

Prometheus in the Underworld, Albert Camus

Prometheus in the Underworld¹

I felt the Gods were lacking as long as there was nothing to oppose them.
Lucian, Prometheus in the Caucasus

What does Prometheus mean to man today? One could doubtless claim this God-defying rebel as the model of contemporary man and his protest thousands of years ago in the deserts of Scythia as culminating in the unparalleled historical convulsion of our day. But, at the same time, something suggests that this victim of persecution is still among us and that we are still deaf to the great cry of human revolt of which he gives the solitary signal.

Modern man indeed endures a multitude of suffering on the narrow surface of this earth; for the man deprived of food and warmth, liberty is merely a luxury that can wait; all he can do is suffer a little more, as if it were only a question of letting liberty and its last witnesses vanish a bit more. Prometheus was the hero who loved men enough to give them fire and liberty, technology and art. Today, mankind needs and cares only for technology. We rebel through our machines, holding art and what art implies as an obstacle and a symbol of slavery.

But what characterizes Prometheus is that he cannot separate machines from art. He believes that both souls and bodies can be freed at the same time. Man today believes that we must first of all free the body, even if the mind must suffer temporary death. But can the mind die temporarily?

Indeed, if Prometheus were to reappear, modern man would treat him as the gods did long ago: they would nail him to a rock, in the name of the very humanism he was the first to symbolize. The hostile voices to insult the defeated victim would be the very ones that echo on the threshold of Aeschylean tragedy: those of Force and Violence.

Am I yielding to the meanness of our times, to naked trees and the winter of the world? But this very nostalgia for light is my justification: it speaks to me of another world, of my true homeland. Does this nostalgia still mean something to some men? The year the war began, I was to board a ship and follow the voyage of Ulysses. At that time, even a young man without money could entertain the extravagant notion of crossing the sea in quest of sunlight. But I did what everyone else did at the time.

I did not get on that ship. I took my place in the queue shuffling toward the open mouth of hell. Little by little, we entered. At the first cry of murdered innocence, the door slammed shut behind us.

We were in hell, and we have not left it since. For six long years we have been trying to come to terms with it. Now we glimpse the warm ghosts of fortunate islands only at the end of long, cold, sunless years that lie ahead.

How then, in this damp, dark Europe, can we avoid hearing with a quiver of regret and difficult complicity the cry the aged Chateaubriand uttered to Ampère departing for Greece: "You won't find a leaf from the olive trees or a single grape left of the ones I saw in Attica. I even miss the grass that grew there in my day. I haven't had the strength to make a patch of heather grow."²

And we too, for all our youthful blood, sunk as we are in the terrible old age of this last century, sometimes miss the grass that has always grown, the olive leaf that we'll no longer go to look at just to see it, and the grapes of liberty.

Man is everywhere, and everywhere we find his cries, his suffering, and his

threats. With so many men gathered together, there is no room for grasshoppers. History is a sterile earth where heather does not grow. Yet men today have chosen history, and they neither could nor should turn away from it. But instead of mastering it, they agree a little more each day to be its slave.

Thus they betray Prometheus, this son "both bold in thought and light of heart." This is how they revert to the wretchedness of the men Prometheus tried to save. "They saw without seeing, heard without listening, like figures in a dream."

Yes, one evening in Provence, one perfect hill, one whiff of salt are enough to show us that everything still lies before us. We need to invent fire once more, to settle down once again to the job of appeasing the body's hunger. Attica, liberty, and its grape-gathering, the bread of the soul, must come later. What can we do about this but cry to ourselves: "They will never exist any more, or they will exist for others," and do what must be done so that others at least do not go begging?

We who feel this so painfully, and yet who try to accept it without bitterness, are we lagging behind, or are we forging ahead, and will we have the strength to make the heather grow again?

We can imagine how Prometheus would have replied to this question that rises from our century. Indeed, he has already given his answer: "I promise you, O mortals, both improvement and repair, if you are skillful, virtuous and strong enough to achieve them with your own hands."

If, then, it is true that salvation lies in our own hands, I will answer Yes to the question of the century, because of the thoughtful strength and the intelligent courage I still feel in some of the people I know. "O Justice, O my mother," cries Prometheus, "you see what I am made to suffer." And Hermes mocks the hero: "I am amazed that, being a God, you did not foresee the torment you are suffering." "I did see it," replies the rebel.

The men I've mentioned are also the sons of justice. They, too, suffer from the misery of all men, knowing what they do. They know all too well that blind justice does not exist, that history has no eyes, and that we must therefore reject its justice in order to replace it as much as possible with the justice conceived by the mind. This is how Prometheus returns in our century.

Myths have no life of their own. They wait for us to give them flesh. If one man in the world answers their call, they give us their strength in all its fullness. We must preserve this myth, and ensure that its slumber is not mortal so that its resurrection is possible. I sometimes doubt whether men can be saved today. But it is still possible to save their children, both body and mind. It is possible to offer them at the same time the chance for happiness and beauty.

If we must resign ourselves to living without beauty, and the freedom that is a part of beauty, the myth of Prometheus is one of those that will remind us that any mutilation of man can only be temporary, and that one serves nothing in man if one does not serve the whole man.

If he is hungry for bread and heather, and if it is true that bread is the more necessary, let us learn how to keep the memory of heather alive. At the darkest heart of history, Promethean men, without flinching from their difficult calling, will keep watch over the earth and the tireless grass. In the thunder and lightning of the gods, the chained hero keeps his quiet faith in man. This is how he is harder than his rock and more patient than his vulture.

His long stubbornness has more meaning for us than his revolt against the gods. Along with his admirable determination to separate and exclude nothing, which always has and always will reconcile mankind's suffering with the springtimes of the world.

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1 This essay was first published in 1947 by Palimugre, in Paris.

2 Camus first noted down this quotation from Chateaubriand in July 1945. See Carnets II, p. 136; Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 104. —P.T.

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