

Does Egyptology Need a “Theory of Literature”?

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Would Egyptology as a discipline (or, more precisely, would a part of the discipline called “Egyptology”) fare better if it intensified its intellectual exchange with the “theory of literature”? The question is more complex than it may appear at first glance – and this is true for a number of different reasons. Above all, it is far from being obvious, at least it is far from being obvious to me, what the scholarly community of the Egyptologists needs or wants, and it is equally difficult to say what exactly the heterogeneous enterprise of literary theory can offer today. Secondly, as both Egyptology and literary theory are institutions (or “discourses”) with their particular histories, there is no guarantee that these two institutions/discourses will converge in that kind of dialogue or exchange whose possibility is already taken for granted in the question of whether Egyptology needs a theory of literature. A naïve approach would presuppose that Egyptology and theory of literature are nothing but the absorption of phenomenal fields (Ancient Egyptian culture and Literature) by scholarly discourses which, somehow inevitably, belong to the same categorical level. In reality, however, an infinity of possible perspectives and functions may shape the mediation between any field of objects and the scholarly discourses referring to it (a scholarly discourse, for example, could conceive of itself as offering the interiorization of [more or less] practical skills, or as a contribution towards the constitution

of a national identity, or as participating in the exploration of possible functions of the human mind) – so that an unproblematic encounter between discourses like those of Egyptology and literary theory (on the basis of an identical or at least similar relationship to their objects) is very unlikely.

This is why, if we are serious about finding an answer, we must begin by *contextualizing the question* of whether Egyptology needs a theory of literature. We will therefore take a closer look at the historical circumstances that accompanied the emergence and the development of both Egyptology (1) and of literary theory (2) in order to identify possible epistemological and discursive asymmetries (3) between them, asymmetries which may potentially complicate their dialogue. While such a contextualization will indeed enable us to come up with an answer or, rather, with a series of answers to our key question, these *answers will remain oblique* because, as we will see, the relationship between Egyptology and literary theory proves to be not a particularly easy one. The contemporary state of Egyptological research offers highly interesting results to the disciplines in its scholarly environment (4) but, on the other hand, literary theory has a tendency today, stronger perhaps than ever before, of suggesting a thorough historization of the concept of “literature”. Once we know which specific varieties of literature literary theory is actually dealing with, this may generate serious scepticism about the applicability of results coming from literary theory to a culture as remote from the occidental tradition as that of Ancient Egypt. (5) But, then, turning around the initial question, should one not at least say that literary theory needs Egyptology? The answer is, once again, complex (6) – for it depends on how we determine the tasks and functions of literary theory. One expectation, however, remains stable within and despite such considerable complexities. With literary theory or without it, Egyptologists will find fascinated readers inside and outside of the academic world.

1

It is almost uncanny to read that, several centuries ago, the sites of the pyramids were “a favorite riding, hunting and tournament ground for the social and military elites of Muslim Egypt” and that, for the longest time, the worldview of Islam attributed dangerous magic influences to the remainders of that remote culture which nobody could understand because nobody could decipher its writing. Even those Ancient Greek authors who had accumulated such an impressive body of knowledge about the history and the institutions of their neighboring empire gave Egypt a “marginal position” within their own mappings. From the angle of the Christian tradition, finally, the pyramids and their world were, so to speak, in a relation of half distance because, on the one side, motifs from Egyptian narratives, mediated through

¹. See the entry "Mummies", in: GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich. In 1926. An Essay on Historical Simultaneity. Cambridge, Ms., 1997, XX-XXX.

Coptic texts, found entry into many apocryphal stories but, on the other side, these motifs never reached the canon of the Gospel. At no other moment since its final disappearance during the times of the Roman Empire, have Ancient Egypt and its texts indeed been as close and, even on a popular level, so well explained as during our century within western culture. If the obsession with looking into Tutankhamen's face and the egyptomania of the 1920s were perhaps the most intense moments of this presence,¹ the volume of knowledge made available and the intensity of our historical understanding have dramatically increased over the past decades, while the place of Ancient Egypt within educational curricula and publishing programs seems to be as stable as ever.

There is no need to insist that all of this would not have been possible without the stunningly successful history of "Egyptology" as an academic field of research. For it belongs to our general cultural knowledge that the origins of Egyptology (with more irrefutable evidence than those of most other disciplines) go back to an initial event and to an initial achievement, i.e., to Napoleon's expedition to Egypt between 1798 and 1801, which led to the discovery of the stone of Rosette and to the deciphering of the hieroglyphs. in 1822. by Champollion. In contrast, it is much less evident than for the disciplines focussing on national cultures what really motivated the Egyptologists of the first generation in their heroic labor of transcribing, translating, and editing texts. Occasionally, we can reconstruct an individual reason for such enthusiasm, like Charles Wycliff Goodwin's and François-Joseph Chabas' ambition to prove wrong the interpretation of certain papyri as a testimony for the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. On the whole, however, it appears to be symptomatic that early Egyptologists, in their large majority, were amateur scholars. During several decades, there was no obvious need nor interest on the States' side to institutionalize Egyptology as an academic discipline. It is not untypical, in this respect, that, towards the end of the 19th century, the University of Berlin became a center for the systematization (mainly consisting in writing grammars and dictionaries) of the work produced by the first generation of Egyptologists. Nowhere was the academic ideal of "covering" the full horizon of known cultures and of all the available cultural materials more rigorously pursued, even in the absence of an immediate political interest, than in Prussia and, since 1871, in the Germany of the Second Empire. By 1927, it probably was quite a normal expectation that an ambitious editorial project like the *Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft* (which in fact was rather a manual of literary history than of literary studies in general) would contain a chapter on Ancient Egyptian literature.

This chapter in the *Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft*, written by Max Pieper and published under the title "Die aegyptische Literatur", together with a review article by Alfred Herrmann, illustrates an important bifurcation

within the history of Egyptology. While Pieper used texts labeled as “literature” with the mere intention of gaining access to the history of Ancient Egyptian culture, Herrmann insisted on the task of analyzing the complete corpus of Egyptian literature from the angle of a form-oriented reconstruction of literary genres. This divergence between Pieper and Herrmann might be long forgotten, if it were not for the publication, in 1974, and for the success of an essay in which Jan Assmann proposed a recourse to the then much debated (but already more than fifty years old) theories of the Russian Formalists. The intention was, once again, to develop a concept of “literature” compatible with a specific sub-group within the total corpus of Ancient Egyptian texts.² What particularly fascinated Assmann in this context was the Formalists’ idea of purely relational definitions for the “literatures” within each specific culture and each historical period, definitions of literature that were meant to depend entirely on the difference between the “literary” texts and their particular discursive environments. The discussion of Assmann’s proposal within Egyptology seems to have led to a much less theoretically conscious concern with “literariness”, to a concern also that has not always resisted the temptation of using substantialist (non-historicized) sets of criteria in order to determine which Old Egyptian texts should be regarded as “literary”. Altogether, it was surprising for me to discover such an intense debate about textual classifications and about textual forms generally referred to as “aesthetic” within a discipline whose broad success has always been based on its contributions to our knowledge of cultural history. But what is surprising must not necessarily be problematic or even illegitimate.

2

Different from Egyptology, the field of literary studies (as an assembly of academic disciplines that include, each, the historiography of a national literature in an European language, the practice of literary interpretation, and debates about a theory of literature) does not have a clear-cut, consensual reference when it comes to narrating its historical origin. On the other hand, it is easier for literary studies than it is for Egyptology to understand why the disciplines gathered under its umbrella found strong support from the State’s side and why they were thriving all over the 19th century in most European countries.³ A point of departure for narrating the history of literary studies could be the then new divergence and the fast widening gap between normative conceptions of society and gap brought in to being, as a new cultural space to which, at least theoretically, every citizen had access, the sphere of leisure. Leisure was constituted by activities that either fostered the illusion of enjoying those privileges which the normative image of society promised to everyone (without fulfilling this promise in everyday life), or it offered

². Der literarische Text im alten Aegypten. Versuch einer Begriffsbestimmung. In: *OLZ* 69:117-26, 1974.

³. See GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich. Un souffle d’Allemagne ayant passé. Friedrich Diez, Gaston Paris, and the Origins of National Philology. In: *Romance Philology* 40:1-37, 1986; Idem. The Future of Literary Studies? In: *New Literary History* 26:499-519 (Summer 1995); READINGS, Bill. The University in Ruins. Cambridge, Ms., 1996.

forms of experience suggesting that the perceived gap between everyday-life and the self-glorifying image of society did not "really" exist. During the decades of European Romanticism, the writing and the reading of literature became a part of this sphere of leisure. Reading literature was regarded as a kingsway towards the interiorization of the normative image of society, and literary studies were created as an institution that supported the discourses of literature in fulfilling their new function of mediating between everyday experience and the official social utopia.

This occurred under two different modalities. Wherever the bourgeois Reforms were reactions to a situation of defeat and of national humiliation (like in Germany), the normative conception of society drew its values, its images, and its metaphors from a glorified, mostly medieval past which, from a (for us problematic) 19th century perspective, appeared almost naturally to be a national past. Under such circumstances, literary history and the editing of texts from the "national" past became a concern, in addition to the production of textual interpretations for the orientation of non-professional readers. In those cases, however, in which the bourgeois Reforms or Revolutions occurred without a nationally humiliating event, like in England or in France (at least before 1871), the normative image of society consisted in an ideal notion of Makind which presented itself as universal – but which, today, we can easily identify as composed by specifically European (and often even: nationally specific) values. A crucial condition for this framing of an academic discipline was an – again – historically specific concept of "literature" which literary studies, in their early beginnings, projected indiscriminately to the different periods of literary history.⁴ This concept presupposed that any literary text was the product of an inspired individual author's intention and agency (i.e. the emanation of a "genius"); that literary authors, without personally knowing their readers, were always close, in the texts they wrote, to the reader's most intimate thoughts and desires; that neither the writing nor the reading of those texts was informed by any concrete interest and that, therefore, their generalized semantic status was that of fiction; that phenomena of form played a more important role for literary texts than within any other type of discourse. Later, it became an increasingly accepted – and often feared – expectation that literary texts had a critical or even a "subversive" potential.

Three important contrasts between the disciplinary development of literary studies and the early stages of Egyptology have become evident from this short description. Firstly, no specific concept of literature, neither implicitly nor explicitly, plays a foundation for Egyptology. Secondly, as claims for a continuity between Ancient Egyptian culture and the present of the western nations have never been made, Egyptology, unlike literary studies, does not participate in any functions of social or political legitimation. This,

⁴. See GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich. *Medium Literatur* forthcoming in: FASSLER, Manfred / HALBACH, Wulf / KONITZER Ralph, eds.: *Mediengeschichte(n)*. München 1997, XXX-XXX.

thirdly, must have been a main reason why, despite the complexity of the tasks implied and despite the early date of its foundational events, the process of professionalization and the academic institutionalization of Egyptology occurred with a considerable delay compared to literary studies. From the point of view of the unquestioned status and the social impact of the discipline, the 19th century was probably the great age of literary studies, in particular of literary history. The discipline underwent a first serious crisis, especially in those countries which had followed the German model of academic institutionalization, during the first decades of our century – and the emergence of the subfield called “literary studies” was a direct reaction to this crisis. What became problematic, in a changing epistemological environment and under the traumatic impact of the first World War, were those idealized concepts of the nation and of Mankind which, from their beginning, had been the most important horizons of reference for the literary disciplines. As these horizons began to vanish, literary scholars saw themselves confronted with a number of questions that had been implicitly answered (or should one rather say: that had been successfully silenced) by the disciplinary practice during the 19th century. These questions have ever since constituted the field of literary theory – and what has guaranteed their survival was the fact that they never found definitively satisfying answers. The first of these questions concerned the *function of literary studies* (now that this function could no longer consist in its contribution towards the mediation between the everyday experience and the normative image of society). The second new question came from the *need for a metahistorical definition of literature* with which to circumscribe the field of literary studies (previously, the romantic notion of literature had been taken for granted in this context and, in addition, there had been a tendency to attribute the status of “literature” to any text that could be used in the function of mediating between the normative image of society and everyday experience).⁵ Finally, it was now no longer obvious *how the history of literature would relate to other lines of historical development* (before, all different histories had been seen as converging in the one normative concepts of the nation or of Mankind).

These three questions were primordial, for example, within Russian Formalism which is generally regarded as the first “theory of literature” deserving this name. But there was another new form of practice emerging within literary studies which reacted to the crisis of the discipline. This practice, particularly influential among some of the most outstanding German scholars of the 1920s,⁶ did not develop a self-referential discourse as programmatic as that of Formalism and is therefore more difficult to identify. It presupposed a shift from discourses presenting national histories of literature as linear developments towards a paradigm of comparison between chronologically parallel segments within different national literatures. Such

⁵. This is the reason why the medieval corpora within the different European national literature always include texts, such as prayers, recipes, contracts etc., that we can by no means associate with our modern concepts of “literature”.

⁶. See GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich. Karl Vossler's noble Eignamkeit. Über die Ambivalenzen der ‘inneren Emigration’”. In: GEISLER, R./POPP, W., eds.: *Wissenschaft und Nationalsozialismus*. Essen, 1988, 275-298; id: *Pathos of the Earthly Progress*. Erich Auerbach's *Everydays*. In: LERER, Seth, ed.: *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology*. Stanford, 1996, 13-35. Regarding the emergence of the discipline of Comparative Literature, see PALUMBO-LIU, David: *Termos da (in)diferença: Cosmopolitismo, Política Cultural e o Futuro dos estudos da Literatura*. In: *Cader-nos da Pósl/etras*. Rio de Janeiro, 14:46-62, 1995.

7. In this regard, it is interesting to know that the editor of the above-mentioned *Handbuch der Literaturwissenschaft* was Oskar Walzel, one of the most influential representatives of the comparative (and cultural-historical) approach in literary studies. See e.g. his: *Vom Geistesleben des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*. Leipzig, 1911 (trans. into English in 1932.) André Jolles' extraordinary book, *Einfache Formen*, (Halle, 1930), whose impact on Egyptology is mentioned by Schenkel, belongs into the same historical context.

8. This, I suppose, must be the main reason for the scepticism, articulated by Wolfgang Schenkel, regarding the possibility for Egyptologists to write a "History of Egyptian literature".

comparing become a way of reconstructing certain features that characterize specific periods within European culture. Literary history, in this context, turned into cultural history. It seems that Egyptology responded to both of the new paradigms which came out of the crisis of literary studies, to literary theory and to the new discourse of cultural history. But the moments of highest intensity in these responses inverted the order in which the new paradigms had emerged. While the model of cultural history probably reached its greatest influence within Egyptology during the 1920s, (contemporary to its culminating moment in literary studies),⁷ the broad reception of the Formalists began only fifty years later, simultaneous to their enthusiastic rediscovery within literary studies.

But it is perhaps less important for us to reconstruct the details of similar historical filiations than to emphasize those insights resulting from our brief juxtaposition of the histories of Egyptology and of literary studies (including literary theory) which directly concern the key problem of their epistemological compatibility. Without always taking it into account, literary studies have been based, since their beginning, on a highly specific concept of literature, a concept which is unlikely to have any more than rough parallels within Ancient Egyptian culture.⁸

Emerging from chronologically close but culturally very different contexts, it is not surprising that the academic disciplines of Egyptology and of literary studies have developed different political concerns, different intellectual paradigms, and different discursive models. Literary theory, in specific, is an academic subfield whose questions and whose accomplishments depend directly on a particular moment in the history of literary studies. There is no guarantee, to say the least, that the results of literary theory can ever be successfully transferred and applied to any disciplinary field outside literary studies.

3

Such very general considerations about possible asymmetries between Egyptology and literary studies become more concrete as soon as one compares some of the specific conditions and difficulties under which Egyptologists do their work with the practice of the historian of western literatures. One of the most striking contrasts is that between an extreme scarcity of documents available for Ancient Egyptian culture and, on the other hand, an abundance of primary texts with which even the medievalists among literary historians are struggling today. If Egyptologists must ask the question, for example, whether any equivalent to a literary discourse existed during the Ancient Kingdom, if a specialist counts a total of between twenty or thirty distinguishable traditions for literary texts during the Middle Kingdom, and

if the work of editing and translating in a field as important as that of the demotic texts is still in its initial stage, then the observation of any kind of historical development within Ancient Egyptian literature, due to such scarcity of sources, has a highly hypothetical status – and the reconstruction of any intertextual networks is perhaps simply impossible. Egyptologists are certainly aware of the consequences which this situation has for the status of their discourses – up to the point where such awareness has become a key-component in the intellectual identity of their discipline. This challenge coming from the discipline's precarious documentary basis is aggravated both by the lack of any meta-commentaries and concepts, within Ancient Egyptian culture, regarding the texts characterized as “literary”, and by the fragmentary character of most of the textual sources that we possess. The state of the discipline's archive and the distance that separates us, on different levels, from Ancient Egypt confront the Egyptologist with hermeneutic challenges that could hardly be any tougher – and any more elementary. At the same time and for the same lack of contextualizing knowledge, the highest levels of hermeneutic sophistication often remain inaccessible for the Egyptologist. As long as it is unclear whether or not a specific textual passage must be read as a metaphor and whether another one is a euphemism for a sexual detail or a phrase without any sexual connotations, as long as the Egyptologist's task is often reduced to “translating what he does not understand”, concerns like those, for example, of deconstruction or of *critique génétique* are quite secondary.

Other limits and problems of Egyptology have to do with the multiple writing systems which Ancient Egyptian culture developed and with the materiality of the media which it used. Given the strictly consonantic character of these writing systems, there is no hope for us to ever imagine the sound qualities of Ancient Egyptian texts, which of course makes particularly precarious the analysis and even the identification of lyrical texts. On the other hand, one may suppose that the role played by the form of graphemes in the construction of texts, including the constitution of their content, must have been quite different from the reduced importance typically attributed to graphemes within our – logocentric – western culture. But above all the multiplicity of the writing systems and of the material media belonging to Ancient Egyptian culture makes highly problematic the assumption that Ancient Egyptian literature constituted a unity. We know that, at least statistically, certain relationships of preference existed between determinate textual genres and the different writing systems (i.e. monumental hieroglyphs, cursive hieroglyphs, hieratic writing, and demotic writing). The picture becomes even more complex – and even more potentially heterogeneous – if one takes into account, as a third level of reference, the different materials on which texts (in different letters) were written – such as walls, papyri, wood

⁹ From a similar perspective, literary studies have discussed, during recent years, whether the emergence of the concept and of the forms of literature to which we are used in western cultures was not a result of the institutionalization of the printing press. See SMOLKA-KOERDT, Gisela/ SPANGENBERG, Peter-Michael/ TILLMANN-BARTYLLA, Dagmar, eds.; *Der Ursprung von Literatur. Medien/Rollen/Kommunikations-situationen zwischen 1450 und 1650*. München, 1988.

tablets, and ostraka. Finally, at least during the New Kingdom, situations of diglossia introduced the simultaneous existence of historically different layers of language as a further complexifying dimension. Of course Egyptologists thematize all these problems, with special emphasis given, it seems, to the functions and generic restrictions of monumental hieroglyphs. But two overarching questions – highly interesting questions from the perspective of contemporary literary studies – still remain to be addressed. The first of these questions – the one emphasizing historical difference – is whether a more systematic approach to the phenomenal levels of the writing systems and of the material media would not generate new insights into the institutionalization of and the distinction between different communicative forms, especially between those communicative forms that remain without self-reference in Ancient Egyptian culture and must therefore be recuperated inductively.⁹ Which are the genres, for example, that only materialized in monumental writing? The second question is a self-reflexive question regarding the present state of the Egyptological debates. If we make an association between the western concept of literature, logocentrism, and a lack of attention dedicated to what Derrida calls the "exteriority of writing", could we then say that the Egyptologists' fascination with the (inevitably homogenizing) concept of "literature" necessarily implies the risk of losing out of sight the dimensions of the writing systems and of the media?

4

To emphasize, as the previous section did, that Egyptologists are confronted with difficulties and tasks unknown to literary critics and historians of literature, with tasks also that sometimes seriously limit their possibilities of understanding and of historical reconstruction, does of course not mean that Egyptology has nothing to offer to its neighboring disciplines. The contrary is the case. Whenever Egyptologists, in their analytical practice, have not been relying on the universal validity of certain patterns generalized within western cultures, they have produced insights that are the more important for the historians and theorists of literature as they are all highly counterintuitive. In their majority, these insights focus on the pragmatic conditions for the production and reception of texts in Ancient Egypt. Of particular interest are the manifold and complementary observations regarding the status of writing and of writing competence. Based on the fact, trivial for Egyptologists, that the quantitatively most important source for texts from Ancient Egypt are indeed tombs, the logical consequence that texts not having to do with tombs constitute the exception has made questions about the functions of these "other texts" particularly productive. These questions drew new attention to the – only vaguely institutionalized – social situation

of Ancient Egyptian schools and generated the thesis that knowing how to read and how to write (and, with it, the capacity of “inhabiting” a certain number of highly canonized texts) was synonymous with “being an Egyptian”. As soon, however, as we accept this suggestion, the historical reference of “being an Egyptian” is reduced to a small elite within that culture, more precisely to “the titled and official classes”. If papyri were the most frequently used material medium facilitating this process of socialization, it is obvious that the royal inscriptions in monumental hieroglyphs fulfilled different functions. Above all, they were meant to impose a specific impact on the beholders and their behavior, and they thus became part of “the state’s memorial of elite values”.

In the context of similar reflections and reconstructions, Egyptologists rely on the concept of “genre”, especially on an interpretation of “genre” coming from Protestant theology¹⁰ which presents each recurrent textual form as shaped by a specific “Sitz im Leben”. Such attention given to the frame conditions under which texts were produced and used has greatly differentiated the understanding of the relationship between power and religion in Ancient Egypt. The knowledge of certain texts and their content was indeed an essential condition for the pharaoh’s power. To read those texts meant to reenact a set of ideological models. Within Egyptian culture, such constant commemoration of certain values constituted a necessary function that was covered by the broad corpus of didactic texts. For, typically, Egyptian gods were not expected to provide clear-cut distinctions between sins and virtues, and they therefore left a void regarding ethical orientation – which theology in and by itself could not easily fill. A particularly interesting genre, a genre with a very different – but also religious – origin is that of autobiography. Without any exceptions, its early manifestations were dedicated to what was the central project in every Egyptian’s life: the reassurance of a – spiritual and, in a certain sense, also material – survival after one’s physical death. This wish, which transcended the mere hope of being remembered by one’s posterity, this wish for “real presence” (and the allusion to a key-motif of medieval theology is deliberate here) explains why we find early autobiographies as hieroglyphic inscriptions carved into widely visible stelae that were erected in public places. While such early examples of autobiography always render a highly conventional and highly idealized image of the person in question, the genre ended up coming much closer to our modern expectations of an individualized and individualizing account. This historical development culminates in the fictional narrative about the life of *Sinuhe*, the perhaps most unusual and (according to our modern criteria) the most “literary” text within Ancient Egyptian culture. That such changes on the level of genre-typical content went along with a development of the generic functions appears from certain changes, occurring over the centuries, in the mediatic presentation of autobiographical writing. But as close as the forms and

¹⁰. See JAUSS, Hans Robert. *Theorie der Gattungen und Literatur des Mittelalters*. In: DELBOUILLA, Maurice, ed. *Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*. Heidelberg, 1972. Vol. 1, 107-138. esp. 129-134.

functions of certain Egyptian genres may come to certain patterns of the western tradition, important and interesting differences remain. A particularly striking case is the concretization of the function of entertainment within the Egyptologists’ debates. Often, “entertainment” seems to have responded to the need of calming the pharaoh’s temper – which, at the Egyptian court, meant much more than just pleasing or flattering the ruler. For the pharaoh’s temper, perhaps even his melancholy (if we may use this word despite its historically very specific meaning), constituted situations of concrete danger for the courtiers and even for the members of the royal family. Being interpreted as part of a cosmological disorder, the pharaoh’s temper was never reduced to just being the symptom of an unpleasant individual disposition.

One of the most fascinating aspects within the pragmatics of Ancient Egyptian texts (a topic that literary historians should more systematically explore) regards the question of authorship. While most texts are not related to any name at all. Egyptologists are certain that, in the cases of those two genres whose texts are quite regularly attributed to individuals, i.e. in the case of didactic literature and in that of autobiography, the name-references do not correspond to our modern criteria of authorship. Regarding the autobiographies, there is no reason to believe that those in whose name they were written – in the first person – were those who actually composed the texts. If it is characteristic for didactic texts that they present themselves as the work of individuals (mostly of individuals that had lived in a chronologically remote age), we tend to believe that, with a few exceptions, these attributions were invented because they gave the texts that specific aura of dignity which we associate with wisdom. The sum of such observations regarding the question of authorship suggests that we need to rethink the entire problem for the context of Ancient Egyptian culture. This rethinking has indeed already begun. Egyptologists have thus come to postulate that, from the point of view of authorial agency, the pharaoh may have been regarded as the only and universal author of all texts – not unlike the god of the Christian Middle ages for whom the Latin word “*auctor*” was reserved. Others think that the role of authorship may have corresponded, at least for the majority of the texts transmitted, to the owners of monumental tombs.

5

The topic, predominant within the pragmatics of Ancient Egyptian culture, of the intricate and seemingly ubiquitous relationships between those texts which Egyptologists define as “literature” and the different forms of religious practice brings us back to the main question with which this essay is confronted. It is the question (now more obvious in its complexity) of whether one can successfully apply certain definitions of “literature” and

other results of literary theory to Ancient Egyptian culture. Let us discuss one more example. Together, literary and theological texts constitute “the majority of our evidence” for the existence of myths during the Middle Kingdom. This precisely explains the impression that aesthetic functions and functions of magic were often intertwined, and that, although any kind of magic implies strong claims of referentiality, fictional texts could be used in contexts of magic practice. In the case of this interesting discursive configuration, too strong an emphasis on the “literariness” of certain texts and, as its consequence, an isolation of these “literary” texts from the rest of the Egyptian corpus could imply the risk of missing – or even of losing – insights into those phenomena of cultural alterity by which the neighboring disciplines of Egyptology and the non-academic readership are so particularly fascinated. Conversely, a not sufficiently skeptical application of the concept of literature may also run the risk of producing effects of homogenization and impressions of homogeneity that are as problematic as the effects of isolating literature from its discursive environment. Therefore, Egyptologists who seek a dialogue with the most recent debates in literary studies should pay specific attention to its present tendency of developing distinctions between different levels of mediality, to a tendency, that is, which has opened up new perspectives of internal differentiation and historization within the field of western literatures.¹¹ For it is likely that the application of this aspect to Ancient Egyptian culture could, in turn, generate insights of paradigmatic value for literary studies. The functional differentiation between different writing systems in Ancient Egypt, for example, appears to be more complex and, at the same time, more systematized than in any of the western literatures. In contrast, analyses about the degrees of “poeticity” represented by certain Egyptian texts or investigations regarding their status as “artworks”, as impressive as their argumentations may sometimes look, will always be accompanied by doubts about their historical and cultural appropriateness.

At the end, an outsider cannot quite repress the question what is at stake in the Egyptologists’ contemporary fascination with a concept of literature adopted from literary theory – if so much seems to be at risk. Doubtlessly, this fascination must be motivated and guided by some intuitions which the outsider, for a sheer lack of reading competence, is not capable of sharing. In the interest of a fruitful intellectual exchange between the disciplines, it would certainly be helpful to make more explicit these intuitions which have led to the belief that literature, in the western sense of the word, was a part of Ancient Egyptian culture. But is it too simplistic to go one step further and ask whether, in addition, the concern of a small group of specialists not to lose the contact with the ongoing debates in the neighboring disciplines may have played a role in Egyptology’s shift to “literariness”? On the one hand, it can only be in the interest of the scholars of modern literatures that Egyptologists

¹¹. See, as evidence for this concern, a number of the contributions to GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich / PFEIFFER, K. Ludwig, eds.: *Materialities of Communication*. Stanford, 1994.

have and foster such concerns. On the other hand, however, literary scholars would be disrespectful of their colleagues in the field of Egyptology if they did not openly and (if necessary) critically react to the results which their interest for literary theory has produced. From the point of view of the ongoing discussion in literary studies, theorists of literature are under the obligation to warn Egyptologists against the possible emergence of what one may call "epistemological artefacts": against historical reconstructions, that is, which are visibly shaped by problematic asymmetries between the theoretical concepts used and the cultural phenomena analyzed. At the same time, we should insist that the intellectual tradition of literary theory has far more to offer than just definitions of literature that pretend to be of metahistorical and transcultural value. If, as I would argue, there is nothing wrong with the traditional Egyptological habit of reading texts primarily as historical documents, then we can conclude that the development of certain motifs which dominated in the Egyptologists' dialogue with literary studies during the 1920s would have a greater intellectual potential than the continued insistence on the Formalist and Structuralist agenda. After all, this agenda is not as modern as it may look. What was rediscovered and partly revised by literary studies – and by Egyptology – during the 1970s goes back, in its epistemological origins, to the turning of the century.

6

Ancient Egyptian culture is so remote from our present-day concerns that we cannot easily hope or even claim to "learn" anything immediately useful from it.¹² Becoming familiar with Egyptian culture will not provide us with solutions for everyday problems nor contribute to the legitimation of institutions existing in the present. This lack of a primarily evident "usefulness" may be one reason why it has become a temptation, especially within the European academic context, to integrate the results of Egyptological research into the larger framework of a "historical anthropology". Historical anthropology (if I understand the concept correctly)¹³ seeks to juxtapose and to systematize a broad variety of historically and culturally different forms of human behavior and its manifestations, with the ultimate goal of rendering a picture of the potential and of the limits implicit to the human mind – and perhaps also to the human body. From this perspective, the notion of a "historical anthropology" comes close to Edmund Husserl's concept of "life-world" – especially to its sociological interpretations.¹⁴ While historical anthropology as a possible context thus offers a function to Egyptological research – however vague and purely academic this function may be – one should not completely repress, at least within the contemporary epistemological situation, a certain dose of skepticism. Does historical anthropol-

¹². See *After Learning from History*, the introductory chapter to my forthcoming book: *In 1926. An essay on Historical Simultaneity*, Cambridge, Ms., 1997.

¹³. See, for a complex discussion, ISER, Wolfgang. *Key Concepts of Current Literary Theory and the Imaginary, and Toward a Literary Anthropology*, in: *Prospecting. From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*, Baltimore, 1989, 215-35, 262-84.

¹⁴. See GUMBRECHT, Hans Ulrich. *Everyday-World and "Life-World" as Philosophical Concepts. A Genealogical Approach*, in: *New Literary History* 24:745-61, 1993/94.

ogy not inevitably imply the problematic presupposition that something like a common denominator of “the human” must exist? And do we not run the risk of reducing the fascinating alterity of a culture like that of Ancient Egypt if we oblige ourselves to constantly compare and compatibilize it, under the pressure of such an “anthropological” framework, with phenomena belonging to different cultures? While such reservations are hard to eliminate, there is of course also the danger, on the other hand, of endlessly indulging in the exotic otherness of Egyptian culture. This would be the danger of “orientalizing”¹⁵ Ancient Egypt, the danger of an attitude as unacceptable, from an epistemological point of view, as the tendency towards uncritical and boundless totalization which is inherent to the paradigm of historical anthropology.

In cultural moments like ours, where the validity of the most venerable forms of practice, with their underlying presuppositions and values, is no longer self-evident, we are condemned (or should we rather say: we are blessed with the opportunity) to speculate about possible preconscious fascinations that condition our choices and our behavior. In this sense, it has been said,¹⁶ that what we call “historical culture” may be driven by a desire to speak to the dead. There is no other field which illustrates this thesis more convincingly than the institutionalized relationship between contemporary culture, academic and popular, and the culture of Ancient Egypt. If we are only ready to admit that, at least for the time being, we have no better – honest – reason for our fascination with Ancient Egypt (and for our fascination with so many other cultures of the past) than the desire to speak to the dead, then it becomes evident that our view of Ancient Egypt relies on a strong aesthetic component. Such an insight – or has it more of a confession? – causes a remarkable shift in the significance of our initial question. For the answer to this question, the answer to the question whether Egyptology needs theory of literature, would then no longer depend on our inclination – or reluctance – to identify the texts of Ancient Egypt as “literary”. Rather, we would have to deal with the problem of whether we want to acknowledge “as literary” the texts produced by the discipline of Egyptology. If we do so, we inevitably transform the question about the usefulness of literary theory for Egyptology from an object-related question into a self-reflexive problem. And there is certainly reason to believe that some of the very best texts written by Egyptologists manifest and facilitate such an aesthetic approach towards the past.

¹⁵. Despite an exuberant variety of interpretations and applications, one still feels obliged to refer to the genealogical origin of this concept, SAID, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York, 1978.

¹⁶. See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt's contribution to VEESER, H. Aram, ed.: *The New Historicism*. New York, 1989.