Chapter 5

“From a Particular to a Universal”: The Shelley Circle, 1820–22

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I noted how John Taylor Coleridge criticizes *Laon and Cythna* for reasoning “from a particular to a universal.” The poem, he says, purports to narrate a specific revolutionary moment, but also presents a universally applicable ideal for a new society. With Coleridge’s phrase in mind, this chapter focuses on the two texts in which Percy Shelley uses the word “Europe” most often: the *Defence of Poetry* and *Hellas*, both written in 1821. In these works, Shelley identifies certain historical events and literary texts which together construct a uniquely European culture. But he also generalizes European culture into a universal ideal for all humanity, suggesting that European history offers a model for universal “progress.” As a consequence, both *Hellas* and the *Defence* interconnect ideas about Europe, Greece, and civilization. For Shelley, these concepts come to define one another: European culture epitomizes the notion of civilization, while the achievements of ancient Greece define the development of Europe. In other words, Europe and Greece are discussed in ways which are both totalizing and specific: Greek history and culture is thus made universally applicable to all places and periods and, simultaneously, the European present is defined by the specificity of the Greek past. Having discussed *Hellas* and the *Defence*, this chapter then analyses the Shelley circle’s experience of travel between late 1820 and early 1822. Their travel-writings is deeply connected to ideas about Europe since it constructs and traverses boundaries between spaces and peoples, emphasizing separation.

as well as new possibilities for cultural contact and communication. Last, I examine whether Shelley’s translations create a transnational literary culture by fusing together different linguistic traditions in a single text, or whether he appropriates other languages and literatures. These questions of travel and translation, I want to suggest, are informed by the terminology of “the particular and the universal,” and are crucial in constructing Shelley’s ideas of Europe.

**Hellas**

In his preface to *Hellas*, Percy Shelley acknowledges the influence of Æschylus’s *The Persæ*, a play which describes the victory of the ancient Greeks over their Persian invaders. He connects the drama to “the events of the moment,” namely the Greek War of Independence from the Ottomans. The connection between ancient and contemporary history is crucial, since Shelley goes on to make a case for “the final triumph of the Greek cause as a portion of the cause of civilisation and social improvement.” He identifies a progress theory which articulates itself through Greece: both the ancient victory and the modern conflict are part of the same trajectory leading to a more ideal society. Greece is the basis for an idea of “civilisation”: Shelley expresses his disgust for “the apathy of the rulers of the civilised world to the astonished circumstances of the descendents of that nation to which they owe their civilisation.” For Shelley, civilization and Greece have become mutually defining concepts: the “civilised world” is shaped by its Greek legacy, and ancient Greece is seen in terms of subsequent “social improvement.”

But, what is this “civilised world” arising from ancient Greece? When Shelley declares “We are all Greeks—our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece,” to whom is he referring? As the analysis develops, a definition of this collective “we” becomes clearer:

“Civilised world” refers only to Greco-Roman society and not to the Chinese, Japanese, or Islamic empires. Indeed, as the preface continues, “we” gradually comes to mean “Europeans”: the youth of “Italy, Germany