

ISSN: 2278-9529



**GALAXY**

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

July 2015 Vol. 4. Issue IV

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

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## Prometheus: The Archetypal Existentialist Rebel

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*Prometheus Bound* stands apart from Robert Lowell's other plays and is of special interest because here we find a fine embodiment of an existentialist rebel in the character of Prometheus, despite the mythical content of the play. In his adaptation of Aeschylus's play, he reworks the classical myth of Prometheus. We can trace subtle elements of archetypal rebels like Milton's Satan, Camus's Sisyphus and Joyce's Daedalus in his Prometheus. However, nuances of the contemporary situation are also incorporated in order to make it relevant to the present. However, as he himself admits there is no attempt at modernization:

There are no tanks or cigarette lighters. No contemporary statesman is parodied.

Yet I think my own concerns and worries and those of the times seep in (*In the Author's note V*)

Lowell has termed *Prometheus Bound* a "translation". According to him, in translation, the poetry seems "lofty and dead" and the characters seem to be "statues". Yet "something living somehow burns" through the worst translation. Nevertheless, it is more than that. It is a stimulating intellectual drama, and a challenging one because of its unconventional theme wherein Lowell examines the psychology of the rebel in the character of Prometheus. Compared to the usual dramas there is an obvious lack of action. There is no progress of events in the play, no real action or plot. It is the thoughts occurring in Prometheus's mind, which makes the play come alive. The other characters interspersed in the play with whom Prometheus interacts like the Chorus, Ocean, Force, Power etc are only personifications of natural phenomena and they serve as foils to highlight Prometheus's idealism and determination.

Lowell's interest in Prometheus seems to have been sparked off because of his fascination with rebellion. Each of his plays in *The Old Glory*, depicts the craze for power and the corruption of the individual through this. Prometheus is the prototype of the rebel that Camus spoke about. Camus has defined the rebel as, "A man who says no; but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes as soon as he begins to think for himself" (19). Camus further explicates:

He rebels because he categorically refuses to submit to conditions that he considers intolerable and also because he is confusedly convinced that his position is justified, or rather, because in his own mind he thinks that he has the right to ... Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that somewhere, in some way, you are justified (*The Rebel* 19).

Though generally distrustful of rebellions and the violence which ensues as a result of it, Prometheus is, for Lowell, a rebel with a cause. The crux of the matter is presented in Prometheus's answer to the Chorus's (Second Voice) question as to why he was chained to the rock:

... Man was what troubled him. Zeus looked at man with disgust and said, "Why do you put up with man? He cares for nothing... He is always the same. He gets nowhere. Why don't I wipe him out?" When I heard Zeus, I said to myself, "Poor man, the King of the gods hates you. None of the gods will help you. Perhaps, if you have fire, you can help yourself". So, man has fire! And Zeus, the inscrutable, has not wiped him out, but has consented to let him live, miserable, dying, though equal to the gods in thought. I ... have been punished. I thought I could move the world(10).

Camus has pointed out that revolt occurs not only amongst the oppressed but that it can also break out at the mere spectacle of oppression of which someone else is the victim (22). Here it is Zeus's oppression of man, which causes Prometheus to rise in revolt. Prometheus's conscience is clear since he had revolted only for a good cause, that of man. Hence when the Chorus speaks to him in a tone of admiration mingled with pity – "Chorus: Feverish earth images spurt and crackle through your poor mind – so much done for man, so little for yourself!" (22) – he can resolutely retort thus, proving the single-mindedness of his purpose. "... I had no choice, such was the devotion that drew me on" (52). Once he has committed himself to a cause, he has no regrets in seeing it through. Prometheus, the rebel, bears out Camus's analysis:

... the rebel – at the moment of his greatest impetus and no matter what his aims – keeps nothing in reserve and commits himself completely. Undoubtedly he demands respect for himself, but only in so far as he identifies himself with humanity in general (22).

Prometheus's position as a rebel is further highlighted when he is compared and contrasted with the other rebel-hero archetypes occurring in literature. Fortitude in the face of

strife characterizes Milton's Satan as he revolts against, "Divine violence". "Whom reason hath equal'd force hath made supreme/Above his equals" says Milton's Satan (*Paradise Lost Bk.I, 248-49*). His position as a leader of the fallen angels, his motivation and uncompromising optimism excite out sympathy and compassion rather than our scorn. Unwilling admiration for the rebel has almost made an epic hero of Satan prompting writers like Blake to say Milton was of the "Devils' Party"<sup>1</sup> rather than God's. Though Prometheus's aims are very different from Satan's, the uncompromising faith in their respective beliefs is a common ground for the comparison. In this context, it might be enlightening to note the comparison that Maud Bodkin has drawn between Prometheus and Satan in Chapter V of **Archetypal Patterns in Modern Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination:**

... In the earlier books [of *Paradise Lost*] Satan appears as a Promethean figure. The theme of his heroic struggle and endurance against hopeless odds wakens in the poet and reader a sense of his own state as against the odds of destiny. Caught into this theme the reader like the poet himself becomes, knowing it or not, "of the Devil's party" finding expression through Satan's heroic agony  
(234).

It reminds us of the famous saying of Blake in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that Milton wrote "at liberty" of Devils and Hell "because he was a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it."

Bodkin further elaborates that Prometheus is grander than Satan is because he is not susceptible to the delusions of power and megalomania. Moreover, Prometheus's rebellion has an aspect of self-sacrifice because he had revolted only for supplying man with the weapon of self-defence. However, the one fascinating aspect, which prompts the comparison between the two, is the stoic endurance of suffering—the "courage never to submit or yield" characterizes both Satan and Prometheus. Especially noteworthy is the courage and unyielding optimism evinced by Satan in the following lines where he takes leave of Heaven:

Farewell, happy fields,  
Where joy forever dwells! Hail, horrors! Hail,  
Infernal world! And thou profoundest Hell,  
Receive thy new possessour! One who brings  
A mind not to be chang'd by place or time:  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n,  
What matter where, If I still be the same,

And what I should be, all but less than he

Whom thunder heath made greater?

(*Paradise Lost*, B.K.I. 249-258)

It parallels Prometheus's words of self-congratulation at the realization that his intellect is free though he is bound:

... And now, when I have lost the path, and stand here, even now, I think back with delight on those years I gave to puzzling out some foot-print, or accident (51) ... Now that I am chained here, I suppose I am almost free at last. You look on me as an insect, but you can't harness an insect like an ox and force it to haul your cart of stones. I won't answer your questions (61).

However, Prometheus's position of revolt is closer to Camus's Sisyphus. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus characterizes Sisyphus as an absurd hero because he is a victim to "that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted towards accomplishing nothing"(97). He further elaborates why the myth is tragic:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? ... Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition; it is what he thinks during his descend. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn (97-98).

His victory comes when he concludes, "... all is well" inspite of the trials and tribulations that he has been subjected. He is able to build a world of his own through the stoic character.

For Camus, the master-slave relationship epitomizes the inequality, which exists in all societies, and it is therefore the basis for all rebellion. The situation, which exists between Zeus and Prometheus, is also that of the oppressor versus the oppressed type. The basis of the play is the philosophy of existentialism, which has been applied to the classical myth of Prometheus. Through the figure Prometheus, Lowell brings out the tragic hero of the existentialists who is aware of his own fate, yet whose knowledge seems to bring no redemption from pain and suffering. Even while he undergoes eternal suffering, many of his former allies wonder at his defiance and urge him to surrender:

Ocean

... You helped establish the new order, now you must live in it. You are wise, but you do not know how to hold your tongue... Soon your torture will be far

worse. You are wise, but you do not know how to surrender. You think your defiance is godlike and noble (16).

Nevertheless, Prometheus has only contempt for such an attitude adopted to protect oneself. He accepts the responsibility for his actions – “I have done what I have done. I suffer. I knew I would suffer” (17). Like Camus’s Sisyphus, Lowell’s Prometheus must find contentment in consciousness alone –consciousness of the decay that must bring down Zeus, his tormentor. The knowledge that no one is invulnerable is his only consolation. For Lowell, Prometheus is a symbol of the modern man who is heroic in his tragedy. The fears that haunt Prometheus may not be the ones that haunt the modern man. The causes may be different, but the basic emotion remains the same. Camus has an interesting remark to make on the expression of rebel thought, which enhances our perception of the inner conflict of Prometheus, chained as he is to the rocky mountain.

All rebel thought ... is either expressed in rhetoric or in a closed universe. The convents and isolated castles of Sade, the island or the lonely rock of the romantics, the solitary heights of Nietzsche, prison, the nation behind barbed wire, the concentration camps, the empire of free slaves all illustrate, after their own fashion, the same need for coherence and unity. In these sealed worlds man can reign and have knowledge at last (224).

Prometheus had dared to do what no other god would do. He had risked the wrath of Zeus to give man the gift of Fire. For this, he is doomed to eternity, being chained to a high rock where humanity would not reach him. At this height, the Sun with its blazing heat and Night with its biting cold only intensify his misery. Compounded with all this, is the nerve-racking loneliness. His isolation from human communication makes him a slave to his thoughts. Those warring thoughts set up a veritable conflict in his mind. The mental agony in Prometheus’s mind is indicated through these words of the Chorus (First Voice):

You speak lightly of dying, Prometheus. We could never live with the thoughts that clash through your clear mind (20).

Lillian Feder in her work titled *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* has identified the characteristics of the mythic hero, which reveal to us the relevance of Prometheus as a tragic hero. She states that we identify with the mythic hero because he not only he acts out our unconscious wishes and fears, but also serves as a voice for humankind as a whole – he asks essential questions which we normally avoid and seeks solutions to them (11). The consequences that the mythic hero faces are accurately summed up thus:

For these answers he [the mythic hero] pays a price most men do not have the

strength or courage to pay. The mythical figure's conflicts and actions are usually related to some social problem or issue, yet, as a result of behavior that offends his society, or because of some deep suffering, he becomes an outcast. His endurance of pain, his violation of the most sacred ties to parents, wife or children, are metaphorical expression of man's efforts to understand and come to terms with his own nature and the conditions of human life (12).

The Promethean myth is used here to illustrate aspects of the strength of man in contrast to the forces of Nature or Destiny. At the heart of the play is the theme of the individual surviving in a hostile world and it is an attempt to examine suffering as a constituent of human existence. In Lowell's Prometheus, we have more of an existentialist rebel who is aware of the consequences of this action and has the sheer grit and courage to face it unnervingly. Individual will is seen to be supreme despite limitations.

The Kierkegaardian concept of history as repetition is borne out by Prometheus when he says: "We have struggled to where we are by living through a succession of tyrannies" (8). Fein points out Prometheus's value for us when he says that he is a rebel who did not use crime and tyranny to bring down the gods. He chooses to remain a heretic rather than become an oppressor, chooses the human condition to "divine authoritarianism" (*Robert Lowell 163*). This evinced by Prometheus's words to the Chorus, "If I could die like Io, I would be free. I don't want to be God, God is only able to kill" (33). Prometheus's rebellion against God is certainly different from Caligula's. Once Caligula realizes that men are not happy on this earth and that they are ultimately overcome by death, he releases a reign of terror to make men conscious of the absurdity of life. Though his motives were good, the excesses committed by Caligula lead to his downfall. However, Prometheus realized that real rebellion is a creator of values. He chooses "to learn to live and to die, and in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god" (*The Rebel, 273*)

Prometheus is a metaphysical rebel in the sense that he protests against his condition. According to Camus:

He [the metaphysical rebel] attacks a shattered world to make it whole. He confronts the injustice at large in the world with his own principles of justice. Thus all he originally wants is to resolve this contradiction and establish a reign of justice, if he can, or of injustice if he is driven to the end of his tether ... When he refuses to recognize his mortality, the rebel simultaneously refuses to recognize the power that makes him live in this condition. The metaphysical rebel, is, therefore, certainly not an atheist, as one might think him, but

inevitably he is a blasphemer. He simply blasphemes, primarily in the name of order, by denouncing God as the origin of death and as the supreme disillusionment (29-30).

Prometheus rebels against Zeus primarily because he is a tyrant in his attitude towards man and secondly, because he does not recognize Zeus's right to punish him for, "Zeus, above all, is not innocent enough to exercise this right" (210).

According to Heidegger, the theme of history is man himself. Therefore, Prometheus may symbolize the universal man and his sufferings may serve to highlight the sufferings of the common man in the hands of modern tyrants. As the play progresses Prometheus becomes a hero in the existentialist mode whose only reward is awareness. Even though he is physically bound to the rock, his intellect is free. Through his intellect, he seeks to inhabit a plane above the physical and suffering world. This intellect is razor sharp and has potential for destruction as well as creation. The Fire, which Prometheus gave to Man, might symbolize intellect, imagination and the power of creation latent in man by which he is almost god-like and might aspire to Zeus's height. If Prometheus is an embodiment of intellect, Prometheus's banishment from the centre of Power, can be seen as the banishment of the intellect. The mythical situation has its relevance in contemporary politics where in dictatorships a hostile relationship can be traced to the intelligentsia, who by creating awareness among the people would be undermining their power and influence. Their desperate measures for keeping the masses under suppression, therefore included the policy of exiling intellectuals. Richard J. Fein in his work, *Robert Lowell*, sums up Prometheus thus: "Prometheus is the intellectual examining his own intellectual history, the rebel pondering his rebellion" (160). Nevertheless, Prometheus is not intellect alone. Lowell has attempted at humanizing him. In spite of his suffering, he is considerate of others. On hearing from the gulls that his wife Alcyone is coming to see him, he becomes a personification of concern and worry.

Prometheus:

Her pity for me has made her lag. Hurry back to her, warn her she mustn't come yet ... The wings of the hawk are too freshly smashed, his eye is frightened and starved (6).

However, at her non-appearance he is tormented and full of self-pity (just as any husband would be)

Prometheus:

So, Alcyone only wishes to remember my glory! She will never look at me

...Others rebelled and were more fortunate. They rebelled, they were buried. Now they hardly hump the curve of the earth. He who looks for me will see and learn his lesson (7).

Prometheus's victory lies in the knowledge that one day his tormentor will also meet his downfall. He refuses to buckle under threat from Hermes, an agent of Zeus, who is anxious about his master's future. Prometheus is a symbol of Camus's absurd hero who finds victory in defeat. Knowing that fate cannot be changed, he continues to rebel. However, consciousness itself seems to be the only reward. In the solitariness of his imprisonment, he realizes that nothing is permanent, that change is the order of life. The old Gods give way to the new. Even the all-powerful Zeus, he knows, will one day be a victim to destruction and decay. Zeus is not infallible as his words to Io show: "You show up a weakness in Zeus. He can fall in love" (289). However, the knowledge of the impending disaster does not bring any peace of mind.

With knowledge, comes the realization that nobody can have an upper hand over him unless he allows it. Therefore, we find Prometheus gathering inner strength to combat the forces of physical torture. He realizes fully well that he has to bear the consequences of his actions and is prepared for it. The initial stage of the situation, with Prometheus as victim and Zeus as tormentor, changes when Prometheus transcends physical pain and suffering to realize that he is mentally free. There is a limitation to Zeus's power since, even he, cannot yoke Prometheus's mind:

Now that I am chained here, I suppose I am almost free at last. You look on me as an insect, but you can't harness an insect like an ox and force it to haul your cart of stones. I won't answer your questions (61).

Prometheus celebrates his mind, which is free to roam about in all the realms and which can make, as Milton says, a Heaven of Hell or a Hell of Heaven. Lowell seems to be praising Prometheus's stoic affirmation. Prometheus, like Tiresias of Eliot's *The Wasteland*, has repeatedly endorsed that fore vision is a curse because it has served only to increase his anguish. His words to Io are tinged with irony: "You see what my foresight has done for me"(29). However, Io's counter accusation is equally revealing: "You are afraid to look ahead. That's why you are chained here" (3). His foresight, he says, did not prevent him from helping man to defend himself against Zeus's might. By his endeavour to alleviate the miseries of man, he is seen in the light of a social revolutionary who worked selflessly for a good cause. He had no other commitment but loyalty to his own mind and, to be true to this, he was prepared to take any risk, including Zeus's wrath. It is therefore evident that

Prometheus chose his own off-beaten track in the face of remaining indifferent to the plight of man. By exerting his choice, he was committing himself to God's wrath, as a consequence of which he brings down suffering on his head. Nevertheless, by enduring it, he realizes that suffering is existence. By sheer courage of conviction, he is able to transcend it too.

Camus has made an interesting hypothesis in the fourth chapter of *The Rebel* entitled "Rebellion and Art", wherein he has stated that Art is a form of rebellion. According to him, no artist can ignore reality. He further elaborates that artistic creation is a demand for unity and also simultaneously, a rejection of the world. It rejects the world on account of what it lacks and also in the name of what it is. In this rejection, the rebellion of the artist is embodied – "Rebellion can be observed here in its pure state and in its original complexities. Thus art should give us a final perspective on the content of rebellion"(222). From this angle rebellion is, therefore, "a fabricator of universes".

However, Camus is quick to point out the hostility shown to art by all revolutionary reformers. Camus cites Van Gogh who has stated that the world is a study of God, which has turned out badly. Every artist, Camus opines, tries to reconstruct this study and give it the style it lacks. Resemblance to nature or the subject is not its aim. "Its purpose is not to imitate, but to stylize and imprison, in one significant expression . . ." (225). Therefore, the power to create is the artist's rebellion against reality. In the imaginary world of art, "man competes with creation and, provisionally conquers death" (232).

Prometheus could, therefore, be a self-projection. Lowell's rebellion against things that he did not personally believe in, recalls that of Joyce's which is enshrined in Stephen Dedalus's words to Cranly:

... You have asked me what I would do and what I would not do. I will tell you what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it call itself my home, my father-land or my church: and I will try to express myself with some mode of life or art as freely as I can and wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile and cunning (*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 251).

Lowell, like Prometheus, is chained to the rock of contemporary experience because he is out of favour with God. He has to be true to his own experiences in order to find out the truth of his own self. Since he no longer acknowledges the eternal reality, he has to be true to his own experiences, his inner self and this, despite the suffering to the self. Lowell who is aware of the impotence of the gods is similar to Prometheus who foresees the destruction and downfall of Zeus. But unlike Prometheus, Lowell has no authority to answer to and hence he

can do whatever he wishes –in other words, he is “condemned to be free”. The death-wish typical of Lowell is seen reflected in Prometheus also. See, for instance, his words to the

Chorus:

... I wish I could use this feather he [Ocean] gave me. Then I could fly off like a bird..., one day soaring feathers, the next a fluff of dry, descending waste. I would be dead before I even knew I had died(20).

Like Prometheus, Lowell often prefers death to remorseless suffering. In spite of everything, Prometheus is in search of truth. Prometheus, in search of the truth of contemporary experience, has some shades of Lowell’s “Hawthorne”, who is in search of “clue” which will unlock the mysteries of the universe. Hawthorne’s contemplation of the “true and insignificant objects like chips, stones or any common thing” as the source of truth prefigures Prometheus’s search for truth:

Prometheus :

... I have little faith now, but I still look for truth, some momentary crumbling foothold. Even here, I am too hurried, I am like a pebble caught in a landslide (49) ... Around some bend, under some moving stone, behind some thought, if ever it were the right thought, I will find my key. No, not just another of Nature’s million petty clues, but a key, my key, the key, the one that must be there, because it can’t be there – a face still friendly to chaos (52-53).

The parallel that Camus has drawn between the rebel versus history, and the artist versus rebellion is very enlightening in this context:

The rebel, far from making an absolute of history, rejects and disputes, it in the name of a concept which he has of his own nature. He refuses his condition, and his condition is to a large extent historical., Injustice, the transience of time, death—all are manifest in history. In spurning them, history itself is spurned. Most certainly, the rebel does not deny the history that surrounds him. But confronted with it [history], he feels like the artist confronted with reality; he spurns it without escaping from it. He [the rebel] has never succeeded in creating an absolute history. Even though he can participate, by the forces of events, in the crime of history, he cannot necessarily legitimate it (256).

The similarity between the rebel and the artist is clearly highlighted here. Lowell is full of admiration for Prometheus who searches diligently for truth in spite of being aware of the

futility of the venture. In a way, he is an alter ego of the poet-dramatist who searches for the truth of existence to escape from the burden of consciousness.

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