

Introduction

Literary Genres and Literary Styles

When writing first appeared in Egypt, at the very beginning of the dynastic age, its use was limited to the briefest notations designed to identify a person or a place, an event or a possession. An aura of magic surrounded the art which was said to derive from the gods. As its use slowly grew, its first major application (if we judge by the evidence of what has survived) took the form of an *Offering List*, a long list of fabrics, foods, and ointments, carved on the walls of private tombs.

The dogma of the divinity of kingship led to a marked differentiation between the royal and the non-royal, that is, private, spheres. Increasingly, what was proper for the life and death of a king differed from the usages of the private person. There was, of course, common ground, and interchange and adaptation of practices. But it was the differences between the two spheres which placed their stamp on writing, as on all aspects of cultural life.

It was in the context of the private tomb that writing took its first steps toward literature. The tombs belonged to high officials who had grown wealthy in the service of the king, and who applied a significant part of their wealth—in addition to outright royal gifts—to the construction and equipment of their “house of eternity.” On the walls of the tomb, the written word gave specific identity to the pictorial representations. It named the tomb-owner and his family; it listed his ranks and titles, and the offerings he was to receive.

The *Offering List* grew to enormous length, till the day on which an inventive mind realized that a short *Prayer for Offerings* would be an

effective substitute for the unwieldy list. Once the prayer, which may already have existed in spoken form, was put into writing, it became the basic element around which tomb-texts and representations were organized.

Similarly, the ever lengthening lists of an official's ranks and titles were infused with life when the imagination began to flesh them out with narration, and the *Autobiography* was born.

During the Fifth Dynasty, both genres, the *prayer* and the *autobiography* acquired their essential features. The prayers focused on two themes: the request for offerings, and the request for a good reception in the West, the land of the dead. The *prayer for offerings* became standardized to a basic formula, subject to variation and expansion. It invoked the king and the god Anubis, the guardian of the dead, as the powers from whom the desired bounty would come.

Though capable of considerable literary elaboration, the prayer was essentially a function of the cult of the dead and hence not literary in the full sense. The autobiography, on the other hand, unfettered by cultic requirements, became a truly literary product. During the Sixth Dynasty it attained great length, and for the next two millennia it remained in use.

The basic aim of the autobiography—the self-portrait in words—was the same as that of the self-portrait in sculpture and relief: to sum up the characteristic features of the individual person in terms of his positive worth and in the face of eternity. His person should live forever, in the transfigured form of the resurrected dead, and his name should last forever in the memory of people. With eternity the ever-present goal, it followed that neither a person's shortcomings, nor the ephemera of his life, were suitable matter for the autobiography. Hence the blending of the real with the ideal which underlies the autobiography as it does the portrait sculpture.

On first acquaintance, Egyptian autobiographies strike the modern reader as excessively self-laudatory, until he realizes that the autobiography grew up in the shape of an epitaph and in the quest for immortality. The epitaph is not a suitable vehicle for the confession of sins. And the image designed for everlastingness had to be stripped of the faulty and the ephemeral.

The quest for immortality had a magical as well as a moral side. Statues, food offerings, and other rituals would magically ensure revivification and eternal life. But a good moral character, a life lived

in harmony with the divine order (*maat*) was equally essential. Thus the affirmation of moral worth, in the shape of a catalogue of virtues practiced and wrongs not committed, became an integral part of the autobiography. In the Egyptian's relation to the gods morality and magic were ever intertwined. The catalogue of virtues was both a serious commitment to ethical values and a magical means for winning entry into the beyond.

The Sixth Dynasty is the period in which the autobiography, framed by the prayer for offerings, attained its full length. The terse and hesitant use of words which characterizes inscriptions till the end of the Fifth Dynasty, gave way to a loquacity that bespoke the new ability to capture the formless experiences of life in the enduring formulations of the written word. Hand in hand with the expansion of the narrative autobiography went the expansion of the catalogue of virtues. Where the former expressed the specific achievements of the individual life, the latter became increasingly formulaic. The resulting differentiation is one of content as well as of form. The narrative autobiography is told in the free flow of prose. The catalogue of virtues is recited in formalized, symmetrically structured sentences which yield a style of writing that stands midway between prose and poetry.

Two things make the catalogue of virtues significant: first, that it reflected the ethical standards of the society; second, that it affirmed, in the form of a monumental inscription, to have practiced the precepts that the Instructions, written as literary works on papyrus, preached.

These *Instructions in Wisdom*, as they are often called (the Egyptians themselves called them simply Instructions) are the second major literary genre created in the Old Kingdom. Working in the frame of a hierarchic society, the thinkers of the Old Kingdom envisaged the order of human society as the mirror image of the order that governed the universe. As the sun-god through his never failing daily circuit ruled the world, so the divine king guaranteed the human order. Within this framework, pragmatic thought working upon experience, and religious feeling and speculation combined to form convictions that were formulated as brief teachings or maxims. Through the joining of a number of such maxims there resulted the composition of an Instruction. The stylistic device by which maxims were strung together and shaped into a more or less unified work was the narrative frame: a father instructs his son.

In the earliest surviving Instruction, that of *Hardjedef*, the introductory part of the frame consists of the single-sentence statement that the Instruction was made by Prince Hardjedef for his son Au-ibre. In later Instructions the frame was expanded until it reached the great length of the Prologue and Epilogue that surround the thirty-seven maxims of the *Instruction of Ptahhotep*.

The Instruction proved an immensely fruitful and popular genre. It was useful, enlightening, and entertaining. It lent itself to emulation and variation, and each new age filled it with new content. Though it included popular and proverbial wisdom, it was primarily aristocratic, until the New Kingdom when it became “middle class.” At all times it was inspired by the optimistic belief in the teachability and perfectibility of man; and it was the repository of the nation’s distilled wisdom.

Contrary to all other literary works, whose authors remained anonymous, the Instruction was always transmitted in the name of a famous sage. There is today no consensus among scholars about the nature of these attributions: whether they are to be taken as genuine or as pseudepigraphic. Many scholars have upheld the genuineness of the attributions of the *Instructions of Hardjedef* and *Ptahhotep* to Old Kingdom sages of that name—Prince Hardjedef, the son of King Khufu of the Fourth Dynasty, and a vizier Ptahhotep, not otherwise known, who according to the Instruction lived under King Isesi of the Fifth Dynasty. Of the *Instruction to Kagemni* only the final portion is preserved, according to which the instruction was addressed to a vizier Kagemni who served kings Huni and Snefru, the last king of the Third Dynasty and the first king of the Fourth, respectively.

When upholding the genuineness of the attributions, scholars are compelled to assume that two of the three works, *Kagemni* and *Ptahhotep*, were largely rewritten before they attained the forms in which they were copied in the Middle Kingdom papyri that preserved them, for the language of *Kagemni* and *Ptahhotep* is Middle Egyptian, the language of the Middle Kingdom. Only the language of *Hardjedef* is sufficiently archaic to make it appear as an Old Kingdom work not subjected to major alteration. The assumption of major alterations in the course of the transmission of the works is, however, a difficult one. There is nothing in our experience with the transmission of Egyptian texts which parallels the assumed translation of Old Egyptian works into Middle Egyptian. Furthermore, the attribution at the end of

Kagemni is palpably fictional, for the character of the work is so much more evolved than that of the *Instruction of Hardjedef* that an attribution that makes it precede *Hardjedef* by two generations is impossible.

Given the tangibly fictional nature of this attribution, and the difficulty in the assumption of large-scale alterations, given also the parallels with biblical Wisdom Literature (e.g., the attribution of *Proverbs* to King Solomon), I personally am convinced that all three Instructions should be classed as pseudepigrapha. Once freed from the need to see in them compositions of the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties greatly altered by succeeding generations, one can inquire into the probable dates of their composition through the examination of all their aspects: language, style, method of composition, and the kind of thinking they reveal. In my opinion, such an examination makes it probable that the oldest of the three, *Hardjedef*, is a work of the Fifth Dynasty rather than the Fourth, for it is more evolved than the very brief and sparse monumental inscriptions produced in the Fourth Dynasty. *Kagemni* and *Ptahhotep*, which stylistically belong closely together, have the loquacity of Sixth Dynasty monumental inscriptions, and in all respects fit into the ambiance of the late Old Kingdom. They reflect a kingship which, whether or not still all powerful, is still serene, and a society that is orderly and optimistic. The nation is in harmony with itself and with the universe; and the moral values taught are the very same that are claimed in the autobiographies. It is also noteworthy that of the thirty-seven maxims with which Ptahhotep instructs his son, the future vizier, not one has any bearing on the vizierate—a strange situation if the work were the genuine legacy of a vizier who is introducing his son to the highest office of the land. In fact, the maxims embody the pragmatic wisdom of the upper-class Egyptian, and formulate a code of behavior befitting the gentleman of the Old Kingdom.

If seen as belonging to a time near the end of the Old Kingdom, the Middle Egyptian of *Ptahhotep* and *Kagemni* is explained as resulting from only minor alterations, for the end of the Sixth Dynasty and the beginning of the Eleventh are only a hundred years apart; and many of the forms characteristic of Middle Egyptian are found in the biographical inscriptions from Sixth Dynasty tombs.

Though the picture is incomplete, owing to the accidents of survival, it looks as if the monumental inscriptions that come from the royal sphere developed more slowly than their private counterparts.

The reticence may have resulted from the sacral character of the monarchy. In any event, kings had no autobiographies. Their lives were wholly stylized, and at once more public and more remote than those of their subjects. By the end of the Old Kingdom three types of royal inscriptions had appeared in rudimentary form: the brief recording of a single event, the annalistic record, and the decree. These genres were as yet wholly functional and left no room to the literary imagination.

Only in the mortuary sphere, in the vast display of ceremonies devoted to the king's burial and resurrection, did the poetic imagination take wing. In the large body of inscriptions known as *Pyramid Texts*, theological speculations, mythological allusions, and the formulae that served in the performance of a complex ritual were blended into incantations of great verbal force. Their central purpose was to achieve the resurrection of the dead king and his ascent to the sky. While trusting in the magical potency of words, the authors of these incantations often achieved the heightened intensity of formulation which is poetry.

The biographical inscriptions of the First Intermediate Period, that brief interlude of divided power that separates the Old from the Middle Kingdom, are characterized by a proud individualism, displayed alike by nobles and commoners. The society remained hierarchic, but the leaders were now the local chiefs, the rulers of the country's ancient districts (*nomes*). Soon two families of nomarchs, at Heracleopolis and at Thebes, had amassed sufficient power to claim the kingship; and after the final victory of the Theban dynasty over the Heracleopolitan, the united monarchy was restored. This brief period has been much misunderstood. It was neither anarchic nor decadent. The quantities of crude artwork which it produced resulted not from any overall decline, but from the fact that quite ordinary people now made funerary monuments for themselves, while in the Old Kingdom only the wealthy high officials had done so. All that we have of Old Kingdom art is court art, done by the best craftsmen in the service of the king and the nobility. Now, all over the country, in addition to examples of first-rate work, we find that common people constructed simple monuments, done by minor local craftsmen and sometimes perhaps by their owners themselves. What has survived of these are mostly the stelae, made of hard stone, while the rest of the tomb has crumbled.

In the First Intermediate Period and thereafter the stela became the carrier of a short autobiography; and equipped with an offering

prayer and an offering scene it was a self-contained memorial. The relatively small surface of the stela, as compared to the tomb-wall, led to the composition of a succinct summary of life. And when it became customary to transport a memorial stela to the holy city of Abydos, so as to bring its owner close to Osiris, the stela as a self-contained monument proved the most successful repository of the autobiography.

The second major literary legacy of this transitional period is the composition known as the *Instruction to King Merikare*. Standing in the tradition of the Instructions, it added a new dimension: it was a royal instruction; the testament of a departing king to his son and successor, and as such it embodied a treatise on kingship. Like all other Instructions, it is preserved in papyrus copies of later times, and its date must be guessed from internal evidence. The currently prevailing view, which I share, is that the work was composed not by its alleged author, the father of Merikare, but by a court scribe on orders of King Merikare. In other words, that it is pseudepigraphic as far as authorship is concerned but genuine as a work contemporary with the events to which it refers. Its historical content is usually taken seriously. Apart from its historical significance, the work is famous for its lofty morality which goes much beyond the pragmatic wisdom of Ptahhotep. It is also far more ambitious as a literary composition.

By the time Mentuhotep II had reunited the country and inaugurated the Middle Kingdom, the apprenticeship period of Egyptian literature lay behind. The Middle Kingdom produced a vast number of literary works in a variety of genres and with a complete mastery of forms. Thereby it became Egypt's classical age.

Using stelae of considerable size, the private autobiographies of officials, and artists as well, were now major works. They combined narration with catalogues of virtues and elaborate prayers. And often they contained elements not hitherto used: hymns to the gods and praises of the king.

The royal monumental inscriptions of a historical character now came into their own. They gave full and ornate expression to the dogma of the king's divinity, and to his role as leader of the nation in war and in the service of the gods.

The royal testament reappears dramatically in the *Instruction of Amenemhet I*, in which the old king—who was assassinated—warns his successor against trusting his subjects.

Otherwise, the traditional Instructions appear in a new form: the admonitory or prophetic speech of a sage who laments the evil condition into which the country has fallen. This variation on the theme of Instructions can only have resulted from the growing recognition of the problematic nature of human life. All was not well on earth. Men frequently acted from evil impulses; the nation was often rent by civil war. The seemingly permanent order could be destroyed—and yet the gods did not intervene. Thus the Egyptian began to grapple with the problem of evil.

The *Prophecies of Neferti* and the *Admonitions of Ipuwer* treat of evil as a social phenomenon, and their solution is the traditional one: a strong king is the guarantor of harmony.

To these ancient authors of around 2000 B.C. goes the credit of having formulated the problem of evil in at least one of its aspects. Their limitations in handling it are quite apparent. Painting in strong colors they reduced the problem to the dichotomy: order versus chaos. And in their efforts to describe a largely imaginary chaos, they employed an overwrought and repetitious pairing of opposites. Their principal rhetorical device was the reversal of a situation into its opposite: what was great has become small; the high has been laid low; the slaves have become masters; the masters are slaves; the riverbed is dry; the dry land is under water; and so on. These conceptual clichés, for which exact parallels exist in other literatures, have unfortunately often been taken for indicators of revolutionary upheavals. There is, however, no historical evidence whatever to warrant the conclusion that at one time or another a social revolution took place in ancient Egypt. Warfare at the time of a king's death appears to have been common. But at no time was the hierarchic order of the society abrogated or endangered. Eventually, the literary working of the theme "order versus chaos" spent itself. It had no sequel in the literature of the New Kingdom.

Egypt's high regard for the art of using words, a valuation of rhetoric comparable to that which was to prevail in Greece and Rome, found conscious expression in the composition known as the *Eloquent Peasant*. Here the art of fine speaking was made to serve the defense of justice. To the Egyptians eloquence came from straight thinking. It was left to the Greeks to discover that rhetoric could also promote an unworthy cause. In its display of fine speech this work, more than any other, made extensive and successful use of metaphors and other poetic imagery.

Hymns to the gods, close relations to the biblical psalms, appear on stone and on papyrus; and hymns to the king are elaborated into artfully constructed poems.

Brief snatches of song sung to the accompaniment of a harp grow into poetic works, some of which once again give expression to the reflective and troubled moods which inform so much Middle Kingdom literature. In lamenting the passing of life they sound a note of skepticism which was to become a continuous, if subdued, melody.

In the *Prose Tales* the art of fiction can be seen to grow in refinement, from the simply told tale of the shipwrecked sailor to the complex artistry of the *Story of Sinuhe*. All Egyptian narratives have an effective directness. They sketch a situation by a few strokes; there is no description for the sake of description. But there is a liking for the mixing of styles, a technique that culminates in the *Story of Sinuhe*, where the narration is interspersed with three poems and with an exchange of correspondence. Each poem is an example of a genre: the encomium of the king, the personal lyric, and the sacral song. The stylistic richness and refinement of *Sinuhe* cannot be adequately reproduced in translation. But the story's extraordinary vividness, its ability to convey the moods and feelings of its hero, and the excellence of its overall construction, can still fascinate. It is the crown jewel of Middle Kingdom literature.

Egyptian literature employs three styles. Prose, poetry, and a style that stands midway between the two. The hallmark of all prose is the linear forward movement of thought by means of variously structured sentences which, because they are deliberately varied, prevent the emergence of a regular sentence rhythm and of a predictable form. The intermediate style, on the other hand, is characterized by symmetrically structured sentences. It was employed exclusively in direct speech. Hence I call it "symmetrically structured speech," or, the "orational style." It has an exact counterpart in the intermediate style employed in a number of biblical books, notably Proverbs and Job, and a more distant parallel in the intermediate style of classical Arabic known as *saj*. If prose is to poetry as walking is to dancing, the intermediate style may be compared to the formal parade step.

In Egyptian as in biblical literature, the principal device that activates the orational style is the *parallelism of members*. In Egyptian poetry, on the other hand, parallelism of members is only one among a number of

stylistic means. Poetry defies a single definition. Yet most people recognize it when they see it. In formal structure Egyptian poetry was sometimes indistinguishable from the orational style. The difference then is one of content and mood, of feelings conveyed and feelings aroused in the reader or listener. All Instructions were composed in the orational style, and so were the catalogs of virtues in the autobiographies. But when in the *Instruction to Merikare* the king crowns his exhortations with a hymn to the creator, the oration rises into poetry.

By and large, Egyptian poetry used devices that underlined its distance from prose and from the orational style. A major device was the repetition of one line at regular intervals; this created stanzas. In its simplest form the device already occurs in the song of victory which Weni inserted into his autobiography. There the repetition occurs in alternate lines; hence the poem consists of distichs. In the poems that conclude the *Dispute between a Man and His Ba*, the stanzas formed by repetition of lines are tristichs.

The orational style, and all forms of Egyptian poetry, point to a system of metrics which consisted in the accentuation of units of meaning—words, groups of words, and sentences. Whether the metrics entailed a fixed number of stresses in any given line is not known; and efforts to solve this question are stymied, just as they are in the study of biblical metrics, by the absence of all visible indications. But what can be clearly seen in Egyptian, and in biblical, poetic, and orational works is the metrical line as a whole and the principles by which it was constituted. The unit of a line was a unit of meaning, be it a whole sentence or a part of a sentence sufficiently self-contained to allow a pause before and after it. Whether in translations two clauses are gathered into a single line with a caesura, or are printed as two lines, is immaterial as long as the pauses can be observed. In Egyptian and in biblical literature, the metrical line is made apparent through parallelism of members and through more specialized devices, such as the repetition of one line or part of a line. Given the fact that biblical and Egyptian poetry operated with units of meaning, and given the overwhelming importance of parallelism and other devices making for symmetry, there can be no doubt that the metrical line was always an end-stopped line. Enjambment could not occur.

Egyptian grammar is synthetic, expressions are compact, and sentences are short. Analytic English grammar requires more words and

builds longer sentences. Thus, in order to come within hailing distance of the Egyptian, it is necessary to pare the English sentences to the bone and to shun all paraphrastic additions. When this principle is adopted, and when the rule that all Egyptian metrical lines are end-stopped lines is observed, it is possible to translate Egyptian literary works with some degree of accuracy, that is to say, to imitate the Egyptian lines by comparable English lines. The resulting rhythms will roughly approximate the rhythmic beat of the original texts, even though we cannot know what particular methods of accentuation, or cantilation, the Egyptians may have employed when they read, chanted, or sang the dancing words.