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The Visual Otherness of the Enigmatic Text in Some Netherworld Books of the New Kingdom

In the following I discuss the enigmatic text for its visual dimensions and for the particular reading experience it induces. I focus on one specific tradition of enigmatic writing in one corpus among the so-called Netherworld Books, the Books of the Solar-Osirian Unity (henceforth: BSOU), inscribed on the Second Shrine of Tutankhamun, on the Ceiling of Corridor G of the Tomb of Ramses VI, and on the Enigmatic Wall in the Tomb of Ramses IX.¹ Unlike in other traditions of enigmatic writing in the New Kingdom, enigmatic writing in the Netherworld Books does not present a concentration of immediately highly iconic signs, and would therefore appear rather distinct. The setting is different too, in sealed-off funerary apartments rather than (in public spaces) in temples or displayed on private monuments and artifacts. Yet, as to be shown, the Netherworld Books, and particularly the BSOU, demonstrate some of the fundamental determinants and properties of the enigmatic text, in common to the various traditions and practices of enigmatic writing in the New Kingdom.

I first describe how writing is de-familiarized in the BSOU, commenting on the deconventionalization of spellings and the process of sign substitution. Moving beyond the individual signs and words, the main part of the discussion concerns the visual otherness of and patterns in the enigmatic text, and the delayed and dazzled reading that such alteration of writing brings about. In both cases, I begin with an analytic discussion to move to a more interactional approach of the text. I conclude by addressing the apparent paradox of a type of writing that is altered in both its visual dimension and its orientation on reading, yet inscribed in places in which there is no one to see it.

1 De-conventionalization and reduction

Writing in the Netherworld Books is de-familiarized thoroughly in what has been described as a two-step alteration process.² This is analyzed further here with a view on its implications on the visual surface of the enigmatic text and the delayed reading it induces.

¹ Darnell 2004, for the readings and interpretation. Original publications of the texts here cited: Piankoff 1952; Piankoff and Rambova 1954; 1955.

² Werning 2008.

In regular hieroglyphic writing, spellings of words consist of phonograms (uniliterals, biliterals, triliterals), logograms (including radicograms, signs standing for roots), and semantic determinatives (a.k.a. classifiers), variously combined. Spellings of any given word can vary, but not along all theoretically possible combinations: to a significant degree, they are conventionalized.³ These regular spellings typically target the two articulations of language, the semantic and the phonetic. They have a hierarchical structure: phonetic information precedes semantic information, signs complement other signs, and the overall pattern of a spelling can be indicative of root structure. In relation to the above, they also display substantial redundancy – as do all natural writing systems, which can be seen as self-correcting codes.

In enigmatic writing in the *Netherworld Books*, and in the BSOU that form the basis of the present discussion in particular, these spellings are de-conventionalized, with direct effects on all the dimensions just evoked. In what can be described as a first step of alteration, enigmatic spellings are reduced to mainly uniliteral phonograms; biliteral phonograms, logograms and semantic determinatives are retained only uncommonly. As an immediate result, a hierarchical structure is thereby substituted with a flat structure, and redundancy is reduced to a minimum. In what can be described as a second step of alteration, the individual mono-consonantal signs (either present in the regular spelling, or introduced through the first step of alteration as replacement of signs of other categories) are in turn substituted with other mono-consonantal signs that are uncommon, or uncommon with these particular value(s), in regular writing. (It goes without saying that the two-step decomposition is analytic and expository; ancient practices may well have been more synthetic.)

A few introductory examples, drawn from BSOU, pl. 5B (see below, fig. 6), may illustrate the above. To the spellings in the enigmatic text, the conventional spellings, in square brackets, are associated for comparison:⁴

- *wnn* “exist, be”: [𓂏 (regular)] → 𓂏 (col. 5):
 1. suppression of structure and of semantic information: [*wnⁿ-n*, a hierarchical structure with phonetic complementation and indicative of the root *√wn(n)*] → broken down into *w-n-n*, the bare consonantal skeleton, a flat structure;
 2. substitution of individual signs: [—] → the less common and visually more salient 𓂏, for *n*);

³ This conventionalized visual form of written words corresponds to Schenkel’s notion of “Schematogramm” (1971, 91)

⁴ The orientation of signs is reproduced as in the original text from which the examples are drawn; by default, it is from left to right.

- *ntrw* “gods”: [𐎎𐎠𐎢𐎡 (regular)] → 𐎎𐎠𐎢𐎡 (col. 1–2):
 1. suppression of semantic information: [logographic spelling (GOD^{PLURAL})] → broken down into *n-t-rw^{PLURAL}*, the bare consonantal skeleton;
 2. 𐎢 for *n*;
- *kkw* “darkness”: [𐎎𐎎𐎡𐎢 (regular)] → 𐎎𐎎𐎡𐎢 (col. 13–14):
 1. suppression of semantic information and of redundancy: [*k-k-w^{NIGHT}*, with phonetic representation and semantic representation (𐎎) reinforcing one another] → *k-k-w^{PLURAL}*, the bare consonantal skeleton;
 2. substitution of individual signs: [𐎎] → 𐎎 for *k*; [𐎎] → 𐎎 for *w* (both enigmatic values not found in regular writing);
- *h3t* “corpse”: [𐎎𐎢𐎡 (regular)] → 𐎎𐎢𐎡 (col. 10):
 1. suppression of structure [*h3-t*, with feminine ending *-t*, indicative of root $\sqrt{h3}$] and suppression of semantic information and of redundancy: [*h3-t^{MUM-MY}*, with phonetic representation and semantic representation (𐎎) reinforcing one another] → *h-3-t*, the bare consonantal skeleton;
 2. substitution of individual signs: 𐎢 for *h* [in lieu of regular 𐎢]; 𐎢 for *3* [in lieu of regular 𐎢]; 𐎢 for *t* [in lieu of regular 𐎢].

A brief note on enigmatic substitutions

The modes of sign substitution at work in the second step of alteration are principled and can be described variously according to one’s more philological, cultural, or semiotical focus.⁵ In the present context, substitution can be usefully viewed as based on proportional analogy (/four-part analogy: “A is to B like C is to D”), a principle with broad application in a variety of domains (e.g., linguistic morphology).⁶ Thus, given the value *k* of 𐎎 (< *k3*, by the consonantal principle), and considering the meronymic (pars-pro-toto) relation between the hide-and-tail sign 𐎎 and 𐎎, 𐎎 can then itself come to be associated with the value *k*. As has been often described,⁷ such analogy can bear on visual referents, shapes, visual referents and shapes combined, similarity of shapes in the Hieratic cursive, similarity along the phonetic articulation of language, or similarity along the semantic articulation of language.⁸ The practice of enigmatic substitution thus amounts to an implicit native

5 E.g., Roberson, Excursus, this volume a; *CryptLex*, §6; Werning, this volume.

6 E.g., in morphological paradigms (English), [*drive* : *drove*] : [*dive* : *dove*]. Similarly, in morphological change (German), [*packt* : *backt*] : [*packte* : (^{OLD}*buck* >) *backte*].

7 Beyond the studies cited two footnotes above, also, e.g., Klotz, this volume; Werning 2008; Manassa 2004.








8 Examples: 1. similarity of visual referents: 𐎎, substituting (pars pro toto) for 𐎎, for *k* (< *k3*); 2. similarity of shapes: 𐎎 substituting for 𐎎 (regardless of the altogether different visual referents, a pool of water and a seat respectively, the shapes are comparable), for *p*; 3. similarity of visual

meta-discourse on Egyptian signs of writing: rather than just two sides (“signifier, signified”), these have many sides: a shape, a visual referent, counterpart in Hieratic, phonetic associations, semantic associations (and more: for instance in monumental full-figures friezes such as Ramses II’s in the Luxor temple, cultural knowledge embedded in signs of writing is central⁹).








To make things more complex, substitutions can be applied recursively, and, furthermore, include so-called “reversals.”¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that the entropy that could result from this second step of alteration is also kept in check. To begin with, many enigmatic values are recurrent to the point that these values can be considered regular within enigmatic writing – for instance ꜥ for *k* – and therefore givens (a reader conversant with the relevant tradition of enigmatic writing does not need to figure these out); not counting these, substitution is in most cases limited to one step only. In addition, the modes of substitution described above are principled: there are rules of the game. These rules are based on analogy, in ways that are effective in entirely different domains such as linguistic morphology: this is testimony to the general cognitive naturalness of the rules at work. Given the ontological premises of Egyptian writing as given in the ordered world,¹¹ these substitutions are themselves naturally given.

2 Visual otherness, repetition, patterns

The two-step alteration outlined above results in an altered visual form of enigmatic writing. The first step – the reduction of the spellings of words to their bare consonantal skeleton – results in a concentration on mono-consonantal phonograms. The repertoire of signs used is thereby reduced to a small subset only. Accordingly, texts present a degree of repetition of signs that is substantially higher than in regular hieroglyphic writing. The second step – substitution – results in the replacement of common mono-consonantal phonograms by less common or altogether rare ones. The substituted signs typically present a higher visual resolution (are visually more

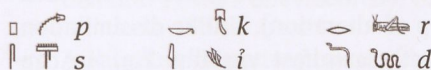
referents and shapes combined: , substituting for  (the signs both represent floorplans of buildings and have similar shapes), for the value *p* < *pr* (**p*^v); 4. similarity of shapes in the Hieratic cursive: , substituting for , for the value *r*; 5/ phonetic similarity:  (*nb* “swim”), substituting for , for the value *nb* “lord”; 6/ semantic similarity:  (in regular writing, a component of *m-hnw* “inside, within”), as an enigmatic spelling for *imi* “that is in.”

⁹ Klotz, this volume.

¹⁰ For example, in enigmatic writing,  (a spewing mouth) regularly has the value *p*. By analogy of visual referents, the more common sign of the mouth, , then comes to stand for the value *p* as well. In regular writing,  stands for *r*: through enigmatic substitution, a “*r*-sign” () has thus come to stand for a value *p*. In regular writing, another sign, , stands for just this value *p*. Just as the “*r*-sign” () has come to stand for *p* in enigmatic writing, so can the “*p*-sign” () then be made to stand for *r*, by inversion.

¹¹ E.g., Meeks 2018, 141–150; Sauneron 1982, 55–56.

detailed) and/or iconicity (defined as a relation to an often animate visual referent) than the signs they substitute for. For instance (in each pair, the sign on the left is the one used in regular writing, the one on the right its most common enigmatic substitution):










The two steps of alteration thus affect the visual resolution of the enigmatic text in two apparently opposite directions: a dramatic reduction in the number of signs, and a heightened visual resolution and/or iconicity of the individual signs. The combined result is a strong sense of repetition: a high degree of repetition results because texts are written with a severely limited number of signs (first step of alteration) and the sense of repetition is made all the stronger visually by the otherness, higher visual resolution, and/or iconicity of the substituted signs (second step of alteration). A whole series of patterns can then be described in the enigmatic text. Some of these are direct artifacts of the two-step alteration described above, while others may have been intentional on the part of the composers of the texts – regardless, the eye, in encountering the enigmatic text, is given a space in which to construct patterns. Types of such pattern are illustrated in what follows; by necessity, the exposition is analytic. The reader is encouraged to construct his own patterns while letting himself drift through enigmatic text.

That an aesthetics of repetition, in general, is integral to the enigmatic text in the BSOU is illustrated very directly by one common group that often opens the enigmatic text and therefore has an emblematic value: *nn n ntrw* “These gods (...)” – that is, *n-n-n-n-t-r^{PLURAL}*, contrasting with regular *nn-n GOD^{PLURAL}*. Beyond, dissimilation and assimilation are key figures of repetition. Like in regular writing, but more commonly than in this, **dissimilation** refers to a situation when a given value is realized in different ways – either by different shapes of a sign or by altogether different signs – in close succession. E.g.:

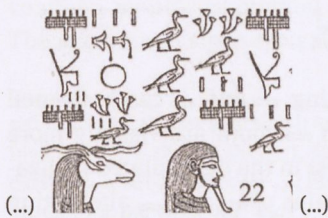
- *stwt* “rays” (BSOU, pl. 23, 39) – In enigmatic writing, and can both spell *t* (, *t < t*; through substitution of shape with ; both are visually more salient variants than regular). An intent is manifest in the dissimilated realization of the two successive *t*'s in *stwt* “rays.” For chains of and alternating in a text, see below.
- *š-p* “receive” and *š-p* “illuminate” (BSOU, pl. 7B) – In regular writing, the two homophonous verbs *šsp* “receive” and *šsp* “illuminate” are distinguished by their different semantic determinatives. After suppression of these and reduction of the spelling to the bare consonantal skeleton, *š-p* (< *šsp*, cf. Coptic), the two words are identical on the graphic level. Here, they are secondarily dissimilated through the different spelling of *p* (and).

Even more characteristic of the enigmatic text is the reverse phenomenon, **assimilation**. This refers to the realization, in close succession, of different values by the same sign or group of signs. In the enigmatic text, the widespread presence of assimilation derives structurally from the reduced number of signs (through reduction to mono-consonantal signs: first step of alteration) compounded with the polyvalency of individual substituted signs (second step of alteration). Unlike dissimilation, assimilation results in repetition that is directly manifest visually. E.g., in cap-

tions:  *b3 t3-tnn* “Ba-Tatenen” (BSOU, pl. 5C, 22 = 5th figure from right), with the BIRD successively for *b3* and *n* (twice); sim.  *ist* “Isis”¹² (BSOU, pl. 4B, right figure);  *šsp-ʿ* “Receiving-of-arm” (BSOU, pl. 7B, 3 = 2nd figure from right). A particular playfulness is demonstrated in cases such as the following:

- assimilation across word boundaries – e.g.,  *tf dw=f* “he calls” (BSOU, pl. 10B, col. 7),¹³ with the SNAKE successively for *f*, *d*, and *f* again; sim.  *iw b3* (*rʿ dw=f* ...) “The ba (of Re calls ...)” (BSOU 9, col. 6–7), with the BIRD successively for *w* and *b3*;
- assimilation of groups of signs – e.g., in captions,  *hprī* “Khepri” (BSOU, pl. 5C, 18), in the same row as  *hr ʿnh-hpr(w)* “Horus living of manifestations” (BSOU, pl. 5C, 20), with the pair SCARAB–SCARAB standing successively for the pseudo-dual *hprī*, than as two distinct logograms, *ʿnh* and *hpr*.¹⁴

Assimilation can result in complex interlocked patterns, as in the following short excerpt:

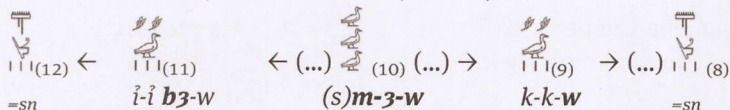



(...)=*sn m kkw sm3w <>pp rʿ ii b3w (...)*
“Their (bodies exist) in complete darkness. When Re passes by, (...)”

Fig. 1: BSOU, pl. 5C, 8–12 (Second Shrine of Tutankhamun, Side One, Scene 5).

12 Darnell 2004, 39–40.
13 Darnell 2004, 123, n. a.
14 Darnell 2004, 70–71.

- In col. 10, the highly polyvalent **GENERIC BIRD** stands for various values, successively *m*, *3*, and *w*, as well as *m* (col. 8), *w* again (col. 9), and *b3* (col. 11). Another polyvalent sign, the **GENERIC PLANT**, stands, doubled, successively for *k-k* (col. 9), then for *i-i* (col. 11). Thus (with **GENERIC BIRDS** boldfaced and doubled **GENERIC PLANTS** underscored): (...)=*s-n m k-k-w s-m-3-w <'>-p-p r^c i-i b3-w (...)*.
- A palindromic pattern can also be detected, centering around the three **GENERIC BIRDS** as a visually salient axis of symmetry:









- The central axis of this palindrom, consisting of three birds (col. 10), is just atop the fifth standing figure in the pictorial scene, the caption of which includes three more GENERIC BIRDS:  *b3 t3-tnn* “Ba-Tatenen” (***b3 t3-t-n-n***; see above).

Assimilation and dissimilation often occur combined. This is called here **inversion** (at the level of the text, not to be confused with the related phenomenon of “inversion” at the level of the substitution of individual signs, mentioned in section 1). An introductory example is this:



Fig. 2: BSOU, pl. 7B (Second Shrine of Tutankhamun, Side One, Scene 8).

- In the inscription, a sequence of birds is seen:
- | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|---|-------|
| (...) |  | (...) |  | (...) |    | (...) |  | (...) |
| | 3 | | 3 | | $w-3-m$ | | m | |

In enigmatic writing, the GENERIC BIRD (𐩦) substitutes for a whole series of bird-signs with various values (assimilation: different values expressed by the same sign). In the sequence above, the GENERIC BIRD alternates formally with the EGYPTIAN VULTURE (𐩦). In the group *m-3-w* (elsewhere as 𐩦𐩦𐩦), the forms are dissimilated, yielding the alternating 𐩦𐩦𐩦. In particular, 𐩦 (which has the value 3 in regular writing) is used for *m* and *w*, but not for 3. This value, in turn, is realized as 𐩦, precisely not as 𐩦. This pattern of inversion extends beyond the group discussed, to the right (𐩦 for *m*) and left (3 realized as 𐩦).

- Rhythm is augmented by the formal dissimilation of the signs for *t*, resulting in a chain that interlocks with the chain of birds just described:
 $(...) \subseteq (...) \supseteq (...) \subseteq (...) \subseteq (...) \supseteq (...) \subseteq (...) \subseteq (...)$

Chains of inversion can be constructed by the beholder throughout an enigmatic text. An example of such possible drifts (among other possible ones) is this:¹⁵

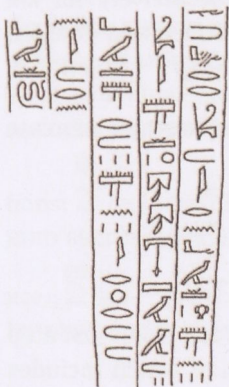

























Fig. 3: BSOU, pl. 21, col. 8–12 (Ceiling of Corridor G of the tomb of Ramses VI, upper register, scene 3).

- In col. 10, top, the group  is for *imn* “hidden” (with  a semi-enigmatic substitution for *im*, and  an enigmatic substitution for *n*). From here, whole webs of relations can be spun. For instance, the same group  in col. 8 and 12 stands for ‘3 “great”, as in regular writing (assimilation of groups: the same group for two different values/words). Elsewhere in the text, ‘3 “great” is similarly realized as  (thus, col. 22, 25), yet once also as  (col. 37; dissimilation: the same word realized in different ways). Going back to the word *imn* “hidden,” this recurs too, but as  (col. 26–27), a dissimilation with respect to  *imn* in col. 10.
- In col. 10, middle, the sequence *s-n* is dissimilated in the same phrase: *sn* *w=sn* “their corpses,” first as  , then as  (and tadditional plural determinative). In the first occurrence,  (*r* in regular writing) is substituted for the value *n*. Making the reader dizzy: the value *n* is also realized, in close vicinity, as  (8, 9) and  (10) (dissimilation), while  also stands for *p* in  ‘*pp*’ (8) and in  *pn* (11)¹⁶ (assmilation).
- In col. 10, bottom, the apparent sequence  falls in two parts,  *hr* belonging to main text of the annotation and  *hnty* to the caption below. Between  *hr* and  *hn-* (in *hnty*), the following relations of both dissimilation and assimila-

¹⁵ Based on the philological analysis by Darnell 2004, 174–188.

¹⁶ Note, furthermore, that  is here next to the regular sign for *n*.

tion can be seen. Dissimilation: the first consonant, *h*, is realized as 𐀀 (an enigmatic substitution) in $\text{𐀀}hr$; 𐀁 (the regular sign for *h*) comes just after, in $\text{𐀁}hn$. Assimilation: the second consonant, *r*, is realized as 𐀂 (the regular value) in $\text{𐀀}hr$; 𐀃 then occurs for *n* (an enigmatic substitution) in $\text{𐀁}hn$. The overall result is inversion: 𐀀 stands for *hr* – which, in regular writing, would be 𐀁 . The signs 𐀁 are directly adjacent – but, rather than for *hr*, they stand for *hn* (in *hnty*).

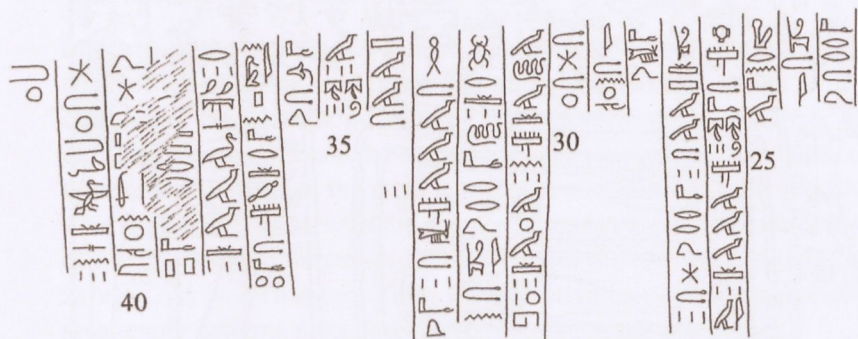


Fig. 4: BSOU, pl. 21, col. 23–42 (Ceiling of Corridor G of the tomb of Ramses VI, upper register, scene 3).

- Wandering further through the same text (see fig. 4, above), a chain of inversion can be constructed (among other possible ones) beginning with the verb ‘*pt*’ “pass, travel,” written with the regular *p*-sign in ‘*pp*’ 𐀀 (thus col. 39–40, 44). A/ dissimilation: the same verb recurs with enigmatic substitutions for *p*: the SPEWING MOUTH in ‘*pt*’ 𐀀 (36) and the MOUTH in ‘*pp*’ 𐀀 (8, 27), ‘*ppt*’ 𐀀 (23). B/ Inversion: the last group (𐀀) would, in regular writing, be read ‘*rr*,’ a form of the verb ‘*rr*’ “ascend.” This very verb is probably present, just next to 𐀀 ‘*pp*’ “passes” (27), in 𐀀 ‘*r*’ “ascends” (28). In 27, the regular “*r*-sign” (𐀂) is thus used for *p*, but not for *r*, for which, in 28, an enigmatic substitution, 𐀃 for 𐀂 , is used. C/ Further inversion: a written form of a word looking like ‘*r*,’ with the regular “*r*-sign” (𐀂), is found, but for an altogether different word: 𐀃 ‘*3*’ “great” (37). D/ Dissimilation: ‘*3*’ “great” is otherwise written 𐀃 (8, 12, 22, 25); as seen above, the spelling stands elsewhere for *imn* “hidden” (10, assimilation), while *imn* “hidden” is also written 𐀃 (26–27, dissimilation). E/ etc.

To give a sense of the overall rhythmical density of the enigmatic text, I now describe some patterns of repetition – dissimilation, assimilation, and inversion, of signs and of groups, in direct adjacency or not – that can be seen in one enigmatic

text. As already noted, the following is necessarily phrased analytically, but should be understood as an invitation to the reader to let himself get absorbed into the enigmatic text.

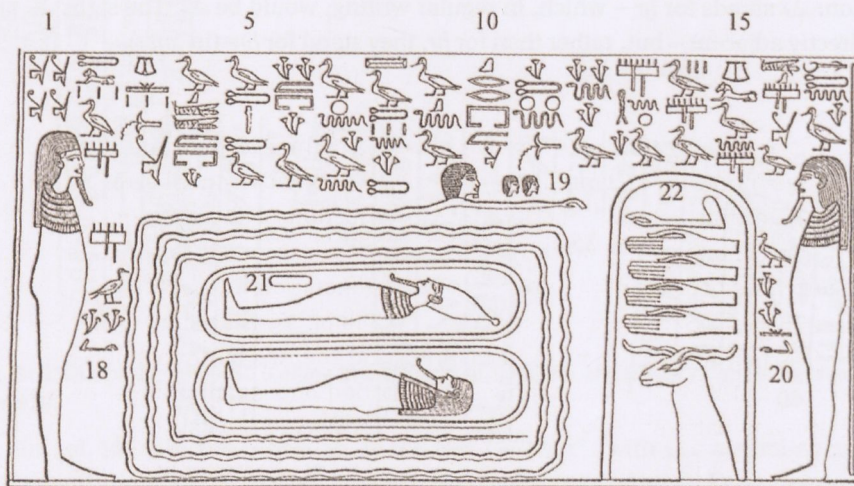









Fig. 5: BSOU, pl. 8 (Second shrine of Tutankhamun, Side 1, Scene 9).

- **Dissimilation** (different graphic realizations of the same value(s)) – E.g.:






col. 4  $\bar{k}rrt$ “cavern” ~ col. 10  $\bar{k}rr<t> t(n \dots)$ “this cavern”. The spellings are dissimilated here on two levels at once: a/ the realization of the sound *r*, first with the GRASSHOPPER (as is regular in enigmatic writing), then with the MOUTH (as is regular in non-enigmatic writing); b/ the position of $\bar{_}$ relative to $\bar{\square}$, first before it, as the feminine ending *-t* of $\bar{k}rrt$ “cavern,” then after it, as the initial *t-* of the demonstrative *tn*.






- **Assimilation** (different values for the same sign or group of signs) – Beyond the ubiquitous GENERIC BIRD  (standing for the values *m*, *w*, *b3*, *3* \bar{k} , *w*), note in particular:





- assimilation of signs, in direct succession, e.g.,  (col. 6–7), with BIRD-BIRD, successively for *w* and *b3*, in $\bar{i}w b3$ ($r' \bar{d}wi=f \dots$) “The ba (of Re calls ...)”; and in close vicinity, e.g.,  (col. 7): SNAKE- ...-SNAKE, successively for \bar{d} and *f*, in $\bar{d}wi=f$ “calls”;
- assimilation of a group of signs, e.g.,  ...  (col. 4, 9), first as *m-k* in *m* $\bar{k}(rrt)$ “in the cavern,” then as \bar{k}^k in $\bar{k}(=f \dots)$ “when (he) enters (...).”

- **Inversion** (assimilation and dissimulation combined) – The following chain, extending from col. 4 to 11, has different shapes for the same value, and different values for the same shapes, combined. First, the forms are dissimilated (\leftharpoonup and \rightharpoonup , both for *t*). Then, the same two forms also come to stand for another value, *m*:

– ${}^4\leftharpoonup t - {}^5\rightharpoonup t, \rightharpoonup t - {}^6\leftharpoonup t - {}^8\rightharpoonup t, \rightharpoonup m - {}^{10}\leftharpoonup m - {}^{11}\rightharpoonup t, \text{---} ({}^{17}\rightharpoonup t)$
(overall pattern: $A_x-B_x-B_x-A_x-B_x-B_y-A_y-B_x (B_x)$)





- **Rhythms and patterns** – A general sense of rhythmical repetition results from the inscription being written mostly with a very small number of signs. (As elsewhere, this is made possible by the reduction of the spellings to mostly uniliteral phonograms and by the polyvalency of several signs.) Thus, counting occurrences of signs in the main text (the “annotation”):  17×;  11×;  9×;  7×; \rightharpoonup 7×;  5×; (...), with the six most common signs accounting for 56/91 = 61.5% of all sign occurrences in the text, and the two most common signs for 28/91 = 30.1%. As a result of this concentration on a small number of signs, a great many patterns present themselves to the eye. For instance:








- A.B ... B.A in close association:  ...  (col. 8–9; sim. in col. 5, see below);
- A.B, over a distance:  –  –  (col. 7, 11, 13); note that all four occurrences of the SUN DISK in the inscription are in association with the SNAKE.

The eye is easily attracted by such recurrent associations of signs and seduced into constructing longer chains of these. One possible such construction is, in col. 11–16 (with A standing for , B for , C for , and D for ; underscore for A–B in sequence, grey for A–C, and wavy underscore for C–D):











- ${}^{11}\underline{A}.\underline{B}.\text{---}.\underline{B}.\text{---}.$ ${}^{12}\underline{A}.\underline{A}.\underline{B}.\underline{A}.\underline{C}.$ ${}^{13}\underline{D}.\text{---}.\underline{B}.\text{---}.\underline{A}.\underline{C}.$ ${}^{14}\underline{C}.\text{---}.\underline{D}.\underline{C}.$ ${}^{15}\text{---}.\text{---}.\underline{C}.\underline{B}.\underline{D}.$ ${}^{16}\text{---}.\text{---}.\underline{D}.\text{---}.\underline{C}$

The longer the beholder stares at the inscription, the more he may construct such patterns based on what is offered in the surface of the enigmatic text. For instance, taking a more absorbed look at col. 4–7:

-     (col. 5–7): A.B.B.---.A.B.B;

-       (col. 4–6): palindrom, D.C.B.A.---.A.B.C.D (with  as D).

- **Generalized inversion across the visual field** – Letting himself be adrift across the visual field, the absorbed beholder is led to construct chains that associate (groups of) signs by assimilation and/or dissimulation. This results in a generalized inversion across the visual field as a whole. E.g.:

- *iw* (particle) as  (col. 6)
 -  for *im(t)* “that is in/there” (col. 4–5, 12, 13) (assimilation)
 - *im* “there” as  (col. 8) (dissimilation)
 -  or *h3t* “light” (col. 11) (assimilation);
-  *hbs*, in *hbsy*-^c “clothed with respect to arm” (18, caption to left standing mummy)
 -  *s*, in *shrw* “fashion, condition” (annotation, bottom of col. 2, just atop the same sign in the caption to left standing mummy) (assimilation)
 -  *s*, in *hbsy*-^c “clothed with respect to arm” (18, in caption to left standing mummy, just below  discussed first) (dissimilation)
 -  *htm*, in *htmy*-^c “destroyed with respect to arm” (20, right standing mummy, standing opposite the caption to left standing mummy) (assimilation)
 -  *htm*, in *htmyt* “place of destruction” (annotation, col. 5) (dissimilation), at the center of the palindrom discussed above.

Other patterns could be identified: given the overall reduction discussed first, repetition and rhythm are everywhere in the enigmatic text in the BSOU. What matters is this: that a great many such patterns can be seen (the ones described above and others), and that there is no necessary hierarchy by which some such patterns should be seen as superordinate to others – so that the beholder, in engaging the enigmatic text visually ever more deeply, gets absorbed into an increasingly dense and enveloping web of such rhythms and patterns.

3 A delayed, absorbed reading

The two-step alteration process described first thus has major effects on the visual surface of the enigmatic text. As the above discussion shows, its effects on reading are no less thorough-going. In analytical terms, these can be approached first in terms of a lesser resolution of enigmatic writing. As noted in the first section, words in regular hieroglyphic writing have more or less conventional spellings (one or several per given word, varying with periods and types of texts) that are layered in structure and carry much built-in redundancy. These spellings also convey essential information about segmentation: bi-consonantal (or tri-consonantal) phonograms indicate that the two (or three) consonants belong to the same word (rather than being the last of one word and the first of the next word); word boundaries can be indicated through semantic determinatives (/classifiers) that stand at the end of the

word or when the spelling is logographic, one sign standing for the word as a whole. Conventionalization, layered structure, built-in redundancy, and indications for segmentation are all general characteristics of natural (empirically attested) writing systems.¹⁷

In enigmatic writing of the sort considered here, all the above are altered dramatically in the first step of alteration discussed in section 1. Spellings are deconventionalized. Semantic information is lost almost entirely: logograms are rare, and semantic determinatives are either absent or reduced to the most generic determinatives possible such as the plural sign or the book roll.¹⁸ Information on segmentation is much reduced too, being limited to those few determinatives that are not suppressed. Spellings are much reduced, often to the bare consonantal skeleton: they are flat in structure, and redundancy is suppressed by and large.¹⁹

The overall effect on reading is illustrated in the short enigmatic text below. This is contrasted with a back-transcription of the same text into regular writing, demonstrating notably how the enigmatic spellings lack in semantic information and how cues for segmentation are much reduced, being limited to the plural determinative (“PL.”). The immediate effects of the second step of alteration – substitution – are indicated by question marks bearing on those signs whose value is at first not clear. Rather than being able to scan words as words, as he would in regular writing, the reader is left floating through a mostly flat, continuous string of signs:



Fig. 6: BSOU, pl. 5B (Second Shrine of Tutankhamun, Side 1, Scene 4).

n-n-n-t-rw-^{PL}

<BIRD>[?]-s-hr-p-n-<BIRD>[?]-k-r-t-^{PL}-s-n-^{PL}

<GOAT_SKIN>[?]-t-^{PL}

hr-<PLANT>[?]-<PLANT>[?]-w-n-n-<PLANT>[?]-<BIRD>[?]-t-s-n-^{PL}


<BIRD>[?]-<PLANT>[?]-<PLANT>[?]-<BIRD>[?]-^{PL}

17 Incidentally, observe that the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) – which focuses on the sole phonetic dimension, presents no layered structure, and is free of any redundancy – is a notational system, not a natural writing system.

18 In enigmatic writing in some Netherworld Books other than BSOU, semantic determinatives are retained, but substituted with typically highly generic ones: this too results in a much reduced semantic resolution of the spelling. See Werning 2011, 99–105, for the Book of Caverns.

19 On the reduction of redundancy, similarly Werning 2011, 105.

Back-transcription into regular writing:



nn-n

m

im-y-t

hr-r-y-t^{SKY}

m

GOD^{PL}

s-h-r^{ABSTRACT}

wnⁿ-n

k-k-w^{NIGHT}

p-n

m

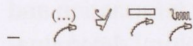
q-r-r-t^{PLACE-PL.}

s-n^{PL.}





nn n nṯrw m šhr pn m krrwt=sn imūt hryt wnn hst=sn m kkw

“These gods are in this fashion in their caverns which are in the Upper Region: it is in the darkness that their corpses(?) exist.”²⁰

Another, very brief example may illustrate the same processes as well as serving to introduce further dimensions of altered reading:



(...) *pn šp tp* (...) “(...) this (fashion): with a shining head (...)”
(BSOU, pl. 4B; Second Shrine of Tutankhamun, Side One, Scene 1²¹)

The word *tp* “head,” rather than being written logographically () is here broken down into its phonetic components, *t* and *p*. Similarly, the word *šsp* “shine,” rather than being writing with a triradical phonogram () *šsp^p-SUN*), is reduced to its phonetic components, *š* and *p* (with the change *šsp* > *šp*). All cues for segmentation are thus suppressed: the reader is confronted with a continuous, un-hierarchical, string of signs. In this short sequence, one sign (the SPEWING_MOUTH) is repeated no less than three times, attraction attention. It attracts further attention through its visual otherness from regular writing () has a higher visual resolution, is more iconic, and is therefore more visually salient overall than the regular sign for *p*, ). Rather than being able to scan words and cruise across the text, as in regular reading, the eye remains stuck with the individual signs and is lured into associating these with one another beyond the linear sequence of underlying speech.

As this example illustrates, the patterns and rhythms described in the previous section add to the altered reading. They do so, for example, when assimilation extends across word boundaries (see the examples in section 2) or when assimilation of groups suggests the wrong segmentation, in both cases setting “traps” to the reader. But the effects of these figures of repetition (assimilation, dissimilation, and inversion, of signs and of groups, etc.) are at once more general and thorough-going.

²⁰ Reading, Darnell 2004, 64–69.
²¹ Reading, Darnell 2004, 43–45, 50–51.

Like the enhanced iconicity of the signs, patterns and rhythms contribute to the overall visual otherness of the enigmatic text. They attract attention away from the underlying linguistic sequence. They open webs of possible associations across the visual surface of the enigmatic text, against linguistic sequentiality.

In regular forms of writing, such as in Egyptian cursive writing, the reader scans chunks of visual information, typically words as a whole. Within such chunks, the signs efface themselves behind a conventional value that is automatically triggered in the context of an itself more or less conventionalized word-spelling. Coming with a dense aesthetic presence, iconic force, and culturally encyclopedic load, hieroglyphic writing is not primarily about fast decoding. But it has, structurally, all the characteristics of natural writing systems discussed above. These are suppressed in enigmatic writing such as described here. Given the loss of information for segmentation, the reader is confronted with a continuous string of signs sitting next to one another. Given the loss of redundancy, he is left to figure out the value of each and every sign individually. In addition, individual mono-consonantal signs are substituted with others. Given the principles of analogical association on which these substitutions are based, the reader is called upon to bring to mind a whole set of possibilities for each individual sign, according to its multiple sides – its visual referent, shape, and phonetic and semantic associations. Rather than being surrogates for a value, the signs pose an enigma, and resonate with other signs. The reader is made to engage these, one by one, intensively. Rather than cruising across the line, the reader “stumbles” upon the individual signs. What is more, the visual otherness of the enigmatic text – the higher visual resolution of individual signs, and the patterns and rhythms in the text – attract attention, away from linguistic sequentiality, to the shimmering visual surface of the text itself. The reader must go through the thickness of writing itself. He gets absorbed into the visual rhythms and patterns of the text. The experience of reading becomes a “dazzled” one.

4 A visual otherness, withdrawn from visibility

Recast in more general terms, much of what was discussed above could be said of enigmatic writing more broadly. Enigmatic writing in general – not just in the BSOU or even the Netherworld Books – is defined by its visual otherness and by the particular experience of a delayed or absorbed reading it calls for. In other settings, enigmatic writing is visible, it comes with a bold visual presence, and can have strongly addressive dimensions. In the Netherworld Books, however, it is inscribed in places, the funerary apartments of kings, in which it is withdrawn from visibility. This raises the final question of how the categories of visual otherness and altered reading, discussed in the present paper, can be relevant in places where there is no beholder.

In addressing this apparent paradox, two preliminary observations must be made. First, the compositions in question circulated (in those places, presumably

temples, in which they were devised and through Vorlagen for their inscriptional realization, possibly further in relation to other functions they may have had too), so that enigmatic writing in these compositions would have been visible for some. Yet these compositions had their destination (or, at least, one destination) in places in which enigmatic writing could not be seen, so that the question of the function of enigmatic writing there remains. The second point is that this question cannot be solved by invoking non-empirical beings (gods) as putative addressees. Absent any indications for such, the inscription of these compositions, including enigmatic writing in these, in places that were withdrawn from visibility must be interpreted as a practice that was deemed meaningful and effective by those people that were involved in it or had knowledge of it.²²

It has been observed that enigmatic writing, in the BSOU and in Netherworld Books more generally, is associated with contents that are liminal in nature and *šṭṣ* “difficult to access, hidden.”²³ In its visual otherness, enigmatic writing is an index of the otherness of a world that is difficult to comprehend. Through a systemic reduction of the characteristics of natural writing systems, compounded with a foregrounding of writing as such, reading is delayed. The visual patterns and shimmering surface of the enigmatic text make for an absorbed or dazzled experience of that text – an experience that becomes itself a figuration of domains of signification that can be pointed at only obliquely. Inscribed in the funerary apartments of king, in a space that also contains the dead ruler’s body, enigmatic writing projects a line of indexical contiguity with this other world that this ruler is to traverse. Writing, here, does not represent nor communicate, but brings about, in ways that were meaningful and important to ancient actors. To establish this performative force of writing, they altered writing in its very substance, doing so on the only two dimensions on which any writing can be altered: how it can be seen and how it relates to language.

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²² Fitzenreiter 2015, discussing the more general problematic.

²³ Darnell, this volume; 2004, 471–482.

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