

**Opening the Way of Writing:  
Semiotic Metaphysics in the *Book of Thoth***

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The editing and publication of the late antique Egyptian text dubbed the *Book of Thoth* may turn out to be a milestone in our recognition of speculative thought in ancient Egypt. Though much uncertainty attends the reading of a text at once enigmatic and lacunose, and the discovery of additional fragments, to the very degree that they would be likely to upset any ventured interpretation, is most devoutly to be wished, it is incumbent upon us to begin to take stock of this text, with the urgency that comes from appreciating the value of an Egyptian voice speaking in ways and on matters of which it previously has not for us. In the following pages, I hope to shed light on some of the reflections of ancient Egypt's master scholars on this same subject.

The *Book of Thoth* differs from other texts that we might regard as exhibiting the speculative tendency, the content of which is cosmogonic. A speculative tendency has long been recognized in Egyptian cosmogonic literature.<sup>1</sup> The *Book of Thoth*, however, draws on cosmogonic themes, but for a purpose wholly novel to us: a metaphysics of semiosis, or sign-production. The *Book of Thoth*, as best we can understand it, presents a manual of scribal initiation. But the text offers a conception of writing, not merely as one occupation amongst others, even as a privileged occupation in the manner of the 'Satire on the Trades', but as an intensification of the way of being of the sign-user as such.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Allen 1988.

The activity of writing in the *Book of Thoth*, according to my reading of it, is essentially a three-sided relationship:

(1) To a textual materiality that is primarily conceived, in accord with fundamental themes in Egyptian cosmogony, as (A) an oceanic chaos or riverine flow and the liminal space of the marsh, which yields the papyrus and reeds from which paper and pens or brushes are fashioned, but also as (B) a particular cultural extension of this environment [216] in the form of the fishing- or fowling-net, and through (C) the processes yielding the charcoal used in ink.

(2) To writers who came before, and hence, in a distinctively Egyptian fashion, to mortality as the locus of ideality, but also to intertextuality as condition of the possibility of semiosis.

(3) To animality in the form of a discrete set of sites of enunciation, principles shaping the textual field in a fashion akin, perhaps, to our concept of 'genre'.

These three externalities of writing come together in the central concept of the *Book of Thoth*, the Chamber of Darkness, which has a distinctive relationship to each of the three. The 'Chamber of Darkness' (*ꜥ.t-kky*) is so important to the so-called *Book of Thoth* that it is possible the text's true title is actually given at B07, 4<sup>2</sup> as "The Ritual of the Regulation of Entering the Chamber of Darkness," and that it is addressed primarily to Seshat, Goddess of Writing. The Chamber of Darkness, since it is usually determined by the book roll sign, seems to be a conceptual *topos* more than a real location, the book roll sign here serving in its function of determining abstract ideas. Indeed, the Chamber of Darkness is so

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<sup>2</sup> References to the *Book of Thoth* are according to the dominant manuscript witness for a section (B07 in this case), even when part of a line may be supplied by a different manuscript (here, e.g., C07.1).

clear a preoccupation of the *Book of Thoth* as to make it unlikely that the term refers primarily to *another* text, and plays such a vital role in the symbolic economy of semiotic production in it that its sense could scarcely be exhausted by the ritual functions of a concrete locale. At Edfu, Seshat is called “Mistress of the Rope, Foremost One of the Chamber of Darkness”; she is “Mistress of the Rope” because of her role in the ceremonial “stretching of the cord” when the foundations of temples were laid, a moment rich in cosmogonic significance. At B04, 7/22, the Book of Thoth speaks of “She-who-is-wise,” presumably Seshat, as “this one who first established the Chamber [of Darkness], she being ... a lamp of prophecy.”

*Kky* or *kkw* in *ꜥ.t-kky* is not the quotidian darkness of night (*grḥ*), but the precosmic darkness personified in Kek and Kauket of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad. *Kky*-darkness is thus often associated with the Nun, the primeval oceanic chaos. In particular, *kky*-darkness suggests lack of differentiation; hence the term *kkw-smꜥw*, ‘utter’ or, literally, ‘united’ darkness, which alludes to the precosmic condition in which “there were not two things”.<sup>3</sup> [217] By means of the Chamber of Darkness, the initiated writer appropriates this night prior to any day: “My heart said to me: ‘Return to it, namely, the Chamber of Darkness, so as to learn its boundary’.”<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the Chamber pertains to the first externality, according to which the material dimension of text embodies aspects of the precosmic state. The Chamber of Darkness also pertains to the second externality, the underworld: “May I see the Chamber of Darkness, entering into the form of it, namely, the excellent limb of the underworld.”<sup>5</sup> Through this aspect, the writer establishes a relationship with writers who went before and who are now ‘excellent spirits’ (*ꜥḥw.w iqr*), transfigured from their mortality to become pure sites of enunciation: “the excellent spirits

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<sup>3</sup> See “Excursus: The challenge of the nonexistent”, 172-185 in Hornung 1982.

<sup>4</sup> B02, 9/5.

<sup>5</sup> B02, 9/12.

think in my heart.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, the Chamber of Darkness is the locus of prophecy (*sr*), and hence is associated with utterances irreducible to human subjectivity, and which are conceived in the form of animals: “These dogs, these jackals, these baboons, these snakes, which prophesize according to their utterances [...]”<sup>7</sup>; “The jackal ... speaks prophecies in the Chamber of Darkness [...]”<sup>8</sup>

### *The Materiality of Texts*

#### *The Sea and the Marsh*

Throughout the *Book of Thoth*, a speaker identified as ‘He-of-Heseret’ (a precinct sacred to Thoth) acts as one of two chief interlocutors of the aspirant to scribal initiation, who is designated as *mr-rh*, ‘The-one-who-loves-knowledge’.

**The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says:** “What is writing [*sh*]? What are its places of storage [or ‘explanation’]? Compare it to its like, O overflowing one!”

**He speaks, namely, The-one-of-Heseret, he says:** “Writing (or ‘a book’) is a sea [*ym*]. Its reeds [*ʿt.w*] are a shore [*ʿt*]. Hasten therein, little one, little one!

Hurry to the shore! Count waves (?) (or ‘difficult passages’). As for its body, it is a myriad [*hh*]. Do not be weak with regard to it (the sea) until its lord permits that you swim in it and he makes a perfect place (?) (or ‘very fair wind’) before you.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> L02, 1/6.

<sup>7</sup> B02, 11/3.

<sup>8</sup> C02.1, 5.

<sup>9</sup> See note on B02, 4/12, Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 210.

<sup>10</sup> B02, 4/12-15. Quack 2007 has presented a translation of the entire extant text of the *Book of Thoth* often diverging significantly from Jasnow and Zauzich’s, and fuller than theirs in some passages. While I have drawn upon Quack’s translations where appropriate,

[218] This particular exchange establishes a dialectic basic to the conceptualization of writing in the *Book of Thoth*, namely the identification of writing's abyssal quality with bodies of water, and its points of determinacy with the marsh plants, especially reeds and papyrus, that furnish the paper and writing instruments used by Egyptian scribes. Hence, at B02, 6/3, in response to an inquiry from 'The-one-who-loves-knowledge' concerning the "nature" and "shape" of the papyrus plant (*sm wt*), 'He-of-Heseret' says "They have named it the  $\zeta$ -plant," i.e., the scribe's reed brush, "namely, the  $\zeta$ -plant of life which the land of mooring will touch," echoing the wordplay between 'reed' and 'shore' in the passage from B02, 4. Reeds or pens also have the sense of a 'shore' of interpretive determinacy at B02, 5/3, where a series of symbols of interpretive difficulty includes "they have assigned reeds (?) which [they] cannot reach."

It cannot easily be determined to what degree we may regard diverse bodies of water mentioned in the Book of Thoth as primary symbols of writing like the 'sea' in B02, 4/13. Sometimes the waters in question are conceived as rivers or canals, and it is anticipated that they can be crossed, which makes them symbols of transition to a different plane or state of being, potentially transformative for the scribe as an individual, but in which the water itself is not thematic:

He speaks, namely, The-one-of-Heseret, he says: "There are three seas to be crossed between them, namely, the corridors (?) of this land. Have you crossed the

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Jasnow and Zauzich's translation must remain the standard for now, inasmuch as Quack's, due to the constraints of journal publication, could not include sufficient textual apparatus—in particular, transliterations of the demotic text as Quack reads it. It is to be hoped that a future edition of the text will incorporate Quack's readings. I have occasionally modified Jasnow and Zauzich's translations in accord with discussions in their notes on the text.

river in their ferries? Have you crossed their canals? Have you given the fare (?) to their ferryman? Have you crossed in their transport ship?”<sup>11</sup>

In other passages, however, the body of water cannot be crossed, and this shifts the focus onto the state of being on the waters, rather than the transit of them, which seems to pertain more directly to the experience of writing itself:

I established my sailings, its ... upon it (?). I have made sailings for a thousand years. Great are the lakes. I rowed in a canal with a sail (?) ... without my being [219] able to reach (?) the ... due to the width of the sea in its entirety. I was not able to reach them, the ... its ... so as to question (?) the sailors who row before it.<sup>12</sup>

The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says: “I have rowed in the circuits (?) of the sea (among?) the apprentices who are in the sacred bark ... Fill my fingers (with) the rudder of the field-dwellers! I spent a thousand years while I rowed therein.”<sup>13</sup>

The writer engages directly and physically with the ‘waters’ of the text by rowing upon them or swimming in them. Swimming and rowing are apparently interchangeable at B02, 4/15, where three manuscripts tell the writer to “swim” (*nb* or *nby*) in the sea of writing, a fourth (L01, 3/1) to “row” (*hny*) in it. B04, 8 speaks at length of certain “rowers ... they worshipping (in) a mode of speech” (8-9). These ‘rowers’ seem to have achieved insight into the texts, so as to be able to direct others, but their own discourse presents an interpretive problem, i.e., they have taken on the qualities of their ‘sea’:

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<sup>11</sup> L01.5, 10/10-12.

<sup>12</sup> B04, 6/12-15.

<sup>13</sup> B02, 15/1-3.

“difficult are their [the rowers’] words; their explanations being too various to write, whereas it is they who commanded to them the loosening [explication] of the papyrus documents” (17-18). The scribal aspirant, too, seems to become native to this aquatic environment through the labor of interpretation: “I have explained them [the documents]. Since I have explained them, I will know how to worship [*snsn*, literally ‘breathe’]” (19).

The image from B02, 4 of ‘counting waves’, *tn tny.w*, where *tny.w* may equally refer to difficult textual passages (*itn.w*, ‘obscurities, riddles’), suggests that resolution of difficulties in the limitless ‘body’ of the text is only to be achieved through a kind of immanent reckoning of and in the very turbulence itself. The contrast between the finitude of counting (*tn*) and the infinity (*hh*) of the text’s ‘body’ indicates that there is no finality to interpretation. Indeed, the labor of interpreting existing texts is inseparable here from the production of new ones; thus it is virtually impossible to clearly distinguish ‘writing’ (*sh*) as the activity of creating new texts, from ‘writing’ as referring to the already existing text the scribe is trying to understand. The plants of the marsh not only furnish the paper and writing instruments of the scribe, but directly symbolize sign production: “Let me reveal a sea which is protected/holy ... its ... grow with turquoise,<sup>14</sup> while nine boats fare [220] north and south within it, concerning their souls [*bj.w*]<sup>15</sup> and their creations, concerning their plants [*jl*], which give birth to new words.”<sup>16</sup> *jl* here represents older Egyptian *jr*, ‘reed’ as in, e.g., the netherworld locale known as the ‘field of reeds’, *sh.t jr.w*. On the fundamental, ‘material’ level, so to speak, of the Egyptian semiotic, there is

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<sup>14</sup> Quack 2007, 282 suggests “its perimeter overgrown with turquoise”. The symbolism of turquoise and lapis lazuli in the *Book of Thoth* is discussed further below.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Souls (*bj.w*) of Re’ is established terminology elsewhere for sacred books, but the *Book of Thoth* seems to refer to texts as *bj.w* even without the theophoric modifier: “It is indeed possible that *bj.w* in the *Book of Thoth* generally refers to the sacred writings,” (Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 28).

<sup>16</sup> B04, 8/2-5.

neither authorial intention, nor transcendent meaning, but only the elemental generativity of the textual environment, with its ‘waves’ and its ‘plants that give birth to new words’.

Here we may adduce a comparison to some themes in Egyptian cosmogonies, which attribute a certain *self-organizing potential* to the precosmic waters and to the plants in them, particularly a floating mass of reeds. Hence, a cosmogonic text from the temple of Horus at Edfu states that

[i]n a moment the water stabilized in passing by; the name is Stabilized-water ... A (floating) mass of reed was seen by He-who-is-on-the-water ... When the Beautiful-of-harpoon arrived, the reed separated (from the rest of the floating masses) as it went to them. And a floater of reed was stabilized in the water, something which the Hovering-one saw while encircling ... When the reed was stabilized, the Falcon was supported <by> the floater of reed. The name of the floater is Support-of-Horus.<sup>17</sup>

In this cosmogony, a discrete ‘floater’ is separated from the main mass of reeds by the harpoon, the characteristic weapon of Horus, which is itself said to originate from the flood.<sup>18</sup> That which imposes determinacy—the cut—upon the floating mass is thus itself part of the same flow whose momentary stasis the floating reeds embody or express.

Similarly, the demotic cosmogony edited and translated in Smith 2002 speaks of a floating thicket of reeds that comes to rest at Thoth’s city of Hermopolis and upon which Ptah seats himself to carry out the further stages in the cosmogonic process.<sup>19</sup> A statement at the very beginning of this fragmentary text apparently draws symbolic value from the

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<sup>17</sup> Edfu VI 181,13-182,3; trans. Finnestad 1985, 27-29.

<sup>18</sup> Finnestad 1985, 28, n. 17.

<sup>19</sup> Fragment 1.



rhizomatic propagation of reeds or rushes: “It will grow, after being cut off, up until today.”<sup>20</sup> In this text, the organizing principle immanent to the waters is personified as *p3-Šy p3 nwn*, ‘Pshai in the Nun’, the ‘destiny’ or ‘fate’ in the primaeval chaos, its *heimarmenē*.

[221] The reed, as the scribe’s brush or pen, gives life and mooring on the text’s abyssal sea by establishing determinacy in the textual field: “The **seven** reeds [*t.w*] which resemble the plow in the **seven** fields of ‘He-who-understands-the-Two Lands’ [Thoth]”;<sup>21</sup> “If a magician (or ‘scholar’) raises (?) ..., a field, the reeds encircle/enchant [*phr*] him (or ‘it’)”;<sup>22</sup> “Let me hasten in proclaiming [the name of] him who is at the top of his brush (?), he who has ordered the earth with his scribal palette.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the demotic *Myth of the Sun’s Eye* speaks of “the papyrus stalk which is found in the hand of all Goddesses, which signifies ‘We are the mistresses of records [*gnw.t*], which are [made of] papyrus [*dm*].”<sup>24</sup>

On this semiotic plane, however, the power of text to clarify and to obscure are inseparable. Hence when Horus, embodying civilization and sovereignty, is born, Isis conceals him in the marshes, in the locus of textuality, and Thoth instructs the marsh dwellers to “confuse the ways of those who rebel against him [Horus] until he has taken for himself the throne of the Two Lands”.<sup>25</sup> Thoth wields the power of the text’s materiality to overwhelm its sense, a power akin to Seth’s and thus a way to resist him.

### *The Net*

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<sup>20</sup> 1.1.

<sup>21</sup> B02, 4/16. There is likely a reference here to the sevenfold feature in Seshat’s headdress.

<sup>22</sup> B02, 2/1.

<sup>23</sup> B02, 8/15.

<sup>24</sup> 6, 10-11: De Cenival 1988, 15 (trans. mine).

<sup>25</sup> §91 in Borghouts 1978 (68).

A net that is identified as the net of Shentait and of Shai (an epithet referring in this text to Seshat) is treated as virtually synonymous with writing itself, as can be seen in the following text:

The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says: “I have fished (with) the net of Shentait, Shai ... the net of ...” The Opener upon his Standard,<sup>26</sup> he says: “What is the taste of the prescription<sup>27</sup> of writing? What is this net?”<sup>28</sup>

In the peculiar terminology of the quote, the net is identified with writing’s *tpy p<sub>hr</sub>*, the ‘taste’ or ‘experience’ of its ‘formula’. The net referred to in [222] the *Book of Thoth* is the word *ity.t*, from older Egyptian *id.t*, but it also apparently incorporates the semantic field of the old Egyptian *ibt*.<sup>29</sup> It seems to be the same net spoken of in the resurrection literature, that is the net trapping fish or birds. This image seems to symbolize souls in some state of passivity.

The special complex of associations contributed to this symbol by the *Book of Thoth* serve to illuminate this symbol in other contexts, as well as being illuminated by them. Thoth and Seshat preside over an important sanctuary at Hermopolis known as the ‘House of the Net’ (*Ht-ibt*), and references to nets, to hunting, and to trapping fish or fowl occur throughout the *Book of Thoth*, though unfortunately often falling in particularly damaged sections. It is clear, however, that this text associates the activity of writing in the

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<sup>26</sup> Jasnow and Zauzich read this name, occurring frequently in the latter parts of the *Book of Thoth*, as *Wpy-tp-<sub>st</sub>=f*, ‘He-has-judged, namely, the-one-who-is-upon-his-back’, and consider it an Osirian epithet, though it is otherwise unattested. Quack, on the other hand, reads *Wpy-tp-<sub>ib</sub>.t=f*, ‘the Opener upon his Standard’, an abbreviated but readily recognizable epithet of Wepwawet, and is likely correct, in my opinion (Quack 2007, 259).

<sup>27</sup> *P<sub>hr</sub>.t*, a ‘recipe’ or ‘formula’, related to *p<sub>hr</sub>*, to perambulate, encircle, encompass (see above quote from B02, 2/1). See the discussion of this term in Ritner 1993, 54-67.

<sup>28</sup> B02, 14/6-7.

<sup>29</sup> Jasnow & Zauzich 2005, 168, note on C04.1, 10.

closest fashion with the activities of hunting wetland creatures with nets or snares.

Agricultural analogies to the work of the writer are also clearly present.<sup>30</sup> But while these are fairly straightforward, if not in their details then in their basic metaphorical intentions, the symbolic context of the writer as netting or trapping is richer and more complex.

In Utterance 555 of the Pyramid Texts, the king affirms “I am hale and my flesh is hale; I am hale and my garment is intact, I have gone up to the sky as Montu, I have gone down as a soul which he entraps, as a soul which he makes divine.”<sup>31</sup> Faulkner identifies the ‘he’ in the last sentence as Thoth, who is mentioned a few lines above, while Allen leaves the reference ambiguous: “He has gone up to the sky as Montu, he has gone down as the *ba* he has netted.”<sup>32</sup> Without attempting a comprehensive interpretation of this passage, it is clear that it associates the net (*ibt*) with the trapping of souls (*b̄.w*) and in turn with embodiment, and that Thoth and Montu are involved. A ritual involving the netting of migratory birds is depicted at the temples of Karnak, Edfu and Esna.<sup>33</sup> This ritual identifies the birds with nomadic enemies of the state, and involves Horus, in a martial role perhaps comparable to that of Montu in the operation from the Pyramid Texts, along with Khnum and Thoth or Seshat. This rite shares the ambivalent character of the operation from the Pyramid Texts. Khnum, for example, is associated with hunting, but also with embodiment, for he famously crafts [223] the frames of mortals upon his potter’s wheel. The equation in some fashion of hunting or war with mortal embodiment is known in other cultures.<sup>34</sup> But the presence of Thoth or Seshat creates a triangular

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<sup>30</sup> See, especially, B02, 5/1-11.

<sup>31</sup> §528 in Allen’s edition.

<sup>32</sup> Faulkner 215. Note that Allen does not convert the statements about the king into the first-person.

<sup>33</sup> Studied comprehensively in Alliot 1946.

<sup>34</sup> The Hellenic Artemis is associated with both hunting and childbirth, for example; for a discussion of the symbolic association of hunting and childbirth in certain Bantu traditions, see de Heusch 1982, 164-170.

structure which makes it possible to articulate the otherwise implicit ambivalence in the symbol of the net.

The resurrection literature, on the one hand, offers spells to prevent the deceased being trapped in the net him/herself, an operation which generally involves demonstrating knowledge of the symbolically pregnant names for different parts of the net or the other equipment of the netherworld fishermen. (In the resurrection literature, the ambiguity with respect to fish and birds as victims of the net seems to be resolved with some consistency in favor of fish; note that *h3t*, ‘corpse’, is written with an Oxyrhynchus fish.)

On the other hand, tomb decorations include bucolic images of the deceased participating in fishing and fowling.<sup>35</sup> One is clearly either *netter* or *netted*; but one text we possess seems to speak directly to the net’s ambivalence. A text edited and translated by Dimitri Meeks, which supplies the mythical aetiology for a Letopolitan ritual called the ‘Wielding of Staves’ (*h3p h3w<sup>c</sup>.w*), tells of Horus using a net (*ib3t; r3-3d.t*) to capture the souls (*b3.w*) of his enemies (*sbiw*), but instead he captures the ‘excellent souls’ (*b3.w iqrw*) and, indeed, the *ba* of his father Osiris.<sup>36</sup> Horus strikes the *ba* of his father, and Thoth joins him, before apparently realizing their mistake, and proceeding to treat Osiris in the ‘House of Gold’ (*Ht-nbw*), which refers in general fashion to the workshop of the sculptors. *Nb*, ‘gold’, is the nexus of an important series of puns in Egyptian, all marked by the presence, sometimes straightforwardly etymological, sometimes allusive, of the bead collar sign.<sup>37</sup> The series includes *nbi* ‘to melt metal’, ‘cast objects in metal’, ‘gild’, and by extension to model or fashion something generally; *nbi*, ‘flame’, specifically the divine flame of the uraeus; *nb*, ‘grain’, perhaps metaphorical from its golden color; but also, intriguingly, *nbi*,

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<sup>35</sup> On positive depictions of fishing and fowling, see, e.g., Binder 2000; on the dangers of the net for the deceased, see Zandee 1960, 226-234.

<sup>36</sup> Meeks 2006, §19. The translation ‘Wielding of Staves’ (*h3p h3w<sup>c</sup>.w*) is preferable in my opinion to Meeks’ “consécration des bâtons”. See Egberts 1995, 112-114.

<sup>37</sup> Gardiner’s S12 and S13.

‘to swim’.<sup>38</sup> The floating mass of reeds that features in the Edfu cosmogony is also, one may note, called *nbi.t*. This [224] semantic extension is important for our purposes, because it relates Osiris cast into the net and Osiris immersed (more commonly expressed by the term *mḥi*)<sup>39</sup> with Osiris *cast into a form*, in this case the mummy-wrappings (*wt*) and sarcophagus (*nb-ḥnḥ*) in which Thoth in the Letopolitan text puts, not Osiris as a whole being, but his *ba*, his ‘soul’ or ‘manifestation’,<sup>40</sup> which is then in turn placed in the fields (*šḥ.t*).

Meeks, drawing on Cauville, relates this operation to the ritual creation of Osirian simulacra, which in itself extends the symbolic complex pertaining to embodiment into a semiotic register bordering that in which the *Book of Thoth* operates, where *b̄.w* are no longer strictly ‘souls’, but *texts*, which are in a sense ‘images’ as well.<sup>41</sup> Meeks’ Letopolitan myth, like the passage from the *Book of Thoth* at the head of this section, invokes Shentait.<sup>42</sup> The simulacrum of Osiris created by Thoth “is there to this day ... Shentait and Merkhetes in his private space [*m ḏsrw=f*],” (VIII, 10). In the Letopolitan rite, Shentait appears, as is typical, with Merkhetes, the two being identified by Cauville with Isis and Nephthys respectively, while in the *Book of Thoth*, Shentait is apparently juxtaposed with Seshat (*ššy*). The name ‘Shentait’ is sometimes derived from *šni*, ‘to encircle’, on which the author of the *Book of Thoth* appears to pun at B02, 14/6, where

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<sup>38</sup> Wb 2, 236.10.

<sup>39</sup> Vernus 1991 argues that Osiris *mḥi* is not Osiris ‘drowned’, but ‘immersed’ or ‘adrift’. Note the metaphorical extension of *mḥi*, which allows one to speak, as in English, of being ‘immersed’ in thought or concern about something (Wb 2, 120.13-16; 122.11).

<sup>40</sup> On the concept of the *ba* generally, see Zabkar 1968.

<sup>41</sup> Meeks 2006, 97 n. 263, 236. Mention should be made here, with all due caution, of the provocative interpretation by B. H. Stricker of the ‘Book of the Earth’ (the critical edition of which is now Roberson 2012) and related texts as ‘embryological’, i.e., pertaining to the process of embodiment, with far-reaching consequences for the relationship between native Egyptian thought and the devaluation of materiality in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (Stricker 1992, 60; 1994, 110-112); for a balanced appraisal of Stricker’s thesis, see Duquesne 1993.

<sup>42</sup> See Cauville 1981.

‘The-one-who-loves-knowledge’ states “I have fished (with) the net [*šn*, lit. ‘encircler’] of Shentait”; another line of thought relates the name to *šni*, ‘to suffer’, seeing in Shentait the widowed Isis. Shentait is also known by the epithet *msn(t)*, ‘the spinner/plaiter’, which in addition to evoking the net, also, as Cauville points out, alludes to *msi*, ‘to give birth’, as well as to *msḥnt*, the place of giving birth.<sup>43</sup>

The net traps *bas*, we might say, in the condition of passivity, in the condition of being objects, instead of subjects, as we read in the *Book of the Dead*:

[225] O ye fishers, children and their fathers, catchers who go about in the midst of the waters. Ye shall not catch me with this net of yours wherewith ye catch the torpid; ye shall not seine me with this seine of yours wherewith ye seine wanderers.<sup>44</sup>

‘Torpid’ or ‘inert’ ones are *nnyw*, to which compare *nny*, ‘to subside’, which is said of flood waters. To be able to avoid being netted, to wield the net instead, is to be able to give names to its parts and to the elements of this activity. In the Letopolitan myth, *bas* are trapped in the net without discrimination, the enemies of Horus and the ‘excellent *bas*’ alike. For the latter, however, represented by the *ba* of Osiris, Thoth fashions a simulacrum. From the net, therefore, emerges an *image* of the ‘excellent’ *ba*. The net is thus the link between *bas* as ‘souls’ and *bas*, ‘texts’, and the ambivalence of the net in general explicable by the ambivalence of the process of the soul’s *becoming an image*.

In lacunose passages such as V01, 3 and V01, 4 of the *Book of Thoth*, we see constant references to nets, hunting, fishing and bird trapping, along with the phrase *grg n3*

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<sup>43</sup> Cauville 1981, 23-24. Cf. Stricker’s remark that “During the pregnancy of the mother the body of the child is woven in the womb,” a function which he relates to Hathor-Tayet (Stricker 1992, 60).

<sup>44</sup> Spell 153, trans. Allen 1974.

*b3.w*, ‘supplying’ or ‘equipping’ the *bas*, which Quack assimilates to the homophonous *grg*; ‘catching’ or ‘hunting’, in recognition of the wordplay inherent in the author’s juxtaposition of the two terms.<sup>45</sup> In the culmination of this passage, a female divinity is introduced, who is identified as a huntress and a trapper.<sup>46</sup> This divinity appears to be Seshat, inasmuch as V01, 4/17 refers to a “lake of life which is before Shai [Seshat]”

There is also an erotic dimension to the hunting/trapping/writing symbolic complex: “The *sšty.t* [‘secret place’?] of the harem does not trap (?) like the one who loves enchantment/writing [*mr-sphl.w*].”<sup>47</sup> The *mr-sphl.w* is likely a divinity of writing: compare B02, 3/9, which refers either to “Mut, the great one of the enchanters/writers [*sphl.w*],” the “great one of the enchantresses,” or the “Great Mother of the writings,” who could be Seshat herself. There is also sexual symbolism apparent in the wordplays at B02, 6/5-6: “Let one open for me the well/nurse [*hnm.t*] which unites with the wise ones that I may drink from its sweet water. The vulva [*štty.t*] which is as a nurse [*ll.t*] for the learned one, may I enter into its doorposts,” where note the echo of *šty*, ‘net’, in *štty*, ‘vulva’. This is in accord with the apparent association of the net with the conditions of mortal embodiment. [226] The identification of Seshat, Goddess of Writing, with hunting, fishing and bird-netting in the *Book of Thoth*, the role of the *bas* in this text, and the symbolic aspirations of the would-be scribe, are all explicable primarily on the basis of the symbolic transposition of the field of mortal embodiment into the field of the text and the becoming-sign of the *ba*.

A further dimension of this process emerges at B02, 15, where the aspirant, who states he has “spent a thousand years row[ing]” amidst the “field-dwellers” (*šht.w*),

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<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Quack 2007, 266; 269.

<sup>46</sup> C04.1, 12-13.

<sup>47</sup> L01.5, 10/9.

“catching fish”, begins recounting a series of items he has received from magical animals in this land:

A baboon gave to me a spear of sixty cubits/hands. He says to me: “It is their *wṯ.t ht*.” A dog/jackal gave to me a block of limestone. He says to me: “It is their net of trapping (?).” An ibis gave to me a cloth/sail of cattle-leather, while its mast is a skin of lion-skin. A dog gave to me a mummy-cloth (with) hieroglyphs. He says to me: “It is their ... of hunting.”<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that the animals are imparting to the aspirant the very sort of knowledge which the operator in the resurrection literature utters either to avoid being trapped by the netherworld fishers, or in order to construct the netherworld ferry-boat.<sup>49</sup> For example, in B02, 15/6, the aspirant receives from a baboon a spear (*in-nw*) which is identified as a *wṯ.t ht*, which is apparently the *wḏ*, ‘steering-post’, or *wḏyt*, ‘helm’ of a ship, belonging perhaps to the “field-dwellers” of B02, 15/2. The older forms of this word occur in the *Coffin Texts* in just such a context. Thus, in *CT* spell 398, for constructing the netherworld ferry-boat, the deceased states of the boat that “Her steering posts [*wḏ*] are the elder Gods who preside over Nedit,” that is, the place where Osiris fell victim to Seth.<sup>50</sup> In spell 404, the deceased, constructing the ferryboat in the presence of the ferryman of the Field of Reeds, says “The name of the steering-posts [*wḏwt*] is ‘Reeds [*ḳꜥw*]<sup>51</sup> of the Field

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<sup>48</sup> B02, 15/6-B04, 6/9-10.

<sup>49</sup> *Coffin Texts* spells 473-481 (the net and fish-trap spells, of which there is a later version in spell 153 of the *Book of the Dead*); 395-403 (the ferry-boat spells). Compare, in particular, the detailed inventory of the parts of the ferry-boat in *CT* spell 398, while spells 473 and 474 have the most detailed inventories of parts of the net.

<sup>50</sup> V, 127.

<sup>51</sup>Cf. *CT* spell 268, ‘Becoming Sobek, Lord of the Winding Waterway’ (IV, 3b; 4e).



of the God’.”<sup>52</sup> The spells from the *Coffin Texts* and the passages from the *Book of Thoth* do not stand in a simple inverse relationship, however, because the symbolic economy in question applies in the *Book of Thoth* to a semiotic field of reference: the block of limestone suitable for making a statue or inscribed [227] temple block, the inscribed mummy-cloth for accomplishing the transition from inert object to “resurrected” subject. Note, in this respect, that a class of words for “form” in Egyptian—*twt*, *ki*, et al.—are distinguishable by the use of the “mummy” determiner, denoting a static, ideal form, while the term *hpr*, “to become”, signified by the scarab beetle, generates a distinct term for forms, *hprw*, which denotes living “transformations”, but takes the mummy determiner in order to denote reified stages of becoming, modes of being arrested from a living flux.<sup>53</sup>

The scribe aspires to the highest degree of form-giving agency, to be a *speaker* as well as a sign; hence B02, 8/10-11 complements formalization as reification—“may I become like unto [*twtw.y*, from *twt*] a monument [or ‘statue’, ‘sign’, *mnw*]” (10)—with fully personalized linguistic agency—“I have completed the action of the <royal> funerary offering/of creation<sup>54</sup> through pronouncing my name in the darkness, while I fight with the *bas*” (11).

Accordingly, parts of the netherworld vessel are identified with body parts or equipment of Gods and semi-divine agencies, and an identification of the vessel itself with the resurrection body of the deceased is implied, e.g., by the identification of Khnum, the God who fashions the bodies of humans and animals before birth, as its artificer. But in

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<sup>52</sup> V, 189.

<sup>53</sup> For the use of the “mummy” determiner see Gardiner’s A53.

<sup>54</sup> See the discussion of the disputed reading at Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 246.

the *Book of Thoth* it appears that the vessel to be constituted, which is explicitly semiotic, is also explicitly identified by the aspirant with the parts of his/her *own* body.<sup>55</sup>

Hence, we find the *wḥ*, steering-oar post, previously encountered at B02, 15/6, where the aspirant stated that a baboon gave him a spear that is “their *wḥ.t ht.*”, again at B04, 6/10-11, where the aspiring scribe states that “(As for) my limbs, it is the ones of the *wḥ* which steer (or ‘hunt’) my heart for them. As for (their) net [*šn*], my tongue supplies [*g/g*, hence suggesting *g/g*, ‘hunt’ as well] one of their...”.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, at B02, 3/11-15, the process of acquiring understanding of the sacred texts is linked to “find[ing] the gathering over eye, ear, heart, tongue, hand, sole of the foot” (12), in terms evoking the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, which has [228] as its goal the animation of statues and other images, not least of which is the resurrection-body of the deceased.<sup>57</sup> Instead of constituting a new vessel/body in the netherworld, therefore, as is the task of the operator in the resurrection literature, it appears that scribal aspirants in the *Book of Thoth* lend their *living bodies* to the semiotic enterprise.

### *Charcoal*

Most of the references to the materiality of texts in the *Book of Thoth* pertain to water, or to the reeds which supply paper and pens. An exception are several passages which speak of charcoal, an ingredient in ink. References to charcoal, and to burning, add an elemental polarity to the prevailing “wetness” of semiosis in the *Book of Thoth*, but also express, on

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<sup>55</sup> *Coffin Texts* spell 397 (V, 83).

<sup>56</sup> Regarding *šn*: it is better logically than the alternative *šn*, ‘hair’, as acknowledged by Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 313, though note in any case B02, 3/6, “May he make a sailing in the sea of *šn*,” to which the editors compare the “hair-lake” of spell 98 of the *Book of the Dead*, a ferry-boat spell; wordplay between *šnw*, ‘net’, and *šn*, ‘hair’, is common in any case, cf. *CT* spell 474 and Faulkner’s n. 28.

<sup>57</sup> For Morenz 1973, e.g., the primary function of the Opening of the Mouth is “to vitalize the image”, and its performance upon mummies derived from this (155-156).

the axis of the materiality of texts, the intersection with the axis of relation to the antecedent subject which is the topic of the next section.

At V01, 3/5, it appears that “container of coal” is a synonym for the Chamber of Darkness: “[...Chamber of] Darkness ... spend the night, spend the day in the container of coal. You are to find scribal equipment...”. At B02, 3/6, we read “May he row in the river of coals.” The editors suggest a reference here to the “Isle of Flame” or “Lake of Fire” known from the afterlife literature, but there is no precedent for a “river of coals” in this connection, and the context suggests ink again.<sup>58</sup> The next line reads “Effective is the chapel of the *bas*. Effective is the one who takes possession for himself of the storeroom of the spirits.” The *bas* here are texts, the ‘spirits’ (*ihy.w*, *ih* in older Egyptian) their authors. B02, 5/4 again links coal to storerooms: “As for these storerooms, they are overflowing with coal: their meanings, a hand which works.”

This line belongs to a passage dense with symbols for writing: there is a reference to seed-corn in thick-walled storerooms, and to interpretive difficulty: “The second body thereof [i.e., of the thick-walled storerooms containing seed-corn] which acts for them as master, they have assigned reeds (?) [*qmbꜣ*] which [they] cannot reach.”<sup>59</sup> A different manuscript has “The second body thereof which has acted for them as the masters of the fields of reeds (?). Another version: they are the Red and Black which cannot [229] be reached.”<sup>60</sup> This kind of internal glossing (*ky d*, ‘another version’) signals multiple layers of symbolism. The concept of a “second body” or “second party”, *h.t 2.nw*, occurs earlier at B02, 2/3, where a reference to the writers of the past is explicit: “As for the magicians/scholars who came into existence earlier, do they not have a second party?” Here, the copyist has glossed the term “second party” as “helper”, i.e., apprentice, disciple

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<sup>58</sup> Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 195-196.

<sup>59</sup> B02, 5/3.

<sup>60</sup> L01, 3/5.

(*hl*<sup>c</sup>, read *hry-9*). The “second body” is thus one who receives a transmitted text. Here, however, the “sea” of the text is one whose reeds’ or ‘shore’ cannot be reached: it resists interpretation; accordingly, the gloss that reads “They are the Red and the Black which cannot be reached,” seems to refer to the two colors of ink scribes used in a finished text.

The “storerooms overflowing with coal” are thus texts, pregnant with meaning (‘seed-corn’; note also B02, 4/16: “The seven reeds [*ḥ.t.w*] which resemble the plow in the seven fields of ‘He-who-understands-the-Two-Lands’ [Thoth]”), but stubborn in their opacity, their darkness. We find again, however, the stress on the immanence of interpretation in the phrase “their meanings, a hand which works.” The answer to the opacity of the “storerooms overflowing with coal” is to write one’s way out: ‘meaning’ (*d*) is nothing other than the working hand. Hence just below we read, “The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says: ‘Let one say to me the work of the fist, the hand which labors on the divine writings.’”<sup>61</sup> The reference to a fist grasping a pen here evokes Atum’s primordial act of masturbation; his fist is personified as the Goddess Nebet-Hetepet, who is possibly mentioned elsewhere in the text.<sup>62</sup> Just as the fluid medium of the text provides both the problem of interpretation (waves, depths) and the means of its resolution (reeds, papyrus), so too the charcoal is at once the symbol of interpretive opacity and of the ink in which the successful interpretation expresses itself.

A further dimension of the symbolism of charcoal in the *Book of Thoth* comes from the process of burning by which it is produced. B02, 5/5 says of the “storerooms overflowing with coal” that the one who lays hold of [230] them without having

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<sup>61</sup> B02, 5/12.

<sup>62</sup> Read by Jasnow and Zauzich as *nb.w-ḥtp.w* and translated as ‘lords/possessors of offerings’, but they express ambivalence (373); Quack is noncommittal, rendering simply ‘Neb-Hetep’. Notable occurrences are especially B07, 2-3, possibly as part of the book’s extended title: “protection of purity of Osiris Naneferhotep, the great god ... unification of his body for (?) the lords of offerings ... before (the goddess) Shai (=Seshat),” and V01, 3/13: “**He opened his mouth. He replied to his disciples (?) (regarding) the lords of offerings (?) the *bas* ... in (or ‘of’) the net (?) ...**”.

experienced “heat” (*hmm*), “their roasting burns his fingers.” Here the charcoal, symbol for the opacity of the text, evokes the ‘heat’ of a process in the subject: experience the ‘heat’ upon one’s own initiative, lest one be ‘burnt’. The editors note a homophony here between *hmm*, ‘heat’, and *šmm*, ‘harvest’, another frequent metaphor in the text. This seems to pertain to another passage: “As for his beloved, he being in complete darkness (or ‘the Chamber of Darkness’), the teaching will light for him a torch ... the one who lives through eternity, they will burn him to his (very) bones. They will make a burning in his lips. They will set his limbs ablaze. She will make ... to his heart before the chamber which has cooked his *kky* ... the initiated ones/torches will draw near before him.”<sup>63</sup> *Kky* here is apparently a part of the body that comes in pairs; Quack suggests “ears”.<sup>64</sup> It seems that the fate writers seek is to be consumed in their writing, leaving behind only an inky trace. Their living speech (lips), their understanding (ears), live eternally as this “storeroom” of coal, which is also a river of coal, however, that flows through their “second body”, the interpretive partner they possess in the living scribe.

### *Dialogue with the Dead: The Textual Underworld*

The axis of relation to the speaking subjects who came before, the prior sites of utterance, seems to be defined in the *Book of Thoth* on one end by the *bas* with whom, or for whom, the writer must *fight*, and the transfigured “spirits” (*3h.w*) who *inform* speech/writing, and who lie beyond such agonism, at the other.

And I shall bow the shoulder under the papyrus roll of the great god, and go (as)  
the possessor of the wealth of the land of the father. Let me go into it, namely, the

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<sup>63</sup> B02, 2/12-16.

<sup>64</sup> Quack 2007, 269.

chamber which is without singing/reading, and you should cause that I discover the form of the ones who are in it. May I see the great and the small (ones), the apprentices who shut their mouths among them. May I see the Chamber of Darkness, entering into the form of it, namely, the excellent limb of the underworld (?). My heart said to me: “Associate with her, namely, the excellent one who is in the room of *ʒkr.t*.”<sup>65</sup>

[231] At B02, 8/11, the aspirant states “I have completed the action of the funerary offering/of creation<sup>66</sup> through pronouncing my name in the darkness, while I fight with the *bas*,” and at B02, 9/16 “May I arm myself with them, my weapons, that I may fight in the Chamber of Darkness.” The ambiguity concerning whether the aspirant means to fight alongside *bas* who are good or against *bas* who are evil is not important, for our purposes, to resolve. In the Letopolitan myth discussed above, Horus wields a net that traps “excellent” *bas* as well as the *bas* of his enemies. Indeed, the field expressed by *bas*, “manifestations, souls”, and by extension “texts”, seems conflictual in its very nature. The aspirant states at B02, 10/1, speaking of unspecified enemies, “May I be full of *ba* against them. May I bring about their end, without forgetting the destruction of them (?),” to which “He-of-Heseret” replies, “Slaughterers (are) these, O you who love knowledge, in the darkness. The lord of the *bas* of Re [i.e., the texts] (is) the messenger of prophecy.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> B02, 9/9-13. A reference to Aker (*ʒkr*), the primordial divinity of earth, or to the affiliated ‘Earth Gods’ (Akeru), as in, e.g., *Coffin Texts* spell 474, one of the net spells: “I know the name of the fishermen who use it [the net]; they are the earth-gods who preceded all the world and who preceded Geb,” (VI, 23; trans. Faulkner 1977, 113); alternately, a form of *Igeret*, a term for the netherworld, from *gr*, ‘to be silent’.

<sup>66</sup> See Jasnow and Zauzich’s note (Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 246) on this line; it is a question either of a “difficult” (243) writing of the name for the mortuary offering prayer, the *ḥtp-ti-nswt*, or a phrase with *qmʒ*, ‘create, creation’. (Quack 2007, 274 does not offer a reading of the difficult phrase at line 11, but concurs with a similarly problematic reading of *ḥtp-ti-nswt* at B02, 8/3.)

<sup>67</sup> B02, 10/2.

*Bas* and *akhu* are paralleled at B02, 3/7: “Effective is the chapel of the *bas*. Eff[ective is] the one who takes possession for himself of the storeroom of the spirits.” The editors remark that “It is tempting to understand the *b3.w* as referring to sacred texts and the *ihy.w* as denoting the authors of those compositions.”<sup>68</sup> The relationship to these spirits can well be characterized as intimate: “[...] while the excellent spirits think (?) in my heart ... [...]”; “[...] ... [...] companion (?) of the spirits.”<sup>69</sup> It is conceivable that the *bas* with which or for which one must fight in some fashion *belong to* the spirits: “Embark me on the ferry of the excellent spirits! Raise up fighting for me with their *bas*.”<sup>70</sup> If they do, however, the “spirits” nevertheless, for their part, unlike the *bas*, inhabit a stabilized, even beatific place: “**The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says:** ‘I have entered ... the (?) field of turquoise which forms a shade for the spirits’.”<sup>71</sup> Turquoise (*mfk.t*), evoking for Egyptians at once [232] the blue sky and the green of growing plants, is literally synonymous with a kind of joy associated especially with the theophany of Hathor.<sup>72</sup> The “field of turquoise” occurs again in frag. B04, 9/21, which Jasnow and Zauzich see as possibly attaching to L01.11, 12/16, which would then refer to a uraeus “giving birth to breaths [*mf*] in a field of turquoise,” these being divine flames<sup>73</sup> which undergo certain transformations, perhaps into the forms of certain animals, in a series of poorly preserved lines.<sup>74</sup> These are themes that will concern us more in the following section, concerning the relation to animality. For now, it suffices to note that the location that is a resting place for the spirits is also the site of a *productivity* on the part of certain fully divine agencies.

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<sup>68</sup> Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 197. Note, among other passages, B02, 10/6: “His *oudjat*-eye saw before the road. He led at the hall of the divine spirits,” which appears to be glossed by L01.2, 6/19: “[...] ... path of their (?) writings [...].”

<sup>69</sup> L02, 1/6; B06, 1/20.

<sup>70</sup> B02, 15/4.

<sup>71</sup> B04, 7/2.

<sup>72</sup> “La joie-*mfk*, ‘joie-céleste’ selon certains, fut considérée par les Égyptiens comme la joie divine par excellence,” (Aufrère 1982-3, 11-12).

<sup>73</sup> Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 480.

<sup>74</sup> L01.11, 12/17-21.

The spirits may be linked to the scribal function of ‘prophet’ (*sb*, from older Egyptian *sr*) as the *bas* are to the function of ‘craftsman’ (*hm*). The latter term is only with difficulty distinguished from *hm*, ‘hunter/fisherman’.<sup>75</sup> This helps to clarify somewhat the ambiguity in the relationship between these functions in the *Book of Thoth*. Generally in this text “craftsman” is a broader term encompassing the office of “prophet” as well. Thus, B02, 2/1 states “They reveal another box of divine secrets. Their craftsman is the one who interprets/prophesizes [*sb*] about them.” In one passage, however, it seems impossible not to construe an opposition between the “craftsman” and the “prophet”. The subject of the passage B02, 2/2 is perhaps the “magician/scholar” (*rh-ihy*) of B02, 2/1, who if he “raises/enlists [*tsy*] ... a field,” then “the reeds [*ry*, suggesting pens] encircle/enchant [*phr*] him/it”: “He has supplied [*grg*, hence also suggesting ‘hunted, captured’] the *bas* of Re [the sacred texts]. Do they [the texts] not serve the one who desires (to be) a prophet, since (or ‘so that’) he will not be able to become a craftsman?”<sup>76</sup> In a broken context, we find the phrase “craftsmen of the House of Life and the Khnum-builder gods.”<sup>77</sup> The association of the craftsmen here with the *hnm.w*, a class of deities associated with Khnum, who fashions the netherworld ferry-boat and the bodies of mortal creatures, underscores that the craftsman, in the narrow sense, belongs to the symbolic complex of writing as hunting and trapping, and the prophet may be contrasted to the craftsman [233] on this basis, namely that the prophet represents the accomplishment and transcendence of this activity.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 32.

<sup>76</sup> B02, 2/2.

<sup>77</sup> L02, 2/12.

<sup>78</sup> To the multiple Khnum deities of this passage might be compared the two ‘Shesmu-creatures’ of V01, 3/3: “[...] 2 *sšm*-animals (?), they serving the scribal palette with wine (?) ...”. Shesmu is associated in the resurrection literature both with supplying meat and wine to the deceased, and with the processing, so to speak, of the objectified souls; e.g., in spell 273 of the Coffin Texts, Shesmu is present with his knife to gut the ‘fish’ caught in



This in itself relates the prophet structurally to the spirits, for the spirits, in a netherworld context, represent the successfully transfigured deceased. The term *šhw* is literally something effective or actualized, from the verb *šh*, to be effective or, more concretely, to be bright or shine. Hence the *šht*, or “horizon”, is concretely the place where the sunrise or sunset occurs, but is also the “horizon” of theophany in general; *šhw* are spells, or effective utterances; and *šhw* the specific category of spells (known as “glorification” spells) that transform the deceased into “effective” ones, that is, into “spirits”—“spiritualizations”. *šhw* can also refer to an artist’s creative powers, as in the Instructions of Ptahhotep: “No artist has command of his *šhw*,” i.e., no artist is in perfect control of their talent.<sup>79</sup> Artistic skill, like magical effectiveness or theophany, is an intensification of the basic state of effectiveness or agency. This is naturally the kind of agency with which the *Book of Thoth* is particularly concerned, and within that narrower category, writing above all: “The scribal palette is the beautiful praise which (is) in the arm of (the god) *ir* [‘to do’] in its true name.”<sup>80</sup> Writing is the highest and purest form of agency, of ‘doing’.

The process that results in a deceased individual becoming a ‘spirit’ renders the individual “true of voice” (*mšc-šrw*), “justified”, as it is commonly translated. An individual thus transfigured has become, from the viewpoint of the scribal initiation, a source of utterance with whom it is appropriate for the writer to enter into the most intimate relationship: “the excellent spirits think in my heart.”<sup>81</sup> This statement about the spirits should be related to certain statements in the text referring specifically to the position of “prophet”, such as B02, 6/4: “**The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says:**

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the net of the netherworld fishers, and cook them in his cauldron, which is called a ‘woman’ (CT VI 8d).

<sup>79</sup> P. Prisse, 56. For a general discussion of the *šhw*, see Ritner 1993, 30-35; a useful review of recent literature can be found in Barbash 2011, 36-39.

<sup>80</sup> B02, 5/6.

<sup>81</sup> L02, 1/6.

'Let one command for me the word which gives birth to the prophets that I may cause that they become pregnant in my flesh',” and B02, 1/3-4: “Control (?) over the heart and tongue is that which causes a prophet to come about. The field is [234] that which gives birth to her children which are as one (?). Have respect (?) for the offspring!” This relationship to the *akhu* is also denoted by the hermeneutic ‘second body’: “As for the magicians/scholars who came into existence earlier, do they not have a second party/body?”<sup>82</sup>

The *bas* are turbulent forces that belong to the *now* of the text, hence they are ‘caught’ in its “net”; to the degree that one is sufficiently “full of *ba*”, one is also the catcher in this economy. One can glimpse this economy of strength at B02, 2/7-11:

... hieroglyphic sign, craftsman. Let him who is strong of arm be at rest (!) The ... breath (?) ... Does ... the servants of Horus, they raising a troop more numerous than the enchantments of the heart? They will ... they will flatter (?) the strong one. They will bow down to the craftsman who makes up 1,000 [L01: ‘They will assign (?) his servants to the craftsman who amounts to 1,000’] ... and myriads bow before him.

The occurrence of Horus here evokes the Letopolitan bird-netting myth, while the isolated term “breath”, *nf*, alludes to the fiery breath of the uraeus. While no connected sense can be made of the fragments, their tone evokes the turbulent realm of contending forces that arise as the cosmos develops.

Noteworthy in this respect is a passage among the unplaced fragments, where repeated occurrences of “strong” and “the strong one” (*qny*, *qnw*) at C04.4, 2/x+4 and

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<sup>82</sup> B02, 2/3.

the parallel L01.8, x+4-5 is followed shortly after by “The evil injury ... of Shu concerning his father, he making a disturbance,” (C04.4, 2/x+7) then, further on, isolated occurrences of “rebel” (*bks*) (C04.4, 2/x+15), and then further occurrences of “strength” and “to raise fighting” (C04.4, 2/x+26-27), while the intervening line “to see for the work of the hands (with) a reed” (C04.4, 2/x+21) assures us that the passage is concerned with writing throughout. The passage suggests the painful dimension of cosmogenesis from the viewpoint of Atum, the primordial monad and father of Shu, as expressed memorably in spell 175 of the *Book of the Dead*, in which Atum complains to Thoth concerning “the Children of Nut,” i.e., the generations of the divine procession concerned with the plane of mortal being (Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, Seth):

They have made war, they have stirred up turmoil, they have committed wrongs,  
they have started rebellions, they have made carnage, they have put under guard.  
Moreover, they have made large into small in all that <I> have done. Give thou  
effective (help, O) Thoth,

[235] to which Thoth replies:

Thou shalt not experience (further) wrongs ... Their years have been shortened ...  
since they have made a mockery of secrecy in all that thou hast done.

The operator of the spell adds:

I am thy palette, (O) Thoth; I have brought thee thy water-bowl. I am not among these who betray their secrets. No betrayal shall come about through me.<sup>83</sup>

It is not a question here of secrecy in a mundane sense, but of the ontological “unconcealing” of mortal, transitory, particular or accidental being as such, which Thoth has the power to remedy, and the operator identifies with Thoth in this activity. Hence the spell evokes Re’s withdrawal from the “rebellious” mortal world in the *Book of the Celestial Cow*, Re’s final act being to empower Thoth to occupy the gap in divine immediacy through his works. The distance between the primordial moments of cosmogenesis and the articulated cosmos is also expressed by the going away and coming back to Atum of his “eye” (*irt*, agency), personified as his daughter Tefnut; and this symbolic complex is evoked in the passage from the Book of Thoth by the line “... he making the companions of the eye, to remain in saying a spell (?) ...”.<sup>84</sup>

While the *bas*, therefore, belong on the side of the text’s materiality, as the material aspect of psyche or the psychical part of materiality, the text as *ꜣh*, ‘effective’, is the product of a transfigured subjectivity. The *ba* is not an authorial intentionality. *Bas* are rather a pre-personal field of potencies.

The nature of that which is *akh* can be glimpsed, I believe, in the literal sense of a mysterious epithet applied to the scribal aspirant in the *Book of Thoth*: “son of *wn-imꜣ*”. At B07, 1, we may have the opening rubric of the text: “The words which cause a youth to learn and a son of *wn-imꜣ* to question.” No translation has been proposed for this phrase, but the translation which offers itself at first glance for *wn-imꜣ* is “who was there”. Jasnow

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<sup>83</sup> Trans. Allen 1974, 183.

<sup>84</sup> C04.4, 2/x+20.

and Zauzich remark, “*Wn-im* may mean, of course, ‘He who was there’ ... but it is by no means clear that this is the force of the phrase.”<sup>85</sup>

There is a possible pun on the name at B07, 14: “... the prophets call out ‘Istes, son of *wn-im*’ to him, every form in which he is [*imw nb i-wn=f*] is that which they say to him.” ‘Istes’ here is the epithet of Thoth, more [236] commonly “Isdes” or “Isden”. This wordplay is a clue to how to hear *wn-im*, so as to evoke the presence of the past that we see also in the Greek *to ti ēn einai*, “essence”, but literally “what it *was* for something to be”. “Essence” is in this sense not so much timelessness as something’s retention of its past, its narrative. The *akhu* are of the past, and in virtue of that, possess a futurity that contrasts to the material textual generativity symbolized by the “plants which give birth to new words.”<sup>86</sup> To be a “son of *wn-im*”, then, is to be a son of one who was there: to be located in space and time. In this respect, it is a kind of polar opposition to the status of *k3-mut.f*, “bull of his mother”, i.e., begetter-of-himself, and similar epithets suggesting self-generation, so that the axis of the scribe extends precisely from the self-begotten (*k3-mut.f*) to the factual (*s3 wn-im*).

### *The Animality of Texts*

Animals are a topic of chief importance in the *Book of Thoth*, but understanding their role is difficult, particularly inasmuch as there may not be a *single* theme of the animal in the text, but rather, as Jasnow and Zauzich remark, the author sometimes “deals with the animal *qua* animal”, other times “as a sacred being”, that is, as a symbol.<sup>87</sup> One identifiable theme, however, is central to the concerns of the text, and hence demands our

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<sup>85</sup> Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 31.

<sup>86</sup> B04, 8/5.

<sup>87</sup> Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 38-9.

best efforts at reconstruction, namely that of the animal as *speaker*. In the quote above, the animal is established as possessing instruction or guidance whose source is explicitly non-textual.<sup>88</sup>

Is a learned one he who instructs? The sacred beasts and the birds, teaching comes about for them, (but) what is the book chapter which they have read? The four-footed beasts which are upon the mountains, do they not have guidance?<sup>89</sup>

This establishes an analogy between the animal and the possibility of absolute textual *originality*. Animals hence represent escape from the hermeneutic closure exhibited by the economy of the *akhu*, the sites of utterance [237] rendered both “justified/true” and “effective” through being freed from indexicality, and the writer in the now, operating as their ‘second body’, fixing meaning through the ongoing production of texts. The animal, lying outside this economy, embodies its originary moment as such:

These dogs, these jackals, these baboons, these snakes which prophesize according to their utterances ... [...].<sup>90</sup>

I have seen (?) the dogs which are as scribes (?) [...].<sup>91</sup>

[...] writing of the dog [...].<sup>92</sup>

[...] these sacred animals which open up the storeroom ... to seek (?) its produce (?) of lapis lazuli (?).<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> This attitude toward the non-human animal presents a clear contrast with the Corpus Hermeticum, and is an example of the limits of comparison between these traditions: humans have “authority” over other, “unreasoning” animals at CH 1, 14; 10, 22; animals are associated with irrational drives, 12, 4; lack consciousness, *Asclepius* 32; and so forth.

<sup>89</sup> B02, 1/6-7.

<sup>90</sup> B02, 11/3.

<sup>91</sup> L01 (V.T.), x+4/23.

<sup>92</sup> L01.7,6.

B02, 10 speaks of the “lord of the *bas* of Re,” that is, the master of the sacred texts, “the messenger of prophecy” (*hby sb*):

He knew the form of speech of the baboons and the ibises. He went about truly (?) in the hall of the dog. He did not restrain their barking. He understood the barkings of these and these cries of the land of the fathers ... He made the four pleas (?) of the wild beasts, one by one ... He understood them. He brought them before me.<sup>94</sup>

The original “prophet” (*sr/sl*) is thus the animal, and the mediation of this inhuman utterance the primary hermeneutical intervention, an intervention, moreover, which is already also *ethical*, as we can see from the reference to juridical “pleas”.

This evokes a passage from the *Pyramid Texts*, Utterance 270 §386-387, an early version of the ferry-boat spell, in which the king affirms “There is no one living who makes accusation against me, there is no one dead who makes accusation against me, there is no duck which makes accusation against me, there is no ox which makes accusation against me.” Faulkner posits that the duck represents birds in general and the ox the land-animals.<sup>95</sup> In a discussion of the passage, Griffiths has related it both to a general ethical concern toward animals in Egyptian thought, as well as to a specific ambivalence with respect to the sacrificial economy, in accord with “the hostile interpretation of animal

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<sup>93</sup> V01, 4/15. Jasnow and Zauzich 2005 have “turquoise” at 162 in error, as their transcription on 161 and note on the line at 165 confirms they read here *hstb*, “lapis lazuli”.

<sup>94</sup> B02, 10/8-11.

<sup>95</sup> Trans. Faulkner 1969, 79.

sacrifices which was so marked a [238] feature of Egyptian religious thought.”<sup>96</sup> This “hostile ideology” manifests itself particularly in the identification of slaughtered animals with the enemies of Osiris and of Horus. So there is ambivalence with respect to killing animals for food, justified in the context of living within an ontic field inherently riven by conflict, but essentially culpable at the same time. This is symbolically united with the ambivalence already noted regarding the *bas* trapped in the symbolic bird- or fish-net.

The aspiring scribe in the *Book of Thoth* seems to enter into a degree of participation in certain animal species. Thus, with respect to the ibis, the aspirant states

May I enter therein, namely, the character (?) of all the ibises, that I betake myself to the place of the servants of Thoth.<sup>97</sup>

May I wake up in the Chamber of Darkness, the wonder (?) of the Ibis under his guidance (?).<sup>98</sup>

A passage from the unplaced fragments contains a speech by “The-one-who-praises-knowledge” (*Hs-rh*, a pun on “Heseret”, the sanctuary of Thoth), which seems to speak of the ascetic lifestyle of the ibises: “The ibises ... Painful is their food, difficult their mode of life.”<sup>99</sup> This continues for a few lines, culminating in the statement that “Their throat says a name to him (?).”<sup>100</sup> “Ibis” (*hb*) is throughout the text a byword for Thoth, and through the wordplay with *hb*, “to send a message”, represents one of the principal functions assigned to him by Re in the *Book of the Celestial Cow*.

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<sup>96</sup> Griffiths 1991, 153.

<sup>97</sup> B02, 9/2.

<sup>98</sup> B07, 15.

<sup>99</sup> F01, 11.

<sup>100</sup> F14, 13.



Another principal function of Thoth's is embodied in the baboon, and in a fragment from the *Book of Thoth* the aspirant seems to refer to a participation therein: "[...] ... sacred animals [...] saying I shall act as a baboon therein."<sup>101</sup> Dogs, not usually particularly associated with Thoth, are strongly associated with Seshat in the *Book of Thoth*, perhaps in her role there of huntress: "[...] wish to bark among the dogs of Shait [Seshat], the great."<sup>102</sup> A participation is evoked again below in direct address: "Let me make a barking with you [...]."<sup>103</sup> We have already noted references to understanding barking and to "dogs which are as scribes".

[239] Another fragment alludes to an economy of symbolic eating probably referring actually to utterance: "Mouths are joyful. Snakes upon the two lips (are) their offering. A dog is their sustenance. A baboon is their ... the reptiles [...]."<sup>104</sup> Dogs vocalize; the same is not so clear with respect to ibises or, *a fortiori*, snakes. The prophetic utterances attributed to such creatures may come from dreams (e.g., B06, 1/12-13: "The-one-who-praises knowledge, he says: 'Do you have a dream? What is it? ...'"), or from the observation and interpretation of the general behavior of sacred animals. But the role of animality in relation to the writer in the *Book of Thoth* seems to go beyond these practices, into a conceptual organization we can only imperfectly understand.

There is a certain cluster of animals in the text consisting of dogs, ibises, baboons, and snakes, which are explicitly said to speak or prophesize and are in direct relationship with the scribal aspirant. We see this cluster in the passage quoted immediately above from B06, 1/4-5 & parallels, which mentions snakes, dogs and baboons in a context of orality probably symbolic of utterance; dogs, jackals, baboons and snakes are said to prophesize at

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<sup>101</sup> B06, 1/16.

<sup>102</sup> B07, 17.

<sup>103</sup> L02, 1/5.

<sup>104</sup> B06, 1/4-5 & parallels.

B02, 11/3; a baboon, a dog/jackal, and an ibis provide equipment to the aspirant at B02, 15/6-B04, 6/9-10.

Some other animals mentioned in the text could, with less certainty, be added to this set, especially bulls or cows, donkeys, and lizards/reptiles. There is clearly a distinction between these animals, in whom a participation of some sort is sought, and the “birds” or “fish” to be trapped in the net.

A small number of passages in the text indicate, however, a further structural bifurcation in the function of animality, one also irreducible to a distinction between “real” and “symbolic” animals. For example, “The sacred animal which has [caused (?)] the baboon to perceive [*ḥm*] is the one which guides ...” (L01 (V.T.), x+3/21) implies some relation *internal* to the category. In other cases, to be causative of thought seems to be a strictly divine prerogative: at B02, 11/2 a speaker identified as “**He-created-the-thoughts** [*mwy.w*]” begins, before a break, to speak of “the hall of the dog”; this is probably the same speaker who refers on the next line to prophetic dogs, jackals, baboons and snakes.<sup>105</sup> An unidentified subject is said at B02, 10/13 to have “created the thoughts of the donkey”.

The animal falling most clearly into a special category in the *Book of Thoth*, a category structurally parallel to the abstract faculty of “thought” [240] lying between the Gods and the other animals, including humans, is the vulture (*nry*). The vulture is the subject of a lengthy section, the so-called “Vulture Text” of L01, in which allegorical vulture figures are assigned to each of the nomes, or districts, of Egypt, this set of vultures being also identified with a core set of highly generative sacred texts:

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<sup>105</sup> B02, 11/3.

May the pastophoroi seek out the writings of the *bas* of Pre [Re], the ones who protect his (?) foundation ... They say to me: “There are forty-two sacred places in the House of Life, they (?) growing [...] ... There are forty-two vultures which give birth between them, while their young ... sing. May I list the vultures together with their names ... A vulture will embrace them, she being in de[sire (?) ...]”<sup>106</sup>

Within a few lines, the aspirant apparently begins reciting the vultures, beginning with “A vulture which draws a bow, while its young ... [...] It is Elephantine,” capital of the First Nome of Upper Egypt.<sup>107</sup> The same multiplicity recurs at B04, 7/8, without reference to vultures, but instead to sacred animals generally: “**The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says:** There are forty-two souls ... which command myriads. They are 3,000 (of) myriads. I will give the choicest of the sacred animals.” A mediating role for some sacred animals in assigning certain “vultures” to certain “territories” is also expressed leading up to the “Vulture Text”: “a kite, an ibis, and a falcon assign them [the *b3.w*, ‘souls/texts’] to the (two) lands [i.e., Egypt] one by one.”<sup>108</sup> A different multiplicity of vultures, but still associated with the sacred texts, is mentioned at B02, 10/2-4, where it is said that

The lord of the *bas* of Re (is) the messenger of prophecy. He made the forms of the vultures of Upper Egypt: ten, he giving praise to god for the teaching. He created nine female vultures of Lower Egypt together with their nine young, they making praise to the *bas* of Re.

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<sup>106</sup> L01 (V.T.), x+1/14-18.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 24.

<sup>108</sup> L01 (V.T.), x+1/12.

A female artificer of some sort, likely Seshat, is also involved in a process generating “vultures” at B04, 7/18-22:

She works some forty (with) gold and turquoise, another two (with) real lapis [lazuli ?] (in) the hall. The vulture discovered its young between [the] pillars (?) [belonging to] an entrance-way (of) the House of Life. Come! Let me go to it. Let me remain in it. Let me interpret the praise which came into being earlier. Let me learn of She-who-is-wise, this one who first established (the) chamber, she being ... a lamp of prophecy.

[241] Turquoise (*mfk*) and lapis lazuli (*hsbd*) are both terms in the language of mineral emotions discussed by Aufrère; they both express a cosmic, indeed a cosmogonic joy closely associated with the theophany of Hathor. The several references to turquoise and lapis lazuli in the *Book of Thoth* make them virtually a further element of the text’s materiality (I), in which texts would be concretions of divine joy, produced in the defense of the cosmos against entropy; V01, 4/15 speaks of sacred animals opening a storeroom containing lapis lazuli, as the conduit, it would seem, for the theophanic dimension of texts.

The passage above about Seshat seems in turn linked to one where the aspirant, in response to prompting from the Opener-upon-his-Standard (Wepwawet), explains the “names and secret aspects” of several beings “more mysterious than the nights”:

There are seven of them who announce [*sr*] the Lord of Protection and who are as protection for the one brilliant (?) of appearances. Another two of them give a foot (or ‘position’) in a ... (in?) the place (?) of death, they being prepared (?) upon earth. The foremost also of them, he being as a lamp which is lit, while he

interprets their language. The last nine (are) columns, carrying a Wadjet-figure amulet which has been spread out [i.e., explained], the orderer of the two lands. A noble vulture is the one who embraces them, it will give birth to all the young so as to settle them (according to their) manner (?).<sup>109</sup>

The two passages, obscure as they may be, likely describe moments in the same process or describe the same process in parallel fashion, i.e., on different planes of being. Thus, for example, the solitary activity of Seshat as “lamp of prophecy” in the first is attributed to the group in the second, who as “columns” personify the “pillars” in the first text; in the first, Seshat is credited with the establishment of the “chamber”, presumably the Chamber of Darkness, while in the second, the prophetic figures create a bridge between this world and the netherworld.

The close association of the vulture and Wadjet, the uraeus cobra, has precedent in the pairing of Wadjet and vulture-formed Nekhbet as symbols of Lower and Upper Egypt respectively. Wadjet occurs again in the fragments of L01.11, which speak of a desire to “dwell in Dep [the city] of Wadjet” (12/2), and then of a uraeus giving birth to breaths of divine flame—Wadjet’s weapon in the defense of the cosmos—in a field of turquoise; some cryptic lines follow—“She transforms [*pn*] fifty of forms to a form [*n hbl r hbl*] [...] [242] some bulls therein in some [...] some snakes, another version: [...]”—ending with “She is like the vulture which gives birth [to a young bird (?) ...].”<sup>110</sup> This process of transformation is perhaps that by which the Wadjet-figure in B02, 12/15 is ‘unfolded’.

The uraeus and the vulture are thus both identified with the production of text in the properly theophanic sense. At L01 (V.T.), x+1/5, in what is effectively the

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<sup>109</sup> B02, 12/11-16. *Wdy* here is either a figure of Wadjet, or a Wedjat-eye. Same usage for “explain” five lines above at B04, 7/8-10: “The opener upon his standard, he says: ‘Explain to me this form of theirs; reveal their shapes.’ May the mouth open ... hear ...”.

<sup>110</sup> L01.11, 12/18-21.

introduction to the “Vulture Text”, we read that “The vulture (?) has protected (?) Nun (?) ... so as to cause the earth to overflow through its work.” The vulture here perhaps embodies the investment, so to speak, of the primordial flux of Nun in the text, which can pour forth to inundate and fructify the earth. Hence the vulture is effectively associated with texts both as the repository of the precosmic chaos, and as the furthest development of the cosmogonic opus, as symbolized by the fiery uraeus cobra, who defends the constituted cosmic order from inimical forces.<sup>111</sup> The vulture is suited to its unique position perhaps by virtue of its position in the ecosystem as the greatest of the carrion eaters. Given the ambivalence Egyptian thought evinces to the eating of flesh, the carrion eater may have been regarded as occupying the *moral* summit of the food-chain. This may shed light on the otherwise obscure tendency for ‘human’ to be written sometimes with a vulture-head.<sup>112</sup>

Closer yet to the concerns specific to the *Book of Thoth* is the parable of ‘Sight’ and ‘Hearing’ from the Demotic *Myth of the Sun’s Eye*, where these two perceptual faculties are personified as two vultures.<sup>113</sup> The text begins by comparing, in metaphorical terms, the relative merits of these two senses.<sup>114</sup> At a certain point, though, it shifts its concern definitively to an ethical register,<sup>115</sup> when the vultures of Hearing and of Sight mutually confirm a chain of consumption that begins with a fly being eaten by a lizard, the lizard by a skink, the skink by a snake, the snake taken by an eagle, which falls with it into the sea, where they are both eaten by an *ꜥt*-fish, which is in turn eaten by a cat-fish, which is eaten by a lion when it comes too close to shore, the lion finally being eaten by a

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<sup>111</sup> In this respect, it does not matter if the item at B02, 12/15 is a figure of Wadjet or of the Wedjat-eye, because the latter symbolizes the effective offering which, as the human reply, so to speak, to the Gods, also manifests the culmination of the emergence of cosmic order.

<sup>112</sup> Wb 2, 279.10.

<sup>113</sup> Translated and discussed in Tait 1976.

<sup>114</sup> From roughly 13.25-14.10.

<sup>115</sup> From 14.30 on.

griffin. The griffin is conceived as the top predator, a position which, however natural, is also inherently morally culpable:

[243] Then <Sight said to> Hearing “What will happen about the murder of the lion that the griffin committed? How will it be settled?” Hearing said to Sight “It is true, do you not know that the griffin is the creature of [Death]? He is the herdsman of everything that is upon the earth. He is the avenger upon whom no avenger can take vengeance. His beak is an eagle’s, his eye is a man’s, his limbs are a lion’s, his ears [...] scale are an *ḥḥ*-fish’s of the sea, his tail is a snake’s—the five that draw breath that are upon the [earth]—this is the form that he takes. It is the case that he wields power over everything that is upon the earth, like Death, the avenger, who is also the herdsman of everything that is upon the earth ... Truly, he who kills is killed, and he who orders a killing, his destruction is ordered.”<sup>116</sup>

Throughout this passage, there is a tacit awareness that the *nrt*, “vulture”, though evoking “fear” (*nrv*), also “protects” (*nri*), and thus is also a “herdsman” (*nr*) in her own right, but not like the griffin. The vulture, too, is at the top of the food chain, but without the moral culpability the griffin bears. This seems to relate directly back to the universal reach of the senses of sight and hearing, especially when they work together to establish the truth of the causal chain represented by the series of predatory encounters (“The two vultures took themselves to the mountain. They found that everything they had said together was entirely true.”). The perceptual faculties are “omnivorous”, they “take in” everything, but without “blame”, without being implicated in the causal chain: contrast this with the incorporation of the five types of animal in the shape of the griffin. The symbol of the

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<sup>116</sup> Tait 1976, 39.

vulture thus combines the widest perception and the most ethically clarified intention. This perhaps explains the priority of the vulture among the animal operators in the *Book of Thoth*.

Of the three relations that, as I have argued, determine the activity of writing in the *Book of Thoth*, textual animality is the most difficult to explicate, due to the fragmentary nature of the most relevant passages and paucity of other extant Egyptian texts to which we might compare it, but also on account of its overall originality for us: the very concept of the animal as deployed in Egyptian thought is completely new to us.<sup>117</sup> Textual animality appears to pertain to the possibility of absolute originality in writing, on the one hand, and to the conditions of theophany in writing on the other. In a seeming hierarchical organization of this field, the vulture represents the highest principle of textual production, with other animals operating closer [244] to the writer him/herself. These other animals, to the extent that they are diverse participations or transformations of some more ideal or divine substance of textuality are perhaps discrete functions of writing akin to what we call “genres”, inasmuch as they are “voices” establishing fields for new writing, but irreducible to the influence exerted on the writer by particular scribal antecedents (the *akhu*).

### *The Nature of Knowledge in the Book of Thoth*

Jasnow and Zauzich subtitle their edition of the *Book of Thoth*, “A Discourse on Knowledge and Pendant to the Classical Hermetica”. I have not addressed myself to the latter claim in the present essay, but would like to say a few words in conclusion about the former. I believe that the *Book of Thoth* must be regarded as a discourse upon knowledge

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<sup>117</sup> A potentially fruitful area of comparison might be with the *ngesh* in Kuba thought, which are animal spirits associated with divination and functionally distinct from ancestral spirits (see, e.g., Mack 1981).



in the specific sense of sign-production or semiosis. It has been noted that Egyptians use terms such as *rh*, “knowledge”, for even the most arcane theological statements, rather than terms implying “belief”, and this speaks indeed to the scope of “knowledge” in the Egyptian worldview.<sup>118</sup> But insofar as the *Book of Thoth* is indeed a discourse upon knowledge, it brings home to us that knowledge is essentially hermeneutic for Egyptian thought.

Typical of how terms such as *ḥm*, “to comprehend” and *ḥr*, “to understand” operate in the *Book of Thoth* is a passage such as this: “If you understand her (and if) you comprehend her praises, she will make her place at your mouth, you being thirsty” (B02, 4/5), where the object is “the nurse who nurtures language [*ḥpy*]” (B02, 4/1). We see this term for language again at B02, 12/14: “The foremost also of them, he being as a lamp which is lit, while he interprets [*wḥm*] their language.” *Wḥm* has the basic meaning of repetition, and therefore what is ‘interpreted’ in this sense is something sufficiently concrete that it may be repeated in order to explicate it. ‘Understanding’ in the *Book of Thoth* has as its condition the relation to some prophetic, that is, originary, text, as we see in the epithet “He-who-understands-prophecy.”<sup>119</sup> This is so even if this text is not what we literally or conventionally understand as text, as when it is said that “the lord of the *bas* of Re ... understood the barkings of these [in the ‘hall of the dog’] and these cries of the land of the fathers” (B02, 10/10), or when the aspirant says “I understood their falcons.”<sup>120</sup>

[245] Recognizing this essentially hermeneutic quality of knowledge for the Egyptian sage allows us to appreciate, to the extent possible in light of the fragmentary nature of the *Book of Thoth*, the purpose of the complex operations and diverse

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<sup>118</sup> See the discussion at Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 62.

<sup>119</sup> B02, 14/5.

<sup>120</sup> B02, 15/5.

relationships in its pages. These relationships, even where they are to prior authors, that is, “spirits”, on the one hand, or to primary sites of utterance, “animals”, on the other, occur within a fundamental textual medium without which they are as inconceivable as the Egyptian cosmos would be without the Nun, the precosmic waters which flow through all reality. The waters of the text are the true presence of this precosmic flow, they are the Nun’s *presence to Truth*, inasmuch as they are these waters, this darkness, rendered *workable* by Thoth and by Seshat, but at the same time, never so tractable that they lose their abyssal quality, their agonism, or their alienness.

The Egyptian *rh-ihy*, “magician, scholar”, is preeminently a knower of texts, but s/he is literally a knower of *things*, *ih*, a word which has the determiner of a rolled papyrus, for it has been abstracted from *particular* things. But this does not mean that the ‘abstract’ object grounded in textuality is not ‘real’, or that particulars are only real in some deceptive discursive twilight. Rather, text circulates in the bodies of all things, and these things obtrude themselves, they are *writing themselves into it* all the time: *everything* is a scribe.

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