

“Unbinding Prometheus”

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Abstract

Rewriting is a mosaic of citations, that is, a new kind of writing grafted on an old one. From this vantage point, Aeschylus's play Prometheus Bound filiates the sources of two Romantic poets, namely, Byron and Goethe. These traverse back history to Prometheus and the world of mythology. They identify themselves with the figure of Prometheus, who is a container of the foundational ideals of the Romantic vision of poetry and the poet. By the same token, the text becomes a place for the residual elements between traditional and contemporary communities. In this way, Lord Byron and Goethe appropriate and rework the mythical figure of Prometheus. “Unbinding Prometheus” is an endeavour to examine the different treatments of the myth of Prometheus in two different texts by Byron and Goethe regarding Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound as a manifest text.

Keywords: ‘Anxiety of Influence,’ Intertextuality, parody and Re-writing.

Any work of art is not immune from the influence of predecessors. As such, writers strive to possess the forms in which the spirit of great intellectuals manifests itself. This idea is at the heart of the dual function of the artist, and, more particularly, the poet who performs the task of 'creation' in consciousness of 'tradition'. As to imitation, poetry is a mimetic art. It creates, but it creates by combination and representation. In this respect, the romantic poets, namely, Byron and Goethe appropriate and rework the mythical figure of Prometheus. Accordingly, they combine their own romantic vision of poetry and the status of the artist with what they 'lifted' from Aeschylus.

As one can easily infer, the lyric of subjectivity lies in-between the mythical and the poetic. Poetry entails the poeticization of the mythical. The multiple 'I's, in Byron's and Goethe's texts refer to a dispersed subjectivity occupying infinite positions, which stretch over the space of time separating the original event, that is, the beginning of the myth and all contexts of enunciation blending myths with realities. From this vantage point, the romantic vision handles a notion of parody. This is evident through the transformation partaken by the poets.

The first part of this paper sets the ground for the methodology adopted by the romantics in approaching the myth of Prometheus, more precisely, Harold Bloom's notorious theory of the "anxiety of influence." The second part undertakes a closer study of the texts in Byron's ode and Goethe's poem on Prometheus establishing the ground for a comparative study of: first, the reconfiguration of events, and second, the scenic representation of Prometheus by reference to the tradition of Greek mythology upon which the romantic rhetoric of the representation of Prometheus is built. The focus on the punishment of Prometheus and his closeness to humanity brings the two versions together in terms of the placement of the mythical figure.

Then, I will place the concept of rewriting at the heart of the departures undertaken by the Romantic poets examining the particular ideologies underlying each rewriting. The two texts rub against each other in terms of the stylistic and thematic concerns to produce an extended metaphor of the romantic vision of Prometheus, poetry and the poet.

The Romantic Vision of the Poet and Poetry: Parodying the Myth of Prometheus

An integral part to the re-writing of the myth of Prometheus is that the two poets foreground a form of parody. From a position which obliterates historical and geographical difference, the two poets have developed in the lyrics of their poems an abstruse and imaginative theory with regard to creation. Their texts on Prometheus are the fruits of an outburst of poetic energy under the stimulus of Aeschylus's play. They first break with the form of soliloquy. Besides, the romantic poets obliterate the trajectory of movements in the manifest text. Their poems turn to be forms of resistance against forgetfulness suspended between the past of the myth, its present and future moments. As long as humanity exists, the myth shall always be remembered, hence, the power of the imaginative impulse rendered in a most poetic form.

Perhaps more importantly, the specificity of the two romantic poets' texts is equally definite through their recurrent themes and the peculiarity of the tone of their re-writings of the myth. Their texts give us the metaphor of the palimpsest installing, hence, a double logic in which they blend the mythic and the poetic. The two poets thus operate within a structure of difference. Repetition is not a matter of a mere copy, but has a disruptive effect. It is precisely what Linda Hutcheon

describes as “discontinuity revealed at the heart of continuity, difference at the heart of similarity” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* 11).

The Romantics & the De-familiarization of the Familiar

The peculiarity of the Romantic poets’ texts lies in the fusion of two moments. The first is a poetic moment translated in the infusion of imagination and emotion, and a shift from the neo-classical balance, rationality and rigidity. The second is a socio-political moment, which targets the existing social and political conditions. Romanticism grows out of the tensions between the ideal concept and the failure of life to correspond to it. The grandeur of the figure of Prometheus is analogous to art, which is born out of constraints, lives through combats and dies to ensure freedom. In this regard, Harold Bloom has formulated a theory of poetry, which could lead toward a vivid critical life. This is obvious through Bloom’s early writings on his true precursor, namely, Blake.

Critics sagely observe that Bloom’s rewriting of Blake can be easily translated into the idiom of the ‘The Anxiety of Influence.’ The power of a poem, indeed, lies in both its referentiality and in its non-referentiality. In Bloom’s early reading of Blake, one can notice an emphasis on the relations between precursors and descendants as the central constituent of poetic meaning. Bloom chooses the figure of the covering cherub as the central emblem of his discussion of the ‘Anxiety of Influence.’ The cherub stands for the “creative anxiety that afflicts all imaginative people” (*The Anxiety of Influence* 36). This helps to demarcate the ‘other’ in all romantic quests, an ‘other’ now fully revealed to have its origins within the “spectre of the internalized poetic precursor” (*The Anxiety of Influence* 36), hence, the dialogue between the referential and the semiotic levels in poetic texts.

Intertextuality is the impetus which triggers the romantic poets’ journeys back to Prometheus and the world of mythology turning the familiar into unfamiliar. In their undertakings of the re-writing of the myth of Prometheus, Byron and Goethe engage their faculty of imagination to “make new things familiar and familiar things new,” using S. Johnson’s quote (as cited in <http://www.gardendigest.com/poetry>). In this sense, the poetic text turns to be the container of substitutions and transformations by means of inversion, conversion, expansion and juxtaposition. While the myth of Prometheus is literally presented in Aeschylus’s text, the two romantic poets complicate the matter further. The story in Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* powerfully appeals to the idealists of the revolutionary romantic age. Goethe has seen in Prometheus the human creator shaping men in his own image and scorning the gods. For Byron, Prometheus is a symbol of heroic endurance.

In their different treatments of the mythical figure of Prometheus, the romantics’ representations of the character and the trajectory of events swing between sticking to the manifest text and departing from it. Aeschylus’s drama filiates the sources of the romantic poets. There is, indeed, a double-faced struggle between a poet and an adverse culture, and a struggle between two moments: one is traditional and the other is a contemporary moment. The text becomes a place for the residual elements between different societies. In this way, the romantic poet identifies with the figure of Prometheus, who is a container of the foundational ideals of the romantic vision of poetry and the poet.

Prometheus and the poet interlace in a perfect manner to the point that the readers cannot distinguish between their respective voices. Such an achievement is assured by the innovation of each poet in the process of artistic creation. Each poet brings something new in his distinct representation of Prometheus, hence, transforming the 'sociolect' into an 'idiolect.' A closer study of the texts will yield the romantic poets' divergences in the re-writing of Prometheus at stylistic and thematic levels.

Parodying the Form of the Original Text

Aeschylus's manifest text *Prometheus Bound* fixes the mountain where Prometheus is chained and the eagle is eating from his liver. This fixes the effect and explains the suffering and pain endured by Prometheus. In their turns, the romantic poets transform the substance without altering the outline. In other words, they adopt the same structure in the configuration of the events with slight displacement of the scenic representation of Prometheus.

In his *ode* of Prometheus, Lord Byron opens his poem by an interjection "Titan!" and a direct address of Prometheus followed by a series of rhetorical questions. There is, indeed, a slight displacement of the chronological order of the events as they appear in the myth translated in a series of questions: "What was thy pity's recompense?" Besides, while Prometheus in Aeschylus's text uses the word 'crime' to talk about Zeus' deeds, Byron twists and calls things by their actual name. Byron re-establishes the chronological order in a very swift manner to better dwell on the effects:

The rock, the vulture, and the chain

Moreover, Byron's use of vague terms, like, 'pity' and 'recompense' centralize and foreground the effect. In this way, Byron's address centralizes Prometheus relegating, henceforth, Zeus. From this vantage point, Byron minimizes the figure of the potentate to better handle the worth, courage and nobility of Prometheus.

As for Goethe, the starting point is the present state of human beings who now master the 'gifts' offered by Prometheus. Goethe presents an already acquired state by humans. In terms of the structure of the story, Goethe starts with causes. He first sheds light on the struggle between Prometheus and Zeus. This is an early stage in the myth. Indeed, before he steals fire, Prometheus "the one who thinks ahead" has detected Zeus's determination to leave mortals as ants. Thus, we still retain some form of effect-cause trajectory translated into a rehearsal of an early stage in the story of the myth as presented in Aeschylus's original text. Goethe extends the myth to include a possible threat by Zeus. Goethe does not delineate the myth. He broadens the scope of the myth by substituting Zeus by other evil elements.

Byron and Goethe repeat Aeschylus's pattern of the myth in a different way. Like Shelley, the English Romantic poet, who argues for the condensation of the myth, both Byron and Goethe strive for brevity, which is 'the soul of wit,' using Shakespeare's terminology. The power of poetry lies in saying a lot using few words. Indeed, romantic poets approach the gods through poetry. The newness of Byron's and Goethe's texts does not eradicate the sense of identification. This constitutes a point at which the two texts meet with the manifest text paving the way for a discussion of the appropriation of Prometheus's attributes and deeds.

The myth of Prometheus is cherished by romantic poets. The moral interest of the fable, which is so powerfully sustained by the suffering and endurance of Prometheus, elevates Prometheus to a rank of a moral and intellectual perfection. The subject of Aeschylus's play *Prometheus Bound* is the transgression of Prometheus, who brings fire to mankind and confers on them other benefits. Indeed, Prometheus endows mortals with 'all art.' The notion of art is inextricably related to the romantics' vision of the world. Vision comes through the notion of art. Moreover, Prometheus steals fire to the gods.

As a motif, fire opens the eyes and minds of humans in order to rise above animality. In this way, humans become artistic developing a taste for goodness and beauty living in a dignified way. That is why, the deeds and attributes of Prometheus are celebrated in Byron's Ode and Goethe's poem. In Aeschylus's text, Prometheus relates what he has done for mankind to the chorus of sea-nymphs:

Until I showed the risings of the stars,
And settings hard to recognize. And I
Found Number for them, chief device of all,
Groupings of letters, Memory's hand maid that,
And mother of the Muses.

However, the two poets sing Prometheus's deeds and attributes.

The Representation of Prometheus's Attributes

Byron's ode to Prometheus sings the deeds and attributes of Prometheus. He glorifies the persona of Prometheus endowing him with poetical characteristics surpassing in that the portrayal of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Prometheus is, in Shelley's judgement, a more poetical character than Satan. In addition to courage and majesty, firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, Prometheus is exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge and the desire for personal aggrandizement. Besides, in Byron's ode, the persona is no longer Prometheus narrating his story, but rather a son of Prometheus, who is the poet writing a praise song to his father Prometheus in order to establish a sense of justice for the 'Friend of Mankind.' The readers feel the poet's as well as Man's indebtedness to their 'Saviour,' who is a Christ-like figure.

Not only does Byron sing Prometheus's attributes, but he also transforms what is 'given' into the lineaments of a solely visionary imagination. Indeed, Byron's text unites his lyrically creative power of imagination and his passion for reforming the world. This is evident in the last stanza when the persona addresses directly his context 'A Mighty lesson we inherit.' Though the figure of the potentate is relegated, the poet's power lies in addressing his time, namely, the 'French Monarch' and its tyranny, hence, illuminating the poet's function within his society. Byron's digressive technique in the last stanza calls attention to the poem's self-reflexive relationship to its historical moment. The poet, therefore, appears as an enlightenment hero, who guides the community. He urges them to learn from Prometheus's 'mighty lesson' and love each other.

As for Goethe, the handling of Prometheus's deeds and attributes moves away from the sense of *écriture blanche* to create loaded and charged images. In this sense, the myth turns to be a kind of vessel reappropriating the attributes of Prometheus in terms of outburst. Goethe's poem turns the mythical into human. The myth is never cut off from the reality of humanity. The myth

shapes humanity since Prometheus stands for Man. That is why, Goethe recuperates the basics of Prometheus' heroic act, namely, his rebellion against the god of gods, Zeus to better accentuate the attributes in a form of confrontation between two single characters: Prometheus/Man versus. all form of hate/cruelty embodied in Zeus. Goethe has established an after-state in which human beings are fully aware of the now/here of their times, and like Prometheus, their benefactor, they are determined to stand still in front of totalitarianism and tyranny.

The rewriting of Prometheus's attributes has become a sort of bespeaking of humane and divine self. One should follow the example set by Prometheus to bend the ills of one's community and society. While human beings sympathize with their liberator under the form of un-dissociable fusion with Prometheus, the poet is determined to keep watch over humans:

Here I will sit, forming men
After my own image.
It will be a race like me,
To suffer, to weep,
To enjoy and to rejoice,
And to pay no attention to you,
As I do!

This revolutionary tone elevates the poet to the status of a viceroy, who is full aware of the persistence of evil.

Like Prometheus, the poet can see ahead of his times. Bound by a love for humanity, the romantic poet is not interested in filling the gaps, but rather in fighting the evil by returning to the original myth of Prometheus and his strong unrelenting love for humanity. There is a parallelism between Prometheus, who rebels against despotism, and the romantics who rebel against the tenets of neo-classicism in order to foreground what has been neglected, more precisely, the relegation of emotions and the power of imagination.

In short, this paper has striven to examine the re-writings undertaken by the Romantics of the myth of Prometheus. The peculiarity of the romantic poets' texts lies in the fusion of a poetic moment with a socio-political moment. It is thus quite appropriate to say that the grandeur of the figure of Prometheus is analogous to art which was born out of struggle, lives to voice the marginalized and dies in the name of freedom.

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