

“Ozymandias”: The Art of the Sonnet

Shelley’s friend the banker Horace Smith stayed with the poet and his wife Mary (author of *Frankenstein*) in the Christmas season of 1817. One evening, they began to discuss recent discoveries in the Near East. In the wake of Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798, the archeological treasures found there stimulated the European imagination. The power of pharaonic Egypt had seemed eternal, but now this once-great empire was (and had long been) in ruins, a feeble shadow.

Shelley and Smith remembered the Roman-era historian Diodorus Siculus, who described a statue of Ozymandias, more commonly known as Rameses II (possibly the pharaoh referred to in the Book of Exodus). Diodorus reports the inscription on the statue, which he claims was the largest in Egypt, as follows: “King of Kings Ozymandias am I. If any want to know how great I am and where I lie, let him outdo me in my work.” (The statue and its inscription do not survive, and were not seen by Shelley; his inspiration for “Ozymandias” was verbal rather than visual.)

Stimulated by their conversation, Smith and Shelley wrote sonnets based on the passage in Diodorus. Smith produced a now-forgotten poem with the unfortunate title “On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below.” Shelley’s contribution was “Ozymandias,” one of the best-known sonnets in European literature.

In addition to the Diodorus passage, Shelley must have recalled similar examples of boastfulness in the epitaphic tradition. In the Greek Anthology (8.177), for example, a gigantic tomb on a high cliff proudly insists that it is the eighth wonder of the world. Here, as in the case of “Ozymandias,” the inert fact of the monument displaces the presence of the dead person it commemorates: the proud claim is made on behalf of art (the tomb and its creator), not the deceased. Though Ozymandias believes he speaks for himself, in Shelley’s poem his monument testifies against him.

“Ozymandias” has an elusive, sidelong approach to its subject. The poem begins with the word “I”—but the first person here is a mere framing device. The “I” quickly fades away in favor

of a mysterious “traveler from an antique land.” This wayfarer presents the remaining thirteen lines of the poem.

The reader encounters Shelley’s poem like an explorer coming upon a strange, desolate landscape. The first image that we see is the “two vast and trunkless legs of stone” in the middle of a desert. Column-like legs but no torso: the center of this great figure, whoever he may have been, remains missing. The sonnet comes to a halt in the middle of its first quatrain. Are these fragmentary legs all that is left?

After this pause, Shelley’s poem describes a “shattered visage,” the enormous face of Ozymandias. The visage is taken apart by the poet, who collaborates with time’s ruinous force. Shelley says nothing about the rest of the face; he describes only the mouth, with its “frown,/And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command.” Cold command is the emblem of the empire-building ruler, of the tyrannical kind that Shelley despised. Ozymandias resembles the monstrous George III of our other Shelley sonnet, “England in 1819.” (Surprisingly, surviving statues of Rameses II, aka Ozymandias, show him with a mild, slightly mischievous expression, not a glowering, imperious one.) The second quatrain shifts to another mediating figure, now not the traveler but the sculptor who depicted the pharaoh. The sculptor “well those passions read,” Shelley tells us: he intuited, beneath the cold, commanding exterior, the tyrant’s passionate rage to impose himself on the world. Ozymandias’ intense emotions “survive, stamp’d on these lifeless things.” But as Shelley attests, the sculptor survives as well, or parts of him do: “the hand that mocked” the king’s passions “and the heart that fed.” (The artist, like the tyrant, lies in fragments.) “Mocked” here has the neutral sense of “described” (common in Shakespeare), as well as its more familiar meaning, to imitate in an insulting way. The artist mocked Ozymandias by depicting him, and in a way that the ruler could not himself perceive (presumably he was satisfied with his portrait). “The heart that fed” is an odd, slightly lurid phrase, apparently referring to the sculptor’s own fervent way of nourishing himself on his massive project. The sculptor’s attitude might resemble—at any event, it certainly suits—the pharaoh’s own aggressive enjoyment of empire. Ruler and artist seem strangely linked here; the latter’s contempt for his subject does not free him from Ozymandias’ enormous shadow.

The challenge for Shelley will thus be to separate himself from the sculptor's harsh satire, which is too intimately tied to the power it opposes. If the artistic rebel merely plays Prometheus to Ozymandias' Zeus, the two will remain locked in futile struggle (the subject of Shelley's great verse drama *Prometheus Unbound*). Shelley's final lines, with their picture of the surrounding desert, are his attempt to remove himself from both the king and the sculptor—to assert an uncanny, ironic perspective, superior to the battle between ruler and ruled that contaminates both.

The sestet moves from the shattered statue of Ozymandias to the pedestal, with its now-ironic inscription: “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings./Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!” Of course, the pharaoh's “works” are nowhere to be seen, in this desert wasteland. The kings that he challenges with the evidence of his superiority are the rival rulers of the nations he has enslaved, perhaps the Israelites and Canaanites known from the biblical account. The son and successor of Ozymandias/Rameses II, known as Merneptah, boasts in a thirteenth-century BCE inscription (on the “Merneptah stele,” discovered in 1896 and therefore unknown to Shelley) that “Israel is destroyed; its seed is gone”—an evidently overoptimistic assessment.

The pedestal stands in the middle of a vast expanse. Shelley applies two alliterative phrases to this desert, “boundless and bare” and “lone and level.” The seemingly infinite empty space provides an appropriate comment on Ozymandias' political will, which has no content except the blind desire to assert his name and kingly reputation. “Ozymandias” is comparable to another signature poem by a great Romantic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's “Kubla Khan.” But whereas Coleridge aligns the ruler's “stately pleasure dome” with poetic vision, Shelley opposes the statue and its boast to his own powerful negative imagination. Time renders fame hollow: it counterposes to the ruler's proud sentence a devastated vista, the trackless sands of Egypt.

Ozymandias and his sculptor bear a fascinating relation to Shelley himself: they might be seen as warnings concerning the aggressive character of human action (whether the king's or the artist's). Shelley was a ceaselessly energetic, desirous creator of poetry, but he yearned for calm. This yearning dictated that he reach beyond his own willful, anarchic spirit, beyond the hubris of the

revolutionary. In his essay “On Life,” Shelley writes that man has “a spirit within him at enmity with dissolution and nothingness.” In one way or another, we all rebel against the oblivion to which death finally condemns us. But we face, in that rebellion, a clear choice of pathways: the road of the ardent man of power who wrecks all before him, and is wrecked in turn; or the road of the poet, who makes his own soul the lyre or Aeolian harp for unseen forces. (One may well doubt the strict binary that Shelley implies, and point to other possibilities.) Shelley's limpid late lyric “With a Guitar, to Jane” evokes wafting harmonies and a supremely light touch. This music occupies the opposite end of the spectrum from Ozymandias' futile, resounding proclamation. Similarly, in the “Ode to the West Wind,” Shelley's lyre opens up the source of a luminous vision: the poet identifies himself with the work of song, the wind that carries inspiration. The poet yields to a strong, invisible power as the politician cannot.

In a letter written during the poet's affair with Jane Williams, Shelley declares, “Jane brings her guitar, and if the past and the future could be obliterated, the present would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment, ‘Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful.’” The endless sands of “Ozymandias” palpably represent the threatening expanse of past and future. Shelley's poem rises from the desert wastes: it entrances us every time we read it, and turns the reading into a “now.”

The critic Leslie Brisman remarks on “the way the timelessness of metaphor escapes the limits of experience” in Shelley. Timelessness can be achieved only by the poet's words, not by the ruler's will to dominate. The fallen titan Ozymandias becomes an occasion for Shelley's exercise of this most tenuous yet persisting form, poetry. Shelley's sonnet, a brief epitome of poetic thinking, has outlasted empires: it has witnessed the deaths of boastful tyrants, and the decline of the British dominion he so heartily scorned.

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Originally Published: March 11th, 2010