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## “Dividuous waves of Greece:” Hellenism between Empire and Revolution

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### **Abstract**

This article proposes a reading of P. B. Shelley’s lyrical drama *Hellas* as a critical encounter with early nineteenth century philhellenic discourse. This reading challenges, therefore, the still prevalent understanding of Shelley as an archetypal idealizing philhellenist. By reading *Hellas* in the context of Shelley’s manifold engagements with classical and modern Greece and by examining the subversive deployment of the “westering” theme in the lyrical parts of the work, I argue: 1) that Shelley draws attention to the appropriation of Hellenism by hegemonic political and cultural discourses of the period and to its entanglement with imperial politics; 2) that the chorus’s gradual recognition of the historical situatedness of its discourse simultaneously resists its wholesale subsumption under Eurocentric universalism and retains a utopian, future-oriented Hellenism as a guide for radical politics.

### **Keywords**

P.B. Shelley - Romantic Hellenism - Greek War of Independence - Westering - Universalism

### I

When Percy Bysshe Shelley chooses Aeschylus’s *Persae* as the model and intertextual referent for his lyrical drama *Hellas* (1821), he is opting for a text that has exerted considerable influence on the formation of a distinct European identity over and against the Asiatic other<sup>1</sup>. Critics and scholars have long acknowledged Aeschylus’s representation of the consequences of hubris at Xerxes’s court, accompanied by the cultural and literary topoi of despotism, luxury, and excess, as one of the earliest instances of the polarization between Greek and barbarian and as foundational for the development of European orientalism (Said 1978, 55-57; Hall 1991, 56-100). Furthermore, Shelley selects a text that was particularly important for the emergence of modern Greek national consciousness. Gonda Van Steen has traced its circulation in

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Greek radical circles during the early 19th century – including its recital and performance in secret meetings – and has made a compelling argument for its role as a «charter myth» in the shaping of modern Greek national ideology (Van Steen 2010, 67-108).

This marked discursive background and context, combined with the philhellenic rhetoric that characterizes *Hellas*<sup>2</sup>, has often been used for classifying Shelley among romantic radical-liberals whose politics were defined and structured by an essentializing distinction from the oriental other. Shelley's idealized conception of classical Greece is thus read as part and parcel of broader networks of reception and appropriation of Hellenism by the dominant political, cultural and aesthetic discourses in an era of emerging imperialism<sup>3</sup>. By assumedly equating Greek liberty and its modern revival with European political modernity, Shelley's radicalism is seen ultimately in theoretical accord with a British foreign policy that, following George Canning's appointment as Foreign Secretary in 1822, favored the creation of an independent Greek state under British influence in order to promote its interests in the eastern Mediterranean and to thwart Russian advances in the region<sup>4</sup>.

In this article, I question this enlisting of Shelley, through the mediation of his Hellenism, under the banner of liberal imperialism. I demonstrate instead, by focusing on *Hellas*, that Shelley puts forward a critical understanding of philhellenism – understood here both as a late 18th-early19th century scholarly, aesthetic, and political movement that affirms the centrality of classical Greece for European modernity *and* as the support for the Greek War of independence (1821-1829)<sup>5</sup> – that recognizes its potential discursive implication in imperial politics. The dynamic relationship between Hellenism – in its cultural, political, aesthetic, educational but also scholarly dimensions – and imperial and colonizing policies, has been the focus of significant scholarly attention in the past decades<sup>6</sup>. My attempt here follows Phiroze Vasunia's suggestion that Hellenism was also the ground for the articulation of an anti-imperial politics of modernity during the 19th century (Vasunia 2010, 289). More specifically, by reading Shelley against the background of British philhellenism in the

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argument.

<sup>2</sup> *Hellas*, according to Richard Holmes's seminal biography of Shelley, «contains the classic English statement of Philhellenism» (Holmes 2003, 678). Maria Schoina notes that Shelley's early critical reception in Greece emphasized his philhellenism and paid particular attention to *Hellas* (Schoina 2008, 258-67).

<sup>3</sup> For such readings of Shelley, and British romantic orientalism in general, see Leask 1992, Makdisi 1998, and Makdisi 2009. Recent works, such as Warren 2014, offer more nuanced readings that emphasize Shelley's critique of Eurocentric orientalism.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome McGann argues that the «typical philhellenist illusions» that mark the “Prologue” to *Hellas* «were open to political exploitation by Europe's imperialist powers» (McGann 1983, 125). See Cunningham 1993, 188-275, for a detailed account of the vacillations of British foreign policy during the period.

<sup>5</sup> See Espagne and Pécout 2005, 5.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions focusing on the British context, see Stray 1998, Bradley 2010, and Hagerman 2013.

early 19th century – a period in which the eastern Mediterranean was a location for both radical revolutionary movements and western imperial expansionism – and by considering the appropriation of the “westering trope” in the lyrical parts of the poem, I argue that *Hellas* becomes a central site where Hellenism’s constitutive role in political modernity is tested and contested. Without sidestepping the undeniable ambivalence that marks Shelley’s Hellenism, I highlight its critical outlook towards European imperial history and its resistance to hegemonic uses of the ancient and classical past.

## II

From the 17th century onwards, travel literature on Greece played a crucial role in the shaping of philhellenic ideology and sentiment as a criterion that could be applied in order to estimate the participation of modern Greeks in political and social modernity. Often taking the form of reflections and observations on the “manners” of modern Greeks, this corpus of texts is a veritable archive of testimonies that blend classical education and ethnographic fascination in their effort to detect remnants of the glorious past in modern customs, behavior, and modes of social organization. The diagnosis is – more often than not – bleak: the moral character of the Greeks was almost invariably «considered despicable and they were represented as vicious, completely devoid of any decency or virtue, and absolutely ignorant and superstitious [...] servile and obsequious, vain, perfidious and cunning, invidious and intriguing, insincere, deceitful and avaricious» (Angelomatis-Tsougarakis 1990, 91-2)<sup>7</sup>.

This trope of moral health or degradation acquires however a particular political inflection in the period following the French Revolution. The purported survival of the ancient Greek character in their modern descendants solidifies the latter’s claim that they form a distinct nation that can and must organize itself, with international support, into an independent, Western-type political society. The ideological potential of Hellenism was evident, for instance, in the 1797 annexation of the Ionian Islands to the First French Republic as part of Napoleonic expansionism. This annexation was accompanied by the deployment of a classicizing rhetoric in addresses to the Greek population of the islands as well as by the commissioning of ethnographical missions in the Mediterranean East by the Directory. Such efforts found their counterpart in Greek radical thought in the pre-revolutionary period. Adamantios Korais, for example, the central figure of the late Greek Enlightenment, draws explicit links between the presumed republican character of the French Revolution and the civilizing mission of French expansionism in these regions. In his *Σάλπισμα Πολεμιστήριον* [War Blare]

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<sup>7</sup> See also the discussion in Spencer 1954, 146-70.

(Korais 1801) the occupation of Egypt by the French troops does not belong to the same order as the Ottoman conquest of the country. Unlike the tyranny exerted by the latter on the «blissful land of the Ptolemies», the French conquest serves historical and cultural progress, falling upon the land «as dew from the sky, bringing to the Egyptians lights and freedom» (Korais 1801, 11-2, my translation)<sup>8</sup>.

This shift in French policy and perceptions did not go unnoticed in British political and cultural circles. Reviews in influential journals not only refute the ethnographical accuracy of accounts that support the continuity between ancient and modern Greeks, but they comment perceptively on the political use and abuse of Hellenism, whether in its revived or in its surviving variety<sup>9</sup>. Soon though, in light of the changing character of British foreign policy in the region in the years of the Greek Revolution, British thinkers and politicians themselves adopt Hellenism as a potent ideological and political tool in order to justify direct or indirect intervention in support of the fighting Greeks and to bring the future Greek state under British modernizing influence.

Thomas Erskine's case is telling: a liberal politician and a lawyer – who had defended, among other radicals, Thomas Paine following the charges brought against the latter with the publication of the second part of *Rights of Man* –, Erskine was a fervent advocate of the Greek cause. His widely circulated *A letter to the Earl of Liverpool* (1822) offers one of the clearest exposition of the links between the liberal understanding of Empire, its civilizing mission, and Hellenism. His call in favor of the Greeks follows the distinction he draws between the liberal British political spirit from that of the countries that formed the Holy Alliance. For Erskine, British support is part of the “duty” that follows from Britain's distinct political character: «[W]e shall never directly nor indirectly discountenance that liberal and free spirit which created, illustrated, and vindicated our own revolution [...] The world [...] is on its march with rapid steps to higher destinies, and I hope that our country, as the original example and pattern of freedom, will always be found, as heretofore, at the head of the column» (Erskine 1823, 8-9). The spirit of classical culture and republican ethos that Erskine perceived in modern Greeks permits him to place them in the sphere of Britain's influence<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Translation my own. For a detailed discussion of Korais' political views as a synthesis of republican and liberal ideas see Kitromilides 2013, 260-90.

<sup>9</sup> See for example the anonymous review of Charles Sigisbert Sonnini's *Travels in Greece and Turkey*, undertaken by order of Louis XVI. and with the authority of the Ottoman Court (1801), published in *The Edinburgh Review* (January, 1823).

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say, of course, that within philhellenic circles *all* claims to liberal and radical modernity were mediated by classical antiquity. The documentary record of the London Philhellenic Committee – a site where Whig liberalism, Benthamite utilitarianism, and radical nonconformism coalesce – reveals no particular resource to ancient Greece other than as a way to gain the support of public opinion. See Rosen 1992 on the involvement of Bentham and his disciples with the Greek cause. Tzourmane 2015

Such concerns play out in Shelley's engagement with different aspects of philhellenism. A few years before the composition of *Hellas*, he had made his venture into global geopolitics in his treatise *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1819-20). In Shelley's speculations on the post-Ottoman future of the Eastern Mediterranean, modern Greeks are not distinguished from their rulers. He imagines instead a settlement of these lands by groups arriving from civilized and liberal countries, more suited to the surroundings once inhabited by the ancient Greeks (Shelley 1954, 239). However, by the time he comes to write the "Preface" to *Hellas*, Shelley seems to no longer hold these views. His understanding of the modern Greeks is more dynamic and, at times, ambivalent. Greeks are presented as *on the way* to civilization, with European learning and culture serving as the mediating factor between past glory and present revival: «[T]he flower of their Youth, returning to their Country from the universities of Italy, Germany and France have communicated to their fellow citizens the latest results of that social perfection of which their ancestors were the original source» (Shelley 2002, 431-2). Anticipating, however, counter-objections that would see the Greeks tainted by centuries of Ottoman rule, Shelley readily admits that the inherited gifts may in fact lie dormant: «If in many instances he is degraded, by moral and political slavery to the practise of the basest vices it engenders, and that below the level of ordinary degradation; let us reflect that the corruption of the best produces the worst, and that habits which subsist only in relation to a peculiar state of social institution, may be expected to cease so soon as that relation is resolved» (Shelley 2002, 431)<sup>11</sup>.

How can we comprehend Shelley's oscillation in his description of the modern Greeks and the apparent lack of a unified position on their relation to their ancestors? A useful starting point would be the consideration of the common ground between Shelley's radicalism and the liberal justification of imperialism as a civilizing mission. Liberal ideology, whether of the radical or the moderate variety, cannot but undermine its own premises and assumptions when it attempts theoretically to justify the imperial universalization of its principles. Homi Bhabha's foundational concept of mimicry is pertinent here. The liberal subject, in order to give grounds for the very existence of the civilizing project, necessarily resorts to the representation of colonial subjects as *potentially* civilizable; always on the way

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provides a highly informative account of the political and ideological character of the different groups that participated in the London Philhellenic Committee. See also Karakatsouli 2016 for a discussion, from a transnational perspective, of the early stages of the philhellenic movement as part of a Mediterranean-wide "liberal international;" especially pp. 145-92 for the British context. The conservative support of the Christian Greeks against the Muslim Turks also played an important role; it is not uncommon to see both the classical and the Christian strain blending together in philhellenic texts of the period.

<sup>11</sup> See Roessel (2002, 22-4) for the popular view among philhellenes that political liberation would lead to moral regeneration.

to civilization but not quite there<sup>12</sup>. While the colonialized other – or, in the case of Greece whose political situation does not permit territorial occupation, the other that must be civilized – can potentially be the same as the European liberal, he must of necessity remain different. Otherwise, the *raison d'être* for a colonial administration or a civilizing project would simply collapse. At the same time, the very existence of this mimetic other, reveals to the liberal subject his own discourse as yet another form of domination, no matter how different from more overtly exploitative modes of imperialism and colonization. In Bhabha's own words, «[c]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*. In order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference», even though that difference cannot be explicitly acknowledged (Bhabha 1984, 129). The case of modern Greeks presents an especially convoluted interweaving of these mimetic patterns. By virtue of their laying claim to a direct or indirect lineage to classical antiquity, the purported source of European civilization, the anxiety of the liberal subject about the potentially dominating and oppressive dimension of its Hellenocentric and modernizing discourse can be assuaged to some degree. This repressed anxiety returns though in the form of an intensified doubt whether modern Greeks will indeed prove to be similar to their forefathers.

However – and this is where Shelley's case begins to resist its wholesale subsumption under this theoretical model – the argumentative line of the “Preface” to *Hellas* does not offer itself quite so unproblematically to such an analysis of the relationship between Europe and modern Greece. The linearity of the model is resisted by a subtle parallel destabilization of Europe's claim to the tradition of ancient Greece. This might sound paradoxical since Shelley is considered to have offered the most memorable statement of European philhellenism by claiming that:

We are all Greeks – our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots 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 have still been savages, and idolaters; or, what is worse, might have arrived at such a stagnant and miserable state of social institution as China and Japan possess (Shelley 2002, 431).

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Bhabha's concept of mimicry in relation to Shelley, see Leask 1992, 70-85. Insightful discussions in relation to the philhellenic context can be found in Gourgouris 1996, 123-7, and Roilos 2003, *passim*, and Karakatsouli 2016, 290-8.

Christopher Hagerman has identified this passage by Shelley as an exemplary modern case of the dominant “imperial trope” within classical discourse. This trope places Greece and Rome at the beginning of European history: «Greece played the part of originator, particularly with respect to literature, philosophy, arts, architecture, free political institutions, and civil society. Rome’s main contribution to world history lay in absorbing Greek civilization, spreading it, and passing it down to posterity» (Hagerman 2013, 39). We can complicate and challenge such readings by considering the convoluted manner in which Shelley represents the relation between modern Europe and classical Greece. The particular phrasing and syntax of the transmission of culture from Greece to Rome undermine any notion of an unproblematic mediation between Greece and contemporary Europe<sup>13</sup>. While the reader should acknowledge the orientalist tropes that structure Shelley’s discourse in this passage («stagnant and miserable state of social institution» in the Orient), she should also detect Shelley’s subtly articulated critique of the oppression and violence that characterizes imperialist civilizing projects. Without Greece, Rome’s imperial project – with its central position in British imperialist discourse – would have been one of simple territorial expansion and domination. In *A Philosophical View of Reform*, the transition from Greece to Rome is much bleaker. Shelley summarily describes the Roman Empire as «that vast and successful scheme for the enslaving [of] the most civilized portion of mankind» (Shelley 1954, 230).

The troubling link that is Rome in the transmission of Greek culture should also problematize any reading that would have Shelley arguing for a cultural and political spirit common to both ancient Greeks and modern Europeans. Alongside the emphatic statement about the rootedness of contemporary culture and institutions in Greece, the “Preface” articulates a persistent criticism of the contemporary situation of English and European politics. Shelley expresses the hope that the Greek Revolution would be part of a revolutionary upheaval that would shake the age: «This is the age of the war of the oppressed against the oppressors, and everyone of those ringleaders of the privileged gangs of murderers and swindlers, called Sovereigns, look to each other for aid against the common enemy [...] Of this holy alliance all the despots of the earth are virtual members» (Shelley 2002, 432).

If it appears that modern Greece destabilizes the connection between ancient Greece and Europe, things are further complicated if we take into account other texts by Shelley that concern classical Greece. In general, Shelley is critical of what he considers an unreflective identification with ancient Greece. In the brief essay *A Discourse on the Manners of the Ancient Greeks Relative to the Subject of Love* (1818) he identifies two prevalent ways through which classical antiquity is approached. He claims that both

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed account of the reception of Rome in Shelley’s work see Sachs 2010, 146-78.

are inadequate and unsuitable for his own argument. First, he rejects a humanist approach that would render the Greeks into another version of our own modernity. Such an approach not only reduces the distance between the ancients and the moderns, it also contains a self-congratulatory outlook by the latter. The second approach that leaves him unsatisfied is the more historicizing and anthropological representations that lack critical perspective. In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley puts forward such a critical reading of Homer. While acknowledging the grandeur of his characters and the noble sentiments they could inspire in the audience of the era, Shelley proposes treating what is unsettling in the epic heroes as «a temporary dress». While necessary to the poet of each period, the imperfections do not negate the poetic archetype: «Nor let it be objected, that these characters are remote from moral perfection, and that they can by no means be considered as edifying patterns for general imitation. Every epoch under names more or less specious has deified its peculiar errors; Revenge is the naked Idol of the worship of a semi-barbarous age» (Shelley 2002, 516). Shelley supports the historicizing understanding of Greece, without reducing it to a position of absolute historical alterity.

It should be clear by now that a unifying synthesis of Shelley's positions on Greece, classical and modern, is not a simple task. The circumstances and time of each of his engagements with this issue differ significantly, and only a too facile approach would reduce into monolithic reading attitudes that span a number of years and are manifested in texts that vary radically from each other in generic make-up and pragmatic orientation. Precisely by keeping this complexity in mind I argue that Shelley, far from being the archetypal philhellene that he is sometimes taken to be, displays instead a critical approach regarding the various dimensions – cultural, political, and aesthetic – of the relationship between classical Greece and radical thought and praxis. This critique cuts both ways. On the one hand, it enjoins contemporary radicalism to criticize any element that belongs not only to political pre-modernity but also to that part of the classical heritage that is tied with modern imperialist history and its political projects. On the other, the Hellenic ideal of artistic creativity and free political institutions enables the critique of contemporary society. This critical model inserts an element of negativity in both terms: Greece not quite as it was and Europe as is yet to be. Thus, it resists the chiasmic identification that holds the Greek to be European and the European to follow from the Greek.

### III

Shelley's awareness of the genealogical complexity and ideological force of Hellenism offers a vantage point for a reading of *Hellas* as a critical engagement with philhellenic discourse. A full consideration of the formal and narrative interplay between the dialogic scenes (containing Mahmud's philosophical discussions with the Jewish sage Ahasuerus, his encounter with the ghost of Mahomet, and his intellectual and moral

reform) and the choral parts (sung by the chorus of the Greek captive women) of the poem lies beyond the spatial limitations of this article. My analysis will focus instead on the lyrical component of the drama and, more specifically, on those parts that describe Freedom's return to its birth-place following its course at various stages of world history. The deployment of this “westering trope” is particularly pertinent to my analysis, since the allegorical representation of the progress of abstract entities—for example, Freedom, Poetry, Wisdom—from the East to the West is often used to affirm Europe's inheritance of the mantle of civilization and progress<sup>14</sup>.

The lyric dimension of the work, in general, is crucial. Shelley states in the “Preface” that the undecided nature of the ongoing war demands formal experimentation. The lack of immediate information forces him to rely on “newspaper erudition”, while the uncertain outcome of the war, unlike the Aeschylean tragedy that was written after the defeat of the Persian forces, necessitates the use of lyrical discourse:

The subject in its present state, is insusceptible of being treated otherwise than lyrically [...] I have, therefore, contented myself with exhibiting a series of lyric pictures, and with having wrought upon the curtain of futurity which falls upon the unfinished scene such figures of indistinct and visionary delineation as suggest the final triumph of the Greek cause as a portion of the cause of civilization and social improvement (Shelley 2002, 430).

These comments, and especially Shelley's desire to ensure the modern and civilized nature of the Greek struggle, suggest on a cursory reading that the lyric mode is employed for the purposes of an aesthetic ideology and in order to provide imaginative resolution to potentially troubling historical questions<sup>15</sup>. My reading of the “westering song” aims instead to show that the chorus, through an encounter with the historical reality of political oppression and violence, undergoes a process that is best characterized as a critical examination of one's own assumptions, and not as an idealizing displacement of history. Insofar as these assumptions are closely linked to the order of the Hellenic, the presumed fountainhead of European civilization and politics – both in their revolutionary and imperial aspirations – I contend that Shelley puts forward a more vigilant approach to philhellenic discourse than often assumed.

The greater part of the first choral movement consists of a song about the return of Freedom to Greece after its course through various stages of European history. In the

<sup>14</sup> For illuminating discussions of the westering trope along these lines see Hartman 1970 and Kramer 2005. For an analysis of this trope in Shelley's “Ode to Liberty” see Goslee 1994.

<sup>15</sup> For a general discussion of romantic-aesthetic ideology see McGann 1983. For readings of *Hellas'* lyrical parts along these lines of interpretation see, among others, Wasserman 1971, McGann 1982, Wallace 1997, and Stock 2010. More recent readings have uncovered tensions and complications in the choral discourse; see Cheeke 1996, Douka-Kabatoglu 1996, and Van Kooy 2009.

earlier *Ode to Liberty* (1820), Athens was the first historical site of Freedom due to the harmonic interweaving of artistic creativity and political freedom. In *Hellas*, Athens is absent from the initial genealogy of freedom. The song, following the cosmological birth of Freedom into time, begins instead with the Persian wars:

Freedom's splendour burst and shone.  
Thermopylae and Marathon  
Caught, like mountains beacon-lighted,  
The springing Fire...

(l. 53-56)

The chorus's discourse, saluting the arrival of Freedom, employs a marked image from the corpus of Aeschylean tragedy. In the opening scene of *Agamemnon*, the first play of the *Oresteia* trilogy, the watchman in Mycenae receives news of the Greek victory in Troy by way of «the agreed beacon-signal, the gleam of fire bringing from Troy the word and news of its capture» (l. 8-10). Shelley thus combines in a single image both epic and tragedy; that is, the exploits of the Greeks at Troy and their violent aftermath – the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the rage of Achilles, and parenticide. Towards the end of the drama, we will see the reappearance of the world of epic and tragedy. There, the chorus will ask that one should «write no more the tale of Troy» and «not mix with Laian rage the joy which dawns upon the free» (l. 1078, 1080-1). By then, the captive women will have come to recognize the elements of violence that inhabit their discourse. At this stage though, unaware of such implications, they celebrate the assumed return of Freedom at its ancestral home.

The next stage of the westering of Freedom/Liberty, common to *Hellas* and the “Ode to Liberty”, is the Roman world. In the “Ode”, republican Liberty is presented through an apprehensive figural language that draws awareness to irrational and uncontrollable elements in an idealizing of freedom that is connected with martial virtue:

Then Rome was, and from thy deep bosom fairest  
Like a wolf-cub from a Cadmean Maenad,  
She drew the milk of greatness, though thy dearest [Athens]  
From that Elysian food was yet unweaned;  
And many a deed of terrible uprightness  
By thy sweet love was sanctified

(l. 91-96)

The rest of the stanzas devoted to Rome, and more specifically its imperial period demonstrate the gradual disappearance of Liberty from the scene:

But when tears stained thy robe of vestal whiteness,  
And gold prophaned thy Capitolian throne  
Thou didst desert, with spirit-winged lightness  
The senate of the tyrants: they sunk prone  
Slaves of one tyrant: Palatinus sighed  
Faint echoes of Ionian song; that tone  
Thou didst delay to hear, lamenting to disown

(l. 102-105)

In *Hellas*, though, the first – harsh but admirable – stage of the Roman Republic is omitted. In the choral song, only the imperial period appears as a locus of Freedom, and the critical perspective is decidedly less conspicuous. The stage is set at Philippi, the location of the decisive win of the forces of the Second Triumvirate against Brutus and Gaius Cassius that paved the way for the seizing of power by Octavian. A reading of these lines influenced by the more direct critique in the “Ode” could perhaps detect an implicit critique in the representation of Freedom «half-alighted», as if already in the process of departing from the scene:

The winged Glory  
on Philippi half-alighted,  
Like an eagle on a promontory  
Its unwearied wings could fan  
The quenchless ashes of Milan

(l. 56-60)

Imperial Rome not only succeeds Greece in this genealogy, but is crucially celebrated for spreading the ideal of Freedom until the period of the Italian communes. From there, in succinct phrasing that suggests the revival of the glorious past, Freedom appears at different historical sites: Florence, Albion, Switzerland, and in more recent times, America, Germany and Spain. With the exception of the French Revolution, the modern course of Freedom is presented as a repetition of the ancient example. Her final reappearance in Greece celebrates the revolution with a phrasing that combines once more the emancipatory aim with darker and – as of yet – unacknowledged premonitions:

Beneath the safety of her wings  
Her renovated nurslings prey,  
And in the naked lightnings

Of truth they purge their dazzled eyes  
(l. 86-89)

The syntax of the last two lines partakes in the unfolding of the double discourse traced so far in this reading. If we choose to consider the transition between lines 88 and 89 as an enjambment – in this case, the adverbial clause would run past the end of the line: «And in the naked lightnings of truth» –, our reading of it would conform to the optimism displayed throughout the choral part. Following Freedom's return to Greece a new era is ushered in. The followers of Freedom gain direct and unmediated access to truth, which subsequently leads to purification of their *hitherto* dazzled eyes. If we opt, however, for the alternative reading by avoiding to read the enjambment – the adverbial clause ending where the line ends: «And in the naked lightnings» – the meaning would be reversed. In this case the immediate contact with the powerful sublimity of Freedom would *now* dazzle their eyes and it would purge them of truth. The syntax permits no clear-cut choice and the two options appear equally valid. The prosody of these lines seems to support the second reading. The preceding iambic trimeter becomes in line 89 a tetrameter, further hinting at its formal difference and its potential syntactical autonomy from the previous three lines. We are dealing therefore with an unresolved ambiguity that problematizes the assumptions that support the very notion of the “westering” of Freedom. On the one hand we have a choral movement marked by an apparent enthusiasm for the return of Liberty that includes, but does not acknowledge, the violent appearance of Freedom both in revolutionary and imperial history. On the other hand, the reader can unpack the sinister implications that lie dormant in the imagery and poetic syntax of the poem in order to detect elements of alterity within the chorus's song.

The third choral movement follows the irruption of vengeful violence on the scene of revolution and it points towards a modification of the chorus's position. Here, we see for the first time a clear shift in the chorus's unreflective stance. Up until this point the chorus was removed from the action. Now, the captive Greek women express the desire to go to the scene of the naval fights in order to scold slavery and herald the coming victory. Embedded within the address to slavery, we find once again the *topos* of the return of Liberty/Freedom. The reappearance of this theme is different from its previous instantiations. Now, and in much clearer terms than before, classical Athens is distinguished from the empires that followed it:

Let there be light! said Liberty,  
And like sunrise from the sea,  
Athens arose! -  
[...]

Where Thermae and Asopus swallowed  
 Persia, as the sand does foam.  
 Deluge upon deluge followed,-  
 Discord, Macedon and Rome:  
 And lastly Thou [slavery]!

(I. 682-84, 688-92)

After its contact with violence the chorus posits classical Greece as an atemporal ideal, and it relinquishes the posing of Western history as a single unity. However, this separation from the presumed historical perversions of Greece is still not successful, since Athens retains its symbolic power as idealized fountainhead of European civilization:

Her citizens, imperial spirits,  
 Rule the present from the past,  
 On all this world of men inherits  
 Their seal is set-

(I. 700-703)

The chorus has not yet assumed a fully critical position towards the Hellenic ideal. The lyrical imagination is at this moment unable to conceive of the new beginning as something other than the repetition of the past, even if that past is distinct and idealized. The dead-end to which this type of imagination leads is indicated even more strongly if we take into account the contradictory elements contained in the description of the ideal Athens by the chorus. While denouncing the Macedonian and Roman empires, the chorus still presents the citizens of Greece as «imperial spirits», whose presence is felt throughout history.

The final choral part, following the announcement of the Greek defeat, begins precisely with such critical distancing from all historical sites that risk repeating the same: «Rome was, and young Atlantis shall become / The wonder, or the terror or the tomb / Of all whose step wakes Power lulled in her savage lair» (I. 993-995). A basic assumption of philhellenic discourse, namely the historical analogy between the Hellenic past and Western civilization, is thus criticized. At the same time, the Hellenic ideal undergoes self-examination. The last song celebrates the rebirth of Greece. This rebirth is presented as a repetition with a difference – and not as a repetition of its past self – that points towards a utopian conception of Hellenism. This is a «brighter Hellas», a «new Peneus», «a loftier Argo», «[a]nother Orpheus», and a «new Ulysses». What is crucial to note is that this idealized Hellenism does not result from the negation of history. It is, instead, made possible only through the chorus's realization of the historical, political, and ideological entanglements of its own philhellenic

rhetoric. It is through this realization that the chorus is now able to *critically* repeat the allusion encountered in the first choral part («Thermopylae and Marathon / Caught, like mountains beacon-lighted») and to explicitly identify components of the Hellenic ideal that perpetuate violence, revenge and guilt:

O, write no more the tale of Troy  
If earth Death's scroll must be!  
Nor mix with Laian rage the joy  
Which dawns upon the free  
(l. 1078-81)

#### IV

In his recent *European Universalism: The Rhetoric of Power* Immanuel Wallerstein puts forward a series of penetrating reflections on the situation of universalist politics today. The theoretical inconsistency and the destructive historical record of European universalism – whose discursive repertoire includes Greco-Roman antiquity (Wallerstein 2006, 33) – should not lead us to adopt a particularism that would reproduce the binary logic of its opponent, serving thus the existing world-system. Beyond the dilemma of eurocentrism and occidentalism, Wallerstein calls for the exploration of «the conditions of possibility» for a «universal universalism» (even though he leaves unspecified the precise content of this universalism) (Wallerstein 2006, 71-84). First among these conditions is the historicization of our intellectual analysis. This task would not aim at the relativization of our discourse but would instead throw in sharp relief the links that tie it to the present historical situation.

It would not be, I believe, far-fetched to consider Shelley's critical engagement with Hellenism as a potential forerunner to this endeavor. Such a genealogical enlisting would not come without reservations regarding his use of Hellenism as a *topos* that regulates participation in modernity. As it has been demonstrated, the deployment of Hellenism as an instrument for political and cultural hegemony was common enough in the liberal and imperial discourses of the period. However, this acknowledgement should not forbid us from appreciating the significantly more complex stance Shelley adopted in *Hellas*, his major philhellenic work. The intricate lineages between classical Greece, contemporary Europe, and modern Greece in the “Preface” of this work, as well as the marked deployment of the westering *topos* show a sharp awareness of the potential ideological uses of philhellenic discourse for hegemonic purposes. Shelley, like Wallerstein, does not delineate the content of his «universal universalism». His critical and poetical practice in *Hellas* possesses critical, not speculative, force. By questioning philhellenism's foundational assumptions and by undermining its established literary *topoi*, Shelley identifies stratifications within the Hellenism, and

highlights the necessity for recognizing the implication of our radical discourses with the contemporary situation precisely in order to resist, critique, and – potentially – overcome it.

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