

Standing Upright, Unsleeping:
Sleeplessness, Wakefulness and Watchfulness in *Prometheus Bound*

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Abstract

This article reinterprets and reinvents Prometheus as an archetype of sleeplessness, wakefulness and, finally, watchfulness, for the twenty-first century – a period characterised by proliferating discourses about the so-called epidemic of insomnia suffered in advanced capitalist societies. In the Aeschylean version of the story, as I contend, this mythical hero, who is at once a god and a prophet, is a victim of what might be characterised, with certain qualifications, as sleep deprivation. The article begins by situating Prometheus in mythographic terms, underlining that scholars have tended to overlook the importance of sleeplessness and wakefulness to Zeus's punishment of him. It then proceeds to trace the changes between Hesiod's and the Aeschylean account of Prometheus, with particular attention to matters of crime and punishment. The article goes on to offer a detailed rereading of *Prometheus Bound*, focusing first on Hermes's threats at the end of the play, which provide an important context for thinking about the penal torture of Prometheus, especially the assault on his sight or vision; and, second, on the torture to which he is subjected by Bia and Kratos at the start of the play, above all the component of it that comprises some form of sleep deprivation. After briefly outlining the importance of sleep deprivation in torture practices of the medieval and early modern periods, the article returns to the classical period and, specifically, the part that remaining awake and hence being conscious of pain plays in an episode in the *Odyssey*. Finally, in a concluding section, it argues that Prometheus's sleeplessness, though the result of torture, acquires a positive, even heroic value in the Aeschylean play because it is implicitly associated with a state of political vigilance that resists the panoptic surveillance of tyrants. Here, wakefulness is redeemed as watchfulness.

Keywords: Aeschylus; *Prometheus Bound*; sleeplessness; sleep deprivation; torture; wakefulness; watchfulness

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'I must endure my fearful watch'
Prometheus Bound

I

In the Preface to his doctoral dissertation on 'The Difference between Democritus' and Epicurus' Philosophy of Nature' (1841), Karl Marx declared that, because of Prometheus's militant insistence on 'man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity', he 'is the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher's calendar'.¹ Prometheus, the mischievous, rebellious Titan who, to the eternal fury of Zeus, stole fire from the Olympian gods and passed it onto humanity as a gift, here incarnates philosophy's heroic resistance to religion. A quarter of a century later, in *Capital* (1867), Marx had recourse to a similar trope when he insisted that the dynamics of accumulation 'rivet the labourer to capital more firmly than the wedges of Vulcan did Prometheus to the rock'.² In this context, Marx portrays the proletariat, instead, as an embattled Promethean victim in the struggle against the Olympian gods of the capitalist system.

From Plato through the Patristics to the present, Prometheus has personified or represented many things to many people; so Marx's appropriations, characteristically striking in their rhetoric, are scarcely exceptional. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in particular, at the height of Romanticism, he was a popular hero. Goethe, whom Marx profoundly admired, was among the first to posit Prometheus both as a rebel, someone seeking autonomy in the face of religious limits on the self's development, and – intimately related to this proposition – an exemplary artist. Byron, to take another famous example, apostrophised the Titan in especially capacious, humanistic terms, as 'a symbol and a sign / To mortals of their fate and force'.³ For Byron's friend P.B. Shelley, committed to pursuing the promise of the French Revolution, from whose ideals the older Romantics had finally resiled, he was emblematic of enduring political rebellion. And for Mary Shelley, whose mythopoeic novel *Frankenstein* is subtitled 'the Modern Prometheus', he was a fanatical Enlightenment scientist who reincarnated the spirit of the Faustian overreacher. Prometheus, in short, is supremely polysemic. As Stuart Curran has drily commented, 'Prometheus, for all intents and purposes, might as well have been Proteus.'⁴

Prometheus's reputation, then, or the history of his representation, is a palimpsest. Surveying some of the ancient sources of the Prometheus myth in his *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* (1373), Giovanni Boccaccio admitted to Hugo IV of Cyprus, who had commissioned the book, that it was proving no simple task 'to peel off the outer layer of these fictions': *Harum fictionum involucrum, serenissime Rex, non erit leve corticem aperire*.⁵ It is neatly put. The competing claims of numerous mythographers and mythopoeic poets over several millennia, which frequently reveal more about their own proclivities than they do about the celebrated Titan that appears in ancient scriptures, whether these are shaped by allegorical or euhemeristic approaches, have veiled rather than revealed his perhaps intrinsically elusive identity. Furthermore, as Hugh Lloyd-Jones reminded his readers with

some condescension, in the end, ‘whatever the generous sympathies of liberals like Shelley may lead them to imagine, Prometheus is only a minor figure in the Greek pantheon.’⁶

Irrespective of these expressions of caution, however, and irrespective too of the competitive, often conflicted history of his appropriations, it still seems possible productively to canonise Prometheus. His potential for re-inscription, his receptiveness to creative reinvention, is far from exhausted. For example, in his mythical role as the thief who stole fire from the gods before passing it onto humanity, he can usefully be identified, in mythological terms, as the original anti-hero. More specifically, he can perhaps be positioned as the founding father, in European culture, of that ‘literature in which crime is glorified’, as Michel Foucault puts it; glorified ‘because it is one of the fine arts, because it can be the work only of exceptional natures, because it reveals the monstrousness of the strong and powerful, because villainy is yet another mode of privilege’.⁷ From this perspective, another Romantic one, Prometheus is the divine prototype of crime as an expression of creativity and individuality. He is Satan’s comrade in arms, as Shelley indicated in the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* (1820): ‘The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan.’⁸

Here, however, I propose to promote Prometheus, or reinvent him, as a heroic archetype of wakefulness and watchfulness (in this respect, too, he has something in common with Satan, since in *Paradise Lost* (1667), which is the seminal influence on *Prometheus Unbound*, the fallen angel plots against God in the sleepless night, whispering to his subordinate, ‘what sleep can close / Thy eye-lids?’).⁹ This Prometheus, though, is not simply the heroic archetype of sleeplessness; he is also, in this interpretation, the prototypical victim of state torture involving sleep deprivation. For, in the Aeschylean version of the Promethean myth, the excruciating condition of sleeplessness is one of those painful discomforts to which Prometheus is condemned as part of his sensational punishment for rebelling against Zeus, the ruler of the gods, and for promoting the interests of humanity instead. If, as Danielle Allen points out, ‘in our imaginations Prometheus remains forever affixed to his rock’, principally because there is so little about him in the ancient literature, then we seem to have forgotten that perpetual sleeplessness is a constituent component of this iconic image.¹⁰ Prometheus, it could be said, is the foremost saint and martyr in the insomniac’s calendar; or, more precisely, that of the individual forced by material circumstances of one kind or another to endure a state of intolerable wakefulness and watchfulness.

Prometheus is, then, the primordial casualty of chronic sleeplessness. In the Aeschylean version of the myth, in contrast to the one in Hesiod that predates it by some three centuries, this state is instrumental to his protracted, torturous experience in the bound or chained condition he suffers on the cliff face in the Caucasus where he has been exiled for his crimes. There, he is consigned to remain ‘standing upright, unsleeping, never bowed in rest’ (32).¹¹ In the shape of sleep deprivation, or something that can be closely compared to this more recent means of state punishment, it is a core component of Zeus’s torture of him. And it is destined to last centuries, if not millennia. As such, in his indomitable ability to endure pain, Prometheus offers to redeem this agonising state of perdition and render it, instead, agonistic; a heroic contest that is at once physical and existential. In the Shelleyan version of the myth, too, in contrast to Goethe’s and Byron’s roughly contemporaneous appropriations, Prometheus’s sleeplessness is a crucial motif both for exploring physical and psychological pain and for testing the political potential of the feat of endurance it entails. Its most striking emblem, in *Prometheus Unbound*, is what the Second Fury spitefully refers to as the unsleeping Prometheus’s ‘lidless eyes’.¹²

Curiously, in fact, few scholars seem to have noticed the significance of sleeplessness, wakefulness or watchfulness to inscriptions and re-inscriptions of the Promethean myth. At most, commentators tend to allude to it only incidentally. Silvia Montiglio, for instance, in

her recent monograph on ‘Sleep and Sleeplessness in Ancient Greek Literature’, mentions it no more than fleetingly, in the course of a discussion of *Agamemnon* and *Iphigenia*, where she remarks a little too dismissively that, in *Prometheus Bound*, ‘wakeful nights’ are merely ‘projected forward, to an indefinite post-dramatic time’.¹³ Scholars of the Prometheus myth and its reception, more specifically, have also overlooked the semantics and politics of sleeplessness. Ian Ruffell, to be sure, has in passing helpfully referred to Prometheus’s ‘sleep deprivation’, a phrase I have already used and to which I shall repeatedly return. But Ruffell, who makes no further allusion to this condition, is an exception.¹⁴

In the Promethean palimpsest, so I propose to emphasise, wakefulness and watchfulness play a fascinating role, even though this role has often been half-erased. If scholars either of Prometheus or the history of sleep have for the most part marginalised the former’s archetypal importance to the latter, then perhaps this is because those canonical thinkers and writers who, since classical times, have put the myth to philosophical, political or theological use in their work have themselves neglected its significance. Thomas Hobbes is one of those commentators on the Promethean myth, to offer an influential example for preliminary purposes, who effaced the role of sleeplessness in especially revealing fashion. In *Leviathan* (1651), he implicitly made the assumption that, because the Titan’s liver was restored at night, at least in those versions of the myth more or less directly derived from Hesiod, he must have slept.

Hobbes interprets the Titan as emblematic of humanity in so far as ‘man’ instinctively looks into the future and therefore suffers ‘anxiety of the time to come’:

For as *Prometheus* (which interpreted, is, *The prudent man*) was bound to the hill *Caucasus*, a place of large prospect, where, an Eagle feeding on his liver, devoured in the day, as much as was repayed in the night: So that man, which looks too far before him, in the care of future time, hath his heart all the day long, gnawed on by feare of death, poverty, or other calamity; and has no repose, nor pause of this anxiety, but in sleep.¹⁵

Hobbes’s point is that Prometheus, a prophet whose name probably signified something like ‘fore-thinker’ to the ancient Greeks, in contemplating ‘the care of future time’ embodies man in the condition in which he cries out for the order of sovereign authority. The cunning, punning reference here to the Caucasus as a ‘place of large prospect’ neatly underlines the indefinite state both of space and time to which Prometheus is cruelly consigned. His punishment is, in effect, to be abandoned in a spatial and temporal void, an order of being with no geographical or historical boundaries, and this reinforces the sense that, in the absence of the sort of routines and structures that sustain human society, he is utterly lost. Hobbes’s vivid sketch thus inadvertently provides a glimpse of an angst-ridden, existential Prometheus, one who struggles with his sense of self and therefore, like Camus’s Sisyphus, seems strikingly modern.

Hobbes fails to perceive, however, that the Aeschylean version of the myth, with its stress on sleeplessness, provides an even better paradigm than Hesiod’s, precisely because it presents Prometheus, and hence the humanity for which he potentially stands, as perpetually in the grip of cares. Instead of offering relief from anxieties, night only intensifies them. The apprehensions Hobbes enumerates – care of future time, fear of death, poverty and other calamities – are precisely characteristic of the victim of sleeplessness. This is manifest in the example of another ancient prophet sometimes compared to Prometheus, namely Job. As the biblical archetype of patience in the face of suffering, Job provides a vivid description of his inability to sleep: ‘When I lie down, I say, When shall I arise, and the night be gone? and I am full of tossings to and fro unto the dawning of the day’ (Job 7: 4).¹⁶ The individual who, whatever its causes, suffers from an inability to sleep, has no repose, because their sleeplessness exacerbates rather than alleviates ‘anxiety of the time to come’. The humanity

of Prometheus, in his Aeschylean identity, is never more evident than in his relationship to the night, which is not a time of recuperation but of redoubled pain.

In the post-classical period, only Shelley, in the *Prometheus Unbound*, directly explored the metaphorical potential of his hero's sleeplessness, which he evocatively refers to as his 'three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours'.¹⁷ Prometheus might be nominated, then, following Shelley, as the unofficial god of sleeplessness or wakefulness in the Greek pantheon. He is the antitype of Hypnos: Anti-Hypnos. In this role, he features as the archetypal instance of a type all too familiar in the twenty-first century – the individual who, for one reason or another, has been rendered incapable of sleep. So, in a different formulation, Latin rather than Greek, it might be said that, if in the Renaissance Prometheus stands for *homo doctus* or *homo sapiens*, because he personifies reason, then a case can be made for him today as the embodiment of *homo insomnis*. For the sleepless person – I hesitate to use the term 'insomniac' because it implicitly limits this type to those whose lack of sleep is not enforced or coerced – is currently the anti-hero of a proliferating discourse, both scientific and journalistic, on the so-called epidemic of sleeplessness afflicting advanced capitalist societies.¹⁸

Sleeplessness or wakefulness, in its twenty-first century context, is not merely individual; it has become a pervasive cultural problem, in part because the individual suffering from this condition is a product, clearly enough, of a society rendered sleepless by the energies, and the ceaseless technologies, of capital accumulation. As Jonathan Crary, the most perceptive critic of the material and social conditions that determine the present situation puts it: 'sleeplessness is the state in which producing, consuming, and discarding occur without pause, hastening the exhaustion of life and the depletion of resources.'¹⁹ Today, the imperative not to sleep, or to minimise sleep at least, is thus one of the means by which capitalism, in Marx's formulation, 'rivet[s] the labourer to capital more firmly than the wedges of Vulcan did Prometheus to the rock'. Prometheus, from this perspective, is a portrait of the contemporary capitalist subject, who is tormented by an economic discipline that insists on their constant capacity to produce or consume. And, of course, restlessly addicted to the blue light of their laptop or smartphone screen.

Prometheus's sleeplessness, in the Aeschylean variant I discuss here, serves first as a constituent part of his torture for the political crimes he has committed; and, second, as an objective correlative for the suffering he undergoes in the course of his painful and protracted punishment, which the classical philologist Carl Kerényi characterised as 'the moral suffering fundamental to human existence'.²⁰ It speaks to us eloquently of state torture, of the sleep deprivation routinely used as an interrogation technique by imperial intelligence units; and of the self-torture that, not least during the current epidemic of sleeplessness, can seem constitutive of human subjectivity. For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the latter is not merely a psychological condition but an ontological one. In one context, he calls it 'insomnia in the bed of being'.²¹ Prometheus personifies this insomnia in the bed of being; or, more precisely, sleeplessness on the rock of being. At the same time, though, as Levinas recognised, this state of being is a condition of vigilance, one that is of potentially enormous political importance because it promises to bear witness to the tyrannical abuse of power.

II

In the *Theogony*, Hesiod's genealogy of the gods, composed in the eighth century BCE, the Greek poet provides the oldest surviving account of 'subtle, shifting-scheming' Prometheus. There, interestingly, Hesiod describes Prometheus's punishment, perhaps the most famous example of torture in Western literature, before rather than after recounting the crimes it

penalises.²² Of course, Hesiod goes on to explain that Prometheus, in a covert provocation, had angered Zeus because, when sacrificing an ox at Mekone, he misled him, on the one hand, by making its meat look like no more than the dead beast's stomach; and, on the other, by artfully disguising its bones in 'glistening fat'. And to explain, too, that this son of Iapetos had further infuriated Zeus by 'stealing the far-beaconing flare of untiring fire in the tube of a fennel' and giving it to 'mortal men who live on earth'. But, in the first instance, Hesiod narrates the punishments suffered by three of the four sons of Iapetos and Clymene, namely Atlas, Menoitios and, most prominently, Prometheus himself, in a brief proleptic passage.²³

Zeus, Hesiod records, sent Menoitios 'down to the darkness' with a 'smoking bolt' and forced Atlas to hold up 'the broad sky with his head and tireless hands, standing at the ends of the earth'. Hesiod presents Prometheus's punishment, on the eastern edge of the Greek world, as symmetrical to that of his brother, on the western edge. This is Kerényi's insight when he notes that, as 'images of hardship and suffering, these two supply a frame to the sphere of temporal human existence.'²⁴ Hesiod describes Prometheus's punishment thus:

And he bound crafty Prometheus in inescapable fetters, grievous bonds, driving them through the middle of a pillar. And he set a great winged eagle upon him, and it fed on his immortal liver, which grew the same amount each way at night as the great bird ate in the course of the day.

This eagle, Hesiod explains, was eventually killed by Zeus's son Heracles, who then freed Prometheus. The ruler of the gods, 'irate though he was,' hoped to promote Heracles' fame, and for this reason 'ended the anger he had before, which was because Prometheus pitted his wits against the mighty son of Kronos'.²⁵ The eagle, in Hesiod, already seems allegorical of the kind of human cares with which, long before Hobbes, influential late-Latin mythographers such as Fulgentius and Servius identified it. For the Greeks, as Ruth Padel has underlined, aerial metaphors such as Zeus's eagle, which gave off 'a characteristic Greek sense of being under attack by one's feelings', often functioned as 'tragic images of emotion'.²⁶

From the eighth century to the fifth century BCE there is virtually no reference to Prometheus in the surviving literature. The Aeschylean version of the myth, written at some point during the classic era of Attic tragedy, is notably different to Hesiod's in its emphases. *Prometheus Bound*, a play that today most scholars agree is less likely to be by Aeschylus than by his son Euphorion, was probably the first or second part of a trilogy, known as the *Prometheia*, which included *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer*.²⁷ Both these other plays are almost completely lost, apart from some minor fragments that include the one reproduced by Cicero, either accurately or inaccurately, in his *Tusculan Disputations* from the first century BCE. *Prometheus Bound* is, incidentally, the only ancient tragedy that does not contain any human beings – unless one counts Io, who appears in the shape of a cow.

Performed in the Theatre of Dionysus at the Acropolis, *Prometheus Bound* is of course structurally different to Hesiod's account because, as a piece of drama in which Prometheus is the central character, it necessarily gives him a voice. But, aside from this formal factor, there are significant changes to the content of the myth. Prometheus's mother, for example, is in this variant of the myth not Clymene, a Titaness personifying fame and infamy, but Themis, one personifying divine order and natural justice. In *Prometheus Bound*, moreover, as distinct from Hesiod's account, the author indicates that Prometheus conspired with Zeus against Kronos during the Titanomachy, the epic, epochal war the Olympians waged against the Titans.

More significantly still, to cite merely the most striking instances of the differences from Hesiod's account, the Aeschylean Prometheus passes on to humanity 'not only the physical fire in the fennel stalk', as Olga Raggio summarises it, 'but also the subtler fire of

reason and wisdom from which all aspects of human civilization are derived'; that is, all the arts and sciences.²⁸ 'So, here's the truth in one word,' Prometheus states simply to the Chorus after enumerating the numerous and various disciplines or skills he has secretly imparted to humanity: 'All human skill and science was Prometheus' gift' (508). This gift, which might be interpreted as the means of enlightenment, the instruments of an intellectual awakening, promises to free sleeping humanity from the oneiric or phantasmagoric state of ignorance to which Zeus had consigned it.

Most strikingly, perhaps, Zeus appears in the Aeschylean version not as the divine benefactor to be found in Hesiod but a despotic ruler who displays distinctly human characteristics. And Prometheus, correlatively, figures less as a thieving trickster than as a rebel who, though he is of course a god and therefore remains far from human himself, has nonetheless liberated humanity and saved it from destruction. In fact, Zeus's failure to express gratitude to Prometheus for taking his side in the Titanomachy is presumably one reason for the latter's insubordinate attitude. *Prometheus Bound*, then, concentrates on the antagonistic relations between Prometheus and a tyrannical Zeus – the 'absolute king', in the eponymous hero's words, whom a faction of the gods, one that had 'resolved to unseat the power of Cronos,' has installed in the Titan's place (201-2). As Richard Seaford has noticed, the root *turann-* is applied to Zeus some twelve times in the play, 'and his many tyrannical characteristics include the self-sufficiency that consists of maltreating his own relative and benefactor (Prometheus).'²⁹ Originally a neutral term, possibly of Lydian origin, the word *tyrannos* designated a monarch who had usurped power rather than inheriting it or acquiring it legally – though it increasingly acquired derogatory connotations.

The Aeschylean playwright thus transforms the competition between Prometheus and Zeus, as Carol Dougherty puts it, 'from a contest of wits to a political rebellion.'³⁰ The play is, in brief, a study of the operations of power. And in this respect it is clearly the product of an historical period in which, after the demise of the tyrants, 'democratic constitutions of various kinds, successful or unsuccessful in different degrees, were introduced, often by violent revolution'.³¹ In the form of Zeus, *Prometheus Bound* exhibits the anti-democratic values that fifth-century Athenian society had supposedly superseded. Sara Forsdyke cites Prometheus's complaint about Zeus's 'tendency / To look on all friends with suspicion', a 'disease' he thinks is 'inherent in a tyrant's soul', as indicative of 'the fear and suspicion that characterize tyrannical rule in democratic ideology'.³² This 'democratic ideology' lies behind the comparatively critical attitude to Zeus to be found in *Prometheus Bound*; an attitude that, prior to the close scholarly analysis of its linguistic inconsistencies, persuaded a number of classicists that, given Aeschylus's respectful attitude to him in the *Oresteia*, the playwright could not have been the author of this play.

In its Aeschylean iteration, the torture of Prometheus – whom Zeus also resents because he possesses the secret of who, ultimately, is destined to save or destroy him – is explicitly political. It is the exemplary punishment of a recently established political regime, one dripping in blood, whose leader is determined to assert his absolute authority. As Hephaestus drily comments in the play, 'power newly won is always harsh' (35). It is a reprisal for a compound act of rebellion. According to Prometheus's own testimony, his first crime is to have 'caused men no longer to see their death', that is, to feel hope (249). His second is to have stolen fire – 'the flowery splendour / Of all-fashioning fire,' in Kratos's delicate formulation – and given it to humanity (7-8). Even though it is eternal, in theory, Prometheus's sentence is a proportionate response, from the Olympian perspective, to the fatal consequences, and the profound philosophical implications, of the gifts he has imparted to humanity. For, as Prometheus later informs the Chorus, 'Mindless, I gave them mind and reason' (444). Before this moment of enlightenment, symbolised by the fire conveyed in the cavity of the fennel stalk, men and women were no more than pre-conscious: 'they had eyes,

but sight was meaningless' (447); and 'all their length of life / They passed like shapes in dreams, confused and purposeless' (448-9). In short, Prometheus made humans human. 'Their every act was without knowledge, till I came,' he boasts (454).

Prometheus's punishment, in which he is brutally fastened to the rock and, in effect, forced to remain awake, is intended to ensure that he is reduced to what Foucault, in his classic account of the biopolitics of the disciplinary state, calls a 'docile body'. 'A body is docile,' he writes, 'that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved.'³³ In a sense, the aim of Zeus's punishment is to reduce Prometheus to the mental and physical state that humans, no different in the first instance from all the other animals, experienced before he fatally enfranchised them with fire and reason. Or, more precisely, to reduce him to the mirror-image of this state – since, where they 'lived in holes, like swarms of ants, / Or deep in sunless caverns', he is forced to live strapped to the top of a mountain (451-2). Prometheus exchanges the depths of the earth for its heights. Where humans, prior to becoming humans, were condemned to utter darkness, he is exposed not simply to the elements but to an excessive light, the light of the pitiless sun. Prometheus is thus catapulted back from the realm of culture to that of nature, and becomes, in effect, pre-historical himself. But, in a crucial difference from the condition of humanity in its pre-human form, he is conscious of this state. This is perhaps the primal human punishment, for it entails being mentally conscious of physical pain.

The persecution of Prometheus, in the Aeschylean version, which is due to last for thirteen generations after Io, takes place then on a 'rocky mountain-top' overlooking the sea in the Caucasus – a setting that is characterised as 'the remotest region of the earth, / The haunt of Scythians, a wilderness without a footprint' (1-2). In spite of its remoteness, though, this mountain is what Foucault might characterise as a 'theatre of terror'.³⁴ If in some foundational sense, as Jean-Pierre Vernant once insisted, Greek tragedy 'poses the problems of law, and the question of what justice is', then the Aeschylean dramatist effectively transforms the distant Caucasus into a scene of corporal punishment far closer to hand, embedding it in the centre of Athens.³⁵ In this way, it evokes neighbouring sites of punishment such as the Heliaea, the city's supreme court, 'where people brought their slaves and handed them over to be tortured, thus attracting a crowd which witnessed the proceedings'.³⁶ The Aeschylean stage functions as the site of disciplinary spectacle: 'punishment-as-spectacle.'³⁷ In staging the theatre of terror as theatre, the playwright stages its theatricality.

In order to underline the spectacular display of power, the Aeschylean drama, which like all Greek tragedies refuses directly to represent violent action on stage, thus consciously produces or reproduces it as theatre. The play's action opens with the entry of Kratos, signifying Strength or Sovereign Rule, and Bia, meaning Violence. These hired thugs, who have dragged Prometheus to the site of his torture, together embody the 'military basis' of Zeus's regime.³⁸ If the latter, Bia, represents the state's physical or military force, then the former, Kratos, personifies something closer to what has later come to be called, in contradistinction, 'hegemony'. Kratos stresses in his opening speech that it is not merely a matter of enslaving Prometheus but of making him, as Joel Agee's suggestive translation recently parsed it, 'learn / to love the tyranny of Zeus.'³⁹ It is through Kratos in the first instance, and Zeus's messenger Hermes in the second, that the rule of the gods weaves 'the honied spells of his persuasive tongue', a force that Prometheus must resist every bit as much as what he calls the ruler's 'fierce threats' (172-3). Here, analogous to his physical binding, is a mental binding. In the form of Kratos and Hermes, successively, Prometheus is to be subjugated by what William Blake, one of the god's great English admirers, famously imagined as 'mind-forg'd manacles'.

‘Here is Prometheus, the rebel,’ Kratos announces in the opening speech, ‘Nail him to the rock; secure him on this towering summit / Fast in the unyielding grip of adamantine chains’ (4-6). Kratos, who uses the term *leorgon*, emphasises that Prometheus is implicitly a criminal or miscreant as well as a rebel (4). Bia remains silent – a testament to the way in which, as Simon Critchley argues, Greek tragedy dramatises the limitation of reason ‘in relation to force, mute violence’.⁴⁰ If Prometheus imparted reason to humanity, along with fire, then it is finally not a match for brute force. But brute force must be framed, here, in the form of torture, which is an elaborate social mechanism for inducing docility. So it is at this point that Hephaestus, the god of fire and metalwork, who is sympathetic to Prometheus, in spite of the role he has been apportioned in Zeus’s act of punishment, commences the task of ‘cruelly clamp[ing] him to this bitter, bleak ravine’ (15). Notwithstanding Hephaestus’s distinctly ambivalent attitude to his task, Kratos will subsequently refer to this engine of torture, mockingly perhaps, as the ‘blacksmith’s masterpiece’ (84) – as if it is comparable, for example, to the wheel used to punish slaves in Athens.

Prior to riveting and manacling him to the rock, Hephaestus directly addresses Prometheus, in a speech that is crucial to my account of the play, as the ‘Son of sagacious Themis, god of mountainous thoughts’:

With heart as sore as yours I now shall fasten you
 In bands of bronze immovable to this desolate peak,
 Where you will hear no voice, nor see a human form;
 But scorched with the sun’s flaming rays your skin will lose
 Its bloom of freshness. Glad will you be to see the night
 Cloaking the day with her dark spangled robe; and glad
 Again when the sun’s warmth scatters the frost at dawn.
 Each changing hour will bring successive pain to rack
 Your body; and no man yet born shall set you free.
 Your kindness to the human race has earned you this.
 A god who would not bow to the gods’ anger – you,
 Transgressing right, gave privileges to mortal men.
 For that you shall keep watch upon this bitter rock,
 Standing upright, unsleeping [*ahypnos*], never bowed in rest.
 And many groans and cries of pain shall come from you,
 All useless; for the heart of Zeus is hard to appease.
 Power newly won is always harsh. (19-35)

Exile, torture, a prolonged execution... In Hephaestus’s speech, the representation of Prometheus’s punishment seems almost as naturalistic, so to speak, as it is clearly mythic. Chained to his rock in the Caucasus, where he will neither hear a voice nor see a ‘human form’, Prometheus is to be alternately scorched by the sun and seared by cold at night. So, there seems to be little to separate Prometheus’s torture from that of an ordinary political prisoner. ‘Each changing hour,’ Hephaestus tells him, ‘will bring successive pain to rack / Your body’ (26-7). Here is what Foucault, in his account of penal torture, characterises as ‘a differentiated production of pain, an organized ritual for the marking of victims and the expression of power that punishes.’⁴¹

Mark Griffith observes that ‘death by exposure, whether through crucifixion, impaling, or fastening to a board, seems to have been a familiar punishment for lower-class criminals and traitors’.⁴² More recently, Ruffell has confirmed that, in the Greek world, punishments like that of Prometheus, who is ‘not only fixed [to a crag] to suffer exposure, constrained position, and sleep deprivation, but is actually impaled onto the rock’, were ‘the privilege of traitors or the lowest sort of criminals’.⁴³ Ruffell’s brief sketch of the terms of Prometheus’s punishment is suggestive, but he doesn’t develop its implications, which I propose to explore here with particular emphasis on the sleep deprivation he suffers.

Prometheus, to reiterate, is sentenced to ‘keep watch upon this bitter rock, / Standing upright, unsleeping, never bowed in rest’ (31-2). Sleeplessness, wakefulness and watchfulness are here knotted together in the tortured form of Prometheus.

III

In the first description of Prometheus’s torture, the one that appears in Hephaestus’s opening speech in the Aeschylean play, it is striking that – in spite of its centrality to Hesiod’s account – there is no mention of the eagle. In *Prometheus Bound*, in fact, the dramatist only invokes the eagle some seventy lines before the end of the play, as a third, escalated phase of punishment. It is important, then, for the sake of comparison, and before returning to this god’s persecution on the mountain-top, to anticipate the description of Prometheus’s subsequent, even more severe punishment, which appears during Hermes’s final, antagonistic dialogue with him. It is at this point that Hermes threatens Prometheus with additional torture if he persists in refusing to reveal to Zeus his secrets. These relate to the question of who will finally overthrow Zeus, an eventuality that is ultimately averted; and to the question of who, some thirty thousand years in the future, is destined to free Prometheus from his imprisonment, a character traditionally assumed, in this context, to be Zeus’s son Chiron.

This redoubled punishment, described by Hermes shortly before the end of the play, effectively penalises Prometheus’s refusal hitherto to become a docile body – ‘a body subjected, used, transformed, and improved’. It penalises his insistence on embodying the spirit of rebellion as opposed to the spirit of obedience or subservience that his initial sentence is clearly intended to accomplish (in a provocation that both Marx and P.B. Shelley loved, Prometheus prefers being ‘bondslave to this rock’ than ‘the trusted messenger of Father Zeus’ (67-8)). The Aeschylean drama explores Zeus’s punishment of Prometheus as a judicial act that complicates or even deconstructs the neat distinction between revenge and retribution on which Athenian justice was supposedly predicated. Readings of Aeschylus’s trilogy the *Oresteia* have often seen it as presenting, in Danielle Allen’s characterisation, ‘a triumphalist advance from political systems of “revenge” to systems of “punishment”’. Whatever the accuracy of this interpretation of the *Oresteia*, however, its narrative is clearly inadequate to the dynamics of *Prometheus Bound*, which dramatises the ways in which, in the form of torture, vengeance remains profoundly imbricated in the rituals of punishment.⁴⁴

As Allen has argued, Zeus is compelled by Prometheus’s stubborn resistance to employ a ‘hierarchy of punishments’, involving differing and intensifying ‘penal techniques’.⁴⁵ He escalates the rebel’s punishment. So, what is Zeus’s final, climactic torture? What is the highest tier of his hierarchy? ‘First,’ Hermes informs Prometheus, ‘Zeus will split this rugged chasm with the shock / And flame of lightning, and entomb you underground / Still clamped on this embracing rock’ (1018-20). At the conclusion of the drama, on the instant Hermes exits the stage, which happens some sixty lines later, ‘threat gives place to performance’, as Prometheus puts it in his final speech, and ‘the cataclysm advances visibly upon [him]’ (1076, 1083). There is an earthquake and a hurricane; there is lightning and thunder; and there is an apocalyptic storm in which ‘sky and sea rage indistinguishably’ (1082). Prometheus rages against the extinction of the light, crying out to his mother, the Earth, and to the sky, ‘where sun and moon / Give light to all in turn’ (1091-2).

The play’s final stage direction, though ambiguous, probably enacts the Titan’s entombment: ‘*The rock collapses and disappears, as the Chorus scatter in all directions.*’ As Oliver Taplin points out, the Aeschylean text does not specifically authorise the assumption that Prometheus is transposed to Tartarus at the end of the play; but the audience is likely either to ‘think automatically that Prometheus would be buried there’, given the protagonist’s

own references to it, or to 'accept Hermes' version, namely that the entire crag will be shattered and that Prometheus, still fixed to his rock, will be buried in the debris.'⁴⁶

In one form or another, then, Prometheus is returned to the darkness, and hence to the nescient, oneiric state of existence, pre-aesthetic and pre-conscious, that characterised humanity before he brought it fire – one where he has eyes 'but sight [is] meaningless' (447). *Prometheus Bound* refers repeatedly to vision; and, as Allen has noticed, "'sight" words predominate more in this than in any other Aeschylean play'.⁴⁷ 'When a long age / Has passed, you will return into the light,' Hermes' threat to Prometheus continues, 'and then / The dark-winged hound of Zeus will come, the savage eagle / An uninvited banqueter, and all day long / Will rip your flesh in rags and feast upon your liver, / Gnawing it black' (1020-1025). In the opening phase of this final, supposedly terminal stage of his punishment, Zeus will drive Prometheus from the cavernous darkness back into the mountainous light. This action is probably significant in part because it replicates the torture of prisoners for whom, in a sadistic irony, the exposure to light, to the 'all-seeing circle of the sun', or its eye, causes blindness (88).

This is an act of political violence as ruthless as it is simple. Certainly, there are records in antiquity of tyrants who first deprived their victims of sight by confining them to complete darkness and then obliterated their sight altogether by dragging them into the light. The Roman general Marcus Atilius Regulus, for example, was allegedly punished in this manner by the Carthaginians in the third century BCE. The historian Tubero, writing in the first century BCE, records that Regulus's enemies incarcerated him repeatedly, for long periods of time, 'in black and deep dungeons,' before taking him out 'when the sun was its most fierce' and forcing him 'to lift his eyes toward the sky'. 'Furthermore,' Tubero continues, 'they pulled apart his eyelids, above and below, and sewed them, so that he could not close his eyes.'⁴⁸ Here, too, as in *Prometheus Bound*, enforced sleeplessness or wakefulness is part of the torturer's arsenal.

According to George Adams, the distinguished eighteenth-century optician and maker of mathematical instruments, writing in his *Essay on Vision* (1789), the Carthaginians' punishment of the Roman general, which 'exposed him to the bright rays of the sun, by which he was very soon blinded', was comparable to one of the methods of torture formerly practised by Dionysius I of Syracuse. In the early fourth century BCE, Adams claims, this Sicilian tyrant 'was accustomed to bring forth his miserable captives from the deep recesses of the darkest dungeons, into white and well-lighted rooms, that he might blind them by the sudden transition from one extreme to the other.'⁴⁹

The prospect of Prometheus's brutal transposition from darkness to extreme light at the end of *Prometheus Bound* implies an assault on his eyes that is tantamount to blinding. In Plato's *Republic*, debating justice with Socrates, Glaucon lists blinding among the most severe corporal punishments visited on Athenian citizens. He describes the victim of torture 'being whipped, stretched on the rack, chained, [and] his eyes put out with red-hot metal', adding that, 'finally, having suffered in every bad way imaginable, he'll be impaled on a stake' (362a).⁵⁰ In a mythical context, especially in the gruesome form of deuculation or enucleation, blinding is a common punishment or self-punishment in ancient texts, as the examples of Samson in the Hebrew Bible and, of course, Oedipus are enough to indicate. The art historian Moshe Barasch has noted that, in ancient culture, blindness is an especially familiar form of punishment for offences against the gods. But he insists that 'some of the best-known offenders' retain their eyesight, though they are gravely punished in other ways', before adducing Prometheus as his example of someone significant whose punishment, 'agonizingly torturing as it was, did not affect his eyes.'⁵¹ In the Aeschylean version, however, contrary to Barasch's assumption, the punishment outlined by Hermes at the end of

the play does in fact imply that his eyes will be affected; that his vision, like the vision of pre-human humans, will be rendered ‘meaningless’ (447).

Here, in *Prometheus Bound*, is a metaphorical blinding. It might be claimed that Prometheus’s liberation, in the Aeschylean version, involves a redemptive reversal of this process of blinding, at least in prospect, because he will not be released from his torment on the mountain-top, as Hermes tells him, ‘till some god be found to take / Your pains upon him, and of his own will descend / To sunless Hades and the black depths of Tartarus’ (1026-8). Tartarus, where Cronos and the other vanquished Titans whom Prometheus betrayed during the Titanomachy were confined, was so far beneath the earth that, according to Hesiod in the *Theogony*, it would take an anvil dropped from its surface into its depths no less than nine days and nights to reach it. It is hinted that either Heracles or Chiron, the centaur whom Heracles wounded and who therefore longed for death, will deprive themselves of their own senses, taking Prometheus’s ‘pain upon him’ (1026-7), in order to liberate him. Symbolically speaking, this is an inversion of the course of Prometheus’s journey from dark to light.

As for the eagle – to return once again to the third and final phase of Prometheus’s threatened punishment as predicted by Hermes at the end of the Aeschylean drama – note that the liver that ‘the dark-winged hound of Zeus’ devours in the day is not, after all, restored at night: ‘All day long,’ the eagle ‘will rip your flesh in rags and feast upon your liver, / Gnawing it black’ (1023-5). And that, till the arrival of Heracles, there will be ‘no release / From such a torment’ (1025-6). In the *Theogony* there is a Sisyphean logic to Prometheus’s punishment, so to speak, because it is cyclical. Or, perhaps, a Danaidian one.⁵² For in this text Prometheus’s liver is restored at night. In *Prometheus Bound*, by contrast, the Titan is apparently subjected to an uninterrupted, linear process of consumption or corrosion – which implies that he remains sleepless. Instead of a fantastical, mythical torture, then, the dramatist presents it, through Hermes’ threat, in notably naturalistic terms.

This brings the punishment of Prometheus closer to that of the giant Tityus. Zeus punished his son Tityus, who had raped the goddess Leto, by binding him in Hades and commanding two vultures to feed on his liver. In the *Odyssey*, the Homeric poet describes his hero seeing the punishment of Tityus during his descent into Hades. In Tartarus, Tityus’s vast form is ‘stretched out nine miles’: ‘Two vultures sit on either side of him, / ripping his liver, plunging in his bowels; / he fails to push them off.’⁵³ Here, as in *Prometheus Bound*, the liver regenerates, if it regenerates at all, not as a result of some divine contrivance but as part of what might cautiously be called a ‘natural’ or organic process.

IV

Solitary confinement in conditions that expose the victim to the elements at their most extreme does not constitute a supernatural sentence. Nor do the various other features of Prometheus’s torture, including the verbal abuse he receives in turn from Kratos and Hermes, seem superhuman. Sleep deprivation, the torture or element of torture in which I am particularly interested here, is a crucial, as well as excruciating, component of the punishment to which, in the Aeschylean drama, Zeus sentences Prometheus. It is human, all too human.

In Hephaestus’s speech, as I have indicated, sleeplessness is emphasised both as one of the consequences and one of the constituent elements of Prometheus’s punishment: ‘For that you shall keep watch upon this bitter rock, / Standing upright, unsleeping [*ahypnos*], never bowed at rest’ (31-2). As is apparent from these lines, it is indissociable from the intolerable posture he is compelled to adopt, which makes it impossible for him to bend his knees (*ou kampton gonu*). This expression, Detienne and Vernant comment, ‘is used here with its usual meaning: to take some rest, to lie down, to relax.’⁵⁴ A painful, physically

unsustainable posture is a striking feature of visual representations of Prometheus. These often portray, in Louis Gernet's phrase, 'un Prométhée enchaîné dans une posture accroupie'; that is, a Prometheus shackled in a crouching or squatting position.⁵⁵ If such a position appears to be inconsistent with that of the unbending Prometheus in the Aeschylean version, or even to contradict it, then this is an illusion. For what matters is that, whether squatting or standing, the Titan is unable to find repose. Here is an orthopaedics of punishment.

Like the use of stress positions, sleep deprivation is often associated with the cruder as well as crueller innovations since the nineteenth century of colonial and imperial authorities – from the colonial police in India in the 1850s to the French forces in Saigon in the 1930s, from the Gestapo in the 1940s to British interrogators in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. Of course, it is still applied in the twenty-first century. After 9/11, according to Darius Rejali's authoritative account of the politics of torture, 'the CIA authorized sleep deprivation in combination with standing handcuff restraints for more than forty hours.'⁵⁶ At Guantánamo, too, guards routinely used sleep deprivation to disorientate captives and extract information from them.⁵⁷ As a punitive strategy, however, sleep deprivation has a longer history than this suggests – though, so far as I am aware, there is no sustained or systematic account of this history.

Rejali, following other historians of torture, identifies the fifteenth-century Italian lawyer Hippolytus de Marsilliis as the first person to document sleep deprivation; and credits him 'with introducing this technique into the Catholic Inquisition's toolkit'.⁵⁸ But there is a certain amount of evidence that sleep deprivation was deployed for punitive purposes prior to its use in Europe in the early modern period. In medieval Britain, for example, as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* recorded, torturers used a contrivance called the 'sachentage'. This was a frame 'with a sharp iron collar preventing the wearer from sitting, lying, or sleeping'.⁵⁹ There is little doubt, though, that the Inquisition was pre-eminent in refining devices for sleep deprivation so as both to punish and to extract confessions from its victims. One notably gruesome and elaborate construction to prevent sleep, the Judas Cradle or Judas Seat, was not unlike the sachentage. This pyramidal engine ended in a sharp point designed to impale the victim's genitalia if they involuntarily relaxed their muscles, making sleep impossible on pain of a protracted, agonising death.⁶⁰ As a relapsed heretic, Tommaso Campanella was tortured on this device for some forty hours in 1601, in an exercise sarcastically called the *veglia*, that is, 'vigil'.⁶¹

Aside from the practices of the Inquisition, sleep deprivation in the early modern period seems to have been particularly closely associated with the persecution of witches. George Ryley Scott has observed that, in seventeenth-century Scotland, 'iron collars, and a contrivance known as the witch's bridle, were used to induce confession, often in conjunction with deprivation of sleep.'⁶² The best evidence for the existence of witches was indeed confession, and in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scotland, where the execution rate for witches was about four times the European average, this was commonly obtained by a process known as 'waking' or 'watching', which might last up to forty hours. In other words, this too entailed an enforced vigil of savage cruelty. 'Unofficial torture, usually in the form of sleep deprivation, was regularly used in extracting confessions of witchcraft,' remarks Paula Hughes.⁶³ It tended to induce hallucinations, which conveniently confirmed the torturers' conspiratorial suspicions.

Even in England, where 'the extreme and macabre forms of torture used in Scotland and on the continent were not in use', sleep deprivation was nonetheless not uncommon. In the counties of Essex and Suffolk, for example, those eliciting confessions in the mid-seventeenth century employed a method known as 'walking', whereby 'watchers kept accused witches awake, usually by making them walk round their cell', because this promised to induce physical exhaustion, then delusion, and finally confession.⁶⁴ At roughly

the same time, the English physician Thomas Ady, who associated such methods with a Popish conspiracy, deplored the use of sleep deprivation, the so-called *tormentum insomniae*, which was inflicted for ‘many nights and days, thereby to distemper their brains and hurt their fancies, at length to extort confession from them’.⁶⁵ Sleep deprivation, it seems, was used more or less systematically in the mass persecution of witches, and hence the oppression of women more generally, during this period.

But if the records of early modern Europe provide a potentially panoramic picture of sleep deprivation, then one of the founding texts of the Western canon, the *Odyssey*, offers a snapshot of sleep deprivation used as a punishment, or one component of a punishment, that predates the Aeschylean Prometheus by some three centuries. This is the torture of Melanthius, the goatherd who, failing to recognise Odysseus when his former master returns home disguised as a beggar after his travels, insults him and kicks him on the hip bone.⁶⁶ In a subsequent episode, Melanthius tries to steal arms from the storeroom, inadvertently left open by Telemachus, so that he can pass them on to Penelope’s suitors, who are involved in a conspiracy against Odysseus. At this point, conscious that they can catch Melanthius in the act, Eumaeus and Philoetius, Odysseus’s faithful servants, ask him whether they should kill their enemy or ‘bring him here to you, so you can punish his many crimes against you in your house’ (22. 168-9). This is the perfect opportunity for Odysseus to channel the anger he felt forced to suppress when Melanthius needlessly attacked him on the road. As in *Prometheus Bound*, the boundaries between the personal and the judicial, between acts of revenge, which are ‘illegitimate responses to wrongdoing’, and acts of punishment, which are ‘legitimate and therefore authoritative responses’, are blurred.⁶⁷

Once Melanthius has been apprehended in the storeroom, Odysseus commands Eumaeus and Philoetius to ‘torture him / with hours of agony before he dies’ (22. 175-6). He then issues some highly specific instructions, which these servants scrupulously enact:

The two men jumped on him and grabbed his hair
to drag him in and threw him on the floor,
shaking with fear. They bound his hands and feet
and yanked them painfully behind his back,
just as the lord of suffering had told them.
They tied him with a knotted rope and hoisted
his body up the column to the rafters (22. 187-93)

‘Such binding and suspending of a captive on a beam or plank,’ Rick Newton comments, ‘is a customary prelude to executionary torture, in both literary and historical contexts.’⁶⁸

Sleeplessness or wakefulness is perhaps a merely collateral effect of this sort of punishment. It is a matter of ensuring that the victim remains acutely conscious in order to maximise his fear and his physical pain. But, sarcastically mocking the malefactor, Eumaeus nonetheless makes its importance explicit, in part no doubt for rhetorical effect: ‘Keep watch the whole night through, Melanthius, / tucked up in this soft bed – it serves you right!’ (22. 195-6). He urges him, furthermore, to ‘wait there for the golden throne of Dawn / leaving the sea, that hour when you would lead / your goats to this house for the suitors’ dinner’ (22. 197-9). Sleep deprivation, even if it is only an ancillary consequence of this punishment, is thus crucial to the cunning, unforgiving Odysseus’s dehumanisation of Melanthius (which precedes the men’s brutal dismemberment of him, after the bloody battle with the suitors, at the end of the section). It is a means of prolonging the torture and protracting his agony. Melanthius, keeping watch ‘the whole night through’, has effectively been subjected to a ‘vigil’.

At the end of the short section on sleep deprivation in his study of torture, Rejali alludes to the fact that, ‘in 2002, American interrogators on the ground in Afghanistan

developed a technique they called “monsterring”,’ which involved keeping prisoners awake for up to thirty hours at a time. In a double sense, it might be said, Zeus ‘monsters’ Prometheus in the Aeschylean play. In the etymological sense, he makes a monster of him, putting him on display in order to present him as an example for disciplinary purposes; in order to reduce him, in the form of a public spectacle, to a state of docility. But, like the US interrogators, he also turns him into a monster by depriving him of sleep. Zeus, in the Aeschylean *Prometheus Bound*, is a rather more refined and sadistic proponent of this method of torture than Odysseus, because he deploys it deliberately.

V

Prometheus, in contrast to Melanthius, is heroic in his suffering. His hyper-consciousness, in spite of being coerced, ultimately acquires a positive value in the play. The Aeschylean Prometheus is ‘compelled to keep watch unceasingly’, as Griffiths puts it, ‘like a guard on duty’.⁶⁹ He transforms himself, through righteous resistance to his despotic ruler, into the foremost saint and martyr of sleeplessness. He converts a state of wakefulness into a state of watchfulness. In this way, he bears witness to tyranny.

Prometheus is, however, not the only character in *Prometheus Bound* associated with an intolerable inability to sleep; and it is in comparing him to these other characters that it becomes possible to recast this condition in a more hopeful light. Io, who does not feature in Hesiod’s account of the myth, is in the Aeschylean version punished by Hera, after she has been sexually exploited by Zeus, by being sentenced to wander the world as a heifer perpetually stung by a gadfly. She is thus condemned to a permanent state of unendurable sleepless consciousness. Christopher Collard, in his edition of *Prometheus Bound*, helpfully observes in this context that if ‘Io’s torment is sleepless wandering, Prometheus’ is sleepless immobility’.⁷⁰ Io’s sleeplessness, moreover, is matched by that of Argus Panoptes, the all-seeing watchman whom Hera commissions to police her, at all times of the day and night, with his multiple eyes. Io describes him to Prometheus as ‘a giant herdsman of ungoverned rage, / Who watched my every step with his ten thousand eyes’ (676-7).

Another symmetrical relationship, in terms of sleeplessness, is the one between Prometheus and Zeus, which is something like the absent centre of the Aeschylean play. In his sleeplessness, as in other characteristics such as his anger, Prometheus is the mirror-image of his oppressor. For where his sleeplessness is involuntary and passive, Zeus’s is voluntary and active. The gods, as Allen comments, ‘were supposed to be ideal punishers – all-seeing, never-sleeping, and having all of eternity in which to punish.’⁷¹ The opening lines of Book 2 of the *Iliad*, for example, present Zeus conspiring, in an insomniac state, to send a ‘baneful dream’ to Agamemnon so as to persuade him precipitously to attack the Trojans:

So the other gods as well as chariot-fighting men
slept through the night; but no sweet sleep held Zeus,
and in his mind he pondered how he might bring honor to
Achilles, and destroy a multitude beside the ships of the Achaeans.⁷²

In Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, to give a more proximate example, the Chorus alludes at one point to Zeus’s sleeplessness. Invoking the mythical conflict between Athena and Poseidon over who deserves to be patron of Athens, and praising the former’s decisive gift of an olive tree, it sings that ‘No one old or young can kill it, no one destroy, / as the eye of Zeus unsleeping keeps constant watch’ (702-3).⁷³ In the Hebrew Bible, for its part, God is represented as sleepless in his vigilance or surveillance: ‘He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep’ (Psalms 121: 4).

In *Prometheus Bound*, recalling the annihilation of Typhon, the ‘earth-born destroying giant’ (350), Prometheus refers at one point to Zeus’s thunderbolt as his ‘sleepless weapon’ (356). As Detienne and Vernant indicate in their reconstruction of Hesiod’s account of Zeus’s victory over the Titans, with this lightning he had decisively ‘consign[ed] his enemies to the Shadows, to the Night where, far from the light of the Sun, the conquered gods must remain, in chains’. ‘Once and for all,’ they underline, these defeated gods ‘lie at the mercy of Zeus, delivered over without defence to an enemy whose eyes unlike theirs, remain wide open and whose vigilance never wavers’.⁷⁴ In the Aeschylean play, Kratos alludes to the sleeplessness of power, as incarnated in Zeus’s insomniac surveillance, when in his opening exchange with Hephaestus he admonishes the blacksmith of the gods that he needs to get on with the task of fettering Prometheus to the rock ‘before the Father sees you idling’ (52).

In *Prometheus Bound*, however, the playwright reconfigures the enforced sleeplessness of the protagonist, his ‘fearful watch’, as a means of negating the tyrant’s all-seeing or panoptic sleeplessness. He redeems the punishment and imparts a positive, potentially emancipative value to it. The eponymous character’s first speech to the Chorus, which consists of the daughters of Oceanus, who have entered the stage and expressed their sympathy for his plight as he stands strapped to the mountain-top, implicitly invokes this very possibility:

Alas, alas! Children of fertile Tethys,
Daughters of Oceanus, whose unsleeping tide
Encircles the whole earth, look at me.
See in how cruel a grip,
Pinned on the craggy peak of this ravine,
I must endure my fearful watch. (137-42)

In representing his punitive wakefulness as a ‘watch’ (*phrouará*), albeit a ‘fearful’ one, Prometheus opens up the prospect of combating Zeus’s unsleeping hold on power with his own unsleeping watchfulness. The adjective ‘unsleeping’, applied to Oceanus’s tide in these lines, appears in retrospect, reading back from the end of this short speech, to adhere to Prometheus. Sleeplessness, here, is implicitly valorised. It becomes an inclusive quality, encircling the earth, rather than one designed to exclude and victimise. Prometheus thus embodies the principle of vigilance as opposed to that of oppressive surveillance. In this sense, the resonance of the prophet Prometheus’s name, associated as it is with forethought, can be forcefully felt. Wakefulness and watchfulness are structural to his identity as a prophet.

In the *Agamemnon*, too, where on her husband’s arrival Clytemnestra refers to ‘thoughtfulness unconquered by sleep’ (912), forethought is associated with sleeplessness. If Prometheus is permanently, preternaturally alert, if he is compelled to ‘watch unceasingly, like a guard on duty’, to cite Griffith again, then in precisely this respect he is a sublimation or heroic re-inscription of the sleepless Watchman at the start of the *Agamemnon*. Aeschylus’s play is, after all, the first of a trilogy in which, according to Montiglio, ‘sleeplessness is in fact the driving impulse’.⁷⁵ The opening scene of the *Agamemnon* takes place at night. There, the Watchman, who is one of Clytemnestra’s slaves, appears above the palace of the Atreidae in the Peloponnesian city of Argos – where Io, incidentally, had been priestess of the goddess Hera – and makes a speech that begins: ‘I ask the gods for release from this misery, the year-long watch I lie awake keeping on the roof of the Atreidae, up above here like a dog’ (1-3). In the course of these nocturnal vigils, he complains, he finds himself ‘shifting [his] bed about at night, wet with dew, unvisited by dreams’ – ‘because fear instead of sleep stand at my side to stop my eyes closing fast in slumber’ (11-16). The Greek

Watchman is waiting ‘for a beacon’s sign, a gleam of fire bringing word from Troy and report of its capture’ (7-8). That is to say, he is waiting for a sign associated with Prometheus and his gift to humanity. His watchfulness is proleptic of the Areopagus in the *Eumenides*, which Athena calls ‘the land’s wakeful guardian of those who sleep’ (706); in contrast to the sleeping Furies whom the ghost of Clytemnestra berates (94-116).

If Prometheus is condemned, as Hephaestus puts it in his opening speech, to ‘keep watch upon this bitter rock, / Standing upright, unsleeping, never bowed in rest’ (31-2), then this is, in the first instance, a physical and mental torture. The Chorus in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* captures something of the psychological agonies of the condition when, referring to Zeus’s slogan ‘Suffer and learn’, it adds that ‘Misery from pain remembered drips / instead of sleep before the heart (179-80).⁷⁶ But his sleeplessness is also a kind of spiritual and political vigil. The Aeschylean playwright converts the conditions of his damnation into the preconditions of redemption. In this respect, Prometheus’s punitive sleeplessness is analogous to the painful ‘unbending’ position in which he is constrained to stand, since this posture means that, symbolically speaking, he ‘does not bend his knee in supplication’.⁷⁷ It is an emblem both of his oppression and his resistance. Just as ‘the qualities of the rock and the fetters that bind him to it’ appear to have ‘infused his will’, in Agee’s perceptive comment, so the all-seeing surveillance to which he is subjected, which is associated with the ‘all-seeing circle of the sun’ (80), seems to have informed or infused his own commitment to seeing, to an all-seeing state.⁷⁸ For Prometheus’s fate is, in effect, permanently to bear witness on behalf of humanity.

Prometheus Bound is invested in staging punishment as ‘a practice of constructing authority’, in Allen’s formulation; and of producing docility, to cite once more the terms I have taken from Foucault.⁷⁹ In presenting its audience with a vision of near endless sleeplessness, it deploys sleep deprivation as an important weapon in the tyrant’s arsenal of tortures. But it finally posits the prophet Prometheus – who in the Aeschylean version of the myth personifies what Ellen Wood calls ‘the Athenian opposition to servitude and arbitrary rule’ – as an alternative agent of authority.⁸⁰ In inviting the audience, like the Oceanids who stand in for the *polis*, to question Zeus’s authority and side with the victim of his punishment, it challenges the legitimacy of his political regime. And it thus embodies a different possibility; a prophetic one. As the philosopher of utopia Ernst Bloch commented, the Aeschylean ‘metaphysics of tragedy’, in the form of Prometheus, ‘nails to the mast its No to the old order and its deeper Yes to a different era, a new heaven.’⁸¹ Prometheus’s sleeplessness, his wakefulness that is at the same time a watchfulness, is structural both to this No and this Yes.

¹ Karl Marx, ‘Doctoral Thesis,’ in *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 13. See also S.S. Prawer, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 23. I’d here like to record my gratitude to Peter Agocs and Phiroze Vasunia for encouraging me to pursue the argument of this article and for helpfully pointing me in the direction of relevant secondary literature; and to Rachel Bowlby and the anonymous referees commissioned by *Textual Practice* for their extremely helpful and constructive comments on the first draft.

² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 799.

³ Lord Byron, ‘Prometheus,’ ll. 45-6, in *The Major Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2000), p. 266.

⁴ Stuart Curran, ‘The Political Prometheus,’ *Studies in Romanticism* 25: 3 (1986), p. 429.

⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, Vol. 1, Books 1-V, ed. and trans. Jon Solomon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 532-3.

⁶ Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), p. 103.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 68.

- ⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2016), p. 184.
- ⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5: 673-4, ed. John Leonard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), pp. 118-9.
- ¹⁰ Danielle S. Allen, *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 294.
- ¹¹ **Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, in *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. ??.** Here, and hereafter, line numbers from this edition are cited in parenthesis in the text.
- ¹² Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 1: 479, p. 204.
- ¹³ Silvia Montiglio, *The Spell of Hypnos: Sleep and Sleeplessness in Ancient Greek Literature* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2016), p. 108. Eluned Summers-Bremner, in her chapter on ‘Sleeplessness in the Ancient World’ in *Insomnia: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2008), pp. 14-34, does not mention Prometheus at all.
- ¹⁴ Ian Ruffell, *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound* (London: Bristol Classics Press, 2012), p. 25.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 76.
- ¹⁶ Numerous commentators have observed the similarities between Prometheus and Job, not least because ‘the Promethean spirit of defiance and refusal to bow to wrong, in spite of every terror, is also Job’s’ (see Marvin H. Pope, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Anchor Bible Job*, trans. Marvin H. Pope, 3rd edition (New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. lxxi.); but none so far as I know have noted that both are in different ways tortured by lack of sleep.
- ¹⁷ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*, 1: 12, p. 188.
- ¹⁸ For a timely and well-informed sense of what is currently at stake, see Darian Leader, *Why We Can’t Sleep* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2019).
- ¹⁹ Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 17.
- ²⁰ Carl Kerényi, *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 [1946]), p. 93.
- ²¹ Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Paul Celan: From Being to the Other,’ in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 45.
- ²² Hesiod, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, trans. M.L. West (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1999), p. 18.
- ²³ Hesiod, *Theogony*, pp. 19-20. Epimetheus, ‘who from the start turned out a disaster to men who live by bread,’ is in this respect relegated from his brothers’ company.
- ²⁴ Kerényi, *Prometheus*, p. 38.
- ²⁵ Hesiod, *Theogony*, pp. 18-19. Hesiod makes no mention of Prometheus’s penance in the *Works and Days*, where he nonetheless details Zeus’s decision to punish humanity for possessing fire, as stolen by ‘the noble son of Iapetos’, by creating the woman Pandora – see *Works and Days*, pp. 38-9.
- ²⁶ Ruth Padel, *In and Out of Minds: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 131.
- ²⁷ For a pioneering statement of the case, see Mark Griffith, *The Authenticity of ‘Prometheus Bound’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). See also Martin L. West, ‘The Authorship of the Prometheus Trilogy,’ in *Studies in Aeschylus* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1990), pp. 51-72.
- ²⁸ Olga Raggio, ‘The Myth of Prometheus: Its Survival and Metamorphoses up to the Eighteenth Century,’ *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 21: 1/2 (1958), p. 45.
- ²⁹ Richard Seaford, *Cosmology and the Polis: The Social Construction of Space and Time in the Tragedies of Aeschylus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 257.
- ³⁰ Carol Dougherty, *Prometheus* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 72.
- ³¹ G.E.M. de Ste Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World from the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (London: Duckworth, 1983 [1981]), p. 283.
- ³² Sara Forsdyke, *Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy: The Politics of Expulsion in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 269.
- ³³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 136.
- ³⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 49.
- ³⁵ Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation,’ in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 279.
- ³⁶ Virginia Hunter, ‘Constructing the Body of the Citizen: Corporal Punishment in Classical Athens,’ *Echos du monde classique: Classical Views* 36: 3 (1992), p. 283. See also Virginia Hunter, *Policing Athens: Social Control in the Attic Lawsuits, 420-320 B.C.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 187; and Peter Hunt, ‘Violence against Slaves in Classical Greece,’ in the *Topography of Violence in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Werner Riess and Garrett C. Fagan (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016), pp. 148-9.
- ³⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 9.
- ³⁸ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, ed. Mark Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 81.
- ³⁹ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Joel Agee (New York: NYRB Classics, 2014), p. 5.

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- ⁴⁰ Simon Critchley, *Tragedy, the Greeks, and Us* (New York: Pantheon, 2019), p. 120.
- ⁴¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 34.
- ⁴² Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, ed. Griffith, p. 88.
- ⁴³ Ruffell, *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound*, p. 25.
- ⁴⁴ Allen, *The World of Prometheus*, p. 20.
- ⁴⁵ Allen, *The World of Prometheus*, p. 32.
- ⁴⁶ Oliver Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Entrances and Exits in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 272.
- ⁴⁷ Allen, *The World of Prometheus*, p. 29.
- ⁴⁸ See T.J. Cornell, ed., *The Fragments of the Roman Historians*, Volume 1: Introduction (Oxford, 2014), p. 757.
- ⁴⁹ George Adams, *An Essay on Vision* (London, 1789), pp. 8-9. See also George Adams, *Lectures on Natural and Experimental Philosophy, Considered in It's [sic] Present State of Improvement*, Vol. 2 (London, 1794), p. 271.
- ⁵⁰ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Christopher Rowe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012), p. 48.
- ⁵¹ Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 26.
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- ⁵³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: Norton, 2018), p. 298.
- ⁵⁴ Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978 [1974]), p. 87.
- ⁵⁵ Louis Gernet, *Anthropologie de la grèce antique* (Paris: Maspero, 1968), p. 295.
- ⁵⁶ Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 291-2.
- ⁵⁷ Ian Cobain, *A Secret History of Torture* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012), pp. 224-7.
- ⁵⁸ Rejali, *Torture and Democracy*, pp. 290-1.
- ⁵⁹ Henry C. Lea, *Superstition and Force: Essays on The Wager of Law, the Wager of Battle, the Ordeal, Torture*, 3rd edition (Philadelphia, 1878), pp. 418.
- ⁶⁰ See Peter Stanford, *Judas: The Most Hated Name in History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2015), p. 173.
- ⁶¹ Ingrid D. Rowland, *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 29. See also Joseph Scalzo, 'Campanella, Foucault, and Madness in Late-Sixteenth Century Italy,' pp. 36-7.
- ⁶² George Ryley Scott, *History of Torture* (London: Sphere, 1971 [1967]), p. 100.
- ⁶³ Paula Hughes, 'Witch-Hunting in Scotland, 1649-50,' in *Scottish Witches and Witch-Hunters*, ed. Julian Goodare (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 99. See also Julian Goodare, *The European Witch-Hunt* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 203; and Goodare's entry on the topic in *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, ed. Michael Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 644.
- ⁶⁴ Louise Jackson, 'Witches, Wives and Mothers: Witchcraft Persecution and Women's Confessions in Seventeenth-Century England,' *Women's History Review* 4: 1 (1995), p. 69.
- ⁶⁵ Quoted in Orna Alyagon Darra, *Marks of an Absolute Witch: Evidentiary Dilemmas in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 252.
- ⁶⁶ Homer, *The Odyssey*, 17: 232, p. 394.
- ⁶⁷ These phrases are taken from Allen, *The World of Prometheus*, p. 23.
- ⁶⁸ Rick M. Newton, 'Odysseus and Melanthius,' *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 38: 1 (1997), pp. 6-7.
- ⁶⁹ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, ed. Griffith, p. 89.
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- ⁷³ Sophocles, *Four Tragedies*, trans. Oliver Taplin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 251.
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- ⁷⁵ Montiglio, *The Spell of Hypnos*, p. 109.
- ⁷⁶ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, in *Oresteia*, trans. Christopher Collard (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2003), p. 7.
- ⁷⁷ Andrew Karp, 'The Disease of Inflexibility in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*,' *Mediterranean Studies* 6 (1996), p. 4.
- ⁷⁸ Joel Agee, 'Introduction,' in Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Agee, pp. xxix-xxx.
- ⁷⁹ Allen, *The World of Prometheus*, p. 24.
- ⁸⁰ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Peasant-Citizen and Slave: The Foundations of Athenian Democracy* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 144.

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