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Shelley's Dramatic Poem, *Hellas* Ideas in an Open-ended Conflict

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Shelley's play, *Hellas*, is examined here as a drama of ideas but these ideas are shown to be not merely abstractions but ideas as embodied in a genuine dramatic work. More important than this is the nature of Shelley's commitment to these ideas which is not final, univocal, reductionist and static but dynamic, equivocal and evolutionary in nature. *Hellas* celebrates a broad-based humanism and ultimate triumph of the forces of liberty, truth and justice. It is a fervent and passionate manifesto of freedom and perfection and the invincibility and timelessness of love, yet the demarcation lines between the contending forces are not ambiguously drawn. Ahasuerus in *Hellas* is a mindboggling seer who sees things in all their complexity. Mahmud, on the other hand, is a simple embodiment of the forces of darkness. Boundaries blur and Shelley's theory of evil takes on a complex and mature aspect. He emerges as a pluralist, projecting the view that truth should be approached through multiple angles.

Hellas is in a way an extension of, an epilogue to *Prometheus Unbound*. *Prometheus Unbound* is a song of freedom, of the victory of good over evil, in heaven whereas *Hellas* celebrates freedom and defeat of evil on the earth. *Prometheus Unbound* is no doubt wider in scope and larger in magnitude and what happens in the heavenly sphere in the play has a bearing on the whole of the universe including the earth. *Hellas* in comparison is limited in scope and magnitude but both are versions of the same theme, notes of the same symphony.

Shelley places his terrestrial hymn to freedom and victory of good over evil in Greece – the region which elicited the homage of his soul and mind. Indeed all the Romantics especially the three major poets of the second generation of the Romantics – Keats, Byron and Shelley – felt instinctively drawn to Greece and all that was Hellenic. Keats's well-known Hellenic bent of mind is reflected in most of his poems especially *Endymion* (his first major poem). 'Ode to Psyche', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and his great unfinished poem in two versions, *Hyperion*. Shelley recognised this spiritual kinship of Keats with Greece and decided to take the poet under his care in Rome and teach him Greek language but Keats's early death put an end to these glorious plans and the deep regret for all this entered Shelley's beautiful elegy on Keats, *Adonais*. Byron's Philhellenism took a practical form. He went to Greece and joined the ranks of the freedom fighters there and died in the thick of the struggle. Shelley, like Keats, was Greek in spirit. His pull towards Greece was not merely instinctive but consciously cultivated. He took great pains to learn the Greek language in order to dive into the very depths of Greek lore and wisdom. Except for his reservations about the ancient Greek attitude to slavery and to women, he was an unqualified admirer of Greece. In his preface to *Hellas* he forcefully asserts that the European civilization has risen from Greece and therefore the apathy of the European nations of his day towards the Greek plight shocked him. He was among the first to perceive that the post-Renaissance civilization is a renewal and extension of the ancient civilization of Greece:

We are all Greeks – our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece. But for Greece, Rome, the instructor, the conqueror, or the metropolis of our ancestors would have spread no illumination with her arms, and we might still have been savages, and idolaters.¹

Shelley therefore felt that the enslavement of Greece by the Ottoman Turks (who were referred to as 'Islam' and 'Muslims') was an insult to the age-old European civilization. The Greek struggle for freedom from the Turkish yoke symbolised European reassertion and Shelley's heart naturally went out to it.

In Italy Shelley had contracted a close friendship with Prince Alexandros Mavrokardatos (1791-1865) a leader of Greek exiles in Rome. Mavrocordato (as the name is usually Westernised) later became one of the chief leaders of the Greek freedom movement and after Greek independence served on four different occasions as the Prime Minister. On April 1, 1821 news reached Rome that the Greeks had openly revolted and declared their independence. Shelley was excited and wrote *Hellas*. For the model of the play he first toyed with the idea of following 'Prologue in Heaven' in Goethe's *Faust*. However he gave the idea up in favour of Aeschylus's *The Persians*, the only Greek play dealing with contemporary events. As the Greek play dramatises the defeat of the Persians led by Xerxes, so *Hellas* sings of the ultimate victory of Greeks, adopting the same dramatic device of employing messengers to report about the outcome of distant battles. In *The Persians* the chorus, Xerxes's mother Atossa and the ghost of his father Darius the great (summoned by Atossa), all lament the pride of Xerxes and foresee his fall. In Shelley's poem the chorus, the phantom of Mohammed the second and the mysterious Jew, Ahasuerus, predict the fall of the Turkish king, Mahmud. Structurally the play consists of seven parts – four sections of intricate choric lyrics and three long sections of dialogue in blank verse. At the head of his preface to the poem Shelley places a line from Sophocles as epigraph:

I am a prophet of glorious struggles.

The play opens as Mahmud is sleeping and the chorus of captive Greek women begin a succession of choric songs eulogising liberty without which Life, Hope, Truth, Love would all be meaningless. Freedom has asserted and reasserted its sway throughout the history of Europe. The American War of Independence and the French Revolution are the latest upsurges. Greece can therefore no longer remain in bondage. Suddenly Mahmud starts up, evidently from a nightmare foreshadowing the impending disaster in the form of Greek independence. He tells Hassan that he feels terribly disturbed by dreams and premonitions and wants him to seek the help of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, to interpret the dreams. It is noteworthy that Shelley had always been fascinated by the legend of the wandering Jew and wrote a long poem early in his career entitled *The Wandering Jew; or, The Victim of the Eternal Avenger*. As they wait for the arrival of Ahasuerus, Hassan, at Mahmud's bidding, relates to him the account of the latest battles between the Turks and the Greeks and although the victory has been temporarily that of the Turks, the way Hassan gives the account of the pride and courage with which the Greeks offer sacrifices, convinces the Sultan of Hassan's sympathetic attitude to the Greeks. He exclaims

Your heart is Greek Hassan.²

As in Aeschylus's *The Persians*, Messengers arrive one after the other with the news of successive defeats of the Turks and triumphant advance of the Greek rebels. The report that the Turks have suffered a defeat at sea adds particularly to the discomfiture of Mahmud. The arrival of Ahasuerus is announced as the chorus sings:

Let there be light! said Liberty
And like sunrise from the sea,
Athens arose! – around her born,
Shone like mountains in the morn

Glorious states, – and are they now
Ashes, wrecks, oblivion?³

As Mahmud enters into conversation with the hoary Jew, he is stupefied. Like Krishna in *Bagavat Geeta*, Ahasuerus talks of illusion and reality

...Sultan! talk no more
Of thee and me, the future and the past;
But look on that which cannot change – the One
The unborn and the undying.⁴

All else, says the seer, is a ‘vision’. All is contained in each”⁵ Thought/ Alone, and its quick elements, Will, Passion,/Reason, Imagination, cannot die.⁶

As Ahasuerus dilates on the power of ‘thought’ to rise above time and space, Mahmud is convulsed and seems to see the vision of his ancestor, Sultan Mohammad II (1432-81) who had captured Constantinople in 1453. The picture of the decisive battle with the Muslim war cry flashes before him. It is to be noted here that the war cry is misquoted by Shelley as ‘Allah- illa Allah’. Actually it is *Allah-u Akbar* (Allah is the greatest). Even *Allah- illa Allah* is also a distortion of Islam’s first article of faith *La-Ilah-a illa Allah*. Ahasuerus leaves after uttering ominous words about the destruction in blood of that which is born in blood:

...Inheritor of glory,
Conceived in darkness, born in blood, and nourished
With tears and toil, thou see’st the mortal throes
Of that whose birth was but the same.⁷

Immediately, the phantom of Mahomet the Second rises before Mahmud to confirm ‘ruin on ruin’:⁸

Islam must fall, but we will reign together
Over its ruins in the world of death.⁹

Even as things are still to take a definite shape, the chorus sings of the restoration of Greece to its famed glory and also of the regeneration of the world in a lyric of ineffable sweetness and formidable power:

The world’s great age begins anew,
The golden years return,
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn;
Heaven smiles, and faith and empires gleam
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.¹⁰

...

Another Athens shall arise,
And to remoter time
Bequeath, like sunset to the skies,
The splendour of its prime.¹¹

Any critical reading of *Hellas* makes it obvious that it is very difficult to call it a play proper. As lyrical poetry it is overwhelming and exhilarating but the dramatic element, except for its weighty, though prolix, dialogues, is too feeble to impress. Shelley was himself conscious of this serious lack. As he wrote in the preface to the play:

The subject in its present state, is insusceptible of being treated otherwise than lyrically, and if I have called this poem a drama from the circumstance of its being composed in dialogue, the licence is not greater than that which has been assumed by other poets who have called their productions epics, only because they have been divided into twelve or twenty-four books.¹²

Mary Shelley's remark on her notes to *Hellas* therefore, sounds quite amusing

It is curious to remark how well he [Shelley] overcomes the difficulty of forming a drama out of such scant materials.¹³

But Mary Shelley is absolutely right when she singles out the poem's lyrical power for special praise. It was among the last of "Shelley's compositions" says she "and is among the most beautiful".¹⁴ She particularly admires its choric songs for their beauty and imaginative quality exemplifying Shelley's peculiar style. She quotes Shelley's philosophico-poetical assertion of the everlasting supremacy of the inheritance of Homer, Sophocles and Plato:

But Greece and her foundations are
Built below the tide of war,
Based on the chrySTALLINE sea
Of thought and its eternity.¹⁵

Indeed this beauty and profundity characterizes the poetry of the whole play:

Blood is the seed of gold.¹⁶

Let there be light! said Liberty
And like sunrise from the sea,
Athens arose! – around her born,
Shone like mountains in the morn
Glorious states, – and are they now
Ashes, wrecks, oblivion?¹⁷

For

Revenge and wrong bring forth their kind,
The foul cubs like their parents are,
Their den is in the guilty mind
And conscience feeds them with despair.¹⁸

The lines quoted in the immediately preceding extract bear close comparison with the following lines from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*:

Pride bringeth forth...
A ruinous younger pride, a child of wrath
Foul as its parentage.¹⁹

As far as lyrical charm is concerned, very few lyrics in the whole range of English lyrical poetry, can stand comparison with the last choric song of *Hellas* beginning with, 'The world's great age begins anew.'

Apart from its lyrical appeal the abiding interest of the play lies in its theme of the conflict of good and evil and ultimate triumph of the forces of justice and freedom. As in *Prometheus Unbound* so in *Hellas* the question of Shelley's view of evil raises its head very significantly. It will be unjust not to perceive in *Hellas* the unmistakable growth into maturity of the constantly evolving moral perspective of the poet. He no longer sees things in puerile black and white. Contrasting mutability of matter with the Eternity of mind, in the context of explaining the origin of evil, he writes in his notes to the play:

Let it not be supposed that I mean to dogmatise upon a subject, concerning which all men are equally ignorant, or that I think the Gordian knot of the origin of evil can be disentangled by that or any similar assertions...That there is a true solution of the riddle, and that in our present state that solution is unattainable by us, are propositions which may be regarded as equally certain...²⁰

The balance and maturity evinced by this extract should be enough to remove many a misunderstanding about Shelley's theory of evil. Included among such critics who have passed harsh strictures against Shelley on this count is the keen-sighted T S Eliot. In *The Use of Poetry and Use of Criticism* he writes:

...his mind was in some ways a very confused one: he was able to be at once and with the same enthusiasm an eighteenth century rationalist and a cloudy Platonist.²¹

No doubt Shelley sometimes gave a Platonic formulation to the doctrine that evil is only related to us as beings in time and space while the eternal archetypes are free from it and we are therefore potentially capable of attaining to an evil-free condition. In this Shelley shows the influence of Spinoza of whom he was a keen student. In his *Ethics* Spinoza writes that Eternity cannot

...be defined in terms of time, or have any relation to time. But, notwithstanding, we feel and know that we are eternal. For the mind feels those things that it conceives by understanding, no less than those things that it remembers. For the eyes of the mind, whereby it sees and observes things, are none other than proofs. Thus, although we do not remember that we existed before the body, yet we feel that our mind, in so far as it involves the essence of the body, under the form of eternity, is eternal, and that thus its existence cannot be defined in terms of time, or be explained through duration. Thus our mind can only be said to endure, and its existence can only be defined by a fixed time, insofar as it involves the actual existence of the body. Thus far only has it the power of determining the existence of things by time, and conceiving them under the category of duration.²²

This doctrine is not only reflected in Shelley's mystical bent of mind but is also embodied in his poetry. In *Hellas*, Ahasuerus, the mysterious Jew, is a representation of Spinoza's ethical ideal. He has been able to leap from duration into Eternity – beyond hatred beyond superstition – a state of near perfectibility. Minds which can view things under the aspect of Eternity can always attain to this condition.

Indicative of the growing maturity of Shelley's moral vision in *Hellas* is the softening of his attitude towards Christianity. No doubt this is partly, perhaps largely, due to the fact that the

Christian Greeks fall under the category of the oppressed in this play but even so Shelley's tone is extraordinarily warm and sympathetic to Jesus Christ and Christianity. Christ is spoken of as 'a great Prophet and as a great human being'²³, a 'Promethean conqueror'²⁴, 'the most just, wise and benevolent of men'²⁵. The chorus sing:

The moon of Mahomet
Arose, and it shall set,
While blazoned as on Heaven's immortal noon
The cross leads generations on.²⁶

And then these words of an avowed enemy of Christianity, Hassan:

...but soon
The abhorred cross glimmered behind, before,
Among, around us; and that fatal sign
Dried with beams the strength in Moslem hearts,
As the sun drinks the dew.²⁷

This is a far cry from *Prometheus Unbound* where the misuse of Christianity is denounced in the strongest terms.

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¹ Thomas Hutchinson, ed. *Shelley: Poetical Works* new ed. Corrected by G M Mathews (London: OUP, 1907), P.205.

All subsequent quotations are from this standard edition of Shelley's works.

² *Hellas* l 454

³ *Ibid.*, ll. 6823-687.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ll. 766-69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, l.792.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 795-797.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 849-52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, l.878.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ll. 888-889.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ll. 1060-65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 1084-87.

¹² *Ibid.*, *Poetical Works*, P. 446.

¹³ *Ibid.*, P. 481

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 481

¹⁵ *Hellas* ll. 696-99.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, l. 248

- ¹⁷ Ibid., ll. 682-87
- ¹⁸ Ibid., ll. 729-33
- ¹⁹ F L Lucas's trans. quoted in *Shelley's Prose and Poetry* edited and selected by Donald H. Reiman (New York & London, 2002 Norton), P. 452.
- ²⁰ *Poetical Works*, P. 478.
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- ²² Quoted in *Shelley: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. M Ridenour (USA: Prentice Hall, 1965), P. 109.
- ²³ *Hellas*, ll. 149-50.
- ²⁴ Ibid., l.213.
- ²⁵ *Poetical Works*, Notes to *Hellas*, P. 379.
- ²⁶ *Hellas* ll. 221-24.
- ²⁷ Ibid., ll. 500-504.