



LANGUAGE, BODY,
AND COGNITION IN
PROMETHEUS UNBOUND

Hilary Grimes

Prometheus Unbound presents complicated interrelationships between language, thought, and sensory experience. So closely knitted, these overlapping facets alternately fail to produce a desired effect, rendering speakers, hearers, seers, and thinkers unable to consolidate their various physical and mental states into a single connective entity. The play highlights this fragmentation in Acts I and II as its characters refer to their ability or inability to hear, speak, see, and think. Attention is returned to eye and ear as these faculties are assaulted by dreams, echoes, and torments carrying portentous knowledge. Language enters this dialogue as Prometheus' gift to mankind, a mechanism dependent on these same physical senses, which "creates thought" in the

Promethean model (II. iv. 72). The crises in these first two acts focus on language as a potent but ultimately incapable agent. In the first soliloquy, Prometheus establishes that his words might have once had power to enact a curse against Jove. As torment, Prometheus learns that language causes humanity despair, good-intentioned words turned to “swift poison” (I.i. 548). The tragedy in *Prometheus Unbound* lies in disconnection. When the descriptive network breaks down, there can be no recognition, forcing shapes into formlessness and words into shadows. By constructing the ultimate obscurity, a “deep truth” that has no image, sound, word, or thought, *Prometheus Unbound* argues not only that each communicative vector remains irresolutely separate from the rest, but that language fails to accurately describe it (II. iv. 116).

In the first act, Jove’s Furies reveal that people used Prometheus’ oral language carelessly, allowing misinterpretation, hypocrisy, and custom to result in widespread despair. Unlike other versions of this myth, the

Furies do not torture Prometheus using physical punishment. First Fury taunts “thou thinkest we will rend thee bone from bone, / and nerve from nerve, working like fire within?” (I. i. 475-76). Instead, they choose a punishment method that affects Prometheus cognitively. Prometheus himself does not appear threatened by physical punishment, saying “ye rend me now – I care not” (I. i. 478). Rather than destroying body, the Furies wish to “bend the Invincible, / the stern of thought” using “the deepest power of Hell” (I. i. 536-38). The Furies “tear the veil,” exposing Prometheus to visions and oral accounts portraying human history (I. i. 539). These presentations follow an accusation that links Prometheus with the pollution, war, destruction, despair, and murder the Furies display. “Dost thou boast the clear knowledge thou wakenedst for man?” the Fury Chorus asks (I. i. 541).

One came forth of gentle worth...
His words outlived him, like swift poison
Withering up truth, peace, and pity (I. i. 546, 548-49).

Here, language links to the apparatus by which “hypocrisy and custom make their minds / The fanes of many a worship, now unworn” (I. i. 631-22). Though words remain the same, they are interpreted and appropriated, making them volatile. As the Fury Chorus continues, they draw attention to Prometheus’ sensory experience, directing him to “look”, “hark”, and “look again”, confirming that the physical causes great pain, but only as a channel of understanding (I. i. 549, 552, 555). Prometheus is tortured, not by wounds, but the fundamental disconnection between communicating bodies, how his gift of speech fails humanity.

Prometheus Unbound provides a unique model to explain how brain, speech, sense, and reality interrelate. Prometheus is more tortured by memory and fantasy within the brain than the ephemeral wound or sight, so he privileges mental capabilities to create reality. His perception magnifies sight and sound, able to selectively recall and ruminate on sensory experiences: “I close my tearless eyes, but see more clear / Thy works

within my woe-illuminated mind” (I. i. 636-37). Others reiterate that the mind’s products are clearer or more real than material manifestations. Earth calls for prophetic spirits to ease Prometheus’ torture, spirits that “breathe, and sicken not, / The atmosphere of human thought,” an immersion which allows them to “bear the prophesy” associated with Prometheus (I. i. 675-76, 690). One spirit follows a poet who “feeds on the aerial kisses / of shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses,” ostensibly a thinker more involved in his mind and imagination than the world around him (I. i. 741-42). But the poet’s cognition and articulation complicates in later lines:

He will watch from dawn to gloom
The lake-reflected sun illumine
The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom,
Nor heed nor see what things they be;
But from these create he can
Forms more real than living man (I. i. 743-748).

To parse this logic, the poet watches but does not heed or see “what things they [the yellow bees in the ivy-bloom] be” (ibid). Despite this, he makes forms that are “more real than living

man” (ibid). Assuming that the forms are poetical, language does not solely depend on the mind to organize the body’s sensory input. Asia draws up a comparative relationship in Act II that has speech or language making thoughts, not the other way around. According to her, humans only think because Prometheus “gave man speech, and speech created thought, / Which is the measure of the universe” (II. iv. 72-73). This affects articulation because if speech dictates thought, the mind isn’t searching for words to describe the world; rather the words exist so the thoughts can.

If language determines the terms by which the mind systematizes, this also affects how one observes and recognizes. The characters in *Prometheus Unbound* are surrounded by ephemeral, ill-defined, and obscured entities, described vaguely as “shapes” or “forms.” These related words denote an edge or contour that is generic, frightening in its unparticular obscurity. The poet is described as feeding on “shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses,” an ambiguity that is contrasted with

the exactness of the descriptive narration: “The lake-reflected sun illumine / The yellow bees in the ivy-bloom” (I. i. 741-42, 743-45). Shapelessness and formlessness push at perceptive limitations, where the boundaries between forms are visually blurred. In Acts I and II, things are veiled, obscured, and unheard throughout as this vagueness resists classification. Prometheus sees “shapeless sights” on his mountain, unrecognizable “ghastly people of the realm of dream” separated by their divergent physical embodiments (I. i. 36-37). One might think that we can eliminate obscurity by illuminating veiled forms and showing “what things they be” (I. i. 746). Perhaps this is what the poet attempts when he lineates image and sound in a concrete manner, pinning the things via linguistic description. This process replaces one form with the other, and, according to the spirit, the latter is more “real.” Returning to Asia’s interpretation, she equates thought with light and measurement, as the human “birthright” is “knowledge, power, / The skill which wields the

elements, the thought / Which pierces this dim universe like light” (II. iv. 39-41). Assuming that language engenders thought, which measures the inability to perceive something as particular rather than shapeless is a fundamental vocabulary issue, not exclusively a failing of the mind or sensory channels.

This is not to say that the senses do not fail in *Prometheus*, because they do, as individuals are physically unable to perceive. Prometheus, for example, cannot hear the language of the dead, despite his divine nature. According to the Earth,

There are two worlds of life and death;
One that which thou beholdest - but the other
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
The shadows or all the forms that think and live,

a distinction that emphasizes the physical inability to see at least half of what exists (I. i. 195-98). When Earth speaks to Prometheus in the dead’s language, he cannot hear it, experiencing instead a quasi-visual indefiniteness: “Obscurely

through my brain, like shadows dim, / Sweep awful thoughts” (I. i. 146-47). Prometheus’ perspective denies him access to information he knows is otherwise available. His self-exile separates him from godly or mortal worlds, but he receives visions and tellings about them from the Furies sent to torture him. Though these Furies uncover, clearing the way for Prometheus to see what was once behind a veil, he cannot actually witness anything shown to him. Furthermore, the Furies make it clear that “worse things, unheard, unseen, remain behind” (I. i. 617). Historical, mortal, and bodily divisions keep the sides of the veil visually separate, as “the grave hides all things beautiful and good” (I. i. 639).

Prometheus cannot hear words meant for the dead or find the “peace” in the grave because he cannot die. Sight and sound fail to represent what is most desired, conveying the truth only as a “shadow.” Asia meets Demogorgon, who promises that he can tell “all things thou dar’st demand”, but his answers to her ultimate questions fall short (II. iv. 10). When Asia asks who is

“master of the slave” between the divine and mortal, he
responds

If the abyss
Could vomit forth its secrets- but a voice
Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;
For what would it avail to bid thee gaze
On the revolving world? (II. iv. 114, 115-18)

Here, words and images are simply unable to convey the most important truths, rendering them imperceptible through these channels.

The lyric play’s form draws attention to a theatrical embodiment, asking readers to imagine and use their own senses. As an emotive production, it naturally directs the onlookers to sense along with its actors and to place themselves within the scene. Asia’s two sisters, Ione and Panthea, have directive roles, describing the action as it occurs onstage.

Throughout Prometheus’ torture, they cover their eyes and ears to avoid witnessing his punishment, though they end up perceiving and describing it, regardless. “My wings are folded

o'er mine ears; / My wings are crossed over mine eyes" but still "a shape, a throng of sounds" makes its way through (I. i. 222-23, 226). Like the Furies, they direct attention to visual or audible cues, saying, "oh sister, look!" or "hark sister! What a low yet dreadful groan / Quite unsuppressed is tearing up the heart / Of the good Titan" (I. i. 433, 578-580). These observations allow the two characters who are most involved in their senses to offer descriptive perspectives inaccessible through other dialogue. Panthea provides Asia with visions through her eyes, as the two are connected by a spell, sharing their separately experienced dreams and visions. Asia repeatedly asks Panthea to "lift up thine eyes and let me read thy dream," finding her eyes "like the deep, blue, boundless Heaven / Contracted to two circles... measureless, orb within orb" (II. i. 55, 114-117). In contrast to thought, which measures linearly, Panthea's eyes are circuitous and measureless.

Prometheus Unbound separates feeling from sensing, which suggests the former may be the means of accessing an

imageless and voiceless truth. As Asia and Panthea meet together, they can sense a presence even when the other is unseen or unheard. Before Panthea even arrives, Asia says, “I feel, I see those eyes which burn” (II. i. 28). The two meet Demogorgon, who they can feel without being able to see him: “Ungazed upon and shapeless; / Neither limb nor form nor outline- yet we feel it is / A living spirit” (II. iv. 5-6). This “feeling” is something other, an ambiguous sense that does not have a physical embodiment to accompany it. Panthea “saw not, heard not, moved not, only felt [Prometheus’] presence”, but it is not clear which sense she is using to perceive him (II. i. 79) Asia approaches feeling as preferable to sight or sound, “thou speakest, but thy words / Are as the air; I feel them not,” (II. i. 109). These quasi-physical reactions focus on less quantifiable sensory experiences than hearing, sight, or scent. More personal, these feelings exist solely in the individual’s body, or the interplay between bodies in Asia and Panthea’s case. This location within a unique and untranslatable

sensation-producing body returns us to the individual's role in Promethean rhetoric. Even though "the abyss" has truths, they cannot be transferred from one entity to another. Seeing, hearing, and perceiving, despite their anchorage to reality, are translations in their own right. The eyes see and translate the forms into the ones they already know, classifying them as having a discernable shape or not. Like the imperceptible truths, feelings, as opposed to senses, are ambiguous enough that they enable perceptions beyond the traditional senses. Perhaps a senseless feeling is the only way to access truth that has no voice and no image, an absolute obscurity.

Examining relationships between the real, the mind, the senses, and language in this text constructs an interpretation.

It draws out the connective tissue between the lyrical arguments until they appear to pull in one direction.

Prometheus fragments sensory experiences to achieve a similar anatomization. By discerning each sense as an actor that does not always function in consort under the auspices of a

privileged mind, the play argues that this disunity results in despair and disaster. Just as the human collective, working as a macrocosmic body, cannot communicate a prophet's words without perverting them, so do the perception chains distort what is to be measured and organized. Still, there is the assumption that truth and unity exist, at least as counterpoints to the present condition. Only after their attempts to access truth do the actors realize their linguistic, physical, and cognitive limitations.