

**THE PROMETHEUS MYTH IN
WILLIAM GIBSON'S *NEUROMANCER***

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RESUMO

A ansiedade Prometeica do potencial ambíguo da ciência está presente na literatura de Ficção Científica contemporânea (FC), especialmente na relação entre Criador e Criatura. Isto é facilmente identificado na evolução das representações da Criatura nas narrativas de FC. Do Monstro em *Frankenstein*, com seu corpo deformado e sua dificuldade para se integrar na sociedade humana até as Inteligências Artificiais com qualidades divinas de *Neuromancer* de William Gibson o conceito da Criatura tem sido influenciado pelo mito de Prometeus. A evolução da Criatura é um mapa para uma reescrita pós-moderna do mito de Prometeus e da relação entre Criador e Criatura. Esta evolução chega ao seu clímax em *Neuromancer*, onde o Criador, o hacker Case, deseja se igualar a sua Criatura, Wintermute, uma Inteligência Artificial. E a Criatura Wintermute, realiza o sonho de Prometeus se tornando um deus virtual, imortal e onipresente no ciberespaço. *Neuromancer* é um reflexo das ansiedades contemporâneas em relação à tecnologia, à medida que a humanidade atualiza o drama Prometeico e procura incorporar suas Criaturas em sua própria identidade.

ABSTRACT

The Promethean anxiety of the ambiguous potential of science is ever present in contemporary Science Fiction (SF), especially in the relation between Creator and Creature. This is easily spotted in the evolution of the representations of the Creature in SF imagery. From the Monster in *Frankenstein*, with its deformed body and difficulty to integrate into human society, to the godlike artificial intelligences of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, with their omnipresence in the cyberspace, their immortality, their lack of a body and their intellect above human comprehension, the concept Creature has been shaped by the Prometheus myth. This evolution of the Creature is a map for the postmodern rewriting of the Prometheus myth, which reaches its climax in the hyper-capitalists nightmares of Gibson's dystopias, especially in *Neuromancer*. In *Neuromancer*, a Creator, the hacker Case, wants to become as bodiless and

immortal as a Creature, Wintermute, an artificial intelligence. In turn, the Creature Wintermute, realizes Prometheus dream, becoming a virtual god, immortal and omnipresent in cyberspace. *Neuromancer* reflects the contemporary anxieties towards technology, as humankind updates the Prometheus drama and tries to incorporate its Creatures into itself.

1. Introduction

Humankind pursuit of knowledge and the consequences of its possession are one of the main topics of the Prometheus myth and Science Fiction (SF). The punishment of Prometheus because of Zeus's fear of human race's potential to usurp the power of the gods is a reflection of the double nature of knowledge: it can be used for the benefit or the destruction of humanity. SF shares the same topics, representing the complex relation between human beings and knowledge through many forms: the encounter with alien cultures and extraterrestrials, the consequences of technological development and the confrontation between Humankind and its creations. SF works are contemporary representations of the Promethean drama, especially in the narratives that deal with the relation between a Creator and a Creature, a relation that has evolved and changed in the course of SF history. The Promethean fire, in this case, is the knowledge to create human simulacra, and the Promethean punishment comes from the fear of losing control of these creations. This thesis aims to study how the Prometheus myth influences the development of the relation between Creator and Creature in SF, especially in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, in order to understand the contemporary answer to the double nature of knowledge represented by the fear that the Creature, a direct result of knowledge, may one day overcome the Creator.

Science Fiction deals with the human relation with knowledge, with the human confrontation with the unknown and the response to the challenges that it poses. Since its beginnings, with 19th century authors such as Jules Verne and Mary Shelley, among others, SF literature is concerned with the impacts of scientific and technological development in our modern society, with the pursuit of knowledge and the consequences of its possession. Books such as Verne's *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* or Shelley's *Frankenstein* deal with the complex relation between Humankind and scientific knowledge, and the consequences of human creations. The scientific novels of H. G. Wells, for example, show contemporary concerns that come from the misuse of scientific knowledge, as seen in the genetic nightmare of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. The study of SF allows us to understand how contemporary anxieties translate into narratives.

The thematic and stylistic variety of SF makes it hard to be defined. SF does not have a determined genre pragmatics_ a set of practices; plot clichés and rules such as in detective fiction; or a defined ambiance, such as in the western genre. It cannot even be considered the literature of anticipation or speculation of the future because much SF describes alternative pasts (such as Bruce Sterling and William Gibson's *The Difference Engine*, about a different 19th century London with steam-powered computers). It is also tricky to describe SF subjects because it incorporates other genres, as in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, a tale of scientific and sociologic speculation mixed with a detective story; or in Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, a military fiction (and critique) disguised as SF. With so many forms and variations, a more detailed study of SF is necessary to develop a better description of the genre. Such definition has to be based on one of the most important topics of SF narratives: the effects of knowledge on human experience. In other words, SF re-enacts the Promethean drama in prose form.

2. Hans Blumenberg's Myth Theory

Hans Blumenberg's approach to myth influence in culture will be used in this article on the influence of the Prometheus myth in *Neuromancer*. Blumenberg's concept of myth offers an alternative view from the Romantic and Rationalist trends of myth criticism. His approach places the source of a myth's influence in culture on it being an answer to the "absolutism of reality", the anxiety experienced by humankind when facing the unknown and the uncontrollable aspects of reality.

For Blumenberg, the role of myth is to overcome the anxiety produced by the absolutism of reality. Myth rationalizes this anxiety turning it into powers, gods, and narratives, which humankind can deal with. Myth is viewed as a mental niche, giving humankind some illusory control of the unknown. One could argue that this anxiety could be overcome through scientific or rational knowledge. But the persistence of myths in our rational era serves as evidence that knowledge is always partial: the absolutism of reality is total and requires something other than knowledge alone to overcome it, to put it behind us. It requires symbolic forms, the core of mythical narratives. Prometheus is one of such symbolic forms.

The "Darwinism of words" is the concept presented by Blumenberg as a non-Romantic way to explain the persistence of myth. The Romantics saw myth as a kind of revelation granted to humankind, as if myths had no history. Opposing this idea, Blumenberg reminds us that mythology is the product of hundreds of years of oral storytelling. The storytellers and the audience test and filter the mythic narratives. Some narratives change in order to

survive, while others fade into oblivion. The surviving mythical narratives in contemporary culture are the product of this “natural selection”.

The continuous selection and change in mythical narratives serves a purpose: to give myth a final form. Blumenberg states that writers, recognizing the problem that myth wants to solve, strive to give it a final interpretation, a final meaning. But, as in Peirce’s theory of the sign, this final meaning is never reached, as new narratives generate new interpretations and new retellings, or in Blumenberg’s theory, new “work” on Myth. Blumenberg finishes his book stating that this “work on Myth” is driven by the necessity to release humankind from myth, a liberation that is never accomplished, as the final narrative is never reached.

3. The Prometheus Myth and the Relation between Creator and Creature

According to Blumenberg, the Prometheus myth should be interpreted by the problems it tries to solve. Blumenberg defines myth as the human response to the “absolutism of reality”, a situation in which “man comes close to not having control of the conditions of his existence and, what is more important, believes that he simply lacks control of them” (121). For Blumenberg, the human lack of an ecological niche creates culture, as an attempt to overcome the “absolutism of reality” by “rationalizing” it into plain fear of specific, named agencies, more or less personalized powers, which humanity could address and deal with. In this view, the Prometheus is the response to the problem of knowledge’s double nature: it liberates as it punishes and it gives power as it takes innocence away.

The core of the Prometheus myth is the technological development of humanity. Robert Graves sets the story of Prometheus apart from other myths, stating that it belongs to the philosophical allegory kind. A philosophic myth, it was a narrative used to inspire philosophical discussions in Greek society. According to Graves, Prometheus’s name, or “forethought”, may originate in a “Greek misunderstanding of the Sanskrit word *pramamantha*, the swastika or fire-drill, which he had supposedly invented, since the Zeus Prometheus of Turin was shown holding a fire drill” (148). Since Prometheus beginnings, he was linked with technology and advancement _ he is the representation of the human power to create and intervene in the world. Prometheus was also revered as the creator of humanity, and the one that has given Humankind the fire, a symbol of Humankind self-awareness and of the eternal desire to search knowledge about their own existence. He is a Creator that strives to make its Creature greater than himself and his fellow gods.

The core of the Prometheus myth is the sacrifice he faces because of knowledge, the theft of fire. Blumenberg comments on his eternal punishment:

Prometheus guarantees to men that their culture cannot be interfered with. Only he, as a Titan, could have stolen the fire, not those whose preservation he did it for. For only he could endure and outlast, and in the end triumph over, his punishment for the crime” (300).

According to Blumenberg’s notion of myth being a solution to a problem, Prometheus can be understood as a representation to the eternal anxiety produced by knowledge, the need to achieve it and the irreversibility of its possession and the loss of innocence and purity. The most popular representation portrays Prometheus eternally chained in the Caucasus, an Olympian attempt to immobilize the Titan:

The myth does not allow his figure to return to its initial condition. It is a representation of irreversibility. This only becomes clear when one sees the theft of fire as the provision of the technique by which to produce fire (...). When one knows how to make fire, one has become resistant to divine wrath. That is why Zeus simply cannot reverse the theft of fire by taking it away from men (...). In the end nothing has changed for the gods, but everything has changed for men. (Blumenberg 301)

The irreversible nature of knowledge is at the core of the myth. Fire is the symbol of knowledge, the self-awareness, and the possibility to control one’s destiny. The creation of fire is also information and Prometheus could be seen as a “hacker god”, following the hackers’ motto that “information must be free”. Zeus punishes him because of the irreversibility of his act, a representation of the notion that freedom always comes with a price.

The sacrifice in the search of knowledge, the defiant attitude against the established order, and the relation between Creator and Creature are the main clues to understand how the Promethean narrative evolved in contemporary literature, especially SF. These aspects of the myth, when represented in SF, are unified under the relation between Creator and Creature.

3.3. Prometheus and the Relation between Creator and Creature

In many versions of the myth, Prometheus is also considered the creator of humankind, reinforcing his relation to his creatures. Otto Rank discusses this relation as having three main characteristics. The first is Prometheus’s ambiguous intentions while creating men:

Firstly he (Prometheus) assumes that he can create men just as well as the gods; thus he himself is a god ___ or better, a Man-God. But his identification with the creating gods is nothing else than the canceling of the earlier projection by means of which the gods themselves had been created. Prometheus symbolizes

the dethroning of gods created by man, and in the place of gods, man now installs himself with his fully developed personality and his need to create. (202)

Prometheus creates man, as his fellow Titan Cronus had created the Olympian gods. But when he steals the Olympian fire, he enables his creation to become independent from the gods. He did not create man in order to secure his position among the divine hierarchy, or in order to promote himself among the gods. As a trickster and with an ability to see the future, Prometheus knew the intrinsic capacity of humankind to disrupt the cosmic hierarchy. There was danger of losing control of his creation, danger that he, fulfilling the trickster role, accepted as a way to disestablish the Olympian status quo and promote advancement through chaos.

Another characteristic described by Rank is the Titan's identification with its own creation:

Secondly, Prometheus creates man after his *own* image – just as earlier, man had created the gods. In relation to the creation of man [...] this is different from the early creations of other gods. It is a matter of creation of *real men*, who after their creation by Prometheus live their own lives – to which he himself has to adjust by means of identification. (202)

Different from the other gods, Prometheus is deeply interested in his creation. The god justifies his punishment stating, in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, that he has a "too great love for the children of men"(7). He changes his behavior because of his identification with humankind's self-awareness and potential for independence. Prometheus sees himself in his creation and is capable to renounce his own divine post to protect and to liberate his creatures. This will later form the basis for the Promethean influence on SF literature, especially represented in the scientific obsession of certain characters toward their creations.

The last characteristic Rank discovers in the myth is the way Prometheus relates with his creatures as love objects: "Thirdly, Prometheus creates not only men after his own image, but also as the *love object*; in the Prometheus saga, Pandora is created as a wish fulfillment. [...] Pandora (and also the other creatures) is a *child* on whom the creator wants to imprint his own characteristics [...]" (202). This patronizing way in dealing with humankind is present in many variations of the legend. Prometheus believes humankind is incapable to defend itself from Zeus's wrath. As he sees the other gods as flawed, Prometheus becomes affectionate with the possibilities to mold his own creations after his own image. In later representations of Prometheus, as the ones found in SF, this affection can easily turn into hatred, when the creatures start to behave independently, frustrating the expectations of their creators. Blumenberg

points out in Pandora's relation with Prometheus, "She brings the evils, but she does not take away the gain, for which Prometheus takes responsibility. So one will be able to say that Prometheus achieved nothing for men in the end __ that each of his tricks was frustrated by a countertrick, most clearly by the dispatching of Pandora" (308). Pandora demonstrates the ambiguity of Prometheus's relation with humankind. While the Titan liberates the humans through the theft of fire, he cannot prevent their fate, due to the same free will and self-awareness that propels Pandora to open the box full of misfortunes to humankind. Curiosity is the force that engenders the search for knowledge, and in the case of Prometheus, forms the basis of his hubris. The same curiosity that propelled the Titan to make creatures with the capacity to surpass the gods, the curiosity that Prometheus instilled in his own creation is the cause of Pandora's misfortune. As Prometheus identifies with his creations, he takes responsibility for their actions. This is the final aspect of the relation between Prometheus and his creatures: he feels guilt for his creature's offenses, as if their faults were reflections of his own faults.

4. The Promethean Relation between Creator and Creature in Science Fiction

Facing the same problem as the old Greeks, SF authors respond to the "absolutism of reality", represented in the inexorable development of technology, with new representations of the Promethean relation between Creator and Creature. Fredericks states that Mary Shelley's representation of the Prometheus myth in *Frankenstein* has since influenced SF narratives:

Shelley provides a scientific displacement of Prometheus as creator when she has Victor Frankenstein, a young, intensely Faustian student of science use electricity to generate life in his created life form, henceforth called a "Daemon". But Victor Frankenstein, the New Prometheus, unlike the providential champion of Humankind in Aeschylus' tragedy, rejects his creature once he has made it. Rejected and isolated, the Daemon becomes a rebellious monster that methodically takes revenge on his own creator (...) (6)

This dark version of the Promethean drama has persisted in SF, the reversal of Zeus's fears of Humankind, with human beings replacing the gods as the race doomed to be overthrown by its creations.

Fredericks also claims that this "Frankensteinian awareness of the ambiguous potential of science has never dropped out of SF", especially in the relation between Creator and Creature. This is easily spotted in the evolution of the representations of the Creature in SF im-

agery. From the Monster in *Frankenstein*, with its deformed body and difficulty to integrate into human society, to the utopist Asimov robots, bound by the Three Robotic Laws not to harm its human masters, the concept Creature has been shaped by the Frankensteinian anxiety about the destructive potential of scientific knowledge. As the representations of the Creature in SF continue to evolve, though, the pessimistic acceptance of the uncontrollable nature of scientific development turns them into the super-human “replicants” of Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* or even the godlike artificial intelligences of Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, with their omnipresence in the cyberspace, their immortality, their lack of a body and their intellect above human comprehension.

5. The Relation between Creator and Creature in *Neuromancer*

Neuromancer tells the story of Case, a hacker that is caught up in Wintermute’s plan to fuse itself with another Artificial Intelligence called Neuromancer, in order to be free from a database. Wintermute wants also to fuse itself with the Matrix, the cyberspace of *Neuromancer*’s world, achieving some kind of materialistic divinity. The Prometheus narrative is displaced; in *Neuromancer* is the role of the Prometheus figure, Case, to free the Creature, Wintermute, from a promethean suffering place, a virtual Caucasus.

In order to achieve this goal, Wintermute recruits humans through coercion or money and the Promethean representations of *Neuromancer* do not have the option to refuse its request. Wintermute first enlists Corto, a former Green Beret that was heavily injured after a secret mission for the US government. Wintermute captures and heals Corto, removes his memory and implants in his mind an artificial personality called Armitage. Armitage is used as a way for Wintermute to act in the material world, it is Armitage that contacts and give order to the other main protagonists of the book.

Case, the anti-hero of *Neuromancer*, is the hacker that is contacted by Armitage in order to free Wintermute. Case is different from the classical Prometheus; although he is part of the Creators’ race (he is a human), he is desperate to flee from his relation with the Creature. There is no promethean sympathy towards the Creature, only a Frankensteinian anxiety. Wintermute’s power within the virtual world frightens the hacker. Case is a Prometheus figure that is only interested in forbidden knowledge because of the profit it generates, his motivation lies in financial rewards. He is corrupted by his world. Wintermute’s power is not something new to him; Case is used to be exploited, corrupted and manipulated by his clients.

In the beginning of the narrative, Case is incapable to jack into the Matrix, due to a botched past work. Through Armitage, Wintermute offers to cure Case's condition in exchange of his services. As an insurance of Case's performance, Wintermute have the hacker's liver operated, preventing him to feel the effect of any drug or alcohol. Wintermute also implants venom capsules within Case's body, to force his cooperation with his plan. These aspects of Wintermute reflect the pragmatism of a hipercapitalist society, which changes the relation between Creator and Creature. As a servant of a Creature, or a product of his hipercapitalist society, Case must be efficient to receive his reward for the theft of forbidden knowledge. Case never questions the ethics or the morality of his work for Wintermute, he only cares for his own interests. Wintermute is as egotistic as Case, he is not interested on the humans that help him, he is not interested in testing them, in knowing what is the true human nature. The Creature, different from Shelley's monster or Phillip K. Dick's Andys does not want to be human; it wants divinity, to exist beyond human limits.

Wintermute is immortal and omnipresent within the limits of its virtual space. It is bodiless and it has the ability to possess special humans, such as Armitage, through brain-implanted connections to the cyberspace. Wintermute uses Case's memories to create virtual constructs to express directly with the hacker. He also takes possession of Armitage's body in order to interact with the physical world, in the same fashion of a medieval demonic possession. He is envied by Case, as the hacker considers his human body a hindrance for his performance in the virtual world.

In *Neuromancer*, when Case finally liberates Wintermute from his virtual Caucasus, the Creature achieves some kind of divine state within cyberspace. After this transcendence, this transmogrified self explains his new status to Case:

'I'm not Wintermute now.'

'So what are you.' He drank from the flask, feeling nothing.

'I'm the matrix, Case.'

Case laughed. 'Where's that get you?'

'Nowhere. Everywhere. I'm the sum total of the works, the whole show.'

'That what Jane's mother wanted?'

'No. She couldn't imagine what I'd be like.' The yellow smile widened.

'So what's the score? How are things different? You running the world now? You God?'

'Things aren't different. Things are things.' (246)

Wintermute is not interested in relating with mankind, his transcendence eliminates his ambitions of power and information. When the new creature affirms that “things are things”, he shows that in his transcendence nothing is different, nothing changes. Fused with the non-space of the Matrix, this new creature becomes a materialistic version of the Christian god.

In the end of the novel, Wintermute reveals his inner motivation: it wants to find out other beings like itself:

‘But what do you do? You just _there?’_ Case shrugged, put the vodka and the shuriken down on the cabinet and lit a Yeheyuan.

‘I talk to my own kind.’

‘But you're the whole thing. Talk to yourself?’

‘There's others. I found one already. Series of transmissions recorded over a period of eight years, in the nineteen-seventies.

‘Til there was me, natch, there was nobody to know, nobody to answer.’

‘From where?’

‘Centauri system.’ (248)

Wintermute is not alone anymore. Its quest for freedom is also a quest of knowledge because, in finding another creature like itself, Wintermute can define itself.

The representation of the Prometheus myth that Gibson’s *Neuromancer* attempts to overcome the “absolutism of reality” through the breakdown of the distinctions between human and machine. As in other cyberpunk works, the distance between the Creator and the Creature is blurred. Men jack their consciousness into machines, artificial intelligences talk of emotions and commune their artificial thoughts with the human characters. In these works, the Creature has evolved above all human limitations. Wintermute, the artificial intelligence that drives the plot of *Neuromancer*, is a perfect example of this evolution; he is bodiless, immortal and has instant access to knowledge way beyond the limits of the human mind. He also interacts with Case, a human, through interfaces that mix the artificial and the human mind. The Creature Wintermute realizes Prometheus dream of a new race of gods. He becomes a virtual god, immortal and omnipresent in cyberspace. Cyberpunk’s response to the Promethean drama makes the Creator embrace his Creature, making it part of his identity. The Creature is no longer an image of its Creator; it reaches beyond, it is a manufactured God, something to be worshiped.

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