

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GREAT BOOKS OF CIVILIZATION

by Joseph Pearce, Editor-in-Chief

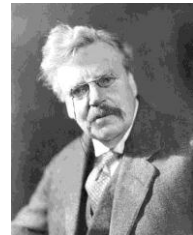


In introducing anything it is always wise to begin by defining our terms. What are the Great Books? What is civilization? We'll begin with the definition of the latter, and with the refutation of common misperceptions of what constitutes civilization.ⁱ

Civilization is not merely the set of customs adopted by a specific people, nor is it defined by the level of complexity within a society. Customs can be dreadfully uncivilized and complex cultures can be truly evil. To speak, for instance, of "Nazi civilization" or "Soviet civilization" is to utter an oxymoron. Put plainly and unequivocally, individuals and societies that are not civilized cannot be part of civilization. In other words, civilization is rooted in morality, and anything rooted in morality is *ipso facto* rooted in philosophy and theology. Thus, putting aside these incorrect definitions and these false and fashionable notions of civilization, the thing itself can be defined as the harmony that arises from the ordering of the life of an individual (or a society) in accordance with his (or its) objective place within the cosmos. Note the word *objective*. It is crucial. Civilization, as an objective entity, is not dependent on who we *think* we are, and what we *think* our place is within the wider scheme of things; it is dependent on who we *really* are, whether we like it or not (or know it or not), and where we belong in an objectively ordered *reality*. If civilization is real it cannot be subject to what we think of it because reality is not subject to what we think of it. The subjectivism (relativism) that denies this foundational fact is inherently deficient in any true awareness of the place of an individual or society within an objectively real cosmos and is *ipso facto* uncivilized.

Having rejected the uncivilized folly of subjectivism, we come to understand that civilization is not subject to our own thoughts or feelings but to the truth beyond ourselves. Since this is so, we cannot know what is civilized *until* we know what is true. The best place to find the truth and to discover the answers to the riddle of man's *being* and *purpose* is in the perennial teaching of Christianity that we are made by God to show forth His goodness and to share eternally in His happiness in heaven. In order to gain this heavenly happiness we must know, love and serve God in this world. We are creatures, made by the Creator, and His will is that we should find eternal joy by knowing, loving and serving Him. This is who we are and where we fit into the cosmos. And this is the very key to civilization. Knowing this fundamental truth and living in obedience to the responsibilities it places upon us *makes* us civilized; failing to know the truth and thereby failing to order our lives in accordance with our responsibilities makes us uncivilized.

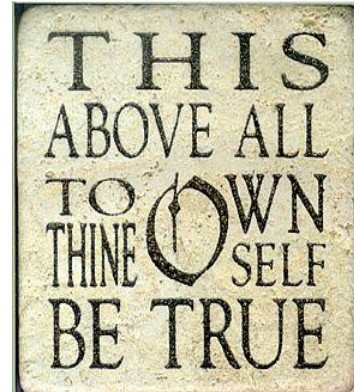
Implicit in the Christian understanding of man's being and purpose is the fact that the human person is *homo viator*, a pilgrim or wayfarer who journeys through mortal life with eternal life always in mind. And yet the great tragedy of our own deplorable epoch is that modern man does not see himself as *homo viator*. "The modern man," wrote Chesterton, "is more like a traveller who has forgotten the name of his destination, and has to go back whence he came, even to find out where he is going."ⁱⁱ *Pace* Chesterton, modern man has not only forgotten the name of his destination, he has even forgotten that he has a destination. He does not know that he is a traveller. He is unaware that he is on a journey or that he has anywhere to go. He is not *homo viator*, nor is he *homo sapiens*, in the sense that he does not know the difference between sapience and techne, or between wisdom and knowledge; he is *homo superbus*, a pathetic creature trapped within the confines of his own self-constructed "self". Making himself the sole



of

arbiter of all “truth” and “morality” he has shrunk the cosmos to the size of his own ego. He is, in fact, such a pathetic creature that he does not even know that he is a creature, in the sense that he does not know or arrogantly denies that he has been created. He has disowned and dethroned God and has made himself the *de facto* god of his own creation.

Homo superbus believes that man’s essential purpose is to love and serve himself. He is motivated by the sin of superbia, the pride that animated Satan’s rebellion, and Adam and Eve’s. His self-centred motto is Satan’s *non serviam*ⁱⁱⁱ, or Polonius’ advice to his son in *Hamlet*: “This above all: To thine own self be true.” Polonius, as *homo superbus* personified, believes that there is no truth beyond the self and therefore nothing to be true to except the self. It is the reductionism of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* metamorphosed into the *reductio ad absurdum* of “I think, therefore everything else is (or isn’t)”. Countering this Cartesian fundamentalism, Etienne Gilson, following the philosophy of his master, Thomas Aquinas, gives the alternative view of man as one who reflects and partakes in the goodness, truth and beauty of God:



Man is not a mind that thinks, but a being who knows other beings as true, who loves them as good, and who enjoys them as beautiful. For all that which is, down to the humblest form of existence, exhibits the inseparable privileges of being, which is truth, goodness and beauty.^{iv}

In conclusion, and in a nutshell, civilization can be defined as the fruits of the works of *homo viator*; whereas its opposite, barbarism, can be defined as the bitter fruits of the works of *homo superbus*. The civilized man is inspired in all that he does by the desire to serve God and his neighbour; the barbarian is inspired by his desire to please himself. If it be argued that history is full of virtuous barbarians, or noble savages, who do not conform to the philosophy and behaviour of *homo superbus*, the response would be that such “barbarians”, insofar as they exhibit the characteristics of *homo viator*, albeit unknowingly, are thereby not “barbarians” at all! On the other hand, cynics and relativists are always barbarians, even if their sophistry and eloquence, and their airs and graces, give them the outward appearance of civilization.

This understanding of civilization necessitates a denial of the Enlightenment fallacy that man is progressing from a primitive barbaric past to a sophisticated civilized future. On the contrary, man is always oscillating between the two poles of his very nature. He is either falling into the folly of the idolatrous love of himself above all others (the barbarism of *homo superbus*), or he is edified by his selfless love for the other (the civilization of *homo viator*). Since this oscillation between sin and virtue is to be found in the heart of every man, it is also to be found at the heart of every age in history. In this sense there is no golden age in the past. Where we find saints we always find sinners. Yet the absence of a golden age does not mean that some ages were not better than others. Each age is characterized by the dominant ideas that animated and motivated its actions, its struggles, its politics, and its art. These ideas leave their indelible mark upon the age, enabling us to see the broad sweep of civilization and barbarism across the centuries.

Viewing the panoramic vista of the history of the West,^v we can see three broad ages of man. The first of these ages is the pre-Christian or pagan age; the second age is the age of Christendom; and the third age may be called the age of Disenchantment.

In the pre-Christian or pagan age, the artists and philosophers examined the struggle between *homo viator* and *homo superbus*, perceiving the superiority of the former over the latter, albeit

through a glass darkly. In this sense the ancient Greeks represent, for the most part, the triumph of civilization over barbarism.



In the age of Christendom we see, subsumed within the very fibre of the individual's conscience and in the very fabric of human society, the affirmation of *homo viator* and the condemnation of *homo superbus*. Christendom's chief characteristic is its overarching unity in the realms of philosophy and theology, a unity in which *homo viator* is not only admired but enshrined. In Christendom, sanctity and heroism are synonymous, with the absence of the one invariably leading to the destruction of the other. And since, for the orthodox Christian, sanctity is also synonymous with sanity, it was incumbent upon all men to overcome the temptations of *homo superbus* (the

barbarian within ourselves) and to become perfect examples of *homo viator* (the saint as the epitome of the civilized man). In this sense the age of Christendom corresponds to the finest flowering of civilization. It is an age in which becoming civilized is the very goal of man's existence because being civilized (holy) is the only means of attaining the perfect civilization of Heaven. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the heart of Christendom – its theology, its philosophy, its painting, its architecture, its sculpture, its music, its literature – is the very incarnation of the integrated harmony, the wholeness and oneness, of its Founder.

In the age of Disenchantment, the wholeness and oneness of Christendom is lost in a progressive fragmentation of thought that continues to this day. From its earliest manifestation in the decay of the Christian humanism and neo-classicism of the Renaissance, and its coming of age in the pride and chutzpah of the superciliously self-named Enlightenment, to its self-defeating victory in the nihilistic nonsense of deconstructionism, the age of Disenchantment represents the triumph of *homo superbus* over *homo viator* and, therefore, the triumph of barbarism over civilization.

At this juncture we should remind ourselves that these three ages do not represent a linear progression in the "right" direction, as the denizens of the age of Disenchantment would have us believe, but a manifestation of the perennial struggle between *homo superbus* and *homo viator*, between barbarism and civilization. On the assumption that civilization is preferable or superior to barbarism, it could be said more truthfully that the age of Disenchantment represents a move in a wrong or regressive direction. In any event, it is certainly wrong to presume that Disenchantment has replaced Christendom, in the sense that it has somehow eclipsed or extinguished the age that preceded it. On the contrary, Christendom is alive and well and existing simultaneously with Disenchantment. This should not surprise us because *homo superbus* can never utterly defeat *homo viator*.



Although the culture has become fragmented and disintegrated in the age of Disenchantment, destroying the unity of the age of Christendom, the presence of Christendom within the age of Disenchantment can be seen in the magic or miracle of Re-enchantment. Many of the greatest works of art in recent centuries are not the products of disenchantment but of re-enchantment. The works of Shakespeare, Dryden, Samuel Johnson, Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Chesterton, Lewis, Tolkien, Waugh and T.S. Eliot, to name but an illustrious few, are inspired by a rejection of disenchantment and a desire for re-enchantment. And what is true of literature is true of painting (the Pre-Raphaelites), architecture (the Gothic Revival), and music (Bruckner, Mahler, Mendelssohn,

Messiaen, Arvo Pärt *etc.*). This disillusionment with disenchantment represents a refusal to believe that reality is only the cold mechanism of the materialist or the meaningless mess of the nihilist; it is an awakening to the enchantment of reality, perceiving it as a miraculous harmony of being, a song, a Great Music, the Music of the Spheres. Hence the employment of “disenchantment” as the operative description of the process that calls itself the Enlightenment. The word, *enchantment*, derives from the Latin, *cantare*, to sing, or *cantus*, song, and the disenchantment of the Enlightenment was the shift from seeing nature as creation, i.e. as a beautiful work of art *sung* into existence by God, to nature as something merely mechanical and, later, merely meaningless. In the age of Disenchantment in which we currently find ourselves the struggle between *homo superbus* and *homo viator* manifests itself in disenchantment and re-enchantment.

Having defined what is meant by civilization, let's proceed to a definition of what constitutes a “Great Book” in the light of our understanding of civilization.

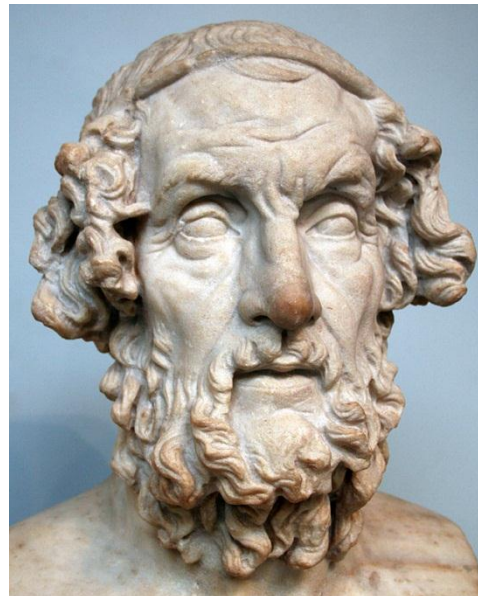
Books can be “great” in two distinct and crucially different ways. They can be “great” objectively, in what they *are*, and they can be “great” subjectively, in what they have *done*. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an objectively “great” book, perhaps objectively the greatest book, in its literary brilliance as a poem and in its sublime exposition of the supernatural destiny of *homo viator* in the light of the theology and philosophy of Christendom. On the other hand, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is a “great” book subjectively in the sense that it is a work of literature that has impacted the culture of the past century to a great degree. It is, however, a eulogy in defence of *homo superbus* and is, as such, an uncivilized work, lacking goodness, truth and beauty. It is, therefore, not an objectively “great” book, which is defined by the degree to which it is civilized, but a subjectively “great” book, which is defined by the degree to which it has done important things to the culture. We should remind ourselves that “important” is emphatically not synonymous with “good”. Evil is important, in the sense that we do it or ignore it at our peril, but it is not good. The Third Reich is one of the most important chapters in twentieth century history but not because Hitler's regime was good. Similarly we should remind ourselves that “culture” is not synonymous with “good”. James Joyce's book is a significant work of *culture* while, at the same time, being profoundly *uncivilized*, and therefore harmful to all that is good, true and beautiful. The obvious analogy is with those other “cultures” that appear in nature. Biological cultures can bring both health and death and just as it is perilous to the body to see no difference between penicillin and e-coli, so it is perilous to the soul to see no difference between good culture (civilization) and bad culture (barbarism). It is, therefore, important to remember that cultures can be barbaric. The culture of death in the Third Reich led to millions dying in concentration camps; the culture of death in the Soviet Union led to

millions dying in the gulag archipelago; and the culture of death in today's institutionalized hedonism is killing millions of unborn children in abortion mills. These are all barbaric cultures ruled over by cultured barbarians. Let's never fall into the trap of believing that something is good or civilized merely because it is cultured.

Now that we have defined our terms, we should be able to distinguish those books that are genuinely great or civilized, in the objective sense in which they mirror man's true image as *homo viator*, from those that are only great in the subjective sense in which they have had a great and important impact upon history through their reflection of the beliefs of *homo superbus*, man's self-deceptive and destructive alter ego. The former are towering testaments to the cooperation of the gifted with the Giver of the gift; high places from which we can survey reality more clearly; edifices that edify. The latter are towering testaments to human pride; high places covered with clouds that prevent us from seeing anything but ourselves; edifices from which we fall. The former are great in the sense that they shine forth the sacred heart of truth, goodness and beauty. The latter are great in the sense that they grate the truth, shredding its surface without ever reaching or touching its core.

Let us end this brief introduction to the Great Books by taking a voyage through the history of western civilization, considering which books are truly great from those that are great truth-graters.

Commencing our odyssey in the pre-Christian or pagan age, we can declare that Homer deserves a place among the truly great for his depiction of the goodness of *homo viator* and the follies of *homo superbus*. In the opening lines of the *Iliad*, the great poet unlocks the morality of the epic drama that is about to unfold by asking for the grace of the gods to show the devastation caused by the prideful anger of Achilles and how the will of God (Zeus) is accomplished in the unfolding of events. The pride of *homo superbus* represented primarily by the actions of Agamemnon, Achilles and Paris are punished in accordance with the overriding will of Zeus. It is also surely significant that the epic ends with praises being sung for the fallen hero, Hector, and not for his conqueror, Achilles. It might also be argued that Homer presents us with the key to understanding his own moral position in the metaphors of reconciliation offered in the epic's penultimate book, in which magnanimity and forgiveness triumph over prideful vengeance. This reading of the *Iliad* may militate against the notion of "pagan heroism" advocated by the neo-classicism of the Enlightenment but it is in complete harmony with the insistence of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis that the pagan myths contain splintered fragments of the one true light that comes from God. The neo-classicists of the Disenchantment were attracted to paganism as a means of escaping from the constraints of Christian moral theology and they read Homer in accordance with this prejudiced desire for moral iconoclasm. For Tolkien and Lewis, however, the pagans were looking for the light that would eventually be revealed in Christ and were assisted in that quest by the grace of the God that they did not know. As Lewis tells us in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, God inspired the pagans with pictures (myths) because they had forgotten how to read. Homer's Muse was, therefore, a grace that he only partially comprehended but which he served with the utmost fidelity, with triumphant results.

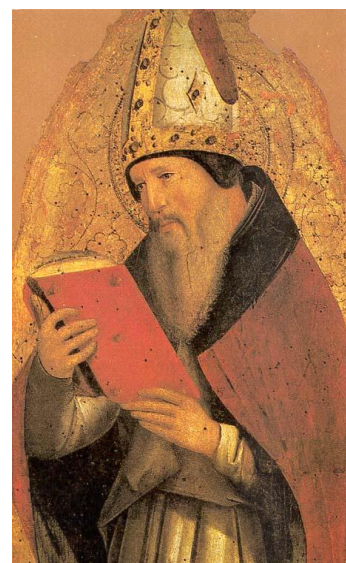


The same triumphant results were achieved in Homer's other great epic, the *Odyssey*, in which the hero is literally *homo viator* making sacrifices in order to get Home. As with the protagonists in the *Iliad*, Odysseus is punished when he forgets his calling as *homo viator* and succumbs to the temptation of *homo superbus*. His boastfulness after the blinding of Polyphemus brings down the curse that destroys his men and delays his own homecoming. If he had been content in decorous humility to remain "Nobody" he would have arrived home expeditiously with his men and ships unharmed; in succumbing to the pride of exalting himself he is humbled by the punishment of the gods. The *Odyssey's* sub-plot also revolves around the theme of man as *homo viator* in the growth to physical and emotional maturity of Telemachos. The journey of Odysseus' son from the inadequacy of boyhood to the fullness of manhood is *homo viator's* rite of passage. For Homer, the true purpose of man is not the static self-absorption of *homo superbus* but the dynamic progress of *homo viator* towards the goal which is his destiny. Finally, for good measure, Homer gives us in the figure of the self-sacrificially circumspect Penelope, the first icon of idealized femininity, a paragon of womanly virtue worthy of the company of Dante's Beatrice and Shakespeare's Cordelia.

In Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Cycle*, we see the first buds of a new springtime of philosophical questioning prophesying the full flowering of Greek philosophy under Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Aeschylus asks fundamental questions about the nature of justice and the role of the divine in breaking the endless cycle of vengeance inherent in human law; Sophocles shows us Oedipus as *homo viator*, a Job-like figure, more sinned against than sinning, who grows in wisdom and virtue through the experience of suffering until, ripened into sanctity, he warrants a mystical assumption into heaven at the end of his life. In *Antigone*, Sophocles has given us a timeless work of literature and political philosophy, providing profound insights into the relationship between religion and the state, and between natural law and human law. Antigone's adherence to the rights of religion over those of the state, and her insistence that the natural law cannot be contradicted by human law, is rooted in her understanding of herself as *homo viator*, whose life on earth is merely a transient phase leading ultimately to the life of eternity.

The fundamental questions asked by the giants of Greek literature were taken up by the great Greek philosophers, and it has been said that all subsequent philosophy is but footnotes on the ideas enunciated by the Greeks. It is indeed one of the great tragedies of the age of Disenchantment that the footnotes to Plato and Aristotle are being written by those who have not understood the text upon which they are commenting. For the age of Christendom, however, the Greeks were allies upon whom the foundations of Christian philosophy were laid. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and the great Christian philosophers were hugely indebted to Plato and Aristotle and used the ideas of their illustrious forebears to forge the impregnable armour of *fides et ratio* with which Christendom has withstood the claims of heretical theology and false philosophy.

The Great Books of early Christendom, such as Augustine's *Confessions* and *City of God* and Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, bear the hallmark of Greek philosophy, and the highest philosophical achievement of the whole of Christendom, the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, can be seen as a dialogue with, and a perfection of, Aristotelianism. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Christendom's highest work of literary art, is a poetic commentary on Aquinas' *Summa*, in which Dante, as a character within the work representing Everyman or *homo viator* personified, goes on a journey from the dark wood of sin to the heights of heaven. As the Comedy unfolds, the dynamism of *homo viator* ascending Mount Purgatory through the motivating



power of penance, and the overflowing joy of the souls who have reached their true Home in Paradise, is contrasted with the stagnant stasis of *homo superba* stuck forever in the flames of his own egocentric passion. It is indeed ironic, and tragi-comic, that the age of Disenchantment only reads the *Inferno*, considering it better than *Purgatory* or *Paradise*. Clearly the age of *homo superba* finds itself stuck where it evidently belongs!

In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one of the truly Great Books of Christendom, all of the characters are on a journey in the literal or physical sense of being on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, but only some of them are on the deeper pilgrimage that leads, via Canterbury, to Heaven. The work serves to illustrate the genuine pilgrim (*homo viator*) from the hypocrites (*homo superba*) who are only along for the ride. As such, Chaucer's *Tales* can be seen as a dialogue between *homo viator* and *homo superba*, in which the latter is exposed as being hypocritical through Chaucer's ingenious use of allegory and irony. In this, as in all the works of Christendom, *homo viator* is the hero and *homo superba* the villain.



Once we move into the age of Disenchantment we see the schism between the new spirit of skeptical humanism (*homo superba*) and the reaction against it in the form of tradition-oriented works of Re-enchantment, which can be seen as *homo viator*'s riposte to the attack upon him. Thus, for instance, Thomas More's *Utopia* and the works of Shakespeare can be seen as ripostes to the new humanism of Machiavelli and to the rise of anti-clerical secularism in England. The disenchantment of Puritan Fundamentalism that sought to remove song, ritual and art from religious worship was countered by the re-enchantment of the

Metaphysical Poets and, later, by Dryden in poems such as *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther*. The disenchantment of eighteenth century rationalism was countered by the conservative re-enchantment of Samuel Johnson, the radical conservatism of William Cobbett, and the Romanticism of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Sir Walter Scott. The disenchantment with the past inherent in the rampant modernism of the industrial revolution was countered by the re-enchantment of Romanticism and neo-mediaevalism, the latter of which spawned the Gothic Revival, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Oxford Movement. The disenchantment of the dark Romanticism of Byron and Shelley, led to the re-enchanted darkness of the Decadents, such as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Huysmans and Wilde, all of whom became converts to Catholicism. The cold disenchantment of Victorian utilitarianism was confuted by the enchanted world of Dickens and his enchanting characters. The nihilistic disenchantment and despair of the twentieth century has inspired the re-enchanted beauty of the works of Chesterton, Tolkien, Lewis, Waugh and Eliot. For all its bombast and bluster, the forces of disenchantment in our own time have not produced works as magnificent and popularly successful as *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*. There is no poetry of disenchantment in the twentieth century to match the beauty of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, and the greatest poem of disillusionment in the past century, Eliot's "The Waste Land", is inspired by a profound disillusionment with disillusionment!

Disenchanted with disenchantment, these multifarious authors and poets serve to illustrate that Great Books are still being written in spite of the prevailing spirit of gloom imposed upon our times by the destructive power of *homo superbus* and the deplorable zeitgeist that is his inheritance.

His inheritance is not our inheritance. The Great Books are our inheritance. They are the inheritance of all of us, or all of us who want them. In reading the Great Books we find ourselves in the presence of Great Minds thinking about Great Things. We find ourselves in the presence of almost three thousand years of genius. We find ourselves in the company of the *illustrissimi* of civilization. In what better company could we possibly hope to spend our time? This side of the grave, there is no better company. The better company, the best possible company, awaits *homo viator* after his temporal journey is over. In the meantime, and we live in mean times, the Great Books are good companions for the journey and excellent guides. Like the *lembas* which sustained Frodo and Sam on their journey through Mordor to Mount Doom, the Great Books are manna for the mind and food for the soul.

[Endnotes are on page 112]

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Introduction to Greek Year Study Guides by Dr. Robert Alexander

“The pleasures arising from thinking and learning will make us think and learn all the more.” - Aristotle



The Study Guides that follow are meant to be a companion to the Angelicum Academy’s Great Books selections [*organized in the manner of a four-year, eight-semester program at the secondary or college level*]. In putting it together we were guided by two principles: 1) that we approach each work on its own terms in an effort to be faithful to its meaning and 2) that we also be aware of the larger tradition out of which the work came and which sets the terms, methods, and forms of the work. We wanted to avoid inserting any beliefs or opinions of our own on the work. We also wanted to do justice, where we could, to the deeper level of meaning that comes from seeing a work in the context of the tradition—science, philosophy, history, and literature—from which it was produced. Because content, structure, and language are basic to all of the works, we devoted questions to those areas.

There is a brief *Summary* of each work followed by suggestions of *Things to Think About* while reading. These suggestions flag some of the important ideas, themes, and images from the work that might be missed when a student encounters it for the first time. The *Study Questions* are sequenced to move the reader through the work. Some of the questions ask for details as a way of encouraging a close, careful reading while others draw attention to parallels and contrasts, significant shifts, or recurring images. Because language is the medium of books and no author chooses either his words or his form casually, there are specific questions directed to the language and structure of each work. The *Reflection Questions* assume the work has been read and are meant to help the reader begin to pull it together as a whole. In addition to belonging to the canon of Western thought –the *Great Conversation* as Robert Hutchins called it - each individual work is a part of a living tradition, so, whenever possible, questions have been included that place the work in its historical context and that look back to the tradition out of which it emerged to help the student recognize the ways in which works speak to each other. The questions are by no means exhaustive and, with the exception of some of the detail questions, they are not asked in a spirit of evoking one-word right or wrong answers. They are intended to enhance an understanding of the work by provoking thoughtful consideration of the text and opening further lines of questioning.



Cosmologies

From ancient time to the present, western thought has undergone fundamental changes in worldviews, and these changes are reflected in the works we read. These works did not emerge from a vacuum; they both grew out of and influenced their worldview. Worldviews are not neat and tidy closed systems. They are an attempt by man to provide answers for the most personal and universal questions. We can discern five over the course of Western Civilization: 1) the mythic view of ancient Greece that in origin the universe is uncreated and eternal (as described by Hesiod); 2) the creation account of Genesis; 3) the Ptolemaic worldview; 4) the Copernican; and 5) the Modern.

The first is the mythic understanding that we find in Hesiod and Homer. Pre-scientific and therefore by modern scientific standards primitive, and in some ways anthropomorphic, it nonetheless took note of and accounted for the natural world and the two fundamental principles of change and permanence. The creation account in Genesis differs from the classical Greek account not just in details---Yahweh's creations, light, waters, earth, are not personified deities---but more importantly, in its source. The classical view was an effort by man to use his intellect and his imagination to make sense of creation. Genesis represents the words of a transcendent God revealing, through His prophets, His providential order and His plan to call men into relationship with Him. The Ptolemaic scheme that rose to prominence in the 2nd century AD was a radical shift from the mythic and Biblical worldviews that preceded it. Drawing on centuries of astronomical charts and tables and using mathematics to arrive at a knowledge of "things which are always what they are," Ptolemy described a universe in which sun, planets, and stars all revolved around the earth.

The next major shift came in the 16th century when Copernicus, seeking to answer the discrepancies in Ptolemy's schemes, startled the world by advancing the theory that the sun, not the earth, was the center of the universe. This heliocentric system was difficult for many people to accept, and it was not until the mid-17th century that it became the established theory of the universe. By the early 20th century, our perception of our place in the universe changed again as new galaxies, light years away from our own, opened up to us. Perhaps more startling than the new galaxies was what opened to us as we shifted our gaze from the visible world we can see with our senses to the invisible structures of reality in the atom. Advances in light, wave, and atomic theory

continue to reveal new answers to our questions and raise new questions about our beginnings. Each of these systems will be looked at in some detail as we come to them in our reading. For now, we are starting at the beginning, with Hesiod and Homer.

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CREATION: The Beginnings

It is clear from Homer's presentation of the gods that the Greeks saw nature as a world in which two things apparently opposite mixed. Nature was at once fecund and teeming with life, and at the same time its powers of fecundity or generation were controlled and limited. They were finite and had form. Brimming life didn't spill over into a riot of shapeless or meaningless flux. There were "things," trees, birds, rocks, the sea, and while these things changed--trees grew from being small into old trees, rocks were crushed or smoothed out from the effects of rain, the sea was constantly in motion and so changing-- they continued to remain what they were: the eucalyptus never ceased being a eucalyptus tree in order to become a pine or oak, and the sea never confused itself with sky, no matter how much of it was condensed into clouds on a hot day. It was still there, existing as the sea.

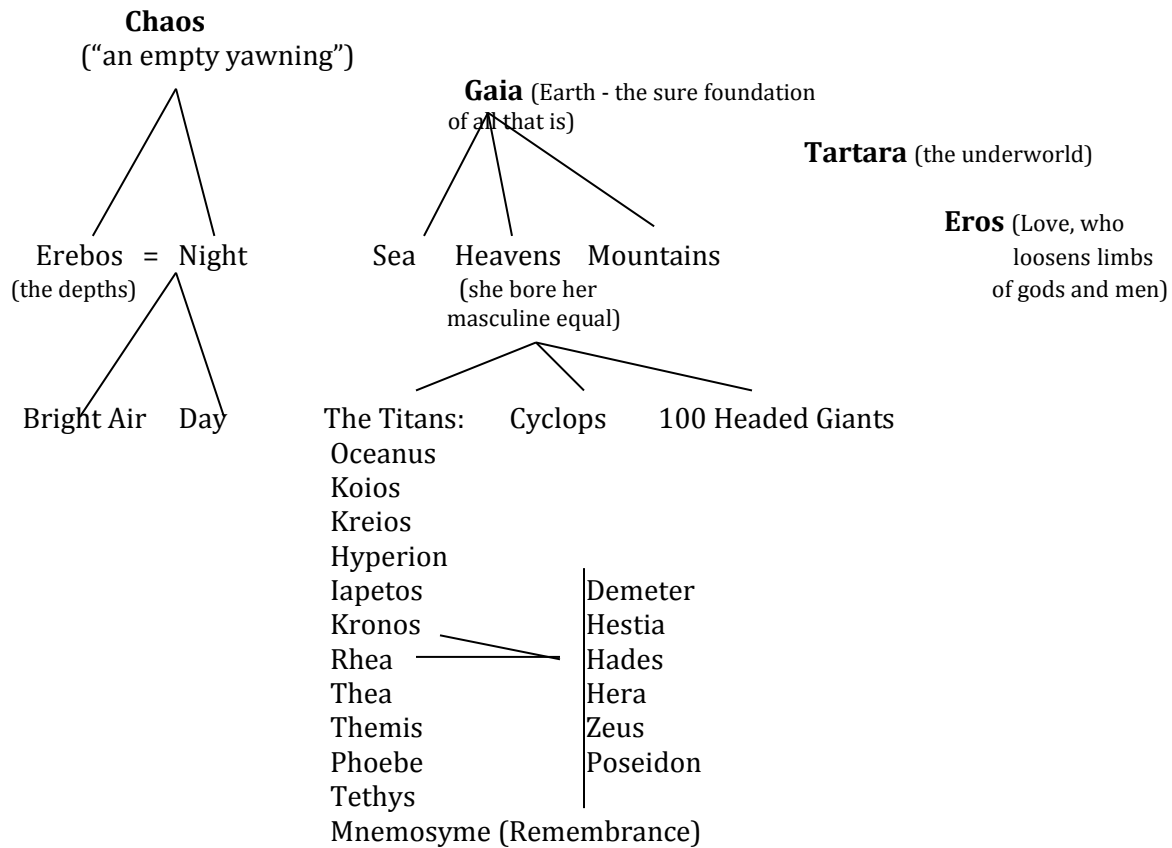
The Greeks saw clearly that life consisted of two apparently contradictory forces interacting, one of growth and change (all things were in flux), and one of permanence and stability. These same two qualities were present, or rather imaged, in their gods. The Hellenic gods were in nature, a part of generation, and possessed within themselves at the same time some principle of order, some quality of form or definition. This is clearly shown in the procession of the gods from their beginnings to the point at which Zeus establishes his rule. Generation threatens to overcome order, but Zeus becomes sovereign; he is the one who maintains order and stability in both the Olympian and human communities.

According to Homer, the beginnings of his rule go back to Okeanos and Tethys. Okeanos and Tethys are estranged from each other; they no longer make love and the generation that had come from their lovemaking has come under control. Homer says, in *The Iliad*, "the two quarreled and have not made love since" (14,198ff). This estrangement between Okeanos and Tethys is apparently a mythic way of expressing that the teeming procreation within nature has ceased, that the tendency of one generation to simply replace another in different form has stopped. Otherwise, the world would have no order; things would have no identity, no form; nature would simply go on producing infinitely, out of control.

Put another way, we can say that what we find in Homer is an early consciousness that some permanence exists in the mutability of things; that within or underlying the constant changing

nature of things, something remains the same. At a level of symbolization, Homer has arrived at a point in time where symbols are sufficient to express a degree of differentiation, an awareness of difference in apparently similar things. The different gods represent our consciousness of god-head differentiated into various aspects or powers: Zeus images power and sight combined; Athena these same qualities but as his daughter in feminine form; Hephaistos, the creative form-giving powers in nature which are linked almost inseparably to the human community with its own powers of making; Ares, the raw passion of power; Aphrodite, this same passion associated with beauty and the erotic desires it awakens in humans. This same sense of differentiation associated with qualities of permanence is evidenced in the treatment of the human community as well, in the fact that most of the heroes are divine born. Achilles is the offspring of Thetis, a goddess who mated with Peleus, his father. All that he does seems ultimately linked to this fact. The readings will suggest this, but for now, the point is that the differentiated symbols of the poem represent an awareness of apparently contradictory things clashing and still coming to order. Symbolically, Zeus' reign suggests the coming into existence of this order, a moment of consciousness, we might say, which corresponds to an awakening to the fact of meaning in history, in time.

In Hesiod's *Theogony* – one of our first readings - the beginnings are presented this way:



Out of Gaia came Ouranos, the Heavens; Pontos, the Sea; and the Mountains, and Gaia bore these all without Eros, without love. Gaia then mated with Ouranos (the Heavens) and produced the generation of Titans. Ouranos covered Gaia each day, as the sky covers the earth, begetting children and hiding them. Gaia "groaned" under this affliction until she plotted with her children to overthrow Ouranos and stop the endless generation. Gaia then conspired with Kronos (or Cronos), and one night when, enflamed with love, Ouranos covered the earth, Kronos cut off his "parts"--

blood was spilt, producing the Erinyes and Aphrodite, the goddess of love. All of the images are an effort to differentiate fundamental aspects and principles of life.

After the revolution (there seems to be a suggestion of a consciousness of some principle of stability entering into the processes of generation), when Kronos was told he would be replaced by his own son, to pretend this he swallowed the children he fathered with Rhea as they were born. Rhea, fearful of losing Zeus, hid him in a cave at birth, and when he grew up, he and the Titans overthrew Kronos and established the reign of Zeus. This moment seems to mark the point at which Greek consciousness or imagination becomes aware of an element of permanence in the flux of things.

When the procession of gods is taken in its entirety, from its beginnings to the rule of Zeus, it suggests a movement from forces that are more immaterial in nature to those that are more material. The process suggests a gradual incarnating of spiritual powers. Okeanos and Tethys are "seeds" of things, Ouranos the heavens, and Kronos an image of an element of time in generation (Kronos = *chronos*, chronology: time). If we relate this to the human community, we see a divine element present in the human: while Achilles and the other heroes are mortal and so subject to death, some part of them still lives on in the afterlife or in their immortalized presence in poetry. There is in them something everlasting.

The Greek Cosmology



The Order of Zeus, the head of the Olympians, arose from a recognizable intelligible pattern. The gods are a part of a process of generation, things that once had no existence and then are brought into being. They are a part of nature, immanent in it. At the same time they are eternal, but not in the same way in which the Christian God, who has no beginning, is eternal. They are not subject to death or mortality like other things in nature. Is there a principle to this cosmology? Apparently so. There is a past, and there are definite places. There was the ancient order of Gaia and Ouranos from which the gods arose, remote, immaterial, distant. There is the gradual procession producing the next generation. Kronos mating with Rhea and so giving rise to time as we know it. And then there is the reign of Zeus in which the gods are more fully connected to nature and closer to man.

To round out the cosmology of the Greek mind, it's important to consider some of the other major figures that make up its typology. Besides the heavens and the sea and the earth, there are in the Greek cosmos two sorts of underworld, Hades and Tartarus.

Hades is the land where the dead go. When Hektor dies, his soul is described as "fluttering free of the limbs...down into Death's house" (22, 361ff). And in Book XXIII (95ff) when the shade of Patroklos visits Achilles to ask why he has not yet received burial, Achilles tries to clasp it, but "the spirit went underground like vapour" and his hands go through it. When a warrior dies in the *Iliad*, he is described as having a darkness come over him, a mist cover his eyes. Death is a descent into shadow. The souls "there," in this land of the dead, have no physical body, no fullness of life, and live in a murky sub-real shadowland. After Patroclus comes to Achilles in a dream, Achilles says, "Even in the house of Hades there is left something, a soul and an image, but there is no real

heart of life in it" (23, 103). Whatever the afterlife is, it represents a loss, a privation that men should fear.

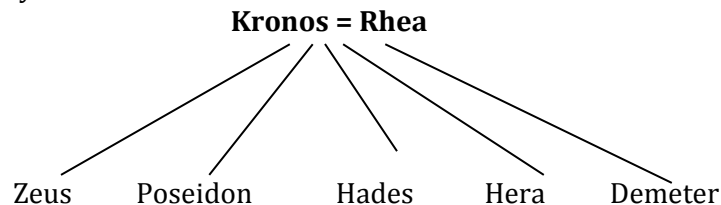
Tartarus is darker, more foreboding, not simply a place where shades go but a place set aside for retributions and punishments. The Titans are bound there for their insolence. Iapetos and Kronos are being kept at the farthest bounds of the earth where there is no sun shining and Tartarus guards them (8, 477). And in Book XIV, when Hera needs the help of Sleep to seduce Zeus, the minor god agrees on one condition: he will exchange sleep for Pasitha, "one of the younger Graces" whom he desires, but Hera must first take an oath "so that all the under gods who gather about Kronos may be witnesses." The Titans, then, are under the pit (14, 275).

According to Homer in the *Iliad*, the genealogy, then, looks something like this:

Okeanos + Tethys
("from whom the gods have risen") ("our mother")

1, 423: Okeanos: from whence the gods arose (XIV, 246) "seed" of immortals (the primal source of all that lives)

14, 200: Tethys: "our mother"



All of this is told us when, in order to get charms to seduce Zeus, Hera lies to Aphrodite, telling her that she is going "to Oceanos, whence the gods have risen, and Tethys our mother who brought me up kindly in their own house, and cared for me and took me from Rhea, at that time when Zeus of the wide brows drove Kronos underneath the earth and barren water. I shall go to visit these, and resolve their division of discord, since now for a long time they have stayed apart from each other and from the bed of love..." (14, 200ff)

There is, too, some accord or harmony between the Olympian order and the earth, that is, within nature. When Zeus and Hera make love in Book XIV, the earth becomes fecund. Earth is responsive (14, 345). It is important to note that while we are in an epic world, the moment of lovemaking is lyrical:

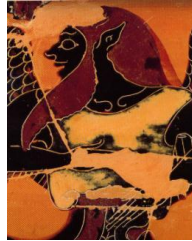
"The divine earth broke into young, fresh grass, and into dewy clover, crocus and hyacinth so thick and soft it held the hard ground deep away from them. There they lay down together and drew about them a golden wonderful cloud, and from it the glimmering dew descended."

It is also said of Zeus's order that it came into being by lot and that he shares power with Hades (ruler of the Underworld) and Poseidon (the ruler of the Sea), his brothers. Zeus apparently, has greater power in the fact that he is the oldest, the first in the order of generation. He rules the heavens as a result; Poseidon, however, warns Zeus that if he doesn't sack Troy he'll incur his anger

(15, 185-211). This is probably the boasting of an angry brother; the times he backs down from Zeus make it clear his powers are no match for his brother's.

* * * * *

A note on date notation: in accordance with the traditional dating system used in the West, and reflecting the actual reference point – the presumed year of the birth Christ (without reference to which contemporary dating is essentially meaningless) - throughout this text years before the birth of Christ are referenced as “BC” (Before Christ) and years after the birth of Christ as “AD” (*Anno Domini* – the year of the Lord).



Hesiod - *Theogony*

(8th Century BC)

CONTEXT

Hesiod's writings cannot be dated exactly, but the consensus is that he wrote sometime between 850 BC and 775 BC. The eighth century BC was a period of expanding trade for Greece both to Europe in the West and Asia in the East, and the influences of these other cultures, particularly the East, can be seen in Hesiod's writing. Born to a merchant sea-man who had given up the sea to make a living off the land, Hesiod grew up a shepherd. He tells us that it was while he tended the sheep that the Muses instructed him to sing. Two of his writings survive intact, *Works and Days*, a didactic poem of moral, spiritual, and practical advice, and the *Theogony*, a genealogy of the gods which presumably reflected the religious beliefs of the ancient Greeks. Hesiod and Homer were the first of the Greek poets whose song and poetry were actually written down instead of being passed on through the oral tradition and so they stand at the beginning of what we know as Greek poetry.

SUMMARY

Hesiod begins *The Theogony* with an invocation to the Muses. He asks the Muses for help that he may sing of the 'holy family of the immortals...how the gods and the earth were born...from the beginning.' First came the four uncreated: Chaos, Gaia (or Earth), Tartarus, and Eros. Chaos gave birth to Erebus and Night, who came together to give birth to Air and Day. From Gaia came Uranus (or Heaven), her equal, and Mountains and the Sea. Gaia (who is feminine) mated with Uranus (who is masculine) and they produced the Titans, six sons and six daughters, the Cyclops and the 100-headed giants. Uranus loathed his own children and as each was born he hid them deep in the ground. Gaia, groaning in sorrow at his actions, urged her children to overthrow their father. Only Kronos was not afraid. Following his mother's plan, Kronos hid one night when Uranus came to lie with Gaia, and cutting off his father's genitals, threw them over his shoulder into the sea. Where the drops of blood fell to the Earth, there arose the Furies, the tree nymphs, and the giants. Where they landed in the sea, Aphrodite was formed.

Kronos bedded with Rhea and she bore him Hestia, Hera, Demeter, Hades, and Zeus. Having learned that, like his father, Kronos too would be overthrown by one of his own children, to prevent which he swallowed each of them at birth, all but Zeus whom Rhea gave birth to in hiding. Raised in

secret, Zeus tricked his father into bringing his brothers and sisters back up and freed the other Titans whom Kronos had imprisoned. The Titans gave Zeus gifts of gratitude, the weapons of thunder and lightning.

Hesiod goes on to describe the births of the hateful children of night, the monstrous children of Ceto, the holy family of nymphs, and all the gods associated with nature. For ten years there was continuous conflict between the Titans and the children of Kronos. Zeus finally summoned the gods together and, promising honor to those who would fight with him, he led them in a war against the Titans. The war, called the Titanomachy, lasted for nine days, ending with the final defeat of the Titans. As victor, Zeus took his father's throne among the gods, and he is described as ruling with wisdom and justice. He fathered many children with goddesses and mortal women. Hesiod ends his genealogy of the gods with a catalogue of gods and heroes born from the unions of goddesses with mortal men.

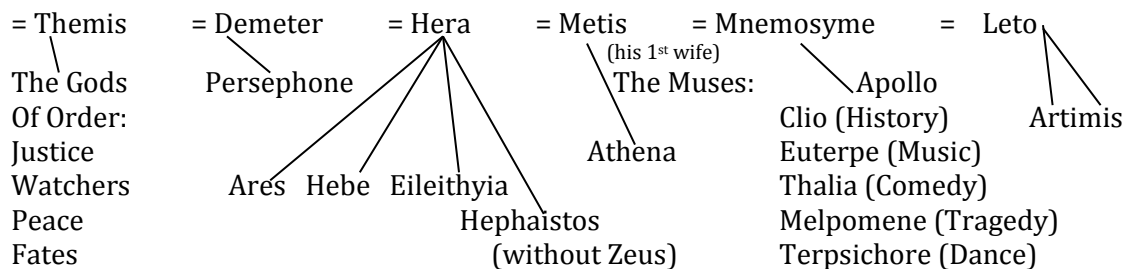


Things to Think About When Reading

1. Notice the movement from more spiritualized matter to more physical matter over the generation of the gods.
2. Be aware of the nature of the early gods and how that nature changes over the generations.
3. Sometimes it is easier to grasp a genealogy when it is set out visually. The lineages of the primary gods can be found in the introduction on cosmology. Below are the children of Zeus by divine lovers as given by Hesiod.



The Children of Zeus (With divine lovers)



Lawfulness

Erato (Lyric poetry)
Polyhymnia (Sacred songs)
Urania (Astronomy)
Calliope (Eloquence)



Clio Thalia Erato Euterpe Polyhymnia Calliope Terpsichore Urania Melpomene

The Muses



Study Questions

[Note: "ll." stands for lines. *E.g.*, ll. 10-20 means lines 10 to 20]

1. What are the four self-made elements (ll. 116ff.)?
2. Why did Gaia incite her children to overthrow their father (ll. 156-168)?
3. Describe the monsters that Ceto gave birth to (ll. 270-336).
4. Prometheus played a trick on Zeus that left him angry with men so that he refused to give them fire. When Prometheus gave it to them, Zeus punished him severely. What affliction did he send men (ll. 571-611)?
5. How did Zeus insure that the line of sons overthrowing their fathers would end with him (ll. 886-900)?
6. How does Hesiod mark the end of the generation of the gods and turn to the mating between goddesses and men (ll.963-68)
 - Why do you think he makes a distinction between the two?

[Note: indented questions require a separate answer, under the same number as the main question.]

7. Contrast the account of beginnings that Hesiod gives us with that of *Genesis*.
8. Hesiod begins with an extended invocation to the Muses. The divine power to bring order is associated with words. John begins the Fourth Gospel with “In the beginning was the Word...” What do the two openings have in common?
 - How are they different?
9. In Hesiod’s account, love (Eros) doesn’t enter the world until after the Chasm, Gaia, and Tartara. What are the implications of that when compared to the Christian belief that love is integral to the first movement of creation?
10. In his genealogy of the gods, Hesiod describes fathers hiding or imprisoning their sons because they fear them and sons overthrowing their fathers. Contrast these relationships to that of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Trinity. What is the difference?
11. Hesiod begins with an extended invocation to the Muses. The divine power to bring order is associated with words. John begins the Fourth Gospel with “In the beginning was the Word...” What do the two openings have in common? How are they different?
12. In Hesiod’s account, love (Eros) doesn’t enter the world until after the Chasm, Gaea, and Tartara. What are the implications of that when compared to the Christian belief that love is integral to the first movement of creation?
13. Hesiod describes the lineage and birth of monsters and dark, chthonic powers who are destroyed or banished to Tartarus. In *Genesis* we are told of the fall of the angels. Think about the implications of the beginnings of evil in the two accounts of creation. How are they different?
 - Why is that difference crucial?



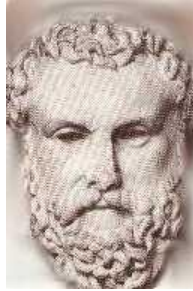
Questions on Language and Form

1. All of nature is in harmony with the divine order. In the *Invocation*, Hesiod asks the muses to help him sing. Words for him are not simply discursive; they are a song. Why is that important?
2. Scientists use words to explain the causes of things. Hesiod is describing generation. How does his use of words differ from a scientist’s?
 - Does Hesiod’s use of language in depicting the gods point to objects in the world as a scientist’s would? What is he describing that is more than what the scientist describes?



Reflection Questions

1. Our understanding of beginnings is important. They are an important clue to the nature of man, whether he is himself high or low born. The modern world assumes low beginning—chemical reactions, amoebas, apes. According to the ancient world, were man's beginnings high or low?
 - How do beginnings affect our image of man?



Aeschylus

Prometheus Bound

(525-456 BC)

Aeschylus was born into an aristocratic family at Eleusis, near Athens. As a young man he fought the Persians at Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea. According to tradition, he wrote his own epitaph which described his military feats during the Persian War but did not even mention his success as a playwright. He won his first dramatic competition in 484 BC at the Great Dionysia (a religious festival) and his last one twenty-five years later in 458 BC for the *Oresteia*. He died in Gela, Sicily in 456 BC. As the first of the three great Greek dramatists, he is called the father of Greek tragedy. He wrote more than seventy plays, of which seven have survived. His innovative introduction of a second actor to the standard chorus and one actor format allowed true dialogue between characters for the first time. Winning thirteen Firsts in the drama competitions during his lifetime, he continued to win them posthumously when his tragedies were entered into competition again after his death.

CONTEXT

Prometheus Bound is the first and only surviving play of a trilogy. Like the *Oresteia*, this trilogy deals with conflicting claims of right. The fragments that remain of the second and third plays follow the pattern of the later *Oresteia*, in which the violence introduced in the first play is answered and complicated in the second (giving us another view of the conflict) and resolved in the third. The play is set immediately after the Titanomachy in which Zeus and his siblings overthrow Cronus and the Titans. Although he was a Titan, Prometheus had learned from his mother, Gaia (Earth), that reason and justice would defeat brute force and so had joined with Zeus in the battle. The race of man that had been created during the reign of Cronus was primitive in its ways and an offense to Zeus. In the play, men are depicted as 'mindless' creatures, almost like clods of earth. But Prometheus took pity on them, teaching them reason, giving them skills and tools, and finally the fire of Hephaestus, a divine, creative light. Zeus was enraged at the last gift and the play gives us his response.

SUMMARY

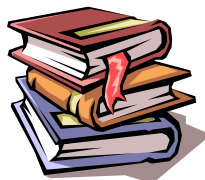
The play opens with Strength and Violence dragging Prometheus up the side of a rocky mountain to a desolate cliff. They are followed by Hephaestus. The three gods are there to chain Prometheus to a rock and leave him, but Strength and Violence are not just following the orders of Zeus, they are angry with Prometheus for being a champion of the human race and giving it fire, the privilege of the gods. Though Hephaestus is the overseer of fire and the one most directly offended, he does not want to see Prometheus punished in such a cruel way and he does his task only because he fears ignoring the command of Zeus. Left alone, Prometheus laments the thousand years he knows he will have to endure his punishment. The Chorus, daughters of Oceanus, arrive to lament with him, and in answer to their questions he describes the help he gave Zeus in his fight with the Titans and all that he did for man that caused Zeus to order this punishment. Oceanus himself arrives as a friend and offers to go to Zeus and plead for Prometheus' release. Prometheus is glad for the friendship and the offer but tells Oceanus that it will do no good, that he risks bringing trouble on himself, and Oceanus leaves.

Prometheus knows through foresight (his name means 'forethought') that one day Zeus will have need of him and release him. Io, a mortal woman whom Zeus desired and is now chased and stung by a gadfly sent by the jealous Hera, stumbles in. She is amazed to find that Prometheus knows all about her torment and asks him to tell her when and how it will come to an end. The Chorus interrupts to ask Io to tell her tale and she agrees. When she finishes, Prometheus tells her of the wandering and suffering that lie ahead of her and prophesies that a child of her line will set him free. The gadfly stings her again and Io rushes off. The Chorus prays never to be the object of Zeus' desire or forced into an unequal marriage. Prometheus makes a startling disclosure to the Chorus, revealing that a marriage of Zeus will be the ruling god's undoing because it will produce a son who is stronger than he is and who will overthrow him. Only Prometheus is able to help him avert this fate and it is this knowledge that will force Zeus to set him free. Hermes arrives as Zeus' messenger, demanding to know about the marriage that will lead to this calamity. Prometheus answers him with contempt and refuses to give him the information. Hermes warns that if he does not give it, his torment will be increased. Prometheus has already foreseen this and stands by his refusal. Hermes leaves and the promised earthquake begins, ending the play.



Things to Think About When Reading the Play

1. Think about the relationship of sight or knowledge to power or force.
2. Prometheus is a god, not a human. Keep in mind the implications of that for a tragic hero.



Study Questions

1. When the play opens, Zeus has recently defeated the Titans and assumed the throne of the gods. What bearing does that have on the punishment he has devised for Prometheus (ll. 34-35)?
2. What are the gifts that Prometheus gave to man (ll. 443-507)?
3. Hera's gadfly will pursue Io all the way into Egypt. Does Hera's persistence defeat Zeus' desire for Io (ll. 845-51)?
4. Zeus is king of the gods; Prometheus has foresight. Which is the greater power, force or sight? How important is foreknowledge to Prometheus' suffering?
5. Characterize Hermes' attitude toward Prometheus and Prometheus' toward Hermes (ll. 945-1057).
6. What is the greater punishment that Zeus promises Prometheus if he does not tell him what he wants to know (ll. 1018-28)?
7. The image Aeschylus gives us of Prometheus is of a god outstretched on a rock. Compare and contrast this image with Christ.
 - What are the similarities? What are the differences?
8. Prometheus' gift of fire is a divine spark, making it possible for man to come out of his "mindlessness." Taking that as a starting place in your thinking, what does Christ's coming into the world do to change man? Remember: He is the Word, the means by which God created man.
9. Prometheus' suffering is made bearable because he has foresight. With that in mind, why do you think Christ's cry "Why have you abandoned me?" is important?
10. Prometheus consoles Io in her suffering with his divine knowledge, helping her to see. Is there any way in which that knowledge can be compared to faith?



Questions on Language and Form

1. Think about the imagery of the play. Strength and Violence are almost more abstract qualities than they are real characters (ll. 1-84). Why? Io is presented to us in the likeness of a cow. These are images that resonate with more than just their surface meanings.
 - What else do they suggest?
2. Hephaestus, Prometheus, and Hermes all describe Zeus in terms of his terrible power and anger. How is the description of Zeus when he finally comes to Io different (ll. 845-51)?
 - Why is it important?
3. Think about the qualities of a tragic hero: nobility, a character flaw that causes his downfall, a recognition of his fault. Do you think that Prometheus is a tragic hero?

4. One of the gifts that accompany light is language. With language, man can see and, along with the gods, create. One of the fruits of the gift is the actual play that Aeschylus has written, what he does through and with language. What does the play reveal about the relationship between men and gods that men were denied in their mindless state?
 5. Prometheus and Io are both suffering the anger of the gods. Prometheus has foresight so that he can see what torments lie ahead of him; Io has been suffering blindly. Could Prometheus have born the suffering inflicted on him if he didn't have foresight?
 - Is what Prometheus tells Io helpful to her or not? Why or why not?
-

ⁱ This definition of civilization transcends the common definition rooted in the Latin *civilis*, meaning merely “citizen”, and has its root in the Augustinian notion that true citizenship, i.e. true civilization, is reserved for those who owe their allegiance to the *civitas Dei* (city of God) as opposed to the *civitas Terrena* (city of Man).

ⁱⁱ Michael Finch, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986, p. 258

ⁱⁱⁱ I will not serve

^{iv} Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937, p. 317

^v Although the vast majority of the Great Books of civilization are the fruits of western culture, which is therefore the focus of our attention, the definition of civilization enunciated above remains applicable to all cultures, east and west. Properly understood, civilization is not western or eastern; it is universal. Great Books speak to the greatness in all men. They address the human condition. *Homo viator* is Everyman in every culture; *homo superbus* is his enemy in every culture.