

A LONG HOPE: THE PROMETHEUS COUNTER-PROJECT

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Abstract

By offering a reading of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, and of the post-Aeschylus tradition of the myth of Prometheus which highlights its revisions as imagined by Karl Marx and Percy Shelley, among others, this paper seeks to explore how to grasp, amid our danger and despair, the prominent poetic and cognitive view of a similar cataclysm from the past, as a lesson to the present. The route to do so encompasses a revisitation of the connections between theatre and democracy in ancient Greece; a consideration of the variations of the themes of knowledge, injustice and tyranny, material civilization and its control and the unbowed personal will to resist oppression, all evoked by the myth of Prometheus; and teasing out the main lineaments of a meaning for the play for an endangered Athenian democracy, as staged around 440 as well as for authors who have recycled its main theme throughout centuries, and finally for us today. It ends by giving pride of place to a Promethean hope, a long hope, arisen from suffering and wedded to cognition, which has crossed centuries and reached our times in urgency.

Keywords: hope; *Prometheus Bound*; Athenian democracy; *Prometheus unbound*; suffering

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Articulating the past historically ... means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger.

Walter Benjamin, Thesis 6

When you lose, don't lose the lesson.
Attributed to the present Dalai Lama

Perhaps we need a less heroic religion than the one of the great mythical tragedies.
Bert Brecht, Diary 1922

0. This essay uses my professional orientations of theatre studies with comparative literature and a movement into political epistemology. Dramaturgy and literature meet here the overwhelming existential threat to all our lives, which demands reflection about how we understand what we hope and wish to understand. Classical studies, in this case of Athens and Aeschylus, I much honour and try to learn from, but the essay cannot be bound by or to them, for I seek a different animal: how to grasp, amid our danger and distress, the prominent poetic and cognitive view of a similar cataclysm from the past, as a lesson to the present.

The work is, of course, a provisional statement: a contribution.

1. The Shaping Context

1.0. To begin with, I had to clarify for myself and my readers key ideologic-political factors shaping Athenian thinking and theatre in the age of its democracy – maybe a partial one, but rare in class history. Its facts and factors are known to specialists but are organised here into an evaluative stance that may be of use.

1.1. *Lineaments of Athenian History ca. 600-400 BC*

Hope is a good breakfast, but it is a bad supper.
Attributed to Francis Bacon

The Mycenaean Age collapsed at the beginning of the last millennium BC. A further break is:

when whole classes were ruined by the great economic crisis of the 7th century, and this in turn was followed by the great political conflicts of the 6th, which translated the economic crisis into terms of murderous class warfare. It is very possible that the resulting upheaval of social strata, by bringing into prominence submerged elements of the mixed population, encouraged the reappearance of old culture patterns which the common folk had never wholly forgotten. (Dodds, 1963, 44-45)

At that time Athens was becoming one of the leading centres in the Greek world. The City-State (*polis*) that eventually comprised all Attica, and was the most populous one in Greece, was ruled by a land-owning aristocracy, the “well-born,” who governed through a council that appointed the chief city officials, the *archons* (governors), and the commander-in-chief. Protests from below had by the 7th century become widespread, and the government appointed in 594 Solon (ca. 640–560) with a mandate to create a new constitution. The power of the aristocratic rulers was reduced by forbidding enslavement of Athenian citizens into debt bondage, breaking up large landed estates, democratising access to legal actions, and freeing up trade and commerce; this allowed the emergence of a prosperous urban merchant class. Solon divided the Athenians into four classes, based on their wealth and ability to perform military service. The poorest class (*thetes*), a majority of the population, received political rights for the first time and were able to vote in the *ecclesia* (assembly), but only the two upper classes, by wealth not noble birth, could hold political office (cf. Hansen, 1992, also Herodotus, 1920 1.29.1-2). It is unclear how many inhabitants Athens had in the 6th century, and there are no records about the important gender and age divisions, but counting women and foreigners it might have been between 20,000 and 40,000; however, by the year 450 there is a rosy estimate of 60,000 male citizens (Hansen 53), and by 400 there will be at least 150,000 citizens with their families, around 50,000 aliens, and more than 100,000 slaves (see also 5.1). It should be remembered that the “majority of Athenian [*polis*] citizens were peasants living in scattered rural villages down to the 4th century BC” (Finlay 3).

The new system in the short term led to more class conflict and after 20 years of unrest the popular party, mainly subsistence peasants, seized power. It was led or usurped by Pisistratus (ruled 561–527), who set Athens on the path of wealth and influence – it became a centre of Greek culture, trade, and prosperity. He preserved the Solonian Constitution, but his family held all the offices of state; his son was overthrown in 510. A popular uprising against the Spartan occupiers and their aristocratic henchmen led to a final reform by Cleisthenes in 508 (cf. Ober, 1996, and Hansen), which created ten new interclass “tribes” (*phylai*); each was divided into three “thirds” from city, seaside, and inland regions, and comprised one or more “demes,” which became the basis of local government. Each *phyle* elected 50 members to the *Boulé*, a council which governed Athens on a day-to-day basis and proposed laws to the assembly of voters in Athens up to 40 times a year. The assembly was open to all citizens over 20 years and was then both a legislature and the highest court, except in murder cases and religious matters that became the only functions of the Areopagus. Most public offices were filled by lot, though the ten *strategoi* (generals) were elected.

This system gave all native males and wealthier foreigners a legal status and stake in governing; it was under Pericles (ca. 461-429) modified by salaries paid for some public duties, granting land to poor peasants and work to urban unemployed, as well as public support for war widows, invalids, orphans, and indigents. The independence and relative equality of Athens resisted continuous

outside threats and repeated attempts of the aristocrats to overthrow it. The Welfare State to a good part collapsed in the Peloponnesian War with Sparta after 431, but the political institutions remained in place for 170 years, until the Macedonian Empire.

In 499, Athens sent troops to aid the Ionian Greek cities of Asia Minor rebelling against the Persian Empire. Two Persian invasions of Greece ensued. In 490, the Athenians led by Miltiades defeated the forces of Darius I at the Battle of Marathon. In 480-479, his son Xerxes disposed of a Spartan force holding the pass of Thermopylae and sacked an evacuated Athens; however, the Athenians with their allies, led by Themistocles, routed the much larger Persian navy at Salamis, and finally the Greeks defeated the Persian army at the battle of Platea. Athens then brought most of the Aegean and many other parts of Greece together into the Delian League; the city was splendidly rebuilt under Pericles, in large part by the tributes of the supposed allies. At the end of Aeschylus's life, in mid-fifth century, "the structure of Athenian society was being surreptitiously but rapidly transformed by the development of slave labour and the conversion of the anti-Persian confederacy into an Athenian Empire" (Thomson, *Aeschylus*, 1968, 215). The resentment of many land-based States led by Sparta led to the Peloponnesian War (431-404) against Athens, faced also by rebellions in its dominions. A devastated Athens never regained its pre-war prosperity.

As to economical classes, they are best indicated by the Athenian armed forces' division ca. 450-430 (Hansen 116) into: cavalry, coming from the top two Solonian classes; hoplites, mainly from the third property class; and light-armed troops constituted by the *thetes*, who also served in the navy, in part as marines and in part as rowers. The core of the land army was the farmers, who could afford both the hoplite armament and the slave assistant in war, but from the Persian wars on as important was the navy, captained largely by the richer classes but overwhelmingly composed of the poor citizens.

The 130 years of Athens power and glory, ca. 560-430, are coeval with the rise of a more or less full male democracy in everyday decisions. The best comparison to it in history may be the rise of US independence and wealth – marred by the weighty factor of Black slavery and Amerindian eradication – between ca. 1776 and 1900, with a similar passage from a largely independent smalltown democracy to imperialism.

1.2. Theatre and Democracy

Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, of the things that are not, that they are not.

Protagoras

1.2.1. The rising Athenian democracy invented, at least for European memory, the practices and terms of theatre and politics. Politics were a largely public interplay of class interests in an almost permanently sitting oral debate. Theatre was a playing space but later by metonymy came to design a stable public

institution based on feedback between its huge audience, practically the citizenry in a festive mood, and new performances. Both assembly democracy and theatre were based on oral argumentation and debate of positions proposed to a large group of listeners, both were bolstered by publicity and written records (cf. Hansen 311-12). Both were a preserve of male citizens over 20, reposing to a good part on invisible female – and later slave – labour. Crucially, “[t]he Athenians had not insulated, as we have by a set of institutional devices, the pursuit of political ends from dramatic representation or the asking of philosophical questions from either” (Alasdair MacIntyre, cited in Finley, 1982, 9). Theatre was a consubstantial part of the affairs of a small and often threatened State community, so that it is utter nonsense to ask whether it was political or not. Rather, the remarkable originality of many such performances – recited, danced, and in part accompanied by music – as heightened and generalised poetic and cognitive interventions into public debate ought to be stressed.

From Solon’s decisive class reforms (594 BCE) on, the widening democracy identified as its central problem distributive – and often also retributive – justice as against simple obedience and piety toward the rulers’ victorious gods under Zeus. Two central factors in dealing with this problem may have in Athens been the role of the wealthy and influential leaders of democracy, and the institution of the City Dionysia annual festival. There is quite some evidence (e.g., in the many scornful references of the Theognidean compilation) that impoverished noblemen were marrying wealthy merchants’ daughters. Bowing to the new force of money (cf. much more in Thomson, *First*, 1972), many ambitious offspring of noble families – from Cleisthenes through Themistocles and up to Pericles – saw they could attain power and/or glory within a democratic institutional system (see Ober 51-52, Hansen 39-40). Many of them might have sincerely identified with popular rule as against both personal rule of a “tyrant” (see 3.2 below) and ancient aristocratic repression of the great majority. They seem to have constituted an elite of permanent “political professionals” balanced by clannish infighting and extraordinary checks on leaders, “more [frequent] than [on] any other such group in history” and easily leading to exile and even death (Hansen 271 and 310). As far as attaining glory is concerned, Aeschylus himself may be counted among the – so to speak – elite democrats.

The new Athenian festival of the City or Great Dionysia was founded and shaped possibly in 534/531, or possibly by ca. 501, after Cleisthenes’s reforms, but at any rate in a drive against the landowning aristocracy, at the time of an abrupt rise in numbers and wealth of the urban classes (cf. Pickard-Cambridge, 1968, also Thomson, *Aeschylus* 141-42). This festival was hugely important, since it was a “public, generally shared communal mode ... for representing political conflict or for putting ... politics to the philosophical question” (MacIntyre, in Finley 9). The City-State was a tight-knit community, largely face-to-face, and reposing on the spoken word, so that

there was continuing contact from childhood with public life, and therefore a larger element of political education (in a strict though not a formal sense) in the process of growing up than in most other societies before or since. Citizens were members of varied formal and informal groups – the family and the household, the urban neighbourhood or the village, military and naval units, occupational groups, upper-class dining clubs, innumerable private cult associations. As in all Mediterranean societies, furthermore, people congregated out of doors.... (Finley 9)

The roots of tragedy were in oral recitation, in often choral lyrics, and probably in dances, but we do not know how they evolved up to and in Thespis (fl. ca. 532), reputed to have first performed itinerant proto-plays; Aristotle's thesis in *Poetics* that they developed through the form of dithyramb, a sung and danced hymn to Dionysus, is widely accepted. However tragedy might have come about, it also used satiric and wisdom verse (Solon was a prominent example), legal discourse, and finally democratic self-examination, growing into a narrative genre by means of dialogue and chorus, and centrally carried by notional-cum-emotional persuasion. As Goldhill (1986) concludes, "The festival of the Great Dionysia ... has a special role in democratic Athens. Before the citizen body, the city's discourse was treated to the radical critique of tragedy, its divisions and tensions were explored." (*Reading* 78)

Beside the Great Dionysia at the beginning of Spring, there was also a wealth of smaller festivities involving performance for various social units throughout the year; a probably satirical reference claimed Athens spent as much on theatre as on its other pride, the war fleet. This main annual civic competition for representation of plays also jettisoned the earlier participation tied to the Attic "tribes," so that any Athenian citizen could submit a unit of three tragedies plus one satyr-play to the senior *archon* or governor of the year, who – no doubt with abundant political pressures from factions – picked three authors for each of the three festival days and allotted to each one of the rich citizens as financier and organiser for the production (see much more in Hall, 2010, 20-27). The average performance audience is thought to have been ca. 15,000 people, from State leaders to plebeians and resident foreigners (metics); it is still unclear whether women attended or not. Thus, the performances had to be understandable to and approvable by at least an operative majority of both the citizen audience and the leading powers-that-be, the latter financing the performance and often sitting in the first rows. This was only possible because it came to offer knowledge through pleasure. Thousands of tragedy texts or at least summaries were prepared, but lost with intolerant monotheisms after the library of Alexandria.

Still, in the agricultural or smalltown environment of most 5th century, performances had to use the model of the "magico-economic" initiation plot of symbolic death – practically a severe ordeal or "contest" (*agon*) – and resurrection, at the time practiced by ritual secret societies (cf. Thomson, *Aeschylus* 138 and 92-95). The seasonal cycle of agricultural fertility based on various Earth goddesses was in many parts of the world accompanied by a ritual performance with an audience (Thomson, *Aeschylus* 96-97). Thomson even assumes that the oldest

myths (and magic) stem from tribal society, where the means of production were communally owned and production and consumption were collective, and so that myths concentrated on absolute essences where nature and society are identified (cf. *First* ch. 16, 336ff.). These roots found favourable ground in the Dionysian framework of enthusiastic democratic festivity at the time of mass popular entry into community affairs and a share of power, but the mythical plot had to be updated for the age of Athenian male public debates. The central problem, equally ideological and formal, was at what point of the cycle should the performance culminate. In two famous single plays valued down the ages, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* (further PB) and Sophocles's *Antigone* – both probably performed in the 440s – the performance culminated “tragically,” as a long winter of justice defeated. Yet it might also present a new model, opening the cycle to an arrow, which PB in good part suggests may be a line of humanity's progress through knowledge and skill (*tekhne*). True, if inserted into the full mythic cycle of either the Oedipus legend or the Prometheus legend, this would be an illusion, and the upward line would either flatten in compromise or indeed bend into a cycle of resignation. This significant historiosophic dilemma still interpellates us powerfully, now that humanity has itself the Olympian destructive thunderbolt but equally misses brakes of virtue and understanding as to its use.

1.2.2. Aeschylus (ca. 525-455) was from a wealthy and probably noble family of Eleusis, a town just west of Athens. He was entering manhood at the time of the definite instalment of democratic rule and seems to have wholeheartedly supported its horizon all along, in his own way.¹ His native town was the seat of the most famous secret Greek cult, the Eleusinian Mysteries of death and rebirth focussed on the Mother Goddess Demeter. Whether he was a full initiate is unknown, but I would believe that a wide-awake youth in a very small city could not have escaped some of the central Eleusinian factors. At the age of 35 to 46, already a well-known tragedian, he fought the Persian invaders at Marathon, where his brother died, at Salamis, and possibly also at Platea. He was a complete and most accomplished performance craftsman: playwright, composer, choreographer, director, actor. Moreover, he was a pathbreaking innovator who seems to have invented the thematically linked trilogy and, even more important, the second actor (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1922, 1449a 15–16). This move revolutionised performance: it allowed the actors' dialogue, with all its clashes, on the “scene” space proper and reshaped the splendour and role of the choral interludes in the mediating “orchestra” space: it joined to visual poetry within evolving action the verbal poetry of reflection. The second actor is in Aeschylus not primarily an antagonist – though he can be that at times, as in PB – but a way of shaping the scenic story's terms and modulating its tension, quite clear in PB. This modulation may be his third major contribution to tragedy.²

All of this amounted to the creation of not only Athenian tragedy as impressive theatre but furthermore of what came later to be called drama³ as part of read literature (and Aeschylus's play scripts began to circulate as such). His

plays “do not sever the individual from the community or from the gods, do not separate the future from the most remote past” (Saïd, 2006, 226); however, they democratise the exclusive hold an aristocracy or the hierophants had on community, gods, and the past. The names of over 80 plays of his are preserved but only seven are almost fully extant, including the linked trilogy *Oresteia*. His first play to be performed was in 499, when he was 26 years old, and his first victory at the main City Dionysia was in 484. His sons Euphorion and Euæon as well as his nephew Philocles and his son also became playwrights, within a stage dynasty that went on much longer. His work was so respected that after his death his tragedies were the first and at beginning the only ones allowed to be restaged.

My thesis, in good part shared by extant literature, is that *Athenian tragedy was created in a fruitful tension between two main factors: the religious and cosmological codification of the ideal City-State, and the pressing politics of the City-State’s yearly survival*. The setting and very modifiable plots of Athenian tragedy were as a rule handed down “myths,” in the sense of a story told about supposedly past events in which prominent humans interacted with divine forces (cf. the discussions in Hall, e.g., 94ff.). However, there were also bold innovations set in a roughly current history of the neighbouring Persian Empire as a negative *exemplum*, beginning with Aeschylus and his evident precursor Phrynichus⁴, both of whom had close ties to Themistocles as leader of an embattled mass democracy. All these settings – say the Argo of *Oresteia* or Thebes of Oedipus plays – acted as an estranged and safe way of looking at the audience’s own certainties and problems, and they are outdone by PB’s non-Homeric warring pantheon at the ends of the Earth.

Beside the mystical traditions of Aeschylus’s birthplace, kindred sources in the elite Pythagorean tenets and possibly mass Orphism have been suggested for his opus (cf. Thomson, *Aeschylus* 229, 199-203, 271, et passim); but since Eleusinian and Orphic gatherings were secret mysteries, we cannot judge this. Perhaps the mixture of cosmic horizons and hard-headed earthly power by the Pythagoreans – e.g., in geometry and civil concord – was of some weight for Aeschylus.⁵ Finally, it is not really important how close Aeschylus was, say, to the Orphics, it is important that in the *Agamemnon* he can call Orpheus’s song powerful because it is joyous (vv. 1629-32). I shall return to his insistence on gods and divine powers, which make it probable that he had been steeped in ancient religious values. His particular achievement was then to fuse them intimately with the rising novelties or novums⁶ in political and cosmological critique at the time, akin to the interpretations by the early sophists Gorgias and Protagoras and by Anaxagoras (cf. Rösler, 1970; for all of them we have only fragments and allusions). Richer possible parallels apply to the very significant philosopher, mathematician, and early scientist Anaxagoras, who came to Athens by ca. 463: he banished rule by gods and inevitable destiny from the universe, substituting for it the knowledge and power of Mind or Reason (*nous*), especially evident in all the forms of life and motion.

“[Tragedy’s] defining characteristic is that it was performed, partly to music, by men in masks and costumes, who danced as they impersonated imaginary long-dead people” (Hall 11). In 5th-Century Athens, any ritual values came to be seen as modifiable by the needs of a popular democracy. In Aeschylus, the politics were subject to both individual-cum-collective decision (i.e., personal responsibility for one’s deeds within a horizon of justice) and cosmic necessities of propriety. Necessity and hope, threat and responsibility, were intermingled in a swirl of music, colour, dance, and high verse, and the outcome of the protagonist’s suffering was a possible lesson for collective redemption.

2. The Play *Prometheus Bound*: The Story Presented

The attitudes of the great tragedians befit a society in which peasants and artisans were citizens and in which craftsmen proudly signed their work, dispelling the anonymity that often characterized craftsmen in other ancient civilizations....

Ellen M. Wood

2.0. The overwhelming impression of PB is one of obscure, solemn, and powerful grandeur arising out of extreme suffering (on suffering as essential tragedy cf. the illuminating Hall, 4-6 et passim). Ultimate matters of human destiny are approached here: as in ritual, but subject to titanic and unbowed personal will to resist oppression.

This seems to me a good reason for concentrating on this single play, as a specific new phase of Aeschylean theatrical cognition – the final one of his old age, before his death (and if the play and performance were significantly added to, then after his death too), at a time of gathering contradictions in a republic becoming empire. Even the fact that only this part of the Aeschylean trilogy has been preserved was not quite accidental: somebody decided to copy this part only... The undoubted, but to my mind explainable, contradictions to presentation of divine as well as tyrannical and impious rule in his previous plays will be discussed later, together with the authorship.

PB is full of variations on the theme at stake, revelations and objections, repetition and echoes. I wish here to tease out only the main lineaments of a PB meaning for an endangered Athenian democracy, as staged probably around 440, and then for us today.

2.1. A big caveat: of the very important music, dance, and sights in PB we know so little that their inflection of the story sense, which all of us must induce from words and some hints about dance and music, cannot be properly evaluated. We can only guess how rich all the unrecorded musical and visual elements were (coloured attire, dances, gestures...). In the whole flow, the most skilful narrating, pacing, and variety of the devices presented dispels monotony, despite the immobile but quite predominant chained hero. We must assume that the decisive upshot or meaning is conveyed by the versified words.⁷

The story is necessarily understood as the interaction of its original Athenian presentation (to the best of our reconstruction) and a typical viewer or reader of a particular spacetime, always inevitably a today.

2.1.1. There were in Athenian tragedy recurring names and conventions for sections of the play, tied to chorus singing and the intervening spoken recitals; I much honour them but cannot use this vocabulary for my purposes. At any rate, Aeschylus was a great breaker of conventions whenever he felt so; I shall therefore divide the story as told – and understandable – into four main blocks. The number of verse adduced does not necessarily show elapsed time onstage, especially for passages sung and/or danced.

- *BLOCK 1, Opening: Setting the Scene* (in all senses)

Pr is brought in by Zeus's agents Power, Violence, and Hephaestus, and chained to a desolate rock at the end of the world as punishment for rescuing mankind by means of fire stolen from gods and the skills arising from it. The block divides into entry with the dialogue of gloating Power and reluctant Hephaestus (verse 1-87) and a monologue by Pr introducing his theme (vv. 88-127).

- *BLOCK 2, The Conflict Sharpened: Reconciliation Refused*

Subsection 1: A Chorus of sympathetic Oceanid sea-nymphs appears in the air (probably lifted above the *skene*) and is told by Pr about the recent war of the new gods against the Titans, won by Zeus's following Pr's counsels, and then about Pr's disgrace because of assisting mankind to survive against Zeus's will (vv. 128-283).

Subsection 2: Interruption -- arrival of old Oceanus, offering himself as a mediator to Zeus if Pr will relinquish his stubborn opposition; this is scornfully refused, Oceanus leaves (vv. 284-396).

Subsection 3: The Chorus sings a lament for Pr's sufferings (vv. 397-435), Pr enumerates at length his gifts to mankind, with some responses by Chorus (vv. 436-525). They grieve for Pr but stress their lack of power (vv. 526-560).

- *BLOCK 3, The Io Story: Suffering the God's Violence*

Io rushes in with the mask of a cow, being stung by a horsefly into fits of madness and of shrieking disoriented; her recitation and dance were accompanied by *aulos*, a flute similar in sound to oboe (vv. 561-588). Dialogue with Pr who had foreseen her coming and then with the Chorus (vv. 589-640). She narrates her rape by Zeus and persecution by jealous Hera; the Chorus bursts out into sympathy and dismay (vv. 641-695). Pr then, with some coaxing by her and the Chorus, foretells first her long tormented future and final pardon by Zeus, also her offspring eventually resulting in Heracles, as well as his own fate; Io departs maddened by stinging (vv. 696-886), there is a final Chorus comment (vv. 887-907).

- *BLOCK 4, Culmination: Into the Pit*

Pr reiterates his certainty of Zeus's downfall to the fearful Chorus (vv. 908-943) and then refuses to disclose how the downfall will happen to Zeus's messenger Hermes, despite his threats. He is therefore plunged into Tartarus for further torments (vv. 944-1093). The play ends with this *coup de théâtre*, a very efficient and literally shattering stage trickery.

The above "episodes" are often non-Aristotelian, clearcut and almost detachable; Aristotelian tragedy theory, drawn largely from Sophocles, does not apply to Aeschylus (cf. Kitto 116, also 110-19). Notably, this is the case for the "Io" Block 3, the most original and effective one, a true masterpiece – though with a tacked-on philistine Chorus sop after Io leaves, possibly by another hand.

The play ends pragmatically in utter defeat, but ethically or ideologically in unbowed steadfastness of the defeated hero, the champion of mankind. The ruler of the gods is a most cruel and unjust autocrat; I shall return to the hero's long-range prophetic foresight of (confusingly) both the downfall of the Olympians and Zeus's coming to wiser counsel.

3. Lineaments of PB Meaning

The thing that now suddenly struck Winston was that his mother's death, nearly thirty years ago, had been tragic and sorrowful in a way that was no longer possible. Tragedy, he perceived, belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there was still privacy, love, and friendship, and when the members of a family stood by one another without needing to know the reason.
George Orwell

3.0. To prefigure later points: my essay is written amid pressing concerns which must use PB a bit as the Middle Ages used fallen Roman monuments: as building blocks of what we need today, retaining much of the old but useful skill and matter. Our concerns may be a continuation of Aeschylus's deepest insight, partly contradicted by him for its political extremity, or they may be a reworking that leaves the contradiction within Aeschylus aside. In either case I believe it is quite allowable to finally plump for the original overwhelming emotional identification in PB with the larger-than-life protagonist as against the cruel and genocidal god/s he hates and is hated by. This is, quite beyond Athenian history or its theatre, strongly suggested by the existence in world literature for half a millennium of a perhaps marginal but forceful monad of a character, mostly induced by echoes of PB as a play script. The fame of Pr (see Storch and Damerau, 2001 and the entry *Prometheus Bound*) includes no less than 41 translations of the play into English from 1832 on, while discussion about him resume after Greece and Rome in the Italian Renaissance and grow apace after the Enlightenment: in Voltaire, in the enthusiastic reference of the *Encyclopédie* article "Grecs," in

Wieland, in Goethe's atheist poem, in Schelling and Schlegel, in Byron's poem, and especially in the magnificent long poem *Prometheus Unbound* by Shelley⁸:

... Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
 Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
 Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
 Over himself; just, gentle, wise; but man
 Passionless – no, yet free from guilt or pain,
 Which were, for his will made or suffered them.... (3: 194-99)

Major Romantic and socialist currents in Europe used a refurbished Pr as an ideal allegorical figure of self-understanding, radical dissent, and spur, centered on his unyielding rebellion against violent upper-class oppression that inflicted unbearable sufferings on the hero and all humans. Such a humanistic and revolutionary horizon is a clearly possible *intentio operis* (see note 14): a hatred of tyrannical Olympian rule whenever found unreasonable and leading to collective destruction. In view of this it is not too surprisingly, that neither capitalist financiers nor the “really obtaining socialist” ones of Stalinist obedience had much use for Pr, only an occasional dissident like the sculptor Ernst Neizvestnyi.

At a time of mass murder of defenceless people by powerful rulers, I believe humanity cannot afford to waste this filiation's store of conceptual and emotional insight and inspiration. If we refuse to forget or falsify history, how can we turn the sense of “story presented” into a meaning for the present-day sharp and truly transcendent threat to mankind as a whole, now translated from hyperbolic myth into daily silent lesions and mass murders of millions in the ripe capitalocene?⁹ In order to arrive at a meaning, two premises have to be adopted. We should not suggest the playwright of PB was unbeknownst to himself a radical Marxist – or nearer to us, a Brechtian – who rejects as insufficient the Athenian democratic compromise (in some ways analogous to the post-Lenin Welfare State in the 20th Century), though I think he saw it stumbling toward failure. Equally, we cannot let go – nor could he – of unyielding Promethean opposition to unjust rule as the only hope, however long deferred, for a reversal of genocidal capitalocene to an age of justice and creativity, as paired in Pr's gift of fire. Fire means today warmth and vision for people, both of which our rulers lack.

Seeking for clarity, I shall analyse the PB meaning in its agential system, its thematic implications, and then go on to the possible horizon or indeed horizons of the Pr figure and syndrome, in and out of the play.

3.1. Agential System

The agential system of this play is most efficient. It consists of a spread at whose poles are the always visually present Pr and the always imaginatively present and constantly discussed –as well as omni-surveillant – Zeus as head of the “young gods” who had just conquered power after a bloody battle with the old regime. As Pr scathingly remarks:

You are new and your rule is new, so you believe
 You inhabit a citadel that grief cannot enter. Haven't I seen
 Two successive autocrat regimes kicked out of it?
 For the third, now reigning, I shall see it happen too,
 Very shamefully, very soon....
 (my poetically inadequate translation using Sommerstein's prose, vv. 955-59; the "you" in 955 is the Olympian gods, the "two regimes" in 957 those of Uranus and Cronus)

Interestingly enough, we find in Aeschylus's opus also the first Athenian glimpse of a three-dimensional character, rather than simply type (cf. Paduan, 2012, on Eteocles in *Seven*), as well as the first female "character," Clytemnestra. The impression of a "rounded" or "realistic" character arises from a presence of incompatible type traits¹⁰: in Pr we might call it the Knower and the Sufferer, alternating between defiant mutism and incremental mantic and poetic explanation. He is so to speak the most absolute agent, responsible for no less than the survival of mankind, onstage during the whole play: for all of PB's huge political and philosophical load, in it all depends on how you judge Pr. Sophocles will pick up on this, most notably in *Antigone*, his female inflection of Pr's absolute refusal.

The Zeus or antagonistic side is represented by the chainers in Block 1, well differentiated into the mime Violence, the co-torturer Power – a clear allegory of gods as violent power – and a reluctant Hephaestus forced to transgress his kin links to Pr, to whom is added in Block 4 the toady and threatening messenger Hermes. Zeus is here, departing from official piety, defined as the opposite of *polis* democracy: *athetos kratynei* says the Chorus, he rules departing from established wont, without any consultation or Themis, arbitrarily (v. 150; cf. Griffith ed., 2007, 117 and section 4.2 below). In between are the typical conciliator Oceanus, briefly shown in order to articulate Pr's refusal to yield; the Chorus of Oceanid nymphs which, though often hesitant and conservative, strongly affirms deep pity and sympathy for Pr, which they deem shared by all people and nature except for pitiless Zeus (see vv. 162ff., 242ff., 397-435); and most important, the expelled rape and torture victim Io, functioning as both lamenter and dialogue partner for Pr. While there was an earlier Io legend, I believe her meeting with Pr was invented by Aeschylus to refute any belief that Pr was being justly punished. Io is in many aspects complementary to Pr: female, ignorant, obedient, and crazed by rape, persecution, and exile, where he is male, sage, insurgent, and possessor of decisive knowledge, never yielding though chained to a rock. However, Io is above all the richest possible semiotic exhibit and final proof, driving home at length and in excruciating detail the moral-cum-political point that Zeus inflicts totally unjust suffering.

But what are in PB all these agents and their splendid stage interaction for? As I have suggested, all center on Pr in some way. A huge and continually refuelled swell of presentative devices inexorably shapes the viewer's identification into the larger-than-life Pr, melding suspense and piecemeal revelation. The devices tend toward "brevity, clarity and rhetorical balance.... [Yet t]he effect is a curious

blend of formalism and passion.” (Griffith ed. 93 and 99) For example, though the famous first speech by Pr contains references to Athenian legal procedure, and the whole play is a prolonged plea in favour of Pr and against Zeus, yet at the same time Pr is being subjected to outrage, degradation, and sorrow (vv. 88-100). The play goes on to insist on two reinforcing factors: emotionally, the omnipresent impact of physical suffering, exemplarily brought home by the utter psychophysical misery of a quite guiltless Io; notionally, the threat by Zeus to destroy all human life, a genocide sabotaged by Pr’s giving humans fire and the arts of knowledge. The viewer’s sympathy for Pr was possibly emboldened by the innovating *filantropia* of Protagoras and *nous* of Anaxagoras, but it is largely constituted by the ancient *filia*, upgraded from aristocratic class solidarity based on blood to something like amicable solidarity.¹¹

3.2. Themes

The play’s overall effect is carried by the – then and now – supremely significant themes of suffering and knowledge arising from the figure of Pr, stern protester and righteous lamenter of unjust suffering. It is a paradoxical and unique fusion of oldest myth lore and newest glimpses of possible progress, a certainly rebellious and potentially revolutionary myth about the “promethean” theme of knowledge and its attendant suffering (male and female) as opposed to the tyranny of Zeus.

The theme of *knowledge* is present both in the prophetic powers of Pr (which I shall, because of its significantly contradictory horizons, discuss separately in 4.1), and in his bestowing knowledge on mankind: this includes after hope and fire also housing, grasping the succession of seasons, numbers, the alphabet, taming animals, medicine, and mining (vv. 441-506). Such cognition is vital to the cosmological scope of PB. It raises the most neuralgic political knot of ruling and violence, justice and its trampling, into absolute spacetime. In the *Oresteia* the deities appear at the end of the trilogy because the struggle of human loyalties has reached an impasse and has to be resolved; the *Prometheia* trilogy (assuming there was one) is entirely devoted to cosmic struggle, and in PB the Titan is the patron of humanity’s interests as against the Olympian gods. Insistently disputing the supreme ruler Zeus, always used as the final repressive argument by the aristocrats and then the conservative wing of democracy, Aeschylus’s constant worry at the central practices of society is raised to publicly debatable cognition: it is about the *aporia* that a just rule has to allow rebellion – or, we might say today, even radical novelty. The price of rebellion is also insisted upon by the prominent show of deep physical lesions of Pr and Io, divine examples to cow all others.

I shall here pursue only two ramifications: knowledge is negatively related to injustice and tyranny, and positively identified as fire and skills.

- *Injustice and tyranny*: Obviously, PB “betrays a preoccupation with tyranny as a political system, and it formulates, perhaps for the first time, many of

the charges which the young democracy must have been making against the tyrants, both its own and those around it. Many of the details which characterize Zeus became, within a short time, stereotyped features of the tyrant.” (Podlecki, 1966, 124); this was to be ultimately codified in Aristotle. The absolute ruler from Olympus is a ruthless tyrant routinely inflicting death and suffering. All stage agents agree on this: his followers are proud of it, Pr denounces it, and the sail-trimmers are unhappy but resigned (Oceanus) or fearful (the Oceanids’ chorus). This impinges decisively on the audience in the extreme torturing, shown with all the sensuality of stage means, *in corpore vili* of Io, a female martyr complementary to Pr: fully dynamic where he is fully static, and fully confused where he is fully prescient.

Suffering because of violent political and/or gender repression is not abstruse theorising here. Aeschylus had first lived under the Pisistratene rule, then become a veteran of the Persian wars, and finally the premier playwright of a turbulent democracy, ever richer and one must suppose with sharper wealth splits, evolving at the time of PB into an inward-looking empire putting down rebellious “allies.” Not only had the exiled autocrat Hippias been with the Persians at Marathon (Herodotus 6.102-103), but ever afterward Athenian democrats had to be on constant guard against the danger that some influential aristocrat, an Alcibiades, might – as always, in collusion with Sparta – become a new ruler and disempower the people (cf. for 457-58 Sommerstein). Parallel to this there grew up in Aeschylus’s time a new conception of the tyrant, present in his *Oresteia*, different from the original neutral meaning of a ruler that had come to power by his own strength, still present in Sophocles’s title *Oidipous Tyrannos* (to be satirically travestied by Percy Shelley as *Swellfoot the Tyrant* instead of the normal “King”). This semantic shift is shared by most writers from Sophocles’s *Antigone* to Herodotus, who describes the tyrant as irresponsible, with a dangerous tendency towards pride and violence, from suspicions of his most prominent citizens to raping women.

- *Material civilisation and its control*: “In the myth of Prometheus, [...f]ire stands for the material basis of civilisation. That is the one constant element in the myth.” (Thomson 297-98, and cf. the whole chapter 297ff.) Pr is the patron saint of Julian Assange and his like, the present diffusers of knowledge and martyrs for an informed democracy. Fire is then a salvational force alternative to gods, both basis and metonymy for cognitions defending life, where collective human skill (*tekhne*) and sapience takes the place of necessity and destiny. Pr is thus doubly a saviour of mankind: first of its generic existence, saving it from probable extinction by Zeus, and second by raising it from brutishness to civilisation by means of technical progress.¹² The one major and possibly decisive ingredient of Greek tradition that is here missing (it did not fit into Aeschylus’s mythical focus, perhaps a refuge from too bold politics) is then the virtuous control and steering of civil life, also from below.

This was to be best developed from the Enlightenment on as the democratic and republican civic virtues centered on the *citoyen*, where both freedom and responsibility are indispensable. The limits of a play without human agency are here seen – indeed, some critics believe Pr was onstage a huge puppet behind whom an actor spoke the verse (this seems strengthened by the final scene of his being hurled to Tartarus through a trapdoor).

4. In Depth: Prometheus in the Play and Out of It

[T]he material of the tragedy is ... the social thought peculiar to the fifth-century [Athens]... [The] values extolled by heroic myth [are brought] publicly into question in the name of the new civic ideal, in the presence of an audience who, in a Greek theater, constituted a kind of popular assembly or tribunal. These conflicts within social thought are transposed into tragedy in accordance with the demands of a new literary genre with its own rules and field of problems.

Jean-Pierre Vernant, transl. modified

4.0. I am sympathetic to the Aeschylean trajectory and huge poetic-cognitive achievements within a democratic but always – but perhaps especially at the moment of PB – threatened societal justice of the Athenian *polis*. I shall argue this trajectory ends with an acute crisis. This might then give us at least a central clue as to why PB is an anomalous play, even for a playwright who had proved very daring from *Persians* (non-mythical setting) to *Oresteia* (refurbishing ancient godheads in the name of civil peace). What is actually the upshot of PB? The question is an intricate one, but it must be attempted. It involves the play's counter-project to Hesiod's account of Pr, then its dating and authorship, and finally – to my mind decisively – whether the authorial misgivings about and forebodings of a radical threat to the democratic compromise could be at least one mainspring for explanation.

4.1. *The Diametrically Opposed Horizons within PB*

Puzzlingly, there are in this play two diametrically opposed horizons for its *raison d'être* and *agon*, the Pr-Zeus collision, both of which are frequently foreseen as sure by Pr: the hints of an ending in reconciliation (e.g. vv. 188-92) quite incompatible with the irreconcilable enmity throughout the play between Pr and the tyrant Zeus. The first horizon sees Zeus mellowing in a far future and rehabilitating Pr in exchange for his secret how to prevent the downfall of the Olympians' rule (Zeus should avoid fathering on Thetis a son who would dispossess him), the second one foresees the Olympians' downfall. This contradiction is highly unusual for a precise craftsman with clear, often innovative, and even black-and-white attitudes – in his first extant play, Xerxes is totally black or impious while Darius and his Queen are totally white or pious.¹³

Thus, one briefer strand in PB envisages a very far-off settlement, which might come, as in the representative destiny of Io (v. 772), after 12 more generations, perhaps 500 years. This could be seen as a middle-of-the-road compromise between the need for firm power and for justice, of a piece with the upshot of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, and it is also carried by the oft recurring metaphor that both "the wrath of Zeus is a disease, and the unrestraint of Prometheus is a disease.... Which is of course intended to suggest the hope of a cure to come" (Thomson 304). We must think this attitude was shared by a good deal of the mainstream democratic audience for what was a popular play, to judge by allusions to it in Euripides and Aristophanes, as well as by further use of Pr in poets and vase paintings (so that reconciliation might have been at least a partial component of Eco's *intentio auctoris*¹⁴). This also hinges on a following play in a putative *Prometheia* trilogy, of which we have some fragments. However, the play's most detailed commentator, having enumerated all the verse that speak of a Zeus mellowing or being overthrown (Griffith ed. 135 and 224), concludes that the overriding intention remains unclear: "[how the trilogy ends] remains of course highly speculative" (304). Aeschylus and/or the play's director (see 4.3) might have well, at a time of gathering tensions, personally favoured a mean course between indignation at violence against people and necessity for keeping civic order (I shall return to this in the discussion of Jaeger vs. Marx).

I shall let the matter rest here, since for my purposes I wish to take PB as a singleton or stand-on-its-own work, as has been for half a millennium assumed in receptions of the Pr syndrome, with weighty consequences we cannot forget. As I have argued in 3.0, this is a legitimately different *intentio operis*.

4.2. On the Gods

Why was Aeschylus obsessed with not only mentioning but also frequently presenting the gods onstage, much more than any other Athenian tragedian we know of (a question much debated in the critical literature from Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1932) to Thomson and on)? My hypothesis is that *the gods are a cosmic guarantee of the City-State*. Its absolute necessity comprehends all the citizens, it enables, shapes, and sanctifies their values; yet State rule in a class and warring society is deeply bound up with the violence, between justice (*dike*) and necessity (*anangke*), that also suffuses all of Aeschylus's plays, and constitutes indeed the special preserve of properly defined tragedy. This contradiction holds most humanely, but also extremely, for the unity of Athenian democracy, which openly debates class tensions short of mutual destruction. However, if the tensions within democracy change, so do the gods. For example, the Olympian Apollo is in *Oresteia* repudiated, first exemplarily by Cassandra because of the suffering he inflicted on her and then politically by Athena, the incarnated democratic *polis*. This is in PB applied to all the gods Pr relentlessly hates.

We can assume Aeschylus had deep affinities to archaic mystical traditions mentioned in 1.22: there was even a famous report (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean*

Ethics, 2005, 1111a8–10, p. 82) of his being accused of *asebeia*, criminal impiety, for revealing some of the Eleusinian cult's secrets on stage, but acquitted on the plea he was unaware that they were secrets. His famous archaism, ranging from numinous presences to diction and tone, was so characteristic and inimitable that it could be comically disparaged one generation after his death, in Aristophanes's *Frogs*. No doubt, this was unfair to the elder playwright's highly efficient blend of stage argumentation and communication; even though we miss his reputedly splendid choreography, there are the obvious sensational visual moments from *Persians* (appearance of Queen Mother and the ghost of Darius) to PB (binding of Pr, flying appearance of Oceanids, final cataclysm). Yet further, Aeschylus was clearly not always bound to official religiosity: even in the *Oresteia*, where the Olympian gods are welcome deciders, the ancient divinities Erinyes have to accept an honourable but quite redefined function in the service of a refurbished, non-aristocratic Areopagus. Just how heterodox he was we do not know, but I much wish we had more than the few fragments about his satyr-play of king Sisyphus who evades Hades, and is because of this punished by Zeus to eternally roll a boulder up a hill in its depths: a jauntier ancestor of Pr bound to his rock.

As opposed to the insistent tradition of aristocrats and tyrants, the Aeschylean divinities are here to protect democracy. One strong way to understand what PB was getting at is to identify the main changes it introduces as compared to the two Hesiodic poems, the only remaining written text about Pr before Aeschylus -- though there might have been oral legends, such as those connected to his worship as co-patron of potters in Athens, with a festival including choral compositions; and he seems to have been mentioned in Protagoras's treatise *On the Original State of Things*, retold with possible twists by Plato in his eponymous dialogue. The changes in the PB story constitute a veritable counter-project to Hesiod's fully pro-Olympian account, where Pr is a sly dissembler and traitor justly punished within a staunchly conservative morality-tale (cf. e.g. Griffith ed. 1-5). Most important may be Aeschylus's new characterisation of him as a Titan and a son of Earth-Themis, taking over her foreseeing power and role in Zeus's victory over the other Titans (cf. Thomson 311), so that he now has a mega-weapon, the Thetis-secret, to threaten Zeus with (Griffith ed. 224, and cf. 5-6 and 301-05). All these deliberate novelties strengthen the status, believability, and most of all antiquity of Pr, who denounces the Olympians' upstart behaviour nine times in a relatively brief play (Griffith ed. 90), culminating in the scathing jibe at these new gods' smug violence cited in 3.1.

Last not least, there is no mention at all in PB of Hesiod's Pandora, created by Zeus to confuse humanity by offsetting Pr's gift of fire and skill. To the contrary of that misogynist invention, which deliberately reversed the old "all-giving" fertility deity into a scourge, Aeschylus allies Pr with the female principle, as son and inheritor of the oldest and most important goddess of procreation and justice. The fusion of Gaea and Themis is very significant: Themis seems to have been a pre-Greek, possibly tribal, chthonic deity, that puts things into their proper place and institutes right custom, the forceful "it is done or it is not done," quite

differing from Zeus's whim (see section 3.1); she is in legends often associated with other goddesses, including Aphrodite. Aeschylus envisages a maternal and matriarchal Gaea-Themis as the eldest, most august, and most knowledgeable goddess, tinged with most ancient sanctity; there is a close parallel here to Eleusine Demeter, a variant mother goddess and order-giver. Also, Aeschylus's other plays are generously supplied with female agents (even if played by male actors): the Queen in *Persians*, the realistically frightened choruses of Theban maidens in *Seven* and of Danaids in *Suppliants*. This culminates in the *Oresteia* trilogy, beginning with the surely guilty but also sinned against perversion in the best drawn female character of Clytemnestra, not to forget her two daughters and the wild Cassandra; for its last two plays it may suffice to cite their titles of *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*. Into PB, Aeschylus introduced first the sympathetic chorus of the somewhat flustered Oceanids and then, as the epitome and full complement of Pr's suffering, the cow-headed victim Io. The episode of Io not only takes an impressive 30% of the whole text, and surely more of scenic time due to the choreography of Io's torturing; her treatment by Zeus, first rape then abandonment to Hera's revenge, is also a full demystification of the innumerable matings of Zeus with women, as well as a counter-project to the ancient religious and ritual lore about the sacred marriage.

4.3. On Authorship, with Dating

PB has a strong Aeschylean imprint of style, argumentative composition, and creative boldness that cannot be traced to any other author of the same power. Who else consistently built on a diametrical reversal of the expected perspective, favouring from *Persians* on the losers and their suffering? If a political *dea ex machina* re-reversed this in *Oresteia*, I assume this was a reaction to the pressure on democracy that included assassination in 461 of its leader Ephialtes, who had proposed to democratise the Areopagus.

As most critics, I believe PB is clearly posterior to the *Oresteia* of 458, picking up a new search where it had stopped. As Thomson summarised it, "The play [PB] contains very little [outward] action; yet it is intensely dramatic. Technically, it is the most accomplished of the extant plays, and shows that by the end of his life Aeschylus had become an absolute master of his craft." (307) Thus, PB – or the whole *Prometheia* trilogy – was most probably composed in the last years of Aeschylus's life, before his death in Sicily ca. 456 (cf. also Podlecki's Appendix, *The Date of the Prometheus Bound*, especially 143-45).

True, there are also significant differences from Aeschylus's earlier opus, though great writers often change strongly toward the end of their lives. One example of a diametrical opposition is the early vs. the final Wittgenstein; and had printing not been invented, doubters might well point out how different was *Winter's Tale* from say *Hamlet*, or *The Misanthrope* from the four years' earlier *School of Wives*... Thus, Podlecki rightly doubts "the neat >evolutionary< theory of Aeschylus' dramatic development" (43). Still, some of the most knowledgeable

critics, such as Griffith, urge another author on grounds of expressions, metre, and other stylemes otherwise never found in Aeschylus.

In this bind, I would agree with Sommerstein that “the Prometheus plays are very unlikely to have been *produced* by Aeschylus in his lifetime: whether or not they were wholly or partly written by him, they were almost certainly presented to the public by someone else.” We have to reasonably consider two probabilities. First, we might posit an “Aeschylus 2.0,” the playwright at the height of his powers and approaching his life’s end who opted to change the attitude toward Olympian gods because of a weighty outside factor, mainly doubts as to the justice and stability of his beloved democratic Athens: Zeus is a powerful code for justice and power in the *polis*. Second – but not incompatibly – we might also posit a further coauthorial hand somewhat changing a not fully finished text; the prominent candidate would be his son Euphorion, known for producing his father’s plays and himself a tragedian of note (cf. Sommerstein 13-14, 16, and 228-34), who was even suspected of passing some of his own texts for his late father’s. Given some traits unusual for Aeschylus’s earlier opus and, for me most important, the unusual muddle of horizons, absent in his earlier very precise, almost forensic, allotments of right and wrong, I would favour a combination of the two possibilities: a not quite finished draft by Aeschylus plus a redoing by the play’s final director, Euphorion. For the purposes of this essay, no more precise identification is needed than that Aeschylus was the principal but not sole text author (cf. Hall 230). The play might have been staged and corrected between his death and 440 – more likely toward the end of that period, in the final decade and sunset of Athenian democracy, at the time of revolts in the empire and rising menaces from Sparta and Persia, both actively antidemocratic States.

4.4. *Jaeger vs. Marx: Suffering and Wisdom*

The two extreme views of the lesson of *Prometheus Bound* are those by Jaeger and Marx.

Werner Jaeger was a thoroughgoing Christian conservative moralist after World War 1. In his well-known huge book *Paideia* (1939), ostentatiously apolitical and with little interest in matters of mass bodily lesion growing apace, his chapter on Aeschylus noted the play’s interaction of “suffering and knowledge” in order to extoll their “spiritual unity” that made its message “the splendour of God’s triumph ... a *harmonia* which mortal wishes never overstep and to which even the Titan-made civilization of mankind must end by adapting itself” (266). This overestimation of the redeeming value of suffering because it brings one to God – he ropes in Job too – makes for Jaeger the no doubt heroic Titan arrogant and hybristic; the play is a theodicy (cf. also 232, 170, et passim).

Karl Marx’s PhD thesis *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1968) culminates with Pr used as a battle cry and banner. At the end of its Introduction, written last, there are two Greek citations from the final scene of PB (vv. 975 and 966-69, as known then). The first

raises Pr's "I [wholly] hate all the gods" to "the philosophy's own Credo, its own maxim (*Spruch*) against all earthly and heavenly gods that do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest godhead," and follows it up by citing "I would never exchange my misfortune (*dyspraxia*) for your servitude." Marx's conclusion is then a pithy encapsulation of his lifelong blend of confidence in a new age and orientation: "Prometheus is the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar" (Prometheus ist der vornehmste Heilige und Märtyrer im philosophischen Kalender).

The Pr figure remains Marx's favourite myth: he was especially fond of his speeches defying servitude and detailing the goods he endowed mankind with. The kinship between Pr and the modern proletariat continued to obsess Marx throughout the 1840s; even in *Das Kapital* (1890) he sarcastically observes that "the law forges the worker more firmly to capital than Hephaestus's wedges nail Prometheus to the cliff" (ch. 25.4, 1873). He is supposed to have reread Aeschylus each year – as also much Shakespeare – to keep his memory fresh. His half a dozen references have had a strong echo, acknowledged from Edmund Wilson and Herbert Marcuse to Alberto Toscano, and still debated.¹⁵

How are we to judge the diametrical opposition between the Jaegerian thesis that in Aeschylus through suffering one gains wisdom and the Marxian one that wisdom (philosophy) means defiance of all rules and rulers that do not acknowledge emancipation from below, whatever the suffering entailed? I believe the Jaegerian position is to be decisively rejected as a conservative bourgeois horizon projected onto this type of tragedy. As to Marx, he is clearly taking from the play only what he needed and ignoring its double horizon. Still, I would embrace his moral and political tendency, a critical and libertarian attitude towards the much too expensive old order, adding the proviso that suffering may have a potentially fruitful aspect insofar as it – as in PB – generates valid cognition. However, we can no longer either romanticise or ignore the terrible aspect of mortifying people, a millionfold lesion and injury inflicted upon sentient and cognising bodies, so well insisted upon in both Io and Pr. This position would gain much from a discussion of Brecht's dialectical rejection of tragedy as predestined: "Brecht rejected any [acceptance of sacrifice which can become redeeming, as in Christ,] as he similarly rejected the idea that suffering can ennoble us" (Williams, 1966, 234, and cf. his general dismissal of merely individualist rebellion in 120).

5. Towards Some Conclusions

*[T]he capacity to build a new future depends on our ability to see
a fundamental continuity with the strengths of the past.
Nietzsche, On the Advantage and Disadvantage of
History for Life*

5.1. *PB as Objective Correlative to the Crisis of Democracy*

Greek tragedy seems to me centrally a show and disclosure about the glories and shadows of power, guaranteeing the just continuation of the *polis*. PB is – more clearly than even *Antigone* – the extreme case of fierce concentration on a rule entailing unjust suffering.

For us today, the thematic field of PB is about countering tyrannic violence by rebellion in order to make life for mortals possible through applied knowledge; this is the play's reason to exist. The play is a poetic oxymoron: a revolutionary yet cosmic myth. Its unresolved contradiction is that it finally cannot imagine any godless world or human agency (cf. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 33), which is seen from above with a mixture of scorn and pity; its alternatives are either defeat with further suffering or a resolution in which the arbitrary despotism and cruelty of a supreme ruler would as arbitrarily mature into a bearable way of life. The bearable life under benevolent rule was analogous to the victorious democracy after the reforms of Solon, Cleisthenes, and Ephialtes, roughly from Themistocles to an apogee and involution in Pericles's empire. I shall appropriate a term from T. S. Eliot and call the analogy in PB an objective correlative: the inner and outer aporias of the imperial *polis*, from economics to wars, were growing into a storm-cloud. Foreign threats from anti-democratic Persia and Sparta converged with the ruling class's swift creation of a gigantic slave population. The somewhat dated statistics by Thomson put it thus:

In 431, according to the most recent estimate, there were at least 172,000 citizens, including their women and children, at least 28,500 resident aliens, and not more than 115,000 slaves. This means that the slaves already amounted to over half the free population, and that little more than a quarter of the total number of adults were in possession of the franchise. (326; cf. Hansen 120-25)

This is not very clear, since it does not give numbers for adult males. No source gives us exact data, but if we assume an average family had four members, there were 43,000 voting citizens, which is less 14% of the ca. 316,000 population. Most historians today assume 80-100,000 of slaves in this ripe Athens, or $\frac{1}{4}$ of the population. It may not be chance that the first slaves of dramaturgic importance in Aeschylus appear in the *Oresteia* and that they are women, the semi-comic nurse Kilissa and the war prisoner Cassandra, while Pr is a divine male slave, tortured as such (cf. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 270-72).

At any rate the huge number of slaves, and the better half of State revenue supplied by tributes from dominated statelets, eroded the basis for a democratic block of smallholders and rich merchants, with a comfortable economical and a relatively high political status of peasants and artisans (cf. the rich argument by Wood, 2015). Further, by the end of the century, Thucydides (1956) will report a taunt, supposed to have originated not too far from the time of the PB performance, that Athens itself had become a *polis tyrannos* (1: 124) – i.e., that

the inner democracy is made possible by rapacious tyranny in their dominions abroad (cf. the rich Raaflaub, 1979; Kallet, 2003; and Boedeker and Raaflaub, 1998). Actually, in the mid-440s – a time that increasingly looks like a watershed – a law by Pericles closed the earlier swiftly rising citizenship to offspring by Athenian father plus mother only; it turned into a hereditary privilege, a closed and eventually much shrinking circle.

For PB, I incline to a variant of Podlecki's view, while changing the problem from individual to structural:

Aeschylus was a *Marathonomachos*, a veteran of the Persian Wars, who had come within the magnetic field of the author of the victory of Salamis. [From *Persians* on, most] of his plays manifest his support of Themistocles, and his only extant trilogy shows him on the side of the liberal reforms of 462. But Pericles was of the younger generation, and Pericles lacked the personal attractiveness of Themistocles. (Podlecki 129, and cf. 125)

Within the ominous context of backgrounding free labour and increasing warfare, my hypothesis is that PB should be primarily read as an Aeschylean stance of embattled libertarian celebration and apprehension, in the spirit of Marathon and Salamina, toward the end of his life and in self-chosen emigration. The profession of tragedian was in Athens a kind of superior artisan, and Pr was a patron divinity of potter artisans. The stall of a democracy of independent citizens, their *autonomia* – being governed by one's own laws – as well as *isonomia*, political equality, and *isegoria*, equal right to speech in assemblies (cf. Wood 86 and 138), grows into a cosmic stall of unfreedom.

5.2. *The Promethean Long Hope*

I wish to end by giving pride of place to a Promethean hope, arisen from suffering and wedded to cognition. The term *theoria*, akin to theatre and numinosity, may provide an approach here.

My *Gemoll* Greek-German dictionary tells me that the root *théa* means *looking*, also *the place from which one looks*, so that it slides easily to the meaning of *performance*, *that which is looked at*. *Theáomai* means *looking at something carefully and/or with wonder*, also *imagining*. The ramifications include on the one hand *theá*, *goddess*, and *theós*, *god or divinity*, and on the other *théatron*, meaning both *a building* (which could also be used for popular assembling) and the *onlookers or audience*. And *theōría* means not only *looking or watching* but also a *festivity*, a *festive procession*, or finally what grew into our main denotation, *theory as a cognitive consideration*. It stands out how little difference is here, materialistically, between people and spatial surroundings as well as between what we split into physical and psychical. In the Athenian *polis* all popular assemblies, and especially the annual one at the Great Dionysia, were officially of a piece with

the community's well-being – from fun, sympathy, and antipathy to affirmation, validation, and preservation of existence. This does not at all mean they could not also be rowdy, sexy or full of conflictual politics; but it means that *theōria* was strongly overdetermined as “participatory attendance ... in the political and religious rites of the state” (Goldhill, “Refracting” 6).

I have argued that in Mysteries, including the original Dionysian feast, the vision of a constraining event, the coldest season, was an anxiogenic phase of the ritual that demanded resolution and deliverance. *Theorein* was there “an intensified seeing” capable of uncovering the roots of matters (Snell, 1948, 18), whereas in Aristotle's *Politics* (1999, 6. 1342 a 23-24, p. 143) the term is fully laicised in opposition to practice, as befits a fully slave-owning society. In between them, for Aeschylus *theoros* and *theorein* meant an intensified vision, as powerful as that of religious mysteries but public and openly debatable. This terminology is insistently applied by Pr, in the meaning of spectacle or sight, to the stance of the Chorus, Oceanus, and Io, and we might assume it was also what Aeschylus was aiming for in the audience.

Thus, PB is to my mind, for all its impurities, Aeschylus's decisive culmination in a cognitive numinosity – or is it numinous cognition? Its price and obverse are that there is no resolution in the play, only a defeat and a hope this may radically change, and in the meantime a rigid refusal to cease radical opposition. The values of a cognitive numinosity can be identified and affirmed, the universe is unthinkable without them, but they cannot in the societal spacetime of PB (realistically) be presented as victorious.¹⁶ How are we today to inherit this, in the spirit of my mottoes from Benjamin, the Dalai Lama, and Nietzsche?

Pr mentions briefly, but before all other gifts of his, that he has given humans hope (v. 250 – it is not mockingly hidden by Zeus, as in Hesiod's Pandora myth). True, this too is in PB ambiguous, “curiously brief and undeveloped” (Griffith ed. 134): it is a “blind hope” achieved by *denying* humans to know the date of their dying. In other words, Pr changed the humans' sense of time from closed to open, from certain death to possibilities of intervention into everyday straits. If we are to apply this to ourselves, two questions arise: how much time might we have? And what is the central operative precondition for intervening? The answer to the first is unclear, to the second much debated but to my mind clear.

When would a long hope, stemming from the Promethean skills plus emancipation, be realised? He talks about a reconciliation in hundreds of years and gives no prophetic date for a downfall of Zeus. The date of such a new heaven and new earth would obviously not be a quantitative prediction but a qualitative indication of its possibility in, and yet distance from, the spacetime of the original. We have here the experience of modern SF, after the French Revolution and H.G. Wells's *Time Machine*: in it, situating the story in a future situated hundreds – or even hundreds of thousands – of years after the original text indicates that the possibility of a radically different and better future is faint. This is often coupled with the expectation of radical change in Homo sapiens: it literally needs a superman or a series of new avatar super-peoples (as in Olaf

Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, 1930, that logically adds new Earths or planets as their habitat). Nearer to our greater threat, Ursula Le Guin wrote me in the 2010s that Terra may after half a million years cleanse herself and forget our failed species. Alas, in the age of nuclear weapons, the instatement of an increasingly radical and boundlessly destructive capitalocene (see note 10), we cannot afford either of these visions. We cannot even afford the committed Dr Astrov's worry, in an interval of combating epidemics in a miserable population (in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*), as to what will happen in one or two centuries.

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My thanks go first to Matthew Ward, who gifted me with the Aeschylus PB in Greek a couple of years ago and, together with Giulia Maltagliati, rekindled my lifelong interest in ancient Greece (at age 10 I began a novel about the Dorian arrival to the hill of today's Athens, which went no further than page one). MW and GM also sent me oodles of sources and commented the draft. Second and equally to Patricia McManus, who beside much discussion and other encouragements endowed a stuck scholar with access to a university internet site. Early comments by Lance Tait helped. Responsibilities remain the author's – who is well aware that almost any statement about Athenian affairs in 5th century B.C. has been contradicted, and that positions spring from presuppositions.

Notes

1. The very first written record of a juxtaposition of a variant of *demos* (people) with one of *kratos* (power) is in Aeschylus's *Suppliants* vv. 370-72 (see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1990, 258).

My very first university lectures at Zagreb University "theatrology" in 1959/60 began with Aristotle's *Poetics* and Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, read in the vein of Thomson's *Aeschylus and Athens* of 1946 that had impressed me deeply. I am glad I arrived now at an evaluation of PB before I reread Thomson: for, on the one hand, I still found him not only most erudite but also wider than usual, ranging from tribal rituals to Epicure; but on the other hand, it has been for more than half a century (say after 1968) impossible to share his horizon of a worldwide October Revolution – even though it had allowed him a keen understanding of ruling-class practices and ideologies as well as a sympathetic commitment to full democratic liberation. Furthermore, at his time almost nobody had integrated narratology, pioneered by forgotten Russians and Germans ca. 1910-40, into dramaturgic analysis. In sum, I am unable to evaluate fully both Thomson's bold and stimulating sweep from prehistory to the *polis* (also in his *First Greek Philosophers*) and his full probe into Athenian tragedy, and I do not share his reconstruction of a *Prometheia* trilogy. Also, in an age of full politico-ideological occultation of radical democracy – i.e., of its vector towards Shelleyan classlessness – I diverge in good part from some of Thomson's strictures on Aeschylus's horizon of a democratic reconciliation, preferring to see what we can use from this horizon today. Nonetheless, Thomson remains a powerful ancestor, and I have practised a proper critical piety toward his arguments where I could use them.

I also had the good fortune to know personally two central pioneers cited here: Raymond Williams in Cambridge, who pioneered a view of tragedy as still, alas, necessary to our understanding; and Ellen Wood in London. I have from both learned more than I could acknowledge by citing snippets: e.g., though I am

unable to judge Wood's details, I share her main thesis about "free labour" being the politico-economical backbone of Athenian democracy; it follows that its limitation by slavery and State doles might explain much about the determining context of PB.

Given the exiguity of sources about the original staging of PB, I refrain from speculating on its huge contribution to the meaning. A separate essay would be necessary for recent theatre or the movies, such as Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*. I am using the Greek text as edited by Mark Griffith (1983), with introduction and most useful notes; I have taken the liberty to pillage (and vary) his elucidations of the plot in my section 2.11. The English text of PB I cite from Sommerstein ed., with occasional emendations of mine.

2. The first scene of PB has four agents onstage. Critics believe that there must have been a third actor involved here, an innovation Aeschylus would have picked up from early Sophocles.
3. The term *dromena*, the "things done," comes from the Eleusinian Mysteries, where the things said or sung were *legomena*, things displayed *deiknumena*, and things revealed *epiphania*.
4. Phrynichus won his first competition between 511 and 508. He produced tragedies on themes and subjects later exploited in the golden age of Athenian tragedy such as the Danaids, Phoenician Women, and Alcestis. He was the first tragedian we know of to use a historical subject – a play of his, produced in 493-492, showed the fate of that town after conquest by the Persians. Herodotus reports that "when Phrynichus wrote a play entitled *The Fall of Miletus* and produced it, the whole theatre fell to weeping; [the Athenians] fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmas for bringing to mind a calamity that affected them so personally and forbade the performance of that play forever." (6.21). One drachma was the rough equivalent of a highly skilled worker's daily pay, in Europe today officially on average ca. 200 Euro or more; unless Herodotus exaggerates, this was a prohibitive fine of ca. 200,000 or more Euro. Whatever the emotional impact had been, it was surely not levied without a political reason, since Phrynichus was sponsored – like Aeschylus – by the much-contested Themistocles. Both tragedians seem to have also been accused of impiety (see my 4.2), which was a way of trying to exile politically obnoxious people; this was also the case of Anaximander, clearly committed to Pericles (anyway born outside of Athens and thus presumably easier to threaten).
5. However, Pythagoras died ca. 490 and his school's sail-trimming – where concord (*harmonia*) was "a reconciliation of dissentients," a doctrine of the fusion of opposites in a mean – was analogous to the rise of a middle class intermediate between the landowners and the working people (Thomson 201); I can with difficulty reduce, say, the stress on suffering in PB to such a parallel.
6. See on the *novum* Bloch's magnum opus; I have often expatiated upon it, most recently in "On Fake (Death-dealing) vs. True (Life-affirming) Novums." *MediAzioni* 30 (2021): D31-D40, www.mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it.
7. As to the words, Aeschylus is famous for his archaising semantics, e.g. in wondrous and dense neologisms such as *kaxebronthete*, meaning that strength "was thundered out of him" (v.362): which is also a depiction of utter annihilation meted out to an enemy of Zeus; a number of his expressions retain their force after almost two and a half millennia. "Aeschylus' language is also magniloquent, suffused by epic echoes, ornamented with exotic vocabulary, crammed with long, newly coined, compound words, and often experimental.... The sheer scale of his theatrical effects and poetry is reflected in the magnitude of his conception of history and of the universe." (Hall 199-200) I cannot enter into matters of prosody, style, and many masterful smaller components – such as *stichomythia* and other

dialogue, monologue, verse forms for singing or for madness exclamations using variation with increment, and so on (cf. also the following works: Taplin, Oliver. *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy*. Clarendon P, 1977; both titles by Griffith, Sommerstein, and Thomson).

8. Cf. on Prometheus Unbound my early brief discussion in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* [enlarged edn.]. Ed. Gerry Canavan. P. Lang, 2016, with further bibliography. A useful anthology of writings on Pr is Storch-Damerou eds. One should add to this the paintings from Piero di Cosimo through Rubens to Orozco, as well as the music from Beethoven and Liszt to Scriabin and Nono. I do not know of a work surveying the stagings of PB or Pr.
9. See for capitalocene Suvin ch. 24, “Antiutopia in Colonisation Times: Capitalocene and Death,” in *Disputing the Deluge: 21st Century Writings on Utopia, Narration, Horizons of Survival*. Ed. Hugh O’Connell. Bloomsbury, 2022, pp. 317-46; also its ch. 23; and for war my ch. 1, “Capitalism Means/Needs War,” in *Communism, Poetry*. Political Animal Press, 2020, pp. 26-49; both have large bibliographies.
10. I have written on narrative agents, including types and characters, several times, with a brief résumé in my “Introduction” to *Disputing*, 15-16.
11. Filantropia is scornfully imputed to Pr in the very first lines by Power, meaning that he is a traitor to the immortals by helping a lower worthless race (vv. 19 and 37-38; Griffith ed. 9n justly compares that to the US “nigger-lover”). Pr is also characteristically accused of being a newfangled intellectual – sofistes (v. 62), originally simply a wise one but here already approaching the US egghead (cf. Griffith ed. 95); an interesting French monograph on PB by Suzanne Saïd is titled *The Sophist and the Tyrant*. The aristocratic filia can be clearly seen, e.g., in the Theognidean compilation; for filia in PB cf. Griffith ed. 14-15 and 129.
12. The danger of all violent power, including the power of fashioning people’s nature inherent in developed technology whenever applied to life, and then calling the lowest on the scale of power (non-Whites, women, manual workers, etc.) deficient or indeed monstrous, becomes apparent at the time of Mary Shelley’s *Dr. Frankenstein* – her work’s subtitle is *The New Prometheus*. From needful dystopian warning this easily slides to despair, even obscurantism. Some 20th-Century briefer echoes of Pr, notably by Kafka and Heiner Müller, opt for closed horizons.
13. I cannot imagine any narrative of human relationships not shaped by opposition, confrontation or contrast, but this does not necessarily involve adversarial opposition. Historically, as I concluded from a theoretical approach to stage stories in “Revelation vs. Conflict.” *Theatre J* 46.4 (1994), pp. 523-3, the overarching narrative models divide into revelation and conflict. When the story does not involve adversarial opposition, it is a behavioural logic that Jameson (“Soseki and Western Modernism.” *Boundary 2*, 18.3 (1991), pp. 123-41) calls “the mystery, the withholding, the expectation of the secret or revelation” (135). When it adopts adversariness, it is a conflict whose “zero-sum logic” can be traced to monotheism but is particularly well suited to capitalism (132), and ruthlessly displaces older forms of diachronic tension. In revelation, the opposition or contrast is not defined as a conflict of individual wills and ideals but as a confrontation with life and the social world from the vantage point of absolute judgment. Revelation does not deal in the individualist morality of good protagonist vs. bad antagonist but in the epistemology of who sees or understands more. The “adversary” is not evil but delusion, the solution is not in victorious individualist will but in increasing insight into generally valid laws. In most storytelling, within the unavoidable societal limitations of disposable energy and power relationships, these two models are contaminated. However, revelation prevails as the absolute presupposition of positive divine knowledge in Aeschylus, Dante or Zeami’s Deity

Nô, or as the presupposition of negative atheist Limbo in Beckett or Kafka. In Euripides, Shakespeare or Balzac, conflict prevails.

The two horizons in PB are a particularly interesting, though impure, mixture of competing revelations in the Athenian *polis*, in which Pr's Gaea-Themis horizon enters into head-on conflict with the official Olympian piety.

14. For Eco's pioneering work on an artwork's intention as different from the original author's one see Lector in fabula. Bompiani, 1979 [English with modifications as The Role of the Reader. Indiana UP, 1979].
15. In 19th-Century European socialism, Pr was the patron saint both of the enchained proletariat and of communist rebellion. The British utopian socialist J. G. Barmby, who claimed to have introduced the term "communism" into English, founded the journal The Promethean, or Communitarian (later: Communist) Apostle.
16. Re: realism, we should not naively forget the probability that the director and co-author of PB in the 430s had a beady eye out for the reactions of Periclean authorities. Surely repressions such as Phrynichus's crippling fine (see note 5) and the various exile threats for impiety were well-known to people presenting statements to huge audiences that included the ruling elite. A head of workshop and dynasty of tragedians such as Euphorion could not risk its collapse, if he could ward it off by a handful of however illogical speeches, like those constituting the incompatible pro-Zeus horizon, and then pointing out that in a concluding play all will be smoothed out: just in case. This would especially be the case if the original Aeschylus text had initial vacillations.

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