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Ozymandias and the Travelers

By H. M. RICHMOND

THOUGH SHELLEY'S sonnet *Ozymandias* is a familiar and impressive poem, its origin has eluded many attempts at definitive analysis, as Mr. Johnstone Parr's recent article in the *Keats-Shelley Journal*¹ illustrates. The poem's distinctive feature is the vivid visual impression created by the images of the ruined statue and the contrasted level sands of the desert. These images have the dramatic, dreamlike simplicity of those thrown up by the subconscious in the surrealist paintings of Salvador Dali. Scholars have sought for possible sources for Shelley's effects—chiefly in historical accounts where the poet might have found precise descriptions of the statue and its site. Mr. Parr concludes that these researches have so far failed to provide a convincing source, and he supposes therefore that there must exist some as yet undiscovered account on which Shelley drew.

However, it may be that such a source does not take the form expected and that it is this unexpected nature rather than any inaccessibility of the material which is the real difficulty facing scholars. We must beware, for example, of too factual an interpretation of the poem's images. Shelley's wife reminds us of the impact of creative processes on historical fact in her preface to *Frankenstein*, written thirteen years after the sonnet: "Everything must have a beginning. . . . The materials must in the first place, be afforded. . . . Invention consists in the capacity of seizing on the capabilities of a subject, and in the power of molding and fashioning ideas suggested to it."² A source for the sonnet need hardly show a close correspondence with Shelley's description, for a work of art is not based on principles of archeological science. It will be no surprise if Shelley proves to have been guided by his own tastes rather than historical fact in developing his images.

The first step in identifying a source for the sonnet is thus to discover the process of its creation. The fullest account appears to be that in the edition of Shelley's works by R. Ingpen and W. E. Peck:

1. J. Parr, "Shelley's *Ozymandias*," *K-SJ*, VI (1957), 31-35.

2. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London, 1957), p. 8.

The result of a sonnet competition between Shelley and Horace Smith, who had been reading together Diodorus Siculus (probably in Booth's translation, 2 ed., 1721). The epitaph: "My name is Ozymandias," etc. is copied rather closely from Diodorus; though Shelley and Smith chose to give the Egyptian sovereign the Greek name of Ozymandias. Shelley's sonnet was first published in *The Examiner*, January 25, 1818, p. 53; Smith's a week later (Feb. 1, 1818, p. 73), with this note by Smith: "To the Editor of *The Examiner*, Sir,—The subject which suggested the beautiful Sonnet, in a late number, signed 'Glirastes,' produced also the enclosed from another pen, which, if you deem it worthy insertion, is at your service.—H. S." Smith's sonnet was reprinted under a different title, "On a Stupendous Leg of Granite Found in the Desert," in his *Amarynthus, the Nympholept, and Other Poems*, 1821.³

This account is, however, faintly misleading because Diodorus, himself a Greek, uses the name Ozymandias; and there is, therefore, nothing worthy of comment in the use of this form by Shelley. Further, Mr. Parr suspects "that the arrogant epitaph of Ozymandias had become virtually a commonplace"⁴ and Shelley's version of the epitaph is therefore not necessarily derived directly from the ultimate source for it, in Diodorus. Lastly the later title of Smith's poem is misrendered: "found" has been substituted for the phrase "discovered standing by itself." The last detail is the most interesting, for the correct title stresses the discrepancy between Smith's statue and Shelley's. This discrepancy reinforces the idea that the subject, with the exception of the inscription, was a vague and fictitious one derived from the authors' own imaginations. Diodorus' history, at least, affords justification for this view, for there is no reference to any impairment of the statue in any part of the relevant description:

... beside the entrance are 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. . . . And it is not merely for its size that this work merits approbation but it is also marvelous 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, Ozymandyas. If any would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass my works."⁵

The only aspects of this account which suggest Shelley's sonnet are the inscription and the excellence of the sculpture. If we believe Diodorus to be the source there is thus every incentive to agree with the

3. *The Complete Works of P. B. Shelley*, ed. R. Ingpen and W. E. Peck (London, 1927), II, 415.

4. *K-SJ*, VI, 34.
5. *Diodorus of Sicily*, Loeb ed., trans. C. H. Oldfather (London, 1933), I, 167.

recognition of Shelley's creativity shown by Mr. D. W. Thompson in writing: "The face in the sonnet is not that of an Egyptian king, but that of Shelley's tyrant, a Godwinian monarch whose character has been ruined by court life."⁶ However, Mr. Thompson is concerned only to explain the lack of a suitable head in the source which he prefers. It might be suggested that if Shelley could invent a head, there is no reason why he could not invent the whole ruin. The hubris of the inscription transcribed by Diodorus coupled with Shelley's own loathing for Caesarism would naturally suggest the probable ultimate condition of such a statue.

It soon appears that Shelley must certainly have drawn on his own fancy at least to some extent, when we look for alternative sources to Diodorus. Mr. Parr observes that, "No other ancient or classical historian—Herodotus, Strabo, Pausanias, Thucydides, Xenophon, Arrian, Tacitus, or Pliny—mentions Ozymandias or his statue."⁷ As for modern accounts of the statue, they are scarcely more rewarding, as Mr. Parr's careful documentation demonstrates. The statue is clearly identifiable but,

. . . all that remained in Shelley's day was a half torso [the upper half], a mutilated head, and a part of a foot. In Shelley's day the face of the head was so obliterated that no one could have discerned a "frown," a "wrinkled lip," or a "sneer of cold command." And rather than "Two vast and trunkless legs" there were no legs at all. The vainglorious epitaph—"on the pedestal" says Shelley—was apparently not on the remains of the statue in Shelley's day and even if it had been no one could have read it in 1818 because Egyptian hieroglyphics were not understood until Champollion deciphered the Rosetta Stone in 1822.⁸

This summary of the situation appears to constitute a firm refutation of the historicity of Shelley's description, and it is hardly surprising that Mr. Parr observes, of the material available to Shelley, "I have re-examined all of these possible sources, and many more besides, with very little conviction that Shelley's account came from any of them."⁹ In fact, it seems almost impossible that there should exist any historical account matching Shelley's poem. The best that we can hope to find is something which would provoke the sonnet in its present form. If we keep this in mind we shall find at least one narrative of interest among those mentioned by Mr. Parr, though it is not a work that he has been able to examine in its original form.

While Shelley's own attribution of his inspiration to a "traveller" should encourage us to feel that a definite source may exist, we must

6. D. W. Thompson, "Ozymandias," *PQ*, XVI (1937), 59-64.
7. *K-SJ*, VI, 32.

8. The same, pp. 32-33.

9. The same, pp. 33-34.

also take into account Mr. Parr's expectation that "his information came from some source which misrepresented the facts."¹⁰ Unfortunately all too many of the post-classical descriptions of Thebes are hopelessly confused. The worthy Dr. Pococke, for example, a clergyman addicted to travel, wrote an account of the tomb of Ozymandias only a few decades before Shelley's birth, which runs as follows (following Diodorus closely):

At the entrance [of the sepulchre] he mentions three statues, each of one stone the work of Memnon Sicnites, who doubtless was a very famous sculptor; one of them was sitting, and the largest in Egypt, the foot being ten feet and a half long. He makes mention of many other particulars of the statues, and especially the very remarkable inscription that was on this vast colossus. "I am the King of Kings, Ozymandias: If any would know how great I am, and where I lie, let him exceed the works which I have done." This statue, without doubt, has been broken to pieces and carried away, as there is not the least sign of it.¹¹

If Shelley read Pococke, he would therefore find no statue left at all. He would find, further, that the supposed site of the vanished statue was backed by a structure "now about fifty-four feet above the ground." Even the correct site of the statue, which Pococke later incidentally mentions, is ringed with massive ruins. To Shelley's "expressionistic" setting for his ruin we can thus find no possible resemblance in fact, or even in a wildly erratic source. If we are not looking for absolute correspondencies, however, Pococke does offer us some noteworthy material. There are several interesting details—the inscription; the word "colossus"; and the impression of utter destruction ("not the least sign of it"), which might suggest Shelley's more absolute "Nothing beside remains." More important is the unexpectedly firm identification and appreciation of the sculptor "Memnon Sicnites, who doubtless was a very famous sculptor." Diodorus, according to Oldfather's translation, makes no explicit reference to the sculptor, but Booth's version (the one available to Pococke and Shelley) follows the old-fashioned text and renders the passage which Oldfather translates "of black stone from Syene" as "the workmanship of Memnon of Sienitas."¹² It is interesting to see how Pococke's elaboration of this name, which is missing from most accounts, affords a precedent for Shelley's sculptor who "well those passions read."

Pococke's descriptions are, in fact, a test case for the identification of possible sources for Shelley's *Ozymandias*. We have already seen that

10. The same, p. 35.

11. R. Pococke, *A Description of the East, and Some Other Countries* (London, 1743), I, 107.

12. *The Historical Library of Diodorus the Sicilian*, trans. G. Booth (London, 1700), p. 24.

they afford no possible basis for a literal transcription by Shelley, but if we examine the central part of Pococke's chapter on Thebes attentively it soon appears that he is an ideal candidate for the role of the "traveler." The decisive evidence in favor of this was not apparently available to Mr. Parr. Even a casual reader of the first edition of Pococke's travelogue will be struck by the liberal, not to say excessive, number of illustrations supplementing the author's prose account. These are wholly missing from Pinkerton's later edition consulted by Mr. Parr,¹³ but they reinforce the suggestiveness of the prose considerably. For example, after reading the inscription taken from Diodorus, our eye would naturally, in the first edition, be caught by another reference to Ozymandias on the opposite page, which bears several illustrations. The plate in question is described as "the upper part of a statue of Ozymandias at Thebes." This bust is shown full face and lying deeply sunk in the sand to above the breast, so that the head and shoulders alone emerge, just as Shelley's fragment might appear. The illustration is crude but the face is indeed cold and brutal. The identification of the bust may be another of Pococke's mistakes, for he fulfills all too well Mr. Parr's prediction of an erratic reporter as Shelley's source, but the careful reader will no doubt be reminded of another reference by Pococke only a few pages earlier to yet a third statue, clearly the one which modern archeologists consider to be that mentioned in Diodorus' history. On page 101 Pococke observed of this statue:

There are ruins of a pyramidal gate to the south of this building, and of a very large colossal statue; it is broken off about the middle of the trunk, the head is six feet broad.

It would be possible to associate the upper part of this broken statue, whose dimensions Pococke then gives, with the bust (actually lying fairly close to it) which is illustrated six pages later. There is another important feature about Pococke's description of the broken statue on page 101. Most other accounts make quite clear the condition of this fallen colossus, saying that the face had been obliterated and no legs were left, but from Pococke's description it would be natural to imagine that the legs were still standing and that the face was as intact as that of the later illustrated bust.

Illustrations play an important part in correlating another interesting statue described by Pococke with those which we have already noted, and in turn with Shelley's sonnet. Apparently there is a famous statue of Memnon standing at some distance from Thebes, on the plain surrounding the city. The site of this sculpture encouraged Mr. D. W. Thompson to assert in his article that this must in fact be the statue that

13. *K-SJ*, VI, 32.

Shelley is talking about. Mr. Thompson is probably right in thinking that facts about this statue have contributed to Shelley's necessarily composite image, but the account Mr. Thompson favors as a source hardly affords the additional material (such as the illustrated bust of Ozymandias) that we find in Pococke's book. In Pococke the Memnon statue is significantly described in the very paragraph following the author's quotation from Diodorus of the vainglorious inscription (on page 107). Pococke says:

The statue to the north has been broken off at the middle above the arms, that lie on the hams; [he gives a few details implying obscurely that the statue has been rebuilt and continues]. . . . On the pedestal of the imperfect statue is a Greek epigram, and on the insteps and legs, for about eight feet high, are several inscriptions in Greek or Latin, some being epigrams in honour of Memnon.

Thus in the same section of the book appear the epitaph, a drawing of the bust of Ozymandias, and a statue with a Greek (and therefore intelligible) inscription on its pedestal. But this is not all. Pococke devotes three full page plates to the statue of Memnon on the plains. Plates 38 and 39 (between pages 104 and 105 and therefore just before the transcription of the epitaph) display the inscriptions carved on the legs of this colossus since classical time by passing travelers. Each of these rough sketches presents an almost life size portrayal of a single gross leg in complete isolation, with the inscriptions marked neatly in. These ugly images are a very suitable source for a nightmarish vision of stupendous legs—yet since the plates are separate it would be as natural for a poet to write of one of them as of both. Thus there would be no difficulty in explaining how Shelley, more ingeniously drawing on several elements of Pococke's chapter, chose to write of both legs, while Smith, less imaginative, focussed on one only.

One other plate is of interest—number 29 (facing page 96). This confirms the interest of Mr. Thompson's observations by showing the now desert site of Thebes. Small villages appear at the extreme left and right with traces of ruins at the foot of distant mountains. The artist has chosen a remote perspective to enhance the desolation of the prospect. The foreground is level desert except for two completely isolated statues (one being the Memnon of the "legs"). These are situated far from any interruption in the level surface of the plain, just as were the statues of Shelley and Smith.

Within a few pages of Pococke's chapter on Thebes we have now found Diodorus' inscription; an apparent example of the total destruction of a megalomaniac monument; praise of a famous sculptor of Ozymandias; no less than two statues broken "about the middle of the trunk," one apparently still standing like Shelley's figure, and one bear-

ing a Greek inscription, perhaps "an epigram in honour of Memnon," which is described explicitly by the author as appearing "on its pedestal." We have also found drawings of an unprepossessing bust of Ozymandias lying on the sand; two grotesque legs, with Greek inscriptions, displayed on separate plates; and two statues set in the midst of an utterly bare desert plain. It seems to me highly unlikely that any other source could offer a similar series of suggestive details all relevant to Shelley's sonnet. No other visitors would make exactly the same mistakes or omissions that Pococke does and no other source available to Shelley offers comparable visual effects, to my knowledge. In addition, Pococke moralizes the situation temptingly to the poet's taste when he speaks of Thebes as:

. . . that venerable city, the date of whose ruin is older than the foundations of other cities; and yet such vast and surprising remains are still to be seen of such magnificence and solidity, as may convince anyone that beholds them that without some extraordinary accidents, they must have lasted forever, which seems to have been the intention of the founders of them.¹⁴

It might be the moral to the sonnet. The ruin of imperial grandeur by irresistible fate was a theme after Shelley's own heart. His own treatment at the hands of authority made him delight in any demonstration of its impermanence and the supremacy of the artist.

It thus seems more than possible that Shelley looked up Ozymandias in Pococke's travel book (the index suggests the sections to which I have referred) whether or not he was reading Diodorus at the same time. But what in Pococke was a series of random observations became in Shelley's mind a brilliantly symbolic unity, fused by his passionate hatred of tyrants and his desire to pass judgment on their aspirations. It is the neglect of the effect of this passionate and imaginative pressure on the raw material of poetry which has made it hard for scholars to identify a possible source for *Ozymandias*. It is important to stress that Shelley has coordinated the attributes of several distinct statues in order to obtain a single imaginative symbol of hallucinatory distinctness. Any more detailed historical parallel for the sonnet than Pococke affords is unlikely to exist, for Shelley's picture is obviously at variance with most of the facts. Only chance and poetic insight could have created the effect Shelley distills from Pococke's limping prose and awkward illustrations. We do well to remember that, as Aristotle said, poetry is neither history nor philosophy. If we therefore dismiss any mechanical dependence of Shelley's best effects on some unknown source, we are still left with an intelligible version of the development of one of the most vivid symbols for the principle of mutability ever given to philosophy by literature.

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14. *Description of the East*, I, 109.