

“Ozymandias”

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ON A WINTER AFTERNOON AS BROWN AS THE DINGY SHEEP driven early to fold down the high street beyond the darkening garden, a gentleman banker from London, Horace Smith by name, is sitting in the long library of a pleasant house in the village of Marlow, a few miles up the Thames from Henley. He is writing a sonnet.

There is something of the prismatic tidiness of *Dombey* about him and something of the rubicund joviality of Mr. Pickwick. He wears the last century's small clothes still, but his coat is already the alpaca of the age to come. The novels he writes under the name Horatio Smith are like his clothes: They begin in the 18th-century manner and end like 19th century novels. The world has forgotten them, and him, though he was a talented, wonderfully humorous, and generous man. He accepts a pinch of snuff from his host's silver box, dips his quill, and begins to write on a block of paper the top sheet of which bears his host's drawing of a pine forest, an imp, and labyrinth. There is, however, room for a sonnet.

Outside the leaded diamond panes a thoroughly dreary Saturday afternoon makes the firelit room even more comfortable. A white haze from the river sifts through the rusted garden. It is but two days after Christmas of the year 1817, and the banker has walked up the Tyburn Turnpike from London to Uxbridge, and thence by various country roads to the lacemaking town of Marlow.

Our banker's host, a mere boy to judge from his snub nose, spindly six feet, and wild hair (he ducks his head in a pail of water from time to time, for the freshness of it, as he explains), has been reading Gibbon all week and talks about history, to our banker's straight face, as if it were nothing but a succession of tyrants gnawing the elbows of the poor. His wife, a wide-eyed young lady, reads Tacitus for hours on end. She, too, has written a novel, now at the printer. *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, she calls it.

The talk of the three turns from history to certain modern travelers who have been looking at, and theorizing on, cities and empires that have disappeared from the earth with scarcely a trace — to Count Constantin Francois de Chasseboeuf de Volney, whose *Voyage to Egypt and Syria* of 1787 and *Ruins, or Meditations on the Destiny of Empires* of 1791 were books much discussed in Europe and America, and to Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, who had refound the “rose-red city” Petra and the colossal statues of Rameses II at Abu Simbel, and who died earlier that year, buried as a Mohammedan somewhere in the wastes of Egypt.

Our banker has been reading the historian Diodorus, and it is on a description he has found there of a toppled monument that he is about to write a meditative sonnet.

Some 3,300 years before, the grandest Pharaoh of them all, Rameses II, set up a statue of himself at Thebes. It was 60 feet tall, weighed a thousand tons, and had inscribed on it: “I am User-ma-Ra, ruler of rulers, king of Upper and Lower Egypt, He of the Sedge and Bee, the mighty justice of Re, the chosen of Re. If a man wishes to know the greatness of me, here I lie, let him surpass what I have done.”

Six hundred years later, the Greek traveler Hekataios visited Egypt and wrote an account of Rameses' great statue, doing the best he could with his name but making a hash of it. “Osymandyas” was how “User-ma-Ra” sounded to his Greek ears. His book is lost, but Diodorus, which our banker has open before him, included his description in his 40-volume history of the world written in the time of Augustus Caesar.

Here the inscription runs: “King of Kings Osymandyas am I. If any want to know how great I am and where lie, let them outdo my deeds if they can.”

So by lamplight and the failing winter sun Horace Smith the literary banker writes:

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 the 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 meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What wonderful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.

Before he has finished, his boyish host joins him across the table. He proposes to write a sonnet on the same theme. And writes:

There stands by Nile a single pedestal
On which two trunkless legs of crumbling stone
Quiver thru sultry mist; beneath the sand
Half sunk a shuttered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lips impatient of command
Betray some sculptor's art whose

Here he quits, nibbles his quill, and strikes out the first line and the first word of the second line.

Smith has finished his sonnet. His host takes a new sheet and begins over:

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 led:
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias. King Of Kings.
Look on my Works ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing around remains. Round the decay
Of the colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Thus, in 10 minutes flat (or thereabouts), Shelley wrote one of the masterpieces of English poetry. But look how a Pharoah, a committee of historians and explorers, and the luckless Horace Smith, wrote it for him. Genius is perhaps being in the right place at the right time, prepared for the moment. They sent their sonnets off to a newspaper, which printed both. The honest Smith called his "On a Stupendous Leg of Granite. Discovered Standing by Itself in the Deserts of Egypt, with the Inscription Inserted Below." Shelley called his "Ozymandias." Genius may also be knowing how to title a poem.