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## The Avatars of Prometheus: Mythical Phantasmagorias in Shelley and Rimbaud

### Abstract

This essay outlines the alternative tradition of a ‘fantastic’ Prometheus throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main points of reference are Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, Rimbaud’s *Lettres du voyant* and *Illuminations*. The myth of Prometheus plasticator and ‘second maker’ allows Shelley and Rimbaud to shape their respective poetics around the ideal of the poet-demiurge. Their Prometheus is a ‘seer’ who glimpses true reality behind the veil of appearances and, by taking those visions as models, initiates a rebirth and new genesis of creation. He no longer moulds lifeless matter, but the phantasms and shadows of a spiritual otherworld. The results are not living statues, but avatars of reality, replicas animated through the modern form of fire: electricity. His creation is a metempsychosis which does not superadd life to matter, but which proceeds through dissolution, absorption, fusion of subject and object, self and other, in a dynamic flow of multiple and identical lives.

### 1. *Introduction*

#### 1.1. *Prometheus, the poet and the origins of virtual creations*

To track the myth of Prometheus throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century resembles the hunt for a ghost. It means to grasp the progressive evanescence of a solid form into an airy, shapeless silhouette. The task of the following pages, then, would be an almost impossible one: to stop and freeze an ongoing metamorphosis. From being one of the fundamental myths of origin of our civilization and culture, the story of Prometheus becomes a tale of unending transformation, a myth that founds poetry as the dissolving activity capable of turning reality into virtual illusion.

This essay identifies and explores a mythical pattern shared by two apparently distant authors: Percy Bysshe Shelley and Arthur Rimbaud. At different stages of their lives, the two poets both identified with the figure of Prometheus: the former, rewrote and amplified Aeschylus in the ‘lyrical drama’ *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), the magnum opus of a poetic maturity interrupted too soon; whereas the latter, right at the beginning of his equally brief artistic career, alluded to the hero in the famous *Lettres du voyant* to Georges Izambard (May 13th, 1871) and to Paul Demeny (May 15th), where he declared: “donc le poète est vraiment voleur de feu” (Rimbaud 1975, 140). While, in Shelley’s work, the myth takes the shape of a direct reference in a drama of titanic scope and design, in the work of Rimbaud, we only get a passing glimpse.

Shelley’s Prometheus marked a veritable turning point in the reception of the myth throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Prometheus, from rebel and trickster, became the herald of a new civilization and the galvanizer of a revitalized Nature. He is the author of a second, better, creation, the hero of humankind’s second chance, after the destruction and decay of tyranny and greed. Rimbaud used the image of the fire-bringer to define a new poetics. In his adagio the fire symbolizes the unattainable truth hidden behind the veil of appearances, and Prometheus is the mask of the poet-oracle, the ‘seer’ that pierces through the phantoms of reality in search of Truth in its purest form.

### 1.2. *The ‘Prometheus Plasticator’ and Pygmalion*

In what follows, I intend to demonstrate, first, how the shadow of Prometheus is present also in other works by Rimbaud, especially the *Illuminations*, second, that his reworkings of the myth helped projecting Shelley’s example through modernity, turning the archetypical figure of Prometheus *plasticator*<sup>1</sup> and of the subsequent image of the poet as ‘*second maker*’,<sup>2</sup> into a creator of

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1 The first appearance of this motif traces back to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, when Prometheus made man by mixing soil and water: “that earth which the son of Iapetus mixed with fresh, running water, and moulded into the form of the all-controlling gods” (Ovid 1977 ll. 82-83: 9)

2 The formula was an invention of Shaftesbury: “Such a Poet is indeed a second Maker: a just Prometheus, under Jove. Like that Sovereign Artist or universal Plastic Nature, he forms a Whole, coherent and proportion’d in itself” (Shaftesbury 1723, 207).

the phantasms and *simulacra* of imagination, shaping optic perceptions and ideas rather than matter, statues, or bodies. The figure of the Titan, as we will see, often merges with another creator, Pygmalion, in paradigmatic cases of “coalescence des mythes” (Geisler-Szmulewicz 1999, 17). In fact, both stories have a peculiar duplicity, they are myths of animation and, simultaneously, of phantasmatic projection: “a myth of animation *and* the result of an imaginary projection” (Stoichita 2008, 10). The point of encounter is Pandora: in Hesiod she is the *kalón kakón* heavenly creature that deceives human beings, while in Calderón and Goethe, she is the statue that Prometheus moulds and then animates with Minerva’s help.<sup>3</sup> Throughout its evolution, the Prometheus myth maintains some recurrent, and yet often overlooked patterns, which have to do with the topics of virtuality (he is a prophet-oracle), illusion (he deceives the gods), doubleness (he has a brother who is his reversed and opposite image). The temporality of the mythologeme is the future, the destiny of regeneration. Like Gaston Bachelard and Otto Rank noted, the Prometheus complex involves an intellectual sphere, a *projection* more than an identification: the imitation and the attainment of a higher, divine, superhuman, parental model of wisdom and truth (Bachelard 1949, 3-25; Rank 1996, 201-211). In Aeschylus fire allows humanity to free itself from divine necessity and from a hostile nature, in Humanism Prometheus’s gift is the love for knowledge, the *curiositas* that turns *homo naturalis* in *homo civilis* (Boccaccio 2011, 534), while, in the Renaissance, Prometheus stimulates the progress of science (Rossi 2017, 177-188; Seznec 1963; Lemmi 1933), during the Enlightenment that of reason against religion, the Romantic Prometheus is the hero of freedom and emancipation: he symbolizes the creative mind conquest of a private sphere of independence and immortality, finally freeing itself from the “absolutism of reality” (Blumenberg 1985, 3). From beginning to end, he is the *inventor* of a new life, and, fire, from representing the ‘spark’ of the human soul, finally turns, on the threshold of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, into electricity.<sup>4</sup>

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3 I am referring here to *La Estatua de Prometeo* (1672) by Calderón de la Barca, and to Goethe’s dramatic fragment Prometheus and to the ode with the same title (1772-1774).

4 Scholarship treating the myth of Prometheus is, of course, vast. For a general overview, see (Graf 1920; Séchan 1951; Kerényi 1963; Raggio 1958; Trousson 1976; Blumenberg 1985; Lecourt 1996; Piattoni 2012-2013; Duchemin 2019).

1.3. *An experiment in mythocritique*

This study is an attempt of “mythocritique” (Brunel 1992), its focus being not so much the influence of one poet on the other,<sup>5</sup> but the transformations of myth from a Romantic author like Shelley to a pioneer of Symbolism, and a precursor of Surrealism, like Rimbaud. In *Prometheus Unbound* first and in *Illuminations* later, Prometheus turns into a sculptor of airy, ‘happier’ ephemeral forms, the Pygmalion of “the Romantic Image” and of its French counterpart “the Symbol”, those ethereal *effigia* of Truth that Frank Kermode saw as the only reward for the existence of suffering and solitude led by the poet-seer, who is alone and encircled by ‘visions’ and voices like Prometheus on the peak of Caucasus (Kermode 1961, 5). The aim of this experiment in “mythocritique” is to outline the tradition of a ‘fantastic’ Prometheus, demiurge of *phantasmagorias* rather than carver and moulder of living bodies.

2. Prometheus Unbound: *Shelley and the principle of life*

2.1. *Shadows, doubles and the ghosts of imagination*

At the turn of the Nineteenth century, Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Medicine and many other branches of Science launched themselves in search for the principle of life, for the origin of the universe, for the ‘spark’ that animates otherwise dead matter (Holmes 2009). Shelley was acquainted with many of the works of the main protagonists of this quest backwards to the motives of existence. He knew about Herschel’s findings about stars’ clusters and nebulae, about Humphry Davy’s notion of electrical matter, about the vitality debate between William Lawrence and John Abernethy, whether life was something superadded to the body or an immanent function of matter

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5 Mario Praz compared Peyre, author of *Shelley et la France* (Peyre 1935), who attempted to find tangible proofs of Shelley’s influence in French literature, to the protagonist of Kafka’s *The Castle*, always running in circles without the possibility of reaching the target “Professor Peyre tries, like the Land Surveyor in the German novel, to get into touch with the Castle authorities, *i.e.* to trace the presence of Shelley in French Literature: he gets a glimpse of “Klamm” every now and then, but in the end the object of his search remains hopelessly remote” (Praz 1938, 115).

(Grabo 1930; Ruston 2005). In “On Life”, Shelley asks: “What is the cause of life? – that is, how was it preceded, or what agencies distinct from life, have acted or act upon life?” (Shelley 2009, 636). *Prometheus Unbound* is an answer to that question in a dramatic and idealized form.

Act I takes place all inside Prometheus’ mind, his *ratio* being the theater where the imagination’s *phantasmata* reenact the curse and the prophecy that he has cast against Zeus, predicting his final fall. First, he asks the voices of the natural world to repeat those words that his memory cannot rescue. After a description of the terror and disruption that the curse provoked throughout the cosmos, Prometheus evokes the phantom of Jupiter: the curse will be pronounced by the tyrant’s *shadow*:

The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,  
Met his own image walking in the garden.  
The apparition, sole of men, he saw.  
For know 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 of all forms that think and live  
Till death unite them and they part no more;  
Dreams and the light imaginings of men,  
And all that faith creates or love desires,  
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.  
(Shelley 2000, Act I, Scene i, ll. 192-202: 488-489)

Here Shelley is drawing from the Platonic and Neoplatonist belief of a lower world, a Hades where shadows and *simulacra* of the upper world reside, as in an upturned, obscure, reflection. It is from this underworld of empty images that the ghost of Jupiter comes forth: “Why have the secret / powers of this strange world / Driven me, a frail and empty phantom, hither / on direst storms?” (Ibid.: ll, 240-242, 491). Characteristic of Zoroastrianism was a Manichean contrast between good and evil, a world of light and one of darkness embodied respectively by the powers of Ormuzd and Ahriman. The theme of the double was a recurrent pattern in Shelley. Once, he even faced the phantom of his own double at Casa Magni:

A figure wrapped in a mantle, came to his bedside, and beckoned him. He got up, and followed, and when in the drawing room, the phantom lifted up the hood of his cloak, and said, “*Siete soddisfatto*,” and vanished. (Medwin 1913, 405).

Prometheus is no longer the *Plasticator* surrounded by his statues and Praxitelean shapes waiting to be animated. Instead, he is placed at the center of the whirlwind of spirits and doubles of his own imagination, playing with his ideas like an infant with puppets.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2. *Regeneration through dissolution: Panthea's dream*

After the encounter and dialogue with the spectre of Jupiter, Act II starts with the “beauteous shapes” of imagination. This time the evoked *simulacra* are not the shadows of the underworld but the vague images of a dream. In order to free Prometheus, symbol of the creative spirit of man, Panthea flies to the Indian vale where Asia is waiting for her. Asia represents Love, Nature or Beauty and only her awakening and union with Prometheus’ animating principle can trigger the regeneration of life in the cosmos. Panthea arrives with the rising sun, still overwhelmed by two dreams she had during her journey. While she cannot remember the first one, Asia can read through her eyes the content of the second one, which prefigures the future transfiguration of Prometheus into the pure energy that will permeate everything with new life. She remembers-foresees his warm embrace, her being suddenly dissolving in his true light, and their two souls intertwining and melting into one another:

The overpowering light  
Of that immortal shape was shadowed o’er  
By love; which, from his soft and flowing limbs,  
And passion-parted lips, and keen, faint eyes,  
Steamed forth like vaporous fire; an atmosphere

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, in his parodical gothic novel *Nightmare Abbey*, will portray Shelley as Scythrop, a young man of letters of atrabiliar mood, always secluded in his lonesome tower, lost in perennial *reveries*, reading old romances and German tragedies, studying “tomes of transcendental philosophy” (Peacock 1986, 46), learning their “necromantic imagery” (Ibid.), in order to build with all these ideas “many castles in the air, and peopled them with secret tribunals, and bands of illuminati” (Ibid.) or sow phantastic seeds which would, in due time, “germinate into a crop of chimeras, which rapidly shot up into vigorous and abundant vegetation” (Ibid.). All these creations were “the imaginary instruments of his projected regeneration of the human species” (Ibid.). He will eventually fall in love with a young lady named *Marionetta*.



Which wrapped me in its all-dissolving power,  
As the warm ether of the morning sun  
Wraps ere it drinks some cloud of wandering dew.  
I saw not, heard not, moved not, only felt  
His presence flow and mingle through my blood  
Till it became his life, and his grew mine,  
And I was thus absorbed.  
(Shelley 2000 II, i, ll. 71-82: 530-531)

Prometheus' immortal energy spreads and dissolves through Panthea, her name meaning "All-the-gods" or "Deity-in-all" and, thus, standing, within Shelley's Pantheist vision, for the powers or realities of the Universe and of Nature: "dissolution involves the transformation and preservation of one substance into and in another substance" (Wilson 2013, 101). The scene seems to be describing a mesmerising session, an exchange of galvanising life-force, "a kind of life-transplant enacted" (Ruston 2005, 111). According to mesmerism and electromagnetism, a vitalising agent could be transmitted from one more powerful body to an agonising, weaker one: vitality is a synonym of electromagnetism. Prometheus is acting like a reserve of transferable energy, his radiance channels vitality through Panthea, into Nature's soul and body, igniting her rebirth. The fire of the archetypal myth turns into pure electricity, light and heat, all instruments capable of metamorphosing inert matter into a living creature. Panthea takes Pandora's place into the modern Prometheus' laboratory, into his "workshop of filthy creation" (M. Shelley 2019, 35):

I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter. [...] Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. (Ibid.)

### 2.3. *The metamorphosis of Hermaphroditus and the crossing of boundaries between self and other*

In the *Witch of Atlas* the mythologemes of Prometheus mix with those of Pygmalion and Hermaphroditus. The poem is probably composed of materials coeval to *Prometheus Unbound* and which were ultimately discarded from the lyrical drama. Once again, a scene of creation is described. The witch does not

forge a new creature carving stone, rather by conducting flows and currents of ethereal and liquid elements. From the mud and clay used by Prometheus to shape the first man in the *Metamorphoses*, life now stems from a combination of fire and snow:

Then by strange art she kneaded fire and snow  
Together; tempering the repugnant mass  
With liquid love – all things together grow  
Through which the harmony of love can pass;  
And a fair Shape out of her hands did flow –  
A living image, which did far surpass  
In beauty that bright shape of vital stone  
Which drew the heart out of Pygmalion.

A sexless thing it was, and in its growth  
It seemed to have developed no defect  
Of either sex, yet all the grace of both.  
(Shelley 2009 ll. 321-331: 496)

In the *Metamorphoses*, the coalescence of the nymph Salmacis with the beautiful son of Hermes, and of the goddess of Cythera, is imagined as an embrace resembling those of the eagle holding a serpent in its claws, of the ivy enveloping the trunk of a tree, and of the sea-polyp catching the enemy. It is the clasp of all Nature, as such examples encompass sky, earth, and sea. The nymph sees the boy swimming into transparent waters, cannot resist, and joins him into the pool, entangling his body and praying the gods that she may never be parted from him, and him from her:

Grant me this, ye gods, and may no day ever come that shall separate him from me or me from him. The gods heard her prayer. For their two bodies, joined together as they were, were merged in one, with one face and form for both. As when one grafts a twig on some tree, he sees the branches grow one, and with common life come to maturity, so were these two bodies knit in close embrace: they were no longer two, nor such as to be called, one, woman, and one, man. They seemed neither and yet both. (Ovid 1977 IV, ll, 371-79: 205)

In the text, Ovid envisages the impossible unity as reflection and repetition of personal pronouns: the “a me nec me” (Ibid.: 204) of the nymph’s prayer is later realized by the final “neutrumque et utrumque” (Ibid.) with the



latter pronoun absorbed in the former. When Asia sees in Panthea's eyes the embrace of Prometheus, she seems to witness Hermafroditus' creation after the dissolution of one *me* in the *other* me. The *complexus* and the *coitus* described are one and the same, and they both recall those exhalations and radiant vapours that embrace earth at the beginning of Creation: in Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, when the cosmos starts taking a recognizable shape out of chaos, fiery ether wraps the emerging earth in every part and direction, with its *avido complexu*.

Prometheus creates life as God created the universe. The poet imitates them both and, in fact, Shelley, in *On Life*, describes the stance of the creative mind towards the outside reality as dissolution, absorption, lack of any distinction and collapse of boundaries:

Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves. [...] We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who in this respect are always children. These who are subject to the state called reverie feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. [...] The words, *I, you, they*, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. [...] The words *I*, and *you* and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attributed to them. (Shelley 2009, 636)

#### 2.4. *The Poet-Prometheus and the animation of dead matter*

Prometheus' creation proceeds from disembodiment and from the dissolution of limits, from the synthesis of two distinct entities in one unity, from the disruption and annihilation of difference. Selfhood melts into radical hybridity and borders become fluid. The gap between self and other, subject and object, individual identity and multiple, possible worlds is filled by those sublime, terrible, beautiful shapes of a mind absorbed in its *reverie*. The phantasms, and *simulacra*, that the creative minds of Prometheus, and of the poet, can create are "forms more real than living man / Nurslings of immortality!" (Shelley 2000 I, i, ll. 748-49: 521). Also, the differences between senses disappear within

this schema of fusion and interpenetration. The dissolving power of speech, and music, has, according to Shelley, a capacity to animate dead matter stronger than sculpture. In *To Constantia*, Prometheus' spirit, i.e. the mind of man, transfigures objects in "happier form again" (Shelley 2009, 128), surpassing, at once, Pygmalion and the gods. In *Defense of Poetry*, the poet and Prometheus are both godlike, demiurgic figures able to recreate the universe anew:

It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration. It justifies that bold and true word of Tasso: *Non merita nome di creatore se non Iddio ed il Poeta*. (Shelley 2009, 698).

### 3. *The reception of Shelley in 19<sup>th</sup> century French literature*

#### 3.1. *the shelley-prometheus Equation: The Avatars of the Poet*

The fortune of Shelley in France, after the first, incomplete, translations by Madame Amable Tastu in 1834, reaches a turning point with the January 1848 issue of *Revue Des Deux Mondes*, dedicated to modern novelists and poets from Great Britain. E. D. Forgues, in his overview of Shelley's life and work, defines the British poet as a "précoce Titan" (Forgues 1848, 250) in war against Jupiter for the freedom of the oppressed. The creator's identity superimposes onto that one of his creature: the author of *Prometheus Unbound* becomes his hero, a modern, young, Prometheus, paladin in the fight against tyranny. Furthermore, Forgues describes Shelley as a half-pantheist, half-sceptic, in between Platonism and Spinozism, poet-philosopher with a neurotic, mutable personality, prone to the ecstatic raptures and hallucinations reminiscent of Christian hermits: "cette ferveur, cette constitution nerveuse, extatique, sujette à des hallucinations de tous genre qui rappellent tout ce qu'on a lit des grandes solitaires chrétiens" (Ibid.: 250-1). Rimbaud, as we will see, in his *Lettres du Voyant*, written at only 17 years of age, *precociously* identifies with Prometheus, the 'seer' and trickster who stole fire from Jupiter for the sake of humanity. In *Une Saison en Enfer* he will grow accustomed to "l'hallucination simple" (Rimbaud 2009: 265). Moreover, Forgues includes in his survey also a translated passage from the preface of *The Revolt of Islam*, where Shelley declared about his *poetics*: "J'ai descendu le course des grands fleuves" (Forgues

1848, 262), a sentence that will be echoed in the famous incipit of *Le Bateau Ivre*: “Comme je descendais des Fleuves impassibles” (Rimbaud 2009, 162). Two other important critical portraits of Shelley, containing elements that will, perhaps, inspire Rimbaud in his allusion to Prometheus in the 1871 letters, appear in 1866 and 1867. First, Hippolyte Taine, in the fourth volume of the *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, writes that “dans *Prométhée*, il n’a produit que des fantômes sans substance” (Taine 1866, 324). He is a ‘seer’ that had “la vision’ de la beauté” (Ibid.: 323) in a parallel world “au de-là du notre” (Ibid.: 325), in between “le rêve et le symbole” (Ibid.) where his creations could move resembling ethereal, airy “fantômes colorés” (Ibid.) and “figures fantastiques” (Ibid.). Second, Odysse Barot, in the November 30 and December 15 issues of *Revue Contemporaine*, publishes a long account of Shelley’s biography and poetry, fixing the image, already sketched by Forgues twenty years before, of an identification with Prometheus. He refers to Shelley as “ce Prométhée imberbe” (Barot 1867, 209), “ce Titan de dix-huit ans” (Ibid.) who conducted an “existence vagabonde” (Ibid.: 217). Taine too had noticed that he spent most of his life “en plein air, en bateau” (Taine 1866, 325). According to Barot, Shelley’s *Prometheus* is a symphony which weaves together the voices of Nature:

Nous écoutons aussi le chœur des esprits, des génies du ciel et de la terre, les chants des faunes, des heures, des échos, des furies. Toutes les voix de la nature, toutes les notes de la création, toutes les symphonies du monde se font entendre dans ce majestueux concert. (Ibid.: 454)

Thus, Shelley is not only the modern Prometheus, but also “le Lucrèce du XIX siècle” (Ibid.). Each work represents a change of mask, a metamorphoses of the author’s mutable self, a variation of the theme:

Dans la plupart des poèmes il s’est représenté lui-même sous les traits d’un de ses héros, auquel il prête toutes ses idées, ses croyances, ses sentiments, ses aspirations. Tantôt Shelley s’appelle Alastor, tantôt il prend le nom de Laon, le héros de *La révolte d’Islam*. Ce personnage idéal, cet être supérieur, qui se dévoue et meurt pour le bien de l’humanité, ce chevalier errant de la liberté et de la fraternité universelles, ce défenseur né de toutes les nobles causes, cet apologiste de tous les vaincus, ce chantre de tous les opprimés, ce champion du juste et du vrai, ce consolateur de toutes les souffrances, ce martyr, ce Christ, s’appelle aujourd’hui *Le prince Athanase*; demain il s’appellera Prométhée. C’est toujours, sous noms divers, le même type sublime. (Ibid.: 466)

Shelley and the Titan share the same multiplicity of *avatars*. The different incarnations of the poet coincide with the various roles that the fire-bringer played throughout history. *Prometheus Unbound* is just one of the many manifestations of a myth which had prophetically prefigured the future evolution of science and religion, politics and justice:

Le représentant de la vérité contre la formule, de la justice contre l'iniquité, de la liberté contre l'oppression, de la lumière contre les ténèbres, de la science contre l'ignorance, de la minorité contre les masses abruties, de l'humanité contre la terrible fiction qui l'écrase. Prométhée est le symbole du droit, du progrès, de la libre pensée, du dévouement et de l'amour; c'est le type le plus humain et, en même temps, le plus réellement divin qu'ait jamais conçu notre esprit; Prométhée est le précurseur de Socrate, de Vanini, de Galilée; Prométhée, c'est le grand persécuté; le Caucase rappelle le Golgotha. (Ibid.: 455).

In 1838 Quinet publishes his *Prométhée*, where the Titan is seen as *voyant* and prophet, *figura* of Christ before Christ: "il renferme le drame intérieur de Dieu et de l'homme, de la foi et du doute, du créateur et de la créature" (Trousson 1976, 353). In 1843 another Prometheus appears, Louis Ménard's *Prométhée délivrée*, where Shelley's influence is even more explicit than in Quinet. Prometheus here embodies the progress of science. Finally, in Jules Michelet's *La Bible de l'humanité*, published in 1864, once again the Titan is a prophet who was punished for his visions:

C'est la torture intime de l'esprit prophétique. De ces pics effrayants où l'a porté son vol, il voit l'immensité, l'*incognita terra*. Mais comment la décrire? Cette vision trouble qu'on ne peut ni éclaircir ni écarter, accable le voyant. (Michelet 1864, 267)

During the first half of the nineteenth century, other authors identified with Prometheus, making the Titan an artistic model, the "perfect image to express their ideals" (Corbeau-Parsons 2020, 70). Hugo evokes the hero in 'Le Génie,' associating the figure of Prometheus with the artistic genius; in 'Le couchant flamboyant à travers les bruines' Prometheus is juxtaposed to Satan, like in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*. "Les Satans comme les Prométhées" are the phantoms that the genius' mind glimpses through the mists of the infinite; in 'La Vision des montagnes' he is, again, a *figura Christi*, while in 'La Fin de Satan' he is the herald of science. In *The Unknown Masterpiece* Balzac associates the failure of a work of art with the lack of

Prometheus's fire, once again stressing his creative and animating force. After the *voyant* and the Christ before Christ, the *plasticator*, the second maker resurges, bringing back the old superimposition of Pygmalion and Prometheus. Balzac himself is another modern Prometheus, the characters of his Titanic *oeuvre*, the *Comédie Humaine*, recall the countless statues fashioned and turned into living beings by Prometheus. Finally, on the wake of Shelley, Baudelaire's Satan in *Les Litanies de Satan* is indebted to the rejuvenating hero of *Prometheus Unbound*.

#### 4. Rimbaud and the myth of Prometheus

##### 4.1. *The metamorphoses of poet-seer in the Lettres du voyant*

When Rimbaud wrote the *Lettres du voyant* in May 1871, all the above variants of the myth, which directly or indirectly pointed back to Shelley's version, might have contributed to Rimbaud's interpretation of the hero. First, it is clear that the reference to Prometheus takes place within the framework of the relationship between creator and creature, to be intended, first, as bond and communication between the sacred and the mundane spheres, between divinity and humanity, immortality and finitude, second, as consonance between genius and creation, artist and work of art.

In the first one of the two letters, dated May 13th and addressed to the schoolteacher, mentor, friend, Georges Izambard, Rimbaud briefly declares a new poetics of revolt, based on the opposition between a *subjective* approach to poetry and an *objective* one, "une mission qui dépasse les limites du sensible" (Matucci 1986, 18). This is the spring of the Paris Commune and Rimbaud is still animated by a revolutionary passion that, from reality, now extends to the literary sphere. "Poésie objective" (Rimbaud 1975, 112) means "perception évidemment oblique, paradoxale, fugace de l'en-soi démasqué des choses" (Bonnetoy 2009, 127), dissolution of borders between self and other, reason and sensory perception, idea and word, fusion with the *anima mundi*, conquered after a process of self-knowledge, introspection, and *anamnesis*:

C'est faux de dire: Je pense, on devrait dire On me pense – Pardon du jeu de mots. – Je est un autre. Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon (Rimbaud 1975, 113).

Like Shelley wrote in *On Life*, in the creative mind the distinction between *me, you, they* is meaningless, because through the act of creation, through poetry, the unity between outer and inner reality, individual and universal, is attained. Like in the *Metamorphoses* a similar bodily “dérèglement” (Rimbaud 1975, 137) marked the mutual dissolution of *self* and *other*: “*me nec me*” (Ovid 1977, 204). The poet of the future will be conscious of his double nature: both violin and bow, instrument and musician, matter, and spirit. Thanks to the synthesis and fusion with the universal soul, he will be able to live multiple lives simultaneously, to be one and many at the same time, to metamorphosize into all the possible selves.

In the second letter dated May 15th and addressed to Paul Demeny, Rimbaud returns to the same ideas of the previous one, in a longer and expanded *manifesto*. He insists on the Socratic imperative of *knowing thyself*. The poet needs to look for his soul: “il l’inspecte, il la tente, l’apprend” (Rimbaud 1975, 136). The apprehension of the soul echoes Shelley’s “apprehension of life” (Shelley 2009, 633), that unity, attained by the dissolution of individual identity with the surrounding universe, that synthesis of life and meaning, that fullness of being which only Greek poetry could really grasp. “Il s’agit de faire l’âme monstrueuse” (Rimbaud 1975, 137). The process of creation reshapes both creature and creator, turning his identity into an *excessive*, overflowing being, both part and whole, both in and out of frame, both individual and universal soul. Finding the principle of life means, perhaps, the creation of a monstrous existence like the one animated by Dr. Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus? The new poet, like the fire-bringer, will be a ‘seer,’ the prophet who is cursed for his own visions, for having seen that true life is attained by the death and dissolution of the self:

Je dis qu’il faut être *voyant*, se faire *voyant*. Le poète se fait *voyant* par un long, immense et raisonné *dérèglement* de *tous les sens*. Toutes les formes d’amour, de souffrance, de folie; il cherche lui-même, il épuise en lui tous les poisons, pour n’en garder que les quintessences. Ineffable torture où il a besoin de toute la foi, de toute la force surhumaine, où il devient entre tous le grand malade, le grand criminel, le grand maudit – et le suprême Savant – Car il arrive à l’*inconnu*! (Rimbaud 1975, 137)

The poet-voyant sees the true face of things, lifts the veil of appearances, and reveals the infinite behind, the otherworld where the double images, the phantoms, and shadows of beings, “les phosphènes du fantastique”



(Bonnefoy 2009, 116) can be grasped. His poetry will erase the distance between word and meaning, between the original idea and its bodily, material double: speech. In the above paragraph, the allusions to the Prometheus myth become more frequent and increasingly explicit. ‘Torture that needs faith’ might be another *calembour*, a veiled allusion to the Titan’s actual torture: the eagle eating his liver, *foi* standing for *foie*. Then, the self, after having transcended, surpassed, exceeded the limits of a fixed identity, can acquire all those multiple, different existential *avatars* that, in the previous section, were attributes of Prometheus: the criminal-rebel, the cursed martyr and the savant. Like the Titan, who stole fire from heaven and bestowed life, intellect, imagination to humanity, the poet-*voyant*’s mission is to make visible and tangible the ethereal truths ‘seen’ *au de-la*, beyond our subjective, common, habitual perception of things: “imagination remakes the world, finds another reality” (Lawler 1992, 121). The product of his visions will be the creation of hybrid forms, a synthesis and harmony of contraries, dead statues animated by a spark, a soul, phantom of life:

Donc le poète est vraiment voleur de feu. Il est chargé de l’humanité, des *animaux* même ; il devra faire sentir, palper, écouter ses inventions; si ce qu’il rapporte *de là-bas* a forme, il donne forme: si c’est informe, il donne de l’informe. Trouver une langue; [...] Énormité devenant norme, absorbée par tous, il serait vraiment *un multiplicateur de progrès!* (Rimbaud 1975, 140)

Rimbaud evokes two *avatars* of Prometheus: first, the fire-bringer and, second, the *plasticator*. His creations must be ethereal like a symphony, like Orpheus’ music, and tangible, pulsing like Pygmalion’s vitalized statue. Like Hermaphroditus, and like the merging of Prometheus and Panthea, the act of creation is, also, a process of absorption and dissolution of the words “norme” and “enormité”, like in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* “neutrum” absorbed “utrum”. A new language will be necessary, a language that unites signifier and signified, spirit and matter, one that marks the juncture between the world of appearance and the underworld of shadows, phantoms, *simulacra*, like in *Prometheus Unbound*: “How canst thou hear, Who knowest not the language of the dead?” (Shelley 2000 I, ll. 137-138, 485). A truly universal language will be form and formless together, image and imageless at once, like the voice in *Jeunesse* is “sans image” (Rimbaud 2009, 317) and “imageless” like in the dialogue between Demogorgon and Asia:



DEMOGORGON: If the Abyss  
Could vomit forth its secrets: – but a voice  
is wanting, the deep truth is imageless;

ASIA: [...] And of such truths  
Each to itself must be the oracle.  
(Shelley 2000 II, iv, ll. 116-118, 122-123, 564)

Prometheus, second maker, oracle, and poet, will communicate the stolen fire-universal truth to humankind through a new language which combines French Symbol and Romantic Image, Plato and Oriental mysticism. An imageless truth is an unfixed message, a meaning not yet finalized in static form: it is the instantaneous, fleeting intuition of the real face of things when the veil of temporality is lifted and the essence of being appears as dynamic flux, as constant change and metamorphoses. *Je est un autre* is the creative mantra of the modern Prometheus, engraver of phantoms, carver of fluid and hybrid forms, creator of a new *self* caught in an endless chain of different *avatars*, of a *subject* lost and reborn in the current of *objects*. His universe is “marqué par la prolifération” (Murphy 2009, 455) and he is the multiplier of reincarnations, the mesmerizer infusing the universal soul, the *anima mundi*, in the individual soul, dissolving its actuality and uniqueness in the unending excess of infinite, possible existences, like in the paragraph below from *Alchimie du verbe*:

À chaque être, plusieurs *autres* vies me semblaient dues. Ce monsieur ne sait ce qu’il fait: il est un ange. Cette famille est une nichée de chiens. Devant plusieurs hommes, je causai tout haut avec un moment d’une de leurs autres vies. – Ainsi j’ai aimé un porc. (Rimbaud 2009, 268)

According to André Guyaux this tryptic of multiple lives resemble “une interprétation de la métempsychose” (Guyaux 1991, 27) and it will be recalled by the passage below from *Vies III*, where the *self* remembers a variety of past phantasmatic identities. The creations-souvenirs of memory are paralleled to the infinite characters generated by the author of *La Comédie humaine*. Memory, too, like Balzac, is a shadow of Prometheus, and the subject’s reminiscence imitates the rebirth and resurrection initiated by the Titan:

Dans un grenier où je fus enfermé à douze ans j’ai connu le monde, j’ai illustré la comédie humaine. Dans un cellier j’ai appris l’histoire. A quelque fête de nuit dans une cité du Nord,

j'ai rencontré toutes les femmes des anciens peintres. Dans un vieux passage à Paris on m'a enseigné les sciences classiques. Dans une magnifique demeure cernée par l'Orient entier j'ai accompli mon immense œuvre et passé mon illustre retraite. (Rimbaud 2009, 296)

#### 4.2. *The Illuminations and the simulacra of poetic creation*

If *Une saison en enfer* marked a rejection of the *voyance*, some of the *Illuminations* betray, instead, a reemergence of that Promethean idea of poetic creation. Presumably written in between 1873 and 1875, the prose poems reveal the impact that a closer encounter with British culture and literature had on Rimbaud. His first trip to and around London is with Verlaine, in the fall of 1872. During their stay, the two might have visited the Universal Exposition at the Crystal Palace, where pyrotechnical shows might have inspired the title *illuminations*<sup>7</sup> (Underwood 1976, 74). They frantically started to study English, and several issues of *La Renaissance* made them acquainted with Longfellow, Whitman, and Swinburne (Ibid.: 79-86). During the 1870s, Shelley's fortune lived a sort of renaissance, especially under the influence of the pre-Raphaelites and of their reevaluation of Romanticism (Chewning 1955). In 1870, William Micheal Rossetti edited and published in two volumes the poetical works of Shelley. It was the first critical edition of Shelley's poems, introduced by a long biography, *Memoir of Shelley*, where he is depicted as having "a practical eye for ghosts and fiends" and as having "studied the occult sciences, watched for specters, conjured the devil, and speculated on a visit to Africa for the purpose of searching out the magic arcana", (Rossetti 1870, 8) and where *Prometheus Unbound* is defined "the ideal poem of perpetual and triumphant progression – the Atlantis of Man emancipated" (Ibid.: 97). Furthermore, besides having watched Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea* at the Haymarket Theatre, he might have seen at the Gustave Doré Gallery the painting *Les Oceanides*, depicting Prometheus enchained on a rock while the vulture is eating his liver. Prometheus and the vulture are only two barely visible silhouettes in the background, the focus of the scene being the nymphs: some surround the rock, while others appear in a Dantesque, and Shelleyan, whirlwind of spirits flying

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7 For the 'riddle' of the possible meanings of *Illuminations* see *Poétique du fragment* (Guyaux 1985).

over a raging sea. The setting is reminiscent of another illustration by Doré, *Le déluge*, portraying the Biblical flood.

*Après le déluge* is the first fragment of the *Illuminations*. Rimbaud looked back at Ovid's *Metamorphoses* more than at the *Book of Genesis*. The story of Deucalion and Pyrrha – linked to the Prometheus myth since the former is the son of Prometheus and the latter is the daughter of his brother Epimetheus – begins with the flood and ends with the creation of the human species out of the stones that they threw in the ocean. The flood is the first step, the *pars destruens* of Rimbaud's demiurgic project, his will to create humankind and the world anew: "chez Rimbaud c'est le demiurge qui est le modèle de l'entreprise poétique" (Murat 2013, 322). The poet of the *Illuminations* is a second maker, the father of a second creation:

On assiste à l'antagonisme de la vie et de la mort, de la création et de la destruction, à l'antagonisme aussi de deux déluges. Antagonisme peut-être des deux créations, des deux destructions, celle à laquelle a voulu dit-on, présider Dieu, celle à laquelle veut présider le poète. (Brunel 2004, 51)

From the apocalyptic inundation described in *Après le Déluge*, emerges a mysterious *idole*, "yeux noirs et crin jaune" (Rimbaud 2009, 290), whose appearance opens *Enfance*. It is the first allusion to an artificial creature, and, according to Brunel, who recognized this as one of the main recurrent themes of the *Illuminations*, it might have a double meaning: "il désigne une imitation sans valeur, – une poupée, mais pas seulement celle avec laquelle jouent les enfants, une poupée avec laquelle joue encore l'humanité enfante" (Ibid.: 66). In the next paragraphs, the creature seems to come to life, a new color animates her body, "la fille à lèvres d'orange" (Ibid.: 290), and, then, she multiplies herself in a procession of different *avatars*:

Dames qui tournoient sur les terrasses voisines de la mer; enfantes et géantes, superbes noires [...] jeunes mères et grandes sœurs aux regards pleins de pèlerinages, sultanes, princesses de démarche et de costume tyranniques, petites étrangères et personnes doucement malheureuses. (Ibid.)

In the fourth session of *Enfance*, it is the poet himself who modulates in a series of anaphors his successive identities: "Je suis le saint, en prière sur la terrasse, [...] Je suis le savant au fauteuil sombre, [...] je suis le piéton de la grand'route, [...]"

serais bien l'enfant abandonné [...]” (Ibid.: 291). Rimbaud never went to India, but read extensively about Hinduism and its belief in the many lives of the soul, i.e. the multiple *avatars*. “Qu’a-t-on fait du brahmane qui m’expliqua les Proverbes?” (Ibid.: 295) asks the poet in *Vies I*, reminiscing and evoking the phantasm of a past life. In *Conte*, a sort of narrative fragment imitating *One Thousand and One Nights*, the Prince and the Genie are two phantasms of the same identity, each one being the double of the other, whereas, in *Parade*, the poet-demiurge creates a series of “drôles très solides” (Ibid.: 293), acrobats and actors in the spectacle staged for the reader. They play different roles, wear many masks and, like André Guyaux noticed, they compose a parade of virtual beings, *simulacra* of multiple forms:

Dans des costumes improvisés avec le goût du mauvais rêve ils jouent des complaintes, des tragédies de malandrins et de demi-dieux spirituels comme l’histoire ou les religions ne l’ont jamais été. Chinois, Hottentots, bohémiens, niais, hyènes, Molochs, vieilles démenes, démons sinistres, ils mêlent les tours populaires, maternels, avec les poses et les tendresses bestiales. Ils interpréteraient des pièces nouvelles et des chansons “bonnes filles”. Maîtres jongleurs, ils transforment le lieu et les personnes, et usent de la comédie magnétique. (Ibid.: 293-94)

The poet fills his new world with “une cohorte chaotique de fantômes analogiques, apparences imparfaites ou partielles” (Guyaux 1985, 232), grotesque marionettes, deformed and excessive beings belonging more to the virtual, overflowing, universe of imagination than to the rational and causal laws of reality. The fantastic vision, the phantasmatic *comédie*, has a magnetic, totalising force of attraction for the eyes of the viewer. Magnetism is evoked, again, as a galvanising impulse which vitalizes all the surrounding atmosphere within this improvised theatre of the self’s creative power.

After the glimpses of the phantasmagorias brought to the threshold of visibility and existence by the poet’s imagination, two consecutive fragments further reveal his attempt to renovate creature and creation. *Antique* and *Being Beauteous* portray the modern Prometheus at work, and the genesis and nature of the artificial being he forges:

Gracieux fils de Pan! Autour de ton front couronné de fleurettes et de baies tes yeux, des boules précieuses, remuent. Tachées de lies brunes, tes joues se creusent. Tes crocs luisent. Ta poitrine ressemble à une cithare, des tintements circulent dans tes bras blonds. Ton cœur bat dans ce ventre où dort le double sexe. Promène-toi, la nuit, en mouvant doucement cette cuisse, cette seconde cuisse, et cette jambe de gauche. (Ibid.: 294)

*Antique* is a creation myth, the tale of an origin: the genesis of a being at once mythological and artificial. “Le double sexe” suggests an allusion to Hermaphroditus, while the eyes of stones, the final lines with the rhythmical movement of one leg after the other, seem to evoke the first steps of a statue or of an automate, a newly animated Galatea:

L’antiquité, fondue dans sa mythologie, déplace l’objet et le désir, leur donne une manière d’exister, de paraître: L’hermaphrodite est relié à son âge originel, et figé tel un marbre, mais invité au mouvement, convié à devenir vivant, à déambuler dans notre monde contemporain. (Guyaux 1985, 203)

Ancient statues, though, do not have hearts and, in *Antique*, the rhythm of a new, second existence reverberates through inert matter precisely from the beating heart. Like a lyre, the organ-instrument sets the tone for a rebirth, a resurrection, the return from the dead of a creature that once was alive: “le corps devient l’instrument et le joueur, unis dans un même accomplissement visuel et musical” (Guyaux 1985, 200). The overall structure of the fragment, with the first invocation and the final invitation to rise and walk, recalls ancient epitaphs, like those of Bion quoted in Shelley’s *Adonais*. Besides the multiple pleas to live and rise again, other elements come back in *Antique*: in the XXV and XXXVI stanzas, first, Shelley compares Keats’ dead body to a funerary statue, a “monumental stone” (Shelley 2009 l. 310, 540), and, second, he pictures a precocious, untimely death as a “silver lyre unstrung” (Ibid.) as a song held back in “one breast alone” (Ibid.). Both in *Ode to the West Wind* and in *A Defence of Poetry*, Man is associated to a body-lyre that turns sensory impressions into a new harmony, a lasting accord between outside and inside, subject and object, self and other. He, then, juxtaposes child and poet, insomuch as they both respond to reality “as the lyre that trembles and sounds after the wind has died away” (Shelley 2009, 675). Poetry is “the reflected image of that impression” (Ibid.), the reverberation of a chord struck by an external agent, or the lasting effect of something that delights and moves a child to imitate it. *Antique* stages the beginning of Pan’s son resurrection, a new life that the poet imparts to a lifeless statue by addressing it the command “Promène-toi”, an expression which echoes and sounds almost like *Promé-thée*. The poet, like a second maker, creates by naming its creature. The *real* movement of the final lines was announced and prepared by a sort of ‘inner’ movement, only perceivable, at first, as music: “il s’agissait d’une mobilité intérieure, d’un magnétisme, d’une électricité du corps, musicale” (Guyaux 1985, 201).

The next prose poem, *Being Beauteous*, continues further the story of creation. Here the poet reveals his parallel identities and *avatars*: he is Ovid's *plasticator*, a new Pygmalion and, finally, Victor Frankenstein, the modern Prometheus. The setting of the scene is reminiscent of the 'sea of ice' where the famous encounter between Frankenstein and his *Being* takes place. Furthermore, both creatures are gigantic and they are brought to life in a sort of laboratory-*chantier*. If in *Antique* the poet-demiurge animated his artificial being through mainly acoustical means, by striking the chord of a pulsing heart-lyre, now the *being of beauty* materializes into flesh, into a living body, from his previous status as airy form, phantasm, "spectre" and Vision. The poet's creation consists in making visible the invisible by covering, wrapping it with the veil of life: "couleurs propres de la vie" and "nouveau corps amoureux". Life force is transmitted to lifeless matter through an embrace, like Prometheus did when Panthea dissolved within his arms. Once again, Prometheus is the maker of visions, the poet and sculptor that carves the "beauteous shapes", the genii, specters, and spirits, "défilé de féeries" (Rimbaud 2009, 301), that the mind glimpses when the veil of reality is lifted.

#### 4.3. *From fire to electricity: Prometheus and fantastic literature*

The *Illuminations* were published in 1886, the same year of *L'Ève future* by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, a fantastic novel where the myths of Prometheus and Pygmalion are tightly intertwined, on the wake of Hoffmann's works. Here the modern Prometheus is Edison himself and the vitalising principle is the modern *avatar* of fire, electricity:

La lumière, instrument de toutes les fantasmagories, est ainsi saluée comme la source de toute vérité, non pas en vertu de l'idée platonicienne selon laquelle tout l'univers visible serait l'émanation ou la dégradation d'une lumière primordiale, mais en raison de l'universelle incertitude dont elle enveloppe toute chose. (Milner 1982, 213)

Light, energy, life are, once again, the agents of creation like they were, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. In Chapter VI, within a dialogue between Edison and Lord Ewald about the impossible task of bestowing lifeless substance with being, the author inserts an apparently decorative allusion to the Prometheus myth. After Lord Ewald remarked that



he is not like Prometheus and, hence, he cannot steal “une étincelle de ce feu sacré dont l’Esprit du Monde nous pénètre” (Villiers de L’Isle-Adam 1986, 841), quite a pantheist and Neoplatonist reference to the *anima mundi* and to Shelley’s Spirit of the Earth, Edison, first, corrects his friend:

Bah! tout homme a nom Prométhée sans le savoir – et nul n’échappe au bec du vautour, répondit Edison – Milord, en vérité je vous le dis: une seule de ces mêmes étincelles, encore divines, tirées de votre être, et dont vous avez tant de fois essayé (toujours en vain !) d’animer le néant de votre jeune admirée, suffira pour en vivifier l’ombre. (Villiers de L’Isle-Adam 1986, 841)

Like Prometheus tried to animate Pandora, and Pygmalion Galatea, Lord Ewald is in love with a “being beautiful”, but, unfortunately, with no intelligence: the American actress Alicia Clary. He asks Thomas Edison for help, and the scientist has the idea of turning Hadaly, an android previously fabricated by Edison and kept until then in an artificial, ‘electric’ Eden, into a better, perfected copy of Alicia:

La fusion de la science et de la magie exprime la toute-puissance d’Edison et en fait un avatar de Prométhée, comme Villiers le suggère à trois reprises au moins: Edison se rapproche du voleur de feu par sa maîtrise de l’électricité, “cette étincelle léguée par Prométhée, qui court, domptée autour de cette baguette vraiment magique en impressionnant cet aimant”, du titan rebelle par son projet démesuré de donner l’intelligence à son androïde et de surpasser la création divine, du père des hommes par son rêve de créer une nouvelle race d’Eves, qui remplacera l’ancienne, obsolète et imparfaite. (Geisler-Szmulewicz 1999, 361)

Edison persuades a perplexed Lord Ewald that the project is reasonable by making him realize that they will not need to recreate a real human, identical to the model, but only its *shadow*, since love objects, and reality in general, are mere projections of the subject’s desires and illusions:

C’est cette *ombre* seule que vous aimez: c’est pour elle que vous voulez mourir. C’est elle *seule* que vous reconnaissez, absolument, comme RÉELLE! Enfin, c’est cette vision objectivée de votre esprit, que vous appelez, que vous voyez, que vous CRÉEZ en votre vivante, *et qui n’est que votre âme dédoublée en elle*. (Ibid.)

What the self loves, like Narcissus did, is an illusion, a *simulacrum* fashioned by its own *phantasia*: “illusion pour illusion, c’est la copie qui est la moins



illusoire” (Milner 1982, 212). In this sense, everyone is like Prometheus, *plasticator* of shadows in the *camera obscura* of imagination. His creations are ephemeral doubles and mirror images, *avatars*, objectified illusions and “beauteous shapes”. We are back to Boccaccio’s Prometheus in the *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* who was “twofold, just as the man he produced is twofold” (Boccaccio 2011, 535) or, to remain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to Teophile Gautier’s *Avatar* (1856). The doctor Balthazar Cherbonneau, who is in search for the principle of life, abandons Sculpture and Medicine, *i.e.* the projects of Pygmalion and Frankenstein, to embrace Hinduism and the brahmin’s teachings on *metempsychosis*:

Las d’avoir interrogé avec le scalpel, sur le marbre des amphithéâtres, des cadavres qui ne me répondaient pas et ne me laissaient voir que la mort quand je cherchais la vie, je formai le projet – un projet aussi hardi que celui de Prométhée escaladant le ciel pour y ravir le feu – d’atteindre et de surprendre l’âme, de l’analyser et de la disséquer pour ainsi dire; j’abandonnai l’effet pour la cause. (Gautier 1981, 241-242)

Prometheus’ project survives in India,<sup>8</sup> thanks to formulas and mysterious words, “syllabes du Verbe créateur” (Ibid.: 243), a new, unknown *Alchimie du verbe* guiding the self “dans ses Avatars à travers les formes différentes” (Ibid.: 245).

## 5. Conclusion

In the tragedy of Aeschylus, Prometheus taught humanity how to *make* things, both the beautiful creations of art and the useful ones of technology. Shelley’s Prometheus taught human beings how to *reform* things, how to *transform*, to renew and galvanize the vitality of an extinguished and dull world on the brink of death. *Prometheus Unbound* revitalizes the myth by operating this shift: from creation to change, from matter to ideas. The Titan enters the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a spiritual, ethereal force triggering the strife of the human soul toward a new

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8 Jacqueline Duchemin, after Sir James Frazier, traces the origin of Prometheus back to the Vedas: the name Prometheus originates from the root *math-manth*, the verb *manthami*, meaning “to rub”, and from *pramantha*, the stick used to light fire through the rubbing. Frazier juxtaposes Prometheus to *Mâtarisvan*, who, like the titan, brought fire to human beings (Duchemin 2019, 29-30).

life, a second chance. Prometheus becomes now the archetype and model of the poet who transfigures the world through imagination, who sees beyond matter the simultaneous presence of alternative realities. This is how Rimbaud approaches the myth, Prometheus being one of the many *avatars* of his poetic creativity. The poet-*voyant* creates by rejecting a fixed, static identity and by dissolving the Self in a flux of dynamic transformations, in a parade of metamorphosis and metempsychosis. According to Rimbaud, creation entails dematerialization, derangement and *dérèglement*. Hence, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Prometheus the ‘fire bringer’ has vanished into the element of ‘fire’, into the very unmaterial, vaporous object of his gift to humanity: light and electricity, something impalpable and shapeless as the principle of life itself.

We might say that the myth enters Modernity with this disruptive energy capable of undermining the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, the artist and the product of artistic creation. The last, brief, incursion in the fantastic literature of Gautier and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam unveils the destructive potentiality of the Promethean principle: it also blurs the distinction between real and virtual, between body and soul, cause and effect. The modern Prometheus, Dr. Frankenstein *and* Edison, instead of creating a new world have finally turned the old one into the *simulacrum* of itself, a world of shadows, copies and disembodied illusions.

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