The Tale of Sinuhe *1995-1965 B.C.* (Egypt)

The *Tale of Sinuhe* is a brief fiction, set in the early 20th century B.C., in the reign of Amenemhatep III, at a time of High Renaissance for Egyptian culture; the so called Golden Age of the Middle Kingdom. *(The Instruction for Merikare* is only slightly older than *The Tale of Sinuhe*.) The reigning Pharaoh Amenemhatep's grandeur of position is reflected in his name, which meant 'Belonging to the Justice of Re,' the Father God, and the cult of monarchical divinity is here at its apex. Like all Egyptian Pharaohs Amenhemhatep's attention turned early not only to the exercise of administrative control over his rapidly growing domains, but to the construction of a pyramid worthy of his divine kinghood; his first pyramid, the 'Black Pyramid,' was built at Dashur, but was later superseded by a new pyramid at Hawara. The intricate architectural work embodied there reflects engineering skills befitting the monarch of Egypt at a high point in its culture, and the themes of divinity, monarchy, and tomb-building will clearly be seen to penetrate the following tale.

The *Tale of Sinuhe* was composed at just this renascent moment, and yet the always difficult explanatory bridge, between background and text to be explained, is difficult in a case like that presented by the story before us. The story is thin on local details, and though that very thinness is part of the mystery and fascination of the tale, it compounds the problems of lodging our text historically. Who wrote it? Who was the Sinuhe he wrote about? What is he trying to say about the nature of the human person?

As it is, we confront a simple but subtle plot. Sinuhe, a government official, presents a tale which opens with the announcement from his tombstone of the tale of his life, which is what follows. Sinuhe accompanies a certain Prince on assignment to Libya. Then Sinuhe becomes aware (by the miracle of fiction), through an overheard conversation, that there was a problem (*a coup d'état*) in the Royal Palace; and 'then was mine heart distraught, mine arms sank, and trembling fell on all my limbs.' Consequently Sinuhe flees to Canaan. (Within the simple narration, that leads Sinuhe's way, there are moments of sharply felt anxiety: 'I bowed me down in the thicket lest the watcher for the day on the wall should espy me.' His flight is punctuated by his and the narrator's comments on his flight and on himself as the fleer. 'I set out southward yet did I not purpose to reach the Residence (his home city), for I thought that strife would arise, and I was not minded to live after him (the ruler under attack).' With these few words Sinuhe affirmed his fear, his timidity, and his 'love for his master.' And at the same time we hear his muttering self-presence, which these directional plans emerge from. We are jolted by the selfhood presence of Sinuhe, here in his text, more living than any access to self we get in earlier Egyptian or Babylonian literature—and on a par with the depth of *Gilgamesh*, next week's reading.

The ongoing progress of Sinuhe's journey is furthered by the fleer's report to the Prince of Upper Retenu, to whose lands he eventually comes, explaining who he is and where he came from. We hear Sinuhe's account from his own voice, enclosed of course in the narration of the whole text, and are left wondering whether we are to take the report at face value—'I know not what brought me to this land; it was like the dispensation of God'; 'and I said again, disssembling'-- Sinuhe has traversed so many events, without really seeming to belong to them, that he comes across as a shadow figure, when he gives an account of himself to another person. (The construction of selfhood is being ingeniously insinuated here, where it leaves its carbon footprint in the minima of Sinuhe's expressive life.)

Frightened, carefully managing his image lest he fall into dangerous hands, Sinuhe addresses the Prince of Upper Retenu with effusive praise of the new king at the Residence, successor to Amenenemhatep, whose power and mercy are already legendary. (It is hard—

from the 21st century Western readerpoint--not to take Sinuhe, addressing the Prince of Upper Retenu, as a blend of con man, keeping everybody happy while keeping himself safe, with a genuine admirer of his new king/savior.) At this point Sinuhe accepts the invitation of Nenshi, son of Amu, the Prince of Upper Retenu, who has been sheltering him, and settles down with the Prince, to pass an idyllic life as pampered guest, husband of the Prince's daughter, and darling of the Prince's court. The self-reflexive dimension of the character construction seduces us into seeing the world from 'his' standpoint.

Sinuhe becomes a powerful and merciful king in his own right, though telling us about it—first person narration—with a modesty, almost uncertainty, which marks his whole tale. Finally Sinuhe appeals to the royal court from which he first fled, and begs for the right to 'return home.' (His view of himself, as he lodges this petition, is self-critical, confessional: 'Once a fugitive, fled in his season—now the report of me is in the Residence. Once a laggard lagged because of hunger—now give I bread to my neighbor.') The decree permitting him to return to Egypt arrives, and Sinuhe is invited, as an old man now, to return to his roots, where the gods are preparing a funeral in high honors for him. (Please note that what we recount here, for you the student, is in the text recounted by Sinuhe about himself, and thus participates in his narration of a fiction which will settle and enoble his life. The artfulness of the narrator of this tale, who embeds so much self-reflection in his own narration, embodies the kind of move toward the sense of selfhood which this course concerns.)

Sinuhe is overjoyed by the new king's invitation, for which he feels a gratitude indicative of a sense of guilt, or at least of unworthiness. (The way he expresses his joy indicates his insecurity.) Having taken careful leave of his life home with Nenshi, Sinuhe travels back to the home city from which he set out, whence he came, and where the new monarch welcomes him—in a ceremony indicating (but all half-said) how deeply traumatic Sinuhe's absence from home has been, and how deep a fault/error/mistake divides him in old age from the mind that filled him when first he heard bad news from his post in the bull rushes. (Like the narrating king in the *Instruction for Merikare*, Sinuhe lives over the depths of a shameful secret, his impulsive flight.) The rest is history. Back with the royal family Sinuhe is given his own sumptuous quarters, golden raiment, four meals a day, and has nothing left but to live out his life in patronal splendor, awaiting the blessedness of his own beautifully appointed pyramid. He has told us himself into just the overall point the narrator of him wished.

We have said it already; we could assemble pictures of the great temples and sculptures and paintings of the Middle Kingdom Renaissance, and make this week's work an entry on culture at large in Egypt at the beginning of the second millennium B.C. But that would be too much to undertake, our approach too shallow, and our focus diffuse. We are interested in the development of self-awareness or personal presence in Ancient Near Eastern Literature. We are not going to find a subtler or more irresolvable case of the search for personal identity than in the tale of Sinuhe. The way he presents life situations to himself, while himself being a life situation presented by a narrator, is the key to 'his' three dimensionality.

Reading

Parkinson, R.B., *The Tale of Sinuhe and other ancient Egyptian Poems 1940-1640 B.C.*

Discussion Questions

1 In the introductory material, above, we referred to *The Tale of Sinuhe* as a 'brief fiction.' No one knows whether the word 'fiction' applies here. It is possible, but hard to verify, that Sinuhe was a real historical figure. Does the text before us seem to you to bear the marks of a fiction. Is fiction an appropriate vehicle for self-discovery?

2 If anyone is trying to track and define self-identity, in the *Tale of Sinuhe*, it must be the author or narrator of the tale. Does that narrator seem to you to be identical with Sinuhe himself? At what points does the narrator separate from Sinuhe and talk about 'him' as another person, or perhaps as a 'fiction?' Do these layers of personal address and reference qualify this ancient text as what we would call postmodern today?

3 What kind of narrative is the *Tale of Sinuhe*? Do you flow from one stage to another, or is the flow interrupted by major hieratic passages and by jumps in narrative strategy? Do you see any parallel between the formal presentation technique here and that in hieratic Egyptian sculpture, in which the frontally depicted human figure is to us anti-naturalistically juxtaposed to the other images in its painted panel.