

PROMETHEUS CHAINED



**A NEW POEM,
AFTER A PAINTING BY
RIVA LEVITEN**

BRETT RUTHERFORD



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PROMETHEUS CHAINED

after a painting by Riva Leviten

*to be read with Beethoven's Prometheus Variations,
Op 35 (sections of the poem alternating with the
Variations)*

1

The gods did not do this blasphemous thing:
the Titan banished to the mountain heights,
draped in iron chains to a platform of oak,
eyes closed, a shadowed hulk unseeing, hunched
like an animal in some hunter's cruel trap —

this deed was not the grim command of Zeus,
Poseidon did not stir from ocean trench;
Mars did not polish his shield, nor Athena hers.
Blame not jealous Hera, nor Vulcan's forge,
despite the dark treachery of metal work.

2

They did this. *They* put him here —
those little creatures with the monkey eyes,
the ones with all those fingers fluttering.
Someone said he made them from lumps of clay.
Prometheus didn't. He found them scampering
from tree to cavern to waterhole,
a fornicating horde of unformed talents,
flea-bitten, screeching, night-chilled,
terrified of lion, wolf and vulture.
They ate whatever the earth provided
or whatever dead thing no jackal touched.
They sang as they shared their pitiful raw feasts.

3

Some mornings one of them did not awaken.
Some mornings an infant stopped breathing.
They ate their dead silently
 so the vultures would not get them.
Those were the days they did not sing.
They walked about silently
gnawing on bones whose shapes
 disturbed them.

4

The solitary Titan,
outcast among the gods
and last of his kind,
sat quietly and watched them.
They took him for part
of the landscape, a hillock,
a man-shaped terrain
in whose shadow they rested.

He watched their women,
their young at play,
their ritual matings
en masse beneath the moonlight.
The songs they sang
the skin drum rhythming —
the struggle toward harmony
pleased him.

5

Prometheus considered the gods—
their arrogance, amours, wars and jealousies,
the way they fought for dominance —
no room for Titans in their universe! —

and he had thought:
there is as much god in these monkey-things
as there is monkiness among the gods.

And so the great idea had come to him.

6

Cursed be the day he thought of it!
Whatever was he thinking?
He made himself visible to all of them.
One morning the sheltering hill
bent down, and opened its two
 great blue eyes,
forming a face and two extended hands,
bridging their language of grunts and nouns
with the pure Attic of Olympus.

They ran screaming. He waited.
He called them back in mother words,
fatherly admonitions. He shook an oak
until the acorns covered the ground.
He pulled up edible tubers, found fruit,
laid forth the bounty of things
 it was safe to eat.

One by one, they came. They tasted,
ate and slept as he gently taught them
what of the earth was wholesome
and what dark herbs belonged
 in Pluto's garden.

He showed them the seed, and the seedling,
and the furrow, and the harvest watch,
and the sweet sunrise of waving grain.

7

If he had left it there,
they would have been but farming apes.
But oh, no, he could not bear their hunger,
their night fears, their mindless worship
of sun and moon and lights in the sky.

So he took one boy aside,
taught him all the words of the gods,
and showed him how to make a fire.

But what is fire for? the stripling asked,
trembling at the torch he held.
Prometheus answered:

*That which cannot be eaten
fire transforms into food.
The beast you now fear
will fear you when it sees the flame.
The other secrets, you will discover.*

8

The memory turns to gall
as the Titan shifts in his chains.
Fire he gave them forged those chains.
Fire he gave them melted the tar
with which they blacked his bronzed limbs.
Now they are spewing oil
 from Pluto's kingdom;
they mine heavy metals
even Vulcan will not touch.
They will ascend the mountain soon
with gasoline, and napalm,
or something onimous
they call a "thermonuclear device"
to dispose of him once and for all.

Presumptuous monkeys!
they claim they have pried apart
the indivisible atom!



9

Weekly, the humans' Grand Inquisitor
comes to call on Prometheus,
a little man in self-important robes,
like a portable black thunderstorm.
His hawk-face is blue with ague.
(Pestilence is everywhere in their cities now.)

He comes to inspect and tighten the chains.
He will make his report to the Ministry,
and assure the Faithful
that the blaspheming Titan
will soon be no threat —
after the final solution, that is.

10

The Titan ignores the blue-faced visitor.
He knows him well, but will not deign
to lift an eyelid for such a devious gnat.
This is the one who came for wisdom,
asked who the gods were and how they came to be.
Prometheus mistook him
for a fellow seeker.
He asked how the gods as the Titan knew them
meshed with the gods the monkey-men
had recently invented.

The Titan revealed
his own discovered truth:
that the gods are fools and rogues.
That they are only gods because bigger,
stronger and older than others. That Titans
had come earlier and been defeated
(all but one!). And before the Titans,
others, world-spanning, time-defying
entities who hurled whole galaxies
at one another in eons-long struggles —

insect gods, reptile gods, unspeakable beings
with tentacles and eye-stalks, leaping
from space to space and age to age,
and behind all gods the crawling Chaos,
which only the great I am of life-force
prevents from devouring it all —

He revealed this, and more —
of thirty-two so-called creations
that rescued life from nothingness —
and every one followed
by a madhouse of life,
striving up from mud to the stars.

11

When the human repeated
the Titan's theogeny
to his assembled ministers
they shouted *Blasphemy! Blasphemy!*
They came from all over —
the learned men
whose fathers he had taught to read —
they recited proofs
 in a language but recently forgotten
that their own god — a monkey-Zeus —
had made the earth just recently,
and only for the use of monkeys —
especially for the monkeys
 who believed in monkey-Zeus.
(All others were to be put to death,
 or made to serve in silence.)

12

An eagle arrives,
lights on the Titan's
massive forearm.
Prometheus laughs bitterly.
"That old device again?
Fine for abducting boys.
Or have you come to add feathers
to my indignity?"

The eagle says nothing.
Its glacier eyes pierce him.
He tries in vain
to throw off the raptor.

"So, Zeus, you come to gloat!
Acorn-eater,
Cronus's vomit-ball —
go back to Rhea's nipples,
or hide behind Hera."

"Proud to the last,"
the eagle finally responds
in a parody of god-voice.
"Did I not warn you
about the human kind?"

"I see your hand in this,"
Prometheus replies,
"filling their little minds
with holy madness.
I taught them the way of knowledge."

"We scarcely noticed them,"
the eagle insists,
"until their arrogant prayers
polluted the atmosphere.
They have a plaything god
who forbids other gods
their proper commerce."

"They have gone mad,"
Prometheus conjectures.
"Their little monkey-god
was bad enough
with his orangutan beard
and stone tablets.

"Now, according to some,
he found a virgin,
begot a son on her,
sent the son down
to teach the humans.
They killed him.
Then they felt sorry
and decided he rose
from the dead.
Then the son promised
to bring them all back
if they worshipped him —

"There goes Hades!"
Zeus laughs.

“Each time the little
Inquisitor comes,
the story has changed,”
Prometheus complains.
“Finally they called me
to make peace among them.
I went, down there
where their great stone towers
follow both rivers
to the sea.
I heard them. I drank
their new-pressed wine
(good as yours on Olympus, too!)
Their sermons made me sleepy,
or so I thought.
They had drugged my wine!

“Days later I woke
to this prison of chains.
Then came the tar –
they hauled it by the truckload.
Three times they have tried
to burn me to cinders.
Three times my Mother the Earth
has healed me.”

13

“Should we open Tartarus,”

I wonder?”

old Zeus proposes.

“One swipe of a berserker Titan,
your elder, snake-footed brother,
and their cities would topple.

Or we could send Poseidon’s Kraaken –
a million nightmare tentacles
and one consuming beak
with appetite enough
to consume their species —”

“No!” says Prometheus.

“Much as I hate some of them,
the best of them are better than we are.

No! listen, or swoop below and look!

Their towers gleam in the sunrise.

Bridges, aqueducts, fountains and spires,
women in jeweled splendor,

boys in the glory of their summer games,
the poets, the orchestra of viols,

flutes and trumpets. For every word

I taught them they invented twenty.

They can stride the planet,

take the stars.

I want to see

what they do next.”



14

Swirling black clouds
cascade from nearby mountain ranges,
a storm of discord, woe, suspicion,
a hurricane of malice and pestilence,
a bee-swarm of lies, boils and tumors,
wing-dust of a generation of Harpies.
He sees it hovering —
he knows that only he
stands between it and the city —

hag-things with multi-jointed
spindle legs, splayed knees,
elbows and ankles
at insane angles,
broom down
with their companion rooks
to hurl their curses at the earth.

This is Pandora's cloud,
a convocation of evils
all destined to make misery
of so short a life,
pain-edge creeping

just past the prime,
making old age
deaf, blind and crippled.
No wonder the poor creatures
go mad in droves!

Zeus knows the cloud —
he fluttered down
from out its fore-wind.
“Let’s see how god-like they’ll be,”
he taunts the Titan,
“when their flesh erupts in boils,
when they watch their young wither,
and their parents revert to infancy.”

15

“You cannot help them,”
the Olympian boasts.
“Their little lives are like fireflies.
And now their higher wisdom
tells them to kill you!”

“A long list of gods
has tried to kill me,”
Prometheus replies.
“I am the last Titan
now that poor Atlas
has lain down petrified.
Perhaps my race is run,
but I have not yet tired of it.
Can you say as much,
you moth-eaten god?”

16

As the eagle flies off
to the comforts of Olympus,
the promise of apples
that grant eternal life,
Prometheus hurls
his final taunt.

“They’ll learn the truth
that will empty your temples.
Aphrodite’s wrinkles
will crack her marble likeness.
Apollo and Mars, Hephaestus,
Poseidon will all be the stock
of laughing school-boys.

“I go to cinders and funeral smoke,
but I take all of you with me,
household gods of a dead race!

“There *were* no gods.
There *are* no gods.
There are only
monsters.”