

VOICES FROM ANCIENT EGYPT?
PERSONA, TEXT, AND CONTEXT IN “DE ÆGYPTO”
AND “THE TOMB AT AKR ÇAAR”

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How shall we start hence, how begin the progress?
Pace naif Ficinus, say when Hotep-Hotep
Was a king in Egypt –

So wrote Pound in “Three Cantos I.” Progress, according to Pound, should start “with Egypt! ... Or with China ...” (*Personae* 233). He himself did actually start with Egypt: a note to one of his very first published poems (“La Fraisine”) contains an allusion to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, although the alleged quotation is of Pound’s invention. Ancient Egypt also provides the background for two other early poems: “De Ægypto” and “The Tomb at Akr Çaar.”

The present paper will be chiefly concerned with three problems. Although this is not the place for going into details of the Egyptian language, some remarks may be helpful for a better understanding of Pound’s “De Ægypto.” Moreover, there will be an attempt to answer the question as to what extent the original context is relevant for an interpretation of “De Ægypto” and “The Tomb at Akr Çaar.” Finally, there

remains the problem of the persona, which, as will be seen, is essentially different from what might be expected if we consider the Egyptian texts. Results of earlier research have been incorporated as far as necessary.

Pound's sources are to be found in the writings of Sir Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, who, from 1893 to 1924, was Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum. He was a prolific writer, and some of his books had a considerable influence on English and American literature in the 20th century – Joyce, Aiken, and Zukofsky might also be mentioned – though his standards were not always those of contemporary scholarship, let alone modern Egyptology. Pound seems to have been aware of the fact, when he wrote, in an article published in the first issue of Eliot's *Criterion*: “Budge's translation of *The Book of the Dead* is highly distressing to the opposite school of Egyptologists” (153). Nevertheless, he counted it among those translations, which “would have a literary existence of their own even if no originals existed” (152).

The first two lines of “De Ægypto” – a sort of refrain which is repeated three times – are taken from Budge's translation of Spell 78 in the *Book of the Dead*:

I, even I, am he who knoweth the roads
Through the sky, and the wind thereof is my body. (*Personae* 17)

In Budge's version, the phrase reads: “I, even I am he who knoweth the roads through the sky, and the wind thereof is in my body” (235-36). As will be noted, there is a slight difference, but Pound's alteration is, of course, to be preferred from an aesthetic point of view.

The Egyptian text begins with the independent personal pronoun *inek*, which is used when a certain emphasis is required. So there is some justification for Budge's amplification (“I, even I”). Budge, as has been suggested, may have

imitated a Biblical mannerism (Ruthven 58). In the Book of Isaiah, we find: “I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions” (805), and “I, even I, am he that comforteth you” (813). A faithful rendering of the original text is also the “Lady of Life.” Nebet anck, “Lady of Life”, is a name of the goddess Isis (as “Lord of Life” is a name of her husband Osiris), and as such is used in the hymns preceding the collection of spells that make up the *Book of the Dead* (5.40). The direct genitive – nebet anck – is usually found in fixed titles, and the translator was therefore right in spelling “Lady” and “Life” with capital letters at the beginning.

So much for philological details. More important than philological correctness would seem to be the relation between Pound’s poem and the original context, in which his quotations appear. Spell 78 of the *Book of the Dead* is headed: “The Chapter of Making the Transformation into a Divine Hawk” (133), the deceased – as in other spells – wishing to be transformed into a celestial being. The passage is, in fact, much older than the *Book of the Dead*. In its original form, it is part of a dramatic text, dealing with the fate of Osiris, who asks his son Horus for help against his enemy Seth. The words quoted by Pound are spoken by a messenger sent by Horus to his father in the underworld. This, as will be observed, has nothing whatsoever to do with Pound’s poem. But if the speaker in “De Ægypto” is different from the messenger in the dramatic text, he is also different from the deceased speaking in the *Book of the Dead*. Nor can the Lady of Life be easily identified with the Egyptian goddess Isis – which leads us to the problem of the persona.

The speaker reveals his identity in much the same way as the gods are said to reveal their identity to human beings. The words attributed to the veiled statue in the temple of Saïs – “I am everything that is, has been, and will be...” (Plutarch 130-131) – are a famous example from classical antiquity.

Biblical parallels are also well-known. It may be sufficient to quote from Exodus: “I am the LORD thy God” (89) or from the Book of Revelation: “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last” (319). The speaker in Pound’s poem knows the roads through the sky, he flies with the swallows and dips his fingers into the sapphire waters of heaven. We are hence entitled to think of him as a divine being, maybe a kind of cosmic spirit. But this is only part of the story.

The second couplet introduces another figure requiring an explanation: “I have beheld the Lady of Life” (17). Pound, as has long since been observed (West 64), is indebted here to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who in one of his stories tells us that the painter Chiaro dell’Erma once had a vision of his own soul in the shape of a beautiful woman. What, then, about Pound’s “Lady of Life”? As we have seen, the appellation recalls the goddess Isis. Associated with Isis is also “the song of the Lotus of Kumi,” whatever its significance. In Pound’s poem “Lotus-Bloom”, we read:

“The song of of the Lotus of Kumi!”
 Yeah the old lays
 That to Isis they chaunted of eld. (*Collected Early Poems* 239)

The speaker in “De Ægypto” then has had a visionary experience: he has seen the goddess, just as the deceased in the *Book of the Dead* says he has seen his divine father Osiris (29) or the Maat goddesses pass along (222). Again, biblical parallels might be quoted. Jacob declares, in the Book of Genesis: “I have seen God face to face” (40), and Isaiah, terrified, exclaims: “Woe is me! ... for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (770). Remembering Pound’s debt to Rossetti will, however, teach us to see the Lady of Life in a different light. She might as well be an image of the speaker’s soul and, and at the same time, a personification of the creative impulse. “Manus animam

pinxit,” says Rossetti, and Pound, taking up his words, significantly adds: “My pen is in my hand.” There are good reasons to suppose that the persona in “De Ægypto” is actually the poet at work, finding himself in the position of a scribe, who is told “to write the acceptable word.” (Hilda Doolittle, speaking of the poet’s vocation, sees the scribe “second only to the Pharaoh”) (15). His mouth is ready “to chant the pure singing” (*Personae* 18). A divine power has inspired him, as God inspired the prophet Isaiah: “I have put my words in thy mouth” (813). The speaker’s nature is thus ambiguous, oscillating between the human and the divine. The protagonist – really, the inspired poet – assumes the role of a celestial being without losing his proper identity, much as the deceased in the *Book of the Dead* quotes the words of a heavenly messenger, who in his turn assumes the part of a divine falcon.

Egyptian ideas on life after death are also present in “The Tomb at Akr Çaar.” Pound’s direct source seems to have been Budge’s work on Egyptian magic, which appeared in 1899. A key is provided by a prayer on an amulet – a so-called hypocephalus – in the Collection of Egyptian Antiquities of Lady Meux. Budge published the text in 1896 and quoted it in his *Egyptian Magic*. The prayer, which is addressed to the god Amün, contains the phrase: “I am the mighty Soul of saffron-coloured form” (119-20). It is certainly difficult to imagine a soul as saffron-colored, but the idea seemed to have had a certain appeal for Pound, as the saffron soul turns up in his poem.

In *Egyptian Magic*, there is also a reproduction of the vignette (113) which, in the *Book of the Dead*, illustrates Spell 89, entitled: “The Chapter of Causing the Soul to Be United to Its Body in the Underworld” (149). The illustration shows the mummified body lying on a bier with the soul of the deceased hovering above him in the shape of a human-headed bird – a situation which more or less corresponds to the situation described in “The Tomb at Akr

Çaar.” The poem is a dramatic monologue, in which the soul of Nikoptis addresses the dead body, reproaching him for showing no reactions:

I am thy soul, Nikoptis. I have watched
 These five millenia, and thy dead eyes
 Moved not, nor ever answer my desire,
 And thy light limbs, wherethrough I leapt aflame,
 Burn not with me nor any saffron thing. (Personae 56)

In 1954, Pound wrote to Boris de Rachewiltz, who had sent him his *Massime degli antichi Egiziani*: “Congratulations / you have / humanized the egyptians / and Budge didn’t, at least not to the point of getting into my head in 1907 ...” (De Rachewiltz 180). As far as “The Tomb at Akr Çaar” is concerned, Pound did in fact “humanize the Egyptians” – which has a direct bearing on our understanding of the poem’s persona.

The vignette in the *Book of the Dead* depicts a bird with a bearded man’s head. This is certainly not what the words of the speaker in Pound’s poem would suggest. The Egyptian concept of the soul differs radically from the classical tradition, still familiar to the modern world. According to Egyptian beliefs, there are several components constituting the spiritual life of an individual: the *ka* (which may be translated as “life force”), the shadow, the name, and the *ba* (usually translated as “soul”, although the classical as well as the Christian concept is different in several respects). The *ba* has been described as a separate mode of existence: it may return to the mummy, but also move outside the tomb. Pound has the soul say:

Oh! I could get me out ...
 Out through the glass-green fields. (56-7)

But here the similarity ends. The soul of Nikoptis is clearly

not the *ba* in the *Book of the Dead*, but is modeled on the Greek Psyche (to which Pound refers in his “Speech for Psyche in the Golden Book of Apuleius”). Pound either misunderstood the illustration or ignored an important aspect of it: the speaker’s words are not those of a male being, but of a woman in love, complaining about her lover, and as such recall the “Complaint of the Abandoned Girl” – a familiar theme in world literature. Likewise, the reference to “three souls” coming upon Nikoptis is something of a crux. A sign representing three *ba*-souls is known from hieroglyphic writing, but the doctrine of metempsychosis, to which Pound obviously alludes, is not Egyptian, though Herodotus might be cited as a witness to the contrary (457-60).

A reminiscence of the *Book of the Dead* could be seen in the soul’s assertion that she has behaved loyally towards the dead body:

I have been kind. See, I have left the jars sealed,
Lest thou shouldst wake and whimper for thy wine.
And all thy robes I have kept smooth on thee. (56)

In Spell 125 – the famous “Negative Confession” –, the deceased declares, among other things: “I have not purloined the cakes of the gods ... I have not carried away food” (191-194). The text must have been familiar to Pound, since he quotes from it in his memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska (127): “I have not repulsed God in his manifestations” (192). However, the soul’s speech is not a ritual performance, but reflects a personal predicament. The Egyptian text has been “humanized.”

Pound then used his sources to meet his own demands. His method in “De Ægypto” may be called eclectic. The author chooses a number of isolated elements, and by combining them, creates a new unity at the centre of which is the poet, identified with the creative force, which, incidentally, recalls the deceased in the *Book of the Dead* identifying him-

self with the gods. There is also a biblical undercurrent which Pound himself may not have noticed. This is not to say that, inadvertently, he wrote a religious poem – he didn't –, but it shows how deeply the modern mind is rooted in the biblical tradition, whether conscious of the fact or not. In “The Tomb at Akr Çaar”, the Egyptian concept of the *ba*-soul is replaced by a figure similar to the Greek psyche, and linked to the idea of metempsychosis, which again is not Egyptian. In either case, the results are hardly voices from Ancient Egypt, but rather – as Pound put it in canto 7 – “‘toc’ sphinxes, sham-Memphis columns” (26).

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