

Technology and the Humanities  
*In Perspective*  
1983

The sub-title of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is *A Modern Prometheus*, a reference to the Titan of Greek myth whose story served as an inspiration for the novel. Prometheus was chained to a rock on the orders of the great god Zeus; every day for hundreds of years he lay exposed to the elements and had his liver devoured by a vulture. What was his enormous crime? Why did Zeus turn against another god who had helped him overthrow the Titan Kronos and placed him on the throne of the King of the Gods? When Zeus divided power among the gods, he neglected the recently formed, primitive race of humans. In fact, he thought so little of the breed that he considered destroying it and starting over. Prometheus took pity on the human creatures who were living, in his words, as "witless creatures." They crawled like ants in holes in the ground without knowledge of either farming or building. They did not know how to calculate the seasons nor how to read and write.

It was Prometheus who showed them how to tell winter from summer, how to count, and "the combining of letters as a means of remembering all things, the Muses' mother, skilled in craft." He showed them how to domesticate animals and how to navigate the seas with "linen-winged chariots." He gave them knowledge of healing drugs and the mining of precious metals. He even stole some of the sacred fire of Hephaestus, the creator of the human race, and gave it to the pitiful beings so that they rivaled the gods in knowledge and skill.

To the ancient Greeks the greatest good was to become the best of one's kind, and the greatest evil was to try to become like the gods, that is, to commit hubris. The sin of Prometheus was to give technology to men and women, allowing them to commit hubris.

Even today many people fear increasing scientific and technological knowledge, because they believe such knowledge permits us to play god. Certainly, there is reason to be cautious in view of recent developments such as nuclear weapons, genetic engineering, and the exploration of space. But new technological knowledge has always been a source of anxiety. The ancient Greeks believed that plowing the soil was an act of hubris, while in the nineteenth century many people believed it was sinful to be vaccinated. Technological advances that we take for granted--cars, trains, and airplanes, to name just a few--were the source of much controversy, and their inventors were often the objects of criticism because they disturbed the prevailing order.

It is not scientific knowledge that is hubristic, however, but the use to which we put it. It is the role of the humanities to question and inform the conscience of the scientific community so that we may dominate the machine rather than become its servants. Without technology we would be living like the creatures of Prometheus, witless and in caves. It is our task as rational human beings to devise ways to make technology serve human ends.