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, it is incumbent upon us to begin to take stock of this text. Even if the discovery of additional fragments may yet happen, to the very degree that they would be likely to upset any ventured interpretation, it is still wise for us to study the extant material 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.

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. 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.

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 environ-

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* This essay is humbly dedicated to Birger Pearson, in admiration for his skillful integration of phenomenological insight and textual criticism, and appreciation for his demonstration of the power of hermeneutics.

1 E.g., Allen 1988.
ment 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’ (‘t-kky) is so important to the Book of Thoth that it is possible the text’s true title is actually given at Bo7, 42 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 clear a preoccupation of the Book of Thoth as to make it unlikely that the term refers primarily to another text. The Chamber of Darkness 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 Bo4, 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 ‘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-smȝw, ‘utter’ or, literally, ‘united’ darkness, which alludes to the precosmic condition in which “there were not two things.”

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2 References to the Book of Thoth are according to the dominant manuscript witness for a section (Bo7 in this case), even when part of a line may be supplied by a different manuscript (here, e.g., Co7.1).