

## Shelley's "Ozymandias:" A Case Study of Romantic Orientalism

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### Abstract

The paper aims at re-reading Shelley's "Ozymandias" from a post-colonial perspective. The nineteenth century witnessed colonial expansion and the western countries began negotiating with the eastern countries from a culturally and politically superior position. Asia and Africa came to be perceived as inferior in popular imagination due to the academic endeavours in structural anthropology that had racial characteristics and archaeology that encouraged hegemonic thinking of the superiority of the occident. Poets and thinkers, caught in these socio-political thoughts expressed their opinions of the world from a colonial perspective. Thinkers like Karl Marx (1818-1883) and poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) invoked Diodorus Siculus (1st century BC) who had written on Egypt. In the twentieth century Edward Said (1935-2003) analysed how academia was influential in re-creating a new world order in which the occident was portrayed as higher. This paper attempts to understand how Shelley pictured Egypt in his simple and famous poem "Ozymandias."

**Keywords:** P. B. Shelley, *Ozymandias*, Romantic Orientalism

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was an "English Romantic poet whose passionate search for personal love and social justice was gradually channeled from overt actions into poems that rank with the greatest in the English language." scholars consider Shelley as a "passionate idealist and consummate artist who, while developing rational themes within

traditional poetic forms, stretched language to its limits in articulating both personal desire and social altruism” (Reiman).

“Ozymandias” is a sonnet by Shelley, one of his most famous short works, and offers an ironic commentary on the fleeting nature of power. It comments on a ruined statue of Ozymandias (the Greek name for Ramses II of Egypt, who reigned in the 13th century BCE). Shelley imagines the Egyptian location and a lonely statue on sands stretching far away with an inscription: “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Many readers of Shelley’s “Ozymandias” have been puzzled by the discrepancies between the scene he describes and what the visitor to the western part of thebes sees in the Ramesseum, where the shattered colossal statue of Ramesses II (Ozymandias) lies. There are “no trunkless legs of stone,” no pedestal nor any inscription (and we know that there never was one); no “frown” or “wrinkled lip” or “sneer” can be seen on the “shattered visage,” and, what is perhaps most striking, the “colossal wreck” is not alone in the desert, surrounded by “lone and level sands,” but in the midst of the substantial remains of a large temple. The Greek historian Diadorous Siculus (1st century BC) whom Shelley read, provides the basis for the supposed inscription but places it on an unfallen statue, notable for its lack of any flaw or blemish. (Waith 22)

Ozymandias or “Ramses II, Ramses also spelled Ramesses or Rameses, byname Ramses the Great” who flourished during 13th century BCE, it is said, was the “third king of the 19th dynasty (1292–1190 BCE) of ancient Egypt.” His reign is supposed to have been between 1279 BCE to 1213 BCE. This is considered to be the “second longest in Egyptian history.” He was a great warrior and fought with the Hittites, ancient Anatolian (modern-day Turkey). He is well-known for his “extensive building programs and for the many colossal statues of him found all over Egypt.” Exports say that the “best portrait of Ramses II is a fine statue of him as a young man, now in the Egyptian Museum of Turin.” His mummy is “preserved in the Egyptian Museum at Cairo” (Dorman).

The British Museum acquired the statue of Ramses II in 1835 from Henry Salt, an archaeologist, British diplomat and collector. Shelley died in 1822, and obviously had not seen the statue. Henry Salt (1780-1827) was born in Lichfield. He was “trained as a portrait painter” and he visited “India, Ceylon, Abyssinia and Egypt, contributing a number of drawings to his employer's publication, 'Voyages and Travels' (1809).” In 1815 he was appointed as British Consul-General in Egypt. “He excavated extensively in Egypt, procuring a large number of antiquities for The British Museum and for his own collection.” (British Museum)

He sent ... antiquities (his 'First Collection') to The British Museum in 1818 and, after protracted delay, the majority of the pieces were purchased for the knock-down price of £2000. Other pieces were subsequently sold to private collectors (the most notable of these being the sarcophagus of Sety I purchased by Sir John Soane). He formed, during 1819-1824, another collection (his 'Second Collection') which was reported upon by Champollion and purchased by the King of France for £10,000. He formed, after 1824, a final collection of antiquities (his 'Third Collection') which was auctioned at Sotheby's in 1835, the 1,083 lots making a total price of £7,168. Many items were purchased by The British Museum. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. (British Museum)

The attention given to other cultures by Europeans also ended up in material benefits as statues and icons were brought back to Europe and set up in museums for viewing with entry fee. Ancient cultures became profitable businesses. “The ancient Assyrian, Egyptian, and other collections in London, and in other European capitals, make us eyewitnesses of the modes of carrying on that co-operative labour” (Marx 236). Romanticism also had this back up historical processes going on along with Indian thought and Shakespeare being reinvented in Germany. Later, Karl Marx and Edward Said explained the way economics backed up romanticism and orientalism.

Shelley interpreted the statue of Ramses from the perspective of an enlightened intellectual from Europe commenting on the pride and arrogance of Egypt. He presented a lovely

poem that laughed at an ancient civilization that has come to an end with a moral value that said that all power must ultimately come to an end. He located Egypt as a desert that has become lonely and marginalised which has a statue of a bygone emperor on the ground without any symbol of power.

Romantic writers revived these ancient matters with a difference: they undertook to save the overview of human history and destiny, the existential paradigms, and the cardinal values of their religious heritage, by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being. (Bouvard qtd. by Said 115)

Shelley picturises Egyptian civilization as an emblem of failure due to pompousness and self-importance. “Sneer of cold command” of Ozymandias is a symbol of human failure to Shelley. The emperor has qualities that are against the sense of romantic freedom and independence. Shelley hated absolute power as his poems tell us. His poem on Napoleon exemplifies his emotional stand on the idea of the need for absolute power. France, Germany and England had political negotiations with the ideology of absolute power, and colonisation and orientalism merged themselves into the European understanding of history.

It was only when the battles against Napoleon ended with the rule of the Restoration that Romanticism became the leading ideology of a period of the darkest obscurantism. The “moonlit magical night” of the restoration of feudal absolutism was the time of the deepest and most momentous darkening among the nation of “poets and thinkers.” It was not only the time of the most humiliating oppression, but also of the most oppressive domination of philistinism. The wrong, aesthetic direction of the Romantic struggle against the philistine is shown socially in the fact that no ideology or art movement gripped German philistinism as strongly and influenced in as lastingly as Romanticism. From medieval imperial glory, from the pseudo-poetic transfiguration of social and political ties, the “organically” grown historical power, down to the glorification of the

“emotional life,” down to the quietist sinking into the night of any unconscious, any “community,” down to the hatred of progress and freedom of self-responsibility – the consequences of the victory of Romantic ideology can still be felt today in the German psyche. (Lukacs)

Shelley’s poem on Napoleon “Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte,” written in 1815, glorifies the emotion of hatred for absolute power. Tyrants fall and actually they are slaves of power and not real leaders. Time sweeps away the pomp of power into tiny fragments, and falls into the dust of earth, merging into its timelessness. As a Romanticist, Shelley expresses his emotions in absolute freehandedness and glorifies his idea of liberation and freedom. He is shocked to think that Napoleon “shouldst dance and revel on the grave/Of Liberty,” as such a thing should not have occurred in an enlightened continent like Europe. The poem “Ozymandias” is written between the two poems on Napoleon.

I hated thee, fallen tyrant! I did groan  
To think that a most unambitious slave,  
Like thou, shouldst dance and revel on the grave  
Of Liberty. Thou mightst have built thy throne  
Where it had stood even now: thou didst prefer  
A frail and bloody pomp which Time has swept  
In fragments towards Oblivion. Massacre,  
For this I prayed, would on thy sleep have crept,  
Treason and Slavery, Rapine, Fear, and Lust,  
And stifled thee, their minister. I know  
Too late, since thou and France are in the dust,  
That Virtue owns a more eternal foe  
Than Force or Fraud: old Custom, legal Crime,  
And bloody Faith the foulest birth of Time. (“Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte”)

This same tone is found in his poem “Ozymandias” too, written in 1818. Shelley has another poem "Lines written on hearing the News of the Death of Napoleon," written in 1821. These poems are written in an anti-power mode, demanding for a world without tyrants. Shelley calls Napoleon as the fieriest spirit who has been absorbed by mother earth, who seems to be laughing at the foolishness of ambitious and headstrong men, greedy for unconditional power. The poet is speaking to mother earth and the conversation is dramatic and fluent. “Are not the limbs still when the ghost is fled?” - the poet asks mother earth. “I feed on whom I fed,” she answers. “Art thou not over-bold?” - asks the poet. ““Napoleon’s fierce spirit rolled, / In terror, and blood, and gold, / A torrent of ruin to death from his birth,” she answers.

What! alive and so bold, O Earth?

Art thou not over-bold?

What! leapest thou forth as of old

In the light of thy morning mirth,

The last of the flock of the starry fold?

Ha! leapest thou forth as of old?

Are not the limbs still when the ghost is fled?

And canst thou more, Napoleon being dead?

How! is not thy quick heart cold?

What spark is alive on thy hearth?

How! is not his death-knell knolled?

And livest thou still, Mother Earth?

Thou wert warming thy fingers old

O’er the embers covered and cold

Of that most fiery spirit, when it fled—

What, Mother, do you laugh now he is dead?

“Who has known me of old,” replied Earth,  
“Or who has my story told?  
It is thou who art over-bold.”  
And the lightening of scorn laughed forth  
As she sung, “To my bosom I fold  
All my sons when their knell is knolled,  
And so with living motion all are fed,  
And the quick spring like weeds out of the dead.

“Still alive and still bold,” shouted Earth,  
“I grow bolder, and still more bold.  
The dead fill me ten thousandfold  
Fuller of speed, and splendour, and mirth;  
I was cloudy, and sullen, and cold,  
Like a frozen chaos uprolled,  
Till by the spirit of the mighty dead  
My heart grew warm. I feed on whom I fed.

“Ay, alive and still bold,” muttered Earth,  
“Napoleon’s fierce spirit rolled,  
In terror, and blood, and gold,  
A torrent of ruin to death from his birth.  
Leave the millions who follow to mould  
The metal before it is cold,  
And weave into his shame, which like the dead  
Shrouds me, the hopes that from his glory fled.” (“Lines written on hearing the  
News of the Death of Napoleon”)

Shelley's "Ozymandias" frames Egyptian monarchy also in this category of totalitarianism. He perceived the Orient in the same light as a hegemonic and power-based civilization that collapsed because of its limited approach to life. As a European, Shelley has the advantage of commenting upon inferior political ideologies of other countries. "Romantic writers like Byron and Scott consequently had a political vision of the Near Orient and a very combative awareness of how relations between the Orient and Europe would have to be conducted" (Said 192).

Every work on the Orient in these categories tries to characterize the place, of course, but what is of greater interest is the extent to which the work's internal structure is in some measure synonymous with a comprehensive interpretation (or an attempt at it) of the Orient. Most of the time, not surprisingly, this interpretation is a form of Romantic restructuring of the Orient, a revision of it, which restores it redemptively to the present. Every interpretation, every structure created for the Orient, then, is a reinterpretation, a rebuilding of it. (Said 154)

Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) believed in the concept of "liberalism" which was "radical" that it advocated "unrestricted freedom of thought and expression" He felt that "freedom belongs to people's moral dignity," and "essential for individuals' self-realization," and also "people's capacities for discerning the truth are very limited and that it is only through a constant contest between opposing viewpoints that the cause of truth gets advanced" (Forster). The Romantics came under the impact of Herder as his influence continued to dictate ideas to thinkers like John Stuart Mill who learnt these perspectives from Wilhelm von Humboldt to form the core of his own case for freedom of thought and expression in his famous essay "On Liberty."

Imbued with the populist and pluralist sense of history advocated by Herder and others, an eighteenth-century mind could breach the doctrinal walls erected between the West and Islam and see hidden elements of kinship between himself and the Orient. Napoleon is a famous instance of this (usually selective) identification by sympathy. Mozart is another; *The Magic Flute* (in which Masonic codes intermingle with visions of a benign Orient) and *The Abduction*



from the Seraglio locate a particularly magnanimous form of humanity in the Orient. And this, much more than the modish habits of "Turkish" music, drew Mozart sympathetically eastwards. It is very difficult nonetheless to separate such intuitions of the Orient as Mozart's from the entire range of pre-Romantic and Romantic representations of the Orient as exotic locale. Popular Orientalism during the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth attained a vogue of considerable intensity. (Said 118)

Europeans argued that "Orientals require conquest and finding it no paradox that a Western conquest of the Orient was not conquest after all, but liberty." Scholars like "Chateaubriand" generated the "idea in the Romantic redemptive tenor of a Christian mission to revive a dead world, to quicken in it a sense of its own potential, one which only a European can discern underneath a lifeless and degenerate surface" (Said 172). These inferences are surely found in Shelley's "Ozymandias." There is a very strong suggestion in the poem that the desert land has lost its power as it did not practice the ideology of humility, which has made it possible for schools to recommend this poem for children.

"This power of Asiatic and Egyptian kings, Etruscan theocrats, &c., has in modern society been transferred to the capitalist, whether he be an isolated, or as in joint-stock companies, a collective capitalist" (Marx 233). The system of monarchy and its absolute power has not died but continues to exist in capitalism in a different format. Marx realises that power does not go away from any society but lives on in some form or other. Shelley has no reverence for the past glory of Egypt and is caught within the approach of a superior civilization towards an inferior one. Marx has grasped the role played by Egypt and links the dots of history in a sweeping manner. A poet responds to values shared by his people in an emotional manner, whereas a philosopher and economist like Marx presents history from an economic and materialistic perspective.

Plato's *Republic*, in so far as division of labour is treated in it, as the formative principle of the State, is merely the Athenian idealisation of the Egyptian system

of castes, Egypt having served as the model of an industrial country to many of his contemporaries also, amongst others to Isocrates, and it continued to have this importance to the Greeks of the Roman Empire. (Marx 251)

Egypt had “a multitude of colossal statues” and “obelisks made of single blocks of stone.” There were “four temples” and “the oldest is a source of wonder for both its beauty and size, having a circuit of thirteen stades, a height of forty-five cubits, and walls twenty-four feet thick.” The buildings of the temple survived “but the silver and gold and costly works of ivory and rare stone were carried off by the Persians when Cambyses burned the temples of Egypt.” It is said that there were “remarkable tombs of the early kings and of their successors, which leave to those who aspire to similar magnificence no opportunity to outdo them” (Siculus 165).

The “monument of the king known as Osymandyas” has at its entrance “a pylon, constructed of variegated stone, two plethra in breadth and forty-five cubits high.” When we pass through this, “one enters a rectangular peristyle, built of stone, four plethra long on each side.” This is “supported, in place of pillars, by monolithic figures sixteen cubits high, wrought in the ancient manner as to shape.” The ceiling is “two fathoms wide, consists of a single stone” and “highly decorated with stars on a blue field.” If we move one, we see

three statues, each of a single block of black stone from Syene, of which one, that is seated, is the largest of any in Egypt, the foot measuring over seven cubits, while the other two at the knees of this, the one on the right and the other on the left, daughter and mother respectively, are smaller than the one first mentioned. And it is not merely for its size that this work merits approbation, but it is also marvellous by reason of its artistic quality and excellent because of the nature of the stone, since in a block of so great a size there is not a single crack or blemish to be seen. The inscription upon it runs: "King of Kings am I, Osymandyas. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works." There is also another statue of his mother standing alone, a monolith twenty cubits high, and it has three diadems on its head, signifying that she was both daughter and wife and mother of a king. (Siculus 169)

Diodorus Siculus, Greek historian of 1st century BCE, who wrote *Bibliothēkē* or *Library* had been to Egypt, we can assume, as exemplified by scholars. “Such, they say, was the tomb of Ozymandias the king, which is considered far to have excelled all others, not only in the amount of money lavished upon it, but also in the ingenuity shown by the artificers” (Siculus 177). The tone of these descriptions suggests that the Egyptians lived luxurious lives and have surely exploited men to build such colossal structures. Shelley continues the same tone in his poem “Ozymandias.” He does not claim to have visited Egypt and narrates his story on a heard version. He emphasises on the location of the “trunkless legs of stone” as a desert, signifying non-fertility and making the reader infer a kind of dead land. The land is of no more in live use and is described as “antique.” Shelley does not take responsibility for the description and shifts the narration to the traveller’s view. The legs are “lifeless things,” as the traveller portrays. This movement of the poet gives an authenticity to the poem, as if someone else has seen the actual statue’s broken version lying on lonely sands telling us a story of morality - to lead a simple and humble life.

I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said— “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.” (Ozymandias)

How did Horace Smith express his reaction to Egyptian culture and monarchy? He satirises any concept of progress that claims itself as superior. He does not shift the tale to a third person; instead, directly narrates the story as if he has witnessed the whole scene. He also links this story of Egypt with the earlier history of Babylon, analysing the similarities between civilizations that collapse after a few years of grandeur. His perspectives go beyond the ideology of Enlightenment and colonialism. He tries to stand outside of his continent's views on the orient or the other. This view is marginalised in the mainstream Romantic literary writings.

“On a Stupendous Leg of Granite, Discovered Standing by  
Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below”:

In Egypt's sandy silence, all alone,  
Stands a gigantic Leg, which far off throws  
The only shadow that the Desert knows.  
"I am great Ozymandias," saith the stone,  
"The King of kings: this mighty city shows  
The wonders of my hand." The city's gone!  
Naught but the leg remaining to disclose  
The sight of that forgotten Babylon.  
We wonder, and some hunter may express  
Wonder like ours, when through the wilderness  
Where London stood, holding the wolf in chase,  
He met some fragment huge, and stops to guess  
What wonderful, but unrecorded race  
Once dwelt in that annihilated place. (Smith)

Smith takes a further step and comments that what happened to Babylon and Egypt can also happen to London. Surely the judges would not have appreciated this thought process and therefore Shelley's poem would have won the prize in the competition. In the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot echoed Smith's version:

Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal (T. S. Eliot)

Eliot puts all cities together and comments that the idea of progress is an illusion, in a postmodern perspective reflecting the failure of any system to the power of nature. He clubs Asia, Egypt and Europe in one slot going beyond postcolonial readings of literature. Shelley's "Ozymandias" has become a mainstream poem as it reflects Enlightenment ideology of European superiority, and we do not notice colleges and schools adding Horace Smith's poem "Ozymandias" as part of their curriculum.

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