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THE STRUCTURE OF *PROMETHEUS BOUND*

Summary: In the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound* the problem of the stage action is one of the most important ones. Prometheus' obligatory total passivity from the very beginning requires a closer examination of the drama's structure. Instead of concrete physical movements there are ideological questions put forward: what is the meaning of opposition-revolution against the absolute power? What can be our relation like with the opposite positions (Prometheus – Zeus)? Examining these questions the reader gets knowledge of each characters' answers to the main conflict: how to define our place in a given – divine or human – order? In this respect the role of the *Prometheus Bound*' Chorus is surprising, even exceptional in the history of Greek tragedy.

Key words: Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, passivity, opposition-revolution, Chorus, Greek tragedy.

Quite a common critical comment against Aeschylean dramas is that they are static, which might as well be to say they are plain. These kind of comments are often supported by examples of *The Persians* and/or *Prometheus Bound*. *The Persians*, however, is the sole Greek tragedy to treat a historical event, that came down to us, representing an eloquent testimony to refute the theory quite common in even today's textbooks suggesting that ancient Greek playwrights exclusively rendered mythological stories on stage. By title we also know of *Taking of Miletus* by Phrynichus, another tragedy to give account of history, namely the capture and destruction of the Greek colonial city Miletus of Asia Minor by the Persians. By a court decree Phrynichus had to pay a severe fine for speaking of the role of Athens in a condemning tone in his play.

And of course, a drama will always be static when one only considers the lack of the traditional turns and recognition, *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. Which is only fair, since there is no person or event in the play to recognize: the plot unfolds from the uncertain to reveal the sinister and more and more imminent bleak truth by the end. Messengers deliver accounts of the war being fought far away from the Persian court, which is the fictitious scene of the plot, so no actual conflicts, *agons* take place in the real-scene plot. The appearance of Darius' ghost and his brief interaction with the Chorus of the Elders with a hint of a conflict may be considered an exception (vv. 681 to 703). Naturally, there is no change of the scenes in this play, this kind of dramaturgy being foreign to Greek drama. Nor is there any movement, save what is

provided by the *stasima* of the Chorus. Considering that the Chorus consists of the Persian Elders, one must dispense with high expectations as to the vigor of these dances. Atossa leaves the scene for no longer than the time of a chorus song (vv. 531 to 702). The subsequent appearances of Darius' ghost, the Messenger and finally Xerxes constitute the rest of the action to add to the unfolding of the drama through the dialog between Atossa and the Chorus. Aeschylus thus decided on a rather risky dramaturgy when consistently developing the tragedy focusing on the *effects* of the past or, more precisely, the *effects* of the off-scene events in the *near past*, rather than rendering the story as a series of subsequent acts of the characters as he did in *Agamemnon*, *Choephores*, *Eumenides* and *The Seven Against Thebes*.

One cannot defend *Prometheus Bound* with the arguments used for *The Persians*. That the stage image of *Prometheus Bound* is infinitely and unchangeably static, is beyond question. This play is directors' and dramaturges' nightmare. It is certainly hard to think of an opening scene more boldly resisting the spectacular and more clearly lacking impression than the protagonist being nailed to an object – a column or a rock, by the director's discretion – so effectively that he would be held tight for the entire duration of the play. And while one may give it to the plot in *The Persians* that it offers an account of a chronological chain of events starting from the past and unfolding in the present, thus linking these times and creating a tension which culminates in the tragic end; *Prometheus Bound* seems to be defenseless under the accusation of being static. Quite so, for is there anything *more* static for a scene than Prometheus chained to a rock in the middle? In the *prologos* Aeschylus describes in full length and detail and with diffuse accuracy how Hephaestus and his two servants (*Force* and *Violence*) drag in Prometheus and chain this Titan tightly to the rocks of Caucasus. As a result, Prometheus will be denied of the barest range of motion, even less than Atossa was allowed in *The Persians*.

Prometheus is static and immobile, forcing the audience to look directly at a single entity from the first moment of the show until the very last. In his statue-like posture Prometheus' torment is interpreted as the metaphor of the *unchangeability* and *permanence* of his situation.

It appears as if the spectators were looking at a work of art called "The Tormented Titan" in an exhibition hall rather than attending a theater performance – except this image, this work of art is created in front of the audience at a really significant moment of a theater play to remain there all along the present time of the drama.

This is not the only astounding aspect of the prologue of *Prometheus Bound* even if Hephaestus and his henchmen were not commenting and explaining what is happening, the act of tying up Prometheus would still be obviously the execution of some sentence meting out a punishment imposed on a fallen hero. For the course of the drama it means that the tragic fulfillment of a series of events (i.e. a mythological story) constitutes the starting point of a stage act. Indeed, this is not entirely unusual in Greek tragedy, in that there is a number of examples following this pattern. From the Aeschylean dramas *Choephores* and *Eumenides* are based on the same dramaturgy, the preceding events in the former being the murder of Agamemnon; and

Orestes' matricide in the latter. A typical example for this pattern in the Sophoclean literature is *Ajax*, where the antecedents are the protagonist going mad, his crime and the due punishment. Another of Sophocles' dramas, *Oedipus Tyrannus* may also be classified as a representative of this kind of dramaturgy: the plague on Thebes is the last of a tragic chain of events, serving as the outset of the tragedy's stage present time.

From a certain point of view the opening scene of *Prometheus Bound* is exceptional indeed amongst the Greek tragedies: the audience experience actual *physical* insults on the stage. The Titan's chaining to the rock is described in such specific and explicit detail that the spectator will completely perceive the physical abuse delivered by words.

*Put them on his hands: strong, now with the hammer: strike.
Nail him to the rock.
(55–56),*

*Drive the obstinate jaw of the adamantine wedge right through his breast:
drive it hard.
(64–65),*

*Throw the girth around his sides.
(71),*

*Get below now, and hoop his legs in strongly.
(74)*

That Prometheus remains passive and silent enduring this torture will not impair the effectiveness of the description. As it is known, there cannot have been more than two characters involved in conversation at the same time on the stage of the Greek theater, and Aeschylus made a virtue of this dramaturgical necessity to amplify the impact on the spectator. Prometheus will thus silently stand the torments, giving by the way evidence of his heroic qualities.

One might think that an immortal Titan – which Prometheus certainly is – takes no risk in facing most any physical retribution. But in dramaturgical terms this is not what happens on the stage. This Aeschylean, stage-Prometheus *does* suffer great pains from his tortured limbs and will continuously wail and lament in front of the Chorus and Io. What really is presented in the prologue is the punishment of a hero that had defied authority and thus in turn had to spectacularly fall.

Prometheus Bound is a drama of a unique structure. What the viewers actually can see is that one character, Prometheus, recalls a conflict from the past while the other is not even present in the scene. One might argue that Zeus' demonstrative absence from his vanquished foe is undoubtedly justifiable, denoting the restored balance of power, the final conclusion of the fight fought between Zeus and Prometheus, the Authority and the Rebel. Zeus will only convey his will to Prometheus by his servants of various functions: Hephaestus, Force and Violence shall be the executors of his sentence. Hermes, at the end of the drama is merely Zeus' channel to communicate his will to Prometheus. Zeus' superior absence, which reveals the in-

violable and invulnerable nature of his power, adds to the humiliation of his vanquished adversary.

Yet, there is much more to this Aeschylean drama than the conflict between Zeus and Prometheus. The message of this drama points beyond the mere desposal and the superiority of power mirrored in the act of chaining the Titan to a rock, which is nothing more than the starting point of this Aeschylean drama, only the onset of a plot that has little to do with Zeus himself.

Throughout *Prometheus Bound* the question how one can relate to the defiance of authority is investigated. The question phrased through a specific situation of a specific rebel in Aeschylus' drama is eternal and impersonal: how can and how must one relate to an attitude that questions the omnipotence of the prevailing authority, to a firm and solid standpoint dramatically rendered as Prometheus' defiance?

This question yields the first problem play of the history of the theater: there is the revolt as the prerequisite to evoke the consequences that later all characters have to take sides with. And in *this* sense what Prometheus represents is *inescapable*. Prometheus is literally static. He is bound indeed, and so is his *position* in the matter.

That this drama is thus static is beyond argument, but it is static on purpose to express its message. The brutal and humiliating retaliation the Titan has to suffer in consequence of his revolt, his incapacitation so concretely rendered on the stage represent the immutability of the adversaries' situation, that of the Power and the Rebel.

The Rebel had failed, and the revolt had not corrupted the Power. Knowing this reveals that it is not the story of the revolt that happened prior to the stage present that is important. Nevertheless, the audience will learn about the events of the past, primarily from Prometheus' chance remarks and monologues in vv. 107–111; 252; 254: the stealing of fire; 168–172: the Secret hazarding Zeus' power; 228–239; 265–267: the Pity for humankind; 248: the Hope given to humankind; 437–496: the full account of the Titan's good works. However important elements these accounts are of the drama, they are by far not the most important.

Incidentally, these 'flashbacks' classify more as epic than drama elements. They recall and describe events and deeds by the power of the word, whereas the *dramatic* text – manifested through the act on the stage – also has the capacity to demonstrate words and the supporting acting at the same time, and the plot of the drama is born in front of the audience. In the narrative parts Prometheus is the past revived – in dramatical terms, the heroic epic conjured up on stage, the protagonist of a never-written *Prometheia*, telling Ulyssean tales.

The focus of the act on the stage is Prometheus' stillness and immovableness. The structure of the drama is rather simple: deities and divine creatures pay their visit at Prometheus' rock in succession, amongst them the only mortal, Io.

The events displayed on the stage can well be described in the terminology of the ideological dilemma in the drama. In response to the revolt, a variety of different standpoints and attitudes are exposed by the words and each reaction of Prometheus' visitors.

These attitudes and ideologies may be listed as follows.

That Hephaestus and the Force/Violence dyad represent the same approach is merely a deception. True, that all the three of them are unquestioning executors of Zeus' orders, but within this category Hephaestus is clearly different from the other two. While Force and Violence show no interest in the 'subject' of their assignment – Prometheus – whatsoever, their only objective being to quickly and accurately enforce the sentence, Hephaestus is bothered by the sight of the torments of this *God* of his *kin* (19).

*But, for myself, I have not the heart to bind violently a God who is my
kin here on this wintry cliff. Yet there is a constraint upon me to have the
heart just that, for it is a dangerous thing to treat the Father's words
lightly.*
(vv. 14–17)

He does not fail to excuse his move with Zeus' explicit orders (19), but at the same time, he pities Prometheus: *Our kinship has strange power; that, and our life together* (39). He hates the task he has to fulfill as well as his profession (45, 48). He even goes as far as admitting compassion: *Alas, Prometheus, I groan for your sufferings* (64). This groaning and commiseration, however, does not mean that Hephaestus identifies with what Prometheus had done to evoke the punishment or the physical experience of the pains he has to suffer. Hephaestus can only offer his compassion and pity, but not obeying the Authority in carrying the sentence into force is not an alternative. As Hephaestus says, *I am forced to do this* (72).

Despite, Hephaestus' apparent opportunism is not to be judged too readily. If anyone, he should know from his own experience what suffering Zeus can mete out on the disobedient. It was him that the tyrant Zeus thrust down from the Olympus to become the lame blacksmith-god working in the depths of Aetna. This also is a reason for him not even to *think* of defying this Authority. The merciless tyranny he himself had to experience will never allow him to rise up against it. He can understand Prometheus' revolt, but at the same time, he is too well aware of the consequences to follow such behavior. This maimed Hephaestus knows what wrath the Authority can release to retaliate any action against its will. All his past and present binds Hephaestus to obey any order Zeus may give him.

The Chorus consists of the Oceanides, the daughters of Oceanus god of the outer sea. Unusual a choice, but in a similar pattern in another of Aeschylus' dramas, *The Suppliants*, the members of the Chorus are related to a character in the play. What underscores the Oceanides' special situation, unlike in *The Suppliants* is the question why they have come all the way to visit this suffering Titan at this remote Caucasian rock so far away from any sea of the world. One of the tragedy's extremities is that it is set in the *most barren* corner of the world possible. All the more conspicuous thus is the presence of the sea-god's daughters, away from their natural habitat. The keynote of the *parodos* is sincere sympathy and compassion.

*Fear not: this is a company of friends
that comes to your mountain with swift
rivalry of wings.*

*Hardly have we persuaded our Father's
mind...*
(vv. 127–130)

There is more between these lines than a simple reference to emphatic feelings. The remark *hardly have we persuaded our Father's mind* discloses the silhouettes of a conflict never ever discussed in any genre: what objections may Oceanus have had against his daughters visiting Prometheus chained to a rock? Aeschylus is certainly not to be accused of dramaturgical carelessness on account of his never again mentioning this father-and-daughters conflict. The significance of this remark will be discussed later on in this paper. It will be shown that the true meaning of this casual remark will provide the clue to this tragedy.

Oceanus is the first of the visitors at the rock who could, and actually seems to have undertaken the role of the mediator between the two poles, the Authority and the Rebel. As a god from Olympus, he exists in the immediate vicinity of Zeus' power and might as well be considered an ally to him. Meaningfully, Oceanus was assigned a significant part when the power over the world was redistributed. At the same time, depending on Zeus, Oceanus will certainly and without hesitation deny any form of rebellion against the absolute Authority. However, the tormented Prometheus evokes feelings from him to pity this deity of his kind: whatever the Titan has done, he is worthy of compassion.

*...my heart is sore
for your misfortunes; you know that. I think
that it is kinship makes me feel them so.
Besides, apart from kinship, there is no one
I hold in higher estimation...*
(vv. 287–291)

This is how Oceanus addresses the tormented hero. Mentioning kinship and high estimation in this situation definitely means taking sides with Prometheus. So apparently, Prometheus has Oceanus' support. It seems safe thus to assume the Titan will gain a true ally in Oceanus – but anyone hoping so will have to be disappointed. The barely a hundred-line stage presence of Oceanus reveals a rather strange character. He enters at line 284 and leaves at 396, but all through his presence his and Prometheus' lines are somewhat out of proportion: most of the scene is dominated by Prometheus' monologue (340–376). Apart from the stichomythic lines, Oceanus has only two uninterrupted speeches (284–296 and 307–329).

Oceanus starts as it is worthy of a god: *heko* (284). The cause of his visit is honorable: he is by blood related to the Titan (289–294) and has come to offer his help (296–298).

*...that you soon shall know and know that in me
there is no mere word-kindness: tell me
how I can help you, and you will never say*

*that you have any friend more loyal to you
than Oceanus.*
(vv. 293–297)

In this address of Oceanus the stress is on *sympathy* and eagerness for *mutual* action: *synalgo* (288); *syngenes* (289); *symprassein* (295): says Oceanus. In contrast to this profuse *sympatheia*, Prometheus' response appears surprisingly refusing.

*What do I see? Have you, too, come to gape
in wonder at this great display, my torture?
How did you have the courage to come here
to this land, Iron-Mother, leaving the stream
called after you and the rock-roofed, self-established
caverns?*
(vv. 298–303)

In the original Greek the Titan's initial exclamation reveals much more than what the translation is capable of rendering: *ea! ti khrema?* In the tragedy – especially in the Aeschylean tragedy – *ea* is much more than a simple interjection: a hero only uses it when faced with the unalterable fate and realizes the inevitable tragic fall (as in *Agamemnon*, *Eumenides*, *Choephores*, *The Suppliants* and *The Seven Against Thebes*). Thus, not only fails Prometheus to see anything cheerful about Oceanus' visit, but as revealed by his choice of words, he regards it as the sinister fulfillment of his tragic fate.

The next to come to Prometheus is Io (561–886). Prior to her arrival, the Titan and the Chorus were engaged in a lengthy dialogue assessing and analyzing Prometheus' torments (425–560). The most conspicuous about this dialogue is that Prometheus gave a lot more information to the Chorus than he had given to Oceanus. He opened up for the Chorus as if having found a compassionate partner, giving the impression that he completely opened his heart to an audience in which he found true feelings.

A number of quality analyses have been written about the Io-scene, so below only the key features are listed. 1) Io's scene of about 300 lines denote the dramaturgically most important moment of Prometheus' contact with the rest of the world.

2) Io and Prometheus share the same fate: they both are oppressed by the same Authority. Io is the only mortal character in the drama – although by arbitrary divine Authority, this human existence is manifested in a grotesque, tragically distorted animal form – she is supposed to be the furthest away from Prometheus amongst all the visitors at the rock. Yet, Prometheus gives her the longest time and tells her the most about Zeus' power. What is more, Io is the only one that Prometheus provides with a prophecy of the future.

3) The key point still is that Io's fate or, more like, the comparison of Io's and Prometheus' fate throughout the drama yields a peculiar clue indispensable to the deciphering of the tragedy. Prometheus has to suffer because Zeus hates him. Io is exposed to Hera's furious rage because Zeus once loved her. Answering the Aes-

chylean question what feeling one should try in their relationship to evoke from the Authority inevitably leads in an *aporia*. With Zeus, hatred and love, both extremes on the emotional scale seems to be causing a great deal of pain and suffering, physical and emotional likewise. Hence the common fate of Prometheus and Io, that may first seem appalling, fit exactly into the structure of this problem play. The tyranny of the Authority – which, although meting out punishment and deciding on fates in a tragic conflict, does not even appear on the stage – hands out in all possible emotional relations the same tragic destiny to anyone it should get in contact with, may that be a god – just think of Hephaestus –, a Titan or a mortal worldling.

In the play, Hermes is the simplest and most unambiguous divine character (944–1093). He appears in the scene called *exodos* to remain on stage for the rest of the play. With him Prometheus will completely dissociate, even addressing severe insults to him.

Hasten away, back on the road you came.
(vv. 961–962)

*...I set my misfortune
against your slavery*
(vv. 966–967)

*And are you not
a child, and sillier than a child, to think
that I should tell you anything?*
(vv. 987–988)

Poor Hermes does not do anything more to deserve this treatment than fulfills a function mythologically rendered as a *topos*: he is the Messenger of gods and, primarily, of Zeus, on an errand he was sent on. Through the criticism of Prometheus Aeschylus fills this banal platitude with a peculiar content in *Prometheus Bound* and discloses the moral flaws of this lofty function – *the Messenger of gods!* Through Prometheus' eyes Hermes, as the uncritical minion of Authority, is degraded to a henchman equal to Force and Violence.

The tragedy is over: in deafening thunder and lightning Prometheus, along with the rock he is chained to, is precipitated in the depths of Earth by an earthquake (1076–1078).

The characters have now been examined in the order of their appearance to show where they are located on the scale whose ends are Zeus and Prometheus; how they defined themselves by their relation to Authority and to the revolt against it. The outcome for Prometheus is more than depressing: Hephaestus, Force, Violence, Oceanus and Hermes have taken sides with Zeus, even if with certain various extent of reluctance and sympathy hidden deep inside them. Io, the mortal female also prevented by her suffering and half-animal existence does not count as an ally in this predicament – she is of no significance in terms of the Promethean revolt.

As for Prometheus – he remained alone, *tragically* alone, that is. But is it *really* so? There still is a group of characters just tangentially mentioned in this work: the

Chorus, whose presence was only registered with the remark that it was interesting how this group of young ladies, the daughters of Oceanus had come *without* their father's consent to see the Titan out of compassion (128–131). Naturally, as a regular Chorus they were on the stage all along, they saw everybody and heard everything, revealing increasing compassion for the tormented Titan through the *stasimons*. Prometheus' response to this sincere and disinterested *sympatheia* was unusual confidence: he gradually exposed more and more of his suffering and the motives of his acts and revolt. And this is still not the end of the story.

At the end of the tragedy Hermes, giving up on reasoning with Prometheus to make him divulge his secret Zeus wanted so much (1054–1057), turns to the Chorus with surprising kindness.

*You, you, who are so sympathetic with his troubles,
away with you from here, quickly away!
Lest you should find your wits stunned by the thunder
and its hard defending roar.*
(vv. 1058–1062)

A really moving sympathy and concern for the Chorus – or is it? If put in the structure analyzed so far, the meaning of Hermes' words change immediately along with their dramaturgical value. As shown, the Authority had been striving to isolate Prometheus all along, and the last act of this doing would be to deprive the Titan of the Chorus' supportive presence. In the terms of dramaturgy, there is nothing surprising about such an act. What is more, the Chorus, this impersonal, narrative unit that only comments the events rather than getting involved, is *supposed* to leave the stage now that the Titan's torments are about to end – as they would do in any other drama. According to normal choreography, their leave would be required, since the Chorus is not *conflicttable* in the Greek drama.

At this point comes the real and – as far as I know – never so far analyzed *turn* in *Prometheus Bound*. Here is what the Chorus has to say in response to Hermes' 'benevolent' warning:

*Say something else
different from this: give me some other counsel
that I will listen to: this word of yours
for all its instance is not for us.
How dare you bid us practice baseness? We
will bear along with him what we must bear.
I have learned to hate all traitors: there is no
Disease I spit on more than treachery.*
(vv. 1063–1070)

The Chorus call those who betray their friends (*tous prodotas*) *nosos*-stricken. Still, thus severely criticizing *all* characters appeared to that point, including their father, is not the most interesting about this monologue. What is, is that the Chorus of *Prometheus Bound* now openly and unexpectedly, as it is, opposed a divine will,

since Hermes, however low a role he is playing in this scene, is still a *god*. In this light the mention of the *nosos* appears quite justified: the Chorus of the Oceanides became ‘infected’ by Prometheus’ revolt, they ‘caught’ as a disease something that may be put with pathos as the spell of defiance.

But the Chorus, even if making a move this bold, cannot promote to be able to influence the plot by its turn of fate and thus get in the center. The effect of their revolt is immediate: the Chorus will perish in the depths along with Prometheus.

A Chorus of a tragic fate? *Contradictio in se*, one might say. For every philologist, critic or theater person related to the Greek drama since Aristotle will refuse such a proposition without the slightest hesitation.

Yet, if one has really efficiently scrutinized *Prometheus Bound*, or, more likely, its text rather than merely the analyses, one will have to face the fact, that Aeschylus did indeed work out a Chorus which, starting off from the initial *sympatheia* gradually identifies with the protagonist’s cause and eventually deliberately shares his destiny.

Finally, I will ask a very prudent question: could it possibly be time to review such ossified precepts as the *absence of change of characters* in Greek drama?

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