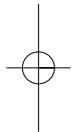# Part One

Performing Poetry

Every plant perishes even as it exists – but not the spoken word.

P Ramesseum II vso ii.5 (Barns 1956: pl. 9)

1

Visitors in Egypt

1.1   Relating to Poems

Mais le déplacement dans le temps n'est souvent jamais mieux obtenu que par le déplacement dans l'espace . . . qui descend les escaliers souterrains de Mycènes plonge au puits des siècles.
      Marguerite Yourcenar, *En pèlerin et en étranger* (1991b: 532)

It is surprising how quickly the ancient historian becomes part of a complex web of living relationships. At first, you visit the cataract island of Sehel (ancient Setjet) only in order to view its inscriptions (e.g. Gasse 2004). Soon, however, you cannot go without visiting friends, so that there is no longer any time to see the inscriptions; but how else could you be there? Without such engagements, we can all too often view a world of sites and not of living communities, since it is easy to deal with the dead in comparison with the living (e.g. Forster 1996 [1936]: 159–62). The dead cannot tell us that we have misunderstood them, and they cannot react when our attempts at communication become too entangled with cultural differences and with our own preoccupations.

   Often the academic viewer tries to hold themself abstracted from the object of his gaze, in a state of neutral objectivity. But "by projecting our own beliefs and our own criteria of scientificity onto the past we miss much more than we see" (Law 2003: 6). The poetry of an ancient verse like *ḥms ḫr-ḥt3w hrw-ṯaw*, "sitting under sails on a windy day" (*Dialogue* 133–4) must be analyzed linguistically but it is not only a sequence of grammatical forms. Even when read in a modern library, there is more visceral physicality in the verse than we often appreciate. In a felucca near Sehel (Fig. 1.1), aping the metaphor, we have more chance of sensing this, and the lexicographical debates as to whether the "sails" (*ḥt3w*) are the plural "sails" of a boat or a term for an "awning" (e.g. A. M. Blackman 1930: 71; Faulkner

Figure 1.1 "Sitting under (modern) sail on a windy day." An ancient image transformed into physical experience in a felucca in the cataract landscape near Abu, modern Aswan (Photograph: R. B. Parkinson)

1956: 39 [106]; Goedicke 1970: 174) seem redundant, as the waters of the cataract swirl as they always have, beating against the prow and troubling the expanses between the boulders.

Both tourists and "western" academics are often enamored of an unchangingly ancient and exotic orient that is untouched by visitors such as themselves and they have often sought involvement only on their own terms.[1] However, "the past *exists* (for us now) as we construct it, but of course it *existed* independent of any of our representations; and that existence imposes an obligation upon and value for our constructions" (Kastan 1999: 41). Donkeys on riverbank pathways, fishermen in creeks, sitting under a sail on a windy day – all these experiences add a sense of life to ancient poems. These resemblances perhaps reassure us that the world is unchanging, that humanity is universal, and that, after all, time and death do not matter so much. We in the modern world often seem to feel a need "to seek among phrases and fragments something unbroken" in order to "oppose the waste and deformity of the world" (Woolf 1992b [1931]: 205, 137), as if wishing

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[1] Compare discussion by Schneider 2003b: 155–8.

that academic expertise will prove stronger than death and that a dialogue with the dead might either revive them or prolong our own existence. However, this cataract landscape is not a backdrop for timeless verse or a stage for modern scholarship. Like any part of our world, it is a culturally fraught and changing social world with which we are involved even by our observation of it. Such physical experiences of "une Égypte qui n'est pas dans les livres savants" (Derchain 1996: 9) can rightly trouble the philologist's dream of a pure objective science and of texts that are transcendent and universal, untouched by the local contingencies of history (cf. Gumbrecht 2003: 1–8, 64–7; L. Marcus 1988: 1–50).

As Raymond Williams argued, literature and other expressive arts "may have quite specific features as practices, but they cannot be separated from the general social process" (2001: 174), and are "always a formative process, within a specific present" (1977: 129). The role of literature in the Middle Kingdom has often been discussed from specific philological, historical, or theoretical viewpoints. Egyptological philology has sometimes retained an old historicist – almost colonial-style – framework, and in the twentieth century this poetry was analyzed as propaganda or cultural texts (overview: Parkinson 2002). There was often a sense that texts were sources for the historian, and were to be regarded as normative representatives of a communal culture rather than as individual cultural artefacts (cf. Meskell 1999: 19). Instead we need, as with Shakespearian texts, an "analysis of the historically based conventions of language and representation; the [work]s themselves as socially and materially produced, within discoverable conditions; indeed the texts themselves as history" (R. Williams 1994: 289). The occasionally abstract and schematic treatment of texts in Egyptology has resulted in part from the models that scholars have inherited from other older, more distinct disciplines, but also in part from a general lack of well-documented authors, readers, findspots, and social contexts. This lack encourages the idea that a text can exist independently of its material embodiment in performance or manuscript, whereas in fact "texts aren't ideas, they are artifacts" (Orgel 2002: 16). And, as Faiza Haikal has noted, a more "local" approach is often desirable.[2] An increasingly globalized world can reduce our awareness of traditional culture and, since the use of "western" theory and translation can risk the erasure of local literary and cultural history (cf. Damrosch 2003: 19, 113), we often need to restore these works to their alterity and their indigenous circumstances.

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[2]   2003a, 2003b. For example, aspects of *The Eloquent Peasant*'s humor and its use of proverbial-sounding wisdom find a readier response with modern Egyptian readers than with European ones (e.g. el-Shamy 2002: xxi, xxv–xxvii).

In the following chapters, I discuss three Middle Kingdom poems, now known as *The Tale of Sinuhe*, *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, and *The Dialogue of a Man and his Soul*; I concentrate on the first of these, since it is the most familiar to modern readers. I consider different moments in their biographies, including ancient receptions, scholarly text editions, and various institutional and personal modern appropriations, in order to suggest the ways in which the ancient **/'ziRnahat/* has become variously *s3-nht*, Saneha, Sinouhé and Sinuhe, and the eloquent petitioner of the other tale has been a "peasant," "saunier," "fellah" or "oasis dweller" (e.g. Quirke 1998b: viii; Junge 2000: 176–8). These three poems survive in a group of 12th-Dynasty manuscripts that were deposited in the tomb of an unknown official, were collected for European museums, and have been much studied and translated. They have survived by more than the chances of physical preservation since "everything we have to . . . analyse . . . is itself the product of previous ponderings, selections, and rejections" both by ancient copyists and modern collectors and scholars (Alcock 2002: 34). We have little data with which to assess how far the literary field and the field of power coincided in the Middle Kingdom, or with which to analyze the period's areas of cultural production and cultural capital (to use Pierre Bourdieu's phraseology: e.g. 1996 [1992]). The manuscripts, however, are themselves commodities, and their existence – no matter how decontextualized by modern investigators – is itself informative. The processes of writing and circulation are inherent in the surviving works and "their multiple and often contradictory agencies are necessarily registered in the text's signifying surface" (Kastan 1999: 28). These aspects were familiar to the ancient poets: the physical act of writing is thematized in *The Eloquent Peasant*, where the plot depends on it (see e.g. Parkinson 2002: 181–2). The extensive textual transmission of two of these poems allows us to trace in part the shaping and evolution of expressive culture in a world very different from our own, and their changing materiality embodies a set of shifting cultural relationships (cf. Meskell 2004: 1–11). Who reads, who writes, and why they do so is something that must be interrogated throughout the ancient and modern histories of these poems: the modern histories of the manuscripts, their collectors and their editors have also shaped their meanings.

In the late twentieth century, studies of early modern European literatures saw a growing awareness of a need to unedit texts and manuscripts and to return them to the specific contexts that created the compositions' meaning; this has been termed "New" or "Material Philology."[3] In particular,

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[3] See L. Marcus 1988, 1996; Kastan 1999; Goldberg 2003. On the emergence of this philology see e.g. Nichols 1990; L. Marcus 1996: 17–39; Gumbrecht 1997, 2003: 37–8.

such a study of the material presence of texts can connect them to practical concerns and can thus "enhanc(e) our capacity to imagine a world of the past" (Gumbrecht 2003: 15). The fragmentary nature of our evidence can itself draw attention from the generalized meaning to the "sensual qualities of the text," moving our interpretation away from "Geistenwissenschaften . . . which dematerializes the objects to which they refer" (2003: 15, 8). Similarly, an awareness of other contemporaneous artefacts can help to visually embed the poems in their local culture (cf. Law 2003: 6), and a re-siting of the manuscripts in their landscapes can help to evoke a little of the general "structure of feeling" that shaped them:

> While we may, in the study of past period, separate out particular aspects of life, and treat them as if they were self-contained, it is obvious that this is only how they may be studied, not how they were experienced . . . It is in art, primarily, that the effect of the totality, the dominant structure of feeling, is expressed and embodied. (R. Williams 2001: 33)

The generality of any period must be balanced with the specificity of the particular instances of art and the importance of individuals has sometimes been underestimated, as has their intentionality and their subjective sensual experiences. Reconstructions of possible material contexts can allow a more balanced view of the texts and foreground their distinctive role as parts of expressive – and not just social and political – culture. One can thus attempt to conduct an archaeology of persons, "locating the ancient individual" (Meskell 1999: 32–6), even though "fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institution . . . [are] inseparably intertwined" (Greenblatt 1980: 256). Such reconstructions of ancient textual experiences are inevitably specu- lative. Fully fictionalized accounts include Philippe Derchain's *Le dernier obélisque* (1987) but all historiography is in part a fiction and an exercise in historical imagination (e.g. White 1998), despite a general academic unease about the role of imagination (Gumbrecht 2003: 21–3). History, biography, and fiction are parts of a continuum, and present fictions shape our own social and cultural lives.

   In modern study, the fragmentation of the diverse sources and perspectives about these poems has often been exacerbated by a professional divergence between "philology" and "archaeology," despite the complementary roles of these areas of study (e.g., J. Richards 2002, 2005; Zettler 1996). While texts offer a means of accessing aspects of experience that leave no direct material traces, archaeology can recover aspects that were unrecorded in writing due to limited literacy (e.g. Meskell 1999, J. Richards 2005). And if textual data can help us summon up a "un monde intérieur" (Yourcenar 1991a [1982]: 523), this is not an exclusively philological activity: all

Figure 1.2 The houses and streets of Middle Kingdom Abu, with human scale: a view down an alley (from House 70) leading to the chapel of Heqaib with its modern roof. (Photograph: R. B. Parkinson)

archaeological practice involves a thinking ourselves into the past.[4] In particular, dirt archaeology can offer a density of detail about areas of lived experience, from which the contextually mobile manuscripts have often been abstracted. The settlement of ancient Abu is well documented, thanks to the excavations of the Swiss-German missions[5] and the work of historians such as Detlef Franke (1994). The site includes a chapel of a local saint, Heqaib, that was discovered in 1932 by villagers seeking fertilizer and was first excavated by Labib Habachi, a native of Aswan (1906–84: Habachi 1985). Around the chapel, houses of the late 12th Dynasty (Fig. 1.2) can still be viewed with their oven-rooms, courtyards, and divans, and their

[4] Hodder and Hutson 2003 [1981]: 145–55; see e.g. Jaritz 2003a–b on emotions and material culture.
[5] E.g. Kaiser 1997, 1998, 1999; von Pilgrim 1996b; Dreyer et al. 2002.

food-stores that are riddled with blocked-up mouseholes and full of goat droppings (House 69; von Pilgrim 1996b: 130–4). These houses represent a pattern of living and experience that is very different from those of many modern academic readers, as can be seen in our problems in identifying the ancient functions of the rooms.[6] Animals also lived in these houses (Hauschteck 2004) and the architecture was shaped by the local context: the lack of bathrooms, for example, was probably due to the proximity of the river (von Pilgrim 1996a: 263). Room usage was probably seasonal, and a sense of flux and mutability is expressed in the poems' imagery of changing weather,[7] but such local diversity is often lost in scholarly plans and the academic search for cultural norms (e.g. Hodder and Hutson 2003 [1981]: 207–14). In this way such sites present in concrete form a basic problem of how to interpret the past, which is in part immediate and familiar and in part distinct and different (Meskell 1999: 223–4).

An anthropological emphasis on lived experience can also lessen the binary opposition of scholar and object that has often characterized "objective" approaches to the "East."[8] As a nineteenth-century Egyptian scholar noted, "one of the beliefs of the Europeans is that the gaze has no effect" (Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi quoted in Mitchell 1988: 2). An engaged approach can provide a more integrated exploration of this relationship between scholar and object, which can in turn provide a justification of the historical enterprise. More specifically, anthropological studies of living poetic traditions can enable a more nuanced view of poetry than is possible with the fragmentary ancient evidence and provide a strategic reminder that the ancient dead were once as alive as we are now. Lila Abu-Lughod has studied the mediating effect of poetry in a living Bedouin society (1999 [1986]) and Dwight Fletcher Reynolds's analysis of epic singers in the Delta suggests a similarly complex role for male poetry. The "shakwa theme," for example, "represents a poetic discourse in which one may express feelings and emotions which it would be dishonorable to express in action or in everyday speech. It is a poetry that constructs a world of un-acted-upon impulses, unspoken voices and unrealized dreams" (1995: 149). Such analyses parallel the role that has been independently suggested for some Middle Kingdom poems (e.g. Parkinson 2002: 86–107). A consideration of such modern performances, which are demonstrably integral with their economic and

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[6] E.g. von Pilgrim 1996b: 205–18; compare Bietak 1996b. See also Meskell 1998b; Koltsida 2007.

[7] E.g. *Eloquent Peasant* B 1 275–6; *Dialogue* 71–2, 88, 134, 139.

[8] As exemplified in the nineteenth-century World Exhibitions (Mitchell 1988: 1–33). See Finnegan 1992b: 220–5; Meskell 2004: 39–58.

social dimensions, power and patronage (Reynolds 1995: 102–4), provides possible models for thinking about unrecorded ancient practices.

Despite the lack of surviving documentation, we can attempt to "only connect" an ancient text with its intertext and context. Source criticism has been a characteristic project of classical philology (Hinds 1998: xi) and is often a somewhat "inert" tool of analysis (Greenblatt 1988: 94–5) but it can also liberate interpretation (cf. Goldberg 2003: 55–78, 152–75); a study of genre, allusions and intertextuality can involve a reconstruction of the original reader's world of verbal experience. An emphasis on perform-ance can also remind us that the physical manuscripts are both material artefacts of copying and editing, and also "notations" of lost social practices of reading and recital (R. Williams 2001: 176). The manuscripts themselves signal the extent to which a poem has a constructed rather than an essential meaning (e.g. Dollimore and Sinfield 1994 [1985]: 95). While our idea of an ancient text and its readers is often single, monolithic and self-reflective – the "fallacy of the homogenous past" (E. D. Hirsch 1976: 40–1) – they were diverse and fluid. In the following chapters, I will attempt to document the possible various "reading communities" (e.g. Fish 1980) and the manner in which they – also including us – have shaped these three poems. A genuinely historical understanding of a poem must express the "inescapable circumstantiality of the text" (Kastan 1999: 53): any text is created by its author(s) and its varied readers, and multiple forces shape its material expression and meanings through time.

1.2   Subaltern Attitudes

Not one of these Richards, Johns, Annes, Elizabeths had left a token of himself behind him, yet all, working together with their spades and their needles, their love-making and their child-bearing have left this. Never had the house looked more noble and humane.

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (1993 [1928]: 73)

All interpretative strategies are not only contingent on social and political factors but they have ethical and political implications and consequences, like any form of academic study (e.g. Law 2003: 275, 279–80). In any cul-ture, there are always alternative histories of subaltern individuals, "histories of women, children, the poor, for example – histories whose very existence would contest the story the hegemonic state would tell of itself."[9] The close

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[9] Kastan 1999: 30; on subaltern studies see e.g. Loomba 1998, esp. 231–45.

association between the ancient elite and the written and visual record has hindered a subaltern approach to Middle Kingdom culture (see e.g. J. Richards 2005: 19–31; Seidlmayer 2007). An awareness of textual instability, however, can open up the interpretative spaces beyond the assumptions of a normative academic "common sense" (Goldberg 2003: 48–54), so that the texts become data for "the cultural critic interested in the stresses that culture would suture [rather] than for the intellectual historian interested in a shared conceptual inheritance" (Kastan 1999: 54). It can thus also open up a "queer philology," taking queer as "*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin 1995: 62). This term can usefully designate readings that "seek to examine the theoretical and critical forces . . . that privilege the normative over the disruptive" (Martin and Piggford 1997: 10). As Scott Bravmann comments: "As a heuristic device 'queer' has helped focus attention on how culturally sanctioned versions of the normal and the natural have been constructed and sustained, revealing them to be cultural fictions enabled only through their dependent relationship with the abnormal and the unnatural which those fictions themselves construct" (1997: 20). Such relatively recent strategies are part of archaeology's movement to account for individual agency and resistance (Hodder and Hutson 2003 [1981]: 90–105) but they are not exclusively modern concerns. The search for subaltern voices and (hi)stories can be paralleled in the 12th-Dynasty *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* itself, where an elite author gives voice to a dispossessed peasant-trader. As in all subaltern studies, the voice thus recovered is contingent on the author's privileged status and intentions and cannot be accepted unquestioningly.[10] Interpretations of gender and sexuality in Egyptian high culture offer a parallel instance to the interpretative problems of the subaltern approach to literature and to the implications of such an approach (cf. e.g. Bravmann 1997; Seidman 1997); as David Halperin has noted, the history of sexuality exemplifies fundamental questions of identity and difference in historiography (2002: 105–6; see also Schmidt and Voss 2000). Same-sex desire between men is prominent in the Middle Kingdom literary corpus, and competing modern interpretations of these texts are fashioned within specific contexts (e.g. Parkinson 1995 and in press). Here the tensions between the familiarity and the alterity of the past can have clear and profound effects on modern individual lives and political attitudes. However, the same tensions and effects are true – if less obviously so – of every reading of a poem.

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[10] Subaltern studies inevitably run the risk of being unconscious acts of ventriloquizing (Loomba 1998: 243–4; Schmidt and Voss 2000: 5–6). On the elite nature of high culture, see e.g. Baines and Yoffee 1998; 233–52; Baines 2007: 13–14.

Each reader brings his own world to the act of reading, and a poem's ability to evoke different significances may even be one aspect of its ability to endure (e.g. Valéry 1960: 561–2). Without a wide variety of readings we will underestimate this rich corpus. A survey of the poems' receptions shows that some audiences have responded to aspects of the texts that are often excluded from, or underestimated in, modern academic approaches. Although traditional philology often aspires to single objectivity, the poems are as multiple and as layered as the physical landscapes of their creation and reception – each period constructs and reshapes its own landscape from the same geological locations, as envisioned in Raymond Williams's fictional account of the different lives of the Welsh Black Mountains (1989–90; cf. Alcock 2002). Luxor is central to the present narrative, partly because the local environment favors preservation (e.g. d'Athanasi 1836a: 61–3) and partly because it has become a privileged site in modern study. There are, however, many Wasets/Thebes/Luxors. The Waset of any individual reader of these poems has been continually re-envisioned and reshaped by different generations and individuals, as outlined in the subsequent chapters, through to the present period where the area is also partly occupied by tourists and archaeologists. And within each generation, different groups and individuals envisage their own landscapes. An awareness of such multifarious personal perspectives reminds us that interpretation can be an act of empathy as well as academic detachment. "Understanding is not empathy" (Hodder and Hutson 2003 [1981]: 161) but empathy's value is usually underestimated in our engagement with other ancient cultures (Parkinson 2002: 288–91). As visitors walking through streets in a supposedly "antique land," it is interesting to observe how someone smiles as we pass, to speculate about their motives, and to analyze the cultural and social meanings of this gesture in a detached manner. But we can, of course, also smile back.

1.3   Siting an Invisible Art

> *And like this insubstantiall Pageant faded*
> *Leaue not a racke behinde.*
> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
> (iv.1 ll. 154–5)

In the surviving Middle Kingdom evidence, poetry is an invisible art, apart from the material presence of the poems' manuscripts. How then can it be described or imagined? The social space for literature also remains

deeply problematic, especially since there is no surviving substantial meta-discourse about literature or performance outside of the poems themselves (see Parkinson 2002: 45–85). Literary texts did not feature in ancient visual representations: scenes of reading or performing are absent in the extensive body of elite tomb scenes showing the activities of the living, and Adolf Erman suggested that this was because such stories were "recited only to the common people in the street" (1927: xxix). This is unlikely to be true, partly because many lowly activities were represented in these scenes and partly because written literature belonged to an upper elite sphere. This absence of representations of literary texts contrasts with the moderately numerous depictions of administrative manuscripts being compiled or being presented to tomb-owners (e.g. Der Manuelian 1996b). Ritual lyrics and recitation are also sometimes attested in tomb scenes (e.g. Morenz 1996: 58–77), as is the presentation of liturgical documents (cf. Dominicus 1994: 80–8). One such scene on the sarcophagus of the 11th-Dynasty princess Ashayet from the Southern City shows a seated scribe of the divine book reading a liturgical text to her (Fischer 1996: pl. 14b; Morenz 1996: 71–4; Fig. 1.3). Likewise, musicians and singers could be represented, evoking the

Figure 1.3 A royal audience, c. 1870 BC: the scribe of the divine book Intef recites a liturgy from a manuscript to his mistress, the princess Ashayet. A scene on the inner face of her sarcophagus (Cairo JdE 47267) (Photograph: R. B. Parkinson)

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Figure 1.4 An elite audience: three women sing a praise song to Sarenput son of Hapi from the facade of his tomb on the cliffs opposite Abu. Above them, he sits in state in a hall. The women are shown again in the interior where the words of their song are written above them (Photograph: R. B. Parkinson)

tomb-owner's leisured status, as in one early 12th-Dynasty steward's funerary model of some singers and a harpist performing before him,[11] or as in the tomb of Sarenput son of Hapi at Abu, where singing women were shown, once with the words of liturgical praise-songs acclaiming "the Mayor and Overseer of priests Sarenput" (Song B l.1; Parkinson and Franke 2007; Fig. 1.4). It is unknowable how far the iconographic codes corresponded to actual practices, and these uncommon instances may even be exceptions to, rather than evidence for, the prevailing cultural practices. Nevertheless, these representations attest the occasional prestigious display of these types of manuscripts and performative genres.

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[11] Cairo JdE 39130, from the tomb of the Steward Karenen near King Teti's pyramid at Saqqara (PM III.2^2, 561; Podvin 1997: 129–32).

The contrasting non-visual aspect of literature may in part reflect an ancient sense that literature was an essentially aural performative phenomenon.[12] Reading aloud was an integral social aspect of textuality in Ancient Egypt (e.g. Baines 1999b: 28–30; 2007: 152–6; Redford 2000: 159–63), and these literary texts arguably lend themselves to, and require, performance (Eyre 2000; Morenz 2000a: 59–61). However, as noted above, many similarly "aural" genres were represented unlike literature. In many cultures, literary performances – as opposed to such rituals or eulogies – are treated ambivalently due to unease about their representational character, since their "existence is potentially capable of calling forth . . . cognitive tensions or contradictions" (Goody 1997: 146, in general 99–152). One might suggest a similar explanation for the lack of literary scenes in elite tombs, except for the fact that Middle Kingdom literature, although it often deals with potentially dissident narratives, remains an integral part of high culture (Parkinson 2002). These largely non-religious and occasionally frivolous works may have lacked sufficient symbolic overtones of rebirth and regeneration to make them suitable for specifically funerary iconography. But perhaps literary performances were, like many social activities, excluded from the decorum of tomb decoration for some less significant reason – perhaps simply because singing is a more visually legible entertainment, especially when accompanied by musical instruments.

Poetry is also an anonymous art in the Middle Kingdom although, as Philippe Derchain has noted, someone must have written the poems (1996: 94). The poems sometimes present themselves as records of extempore performances by skilled composers. No matter how fictionalized these descriptions are, they suggest that the concept of a single author is in part relevant. However, authorship is fluctuating institution and it is only one aspect of how literature is institutionalized and created (e.g. Kastan 1999: 32–40; for Egypt: Parkinson 2002: 75–8; Quirke 2004b: 31–6). Middle Kingdom attitudes to authorship and textuality were such that the identity and the compositional processes of the authors of the poems were unrecorded, as were the means of commissioning and performing, transmission and copying. One can nevertheless induce a cultural field for literary texts and from this suggest an approximate position for its creation within the higher sub-elite, probably as a relatively specialized activity.[13] The poems were probably collaborative works in some respects, shaped by patrons and performers,

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[12] Literary manuscripts are always unillustrated (Parkinson 2002: 74 n. 13; see, however, Derchain 2002).

[13] Parkinson 1996a, 2002: 78. It is only occasionally possible to add any detail to such a hypothesis (e.g. Morenz 2002: 138–9).

and the "authority" of any copy would not have lain with a single individual author (Renaissance examples: de Grazia and Stallybrass 1993: 273–9; Orgel 2002: 1–5). Authorial intention, however, is only part of the multiple creation of meaning, together with multiple complex social practices that continuously shape the text's "absorbent surface" (de Grazia and Stallybrass 1993: 283). As David Scott Kastan comments " 'Who reads and what' is as relevant a question as 'who writes and why,' and both must be answered if we are to consider meaning as a genuinely historical concern" (1999: 54). Reassembling data about the poems' manuscripts, their findspots and physical features allows us to go some way to recover a sense of the specific social and material circumstances in which poetic meaning was created and experienced:

> A text's meanings, as they emerge in history, are not produced solely by its author's intentions, which in various ways get disrupted and dispersed as the text is materialized and encountered; rather, its meanings are generated in the complex negotiation between the pressure it exerts, as both a formal and material structure, and the often perverse productivity of its readers or spectators . . . who experience the text with unpredictable desires, expectations, and abilities. (Kastan 1999: 54)

Each of the three poems considered here deploys certain phrases and concepts which suggest what ideological position they inhabited: *The Tale of Sinuhe* shows familiarity with both the etiquette of the court and the lands of Palestine; *The Eloquent Peasant* with the elite doctrine of Maat, as well as with everyday issues of government activity on a local level; *The Dialogue of a Man and his Soul* draws on a wide sphere of written culture including elite funerary texts. These aspects suggest that – as with other forms of high culture – the royal court and/or its immediate sphere were, at least in theory, the center of their production in terms of both a physical location and an ideological patron and framework. If the royal Residence was not the sole center of composition, it was probably at least a major center for the most prestigious works, and these works seem to have been distributed through the country. The three poems discussed here arguably dated from within some sixty years of the founding of the dynasty's new Residence, and the creation of written literature as a phenomenon was arguably an act of the 12th-Dynasty royal court, perhaps in final decade of the reign of Sehotepibre Amenemhat I, as part of a "media revolution" marking the cultural renaissance of the new dynasty.[14] The very use of writing for poetry moved it from a sphere of short-lived (and now

[14] Morenz 1996: 3; Moers 2000: 59–80; Parkinson 2002: 55–78, 282. The court necropolis has been the findspot of one literary manuscript: P. Lythgoe (Parkinson 2002: 299–300). On datings: 2002: 297–8, 309.

invisible) practices to a sphere of enduring inscribed practices. As Ian Hodder and Scott Hutson observe, "materialisation can be a political strategy because when a particular meaning is materialised in durable long-lasting form, that meaning comes across as permanent. Things that are permanent may seem natural, and therefore beyond question; incontestable" (2003 [1981]: 66–7). Nevertheless, the transmission of poetry on papyrus also set it apart from the monumental official discourse that was inscribed on more eternal stone, although it belonged to the same world of self-promoting elite trans-mission (e.g. Parkinson 2002: 73–5).

Our ignorance of poetry's contexts is paralleled in our relative ignorance of this royal location whose history parallels in many respects that of the poems. The city was formally named Amenemhat Itj-tawi, "Amenemhat Seizer of the Two Lands," but was generally referred to as "the Residence" or "Center" (*ẖnw*: e.g. W. K. Simpson 1963b, 1980; Gomaà 1987: 36–9, 61). While the court's administrative structure can be partly reconstructed (e.g. Quirke 1991a), its material architecture and precise location are unknown. It probably lay east of the pyramid of the city's and dynasty's founder Sehotepibre Amenemhat I, near modern el-Lisht where there are several large koms along the desert edge (D. Arnold 1988, 1992). In the el-Muhit canal about 250 meters northeast of the pyramid's valley temple, three granite altars have been found which could be the remains of a city temple (D. Arnold 1988: 14; F. Arnold 1996: 13). In the 13th Dynasty, suburbs apparently belonging to lower ranking officials and craftsmen extended up onto the desert escarpment and into the pyramid complex, although the cemetery was still in use (F. Arnold 1996, esp. 13–15; Bourriau 2004: 52–6). The pyramid was apparently robbed in the late 13th Dynasty and at some point around now, the king and government would retreat south to Waset (e.g. Bourriau 2000: 198–9; Ryholt 1997: 79–80). Like the poems, the city's later history grows more obscure but allusions suggest that it was still a significant settlement in 728 BC, and later still in 654 BC, Wahibre Psammetichus I spent a "happy moment" visiting a structure of Sehotepibre Amenemhat I, perhaps his pyramid.[15] Memory of the town as a royal court endures in Ptolemaic mythology (W. K. Simpson 1963b: 59 n. 28), and its reputation is even traceable in specialized hieroglyphic orthography: in the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu the sign that writes Itj-tawi was still used to write in sportive style the word "Residence" and the homophonous preposition "within."[16] Its history continues into modern times and the Arabic name

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[15] 728 BC in the Piye stela l. 3, 83–5 (W. K. Simpson 1963b: 58–9; Grimal 1981: 12–13, 90–1). Psammetichus: stela of Year 11 from South Saqqara, ll. 1–2 (Perdu 2002: 30–5; Der Manuelian 1994: 323–32).

[16] *ẖnw* and *m-ẖnw*: e.g. *Edfu* VI, 200 l. 9; P. Wilson 1997: 766–7.

Figure 1.5 The desert landscape near modern el-Lisht, looking from the pyramid of Kheperkare Senwosret I toward the pyramid of his father Sehotepibre Amenemhat I. In the valley beyond is the probable site of the Residence of Itj-tawi (Photograph: R. B. Parkinson)

of el-Lisht may even derive from an abbreviated form of the ancient name, Itju (W. K. Simpson 1963b: 59 n. 29). But despite this enduring fame, we know nothing of the physical palace of the early 12th Dynasty that was the center of the Residence and that is so prominent a location in *Sinuhe*.

If the archaeology of the settlement area is as yet largely inaccessible, the landscape that surrounded both court and poetry can retain an impact on the modern visitor, and such experiences can help us draw a little closer to imagining the context of these works in unabstract terms (Fig. 1.5). On one such visit in 2001, the nearby pyramid of Kheperkare Senwosret I was a shining wreck that was at first indistinguishable from the desert's hills and dunes until a passing man with a donkey answered a request for directions. Walking through the pyramid enclosure where Sinuhe was imagined to be buried left me with a strange sensation of finally standing in a place that had been read about so often in a poem. Of course, my modern sensation of this constructed landscape cannot be projected back onto its various multifarious pasts (cf. Hodder and Hutson 2003: 118–210), and many of the ancient readers of *Sinuhe* will never have had any opportunity

or even desire to visit the fictional scene of Sinuhe's burial, as I had then. Nevertheless, on that afternoon of pale white light, looking down toward the valley, the modern and ancient settlements beneath the desert escarpment seemed inextricably linked. Although we cannot place the composers of these poems precisely in time, location or society, it seems likely that they worked, and these three poems were first performed, somewhere on that plain beneath the pyramids. The long history of all our readings probably began here.