

The Metaphor of Prometheus in Blumenberg

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Introduction

In evaluating Blumenberg's *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979/1985) and its use of Prometheus as a "major figure of reference" in the "history of western self-consciousness", Stroumsa (1987, 310) observed:

Ambiguous, very learned, and difficult, *Arbeit am Mythos* (1979) is an impressive achievement. Yet, it somehow misses the mark.

Stroumsa is critical of Blumenberg's axiomatic assertion that the advent of Christianity drastically altered the myth of Prometheus; yet, in tracking the Christian transformations of Prometheus to argue about a two-tiered culture in which Christian mysteries reserved the first rank (p.320), Stroumsa (1987, 323) remains uncertain whether the reworked Prometheus' metaphor "imposed its mark on western culture." It is this question that I shall tease out further in this brief note, taking start from Blumenberg's background as a classicist.

In my view, Blumenberg, influenced by the *Graecomanie* of his era (Graevenitz 1987, x), perceived the Greek society in isolation from other ancient cultures and subsequent eras; thus, his critics often point out the inability of the Greek paradigm to explain all modern metaphors for historical progress (Wallace 1984; cf. Adams 1991). As a result of the "uniqueness" of the Greeks and their alleged promotion of Reason, a nineteenth-century scholarly construction (Heit 2007), Blumenberg underestimated the importance of ritual in shaping Greek thought. Hence, although he appreciates the sacred aspects of ancient myths, he does not accept that their mysticism influenced the metaphors subsequent generations used to express their quest

for progress through past mythic figures (cf. Snell's critical stance toward Creuzer "who set out to locate the real religious forces of the Greeks in the sombre recesses of symbolism, mysticism and ecstatic frenzy," a phenomenon that in his view is "characteristic only of late antiquity;" Snell 1953, 43). The question regarding the ritualised social and political economy of status in ancient societies and its modern reverberations is a huge quest, so here I only try to defend its undertaking. After all, according to Levi-Strauss a myth is defined by the sum of all its versions (1955, 431-432; cf. Ricoeur 2004, 44), including its contemporary manifestations.

Promethean Transformations

The myth of Prometheus appears in two versions in Hesiod; in *Theogony* (507-616) Prometheus appears as the instructor of humans regarding sacrificial codes. The myth proposes nothing less than an interpretation of civilisation and its origins, together with an aetiology of sacrifice and the existence of evil in the world. In the *Works and Days* (42-105) Prometheus seals the much-regretted separation of man from god by stealing the fire from the latter. Here, the definition of mortality already points to a new awareness of status, typical of human civilisation. This was the main interpretation of the myth in antiquity, also detailed in Plato's *Protagoras* (320c-328d with Stroumsa 1987, 310). By going against his own kin, Prometheus delivered culture at the collective level, for the benefit of humanity.

Centuries later, Prometheus becomes the symbol of the rebellious man who defies god and religiosity in favour of Reason. This drastic change which Blumenberg embraced was anticipated by Goethe who concluded his poem *Prometheus* with the all-important emphasis on the individual "ich" (Ziolkowski 2000, 114). Hence, in the eighteenth-century Prometheus is cast as rejecting superstition and religiosity, promoting reason and science as the underpinnings of human progress with emphasis on the progress of the individual than the society. Humans are thus rid of the fear of sin and the sinful quest for knowledge. The "modern" Prometheus is cast as the pioneer who opposed the irrationality of divinity in favour of the enlightenment and became an educator of humans, a role Boccaccio also attributed to the Titan.

But how modern is Blumenberg's Prometheus? Prometheus was already cast as an educator in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Vergil's *Georgics* (Wilkinson 1950, 25), a work preoccupied with divine providence and widely studied in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Boccaccio made extensive use of Vergil in *Decameron* IV where he addresses a prayer to Zeus as a god of justice (Barsella 2004, 129), echoing Vergil's Stoic version of Jovian theodicy, while generally in his *Genealogie* he developed the idea of the poet-philosopher (Barsella 2004, 123-126), echoing Vergil's notion of the poet-prophet (*vates*). Apparently, then, in adopting/adapting Boccaccio's Prometheus, Blumenberg overlooked the ritual invest-

ment of progress in Vergil and/or his Greek models which Boccaccio seemed to appreciate. Furthermore, although in his *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* Blumenberg (1985, 50-51) holds that turning points in human history announce themselves as clusters and accelerations of processes, as failed revolutions and changes heralded long before the definite turn, he refuses to acknowledge that the modern world is itself a symptom of crisis due to change. Still, in *Arbeit am Mythos*, Blumenberg concedes that mythic symbols are invested with past ritual values which, despite fading at times, keep coming back during times of acute change. So, why would modernity be anything other than (yet another) a phase of introspection prompted by the technological revolution?

Let us now briefly revise the profile of Prometheus as a trickster, a liminal figure crossing freely the borderline between good and evil (cf. Detienne and Vernant 1989); according to Stroumsa (1987), the key to Prometheus' character is precisely this duality which Christianity found difficult to accommodate. Alarmed by the comparison between Jesus and Prometheus, especially their suffering in the name of humanity (Teggart 1947, 58-60; cf. Snell 1953, 312), Christian thinkers systematically sought to "straighten out" the symbolism of the myth by removing Prometheus' pagan ambivalence. Stroumsa refers to Gnosticism, as the "acute Hellenization" of Christianity, using Harnack's term (1888, 195-196), yet he too does not engage with the ritual investment of Promethean/Greek mythology. Notably, though, in discussing Lucian's mock-play *Dialogue between Prometheus and Zeus*, which shows Prometheus as crucified by Zeus, Stroumsa argues (1987, 314) that Prometheus is to remain crucified between Heaven and Earth as an eternal reminder of the nature and fate of the Titans, situated between men and gods. However, as an intermediary, Prometheus is the par excellent initiate, a metaphor compatible with Blumenberg's understanding of Prometheus as a pioneer and with Stroumsa's reading of Prometheus' punishment as a reminder of boundaries that cannot be trespassed, a *salvator salvandus* in Augustine's words (a saviour in need of salvation, *C. Faustum* 2.5).

Given that cultural pioneers (cf. Anagnostou-Laoutides 2020 on Christian Heracles) are typically inadmissible in the order they strive to establish, I am inclined to see Prometheus as a hierophant, understood already in antiquity as a symbol of the sacrifice (of innocence?) man ought to accept as a result of acquiring self-awareness, of being initiated into culture. Blumenberg seems to sense this because in his *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1985, 404) he notes: "Lack of consideration for happiness becomes the stigma of truth itself, a homage to its absolutism;" hence, pain legitimizes knowledge. Although to embrace this pain one ought to reject religion, according to Blumenberg, this is not different to what ancient initiates strove to achieve by undergoing demanding initiations and "blindly" entrusting themselves to divine will. In light of the theory of modernization, the direct child of modernity, and the

acute struggle of the West with the mystic East, Nietzsche was probably right in observing the superficial renaming of structures without little change in essence. Reason is not the rejection of emotion, but (another attempt at) the articulation and canonization of our existential fears. Hence, Stroumsa (1987, 315) also points out Prometheus in Julian's the Apostate *Oration to the Uneducated Cynics* (6.3, text and trans. LCL 29: 8-9) where he writes:

The gift of the gods sent down to mankind with the glowing flame from the sun through the agency of Prometheus, along with the blessings that we owe to Hermes, is no other than the bestowal of reason and mind.

Stroumsa (1987, 316-317) believes that here the motif of Prometheus the rebel, which was prominent in the Greek culture, is missing; the fourth century, he argues, is sufficiently different to allow for the complete change of myth to metaphor, and the impositions of Christianity on pagan myths. But in forming his opinion he overlooks the role of Prometheus in Aristophanes' *Birds* (1532-33 and 1587-88) where the Titan appears as an advisor of men on how to deal with divine envoys including Heracles, his liberator – even in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* the suffering of Prometheus has been understood to serve a greater divine scheme (Lloyd-Jones 2003). Moreover, in Aelius Aristides Prometheus appears in front of Zeus as an ambassador on humanity's behalf (*Or.* 2.396). The idea was not uncommon in the Greco-Roman world because, as Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 38.18) argues, all messengers on behalf of friendship are in the service of the gods. In fact, Julian's opinion is also compatible with Plato's idea (*Phd.* 60c; cf. *Leg.* 941a) that the gods wished to reconcile the war of pleasure and pain. Thus, I think that Stroumsa's emphasis on the duality of Prometheus as the essence of the myth's pagan past imposes a misleading frame on it since in antiquity evil is the precondition of good, the challenge presented for the final prevailing of good through ritual. In fact, when Tertullian (*Ap.* 47.14) or Clement of Alexandria (*Str.* 1.17.81.4) are polemical toward pagan truth (cited in Stroumsa 1987, 317 with nn28-29), they are re-mythologizing pagan myths, aware of their right to negotiate past metaphors about our ambivalent relationship with our human nature. Ancient metaphors do not operate as exclusive or semantically limited antithetical pairs, as structuralism would have it, but seem to build on previous metaphorical meanings that can be flexed and adapted.

Concluding Remarks

The fourth century is not a/the time when suddenly myth becomes metaphor much in the way that modernity does not do away with myth. In my view, the metaphorical aspects of myth existed from the very beginning and allowed people to express their position in the world as well as their awareness of themselves. In Löwith's critique of Blumenberg (discussed by

Wallace 1981), I would add his reluctance to engage with the ritual aspects of mythic symbols. Löwith argues that modernity is illegitimate because the dominating motif of progress is in actuality the Christian eschatological worldview cloaked in a secularized veneer. Blumenberg holds that apocalypticism and belief in progress have different roots, but the Prometheus' myth challenges his view. Or as Zenck (1998) argued, historical turning points are eased through the return to ancient, archaic, or else foreign or non-European rituals in the hope of finding a new future by means of a backward-looking orientation. From this point of view, Prometheus continues to determine western culture by being a symbol of our past struggles with ourselves and our need for turning points to determine our evolution.

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