

CULTURAL AND LITERARY TEXTS

JAN ASSMANN

I. The literary and the non-literary

a) Drawing the distinction

There has scarcely ever been a doubt among Egyptologists whether a text should be classified among literary or non-literary texts. In practice, this distinction works extremely well, better perhaps than in our postmodern days when we don't know whether to read Jacques Derrida as literature or as philosophy, or Carlos Castaneda as fiction or ethnography. There are very few Egyptian borderline cases of this kind. The best known is the account of *Wenamun* about his mission to Lebanon. It is so well cast in the form of an official report that we are unable to tell whether this is a piece of literature or a document of bureaucracy.¹ Another text which is imitating a well known non-literary genre is the autobiography of *Sinuhe*. A scholar of the stature of Georges Posener could seriously expect that some day the original inscription of the historical Sinuhe would turn up.² He did not exclude the possibility that the text of *Sinuhe* was originally composed for a tomb inscription and only afterwards copied on papyrus because of its literary merits. There are examples of such a procedure. The victory inscription of Kamose appears on his two stelae and also on a hieratic tablet,³ and the so-called *Poem of the Battle of Qadesh* is attested on temple walls and a literary papyrus; and the *Berlin Leather Roll* with its building inscription of Sesostris I. is obviously copied from a lost inscripational original.⁴ There is also the inverse case: that a text composed for circulation on papyrus was copied on a tomb stela, such as the *Enseignement loyaliste* which appears on papyri and ostraca, but also on the funerary stela of Ankhsehetepibre.⁵ A text like the victory poem of Piye which exceeds by far the usual size of a stela-inscription might originally have been composed as a book-scroll for literary circulation. These borderline cases might lead to the assumption that in Egypt the distinction between the literary and the non-literary refers not to texts but to manuscripts and inscriptions. One and the same text might fulfill

1 The bureaucratic and non-literary character concerns not only style and language of the text, but also the layout of the written page; cf. Černý, *Paper and books*, 22.

2 Posener, *Littérature et politique*, 90 f.

3 Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit*, no. 119; Habachi, *The second stela of Kamose*; Smith/Smith, "A reconsideration of the Kamose texts", in *ZÄS* 103 (1976), 48-76; Eyre, "The Semna stelae: quotation, genre, and functions of literature", in Groll (ed.), *Studies Lichtheim*, vol. 1, 134-165, 144 f.

4 Eyre, in *Studies Lichtheim*, vol. 1, 143 f.; on the text of the *Berlin Leather Roll* and its poetical form cf. Osing, "Zu zwei literarischen Texten des Mittleren Reichs", in Osing/Kolding Nielsen (eds.), *Studies Iversen*, 101-120.

5 Posener, *L'Enseignement loyaliste*.

several different functions and it might, therefore, be only the form of the writing and not of the text which is determined by the function. This would mean that we may not speak of literary *texts* but only of literary *manuscripts*. As far as texts are concerned, there would be no distinction between the literary and the non-literary. This distinction would only become visible when a text comes to be written down.

This extreme position, however, does not stand for the test. In most cases, and especially in the case of *Simuhe*, it is the text and not the manuscript which decides about its literary or non-literary character. A real tomb inscription would contain a different text. There is a clear-cut distinction; this distinction might be wilfully blurred in some exceptional cases but this very act of wilful blurring confirms the existence of the distinction, otherwise there would be no point in blurring it.

Our generation – I am thinking of the Egyptologists present in this conference, and of Elke Blumenthal and others, who, unfortunately, are not – saw their primary task in establishing the distinction and in defining its essence. The reason for this shift of paradigm (if I may call it so) was that the generation of our teachers had proved somewhat insensitive with regard to this distinction between the realms of the literary and the non-literary within Egyptian textual culture and that the *Handbuch der Literatur* which appeared in 1970 in its second edition had codified this state of the art. It might be true that my review of the *Handbuch* which focused on this indistinction and this obvious blindness for the “literaricity” of Egyptian literature was somehow triggering a move in the opposite direction. Now, after 20 years, the situation has completely changed, and it is now Antonio Loprieno’s article on “Defining Egyptian literature”⁶ which can be counted for a representative codification of the new state of the art.

However, the question is whether we did not go too far. When I wrote the review of the *Handbuch* in 1974 I was under the influence of Russian formalists and semioticians, especially Roman Jakobson, Jurij Tynjanow, and Jurij Lotman. From Jakobson I took (as everybody else did at that time) the notion of “autoreflexivity” as the distinctive feature of the poetic function, and from Tynjanow and Lotman I took the notion of “Ausgangstyp”, a non-literary type serving as a model for a literary text. The whole concept of a dichotomy between the literary and the non-literary and the idea that this distinction is constantly redefined by every new literary text belongs to the formalistic tradition. It might be recalled that Georges Posener, the first one to emphasize the distinction and to reflect on the specificity of texts to be qualified as literary spent his early youth in Saint-Petersbourg in a house frequented by Victor Shklovsky and other leading figures of Russian literary theory.⁷ Before I start venting my misgivings about the new paradigm which I myself had been promoting, I would like to reconfirm those of our points which, in my opinion, should not be given up. The great discovery of formalism which, I think, is still valuable was the rejection of substantial definitions of literature in terms of a specific language (“poetic diction”), theme, form (for instance: metrical form) or “poetic devices” such

6 Loprieno, “Defining Egyptian literature: ancient texts and modern literary theory”, in Cooper/Schwartz (eds.), *The study of the Ancient Near East in the twenty-first century*, 209-232 (reprinted in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 39-58).

7 Cf. the account of his brother Vladimir Pozner, *Vladimir Pozner se souvient*.

as metaphor in favour of relational or functional definitions. Poetic form cannot count for a decisive criterion whether a text is to be classified as literary or non-literary. The difference between literary and non-literary texts can only be functionally determined but not by criteria such as “dichterische Gestaltung oder deren Abglanz”⁸ (poetic formulation or its reflection) as used by the *Handbuch*. Non-literary texts such as funerary spells or royal inscriptions (cf. the “poetical stela” of Thutmosis III.⁹ or the Semna stelae of Sesostriis III.¹⁰) may be poetically shaped to the highest degree and literary texts such as the tale of the *Two Brothers* may be absolutely negligent in this respect.¹¹ Nevertheless, these texts are separated by a boundary line and this boundary line can only be determined in terms of function.

b) *The functional and the non-functional. Genre and framing*

The question is whether literature is a function or rather a non-function, the absence or negation of function. In my article of 1974 I had voted for the second alternative, and it is this option which I would like to modify if not to revoke. I defined the distinction between literary and non-literary texts as the difference between the non-functional and the functional and subsumed the whole range of non-literary texts under the notion of “Gebrauchsliteratur” (functional literature). The underlying problem was the definition of genre and the question of morphogenetic factors. In the *Handbuch*, Hermann Kees maintained the idea that the concept of genre belonged to modern literary theory and could not be applied to ancient Egyptian literature without creating gaps and disrupting continuities. Kees obviously understood by “genre” something like epic, drama, and lyric. I wanted to show that there are no universal genres, but also that there is no textual tradition without genres and that our task should consist in discovering and defining the specific genres of Egyptian textual tradition. My thesis was, that the form-giving and genre-defining principle should be identified as a specific function or “Sitz im Leben”. Function determines the form of the text according to parameters such as long or short, narrative or non-narrative, vernacular or classical language or something in-between, poetical structuring: highly, or weakly, or nothing at all, and so forth. Moreover, and much more importantly, function determines the meaning of the text. This was my decisive criterion for distinguishing functional and non-functional literature. As far as meaning is concerned, a functional text is always a fragment, however well its written articulation might be preserved. It is not complete, because an important part of its meaning is missing which is to be provided by its functional context. The meaning of a ritual spell such as (just to give an example) the famous *Cannibal Hymn* will always remain obscure to us unless we are able to reconstruct the ritual context, for instance a fumigation, or a libation, or another rite of this sort. The result is that any attempt at interpreting functional texts has to start from identifying the genre, collecting a corpus of texts pertaining to this genre, reconstructing the situational or functional context on the basis of this corpus and only then explain the individual text. With literary texts, the

8 Brunner, *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der altägyptischen Literatur*, XI.

9 Assmann, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete* Nr. 233; text: *Urk.* IV, 610-624.

10 Eyre, in Groll (ed.), *Studies Lichtheim*, vol. 1.

11 Blumenthal, “Die Erzählung des Papyrus d’Orbiney als Literaturwerk”, in *ZÄS* 99 (1972), 1-17.

situation is dramatically different. The meaning of a literary text does not seem to be dependent on a specific functional context. The collection of a complete corpus of autobiographical inscriptions would not decisively improve our understanding of *Simuhe*, desirable as such a corpus in itself would be. And what would be the corpus to be collected in order to elucidate texts such as the *The Man who was Tired of Life* or the *Eloquent Peasant*? Therefore, my thesis was that for literary texts, there is no context that would be part of the meaning. The meaning is entirely within the text.

Moreover, there is a tendency to supplement the missing context in literary texts by a frame of narrative which functions as a semantic determinative in the same way as does the context in the case of non-literary texts. All literary texts of the Middle Kingdom show such a framing. The frame can be very elaborate as in the case of the *Eloquent Peasant* or the *Instructions of Ptahhotep* or it can be reduced to some short allusions as in the case of the *Instruction of Amenemhet I.*, but it is always there or its original presence must be conjectured in the case of fragmentarily preserved texts such as the *Admonitions* and the *The Man who was Tired of Life*.¹² The framing gives all the information that would be provided by the context in case of functional texts. The frame is a kind of textualization of context in order to render the text independent of any specific contextual embedding. This contextual independence is the hallmark of literature in ancient Egypt.

If function has to be excluded as a morphogenetic principle in the case of literary texts, what then could account for their formal diversity? My idea was that a literary text follows the model either of a non-literary genre, in the way *Simuhe* follows the model of autobiographical inscriptions, the *Shipwrecked Sailor* that of expedition reports, and so forth, or it reflects a genre of oral tradition or "Sprechsitte"¹³ in the way the lamentations make use of the dirge (or funerary lamentation) or the *Satire of the Trades* reflects derisory songs among workmen, and so forth, or, as a third possibility, that a literary text just follows the model of another literary text in the way the *Lamentation of Khakheperreseneb* is modeled after the *Prophecies of Neferti* or the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* became the model for all later instructions. In this case of literary series formation we can speak of intertextuality, another term that derives from the school of formalism.¹⁴ Intertextuality is just another device of achieving and affirming functional independence. Literature is born from literature and not from life and its functional necessities. So far my original position which I am now going to modify.

12 Fecht, *Der Vorwurf an Gott*, proposes a speech before the tribunal of the judgement of the dead as frame of the *Admonitions*; a similar framing seems to be presupposed by the *The Man who was Tired of Life*.

13 Cf. Seibert, *Charakteristik*.

14 Loprieno, in Cooper/Schwartz (eds.), *The study of the Ancient Near East in the twenty-first century*, 222-226, with reference to Broich/Pfister (eds.), *Intertextualität*.

II. The theory of cultural texts

a) Texts before the era of literature

Let me start with the concept of non-functionality or "Situationsabstraktheit". What could be the place of non-functional texts in a traditional society? The problem becomes clearer, perhaps, by the analogy of images. Art could be defined as the making of non-functional images. Works of art function in their own way and determine the contexts in which they occur, such as museums, galleries, and private collections. But how about non-functional images in ancient Egypt? There is, quite obviously, nothing of this sort. Would we define Egyptian art by non-functionality, we would have to give up the term Egyptian art altogether. In order to avoid anachronistic concepts in dealing with early images, specialists of medieval art such as Hans Belting have delimited the "era of art" to the Renaissance and after. They speak of a "history of the image before the era of art".¹⁵ I think we should follow their example and speak of a history of the text before the era of literature. The era of literature starts, as does the era of art, with the institutionalization of a space outside of, and independent from the traditional functions of culture. Museums, collections, an art market, private connoisseurship are typical elements of such a space. With texts, the change is even more dramatic, due to the invention of the printing press. We see publishers, libraries, book fairs, a book market, and a culture of private reading developing all over Europe. Such a de-functionalized space is characterized by unrestricted and ubiquitous accessibility. You can read a text or look at an image whenever you choose, if it is in your possession or if there is a library or a museum within reach. The notion of non-functionality implies the idea of a space of such an indifferent accessibility. In speaking of "literary circulation", we were taking the existence of such a space for granted. But if we start seriously asking ourselves how such a space could have possibly been looking like in ancient Egypt, we are at a loss. There certainly was no book market. Manuscripts were circulating only within the functional institutions such as the school, the temple, and the different departments of the administration. Private book possession must have been rather limited. The three best known examples are the Ramesseum chest from the late Middle Kingdom,¹⁶ the library of Qenherkhepeshef from the 20th dynasty,¹⁷ and the Wilbour convolute at the Brooklyn Museum from the Late Period. All these private libraries show the same mixture of liturgical, magical, medical, sapiential, and belletristic texts. Belles-lettres seem to belong to the literary equipment of a priest or physician, somebody who needs written texts for the performance of his profession.

b) Storage and communication as functions of writing

A re-assessment of the question of the place of belles-lettres within the textual culture of ancient Egypt should start from a general survey regarding the use and development of writing in Egypt. Concerning the primary functions of writing I would like to start with a very general reflexion. There seem to be

15 Belting, *Bild und Kult*.

16 Cf. David, "Religious practices in a pyramid workmen's town of the twelfth dynasty", in *The Bulletin of the Australian Center for Egyptology* 2 (1991), 33-40, esp. 37 ff.

17 Pestman, "Who were the owners, in the 'community of workmen', of the Chester Beatty Papyri?", in Demarée/Janssen (eds.), *Gleanings from Deir el-Medina*, 155-172.

two fundamentally different functions of writing, namely storage and communication. They may be understood as extensions of two different bodily capacities. As the medium of storage, writing extends the range of human memory and as the medium of communication it extends the range of the human voice. In the first case, writing is employed in order to preserve data that would otherwise be forgotten, and in the second case to reach addressees who are distant in space or time. Any look at the early history of writing can teach us that it is not communication but storage that was responsible for the invention of systems of notation that preceded real scripts and that might therefore be referred to as pre-writing. Systems of prewriting such as knotted cords, or calculi, or picture writing served as memory supports. The most typical functional context for the development of such databases was economy. This has a very simple explanation. Economical data have no intrinsic mnemophilic quality. Because of their contingency they demand exterior notation. This is the origin of the archive. In Egypt, two additional macro-functions evolve together with the first stages of political unification: the realms of the cult and of monumental inscriptions. Thus we may distinguish three major resorts of textual culture in archaic and Old Kingdom Egypt: *the bureaucratic archive, the cult, and the realm of monumental representation*. These are the three fundamental functional domains where all the major techniques, conventions, refinements, and sophistications of Egyptian writing culture such as the use of red and black ink, the arrangement in tables, split columns, title lines, illustrations, cryptography, and so forth were developed. All the secondary domains of writing such as funerary literature, belles-lettres, and scientific literature feed, as it were, on the know-how of the scribes of the bureaucracy and the temple scriptorium.

Except for some letters and dispatches, and for the sphere of the monumental which is a special case, writing functions in all these areas as a means of storage and not of communication. You would not put a text into writing in order to publish it, or to get it circulated. On the contrary, publishing a text would mean to retrieve it from the archive and to read it aloud to a group of people. The normal ways of circulation were oral, and writing was used only in those cultural fields where communication required the use of artificial storage. These were administration and ritual as exemplified by the *Abusir Papyri* and the *Pyramid Texts*. What I want to convey by these observations is an idea of the marginality and improbability of writing. In the whole sphere of cultural knowledge and communication, writing appears at first as a rather exceptional case. The disembodiment of knowledge, its referral to writing, and its storage in archives occurs only where its natural form of embodiment in living memories proves insufficient or where a form of visibility and permanence is wanted which only writing can provide. Writing was employed where it was indispensable. These were

1. those fields of cultural practice which had grown too complex to be handled by natural memory alone and had therefore depend on an artificial memory of written archives: economy, administration, and royal funerary and mortuary ritual.

2. documents, acts, and edicts, where writing seems to fulfill a performative function, that is, something has to be written down in order to become "real" or socially/culturally efficient.

3. Monuments, where visibility of meaning was wanted and where writing was believed to be a medium of self-immortalization, of carrying the voice of the deceased beyond the threshold of death in order to continue a discourse with posterity.

c) *The "identity function" and the function of literature*

At this point I would like to introduce the concept of "cultural text". Cultural texts form the center of what could be termed the traditional and relevant knowledge of a society. Cultural texts may be other than purely linguistic phenomena. All kinds of ceremonies, rituals, festivals, customs, dances, images, symbols, "lieux de mémoire", and so forth may count as cultural texts as long as they are important for, and expressive of the self-image and self-understanding of a given society, in short: if they fulfill an "identity function".¹⁸ After all that has been said regarding the early functions of writing it may be obvious that cultural texts which hold the central place in the cultural memory are the very last material which a society would think of entrusting to the realm of disembodied knowledge. Cultural texts form the embodied knowledge par excellence. They are meant to be learned by heart and to be thus embodied by every full member of the society. Writing or notational systems of prewriting might play a subsidiary role for the specialists in helping to remember long stories or lists in the right order. But memory remains always the main carrier of the central stock of cultural knowledge. The main function of cultural texts is to act as a kind of normative and formative cultural program which conveys and reproduces cultural identity from one generation to the other. This constitutes what I will call their "identity function".

The natural and traditional locus of cultural texts is both the ritual and the memory. The ritual provides the context for the ceremonial recitation, circulation, and communication of cultural texts. They are not ubiquitously accessible. Some traces of this kind of ritual performance or presentification of cultural texts have survived even in literate societies, for instance in Judaism where the feast of Purim provides the occasion of reading the *Book of Esther*, Passover that of reading *Song of Songs*, Schavuot that of *Ruth*, Yom Kippur that of *Jonah*, and Sukkot that of *Qohelet*. In Germany, where the *Christmas Oratorio* by J.S. Bach ranks among the cultural texts, you have to wait until Christmas time for a public performance. Richard Wagner has strived for something similar. He notes to have planned to burn the partition score of *Siegfried* after the first performance in order to exclude any accessibility of the text outside the ceremonial performance which should live on in memory alone. Thus, the cultural text is the very opposite of a de-contextualized, situationally abstract, non-functional object of disinterested pleasure and lonely reading. It is highly functional in a normative and/or formative way and situationally highly determined.

18 Geertz, *Dichte Beschreibung*, 258, understands by "cultural texts" not only written texts but also structured and repeatable performances such as the Balinese cock fight. The cultural text is a semiotic unit whose repeated actualization in the form of reading, recitation, and performance informs the identity of the participants in a normative and/or formative way.

d) *The school as the institutional frame of literary cultural texts*

Cultural texts in general initiate the novice into culture in general. There are, however, specialized fields of culture which require special initiation. With regard to ancient Egypt, one would think in the very first place of the art of writing, which, in this society, is tantamount to the art of administration and all the other branches of political, legal, ritual, economical, mathematical, and technical knowledge. Writing and reading form the entrance to the ruling class, the class of "literatocracy" which, in Egypt, is not recruited by birth but by education. It is evident that this subsystem developed its own institutions of recruitment, socialization, and structural reproduction which we became accustomed to subsume under the somewhat anachronistic term of "school". By using this term, we must not think of special buildings, large classes, and professional teachers. Classes existed only for the first four years of elementary education; they were small and were taught by priests or officials who held positions in the temple or in the civil administration. After these four years, education was continued on the basis of individual apprenticeship. With these necessary changes, we may employ the term "school" in order to denote the whole system of socialization, education, training, cultural formation, and promotion. The Egyptian school in this broad sense is designed to impart not only special skills but above all fundamentals of cultural and moral formation in the sense of *musar*, *paideia*, or *Bildung*. My thesis is that this is the functional frame for most of those texts which we are used to classify as "literature". These texts, as well as the orally transmitted cultural texts, were meant to be learned by heart and to be stored in memory. This is what constitutes their identity function. But at the same time they served the purpose of an initiation into the art of writing. For that purpose they had to be written down from memory after having been learnt by heart. They imparted literate *and* cultural competence, the knowledge how to write in order to become a scribe and how to live in order to become a gentleman. We must not forget that the scribes did not just belong to a specialized guild of craft but that they represented the Egyptian aristocracy and the ruling class. Things changed somewhat during the New Kingdom and so did literature, but this description may apply fairly well to the Middle Kingdom and, therefore, to the classical age of Egyptian literature. Scribal culture was held representative of culture in general. Unlike India, where every caste developed its own system of values and code of honor, Egypt did not develop a stratified system of different cultural codes. The scribal class embodied in a representative way all the culturally relevant values and moral codes. The scribe was the exemplary Egyptian.

It seems as if this educational system did not yet exist during the Old Kingdom and that it only developed in the 12th dynasty and its efforts to create a new class of priests and state officials.¹⁹ I think it was in the functional frame of this cultural and political project that most of the great texts of

19 This may be wrong. There is a very marked transition from the courtly elite of the first four dynasties which was founded on kinship to a bureaucratic elite founded on expertise as early as the 5th dynasty. This transition might have generated a body of cultural texts serving as a codification of, and initiation into, the ethos of the new elite. I cannot completely exclude the possibility that the instructions of *Hardjedef*, *Kagemni*, and *Ptahhotep* date from the Old Kingdom. But I prefer for reasons of plausibility a date in the 12th dynasty.

the Middle Kingdom had been composed. They were meant as cultural texts to function in the specific frame of textual or scribal culture and to form the cultural memory of the new ruling elite.

I think that Posener was basically right in ascertaining the politically supportive tendencies of practically all the texts that form the body of Middle Kingdom literature, but I also agree with Stephen Quirke²⁰ and others that “propaganda” might not be the right term to denote the political function of these texts. The notion of propaganda is too specific, too pejorative, and too unidirectional. These texts were meant to form and inform not only the future officials but the future kings as well (cf. the *Instruction for Merikare*). The fundamentals of culture and morals which they were to impart applied to kings as well as to priests, judges, and administrators. It was the very generality of this knowledge and of this functional context which conferred upon the texts their general character, and it is this general and fundamental character which makes them comparable to what we understand by literature. It is the general and representative character of these texts, their identity function, which gives them their public quality as opposed to those domains of Egyptian textual culture which are usually associated with the notion of secrecy, such as funerary literature, magical texts, temple recitations, and rituals, and most kinds of what I have called “encyclopaedic literature”.²¹

At this point of the argument, it would be necessary to examine the specific texts that form the body of Middle Kingdom literature and to demonstrate for every single one of them how its theme and structure corresponds to this functional frame of general cultural formation or “identity function”. This demonstration, however, would take us too far, and I think that, at least for Egyptologists, the case is too evident as to require detailed argumentation. With the instructions such as *Ptahhotep*, *Hardjedef*, *Kagemni*, *Merikare*, *Amenemhet I.*, the *Satire of Trades*, the book *Kemit*, the *Loyalistic Instruction*, the *Instruction of a Man for his Son*, and the *Hymn to the Nile* there is no problem as far as their formative and normative claims are concerned, and the same applies to the dialogues and lamentations such as the *The Man who was Tired of Life*, the *Eloquent Peasant*, *Si-Sobek*, the *Prophecies of Neferti*, *Khakheperreseneb*, and the *Admonitions*. All these texts which we usually subsume under the category of “wisdom literature” display and teach the fundamentals of Maat, the instructions on the individual level and the lamentations on the level of society. The didactic impact of the narratives such as *Sinuhe* and the *Shipwrecked Sailor* has already been shown by Eberhard Otto.²² The *Shipwrecked Sailor* even reflects this purpose of moral orientation in its frame narrative as well as in the encased narrative of the serpent which reproduces in the form of a *mise en abime* or self-reproduction the whole in a part. The story is told by the hero to a high official in order to teach him the right behaviour vis à vis the king and the addressee is summoned to listen to the story by the same formula that the wisdom texts use to instruct the disciple. The story of the serpent is told to the hero in order to teach him how to survive a situation of abandonment and solitude.

20 Quirke, Review of Loprieno, in *DE* 16 (1990), 92.

21 I am trying to translate the German term “Wissensliteratur” and I am thinking not only of the Onomastica, but of all kinds of manuals meant for consultation, rather than recitation.

22 Otto, “Sinuhe und der Schiffbrüchige als lehrhafte Stücke”, in *ZÄS* 93 (1966), 100-111.

Instead of going into details here, I would like to stress two points:

1. There are more “cultural texts” than those which form the body of normative and formative literature. We must not forget that the bulk of cultural texts would have been entrusted to memory rather than to writing even during the Middle Kingdom and that there must have existed, besides the body of literature of which we possess some small traces, a large oral tradition.

2. We must not construct the relation between oral and written tradition in terms of translation. The written tradition is not just the translation of orally transmitted knowledge into texts. Rather, it constitutes a cultural field of its own and develops according to its own rules. The text that draws this distinction and that formulates the most important of these rules governing the realm of literature is the famous *Lamentations of Khakheperreseneb*:

Had I unknown phrases,
 Sayings that are strange,
 Novel, untried words,
 Free of repetition;
 Not transmitted sayings,
 Spoken by the ancestors!
 I wring out my body of what it holds,
 In releasing all my words;
 For what was said is repetition,
 When what was said is said.
 Ancestor's words are nothing to boast of,
 They are found by those who come after.

Not speaks one who spoke,
 There speaks one who will speak,
 May another find what he will speak!
 Not a teller of tales after they happen,
 This has been done before;
 Nor a teller of what might be said,
 This is vain endeavor, it is lies,
 And none will recall his name to others.
 I say this in accord with what I have seen:
 From the first generation to those who come after,
 They imitate that which is past.
 Would that I knew what others ignore,
 Such as has not been repeated,
 To say it and have my heart answer me,

To inform it of my distress,
 Shift to it the load on my back,
 The matters that afflict me,
 Relate to it of what I suffer
 And sigh "Ah" with relief!²³

The sufferings of Khakheperreseneb are those of an author, a writer of texts in opposition to a singer of tales. The singer of tales is valued according to his ability to embody and represent the tradition. It is not variation – let alone innovation – but faithful reproduction what the public expects from him. The tradition does not exist independently of his embodying it. He is the only access to the tradition. The writer of texts is in a different situation. The tradition is already there in form of other texts and he has to create a text that stands the comparison. It is not re-embodiment, repetition, and reproduction that the public expects of him but variation and innovation. The space of written tradition is governed by rules of competition and variation in the same way as the space of oral tradition is governed by rules of faithful repetition and reproduction. The writer is operating in the space of discursive visibility. I have argued elsewhere that in Egypt the concept of visual discursive space is modelled upon the institutions of the monumental tomb and the monumental discourse. Khakheperreseneb alludes to this sphere by expressions such as "boasting" and "recalling the name". He thinks of a text as a means of immortality. In later texts this parallel will be spelled out in all detail. The institution of the monumental tomb is the model of the Egyptian idea of literature. The literary text is immortal because it is meant to become a cultural text and to stay on in cultural memory. Literature is conceived as a kind of immaterial and imperishable necropolis where tombs of all periods stand one besides the other ready to be visited by posterity, each of them testifying of an individual experience and achievement which guarantees its undiminishing significance and relevance. According to critics such as George Steiner,²⁴ the situation has not much changed since. As far as this "immortality function" of literature is concerned, writing functions as an extension not of individual but of social memory and is in this respect functionally equivalent to the monumental tomb.

23 BM EA 5645 rto., 1-9; translation Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian literature*, vol. 1, 146 f.

24 "What is central to a true culture is a certain view of the relations between time and individual death.

The thrust of will which engenders art and disinterested thought, the engaged response which alone can ensure its transmission to other human beings, to the future, are rooted in a gamble on transcendence. The writer or thinker means the words of the poem, the sinews of the argument, the personae of the drama, to outlast his own life, to take on the mystery of autonomous presence and presentness. The sculptor commits to the stone the vitalities against and across time which will soon drain from his own living hand. Art and mind address those who are not yet, even at the risk, deliberately incurred, of being unnoticed by the living". See Steiner, *In Bluebeard's castle*, 71.

III. Entertainment and carnival

The functional definition of literature which I am proposing for ancient Egypt does not apply, however, to all the texts which we are accustomed to classify as literature. The identity function of cultural texts applies only to those texts which have an evident didactic impact, such as the Maat literature of instructions and lamentations, and the didactic narratives. Besides this body of cultural texts there is not only the realm of oral tradition but also the case of those texts that cannot count as "cultural texts" because they lack this character of general normativity and formativity. I am thinking of monumental, documentary, encyclopaedic, and recitation literature. These texts are not meant to be learned by heart but to be consulted or ritually performed. We must not forget that these domains of Egyptian textual culture by far exceed the realm of literature in the strict sense of literary cultural texts as far as sheer material output is concerned.

This picture seems to include all the texts up to the Amarna age. After Amarna, however, the situation changes fundamentally. I will confine myself to some very brief allusions. The great innovation of the Ramesside period is the appearance of "entertainment literature" within the realm of the written tradition. There had been allusions to the social and especially courtly function of entertainment already in some Middle Kingdom texts. Kings must be entertained when they suffer from fits of anger, melancholy, or boredom. Sinuhe tells us how the princesses sing a song of reconciliation in order to cure the king from a wave of anger which threatens to get hold of him in a specific situation. Neferti is represented to recite his prophecies to a king who wants to be entertained. The stories of *Papyrus Westcar* are set in a frame of courtly entertainment. We may safely assume that the entertainment of kings and high officials constituted a major function and situational context for literary performance in ancient Egypt. But normally, the requirements of this situational context would be fulfilled by oral tradition in the same way as other situations of social life such as courtly and forensic debate and rhetoric, the rules of which play such an important role in the instructions. The great innovation of the Ramesside age is the textualization of some parts of oral tradition pertaining to the function of pleasure and entertainment. Examples are love songs, harper's songs, mythological tales, fables and fables, historical romances, fairy tales, and other forms of literary narrative. Elke Blumenthal has proposed to subsume the narrative texts under the rubric of entertainment literature,²⁵ and I would like to enlarge this notion so as to include the love songs and other genres of entertainment as well and to associate this function with the Egyptian notion of *šmḥ jb*, lit. "make the heart forget" (namely: the sorrow). There is a certain affinity of this domain to what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed *Carnival*; the character of the burlesque, the ironic, the comical, even the frivolous and the obscene is rather prominent in some of these texts. But the demotic text known as the *Myth of the Solar Eye* illustrates also the role of didactic texts such as fables within the function of courtly entertainment. The role of the king is here played by the lion-goddess Tefnut whose temper oscillates between anger and gentleness.

25 Blumenthal, in *ZÄS* 99 (1972), 1-17.

In the literary tradition (or even “system”) of the Ramesside period, this kind of texts represent the “modern” literature as opposed to what only now became to be canonized as the “classical” tradition. Classical and modern literature complement and presuppose each other in the same way as in the early Hellenistic neoterism of Alexandria. This distinction is build upon the cultural split into the past and the present, or the classical language and the vernacular, which characterizes the Ramesside situation. In this stage of cultural evolution, when the identity function of cultural texts has been shifted to the canon of classical texts, we witness the rise of a comparatively de-functionalized sphere of literary production and reception which we may classify as belles-lettres without making ourselves guilty of too much of anachronism.

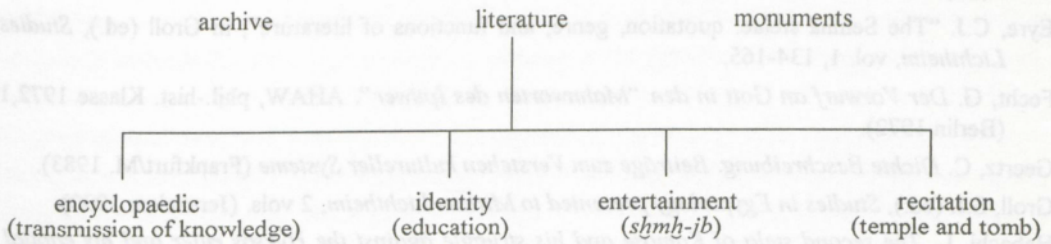


fig.1

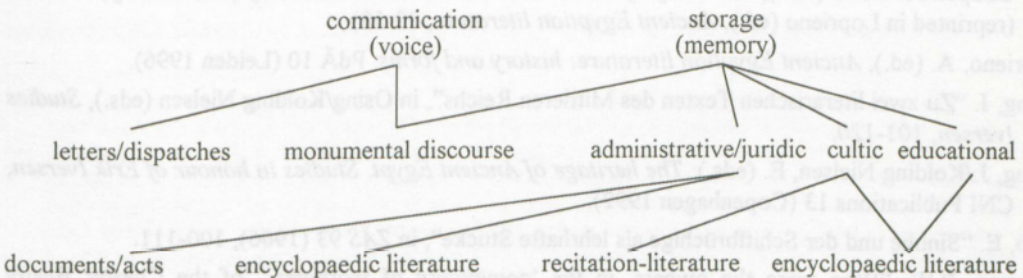


fig.2

References:

- Assmann, J. *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete* (Zürich-München 1975).
- Belting, H. *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (München 1991).
- Blumenthal, E. "Die Erzählung des Papyrus d'Orbiney als Literaturwerk", in *ZÄS* 99 (1972), 1-17.
- Broich, U./Pfister, M. (eds.), *Intertextualität. Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien. Konzepte der Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft* 35 (Tübingen 1985).
- Brunner, H. *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der altägyptischen Literatur*. Grundzüge Bd. 8 (Darmstadt 1986).
- Černý, J. *Paper and books in Ancient Egypt* (London 1952).
- Cooper, J.S./Schwartz, G.M. (eds.), *The study of the Ancient Near East in the twenty-first century. The William Foxwell Albright centennial conference* (Wynona Lake 1996).
- David, R.A. "Religious practices in a pyramid workman's town of the twelfth dynasty", in *The Bulletin of the Australian Center for Egyptology* 2 (1991), 33-40.
- Demarée, R.J./Janssen J.J. (eds.), *Gleanings from Deir el-Medīna*. Egyptologische Uitgaven I (Leiden 1982).
- Eyre, C.J. "The Semna stelae: quotation, genre, and functions of literature", in Groll (ed.), *Studies in Lichtheim*, vol. 1, 134-165.
- Fecht, G. *Der Vorwurf an Gott in den "Mahnworten des Ipuwer"*. AHAW, phil.-hist. Klasse 1972, 1 (Berlin 1972).
- Geertz, C. *Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme* (Frankfurt/M. 1983).
- Groll, S.I. (ed.), *Studies in Egyptology presented to Miriam Lichtheim*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem 1990).
- Habachi, L. *The second stela of Kamose and his struggle against the Hyksos ruler and his capital*. ADAIK 8 (Glückstadt 1972).
- Helck, W. *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit und neue Texte der 18. Dynastie*. KÄT (Wiesbaden 1983).
- Lichtheim, M. *Ancient Egyptian literature*, vol. 1: *The Old and Middle Kingdom* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1973).
- Loprieno, A. "Defining Egyptian literature: ancient texts and modern literary theory", in Cooper/Schwartz (eds.), *The study of the Ancient Near East in the twenty-first century*, 209-232 (reprinted in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 39-58).
- Loprieno, A. (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature: history and forms*. PdÄ 10 (Leiden 1996).
- Osing, J. "Zu zwei literarischen Texten des Mittleren Reichs", in Osing/Kolding Nielsen (eds.), *Studies Iversen*, 101-120.
- Osing, J./Kolding Nielsen, E. (eds.), *The heritage of Ancient Egypt. Studies in honour of Erik Iversen*, CNI Publications 13 (Copenhagen 1992).
- Otto, E. "Sinuhe und der Schiffbrüchige als lehrhafte Stücke", in *ZÄS* 93 (1966), 100-111.
- Pestman, P.W. "Who were the owners, in the 'community of workmen', of the Chester Beatty Papyrus?", in Demarée/Janssen (eds.), *Gleanings from Deir el-Medīna*, 155-172.
- Posener, G. *Littérature et politique dans l'Égypte de la XII^e dynastie*. BEHE 307 (Paris 1956).
- . *L'Enseignement loyaliste. Sagesse égyptienne du Moyen Empire*. Centre de recherches d'histoire et de philologie 2. Hautes études orientales 5 (Genève 1976).

Pozner, V. *Vladimir Pozner se souvient* (Paris 1989).

Quirke, St. Review of Loprieno, *Topos und Mimesis*, in *DE* 16 (1990), 89-95.

Seibert, P. *Die Charakteristik. Untersuchungen zu einer altägyptischen Sprechsitte und ihren Ausprägungen in Folklore und Literatur*. ÄgAbh. 17 (Wiesbaden 1967).

Smith, H.S./Smith, A. "A reconsideration of the Kamose texts", in *ZÄS* 103 (1976), 48-76.

Steiner, G. *In Bluebeard's castle. Some notes towards the re-definition of culture* (London 1971).

Introduction method, writing "Ancient Egypt" in 1998

This essay does not attempt a strongly theoretical analysis of Egyptian material, but rather seeks to describe a theoretically aware approach to these ancient, extremely precious products of high culture. In studying literature, we understand a large part of its complexity; we can imagine a phenomenon that has no topology rather than an object's exact spatial dimensions. In other words, we think we know what literature is. The process of reading attempts to connect one of us, the reader, more closely to the culture under study, and more generally a pathway to the historic humanistic process. In addition, it may be necessary to extend definitions or to describe an available one. Recent, primarily Western developments stemming from the word *ethnology* have opened the fields of what may be called "art" perhaps offer a remote parallel, if not a work regarding the complexity of the material, and more significantly for the fundamental steps and further course of performance, which is so easily overlooked in the original work, and consequently often missed. Proceeding in this direction, we may be able not just to refine but also to expand definitions and theories in order to render them more encompassing and less bound to Western culture, and in doing so, the re-examination of the social institutions that created and sustained literature.

Such an understanding, for a society as remote as Egypt, is largely based on linguistic, sociology, and inference - methods that place the reader in a position rather uncomfortably in the foreground. As such, they have evolved greatly over the last twenty to thirty years in the wake of changes in general perceptions and methods of studying. The essential breakthrough came from taking seriously the idea

1. This essay reworks a paper delivered at the colloquium "Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Theory" in March 1994. Much of the section "Early uses of text and biography" is incorporated in "Biography before biography", in *Quantitative Studies in Egyptian Literature and Religion*, 173-174, while the second part covers similar ground to my chapter "Myth and narrative" in *Logos and Myth in Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 361-373. In view of the workshop's character of the former publication, I give only passing references. While the meeting from which the paper springs was a comparative one, my presentation here is basically Egyptological, but I have benefited by the broader considerations used in the discussion. Part of my argument relies on Harris' volume, "Oral, linguistic, and written in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia", in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Religion*, 199-200.

While writing the present essay, I have studied self-presentation in earlier works, from the 1st to the 4th dynasties. The results of this work are incorporated in an essay entitled "Forerunners of narrative biography", which was in appear in a Festschrift in 1998. The new study suggests that some of the precedents I discussed here may have appeared slightly earlier than I had previously thought.

I am very grateful indeed to Antonio Loprieno for his permission to check the bibliography in Los Angeles and for making the event and its bringing together of different disciplines with a success. I should also like to thank Richard Parkinson for valuable comments on a draft.