

“That Colossal Wreck”: La Boétie, Prometheus and the tyrant’s downfall in Shelley’s ‘Ozymandias’

From 29 February 2024 to 5 January 2025, the Bodleian Library in Oxford held an exhibition titled “Write Cut Rewrite”, showcasing authors’ rough drafts and the thought-processes revealed within their scribbles and scorings-out. It brought to mind Charles Lamb’s horrified reaction, in 1820, to the original manuscript of Milton’s ‘Lycidas’:

How it staggered me to see the fine things in their ore! interlined, corrected! as if their words were mortal, alterable, displaceable at pleasure! as if they might have been otherwise, and just as good! as if inspiration was made up of parts, and these fluctuating, successive, indifferent!¹

Lamb might have expressed similar sentiments had he viewed Shelley’s earliest known 1817 holograph draft of his sonnet ‘Ozymandias’ (Fig. 1).² On the exhibition website, the fourth image of the exhibition’s ‘highlights’ shows Shelley’s notebook spread open at the crucial pages.³ The right-hand ‘verso’ leaf shows creative doodling (a mountain-range reflected in a lake, then turned into a bat) and concepts struggling to emerge. It seems clear that from the beginning the seed of Shelley’s inspiration lay, not in the famous “trunkless legs of stone”, but in an empty “pedestal.” One scored-out sentence reads, “There stands close by Nile a lone single pedestal.” Curiously, Shelley’s initial opening did not address the ruins of the statue, but the pedestal freed of its burden.

¹ Charles Lamb. *Elia*: being the hitherto uncollected writings of Charles Lamb (London: Edward Moxon, 1867), 146.

² Percy Bysshe Shelley. Draft of Ozymandias (1817). Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts. MS Shelley e. 4 fol. 85V.

³ Bodleian Libraries, ‘Write Cut Rewrite’. last accessed Jan 1, 2026, <https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/cut>.



Fig 1. Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 1817. Draft of Ozymandias. Bodleian MS Shelley e. 4 fol. 85V.

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This article will argue that ‘Ozymandias’ can be read as an oblique commentary, not simply on ancient ruins and the futility of human endeavour, but on contemporary political trends which had occupied Shelley since his expulsion from Oxford in 1811. As Paul Foot remarks, “[a]lmost all his narrative poetry has at its centre a king or a tyrant”⁴ and much of his oeuvre centres on the necessity of the tyrant’s reform or forcible removal. Alongside ‘Ozymandias’ Shelley was working on ‘Laon and Cythna’ (his later title, ‘The Revolt of Islam’, is scrawled along the Bodleian draft) which presented in part “the awakening of an immense nation from their slavery and degradation to a true sense of moral dignity and freedom; the bloodless dethronement of their oppressors.”⁵ Scenarios of fictional historical revolution evidently occupied his thoughts. It also cannot have escaped Shelley’s notice that overturned statues, pulled from their pedestals by angry mobs, had famously served as bellwethers of revolution in the eighteenth century: the statue of King George III in New York City, toppled after a reading of the Declaration of Independence in 1776; the statues of various French kings, destroyed in Revolutionary Paris between 1791-3. Given such precedents, the ‘Ozymandias’ wreckage can usefully be read as something close to Shelley’s political thought: visible evidence of a successful uprising within an ancient civilization. Robert A. Davis reads ‘Ozymandias’ within the tradition of political iconoclasm, stating “whether this [destruction] is the result of natural forces, human intervention or both is never fully determined.”⁶

If the wreckage of the ‘trunkless legs’ and ‘half-buried’ stone ‘visage’ depicts evidence of a successful human rebellion, then this invites further questions: how was this revolution effected? Which intellectual paradigms would Shelley have employed in imagining the successful eradication of a tyrant by a mass uprising? Foremost amongst Shelley’s concerns was that any such uprising should avoid bloodshed. Shelley, his wife Mary and his father-in-law William Godwin abhorred the French Revolution, and knew the dangers of permitting slaughter in the name of self-righteousness. Indeed, Godwin made his distrust of popular action clear when Shelley sent him his 1812 pamphlet ‘An Address to the Irish People’. In it, Shelley had urged his readers to “resist oppression, not by force of arms, but by power of mind”.⁷ However, Godwin responded in horror: “Shelley, you are preparing a scene of

⁴ Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 1984), 50.

⁵ Donald H. Reiman et al, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 3 (Maryland, USA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 113.

⁶ Robert A. Davis, ‘Look on my works ye mighty...’: Iconoclasm, education and the fate of statues. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, vol. 55, iss. 3, June 2021, 535.

⁷ Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, eds. *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 5 (New York: Gordian Press, 1965), 226.

blood!”⁸ Even this cautious proposal, he warned, would incite the Irish to “rise up like Cadmus's seed of dragon's teeth, and their first act will be to destroy each other”.⁹ Similarly, Mary Shelley expressed her fears of William Cobbett in 1817: “a revolution in this country would not be *bloodless* if that man has any power in it.”¹⁰

Though he shared this horror of bloodshed, Shelley also understood that Godwinian gradualism would not alleviate contemporary suffering. For him, the squalor of the Dublin streets had revealed the need for swift political change: “I had no conception of the depth of human misery until now.”¹¹ However, the conundrum remained: how could such political action be timely yet ‘bloodless’? In his unpublished ‘Fragments on Reform’, usually dated to 1817, Shelley wrote of British politics, “Call it reform or revolution, as you will, a change must take place; one of the consequences of which will be, the wresting of political power from those who are at present the depositories of it.”¹² This paper posits that the earliest draft of *Ozymandias* contains, in Lamb’s term, ‘fluctuating’ indicators of Shelley’s working out, and incorporation of, two contrasting theories of mass rebellion within the poem: what I would term the ‘Boétian’ and the ‘Promethean’. Both theories value human life, and the first, quasi-utopian, paradigm of ‘reform’ is complicated by the introduction of a second, ‘revolutionary’, self-sacrificial paradigm later in the draft.

The first of these theoretical solutions originates in a sixteenth-century political tract, the ‘Discours de la servitude volontaire’ (‘Discourse on Voluntary Servitude’) by Etienne de la Boétie. (Probably written between 1552-3, it was published after Boétie’s death in 1563.) Famously, this tract is an early argument for passive resistance. Shelley was unquestionably familiar with it, as variations of its title have been noted in Shelley’s writings.¹³ In 2024 Nora Crook hypothesized that the edition of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* read aloud by Shelley to Mary in 1816 may have contained Boétie’s ‘Discourse’ in an appendix.¹⁴ Shelley would have seen in Boétie a kindred spirit: both were young and altruistic firebrands, united in their faith that a tyrant could be brought low by an enlightened populace employing large-scale

⁸ Thomas Jefferson Hogg, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2. (London: Edward Moxon, 1858), 99.

⁹ Hogg, *Life of Shelley*, vol. 2, 97.

¹⁰ Ernest Dowden, *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2. (London, Kegan Paul, 1886), 147.

¹¹ Hogg, *Life of Shelley*, vol. 2, 94.

¹² Ingpen and Peck, eds. *Complete Works*, vol. 6, 295.

¹³ Reiman et al, *Complete Poetry*, vol. 3, 820.

¹⁴ Nora Crook, Shelley and Slavery. *The Wordsworth Circle*, University of Chicago Press (vol. 55, No. 1, winter 2024), 48-49.

passive resistance. Boétie's exhortation to his readers reaches a crescendo in his vision of a statue's toppling:

[Y]ou can deliver yourselves if you try, not by taking action, but merely by willing to be free. Resolve to serve no more, and you are at once freed. I do not ask that you place hands upon the tyrant to topple him over, but simply that you support him no longer; then you will behold him, like a great Colossus whose pedestal has been pulled away, fall of his own weight and break into pieces?¹⁵

Boétie's image of the "Colossus" carries connotations of the fall of the mighty, invoking both the statue in Nebuchadnezzar's Dream with its unstable foundations (feet of 'iron and clay'), and the downfall of the Colossus of Rhodes after an earthquake in 226 BC. (Shelley may also have remembered Byron's 1814 'Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte', referencing the emperor's 'feet of clay').¹⁶ In his 'Address to the Irish People', Shelley had urged his readers to "be all of one mind as nearly as you can."¹⁷ Similarly, Godwin had written in his 1794 novel *Caleb Williams*, "I was astonished at the folly of my species, that they did not rise up as one man, and shake off chains so ignominious."¹⁸ Refraining from violence, yet rising up in a unanimous refusal to enact the tyrant's will: here in Boétie was Shelley's ideal, captured in an image with mythic resonance.

At the beginning of the Bodleian draft, the poet's emphasis is on the *pedestal* as the foundation of Ozymandias' statue and the fulcrum of his downfall. The word "pedestal" appears three times in the first four sentences as false starts [~~'A pedestal in' / 'A pedestal is' / 'There stands by Nile a lone single pedestal'~~]. This is followed by two variants on 'Colossus' [~~"The wreck of a colossal form", "the wrecks of a colossal image"~~]. This cluster of Boétian reference near the start suggests that Shelley's initial conception of *Ozymandias*' statue was its collapse, not from the erosion of millennia, but from collective non-violent resistance in the Boétian mould. The image of the empty pedestal, freed of its tyrannical statuary, was the natural outcome of Shelley's wish for "unanimity founded on reason".¹⁹

However, halfway through the process of composition, a new theme apparently occurred to Shelley. His focus switches from the statue and pedestal to its creator. He writes, in a scored-

¹⁵ Etienne de la Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, transl. Harry Kurz, (Alabama, USA: The Mises Institute, 1975), 48-9.

¹⁶ Lord Byron, *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* (London: John Murray, 1814), 10.

¹⁷ Ingpen and Peck, eds. *Complete Works*, vol. 5, 230.

¹⁸ William Godwin, *The Adventures of Caleb Williams; or, Things as they are* (London: Richard Bentley, 1849), 215.

¹⁹ Hogg, *Life of Shelley*, vol 2, 93.

out line, that the statue “~~betrays some sculpt~~”: later he works out the thought fully (“betrays some sculptor’s art, who”) and then ceases. As Patrick Gillespie observes,

Shelley’s sketch stops here. It’s almost as though he realizes that he can make something more from the artist. When the Sonnet is completed, the artist will have become as important to the poem as Ozymandias.²⁰

In making the sculptor a character in his own right, Shelley introduced another theme important to him: the artist’s power to influence society. In 1816 he wrote to Leigh Hunt, “I am undeceived in the belief that I have powers deeply to interest, or substantially to improve, mankind.”²¹ The employment of art for political ends, as a means of ‘interesting’ an audience, and subsequently ‘improving’ their lot, may be traced in the sculptor’s actions in ‘Ozymandias’.

The passage which indicates the sculptor’s political role culminates in one of English poetry’s most enigmatic lines:

its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;²²

The ‘hand’ is certainly the sculptor’s, since the verb “mocked” both renders and insults his subject. However, whose is the “heart that fed”? Frequently the line is interpreted as the struggle between sculptor and tyrant: “The hand is the sculptor’s; the heart, the pharaoh’s.”²³ However, I would argue that the ‘heart’ belongs to the sculptor, and that his political role is clarified by the end-rhyme of ‘fed’, an echo of Milton’s ‘Lycidas’. In his 1638 poem Milton shifts from the elegiac form to interrogate the ‘pastor’ at the heart of the pastoral genre. This role derives from the Latin *pascere* (‘feeding’, ‘grazing’), so Milton uses the Classical imagery of shepherds and flocks to address failures in contemporary Christian ministry, in particular the Church of England’s neglect of parishioners: “The hungry sheep look up and are not fed.”²⁴ Following ‘Lycidas’, the “heart that fed” would indicate not Ozymandias’

²⁰ Patrick Gillespie, ‘Ozymandias – the Bodleian Draft’. Poemshape, 19 June 2012. <https://poemshape.wordpress.com/2012/06/19/ozymandias-the-bodleian-draft/>.

²¹ Ingpen and Peck, eds. *Complete Works*, vol. 9, 208.

²² Reiman et al, *Complete Poetry*, vol. 3, 327.

²³ William Logan, *Dickinson’s Nerves, Frost’s Woods: Poetry in the Shadow of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 14.

²⁴ John Milton, *Lycidas* (London: The De La More Press, 1903), 23.

voracious appetites, but the sculptor's assuming a leadership role within society and 'feeding' others.

For Shelley, the mythological figure who combined these elements of compassion and the fight against injustice was Prometheus, the Titan who defied Zeus' will in giving fire to mankind and paid a harsh penalty for his defiance. Aeschylus' drama 'Prometheus Bound' lists his gifts to humanity (not merely physical but also intellectual 'fire', in the form of mathematics, medicine, astronomy and farming), and his consequent imprisonment and torture for his defiance: "A god, the enemy of Zeus,/ Who have earned the enmity of all gods.../ Because I was too good a friend to men."²⁵ Traditionally Prometheus's punishment for his rebellion was for his liver to be eternally consumed by Zeus's eagle, but in Shelley's 1821 poem, 'Prometheus Unbound', the organ suffering punitive ravages is the heart ("his beak... tears up/My heart").²⁶ Here Prometheus' heart is literally "the heart that fed", giving itself up to be devoured for a noble cause.

In this reading of 'Ozymandias', the sculptor feels a Promethean compassion towards the people, and at the most basic level he 'feeds' his people by depicting the truth. However, in creating the tyrannical statue he employs his art to convey to his audience, not a Boétian vision of reasoned co-operation, but emotional provocation. As Shelley wrote in 1811, "shall no patriot tear the veil away/ Which hides these vices from the face of day?"²⁷ It is the sculptor's deliberate rebellion – his mocking depiction of Ozymandias' corrupt nature, his visible 'sneer of cold command' – which directly inspires the people to recognize their leader's tyranny and rise up against him.

Such provocation to anger naturally raises the troubling issue of violence: did this scenario not contradict Shelley's strong admonition against violence in politics? In his 'Address to the Irish People' he had urged his readers to "[h]ave nothing to do with force and violence" and asked "Wherever has violence succeeded?"²⁸ Another concern is that inciting a crowd to rebellion may appear manipulative, the action of a leader who urges others to take life-endangering risks whilst preserving their own safety. However, in 'Ozymandias', the potential difficulties of 'violence' and 'manipulation' are both solved by the sculptor's making a significant personal sacrifice to advance the people's freedom.

²⁵ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* et al, transl. Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin, 1971), 24.

²⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama* (London: C & J Ollier, 1820), 21.

²⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Political Essay on the Existing State of Things* (London: B. Crosby, 1811), 12.

²⁸ Ingpen and Peck, eds. *Complete Works*, vol. 5, 228, 225.

Shelley did not believe that art's sole purpose was to outlive humanity. In his 'Address to the Irish People', he wrote, "[A]re not the arts very inferior things to virtue and happiness – the man would be very dead to all generous feelings who would rather see pretty pictures and statues, than a million free and happy men."²⁹ In this reading of 'Ozymandias', the sculptor's actions are determined by this stark choice between Art and Liberty. Rather than exalting his art, the sculptor chooses to liberate his nation at the cost of the crowd's destruction of his 'pretty' statue. In creating the statue, he ensures that the tyrant will be removed from power, but not necessarily killed: as with the statues of rulers previously toppled in New York and Paris, the crowd's wrath is enacted first against the statue, acting as an early warning and potentially allowing the ruler to escape with his life.

The idea of self-sacrifice to ensure another's survival occurs in Shelley's parallel composition 'The Revolt of Islam', where Laon surrenders himself for execution on condition that his lover Cythna would be pardoned and permitted passage to America ("the boon I pray/ Is this, that Cythna shall be conveyed there").³⁰ In 'Ozymandias' the sculptor, in creating his provocative sculpture, is enacting a kind of Girardian scapegoat/substitution mechanism: this is not pure self-sacrifice, as with Laon, but instead a transference of hostility from a human victim to an object. In this reading the sculptor offers not himself, but his statue, to the mob in place of the tyrant. He incites the people's anger in order to compel them to take action, but intends that the ensuing violence will be confined to the destruction of his artwork alone. Here the phrase "these lifeless things" is significant: this violence would be enacted upon a voluntary offering, and upon unfeeling stone rather than living flesh.

There is another sense in which the sculptor's 'heart' has 'fed' his people. We must return to Shelley's fair copy of 'Ozymandias' (written on the reverse of the verso leaf containing the draft). The tyrant's declaration "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" is followed by Shelley's original line "No thing remains beside."³¹ This was altered to 'No thing beside remains' for 'Ozymandias's' publication in *The Examiner* on 11 January 1818.³² According to Kelvin Everest, it was presumably Shelley's friend and editor Thomas Love Peacock who in 1819, during Shelley's residence abroad, edited the line definitively to "Nothing beside remains".³³ However, in Shelley's fair copy and in *The Examiner*, the phrasing draws the

²⁹ Ingpen and Peck, eds. *Complete Works*, vol. 5, 234.

³⁰ Reiman et al, *Complete Poetry*, vol. 3, 304.

³¹ Reiman et al, *Complete Poetry*, vol. 3, 322, 327.

³² Reiman et al, *Complete Poetry*, vol. 3, 321, 326.

³³ Kelvin Everest, *Keats and Shelley: Winds of Light*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 195.

reader's attention to the absence of "thing[s]" remaining "beside" the statue. We see a pair of legs, a head and a still-legible pedestal: where is the rest? The most likely explanation is that these abandoned ancient materials were seized and reused for later constructions. One 1819 fragment of Shelley's hints at this, "What men gain fairly":

But he who gains by base and armed wrong,

Or guilty fraud, or base compliances...

May be despoild³⁴

This provides an answer to the riddle of the statue's missing body and limbs: as a product of tyranny, it has been 'despoiled'. Charles Rollins' 1815 *Histoire ancienne* related that the Persian King Cambyses II despoiled Ozymandias' tomb for its gold³⁵; however, in Shelley's version, the statue is likely to have been plundered by the people. Just as Prometheus bestowed on humanity various gifts for their benefit, one imagines that the sculptor would want the fragments of his broken statue to be taken away to alleviate what Shelley in 1812 termed 'human misery.'

Elements of both paradigms, the 'Boétian' and the 'Promethean', 'reform and revolution', appear together in some of Shelley's later work. The 1819 poem 'The Mask/Masque of Anarchy', with its call to nonviolent resistance, 'Rise like lions after slumber/ In unvanquishable number'³⁶, famously inspired Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement. However, Shelley's initial procession of grotesquely-caricatured contemporary politicians is reminiscent of the sculptor's incendiary depiction of Ozymandias' "sneer of cold command." In the 1820 lyrical drama 'Prometheus Unbound', the eponymous hero's rebellion is past, and his refusal to descend to bitterness embodies the calm self-control of 'reform'. However, his defiance lives on: change is only effected after Asia's interrogation of the spirit Demogorgon, who becomes awakened to Jupiter's sadism and rises up to stop him, in 'revolutionary' fashion, by dragging him into an abyss. As Foot points out, the name 'Demogorgon' literally means 'people-monster' (Greek: '*demos*' + '*gorgon*') and therefore hints at the masses rising to rid their world of a tyrant.³⁷ Again, Shelley relates a narrative of a lone voice inspiring the people to take direct and united action to topple an unjust ruler.

³⁴ H. Buxton Forman, *Note Books of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: The Bibliophile Society, 1911), 182.

³⁵ Charles Rollin, *Histoire ancienne des Égyptiens, etc.* vol. 2 (Paris: Babeuf & Saintmichel, 1815), 330-1. Reiman et al, *Complete Poetry*, vol. 3, 947.

³⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Masque of Anarchy* (London: Edward Moxon, 1832), 47.

³⁷ Foot, *Red Shelley*, 194.

In conclusion, it is bittersweet that in ‘Ozymandias’ the lone voice of the political agitator, the ‘sculptor’, is depicted as lost in Time, with his influence and impact largely unrecognized by posterity. However, in two separate tracts, Shelley would name “poets” as “the unacknowledged legislators of the world”³⁸, so in this context the artist’s obscurity is perhaps appropriate. Given that ‘Ozymandias’ was first published in *The Examiner* under the name ‘Glirastes’ (‘dormouse-lover’, a tribute to his wife Mary), Shelley may have intentionally mimicked his sculptor in remaining nameless and ‘unacknowledged’, choosing to publish a masterpiece under a pseudonym.

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³⁸ Ingpen and Peck, eds. *Complete Works*, vol. 7, 20, 140.

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