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## “Passions Read”: “Ozymandias”

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### ABSTRACT

In Horace Smith’s nearly forgotten companion to Percy Shelley’s most famous sonnet, the broken sculpture voices its decree: “I am great Ozymandias,” saith the stone.” Shelley’s poem, on the other hand, takes care to give us the king’s speech in writing: “on the pedestal, these words appear.” Shelley’s instinct for the difference between inscription and saying speaks to his own belief in poetry’s staying power. Two hundred years on, what remains of Shelley’s poetry besides words on a page? The extent to which words, and the pages on which they appear, mattered to Shelley constitutes the broad subject of this essay, which also permits itself to dwell in a few unanswerable questions about where poetry resides—the throat, the letter, or somewhere else entirely. Interrogating “Ozymandias” for its enthusiasm as well as its skepticism regarding print, the essay wishes to raise the following question: how does Shelley’s attitude towards poetry’s remains—its “everlasting” power—prefigure our own contemporary debates regarding the permanence and impermanence of poetic texts in a digital age?

Where do poems live—the ear, the page, or the mind? Questions like this reflect poetry’s phenomenological variety. Yet poems, in their presentation, are subject to the realities of space and time. As readers, we most often encounter them visually: in books or on screens. And, as Johanna Drucker has noted with regard to poetry’s graphical qualities and codes, “the transmission history of poetry depends upon visual forms” (237). Notwithstanding the ancient, oral tradition, our ability to see a poem (in some form of print) remains integral to our reception of it, no matter how emphatic or pleasing its sounds are. This essay, as it sidles up to Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” concerns itself with the value of that poem’s visual element: its presence on the page. Several of the problems Shelley addresses in his sonnet about a broken statue—how time erodes power, how things do not last—are figured in the verbal and visual materiality of the text itself. Surely “the decay / Of that colossal Wreck” not only announces a whole civilization’s destruction but also hints at the poet’s consideration of his own legacy (12–13).<sup>1</sup> How much was Shelley thinking about the preservation of his own lines and meanings as he imagined the history of a king’s ill-fated boast? And what general lessons about

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poetry's physical staying power does he engrave in the inscription he places at the heart of "Ozymandias"?

The lastingness of physical texts, compared to the ephemerality of sounds or mental pictures, is surely one reason why poems tend to be written down. Some classical scholars even propose that the ancient Greeks developed their alphabet expressly to preserve Homer's poetry.<sup>2</sup> Visual lines keep in ways that heard ones do not, even if the physical manner in which texts are kept is always evolving (early texts were recorded on papyrus; then they were stored in books in libraries; latterly, on servers in bytes). Drucker supposes that "the nostalgic attachment to the idea of an 'origin' of poetry in song makes us give more significance to sound values over visual ones," but she goes on to point out how in most cases, the sounds of poetry could not exist without the visual texts to convey it: "If I erase the letters [on the page,] no 'sound' remains" (238–39). In fact, there are numerous poetic effects bound up solely in poetry's visible properties. Some rhymes are meant to be seen rather than heard ("flower" and "mower," "bead" and "dead," "hear" and "pear"); others please primarily through their visual difference ("vast" and "passed," "said" and "fed," "fanned" and "land"). These visual elements work alongside a text's sound cues. And just as stanzas and the spaces between them can offer visual clues towards meaning, so line breaks affect not only the pacing of a poem but also the message it delivers. The same is true of a poem's typographical elements (italics and capital letters), to say nothing of concrete poems, which must be seen to be believed. Taking certain poems off the page would involve disbanding poetic properties that are mutually constitutive. Practically speaking, it is not easy to disentangle "poetry" from the text that delivers it. A few of Shelley's critics—William Galperin, Nancy Moore Goslee—have drawn attention to Shelley's recourse to visible forms and textuality as a complement to the ideological nature of much of his verse. My reading of "Ozymandias" follows their example in thinking through the implications of a poem that appears to prefigure its own annihilation while simultaneously celebrating the unexpected lastingness of physical words.

Shelley was not thinking about textuality per se when he attempted to define "a poem" as the "very image of life expressed in its eternal truth" in his 1821 "Defence" (515). But he appears to be contemplating something like it in several letters from his early years. Writing to his friend Elizabeth Hitchener in 1812, he inserts several lines of his own poetry and then explains them in the following way: "These are merely sent as lineaments in the picture of my mind on these topics. I find that sometimes I can write poetry when I feel" (*Letters* 1: 254). Lineaments are not lines exactly, but Shelley associates them in this letter with poetry's visible form, which somehow corresponds to "the picture of [his] mind." Later that year (he was just nineteen), Shelley uses the word "lineaments" again in a letter to William Godwin, whom he had not yet met face to face:

I have never seen you & yet I think I know you. I think I knew you even before I ever heard from you; whilst yet it was a question with me whether you were living or dead. It has appeared to me that there are lineaments in the soul as well as the face; lineaments too less equivocal & deceptive than those which result from mere physical organization. This opinion may be illusory, if I find it so it shall be retracted. (*Letters* 1: 315)

The lineaments here, like those in the earlier letter, connect the external world with its internal counterpart: what can be read on a physical face (say Godwin's) can likewise

be “read”—perhaps read better—on the page of the soul which corresponds to it. For Shelley, the “lineaments” of Godwin’s soul (which up to now comprise his mental picture of him) are gleaned from the text that precedes the physical person. He appeals, in this same letter, to “the picture of you in the retina of my intellect” and expresses a belief that “words are merely signs of ideas” (*Letters* 1: 316–17). Shelley had indeed been acquainted with Godwin’s words for some time—it was only upon discovering that he had mistakenly “enrolled [his] name on the list of the honorable dead,” that the poet reached out to him in London (*Letters* 1: 220). His letter above implies that he finds the soul’s lineaments—as expressed in writing—more trustworthy than the “equivocal & deceptive” faces of people in real life.<sup>3</sup> It is an opinion Shelley gives in direct response to something Godwin had noted in a previous letter:

My dear Shelley,

Our acquaintance is a whimsical, and, to a certain degree, anomalous one. I have never seen your face—

Your face, my Thane, is as a book, where men  
May read strange matters.

—and till I have seen a man’s face, I may say, in good sooth, I do not know him.  
(*Letters* 1: 313n1)

Shelley may have been disappointed to find that the sort of “lineaments” he felt he had gleaned from Godwin’s writing were rejected by Godwin himself in favor of the actual face (which he ironically likens, via *Macbeth*, to a book), or perhaps he is provoking Godwin for fun. But this question of seeing and reading faces—along with its relation to the other kind of reading—will return with full complexity five years later in the language of one of his best-known poems:

#### Ozymandias.

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.”—

On the face of it, Shelley’s poem is preoccupied with the question of what lasts and what does not. His traveler reminds us that although whole civilizations are lost to time, an artist’s ability to read and express passions inherent to human nature survives, no matter how many millennia. Or is that what the traveler is saying? The poem’s complicated syntax, especially beginning in line six, teases the reader into believing that “survive” has no particular object. But line eight metonymically kills off both sculptor and king in a single blow when “survive” suddenly turns transitive: the passions

survive both the “hand” of the sculptor and the “heart” of the king. So perhaps artists and their “works” do share the fate of ancient worlds—these legs of stone are “trunkless,” and the carved visage is “half sunk,” after all. The issue of passion’s survival appears to turn on the question of whether there is lasting value in reading an expression “stamped” on “lifeless things.”

But there is more to read here than just the lineaments of the statue’s face. The king’s inscription, which dominates the sonnet’s second half, comes to life just as Shelley renders his visage lifeless. The sonnet’s powerful twist emerges in the form of the devastating irony bound up in the pedestal’s text: the very words that this traveler encounters have been transformed through the literal sands of time to mean exactly the opposite of what Ozymandias intended by them. That is to say, the sculptor’s physical inscription has recorded his words for posterity, but their message has changed profoundly. Anyone looking at the paltry ruin of the king’s “Works” now could only feel despair of a very different sort than the king had in mind. Shelley’s wordplay on “beside”—we almost hear the traveler saying “Nothing *besides* remains”—puts the finishing touch on the saying’s double meaning. (Shelley’s original wording in the draft, which reads “No thing remains beside,” does not allow this ambiguity—he must have changed it when revising the poem for publication in *The Examiner*.) “Remains” is a pun, too: as Kelvin Everest has noted, “‘remains’ is allowed just a hint of ambivalence—substantive or verb?” so that we feel the vast emptiness of the desert while also imagining a pile of scattered “remains”—not just of statuary but perhaps even the disintegrated body of the tyrant himself (30). Both puns, combined in the poem’s most pithy sentence, deliver the thrust of the poem’s satire: the decapitated form of Ozymandias is now all that remains of his once extraordinary kingdom.

Shelley’s light-touch delivery, through a moral inferred by the reader rather than tyrannically imposed on him in the way that closing couplets sometimes do, gives his poem much of its appeal. We know the initial speaker cannot be Shelley himself—the real statue of Rameses II that bore such an inscription did not survive to the nineteenth century—only some fictional character, who quotes a fictional traveler, who cedes the narrative to a further quotation of the inscription near the end.<sup>4</sup> The multiple layers of address imbue the poem with a measure of quietude in spite of its quotation marks, which feel more visually descriptive than indicative of speech. Lisa Steinman has even suggested that the poem has no “speaking voice” at all: “It appears from the closing quotation marks that we are to understand the last tercet as part of the traveler’s reported story; and yet . . . the traveller is in some ways the least realized character in the poem” (117). And the calm of Shelley’s final sentence, as if it were describing a shipwreck fathoms deep rather than a “colossal Wreck” right in front of us, reinstates the distance implied by the word “antique” in the first line. Not only is this place inaccessible; so is the poem’s “point.”

Shelley’s inspired reluctance to say what he means has been matched by his major critics and editors, who, apart from cataloguing its many possible source texts, have had oddly little to say about this most famous of all his works. “Ozymandias” has been read widely since its inclusion in Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* in 1861, but for a poem still so persistent in classrooms and lecture halls, it remains relatively unfettered by major “readings.” There are certainly some very good minor ones: Jean Hall has a simple but persuasive interpretation in her book on Shelley’s images; William Logan’s essay on the poem gives a thorough narrative of its historical interest; Michael O’Neill

summarizes its variants and comments on its formal properties and reception in the 2012 edition of Shelley's poems; and Everest uses the textual history of the poem to make a point about authorial intention and indeterminacy; and so on. But Stuart Curran's influential book on form in Romantic poetry refers to the sonnet only once, and then just in passing (54), and three of the seminal book-length studies of Shelley's poetry—Earl Wasserman's *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, Harold Bloom's *Shelley's Mythmaking*, and William Keach's *Shelley's Style*—manage never to mention the poem at all. Perhaps they and other critics feel it is an outlier among his works. Or maybe they suppose Shelley's meaning is clear enough without having to say it. Or perhaps they take their cue from the sonnet and believe in leaving the point unsaid. As O'Neill makes clear in his commentary to the 2012 edition, the poet's "success in this poem derives from reticence ... Readers draw their own conclusions from the poet's unmoralizing presentation" (949–50). When Shelley pits an artist against a king, everybody knows whose side he is on.

However the longer one reads and thinks about "Ozymandias," the more tangled its messaging gets. Through its description of the ruins of his kingdom and his face, the poem bears witness to the permanent erasure of Ozymandias's world. But it also testifies to the lastingness of his text. In his book on posterity in the Romantic period, Andrew Bennett connects Shelley's general "interest in the question of immortality" to the "remains which writing constitutes" (167). This self-referential quality at the heart of "Ozymandias"—it is, after all, a poem concerned with the lastingness of art—turns its moral back on itself. For one thing, Shelley's underlying irony that an artist's rendering of Ozymandias's arrogant face, along with a record of his boast, is the only remaining part of his "Works" relies on the preservation of the words that "appear" on the stone, which are themselves a verbal trace within the poem of its own visuality. Part of the stakes of the sonnet are thus bound up in Shelley's decision to inscribe the king's message rather than to figure him "saying" it. So how does the fate of Ozymandias's text, which "remains" but loses all of its rhetorical force over time, reflect Shelley's sense of the fate of his own writing? Are his own words' meanings doomed for reversal too?

Several of the details regarding the poem's composition and publication speak to these questions, suggesting the extent to which Shelley cares about poetry's physical presence on the page. There are two surviving drafts occupying two sides of a single notebook sheet: on the verso, a very early jotting of words and ideas towards the poem, and on the recto, a fair copy, written in Shelley's hand, which more or less reflects the finished text minus a few small revisions. (In addition to changing "No thing remains beside" in line twelve to "Nothing beside remains," Shelley revises "this legend clear," in line nine, to "these words appear" [*Bodleian MS* 340–43].) The jotting suggests that the poet began with Ozymandias's words, "My name is Ozymandias—King of Kings," which he scribbled at the top of the page, and then proceeded through a series of misfires in phrasing, subsequently crossed out, regarding the pedestal, body parts, and stone (*Bodleian MS* 342). There is no sign of a traveler in this early version, and apart from Ozymandias's opening speech, it appears that Shelley was writing in a more personal idiom (a stray line near the bottom of his page reads, "cannot we rest until our life is gone?") (342).

The exact date that Shelley began this draft is not known—his letters do not mention it—but it likely came about as part of a friendly sonnet-writing competition between the

poet and his financier friend Horace Smith, who visited the Shelleys in Marlow during the days following Christmas 1817. Shelley had been ill for much of the autumn and was now preoccupied with financial matters as well as the publication of *Laon and Cythna*. And yet he and Smith published memorable sonnets, both titled “Ozymandias,” in Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner* in January and February respectively. Were they writing under fifteen-minute timed conditions, as Hunt has described other such competitions involving himself and Shelley and Keats? (On one of these occasions, less than a month after publishing “Ozymandias,” Hunt competed with his two friends to write a sonnet on the Nile, which, in its description of “old hushed Egypt and its sands” as well as its “silence . . . / As of a world left empty of its throng,” bears traces of Shelley’s prior work [48].) Or did Shelley and Smith actually correspond over several weeks to write their poems, exchanging ideas and source material? It is not clear whether Shelley wrote any intermediate drafts between the rough jotting and his fair copy on the recto, though one could conjecture he must have, to have been able to produce so neat a version on the other side of the first draft’s page (it is possible to imagine him flipping the sheet over and back multiple times during the process of composition—or else composing the latter version without ever looking at the former—but both seem unlikely). Whatever the timing, Shelley at some point invents the traveler who reports the story and quotes Ozymandias’s words as they “appear” on the pedestal.

Shelley’s finished poem differs from his friend’s in several crucial ways including its handling of Ozymandias’s “text.” Here is the version Smith published in *The Examiner* (we have no draft)—less famous than Shelley’s to be sure, but not without its own charms:

#### OZYMANDIAS.

IN Egypt’s sandy silence, all alone,  
 Stands a gigantic Leg, which far off throws  
 The only shadow that the Desart 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,—  
 Nought but the Leg remaining to disclose  
 The site of this forgotten Babylon.

We wonder,—and some Hunter may express  
 Wonder like ours, when thro’ the wilderness  
 Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,  
 He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess  
 What powerful but unrecorded race  
 Once dwelt in that annihilated place.

Smith’s sonnet begins in the vast and silent sands where Shelley’s ends. It mentions no pedestal, only a “gigantic Leg,” which itself appears to deliver the message, slightly different from Shelley’s, of Ozymandias’s “forgotten” achievements. There is something deeply comical about Smith’s treatment of the statue—slightly preposterous even—compared to Shelley’s. Rather than two legs and a face, Smith imagines a single appendage; and surely he exaggerates when he says that this object throws the desert’s only shadow—dunes cast shadows too. The drama inherent in this exaggeration perhaps converses with Henry Fuseli’s *Drawing of a figure seated before gigantic antique fragments* (c. 1780),



which Smith and Shelley would likely have known, depicting a man slumped over a pedestal bearing two enormous but broken pieces of ancient statue (a lone foot and severed hand). The enormous scale of these body parts from the past form a humorous contrast to the man sitting below them just as Smith's "gigantic Leg" plays with scale against the sands that surround it. Both Fuseli's drawing and Shelley's poem arrange their ruins on a pedestal, while Smith lets the leg do the talking: "*saith* the stone" and "Nought but the leg remaining to *disclose*. . . ." These are small variations in kind, but they create large differences in effect. Where Shelley figures speech preserved in a textual engraving, through the "mock[ing]" "hand" of a knowing sculptor, Smith offers a disembodied leg that seems to talk out loud to no one. (After Smith's initial publication of his sonnet in *The Examiner*, he appears to have had second thoughts regarding the ambiguous source of the king's speech; collecting the poem in his book *Amarynthus, the Nympholept ... with Other Poems* three years later, he uses the title to clarify: "ON A STUPENDOUS LEG OF GRANITE, DISCOVERED STANDING BY ITSELF IN THE DESERTS OF EGYPT, WITH THE INSCRIPTION INSERTED BELOW.") Many of the words Shelley chooses feature in the octave of Smith's sonnet, suggesting that the two friends were either working from a shared source or collaborating in some way (or else Smith composed his later, with Shelley's in mind—but given the close timing of the publications, this seems unlikely). In addition to Ozymandias's speech, which both poets base on the actual inscription on a now-lost statue of King Rameses II described in Diodorus's history, the two sonnets have in common "stone," "hand," "leg," "stands," "sand," "remain," "mighty," and "Desart." But the friends arrange their words to very different ends. Shelley's artful "hand," so capable of mocking the king (in both senses), crucially belongs to the king himself in Smith's poem, making it seem all the more unfortunate that only the leg survives.

Smith's sonnet, which O'Neill calls "stylish but facile," really comes into its own in the sestet, where it diverges from Shelley's entirely (330). His extended simile describing an overgrown "wilderness / Where London stood" hammers home the relevance of the Egyptian legend to the poet's contemporary world. Where Shelley holds back, Smith turns explicit: the hilarious clash of the ancient and the modern across his sonnet's volta becomes a profitable way of clarifying the moral. Smith's wondering "Hunter," staring at the ruins of some now wrecked Parliament or St. Paul's, is a reincarnation of the witness in the first half of the poem, who is forced to stare at a lone leg and in its shadow imaginatively rebuild an entire city. By the comparison, Smith implies the savagery of his own age. Shelley is surely thinking along similarly satirical lines—but he is subtle enough not to spell it out.

In preserving some measure of distance between his poem's primary scenario and its political implications, Shelley allows other concerns to creep in, including poets and their legacy. Whereas the couplet at the end of Smith's sonnet imagines a time when both Egypt's and London's wonders are left totally "annihilated" and "unrecorded," Shelley's poem is not quite so pessimistic. Ozymandias's works are lost, but something of the sculptor's reading of the king's passions, and specifically his record of the king's language, remain, "stamped on these lifeless things." Shelley's instinct to carve the message on a pedestal—to put it in writing, even within the poem—may have come from Diodorus's account: "The inscription upon it runs: 'King of Kings am I, Osymandias. If anyone would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works'" (*Poems of Shelley* 2: 308). The pedestal may be Shelley's invention, or something that



looks like a pedestal may appear in the plates in Pococke (another likely source for Smith and Shelley as they wrote); but either way, Shelley takes care to incorporate a visual picture of Ozymandias's message—"these words appear"—into his poem rather than letting the statue seem to speak them. Doing so aligns his own poetic work with the sculptor's: both are concerned not only with mocking kings but with leaving a lasting, visible trace. One even hears in the word "stamped" a combination of the qualities of statuary and print, just as the word "read" in line six elides the sculptor's method with Shelley's. That the sculptor is a reader underscores the importance of laying the words down. And likewise Shelley's choice of "hand" (for the sculptor) in line eight applies equally to the written quality of his own art (that is, his handwriting). In the case of "Ozymandias," the more one associates the sculptor's hand with both the physical sneer of the king's "visage" and the physicality of the inscription, the more palpably written Shelley's own "hand" becomes. Several commentators have pointed out an inaccuracy in Shelley's depiction of the statue's face, since Egyptian sculptors of this period never assigned emotions to faces, but like most poets' mistakes, Shelley's anachronism ends up serving a different purpose: visual details like "wrinkled lip" and "sneer of cold command" are of supreme importance not only as evidence of the sculptor's talent for "reading" but also of his wish to leave a physical trace of his power to "mock." Mocking in stone—or in writing—is better than doing so in person (and safer, too).

Scholars of Romanticism have often noted the ways in which the imaginative faculties of writers of this period appear to dominate over their visual ones. But as Galperin has argued, this is not always the case (21)—even for Shelley, who announces in his "Defence of Poetry" that "language is arbitrarily produced by the Imagination and has relation to thoughts alone" (513). At this point in the "Defence," Shelley is distinguishing the verbal arts from those employed by "sculptors, painters, and musicians" whose materials and instruments "interpose between conception and expression" (513). But in doing so, he also notes how poets have "employed language as the hieroglyphic of their thoughts" (513)—a definition which Galperin subjects to some pressure:

Yet the question remains: Is the typology of visual perception—"hieroglyphic," "mirror," "reflection"—sufficient in actually describing poetry's function, not to mention its predominance among competing modes of presentation? The answer, particularly if one accepts what Shelley claims for poetry, is decidedly no. If anything, Shelley's recourse to a typology of seeing in his defense of poetry puts substantial limits on poetry by recalling—and by eventually recuperating poetry in terms of—what it lacks and can be said even to eschew: specifically, access to a visible, perceivable world. (21)

Galperin is pointing out Shelley's "recourse" to the visual as a way of recovering the complexity of the poet's argument about poetry's relation to other arts. But his final comment about the power of visual symbols (as opposed to conception alone) momentarily sidelines poetry's textual element. Shelley is not thinking specifically about the visible aspects of text in his "Defence" either, but it is the case that even poetry, with its lightning link between conception and expression, in most cases intercedes through a written medium that can be seen—and is in that sense a material hieroglyph as perceivable as any sculpture or sound. "Ozymandias" is a poem with its fingers in all of these elements: the conceptual, the spoken, the sculptural, and the inscribed. When comparing the various arts in his "Defence," Shelley is quick to pit the verbal against the visual—words as opposed to things (paintings, sculptures) as modes of expression. But in the case of poetry's

publication (and even before, as it develops in manuscript), the verbal is also expressed visually. Shelley's sonnet appears to understand this relation even as it describes the inevitable destruction of sculptures. Its nuanced view on textuality may in fact help explain his description, in the "Defence," of poets' "language" as "the hieroglyphic of their thought." And in the months preceding his composition of "Ozymandias," Shelley and his friends frequently enjoyed "carving Greek hieroglyphics and revolutionary slogans" into the trees surrounding his house in Marlow (Holmes 368).

Hieroglyphics are everywhere in Shelley's manuscripts, too. Throughout his notebooks, the visual aspects of his language assert themselves readily. Goslee's book on *Shelley's Visual Imagination* catalogues and interprets these frequent "experiments with the visuality of written language," and her analysis reveals that

Shelley's poetry emerges ... on the material page in ways that seize upon and then thematize the graphic and material processes of writing ... The genesis of his published poems in draft notebooks shows repeated play with visual sketches and other graphic, material gestures, scripted words often punctuated or interwoven with visual sketches, texts often revised to incorporate their own sometimes resistant materiality into their themes and then reproduced as figures and themes in a printed text. (2–3)

Although Goslee does not include "Ozymandias" among her examples, the drafts of this poem do indeed feature copious markings, sketches, and other visual "traces" that may well have influenced "the verbal images and themes of the completed poem" (3). In her writings on epitaphic poetry, the poet Anne Carson has pointed out how "[p]hysical facts do influence artistic and cognitive design" (80). At the very least, the physical attributes of Shelley's page connect to its celebration of inscription and visual form. On the early draft, for example, among jottings and crossed out lines of poetry and several notes on Cicero (written at a different time in different ink), there is a rough sketch of a mountain range with its mirrored reflection on a still body of water. One has to turn the notebook horizontally to see it, since the orientation of the drawing lies perpendicular to the poem. Did Shelley compose his sonnet on a page that already had this drawing on it? Or was he doodling before or after he wrote? Carson notes that "An oral poet may labor under restrictions of time or personal stamina or social decorum but only an inscriptional poet has to measure his inspiration against the size of his writing surface" (78). Could the image on Shelley's paper likewise have influenced the way he rendered, in writing, the vast distances of desert at the end of the poem? Goslee notes in general of these "graphic inscriptions" that the "liminal interplay between verbal and visual expression leads toward the complete poem's oscillation between heard voices and seen—often barely seen—figures, shapes, spirits, genii, or human characters" (226). If she is right, then some of the fundamental elements of Shelley's sonnet—its layered voices, its broken images, its haunting inscription—are in part directed by the atmosphere of visuality created by his drafts. We can only ever guess at the specific significance of those mountains (especially not knowing which mountains they are), but the materiality of the notebook pages, with their varied evidence of the poet's passions "stamped on these lifeless things," throws into relief the "hieroglyphic" qualities at the heart of all of Shelley's poetical conceptions.

The fair copy of "Ozymandias" on the recto side of the notebook page similarly bears the faint trace of a sketch of trees—possibly bled onto it from a separate sheet—but is

otherwise relatively clean. (At the bottom of the page, Shelley has written in a different-looking ink three unpublished lines for a different poem, and there are also several small, short lines, almost looking like whiskers, off to one side—perhaps evidence of his totting something up, or else testing out his ink.) The visual significance of this draft is twofold. Most important, it represents the last version of “Ozymandias” that readers can be certain was approved by Shelley himself: the *Examiner* copy, with its various inconsistencies, was likely arranged by Leigh Hunt, and we know that Shelley, who soon afterwards left for Italy, directed his friend Thomas Peacock to collect the “other poems,” including “Ozymandias,” that were published alongside *Rosalind and Helen* in 1819. So the pointing and layout of this fair copy are perhaps closest to what Shelley intended (for this reason most editors revert to its spellings and punctuation even when adopting the more substantive revisions introduced—presumably also by Shelley—in the later versions). Secondly, this copy of the poem, in Shelley’s hand, reveals a clear interest on his part in typography. Everest has noted that even “[by] Shelley’s own standards, this is a very carefully punctuated text” (40). Compared to Hunt’s sloppily published version (with its heavy capitalization and open quotation marks that are never closed), the grammar of Shelley’s copy is carefully managed, including no fewer than fifteen commas, three full stops, an exclamation point, an ellipsis, two dashes, five ampersands, a colon, a semi-colon, and the clear use of opened and closed quotation marks. Nobody could accuse Shelley of leaving the punctuation up to his editors.<sup>5</sup> What this draft and so many others tell us is that Shelley actively participated in the translation of his works from thought to text—“between conception and expression” (*SPP* 513). His creative process involved written elements as well as non-verbal doodles from the earliest stages.

Some of these manuscript traces, were they widely available to see, would likely affect a reader’s experience of “Ozymandias.” The handwriting, as Everest and others have noted, is “strikingly neat and spaced attentively on the page” (40). And even the printed version of the poem bears qualities that an audience only hearing the sonnet aloud might wish to consider (as is the case with most poems). For example, Shelley keeps the octave and sestet of this irregular sonnet together rather than separating them into two stanzas. Goslee’s account of his spatial decisions points to the value in seeing his verse:

[The] interplay between material factors and compositional choices manifests itself in the positioning of stanza forms among available notebooks or on a given page of a specific notebook. This spatiality signifies the auditory patterns of the poem both as it is composed and as it is being read, but an auditory performance, whether mental or spoken aloud, does not quite exhaust the spatial possibilities for signification. Nor does the written form, of course, represent all the possibilities for an oral performance. (*Shelley’s Visual Imagination* 15)

Keeping the halves of the poem “together,” as it were, prioritizes its narrative element over its lyric one and allows the sonnet to remain lopsided in its perspective (there is no obvious “turn”). The opening line offers a first-person narrator whose subjectivity is immediately superseded by the traveler’s speech—a hijack that is visible on the page. The traveler and his quotation marks carry the poem off to its finish.

In addition to these broad aspects of appearance, subtler features having to do with the look of the poem likewise enrich its effects. For instance there is the charm of Shelley’s old-fashioned spelling of “desart,” which Smith also adopts (both “desert” and “desart” were in use during the Romantic period)—a choice that perhaps shines a fictive

quality on the traveler who “says” the word, as though he, too, is somehow “antique.” Shelley’s ellipsis between “stand in the desert” and “Near them” in line three signifies a pause in the story rather than a full stop. Everest hears in this punctuation a “tensed hiatus” in the traveler’s narrative indicative of a general “undercurrent of muted excitement” throughout (27). The syntactical complexity of the following sentence—resulting in the surprise transitive of “survive”—reflects the predicament of a poet attending to the demands of rhyme scheme, meter, and lineation as much as the “idiomatic articulacy” of the traveler’s speech (28). Shelley is using his language here to negotiate a middle ground: his poem not only encompasses voice in the mouth of the traveler, but also speech as written down by a poet dealing with certain pressures brought on by strict form and the prospect of ushering the lines into print. Were it not for the necessity of ending a line with “read” and creating a rhyme for it, would “survive” have remained intransitive? Sonnets rely on sounds (for example, rhyme and meter) as all poems do—but they also exhibit substance through their layout and lineation. (Can there be a sonnet that does not exist on the page? Do lines insist on materiality?)

These are philosophical questions (taken up elsewhere by Drucker and others), but for Shelley’s editors, they are practical, too. There is no single authoritative version of “Ozymandias” because there is no single material version of the poem that convincingly asserts itself as *the* text; most scholarly editions either provide multiple versions (that is, Shelley’s fair copy as well as the *Examiner* version) or offer a composite text that incorporates the best of both—the careful punctuation of Shelley’s draft with the polished phrases of the two versions published within his lifetime. (It is perhaps worth noting that seeing the poem in its original published context, in the pages of *The Examiner*, allows one to read its political statement in concert with an adjacent article debating the nation’s Poor Laws.) But, as Everest notes, the indeterminacy of the text (texts?) and its mutability (through multiple publications on the one hand and the loss or decay of notebook versions on the other) simultaneously speak to the sonnet’s central problem:

The sonnet thus once again returns us to its power repeatedly to disclose previously unrealised perspectives of self-reference and self-critique in its handling of a *topos*; for the sonnet exists in time, just like the sculpture of the tyrant ... The poem, like Ozymandias’ statue, has to maintain some form of material existence in the world; and, this being so, time will corrupt it in the end, and thereby bring into being a destructive irony identical with the one that has transformed the meaning of the legend quoted in the sonnet. This presentation allows the legend on the pedestal to propose itself as a legend for the sonnet also; the poem then in a way anticipates the time when it too will have been left standing, ravaged by time, and lying to be found by some unimaginable audience in a context changed out of all recognition from the one in which it came to exist. The issue that the poem leads us back to is thus ultimately disclosed as that of the mode of existence of the verbal work of art. (31–32)

Shelley’s poem is in this sense hyper-aware of its own materiality and self-reflexive in its message. Its irony relies on the preservation of Ozymandias’s inscription—and yet Shelley understands that the lastingness of such an inscription is what makes it vulnerable to a different form of ruin: the meaning can be lost in lieu of the material. The poem is therefore a testament to its own materiality—its presence on the page—as well as a lament over its own inevitable destruction. Either way, the fact that we can see it is part of the point.

A passage towards the end of Shelley's "Defence" dwells on poetry's capacity to "remain," through time's inevitable erasures, in "traces." It appears to do so with the images of "Ozymandias" in mind:

[Poetry] is as it were the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own; but its foot-steps are like those of a wind over a sea, which the coming calm erases, and whose traces remain only as on the wrinkled sand which paves it. (532)

Whether or not Shelley is conscious of the way he is blending the former king's "wrinkled lip" with poetic traces "stamped" on underwater sand, or conscious of how these erasable "footsteps" on water relate his desert-bound statue's "Wreck[ed]" leg, matters less than that he associates all of these visual images with poetry's tendency to "remain" in visible "traces" even when pitted against destructive forces. Perhaps the level sands at the end of "Ozymandias" imply they are there for the rewriting. Like sands, faces wrinkle; and so do pages. All are subject to the weathering powers of time. But looking down into his notebook, Shelley appears to find consolation in the possibility that his words—their written, material presence if not their sounds or meanings—could well survive him.

And of course they do. But like the words of Ozymandias, preserved in stone for millennia only to see their meaning irrevocably changed through time, Shelley's language cannot escape the mutability brought on by context. Now, in a cold rotunda in Oxford, through a shadowy passageway in University College, a memorial of Shelley's remains lies carved in stone, depicted as he would have appeared washed up and idealized on an Italian shore in July of 1822. The sculptor, Edward Onslow Ford, figures the poet in death instead of life. And on the wall to the right, in a sequence of three panels over his limp-looking body, "these words appear":

THE ONE REMAINS, THE MANY CHANGE AND PASS;  
HEAVEN'S LIGHT FOREVER SHINES, EARTH'S SHADOWS FLY;  
LIFE, LIKE A DOME OF MANY-COLOURED GLASS,

STAINS THE WHITE RADIANCE OF ETERNITY,  
UNTIL DEATH TRAMPLES IT TO FRAGMENTS.—DIE,  
IF THOU WOULDST BE WITH THAT WHICH THOU DOST SEEK!

FOLLOW WHERE ALL IS FLED!—ROME'S AZURE SKY,  
FLOWERS, RUINS, STATUES, MUSIC, WORDS, ARE WEAK  
THE GLORY THEY TRANSFUSE WITH FITTING TRUTH TO SPEAK.

When he composed these words in the fifty-second stanza of *Adonais*, Shelley was grieving for Keats and contemplating the experience of having to survive him. But it is also possible that he anticipated the lines' applicability to his own death. (He would certainly not be the first elegist to mourn himself.) In fact, the words he inscribed on Ozymandias's pedestal, and in particular the irony of their fate, speak to this prescience: Shelley understood that poetic language derives some of its power from its simultaneous permanence and impermanence. Written words remember the fleeting inspiration they stand for even as they come to embody that fleetingness—both remaining *and* remains. The undoing of Shelley's original meaning enacted by the display of his words for Keats on a wall above the statue of his own dead body is prefigured in the lesson of "Ozymandias" regarding what lasts (written language) and what does not (its intended meaning). In the original

text of “Adonais,” Shelley’s words are not capitalized, nor do they appear in tercets in gold paint in panels by themselves. But in their new context above Ford’s statue, his verses manage not only to speak to the circumstances surrounding Shelley’s untimely death but also to mirror the features of their current setting as well as the language Shelley uses in “Ozymandias”: “REMAINS,” “FRAGMENTS,” “RUINS,” “STATUES,” “WORDS.”

Close to the sculpture, in the rotunda’s foyer, a modern notice board issues the following note: “Recent restoration work has attempted to recreate the original colour scheme of the memorial, so that it can be seen as its sculptor intended.” Is such a thing ever possible? One of the lessons Shelley’s sonnet offers is that passions can survive much longer than artistic intentions. Another is that words themselves are easier to preserve than meanings. How poems look and where they remain matters. Just as historical context influences the ways we read poems, so the visible language—the poem’s “lineaments” on the face of the page—absorb, reflect, and change a poem’s meaning. Shelley knew this when he placed the tyrant’s speech on a stone that would outlive his “Works” in order to record his diminishing power over time. Reading Shelley’s words above a statue of his remains similarly testifies to the strengths and weaknesses of writing as poetry’s medium. The existence of those physical, handwritten drafts of “Ozymandias” in the notebook’s pages—along with the printed copies of the poem in anthologies—does the same.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, Shelley’s poetry and “A Defence of Poetry” are quoted from *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, and cited by line or page number.
2. See, for example, Wade-Gery; and Powell.
3. Shelley’s interest in the power of “lineaments” would continue throughout his life: his 1819 poem “On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci” describes the “the lineaments of that dead face,” noting that “Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie / Loveliness like a shadow” (*Poems of Shelley* vol. 3: lines 11; 5–6).
4. The ancient historian Diodorus Siculus describes a statue of the Egyptian king Rameses II, called “Osymandias” by the Greeks, bearing such an inscription. See the editorial commentary to “Ozymandias” in *The Poems of Shelley* for a detailed account of its sources, including Denon, Pococke, and the scholarship surrounding them (2: 307–11).
5. Bysshe Inigo Coffey presents a cogent discussion of some of the editorial cruxes related to Shelley’s pointing marks in the introduction to his study (20–23).

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