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Moers, Gerald (ed.)
 Definitely: Egyptian literature. Proceedings of the symposium "Ancient Egyptian literature: history and forms",
 Los Angeles, March 24-26, 1995 /
 Gerald Moers. — Göttingen: Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, 1999
 (Lingua Aegyptia — Studia monographica; Bd. 2)
 ISSN 0946-8641

NE: Lingua Aegyptia — Studia monographica

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 Printed in Germany
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 Genehmigung der Herausgeber.
 Reproduktion, Druck und Verarbeitung: Hubert & Co., Göttingen
 Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, archivfähigem Papier

TRAVEL AS NARRATIVE IN EGYPTIAN LITERATURE¹

GERALD MOERS

Introduction

Only the last two and a half decades witnessed the critical study of ancient Egyptian literature as a comparatively independent field of research. This new development does of course not imply that Egyptian literary texts have not been subject to different scholarly approaches prior to this era.² More traditionally oriented research, however, differs distinctly from newer approaches. To begin with, a critical examination of Egyptological literary histories or anthologies such as Hellmut Brunner's *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der altägyptischen Literatur*³ or Miriam Lichtheim's important *Ancient Egyptian literature*⁴ could provide the impression that everything written counts as Egyptian literature: narratives stand side by side with mortuary texts, and while religious treatments are grouped alongside administrative documents, fairy tales jostle historical texts. As arbitrary as this enumeration were the different authors' bases of classification: here we find formal or generic reasons, there the authors adduce style or contents of a text as criteria for its incorporation into the literary corpus. Moreover, older scholarship used almost every Egyptian text as quarry for politically or historically significant information,⁵ while one and the same text could be used at the same time as a source of historical topography and social history or called upon to embody the aesthetic qualities of Egyptian literature.⁶ The authors, however, did seldom give explicit reasons or criteria for either the one or the other of their readings of a certain text. If we consider, for example, the story of *Sinuhe*, some scholars had major disputes in trying to establish the only route Sinuhe could have taken on his flight to the Near East, while others were not willing to decide about the literary status of the tale, since they considered it a real autobiography and hoped therefore that at some time the 'real' Sinuhe's tomb would be

1 I am grateful to Antonio Loprieno for giving me the opportunity to participate in the symposium "Ancient Egyptian literature: history and forms", and especially to the other participants for many helpful suggestions. I am very much indebted to Michael Cooperson, UCLA, for improving my English idiom and for numerable valuable comments on a previous draft of this paper.

2 For the older history of the sub-discipline see now Schenkel, "Ägyptische Literatur und ägyptologische Forschung: eine wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Einleitung", in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 21-28.

3 Brunner, *Grundzüge einer Geschichte der altägyptischen Literatur*.

4 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 3 vols.

5 A tradition mainly connected with the concept of "propaganda" developed in Georges Posener's *Littérature et politique*; cf. recently Helck, "Die 'Geschichte des Schiffbrüchigen' – Eine Stimme der Opposition?", in Osing/Kolding Nielsen (eds.), *Studies Iversen*, 73-76.

6 Concerning the tales of *Sinuhe*, *Wenamun*, and the *Tale of Woe*, I give an exemplary collection of positions taken vis-à-vis these texts in Moers, *Der Aufbruch ins Fiktionale*, 30-34.

rediscovered.⁷ The methodological difficulties of all these approaches stem from reading the text literally and not in a literary way and are grounded in the lack of a general theoretical basis for Egyptological literary criticism, a theoretical basis that can be applied to the Egyptian textual material as a whole and that can enable one to 'measure' the extent of every text's inherent literariness.

Trying to compensate for this lack, only few scholars attempted to direct their studies to one specific genre but then remained almost always restricted to its formal aspects. For this reason these approaches were mostly unsuitable for assigning texts to their appropriate place in the system of Egyptian literature.⁸ This holds true especially for the so-called *Metrik* which reduces literariness to a numerical phenomenon based on grammatical units.⁹ Furthermore, it is formalistic and universalistic to such a degree that it applies to almost every written text. In consequence, it does not give any indication of the degree of literariness of the text in question.¹⁰ Another problem is the Egyptological arbitrariness in the application of this method: although the *Metrik* is theoretically grounded in a rhetorical (i.e. poetical; see the following remarks) approach to literature, it still claims explanatory adequacy for fictional literature.¹¹

In addition, almost all of these studies adopt a more or less implicit and therefore not always unproblematic orientation towards rhetorical(-poetical) or aesthetic concepts of literature, i.e. those concepts that were the predominant ones of describing Western literature until the 1960's. However, especially if these concepts become mixed, one can not necessarily establish their applicability to the Egyptian material by means of the Egyptian sources themselves. Moreover, for reasons of their specific nature these concepts remain very much indebted to the literatures they constitute, since both were ways of pre-scribing how literature had to be rather than methods of explaining what literature may be or – nowadays even more important – may do. Thus, Aristotelian poetics and its later rhetorical offsprings were the constitutive systems of literatures from the classical antiquity to the end of the 18th century and were mostly concerned with the *production* techniques of literature ('Regelpoetiken'), while aesthetics was a more philosophical phenomenon predominant in the 19th century and grounded in the opinion that literature – as art in general – was one way of representing the ultimate truth inherent in human life.¹²

⁷ Posener, *Littérature et politique*, 90 f.

⁸ Compare now, however, the articles in part three of Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, and there especially Parkinson, "Types of literature in the Middle Kingdom", 297-312, for the problems and the perspectives of genre-oriented research in Egyptological literary criticism. A list of former genre-related studies can be found in Gnirs, "Die ägyptische Autobiographie", in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 192, with n. 3.

⁹ A very useful summary of the discussion about Fecht's *Metrik* and the – if generalized – equally problematic concept of *thought couplets* (Foster) gives Burkard, "Metrik, Prosodie und formaler Aufbau ägyptischer literarischer Texte", in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 447-463.

¹⁰ Besides, this concept neglects some important linguistic difficulties which of course have their reasons in the state of research on Egyptological linguistics, but which are nevertheless well-known. So, the phonetic and syllabic reconstruction of Egyptian as the basis of establishing stress units, the so-called *kola*, is not yet satisfactorily clarified.

¹¹ For the opposition of poetry and fiction cf. Todorov, *Genres in discourse*, 1-12, and Egelton, *Einführung in die Literaturwissenschaft*, 6 ff. Apparently, Egyptological criticism has not yet taken into consideration this fundamental distinction except for Gnirs, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 193, with n. 7.

¹² For the concepts of classical rhetoric and aesthetic cf. Ueding, *Klassische Rhetorik*, Iser, "Interpretationsperspektiven moderner Kunsttheorie", in Henrich/Iser (eds.), *Theorien der Kunst*, 33-58, and idem,

Triggered mainly by Jan Assmann's review article of 1974, a paradigmatic shift took place in Egyptological criticism. Scholarship now understands – in accordance with poststructuralist literary theory – ancient Egyptian literature as a cultural construct, implying that literature like any other product of language is a constructed medium of communication.¹³ Therefore, also Egyptian genres acquire the character of literary social institutions¹⁴ which, in the course of their historical development, design structures from the tension between social restrictedness and literary determination by inherent laws.¹⁵ By means of these structures, genres are able on the one side to fulfill the expectations of the social environment they are rooted in. On the other side, by virtue of their literary autonomy, they are in the position to find innovative and individual answers to the questions of their environment. This concept of genre can be paralleled with the "topos and mimesis" dichotomy which was introduced into Egyptological discussion by Antonio Loprieno in the late 1980's.¹⁶ For him, "topos" marks the pole of social expectation, whereas "mimesis" sketches the pole of more innovative or individual answers. This means that we face basically two major types of literary texts throughout Egyptian literary history: one type describes the world as Egypt's thought of it, its genres are mainly didactic¹⁷ in nature. The other type describes the world as an individual "author"¹⁸ perceives it. This type of tackling with the world is best represented in realistic¹⁹ narratives. It was again Antonio Loprieno who, also recently, systematically imported a set of further criteria such as fictionality, intertextuality, and reception from the field of literary theory in order to define Egyptian literature,²⁰ after especially the terms fiction and fictionality were often used but never explicitly defined before.²¹

Theorie der Literatur, 7 ff. While a classical-rhetorical model is the basis of Fecht's *Metrik*, the aesthetic approach to literature which is strongly connected with the concept of "Gesamtkunstwerk", finds a recent Egyptological example in Burkard, *Überlegungen zur Form der ägyptischen Literatur*.

¹³ See, for example, Egelton, *Einführung in die Literaturwissenschaft*, 1-18. Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*, 9 ff., 56 ff., and idem, *Theorie der Literatur*, 21-25.

¹⁴ So the translation of Volkamp, "Gattungen als literarisch soziale Institutionen", in Hinck (ed.), *Textsortenlehre – Gattungsgeschichte*, 22-44; for Egyptological criticism cf. Parkinson, "Teachings, discourses, and tales from the Middle Kingdom", in Quirke (ed.), *Middle Kingdom studies*, 91 (with reference to Egelton, cf. n. 13 above), and idem, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 297 f.

¹⁵ Volkamp, "Literarische Gattungen und literaturgeschichtliche Epochen", in Bracker/Stückrath (eds.), *Literaturwissenschaft Grundkurs* 2, 51-74.

¹⁶ Loprieno, *Topos und Mimesis*, esp. 10-18.

¹⁷ In the following, my use of the term "didactic" will refer to the content-side of what I will show to be a genuine Egyptian notion of *rhetoric*, and not to the rhetorical(-poetical) concepts of Western literature mentioned above. This use of "didactic" is in part coextensional with what Loprieno, *Topos und Mimesis*, 20, has termed "topical" with reference, however, to Western rhetoric.

¹⁸ For the complex of individual 'authorship' as an "nécessité épistémologique" see now the idealistic approach of Derchain, "Auteur et société" in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 83-94, esp. 84, 92, 94.

¹⁹ I use the term "realistic" as synonymous with what Loprieno, *Topos und Mimesis*, 11 ff. has termed "mimetic", thereby following Erich Auerbach's influential study *Mimesis*, i.e. the attempt to represent experienced reality via literature.

²⁰ 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, now reprinted with minor changes and some bibliographical updating as "Defining Egyptian literature: ancient texts and modern theories", in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 39-58.

²¹ Examples can be found in the list of older studies I referred to in n. 6. The same holds true for the somewhat loose use of the term 'intertextuality' in Assmann, *Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, 192. For a critical review of the perspec-

Rhetoric and narrative

But let us for a short moment turn back to things that prior scholarship could have done – but did not do – with its mainly rhetorical(-poetical) instrumentary even before the just mentioned shift in Egyptological literary criticism. First of all, Egyptian literature lacks a discourse that, borrowing from the expression “explicit theology” coined by Jan Assmann,²² could be labelled as explicit literary criticism, i.e. it lacks an autochthonous Egyptian literary theory. Notwithstanding this for Egyptian literature seems to hold true what is a well known fact elsewhere: very frequently, literary creations are in themselves carriers of ideas or theories of what should constitute literature at a certain place and a certain time and take part in the process of literary production. This means that literary texts very often define themselves as to what they are and how they are to be read. Therefore it might also have been possible for traditional scholarship to deduce the existence of an inherent Egyptian notion of literature from some Middle Kingdom sources that are self-referential in this respect. For the moment, this notion could be sketched as *rhetoric*, the centre of which would be the Egyptian expression of *mdw.t nfr.t*, *perfect speech*. And because it is possible to distill this concept of *rhetoric* from Egyptian sources themselves, it also differs, even in most likely cases of practical resemblances,²³ – at least methodologically – from the rhetorical(-poetical) models that are bound to Western literatures but were nevertheless implicitly used in Egyptology until recently.²⁴

So, one of the main examples of the Egyptian didactic discourse, the *Instruction of Ptahhotep* from the early Middle Kingdom, probably the reign of Amenemhat I. (1938-1908 B.C.),²⁵ regards itself as a manual of *perfect speech* when it says:²⁶

“Beginning of the verses of perfect speech (*mdw.t nfr.t*)

spoken by the Patrician and Count,
the God’s father, whom the God loves,
the eldest King’s Own Son,
the Lord Vizier Ptahhotep,
in teaching the ignorant to be wise,
to be the standard of perfect speech (*mdw.t nfr.t*),
good for him who will hear,
woeful for him who will transgress it.”

tives and limits of an Egyptological application of this concept see the chapter “Intertextualität” in Moers, *Der Aufbruch ins Fiktionale*, 83-122.

²² Assmann, *Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, 192-282.

²³ Cf. Junge, “Rhetorik”, in *LdA* V, 250-253.

²⁴ Cf. above, and n. 17.

²⁵ The chronological fixing of the Middle Kingdom texts follows Parkinson, *Voices from Ancient Egypt*, 12.

²⁶ pPrisse 5.6 ff. (Žába, *Ptahhotep*, II. 42-50); this and all subsequent translations follow Parkinson, *The tale of Sinuhe*.

The central part of the text deals with formulating rhetorical rules. But at the same time, in its introduction the text labels itself as *mdw.t nfr.t* which is the actual goal of the rules it will formulate. In this way the text presents itself as a textual manifestation of applied rhetoric and subordinates itself implicitly to a rhetorical concept of literature, a concept that never becomes explicit outside the Egyptian literary discourse.

Other texts as well make explicit their rhetorical nature by an act of literary self-revelation when they inscribe their *raison d’être* in themselves by a motivating narrative frame, a phenomenon that seems to be characteristic of literatures in the process of formation.²⁷

For example, the *Eloquent Peasant*, probably from the reign of Amenemhat II. (1876-1842 B.C.), is a *nfr mdw n wn mꜛꜥ*, “one whose speech is truly perfect”.²⁸ According to the tale, this was the only reason for the king’s command to record and publish it.

And in the *Words of Neferti* from the reign of Amenemhat I. (1938-1908 B.C.), an example of the Egyptian lamentation-genre, the text presents *Neferti*’s narration as the fulfillment of a request for *mdw.t nfr.t* which the king expressed in the framelike beginning of the text:

“... Lads!

Look, I’ve had you called to make you seek me out
a son of yours who is a man of understanding,
a brother of yours who is a clever man,
a friend of yours who can achieve a perfect deed,
who will tell me a few perfect words (*mdw.t nfr.t*),
choice verses,
which my majesty will be entertained to hear”.²⁹
and

“... Come now
Neferti, my friend,
and tell me a few perfect words (*mdw.t nfr.t*),
choice verses,
which my majesty will be entertained to hear”.³⁰

If the results gained by these generic examples are transferable to their specific generic concept, a substantial part of the earliest Egyptian literature which developed in the Middle Kingdom, is at least implicitly orientated towards a rhetorical notion of literature. However, this rhetorical method is bound only to the didactic genres like instructions, discourses or lamentations. All together, these genres

²⁷ Cf. Assmann, “Kulturelle und literarische Texte”, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 63, and in this volume, 3 f.

²⁸ B1, 106 f., following the new numbering of Parkinson, *The tale of the Eloquent Peasant*.

²⁹ pLeningrad 1116A, 6 ff. (Helck, *Die Prophezeiung des Nfr.tj*).

³⁰ pLeningrad 1116A, 12 f. (Helck, *Die Prophezeiung des Nfr.tj*, 11).

make up the literary core of Egyptian "education" which tries to integrate the individual into society so that he may live a life according to the expectations of a "collective identity",³¹ i.e. to live a solidary life according to the concept of *mꜛ.t*.³² Because of this particular referentiality, the notion of *mdw.t nfr.t* also implies the social dimension of spoken perfection³³ or solidary speech. With respect to the *mꜛ.t*-concept, *mdw.t nfr.t* can therefore be labelled as its "mythical analogon"³⁴ which has a clear "identity function".³⁵ the only way to produce a literary text that is solidary in terms of a collective identity is to use the vehicle of perfect speech (*mdw.t nfr.t*). In the end, by means of this referentiality, a general rhetorical notion of literature takes shape as the specifically Egyptian rhetoric. It is this combination of formal-rhetorical aspects and referentiality that characterizes the didactic part of Egyptian literature, the part which constitutes the essential and constant point of reference in the history of Egyptian literary production.³⁶

But the didactic side of Egyptian literature forms only one pole in Egyptian literary history. Already in the Middle Kingdom's 12th dynasty (1990-1785 B.C.) we find texts like the story of the *Shipwrecked Sailor* or the story of *Simuhe* which are narrative prose tales. Also the above-mentioned story of the *Eloquent Peasant* frames its didactic and for this reason, as we have seen, formally rhetorical main part, in a narrative. Moreover, the two texts mentioned first are particularly resistant to the rhetorical model. This has caused major problems in the Egyptological treatment of these texts, problems aggravated by the fact that Egyptian does not possess specific generic notions to designate the mode and the genres of Egyptian narrative. In contrast, the genres of didactic literature possess comparatively³⁷ straightforward generic designations such as *sbj.t* for instructions and *mdw.t* or *tz* for discourses or lamentations. Thus, while we must be satisfied on the formal level with the negative data of an insufficiently suitable apparatus of description, we can compensate by referring to the relative coherence of the contents: *Simuhe* and the *Shipwrecked Sailor* are travel narratives or at least literary treatments of the travelling-abroad motif, and the same holds true for the story of the *Eloquent Peasant*, although in this case only the narrative frame is involved. Thus, metaphorically speaking, the Egyptian literary discourse started to move. Although the reasons for this never become explicit, again they are formulated by a literary product itself: The *Words of Khakheperreseneb*, not predating the reign of Senwos-

31 Cf. Assmann, "Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität", in Assmann/Hölscher (eds.), *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, 9-19.

32 Assmann, *Ma'at*, esp. 58-85.

33 Parkinson, in Quirke (ed.), *Middle Kingdom studies*, 93, 100.

34 Lugowski, *Die Form der Individualität im Roman*, 10-13. Lugowski understands the "mythical analogon" as the artificial whole in which the world is rendered in a work of literature without being perceived as artificial. This unperceived artificiality is the reason for the community-founding force implicit in the mythical analogon.

35 For this term cf. Assmann, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 68-72, and in this volume, 7.

36 This concept of didactic literature comes very close to what Assmann recently labelled as "cultural texts", cf. Assmann, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 58-82, and in this volume, 1-15. To subsume under this heading, however, as Assmann does, also the Middle Kingdom narrative literature, means to oversimplify the particular differences between didactic and realistic narrative Egyptian literature, cf. the following.

37 Compare, however, the remarks of Parkinson, in Quirke (ed.), *Middle Kingdom studies*, 92, and idem, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 297-312.

ret II. (1844-1837 B.C.),³⁸ criticize the literary conformity of the didactic discourse based on its static rhetoric, a rhetoric that is comparable to the *demonstrare artem* of classical rhetoric. The text expresses its criticism via *dissimulative irony* in its introductory literary-theoretical prologue:

"The collection of words, gathering of verses
the seeking of utterances with heart-searching,
made by the priest of Heliopolis,
Seni's son Khakheperreseneb,
called Ankhu,

He says, 'If only I had unknown utterances
and extraordinary verses,
in a new language that does not pass away,
free from repetition
without a verse of worn-out speech
spoken by the ancestors!

I shall wring my body for what is in it,
– a release of all my speech.
For what is already said can only be repeated;
what is said once has been said;
this is no vain boast of the ancients' speech
that those who are later should find it good.

No speaker has spoken yet – may one who will speak now speak
and another find what he will speak good!

No one has spoken yet for a matter spoken afterwards,
as they have done long before.

Here is no speaking what is only planned to be said:

this is searching after ruin, this is falsehood –

there is none who will remember his name to others!

I have said these things as I have seen them;
from the first generations until those who come after,
they are now like what has passed away.

If only I knew what was unknown to others,
what is still unrepeated!"³⁹

38 Vernus, *Essai sur la conscience de l'histoire dans l'Égypte pharaonique*, 3, proposes the end of dynasty XII or dynasty XIII as date for the composition of the text.

39 BM, EA 5645 rto., 1-7 (Gardiner, *Admonitions*, 96-100).

Following these passages is a short transition introducing what he wants his laments really to be about: meditations "on what has happened",⁴⁰ i.e. the real "state of things that have happened throughout the land"⁴¹ as opposed to a perpetuation of the very discourse that was already "spoken by the ancestors". Remarkably, however, what he produces on all levels of his text is in itself a perfect example of the Egyptian lamentation genre: as to his lament's contents, he creates the frightening image of a society in decline which is the most typical theme for this genre. Formally, he utilizes the devices of *mdw.t nfr.t* and is probably its most distinguished and prominent example. Thus he gives in, though only ironically, to the inevitability of the perpetuation of didactic discourse by seemingly letting happen to him that which he was trying to avoid, namely producing the same formalized type of literature as his ancestors of whom he is so critical. In fact, Khakheperreseneb expresses his feeling of displeasure at the insufficiency of a rhetorically and didactically orientated production of literature. He refers explicitly to the weak points and hollowness of the system he criticizes, mentioning paralysis on the formal level and in the subject matter: he contrasts "worn-out speech" and "repetition" with "extraordinary verses" and "unknown utterances" and points thus to the failure to deal with reality when he opposes "speaking for a matter spoken afterwards" and "speaking what is only planned to be said" to his own meditation on "the things that have happened throughout the land".

So, even if Khakheperreseneb is no literary revolutionary,⁴² in my opinion the self-critical consciousness of the *Words of Khakheperreseneb* points to the desire for change in (not only)⁴³ the literary discourse.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the pure existence of narrative texts that formally do not follow the model of Egyptian didactic literature points to an already changed, or at least expanded, literary discourse. This discourse is best designated by the modern colloquial term of literature "in the literal or narrower sense of the word". Texts of this kind which stand out for their greater interest in presenting reality and which emphasize individual achievements or shortcomings, can to a large degree be labelled *literary fiction*.⁴⁵ In Egypt, however, they never – not even in self-referential literature – got a name of their own.

40 BM EA 5645 rto., 10 (Gardiner, *Admonitions*, 101).

41 Loc. cit.

42 As suggested by Ockinga, "The burden of Kha'kheperre sonbu", in *JEA* 69 (1983), 93, opposed by Parkinson, in Quirke (ed.), *Middle Kingdom studies*, 98.

43 Compare the following note.

44 Recently, Vernus, *Essai sur la conscience de l'histoire dans l'Égypte pharaonique*, 1-33, has argued that Khakheperreseneb's originality lies in that he expresses a different view on history than any other Egyptian (literary) text. I will show in a forthcoming study entitled "Self(-fashioning identity: the interplay of reenactment and memory in the Complaints of Khakheperreseneb)" (to appear in LingAeg) that the *Words of Khakheperreseneb* mark exactly the interface of the historical and the literary consciousness in Egypt, i.e. the acknowledgement of literature in general as a contextualized medium of constructing (cultural) identity.

45 Those texts were labelled "Mimesis" by Loprieno for the purpose of Egyptological discussion, cf. also n. 19.

Travel as narrative

Now, as was said before, the tales of the *Eloquent Peasant*, of the *Shipwrecked Sailor*, and of *Sinuhe* are travel narratives or at least literary treatments of the travelling-abroad motif. I would like to apply to this motif a notion coined by Manfred Frank who analysed it as a scheme that mirrors in itself the quest-structure underlying narrative discourse:⁴⁶ thus, the travelling-abroad motif is a "Schema der Reflexion, das [...] poetisch präfiguriert wird".⁴⁷ In this way, motif and narrative become a sign for each other. Selfreferentiality which is created in this way is one reason for the travel narratives' higher degree of fictionality, because this fictionality is generically preconditioned. The second reason is that these texts in themselves also openly mirror their fictional character; since, if fiction is – as defined by literary theory – an act of transgressing boundaries such as the one between the reality of the world and a hypothetical reality,⁴⁸ the travelling-abroad motif becomes the ideal and predestined vehicle of literary fictionality.

Although the texts' exact dating and therefore their chronological order can not definitely be established at the present stage of Egyptological research, I would like to begin with the third-person narrative of the *Eloquent Peasant* which dates from the reign of Amenemhat II. (1876-1842 B.C.). A peasant sets out from the Wadi Natrûn oasis, located to the west of the Nile delta, to bring his local products to the erstwhile capital of Heracleopolis. On his way an agrarian leaseholder uses flimsy pretexts to rob him of his goods and maltreat him. But after some delay the peasant's outstanding eloquence wins him access to the king and the opportunity to expose his predicament to him. He expresses his demands for justice in nine elaborate and ingenious petitions which form the centrepiece of the text and could count as a tour de force of Egyptian rhetoric.⁴⁹ But the story as a whole is held together by a narrative frame that describes the peasant's *journey* from his oasis to the capital until the happy ending. This narrative frame raises and constructs the questions and problems, while the rhetorical parts of the story answer them: to prove the validity of the Egyptian idea of society characterized by a collective identity and by a solidarity grounded in the concept of *mꜥ.t*⁵⁰ and embodying values such as truth, correct hierarchical behaviour, and again fulfillment of social expectations, the peasant first had to move from the cultural periphery of his oasis to the centre of his culture. And also the concept of *mꜥ.t* itself had first to be challenged by the evil deeds of the agrarian leaseholder. For this reason I see the narrative frame of the *Eloquent Peasant* as a first sheet lightning on the fictional horizon of Egyptian literature, although in the end it remains part of the didactic literary discourse, because the answers of this text are more or less predictable. Nevertheless, to pick up once more the

46 Cf. Pfister, "Zur Systemreferenz", in Broich/Pfister (eds.), *Intertextualität*, 57.

47 Cf. Frank, *Unendliche Fahrt*, 44, with reference to the *Odyssey*. He understands this scheme as a metaphor used in philosophy and literature to express the identity of from where life comes and where it goes, while he sees the departure from the point of origin, i.e. the way or travel itself, only as the metaphorical detour man and thought have to take to realize the point of origin as their destination.

48 Cf. Iser, *Theorie der Literatur*, 21-25, and idem, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*, passim.

49 Cf. Junge, in *LÄ* V, 251, and Parkinson, *The tale of Sinuhe*, 55: "This rhetorical exuberance is in part the point of the tale".

50 Cf. Assmann, *Ma'at*, esp. 58-85, regarding the tale of the *Eloquent Peasant*.

metaphor of movement: with this text's mixture of genres and modes we are halfway between rhetoric and narrative.

Unlike the story of the *Eloquent Peasant*, the two other travelling-abroad stories from the Middle Kingdom are first-person narratives. In the history of Egyptian literary narrative until the end of the New Kingdom this narrative position is exclusively used for travel narratives, whereas in later times, not all travel narratives are first-person narratives, nor are all first person narratives travel narratives.⁵¹ For this reason I interpret the first-person narrator as the formal expression of the more individual quest-structure which is underlying narratives in general and travel-narratives in particular. This shift of the narrative standpoint away from the objectivizing third-person narrative frames of a didactic text like the *Words of Neferti* or a genre-mixture like the *Eloquent Peasant* is typical, in my view, of the genre of Egyptian travel-narratives and goes hand in hand with the creation of the more subjective and individual world which subsumes of the realistic character of these texts.

The first of these Middle Kingdom first-person narratives is the story of the *Shipwrecked Sailor* from the second half of the 12th dynasty. In this tale a low-ranking attendant tells a high official his personal experience of having been shipwrecked on a lonely island several years before. This high official is returning to the residence from an apparently unsuccessful expedition and despairing of his reception at court. But although the attendant's adventure is presented as an example of overcoming personal disaster, the high official remains unconvinced and fearful of the things to come. Thus, in this tale individual failure is openly treated for the first time in the history of Egyptian narrative literature.⁵² Therefore and for reasons which are connected with the more imaginary character of this tale, such as the anonymity of the heroes and the violation of basic rules of external reality,⁵³ the *Shipwrecked Sailor* becomes a paradigmatic interpretative key for all preceding and subsequent travel-literature. On the one hand this tale reveals its fictional status by employing the imaginary.⁵⁴ On the other hand, the underlying quest-structure of the travel-abroad-motif reveals itself as a metaphor of the dubious fragility of human existence in general, a fragility that is summarized and reflected in the last sentence of the narrative: "Who pours water [for] a goose when the day dawns for its slaughter in the morrow?"⁵⁵

51 For a typological distinction of first- and third-person narrator in Egyptian narratives see now Claudia Suhr in this volume, 91-129.

52 Failure in form of a "death abroad" is already treated in Old Kingdom autobiographies. The main point of these texts, however, is a description of the successful return of the corpses and not the fact of dying abroad itself, cf. Gnirs, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 212.

53 Loprieno, "The sign of literature in the Shipwrecked Sailor", in Verhoeven/Graefe (eds.), *Festgabe Derchain*, 211, and Loprieno, in Cooper/Schwartz (eds.), *The study of the Ancient Near East in the twenty-first century*, 215 f.

54 For the imaginary in general and its role in fictional texts see Iser, *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre*, 19-23, and 292-425.

55 pLeningrad 1115, 184 ff. (Blackman, *MES* 48, 1 f.). For this passage see especially Gilula, "Shipwrecked Sailor lines 184-185", in Johnson/Wente (eds.), *Studies Hughes*, 75-82, and Spalinger, "An alarming parallel to the end of the Shipwrecked Sailor", in *GIM* 73 (1984), 91-95.

With this in mind let us turn to the tale of *Sinuhe* from the time shortly after Senwosret I. (1918-1875 B.C.), the most classic text of ancient Egyptian literature, in the frame of both the Egyptian and the Egyptological aesthetics of reception.⁵⁶ After a comparatively short frame that resembles funerary autobiography, the hero Sinuhe tells the story of his life in a first-person narrative. Feeling guilty without any apparent reason after the death of the reigning king, he exiles himself for several years to the Near East. There he discovers the roots of his own Egyptian identity in Ammunenschi, the ruler of Upper Retjenu, who functions as a metaphor of Sinuhe's potential identity and who convinces the hero of the advantages of being Egyptian by being his competent partner in discussions about the Egyptian view of the world. Eventually, it is the catalytic function of Sinuhe's experience of feeling himself a foreigner that makes possible the return to his native country as an Egyptian par excellence. The complexity and totality of Sinuhe's self-realization abroad corresponds on the formal level with the often stated lack of generic uniformity,⁵⁷ a diversity or hybridity⁵⁸ due to a form of intertextuality which draws on literary forms rather than on contents and that therefore can be labelled 'generic' intertextuality.⁵⁹ Far from being an autobiography, the text presents many other – mostly referential-non-literary or didactic – genres⁶⁰ to illuminate the different ways of coming to the same conclusion: for an Egyptian there is no other choice than to be Egyptian. This ultimately didactic message is closely connected to the narrative point of view. This kind of totality of a first-person narrator's life-review is a characteristic feature of the "novel of memoirs"-genre which is the least subjective form of first person narratives and most closely related to objective third-person narratives⁶¹ which in Egypt always have a strong tendency to be didactic (cf. the *Eloquent Peasant*).

But to achieve the insight that his identity can only lie in the acceptance of the social role "Egyptian", Sinuhe's road had to be much longer than for example the *Eloquent Peasant*'s inner-Egyptian journey. And what is even more important, he had to transgress the Egyptian borders.

This transgression of topographical boundaries is metaphorically equivalent to the transgression of socially defined boundaries and therefore implies that kind of improper social behaviour which was always denounced throughout Egyptian history.⁶² While the story of the *Eloquent Peasant* merely envisaged to prove the validity of the Egyptian concept of society and *mꜥꜣt*, these concepts are individually and fundamentally challenged by the hero's flight in the tale of *Sinuhe*, since this flight is equivalent to a rejection of the role he is assigned by his society. Older scholarship has indulged in speculations about the reasons for this flight and Sinuhe's possible involvement in the affair of the death of Amenemhat I. But the more interesting part of the autobiographical frame is the fact that Sinuhe's memoirs start off exactly at the point of his flight and not with the description of his previous

56 Text in Koch, *Sinuhe*.

57 Baines, "Interpreting Sinuhe", in *JEA* 68 (1982), 34, sees the text as a "virtual compendium of important literary forms".

58 For generic hybridity see now Parkinson, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 308-311.

59 Pfister, in Bröck/Pfister (eds.), *Intertextualität*, calls this type of intertextuality "system-referential" and understands it as the reference to genres rather than to texts or passages of texts.

60 Listed in Baines, in *JEA* 68 (1982), 34.

61 Hamburger, *Die Logik der Dichtung*, 281-286.

62 Cf. for example Guglielmi, "Eine 'Lehre' für einen reiselustigen Sohn", in *WiO* 14 (1983), 147-166.

career. In my view, this constitutes yet another challenge to the concept of collective identity. Apparently, the ideal-biographical blueprint of life inherent in this concept was so clearly presupposed in Egyptian society that to follow its expectations was felt as insufficient and as lacking explanatory adequacy to present an individual life as it is done in *Simuhe*. In fact, Sinuhe shuns the unattractiveness of his own ideal biography. Thus, the flight itself and the withdrawal from ideal and long-established ways constitute Sinuhe's guilt. This is the reason why older scholarship could not find any substantial motivation for his flight in the text itself: as John Baines already pointed out, it is "self-sufficient, because it is all that the plot requires".⁶³ In this way, flight and guilt textually become each other's precondition, i.e. Sinuhe is not guilty of anything but fleeing. Metaphorically speaking, it is the existence of his own text by which Sinuhe becomes guilty.

As a whole, this text is a more or less successful attempt to handle the problem of social diversification accompanied by growing individuality, a problem specific to the Egypt of the Middle Kingdom.⁶⁴ But unlike for example the highly didactic lamentation genre which is only (re-)presentational in this respect, the tale of *Simuhe* is an attempt to tackle this problem realistically and to prove in this way the validity of the Egyptian concept of life.

The travel-abroad motif receives a fresh and different literary treatment after a period of relative silence in the so called *Report of Wenamun* either from the reign of Ramses XI. at the end of the Ramesside era or – more likely – from the reign of Herihor at the beginning of dynasty XXI.⁶⁵ But compared with the tale of *Simuhe*, this 'report' differs significantly in terms of its plot development and its language use. On the one hand, the plot of this text is structured by actions taking place on water which is, with respect to the motif, in itself more dangerous and burdened with guilt than travelling by land.⁶⁶ On the other hand, the story is told not in classical Middle Egyptian but in Late Egyptian which is the more realistic language.⁶⁷ The hero Wenamun sets out on a business trip to the Near East, well endowed with money and divine support. He takes along an idol of "Amun-Of-The-Road" that initially represents Amun in his aspect of protector of travellers. Moreover, this idol is a metaphor for the New Kingdom concept of 'Amun' himself, whose cyclical movement in his bark maintains the order of creation and who therefore represents and also guarantees the functional unity of the Egyptian cosmos. Thus, in a proverbial sense, Wenamun and Amun are in the same boat. In the course of his trip Wenamun has several experiences that confront him with the real nature of his Egyptian identity. Again a quantity "foreign ruler" is used for this purpose. But in contrast to Sinuhe, Wenamun finds out

that neither is he the one he thought himself to be, nor do the world and its representational concept 'Amun' operate as he believed. The divine idol does not protect him in any way; on the contrary, he is the one who has to hide it. And also his efforts to put the debates with his foreign counterparts on the basis of the conception of collective identity he entertains of himself result in a disaster when Tjekerbaal, the ruler of Byblos, unmasks them as nothing but rhetoric.⁶⁸ step by step he is deprived of his identity when nobody listens to his attempted explanations of the world and when the supplying of the wood which he understood as an expression of a higher order suddenly turns out to be a simple commercial deal. On this background one understands the important role the divine idol is playing in this text: Wenamun's travel is synonymous with an examination of the coherence of the Egyptian conception of life and ends up in a "decomposition of the mythical analogon"⁶⁹ which results in Wenamun's complete loss of identity. This unravelling becomes evident mainly in the subject-object relation of individual and world: while Sinuhe was at most points of his life abroad the acting part of the world he encountered, Wenamun has the bitter experience of being nothing but the object of his surroundings: his ego is reduced to a mere grammatical subject. Formally, the harshness and cruelty of the disappointments Wenamun has to face is directly related to the language used in this text: it is the realism and sometimes even the naturalism of everyday written Late Egyptian that imparts to this text the character of a travel-report and – by far more important – its "serious tone".⁷⁰ Again, as was the case with Sinuhe, Wenamun's experiences are likewise conditioned by the development of the Egyptian society in Ramesside times in which growing individuality and personal freedom on the one hand are combined with growing isolation of the individual on the other.⁷¹ Both in the religious sphere with the phenomenon of personal piety and in the economic sphere⁷² the individualization of society brought along the usual negative results, such as mutual indifference or greed for profit. The basic difference, however, between the tale of *Simuhe* and that of *Wenamun* becomes visible also in another respect. As a result of its integrating power, the tale of *Simuhe* appeared in over 30 (mostly partial) copies and thus became one of the classics of ancient Egyptian literature, since both in form and contents it succeeded in giving an affirmative and a-temporal answer to the question whether a concept of collective identity was still valid even in times when it was challenged by growing individuality (see above).

The tale of *Wenamun*, however, is denied this kind of positive reception: language and contents are extreme to such a degree that from the very beginning there is no way to bring the described experiences into harmony with the Egyptian world view inherent in the concept 'Amun' (see above). On the contrary, the text openly challenges this concept as an adequate means of world-explanation: instead of providing satisfactory answers how to close the fissures that become more and more visible in

63 Cf. Baines, in *JEA* 68 (1982), 42.

64 Loprieno, *Topos und Mimesis*, 85–97.

65 Cf. the new chronological fixing by Jansen-Winkeln, "Das Ende des Neuen Reiches", in *ZÄS* 119 (1992), 25 f., and idem, "Die thebanischen Gräber der 21. Dynastie", in *GM* 157 (1997), 65 f. Text in Gardiner, *LES*, 61.1–76.1, introduction in Moers, "Die Reiseerzählung des Wenamun", in Kaiser (ed.), *TUAT* III.5, *Mythen und Epen* III, 912–921.

66 Compare the chapter "Wasser, Krokodile und andere Gefahren", in Moers, *Der Aufbruch ins Fiktionale*, 153–189.

67 See for example Baines, "Classicism and modernism in the literature of the New Kingdom", in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 171 f. For the dichotomy of classical Middle Egyptian and "proletarian" Late Egyptian cf. Loprieno, "Linguistic variety and Egyptian literature", in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 522 f.

68 pMoskau 120 2.60 (Gardiner, *LES*, 73.5 f.).

69 English translation of Lugowski's German term "Zersetzung des mythischen Analogons". With Lugowski, such a decomposition takes place when the artificiality of a discourse is thematized and becomes the theme of reflection in the text itself, cf. Lugowski, *Die Form der Individualität im Roman*, 10–13, and 52–141. Exactly this happens with Tjekerbaal's ironic remark to Wenamun's applied rhetoric, cf. n. 68 above.

70 So Baines, in Loprieno (ed.), *Ancient Egyptian literature*, 171, who also contrasts this linguistic form with the "conventionalized hybrid" of what is normally called "Literary Late Egyptian", op. cit., 159.

71 Loprieno, *Topos und Mimesis*, 89.

72 Kemp, *Ancient Egypt. Anatomy of a civilization*, 232–260.

this concept, it restricts itself to a representation of these fissures and leaves it exclusively to the reader to find possible answers. In this way left alone by the text and the questions it produces, the reader reacts by denying the tale of *Wenamun* a reception comparable to that of the tale of *Simuhe*. To return once more to the scheme of reflexion that is embodied in the travelling-abroad motif: in the tale of *Simuhe* the point of departure and the destination are identical. The hero flees from being an Egyptian to accept it eventually as his only possible identity. In the tale of *Wenamun*, however, the hero is not that lucky: in his case the movement of reflexion does no longer reach the point of departure, and the result is the hero's loss of identity described above.

The next example of the Egyptian genre of travel-narratives is the *Letter of Wermai*, better known as the *Tale of Woe*, a fictional letter which was found near el-Hibeh together with the tale of *Wenamun* and the onomasticon of *Amenemope*.⁷³ Besides this hardly accidental fact and the identical dating of both texts, it is the close correspondence in contents that is most striking: in the letter, the travel abroad motif is transposed to Egypt itself. The text describes the strange experience of the almost kafkaesque alienation of the high priest of Heliopolis, a victim of nameless evil who suddenly finds himself a foreigner in his own country. After an introductory epistolary formula that is usual for its time⁷⁴ and that covers more than a quarter of the composition, the hero Wermai describes his experiences: he is maltreated, his property is robbed, and he is driven out of his hometown, all without any apparent reason. Driven by his ill fortune, the hero roams throughout Egypt and the Delta, tries to make new friends but fails in this effort, and has to face loneliness for the rest of his journey. Finally, he is stranded in an oasis controlled by the same evil. At this point I would briefly like to recall to mind the story of the *Eloquent Peasant*, in which the hero starts his journey in an oasis to examine the concepts of *mꜣꜥ.t* at the centre of the collective Egyptian identity and to find them both still valid. Wermai has the opposite experience: as the high-priest of a central cult-place, he is driven out to the periphery of an oasis to find out that the concepts of *mꜣꜥ.t* and with it the collective identity have become hollow and worthless and are substituted by the law of the strongest. On this background Wermai in his total isolation impersonates the final point of the literary treatment of Egyptian individuality: metaphorically speaking, he has become the victim of the very development that started in the Middle Kingdom with *Simuhe's* flight at the latest.

In this case too, form and contents are symmetrical. As literary genre, the letter is the most subjective and clearest form of first-person narrative as well as the most private of all narrative techniques.⁷⁵ Since a letter in itself is normally not intended for publication in the strict sense of the word, the normal procedure of transposing it into the public domain is an editor's note which on the other hand is a clear sign of the composition's fictionality.⁷⁶ This is why also the *Letter of Wermai* is presented to the

73 Cf. Caminos, *Tale of Woe*, and Moers, "Der Brief des Wermai. Der Moskauer Literarische Brief", in Kaiser (ed.), *TUAT* III.5, *Mythen und Epen* III, 922-929.

74 Bakir, *Egyptian epistolography*, 35-92, and Caminos, *Tale of woe*, 11.

75 Hamburger, *Die Logik der Dichtung*, 281-286, and, for the *Letter of Wermai*, Suhr, in this volume, 95, 119 ff.

76 See generally Anton, *Authentizität als Fiktion*, and, for the *Letter of Wermai*, Suhr, in this volume, 104.

reader as a 'copy' of the original. Thus, the isolation of the writer in this composition finds its adequate means of expression in the literary form itself.

As the movement between periphery and centre in this composition is reversed in comparison to the tale of the *Eloquent Peasant*, so is the relation between rhetorical and realistic passages. While the rhetoric is reduced to the typical epistolary formula, the realistic description of the hero's ill fortune forms the main part of the letter. For this reason there is no longer a confrontative discussion between societal expectations expressed via rhetoric and its individual realistic challenge – as was still the case at least in the dialogic parts of *Simuhe* and *Wenamun* – but an entirely realistic and sometimes fully naturalistic presentation of the total disintegration of Egyptian society and the downfall of the concept of a collective identity that should have given form to it. That this work shared the narrative of *Wenamun's* fate regarding the aesthetics of reception should therefore stand to reason.

The last example of our group of ancient Egyptian treatments of the travelling-abroad motif is the narrative of the *Benitresh-Stela* from the middle of the first millennium B.C.⁷⁷ Again and for the last time, in this narrative the motif is used as a literary reckoning with past and present. The stela presents a divine statue's journey to a Near-Eastern kingdom undertaken to cure Pharaoh's near relative (the Princess of Bahktan) of a serious disease. After working a cure by expelling the disease demon and after a longer forced delay abroad, the divine statue returns safely to Egypt.

This treatment of the travelling-abroad motif differs radically from all the other instances of Egyptian travel literature discussed so far. To begin with, the medium of publication as a stela which was found in a temple, indicates that this text is an example of *decorum*⁷⁸ and is thus medially closely linked to the rhetorical genres.⁷⁹ Secondly, the text's narrated time is made up from past and present elements. This becomes evident mainly in the figure of Pharaoh: while the text rhetorically refers to the topos of a glorified past by composing his name of fragments of the names of different important historical kings, Pharaoh himself represents and enacts this glorified past on the contemporary level of the narrative. Thirdly, the story is told as an objectivizing third-person narrative. Taken together, these hints point to the text's being an attempt to present the contemporary situations in a more rhetorical way to express how official Egypt would like them to be, rather than being a realistic discussion of experiences acquired abroad. But in the middle of the first millennium B.C. such positive experiences with foreign countries as described by this text are only to present rhetorically. The historical reality which was determined by Egypt's striking and rapid loss of power in the Near East, looked completely different. An Egyptian Pharaoh would not receive tributes in this part of the world, nor would an Egyptian divine image be necessary to cure the local sick.

77 Cf. Kammerzell, "Ein ägyptischer Gott reist nach Bachtana, um die von einem Dämonen besessene Prinzessin Bintrischji zu heilen (Benitresh-Stele)", in Kaiser (ed.), *TUAT* III.5, *Mythen und Epen* III, 955-964.

78 Cf. Baines, "Literacy and Ancient Egyptian society, in *Man* N.S. 18 (1983), 576; idem., *Fecundity figures*, 277-305, and idem., "Restricted knowledge, hierarchy, and decorum: modern perceptions and ancient institutions", in *JARCE* 27 (1990), 20 f.

79 In this sense Loprieno, in Cooper/Schwartz (eds.), *The study of the Ancient Near East in the twenty-first century*, 214 f.

From a functional point of view, the role of the divine statue in this text corresponds to that of the "Amun-Of-The-Road" in the tale of *Wenamun*. The difference lies in the fact that by the successful effect of the divine idol the validity of the Egyptian world view is proved in a literary way: Pharaoh still rules the world, and an Egyptian god is still the best and still the only remedy for any problems to arise. It is on this vivid opposition between real-world conditions and their literary treatment that the narrative point of view of this text is based: only the third-person narrator can describe the former Egyptian sphere of influence in the middle of the first millennium B.C. in such a positive manner. A first-person narrative, on the contrary, would probably tell about different experiences, experiences that would more or less fit those Wenamun or Wernai had had. Seen from this angle, the narrative of the *Benetresh-Stela* is the literary attempt to rehabilitate an Egyptian view of the world that was proven invalid by texts like the tale of *Wenamun* or the *Letter of Wernai*. For the same reason the text – although in itself a narrative – comes formally very close to what I termed above as Egyptian rhetoric: a rhetoric that now tries to recolonialize the genre of travel-narratives that it had lost at least 1500 years earlier.

Conclusion

The development of Egyptian fictional discourse is on the one hand closely connected with the occurrence of first-person narratives. These narratives openly indicate their fictionality by making use of the travelling-abroad motif which – textually shaped as a heroes' leaving Egypt – is a metaphor of the boundary-transgressing nature of fiction itself. On the other hand, fictional travel-literature is the only place where in pharaonic Egypt the apparently problematic interface of cultural and individual identity is openly discussed: while didactic-rhetorical literature throughout the history of Egypt merely presents the official view on cultural and collective identity and thus – as a mythical analogon of the *mš.t*-concept – has a clear identity-function, it is fictional travel-literature that from the Middle Kingdom onwards takes up the cause of the theme of an individual de-limitation of society and thus challenges these official identity-concepts. It is in both ways taken together that Egyptian literature is able to show the rear views of those worlds that have been used to create the fictional universe.⁸⁰

(finished fall 1997)

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80 Cf. Iser, *Theorie der Literatur*, 11: "Als ein 'Plenum der Möglichkeiten' deckt Literatur die Rückansichten jener Welten auf, die in sie eingegangen sind".

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