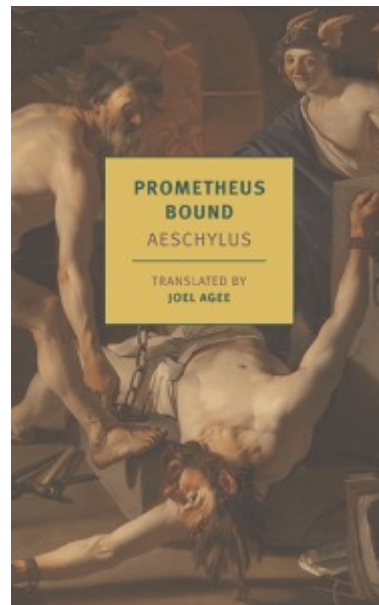




Torture and Surveillance of the Gods: A Brilliant New Translation of ‘Prometheus Bound’

By Jonathon Sturgeon on Mar 26, 2015 4:15pm

“Few Gods or monsters in the teeming world of Greek mythology have ignited the Western imagination like Prometheus,” Joel Agee writes in the introduction to his new translation of *Prometheus Bound*. It’s true. For Nietzsche, Agee points out, the Titan who brought fire from the gods to humans was the model artist. For the Shelleys, Prometheus was either a revolutionary figure (*Prometheus Unbound*) or a symbol of scientific hubris (*Frankenstein*). Even Beethoven weirdly positioned Napoleon as a Promethean figure, evidently forgetting that the titan raged against the tyranny of Zeus.



From the emancipatory writings of Karl Marx to the conservative gibberish of Eric Voegelin, Prometheus has, for millennia, inspired transcendent visions of revolt and supreme authority on both left and right. Yet the ideological ubiquity of Prometheus betrays a weird fact: we have only one play, from antiquity, featuring the Titan as a character. And, what’s weirder, we don’t even know who wrote it.

The brief and awe-inducing Greek tragedy *Prometheus Bound* is commonly attributed to Aeschylus, who was thought to have written the play until the 19th century, when its authorship came into question. Of foremost concern was the notion that Aeschylus, whose other tragedies and dramas are unerringly pious, could have written such a scathing attack on Zeus, the supreme god and “King of Kings.” Today, Agee points out, even after the advent of statistical and metrical methods of analysis, the tragedy’s authorship is still in question. At this point, its ascription to Aeschylus is a convention.

After reading the new translation by NYRB Classics, it hardly seems to matter. In Agee’s hands, *Prometheus Bound* becomes a precise, powerful, even thunderous rhetorical disturbance on the themes of tyranny, torture, political foresight, and revolt.

Source: <http://flavorwire.com/511454/torture-and-surveillance-of-the-gods-a-brilliant-new-translation-of-prometheus-bound>



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If you’re unfamiliar with the basic arc of the tragedy, the story is fairly straightforward — there is little to no plot to be had. Zeus has bound Prometheus to a mountain for the crime of bringing fire, art, culture, and reason to human beings. What follows is a series of discussions between Prometheus and a varied cast of both sympathetic and apathetic characters, most of whom advise him — given that he is a titan who cannot die — to repent and end his infinite suffering. Accordingly, the drama opens with a scene of torture — one that resonates deeply in the era of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib — wherein Kratos and Bia, henchman of Zeus, oversee Hephaistos, the god of fire and metalwork, as he binds and chains Prometheus to the mountain. Although Bia is eerily quiet, Kratos explains the events in no uncertain terms:

It was your flower he stole, the bright and dancing fire,
and gave its wonderworking power to mortals.
This is the crime for which he must now pay
the price to all the gods, that he may learn
to love the tyranny of Zeus
and quit his friendship with the human race.

As you can see above, part of the wonder of Agee’s translation is the combination of its metrical brilliance (“wonderworking power”) and the centered, symmetrical shape of its lines and stanzas — an intuitive gesture of the translator’s recently bolstered by scholarship. The cumulative effect is astounding, even over the course of a brief drama.

Among Agee’s many innovations is the way he allows Zeus, who is not listed in the *dramatis personae*, to become another character, an omnipresence who can potentially hear or see the events unfolding on the mountain where Prometheus is chained. The effect is bracing. The fear of Zeus as Panopticon instills a deep, chilling fear in the gods who collect there. The very idea that Zeus may hear their dialogue alters it irrevocably: I know of no better literary representation of literary and political discourse in the age of surveillance.

This time around, I began to read *Prometheus Bound* perhaps against the grain. I began to see Prometheus as a self-proclaimed representative of the human race, one who uses the excuse of tyranny to take credit for all human innovation. He made me think of our Congress, a deadlocked body that employs the constant threat of a state of emergency to undercut collective progress, to excuse its own ineffectualness. In short, a brilliant new translation of a 2000-year-old play refocused my gaze on our political drama in a way that no novel has in some time. Aeschylus or not: here’s to another thousand years.

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