

The Antidote: *Classic Poetry for Today*

A Reading of 'Ozymandias' by Percy Bysshe Shelley

By CHRISTOPHER NIELD
Special to *The Epoch Times*

What lessons can we draw from the ruins of past civilizations?

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.*

In 629, the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang began an extraordinary journey—one that took him from the gates of Yumen, across the Gobi desert and into the Bamiyan valley in what is now Afghanistan. This was a stopping-off point for merchants traveling along the Silk Road, which stretched all the way to Rome. Here, to his astonishment, Xuanzang saw two vast Buddhas in the style of Grecian sculpture, decorated with gold and fine jewels. These were the statues, finally scraped of their finery into stark featureless calm, that were blown up in 2001 by the Taliban.

I find it difficult not to think of the Bamiyan Buddha figures when I read Shelley's poem, first published in 1818, on the transience of worldly ambition and the immortality of art. In the sonnet, the poet meets a traveler who tells him of a shattered colossus lying in distant sands. What follows is a vision in which the bare facts of history yield to the insight of the writer's imagination.

Our mind roves with his over the blazing sands, where we find and focus on the statue's broken face. Its "frown" and "wrinkled lip" and "sneer of cold command" could hardly seem less forbidding. There's a hint of the Biblical story of Nebuchadnezzar, the king who erects a golden statue to himself and forces his people to bow down to it, on pain of death. In the modern era, we see the mania for idolatry in despots like North Korea's Kim Il Sung.

What we discern in the face is a coded message. The sculptor, seemingly an instrument of the state, has "mocked" the all-powerful chieftain, meaning both to imitate and ridicule. Lines 6 to 8 are grammatically ambiguous, and different meanings are possible, but one interpretation is that the artist's "heart," his sense of compassion and morality, still throbs in the otherwise lifeless head. In other words, love and truth ultimately triumph over cruel, autocratic intelligence. In a way, this story is the reverse of the Bamiyan Buddhas, whose beauty was brought down by tyranny.

Despite the desolation of Shelley's scene, there is a hope here of emotional and artistic continuity. Basic human nature dictates that, despite differences in time and culture, our gestures can be read and recognized by future generations in our finest cultural artifacts. This is what canonical writers like Homer, Shakespeare and Shelley are—antique travelers who tell us spellbinding stories the moment we open their works today. Want to hear a good one? Turn to the Chinese masterpiece by Wu Cheng'en, "Journey to the West" (better known as "Monkey"), in which Xuanzang is mythologized as the gentle Tripitaka. These wise voices murmur on, while their political rulers are now mute.

In "Ozymandias," the tyrant's claim to omnipotence can still be read (this is based on a boast made by the pharaoh, Ramesses the Great), but the context has reversed its meaning. What was an assertion of tribal supremacy, set against the pomp and majesty of imperial splendor, has become in isolation a dire warning that all earthly authority is ephemeral. Those who set themselves up as gods will suffer a tragic humiliation.

The concluding lines are truly epic. First we take in the massive scale of the wreck; then we notice it is merely a speck amid the surrounding desert. Nature trumps civilization, but the feeling is not one of despair but a strange exhilarated contentment.

Time, however, has a knack of throwing up a few surprises. There may yet, for instance, be a twist to the story of the Bamiyan Buddhas, for in his account Xuanzang described not two statues but three. The third Buddha was the biggest of them all and depicted Sakyamuni resting on his side. Today, the archaeologist Zmaryali Tarzi believes he may be on the verge of uncovering this ancient wonder, which he describes as larger than the Eiffel Tower. So could a new Buddha be about to rise from the level sands, victorious over fundamentalist hate?

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) was an English Romantic poet who rebelled against the political, social and religious conventions of the day. He drowned off the coast of Italy at the age of 29. Contact Christopher Nield at: christophernield@hotmail.com.

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Ghanaians Say Stylish Goodbye With Fantasy Coffins

Funeral parties place to be seen on weekends

TESHIE, Ghana (Reuters)—The day before his mother's funeral, Donald Rockson had a last-minute change of heart about her bible-shaped coffin. He had wanted the coffin to reflect his mother's position as a devout churchgoer in this suburb of Accra, Ghana's capital. "She is a church elder so it should be a bible in which she is buried," he explained. "But the coffin was not nice, it was not presentable." Ditching the bible idea, his search for the perfect coffin brought him to Daniel Mensah's coffin shop. Rockson, who has saved a video of his mother lying in state on his mobile phone, comments with approval as Mensah and his apprentices pin silk and fix crosses and roses to an ornate white coffin, just minutes before the funeral is due to start.

Funerals are important social occasions in this West African country and elaborate, brightly colored coffins have become an art form. Most customers give Mensah more time than Rockson but all want to give their loved ones a fitting send-off in a coffin that honors who they were and what they did. Fantasy coffins shaped like Coca-Cola bottles, chickens, cars, cameras, birds and bibles are all on sale in Teshie.

First popularized in the 1950s, the coffins cost between \$300 and \$800 in a country where many live on barely \$2 a day. Some say the coffin represents an aspiration, or pride in the achievements of a short earthly stay in a poor country. "If you can't acquire it, you can at least be buried in it," said Kwame Labi, a research fellow at the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies. "It is born out of economic crisis, out of trying to build confidence and pride in what life you have."

In many African countries, rich funeral traditions have been eroded by poverty and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS but Ghana's stability and the relative prosperity in the world's second largest cocoa exporter have helped preserve these traditions.

Most weekends, funeral parties are held across the former British colony. In some towns, large billboards advertise the time and place of the "homecoming" or "farewell," usually accompanied by a picture of



William West/AFP/Getty Images

GOING OUT IN STYLE: Cultural Producer Lisa Warrener inspects a coffin carved in the shape of a frilled lizard by the Paa Joe Carpentry workshop in Ghana and commissioned for the cultural festival of the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne. The collection of coffins, which includes a mobile phone, a shark and a running shoe, celebrates the role of life and death in contemporary Ghanaian life; and the coffins have special significance to the past life of the deceased. Modern Ghanaian funerals are colorful and noisy spectacles, with the carved and brilliantly colored coffins being carried through the town an integral part of the ceremony

the deceased. Other people take out full-page national newspaper ads, inviting all to the funeral, but the most vivid expressions of this commitment to saying goodbye are the fantasy coffins.

Farmer Christopher Miensa Kofi Azornu harvested palm fruits and tapped palm trees, distilling their content into a popular local gin called akpeteshie. When he died earlier this year aged 82, his 12 children agreed he should be buried in a palm fruit-shaped coffin. "Our father is dead ... He will be buried once and for all. However expensive it is, we feel that is the last way of according him respect," his son Ruben Kumah said. "He lived all his life on his palm oil plantation, he loved that profession," Kumah added. Thousands of people are expected to attend the three-day funeral in the Volta Region. Kumah and his siblings are making sure enough palm trees are uprooted to provide akpeteshie for all the guests. For Kumah, the coffin says what a thousand words could not. "This is an illiterate community. There are no articles or magazines written about him. We feel ... that with the provi-

sion of a coffin like this, everybody who sees it will know."

Buying a good coffin also offers a chance, some believe, to calm an angry spirit, who could wreak havoc from the next world. In many African communities, Christian faith often co-exists with traditional beliefs in a world of spirits. Brigid Sackey, a professor in the University of Ghana's African Studies department, explained the reasoning. "The dead person is a spiritual being. He has more power than we have. If we send you off in style, you won't send disaster, drought or famine back," Sackey said. For others, fantasy coffins are a unique art form. International collectors and museums sometimes snap up elaborate examples, paying up to \$2,000 per item, a price justified by the use of more expensive wood. It's not just the money that coffin makers like veteran Paa Joe, who spends weeks shaping, sandpapering and polishing his works, find attractive. "It can take a few weeks to get the shape complete and then it is in the grave. It is better to have it in the gallery or museum and then everyone will see it," he laughs.

Michael Paul Chan in 'The Closer'

TNT's top-rated crime drama

By ESTER MOLAYEME
Special to *The Epoch Times*

LOS ANGELES—After a very successful first season, Michael Paul Chan returns with the entire SAG award-nominated cast in "The Closer," TNT's top-rated crime drama, which premiered commercial free on June 12.

While the theme in the first season was about the LAPD Deputy Chief Brenda Johnson (Golden Globe and Screen Actors' Guild Awards nominee Kyra Sedgwick), a successful woman making it in a man's world, the 2006 season of "The Closer" will center around partnership while revealing much more about the series' intriguing characters.

In "The Closer," Chan is the highly skilled and efficient LAPD Priority Homicide Squad computer expert, Lt. Tao. Chan explains that "Lt. Tao is initially socially inept and shy, but very useful to Brenda because of his knowledge. He is also one of Brenda's entrusted guys and, like Brenda, cerebral in his approach."

During my interview with Chan, he revealed that what he likes most about his role is that Lt. Tao is smart ("has smarts going on") and that he is ac-

cepted as a homicide detective based on merit and character.

A third-generation Chinese-American, born and raised in San Francisco, Chan received his training at the American Conservatory and is a founding member of the Asian-American Theatre Company.

Chan confided that in real life he is not technically oriented and much more artistic than his character, Lt. Tao, and that he enjoys surfing. Chan began his career as a musician playing in a high school rock and roll band.

The role of the LAPD Detective of the Priority Homicide Squad, Lt. Tao, is a familiar one to Chan who, in 2002, was also Detective Ron Lu in the TV series "Robbery Homicide Division."

Chan's acting career roles often covered cross-cultural and class backgrounds, taking him to other countries including China, Thailand, Israel and the United Kingdom.

The Chinese audience may remember him in the highly acclaimed "Joy Luck Club" (1993) about the generational conflict of Chinese-American mothers and daughters, and in the American Playhouse production of "Thousand

Pieces of Gold" (1991), featuring the story of the first Chinese to come to America. Chan was also on television for two seasons as the voice of Jimmy Ho, the Korean-Soul-Brotha on the animated series "The PJ's" (1999) starring Eddie Murphy.

More recently we saw Chan as Dr. Luis Roh in "Mrs. Harris" (2005), and as Judge Lionel Ping in the TV series "Arrested Development" (2005).

Chan finds that the popularity of "The Closer" is due to good characters, good writing, Kyra and the great cast, and that it is a quirky show. "One gets to know the characters right away because they are quirky, believable and interesting, the type people can easily identify with," said Chan.

Aside from the episodes' edge-of-the-seat suspense and mystery, having as a consulting producer Gil Garcetti, the veteran Los Angeles County District Attorney, adds to the gripping stories a tone of veracity and legal correctness.

We will soon see more of the remarkable Michael Paul Chan in the role of Jimmy Chan in "Americanease" (2006), based on a novel by Shawn Wong, and directed by Eric Byler.



Shealah Craighead/White House via Getty Images

GRANT WOOD EXHIBIT: First lady Laura Bush (L) listens to Jane Milosch (R), curator of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery, talk about the Grant Wood painting "American Gothic" during a tour of the Renwick Gallery exhibit in Washington, D.C. The exhibit, "Grant Wood's Studio: Birthplace of American Gothic," opened in March.