

# Romantic Prophecy: how J. M. W. Turner and Percy Bysshe Shelley used portrayals of North Africa to foreshadow the fall of the British Empire

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*The region of North Africa was described by Michel Foucault as a 'heterotopia': a physical site in which diverse and ambiguous liniments of time and space exist.<sup>1</sup> Shaped by a history of multiple colonial conquests, the area was considered by JMW Turner and Percy Shelley to be a palimpsest of different cultures, where empires were built, destroyed, and rose once again under new regimes. To Shelley and Turner, North Africa's history foreshadowed the fall of the British empire. This paper shall explore how both Shelley and Turner portrayed North Africa to criticise British imperialism in the painting *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* and the poem 'Ozymandias'.*

The relationship between English romanticism and British imperialism is cross grained and contradictory. As British artists gained access to far-flung regions, they acquired exposure to different cultures, set eyes upon new landscapes, and discovered long-buried histories. Throughout the 18th century, imperialist ideologies thrived in Whig poetry as if set to the tune of James Thomson's *Rule Britannia* — with all the slavery, war, and subjection swept up in the sheer gusto of the narrative.<sup>2</sup> However, as one century flowed into the next, these ideologies were challenged by many Romantic artists. In distant lands and across oceans, these artists did not see the glory of empire reflected. Instead, as Britain's borders swelled, they saw the liberties of the empire's new subjects contract — and took note of all the violence that made it so.

The 18th century and early 19th century witnessed Britain's empire flourish and then fragment. Expansionist endeavours that spanned the globe in some cases barely outlasted lifetimes. This essay will explore how JMW Turner and Percy Shelley critiqued imperialism

through their prophetic depiction of fallen empires in the North Africa region. Specifically, this essay shall discuss the painting *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* and the poem *Ozymandias*.

First, this paper will trace why North Africa was of interest to Shelley and Turner and why, in turn, they used its portrayal to critique the British Empire. It will then explore the individual experiences of both Romantic artists to establish the context which informed their ideas about empire. Finally, it will analyse how both Shelley and Turner used poetry and pigments — respectively — to express those ideas.

In the years between 1800 and 1817, when Turner completed *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire*, and Shelley wrote *Ozymandias*, there was heightened focus on the expansionistic exploits of the ruling elites of Europe. Specifically, the world watched Britain and France's ventures in North Africa with interest.<sup>3</sup> For France, North Africa seeped into the nation's colonial culture with Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798,

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, vol 16, 1986, pp 22-7.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Gerrard, 'The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry and National Myth', 1725-42 (Oxford, 1994). p.10.

<sup>3</sup> Mieke van der Linden, 'French Equatorial Africa', *The Acquisition of Africa* (2016) 139-173, p.140.

which resulted in a myriad of visual and literary representations of the area.<sup>4</sup> British interest in North Africa, in turn, was then predicated on Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of the Nile, which gave birth to a newfound British attraction toward Ancient Egyptian culture — or 'Egyptomania,' as Richard Altick described it.<sup>5</sup> After Mohammed Ali installed himself as pasha in 1806, he stoked the embers of this interest by encouraging an artistic rivalry between the French and British.<sup>6</sup> Even before the building of the Suez Canal in 1855, a large European population was already established in Egypt, controlling considerable export and import trade.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, North Africa became a region that was portrayed frequently in art and literature across Europe.

A veritable mix of artistic representations and economic opportunities brought North Africa across the Strait of Gibraltar into the peripheries of European consciousness. It was then the region's local history — and the lessons that could be learned from it — that, for the likes of Shelley and Turner, pulled North Africa further into focus. The geographical area is what Michel Foucault describes as a 'heterotopia': a physical site in which diverse and ambiguous liniments of time and space exist.<sup>8</sup> Despite its physical orientation being south of Britain, North Africa was still considered 'Eastern.' This is because its 'Eastern' characteristics come not from its physical space, but from its subjugation by Eastern empires: Carthage was founded by

the Phoenicians. Centuries later, North Africa was controlled by Arabic and then Turkish rulers.<sup>9</sup> The ebb and flow of different powers in the region made it a physical and historical harbinger: empires do not last. As Kay Kriz writes: 'Past glories of both Egypt and Carthage were repeatedly extolled in Western writings in order to emphasise the political oppression and cultural decline of their respective contemporary societies.'<sup>10</sup> Therefore, while North Africa had economic and artistic appeal to Europe at large, Shelley and Turner saw the region's local history as an exemplar for the pitfalls of empire.

North Africa's history had prophetic parallels to early 19th century Britain. Elizabeth Fay writes of Shelley that, 'Egypt, for him, represented both a lost world and a clear example of the erroneous use of power' which 'explains the downfall of its civilization.' Specifically, Fay points to Egypt's use of slave labour as being reminiscent of English labour practices.<sup>11</sup> For Turner, his initial interest was predicated on Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*.<sup>12</sup> He was particularly fascinated by descriptions of great civilizations of the past that developed, prospered, and eventually declined. His fascination, as Gerald Finley has highlighted, stems from contemporary associations between Britain and historical empires: Turner 'was aware of, and interested in, the well-known and often repeated relationship drawn between Britain and Rome, and especially during the tense period of the

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<sup>4</sup> Kay Dian Kriz, 'Dido versus the Pirates: Turner's Carthaginian Paintings and the Sublimation of Colonial Desire', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol.18, No.1, (1995) pp. 116–132, p.120.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1978), pp 235-46.

<sup>6</sup> Kieran Mortimer-Murphy, *French and British Policy and Culture in Egypt 1798-1841: The Reign of Muhammad Ali and the Eastern Crisis*, (Adelaide, Australia, Flinders University, 2020), p.93.

<sup>7</sup> Philippa Levine, *The British Empire: Sunrise to Sunset*, (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY.: Pearson Education, 2007), p.90.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, pp 22-7.

<sup>9</sup> Kriz, p.117.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.120.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth A. Fay, *Romantic Egypt: Abyssal Ground of British Romanticism*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021), p.96.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald Finley, *Love and Duty: J. M. W. Turner and the Aeneas Legend* (Deutscher Kunstverlag GmbH Munchen Berlin, 2010) p. 367.

Napoleonic Wars, those between Britain and Carthage, and France and Rome.<sup>13</sup> The fall of the sea-faring Carthage sparked anxieties about the longevity of Britain. North Africa, therefore, was the perfect envelope for Turner and Shelley to accommodate their anti-imperialist messages.

Their commitment to spread those messages, however, stems from both Shelley and Turner's interest in — and proximity to — political reform. Shelley's lifetime, for example, spanned a turbulent space of transition; he was a witness to the birth of Britain's imperialism and would die before the empire reached its peak. During this developmental period, enlightenment philosophies receded, making space for the rise of imperialist rhetoric consisting of a blend of evangelism and utilitarianism<sup>14</sup> — movements that Shelley demonstrated an understanding of in his essay *A Philosophical View of Reform*.<sup>15</sup> At just 18 years old, Shelley wrote his *Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things* in support of the Irish journalist Peter Finnerty, which contained an acerbic polemic against British oppression in India.<sup>16</sup> In his *Poetical Essay*, Shelley criticised the violence that inextricably accompanied the British empire's expansion, mourning how millions 'In mangled heaps on War's red altar lie'. Many prominent imperialists of the 19th century invoked a Kiplingesque spirit that used a fragile sense of moral obligation as an exculpation for inflicting violence on native peoples.<sup>17</sup> Shelley, meanwhile, abhorred violence

in all its forms, including as a means to revolution. In *An Address to the Irish People* in 1812, Shelley wrote: 'firmly, yet quietly, resist. When one cheek is struck, turn the other to the insulting crowd... you will resist and conquer.'<sup>18</sup> Considering that violence followed the empire wherever it went, Shelley could not reconcile himself to support it.<sup>19</sup>

Like Shelley, Turner had an interest in political reform throughout his life. Imperialism shaped the times of the ambitious artist who consequently reshaped an art form.<sup>20</sup> He was a close friend of the Whig MP Walter Fawkes, who, in turn, was a political ally of Sir Francis Burdett — to whom Shelley would dedicate the poem *The Wandering Jew*.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Shelley's influence has been identified in several of Turner's works. For example, Sam Smiles argues that Turner's unfinished *Death on a Pale Horse* was inspired by Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*. Drafted in 1819 in response to the Peterloo massacre, Shelley created a figure of Anarchy described as:

*Last came Anarchy: he rode  
On a white horse, splashed with blood;  
He was pale even to the lips,  
Like death in the Apocalypse.  
And he wore a kingly crown;  
And in his grasp a sceptre shone;  
On his brow this mark I saw —  
'I AM GOD, AND KING, AND LAW!*

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>14</sup> Madhu Benoit, *Transparent Peaks – Shelley's Imperialism*, (Fabien Desset, 2019) p.51.

<sup>15</sup> Percy Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform*, ed. Thomas William Rolleston, (Oxford University Press, 1920) digitized 2006

<sup>16</sup> Michael Rosen quoted in Alison Flood, *Lost Shelley Poem execrating 'rank corruption' of ruling class mad epublic*, *The Guardian* (2015).

<sup>17</sup> John Kucich, 'Fictions of Empire,' *Complete Texts with Introduction, Historical Contexts, Critical Essays* (Houghton Mifflin, 2008) p.114.

<sup>18</sup> Percy, Shelley, *An Address to the Irish People* (1812) digitised 2009, pp. 16-16.

<sup>19</sup> Amanda Nettelbeck, Lyndall Ryan, 'Frontier Violence in the 19th-Century British Empire', *Warfare, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p.227.

<sup>20</sup> Jason Farago, *JMW Turner: The Romantic Turns Reformist*, *The New York Times* (2023).

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Neill Cameron, 'Shelley and the Reformers', *ELH* Vol. 12, No.1 (1945) pp. 62-85. p.66.

As Smile highlights: 'there is a reasonable concordance between the figure presented in Shelley's evocative stanzas and Turner's dream-like image.'<sup>22</sup> Shades of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* have also been recognised in Turner's *The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*.<sup>23</sup> Turner's personal library even contained an anthology of contemporary British poets, among which was Shelley.<sup>24</sup> Both Shelley and Turner, therefore, had early interests in political reform, which would later shape the contours for their portrayals of North Africa.

Perhaps the quintessential example of anti-imperialist poetry, Shelley's *Ozymandias* was inspired by an important acquisition by the British Museum. Echoing Turner's historical interest in the *Aeneid*, the British museum's possession of a bust of Ramesses II in 1817 was a principal catalyst for the poet's verse. Although it cannot be confirmed that Shelley attended the exhibit, he was aware of Ramesses II (Ozymandias) through his readings of Diodorus Siculus.<sup>25</sup> Siculus, a Roman-era historian, wrote that Ozymandias marked the height of the Egyptian empire. Spurred by the museum's acquisition, Shelley's poem begins:

*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,  
(Ozymandias, PS, 1-5)*

Immediately, the grandeur of a once great ruler is juxtaposed against the 'traveller from an

antique land' who is the transmitter of all that follows. The power of recitation lies entirely with the narrator, removing the traveller's agency from his own story — in much the same way the bust of Ramesses II was removed from the sands of Egypt. Our introduction to Ozymandias' statue is when Shelley writes: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone,' once again contrasting all of Ozymandias' historical achievements against his 'shattered' monument. The inscription, which survives on the plinth, reads: 'Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!' (PS, 11). The irony is embedded in the alternative meaning of 'despair!', as the 'Works' the plinth refers to have all been swallowed by the arid desert. This new, bleak context of 'despair' serves as a warning to other powerful rulers: 'no matter how much power they think they currently hold, their influence will someday dwindle as well.'<sup>26</sup>

All that remains of the statue's 'visage' is Ozymandias' mouth, with its 'frown, And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command.' The description of Ozymandias here echoes Shelley's sentiment toward King George III in the sonnet *England in 1819*: 'mad, blind, despised, and dying king' (E1819, PS, 17). Although the statue's head is half sunk in the sand, Shelley declines to describe Ozymandias' eyes, further imitating the 'blind' King George. The poems and the rulers they portray are further connected later in *England in 1819*, when Shelley writes: 'A Senate, Time's worst statute unrepealed,' (PS, 29) invoking statuesque imagery to liken imperialism to archaic, crumbling monuments. In *Ozymandias*, Shelley later makes clear that the

<sup>22</sup> Sam Smiles, 'The Fall of Anarchy: Politics and Anatomy in an Enigmatic Painting by JMW Turner', *Tate papers*, No. 25 (2016). No page number.

<sup>23</sup> John Gage, *Colour in Turner: Poetry and Truth*, (London: Studio Vista, 1969), pp.145–7, 186.

<sup>24</sup> Smiles.

<sup>25</sup> Ian Shaw, *Ancient Egypt, A Very Short introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2021) p.80.

<sup>26</sup> Melissa Rubbert, 'The Politics of Form in Shelley's 'Ozymandias'', *Shawangunk Review*, vol. 29 (2018), page numbers not provided.

monument is the final remnant of a once great empire through the alliterative devices 'boundless and bare' and 'lone and level.'

Pictorially, Turner uses the idea of empty space in *The Decline of the Carthaginian Empire* to similar effect. The figures in the painting are clumped toward the edges of the frame, while the setting sun shines down on the broken remains of Carthage. Among the iconography Turner chooses to highlight here is a rudder wrapped in chains — a clear symbol for the fall of Britain as the 'ruler of the waves.'<sup>27</sup> There is also a trophy and a broken marble that depicts a warrior — fragments of military prowess that signal 'Carthage is ruined by itself... it has to fall to pieces like any other empire.'<sup>28</sup> The most emphasised figures in the painting are women, and the viewer's eyes are strategically drawn to a mother holding her child tightly on the left, whilst another grieves on the right. Consider this composition against the full title of the work: *Decline of the Carthaginian Empire — Rome being determined on the overthrow of her hated rival, demanded from her such terms as might either force her into war or ruin her by compliance; the enervated Carthaginians, in their anxiety for Peace, consented to give up their arms and their children.* With this in mind, the female bodies become symbolic of a once great empire having its freedom revoked.

First exhibited in 1817, the painting is a companion to *Dido building Carthage*, which was first exhibited in the previous year. The contextual topicality of the work is crucial to understanding its prophetic purpose. It is a

depiction of a great maritime empire in decline, painted shortly after Napoleon was overthrown, and the emergence of seafaring Britain as Europe's chief naval power. As Karl Kroeber writes, to overlook Turner's comment upon imperialism would be as 'narrow-minded as repudiating the cogency of his observation: the British Empire is no more.'<sup>29</sup> Like *Ozymandias*, the setting is historical — giving the viewer perspective about where they exist in time. The setting sun is a portentous, supernatural sign, heralding the approach of the destructive Roman empire — and, in turn, the fall of the British empire.<sup>30</sup> With the gathering haze of the setting sun, Turner emphasises the 'fragility of every empire on earth.'<sup>31</sup> The allusion to the British empire is evident by the sky formation, which much more closely resembles a northern-maritime climate than the North-African coast.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the vast topography — with its lush vegetation, rather than arid qualities — is reminiscent of a European settlement. Furthermore, the light-skinned bodies of the figures, attired in vaguely classicised garments, can also be directly related to British artistic traditions.<sup>33</sup> As one contemporary critic highlighted in *The Champion*, 'Mr Turner may not have faithfully depicted the character of African scenery: he probably was not very anxious to do this.'<sup>34</sup>

The polemic in *The Champion* does, however, raise a significant limitation of Turner's own criticism of colonial conquests. Empire became a significant part of Britain's culture, while the anonymous and enslaved workers — who

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Mack, 'Light and the Destruction of the Empire: A Comparison between the Role of Prophecy in JMW Turner and John Ruskin', *Literature and Theology* Vol. 12, No. 4 (December 1998), p.396.

<sup>28</sup> Mack, p.396.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Kroeber, 'Experience as History: Shelley's Venice, Turner's Carthage', *ELH*, vol. 41, No.3 (1974), pp. 321-339, p.325.

<sup>30</sup> Mack, p.395.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Ursula Seibold referenced in Mack, p.396.

<sup>33</sup> Kriz, pp. 116-132, p.126.

<sup>34</sup> 'Royal Academy Exhibition', *The Champion*, 1 May 1814, p. 149.

laboured and died for that culture — had their identities erased from history.<sup>35</sup> In colouring the landscape of Carthage with European elements, Turner risked adding to a tradition of erasing representations of native cultures. However, considering that Turner stayed very close in the painting to his source, Oliver Goldsmith's *A Roman History* — which Turner owned and annotated — it seems likely that the decision to add recognisable European elements was a conscious decision to encourage the viewer to see themselves in the art and engage with the narrative.<sup>36</sup> Critic Michael Mack argues that narrative structure, in both poetry and art, was a distinctly Romantic device to put forward general truths about mankind, history, and its destiny.<sup>37</sup> Mack writes that 'traditional poetic stories instruct their readers about the conditions of human life by showing in an exemplary way to where certain kinds of actions lead: someone's behaviour in the past led to the following consequences in the future.'<sup>38</sup> The quote was written specifically in reference to Turner's art, by comparing it to European poetic traditions. Mack's argument — that poetry was a means to instruct readers and warn of future consequences — is an accurate, but distant, echo of Turner's own thoughts on his art. Writing in 1811, Turner wrote: 'Why say the Poet and Prophet are not often united? — for if they are not they ought to be.'<sup>39</sup> When Turner painted, he consciously endeavoured to imbue his art with the same prophetic depictions that the likes of Shelley had already laid down in poetry.

In conclusion, Shelley and Turner's first shared critique of imperialism was conveyed through

where they chose to set their works: North Africa. Consider, as one reviewer did in the *Quarterly Review* in 1816, the fate that befell the once mighty Carthaginian empire:

*... a few remains of the public cisterns and the common sewers, are all that is left to point out where Carthage, with its 700,000 inhabitants, once stood. That commerce, which raised them to a pitch of wealth and glory unequalled in their day, is now dwindled to a few armed vessels and rowboats employed solely in rapine and plunder, and that manly republican freedom... is now sunk into the lowest and most abject state of slavery.'*<sup>40</sup>

The fate of Carthage is reminiscent of Ozymandias' empire. All that remains is a statue in the desert, 'sunk' in the sand as Carthage's freedom was 'sunk' into slavery. Shelley's work fit into a contemporary colonial discourse that inscribed the fall of empires with physical ruins. Those ruins, in turn, foreshadowed the fall of Britain's empire. Turner, however, veered away from this specific 19th-century thinking and avoided focusing on ruins. Instead, he conveys moral, rather than physical, decay through his skyscape and figures.<sup>41</sup> However, there are still elements of destruction that, like Ozymandias's crumbling statue, foreshadow the physical fall of Britain, including the myriad of shattered iconography previously discussed.

Although anti-imperialist sentiment was often considered 'radical,' we can trace how these attitudes shifted throughout both Turner and Shelley's lives. Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy*, for example, was written in 1819, but it wasn't

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<sup>35</sup> Emily Casey, *Visual Culture of the Atlantic World*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2018), no page number available.

<sup>36</sup> Kathleen Nicholson quoted in Leo Costello, 'JMW Turner and the Subject of History' (Taylor & Francis, 2017), p.85.

<sup>37</sup> Mack, pp. 390-406, p.390.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.390.

<sup>39</sup> John Gage, *JMW Turner 'A wonderful Range of Mind'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) p.187.

<sup>40</sup> 'The Barbary States', *Quarterly Review*, (1816), pp.154-5.

<sup>41</sup> Costello, p.85.

published until 1832 due to its contentious political message. Leigh Hunt wrote that he did not 'insert it, because... the public at large had not become sufficiently discerning to do justice to the sincerity and kind-heartedness of the... verse.'<sup>42</sup> However, in the wake of The Reform Act 1832, national sentiments caught up to the likes of Turner and Shelley. Even the *Times* wrote of Shelley: 'the Radical poet has exhibited not merely the enthusiasm of genuine poetry, but the sound principles of constitutional freedom.'<sup>43</sup> In fact, the anti-imperialist sentiments that the Romantics expressed are still being used today. Shelley, after all, was frequently quoted by Gandhi and influenced student-led protests in Tiananmen.<sup>44</sup> In Turner's case, the need for political reform was written in his sunsets, while history laid at the feet of the figures who were on the cusp of losing it. Turner now stands as one of Britain's most enduring reformist artists — after all, the most prestigious award for contemporary art in Britain carries his name, The Turner Prize. Although in his time, the Royal Academy appeared more shocked by his use of paints. As Jason Farago writes: 'That blindness to what Turner actually painted endured for long decades thereafter.'<sup>45</sup> All the while, Turner's anti-imperialist sentiments dazzled in plain view, shimmering on the sunlit water.

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<sup>42</sup> Percy Shelley, *The Masque of Anarchy*, ed. Leigh Hunt, (1842) digitised 2006. p.3.

<sup>43</sup> *Times*, 13 November 1832, p.3.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew C. Borushko, 'Violence and Nonviolence in Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy'', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 2010, Vol. 59 (2010), pp. 96-113, p.96.

<sup>45</sup> Farago.

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