but a fuller exposition of its terms, if obliquely expressed, is better discerned in a work by an author Shelley much admired, *France* (1817) by Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan. This is her description of the vanquished Napoleon on St. Helena:

> Alone, in his desolate dwelling; deprived of every solace of humanity; torn from those ties, which alone throw a ray of brightness over the darkest shades of misfortune; wanting all the comforts, and many of the necessities of life; the victim of the caprice of petty delegated power; harassed by every-day oppression; mortified by mean, reiterated, hourly privation; chained to a solitary and inaccessible rock, with no object on which to fix his attention, but the sky to whose inclemency he is exposed; or that little spot of earth, within whose narrow bounds he is destined to wear away the dreary hours of unvaried captivity, in hopeless, cheerless, life-consuming misery! Where now is his faith in the magnanimity of England? his trust in her generosity? his hopes in her beneficence?[22]

Behind this passage is Lady Morgan's contemporary recognition that the Bourbon Restoration was dependent on the units of the British army that remained in France to prevent any attempt to return Napoleon to power. The implicit equations are between Napoleon and Prometheus, his jailors and the vulture, petty bureaucrats and the sycophant Mercury, between Great Britain and Jupiter. The terms are shifted diametrically from those informing the "Prometheus Delivered" of the *Poems on the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. They remind us, however, if we have strayed

21. The figure of Prometheus does not, as far as I can determine, otherwise appear in this feminist literature, probably because the legendary associations are themselves so lodged within a male system of values. Occasionally, especially among the syncretic mythographers, we are reminded that Prometheus overreached himself in creativity by bringing Pandora into the world.

22. *France*, 3rd American ed. (Philadelphia: Thomas, 1817) 327: the passage is quoted in full in the infamous *Quarterly Review* attack on Lady Morgan's *France*, which was well known and widely censured (17 [1817]: 280). In the same guise and even more directly, but from a twenty-year retrospect, is Edgar Quinet's representation of Napoleon: "Du nouveau Prométhée ils ont ouvert le flanc: / Le vautour d'Albion boit lentement son sang" (*Napoléon* [1836] XLVIII, "Sainte-Hélène"). For further examples of this contemporary icon, consult Raymond Trousson, *Le thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne* (Geneva: Droz, 1964) II: 335–42: "L'échec d'un destin titanique: le prométhée de Saint-Hélène."

too far in reading Shelley's lyrical drama from Prometheus' despairing vision of the French Revolution, or Kenneth Neill Cameron's forceful representation of the entire work as a sustained allegory on it, that Shelley had in the still-living figure of Napoleon a contemporary representation of the failed Promethean, one of arresting power.[23] To look at the hopes with which the Revolution began, to see them then transformed into the Roman trappings of Napoleon replete with martial eagles as icons, and then to watch them dashed on the rocks of St. Helena, that is to contemplate Prometheus and discover in his image the Phantasm of Jupiter. In turn, it is to confront, on a specific and living contemporary plane, the rationale for despair enunciated with such chiselled rhetoric by the First Fury (1.618 ff). It is small wonder that all Prometheus can muster by way of answering her syllogisms is pity.

III

Mary Shelley's commentary on *Prometheus Unbound,* first published in the four-volume collected edition of 1839 and then frequently thereafter, notes that Shelley first contemplated the subject of his drama in April 1818 during their month-long stay in Milan. The passage through the Alps was sufficient, as the Shelleys' journal indicates, to bring Aeschylus' drama to mind, but we can surmise that something beyond mere scenery, sublime though it was, prompted the poet's further reflections.[24] Paradoxically, it is likely that the chief influence came from a wholly opposite experience, one not of wild natural landscapes but of civilized refinement. On the evening of 5 April, the day after their arrival, the Shelleys and Claire Clairmont attended La Scala. The opera was Joseph Weigl's *Il rivale di sé stesso,* which they found indifferent. The effect of the ballet which followed it, however, was wholly opposite. All three wrote of its powerful impact: "infinitely magnificent," said Mary; "the most splendid spectacle I ever saw," was her husband's verdict. The group was so impressed that they returned for the twin-bill three weeks later.[25] The ballet was *Otello, ossia Il Moro di Venezia.* The choreographer

23. Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years,* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974) 485–88, 499–501, 539–40.

24. 26 March 1818: "The scene is like that described in the 'Prometheus' of Aeschylus; vast rifts and caverns in granite precipices"—*Mary Shelley's Journal,* ed. Frederick L. Jones (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1947) 94–95.

25. *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley,* ed. Betty T. Bennett (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980) I: 64; Shelley, *Letters* II: 4; Claire Clairmont's Journal entry for 25 April 1818, which documents the return to La Scala, can be found in *Shelley and His Circle,*

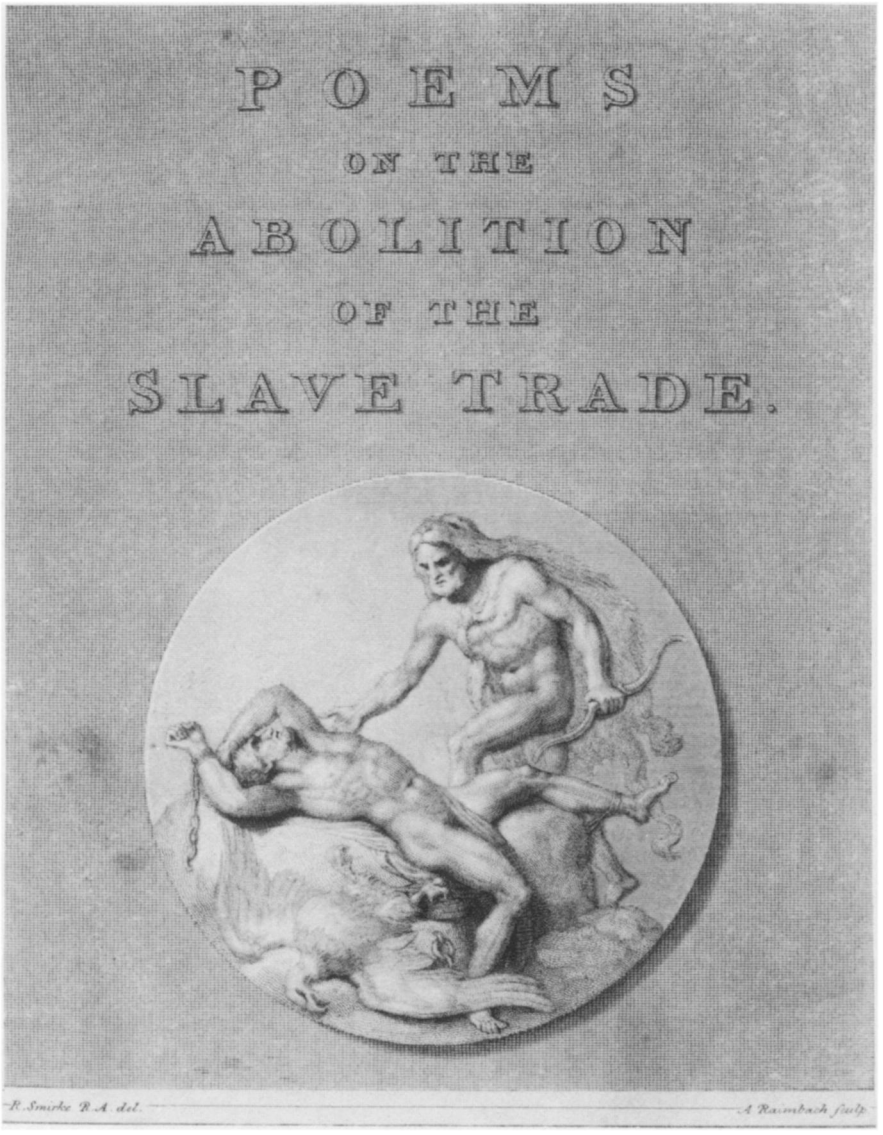

fig. 1: Poems on the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1809)—title-page vignette. Reproduced courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library.

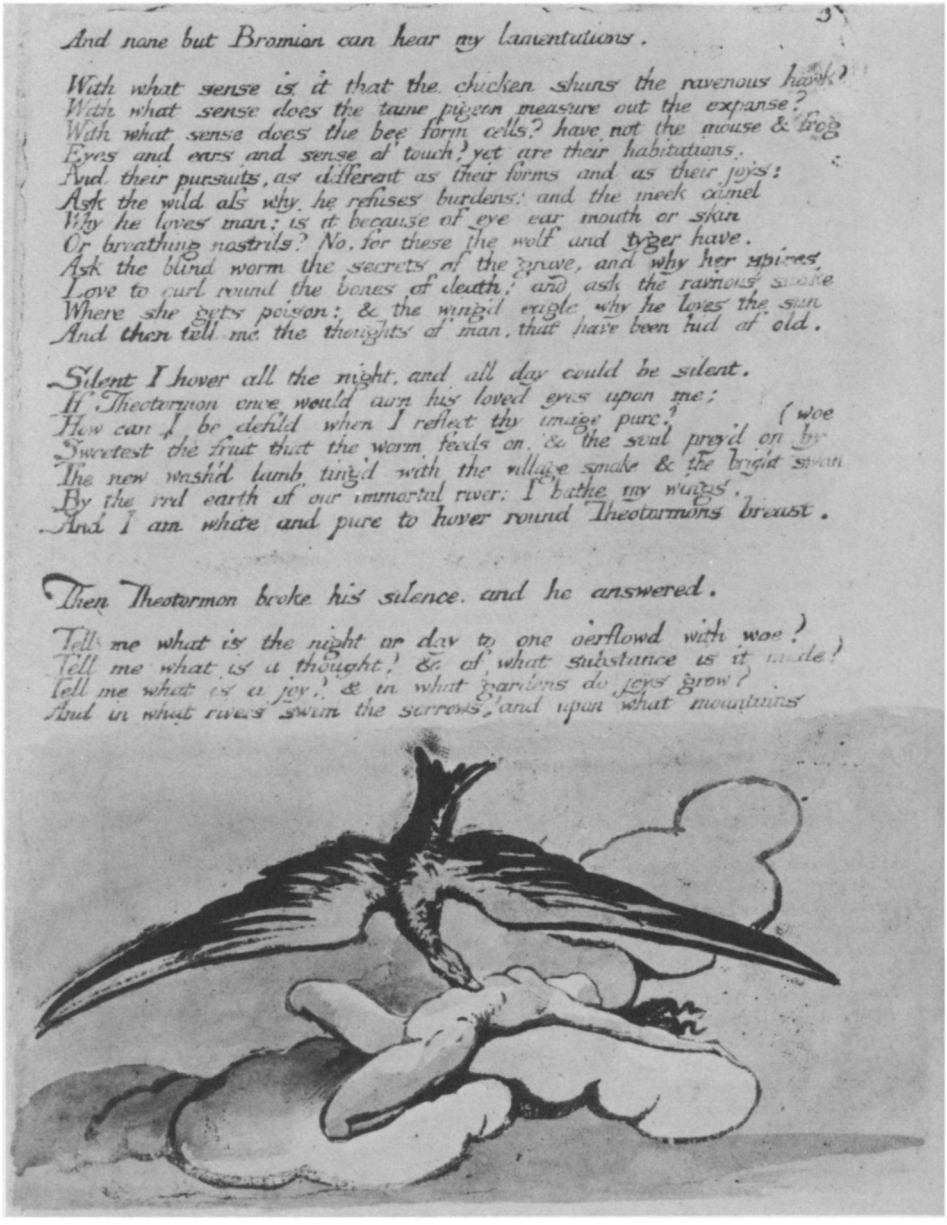

fig. 2: William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (plate 3). Reproduced courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library.

fig. 3: Bronze medallion struck in 1817 to commemorate Salvatore Viganò's *Prometeo* (7.4 cm). Author's private collection.

was Salvatore Viganò, at the height of his fame as the founder of a new school of romantic dance-drama. So celebrated was he that only a few months before the Shelley party arrived in Milan, a bronze medal had been struck to commemorate his ballet of *Prometeo* (*fig.* 3). Is it possible that these English tourists, stage-struck by a new artistic experience—the very type of "arts, though unimagined, yet to be" (*Prometheus Unbound*, III.iii.56)—did *not* see this medal? Indeed, it is more than likely that it was on display in the Teatro alla Scala itself, perhaps with mementoes of the production, including at least a cast list, and that the libretto for the ballet was likewise widely available, if not in the theater then in its immediate precincts.[26]

Viganò had first tried his hand at this subject under truly illustrious circumstances, choreographing Beethoven's *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus* for the Hoftheater, Vienna, in 1801. There were fifteen performances the first year, another thirteen in 1802. Returning to Italy and establishing himself as the resident choreographer at La Scala, a decade later Viganò recast the narrative and greatly enlarged his conception of the ballet. Premiered on 22 May 1813, *Prometeo* was in six acts, with music drawn from the Beethoven production, as well as from Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, Weigl, and Viganò himself (Luigi Boccherini was his uncle). It was proclaimed his masterwork: "Non ballo, ma poema, opera divina."[27] The prima ballerina was Antonia Pallerini, the same dancer whom the Shelley party admired as Desdemona. Some idea of the scale of the ballet may be gathered from the fact that it had thirteen principals

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ed. Donald H. Reiman (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1973) v: 452. The music for the ballet was derived from Rossini's opera, *Otello*.

26. *Prometeo. Ballo Mitologico, inventato e posto sulle scene del R. Teatro alla Scala da Salvatore Viganò nella primavera dell'anno 1813.* Milano: dalla Societa Typographica de' Classici Italiani, 1813. Pp. 30. The medal is inscribed on the rear as follows: "A Salvatore Viganò impareggiabile coreografo che colla rappresentazion del Prometeo data l. an MDCCCXIV nel Regio Teatro di Milano immortalatosi tanta gloria nella Mirra e nel Psammi brillante tuttavia sostiene gli ammiratori del bello sacravano meritamente nel MDCCCXVII" (To Salvatore Viganò, incomparable choreographer, who having immortalized himself with his production of Prometheus, given the year 1814 in the Royal Theater of Milan, still brilliantly sustains so much glory in Myrrha and Psammi, the admirers of the beautiful deservedly dedicated [this medal] in 1817).

27. "Not a ballet, but a poem, a divine creation": I quote from what is presumably a contemporary reaction reported in the article on Viganò in the *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo* IX: 1678–79. Stendhal drew a comparison between Viganò's *Mirra* and productions of Shakespeare in *Rome, Florence, and Naples* (entry for 22 November 1816), which was elevated by Lady Morgan to the claim that Viganò "is the Shakespeare of his art; and with such powerful conceptions, and such intimate knowledge of nature and effect, as he exhibits, it is wonderful that, instead of composing ballets, he does not write epics": *Italy* (London: Henry Colburn, 1821) I: 98.

and thirty-eight identifiable characters within the chorus. A grand pantomime, representing the marvels of heaven at the beginning of the second act, suggests an even larger corps de ballet. *Prometeo* was conceived in every sense as a spectacle, and if Shelley were aware of nothing more than that Viganò had earlier rendered such a piece, the experience of this new dramatic ballet might have been sufficient to spark his own imagination toward a "sublime spectacle" based on the Prometheus myth.

But there are correspondences between the two works that suggest a more intimate acquaintance with Viganò's conception. The second-act pantomime in heaven, for instance, involves a succession of allegorical figures representing Darkness, Dawn, the Hours, Phoebus Apollo, the Year, the Seasons, and the Months, the stuff of allegorical painting, particularly that of Salvatore Rosa, transposed to the stage. But it is clearly the semblance of this stage on which the fourth act of *Prometheus Unbound* also opens, with dawn replacing night, and a double chorus of Hours who "bear Time to his tomb in eternity" (IV.14) passing successively across it. As Ronald Tetrault has convincingly argued, a number of devices in *Prometheus Unbound,* particularly its spirit choruses, seem to derive from balletic practice, but his supposition that this reflects Shelley's admiration for Mme. Melanie, the principal ballerina in London before his departure for the continent, tends to privilege performance over choreographic conception.[28] The libretto for Viganò's ballet reveals a decided preference for dramatic spectacle over mere dance, which was, indeed, his legacy to the development of the art of nineteenth-century ballet. The finale of the second act is indicative. From Phoebus Apollo's sun-chariot Prometheus, aided by Minerva, lights a torch to transport the heavenly fire to earth. "Jove, apprized of this great theft, burns with anger. The burst of a lightning bolt announces the divine vendetta; a dark mist envelops the chariot of the sun, Minerva vanishes, and the wretched Prometheus falls to earth in the midst of whirlwinds and whistling storms."[29]

Beyond the nature of the mythic conception itself, there are as well specific details reminiscent of Shelley's drama: for example, a chorus of ten Loves (Amorini) who arise from the sparks of Prometheus' falling torch at the beginning of Act III and begin the process of raising hu-

28. "Shelley at the Opera," *ELH* 48 (1981): 144–71, esp. 161–65.

29. "Giove, accostosi del gran furto, arde di sdegno. Lo scoppio d'un fulmine annunzia la divina vendetta; buja caligine s'avvolge intorno al cocchio del Sole, Minerva sparisce, e il misero Prometeo precipita sulla terra in mezzo al roteare de' turbini ed al fischiare delle procelle" (*Prometeo* 17).

manity from its state of savagery, or the three Graces, who are summoned to the Temple of Virtue in the fifth act to surround the representative human couple whom Prometheus has raised to a state of civilization and whose subsequent nuptials are celebrated with an allegorical epithalamial dance.[30] Most striking is the name of the exemplary woman, danced by the prima ballerina, Palladini: Eone. Inasmuch as Shelley's Ione seems to fulfill a similar role, being the closest to the human state of Shelley's three immortal women, his adoption of the name may have a simpler provenance than his commentators have been able thus far to discover. Even if Shelley were simply following an Italian (or Latin) rendering of the name of Aeschylus' representative human, Io, which is the solution I argued in *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis* (49), an Eone derived by an Italian dramatist to exactly the same purpose would at least suggest precedent.

Beyond what Viganò's *Prometeo* portends for the history of dance, however, it has a further historical import, one whose ideological thrust is in this time uniquely congruent with that of Byron and particularly Shelley. The title page for the libretto, quite understandably, misrepresents the actual circumstances of Viganò's production. His *Prometeo* did not take place in the "R. Teatro alla Scala," the Royal Theater of La Scala, but in the free Milan of the late Napoleonic Empire. By the time the medal was struck and the Shelleys spent their month in Milan, Lombardy had been ceded, as part of the settlement of the Congress of Vienna, to the Hapsburg empire of Austria.[31] It is ironic that the only treatment of the ideological currents underlying Viganò's ballet should have got them exactly wrong. Raymond Trousson, apparently reading one sentence from the libretto, characterizes the work as reactionary, counselling man's duty as total submission to the will of God.[32] On the contrary, Viganò's *Prometeo* is written in the spirit of the Napoleonic mythos and, independent of whether Shelley knew anything beyond its mere existence, its ideological import has bearing on the radical, if refined, politics of Shelley's own drama.

30. Spirits of Love succeed the Furies in *Prometheus Unbound,* I.664 ff.; on the three Graces as models for Asia, Panthea, and Ione, see Wasserman 364–66, and Curran, *Shelley's Annus Mirabilis* 50; the epithalamial duet of Asia and the Voice in the Air (customarily interpreted as Prometheus) at the end of Act II is enlarged and extended in the love duet of the Earth and Moon in Act IV.

31. It is at least conceivable that the elegant tributary medal for Viganò memorialized a state of mind and of polity, the titan of Milanese freedom crushed by the tyranny of this new Jupiter. At the very least, a celebration of Italian artistic genius, in these circumstances, had decidedly nationalistic overtones.

32. *Le thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne* II: 305.

In fairness to Trousson, there are obvious hermeneutic problems involved in interpreting the libretto of a ballet. It is difficult to ascribe irony to a situation wholly dependent for our understanding on a pantomime we can never observe. Still, when after Prometheus is seized his human dependents burn with resentment and Virtue teaches them submission to the divine will and propitiation through prayers and sacrifice, it is also difficult not to see such counsel, which of course cannot be articulated, as heavily tempered by its surroundings. The humanity that originally submitted, without knowing better, to the divine will was in a state of savagery: they are described as "le umane belve," wild, ferocious humanity (12), in the libretto. Asia describes the same abject condition depicted in the first act of Viganò's ballet:

> And Jove now reigned; for on the race of man
> First famine and then toil and 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 desart hearts fierce wants he sent
> And mad disquietudes, and shadows idle
> Of unreal good, which levied mutual war,
> So ruining the lair wherein they raged.
>
> (II.iv.49–58)

Viganò's ballet begins as "Prometheus contemplates the human species, and seeing it coarse, weak, defenceless, deprived of expedients and of reason, and inferior to the brutes themselves, is saddened and laments over it, yet nonetheless he resolves in his great mind by what means to raise the species above all other living beings."[33] The opening act ends in a general melee as the apple given to Eone by the personification of Agriculture precipitates among her fellow humans a brutal struggle for its possession and Prometheus is ready to abandon his plans for their redemption. It is an ugly and naturalistic scene, a remarkable departure from the conventions of classical ballet, and it posits a myth of human development opposed to the Christian fall and implicating the will of Jove, to which Virtue will later counsel submission, in the degradation of humanity.

33. "Prometeo contempla la specie umana, e vendendola rozza, debole, inerme, priva d'accorgimento e di ragione, ed inferiore agli stessi bruti, se ne rattrista, ne geme, e volge nella sua gran mente i mezzi coi quali sollevarla nondimeno al di sopra di tutti gli altri esseri viventi" (*Prometeo* 11).

The final act opens with several Cyclops binding Prometheus to a mountainside, impaling him with a diamond rivet, and summoning the vulture to lacerate his abdomen, while Virtue and her now submissive humanity vainly pray for Jove's intercession. Suddenly there enter on stage Hercules and a group of his followers, for which we may, I think, rightly read Napoleon and the French army. Indignant at the spectacle of this undeserved torture, Hercules does not hesitate, but climbs the mountain, kills the ravaging bird, and liberates Prometheus, who by now is on the verge of death. Such stress on Prometheus' mortal condition may be construed as Italian theatrical sentiment, but it assuredly places strong accent on the linkage of Prometheus with humankind, and on the responsibility taken by a human, Hercules, for freeing their savior. At last, out of love for his son Hercules, which may be interpreted as an acceptance of human rights in the world, Jove relents and descends to crown Prometheus with eternal amaranth. Neither chronology nor characterization are exactly consistent here, but what is unquestionably so is the responsibility of humanity for its own elevation and preservation. The Jove of this ballet is a monarch of the ancien regime, content in his heavenly palace and wholly indifferent to the state of the proletariat left in deprivation on earth. Prometheus the encyclopedist gives humanity knowledge by which to better itself, but it only avails when invested in deeds, when placed into action. This is not so much the abstraction of Faust's "In the beginning was the Deed," as it is an enforcement of human will and power. So Hercules, in his only speech (three and a half lines) of Shelley's drama, greets the regenerate Prometheus:

> Most glorious among spirits, thus doth strength
> To wisdom, courage, and long suffering love
> And thee, who art the form they animate,
> Minister, like a slave.
>
> (III.iii.1–4)

Shelley's accents fall on the subservience of force to wisdom, courage, and love, which after a quarter-century of warfare is highly understandable, but in every other sense his lyrical drama reinforces the ideology of Viganò's "choral drama."[34] Human reason, which dislodges false gods from idolatry, employs its best arts to liberate humanity from degradation. Love socializes this individual reach for excellence. A collective

34. Shelley used this term, so highly suggestive of his generic designation for *Prometheus Unbound*, in a letter to Peacock the day after seeing Viganò's *Otello* (*Letters* II: 4).

strength ensures the assertion of human rights. If there are gods left at this point—whether a reeducated Jove or a dark power named Demogorgon—they are at last operating in the service of the people. But if they do not serve humanity, they (and the institutions that are their support) must be superseded. Viganò's humanist ballet, written in the shadow of Napoleon's waning fortunes, is a testament to the revolutionary ethos of contemporary Europe before it disappeared in the reaffirmation of feudal legitimacy in 1815. *Prometheus Unbound,* written on the other side of that great divide, is a similar testament, a keeping of the old and still burning faith.

As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, it is easily conceivable that Shelley was familiar with every example cited here except for that of Blake. Yet even if he were not, or if he came across a political representation of Prometheus long before he planned his drama and it therefore did not truly register, the large certainties that motivate this argument remain. Prometheus, in these representative examples from Britain's romantic period, is an avatar of revolution against specific oppressions: civil, racial, sexual, and religious. He stands for a humanity bound to an undeserved state and no longer acquiescent in its degradation, a humanity with the will to be free and the power to dictate the terms of that freedom. From his association with mental growth this Prometheus assimilates the psychological threats that come from within—despair, inanition, and a loss of moral authority—to the external political repression he would overthrow. They are equal dangers, the legacy of the ancien regime and of the Napoleonic Empire alike. *Prometheus Unbound,* acknowledging that legacy, therefore adds another integer to the equation—patience. "Methinks we have survived an age of despair," Shelley wrote in the preface to *The Revolt of Islam,* contemplating the wreck of Europe's revolution shortly before he set forth from England. *Prometheus Unbound,* his next major poem, may be a great artistic advance, but it testifies to essentially the same faith. It is at once a manual for survival against that despair and a memorandum of the grievances yet to be assuaged.

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