Prometheus and The Abstract Sublime

Prometheus
By Lord Byron

Titan! to whose immortal eyes
The sufferings of mortality,
Seen in their sad reality,
Were not as things that gods despise;
What was thy pity's recompense?
A silent suffering, and intense;
The rock, the vulture, and the chain,
All that the proud can feel of pain,
The agony they do not show,
The suffocating sense of woe,
Which speaks but in its loneliness,
And then is jealous lest the sky
Should have a listener, nor will sigh
Until its voice is echoless.

Titan! to thee the strife was given
Between the suffering and the will,
Which torture where they cannot kill;
And the inexorable Heaven,
And the deaf tyranny of Fate,
The ruling principle of Hate,
Which for its pleasure doth create
The things it may annihilate,
Refus'd thee even the boon to die:
The wretched gift Eternity
Was thine—and thou hast borne it well.
All that the Thunderer wrung from thee
Was but the menace which flung back
On him the tormentors of thy rack;
The fate thou didst so well foresee,
But would not to appease him tell;
And in thy Silence was his Sentence,
And in his Soul a vain repentance,
And evil dread so ill dissembled,
That in his hand the lightnings trembled.

Lord Byron’s poem Prometheus is not a typical choice when seeking to explain the sublime. It is not about vast and towering mountain ranges or ferocious predators, excluding the possibly mountainous nature of Prometheus’s rock or the potentially predatory intentions of a certain eagle. It is the more abstract concepts of the sublime that lace this poem, drawing in the reader with feelings of foreboding gravity. It seems that there are two primary sources of the sublime within this poem. One of them is the profound sacrifice of Prometheus, while the other one is his rebellion against the gods. There is of course, specific sublime language used throughout the poem, but this is more superficial in this particular piece than in others referenced within this wiki. The sublime here comes from a much more abstract but no less profound source.

One of the most prominent themes of this poem is sacrifice. Prometheus is a pre-Christian savior who endured tremendous punishment for the benefit of humanity. If this story sounds familiar, that's because many religions throughout time have used this general archetype to engender feelings of solemnity in their followers. While not all sacrifice will fit within the domain of the sublime (A suburban mother using her vacation days to take care of a sick child doesn't exactly engender the same feelings of awe and trepidation as a crucifixion), there is a specific type of martyrdom that seems to summon that distinctive chill down the spine that is so inextricably linked to the sublime. It is not merely the violence of the actions taking place but rather the question that individuals must ask themselves; is there anything or anyone in this world that I care about enough to do something like that? It is an internal sort of sublime beyond Burke’s original theoretical framework. There is something sublime in the act of disconcerting self-reflection. It is an internal struggle of epic proportions to admit one's inadequacy, perceived or otherwise.

The act of rebellion is an integral part of the human experience. Every child will eventually rebel against their parents, and every people, if left for enough time, will rebel against their government. All relationships are a balancing act, and no balance can be maintained forever. This becomes even more certain as a person or people grow beyond their previous boundaries. The act of rebellion is not, however, without consequences. For a child caught smoking cigarettes behind the gym, it might be as simple as revoking gaming privileges. Still, for people struggling for freedom, the ramifications of failure are much more severe. Prometheus brought fire to humanity against the wishes of Zeus. The exact politics of The Olympian pantheon are not particularly relevant in this situation but suffice it to say Zeus was undoubtedly an authority figure over Prometheus. His rebellion against Zeus carries all the typical hallmarks that we would look for in the sublime. There is an element of danger, an element of grandeur, an inspiration to be gleaned, and humbling implications. Unfortunately, just as many other revolutions have begun with idealistic fervor and ended up tainted by humanity, so too did fire become a weapon of war.

It makes a peculiar sort of sense that the ancient Greeks would have attached such a tragic tale to the element of fire. It is warm but also dangerous. It is glorious but eternally hungry. The very nature of fire is sublime. There is a twisted logic to the severity of Prometheus’s punishment. Fire is power, and power is sublime. Those in authority rarely tolerate an alternate source of awe and fear.
Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,
To render with thy precepts less
The sum of human wretchedness,
And strengthen Man with his own mind;
But baffled as thou wert from high,
Still in thy patient energy,
In the endurance, and repulse
Of thine impenetrable Spirit,
Which Earth and Heaven could not convulse,
A mighty lesson we inherit:
Thou art 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;
And Man in portions can foresee
His own funereal destiny;
His wretchedness, and his resistance,
And his sad unallied existence:
To which his Spirit may oppose
Itself—and equal to all woes,
And a firm will, and a deep sense,
Which even in torture can descry
Its own concenter'd recompense,
Triumphant where it dares defy,
And making Death a Victory.