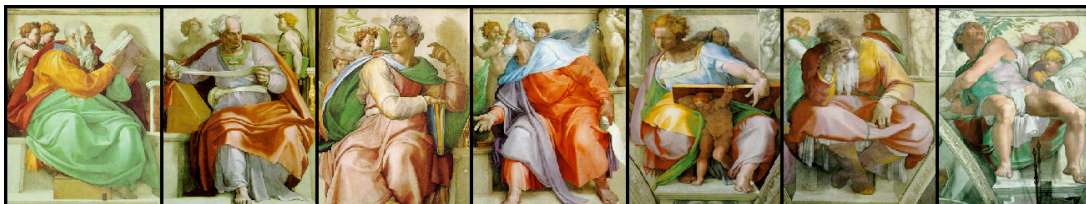


The Hero as Creator

The myth of the hero is a part of every culture on earth, as has been brilliantly documented by Joseph Campbell in his most famous work, **The Hero with a Thousand Faces**. However, in Western Civilization, the hero acquires a creative as well as a defiant dimension that is rarely encountered in other parts of the world. The challenge of the gods appears in ancient Greece, in myth as well as in art, with Homer the greatest narrator of the hero's defiance. It is clear that our heroes will not submit to anyone, not even a god. In this way we express one of the fundamental values of our civilization: individual liberty. However, there is an even subtler form of defiance implicit in becoming a creator, usurping the basic role of the gods. In the west we understand art as the individual creation of an artist. This is essentially a Greek invention, and it represents assuming this divine function.

Since the Renaissance, with its renewed interest in antiquity, the artist/creator again assumes the role of announcing man's destiny. The gods were created in man's image. Why not assume the role that is naturally ours? Michelangelo was one of those artists that assumed that role. In the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he created a grand, humanist vision, but in order to read it "creatively", we need to read it in the opposite direction as it is usually read. The heroic ethic is the opposite of the Christian ethic. A Christian reading of the ceiling simply sees a representation of the Bible's Book of Genesis, starting with the creation of the world, then the creation of man, the expulsion from paradise, the flood and ending with Noah's drunkenness. However, if you "read" the ceiling in the sequence of one who enters the Chapel, that is, from the door to the altar, the story is reversed. We begin with Noah's drunkenness, representing elemental man, and we crown the process with the creation. In this reading, the famous fresco where God appears to transmit life to Adam could be interpreted as man reaching for his destiny as a creator. Thus, it isn't "God" that creates "Man", but rather man who projects himself into a divine dimension. This reverse reading, going from the entrance to the altar, is supported by the sequence of prophets that appear on both sides of the Chapel, beginning with Zachariah, over the entrance, and reaching a climax with Jonah, over the altar. As can be seen below, there is clearly a process through which the prophets become progressively more active, going from reading to writing, and eventually to the ecstasy of Jonah. In this sequence, the exception is Jeremiah, whose thoughtful attitude just before Jonah's ecstasy, we will consider later.



Zachariah Joel Isaiah Ezequiel Daniel Jeremiah Jonah

Now we can understand much better Beethoven's obsession with the figure of Prometheus. One of the versions of the Prometheus myth presents him as the creator of man (and this is how he appears in **The Creatures of Prometheus**, for which Beethoven

composed incidental music). One aspect of the revolutionary fervor sweeping Europe at the beginning of the 19th Century was the necessity to create a new man, who would be at the same time free and creative. This idea, together with the Prometheus myth, guides Beethoven in his transition to his second period and the Eroica Symphony. In this symphony Beethoven expresses his cosmological vision based on the heroic ethic.

It is widely known that Beethoven uses a theme from **The Creatures of Prometheus** in the last movement of his Third Symphony. More surprising is that the “Eroica” Variations for piano were, in a sense, his first “sketch” for the finale of the symphony. We can almost say that the first three movements were created in order to get to the last. Lewis Lockwood has persuasively argued this in his “Beethoven – Studies in the Creative Process”. When one first gets to know this symphony, the emphasis is usually in the first two movements, which can be easily identified with a hero’s actions in the first and his funeral procession in the second. Traditionally, this has required conceptual gymnastics to figure out what the last two movements stand for.

We can solve this riddle by giving the first two movements a different perspective as stations in a process of transformation that culminates in the creation of a new man in the finale. We can summarize the process by interpreting the first movement as the vicissitudes of the hero in the world, the futility of which convince him of the necessity of detaching himself from daily life in order to become a true creator. The second movement tells of the very painful process of this detachment, analogous to a non-physical death. The third movement would represent a rebirth on a different level of consciousness. The fourth movement would be the creation of a new man, or perhaps of oneself as a creator. Painted on the Sistine ceiling we can see the same idea. At the lower level, we have the ancestors of Christ with heroic acts in the corners. A cornice, with symbols of death and demons, is analogous to the Funeral March of the symphony. The prophets and the creation in the highest part of the ceiling correspond to the last two movements. This surprisingly conceptual correspondence allows us to speculate that this process of transformation is archetypal of western heroic art. It is no coincidence that our civilization has been the most creative in the world.

Let us go through the symphony movement by movement. After two surprising fortissimo chords, the main theme appears in the cellos and basses. It is a noble and flexible theme that wonderfully represents the heroic ideal. After this theme we get a torrent of short motifs, associated more with epic action than with dramatic conflict. But from the beginning there is conflict indeed, implicit in the presentation of the main theme. We soon hear a series of *sforzandos* that try to impose a rhythm of 2 over the movement’s underlying rhythm of 3 (the hero’s action, in 2, in conflict with the world, in 3). In the Development section, this rhythmic conflict explodes in all its fury, now including harmonic conflict as well. In the middle of the movement we reach a terrible climax. Battered and wounded, we must now face an even more dangerous enemy: the temptation to abandon the struggle. We get a new, lyrical theme in E Minor, an extreme opposite of the E flat Major of the main theme. This is the only time that Beethoven introduces a new theme in the Development section of a symphonic movement. It is plaintive and seductive. Why not accept things as they are? Why so much fighting? This

temptation is rejected with great difficulty, but we are unable to find our way back to our mission and our destiny until we hear the main theme again in its original tonality of E flat. In this way we are able to maintain our individuality and our freedom. This famous appearance of the theme in the second horn broke with formal tradition, where the original tonality appears only with the beginning of the Recapitulation section. We know from Beethoven's sketchbooks that this early appearance was already present in the first sketches of the section, meaning that it was an integral part of the original plan of the work.

In the Coda of the first movement, the longest that had ever been written until this time, Beethoven remembers this experience, although it seems less dangerous but darker and more reflexive. In this interior journey we come face-to-face with our inner demons, and they will help drive us to the final affirmation of the main theme. We now know that we must detach ourselves from the everyday experience in order to move to a higher level of consciousness that will allow us to become creators. In the Funeral March we will have to face the terrible consequences of this decision. We will gain the strength necessary to move forward only after a sublime experience brought about by the central section of the movement, beginning with a fugue of cosmic dimensions. The devastating power of this movement is not the result of "burying" an admired hero, but rather of "burying" our own everyday existence.

The Scherzo revives us in the same way that the Prophets on the Sistine Ceiling are animated by a wind that moves their clothing. At this new level of consciousness every experience is different. The awe implicit in this new vision of reality is brilliantly expressed in the horn fanfares of the Trio. The figure of Jonah painted over the Sistine altar is an excellent pictorial representation of this experience.

In the fourth movement we create a new man. It is in Theme and Variation form, although somewhat unusual in that the theme in its full form does not appear until we have heard three preliminary variations. As we move through the variations, our new man will acquire the basic elements of a human being: energy, emotions and reason. We can say that the meaning or sense of life is expressed in the Andante section, with love and nobility as its foundations. This Andante reaches a great climax that could have ended the work, if the composer had been an artist of lesser quality. But great art is based on reality and not in fantasy. Beethoven, great artist that he was, knew that life acquires meaning through actions and not just through emotions. A clear vision of reality must also take into account that, in the end, there is only death. For this reason, Beethoven places a passage that evokes the Funeral March after the wonderful climax mentioned above and the final Presto. In the end, our destiny commands us to live without fear and without hope. We do it because our innards, our eros, are irresistibly attracted by that vortex that is life.

Our destiny is inside

In the Eroic symphony there is a recurrent motif similar to the famous motif of the Fifth Symphony, but used in such a subtle manner that it is difficult to detect. It consists of

three repeated notes. The first two are the same, but the third has a different character. Sometimes it is shorter, sometimes it is longer and sometimes it has an accent. Its most dramatic appearances are at turning points in the work and have important consequences. I believe that its meaning is similar to the recurrent theme in the Fifth Symphony, which is usually associated with destiny. In the first movement it appears at the climax of the central conflict of the Development section, just before the lyric theme in E Minor. In this case, it has the following form:



In this case, the third note is shorter and *staccato*, as if the hero's destiny is truncated at this time. In the second movement, it also appears in the central section, after the fugue. It now appears in the following form:



The third note is now longer, with a *sforzando* and a 32nd note anacrusis, which thrust us forward, towards accepting our destiny. In the fourth movement it appears in two forms. It first appears as part of the Prometheus theme:



Here it is affirmative. Being part of the theme, we can assume that we have now assimilated our destiny, forming an integral part of our actions. This may well be the origin of this motif, since this theme is at the root of the composition of the symphony. The second time it appears before the final Presto in a section that evokes the Funeral March:



The last note is longer but unaccented, directing us to take a long term view, without illusions, but with perseverance.

In the first two cases mentioned above, the theme is a development of material presented previously in each movement. In the third case it is part of the theme itself. This would indicate that Beethoven perceived our destiny to be inside of us, not something “out there” that capriciously comes down on us. This is consistent with forging our own destiny, and with the heroic ethic. It is also consistent with Nietzsche's dictum: *become who you are*.