

Fiction's Early Dawn

It can be reasonably affirmed that the first continuous prose fiction was written in Ancient Egyptian despite the fact that the language had no word for "novel" or "story." The relevant term, in Roman script, is "mdt nfrt" which is usually translated as *belles lettres* or fine speech.¹ The Egyptians may not have had a word for it but their prose fiction surprises, first on account of its primacy and then because of its Promethean enthusiasms, its fascinating intrigues and concern with magic, its richness of language, and its archetypal, if primitive characterization.

The papyrus of two of the earliest stories, "Khafra's Tale" and "Hordedef's Tale" from *Tales of the Magicians* was probably written in the XIIth Dynasty (Middle Kingdom, 1995-1790 B.C.) but Petrie claims² because of the crudities, because of the childish profusion of marvels in *Tales of the Magicians*, that they probably belong to a different and much earlier age. Magic—awe of the wonderful and the impossible, the pilgrimage to Delphi, to Mecca, or to the guru, the waving of the wand, the quest for the golden fleece or for the philosopher's touchstone—has always been one of the dominant components of man's narratives. Next to sex, with which, in a manner of speaking, it is sometimes intertwined, magic and its necessary concomitant superstition are probably the strongest forces in man's life, and thus they appear in novels, the recordings of man's life.

Two stories from the dawn of fiction are told by his sons to King Khufu. They are fictitious but King Khufu and his successor Khafra are historically ascertainable. "Khafra's Tale" opens with adultery and is sustained with magic. In it, the wife of King Nebka's "reciter" falls in love with the King's page and sends him a gift which suitably arouses him: "Now there was a lodge in the garden of Uba-aner; and one day the page said to the wife of Uba-aner, 'In the garden of Uba-aner there is now a lodge; behold, let us therein take our pleasure.' So the wife of Uba-aner sent to the steward who had charge over the garden, saying, 'Let the lodge which is in the garden be made ready.' And she remained there, and rested and drank with the page until the sun went down" (Petrie, p. 10). We are immediately struck by the direct simplicity of the telling and want to describe it as biblical until we realize that this was written long before the Bible. We may also be struck by what seems to be a Victorian reticence in the relation of the lovemaking. The next time, however, when the wife of Uba-aner sends to the steward who has charge over the garden and commands that the lodge which is in the garden be made ready, the repetition of descriptive, identifying phrases instead of dull pronouns holds an ancient charm. The lovemaking is also more joyful and a little more explicit: ". . . she came and made merry therein with the page." Indeed, in early Egyptian writing, a veil of propriety is drawn across acts of sexual intimacy.

It is noticeable that this first Lady Chatterley is not given a name—women are rarely given names in Egyptian fiction. Nor is the page to whom comes a swift retribution. After ignoring the affair for a few days the steward divulges what is going on to his master, Uba-aner, who immediately fashions "a crocodile of wax, seven fingers long" and the steward is told to throw it in the lake when the page is

¹See William Kelly Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 6.

²W. M. Flinders Petrie, ed., *Egyptian Tales: Translated from Papyri* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1971), p. 59.

bathing. When the wax crocodile hits the water it becomes alive, swells to seven cubits and swallows up the page. The king is shown the crocodile with the page inside it (after all it was the king's page) and Uba-aner tells the king of his wife's and the page's faithlessness.

If we notice, in these primal stories, a general reluctance to provide sexual detail, we find no comparable diffidence in the description of whippings, tortures, murders, and bodily mutilation. The punishment of the two lovers is immediate: "His majesty said unto the crocodile, 'Take to thee thy prey.' And the crocodile plunged into the lake with his prey, and no man knew whither he went." The woman taken in adultery is just as summarily dealt with: "And his majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the blessed, commanded, and they brought forth the wife of Uba-aner to the north side of the harem, and burnt her with fire, and cast her ashes in the river" (Petrie, p. 15). There may well be here a "childish profusion of marvels" but the laudable brevity of narration, the refreshing innocent wit, the sparse but appropriate detail, and the shock of its unhesitant resolution put the tale in sparkling contrast with many ponderosities of later civilizations.

In "Hordedef's Tale" there is an amusing passage concerned very much with childish wonderment. A wise old wizard called Dedi is brought to King Khufu and he claims that he can "restore the head which is smitten off." He is tested by the King: "And a duck was brought unto him, and its head was cut off. And the duck was laid on the west side of the hall and its head on the east side of the hall. And Dedi spoke his magic speech. And the duck fluttered along the ground, and its head came likewise; and when it had come part to part the duck stood and quacked" (Petrie, p. 28). Similar experiments are successfully tried on a goose and an ox. "Hordedef's Tale" loses much of the pleasing simplicity and the miniature fluorescence of the preceding story, as its plot is more obscure and complex. In spite of this, the magic is just as farfetched. A third tale, "The Lamentations of the Fellah"—the title has been translated also as "The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant"—is a much more sophisticated story from the period of the Middle Kingdom, which retains a fetching appeal and sparkle, the mark of the freshness of humanity's earliest fiction. It is concerned with frustration and injustice in matters of caste, and with the long delay in granting rudimentary human privilege to the exploited poor, be they deserving or undeserving. Khunianupu, a *fellah* of the Plain of Salt prepares to go on a journey to sell his produce: "When this *fellah* went down into Egypt, he loaded his asses with reeds, rushes, natron, salt, wood of Uiti, acacia from the Country of the Oxen, wolf skins, jackal hides, sage, onyx, maize, colocynth, coriander, aniseed, talc, ollite, wild mint, grapes, pigeons, partridges, quails, anemones, narcissus, seed of the sun, *hairs of the earth*, and allspice, complete with all the good products of the *Plain of Salt*."³ When he arrives "north of the town of Madenit" he is tricked by a serf called Thotnakhuti who ingeniously causes one of the *fellah's* asses to eat a mouthful of his wheat. For compensation Thotnakhuti impounds the asses and goods and beats the *fellah* with "a green branch of tamarisk." After vainly "bemoaning himself" to Thotnakhuti for four days, the *fellah* complains to the Mayor of the Palace, Rensi, son of Maru and the rest of the unfinished story consists of fine speeches, the ancient Egyptian generic term, we remember, for fiction.

It is noticeable that there is no magic in this tale from the Plain of Salt and Madenit. The opening description and action of the story moves rapidly and unerringly: a cameo of the *fellah's* home—granary and a patch of corn, a mute wife, a brood of unseen children; the journey, with asses laden with a wondrous

³Gaston Maspero, *Popular Stories of Ancient Egypt* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1967), p. 46.

assortment of local produce to trade for household provisions; the simple trick, and the final assault and robbery on the part of Thotnakhūiti. The narrative so far is compact, economically told, dramatic and we see into an early age, far removed but curiously familiar, saddening in its reminder of man's original sinning, unexpected in its sly satire. The impact of this fiction lies there. The subsequent flowery garrulity of the *fellah's* speeches which comprise more than three quarters of the story is formed from a surfeit of oratorical embellishment which is often unintelligible in its verbal hysteria and convolution. We see something similar in some of the "novels" of Elizabethan and seventeenth-century English literature and in much of our longer-winded contemporary fiction.

With "The Story of the Two Brothers," a work of the New Kingdom, we return once more to the now familiar mixture of sex and magic. Bāiti, a young man of massive strength, great virility and high principles, lives with his elder brother, Anupu, a small holder, and Anupu's wife, yet another hot-blooded, nameless woman. One day, on Bāiti's return from the fields to get some more seed, she bribes him with the promise of "two beauteous garments"—clothes appear to be the regular currency in the matter of seduction—and attempts to seduce him. We recall the Old Testament story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife which may well have descended from this one. In a state of moral indignation Bāiti repulses her; she is afraid that he will tell her husband and so, on Anupu's coming home, she feigns molestation and claims that Bāiti had attempted to seduce her. Anupu "became like a cheetah of the south," sharpens his knife and hides in the cowshed to do his brother in. Warned by a talking cow, Bāiti runs away and Anupu rushes after him. The sun god, Râ, causes a stretch of water, full of crocodiles, to appear between the two brothers. Bāiti, standing on the far bank, berates his elder brother for not listening to his version of the incident and then slices off his virile member with a reed-cutter and throws it into the water where it is immediately gobbled up by an electric catfish. There follow a series of narrative fantasies spread over many years. Bāiti dies, is resurrected, and is provided by the sun god with a beautiful wife who has the essence of the gods in her but who proves faithless and deserts him for the Pharaoh. Bāiti is then transformed into a bull and later into two perseae trees. These, at the request of his perfidious wife, are chopped down to be made into furniture, but during that operation one of his splinters flies into his wife's mouth. She is impregnated by it and Bāiti is born again, with his former wife now his mother. He grows up and on Pharaoh's death he succeeds him, causes his mother to be executed and reigns as King of Egypt for twenty years. A wild tale indeed but a further reading will show that narrative has become a means by which emotions and moral registers may be explored.

In this very cursory note on the fiction from the three kingdoms of Ancient Egypt I have tried to exhibit something of the atmosphere of the age as it emerges from narrations, the texture and mode of the stories, and especially the thematic selection and arrangement. I suggest that the tradition of the novel—using that term with circumspection—begins here and in a series of surfacings, moves from Egypt into the Greek and Roman civilizations.

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