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Letters on Prometheus

François Hemsterhuis

Translated, introduced, and annotated by Daniel Whistler*

Prometheus is one of the more significant figures in Hemsterhuis's philosophical mythology. The Titan who stole fire from Olympus to bring the human race to life occupies a central place in the dialogue, *Simon ou des facultés de l'âme*. Here he undergoes a metamorphosis, losing much of his backstory (as Zeus's embittered rival) and even his fate (his liver eaten interminably by an eagle in the Caucasus) to become, instead, a creator-deity who builds the faculties of the human mind, as the demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus* constructs nature. Indeed, whenever Hemsterhuis speaks of Prometheus, he has Plato on his mind: *Simon* ultimately attempts to rewrite the Prometheus-myth from Plato's *Protagoras* in order to answer its guiding question anew: can virtue be taught?

The translations that follows consist of extracts from five letters written to Amalie Gallitzin (the 'Diotima' to Hemsterhuis's 'Socrates').¹ Three of the letters were written in 1780 when Hemsterhuis was immersed in the composition of *Simon* and the other two date from 1786 when Hemsterhuis had become embroiled in the German *Spinozismusstreit*—encountering Goethe's *Prometheus* poem in Jacobi's *Über Die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*.² These translations are intended to shed light not only on

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¹ Unfortunately, Gallitzin's responses are either no longer extant or do not focus on Hemsterhuis's discussion of Prometheus, and so are not included in the below. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise the extent to which Hemsterhuis's thinking after 1775 was the product of *symphilosophische* collaboration with her.

² The translations are based on the text established in François Hemsterhuis, *Briefwisseling (Hemsterhuisiana)*, 13 vols, ed. Jacob van Sluis (Berltsam, 2011-17) [Henceforth cited in-text

the genesis of Hemsterhuis's own late philosophy (particularly that dialogue Schlegel described as 'Socratic poetry'³), but also on his reaction to the German poetry and philosophy of the period. And, on this basis, the ultimate aim is to exhibit some of the connections that hold between Hemsterhuis's own philosophy and its German reception.

Prometheus plays two roles in *Simon*. He first appears in a 'beautiful group in bronze... which represents Prometheus forming the first man' that had been sculpted by the character, Mnesarchus. The sculpture expresses both 'a deep and attentive genius in Prometheus's physiognomy and attitude' and 'that air of candour, of naivety and of astonishment in the new-born' human prior to receipt of Prometheus's gift (*EE* 2.103). It is this sculpture that triggers the rest of the discussion, particularly its thematic concern with the relation between the inner and the outer in aesthetic creation and human behaviour. That is, the sculpture provokes Aristophanes' challenge—that Prometheus is guilty of creating 'man all wrong by putting what ought to be inside outside and what should be outside inside' (*EE* 2.103). It is for this reason Prometheus makes his second appearance in Diotima's Prometheus-myth which serves as an introduction to Hemsterhuis's own faculty-psychology.

The letters below give a hint of the genesis of Hemsterhuis's thinking on this subject—a shift away from some of the more popular conceptions of Prometheus in the eighteenth century, whether that be the traditional image of Prometheus as a hubristic transgressor of divine and natural law, the proto-Shelleyan image of Prometheus as heroic martyr suffering out of love for humanity, or the Rousseauian image of Prometheus (developed in the opening to the 1749 *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*) as the cause of humanity's woes. Hemsterhuis's Prometheus is more gift-giver than thief or trickster. Moreover, the reference to Rousseau is particularly significant given the frontispiece to the first *Discours* displays a picture of Prometheus warning against touching the heavenly fire and so becoming 'seduced by the brilliance of letters and... study'—an affliction to which he then subjects humanity. The Prometheus sketched in Rousseau's *Discours* reveals himself to be 'a god hostile to men's peace and quiet [as] the inventor of the sciences', i.e.,

as *B*]. The letters translated are 3.22, 3.24, 3.36, 7.29, 7.53. A series of notes and clarifications on the two largest extracts are provided in François Hemsterhuis, *Lettres de Socrate à Diotime: Cent cinquante lettres du philosophe néerlandais Frans Hemsterhuis à la Princesse de Gallitzin*, ed. Marcel F. Fresco (Frankfurt am Main: Hansel-Hohenhausen, 2007), 231-3, 402-5.

³ Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler et al. (Munich: Schöningh, 1958-2002), 1.244.

responsible for humanity's corruption and decadence.⁴ It is for this reason that Hemsterhuis's own drawings (referred to and included in these letters) should be read, very literally, as an attempt *to see Prometheus differently*, to counter the Rousseauian narrative of decadence. Through his drawings, Hemsterhuis refigures Prometheus against Rousseau and, in so doing, signals his intent to redeem human knowledge and art.

This is the intellectual context to Hemsterhuis's encounter with Goethe's *Prometheus* poem in December 1785 (when he first reads Jacobi's *Spinoza-Briefe*) and then in July 1786 (when he returns to it alongside Jacobi's recently published *Wider Mendelssohns Beschuldigungen*). Of course, like most of his contemporaries, Hemsterhuis was unaware that Goethe was the author of this poem: Jacobi presents it anonymously on a detachable, separated-off page of his book without noting author, title, content or context. Its role is nevertheless essential to the whole controversy: Jacobi presents the poem to Lessing in Wolfenbüttel in June 1780 as a 'scandal', but Lessing is not scandalised; instead, Jacobi reports him as responding, 'The point of view from which the poem is treated is my own point of view... The orthodox concepts of the Divinity are no longer for me; I cannot stomach them. *Hen kai pan!* I know of nothing else. That is also the direction of the poem, and I must confess that I like it very much.'⁵ Lessing embraces what he perceives as a crypto-Spinozism implicit in the poem's tirade against the gods ('Miserably you feed / Your greatness / On tithes of sacrifice') and its subsequent resolution to create in humanity a race indifferent to them ('To pay you no regard').⁶

Two closely related features of Hemsterhuis's reaction to Goethe's poem are worth noting. First, Hemsterhuis's initial enthusiasm for the poem's style is framed around a comparison to Euripides. And what is striking is that (seemingly coincidentally) Hemsterhuis goes on to interpret other works by Goethe according to the very same frame of reference. Hence, he remarks to Gallitzin in March 1788 after reading Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, 'I do not conceive how Goethe was able to so perfectly capture Euripides' tone, unless there was a time in his life when he read Greek as his own language.' (B 9.22) The Goethe-Euripides affinity remains constant, even if unknowingly so.

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2, 16.

⁵ F. H. Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), 187.

⁶ Translation by Jeremy Walker in Jacobi, *Main Philosophical Writings*, 185-6.

Secondly, there is something jarring about Hemsterhuis's rather pedantic response to Goethe's poem with its focus on the erudite details of Greek theogony. Hemsterhuis's antiquarianism seems to miss the point, to betray a generational difference between a philological and an 'inspired' reaction to the material. However, one further piece of context helps make some sense of it—Hemsterhuis's recurring anxiety over Goethe's neglect of the letter of art for its spirit, i.e., his privileging of inner meaning over antiquarian and philological 'facts' that determine this meaning.⁷ According to Hemsterhuis, one should never bypass such 'facts', just as one should not remain content with them alone. He worries, then, that Goethe's 'genius' is dangerous insofar as it eschews 'thorough reading' (*B* 9.19). What emerges here—and is performed in the letters below—is a specific hermeneutic model further enriched by noting the constitutive role that drawing and sketching play in these reflections on Prometheus.⁸ The philosopher and the poet must become philologist and draughtsman too, for spirit cannot be separated from, but is instead constituted by both antiquarian attention to the letter and artistic performance of the line.

⁷ On this discussion, see further Daniel Whistler, *François Hemsterhuis and the Writing of Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 36-8.

⁸ The constitutive role of thinking-through-drawing in Hemsterhuis's philosophising has long been emphasised by Peter Sonderren—see, e.g., 'Hemsterhuis's Art and Aesthetics: Theories in the Making', in François Hemsterhuis, *Early Writings, 1762–1773*, ed. and trans. Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 3–22.



The Hague, 12th March 1780

My very dear Diotima. Pardon me for this scribble. I was about to write to you when my mind—pregnant with who knows what—gave birth to this strange composition of Prometheus, instead of any words. As it happened to be right in the middle of the paper, I am continuing on the same page and you can take my Titan for an ornament, if you like. [...]

Goodbye my very dear Diotima, as soon as I feel better, I will write better. Embrace my Mimi and my Mitri¹ on behalf of

Σωκράτης²

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¹ Gallitzin's children, Marianne and Dmitri.

² 'Socrates'

The Hague, 19th March 1780

My very dear Diotima [...]

That Prometheus pleases you pleases me. It could certainly adorn *Simon*, for I am quite content with the composition.³

[...]

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The Hague, 26th April 1780

My very dear Diotima [...]

Something very peculiar happened to me. A little while ago I had envisaged a composition to represent Prometheus's punishment and was quite content with it. Since then, I have wanted one for a Prometheus who creates man and gives him intelligence. I think I've made more than 20 drawings in spare moments which displease me, since all of them merely showed a man making a statue and so represented some sculptor and not our famous Titan. This morning, annoyed at how little success I'd been having, I threw my sketches into the fire, and a moment later Mr Millotti⁴ was announced to me: you met [him] at Niethuis.⁵ He had come from Italy to show me some gemstones. The first which fell into my hands was Prometheus in an attitude I'd never seen him in before. After having constructed man's frame, he communicates to him intelligence and life by touching [man's] head with his finger, and the little skeleton thanks him for this benefaction.⁶ I need not tell you that it is solely a Greek artist who could have thought in this way. The stone is very small. I might send you a reproduction, but I don't want to because this reproduction is very bad—the stone having been badly damaged. But when you see it (it's a small onyx), you'll find it steeped in spirit. It is a Greek work of the highest antiquity and of the same style as the two heroes in emerald that you have spoken of. If I have any time soon, I'll draw a little sketch so that you can judge the spirit of the stone [for yourself].

³ Hemsterhuis never prepared *Simon* for publication himself, so, unlike many of his other works, no vignettes or sketches were ultimately included with it.

⁴ Millotti was a Florentine antiquarian in the service of Maria Teresa, Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, and mentioned in catalogues of engraved gemstones across Europe.

⁵ Gallitzin's residence near The Hague before her move to Münster.

⁶ This engraving roughly corresponds to Mnesarchus's sculpture which triggers the discussion in *Simon*.

Millotti has three or four pieces which are curious for their subject matter and with which he will not part. Among others, an Erichthonius⁷ fighting a griffin which is truly beautiful, but which he loves too much himself [to part with]. Millotti afforded me the opportunity to look back at our little collection for the first time since Münster.⁸ It has gained some reputation in Italy and so too has your servant⁹, for there are gemstones which are sold there on the basis I've approved them, even though I've never seen them in my life. What I just said about the style of the Prometheus is false. It belongs to a later century and, when you see the stone which is the colour of the Homer¹⁰, you'll see the most noble and exact design that I've ever seen in a Greek work. This will surprise you, but it must be remembered that it's due to the onyx's colour, as in the Homer, and that the stone has been modified by the artist to please on its own account more than by its reproduction. If Winckelmann doesn't speak of this composition of Prometheus in that great work you possess.¹¹ I'm sure that it was absolutely unknown until now.¹²

[...]

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The Hague, Tuesday 11th April 1786

My very dear Diotima, [...] ¹³

⁷ Erichthonius was a mythical Athenian King, fathered by Hephaestus and adopted and protected by Athena.

⁸ Either since Gallitzin's move to Münster in August 1779 or since Hemsterhuis and Gallitzin both visited Münster in May 1779.

⁹ Hemsterhuis.

¹⁰ I.e., an onyx engraved with Homer's portrait familiar to both Hemsterhuis and Gallitzin.

¹¹ Presumably J. J. Winckelmann's 1764 *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, although it could also be a reference to the 1767-8 *Monumenti antichi inedita*.

¹² Scenes depicting Prometheus creating the first man had become relatively popular in the second half of the eighteenth century, as testified by the statue of Pietro Stagi and the painting by F. A. Maulbertsch. As early as 1589, Hendrik Glotzius had composed *Prometheus forms man and animates him with fire from heaven*. An antique ringstone with an engraving of Prometheus creating the first man now sits in the Thorvaldsens Museum in Copenhagen: it is similar insofar as the man is represented as a skeleton, but quite different in that Prometheus holds a chisel, rather than touching the man's head.

¹³ The translation to the opening paragraph of this letter is by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler and is taken from the forthcoming volume 3 to the *Edinburgh Edition of the Philosophical Works of François Hemsterhuis*. The section, 'Further Reflections on Spinoza and the Spinoza Controversy', in that volume provides much of the background to the translation below.

I shall be delighted to receive polemical works concerning Lessing.¹⁴ I fear that this affair will cause pain and even harm to our dear Jacobi, [who is] subject to a very overwhelming hypochondria. If, after having read these pieces, I found that I could be of use to him in this matter, I would doubtless do something, but I will certainly do nothing without your advice. [...]

Goodbye, my very dear Diotima, my friend, may God bless you along with your dear children and your Great Friend¹⁵.

Σωκράτης

[P.S.] I don't dare reread my letter, fearing to see there only gibberish. Six pages on such material is certainly too little. Tell me, I beg you once and for all, who is the real author of the Prometheus Ode?¹⁶ Whoever it is, I will always admire him, not for the fundamentals of his piece of course, but for the inconceivable affinity there is between Euripides's turn of thought and that of this author.

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The Hague, Tuesday 4th July 1786

My very dear Diotima, my friend, the post just arrived without bringing any of your news, although on Friday I did receive Jacobi's book, read it avidly straightaway and have since reread his dissertation on Spinozism anew.¹⁷ This is all I've seen concerning the controversy. All I can conclude from it is 1° that our dear Jacobi is not guilty in any respect and that he has done only what any man would have or could have in his place; 2° that the description our excellent Blankenburg gave me of Mendelssohn is of the most exact

¹⁴ On 30th March (B III.90), Gallitzin had relayed to Hemsterhuis some of the scandal caused in Germany by the publication of Jacobi's *Spinoza-Briefe* (which Hemsterhuis had already studied in December 1785). She suggested sending him the more recent polemics, Mendelssohn's *An die Freunde Lessings* and Jacobi's response (*Wider Mendelssohns Beschuldigungen*) which both appeared in early 1786. On 7th April, Gallitzin adds, 'Jacobi has been charged with sending you everything which concerns the essentials of his literary quarrel and we will speak of it when you've read it all.' (B III.116)

¹⁵ Franz von Fürstenberg.

¹⁶ Goethe's poem is printed anonymously in Jacobi's *Spinoza-Briefe*.

¹⁷ The book Hemsterhuis has just received is *Wider Mendelssohns Beschuldigungen betreffend die Briefe über die Lehre des Spinoza* (1786) and 'the dissertation on Spinozism' is, of course, *Über Die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (1785).

truth;¹⁸ 3° that, between ourselves, it seems like a little bit of prudishness or vanity in the Lady-confidante¹⁹ was the cause of all this commotion, for, on the one hand, the matter does not appear to me as important as she seems to have believed, and, on the other, she ought to have been familiar enough with Mendelssohn to know that one shouldn't throw off-putting ideas straight into such minds without first preparing them. But ultimately, my dear Diotima, you will have seen and read more in this affair than me, [and so] you are in an infinitely better position to judge it, and I will be charmed to receive your insights on the above, although I even more eagerly implore [you to send] them on the [below] reflections on the subject of the poem which has for its title, *Prometheus*, and which I found to be, as you said, utterly beautiful.

1° If this poem had appeared in Jacobi's first book without Prometheus's name and as the scrap of some dramatic work, no one would have judged the author to be an atheist; no one would have fallen into Plutarch's error²⁰ of attributing the extensive opinions of the magnificent character of Sisyphus to the author of the tragedy (who he takes to be Euripides, but who is probably Critias.²¹ One day, I'll attempt to translate what remains to us of this beautiful speech, which contains the most seriously clever things the Ancients said against all divinity.)

2° It is only in our friend's more recent work that this poem, this scrap of some dramatic piece, is presented [explicitly] as a monologue by Prometheus²²—and this is absolutely absurd and pours ridicule on the poet whoever he is. If Sisyphus or Salmoneus²³, his brother—both well-known villains—had used such language, it would have been very natural. But Prometheus was Jupiter's first cousin. Both of them had Uranus as their

¹⁸ Christian Friedrich von Blankenburg (1744-96), the translator of the unauthorised 1782 German translation of Hemsterhuis's works. This description of Mendelssohn is not to be found in any of the extant letters. Hemsterhuis had himself corresponded with Mendelssohn in the early 1780s.

¹⁹ Presumably a rather uncharitable reference to Elise Reimarus, who had acted as intermediary between Jacobi and Mendelssohn at the very start of the controversy in 1783.

²⁰ Hemsterhuis is here referring to the fifth-century 'Sisyphus fragment' that was preserved in Sextus Empiricus' *Against the Physicians* (1.54) and which concludes, 'Thus first did some man, as I deem, persuade / Men to suppose the race of Gods exists.' It is usually ascribed to Critias, (460 – 403 BC) but some modern scholars still claim Euripides's authorship. It is not clear what passage in Plutarch Hemsterhuis is referring to—see, perhaps, *De superstitione* 171c.

²¹ See previous note.

²² Despite what Hemsterhuis suggests in the previous paragraph, neither Goethe's poem itself nor the initial *Spinoza-Briefe* mention Prometheus by name. Jacobi only does so for the first time at the opening to *Wider Mendelssohns Beschuldigungen* ([Leipzig: Goeve, 1786], 3).

²³ Mythical king and founder of Salmone; associated with 'wickedness' by Hesiod, Plutarch, Pindar, etc. Both Sisyphus and Salmoneus were sons of King Aeolus of Thessaly.

grandfather, and not only was Iapetus (father of Prometheus) brother of Saturn (father of Jupiter), but Saturn was younger than Iapetus and, in fact, the youngest of Uranus's six children.²⁴ Therefore, by right of birth, Prometheus had the advantage over Jupiter. Hence, in Aeschylus²⁵ and elsewhere he speaks very naturally of Jupiter as an usurper and a tyrant, but it would be the most ridiculous extravagance to make him say, my first cousin Jupiter or Zeus does not exist and is only a being of reason, even though, on Jupiter's orders, he is currently being crucified on the Caucasus [out of concern] for the wellbeing of men, and so much so that even the Church Fathers believed him to be the prototype of Jesus Christ.²⁶

If the author of the poem in question had first of all attributed it to Sisyphus, Lycaon²⁷, Salmoneus, etc., the whole scandal would have been avoided, and this beautiful poem could have formed a very beautiful part of some dramatic piece. Beautiful geniuses do not sense—or do so too late—the utility of knowing the theology of the ancients, and I note it is one of the attributes of your wisdom to have taught this science to Mimi and Mitri precisely at the age one ought to²⁸—a science which, within the empire of Beauty alone, is almost the most important of all, without even taking into account the light it throws on history and on the historical branch of philosophy. It forms an excellent study for children. It amuses, it ornaments and enriches the imagination. It exercises moral sensibility and leaves no trace that could do harm in the future.

I'm annoyed that our dear Jacobi failed to hit his mark, namely, to provoke discussion of the Spinozism of our day among minds made for [such discussion], for it seems to me that the nice way in which Mendelssohn and his like have turned the matter means that Jacobi must now leave them alone to speak at their ease.²⁹ [...]

Goodbye my very dear Diotima, my friend, may God bless you along with your dear children and our Great Friend.

Σωκράτης

²⁴ This is how Hesiod presents Prometheus's genealogy in the *Theogony*.

²⁵ In Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, where, e.g., Prometheus dubs Zeus, 'the tyrant of the gods' (l. 224).

²⁶ Tertullian occasionally speaks of God as 'the true Prometheus' (e.g., *Apology* 18), but it is in fact Lucian (one of Hemsterhuis's favourite writers) who develops the comparison between Christ and Prometheus most fully, but in a satirical vein, in his *Prometheus*. In later years, Hemsterhuis admits to having read very little of the Church Fathers first-hand (*B* 10.71).

²⁷ Mythical king of Arcadia who tested Zeus by serving him the flesh of his own son, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

²⁸ By the date of this letter both of Gallitzin's children were in their mid-teens.

²⁹ This is seemingly a reference to the repercussions of Mendelssohn's death in January 1786.