

Ocular desire in a time of darkness. Urban festivals and divine visibility in Ancient Egypt

In the cult chapel of a certain Pairi in Thebes (Theban Tomb Nr. 139), erected around 1420 BCE, a visitor named Pawah, some 80 years later, scribbled a graffito on the left jamb of an inner doorway¹ which has been generally understood as being the complaint of a man about his blindness and the prayer for restoration of his sight.² The true meaning and significance of the text becomes only clear, however, when we look closely into what the man is really complaining of.³

Year 3, third month of inundation, day 10.

The king of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the two lands,
Ankh-kheprure, beloved of..., the son of Re Nefernefruten beloved of
Wan[re].

1 Giving praise⁴ to Amun,

2 prostration before Onnophris⁵,

1 For the location see B. Porter, R. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings*, I.1, Oxford ²1960, 253 (5). The text has been edited by Gardiner, "The Graffito from the Tomb of Pere", in: *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 14, 1928, pp. 10–11; for a recent German translation see my *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete*, Zürich 1975, Nr.147.

2 See most recently A. Barucq, F. Daumas, *Hymnes et prières de l'Égypte ancienne*, Paris 1980, pp. 203ff. No. 71: "prière d'un aveugle à Amon".

3 The following translation makes use of G. Fechts reconstruction of Egyptian metrics. The text (including title but not date and subscript) seems to be divided into two parts of 23 and 19 verses, each of them containing 4 stanzas.

4 Instead of *j3w* "praise", which is what the formula requires, the text reads *dw3* "adoration".

5 The divine names are written in cartouches like royal names, corresponding to the Amarna convention of writing the name of the god Aten. The formula implies an equation of Amun and Osiris (called Onnophris) which, as far as I know, is unparalleled elsewhere.

3 by the web-priest, scribe of the divine offerings of Amun
 4 in the house of Ankhkheprure in Thebes,
 5 Pawah, born of Itiseneb. He says:

6 My heart longs to see you, Lord of the Persea-trees⁶,
 7 when your neck receives garlands⁷!
 8 You give satiety without eating,
 9 drunkenness without⁸ drinking.

10 My heart longs to see you, that my heart may rejoice,
 11 Amun, you fighter⁹ for the poor!
 12 You are the father of the motherless,
 13 the husband of the widow.

14 How sweet it is to pronounce your name:
 15 it is like the taste of life,
 16 it is like the taste of bread for a child,
 17 (like) clothing for the naked,
 18 like the smell of fragrant herbs¹⁰
 19 in the time of heat.

20 You are like [...]
 21 You are like the taste of [...] ruler,
 22 (like) breathing air for him who was in bondage.
 23 [...]

6 *sw3b* "a (holy) tree: Persea (mimusops Schimper)", *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* IV, p. 435.10–14.

7 Read *m3ḥw* "wreaths, garlands", *Wörterbuch* II, p. 31.1–4, which occurs in this writing. The generally accepted reading *mḥjt* "northwind" presupposes emendation and does not make sense, because it does not refer to a *visible* phenomenon. *ḥḥ* as a word for neck is usually employed in connection with decorations like collars, wreaths and the like.

8 "Without" is written *bw* in verse 8 and *r bw* in verse 9. There are two possibilities: either we cancel the *r* in verse 9 and take *bw* to be a (common) mistake for *bn* "without", or we read *r bw* in both verses and read "instead of". Gardiner, who prefers the former alternative because "the sense is infinitely more satisfactory" seems not to be aware of the fact that the sense is exactly the same in both readings. Giving satiety "instead of eating" means, of course, satiety without eating.

9 From *ḥnwt* "spear" (*Wörterbuch* III, p. 110.11)? Or "protector", from *ḥn* "to protect" (*ibid.*, p. 101.8–11)?

10 *Wörterbuch* III, p. 221.

38 Dispell fear, give joy into the heart(s) of men!

39 How rejoices the face that sees you, Amun.

40 It is in feast every day.

41 For the Ka of the wab-priest, the scribe of the temple of Amun.

42 in the house of Ankhkheprure, Pawah, born of Itiseneb.

(subscript)

To your Ka! Spend a happy day in the midst of your fellow-townsmen!

(By) his brother, the outline draughtsman, Batjai of the house of Ankhkheprure.

We are dealing here with the complaint and the prayer of a man, who feels he is living in darkness and who longs for the sight of the face of God. The wish to see God occurs not less than five times in the text:

- in the introductory lines of the first two stanzas (vs. 6 and 10)
- in the appeal for light (vs. 29–30, 33)
- and in the closing benediction¹⁸ (vs. 31–32).

The text is a complaint, an expression of longing and unfulfilled desire. Yet, the speaker is not in utmost misery and desolation. Though deprived of the sight of the god Amun, he still enjoys the sweetness of his name. The mere sound of the name is of unspeakable sweetness, like the taste of life, like breathing air for him who was in bondage. In speaking of the name, the lamentation turns into praise. The style of this praise is lyrical in the highest degree of Egyptian poetry; it is immediately reminiscent of a famous poem in praise of death in a much older text which is rightly held to be the apex of Egyptian poetry¹⁹:

Death is before me today
 like a sick man's recovery
 like going outdoors after confinement.
 Death is before me today
 like the fragrance of myrrh
 like sitting under a sail on breeze day.

18 For the use and significance of the "makarismos" form in Egyptian texts see Assmann, "Weisheit, Loyalismus und Frömmigkeit", in: E. Hornung, O. Keel (Hrsg.), *Studien zu ägyptischen Lebenslehren*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 28, 1979, pp. 12–72.

19 A text known as the "Tired of Life" or "The Dispute between a Man and his Ba" preserved on Pap. Berlin 3024, see H. Goedicke, *The Report about the dispute of a Man with his Ba*, Baltimore 1970.

- 24 Be merciful, [...]
 25 [... cal]ling the lord of virtue, that he may turn.
 26 Turn your face towards us, o lord of eternity!
 27 You were here before 'they' arose,
 28 you will be here when 'they' are gone.¹¹
- 29 You caused me to see a darkness of your making.
 30 Bestow light upon me, so that I may see you.¹²
 31 As your Ka endures, as your beautiful beloved face endures,
 32 you will come from afar¹³
 33 and grant that this servant may see you,
 34 the scribe Pawah.
 35 Give to him "merciful is Re" (a blessing¹⁴).
- 36 How¹⁵ good it is to follow you, Amun:
 37 A lord great to be found¹⁶ for him who seeks him.¹⁷

11 Read *hn* "to go", *Wörterbuch* III, p. 103.6–21.

12 Read *tw* for *tn*.

13 This assertion is cast in the form of an oath, cf. similarly Berlin Stela 20377: "As your Ka endures, you will be merciful" (*w3ḥ k3.k jw.k r ḥtp*). In the same text we read: "You are the one who comes from afar!".

14 Cf. Cerny-Gardiner (eds.), *Hieratic Ostraca*, pl. xxxiii No. 4 rto: "I have come to say to you 'merciful is Re!'".

15 Read *hjj*, not *zp snw* ("twice").

16 *gmj* "to find" has a pregnant meaning in the context of "Personal Piety". It refers to the personal experience of a divine intervention, especially of a rescuing character. The intervention as such is referred to as "coming".

May Amun be found having come,
 the sweet breeze before him. (Pap. Anastasi IV, 10.3–4).
 I found the lord of the gods having come with northwind
 the sweet breeze before him
 (Berlin Stela 20377)

I found her having come with sweet breeze
 (Turin Stela 1593+1694)

My voice circulated in southern Heliopolis,
 I found Amun having come since I called him
 (Battle of Qadesh, Poem 122–23).

The idea of god's rescuing coming is expressed, in our text as elsewhere, as "coming from afar".

17 Lit. "Great for him who seeks him in finding him". For the use of the suffix pronoun after participles as well as infinitives s. A. Erman, *Neuägyptische Grammatik*, 82.

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