

# Free To Serve

When school starts up again and you or your children sit down to tackle the assignment that has become a perennial favorite of composition teachers everywhere, "What I Did During My Summer Vacation," odds are pretty good that this traditional chronicle of leisure activities will include the reading of a book or two. Perhaps you will have chosen a classic of literature, such as *Moby Dick*, to while away the waking hours between excursions to the beach and excursions to the cinema to take in films about excursions to the beach; or a recent bestseller that all of your friends had been talking about, the autobiography of some celebrity's revengeful offspring. Or maybe it will have been one of those How To books that provide an introduction to a hobby or a program for self-improvement — *How To Play Chess*, *How To Dress For Success*, or *How To Dress To Play Chess*.

Certain that lists of recommended reading have been provided by foresighted instructors, we offer here instead the titles of some recent publications that ought scrupulously to be avoided during the summer, or any time else:

## A Ban For All Seasons

- *The Complete Guide to Sexual Fulfillment*. A complete guide? Surely they've missed something! And what do you do when you've achieved fulfillment — take up macramé? This one's billed as "a constructive guide for anyone looking for answers to such questions as: Am I inhibited? . . . Am I living with the right person? . . . What innovations can my

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partner and I incorporate into our love-making?"

- *Egoshell*. "The authors call individuals, not nations, to action to draft a Planetary Declaration of *Interdependence* that . . . would tell the world that individuals expect their governing institutions to solidify the brother- and sisterhood of humankind." Fair enough. Who can argue with keeping our brotherhoods and sisterhoods solid? We wouldn't want them to get soft and drip all over the place.

- *Polydoxy*. This is not a new denture adhesive: "Polydoxy is a religious ideology that affirms the ultimate right of an individual to religious self-authority and autonomy." Huey Long would have had a field day with this religious equivalent of socialism: Every man a bishop! A crozier in every closet!

- *The Transcendental Temptation*. Since when is man tempted to think about higher things? Can you imagine

Theodore Dreiser penning an overlong and overdrawn novel about an innocent young lady traveling to Chicago to make a new start for herself, only to be seduced into a life of orthodoxy and virtue? Her elevated state would be too, too joyous to contemplate!

What do these four books have in common, other than a trendiness bordering on self-parody and a determination to fill the free time of intellectually unarmed readers with the free thinking of their ideologically committed authors? For one thing, they're all published by Prometheus Books, the Buffalo-based publishing house established by president and editor-in-chief Paul Kurtz, a professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, the author of 25 books (including *The Transcendental Temptation*), and a self-avowed secular humanist.

## Let's Be Reasonable!

"Secular humanists," Kurtz explained in a recent Associated Press interview, "are committed to the use of reason and science to understand the world. We also believe it's necessary to develop a new morality appropriate to the present needs. I believe in the use of reason to build a good life on this planet without the illusion of salvation or immortality." That good life and that new morality are the subjects of a number of publications bearing the Prometheus Books emblem:

*Atheism: The Case Against God*  
*The Atheist Debator's Handbook*  
*Beneficent Euthanasia*  
*Classics of Free Thought*  
*Critiques of God*  
*Did Jesus Exist?*  
*The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*  
*Ethics Without God*



Secular Humanist Paul Kurtz

Prometheus would approve. In Greek mythology, Prometheus was one of the Titans, the race of superhuman beings who preceded the gods and were displaced by them. He figured prominently in the defeat of his fellow Titans, whom he betrayed to make common cause with Zeus and the gods. Subsequently, Prometheus betrayed Zeus too, by stealing an element that belonged properly to the gods — fire — and bestowing it as a gift upon mankind. In payment for this treachery, Zeus had Prometheus chained to a mountaintop, where day after day an eagle would come to gnaw at his liver, which in the course of the night would regenerate itself, only

to be devoured again.

The two most famous dramatizations of this myth are *Prometheus Bound*, by the Greek tragedian Aeschylus, and *Prometheus Unbound*, written during the Romantic period, more than two millennia later, by the English poet Shelley. Of the two versions, two thousand years of evolution and human progress notwithstanding, that of Aeschylus is by far the more complex and more mature. A member of the aristocracy and a hero of the Battle of Marathon (490 BC), Aeschylus lived to a ripe and wise old age, and saw with his own eyes the demagogues who arose to destroy Greek democracy and the havoc that they wreaked by pandering to the egalitarian spirit. An appreciation for hierarchy and order is evident in his play. Contemporary critics to the contrary, *Prometheus Bound* is a conservative classic.

## Prometheus Bound

In the very first scene, the allegorical figure of Power explains the significance of the crime committed by Prometheus, the theft of fire and its transferral to man, and the necessity of punishment:

This was the sin against God,  
 and now the iron  
 Of retribution he must undergo,  
 That so the lesson be learned:  
 with Zeus's absolute power  
 To be content, and so give up  
 the road  
 That leads to love of man.

Even the chorus that pities his plight recognizes that Prometheus is guilty of excessive willfulness — that he is “too free” — and that the blasphemer must be punished “Who awe to Zeus denied/And privately sanctified/The estate of mortals.” Genesis, a cosmic power who can empathize with Prometheus, having also preceded Zeus only to find himself now subservient to him, echoes the sentiment of the chorus:

Time-worn perhaps my sentiments  
 may seem,  
 But what you've paid, Prometheus,  
 is the wage  
 Earned by a rash, an overweening  
 tongue.  
 And you are not yet humbled,  
 nor will bow  
 Before defeat, but rather make it  
 worse.

\* \* \*

You are the mastermind, and you  
 should know  
 How with tongue's vanity a price  
 must go.

Prometheus turns a deaf ear to the pleas of the chorus and of Genesis. He rejects the possibility of a reconciliation; he will make no overtures to Zeus: “Go cringe and kiss authority, and fall/Prostrate. To me Zeus matters not at all.”

## The Fire of Arrogance

Hermes, the messenger of Zeus, is less patient with the stubbornness of “the scientific sinner,” as he mockingly dubs Prometheus, and less tolerant of his moral posturing. He tries with ridicule to demonstrate the foolhardiness of resistance to Zeus, at which point, with an ironic combination of accurate perception and



Appropriate punishment: Prometheus pays for biliousness with his liver.

inaccurate application of it, Prometheus identifies the principle that underlies his punishment and inspires the drama of Aeschylus. "The fire of arrogance must be fought with fire," he proclaims, but the implications of his formulation are directly contrary to what he believes them to be. It is not Prometheus who is fighting with fire the fire of Zeus's arrogance, but Zeus who therewith fights the fire of the arrogance of Prometheus. For there are none but harsh means to deal successfully with self-righteous rebels; in punishing Prometheus, Zeus is doing what must be done.

Given the limitless arrogance that Prometheus displays in defeat, Hermes bristles at the thought of what the consequences might have been had the rebel managed to escape chastisement: "Lucky the fortune that affects you thus! No one could tolerate you prosperous." With his parting words, Hermes reminds Prometheus that the latter brought misfortune upon himself:

And yet, remember the word I say,  
The warning given, the price  
to pay,  
Nor when self-destroyed for release  
you strive,  
Calamity's desperate fugitive,  
Blame fate or fortune or Zeus's  
design  
For perils that compass  
unforeseen.  
No, the design it is your own,  
Yours the gauge, the defiance  
thrown,  
Yours the initiative, cold and clear,  
The wide-eyed choice, the  
presumption sheer,  
That cast you in toils infatuate  
Of self-destruction's unfathomed  
net.

Shelley tells the story somewhat differently, in his *Prometheus Unbound*. Had he lived another 165 years, instead of a poet he might have been a much sought-after press agent for candidates, like the gladly departed Gary Hart, whose license is rarely poetic and whose reputations, as leaders of men and men of compassion, betray unmistakable signs of having benefitted from the art of mythmaking. Shelley was born just two years after the storming of the Bastille, and he grew up and died, at the age of 30, in the revolutionary atmosphere that

had engulfed Europe. Shelley himself was an outspoken atheist, a materialist and a rationalist, and an ardent advocate of free love and communism. It is no great surprise, then, that in his hands the story of Prometheus becomes a glorification of radicalism, instead of a condemnation of it, and that the puerile whimperings of the castigated Titan are falsely ennobled to elicit sympathy from the reader.

In the course of his metaphorical argument for license, Shelley takes several liberties himself with the details of the myth of Prometheus and admits as much in his preface to the drama. "The *Prometheus Unbound* of Aeschylus [a sequel to his *Prometheus Bound* that has been lost to posterity] supposed the reconciliation of Jupiter [the Roman name for Zeus] with his victim," Shelley observes. "But, in truth, I was averse [to] recon-

ciling the champion with the oppressor of mankind." Thus, in Shelley's version, or perversion, of the story, Jupiter is overthrown — by the power of Love! — when Prometheus (the transgressor!) forgives Him (the one whose commandments have been transgressed!) for attempting to exact retribution. Shelley describes with tedious exuberance the ideal state that results: The evil tyrant Jupiter is dethroned, Prometheus is free (free to betray humanity as he has previously betrayed the gods and the Titans), universal love prevails, and life for all mankind is groovy beyond belief. This is philosophy for the Pepsi Generation, deep thinking for the graduates of Mr. Roger's Neighborhood.

### Prometheus Unbound

In Shelley's version of the tale, Prometheus is, in his own and in the poet's



Satan would "rather reign in hell than serve in heaven."



estimation, a figure "who checked/... The falsehood and the force of him who reigns/Supreme..." His mother, the Earth, says of him: "...thou art more than God/Being wise and kind..." In stark contrast to the treatment by Aeschylus of the corresponding scene, Shelley depicts Mercury — the messenger of Jupiter in Roman mythology, as Hermes is the messenger of Zeus in the Greek system — as one who takes pity on the upstart Titan and, instead of mocking, flatters him, encouraging Prometheus to reconcile himself with Jupiter not because it is his duty (not because he is, both literally and figuratively, *bound* to do so) but simply because this is the assignment that Jupiter has given to him (Mercury):

To thee unwillingly, most  
unwillingly  
I come, by the great Father's will  
driven down,  
To execute a doom of new revenge.  
Alas! I pity thee, and hate myself  
That I can do no more....  
... Wise art thou, firm and good,  
But vainly wouldst stand forth  
alone in strife  
Against the Omnipotent....

Like that of Aeschylus, the Prometheus of Shelley considers himself a benefactor of mankind — "The saviour and the strength of suffering man" — and a victim of unjust punishment. He says of Jupiter: "He but requites me for his own misdeed." As with Aeschylus, so with Shelley, Prometheus represents the democratic or egalitarian spirit, the desire to "make the earth/One brotherhood," in which "man remains

Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed,  
but man  
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and  
nationless,  
Exempt from awe, worship, degree,  
the king  
Over himself....

The all-important difference between the two versions of the tale is that Shelley endorses the vision of Prometheus, whereas Aeschylus resolutely rejects it. Absent from the version of Aeschylus is the chorus of spirits that in Shelley's interpolation help to transform the utopian vision into the real thing:

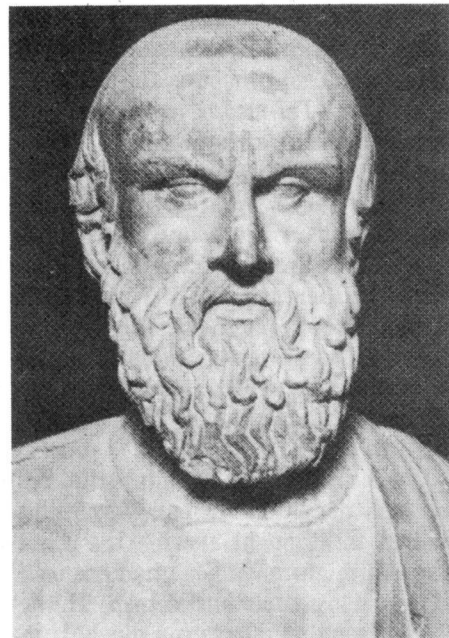
And our singing shall build  
In the void's loose field  
A world for the Spirit of Wisdom  
to wield;  
We will take our plan  
From the new world of man,  
And our work shall be called  
the Promethean.

Had the beverage been available at the time — had the visionary poet been able to envision its creation — Shelley would surely have included the desire of the chorus of spirits to "buy the world a Coke and keep it company."

### Unable to De-liver

It is not only the anatomy of the myth that Shelley distorts, but the anatomy of the central character as well, for in his disingenuous version it is the *heart* of Prometheus and not his liver that is devoured by the avenging vulture. This is no trivial substitution: If the actions of Prometheus have been prompted by the urgings of his heart, he must be viewed as a figure motivated by love, in which case we as readers are encouraged to approve his actions — or to reject them less resolutely — to balk at the severity of his punishment, and to detest — or to admire with considerably less ardor — the judge who has passed the sentence. If, on the other hand, as the original Greek versions of the myth stated explicitly and consistently, the motivation of Prometheus finds its origin in the liver — traditionally considered the source of anger (or biliousness), as the heart is thought to be the source of love — Prometheus remains a figure driven not by love of man but by hatred of the gods. He is, then, unquestionably a figure deserving of condemnation, not praise or pity. His example is one to be held up for scorn, not for admiration. His is the way that leads to damnation, not salvation. He is a satanic figure.

Though Shelley has tried to remake him into a kind of denatured Christ figure, Prometheus bears a striking resemblance to Lucifer, who likewise is associated with fire — a fire that "enlightens" man; forges a pride within him that hardens his heart; and, when he presumes to be its master, consumes him. (It is not at all unlikely that Prometheus was simply a Greek interpretation of the Judaic conception of Satan.) Shelley was fully aware of this similarity: "The only



Aeschylus

imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus," he observes in his preface, "is Satan." In Shelley's mind, Satan and Prometheus are both models of "courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force." Shelley admits candidly that he chose Prometheus as the subject of his drama because, unlike Satan, "he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement." Not that he is exempt from all those repugnant traits, but merely that he is "susceptible of being described" that way.

Just as we would be wary of any attempt to inculcate in us or our children an admiration for Satan, so should we be on guard against the presentation of his call to rebellion in any other literary or artistic form. We can only imagine in how many readers Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* may have inspired a revolutionary fervor, but we do know that the play has since proved to be a favorite of radicals. Karl Marx, Robert Owen, and George Bernard Shaw all expressed admiration for it. That not all Europeans had as yet taken leave of their senses was demonstrated at the time of the play's publication by the harsh and widespread criticism it received as blasphemous and immoral. That it has since become a staple of anthologies of English literature says much about the depravity of 20th Century culture. Those early crit-



Percy Bysshe Shelley

icisms, as valid today as they were 167 years ago, are either ignored by anthology editors and their comrades in indoctrination or, more effectively, dismissed as quaint or unenlightened — with that searingly haughty air of condescension that may not endear the learned professor to his students but does succeed in stifling dissent. (So very Promethean are the characters assumed by these titans of tutorship that we might expect them to arrive for their daily lectures sporting loincloths, did such garments come in tweed.) The one positive aspect of the deplorable state of contemporary education in America is that the number of students who can and do read such subversive material as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* is extremely limited.

So successful has been the promulgation of Shelley's retelling of the myth that his version is now the accepted interpretation of the original story. Thomas Bulfinch, of *Bulfinch's Mythology* fame, proclaims that Prometheus has "become the symbol of magnanimous endurance of unmerited suffering, and strength of will resisting oppression." Edith Hamilton, whose compendium of mythology for the masses rivals that of Bulfinch in popularity, has this to say of Prometheus: "His name has stood through all the centuries, from Greek days to our own, as that of a great rebel against injustice and the authority of power." Michael Grant puts it most succinctly in his *Myths of*

*the Greeks and Romans* when he labels Prometheus "the patron saint of the proletariat."

### Prometheus On The Rebound

Is it any wonder then that the "fire of arrogance" burns brightly throughout the modern world? That the proposition "Every man a king" — or bishop, or Indian chief — is no longer considered a palpable absurdity, but a commonplace? That the world is increasingly populated by persons who propose to eliminate all distinction from the land and yet act as though they were a law unto themselves? We do not have to look far to find these fire-bearers with their patronizing personalities and their futurist perspectives — no farther, in fact, than the nightly news, in which arrogant anchormen deliver Shelleyesque panegyrics on Promethean politicians. Who was Prometheus, after all, but the Gary Hart of Greek mythology, the Titan with "new ideas" who broke the rules and balked at paying the penalty for his transgressions?

Like Prometheus, Gary Hart was a victim of his own hubris who remained defiant until the end, blaming everyone but himself for his downfall. How many Americans unwittingly echoed Hermes when they breathed a sigh of relief at Gary Hart's departure and thought to themselves: Thank God he didn't become president; the man would have been insufferable! Did he really expect us to believe, when ambiguously but defiantly he announced his withdrawal from the race, that his comments were motivated by a sincere concern for the integrity of the political process and the right of the citizens to vote for the candidate of their choice — when all but the most starry-eyed adolescent campaign workers could see that he was merely peeved at being caught *in flagrante delicto*, and put out at the thought of having to submit to the standards of mere mortals? Clearly, he was filled not with concern for his fellow man, much less remorse, but with anger. Had he been honest, had he possessed a modicum of self-knowledge years earlier when he changed his name from Hart-pence to Hart — had he been more *pensive* when he clipped the *-pence* — the fallen frontrunner might more appropriately have dubbed himself Gary Liver.

To be fair to Prometheus, who suffers by comparison with Hart, we must admit that the ideas of the former really were

"new ideas," that they were in fact the essence of modernism (which, these days, is just a trifle old hat). Prometheus refused to pay the tribute due to God (Zeus or Jupiter) and, with reason and science (symbolized by fire), sought to elevate man beyond his station. He was, in short, the original secular humanist, and a fitting role model for Paul Kurtz and his free-thinking fellows.

Unfortunately for ever-modern man, these old ideas continue to be touted from age to age as new ideas, and keepers of the flame spring up in every generation to light the fire of arrogance in their unsuspecting fellows. "Liberty, fraternity, and equality" are the incompatible and unworkable Promethean platitudes that Kurtz and company have taken up where seven thousand years of arrogant ancestors have left off. "The present epoch is a revolutionary one," Kurtz informs us. And so it is. As was the last one, and the one before it. Ah, but this one's different, he says: "The revolution that we are experiencing today is a moral revolution." In an essay entitled, appropriately enough, "Humanism and the Moral Revolution," he describes this age-old phenomenon as though it really were making its first appearance on this planet:

The overthrow of customary morality has occurred in large part because of an explosive technology that has rapidly transformed our culture. A sharp disparity has emerged between the new technology and our inherited moral codes. The latter were encased in custom, enshrined in sacred tradition and supported by the sanction of law. The moral tradition was taken as absolute — unquestionable and beyond the range of critical inquiry. The strains between the received morality and the demands of modern life were too great; the moral "virtues" were out of touch with the world and practice deviated widely from professed ideals.

Suddenly, the dam has burst and the old moral mythology is now being lampooned. There is a long-overdue demand for reappraisal and modification. A moral reconstruction is proceeding at an accelerated pace.

## Prometheus Crowned

That old dam has broken, all right, and — to extend a metaphor that in its staleness aptly symbolizes the originality of Kurtz's commentary — who do we turn to for help but the wise guys who broke it? Yep, it's time to call out the Corps of (Social) Engineers — not to rebuild the dam they worked so hard to destroy, but to finish flooding the town and drowning all the townsmen. See someone foundering? Is he going down for the third time? Don't throw him a life preserver (personal flotation device, in modern parlance); throw him a lead weight! Have we expanded the concept of freedom to the point of meaninglessness? Let's expand it some more. Has secular humanism destroyed nearly every aspect of our civilization worthy of preservation? Let's institutionalize it!

Death and destruction are the natural consequences of the breaking of a dam. No matter. We mustn't stand in the way of progress. Blithely, Kurtz continues:

The basic assumption of the new morality is the conviction that the good life is achieved when we realize the human potential. This means that we ought to reject all those creeds and dogmas that impede human fulfillment or impose external authoritarian rules upon human beings. The traditional supernaturalistic moral commandments are especially repressive of our human needs. They are immoral insofar as they foster illusions about human destiny and suppress vital inclinations.

What are we to expect from this "moral reconstruction"? We have the Reconstruction of the South to judge by; we know what a signal success was achieved by that experiment in arrogance, when ignorant and uncouth ex-slaves were raised to sudden eminence and encouraged to lord it over their intellectual and cultural superiors. Will thieves and murderers, rakes and perverts, artistes and poetasters come to hold sway over their unreconstructed fellows, those poor benighted souls who still believe that virtue is its own reward? Will viciousness be established as the sole determinant of status in the new order, as color and class have been in previous eras? They will — it will — if men like Kurtz and his chorus

of spirited humanists succeed in transforming their utopian vision into the real thing. "Humanism," Kurtz confides, in an essay entitled "Is Everyone A Humanist?" (the answer to which, thank God, is still no — or, at least, not yet), "is related to a doctrine of liberation and emancipation. It values the autonomy of free agents, not only in their intellectual beliefs but in their aesthetic experience, their romantic or sexual proclivities, their moral tastes and values." How long before this freedom for everyone becomes a free-for-all, Kurtz doesn't say, but we can be assured that individual liberty will soon become individual license, and that this subsidized self-indulgence will not stop at the whistling of Cole Porter tunes in public.

## In The Dogma House

"In olden days a glimpse of stocking was looked upon as something shocking; now, heaven knows, anything goes." Yes, anything goes. That's the great attraction of secular humanism. The package offers a little something for everyone, and the terms are exceedingly attractive: Buy now, pay later. What exactly will it cost us? Well, let's not talk about that right now. Just sign here.

No subject is taboo to free thinkers — no subject but one, belief in God. For atheism is the opiate of the intellectuals, whose minds are thereby dulled to every token of divinity. The faithful will be outcasts in the new order, and the measure of the "freedom" of what will pass for thought will be the fervency of one's non-belief. "Humanism cannot in any fair sense of the word apply to one who still believes in God as the source and creator of the universe," Kurtz comments.

Will our enlightened brethren suffer us to exist as harmless anomalies and quaint anachronisms? Afraid not. No, our faith is a constant challenge to their infidelity; it makes them feel bad. We'll just have to go. You see, humanists cannot be truly free until all belief and all believers are exterminated:

For Humanism has always been opposed to any and all forms of tyranny over the mind of man. This puts Humanism squarely in opposition to all authoritarian, religious or totalitarian ideologies that attempt to suppress, limit or censor human intelligence or to impose an

orthodoxy of belief or morality. It is opposed to any code of infallibility, official doctrine, Church or party line that is offered as a substitute for free, independent and critical thought and does not permit heresy, dissent or deviation.

As they lead us off to slaughter, Kurtz and his companions will attempt to convince us that it is we who have persecuted them. "The right of individuals to the free use of knowledge" Kurtz calls "the heart of the Humanist ideal," but can we be faulted for suspecting that he really means "the liver"?

For better or worse, we have been encouraged over the years to think of ourselves as consumers, and we have learned to shop around, to look at "bargains" with a critical eye and to listen with a skeptical ear to sales pitches that include "free" offers. There is a marketplace for ideas too, in which the same sales techniques are used by the "manufacturers" to move the "merchandise." Just as we would be wary of contracts and other commercial transactions that include the offer of free toasters, free cameras, free television sets, and now free microwave ovens and videotape players, so should we be skeptical of concepts that are presented to us at no apparent charge. We know better than to believe in the "free lunch" and the "free ride," but how many of us are still taken in by the seeming costlessness of free thought? Let's face it: Free thinking is the foolishness that someone else must pay for — at the outset, at least, for there is a price attached to every idea and very often, in the end, even the unscrupulous buyer pays quite dearly for the free ones.

It has been said before, but it bears repeating, that freedom itself is not free, and that eternal vigilance is the price of it. What needs to be said, however, is what freedom really is. In truth, there is no freedom but the freedom to serve. Freedom consists of nothing but a choice of masters. We will serve God, or we will serve mammon. We will obey the promptings of our hearts, or we will follow the dictates of our livers. There is no other choice; there is no other freedom. And if we do not make a conscious decision, we will serve the devil by default. ■