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Theodore Ziolkowski: The Sin of Knowledge

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The Timeless Topicality of Myth

ADAM, Prometheus, and Faust are always with us. In the summer of 1998 Hugendubel's bookstore in Berlin, facing the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church whose bombed-out shell stands as a monument to the ravages of war, displayed new publications on a large table, on one corner of which reposed a heaping bowl of apples. A long, stuffed, rather jolly green serpent was suspended overhead. Confronted with this display, potential customers and readers found themselves thrust willy-nilly into the roles of Adam and Eve, tempted by the literary offerings to sacrifice their intellectual innocence yet again by consuming knowledge. An example of a different sort: the renowned Museum of Hygiene in Dresden features a life-size reproduction of one of Lucas Cranach's familiar paintings of Adam and Eve standing beneath the Tree of Knowledge. But here a sheet of clear plastic imposed directly in front of the painting contains various contraceptive devices, each in its proper position vis-à-vis the anatomies of the first man and woman. Again the implications leave nothing to the imagination. Germany is, of course, not alone in its exploitation of this cultural shorthand. We Americans are confronted daily with the corporate logo of Apple computers, urging us to take a bite from that corporation's electronic access to knowledge. As I write, the cover of the journal *Academe* (September/October 1998) features another painting by Cranach to illustrate an issue dedicated to sex and the academy. In that same month the on-line magazine *Salon* offered a cartoon based on Masaccio's *Expulsion from Paradise* with a sword-wielding angel; the heads of the two protoplasts were replaced by those of President Clinton and the First Lady, and the Eden in the background was

symbolized by the White House. No citizen following the Sex-gate scandals of 1998 required an exegesis.

The biblical analogies are by no means unique. Prometheus has been called the only figure of classical mythology that has retained for the modern imagination a vital remnant of existential significance.¹ The evidence seems to validate that view. An element identified in 1945 and providing the energy source for luminescent watch dials as well as the miniature power source for space vehicles was labeled prometheum. In 1947, when Raymond A. Dart discovered in a South African cave at Makapansgat the remains of what he erroneously believed (from carbon traces) to be the first hominids to possess fire and forethought (for hunting and weapons), he named him *Australopithecus prometheus*. At Rockefeller Center in New York City an eight-ton bronze sculpture of Prometheus has since 1934 loomed over—not, to be sure, the business titans of Manhattan but—the swirling hordes of its ice-skating rink. The American titan was matched in monumentality by the two stone Prometheuses created in the 1930s by the German sculptor Arno Breker. In 1969 David S. Landes entitled his now classic study of technological change and industrial development in Western Europe from 1750 to the present *The Unbound Prometheus*. More recently Thomas P. Hughes called his analysis of the technological revolution during the Cold War years *Rescuing Prometheus*. The 1998 edition of *Books in Print* lists two densely printed columns of volumes in which Prometheus is “Rising,” “Revisited,” and “Reborn.” An international journal of science policy is published in Italy under the title *Prometheus*; a major exhibition on gene technology was mounted in 1998 for the national Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany and publicized as “Prometheus in the Lab”; and that same year the German Historical Museum in Berlin cosponsored in Völklingen a 3.5-million-mark exhibition on the transformation of humanity’s self-perception over time entitled “Prometheus: People, Images, Vision.” For such reasons as these, in his 1995 encyclical letter on abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty (§15),

Pope John Paul II lamented the existence in contemporary culture of “a certain Promethean attitude which leads people to think that they can control life and death by taking the decisions about them into their own hands.” Clearly Prometheus, rejuvenated by the magic of molecular biology, still speaks to our imaginations as the twenty-first century begins.

The Bible and classical mythology do not provide the only sources for those vivid images that shape our cultural consciousness. Faust has long been a point of reference in Germany for advertisements (notably for wines and Mephisto footwear), political cartoons, and—during the inflationary years of the 1920s—even banknotes. But that great Reformation myth, which Oswald Spengler appropriated as a designation for Western civilization altogether, has made its way across the seas to become an international shibboleth for the demonic aspects of our technological world. Indications of the myth’s familiarity can be seen in its appropriation by the comic book industry. Steadily in print since 1952, George Haimsohn’s Madcap Classic *The Bedside Faust* presents in its cartoons a faithful rendition of seduction and betrayal. In his *Neo-Faust* (1989) the “Japanese Walt Disney” Osamu Tezuka portrays an aging biochemist who is rejuvenated and corrupted by a voluptuous female Mephisto. And the raunchy German “comic tragedy” by “Flix,” with the startling English title *Who the Fuck Is Faust?* (1998), gives us Faust, Mephisto, and Gretchen “ready for the next millennium” in a contemporary Federal Republic, where among other adaptations the Walpurgis Night turns out to be a drug trip.² The legend attained perhaps its ultimate trivialization in the photo-novel by fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld (1995). Sixty black-and-white photos interspersed with movie-title cards featuring model Claudia Schiffer as Margaret, magician David Copperfield as Mephisto, and ex-model Veruschka von Lehn-dorff as Miss Lucy Fer, the owner of Martha’s Garden nightclub in Monte Carlo, trace the adventures of a contemporary jet-set Faust, whose Gretchen ends up as a call girl in a high-priced bordello.