

CHAPTER V

Hellas

Hellas of Shelley is set on the Greek dramatic form and is modelled upon the *Persae* of Aeschylus. In the poet's own words:

The *Persae* of Aeschylus afforded me the first model of my conception, although the decision of the contest now waging in Greece being yet suspended forbids a catastrophe parallel to the return of Xerxes and the desolation of the Persians. ¹

But the play was actually inspired by the ideals of Godwin which put stress on the basic nobility of man's nature. We know that the very revolutionary idealism of Godwin, his impossibly high conception of man, was a major influence on Shelley and consequently on his two plays *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas*. H.N. Brailsford said, 'It would be no exaggeration to say that Godwin formed Shelley's mind, and that *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas* were the greatest of Godwin's works'.² The whole conduct of rational action, as Godwin perceives it, is consequent upon the theoretical position that 'to a rational being there can be but one rule of conduct, justice, and one mode of ascertaining the rule, the exercise of his understanding.'³ Such an appeal to reason, issuing forth in justice, is a kind of return to first principle, which recalls Rousseau, Godwin argues that the route of much of the evil in the world comes from the greed of possessing property, etc.:

With grief it must be confessed, that, however, great and extensive are the evils that are produced by monarchies and court by the imposture of priests and the iniquity of criminal laws, all these are imbecile and impotent

compared with the evils that arise out of the established administration of property. ⁵

We know property leads to the exploitation of one many by another, and to the inequity of individual power and opportunity. If we remove these inequalities all will be well. But in spite of this improbable and unfounded optimism, Godwin produces in this and other passages a heavy mixture of idealism along with other radicals and poets of 1793. The humanitarian instincts of the work, its attack on monarchy and aristocracy and its advocacy of public good over private needs and affectations, all had a compulsion for a mind like that of Shelly, sensitive, subtle and independent, Godwin raised the standard of morality above the reach of humanity and directed virtue to the most airy and romantic heights. It is therefore not surprising that Brailsford would call *Prometheus Unbound* and *Hellas* 'the greatest of Godwin's works.'⁶

Like *Prometheus Unbound*, *Hellas* also bears the testimony to the influence of Godwin's noble conception of moral conduct and freedom. Shelly was also directly inspired by the Greek declaration of independence from the Turkish Yoke and this play unfolds the story of Salamis in terms of contemporary warfare and makes a prophecy of Hellenic freedom.

PART II

Hellas has a theme which is more universal in appeal than *The Cenci*. Shelley's preface to the play tells us about the newspaper information on which the *Oedipus Tyrannus* was based and here also the Greek design is used:

Common fame is the only authority which I can allege for the details which form the basis of the poem, and I must trespass upon, the forgiveness of my readers for the display of newspaper erudition to which I have been reduced.⁷

This time the tone of the play is idealistic. The past events are ‘Wrought upon the creation of futility’, through a series of lyrical pictures, composed in the autumn of 1821, it was published in the spring of 1822. In one of his letters Shelley says that the play was written “in one of those few moments of enthusiasm which now seldom visit.”⁸

The immediate urge was purely mundane to air his views on certain contemporary affairs. As personal matters like his friendship with Prince Mavrocercato and his interest in freedom could be combined in the play, the poet was happy with the subject.

PART III

In the preface Shelley explains that the poem can be called a ‘drama’ only ‘from the circumstance of its being composed in dialogue’.⁹ As hinted earlier the backdrop of the story is the Greek war of independence against the Turks. The poet, greatly admired the ancient ‘Productions’ of Greece and felt strongly about the apathy of the civilized world towards the aspirations of the ‘modern’ Greeks. Shelley emotionally writes in his preface;

The apathy of the rulers of the civilized world to the astonishing circumstance of the descendants of that nation to which they owe their civilization, rising as it were from the ashes of their ruin, is something perfectly inexplicable to a mere spectator of the shows of this mortal scene.¹⁰

That Shelly welcomed this revolution or war for national independence is recorded by Mary Shelly in her note on *Hellas*:

Shelley had hymned the dawn of liberty in Spain and Naples, in two odes dictated by the warmest enthusiasm; he felt himself naturally impelled to decorate with poetry of the descendants of that people whose works he regarded with deep admiration and to adopt the vaticinary character prophesying their success.¹¹

Cameron describes Shelley's preface as: 'Perhaps the most concentrated revolutionary statement of the age.'¹² It is really so significant: '...as portion of the cause of civilization and social improvement'¹³

The relevant portion of the preface is also being quoted to point out Shelley's awareness of the growing revolutionary movement:

...it is also unquestionable that actions of the most exalted courage have been performed by the Greeks – that they have gained more than one naval victory and that their defeat in Wallachia was signalized by circumstances of heroism more glorious than victory.¹⁴

In this war of the oppressed against oppressors, the privileged gang of murderers and swindlers are the sovereigns. Shelley did not believe that the modern Greeks were degenerate. On the other hand, he believed that their growing opposition to the Turks had transformed them, for 'habits which subsist only in relation to a peculiar state of social institution may be expected to cease as soon as that relation is dissolved.'¹⁵ Thus here Shelley places the emphasis on social conditioning. He acts not as a dreamer but interprets contemporary politics and analyses even the role of Russia in this context. He says:

Russia desires to possess, not to liberate Greece; and is contented to see the Turk, its natural enemies, and the Greeks, its intended slaves, enfeeble each other until one or both fall into its net.¹⁶

Shelley knows that the rulers of Europe are hesitant to intervene, because the struggle of Greece is generated from a spirit of revolution – ‘the same spirit before which they tremble throughout the rest of Europe.’¹⁷ But Shelley is, as usual optimistic and hailing the glorious future:

...a new race has arisen throughout Europe, nursed in the abhorrence of the opinions which are its chains, and she will continue to produce fresh generations to accomplish that destiny which tyrants foresee and dread. ¹⁸

He is confident of the consequences of the conflict between ‘the oppressed’ and ‘the oppressors’ and along with ‘the exploited’ watches the moment of their approaching scepters from their grasp. ¹⁹

PART IV

There is a prologue to the play, but when the play was first published in 1822, it did not contain the Prologue; Shelly’s intention in composing the Prologue was to develop some of the general ideas underlying the dream and to put the Greek war in historical perspective. But for some reason, it was not appended to the play.

The Prologue has some significance. It consists of fifty-one lines. The protagonists are Christ, Satan, and Mahomet. At the beginning of the prologue, the Herald of Eternity announces the sitting of the ‘Senate of the Gods.’ In his speech there is a reference to the past era of Greek civilization:

Within the circuit of this pendent orb
There lies an antique region, on which fell
The dews of thought in the world’s golden dawn
Earliest and most benign, and from it sprung
Temples and cities and immortal forms

And harmonies of wisdom and of song,

And thoughts, and deeds worthy of thoughts so fair.

(Prologue to *Hellas*, 11.32—37)

After a chorus which introduces Satan, Christ and Mahomet—these three come before the senate to plead for or against Greece, Christ, speaking first, plead for Greece and urges God to send forth:

Fate

Thy irrevocable child: let her descend,

A seraph-wing'd Victory [arrayed]

In tempest of the omnipotence of God

Which sweeps through all things.

(*Ibid.* ll. 100—4)

He further hopes that in spite of the schemes of the 'Quadruple Alliance' and the 'Holy alliance' — "hollow league" — Greece will come out victorious. On the other hand, Satan declares that fate is the instrument also;

Thou Destiny,

Thou who art mailed in the omnipotence

Of Him who sends thee forth, what e'er thy task,

Speed, spare not to accomplish, and be mine

Thy trophies, whether Greece again become

The fountain in the desert whence the earth

Shall drink of freedom, which shall give it strength

To suffer, or a gulf of hollow death

To swallow all delight, all life, all hope.

(*Ibid.* 11. 133—141)

By means of this weapon, Satan is ready to destroy progress itself:

...war shall hover

Above, and fraud shall gape below, & change

Shall flit before thee on her dragon wings,

Convulsing and consuming,...

(*Ibid.* 11. 147—150)

He chooses 'Anarchy' as his first weapon; and his next weapon is 'tyranny'.

'Anarchy' refers to the social chaos and violence, which led to the defeat of the French Revolution and "tyranny" to the rule of Napoleon. But Christ intervenes and reminds him that new forces are waking up:

Obdurate spirit!

Thou seest but the Past in the To-come.

(*Ibid.* 11. 160—161)

Then Mahomet also calls fate to assist the Turks, but before his message becomes clear, the Prologue ends.

As in *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley has portrayed Christ as the representative of the suffering humanity. Here also, Christ, as the spokesman for progress is a symbol of a revolutionary spirit. Shelley, as his *Essay on Christianity* shows, drew a distinction between Christ and the Christian Church. He regarded Christ as a moralist, as a revolutionary. In *Hellas* he tried to draw Christian support on behalf of the Greeks against the Turks.

This Prologue provides an appropriate background to the play itself. It establishes the moral concern of Shelley which is reflected throughout the play. M. Wilson aptly comments;

The radical evil, so brilliantly depicted in *Prometheus Unbound*, is not forgotten but it has continually been edged out of the way, the Platonic evil of domination in Time and by references to historical cycles, rolling worlds, ebb

and flow, thrones of buildings on chaos, crystalline floors paving chaos, foundations solid or fluctuating, and the like.²⁰

PART V

The action of the drama has two movements. The first depicts the initial triumph of the Greeks and the second expresses the treachery of the great powers that leave Greece to its fate. The first movement may be divided into some stages—the first stage consists of a Chorus, singing the victory of the courageous Greeks, a conversation between the Sultan Mahmud and his adviser Hussan, and the appearance of the ancient soothsayer Ahasuerus, and, also, another Chorus forecasting the destination of Mohammedan power. Then on the central stage there are announcements of a series of Greek victories, a third Chorus, referring to the libertarian and cultural traditions of Greece, and the arrival of apparitions of Mahomet the second who prophesies further ruin. The second movement is formed of the announcements of treachery of the great powers and the connection in the semi choruses regarding the golden future.

The action of *Hellas* opens at Constantinople. The Turkish Sultan Mahmud is asleep. The captive Greek women are singing a hymn to liberty:

Freedom, so
To what of Greece remaineth now
Returns; her hoary ruins glow
Like Orient mountains lost in day;

(*Hellas*; Sc.1. ll. 82—85)

Mahmud, thus disquieted by the song wakes up from a disquieting dream. His advisor Hasan suggests consultation with the old Jew but the King remains disturbed:

Kings are like stars—they rise and set, they have
The worship of the world, but no repose.

(Hellas, sc I, ll 195—196)

After Hasan's departure, the imprisoned Greek women again sing in a Chorus:

World on worlds are rolling over
From creation to decay,
Like the bubbles on a river
Sparkling, bursting, borne away.

(Ibid. ll. 197—200)

Then Mahmud and Hassan reenter. Mahmud is gloomy at the thought of his empire being torn by internal conflicts and outward attacks and he is drawn towards inevitable destruction:

Ruin above, and anarchy below;
Terror without, and treachery within;

(Ibid. ll.268—269)

Hasan tries to cheer him up:

Famine, and pestilence,
And panic, shall wage war upon our side!

(Ibid. ll.439—440)

In the mean time, a messenger announces the withdrawal of the Russian ambassador from Constantinople and another messenger enters with the sudden success of the revolutionaries in the Morea. A third messenger enters with the news of the spread of revolt

within the empire, involving Damascus, Medina, Persia, Crete and Cyprus. Again a forth messenger brings information that a Greek squadron was moving towards the Bay of Corinth. Thus the disheartening news of the war with the Greeks go on pouring in. K N. Cameron comments on this scene:

The spirit that animates the scene inversely conveyed through the alarm and gloom of the speakers – reflects the joyous exultation with which liberal Europe watched the insurgent advance of the Greeks²¹

Then, again, the semichoruses and the Chorus of the captive Greek women assert the continuity and greatness of the Greek spirit;

But Greece and her foundation are
Built below the tide of war,
Based on the crystalline sea
Of thought and its eternity;

(Hellas, ll. 696—699)

Cameron further comments on the significance of this chorus:

As in the ‘World on Worlds’ chorus, Shelly contrasts the general continuity of mind with the passing of material objects This inspiring and progressive body of thought will join with historical necessity to secure Greek victory.... But if this victory is to be permanent and not, it is implied, to end in internal military despotism, the Greeks must reject vengeance....The object of this chorus, coming immediately after the successive reports of Greek victories, is to foreshadow the drama’s final message of hope.²²

As the chorus stops, Mahmud comes back with Ahasuerous the Jew. Through his hypnotic spell, the Sultan sees the phantom of Mahmud the Second. It predicts that ‘the

Empire nods in its decay', for 'the autumn of a greener faith is come'. (ll. 870-71) It prophesies further:

Islam must fall, but we will reign together
Over its ruins in the world of death:—
And if the trunk be dry, yet shall the seed
Unfold it self even in the shape of that
Which gathers birth in its decay.

(*Ibid.* ll. 889-891)

Mahmud is then left in despair and so the victory shouts coming off stage do not inspire. Mahmud knows that the successes are short lived and hence meaningless:

Weak lightning before darkness! poor faint smile
Of dying Islam,

(*Ibid.* ll. 915-16)

Though the main action is over at this stage the crude shouts of the masses are shown pitted against the chanting of the semichorus. Here is a dramatic conflict which continues till triumphant chorus cries at the end;

The world's great age begins anew

(*Ibid.* ll.1060)

'Voices without' which announce the successive treacheries of the great powers are answered by defiant semi-chorus. The whole episode is wound up in the final chorus of hope for a regenerated Hellas in an egalitarian world. This concluding movement begins with a voice without, which announces the fresh advance of the Turks. The next semichorus reflects the impending horror of a small nation watching the gathering of destructive power:

Victorious wrong, with Vulture scream,
Salutes the rising sun, pursues the flying day!

Another voice without cries 'victory', 'victory' because Russia is unwilling to intervene against the Turks:

Victory! Victory! Russia's famished eagles

Dare not to prey beneath the crescent's light.

(*Ibid.* ll. 948-949)

Still another voice brings the news that Austria, Russia, Britain and France have agreed on a policy of nonintervention. Naturally, at first the semi-chorus I and II express bewilderment and despair at the news of this international treachery:

Semichorus I: Alas! for liberty!

If numbers, wealth, or unfulfilling years,

Or fate, can quell the free!

(*Ibid.* ll. 973—975)

Semichorus II: Repulse, with plumes from conquest torn led the ten thousand

from the limits of the morn: 'Through many an hostile Anarchy!'

(*Ibid.* ll. 988—990)

Then, gradually, the chorus again asserts the immortality of the Greek ideal. In two revolutionary stanzas, the chorus defies the gathering forces of reaction:

Semichorus I: Let the tyrants rule the desert they have made;

Let the free possess the Paradise they claim.

Be the fortune of our fierce oppressors weighed

With our ruin, our resistance, and our name!

Semichorus II : Our deed shall be the seed of their decay,
Our survivors be the shadow of their pride,
Our adversity a dream to pass away—
This dishonour a remembrance to abide!

(Ibid. ll. 1008—1015)

There comes yet another announcement of victory; the British navy has also decided not to intervene against the Turks. But the semi chorus is hopeful of a democratic power rising in America:

Semichorus I : Let freedom and Peace flee for
To a sunnier strand,
And follow Love's folding star
To the Evening land!

(Ibid. ll. 1027—1030)

The dream ends with the Shelleyan vision of millennium in a chorus:

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 faiths and empires gleam,
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

.....

Another Athence shall arise,
And to remoter time
Bequeath, like sunset to the skies,
The splendor of its prime;

And leave, if naught, so bright may live,
All earth can take or Heaven can give.

(Ibid. ll. 1060—10-89)

But at the back of his mind the poet apprehends that the shadows of the monsters of death and hatred may return:

Oh, cease! must hate and death return?

Cease! must men kill and die?

Cease! Drain not to its dregs the urn

Of bitter prophecy,

The world is weary of the past,

Oh, might it die or rest at last!

(Ibid. ll. 1060—1100)

On this concluding chorus, Mrs. Shelley's observations are worth quoting:

The conclusion of the last chorus is among the most beautiful of his lyrics. The imagery is distinct and majestic; the prophecy, such as poets love to dwell upon, the Regeneration of Mankind — and that Regeneration reflecting back splendour on the foregone time, from which it inherits so much of intellectual wealth, and memory of past virtuous deeds, as must render the possession of happiness and peace of tenfold value.²³

This chorus hails the new world order to come in further where mankind will take its rightful place. This represents the philosophy of Shelley, the visionary. Cameron's interpretation of the 'philosophy' may also be relevant here:

The final vision of *Hellas* revolves, like *The Revolt of Islam*, or *Ode to the West Wind* around the passing of the 'winter of the world' and the coming of the 'spring' of a new society.²⁴

Woodings, however, rightly points out the fear in the subconscious mind of the poet – in fact the thought of evil is never absent from Shelley's mind – even in the most optimistic moment (e.g. the end of *Prometheus Unbound*). Woodings says:

Equality and human brotherhood will constitute the basis for morality and philosophy in this new world society. People will then abandon any kind of filial religion, especially the old religions of persecution and exploration. It is possible, however, that sometime in future the new order might be destroyed and war and persecution might return.²⁵

Thus Shelley's *Hellas* reflects the conflict of his mind; he was optimistic of the arrival of a golden era at the end; but he was not sure of the means to attain it; at the same time he was afraid that human error may at any time regenerate the force of evil, which will again destroy the new world order.

PART VI

The action of the play is greatly more dramatic than *Oedipus Tyrannus* and we feel at the end, as if an exciting episode from a great drama has been presented to us. The battle for freedom is always an exciting subject and the author's consciousness of the opposing conflicts is interspersed throughout the play in such a way that the dramatic objectivity is almost lost in the subjective cobweb of emotion.

Shelley, however, deserves credit for adjusting the Elizabethan tradition of occasional scene-shifting with the Greek technique of sustained scenic effects. The Messenger's narration of events, supernatural sooth sayings and dream disturbing effects also heighten the dramatic tempo.

Shelley's ardour for Greek war, for Greek literature and culture, has not however, clouded the dramatic inspiration in him. The Sultan is not cast in the mould of the traditional frauds. He attains some tragic dimension when he stands out in bold relief as a melancholy figure as thoughtful as Hamlet:

Ruin above, and anarchy below;
Terror without, and treachery within;
The chalice of destruction full, and all
Thirsting to drink, and who among us dare
To dash it from his lips? And where is Hope?

(Hellas. ll. 268-272)

And as defiant as Macbeth:

Tomorrow and tomorrow are as lamps
Set in our path to light us to the edge
Through rough and smooth, nor can we suffer aught
Which he inflicts not in whose hand we are. *(Ibid. ll. 644-647)*

The messengers look indifferent and insignificant figures in the large canvas. Whatever their roles are the characters seem above our contempt.

There is the presence of Shakespearean echoes at other places also;

...Ominous signs

Are blazoned broadly on the noonday sky:
One saw a red cross stamped upon the sun;
It has rained blood: and monstrous births declare
The secret wrath of Nature and her Lord.
The army encamped upon the Cydaris
Was roused last night by the alarm of battle,
And saw two hosts conflicting in the air,
The shadows doubtless of the unborn time
Cast on the mirror of the night. While yet
The fight hung balanced, there arose a storm
Which swept the phantoms from among the stars.

(*Ibid.* 601-612)

Here the echoes from *Julius Caesar* is distinctly heard:

I have seen tempests, when the scolding winds
Have riv'd the knightly oaks...
But never till tonight, never till now,
Did I go through a tempest dropping fire.
And yesterday the bird of night did sit,
Even at noonday, upon the market place,
Hooting and shrieking²⁶

Despite such Shakespearean echoes the lyrical raptures are impressive:

Semichorus I : I hear! I hear!
 The hiss as of a rushing wind,

The roar as of an ocean foaming,

The thunder as of earthquake coming.

I hear! I hear!

(*Hellas*. ll. 719-723)

In basic structure and the central conflict *Hellas* is a drama. But all the other essential dramatic ingredients are lacking. It is to a great extent, devoid of the first and foremost quality of a play, objectivity. Most of the characters are types rather than individuals. At various places lyrical waves halt the action. The main characters seem to be Shelley's mouthpieces. Therefore the poetic work fits in his own visions into the framework of a poetical unit and consequently the ideas remain vague and abstraction dims the dramatic concretion. Thus *Hellas* remains, along with *Prometheus Unbound*, a reading play.

Shelley himself believes that:

The final chorus is indistinct and obscure as the event of the living drama whose arrival it foretells. Prophecies of wars, and rumours of wars, etc. may safely be made by poet or prophet in any age, but to anticipate however darkly a period of regeneration and happiness is a mere hazardous exercise of the faculty, which bards possess or feign.²⁷

We have only to say that 'this hazardous exercise of the faculty', Shelley really possessed and not merely feigned. But, then, it may produce good poetry and not good drama.

PART - VII

This drama was however written at the very beginning of Greek uprising (in the autumn of 1821), but, it looked forward to the triumph of freedom and love as inevitable and this is a moral triumph which the poet aims at. The Turkish ruler, Mahmud, is shown as uneasy and time-bound, whereas the Greek ideal is shown as timeless,

But Greece and her foundations are

Built below, the tide of war.

Based on the crystalline sea

Of thought and its eternity.

(Hellas. ll. 696-699)

This empire of Greece is that of the spirit. In a reference to St. Paul's preaching at Athens, Shelley sees it as embodying love and not hate;

In sacred Athens, near the fane

Of Wisdom, Pity's altar stood,

Serve not the unknown God in vain,

But pray that broken shrine again,

Love for hate and tears for blood.

(Ibid. ll. 733-737)

The antithesis of love and hate is further emphasized when the spirit of Mahomet the second is summoned up (Shelley's parallel with Aeschylus' Darius). Mahomet the Second had conquered Constantinople in 1453; he now prophesies the end of the Islamic empire and underlines Mahmud's subjections to time earthly fears...which lead to hate. In a fine piece of irony Mahmud's hopes are given a boost when the great powers stand by and see Greece defeated reversing the course of Aeschylus' play: but this is done only to emphasize the

fragility of such a victory and this way the moral concern of the poet is tensely sustained. The Turkish voices shouting “kill! Crush! Despoil” (l.1022) are made to recede in the background by the magnificent final chorus, which, as Shelley himself pointed out, is as prophecy like that Isaiah and Virgil’s in the fourth Eclogue:

The world’s great age begins anew
The golden years return,

(*Ibid.* ll. 1060-1061)

But the poet himself was anxious of the fate of the world. As in *Prometheus Unbound* Demogorgon gives a warning that the serpent may, clasp Eternity again, here also as we have pointed out earlier, hope ends in melancholy:

Oh, cease! must hate and death return?
Cease! must men kill and die?
Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn
Of bitter prophecy,
The world is weary of the past,
Oh, might it die or rest at last!

(*Ibid.* ll. 1096-1101)

This oft-repeated stanza may be explained this way: According to the rotation of the wheel, hate and death will return. The play thus suggests that death is the way to rest, for men can rest only in contemplating the eternal. However, *Hellas* does not end as *Adonais* does. *Adonais* insists on the advantage that the dead has over the living:

Die,

If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!

(29 L I I)

Hellas does not offer such an answer, for it is written as a tribute to the Greek cause. Nevertheless, it seems that *Hellas* is moving towards such an event.

As usual, Shelly was sure that in the conflict between love and hate, ultimately, love will win; he was vacillating about the appropriate means, and from that mood generates the anxiety, worry and uncertainty regarding the moral course to be adopted in future.

However, it may not be impertinent to say that the play is not obviously a major dramatic work of the poet. It is evident that Shelly tried to be objective but he could not help bringing in his old political, social and philosophical views, and hence in this play he lacks the necessary objective view of a successful dramatist.

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