ON THE CONCEPTION OF THE POETIC FORM — A LOVE LETTER TO A DEPARTED WIFE

OSTRACON LOUVRE 698

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The ostracon Louvre 698 is a vestige of a rare moment in the history of ancient Egyptian literature — the instant of a literary form's conception. It stands at that elusive juncture where the writer consciously makes the transition from the banal to the poetic, from non-art to art.

The text of this ostracon is usually assigned to the corpus of "letters to the dead."[1] It is written on a limestone flake in the hand of the well-known 20th dynasty scribe, Butehamun, son of Dhutimes, from Deir el-Medineh,[2] and addressed to his departed first wife Ikhtay. "Letters to the Dead" are a defined sub-genre of letters in ancient Egyptian literature and are known from the end of the Old Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom.[3] By the genre definition they differ from regular letters in that the addressee is always a dead person. People plead with their dead relatives to stop interfering with their lives or ask them for help in matters such as curing an illness or righting an injustice. From these requests we can deduce that the dead could be held responsible for events in the land of the living, and that

[1] It has been assigned to the genre of "letter" by all scholars, see Gardiner and Černý 1957:22; Wente 1990:217–218; Frandsen 1992.

[2] Gardiner and Černý 1957; pl. LXXX–LXXXa. In his *Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period*, Černý (1973:369–370) offered a partial translation and identified the writer as the well-known Butehamun from Deir el-Medineh. (For why only one Butehamun, and not two or even three individuals by the same name, see recently, and very convincingly, Jansen-Winkeln 1994.) In his "Letters from Ancient Egypt" Edward Wente gave an excellent new translation but without commentary. The most recent and penetrating treatment of the text is that of Frandsen, which includes a detailed linguistic and philological discussion. My translation and interpretation of the text differs on some telling points from that of Wente and Frandsen. For the genre of "Letters to the Dead" in general, see Gardiner and Sethe 1928, Wente 1990:210; conclusive bibliography in Frandsen 1990:31 n.4.

[3] Actually to date, see Frandsen 1992.

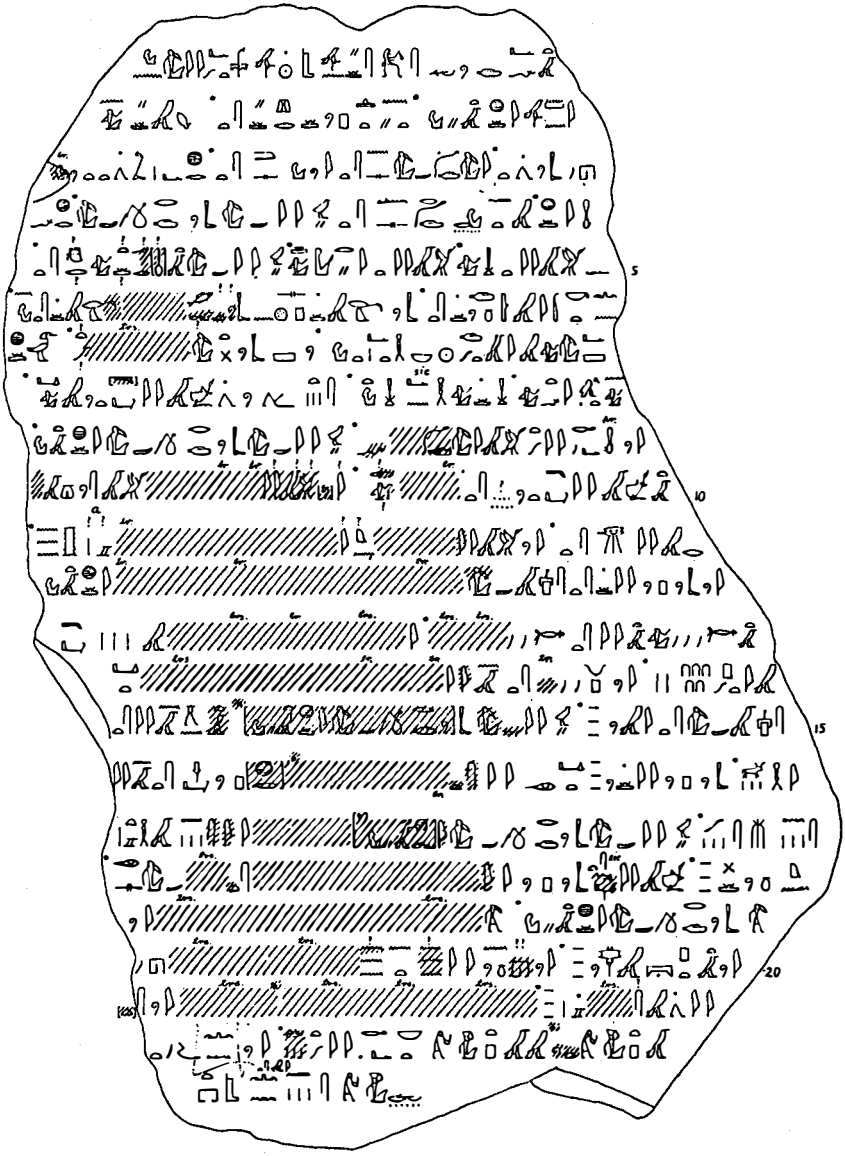

Fig. 1. Ostracon Louvre 698, *Recto*. (After Gardiner and Černý 1957, pl. LXXX)

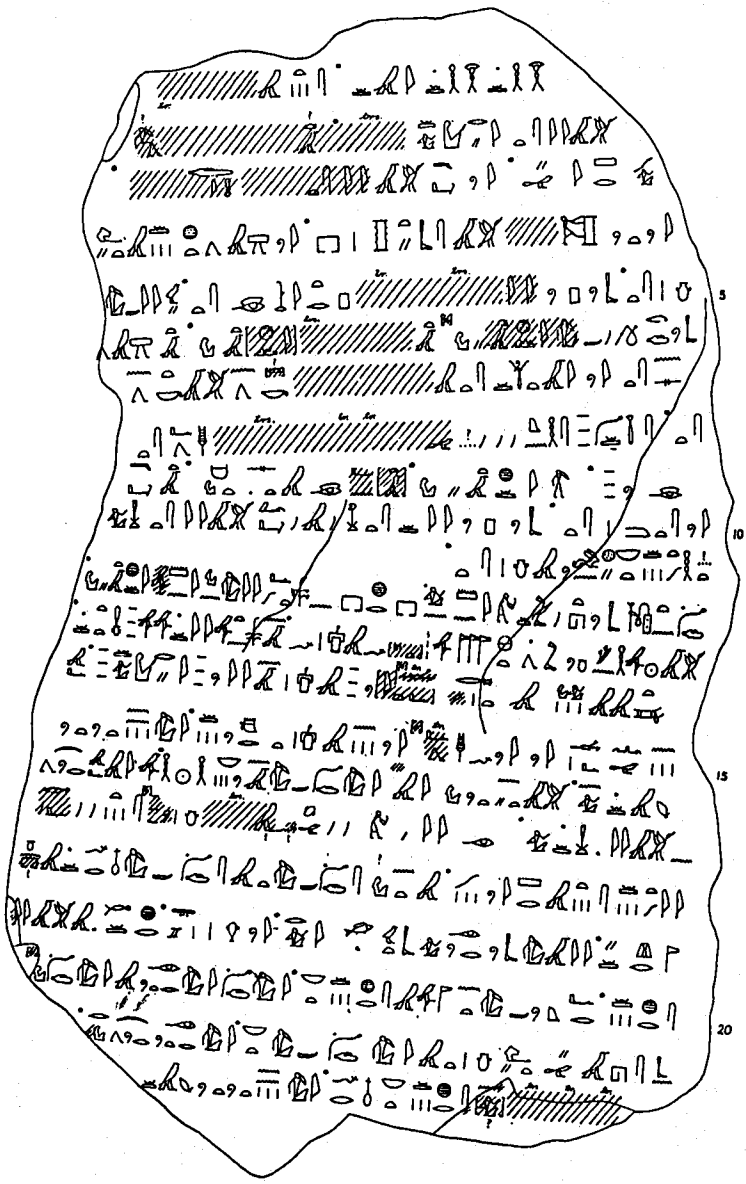

Fig. 2. Ostracon Louvre 698, *Verso* (After Gardiner and Černý 1957, pl. LXXX)

the Egyptians believed that the dead could be called upon to intervene in earthly affairs and in some cases they could even be sued before a netherworld tribunal. The letters were generally written on a vessel deposited in the tomb so the dead person would be sure to read them (Gardiner and Sethe 1928; Grieshammer 1975; Wente 1990:210); Butehamun's letter is written on a limestone flake and was probably deposited by him near his first wife's coffin, in her tomb.

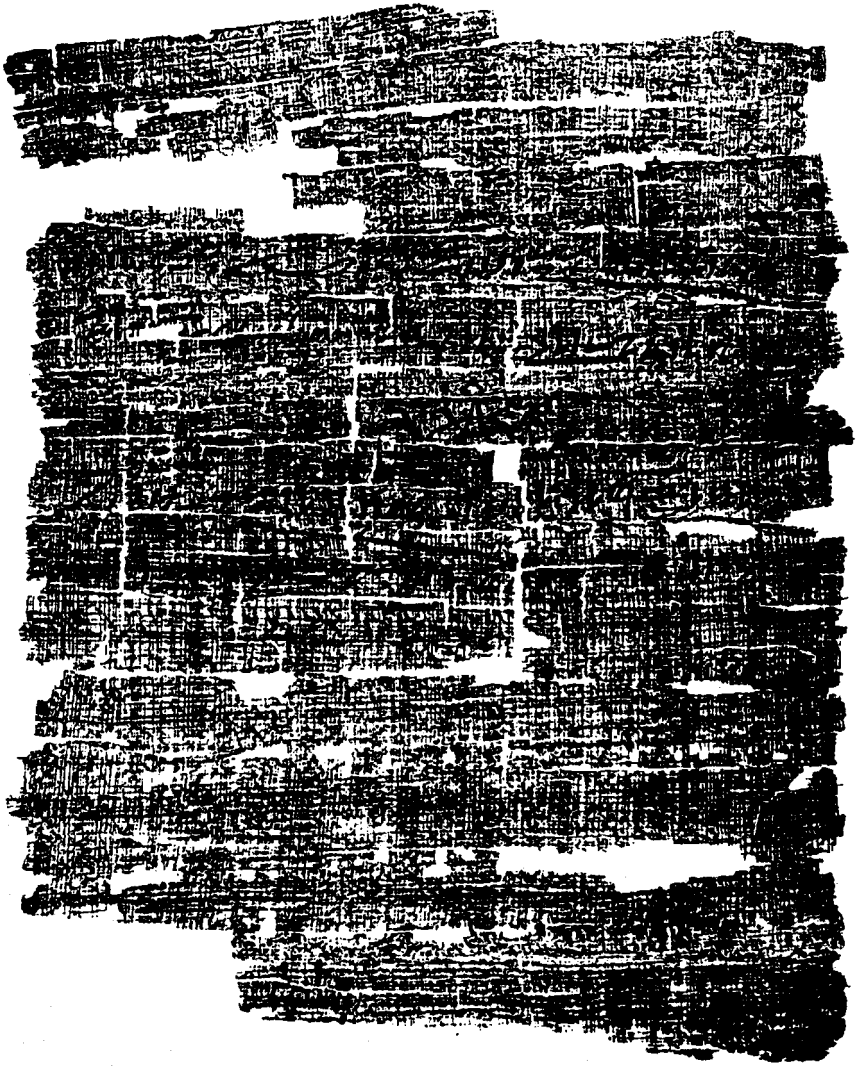

Fig. 3. pBM 10411, *Verso* (After Janssen 1991, pl. 4)

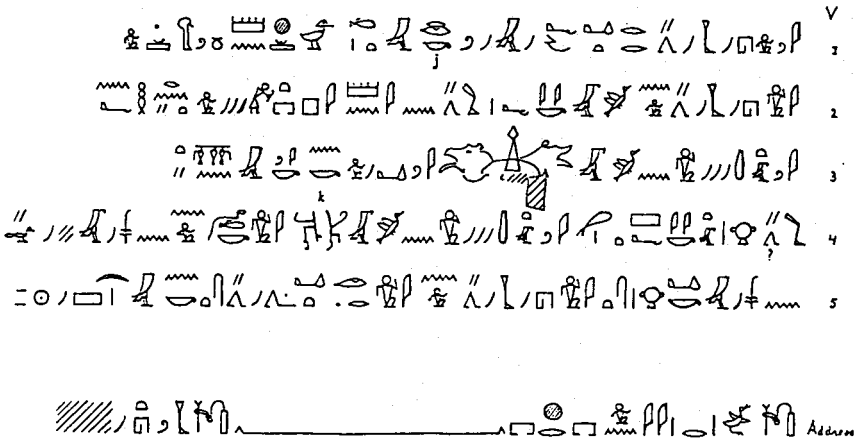

Fig. 4. pBM 10411 transcription to the *Verso* (After Janssen 1991, pl. 3) Copyright British Museum.

The text is complete and runs along both sides of the limestone flake (figs. 1–2). Yet we can only share Černý's regret as to its general condition: "Unfortunately, many lines are irretrievably damaged by the rubbing to which the stone was exposed after it had been thrown out of the tomb by impious hands into the rubble of the Theban necropolis." Another difficulty is the extreme cursiveness of the hieratic script, rendering some parts of the transliteration a mere suggestion. The whole text is written in red ink, and is dotted in black. Usually these texts are written in black and are dotted with red. It is difficult to know if this change is due to some technical problem, or has a significant semiotic role. Černý suggests that the text was reread carefully by the writer (Černý 1973:396). I would like to offer here a somewhat different translation of the more legible parts of the text,[4] and then discuss the importance of this text from the point of view of the literary form's history.

Text

The noble coffin[a] of the departed chantress of Amon, Ikhtay;
That beneath which she lies.
Listen to me and please send
My message to her, as you are at her side.
"What is your condition?

[4] For complete translations, see Wente 1990:217–219, and Frandsen 1992.

How are you?"[5]
It is you who will say to her
"*Ouy, I do not prosper*"[b]
So he says, your brother, your companion.[6]
"Ouy, the perfection of beauty[c]
Like whom there is no other[d]
I did not find any evil [in you]
[Nor did you find it]?
I call for your body every moment[e]
Answer [me . . .]
Excellent you are to me, more than mother, father
Brothers and sisters.[f]
They come, but you are taken from me.
It is as powerful [as I recount it].
Ouy, I do not prosper, Ikhtay.
The one that has been taken --

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the fool is [still] crying over her
My - - - - - -embrace———
But she is not satisfied- - - - -
[Ouy, I do not prosper,] Ikhtay
———
———
Ouy, [I do not prosper, Ikhtay]
The taking of her cattle
They did not cause her to make—
You have made an offering of their offspring
Ouy, I do not prosper, [Ikhtay]
— ———many fields —
———
Ouy, I do not prosper, Ikhtay
———
When the sky was windy
When waves of water——
descended———
As she[7] was loaded,
with all sorts of heavy loads,

[5] The question "how are you" appears as *iw.t mi ih* in a letter to a dead woman at theend of the First Intermediate Period, see Wente 1975/76.

[6] Butehamun uses the possessive article *p3y.t-sn* and not the usual suffix; compare Groll 1990.

[7] Or "as *it* was loaded."

Although there was no carrying pole for them,
nor a place to place them thereof.
They----------her companion

I followed everything that was in her heart

Ouy, I do not prosper, Ikhtay
The----------Ikhtay
The one that departed while her role

Ouy, Ikhtay, the fairest of women[8]
She was taken away while she was on my side
She did not neglect her brother
In every [matter] that was in her heart.

Statement by the necropolis scribe Butehamun to the chantress of Amon Ikhtay:
Pre has departed, his Ennead following him, the king as well.
All humans in one body following their fellow-beings.
There is no one who will stay,
We shall all follow you;
Can anyone hear me in the place where you are?[9]
Tell the lord of eternity,
Let my brother arrive.
Make----------
Their great ones as their small ones.
It is you who will tell good tidings in the necropolis,
Since I committed no abomination against you while you were on earth;
So grasp my situation,
Swear to god in every manner,
Saying: "It is in accordance with what I have said that things shall be done".
May I not deceive your heart in anything I have said;
Until I reach you.
------in every good manner.
Can anybody hear at all?[g]

[8] Lit. "as a woman."
[9] See Groll 1970:57.

Commentary

(a) The word *ʿfdt* is a secular name for the coffin that is otherwise usually identified with the goddess Nut (Willems 1988; Frandsen 1992). The direct address to the coffin can be compared to the direct address to the *tr* "door bolt" in the Chester Beatty love songs (Gardiner 1931:17,8–9 [pl.XVII A]; Fox 1985:403); both are metonymic representations of the lover through an element of her surroundings.

(b) My reading here is *bw rwḏ.(i)* "I do not prosper," instead of as *bw rwḏ.(t)* "you do not prosper," by all the other translators. The omission of the first person suffix is a very common phenomenon in Egyptian script from the Old Kingdom onwards. The *bw sḏm.f* is an "indexical feature"[10] of the literary texts of the period, masking two forms, the *bw sḏm.f* of the past and the *bw sḏm.f* of the present, which are paralleled by *bw iri.f sḏm* and *bwpw.f sḏm* in the non-literary texts (see Groll 1975/6:242–243; Frandsen 1991; and recently Winand 1992:198–199). In the non-literary texts the *bw sḏm.f* is confined to the verbs *ini* and *rḫ* (Groll in Černý and Groll 1985:LXVI). On the semantic level, it is probably the obvious negation of a state that could be reached through the lover's nearness. In the Cairo Love Songs, 20A,2 and 20G,13, the boy and the girl say respectively: . . . *ḫrw didi rwḏ ḥʿt.i* — "[it is your] voice that causes my body to prosper" and *t3y.s-mrwt didi rwḏ.i* — "your love causes that I shall prosper" (Fox 1985:385).

(c) Compare the Hebrew כלילת יופי, "the perfection of beauty," Lamentations 2:15.

(d) The *nn* (together with the *n*) are the indexical features *par excellence* of literary Late Egyptian (see Goldwasser 1991). The *nn* appears three times in the "poem" part of the text, always negating a noun with zero article. Compare here the Chester Beatty love songs, *wʿ.ti nn ky* (Gardiner pl.XVI A, 11).

(e) This sentence describes the desperate longing for the physical existence of the loved one. The *ʿš.i* might be understood as the *sḏm.f* of the simple present of literary Late Egyptian (Groll 1974), or as a literary emphatic form (Groll 1975/6).

(f) Here I read *3ḫ(tw) n.i (r) mwt (r) it (r) sn ḥnʿ snt*. Compare here *3ḫ n.i sn.i r pḥrt* of the love songs. For this type of sentence see Groll 1967:34. The text does not read *p3y.i-mwt* as one might have expected in a case of a possessive article, see Groll 1990.

(g) *inn twtw (ḥr) sḏm*, lit. "does anybody hear?" (Groll 1970:56–7, 103). This unique sceptic contemplation, which is very rare in the Egyptian literature, stands in contrast to the very existence of the genre, which is based on the assumption that one could communicate with the dead.

[10] For this term see Halliday and Hasan 1989:38, and Goldwasser 1991:104–141.

Although adopting the usual theme of the "letters to the dead," i.e., "I acted in your best interest, so now please act for me" (Wente 1990), Butehamun succeeds in transcending the banality of this bargain by making a poetic emotive statement.

DISCUSSION

The text is defined *ipso facto* by the writer himself as a literary text. This can be learned from the fact that the text is dotted by verse-points. Only what is defined today as "literary" was so marked by the scribes of the Ramesside period. Within the genre of letters, only "literary letters" might carry verse-points. If we examine the repertoire of dotted letters from a grammatical and lexicographical point of view, we shall immediately see that in almost every case the "literariness" of the letter is also projected onto the grammatical and lexical levels through the use of language registers normally outside the sphere of the "written as if spoken" language (Goldwasser 1990).[11] The "Letters to the Dead" can mostly be classified as non-literary, as they are composed in registers of language[12] belonging to the non-literary sphere; that is, they do not contain verse-points and their subjects, grammar and lexis, are shared by "regular" non-literary letters. Yet, our letter (and to go by Charles Porter's definition of a letter there is no reason to avoid classifying it as such)[13] is written in a definite *literary* register of the end of the 20th dynasty; it contains literary indexical forms like the Middle-Egyptian negation *nn*, and the literary negation *bw sḏm.f* appears as the *motto* of the text. There is also use of adjectival sentences and interjections that are infrequent in the non-literary corpus, and the literary *sḏm.f* (either emphatic or present simple) appears side by side with accentuated non-literary forms such as *bwpw.f sḏm*, or the Ramesside possessive articles. This mixture of colloquial with poetic forms is precisely the texture of Late Egyptian literary genres as we know them.[14]

[11] Also Goldwasser 1991; Winand 1992. pAnastasi I is indeed the most sophisticated and complex example of this phenomenon; other letters might stand more on the edge of the literary and non-literary, but they will nevertheless contain some (even if less conspicuous) indexical features of the literary aggregate, e.g., pAnastasi VI which was probably written for school purposes "for publication." Nevertheless, a text might contain literary registers while not having verse-points. On the verse-points in general, see Gardiner 1931:28; LÄ VI:1017–1018.

[12] For the definition of registers in Ramesside texts, see Goldwasser 1990, 1991.

[13] It must be assigned to the genre of "letters" as it has an author that identified himself; it is written directly "out of its author's experience or wishes or aspirations," and its "I" refers to its author directly. It is also written "forward" with no certainty about the future, it is discontinuous, multidirectional and fragmented. It has a definable intention and an addressee (Porter 1986:2–5).

[14] Groll 1975/76; 1991.

Nevertheless, the text under consideration contains two positively distinguishable parts; the first long part, which is rendered poetic through the use of refrain and poetic language, and the second, bearing the more traditional letter opening, less poetic in nature, though still containing indexical literary features like the *bw sḏm.f* (*bw iri.i*, vs.19) of the past.[15] This part allows the appearance of the strong non-literary markers such as the negation *bn* and the interrogative particle *inn*[16] (vs.20), which were not allowed into the first part of the text.

As to its literary merits, this text seems to offer us a rare view of a moment when the boundaries of genre were extended not for mere administrative or political reasons,[17] but in order to serve the most human of needs.

In writing to his deceased wife, in wishing to tell her of his profound loneliness, his longings, his fear of the future and, most dangerous of all, in confessing to her his shaken belief in the existence of the hereafter, the conventional registers of language of the non-literary letters might well have seemed unsatisfactory and dull to Butehamun. He could not find words good enough to describe his feelings of tenderness, yearning, and distress. Echoes of well-known love-songs might then have come forward in the writer's mind. *t3y.i snt*, "My sister," *wʿt nn ky* — "the one without comparison," *3ḫ n.i sn.i r pḫrt*, "better is my brother to me than any remedies," and *ḥ-n-r n.i*..... *ḥ-n-r n.i*....., "pray I had," the elegiac literal repetitions of the love-songs.[18] Did some model of an elegiac song, perhaps like the one of the Lebensmüden (pBerlin 3024, Lichtheim 1973:166–168) commingle in his mind with the love poetry of his day and entice him to write "something else" — a new, different kind of letter, embracing different registers of language, extremely laic in tone,[19] a "love-song letter," or a "mourning letter," and thus a literary artifact.[20] Verse-points make their appearance. The miracle of Art has taken place. The poetic form has been conceived.

Genuine love letters from the pharaonic age are practically unknown. They may have existed, but they have not come down to us.[21] Strangely enough, the only text which could be deemed as approaching this genre is another "Letter to the Dead" written by an army officer to his departed

[15] Groll 1975/76; Winand 1992:198.

[16] Černý and Groll:206–207, 149–150; Satzinger 1976:106–109.

[17] For administrative and religious reasons for the movement of genre boundaries, see Goldwasser 1991.

[18] Compare here also the later Louvre stela C100: *bnr bnr mrwt* [illegible] *ḫr*, Fox 1985:405.

[19] "The Egyptian love-songs are still well on the secular side of the border," Fox 1985:234.

[20] For the definition of the "poetic" in Late Egyptian, see Groll 1992.

[21] "Sentimental correspondence" is unknown in Europe before the seventeenth century (Porter 1986:11).

wife (pLeiden 371).[22] He also complains of longing, of being unable to continue in his normal course of life, and his language, too, is profoundly intimate ("I never concealed anything from you"),[23] yet there is an enormous difference between the two letters. The Leiden letter never crosses any borders, never tries to reach other registers of thought and language unavailable in the ordinary repertoire of the letter medium. The writer's distress is described in terms of a legal procedure. The atmosphere is that of a litigation, not a love song; "let the gods judge who is right ... as I did so much for you when you were alive" (Gardiner and Sethe 1928:pls VII–VIII).

Butehamun, the writer of our letter, was a famous scribe, belonging to the elite group of scribes of Deir el-Medineh at the end of the 20th dynasty. We have a unique opportunity to learn about the individual administrative register of this son of the famous Dhutimes through a number of letters (and also some graffiti) written by him to his father, to Paiankh, and to some other scribes (Černý 1939, letters Nos. 8, 16, 28, 29, 43; Janssen 1991, letter I).[24] His superior style borders on the poetical even within the limits of the administrative genre. In letter No. 29 he writes to the companion of his ailing father far away in the south: "You are indeed a good man; you are like a father to me. Be pilot to the scribe *Ṯ3ry*,[25] one knows that his strength is not with him ... take care of him day and night, as you embrace him (for me). You are used to these journeys, but a man becomes childish when he suffers, as he has not seen the face of fear before" (Černý 1939:48–49). This somewhat apologetic, emotive text still succeeds in conveying to us, even through the barrier of three thousand years, the warmth and tenderness felt by a son toward his aging father. The register in use is the highest administrative variation, with one lexical marker that echoes the literary registers. The term *ꜥš-ḥ3t* is regularly applied in the personal piety prayers of the period to the god Amon.

Letter No. 43 in Černý's collection is also attributed by Wente to Butehamun (Wente 1967:17). The *ꜥš-ḥ3t* theme is repeated and developed: "...and give hand to the scribe *Ṯ3ry* in the ship; and look after him day and night carefully. Be pilot to him, so Amon will be pilot to you."

In letter No. 8, addressed directly to his father, we also find some pearls of style. In the long passage of congratulations he incorporates again a sentence probably taken from a prayer to Amon (Černý 1939:14, rt.7–9): *mtw.k mḥ irt.k m Imn nst-t3wy p3y.k-nḏnḏ ikm ꜥ3 nty hn.k n.f 3t.k*, "and you will fill your eyes with Amen of the Throne(s) of the two lands, your

[22] Gardiner and Sethe 1928; Guimet 1973.

[23] pLeiden 371 line 17.

[24] For translation see Wente 1967.

[25] A sobriquet of his father Dhutimes.

protector; (the) great shield to whom you bend your back." The second part of this sentence, *ikm ʿ3 nty hn.k n.f 3t.k*, is outstanding within the administrative register. The writer uses archaic language to describe Amon. The noun *ikm*-shield, appears with a zero article; lexically this metaphor tallies with similar descriptions of the god in the literary texts;[26] it is followed by the relative pronoun *nty* and a rare *sḏm.f* form, which is probably a Middle Egyptian emphatic form.[27] Nevertheless, as this phrase is incorporated within the string of religious congratulations, and not within the main administrative register, it probably had the effect of enriching rather than offending the coherence of the text. Another interesting part of the same letter is the one dealing with "the red crown" (vs.3–6). Apart from being a principal canon of Late Egyptian grammars,[28] this passage projects one of most interesting and creative features of Butehamun's idiolect — his partiality for picture-writing, and his inclination to write on occasion in the most unusual ideograms, some of his own invention. The red crown is written pictorially, creating a visual focus on the red crown on the perceptual level, different from that of its grammatical level.[29] In another letter of Butehamun (B.M. 10411, Janssen 1991 pls. 3, 4), a striking pictogram appears in the midst of the cursive hieratic text (figs. 3–4), probably describing a kind of amulet. This artistic tendency of Butehamun can also be traced in our text. The word *wy* playing the opening note to the repetitive elegiac couplet of the text, "Ouy, Ikhtay, I do not prosper," is written alphabetically. Yet, twice in this text we find it written *pictorially* by the pictograph of a wailing man (figs. 1–2; rt.19 vs.9).[30]

The canonized aggregate of texts does not always meet the needs of society or the individual. The borders of this aggregate can be expanded in concordance with institutional needs, as in the case of the literary letter of the genre of Anastasi I. New genres might infiltrate the aggregate via the constant stress of strong collective religious or social needs, as in the case of the private piety repertoire.[31] But it is very rare that we find the testimony of such a step taken by an individual in ancient times, motivated by strong personal causes. By its nature, it remains a single experiment, not canonized as a model within the repertoire, nor incorporated into it through the process of static canonicity.[32]

[26] See pAnastasi I 8,3 — *iw nṯr.i Ḏḥwty m ikm ḥ3.i* (Gardiner 1911:14,11).

[27] Compare here pHarris I, 22,1 — *rśwt nty h3n.f n.k ntr pn Imn p3-k3 mwt.f.* (Erichsen 1933). Compare the non-literary form in Wenamun: *p3-nty i.ir.f nw (m) iy.t n.i* (Gardiner 1932:65, 11–12).

[28] E.g., Groll 1970:193.

[29] See Goldwasser 1995:108–113.

[30] This sign is not listed by Möller 1927.

[31] Goldwasser 1991.

[32] For these terms, see Even-Zohar 1990.

Theoretically, the poem might be of an elegy-song type that has not come down to us within the known repertoire, rather than a new creation by Butehamun. I would like to believe it to be an original effort, standing on the fringes or outside the canonized corpus. It seems that there is sufficient evidence to show that Butehamun was endowed with the knowledge, sensitivity and poetical power needed to originate an original "literary form" of his own like the "Elegy for my Dead Wife."

POSTSCRIPT

When this article was in press I received Deborah Sweeny's review of Frandsen's article in *Discussions in Egyptology* 30 (1994):205–210. Unfortunately it arrived too late for me to include in the discussion.

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