

OVERCOMING TYRANNY: LOVE, TRUTH AND MEANING IN SHELLEY'S *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*

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Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is a rewriting of Aeschylus's *Bound Prometheus*. As such, it is a work of Romantic Hellenism which, as so many Romantic texts, focuses on the ideas of Revolution and change, as well as the possibility of a better society. Prometheus, in his unenlightened state of primordial energy, provided mankind with the fire of enlightenment but, at the same time, angered Jupiter by his disobedience and the theft of the divine gift. Prometheus's defiant energy is described in terms that are analogous to Jupiter's destructive rage. It is made clear that Promethean society can only prosper if its founder – joined by the love of Asia – overcomes his hatred of Jupiter. Romantic love is seen as the force that can annihilate the despotism of Jupiter and is, therefore, used as a medium of fate and truth which cannot be controlled by anybody. This article, in reading *Prometheus Unbound*, focuses on the revolutionary and revolutionising quality of love to effect truth.

Shelley, in writing *Prometheus Unbound* (1816), chose a highly politicised mythological figure that had first been used dramatically by Aeschylus. He did not use Prometheus in a narrowly political or revolutionary sense, but was aware that the “revolutions of power are as nothing when viewed in relation to eternity” (Carey 1975:90). The poet conceptualises Prometheus as something greater than merely a response to current events; rather, in his “lyrical reading drama” he provides “an exploration of the timeless laws underlying the repetitive patterns of human motivation and activity, political and private” (Carey 1975:82-83). Or, as Maurice Bowra pointed out long ago, Shelley's “Prometheus is not a real person in whose individual existence he believes, but a figure who symbolizes a great abstract idea” (1988:106).

Michael Ferber explains the Romantic fascination with Prometheus with the assumption that Prometheus was considered as “a symbol of enlightenment, of resistance to tyranny, of republicanism, even of America and George Washington” (1993:66). Shelley’s attitude towards the figure of Prometheus was an ambivalent one, since he initially, as in *Queen Mab* (1813), despised his character due to his being responsible for all the ills that were unleashed on mankind; Jupiter, on the other hand, was understood by Shelley as the supreme master of all gods and protector of mankind. With the gift of fire that Prometheus provided, man abandoned his vegetarian (and in Shelley’s view) natural diet. Only once man had returned to this primeval state of vegetarianism would the original state of happiness, of herbs and water, be restored (Kreutz 1963:82).

Helmut Viebrock suggests that personal difficulties (the deaths of Shelley’s first wife and a child) and a protracted stay in Italy where he was able to observe England’s worsening political situation from a distance, led to Shelley’s adopting a different attitude towards the figure of Prometheus. The result of this changed attitude is his image in *Prometheus Unbound* of a “moral” figure that is characterised by his “sufferings and endurance” as well as his “firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force” (Shelley 1977:133). Shelley then understands Prometheus as free from the “taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandisement” (1977:133), which distinguish his hero from the (anti-)hero of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Satan, whose character is dominated by these so-called “taints.” This image of Prometheus is also in clear opposition to Aeschylus’s conception of Prometheus in that in the *Bound Prometheus* Prometheus finally reconciles with Zeus and, in doing so, gives up the principles for which he has suffered. In that respect, Shelley’s text is more or less “independent” and “subversive of its source” (Ward 1982:193).¹

One essential difference between Aeschylus and Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* is that Prometheus teaches himself to overcome his hatred of Jupiter. However, it is not only the dissolution of his hatred taking place within Prometheus’s mind, which is portrayed in the drama, but his overcoming his negative passion – his hatred – through love. It is the centrality of love and truth – constituents of Shelley’s idealism – that I aim to discuss in this article.

Wolf Hirst argues that “Prometheus overcomes his own fictions of omnipotence” (1994:232) and thereby gains awareness of the meaning not only of

¹ Gurr does not acknowledge that “Aeschylus [...] failed ethically in his responsibilities as a poet towards the emancipation of mankind” (1998:72) but argues instead that the “sarcastic validation of death or suffering” in *Prometheus Unbound* “can hardly be taken seriously,” for “a play ending in reconciliation could either be seen as a mere *utopia* of reconciliation or even as an undermined sarcastic ending” (1998:78).

his own existence but also of the happiness that a terrestrial life of love can afford. Shelley sees Prometheus as representing “the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends” (Shelley 1977:133). Maurice Bowra equally comments that he “is what Shelley regarded as the noblest force in the human self, the desire for the good and the willingness to make any sacrifice for it” (1988:107). At the end of the drama, Prometheus proves victorious, for his idealism and his conviction of the power of love have become so overwhelming that Demogorgon, the oracle and mouthpiece of fate, announces the downfall of Jupiter. Prometheus’s Platonic idealism consists in love and truth, and Shelley conceptualises *Prometheus Unbound* as an expression of hope for ages yet to come:

My purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarize the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms 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 which the unconscious passenger tramples into dust, although they would bear the harvest of his happiness. (1977:135)

Prometheus’s bestowing the fire on mankind, therefore, was an act of kindness – part of Shelley’s “beautiful idealism.” And the responsibility that Prometheus feels for man is heightened as he is exposed to the arbitrary punishment that Jupiter inflicts through his minions, thereby reinforcing the former’s link (of love) with man. The act of bringing the fire to man, in that respect, may be understood not only as an expression of sympathy with the oppressed and unenlightened, but also as an expression of the love with the help of which he is enabled to overcome the hatred of his oppressor. The traditional view of titanism as “revolt against tradition and authority” with Prometheus’s “heroic endurance and an obdurate, defiant rejection of compromise” (Hirst 1994:227), however, does not take into account the means by which Jupiter’s tyranny is ended.² For Prometheus as a representation of a “new” type of titan it is therefore necessary to renounce the curse he articulated in a state of greatest passion and rage. As William D. Brewer points out in that regard, one “should not forget that Shelley’s apocalypse is not final, and that future falls are possible even after the apocalypse of *Prometheus Unbound*” (1991:51). Timothy Webb emphasises the importance of love in Prometheus’s resistance against the violent authority of Jupiter, for “[e]ventually, Prometheus is able to conquer these dark murmurings from his own heart but only with the help of Asia, [...] who [...] represents the capacity for love within Prometheus himself” (Webb 1977:118). Yet, Prometheus, like Jupiter, is an ambivalent figure, for, as Shelley observes,

² See Webb’s remarks on titanism and the significance of volcanoes: “Many of the Titans were imprisoned under mountains; volcanic activity was therefore associated with their violent efforts to break out and to overthrow the divine establishment” (1977:220).

happiness, and, above all, love, ideals for which Prometheus is prepared to suffer continual pain. Prometheus's apostrophe is passionate, venting his unrestrained rage and hatred against Jupiter at the injustice done him; one moment he is "eyeless in hate" while only two lines later he is able to state more collectedly that the "misery" that has befallen him is only the expression of "vain revenge" on the part of Jupiter. The ambiguity of "vain revenge" as, on the one hand, alluding to Prometheus's conviction of the approaching end of Jupiter's rule while, on the other, rebuking Jupiter for his high-handedness and vanity to believe that he could subdue Prometheus, reflects the change that Prometheus is undergoing towards hope and love.

Emphasising his supposed sense of independence of mind and liberty – even in confinement – he provocatively states that "torture and solitude, / Scorn and despair" constitute his "Empire" (I, 15). In fact, his inability to sleep and the workings of his imagination, that is, nightmares of the "ghastly people of the realm of dream," are haunting and make him restless, but they also induce him to reflect. He is aware of Jupiter's tormenting him at all times, an awareness that is further heightened by the physical pain from which he cannot escape, for "Heaven's winged hound," the eagle, "His beak in poison not his own, tears up / My heart" (I, 34-35). "Solitude," in a Wordsworthian context of communion with Nature, was positive and inspiring; and even for Prometheus it provides a state and time of isolation in which he can reflect, endure and try to overcome his hatred.³ Although his torment is enforced mentally, physically as well as externally through the "genii of the whirlwind" that "rage" against him, "afflict[ing]" him "with keen hail," the cycle of day and night provides fresh hope for his delivery. The eagle vainly attempts to tear out the titan's perpetually re-growing heart; Shelley thereby indicates Jupiter's ultimate impotence, since although he wants to destroy the physical heart, he is unable to destroy the symbolic power of Prometheus's heart as an expression of love.

A turning point in his suffering is reached when he can acknowledge his having overcome his hatred of Jupiter. Instead of hating Jupiter, he pities him: "Disdain? Ah no! I pity thee" (I, 53). Christ-like, he is able to pity the tyrant who has tortured him. However, it is through this suffering that he has realised the meaning of love and truth, for only these will secure stability and happiness. Although Prometheus's renouncing of his curse of Jupiter has the effect of anti-climax, it testifies to his awareness that Jupiter's "ill tyranny" is doomed and will come to an end before long. Prometheus's abrupt change has been read not only as anti-climactic but as contradictory and inconsistent, for as Stuart M. Sperry notes: "how can one conceive of genuine moral reformation that arises unaccountably, that is unprepared for by a

³ Jupiter's solitude is different, for he has threatened everybody with his addiction to power so that he is "friendless," does not know "faith or love," except self-love, and therefore will feel the greater tortures when Demogorgon proclaims his fate. See *Prometheus Unbound*, II, iv, 47ff.

process of conscious recognition and a convincing renewal of the emotions?" (1981:242). His change is imperative, however, to enforce Shelley's idealistic vision of love.

Prometheus realises that he will be responsible for Jupiter's downfall. The end of the tyrant's rule will be brought about without employing any violent means but with the help of love and truth, which will in turn elevate Prometheus to Jupiter's throne. Jupiter's chaining of the titan, in that respect, appears to be a fight against the inevitable – against fate itself – for he is unable to kill Prometheus.

Jupiter's inexpressible fear of the "secret known / To thee [Prometheus], and to none else of living things, / Which may transfer the sceptre of wide Heaven" (I, 371-73) is given voice to in Mercury's speech when he asks Prometheus to renounce his curse, to repent and ask forgiveness. On behalf of Jupiter, Mercury threatens Prometheus with "slow agonies in Hell" (I, 376), "unimagined pains" (I, 375) and "savagely fiends" (I, 369). Mercury acknowledges that Prometheus is "wise" "firm and good," but at the same time appeals to the titan's "haughty heart" (I, 387) to "bend thy soul in prayer" (I, 376) and ask Jupiter's pardon. Prometheus, all too certain of the truth of the "secret" mentioned by Mercury, sternly retorts: "He but requites me for his own misdeed" (I, 392). Mercury even offers Prometheus to be reinstated in Heaven and to be able to participate in the "voluptuous joy" of the gods, but the sincere "Champion of Heaven's slaves" (I, 443) rejects this dishonest offer. The immediate punishment for this further instance of disobedience will be administered by the furies, "the ministers of pain and fear / And disappointment and mistrust and hate / And clinging crime" (I, 452-54). This parallelism, which occurs in the form of an enumeration, further contributes to defining the cruelty of Jupiter's punishment of the titan. Prometheus, despite the "execrable" (I, 449) furies, resists all temptation of reconciling with Jupiter and pronounces that "Pain is my element as hate is thine; / Ye rend me now: I care not" (I, 476-77). His changed – and enlightened – attitude towards Jupiter and his tyranny is reflected in his changing through love rather than hate, or, as Marilyn Butler points out, "a solitary hero frees himself from the sterility and self-inflicted punishment" (1982:142) by rejecting his pain and living up to the principles of love and truth. Stuart Curran similarly notes that "the repeated identification of Prometheus as a human rather than immortal figure" (1986:444) conveys a sense of responsibility for mankind on Prometheus, since he bestowed the gift of fire and thereby contributed to end man's subjection and Jupiter's absolute tyranny. As the Chorus of Furies points out, Prometheus conferred "clear knowledge" (I, 542) and consciousness of suffering on man.

Yet, Prometheus does not boast of his bringing knowledge – including the sciences – to man, but considers his 'missionary' undertaking as necessary and

inevitable.⁴ He bestowed the gift of fire in the awareness that “Truth, liberty and love” (I, 651) would develop as guiding forces on earth (despite the many ruthless actions of Jupiter) whilst Heaven is plagued by “strife, deceit and fear” (I, 651ff) as well as “fierce confusion” (I, 652). His endurance is marked by his awareness that he is being punished for the love that he considers worthwhile: “Yet am I king over myself, and rule / The torturing and conflicting throngs within” (I, 492-93). The gentle “Spirits” further reveal to Prometheus that “’twas the soul of Love; / ’Twas the hope, the prophecy, / Which begins and ends in thee” (I, 705-707). In other words, Prometheus is the symbol of hope, and love (not only for man but also for Asia) has enabled him to be oblivious to the pain of the tyranny of Jupiter. In that respect, “Love is presented as a viable alternative to the barren and self-destructive man-versus-God scenario. Prometheus recognises the importance of Asia’s love [...] and Asia becomes a vital part of his unchaining and the renewal of the universe” (Brewer 1991:51). Shelley, according to Ross Woodman, is counteracting gender stereotypes in that Prometheus “must [...] withdraw completely from his own limited maleness to permit the unknown female to assume control” (1981:227) and power. So, Asia is no longer seen as a complement to him, but her subjective love leads to Prometheus’s deliverance. Love, both platonic and sexual, thus overcomes structural order by establishing peace and self-control.⁵

Asia’s soliloquy at the beginning of Act II announces the “wak[ing]” of Spring. The season has changed, and the “crimson dawn” (II, 27) signifies a new beginning (of freedom) for Prometheus. Asia possesses the visionary gift with the help of which Prometheus is able to predict the “positive apocalypse” (Brewer 1991:50), for she sees “a shade – a shape – ’tis He, arrayed / In the soft light of his own smiles, which spread / Like radiance” (II, 120-22). The “enchantment old” (II, 100) that produced this vision then turns into “fine clear sounds” (II, 165) inducing Asia and Panthea to follow them, a journey that Earl R. Wasserman has interpreted as “the journey of Love to Demogorgon’s realm” (1971:324).

On their way to Demogorgon’s cave they encounter two fauns one of whom discourses on the natural order of things, the “Chaos old” (II, i, 92) and Prometheus’s position in this chaos. It is Prometheus’s task to provide this chaos with a new order in that he reunites the different elements on earth with the supremacy of Heaven. Following the music, they reach Demogorgon, “the Eternal, the Immortal” (II, iii,

⁴ Ferber does not only consider the hero as the bearer of fire but he assumes that “Prometheus might [...] stand for the imagination, or even the poetic faculty, which created the human world” (1993:83).

⁵ Isomaki, “Love as Cause in *Prometheus Unbound*,” p. 659, emphasises the importance of Asia and her centrality by functioning as a dominant force of love in Act II: “What intervenes between Prometheus’s retraction of the curse and the fall of Jupiter is, of course, Act II, which belongs to Asia, who has been associated with love.” See also, Pottle 1965:133-43.

95) under whose throne the “snake-like Doom” (II, iii, 97) only waits to unfold itself (and its meaning).

Shelley’s image of the snake is a symbol of the prophetic notion of destiny, which is as colourless, amorphous and bodiless as Demogorgon himself (Viebrock 1967:344). Christian Kreutz comprehends the changing of the snake’s (linear) shape – the forming of a ring – as a symbol of the eternal ring without beginning and end. The destruction of this (ideal and) perfect shape signifies the adoption of what Shelley calls “form” (Kreutz 1963:117-118). “Form,” in this context, refers to the meaningful changeability of the shape of the snake, which stands for the fate of both man and gods, thereby implying the symbolic power to announce radical change by uncurling and breaking her eternal form (Viebrock 1971:23). Thus, neither the snake nor Demogorgon determine history or fate; rather, they read the signs and interpret them in that they realise the fatal and all-deciding *Endzeit* of a destructive power such as Jupiter’s. Karl Heinz Göller defines the imagery with which Shelley describes both Demogorgon and the snake in terms that acknowledge the supertemporal and superspatial significance of these harbingers of fate (1963:381).⁶

The figure of Demogorgon, as the snake, has been ambivalently discussed.⁷ Viebrock suggests that Demogorgon is a telling-name that combines *demiourgos agathos*, and adds that the aspect of *gorgo* must have also had a bearing on the name as it is understood in *Prometheus Unbound* (1971:121). Christian Kreutz (1963:121) objects to this reading, and J. F. C. Gutteling offers a more comprehensive description than Viebrock’s, focusing on the characteristics of both his being and function.⁸ Demogorgon is initially depicted as an unspecific “mighty Darkness” (II, iv, 3); he occupies the “seat of Power” (II, iv, 4) from which “rays of gloom” (II, iv, 4) are streaming. He seems to be a shadow of an actual person, a person that might naturally belong to the Hades depicted in the first act. He is further characterised by Panthea as “A living Spirit” (II, iv, 7), the embodiment of eternity and wisdom. Upon Asia’s question who is responsible for the hardships on earth, however, he hesitates to acknowledge directly and frankly the name of Jupiter, but replies in mysterious riddles – reflecting what Wasserman terms his “failure to communicate oracular truths” (1971:323) – that provide the cryptic answer that “All spirits are enslaved which serve things evil: / Thou knowest if Jupiter be such or no” (II, iv,

⁶ Göller 1963:381: “Die Bilder verweisen durch ihren spirituellen Gehalt auf eine von der Transzendenz durchwebte Wirklichkeit, die durch den Vergleich nicht anschaulicher wird, sondern sich in ihrer ewigen Geistigkeit offenbart.”

⁷ See Bowra’s unconvincing view that the “son who overthrows Jupiter is Demogorgon” (1988:108).

⁸ Gutteling 1924:285: “Demogorgon apparently is a fusion of three ideas: the inscrutable Mystery at the background of existence, Eternity and the Destiny which pushes the Tyrant from the throne. We may understand him as Shelley’s conception of Fate.”

110-11), confirming Asia's allusion to Prometheus's suffering and its being inflicted by Jupiter:

Prometheus gave to man, for which he hangs
 Withering in destined pain: but who rains down
 Evil, the immedicable plague, which, while
 Man looks on his creation like a God
 And sees that it is glorious, drives him on,
 The wreck of his own will, the scorn of earth,
 The outcast, the abandoned, the alone?
 Not Jove: while yet his frown shook Heaven, ay, when
 His adversary from adamantine chains
 Cursed him, he trembled like a slave. (II, iv, 99-108)

Having established that Jupiter is guilty of the enslavement of both Prometheus and mankind, as well as of the "tyranny of heaven" (III, ii, 57), she offers a eulogy of the great titan:

Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes
 Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers,
 Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth, fadeless blooms;
 That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings
 The shape of Death; and Love he sent to bind
 The disunited tendrils of that vine
 Which bears the wine of life, the human heart;
 And he tamed fire, which like some beast of prey
 Most terrible, but lovely, played beneath
 The frown of man ... (II, iv, 59-68)

Act III, Scene 3 depicts Prometheus's liberation through Hercules; the pseudo-fate that Jupiter had imposed on him is ended, and he is praised as "Most glorious among Spirits" (III, iii, 1) who is characterised by "wisdom, courage, and long-suffering love" (III, iii, 2). Asia is commended in terms of light, and light/fire (also signifying enlightenment) is understood as a force that makes possible an "effortless victory of light within the human mind," thereby rewarding the "passive resistance" and "boycott" of Prometheus (Brinton 1966:168, 172, 173). In other words, "Shelley does not insist on an immediate revolution" (Brinton 1966:172), but introduces the elements of endurance and love to emphasise that only these feelings will enable man to progress and be happy.⁹

Act IV depicts the general rejoicing at having overcome the "hell of hatreds, and hopes, and fears" (IV, 119). Shelley's natural philosophy is reflected in the equation of "Earth, Air and Light" with "Love, Thought, and Breath" (IV, 148 and

⁹ *Prometheus Unbound*, III, iii, 151.

151).¹⁰ By attributing powerful love and a “Spirit of Wisdom” to Earth, Shelley sees her as a significant force in the creation of a new world – without “visions of hate and care” (IV, 62) – as well as the advent of a new age. Like the rain that cleanses terrestrial as well as heavenly life from the memory of Jupiter’s misrule, “the deep music of the rolling world” will heal the wounds inflicted by the cruel tyrant. The “might of healing springs” will support the music in restoring man to health and independence. Through this process the two spheres from their unhappy past, “Heaven and Earth [are] united” by an immortal titan who feels for those on whom he has inflicted – unconsciously and involuntarily – so many ills but also whom he has given knowledge, consciousness and free will.

The “perpetual Orphic song” expresses both the stability, love and happiness for which Prometheus has endured pain and suffered punishment, but it also testifies to the belief that, provided Prometheus is not corrupted by the ambitions of the tyrant, lasting happiness is possible. It is the language of poets that narrated the account of Prometheus, and it will be poets, too, who, Demogorgon-like, articulate visions and can therefore be conceived of as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” (Shelley 1977:508); for, according to Shelley, “Poets are superior to historians and philosophers, they do not confine themselves to the depiction of what was or to speculations about what is true” (Rohmann 1994:161), but they represent a vision of eternal truth. In the new Promethean society, poetry “becomes the keystone of spiritual freedom which alone guarantees a humane quality of life” (Rohmann 1994:166).

Prometheus’s “individualism” and his “insistence on the dignity of man as MAN” have overcome the “cause of all political evil [embodied by Jupiter]” (Brinton 1966:176), that is, Prometheus, through his resistance, has managed to create an order that is characterised by “beauty, love, calm, harmony” (IV, 527) as well as his “selfless desire for the good of its object” (Isomaki 1989:659). Ward adds that Prometheus represents an idea rather than an individual being, since “Prometheus is not a New Man, nor indeed a discrete entity” (1982:195). Prometheus “is humanity at an idealist extreme and outside the bounds of time and discrete identity” (1982:Ward 195).¹¹ While Jupiter is condemned to linger eternally in the “void

¹⁰ See Bromwich 2003: 239-59.

¹¹ Gurr argues, however, that “Prometheus in Shelley’s conception is not only Man personified, but also the archetypal poet” of Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* (1998:79). Wasserman, on the other hand, provides a more appropriate characterisation of the titan by observing that “the events of the first three acts are not intended as heroic human drama, and man plays only an off-stage role. As Demogorgon’s final words make clear, Shelley never thought that earthly man, in contradistinction to Prometheus, could ever be released from the strenuous moral resoluteness made necessary by the continuous threat of resurrected evil. The scope of the Prometheus action is cosmic, not human; its end is apocalyptic, not utopian” (1971:306).

abyss" (IV, 554), Prometheus has filled the void left by "Heaven's despotism" (IV, 555) with the "tender light" (IV, 496) of love, truth and harmony. Love, according to Shelley, will survive all oppression. In that respect, he recalls not only Prometheus's heroic resistance but recommends to future 'human' titans "To defy Power, which seems omnipotent; / To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates" (IV, 572-74). Demogorgon at the end of *Prometheus Unbound* highlights the ultimate importance of "Prometheus's commitment to active love" (Ward 1982:195) without which Jupiter's tyranny could never have been overthrown:

Love, from its awful throne of patient power
 In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour
 Of dread endurance, from the slippery, steep,
 And narrow verge of crag-like agony, springs
 And folds over the world its healing wings. (IV, 557-61)

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