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WILLIAM FREEDMAN

Postponement and Perspectives in Shelley’s “Ozymandias”

Probably few poems are at once as widely known and little discussed as Shelley’s “Ozymandias.” Most studies of Shelley, early and recent, major and minor, ignore the poem altogether—looking for the poem, one grows prepared for index skippage from “Ode to the West Wind” to “Prince Athanase” or from “Oh! there are spirits . . .” to “Peter Bell the Third”—and those that mention it do little more. Probably it is implicit agreement with Graham Hough’s greeting and parting gesture to the sonnet, that “Ozymandias is an extremely clear and direct poem, advancing to a predetermined end by means of one firmly held image,”1 that has discouraged attention.

What little study the poem has stimulated has been devoted chiefly to the quest for sources, predictably in the accounts of traveler-historians, for Shelley’s powerful description of the shattered statue and its suggestive inscription. The original statue, it seems likely, is that described by Diodorus Siculus in his Bibliotheca Historica (first century B.C.). Diodorus praises a massive sitting statue of a Pharaoh (identifiably Ramses II) “admirable for its art and workmanship, and the excellency of its stone” and bearing the inscription: “I am Ozymandias, king of kings; if any would know how great I am, and where I lie, let him excel me in any of my works.”2 But since the colossus was evidently intact at the time of Diodorus’ writing, and since far less of it than the poem describes remained by Shelley’s lifetime, pursuers of his sources for “Ozymandias” have turned their attention to other statues and much later descriptions.

D. W. Thompson argued for Savary’s account of a statue by Memnon located on the plain surrounding Thebes.3 Henry Jewell Pettit called


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attention to Denon’s *Voyage dans la Haute et la Basse Egypte*, which describes the pedestal to a statue probably not of Ozymandias and by then reduced to a shapeless rock of granite.\(^4\) Johnstone Parr offered Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* as a possible source for the epitaph.\(^5\) But in a later study, after reviewing an intimidating number of suggested and possible sources, Parr emerged “with very little conviction that Shelley’s account came from any of them.”\(^6\) Inferring that the description matches no extant remains and is therefore based on an inaccurate report, Parr held out the hope that the unfindable October-December, 1818 issues of a London periodical called the *Traveller*, should they ever turn up, might produce Shelley’s misinformed “traveller from an antique land.”\(^7\) Finally, H. M. Richmond, after reviewing Parr’s review and drawing conclusions from the failed quest thus far, argued against the existence of a single source for the poem’s description—a single fractured statue replete with frown, wrinkled lip, and famed inscription—and for a more creative fusion and transformation of a variety of different remains as described in Pococke’s *A Description of the East, and Some Other Countries*, published in 1743.\(^8\)

I cite all these researches at this length only because I believe we can at times find direction toward the implications or possibilities of a poem in the nature no less than the content of the controversies it provokes. What troubles readers is often an indication of what troubles the work they read, and their search may be revealing not primarily for the conflicting solutions they offer, but as a dispersed or collective image of the poem’s own variety, tentativity, and quest. In the case of “Ozymandias,” background inquiries into the identity of Shelley’s traveler and statue bring us closer to the literary experience of the poem than almost all the dismissively brief assurances about its theme. The concern of “Ozymandias” scholarship is the search for origins and sources, for the multiply filtered relationships between Ozymandias (or Ramses II), the sculptor (probably Memnon of Sienitas) who rendered his gigantic form at the Pharaoh’s behest, the many traveler-historians who described, with varying degrees of precision and reliability, the statues they saw or


\(^{7}\) *Keats-Shelley Journal* 35.

learned of, and the poet Shelley. That, I will contend, complicated still further by the inevitable addition of the reader of the poem, is also the subject, at least a subject, of Shelley’s poem. Searches for the stone and paper origins of “Ozymandias” are scholarly accounts of a poet’s rendering of a historian’s report of a sculptor’s time-altered fashioning of a tyrant and his vain boast. Critical readings of the poem are, for literary rather than historical reasons, reflections of that many-lensed gaze. They are interpretations of the poet’s (apparently ironic) judgment of a tale allegedly told him by a traveler recollecting his impressions of an artist’s time- and fate-shattered rendering of a historical figure’s visage and character and his inscription of that ruler’s own assessment of the magnitude, prospects, and implications of his achievements.

Serious efforts to come to terms with “Ozymandias” are a rarity, but none can take place without some reference to the curious presence of the filtering “traveller from an antique land.” Why interpose him? Why does the speaker or poet not describe directly the fallen statue he has seen or sees? One answer, by far the most familiar, is that the traveler, “a reliable fellow,” in Desmond King-Hele’s urbane judgment, “quick to observe relevant detail and not too wild in interpreting it,” lends credibility to the poem’s report. Another, less often heard but feasible, is that by displacing the testimony from first to second hand, Shelley introduces what otherwise would hardly occur to us: the possibility of doubting its validity. For while the removal depersonalizes the account in a way Shelley, that preeminently personal poet, apparently found intriguing, voices other than the poet’s or those that pass for his are almost inevitably less automatically credited than his own. This question, however, like the issue of sources, is ultimately more interesting as a reflection of the questions and issues the poem itself raises and vies with than for the answers either gives. For what is quite undeniable is that—whether at the price or added profit of credibility—the poet “distances himself from the poem’s subject by having all details supplied by some unnamed traveler.”

This distance, supported by the detached tone of the poem, is markedly atypical of Shelley, and it provides another explanation for the poem’s neglect among writers interested in Shelley’s poems chiefly as constituent entries in a coherent canon representative of the poet and the man. There may be much to learn about the poet Shelley from the seemingly aberrant detachment of this poem. But my immediate concern

is with “Ozymandias” and with the concepts of distance, postponement, filtering, interpretation and reliability that pervade and characterize it. The traveler is but the most obvious manifestation of the poem’s preoccupation with such matters, the surface extrusion of a deeply stratified formation that is the poem.

The implication of the poem’s ironic comment on the transience of human power and accomplishment is that the truth is not, as Ozymandias and perhaps the sculptor believed, the product of first perception; one must wait for reliable or final answers. Almost everything in “Ozymandias” supports and enriches this notion, complicating it finally to the point where even that seemingly reliable inference forfeits, like the statue, its solidity.

The apparent meaning of the poem is itself postponed until the last lines, even a bit beyond their reading to the delayed grasp of the ironic disharmony between the inscribed boast and the leveling sands that follow and erode it. Not until we arrive at the closing words of the poem and perhaps beyond them do we realize that process is point, that knowledge is a matter of postponement and delayed recognition. This principle of postponement, however, is not postponed. It begins with the interposition of the traveler in the first line of the sonnet and is quickly thickened by the syntactic organization of his introduction and first words. The description commences after a portentous colon prepared by more than a line of verse, and it is marked by clipped adverbial phrases and pauses that hesitantly detail the description yet thwart our arrival at its main subject. The fragmented construction is doubtless a verbal replication of the fractured statue it describes. But it is also part of the system of filtering postponements that steal not initial but delayed and considered attention from the simpler message. Or rather, it shifts attention from the obvious substance of the moral to the conditions of its realization.

The syntax of lines three and four is thwarting, but clear. “Near them, on the sand, / Half sunk, a shattered visage lies. . . .” What follows is equally Germanic in its construction but more hesitant and labyrinthine, compelling a longer, more difficult journey to completion. The thought begun on line three is not completed until the end of line nine. And even then, because of the inversions, qualifying and parenthetical phrases, understanding is delayed, forced back through the blocking fragments to a grammatical reordering that gives us paraphrasable meaning. Once again, however, technique all but overwhelms apparent objective, for we are more involved with the unravelling and working through than with the cognitive point of its product. Here too there is a seemingly secondary meaning that joins with the means of its discovery
to usurp a central position in our experience of the poem. More interesting than the sculptor’s physiognomical rendering of his subject’s cruel tyranny is the observation—delayed for us by the windings of the sentence that contains it—that postponed judgment is reliable judgment, or at least more reliable. The realization is qualified by the decayed condition of the sculpture. But the point that emerges as a reflection and consequence of our reading of these wreathed lines is that what survives and thus, by implication, what is of consequence, is neither life nor the ordinary manifestations of power, but art. One must wait centuries, perhaps millenia or a few disturbingly situated phrases to learn it, but life, in so far as it survives at all, survives only in the lifeless images of art.

The temporal delays enforced by the syntax become an important feature of the poem as experienced and support its implied reflections on the deceits of immediacy and the enhancement of understanding with time. Both are complemented by a more complex spatio-temporal arrangement of speakers, renderers and interpreters that complicates the message by adding to it a somewhat less committal investigation of the act and implications of interpretation itself.

One point of the poem, surely, the one on which its irony—indeed all irony—depends, is that texts or statements can be read in more than one way. Most obviously this refers to Ozymandias’ reading of his achievement and the poet’s apparent reinterpretation of it in the light of time’s triumph and the surrounding void. But there are more than two readers here and more than one text to be read. There are two readers of events who speak the poem: the traveler and the “I” (we will call him “Shelley”) who met him, heard his words and recorded them. There are two more readers in the poem to whom at least one of the first pair, the traveler, refers: Ozymandias and the sculptor who “well those passions read which yet survive. . . .” And there is a fifth reader outside the poem whose job it presumably is to read, interpret, and understand them all.

Taken collectively, they represent a considerable range of types of readers, of ways in which written or other material may be approached—different types, more completely, of creators and interpreters, since all are in some ways both. Ozymandias is an artist of sorts, a creator, a tyrannical Prospero who, by erecting great cities and monuments in what once was desert, in effect creates something from near nothing. As an interpreter of the message and implications of his own construction, he is a literalist; he cannot go beyond the evidence immediate to his eyes. If Ozymandias is a divine “maker,” a creator of what was not, his sculptor is mimetic, though not in the most external sense. The
sculptor copies what he sees, but he sees more than may be evident to the imperceptive eye. When the traveler remarks that the sculptor “well those passions read,” he indicates that the passions Ozymandias’ heart fed were more observable there than on his countenance. Physicalizing spirit as he does, the sculptor reveals himself a keen reader and metonymic renderer of human nature. The traveler seems more critic than creator. Although he is a teller of tales who vividly and graphically narrates what he has thought and seen, his primary function is as reader—neutral and assessing—of the work of others. As such, he judges art as representation and principally in terms of its truth value, which he determines with the aid of knowledge brought to the work from beyond it. It is with reference to what he presumably knows of the expired heart of Ozymandias that he praises the sculptor’s accomplishment. The traveler is more critic than creator, but like the others, he is ultimately, perhaps inevitably, both. Making of this combination of description and judgment his riveting tale, he turns criticism into a narrative art the skillfulness of which is visible not least in the dramatic efficacy and thematic import of his postponements. The poet “Shelley” too is a fusion of artist and reader. He is a poet, of course; he makes the poem we read. But he makes it, perhaps again inevitably, of mediated experience, of the works and commentary of his predecessors. As artist, he is the poet whose written reading is his poem. As reader or critic, he is one who resists the overt or single-minded interpretation that characterize the sculptor and traveler and shows us that texts may be read as their own implicit contradictions. Applying his undercutting technique to the inscription on the statue’s pedestal, he leaves open the possibility of its application elsewhere: minimally to the recorded words of the traveler, to his own, and to the judgment of those of us who set them down. Finally, there is ourselves, potentially creative readers and interpreters of last resort. How we use our opportunity is something we determine and, with few exceptions, only we know. You are reading now my own current use and in the process fabricating yours.

Countless kinds of makers and readers, then—four in the poem, the rest feasting on it—but not so disorderly in their habits as they perhaps appear. One can arrange these reading speakers or speaking readers in a number of complementary ways. To begin with, they are organized Chinese-box fashion, whereby each surrounds and reads the one before, each one concentrically encompassing an increasing number of components. Ozymandias is at the center, he and his intimidating assessment serving as the texts that others read and interpret. Whatever is to become of his reading—we will come to that—he is nearest the source. Indeed, he is the object as well as the first purveyor of judgment. The first
reader of this primary reader, the one nearest to him in time and space and furthest removed by additional filters from ourselves, is the sculptor. As Ozymandias reads himself self-aggrandizingly, the sculptor expresses an apparently negative judgment on this ruler, fashioning him with “frown, / And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command” in order, we surmise, to suggest a disdainful and imperious cruelty. He “mocks” his Pharaoh in both senses of that word. Actually, it requires but a moment’s reflection—not often granted this neglected poem—to realize that we know virtually nothing of Ozymandias at first- or even second-hand. What we know or believe we know of him we have not from himself, as we initially imagined, but from the sculptor who has created him for us and left the only record of him the sonnet affords us. The view we have of Ozymandias is the sculptor’s view. Even the inscription is his. And while we may perhaps assume it was prescribed by the king, so that we can claim at least tentative second-hand cognition of his massive arrogance and pride, what more we claim to understand of him is our interpretation of the sculptor’s interpretation as limned in the features of the remnant visage.

Even that is to say too much, to place ourselves nearer the source than we legitimately may. For in fact our reading of the sculptor’s reading is filtered through the additional report and assessment of the traveler. That the turn of the mouth and lip depicts a frown, still moreso than the frown is a “sneer of cold command,” are inferences drawn from data that may be otherwise interpretable. They are, in short, readings; but while less than certain, we believe we have good grounds for accepting them, since such data is typically transparent, rarely given to widely disparate readings. The grounds for accepting the traveler’s judgment that these features indicate the sculptor “well those passions read” are, within the fourteen-line frame of the poem, far weaker. For in fact the sonnet itself offers us little more than the not-yet-revealed and far less revealing inscription for confirmation or verification. This is the naked interpretation of the traveler based on information both he and we may have, but which remains nonetheless outside the poem. The traveler reads the sculptor’s reading of Ozymandias as the correct one, and as readers we are obliged in turn to assess this latter judgment on the scant evidence available to us.

That most of us are inclined to accept the traveler’s reading, to read his reading of the sculptor’s reading as valid, is owed to a number of contributing factors: First, that he seems to be a careful observer of pertinent detail, hence perhaps trustworthy in subtler matters of perception and judgment, although the leap is a dangerous one—viz. Lemuel Gulliver, minute recorder, blind and wretched judge. Second, that the
inscription, which we attribute—somewhat speculatively—to Ozymandias and insist he did not himself intend ironically, offers at least partial confirmation of the assessment and because many of us bring to the poem historical data it does not contain. And third, because “Shelley,” the first-person speaker, tacitly accepts the traveler’s interpretation of the sculptor’s and seems to incorporate it into the message of the poem as we understand it. The irony is more poignant still if it cuts against a tyrant not merely haughty but cruel. There may be other reasons for accepting (or questioning, qualifying, or rejecting) the traveler’s claim. Indeed, there most assuredly are. But it is less important to investigate them than to recognize that the reader’s experience of the poem is less that of a given meaning or interpretation than of the complex and filtered process of arrival. His main task and experience is to read and juggle multiply refracted readings of what is itself less fact than a further reading: Ozymandias’ self-assessment and the inferences it leads him to.

The last of the three reasons just cited takes us to the last of the poem’s four lenses or filters, the poet “Shelley.” Our normal assumption in reading a poem or other work of literature is that we are reading and perhaps interpreting the artist’s beliefs, attitudes, or interpretations of “reality.” In this instance, however, we are asked to apprehend the poet’s apprehension of a traveler’s judgmental report of a sculptor’s interpretive rendering of a man and his judgments. Most of us read him ironically, feel quite certain that he is turning the traveler’s personal deprecation into a larger statement on the nature and transiency of power, the indomitable power of transiency and the consequent folly of human pride. “Shelley” is the box that contains all others, each inside the next, and it seems to enclose them ironically, to accept the anti-Ozymandian criticism of the traveler and sculptor, but to go beyond them to a philosophical judgment upon tyranny, accomplishment, and time; to go beyond the sculptor, at any rate, because we cannot be certain whether or not the traveler perceived or intended the irony we believe “Shelley” has. That is our reading, of course—or the reading most of us accept. For we are the inevitable last readers (or were until you read this or other readings of the poem), the one whose judgment we feel most secure we can identify and trust.

The readers, I believe, in addition to the Chinese-box construction of increasingly more comprehensive judgments, can also be arranged on a scale of reliability and certainty: our certainty about their reliability. The question is: how certain are we that each of the given readers perceives matters as we do and identifies the critical irony we confidently impugn. The terms are different, but the order is the same. The poem achieves—I would say is—a progression of reliability in its successive perspectives,
beginning (where the poem ends) with Ozymandias and culminating (where the reading begins) with ourselves. Ozymandias, we feel confident, has mis-perceived quite thoroughly both himself and his achievements and could not have seen—for it would then not be irony—the ironic implications of his boast. The sculptor has apparently grasped the contemptuous ferocity of his subject. But it is unlikely that he perceived the hollowness of a power and pride which must have intimidated him almost as much as others or foresaw the irony of the chiseled declaration. The traveler, we believe, is correct about both the character of Ozymandias and the trenchancy of the sculptor. And he seems right as well about the greater durability of art than life, most evidently but not exclusively in this instance. It seems almost impossible for us to determine whether or not he is aware of the irony implicit in the juxtaposition of the inscription and the closing description of the arid expanses that refute it. He has the capacity for at least limited judgment of character and art. But he is mainly a factual reporter. Either may dominate this closing statement. And while the same is true for the poet “Shelley,” our lesser a priori respect for travelers than for poets, our less developed expectation of irony in their utterances, and our predisposition to believe that the poet wishes always to add to what even his putative spokesmen remark combine to leave us uncertain about the traveler’s perception of the irony.

For the poet “Shelley” we have most regard; about him we have least doubt. It is not so much that he seems correct in accepting the judgment of Ozymandias implied, the traveler affirms, by the sculpture and confirmed by the traveler. Rather, he is our reason for accepting theirs. The relationship is more complicated, and reciprocal. It is because he has presented them as he has that their judgments are given and in turn lend credence to the poet’s implicit subscription to them. He is justified, then, we feel, in his silent ratification of the poem’s internal evaluations of Ozymandias and the longevity of art; justified too in his apparent ridicule of the tyrant’s emptied claim. We are more secure in asserting the poet’s perception and exploitation of the irony than the traveler’s. But even here there is room for at least a trace of doubt—we can never know, after all—and certainty is applicable only to our own apprehension or imitation of irony to the sestet, assuming that is how we read it.

Each of the poem’s five readers, then, knows more than the one who is nearer the core interpretation on the statue’s pedestal. Each incorporates the reading of the one before and adds additional components: acceptance or rejection of that earlier judgment, a broadening of perspective, or philosophical commentary. Reliability of judgment, like breadth of understanding, seems to increase with distance from the
center. We are most confident of the validity of our own reading or interpretation and of the invalidity, even ironic absurdity of the king’s. The others are ranged between us, with the poet “Shelley” nearest ourselves, the sculptor on the tyrant’s side of the traveler. Interestingly, the only reader whose interpretation of events we confidently dismiss is the one who is himself surest of his judgment and who deals most directly with immediate, unrecorded experience. Only Ozymandias attempts a direct statement about his own relation with the world and with other men. Even this statement must be substantially qualified. For by speaking through an inscription chiseled, presumably for posterity, into stone, Ozymandias assures a set of shifting referents for every part of his declaration. The Ozymandias to whom the name ostensibly refers is for the first readers a living being and ruler, for subsequent ones a protean implication of receding history, and for ourselves the scorned object of fate’s ironies. Similarly, both the works and the mighty he summons to regard them assume with time a changing character or identity—the mighty knowingly, the works to Ozymandias’ own unfelt despair.

By means of the “readers reading readers” construction, whereby it seems to achieve its point about pride, tyranny, and time, “Ozymandias” makes a subtler point as well, if not instead. Existing as it does through postponements and successive layerings of perspective and judgment, it keeps before us the act of reading and interpretation itself. The ironic twist of the inscription is pointedly postponed until the end; questions of assessment, complications of perspective, and postponements of judgment, on the other hand, are with us everywhere and constitute a far weightier proportion of our experience of the poem. By the pervasiveness of their presence, their evocative dominance of the poem and our attention, they bring to our awareness not so much a message about either time or perspective—though that perhaps as well—but a sense of the layered complexities of reading and interpretation. They make of these acts the reticent subject of the poem and add to the more evident theme of “Ozymandias” the recognition that truth is apprehended, if at all, not immediately or directly, but as a product of delayed cognition and a grasp of spoken, sculpted, and ultimately written interpretations—still not of physical presences, but of other interpretations, perhaps by extension ad infinitum: “The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

This last line of the poem opens possibilities as it seems to close them. The emergent truth of the poet “Shelley’s” apparent message, dramatically and temporally delayed, is dependent on the passage of time whose effects are visible in the first four lines and in this last. We accept his ironic dismissal of the tyrant’s boast because we have seen what an
absurdity time has made of it. And yet, the seemingly universal and eternal truth is eminently temporal, hardly less restricted than the discredited proclamation on the pedestal. Hardly less than that of the king’s assertion, the power of persuasion of the lone and level sands is contingent on the incompleteness of their own conquest. Their message too is subject to erasure, and it will be erased when the remnants and inscription are. When “nothing beside remains,” erodes to nothing at all, and when the lone and level sands stretch not far away but everywhere in sight, when time, in other words, is utterly triumphant, it will lose its power over man. It is only the survival of the remnants of culture, conquest, or human achievement that put them in doubt and reduce to mockery their claims upon eternity. When the inscriptions themselves are lost to time, the truth of their falsehood, hence of the poem’s apparent point, is lost with them. No less than the judgment of Ozymandias, then, “Shelley’s” and our own is subject to the ravages of time. More fully than we had guessed, it is all—as the poem’s technique implicitly avers—a matter of postponement, distance, and added perspectives. It is from such layered distances, the scholars tell us, that Shelley arrived at his poem and the larger ideas it seems to offer us. Travelers of another kind, we must wind the same way.

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