Triumphant Where It Dares Defy: The Resistance of “Prometheus” To Critical Classification

“The wretched gift eternity
    Was thine— and thou hast borne it well.”

The figure of Prometheus has so far proved as eternal as Byron claimed. With roots in Greek mythology thousands of years old, and continuing to appear as himself, as an archetype, an enigmatic reference, or in any of a dozen other forms on stage, screen, canvas, and page, he is a familiar figure, though his story is perhaps muddled by modern retellings that simplify the nature of his struggle and his punishment. In spite of this, the second part of Byron's claim also remains true: in sum, Prometheus has stood the test of time admirably, more so than many other figures of myth, many probably unknown to us, and his modern stature is primarily due to the efforts of such creative minds as Byron himself. His allure is due to his combination of simple revolutionary principles and complex circumstances. He exists at the center of a classical myth surprising in its narrative simplicity, but with complicated social and philosophical arguments. The arguments, which involve religion, humanity, tyranny, mercy, revolution, injustice, and the potential of the human race, lay fertile ground for a variety of different interpretations of the Titan. Byron engages this myth to illustrate one particular species of rebellious hero, a type for which he was already known at the time of the poem's writing. His “Prometheus” is a poem of concision and complexity, illustrating a hero immensely Romantic, and even more immensely Byronic, in his heroic qualities.

As the Prometheus myth inspires multiple versions of hero, so does each hero likewise engender various critical approaches. Byron's “Prometheus” is incorporated into many conceptions and critical perspectives of Byron's work, protagonists, and even of his own life. These critical structures naturally incorporate more than just this one of Byron's many works. In

the process of developing systems to address all of Byron's heroic figures, though, each system inevitably becomes constricted, tightening its criteria around its critical concept, and as it does, “Prometheus,” in particular, begins to resist the critical strictures into which it has been placed.

From among the copious amounts of critical work on Byron and his heroic figures, the three critical exercises to be examined here demonstrate a consistent quality in their failures to adequately address the figure and poem of Byron's Prometheus. Peter Thorslev, in his somewhat dated 1962 book *Byronic Hero*, attempts to examine the idea of the Romantic Hero from a historical perspective: he examines the precursors to Romantic Hero types, and then Romantic Hero types themselves as categories. John Ower, fifteen years later, takes a more linear approach to the experience of the Romantic protagonist as the aesthetic hero: he develops a three-stage path of the experiences of the aesthetic hero from his initial experience, through his “fall,” and into his redemption. Ian Dennis takes concepts from Rene Girard and his work on imitative desire (in a work much more recent than either Thorslev or Ower) and examines Byron's work through the understanding of desire-structures: characters fulfill positions in a network of desired objects, models who portray desire, and subjects who imitate models. In each critical approach, Byron's Prometheus resists any single category, and, moreover, does so in a manner that corresponds to the fundamental critical concept around which the system of categorization is based. He supersedes Thorslev's historical approach by appropriating qualities from far too many sources, and by remaining too similar to multiple categories, bridging the gaps between types. In Ower's linear, experiential system, Prometheus' immortality and the nature of his continuous and eternal rebellion prevent him from moving along the system of stages, while he simultaneously exists in

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3 John Ower, “The Aesthetic Hero: His Innocence, Fall, And Redemption” *Bucknell Review [Literature & History]* ed. Harry Garvin 23:2 (Fall, 1977)
all three stages at once. Dennis is the only one of the three whose analysis acknowledges (and revolves around) the fact that Prometheus fulfills multiple roles in the desire structure simultaneously, precisely because his rebellion hinges on his simultaneous existence as model and object. Dennis fails, however, to examine the role “Prometheus” plays as itself a model and object of desire in the context of Byron and his audience. Every time, “Prometheus” resists classification on any other terms than itself, and always through the same mechanic by which it is being classified.

Because a working knowledge of the complete Prometheus myth is a requirement for understanding both Prometheus as a general figure and the alterations made by Byron to form his own concept of the Titan, I will first summarize the Prometheus myth, in the Aeschylean form that it was known to Byron, and commonly known today (as opposed to the version authored by Hesiod centuries earlier in his Theogony). The Titan of Aeschylus appears in the drama Prometheus Bound, and the play covers a very limited portion of the entire myth. Prometheus has opposed the will of the newly crowned king of the gods, Zeus, whom he had previously aided in the latter's coup, by defending the race of humans from Zeus' intention to destroy them. He has done this by giving to them the art and power of fire, a prize previously belonging only to the gods, and along with that, depending on interpretation of the myth, a partial gift of prophecy— the ability to recognize their own mortality— and/or the gift of other technical arts, such as agriculture, navigation, and husbandry. In Aeschylus, furthermore, Prometheus claims rather to have taken from man the knowledge of his mortality, allowing humans to live in “blind hopefulness.” For these crimes, Zeus sentences the Titan to one of his famous eternal torments: in the case of the Titan, to live, immortal, chained to a mountain with a predatory bird (in Aeschylus, an eagle; in Byron, a vulture) constantly tearing at his liver. Prometheus retaliates by explaining that, with his own powers as a seer, he knows the process by which Zeus will one day be unseated
as king of the gods.5 By withholding the prophecy, he ensures that Zeus cannot circumvent it, and that one day his tyrannical reign will be ended, saving humans forever. He is then taken to be shackled to his mountain at the outset of the play, where he explains his crimes, the import of his prophecy (though not the actual insight), and argues against the tyranny of Zeus to a chorus, the god Oceanus, and the human woman Io, who has been cursed by Hera, and wanders into and out of his prison valley in the middle section of the play, and finally is dragged beneath the earth at the conclusion. In the two lost sequels to the play, it is known that Prometheus eventually capitulates to Zeus, presumably an older and wiser king than in his tyrannical early days, and, revealing the content of the prophecy, is released.

While this summary addresses the relevant narrative aspects of the Prometheus myth, the particular character of Prometheus is also important: not just in his actions, but also in his speech and behavior. He spends the whole drama chained to a mountain with a wedge driven into his chest, so his action in the drama is essentially non-existent. He therefore spends a considerable amount of time talking, much of it railing against Zeus for his punishment, demeaning his visitors in surly and passive-aggressive fashion, and, for Io, showing a considerably more compassionate side, giving her the aid of his prophecy to inform her of the course her wanderings will lead her. Finally, he drives off Hermes, dispatched with a message from Zeus instructing the Titan to explain his prophecy, severely alienating the bitter and sarcastic fellow immortal with his anti-social and revolutionary rhetoric. At times compassionate, sometimes stoically rebellious, and frequently obnoxious or downright whiny, Prometheus is notably defined by his speech (and speeches) in the drama, as opposed to Byron’s entirely silent, surprisingly active Titan, who stoically bears up under continuous torture and never voices complaint, nor will speak to anyone

5 This prophecy, incidentally, is of the child of the nymph Thetis: her son will be greater in power than his father. When Zeus eventually learns the nature of this prophecy, he marries Thetis off to Peleus. The product of their union is the Greek hero Achilles, and their wedding sets off the events that lead to the Trojan war.
at all, except “in [his] loneliness” to the unhearing sky.

Understanding Aeschylus’ Titan, we can now turn to Byron's. We first examine his particular qualities as a hero, and how precisely they are heroic qualities. While this will give us a conception of the Prometheus figure as a hero in a somewhat universal sense, looking at contrasts between the Prometheus of Aeschylus and of Byron that suggests precisely what kind of hero Byron desired in his poetic and cultural context. With this initial understanding of Prometheus as a hero in Byron and in Byron's source, we can begin to discuss critical views of Romantic heroes and Prometheus' various positions (and discomforts) in those views.

The Prometheus of Aeschylus and Byron is a fallen Titan, laid low in his betrayal of Zeus by giving the gift of fire and “partial prophecy.” He is to both writers principally a rebellious figure against Zeus. Both figures have in common their resistance to the “tyranny” of Zeus, and that resistance being on behalf of mankind. Though the stakes of the intervention in the Aeschylean myth are higher—his Titan “saved the human race from being ground/ To dust, from total death,” whereas Byron's Titan's efforts “render... less/ The sum of human wretchedness/ And strengthen Man” (36-38)—both are partisans of humanity, and active, energetic partisans. They intercede on behalf of a humanity that cannot itself act in a divine sphere: they recognize human frailty and limitations and do what humans cannot. That both Titans do what humans would like to but cannot begins to illustrate the cultural image of a hero that Prometheus fulfills.

Both ancient Greek and early 19th century European writers (Byron was sufficiently well-traveled and experienced when he wrote “Prometheus” in 1816 to be considered not merely English but European) demonstrate a desire for a figure who can act alone to create great change, and a figure that can surpass human limitation of frailty (physical weakness, mortality). This is further demonstrated: the two versions of the Titan are punished physically, with both the imprisonment

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and the eternal torment by the vulture recognizing the eternal presence, and endurance, of the hero. This cultural figure, a champion of humanity's interest in an arena beyond the reach of humanity, expresses a common desire to have access to those regions.

Silence and death are figuratively interconnected, both in literature at large and in “Prometheus” in specific, and this interconnection becomes a key trait of a hero, and one which critics will find a stumbling block in addressing both Titan and poem. The Titan's choice of silence in imitation of his desire for death and the concomitant “Victory” over Zeus that desire achieves parallels the Thunderer's efforts at “speech” through torture and enforced life—“the wretched gift eternity” (24). The contrast is in action against passivity, where passivity is the strategy of humanity and its partisan, a strategy being newly explored by the Titan and through his example, demonstrated to the emergent human race. This strategy proves, via Prometheus, to be an effective one: Zeus requires Prometheus, and humanity, to interact with him—demands that they seek to emulate godlike powers of speech—and instead, his own ability to act, his divine quality, comes under attack, as “in his hands the lightnings trembled” (33) hints of enforced passivity when Zeus briefly and perhaps unconsciously emulates the strategy of his victims. In his own inability to influence Prometheus, Zeus sees shadows of his own mortality—literally, in Prometheus' refusal to speak of Zeus' fall, and figuratively, in his reduction to enforced passivity, the failure to affect others. The passivity that becomes the hallmark of human resistance to omnipotence is the same silence, the tacit refusal to actively worship, that is “Man's fate and force,” his only effective “action” when passivity is a defining mortal trait. This mortal trait of silence, indicating a more human than divine Prometheus, challenges many critics who otherwise structure their conceptions of the hero to address explicitly human heroes; Prometheus takes on some, but not all, of these human qualities through his mortal silence.

An enormous difference in the two versions of the Prometheus narrative suggests a
remarkable emendation on Byron's part. While most attention to the Prometheus myth focuses on his theft of fire and gift of it to humanity, Byron attends to what is often called Prometheus' gift of partial prophecy: that “Man in portions can foresee/ His own funereal destiny” (49-50). The significant emendation of this point is that while Byron claims that it is through Prometheus that man can see his own mortality, and therefore “his wretchedness and his resistance,/ And his sad unallied existence,” Aeschylus claims quite the opposite; rather, that Prometheus “caused men no longer to foresee their death... planted firmly in their hearts blind hopefulness.”\textsuperscript{7} Byron, knowing both the gift of prophecy in Aeschylus and the claim that Aeschylus makes towards a human ignorance of mortality, nevertheless turns the gift entirely around into what seems, to a modern audience, to be a more sensible and powerful gift, particularly given the symbol of Prometheus as “making Death a Victory” (59). His cultural standpoint, then, recognizes death as a potentially desirable object, one which Byron promotes, rather than one to be blindly ignored, as Aeschylus suggests is desirable.

The nature of Promethean foresight also parallels mortal silence and passivity in that it seems to be a primarily mortal-aligned quality. Prometheus teaches Man to “foresee/ His own funereal destiny,” an ability he exemplifies in his alignment with humans and the mortal coil, as opposed to Zeus, who does not. Blinded by his own presumably unshakable immortality, Zeus cannot foresee death for himself, or more precisely, defeat.\textsuperscript{8} Prometheus, who has seen and experienced defeat himself, can foresee in the manner of mortals his own fallibility, and also that of Zeus. His condition of understanding fallibility— not just of mortals or of divine beings, but of both— is contingent upon having failed, and therefore recognizing that potential for failure in the self and in all others, and it is this understanding that he shares with mortals. As with silence, the

\textsuperscript{7} Aeschylus 249-51
\textsuperscript{8} It should be noted that Prometheus' vision does not explicitly portend the fall of Zeus, but merely the rise of a greater power; Zeus may not necessarily die, but perhaps only be unseated— an equally terrifying fate, apparently.
Promethean foresight suggests that Prometheus is not merely in alliance with mortals, but in fact in some ways a member of their race: like Man, Prometheus is only “in part divine,” and in another part mortal, the latter of which Zeus does not share, and thus lacks the passive capacity for silence and foreknowledge of his own annihilation.

Byron, then, shows a clear inclination toward a particular style of hero in Prometheus—a style that is hardly surprising, given any understanding of his body of work. His Prometheus retains the mythical scope of the Titan's actions on behalf of all of humankind and the immense physical nature of a “Titan” (the only form of address ever given the hero; lacking the title of the poem, this could be about an anonymous fictional figure), but in the person of the hero himself, Byron pushes the figure of the rebel further than Aeschylus, for whatever reason, desires or dares to. He makes him angrier, more passionate, and yet also more stoic and silent. He also addresses the cultural divide that puts death and human foreknowledge of it as a desirable object, making it a powerful aid to the “sad, unallied existence” (52) of humankind, and arranges an understanding of metaphysical mortality and divinity that justifies the action and inaction of the respective antagonist and hero, and the relationship of those figures to mortality.

With these ideas, then, of some of the qualities of Prometheus as a hero, and a consequent suggestion of the standpoint from which he was formed, Prometheus can be examined, and indeed has been, by a variety of critics seeking to define a conception of, and system of classification for, the Byronic Hero. In the particular case of Prometheus, the study of the heroic archetype(s) is in some ways simplified: his formulation as the culmination of the qualities of the Byronic Hero, the idealized and fully realized endpoint of the evolution of the Romantic Hero, allows most critics to explore his existence as a final stage in what generally seems to be a linear system of heroic forms. In the eyes of Peter Thorslev and John Ower, Romantic and Byronic Heroes follow a path of evolution, developed across the course of the Romantic movement or across an individual track.
of the hero's experience. The figure of Prometheus, for both, exists near the concluding end of their respective heroic evolutions. This is a slightly tautological point: Prometheus is a culmination of qualities developed across Byronic Heroes, and critical understandings of Prometheus place him at the end of their respective systems of development. The tautology, and simplicity, is broken by recognizing that Prometheus' influence as the “Romantic Hero apotheosized,” in Thorslev's phrase, extends his position into multiple different categories within each critical system of analysis. By virtue of his role in taking up myriad traits displayed in other Byronic Heroes and combining, strengthening, or reinterpreting them, he necessarily is positioned to dabble in nearly any category of Romantic Heroism, but to be addressed fully by none of them. In Thorslev's more extensive and more detailed systems, he displays qualities from several different categories, but cannot be classified into any one aspect.

The Titan demonstrates aspects of Thorslev's Gothic Villain and Man of Sensibility (both prototypes preceding the actual Romantic Hero types,) the Noble Outlaw, and of course, the “Prometheus and Satan” category. Prometheus does not merely exhibit qualities from this last group so much as exemplify them, but it too requires examination as forming the category of “apotheosized” heroes that Thorslev so admires. In Thorslev's eyes, Prometheus is given his own category (with Satan), which is again a rather tautological position: his category encompasses the two heroes that should more likely be called “Promethean” in their qualities than any other single descriptor. Furthermore, Satan is more a poor Promethean hero than the Titan is a good Satanic one; Prometheus is an archetype of hero himself, defying in his Romantic traits any category other than his own. At the same time, Prometheus exhibits qualities that appear in several of Thorslev's categories of Romantic Hero, bringing together what Thorslev calls “those two most prominent and not always compatible concerns of Romanticism— the concern for individual liberty, and the

9 Thorslev 108
Byron's Prometheus cannot be considered in any way to qualify as one of Thorslev's “Gothic Villains;” yet he does retain a few qualities that Thorslev attaches to the Gothic Villain, and Thorslev himself notes that “Pre-Byronic sentimentalizing of the Gothic Villain... [illustrates] the transformation from villain to hero”\(^\text{11}\) that he then goes on to discuss in his next four chapters, culminating in his examination of Prometheus. Byron's Titan shares certain limited characteristics with the Gothic Villain, particularly in its latest form: Prometheus' stubborn resistance to Zeus, the “endurance and repulse/ of [his] impenetrable Spirit,” (41-42) especially in the first twenty-eight lines of the poem, in which the reason for Prometheus' imprisonment and defiance have yet to be established, suggests what Thorslev sees as the key division between the Villain and the Noble Outlaw archetype from which the Titan also draws. The Gothic Villain, who acquires a certain taste for the sympathies of the audience and begins to play significantly to them in the end of his time,\(^\text{12}\) remains villainous nevertheless, sticking to his misogyny and sadism, or else experiences a complete change of heart, admitting his wrongness and acceding to the social codes he previously had sought to violate. Prometheus, it must be remembered, is a trickster and a renegade, and he proves himself relentlessly devoted to the success of his scheme. Furthermore, his position leans more strongly towards heroic in Byron's lyric, but even then, his actions are acknowledged to be criminal: his was a “Godlike crime” (35). It is only within the contemporary (and modern) human and humanistic context that his theft of fire is seen as acceptable and in fact admirable; within the ostensible context of the Titan, it's somewhat closer to treason. Byron's Titan shares his other tenuous connection to the Gothic Villain in his continued devotion to his scheme, with only himself as “a symbol and a sign/ To Mortals” to show for it. Aeschylus' Titan is much closer to

\(^{10}\) Thorslev 108  
\(^{11}\) Thorslev 61  
\(^{12}\) According to Thorslev; 59
the tradition of the Gothic Villain than Byron's admired poetic subject, rebellious immortal on behalf of those weaker than himself.

Byron's Prometheus has a few connections with the Gothic Hero, but his associations with another of Thorslev's types, the Hero of Sensibility—both the Man of Feeling and the Gloomy Egoist subtypes—are more common. He shares the “goodness of heart and...benevolence”\(^{13}\) of the Man of Feeling—in the eyes of the poem's speaker, at least—and in a somewhat ironic sense he fulfills Thorslev's final criterion: “something of a solitary in the sense that he is set off from the run of men by his very sensitivity.” His benevolence, in its superlative range and willingness to sacrifice, is a distinctive characteristic of the apotheosized Romantic Hero, and, interestingly, not a trait generally visible in any of the other heroic archetypes. It is also most definitely not a trait that belongs to his cohabitant in the category, Satan. As noted before, Prometheus' silence suggests that he is indeed “something of a solitary,” and while his solitary punishment is not self-imposed to protect his sensibilities, it is indeed his ostensible sensitivity towards mankind that has landed him in his current straits: “Thy Godlike crime was to be kind” (35). His existence in that punishment, though, and his powerful and damning silence, suggest that he has acquired the desire for isolation that typifies the isolated Man of Feeling. More precisely, his isolation is likewise the superlative of that characteristic, though in this instance that is a more indirect effect of his apotheosis, rather than a direct trait.

While Prometheus shares a few more minor and tenuous connections\(^{14}\) with the Man of Feeling, Thorslev's Gloomy Egoist also holds important connections to the Titan, and in occasionally curious manners. The concern of the Gloomy Egoist is death, and Prometheus has

\(^{13}\) Thorslev 39
\(^{14}\) His status as Titan, not deity, could be seen as a parallel to Thorslev's “middle classes or lower gentry” criterion
strong opinions on the “boon to die” (23). He is indeed “surfeited with life:”\(^\text{15}\) immortality in eternal tortured imprisonment is a more lasting curse than the mere dissatisfaction and personal grief that afflicts the graveyard-loitering Egoist. His immortality, which would likely turn Byron's Conrad, Manfred, or Juan to a mournful wandering Egoist (or in Manfred's case, more of one) even in the best of cases, makes him a supremely stoic figure, the most deserving of his meditations on the nature of death. Likewise, the “the long pessimistic self-analyses”\(^\text{16}\) that Thorslev notes of the Egoist are not voiced by Byron's silent Titan, but arguably by his poem's speaker; the Titan is jealously silent with his own “suffocating sense of woe” (10). His consciousness of his position and his own desires for any form of release besides complicity borders on self-absorption (and not unreasonably so, given his isolation.)

The superlative benevolence, isolation, and introversion of Prometheus draw him powerfully, though certainly not sufficiently, towards the realm of the Hero of Sensitivity, as an amalgamation of the highly externalized and “sensitive” Man of Feeling, and the heavily internalized Gloomy Egoist. Pulled in his past to respond supremely to the sufferings of man, and following his imprisonment, driven back into himself with such suffering, he is the extreme example of the emotional characteristics, if not in the least bit the physical ones, of the Hero of Sensitivity. Among his characteristics as the “apotheosized” Romantic Hero, his demonstrated concern for man, as well as his self-sacrifice, isolation, and self-absorption all link him to the figure of the Hero of Sensitivity, but as a more powerful and vibrant example than that category can permit. He exceeds, by virtue of his scope as a hero, the boundaries of that category, linking into others through other traits too powerful to remain within the bounds of the “never robust” Men of Feeling and too externally aware for the Egoist.

\(^{15}\) Thorslev 46
\(^{16}\) Thorslev 46
As Thorslev sees the Romantic Hero come into its own, the vision of the Hero begins to more closely approximate Prometheus as the crowning figure of Romantic Heroism. The Noble Outlaw, a category that Byron took up and truly made his own, particularly with his Turkish tales, is the first category where Prometheus, with his active, rebellious nature, can be easily recognized and, though not slotted home, certainly forced to fit with less stretching than other forms. In fact, Thorslev's latter “types” of Romantic Heroes tend to be merely Romantic variations on the Noble Outlaw theme: Faust, Cain, Satan, and Prometheus are all some form or another of a Noble Outlaw. The Noble outlaw is, in Thorslev's words:

Invariably fiery, passionate, and heroic; he is in the true sense bigger than the life around him. He always pre-empts the stage... even when... there are others of the *dramatis personae* who have more lines, more action, and ostensibly more sympathetic characteristics. In all of his appearances, the Noble Outlaw personified the Romantic nostalgia for the days when it was still possible for a leader to dominate his group of followers by sheer physical courage, strength of will, and personal magnetism.¹⁷

Prometheus is certainly many of the physical and emotional traits described here by Thorslev. He is passionate and heroic; he holds center stage in Aeschylus' drama, and in Shelley's, in spite of his demonstrable inactivity. In Byron's poem, he trades his speeches for passive action, causing even less to occur and yet dominating attention all the more, as the sole focus of the poem up to the last fifteen lines, with no subsidiary characters present until “Mortals” (46) recognize the Titan's symbolic figure. Also, as has been noted, he fits firmly into the Romantic desire for a single man to be able to move more than himself: to single-handedly rule an outlaw band, or to defend the entire human race, by that strength of will and physical courage.

At the same time, though, Byron's Prometheus is not truly fiery: he is passionate, but does not manifest it externally. Nor does he, in fact, lead anyone: Prometheus' actions, while they

¹⁷ Thorslev 68-69
influence a great number of individuals as “a symbol and a sign,” (45) do not, as such a symbol, compel anyone to aid or obey him. He is not charismatic, but merely admirably rebellious: more maverick than champion of the people. Thorslev also outlines the Noble Outlaw as a character forever sympathetic: “having been wronged either by intimate personal friends, or by society in general... his rebellion is thus always given a plausible motive.”

Prometheus, while sympathetic, is not so for any personal reasons; he has not been betrayed by a friend. Byron's Prometheus doesn't have the fully explored background of Aeschylus, but his opposition is active, a product of his “precepts,” (35) rather than a response to a betrayal by Zeus. Prometheus cannot even blame society, because though his motives are insufficiently explored by Byron, in favor of expounding the value of his actions, all that human society has failed to do is rescue him, an impossible task. Divine society perhaps has failed to aid him in his rebellion against Zeus' tyranny over mortals, but as they enjoy the fruit of that tyranny, there is some question as to who exactly in any society has failed him in any function they could be expected to perform. Hermes, at the close of the Aeschylean drama, urges Prometheus to make amends and rejoin the court of Zeus and the Titan's fellow immortals, and Hephaestus, at the beginning, is rueful of his own complicity in the Titan's imprisonment; as representatives of the Titan's “society,” they are accepting, not betraying. 

The Titan's natural contrariness, which prompted him in myth to cross Zeus before, makes him a less justifiable outlaw, and less forgivable, than Byron's noble criminals of circumstance.

In spite of his failings, Prometheus is both noble and outlaw, and even fulfills Thorslev's criteria for a truly Romantic example of such: he does indeed achieve the height of the “bleak,

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18 Thorslev 69
19 Aeschylus 943-50, 11-36
windswept shores, or lonely and deserted moors,”20 and while his sins are no secret, he surpasses all mortal heroes in the sense of “sublimity,” the fallen-angel quality, that haunts the Romantic Hero. These truly Romantic elements are built into the poem early on by Byron:

What was thy pity's recompense?  
A silent suffering, and intense;  
The rock, the vulture, and the chain,  
All that the proud can feel of pain,  
The agony they do not show,  
The suffocating sense of woe  
Which speaks but in its loneliness... (5-11)

His prison— “The rock, the vulture, and the chain”— is supremely bleak and empty, unvisited, as opposed to the Prometheus of Aeschylus, by any mortal or immortal, to whom he would not speak anyway. His sublimity begins in the pity that he feels for human suffering, and his fall is in the “recompense,” the “silent suffering” that he cannot allow to show. His “loneliness” recognizes both the remnants of his desire for other company, and, in the context of the negation of the beginning of that line, his deliberate and self-imposed isolation from that company: the desire for and abstinence from a comfort, which defines more clearly the bleakness of his surroundings, and the fall that has led him there. In a poem of less than sixty lines, Byron spends nearly the first full quarter of them essentially building up these two qualities: a bleak, inhospitable setting, and the great height and fall of the Titan. Even so, despite being noble and outlaw, qualities that stand him at the front rank of Romantic Heroes, Prometheus is not Thorslev's Noble Outlaw.

Thorslev finally turns to Prometheus as a class unto himself (and Satan,) awarding no title but defining him as the epitome of the Romantic rebel figure. In this sense, Prometheus fits like no other figure, including Satan: the category is essentially the Promethean Hero. Byron's Titan in fact fits more closely into this category than most other Romantic interpretations, as it is based more closely than others on the Aeschylean myth that was the familiar version to most of Europe.

20 Thorslev 70
Where Shelley's Prometheus is more of a sufferer who is finally freed, Thorslev's Promethean type is primarily a rebel, with all other characteristics being secondary: his first qualification is always his opposition to God, and after that, the rest of the qualities prove far more fluid. In this sense, Prometheus is most certainly the pinnacle of the Romantic rebel. He is, from a human perspective, moral, defiant and courageous in his efforts, and unceasingly dedicated to his cause, a superlative figure in every instance. Satan, in contrast, approximates Prometheus in his rebellion, courage, and suffering, but never in his morality. Thorslev credits Prometheus with “lend[ing] 'Promethean' characteristics to all the rest of these [Romantic] heroes,”21 and this is certainly true of Satan, though arguably quite untrue, as we have seen, of other types of heroes.

In fact, Thorslev is generally quite over-appreciative of Prometheus as a heroic figure, consistently ignoring his flaws both as a moral character and as a Romantic Hero. For instance, Byron's Prometheus demonstrates the distinctive silence we have noted towards the poem's (presumably human) speaker and in fact to the world in general. This rejection of empathy or connection, from the Titan who once acted on behalf of an entire race, is a kind of hypocrisy highly unusual to his rebellious heroes; the Titan whose “Godlike crime was to be kind/ To render with [his] precepts less/ The sum of human wretchedness” (35-37) is also the Titan who “speaks but in his loneliness,” (11) rejecting any companionship, even the adulation of the poem's speaker. Byron's Prometheus has, moreover, a vicious edge to his passionate nature that drives him to turn his imprisonment into a continuous battle with Zeus, hurling tortures back upon him and jealously guarding his every word against all other beings. Prometheus by his actions instructs Man to oppose the same emptiness, the “sad, unallied existence” of Mankind in the universe, in order to become “Triumphant where it dares defy:” a potent act of rebellion but also suspiciously empty, triumphing over the enormous opposition of notably empty existence. His rebellion as a symbol

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21 Thorslev 113
has a dangerous potential to be misused, which, though unstated, has a touch of potential truth to it: that his rebelliousness, whatever the result, may have been for no reason other than stubborn contrariness, revolution for the sake of itself.

With the suggestion that Prometheus is perhaps not the climactic figure of the Romantic Hero, Thorslev's potential as a critical source is exhausted. Even so, Prometheus has demonstrated perhaps the reverse of the credit Thorslev gave him: rather than lending his characteristics to other Romantic Heroes, he may have instead borrowed from wide across the spectrum, taking significant aspects of pre-Romantic and Romantic heroic archetypes and combining them into Byron's most concise and powerful heroic type. Thorslev's historical approach to Byronic Heroes and his designation of the Titan as a separate class is opposed by Prometheus' clear influences from nearly every heroic type Thorslev can think of, and his defiance of the full criteria of each class, even the one built around him.

John Ower's “Aesthetic Hero” provides a new way of looking at Prometheus as a heroic figure, but it too fails to overcome the difficulties that Thorslev faced with his concept of the Titan as the apotheosis of the Romantic Hero. Prometheus fulfills in Ower's schema of heroic types too many positions, though as in Thorslev, he is given one particular category primarily devoted to himself. Ower expounds an idea of the Romantic hero revolving around the figure of the aesthetic hero, “primarily in contradistinction to the ethical and religious in their commonly accepted, traditional senses.” The aesthetic hero is, in simple terms, a superior being. He is naturally gifted, having “a superabundance of inner force” that defies any particular classification in its generality and universal application. Ower defines this force as being non-religious in its disassociation from the soul, and non-ethical in its distinct separation from the question of good or

22 Unlike Thorslev, this category is only exemplified, not effectively limited to, Prometheus, but Ower gives no other suggestions for the role except, perhaps, Christ.
23 Ower 96
evil. Having established the innate qualification of the aesthetic hero as a person of enormous personal energy and ability, Ower further breaks down the aesthetic hero into three forms corresponding to stages in the experience of the hero: the innocent hero, the fallen hero, and the redeemed hero. Byron's Prometheus, however, demonstrates qualities belonging to all three classes of hero: the innocent, in his endurance and continued opposition to Zeus; the fallen, in his various estrangements from his peers, his world, and from “his God;” and, as Ower argues, the redeemed, in his moral nature and use of his superhuman faculties on behalf of a frail humanity.

The most tenuous link between Prometheus and the aesthetic hero is the Titan as the innocent hero. The task is in determining the qualities he shares with that figure, as it is clearly the category in which he fits least comfortably, primarily because Ower's definitions rely on the innocent hero also being human. The innocent hero is “so superior to his fellows that he feels above the social, moral, and religious codes by which they are governed. He is also beyond all personal ties, at least of the sort that imply dependence.”24 While Prometheus certainly claims to supersede by his natural talents the social and moral codes of the human world, he is not human, and thus arguably remains unbound by those codes by definition.25 Within a context of fellow immortals, however, he displays the “devil-may-care” attitude that of the innocent hero, his casual certainty of his personal immunity from other influences. The Aeschylean Prometheus from whom Byron drew his version of the myth certainly has such casual confidence in his power, and it is with that casual confidence that he crossed the will of Zeus: “This purpose there was no one to oppose but I: / I dared.”26 His frank boast of his willingness to cross Zeus and his previous claim— “I swear to you that I, humiliated as I am, / ...Shall yet be needed by the lord of

24 Ower 99
25 Essentially, this argument revolves around a circular point: his qualities which fulfill the definition are also qualities that might preclude him from fulfilling it. Chasing the point brings no reward; however, there are other aspects to examine.
26 Aeschylus 235-236
immortals”—which articulates his continued conviction of his personal superiority, having nothing at all to do with altruism toward humans, clearly point towards Byron's source, at least, having distinct qualities of the innocent aesthetic hero. Byron's Titan displays the same brash opposition to Zeus in his actions; the “menace which flung back” (27) is not merely evidence of opposition to Zeus, but also, by that evidence and the fact of Zeus as omnipotent ruling deity, an implicit brashness, Prometheus unthinking or at least uncaring of the consequences of his actions. The continued, flagrant opposition of Prometheus to Zeus is his unceasing endeavor to prove his mastery over all, the greatest challenge of which is the Thunderer. His continued defiance during and after his fall suggest that his innocent state as a hero is never quite broken: he remains unconvinced of Zeus' supremacy in their contest.27 Even in the midst of what is undeniably Prometheus' fall, it is as if the only individual unaware of his failure to overcome Zeus is Prometheus himself.

Byron's Titan clearly aligns with the category, the phase in the heroic experience, that Ower calls the fallen aesthetic hero. Ower's innocent is transformed into the fallen hero when he finally engages a force against which he cannot actually succeed. Ower's distinction of the point is the moment at which the aesthetic hero “attempt[s] to expand his ego [to exercise his inner force] to the point at which he becomes cosmic and divine... Through ultimate self-assertion, he comes into conflict with... the traditional religious and moral order.”28 This is certainly the case for Prometheus: his attempt to test his power against that of Zeus is stopped, not by moral order, but certainly by traditional religious ranking. Even though Prometheus' objective, in Byron's eyes, is achieved, and humans are saved from the “ruling principle of Hate,” (20) Prometheus himself is unsuccessful: to maintain his victory of protecting humans, he must continue to war with Zeus.

27 Ian Dennis, who will be discussed next, suggests Prometheus may even be winning.
28 Ower 103
forever successful only as long as he does not cease to fight.

As a fallen hero, in Ower's definition, Prometheus fits nearly all the requirements. First, Ower argues, “because of his assertion of superiority to all normal human codes and bonds, the aesthetic hero becomes completely and painfully estranged from his fellow men.” While this of course must be adjusted for Prometheus as a Titan, rather than a human, it remains the first point asserted by Byron's poetic voice:

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Titan! To whose immortal eyes
The sufferings of mortality,
Seen in their sad reality,
Were not as things which gods despise; (1-4)
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Immediately, Byron establishes the difference between Prometheus and his fellow immortals: to him, the sufferings of mortality are seen differently. His action, to assert his own power as an immortal, sets him apart both in his offense against Zeus and in the implied difference in appreciation of suffering that the poetic speaker observes between the Titan and the other gods. His continued estrangement, after his fall, is attested to later: the Titan “speaks but in its loneliness/ and then is jealous, lest the sky/ should have a listener” (11-13). Byron's Prometheus never, of course, speaks in the presence of the poem's speaker, as distant from humankind as he is from divine. This estrangement is all separation beyond that which occurs automatically in the circumstances of the Titan's imprisonment.

The circumstances of his imprisonment, though, gesture towards a different level of estrangement, that of the fallen hero from nature. While nature is given very limited attention in the poem—it is, after all, a poem about rebellion against social, religious, and moral forces, not natural ones—the one line in which it is evoked, “The rock, the vulture, and the chain,” (7) is a powerful moment in the language of the poem. Unlike his other estrangements, the division

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29 Ower 104
between hero and nature is not self-inflicted, as Ower suggests it should be in the natural progress of the hero's fall, but rather inflicted upon him. Nevertheless, the effect remains of his division from nature. In the single set of images, Byron first evokes nature not in the familiar Romantic terms of Wordsworth's “deep rivers, and the lonely streams,” or in the hillsides of emerald grass with which Keats is replete, but in the single stark image of a rock, plain and unspecific. The only nature Prometheus can draw upon is not alive, nor even noble mountains or arching cliffs, but a single uninspiring boulder, which, adding to his estrangement, is itself his jailer. Lacking flora, he regrettably is not out of touch with the fauna: the vulture, the only living representative of nature, is not merely an ugly scavenging bird, considerably beneath the proud Jovian eagle of the Aeschylean source, but is also his tormentor. Finally, the third image of the chain, unnatural harsh iron, shaped by Hephaestus with artifice, rather than by natural forces, is the crowning stroke in dividing Prometheus from drawing any inspiration or support from even the preceding two images. Prometheus does not estrange himself from nature through his own actions as an aesthetic hero in the innocence of his power, but rather nature is estranged from him, applied against him to force him away from that scene of traditional comfort to the Romantic hero.

Of the latter two levels of estrangement that Ower posits for the fallen aesthetic hero, Prometheus easily and automatically fulfills the first— estrangement from God (which is to say, Zeus,) a claim so evident as to merit no argument— but does not seem to fulfill the second. Estrangement from self seems a problem particularly exemplified by the likes of Byron's Manfred: at the end of his life, Manfred is so self-tormented that he welcomes death. Prometheus, though, hardly seems estranged from himself, particularly given that, as is indicated by the final line of the poem, his own death would represent not a defeat but a “Victory.” In this sense, though, the

closest he approaches to self-estrangement is his own continued life imprisoned. In willingly
continuing this life, there is perhaps a suggestion of self-estrangement, but not one that stands up
to counterargument. Ower instead argues that Prometheus' continued life is a sign of the Titan's
placement in the final category (and the one for which Ower uses Prometheus himself as the
example,) the redeemed aesthetic hero.

Ower of course has a well-defined and convincing argument for Prometheus as Byron's
prime redeemed aesthetic hero: the redeemed hero is the hero whose immense personal energy is
harnessed to the ends of what Ower initially defined as the more traditional concepts of heroism:
religion and morality. Essentially, the “redemption” of the aesthetic hero, for Ower, is his
transformation into another, more traditional form of hero, his disintegration as an aesthetic hero
and reconstitution in another form. Prometheus, however, remains in his redemption still the
fallen hero. This redemption, harnessing his own personal energies against the power of Zeus,
points out that his success can only come as long as he continues, in fact, to fail. Ower asserts a
moral impulse in Prometheus, which is clearly evidenced, as existing in the eyes of the poem's
speaker (and presumably in some form in Byron's eyes,) on multiple occasions— the opening four
lines of both the first and third stanzas are unambiguous on this. He epitomizes the positive
suffering on behalf of others so praised by traditional philosophical morality, and does it in
defense against “deaf tyranny” and autocracy, so demonized by political philosophy (and,
according to Thorslev, by the Romantic ideals of individual liberty and fraternal society.) As he
acts morally, though, he remains a fallen hero in that “like Melville's Ahab, [Prometheus is] in
conflict with malignant omnipotence without entirely transcending that evil himself.”31 Ower
refers in this thought to the Prometheus of Shelley's drama in his early stage, but fails to see its
applicability to Byron's Prometheus, who never transcends that early stage. Shelley's Titan

31 Ower 111
experiences a complex conversion to redemption in that narrative, which Byron's Titan does not, and, we may suspect, would not. Byron's Titan is a fallen hero, and remains so: his lesson is victory in death, not in successful rebellion. He does not forgive, as Shelley's Prometheus does, and he is not freed. Byron's Prometheus, even in his redemption, remains, and must remain, a heroic figure whose heroism can never be concluded lest it turn false.

Ower's schema of the aesthetic hero, being less precisely attenuated than Thorslev's, is both more conducive to encompassing a complete figure of Prometheus, and concurrently less effective at encompassing him. Where Thorslev's system clearly delineated other categories of hero to which Prometheus had no relationship, Ower has no such place: Prometheus interacts with all his forms of the aesthetic hero. Through the circumstances of the Prometheus story, instead of the superlative nature of his characteristics, he remains a figure too extensive, particularly in a temporal sense, to categorize. To Ower, delimiting the hero's qualities based on his progress in a journey of heroic experiences, Prometheus' inability by virtue of immortality to continue that journey, but instead to superimpose the phases on top of each other, prohibits his limitation to one phase of experience.

Where Thorslev examines the Romantic Hero in the figure's historical context, and Ower defines him by his phase of the heroic experience, Ian Dennis instead takes a view of Byronic Heroes (and indeed of a significant portion of Byron's work) that breaks from this trend of viewing the characteristics of various heroes purely as characters and instead views them first as figures in a kind of anthropological structure, addressing their characteristics as they influence the heroes' interactions, particularly with antagonists and ostensible or hopeful lovers. Dennis' view explicitly requires the hero to be able, and even eager, to fill multiple roles: the subject, usually

32 These include such categories as his Child of Nature or Wandering Jew/Cain and Ahasuerus types, which were neglected here because they have no bearing on Prometheus or his qualities.
unwillingly or unwittingly; the model, often deliberately; and the object of desires, particularly in “Prometheus,” simultaneously.

Dennis builds his critical structure on Rene Girard's theory of imitative desire. Girard defines desire in a system wherein desire is fundamental to existence; all that is aware has desires. These desires are towards “objects,” but the system does not simply exist between these two points. Desires on the part of the individual are suggested by the apparent desires of others, through whom the desires of the first group, called subjects, are directed. Those who “mediate” such desires are models; their desires for objects shape both the mass desires of subjects and those of other models. Models can therefore be subjects as well, and in fact are almost necessarily so. The theory illustrates the system of celebrity and power that today seems evident, but during Byron's era was in its earliest stages, and the limits of which, Dennis claims, Byron himself would test both personally and in his writing.

The second element of Girard's theory, and the one most distinctly active within the poem, involves the manner of displaying and modeling desires. Modeling is a process of demonstrating desires and thereby subjecting others, and a model can therefore manipulate subjects through his or her own appearances of desires on others. More specifically, a model can direct subjects towards desire of an object, and then appropriate a different object of the model's hidden desire. At no point, however, is any actor within the system without desire, at least in the eyes of those also within the system. The assumption of the universality of some form of desire among all individuals is based on an assumption of similarity—“I desire, and therefore others must also desire”—and demands the fulfillment of each position of the structure, ensuring the continuation of the system. The modeling of true and false desires, and the appearance of an absence of desire,
are important aspects of Dennis' reading of the poem.\textsuperscript{35}

Dennis reads “Prometheus” as a collapse of Girard's triangular framework. Its initial address— “Titan!” (1)— places Prometheus at the apex, as it were, of the triangular structure, the position that both other roles require: the model, being seen by others, and as a model, initially not an object. But where the framework would normally require an object to be desired, a model desiring that object, and a subject reading the desires of the model and imitating the initial desire for the object, “Prometheus” first collapses one element of the structure by removing any definite object. “What was thy pity's recompense?” (5) asserts an initial desire, the “recompense,” on the Titan's part, though it does not explicate it: Prometheus, through actions driven by pity, has sought some object, the intended “recompense” of his pity and consequent action. The question, though, at once opens a space for the object and at the same time negates that space; the answer, a description of the Titan's sufferings, is not the intended object. Prometheus' desires are aborted by the speaker in favor of a recognition of his present ills— though his desire, the third stanza later informs the reader, is achieved: Man can “in portions foresee” (49). Lacking an immediate object, however, the poem attends the one element available to it: the Titan himself, as a model.

The conflict of Prometheus and Zeus, after Prometheus' initial actions motivated by pity and Zeus' response, becomes a conflict not characterized by any overt action, Dennis argues, but rather by measured inaction: both Prometheus and Zeus attempt to model and subject the other. This is Girardian “internal mediation,” a system where the model is close to the subject and therefore can, if the subject displays a more enticing desire, subject his model to himself, thereby mediating the other and becoming himself a model. Zeus and Prometheus inhabit such a system, but without external objects of desire. Zeus personally has no stake in Prometheus, in the original mythology, until Prometheus illustrates through his pitying actions a desire other than those

\textsuperscript{35} Dennis 97
modeled by Zeus. As unchallenged model for others, Zeus' response is to examine Prometheus and determine how to return the Titan to the fold of subjects. Zeus therefore becomes initially subjected to Prometheus, desiring Prometheus in his apparent lack of desire. This lack, interpreted by a fellow model or subject, can only be interpreted, according to Girard, as a hidden desire for the self, and one that is enormously powerful as a modeled behavior in its capacity to subject others. Prometheus, Dennis claims, models a desire towards nothing at all in his studied silence toward Zeus; he refuses even to give vent to his sufferings:

Which speaks but in its loneliness,
And then is jealous lest the sky
Should have a listener, nor will sigh
Until its voice is echoless. (11-14)

Zeus therefore imprisons Prometheus, subjecting him to “the rock, the vulture, and the chain,” and absents himself, attempting to force the Titan to demonstrate desires external to himself and offered by Zeus: freedom from imprisonment and his “torments” at the hands of the scavenging counterpart of the classically Jovian eagle. Prometheus' resistance, the “agony” he refuses to display, is his now deliberate maintenance of his interpreted attitude of self-desire. His stoicism and resistance in the face of tyranny exposes the subjection of Zeus to Prometheus' apparent self-desire. Maintaining this facade of desire, however, requires Prometheus to remain imprisoned, eternally denying his captor even at the cost of his own desires.

Dennis further notes the second collapse of the already-reduced Girardian structure when he points out the relative absence of Zeus from the poem itself. Despite the ongoing nature of the struggle to subject the other, Zeus is not extensively present within the poem, and not at all within the scene the poem depicts—the rock/vulture/chain tableau. This second collapse, which Dennis does not extensively address, further condenses the system upon itself, not only creating

36 Dennis 97
37 Dennis 95
and rewarding the Titan's self-desire by virtue of his solitary existence, but also asserting his continued victory. If Zeus attended Prometheus continuously, his evident desire for the Titan's submission would make him the subject of the desire structure, but in his continued imprisonment of Prometheus, in spite of his ability to lift it, he betrays his continued attention, and thus desire, even when absent. The second collapse, Byron pointedly removing the figure of Zeus, suggests a solution to the subject-model conflict that Zeus, who understands the nature of the conflict less than his prisoner, never attempts: ending it. While Prometheus remains chained, he retains his status as the model, desiring himself and willing to sacrifice his other desires to retain his superiority. He demonstrates a commitment to a Pyrrhic victory, in which no one achieves what they desire. Zeus' perennial absence only reinforces the eternal nature of the reciprocal contest—“all that the Thunderer wrung from thee/ Was but the menace which flung back/ On him the torments of thy rack,” (26-28) points to just such a reciprocity—when instead, were he to release Prometheus and concede that neither is subject to the other, they would both be free from subjection to pursue other desires—accepting the existence of other models and coexisting. In the presence of Zeus, the conflict would be active, proceeding toward a conclusion, but in his absence and the secondary collapse of the desire structure, Prometheus can only appear to desire himself, denying both actors, Titan and god, freedom to desire without subjection.

Prometheus' silence in the poem, which holds so many possible interpretations, indicates Byron's method of engineering Prometheus' success. Prometheus doesn't merely compete in internal mediation, the close, reciprocal form of competitive, imitative desire, with Zeus, but is also being set up in external mediation, the desire dynamic in which a model is separated from the subject, and therefore uninfluenced by their desires. His denial of Zeus, which is construed to
represent “secret and triumphantly gratified desire for oneself,”38 doesn't merely influence and subject to Zeus to himself, but also influences Byron's audience. His silence within the poem constitutes a refusal to acknowledge the praise being given him by the speaker on behalf of humanity, which feeds back into his apparent self-desire. This silent refusal, a change from the conspicuously vocal Aeschylean Titan, becomes evidence that Prometheus is not just absent of any exterior desires, but even absent of the desire to be acknowledged for his lack of desire. Prometheus appears to be disinterested both in winning his contest with Zeus and in being recognized in his victory. This recursion of developing others' attractions towards oneself by manifesting no external desire reinforces the Titan's ability to subject others to himself as model, and its effect is principally aimed at Byron's audience. The value of this silence as a tool of subjecting others, and the fact that it is understood by the Titan as he practices it, is evidenced by the poet's recognition of the Titan's silence: “Which speaks but in its loneliness,/ ... nor will sigh/unless its voice is echoless” (11-14). The Titan understands the power that his silence gives him as a tool to subject others, and Byron understands its value as a visible characteristic in his hero.

Dennis neglects to examine another potential subject and model, who is implied in the modeling demeanor of Prometheus: Byron himself. If, as Thorslev and Ower suggest, Prometheus as a Romantic hero is a culmination of ideal Romantic qualities, then he illustrates not only cultural ideas of the character of the hero, but also Byron's desires for a personal hero or persona, his vision as a poet and a person of the ideal figure to contend eternally on behalf of the human race. As such, Prometheus is not alone in his contest with Zeus, but is in fact winning: in his desire for himself, Prometheus also subjects observers of the contest, particularly those spectators, such as the readers of the poem, who observe through the lens of Byron's own desire. He continues to assert independence by subjecting to himself individuals that Zeus had previously

38 Dennis 97
sought to subject to the allure and majesty of his own godhood—humans. Byron employs Prometheus in the conflict internal to the poem, which Dennis identifies, and he also employs “Prometheus” as a poem in an external mediation involving himself and his audience, manipulating their desires in relationship to himself and his work.

Byron's personal history, in brief, demonstrates his own desire for the heroic qualities of Prometheus, and his relationship to his audience allows him to model a similar desire for his hero and the heroic qualities Prometheus displays. Byron's desire to undertake the role of righteous revolutionary is visible in his ill-fated trip to Greece. His final poem, “On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year,” written in Greece, indicates that even if he did not die a soldier's death, he served admirably as a propagandist for the Greek effort. His own eagerness to escape the opprobrium of his rumored affair with his half-sister might make him a supporter of social revolutionaries, other challengers of the codes of society, and also perhaps incline him towards a desire to subject the same enforcers of the moral codes that had driven him from England. As one of the earliest of modern celebrities, with his own actions the focus of intense interest among the poetry-reading public, he was ideally placed to model behaviors and desires, both personally and with his poetry, for the public to imitate and correspondingly desire. Byron's Romantic interest in Thorslev's “society, the brotherhood of man” also inclines him, in the process of (almost) vindictively subjecting his audience, to model revolutionary behaviors that are nonetheless, as Ower claims, the actions of a “redeemed” aesthetic hero: morally-oriented exertion of effort towards a public good. In more ways than one, Byron takes on the qualities of his Prometheus, resisting the tyranny of public opprobrium indefinitely in order to continuously subject them and model for them the revolutionary, individualistic behavior he personally endorses.

Whether “Prometheus” can achieve such a modeling is, I contend, beyond question. Dennis phrases the question of the poem's relationship to Byron's audience most completely:
Can such poems [“Prometheus” and “The Prisoner of Chillon”]— measured, dignified, humanely engaged—be said to participate in the same hot exchange of provocation and adulation, or of modeling, subjection, and resentment, that increasingly seemed to characterize Byron's relationship with his audience? Were they also attempts to exercise power and dominion...?39

The principal flaw in this question, and the reason that the question is not promptly and simply answered, is that Dennis presumes that the “measured, dignified, humanely engaged” aspects of the poems, which they certainly contain, preclude other aspects less antithetical to the “hot exchange” he sees as taking place between Byron and his audience. While the poems are everything he describes, “Prometheus” is also, even within its “measure,” a poem with strong, passionate language, describing a revolutionary impulse well beyond any such measure.40 While Byron does indeed give a dignified treatment to Prometheus, there are moments, such as the rhyme-linked quartet in the second stanza, where the persistence of the rhyming syllable combines with increasingly strident accusations against Zeus and Byron presses on the edges of such measures:

And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
The ruling principle of Hate
Which for its pleasure doth create
The things it may annihilate... (19-22)

Byron may have kept the poem dignified and measured, but he has also informed the reader of the energy and revolutionary impulse lying beneath the “silent suffering” surface. This is the poem that engages the readers, that participates in the “hot exchange of provocation and adulation” that characterizes Byron's interactions with those readers.

Dennis, then, is the critic who most successfully holds on to his analysis of Prometheus in spite of the now recognizable tendency of the poem to press back against limiting classification.

39 Dennis 95
40 “The Prisoner Of Chillon” has other qualities, such as its sourceless, pervasive implications of cruelty, that surpass its own “measures.”
His success lies mostly in his tacit recognition of the tendency of “Prometheus” to resist such interpretations and his incorporation of that tendency as his argument: Prometheus is not merely model or subject or object, but is specifically an example of simultaneous occupancy of multiple positions in the structure. The poem, however, also exists within a structure of desire that transcends its content on the page into the realm of its author and readers. It successfully enters into the desire structure of Byron and his public, the “hot exchange of provocation” that Byron negotiates, and proves a tool for its author to manipulate his public image.

Byron's Titan is a figure who bears the “wretched gift eternity” well. His resistance to classification, by opposing his imprisonment precisely through the means by which he is imprisoned, is his perpetual punishment for striving to achieve, to be recognized. Thorslev's admiring conscription of the Titan into a historical argument, Ower's similarly admiring limitation of him into a particular set of experiences, and Dennis' use of Girard to establish a particular vision of Prometheus' desires and actions (which admittedly comes closest to sticking,) all feed the revolutionary nature of the Prometheus myth, which merely endures and expands beyond their efforts to access greater heights and deeper meanings. He performs his capacity as symbol and sign in the endurance of his character, his continuous rebellion against obscurity, mediocrity, and passivity, much like Byron himself did and does. The Titan is a hero in conflict with god and himself, continuously striving to defeat the force that enchains him, always by resistance enacted from within the chains themselves. “Prometheus” is a kind of Byronic personal manifesto, and in its relentless rebellion, consistent resistance to external authority or social pressure, in its character which expands beyond any limits placed upon it, and even in its concluding statement of victory not only in spite of but through death, on a rocky outcropping or in Greece engaged in righteous revolution, it proves itself “a mighty lesson.”