Ozymandias

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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 shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd 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."
—SHELLEY, "Ozymandias"

My account of the artifaction of the Memnon head has foregrounded the material aspects of the process of artifaction. For the most part, I have read sources indexically, as references to actual events, actual people, and an actual object. Of course, each source is also a representation. To observe this is to emphasize a point made earlier about the performance played by the paper trail of the provenance itself. That is, the archives did not merely tell the story of how the Memnon head became an artifact; they were also gathered to guarantee that very outcome. To underscore the substantive role played by representations in the artifaction process I want to briefly consider Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias" since it too belongs to this body of texts bundled with the Memnon head. Much might

be said about the poem, but I will consider only three points: the first has to do with how it frames the object as a ruin; the second, with its use of prosopopoeia (personification); the third, with how it performs within the network of artifaction.

Of the various representations attached to the Memnon head, Shelley's poem is undoubtedly the most famous. It was composed in the context of a friendly literary competition with Horace Smith, as both men, like much of the London lettered class, followed reports of the head's imminent arrival.[1] The poem's literary power results from how it explores monumentalization as an uncertain act of signification.[2] It accomplishes this effect by conceptually linking the crafts of the sculptor and the poet, each of whom (in his own way) creates works of art intended to last beyond the historical moment in which they are made. At the same time, however, "Ozymandias" injects real ambiguity into the question of the meaning-making art since each artist—the sculptor who "mocks" and the poet who ironizes—creates a work that has, in a sense, a life of its own, one that cannot be reduced to the intent of the humans making it. Shelley's poem is a study of the gesture of monumentalization insofar as it explores this theme both in its depiction of the sculptor and in its own form as a poem.[3]

As critics have pointed out, Shelley relied heavily on the accounts of travelers like Diodorus Siculus, Pococke, and Denon who visited the Memnonium.[4] Indeed, the poem signals this fact at the beginning: "I met a traveler from an antique land / Who said . . ." It is not especially surprising that Shelley would seek inspiration for his poem in the extensive body of travel writing on Egypt. Yet it is striking that the central image of the poem—the "colossal wreck"—would be framed in such a way as to emphasize its received, citational quality. In so doing, the poem gestures toward the authority of experience in travel writing of the period. What has not been fully appreciated is how Shelley imagined the place—a "desert" of "lone and level sands"—as being outside of human society. While the Memnonium may not have been as populated as other Egyptian temples and tombs during this period, it is abundantly clear in the accounts of Belzoni and others that the place was far from uninhabited. Of course, it is beside the point to fault Shelley's lack of realism because his poem depopulates the Memnonium. It is, however, salient to observe how much his image corresponds to the view—expressed by Belzoni and others—that the antiquities of Egypt ought to be separated from the modern inhabit-

ants. In order to produce the illusion that the ancient past is immediately available, "Ozymandias" necessarily removes the object from its social context. This act of rendition mirrors in essence the radical recontextualization that Egyptian antiquities underwent as they were brought under the sign of the artifact.

Still, the poem does more than this. The act of citation puts a double distance between any place called here and the scene described. The ruin lies far away across space and time; the expanse is extended again by the fact that it appears as received speech. Yet, for all the distance marked by geography, antiquity, and irony, the poem performs a close examination of the statue. In the sense that it is a study of an object, the poem telescopes us directly into the presence of the ruin. Here, we are with the postantiquarian scholar of art who closely studies the individual piece of work as a totality in itself, though one that opens up onto other hermeneutical scenes. This intimate study of the face quickly leads to a consideration of the relation between the sculpture's artist and his subject, the tyrant Pharaoh. The poem suggests that the sculpture of the king is not an unambiguous one, since the very gestures which indicate the subject's power ("wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command") also attest to the control of the artist, whose "heart" created the statue and whose "hand" appears to have mocked his subject. Critics have focused on this description of the relationship between artist and king in order to argue that Shelley is here asserting the power of the creative arts over politics. But, more germane to thinking about the Memnon head as an artifact, we might recognize Shelley's effort—in pure imagination—to read for an original context (the relation between patron and artist) through which one might interpret subtle, even ironic, aspects within a work of Egyptian art. In other words, the "study" enacted in the poem was precisely one that art historians could not yet perform. In this sense, the poem prefigures a later moment when the Memnon head would become a historical artifact, just as it anticipates the historian's eye studying it.

A larger irony lingers, however, in the juxtaposition of the sculpture's inscription ("Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!") and its current state of ruin and neglect. One function of this writing is to lend voice and words to the inanimate object. The image on which the poem ends is like that of a colossal statue speaking with no one to heed his words save the modern traveler or reader of inscriptions. What is the significance

of representing this object as sneering and communicating? Similarly, Belzoni portrayed the Memnon head as a living thing when he described it as smiling at him at the thought of being taken away. To call this kind of figure personification is correct, but that observation does not flesh out the full meaning. What Shelley's poem describes in figurative terms is thus more or less what the statue actually is: the product of human labor; a representation of a human form that has a relation to human life; a representation that has an association with human power. By imagining the lively aspect of the statue, Shelley's poem reactivates the human aspects of the object that were congealed in the stone.

The personified figurative language of literary descriptions—in Belzoni, in Shelley, and elsewhere—is a useful correction to the impression that artifacts are the passive objects of actions and processes performed by human actors. It becomes a dominant theme in much European (and later Egyptian) literature about Pharaonic antiquities (especially that about mummies). This tradition of prosopopoeia suggests that there might be traces of the human in the object itself, or at least qualities in the artifact, like agency, that one normally associates with human life. Indeed, the literary description of the object often returns to this point in order to reveal something that the other forms of discourse do not: namely, that its existence is entangled with the lives of the humans around it and in that sense it might be said to have a life. In this way, Shelley's poem compels us to ask, What if artifacts are not inert? What if they are not just the instruments or consequences of history making, but rather agents within it? This second question may appear strange, since it runs contrary to the common assumption that agency is a uniquely human attribute. Yet it may be that the prosopopoeic literary descriptions capture this aspect of the artifact more accurately than prosaic accounts.

The point might be made differently: the artifaction of the Memnon head entailed catching it in networks of concepts, writing, sciences, and practices normally associated exclusively with humans. Artifacts brought into such networks, and assimilated into such institutions, helped those who controlled them produce claims that were not just about the ancient past, but also about the modern present. These claims had, as we shall see, profound implications for how Egypt's modern rulers—colonial and nationalist—would legitimate their power. Just as the knowledge and power produced in relation to artifacts must become entangled with their

matter, so too must human agency, when it is constructed in relation to objects, share some life with them. In this regard, the personified artifact resonates with the notion of the *actant*, since it too describes how power might obtain in the matter of an object when it is part of an assemblage of social and political relations.[5] Shelley's sonnet thus suggests that the artifact is a prosthesis in the performance of human power relations and a material site within a network of forces that encompasses humans and nonhumans alike.

A final point with regard to the poem's association with the Memnon head artifact and the issue of entanglement. Recall that Shelley's poem derives from a long tradition of travel writing on Pharaonic antiquities and in that sense might be said to be a secondary (or tertiary) artifact in relation to the object itself. However, the poem's publication predated the arrival of the Memnon head in London, and its light no doubt helped illuminate the object itself. We know also that John Keats visited the Egyptian collection at the British Museum during the early months of the Memnon head's arrival, and was inspired to write at least seven poems on ancient Egyptian themes as a result. Is it accurate to say that the meaning of "Ozymandias" derives from the object it is said to represent or that the image created by the poem is what informs the museum-goer's experience of the artifact? To frame the relationship between artifact and representation in terms of the familiar conundrum raised by the original and the copy misses what was likely a more crucial aspect, namely, that when joined together, poem and statue (or artifact and provenance, or object and representation) formed a network of concepts, images, and material facts powerful enough to make it seem natural and inevitable that the Memnon head would now reside in London for the contemplation of the British public. In this way, Shelley's poem does more than describe an Egyptian monument or problematize the gesture of artistic monumentalization. In monumentalizing the alienability of objects found in Egypt, the poem is part of the wider set of networks that together effected the Memnon head's artifaction. "Ozymandias" is thus more than a poem about an object. It is an instance of how in the emergent institutions of Egyptology and Egyptomania there was "no important difference between stories and materials."[6]