



Illinois Wesleyan University
Digital Commons @ IWU

John Wesley Powell Student Research
Conference

1993, 4th Annual JWP Conference

May 8th, 9:30 AM - 4:30 PM

The Hymn "Prometheus" by Goethe

Angelica Ushatova
Illinois Wesleyan University

Julie Prandi, Faculty Advisor
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc>

Ushatova, Angelica and Prandi, Faculty Advisor, Julie, "The Hymn "Prometheus" by Goethe" (1993). *John Wesley Powell Student Research Conference*. 8.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc/1993/posters/8>

This Event is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

THE HYMN "PROMETHEUS" BY GOETHE.

Angelica Ushatova, Dept. of Foreign Languages, IWU, Julie Prandi*

This paper will explore disagreements over the interpretation of Goethe's poem *Prometheus* and offer a way of understanding the poem that is consonant with Goethe's world view. The hymn *Prometheus* fell within a seminal epoch in German literature, the literary movement *Sturm und Drang*, a precursor of European Romanticism. Goethe belonged to and profoundly affected this period, which exalted nature, feeling, and human individualism and sought to overthrow the Enlightenment cult of Rationalism. The image of Prometheus was popular among the writers of *Sturm und Drang*. Young Goethe calls the story of Prometheus his "beloved fixed idea". In his autobiography *Poetry and Truth*, Goethe, commenting on this idea, says that although one can attach philosophical or religious implications to the Prometheus myth, it really belongs to the realm of poetry. He thinks that it is a beautiful thought to have human beings created, not by the supreme ruler of the world, but by a lesser figure.

Symbolism of the poem allows various interpretations. At the time of Goethe the hymn *Prometheus* was involved in the so called *Spinozadispute* and was regarded as the proclamation of Pantheism. The Zeus figure evokes a chain of images. The supreme God can represent the princes, and in this case the poem acquires social-revolutionary meaning. Goethe's strict father, who preferred reverence over love, can also stand for Zeus. The hymn then plays an important role in the development of Goethe's personality. If we view Zeus as the Christian God, then Prometheus' open defiance is an attack upon Christianity. The *Prometheus* ode depicts also the confrontation between Zeus and his son. Prometheus refuses all cooperation with the gods, presenting himself as an equal to them. He isolates himself in order to create. The bright, youthful, loving creator of mankind symbolises primarily the creative power of the artist, sufficient to himself, needing no help from the gods. But what is Goethe's own point of view on this subject matter?

When the twenty-five-year-old Goethe wrote the poem *Prometheus*, it was probably an expression of unreconcilable conflict between the individual and the divine. But in his maturity Goethe came to view it differently, as only one side of a polarized human nature, that of self-concentration and protest against authority. The other side, equally as important to Goethe, finds expression in his hymn *Ganymed*, which he put side by side with *Prometheus* in later editions of his poems. Whereas Prometheus protests against the divine order, Ganymed exemplifies the movement towards unification with the divine through nature. As Goethe wrote in his autobiography *Poetry and Truth*: "The spirit of contradiction and the taste for paradox are latent in us all."