

## Jan Assmann

The human sense of time is based on our immediate experience, which is twofold: the cyclical return of waking and sleeping, of eating and fasting, of summer and winter, and so forth, and the consciousness of our own finality that distinguishes us from other animals. Every cultural concept of time, then, is determined by cyclicity and linearity, by the circle and the arrow. The ancient Egyptian concept of time is no exception to this general rule; however, the leading temporal dichotomy captures time here in the form of negation: the endlessness of repetition, which in Egyptian is called *neheh*, and of duration, or *djet*. This dual concept of time is rooted in human experience and in the Egyptian language.

The temporal system of the Egyptian language is based not

on the triad of tenses—past, present, future—but on the opposition of aspects—perfective and imperfective. The perfective aspect shows a process from without, understood as complete and terminated; the imperfective aspect shows this process from within, as ongoing, continuing. It follows that *djet* refers to the unchangeable and endless duration of something that is accomplished and complete. The deity that represents time in this aspect is Osiris and his epithet is *Wenen-nefer*, “who exists in perfection.” *Neheh*, on the other hand, refers to endless repetition and regeneration, and the corresponding deity is Ra, the sun god in his morning aspect as *Khepre*, “who transforms himself.” Whereas *neheh* is associated with the sky, the stars, and their endless rotation, *djet* is

associated with the earth, the stone, and its endless duration. Both concepts—*neheh* and *djet*—denote time in the mode of negation, and together they refer to “eternity,” our notion of negative time. For us, “eternity” negates time in its motion, from future via present into past, or vice versa. For the Egyptian, eternity negates time in its cessation of repetitions and its ending of duration.

Time in its *neheh* aspect is endless but measurable and countable in terms of hours, days, months, and years. In its *djet* aspect, however, time is evaluative. Only the perfect is admitted to it. The Egyptians were highly inventive at forming strategies to overcome the curse of perishability inherent in their understanding of everything imperfect. How may a human being be saved from decay and corruption? The Egyptian answer is twofold: by mummification and by Ma’at, and it concerns the bodily and the spiritual self. The ritual of embalming culminates in a statement that mentions both components of the person, and it refers one to *neheh* and the stars, and to *djet* and the stone:

May your Ba (soul) exist, living in *neheh*  
like Orion in the body of the heavenly goddess;  
may your corpse endure in *djet*  
like the stone of the mountains.

In its last stages, the ritual of mummification turns to the spiritual self in order to bring it into the state of perfection. This is the moment when Ma’at becomes important. We circumscribe the concept of Ma’at with notions such as “truth,” “justice,” “order,” “harmony” (social and cosmic), and also of a goddess personifying this complex concept. It is believed that the dead have to undergo a process of justification by appearing before a divine tribunal consisting of forty-two judges (one for each of the forty-two nomes, or provinces, of Egypt) and their president, Osiris, and to declare their innocence with regard to a list of some eighty sins. During this recitation, the heart will be weighed on a balance against a feather, the symbol of Ma’at. With every lie, the scale with the heart would sink, and if it ends up heavier than the scale with the feather, a monster will devour the heart, and this would be the end of the person. In the case of perfect equilibrium, however, the deceased will be “justified” and then admitted among the “lords of eternity,” who enjoy an eternal life in the world of the gods.

This idea of a postmortem judgment, which originated in Egypt about 2000 BCE, determined the Egyptian sense of time in the most fundamental way. “Do not trust in the length of years,” we read in a text: “they [the judges] view a lifetime in an hour. When a man remains over after death, his deeds are summed up beside him. Being yonder lasts forever—[he is] a fool who does what they reprove. He who reaches them without having done wrong will exist there as a god, free-striding like the lords of eternity.” Some centuries later, a certain Baki states that he is “a noble and pleased with Ma’at, who conformed to the laws of the Hall of Truths [the divine judgment]; for I planned to reach the necropolis without a baseness attached to my name.” Ma’at is the principle of moral perfection, which individuals may attain during their lifetime by observing its laws and which bestows incorruptible duration on its followers: “Ma’at lasts for eternity, it enters the graveyard with its doer. When he is buried and the earth enfolds him, his name does not pass from the earth. He is remembered because of perfection.”

Ma’at and the divine judgment are allegories of memory in which the “justified,” who is recognized as perfect on account of his or her moral conduct, has won an everlasting place. In view of the eternity of memory, the time of earthly existence shrinks to a short moment: “Only a little of life is this world, but eternity is in the hereafter” reads an inscription in a tomb. It is from this perspective that the Egyptians, as stated by Hecataeus, who visited Egypt at the end of the fourth century BCE, “regard the time spent in this life as completely worthless; but to be remembered for virtue after one’s demise they hold to be of the highest value. . . . For this reason, they trouble themselves little about the furnishings of their houses, but betray an excess of expenditure and ostentation concerning their places of burial.” This explains why Egypt is covered with pyramids, tombs, and monuments of all sorts—for stone, memory, moral perfection, and eternity go together in the Egyptian mind.

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