It has become a commonplace to call a great artist ‘Promethean’. But how did we get from Hesiod’s wily thief, via Aeschylus’ founder of all human culture, to Goethe and the Romantics’ creative genius with a distinctly metaphysical and rebellious edge, to Nietzsche’s necessary sacrilege, then finally to cliché where the symbolic credentials of the Promethean artist empty out into a (Romantic) commonplace? This article traces the genealogy of the transformation of Prometheus from a quasi-comic thief to creative genius and rebel, and argues that Nietzsche’s use of the inherently metaphysical Prometheus in *The Birth of Tragedy* paradoxically
‘[H]e was praising your originality in following no exemplar, just as Prometheus, at a time when no men existed, fashioned them from his imagination... ’ – Lucian of Samosata, To One Who Said, ‘You’re a Prometheus in Words’

It has become a commonplace, a cliché in fact, to call a great artist ‘Promethean’, after the Greek mythological figure that stole fire from the gods and was punished by being fastened to a rock in the wilderness. Zeus’s eagle then pecked out his (forever renewable) liver every day for thousands of years. But how did Prometheus, who in the earliest accounts in Hesiod was portrayed as a wily thief, become the symbol of creative genius with a distinctly rebellious edge? Prometheus was associated with pottery and sculpture in antiquity. Lucian of Samosata may have been the earliest to make the direct connection between Prometheus and poetry. The notion of the Promethean artist was brought to its apotheosis by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1774–1832) who, at least in his younger days, saw himself as Prometheus, and was called ‘Prometheus-Goethe’ by a friend. Goethe’s ‘Prometheus’ works also incorporate a strong dose of metaphysical rebellion, despite his ongoing belief in divinity. By the time we reach Nietzsche, the Promethean individual, for whom life is an aesthetic construct, embodies a ‘necessary sacrilege’ against the gods. During the twentieth century, the metaphysical and symbolic credentials of the Promethean artist empty out into a Romantic commonplace. How did we get from Hesiod, to Nietzsche, to cliché? This article traces the genealogy of this transformation from a quasi-comic thief to creative genius and rebel, and argues that Nietzsche’s use of the inherently metaphysical Prometheus in The Birth of Tragedy paradoxically hastened the Titan’s fall into empty topos.

THE MYTH OF PROMETHEUS
The Greek myth of Prometheus bears on the etiology of human suffering and mortality (alienation from divinity), forethought (the potential to minimise suffering, or at least expect it) and the human use of fire (to survive and prosper, materially and intellectually, independently of transcendent beings, and despite hardship). The main elements of the myth are to be found in Hesiod’s Theogony (vv507–616) and Works and Days (vv42–105), and (with very different implications) in Aeschylus’ enigmatic play Prometheus Bound. Prometheus is a Titan god; that is, he belongs to the era of divinity that precedes the Olympian gods Zeus, Apollo, Athena and so on. He is a cosmic contemporary of Zeus’ father Kronos. Called upon by Zeus to help establish the hierarchy and division of roles and honours between the immortal gods and mortal men, after Zeus had defeated his father in cosmic war, Prometheus slaughters an ox and divides it into two parts. One portion consists of a parcel of (apparently mouth-watering) thick white animal fat on the outside, concealing on the inside bare white bones stripped of all edible meat. The second consists of all the edible meat on the inside wrapped in the ox’s hide and placed inside its slimy and repellant stomach. Zeus chooses the appealing parcel of bones wrapped in fat, and to humanity is given the gruesome stomach containing edible meat. Zeus is furious at the deception (although he already knew the parcels’ contents) and withdraws fire from human use, thus preventing them from cooking their allotted meat. Prometheus then takes a giant fennel stalk to heaven—its characteristic is that the outside is wet while the inside is dry. Stealing a seed of Zeus’ fire, he hides it in the dry interior of the fennel stalk and gives it to mortals. Zeus, of course, is again furious, and delivers to man a devastating blow intended to ensure he can never again challenge the gods: the creation of woman (the Greeks were not known for their enlightened attitudes to gender politics). Pandora, the first woman, is a collaborative creation by Hephaistos, Athena, Aphrodite and other gods, under the instructions of Zeus. She is irresistibly beautiful on the outside; on the inside, however, she is a lying, cunning bitch with an insatiable hunger for food and sex. As Jean-Pierre Vernant puts it, she is ‘a fire that Zeus puts into households and that burns men up without a flame being struck.’ Prometheus’ brother, Epimetheus, accepts Pandora into his home despite his brother’s warning, making her the first ‘wife’, and soon that fateful ‘jar’, filled with all human miseries, is opened. Henceforth, all men must be born of woman, the embodiment of destruction and fecundity, divinity and bestiality. Prometheus is then chained to a rock in the wilderness for thousands of years, where Zeus’ eagle eats his entire liver every day. The liver is that part of the animal meat that was especially precious to humans in the first act of this drama. Overnight it rejuvenates itself, ready for the eagle’s meal the next day. In the version that Aeschylus uses—or perhaps that he
Prometheus is chained for over 30,000 years, then hurled into Tartarus, and returned later to the outside world where the eagle devours his liver. Eventually, with Zeus’ permission, his son Heracles kills the eagle and frees Prometheus.

There were, of course, other versions. Poets and storytellers had some leeway in focusing on one version or another, in introducing new elements and/or imbuing the myth with new significations. It was Aeschylus who had the most dramatic effect on the myth when, in a trilogy of works including *Prometheus Bound* and two other works now lost, he credited Prometheus with a pivotal role in the creation of all human culture, both material and intellectual. At *Prometheus Bound* II.436–506 Prometheus relates to the chorus that it was his work that allowed humanity to develop from a state of savagery into one of civilisation and self-reliance. E R Dodds highlights the focus here on man’s intellectual progress, and points contextually to the sense of progress experienced by Aeschylus’ generation (the blossoming of Athenian cultural achievements following the Persian wars early in the fifth century BC). George Thomson asserts that fire ‘stands for the material basis of civilisation’ and further that ‘Intelligence, the gift of Prometheus, has made man free, because it had enabled him to comprehend, and so control, the laws of nature.’ Within the parameters set up in *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus’ gifts to mankind, and their subsequent development, as well as human courage in the face of suffering—embodied in the play by both Io and Prometheus (as representative and patron of mankind)—are pitted against the dreadful tyranny of Zeus and the miseries that mortals must endure. Whether or not we agree with Dodds and others that this as an ‘anti-God’ play, or with Raymond Trousson that the trilogy would have resolved itself in a way that reasserted the need and potential for harmony and co-existence between men and gods, there is little doubt that the play is examining these questions. A second major innovation in the play is the crucial secret that Prometheus withholds from Zeus: because he has prophetic powers (Pro-metheus means ‘fore-sight’), Prometheus knows that should Zeus mate with the sea nymph Thetis (daughter of the sea god Nereus), a son will be born to them more powerful than Zeus. This motif is a driving force in the extant play and almost certainly in the trilogy as a whole.

Plato’s discussion of Prometheus bears on the association of the Titan with the arts. In *Protagoras* (320d–322d), Protagoras says that Prometheus stole the arts, or *technai*, from Hephaistos and Athena. Prometheus is here also associated with human ills, and elsewhere with man’s former ability to know the hour of his death (*Gorgias*, 523e–d), and with providing men with fire (*Statesman*, 274c) and knowledge (*Philebus*, 16c).

**‘A PROMETHEUS IN WORDS’**

In another important variation, and one that played a crucial role in the development of the idea of the Promethean artist, Prometheus is credited with being the creator of mankind out of clay, and the stolen fire is the ‘animating principle’ by means of which the clay figure is given life. Of relevance here is the fact that the Greek word *poietes* means ‘maker’ or ‘creator’ as well as ‘poet’ (where ‘poem’ is a constructed arrangement of words). Prometheus was known in antiquity as a potter, and a patron of potters, and under the influence of ‘euhemerist’ interpretation—Euhemerus was a late fourth century BC Greek mythographer who became well known for his rational explanations of myth as being based in historical fact—Prometheus became associated with statuary (the creator of a lifeless human figure out of earth, as opposed to the creator of living humanity). In what is perhaps the earliest known application of the Prometheus story to artistic creation in general, a second century AD short comic work by the Syrian rhetorician Lucian of Samosata (a contemporary of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius) combines a number of these motifs. In *To the one who said ‘You’re a Prometheus in words’*, Lucian is ironically self-effacing:

> So you say I am a Prometheus? If by this, my friend, you mean that my works like his are of clay, I accept the comparison and agree that I am like him... But if you are over-praising my words, implying that they are well wrought and graciously assigning the name of the wisest of the Titans to them, you may find that people will detect irony and an Attic sniff in your praise.

By connecting the creation of statues out of clay with wider artistic endeavour, Lucian planted the seeds for the eventually commonplace application of the adjective ‘Promethean’ to the artist. But the Middle
Ages put a firm stop to this development—the myth of Prometheus was seen as just one more example of pagan ignorance and misunderstanding of God’s creation. Moreover, the artist’s work was for the greater glory of God. It was not until the Renaissance that the Promethean artist made a fleeting reappearance. In *Le vite d’uomini illustri fiorentini*, the Florentine Filippo Villani (late fourteenth–early fifteenth century) compares the artist’s creative work with that of the Almighty. Marc-Jerome Vida (*floruit* 1520s), in *l’Art Poétique*, imagines that Prometheus brought the Muses down to earth and thus endowed men with the skill to write verse. George Chapman (1559–1634), on the other hand, refers to ‘Promethean poets’ who create their own ‘humanity’ in the form of fictional characters without help from any divinity: ‘Promethean poets with the coles / Of their most geniale, more-than-human soules / In living verse, created men like these...’

In 1710 the Right Honourable Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) called Prometheus ‘a second maker, just under Jove’ (in his ‘Soliloquy, or advice to an author’, 1.3.207), which in turn influenced the use of the term by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and others. Shaftesbury’s phrase is significant for two reasons: firstly because he equates the artist’s creativity with that of Jupiter/Zeus, who here stands for the Christian God; and secondly because the artist is ‘just under Jove’, (still) a servant of God and not his equal.

STURM UND DRANG

The decisive step in the development of the Promethean artist, however, was taken in the last three decades of the eighteenth century, during what is known as the *Sturm und Drang* (or Storm and Stress) period. The Promethean artist-genius, who is also a metaphysical rebel, dominates the period, and it is in this guise that Prometheus as metaphysical rebel makes his way most forcefully into the modern imagination. Practical and metaphysical human independence from divinity had been an integral part of the Prometheus myth from at least Aeschylus onwards, despite its sublimation by the Christian Church. Voltaire had focused his 1740 philosophical opera *Pandore (ou Prométhée)* on refuting the notion of original sin and a golden age in the past (such as Rousseau would soon propose), promoting Prometheus as a force for intellectual, material and creative independence from the gods. And although Goethe continued to believe in a broad notion of divinity immanent in Nature, in both his early treatments of the Prometheus myth Time and Fate are greater forces than both Zeus/Jupiter/God and Prometheus/man. Within the matrix of time, Promethean man must rely on his own effort and struggle to make a better world: ‘Didst thou not do all this thyself, / My sacred glowing heart?’ asks Prometheus in the poem’s fourth stanza. But more than Goethe’s unfinished drama, it is the last stanza of his ‘Prometheus’ poem that stands as a pivotal statement of the *Sturm und Drang* ethos:

Here sit I, forming mortals
After my image;
A race resembling me,
To suffer, to weep,
To enjoy, to be glad,
And thee to scorn,  
As I!\(^{27}\)

The *Sturm und Drang* Promethean artist is, by necessity, metaphysically independent.

**ROMANTIC PROMETHEUS**

Trousson notes that in ‘the great rebels of Romanticism’, Goethe’s Promethean rebel-artist-genius would find ‘his natural family’.\(^{28}\) Aeschylus himself became the darling of the Romantics, and in some ways was subsumed into the Titanic creature of his final creative days. Victor Hugo, himself a Romantic hero, saw in Aeschylus just the kind of brooding, rebellious, excessive and passionate (Romantic) qualities that typified the Romantic Prometheus.\(^{29}\) Byron claimed that *Prometheus Bound* had profoundly influenced all of his work.\(^{30}\) As a writer of metaphysical tragedy, Aeschylus was a natural choice for an age passionately involved in metaphysical issues, as they grappled with the cause of evil, God, providence, creation, the soul, man, destiny and the future of the race. The artist-genius-rebel of the *Sturm und Drang* period is now taken for granted, and the artist’s rebellion is directed most notably against Jehovah, the Christian God of the Old Testament, who is seen to be responsible for all evil in the world. A minority strand, which includes Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (subtitled ‘The Modern Prometheus’), sees human suffering and evil as at least partly emanating from scientific arrogance and/or, following Rousseau, the fraudulent claims for civilisation as progress.\(^{31}\) Some saw Prometheus as Napoleon, ‘the living failure of the European dream of liberation’,\(^{32}\) and others the Promethean fire as the pains of love. But, with Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* and its defiant finale taken by itself rather than as part of a trilogy (which may have moved towards a reconciliation with Zeus)—and Nostrand\(^{33}\) asserts that virtually all uses of the Prometheus myth in the nineteenth century derive directly from Aeschylus—the dominant motif in the Romantic era is Prometheus as rebel against the injustices of a Jehovah/Zeus who is jealous of human achievement, and the cause of suffering and evil. From this metaphysical basis, Prometheus becomes the rebel against all forms of oppression, social, political, religious.

The Romantics’ preoccupation with fulfilling their ontological status as human beings, their desire to ‘seize the sceptre from God’ and improve their lives socially and politically by their own hands, has been referred to as their ‘Titanism’.*\(^{34}\) In this rebellion, a surprising theological realignment posits Jesus Christ (the *loving* face of Christianity) as the first victim of Jehovah, and places him amongst the ranks of the Romantic rebels propagating love as a weapon against his pitiless father. The Titan is also compared to Satan (Luci-fer is, after all, the ‘light-bearer’) because of the latter’s rebellion against Jehovah.\(^{35}\)

Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (written 1818–19, published 1820), which the author considered to be his best and favourite work, exemplifies the Romantic Prometheus, and according to Trousson remained, and remains today, its archetype.\(^{36}\) His Prometheus, he says, is ‘the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends’.\(^{37}\) He also rejects, at least for his own work, the possibility that Prometheus might reconcile with the supreme deity: ‘I was averse from a catastrophe so feeble as that of reconciling the Champion with the Oppressor of Mankind.’\(^{38}\) Shelley’s Prometheus is the symbol of humanity as well as its champion, embodying metaphysical as well as social rebellion. Forgiveness and love are the characteristics of the Romantic Jesus, and Shelley’s Prometheus can be seen as both the precursor to Christ (at Act 1, 584–5, Prometheus is described as ‘a youth / With patient looks nailed to a crucifix’) as well as a Christ/Titan assimilation.

Although Shelley rejected official Christianity as a ‘detestable’ religion oppressing mankind with superstition, he nevertheless retained a broad, pantheistic belief in divinity as ‘all that constitutes human perfection’,\(^{39}\) and within this system a loving and forgiving Jesus Christ remained central. His Prometheus is ‘unbound’ only when he no longer hates,\(^{40}\) and the final words of the poem, by Demogorgon to Prometheus and the chorus, exemplify the Romantic archetype:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;  
To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;  
To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;  
To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:
This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be
Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free:
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

As ‘the fatal child’ (III.i.19) and ‘detested prodigy’ (III.i.62) of Jupiter, the somewhat obscure Demogorgon is the son of Zeus/Jupiter’s union with Thetis who will overthrow his father, an event that occurs at the end of Act III. The significance of this event is that Jupiter is seen to be a man-made oppression, an invention of his inner weakness and fear. Demogorgon is Time, or more specifically ‘the force of things driven by the human desire for perfection’, the Romantic combination of rebellion against oppression that is, yet, infused with love, and the clarifying of traditional religious superstition and ignorance by reason and science (Romanticism did not entirely dismiss the benefits of the Enlightenment). Jehovah/Jupiter is overthrown by the Promethean striving to ‘seize the sceptre from God’, and transform this world into a just community by his own efforts.

Those who came after him pick up the elements of the Romantic Prometheus, as set up by Shelley. The principal statement of the motif that Prometheus was a pagan precursor of Christ is made in Edgar Quinet’s 1838 trilogy Prométhée, which Duchemin describes as ‘a remarkable attempt to integrate the rebellion of Prometheus according to Aeschylus, as well as the more recent perspectives of Shelley... with the history of the birth of Christianity.’ Contrary to the prevailing vision of Jehovah, however, Quinet’s supreme God is revealed to be Prometheus’ father, and the trilogy ends in reconciliation and peace. Shelley’s ‘champion and symbol of mankind’ is taken up by Victor Hugo, for whom Prometheus is the ‘awakener of conscience and of reason, liberator of superstition and ignorance... the champion of responsibility; he is, finally, the principle of progress and the ideal projection of humanity onto itself.’ For Byron, who wrote his poem ‘Prometheus’ in 1816 after meeting Shelley, Prometheus is ‘a symbol and a sign / To mortals of their fate and force; / Like thee, Man is in part divine, / A troubled stream from a pure source’ (ll.45-48). In other works, Prometheus is the symbol of science and the arts that will bring freedom to man from the tyranny of religious superstition and repression. One of the defining characteristics of the Romantic era was its insistent focus on the social and spiritual condition of its own times, and the era’s Prometheus was informed by a sense of responsibility towards improving this condition, and a belief that man had the power to do this without assistance from divinity.

**NIETZSCHE’S PROMETHEUS**

In the period after 1850, the Romantic Prometheus artist’s rebellious and anti-religious qualities intensified. According to Trousson, from 1850 the intensity of the reaction against the Old Testament Jehovah both increases in intensity and spreads to religion as a whole, encompassing also its earthly representatives. It is in this context that Friedrich Nietzsche’s use of Prometheus in sections nine and ten of *The Birth of Tragedy* should be viewed. In various French, German and English works the death of the gods and God is announced. Charles Grandmougin’s 1878 Prométhée, for example, urges mankind to ‘Live! For the gods are dead!’ Nietzsche’s Prometheus exhibits an interesting (and very Nietzschean) mix of this theme with the other two main tendencies Trousson notes in the reception of Prometheus during the second half of the nineteenth century: Prometheus associated with the failure of science to answer life’s questions, and Prometheus as the cause of the tragic human separation from (the Christian) God. The last of these Nietzsche was to celebrate rather than lament. Though in many respects Nietzsche’s treatment of the myth sits firmly within the context of its nineteenth century reception, he also introduces a number of highly significant innovations to the ‘meaning’ of the myth that will have an indelible effect on it in the twentieth century, paradoxically sowing the seeds of its decay. *The Birth of Tragedy* exemplifies the union of philosophy and aesthetics that form the matrix within which the notion of the Promethean artist has grown and thrives, but Nietzsche’s drive for the ‘end of metaphysics’ will leave the myth without symbolic foundations.

On the one hand his Prometheus, consciously referencing Goethe’s ‘veritable hymn of impiety’, is the rebellious hero of the Romantics: the ‘innermost kernel of the Prometheus story’ is ‘the necessity of sacrilege imposed upon the titanically striving individual’. Earlier in the chapter he writes, ‘The best and highest possession mankind can acquire is obtained by sacrilege and must be paid for with consequences that involve the whole flood of sufferings and sorrows which the offended divinities have to afflict the nobly aspiring race
of men.”53 The ‘immeasurable suffering of the bold “individual”’54 is the cost of this ‘active sin’, which is a ‘characteristically Promethean virtue’.55 Nietzsche stresses the active aspect of the sacrilege. It is not just that by his very existence man is alienated from the gods, but that mankind actively rebels against them, embracing the human condition with open arms.56 Aeschylus himself becomes for Nietzsche the Romantic ‘Titanic artist’ who understands that the existence of the gods depends on the very human race that is oppressed by them: ‘Man, rising to Titanic stature, gains culture by his own efforts and forces the gods to enter into an alliance with him because in his very own wisdom he holds their existence and their limitations in his hands.’57

On the other hand, Nietzsche’s Prometheus is both anti-science, in the tradition of especially Christian interpretations of Prometheus, as well as vehemently anti-Christian in the vein of the dominant strand of the second half of the nineteenth century. In the ‘Attempt at self criticism’ that he placed at the front of his 1886 edition of the work, Nietzsche describes the issue of the work as ‘the problem of science itself, science considered for the first time as problematic, as questionable’.58 In chapters 14 and 15 Nietzsche specifically attacks scientific and rational ‘knowledge’ as fatally limited;59 science needs art as its ‘necessary correlative... and supplement’.60 Of course, this is not at all the first time that science has been questioned, but Nietzsche would not have wanted to acknowledge those Christian works that had questioned science before he did. For in the same ‘Attempt at self criticism’ he attacks Christianity as ‘the most prodigal elaboration of the moral theme to which humanity has ever been subjected.’ Christianity, with its ‘hostility to life—a furious, vengeful antipathy to life itself” was ‘from the beginning, essentially and fundamentally, life’s nausea and disgust with life, merely concealed behind... faith in “another” or “better” life.”61 The Prometheus myth, ‘the astounding depth’ and terror of which even Aeschylus did not exhaust, has a different message.62 namely that the Titan’s ‘active sin’ confers on mankind his dignity, and provides us with ‘the ethical basis of pessimistic tragedy’, namely ‘the justification of human evil, meaning both human guilt and the human suffering it entails’.63

Nietzsche’s Promethean, aestheticised individual suffers willingly for the benefit of intellectual independence from divinity and, in the end, freedom even from metaphysics. For Prometheus is the prototype of Nietzsche’s later Übermensch,64 and carries within the seeds of his rejection of metaphysics a symptom and a cause of an increasingly materialistic and secularised world in which, as Marx had claimed, ‘all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned’.65 Nietzsche’s influence on the twentieth and twenty-first century is enormous. He is ‘generally perceived as a primary source of many of the modernisms of our time’,66 and ‘increasingly... seems to be the figure who most overshadows twentieth century critical theory’.67 His use of the Prometheus figure carries with it into our own thought and artistic life a great deal of the accumulated reception from previous centuries, in particular the Promethean metaphysical rebel and artist.

But, as Heidegger claimed, he is also ‘the thinker who brings metaphysics to an end.’68 As the twentieth century progressed, the (still Platonic) notion that there is another realm of higher truth, that provides order and meaning to human life on earth, lost traction. Symbolists like Josephin (le Sâr) Peladan, in his 1895 Prometheide trilogy, and Vyacheslav Ivanov in his 1915 Prometej, still depict the Titan in semi-Romantic tones as one who can, through art, creativity and culture, lift mankind from phenomenal poverty to (neo-Platonic) noumenal richness. Expressionist treatments of the myth, however, such as Reinhard Sorge’s very early (1911) Prometheus, Adolphe Appia’s 1925 production of Prometheus Bound (Appia should no longer be considered a Symbolist after his music/movement work with Emile Jaques-Dalcroze at Helerau), and Terence Grey’s 1929 production at the Cambridge Festival Theatre, followed Nietzsche in planting the Titan’s feet firmly in the human, phenomenal realm. And without one foot in the realm of divinity, the ‘man-god’ Prometheus eventually becomes just a man, albeit a creative genius, influenced by Nietzsche’s raising him to the level of Übermensch. When Freud, that other Titan in the development of twentieth century Modernity, reads the myth as involving the renunciation of ‘the homosexually tinged pleasure of extinguishing [fire] with urine’, where the fennel stalk is—surprise!—a symbol of the penis, and the eagle’s feast of liver symbolises the suppression of libidinous passions,69 the writing is clearly on the wall. It is worth noting, however, that the idea of the fennel stalk as penis with great potency stored inside its verticality is already contained within the ancient story, and to some extent it is Prometheus’ usurpation of Zeus’ creative and reproductive powers that causes the terrible revenge of Zeus against the Titan.
Perhaps it is fitting that Nietzsche first found the seeds of his Übermensch in the Greek term hyperanthropos, found in antiquity in one of the works of none other than Lucian of Samosata,70 the same author in whose work the earliest reference to a ‘Prometheus with words’ is found. We now, properly in my view, tend to see the notion of the Promethean artist as a cliché, as imbued with Romantic self-gloration, narcissism, and an over-reliance on the production of creative material solely from within the isolated imaginative world of the so-called genius individual, as if it were possible to exist and create outside of one’s socio-political and cultural context, and without the direct and indirect influence of one’s artistic peers and contemporaries. Great artists are to be admired and treasured for the insights, pleasure, stimulation and sense of connection to deep human ‘truths’ they provide us with, but to raise them to Titanic, Promethean status does them, and us, harm.

ENDNOTES
2 Raymond Trousson, Le Thème de Prométhée dans la Littérature Européenne, Librarie Droz, Geneva, 1964, 245. The friend was Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813). I have used Trousson’s two-volume history of the reception of the myth quite a lot, partly because there is no other treatment anywhere near as thorough, and partly because it, like the other French studies that are cited in this article, are not well known by English speaking readers. All translations from Trousson and other French sources are my own unless otherwise noted.
3 See for example the following: ‘Also implied in each myth is the understanding that creativity is a blessing and a curse, a prize and a punishment. The artist in each one of us knows this well. The distances between creative genius and insanity, between production and pain, between inspiration and the abyss are small, narrow and treacherous. The creative mind struggles each day with him/herself and the world. We artists fight for recognition, fight for acceptance, battle practicality with beauty. We retire each night with exhaustion from the fight, but we wake up to a new day with new vigor and somehow keep going. The artist is strong, for s/he is the rebel and the rewarded, the sinner and the saint, the intellectual and the spiritual. For him/her, the spoils are worth the cost of the hunt. And so the artist pays for the advancements of the all’ (‘Jamie Cotton on creativity’, http://www.baja.com/sensuouseline/sline0497/)

4 Hesiod, who is assumed to have been writing around 700 BC, is the author of two well-known works, Theogony and Works and Days. The first relates the genealogy of the gods (Earth, Ouranos, Kronos, Zeus and so on), and the second focuses on farming and morality. Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound was probably written near the end of his life, around 458–56 BC (see E R Dodds, The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1973, 33–4). For a vivid retelling of the story, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, The Universe, the Gods, and Men, Linda Asher (trans.), Harper Collins, New York, 2001, 45–65. A number of ancient references to the Prometheus myth can be found at http://www.theoi.com/Titan/TitanPrometheus.html, accessed 11 August 2005.
5 The fennel stalk was presumably the precursor of the fire torch that ancient Athenians carried in the annual Prometheia race in honour of Prometheus (see George Thomson, ‘Prometheia’, in Erich Segal (ed.), Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, 168) as well as, perhaps, the modern Olympic torch.
6 Vernant, 61.
7 According to the myth, Pandora’s ‘jar’ is full of all human ills. When she opens it, all the ills are released into the world except Elpis, or hope. The idea that Pandora had a ‘box’ instead of a jar seems to date to Erasmus Trousson, 12–3. The story is ambiguous, of course. Trousson (12–3) notes that Pan-dora means ‘all-giver’ and is associated with Earth. In Works and Days vv 81–2, Hesiod says the name was given by the gods because ‘all they who dwelt on Olympus gave each a gift’, that is they collaborated in her creation. There are indications in some versions of the myth that Zeus held two such jars, one filled with good and the other with evil. Prometheus (whose name means ‘fore-thought’) may have stolen the second jar so as to prevent Zeus from giving its contents to mankind. It seems he may then have given it to his brother, Epimetheus (‘after-thought’) to safeguard. Vernant (63) suggests that perhaps satyrs had spirited it there. However it got there, Pandora finds it and releases the contents into the world. There is another ambiguous aspect to the story—what is Hope doing in the jar of evil, and what does it mean that human beings have no access to it?
8 Vernant, 64.
9 Dodds, 5–7.
10 Thomson, 104.
11 Thomson, 111. See also Trousson, 23: ‘In Aeschylus, fire is no longer “the fire that cooks”: it is the symbol of the arts and science, the symbol, in a word, of civilisation.’
12 Dodds, 14; Trousson, 40.
13 See Mark Griffith, Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound, Cambridge University
that the tradition was ‘presumably much older’.

For the euhemerist tradition, see Trousson, 46, 49, 67–8, 92–3, 145–6, 181–2.

Lucian, 419–27. Lucian focused two other satirical narratives on the figure. In Prometheus or The Caucasus, the longest of these, which may have been intended for public performance, and is perhaps a satire of the opening scene of Aeschylus’ work, Prometheus is portrayed as a ‘sophist’, whose clever arguments against his own punishment are difficult to counter. In Prometheus and Zeus (one of the Dialogues of the Gods), the two enemies face off against one another and come to a resolution in which Prometheus is freed after providing the vital information regarding the marriage to Thetis. For further discussion of Lucian’s Prometheus, see Jacqueline Duchemin, Prométhée, Histoire du Mythe, de ses Origines Orientales ses Incarnations Modernes, Société d’édition, Paris, 1974, 102–7; Trousson, 50–5; Timothy Richard Wutrich, Prometheus and Faust, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1995, 52.

See Trousson, 101 (on Villani), 133–4 (Chapman and Vida).

See Wutrich, 114; Trousson, 223ff. Wutrich (124) cites further evidence from the eighteenth century for the idea of the poet-creator, in Lessing and the Swiss-German theorists Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger.

18 Variously dated as beginning somewhere between 1765 and 1770, and ending somewhere between 1784 and 1795, the ‘Storm and Stress’ (or ‘Urgency’) period rebelled against the strictures of rational, neo-classical culture that had dominated the century until then.

19 While following Rousseau’s ideas in some respects, rejecting many of the norms of their society as well as all forms of tyranny, they countered his notion of the ‘natural man’, who had been corrupted by civilisation, with the importance of learning and the arts (Wutrich, 106–8; Trousson, 233ff).

20 Trousson, 238. Niobe was a mortal woman who boasted she was greater than Leto (mother by Zeus of Apollo and Artemis) because she had 14 children. As a result, all of her children were killed by Apollo and Artemis. Tantalus, her father, and king of the underworld, is a ‘Promethean’ figure who stole ambrosia and nectar from the gods. He also tried to trick the Olympian gods by serving them the boiled-up pieces of his son, Pelops. His punishment was to stand forever in a pool of water with an abundant fruit tree overhead. When he reached up for the fruit, it receded up out of his reach, and when he reached down for water, it too receded downwards out of his reach. Whether Faust, soon to be immortalised by Goethe, was a ‘double’ of Prometheus is examined at length by Wutrich (105–42), who argues that Goethe’s early attachment to the Hellenic Prometheus was superseded by the Germanic Faust, who incorporates many of the elements of Prometheus but embodies a more active rebellion than the Titan confined to a rock in the wilderness. The importance of the Faust figure to modernity is stressed by Marshall Berman in his classic study, All That Is Solid Melts Into Air, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1988, 37–86.

21 Trousson, 245.

22 Goethe later attempted two other Prometheus treatments. The first is the incomplete Sk88 Pandorens Wiederkunft (The Delivery of Pandora), which explores the tension between an active (Promethean) and contemplative (Epimethean) participation in the struggle towards human perfectibility (Trousson, 278–87); the second is a 23-line fragment of a poem, ‘Der befriejung des Prometheus (Prometheus unbound)’, written somewhere between 1795–1800 (Wutrich 150). For the text of the fragment in German, see http://www.kuehnlne-online.de/literatur/goethe/unvollendet/10.htm, accessed 14 September 2005.

23 Trousson, 243–5.

24 In a letter of 1769, Voltaire expresses pleasure at having written a philosophical opera about ‘the origins of evil both moral and physical’ and in a letter of 1765 accuses a jealous and oppressive Jupiter of being the cause of it (Letter to d’Argental, October 13, 1769, and letter to La Borde, 4 September 1765 (cited in Trousson 216). In this philosophical opera, humanity is left with love, and an effort of human will to live without gods, or as he expresses elsewhere (in the very last words of his 1759 Candide, ou l’Optimisme), il faut cultiver notre jardin. At the end of Pandora, after all human ills have been let out of the ‘box’, Love appears to Pandora and Prometheus, and the scene suddenly transforms into Love’s palace. ‘I will battle against a hard Destiny for you’, says Love. Prometheus and Pandora then chant together: ‘In vain the heavens muster evils against us, fear and the horror of death. We will suffer together, and this is not really suffering.’ For the French text of the opera, see http://baroquelibretto.free.fr/pandore.htm, accessed 25 September 2005.


26 Wutrich, 120–2; Trousson, 260.


28 Trousson, 290.

29 Trousson, 296, 315. Indeed, in Trousson’s words (296): ‘Romanticism looked for ancestors for itself, and, surprise, it discovered in antiquity a sense of family.’

30 Trousson, 167, n.156 quotes a letter from Byron to John Murray, 12 October 1817.

31 Trousson (300–8) mentions Giacomo Leopardi’s La Scommessa di Prometeo, 1827 (in which Prometheus is used as a symbol of such fraudulent claims), Salvatore Viganò’s mythological ballet (in which Prometheus’ sin of human reason and science can only be forgiven by God), The Shriek of Prometheus by Horatio Smith (in which the eagle is ‘the minister of unrelenting fate’ warning that any move away from God will mean suffering), and most notably, perhaps, John F Newton’s 1811 Return to Nature, or Defence of Vegetable Regimen (in which Prometheus is blamed for man’s suffering because he caused men to eat meat!).

32 Trousson, 320. At 335ff Trousson cites a number of works that make the identification of Prometheus with Napoleon. While occasionally this is a positive identification (for example, Vincenzo Monti’s three part Prometheus, 1797, 1821, 1832), for most Napoleon–Prometheus is the hope for liberation that turned into oppression. It is interesting to examine Napoleon’s own words on his achievements that have a distinctly Prometheus (and Faustian) ring to them: ‘I closed the gulf of anarchy and brought order
out of chaos. I rewarded merit regardless of birth or wealth, wherever I found it. I abolished feudalism and restored equality to all regardless of religion and before the law. I fought the decept monarchies of the Old Regime because the alternative was the destruction of all. I purified the Revolution.' (http://www.lucidcafe.com/library/95aug/napoleon.html, accessed 16 September 2005).

34 Trousson, 312.
35 Trousson, 313–8.
36 Trousson, 321 n.67, 334.
37 Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Major Works, in Zachery Leader and Michael O’Neill (eds), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003, 230. In his own preface to the poem (229), Shelley compares Prometheus and Satan as rebels against the supreme tyrant, concluding that Prometheus is the better symbol because he is less self-serving.
38 Shelley, 229.
39 Shelley, xx.
40 In their Introduction to Shelley’s Major Works (Shelley, xii), Leader and O’Neill point to the effect on Shelley of the failure of the French Revolution, suggesting that Prometheus Unbound was ‘an imaginative reworking of history that results, in the literary work, in successful liberation—not only from tyranny but from the desire for revenge.’
41 Trousson, 333.
42 Trousson notes (343–50) that in general the Romantics did not use Prometheus as a symbol of direct social action, except in England, where Thomas Kibble Hervey (1832, Prometheus), Joseph Lloyd Breten (1840, Prometheus Britannicus) and John Edmund Reade (1842, Record of the Pyramids) used Prometheus as a symbol of either progressive or conservative politics.
43 Trousson asserts Shelley was ‘the authentic archetype before which all authors who followed had to, whether consciously or not, surrender part of their originality’ (384).
44 Duchemin, xx. In the preface to the work, Quinet wrote: ‘Christ, by destroying Jupiter, is the only redemption possible for Prometheus … Prometheus is the true prophet of Christ within the milieu of Greek antiquity’ (Trousson 353). Quinet traces the development of religious insight from Prometheus to (the Romantic) Christ, ‘another Prometheus with a divine face…a crucified god’ (II.5). But Christ is not the end point in this journey—even Christianity is only one of successive manifestations of divinity (Trousson 357). This did not promote cordial relations with the French Church, and he was eventually banned from teaching his university courses. He was involved in the 1848 revolution and later opposed Napoleon III. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Quinet, accessed 28 September 2005.
45 Trousson, 354–9. Quinet’s trilogy is further discussed by Duchemin, nfft. George Steiner critiques the kind of reconciliation that is reached in this work as typical of ‘Christian tragedy’, which cannot accept the irrational dreadful blackness of true tragedy. George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy. Faber and Faber, London, 1964, 332.
46 Trousson’s words, 360.
47 Trousson, 374–81.