

## Leaving One's Mark

As Wordsworth's story of Michael makes clear, children are not always the most reliable route to making one's mark in the world and ensuring some kind of continuing presence in the future. This is especially the case if you only have one. Some time ago, one of the weekend newspapers ran a feature about a man who, on a conservative estimate, had fathered over 200 children. Mildly autistic, he could not imagine himself ever being married and so became a donor to various sperm banks, calculating that, as he grew older, at least some of the resulting offspring would want to get in touch and quieten his anxieties as to 'Who will remember me when I am gone? Who will talk about me? Who will be my heir?', and other such questions he described as keeping him awake at night. In the event, a small number of his progeny were curious enough to want to discover their biological father and one or two of them eventually established relations with him. 'The pharaohs built pyramids', he was reported as saying, 'These children are my pyramids.'<sup>1</sup>

His remark is a reminder that, instead of or in addition to children, rich and powerful individuals have in the past often sought to ensure a post-mortem future for themselves by overseeing the design and construction of tombs and mausoleums – although anyone who has ever visited a provincial French cemetery, and seen the rows upon rows of great slabs of concrete or marble that constitute the local family vaults, will know that this form of post-mortem commemoration can stretch well down the social scale. It is an impulse that Robert Browning

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1. The weekend newspaper was the Saturday *Guardian* for 24 November 2018.

satirised in his dramatic monologue, 'The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church'. Gathering members of his family around his death bed, including at least one son, the sixteenth-century Catholic bishop in question is feverishly concerned that his tomb should be made of the best materials and thereby outshine that of an ecclesiastical rival, 'Old Gandolf', who has stolen a march on him by dying first and securing a niche in Saint Praxed (a real church in Rome) that the bishop had been eyeing for himself. He wants the best inscriptions and the most elaborate decorations: 'The Saviour at his sermon on the mount', together with Pan, 'Ready to twitch the Nymph's last garment off'. Buried in his vineyard, he says, is a large lump of lapis lazuli with which, like those pharaohs concerned to take some of their material possessions into the afterlife with them, he wants to be buried. But he is worried that his relatives will ignore his wishes and keep for themselves the money he intends for his monument. Then he would be deprived of the satisfaction of old Gandolf having to look across Saint Praxed's at the new tomb with envy, just as in the past he envied the bishop his young mistress. These are, of course, Renaissance churchmen in Rome and, for Browning, Catholic dogma does not prevent them having feelings about how their lives will proceed after death, which have nothing to do with heaven and hell, any more than it prevents them from having children.

A serious variation on what Browning is mocking can be found in all the chantry chapels that were built in pre-Reformation Britain. The provision made in wills for these would also include money for the maintenance of a priest or two whose job it was to say prayers for the deceased, and especially those souls who would be presumed to have to make their way through Purgatory. The belief was that, by this method, the passage to a happier state could be accelerated or eased. The rationale for these buildings was therefore strictly theological (as perhaps it was also for the pyramids) but it is hard not to see both as also answering that anxiety as to 'Who will talk about me?' which the sperm donor expresses. When the English Church was reformed, the notion of Purgatory fell out of favour, news which somehow failed to reach Hamlet and his father but which had previously helped to allow Henry VIII (and his immediate successor) to expropriate or sell off the considerable wealth that chantry chapels had by their time come to represent. Yet what they illustrate here is that people who try to make provision for some kind of continuing presence after their deaths tend to do so on the assumption that the political and social conditions with which they are familiar will not change. The relatively sudden disappearance of the concept of Purgatory from the corridors of power,

if not the psychology of the British nation, is one striking example of how often they do.

If even in Nature nothing lasts *for ever*, how much more true must that be of human affairs. The pharaohs could be said to have done well by their pyramids in that they at least cause us to remember them; but it seems that not every pharaoh had one. Ramesses II was one of Egypt's most successful and long-reigning kings but by the time he came to the throne, pyramid building appears to have gone out of fashion. He did, however, build a temple for his future corpse and had huge carved statues of himself erected all over his kingdom. It is one of these that Shelley reports having heard about in his sonnet known by the Greek version of Ramesses II's name, 'Ozymandias'. The narrator in this well-known poem describes having met a traveller from 'an antique land' who in the desert has come across two huge legs of stone which were 'trunkless'. Lying nearby, half sunk in the sand, was the statue's head with enough features still visible to indicate a frown, a 'wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command'. On its still surviving pedestal were the words, 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: / Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' There was of course no one in the flat desert landscape surrounding the 'colossal wreck' to be impressed.

Shelley was a radical, which is why he was so angry with Wordsworth for having moved from what, in the politics of the 1790s, was the extreme Left to being a crusty old Tory. His poem is a protest against authoritarian rulers such as Ozymandias but it may be also that it carries the hidden implication that art will always trump power. Whether it does or not, this is the belief that Shakespeare states explicitly at the beginning of his Sonnet 55:

*Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes, shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme;*

As all the commentaries indicate, the assertion made here had been made very many times before, and it would often be made subsequently: political power is one thing but, in temporal terms, it can often prove inferior to poetry and the power of the word. One of those who makes this claim is Gibbon, but in a surprising way. 'The romance of *Tom Jones*', he writes in the introduction to his autobiography, 'will outlive the palace of the Escorial, and the imperial eagle of the house of Austria.' One might have expected him to have cited here a classical author, or even to have suggested that, although empires may decline, accounts of how they did so may well live on, so that it seems to me to alter any estimation of his

character in a favourable direction to find him referring to the enduring fame of a comic novel.

Shakespeare talks of his verse surviving into the future but it is hard to see much evidence of his having any great concern for his own literary legacy, a body of work that would keep his name and memory alive once he was gone. Studying as he clearly did his contemporaries, he must have known that he was more gifted than any of them; but, in those last years spent mainly at Stratford, there are no indications of an anxiety to preserve all he had ever written, or anticipate those former colleagues from his acting company who would be responsible for a collected edition of his work in 1623. While certain members of the class from which he drew his patrons were studying plans for their monuments, he seems to have enjoyed enough financial and even critical success (his plays were popular) not to have been too concerned by what we know as posterity. That the bust which his widow eventually had placed in his local church made him look, in the memorable words of one critic, like ‘a self-satisfied pork butcher’<sup>2</sup> was not something over which he had any control; but, had he been overly concerned about these matters, he could easily have made appropriate arrangements before he died.

The critical success Shelley enjoyed was negligible, which must have been galling, especially when the writing of his close friend Byron had made him an international celebrity. But then he was probably too young when he drowned to have been much troubled by the hope that the world would come to recognise how valuable his work actually was after his death. Someone who did nourish this hope as he became older, and was forced to recognise the mediocrity of any immediate success he had enjoyed in the literary world, was his French admirer and contemporary, Stendhal. When he resigned his commission in the French army and set out to be a writer, Stendhal exhibited a degree of self-belief similar to the one that allowed Wordsworth to withstand all the pressure from his relatives to ‘get a proper job’ and the scornful contempt that came from some quarters on the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*. What the young Stendhal wanted, he himself wrote in his literary journal, was ‘to acquire the reputation of the greatest of French poets, not through intrigue like Voltaire but through true merit’. He decided that his way of doing this would be with the composition of comedies like Molière’s.

The problem with this project was that, when Stendhal actually began to compose plays, he found he was incapable of writing verse (a rhyming couplet could take him over three hours of painful labour to complete).

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2. John Dover Wilson.