

## A commentary on “Ozymandias” and “Metaphors of Terror”

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### *Ozymandias*

*Percey Bysshe Shelley*

*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.'*

Historians are engaged in a constant endeavor to find patterns of meaning that could lend us some understanding of human life. Indeed, history is recurrent, and it is fascinating to see how literature can grasp this recurrence, or the universal features of our human past and our human nature, showing us how we and the events that we participate in all fit into a prototype established long, long ago. In this sense, literature merges with historiography unraveling the archetypical meanings that not only dress our past but also foretell its cyclical comebacks. Who would think that a poem, ‘Ozymandias’ (<http://www.yoga.com/raw/readings/Ozymandias>), published in 1818, almost two hundred years ago, would strike us now in the twenty-first century with the metaphorical predictability of the tragic events that overtook the world in the second half of 2001?

George Lakoff’s *Metaphors of Terror* elaborates on the metaphors that envelop the events of September 11, 2001 in New York City. His discussion of the metaphors involved spans a crescendo, first, of buildings as heads, then of tall buildings as people standing erect, and then of each tower falling as a body falling. He went on, expanding the metaphor from the micro to the macro level, with society being a building, more specifically a temple, a context in which the World Trade Center Towers would stand not only as American society itself, but also a temple of American capitalism and power. For Lakoff, then, the crumbling of the Towers led to questions of whether American power and American society, as it is, would last. For him, then, the crumbling of the Towers stood as a metaphor for loss of control and loss of power.

Many are the parallels that we can trace between Ozymandias and the Metaphors of Terror. Upon reading the first lines of Shelley's Ozymandias, one would immediately relate the two vast and trunkless legs of stone standing in the desert to the WTC towers; this relation evoked by the shapes considered. Naturally, we may ask of the great king's statue, "Where is the body?" It is shattered, half buried in the sand, its visage still commanding an arrogant, sneering expression as it lies there. The crumbled Towers then, would most directly parallel the King's shattered statue. As for the derisive look on the statue's face, would Lakoff be suggesting that a similar passion might be stamped on the face of what he called a conservative administration?

There is such vivid irony in Ozymandias' shattered visage on the sand. That king no longer commanded any power; he no longer terrified those he oppressed with his might. Yet, derision still showed in his face; the very passions that brought a period of glory, but also its own destruction, had been well captured by the poet.

If we, as Lakoff suggested, look at things that perpetuate over time as 'standing', then Ozymandias' standing legs, without a body, thus lacking any functionality, and the crumbled WTC towers could be seen as hinting at the impossibility of perpetuation of any power, no matter how great. Could both Shelley and Lakoff be suggesting then that overwhelming, blundering power coupled with arrogance and pride brings upon itself naught but its own destruction? Could it be then that there is no such thing as immanent power – at least in a political sphere, since I do believe that it is an indwelling power that kept all those hit by last year's tragedy standing erect? In the political arena, in contrast, there always seems to be outside forces at bay, very often posing dangerous threats to established hegemonies.

The epitaph, or should we rather say epithet, "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" reveals the vivid irony with which the poem is invested, as it shows a power, which considered itself unbreakable, shattered. The king said, "See my power and fear me." One might not, after all, be wrong in perceiving that perhaps the very power that was supposed to command fear brought destruction upon itself. Indeed, those who launched the attack on the Towers could have said or had in mind those very same words uttered by Ozymandias. But, in their lack of vision, only managed to awaken the deadly wrath of another, stronger power. Lakoff warns however, that in face of such events, "as we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore" (citing Rep. Barbara Lee), lest, one may add, we may share its very same fate.

Lakoff's text and Shelley's two-hundred-year-old poem draw a picture of human society in a time of crisis and change and come forth as a reflection on the ephemeral quality of political powers and societies. Both texts depict the mold that human political history fills. Ozymandias is about the fall of a mighty, ancient king, while Lakoff may be sending a warning about an equally mighty power being shaken. It seems then, that the pairing of Lakoff and Shelley here ultimately serves as a summons for us to reflect on the recurrent nature of history and human action and from there draw insights and wisdom that could prevent the stubborn repetition of a pattern that is clearly ingrained in our history, and which literature has, over the centuries, so well captured. One cannot help

but question, though, the use of such an effort. History itself shows us that the passions driving us have been inherited; these are passions engraved in us and against which struggling could be nothing but a vain enterprise. Will we ever learn from history?