

presented at the table. Now, there is of course a raw, healthy form of experience, just as there is raw, healthy food for the stomach—namely, experiencing something for oneself. But the art of the novel, like the art of cooking, begins where the raw products end. There are many nourishing foodstuffs that are inedible when raw. Just as there are any number of experiences that are better read about than personally undergone. They affect many people so strongly that individuals would not survive them if they were to experience them in the flesh. In short, if there is a Muse of the novel—it would be the tenth—it must bear the features of a kitchen fairy. She raises the world from its raw state in order to produce something edible, something tasty. Read a newspaper while eating, if you must. But never a novel. For that involves two sets of conflicting obligations.

The Art of Storytelling

Every morning brings us news from all over the world.² Yet we are poor in remarkable stories. Why is that? It is because no events reach us without being permeated by explanations. In other words, hardly anything redounds to the advantage of the story; nearly everything, to that of information. In fact, half the art of storytelling is that of keeping it free of all explanations during the telling. In this respect the ancients, Herodotus above all, were masters. In Chapter 14 of Book III of his *Histories*, he tells the story of Psammenitus. The Egyptian king Psammenitus had been defeated and taken prisoner by the Persian king Cambyses; Cambyses was bent on humbling his captive. He gave orders to place Psammenitus on the road on which the Persian triumphal procession was to pass. And he further arranged that the prisoner should see his daughter as a serving girl, taking her pitcher to the well. While all the Egyptians stood lamenting and bewailing this spectacle, Psammenitus alone stood silent and motionless, his eyes fixed on the ground. And when soon after he saw his son in the procession, being led to execution, he likewise remained unmoved. But when he saw one of his old servants, an old man, reduced to beggary, in the ranks of the prisoners, he beat his head with his fists and gave every sign of the profoundest grief.—From this story we can see the nature of true storytelling. The value of information does not survive the moment when it was new. It lives only at that moment. It has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to the moment without loss of time. A story is different; it does not expend itself. It preserves its strength concentrated within itself and is capable of releasing it even after a long time. Thus, Montaigne referred to the story of this Egyptian king, and asked himself why the king mourned only when he caught sight of his servant and not before. Montaigne answers: "Since he was already overwhelmed by grief, it took only the smallest addition for the dam to burst." The story can be understood in this way. But there is room for other explanations, too. Anyone can find out what these reasons are by

Montaigne

Little Tricks of the Trade

Reading novels

Good Writing

The good writer says no more than he thinks.¹ And much depends on that. For speech is not simply the expression but also the making real of thought. In the same way that running is not just the expression of the desire to reach a goal, but also the realization of that goal. But the kind of realization, whether it is precisely adapted to the goal, or whether it loosely and wantonly wastes itself on the desire—depends on the training of the person who is running. The more he has himself in hand and avoids superfluous, exaggerated, and uncoordinated movements, the more self-sufficient his position will be and the more economical his use of his body. The bad writer has many ideas which he lets run riot, just like the bad, untrained runner with his slack, overenthusiastic body action. And for that very reason, he can never say soberly just what he thinks. The talent of the good writer is to make use of his style to supply his thought with a spectacle of the kind provided by a well-trained body. He never says more than he has thought. Hence, his writing redounds not to his own benefit, but solely to the benefit of what he wants to say.

Reading Novels

Not all books are to be read in the same way. Novels, for example, are there to be devoured. To read them is a pleasure of consumption [*Einverleibung*]. This is not empathy. The reader does not put himself in the place of the hero; he absorbs what befalls the hero into himself. The vivid report on those events, however, is the enticing form in which a nourishing meal is

asking Montaigne's question in a circle of friends. For example, one of mine said, "The king is unmoved by the fate of those of royal blood, for it is his own." And another: "We are moved by much on the stage that does not move us in real life. To the king, this servant is only an actor." And a third: "Great suffering builds up and only breaks forth with relaxation. The sight of his servant was the relaxation."—"If this story had taken place today," said a fourth, "all the papers would claim that Pammenitus loved his servant more than his children." What is certain is that every reporter would find an explanation at the drop of a hat. Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable of arousing astonishment and thought even after thousands of years. It resembles the seeds of grain that have lain hermetically sealed in the chambers of the Pyramids for thousands of years, and have retained their power to germinate to this very day.

After Completion

The origin of great works has often been conceptualized in terms of the image of birth. This image is dialectical; it embraces the process from two sides. One is concerned with creative conception and affects the feminine side of genius. This feminine aspect comes to an end with the completion of the work. It sets the work in motion and then it dies. What dies in the master with the finished creation is that part of him in which it was conceived. Now, however—and this is the other side of the coin—the completion of the work is no dead thing. It is not achievable from outside; filing and tinkering does not bring it about. It is perfected in the interior of the work itself. And here, too, we may speak of giving birth. In the act of completion, the created thing gives birth once more to its creator. Not in its feminine aspect, in which it was conceived, but on its masculine side. Ecstatic, the creator overtakes nature, for he will now be indebted to a brighter source for the existence that he received for the first time from the dark depths of the maternal womb. His home is not where he was born; rather, he comes into the world where his home is. He is the masculine firstborn of the work that he had once conceived.

Written 1928–1933; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, 435–438. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

Notes

1. See also the essay "Thought Figures" (section entitled "The Good Writer") in this volume.
2. See also sections VI and VII of Benjamin's essay "Der Erzähler" (The Storyteller).

Experience and Poverty

Our childhood anthologies used to contain the fable of the old man who, on his deathbed, fooled his sons into believing that there was treasure buried in the vineyard. They would only have to dig. They dug, but found no treasure. When autumn came, however, the vineyard bore fruit like no other in the whole land. They then perceived that their father had passed on a valuable piece of experience: the blessing lies in hard work and not in gold. Such lessons in experience were passed on to us, either as threats or as kindly pieces of advice, all the while we were growing up: "You'll find out [erfahren] soon enough!" Moreover, everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside.—Where has it all gone? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story? Where do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring? Who can still call on a proverb when he needs one? And who will even attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of their experience?

No, this much is clear: experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914 to 1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. Perhaps this is less remarkable than it appears. Wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience? And what poured out from the flood of war books ten years later was anything

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

EVERYMAN,
I WILL GO WITH THEE,
AND BE THY GUIDE,
IN THY MOST NEED
TO GO BY THY SIDE

THE COMPLETE WORKS

ESSAYS, TRAVEL JOURNAL, LETTERS

TRANSLATED BY DONALD M. FRAME

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY STUART HAMPSHIRE



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Alfred A. Knopf New York London Toronto

height in another without passionately envious spite? Or was the natural impetuosity of his anger incapable of brooking opposition? In truth, if it could have been bridled, it is probable that it would have been in the capture and desolation of the city of Thebes, at the sight of so many valiant men, lost and without any further means of common defense, cruelly put to the sword. For fully six thousand of them were killed, of whom not one was seen fleeing or asking for mercy, but who were on the contrary seeking, some here, some there, through the streets, to confront the victorious enemy and to provoke an honorable death at his hands. Not one was seen so beaten down with wounds as not to try even in his last gasp to avenge himself, and with the weapons of despair to assuage his death in the death of some enemy. Yet the distress of their valor found no pity, and the length of a day was not enough to satiate Alexander's revenge. This slaughter went on to the last drop of blood that could be shed, and stopped only at the unarmed people, old men, women, and children, so that thirty thousand of them might be taken as slaves.

2

Of sadness

"I am one of those freest from this passion. I neither like it nor respect it, although everyone has decided to honor it, as if at a fixed price, with particular favor. They clothe wisdom, virtue, conscience with it: a stupid and monstrous ornament! The Italians, more appropriately, have baptized malignancy with its name. For it is always a harmful quality, always insane; and, as being always cowardly and base, the Stoics forbid their sages to feel it.

But ⁴the story goes that when Psammenitus, king of Egypt, after his defeat and capture by Cambyses, king of Persia, saw his daughter pass before him as a prisoner, dressed as a servant and on her way to draw water, while all his friends around him were weeping and lamenting, he himself neither moved nor spoke a word, his eyes fixed on the ground. And further, seeing his son presently being led to his death, he held himself to this same demeanor. But having seen one of his friends led along among the captives, he began to beat his head and manifest extreme grief.

This could be compared with what was seen lately of one of our princes,¹ who, hearing at Trent the news of the death of his older brother — a brother in whom lay the support and honor of his whole house — and soon afterward that of a younger brother, his second hope, withstood these two assaults with exemplary steadfastness; but when a few days afterward one of his men came to die, he let himself go at this last accident and, abandoning his resoluteness, gave himself up to sorrow and mourning, so that some argued that he had been touched to the quick only by this last shock. But the truth was that since he was already brimful of sadness, the slightest overload broke down the barriers of his endurance.

One might, I think, make the same judgment of our story, if it did not add that when Cambyses inquired of Psammenitus why, though unmoved by the misfortune of his son and daughter, he lacked the patience to bear that of one of his friends, he answered: "It is because this last grief alone can be signified by tears; the first two far surpass any power of expression."

Perhaps related to this remark is the idea of the ancient painter who, being obliged to represent the grief of the spectators at the sacrifice of Iphigenia according to the degrees of their concern over the death of this beautiful innocent girl, and having exhausted the utmost powers of his art, when he came to the girl's father portrayed him with his face covered, as if no countenance could represent that degree of grief. That is why the poets show that wretched mother Niobe, overwhelmed by losing first seven sons and then soon after as many daughters, as having been at last transformed into a rock —

Petrified by her woes

OVID

— to represent that bleak, dumb, and deaf stupor that benumbs us when accidents surpassing our endurance overwhelm us.

In truth, the impact of grief, to be extreme, must stun the whole soul and impede its freedom of action; as it happens to us, at the hot alarm of some very bad news, to feel ourselves caught, benumbed, and as it were paralyzed from any movements, so that the soul,

¹ Charles de Guise, cardinal of Lorraine. The two brothers are François de Lorraine, duke of Guise, assassinated on February 24, 1563, and François de Lorraine, abbot of Cluny, who died on March 6, 1563.

relaxing afterward into tears and lamentations, seems to unbend, extricate itself, and gain more space and freedom.

³ And grief at long hard last breaks a way for the voice.

VIRGIL

³In the war that King Ferdinand waged around Buda against the widow of John, king of Hungary, Raicsiac, a German captain, seeing the body of a horseman brought in, whom all had seen doing extremely well in the melee, lamented him with an ordinary lament; but, being curious, like the others, to recognize who he was, he found, after they had taken his armor off, that it was his son. And amid the general tears, he alone remained without giving vent to cries or weeping, erect on his feet, his eyes motionless, staring at him fixedly; until the impact of sorrow, freezing his vital spirits, dropped him in this condition stone dead on the ground.

⁴He who can say how he burns, burns little,

PETRARCH

say lovers who want to express an unbearable passion:

Alas, my senses, dazed,

Are snatched away. For soon as I have gazed

On thee, Lesbia, my wits depart amazed,

I can say nothing.

My tongue is numb, a subtle fire runs round

Throughout my every limb, my ears resound

With ringing all their own, both eyes are drowned

In blackest night.

CATULLUS

⁵Nor is it in the live and most ardent heat of passion that we are fit to set forth our amorous complaints and pleadings; the soul is then burdened with deep thoughts, and the body weighed down and languishing with love.

⁶And from that is sometimes engendered the accidental failing that surprises lovers so unseasonably, and that frigidity that seizes them by the force of extreme ardor in the very lap of enjoyment.² All

² The 1588 edition here shows an addition that Montaigne later crossed out: "an accident that is not unknown to me."

passions that allow themselves to be savored and digested are only mediocre.

Light cares can speak, but heavy ones are dumb.

SENECA

¹⁰The surprise of an unexpected pleasure stuns us in the same way:

When, dazed, she saw me come, and with me all around

Trojans and Trojan arms, wonder made her afraid,

She stiffened in mid gaze, the warmth out of her fled.

She crumples, and much later with difficulty speaks.

VIRGIL

¹¹Besides the Roman woman who died overcome with gladness to see her son back from the rout at Cannae, Sophocles and Dionysius the tyrant, who passed away for gladness, and Talva, who died in Corsica reading the news of the honors that the Senate of Rome had decreed for him, we understand that in our time Pope Leo X, upon being advised of the taking of Milan, which he had ardently desired, fell into such an excess of joy that a fever got him and he died. And as a more remarkable testimony of human frailty, it was noted by the ancients that Diodorus the dialectician died on the spot, seized with an extreme passion of shame, for not having been able to shake loose, in his own school and in public, from an argument that had been put to him.

¹²I am little subject to these violent passions. My susceptibility is naturally tough; and I harden and thicken it every day by force of reason.

3 *Our feelings reach out beyond us*

¹³Those who accuse men of always gaping after future things, and teach us to lay hold of present goods and settle ourselves in them, since we have no grip on what is to come (indeed a good deal less than we have on what is past), put their finger on the commonest of human errors – if they dare to call an error something to which Nature herself leads us in serving the continuation of her work,¹⁴ and which, more zealous for our action than for our knowledge, she imprints in us like many other false notions. ¹⁵We are never at home, we are always beyond. Fear, desire, hope, project us toward

HERODOTUS

The Histories

Translated by TOM HOLLAND
Introduction and Notes by PAUL CARTLEDGE

VIKING

[7] Now, it was the Persians, in the immediate wake of their conquest of Egypt, who provisioned the entry route into Egypt with supplies of water, in the manner I have just described; but at the time, there was not a drop to be had. So it was that Cambyses, advised of this by his foreign friend from Halicarnassus, sent messengers with a request for safe passage to the king of the Arabians – who duly answered the pledges given him by granting pledges of his own.

[8] The Arabians,⁹ to a degree that few other peoples can match, regard the giving of pledges as a sacred business. Should two parties wish to make a compact, then the procedure is for a third man to stand between them and use a sharp piece of stone to score a light incision along the palms of their hands, just below their thumbs; he will then take a strip of cloth from both men's cloaks, and use the material to anoint with their blood seven stones which have been placed between them; as he does this, so will he invoke Dionysus and Urania. Once the ritual is completed, the man who is giving the pledge will commend the foreigner – or fellow-townsmen, as the case may be – to his friends, and these friends will then regard it as their solemn duty to honour the pledge themselves. Apart from Urania, the only god whose existence the Arabians acknowledge is Dionysus;¹⁰ his cropped locks, they say, provide them with the inspiration for the way in which they wear their own hair short: that is, cut in a circle, with the temples shaved. Dionysus is called *Orotalt* by the Arabians, and Urania is *Alilat*.

[9] So it was that the king of the Arabians, after he had given his word to the messengers who had come from Cambyses, devised the following plan. First he filled camel-skins with water and loaded them up onto every living camel he had; then, that done, he drove the camels out into the desert, and there awaited Cambyses' army. Such, at any rate, is the more convincing of the accounts that are given; but there is also a less convincing version which nevertheless, since it does have some plausibility, demands to be told. There is a large river in Arabia, the Corys by name,¹¹ which flows into the Red Sea, as it is called. The story goes that the king of the Arabians had raw ox-hides and the skins of various other animals stitched together so as to make a pipe, sufficient in length to reach from this same river to the desert; and that he then channelled water through the pipe into large reservoirs which had been dug in the desert for the purpose of receiving and storing the water. It is twelve days' journey from the river to this particular desert. There were

three pipes, and each one conducted the water to one of three locations.

[10] Psammenitus, the son of Amasis, made camp by what is known as the Pelusiac Mouth of the Nile, there to await Cambyses. Amasis himself was no longer alive by the time Cambyses came to invade Egypt, for he had died after a reign that had lasted forty-four years,¹² and never once known any serious calamity. Following his death and mummification, Amasis was laid to rest in the burial-vault that he himself had had built within the shrine. During the reign of his son, Psammenitus, over Egypt, a phenomenon was witnessed which utterly stupefied the Egyptians: rain fell on Egyptian Thebes. This was something that had never happened before; nor, according to the Thebans themselves, has it happened since, up to my own lifetime. Rain is simply not a feature of upper Egypt. On this one occasion, however, it did rain in Thebes: a light drizzle.

[11] Once the Persians had crossed the desert, they took up positions close to the Egyptians, aiming to engage them in battle; whereupon the Greeks and the Carians, who were employed as mercenaries by the Egyptian king, felt so outraged by what Phanes had done in leading an army of gibberish-spouting foreigners against Egypt, that they devised their own rïposte. Phanes had children whom he had left behind in Egypt; and these children were now brought to the camp, and into the full view of their father. The mercenaries then set up a mixing-bowl midway between their own and the enemy camp, after which they led out the children one by one, and cut their throats over the mixing-bowl. After the final dispatch of all the children, wine and water were poured into the bowl as well; the mercenaries then gulped down the blood and headed off into battle. Fierce though the fighting was, however, and numerous the casualties on both sides, it was the Egyptians who finally turned tail.

[12] I witnessed something truly extraordinary there, which I was tipped off about by the locals. The site is strewn with the bones of men from both sides who fell in the battle, with those of the Persians quite distinct from those of the Egyptians, just as they were when the fighting originally began; and so brittle are the skulls of the Persians that, should you wish to make a hole in one, you would have only to tap it with a single pebble, whereas those of the Egyptians are so tough that it would be a challenge to smash them through, even if you pounded at them

with a rock. Why should this be so? The locals gave a reason which seems to me eminently plausible: namely, that Egyptians are in the habit of shaving their heads from the very earliest days of their childhood, so that the bone ends up thickened by exposure to the sun. (This also explains why Egyptians never go bald – for it is a fact that the incidence of baldness among Egyptians is the lowest anywhere in the world.) This explanation of the toughness of Egyptian skulls also serves to suggest why Persian skulls should be so brittle: the Persians keep their heads out of the sun from birth by wearing conical felt caps, or *tiaras*. So that is how the matter stands. I saw something very similar at Papremis, when I inspected the skulls of those who had perished at the side of Achæmenes, the son of Darius, at the hands of Inaros the Libyan.¹³

[13] When the Egyptians turned tail from the battlefield, they fled in disarray. Once they were all cornered in Memphis, Cambyses sent a Mytilenæan ship upriver, carrying a Persian herald whose mission it was to summon the Egyptians to negotiate. But the Egyptians, when they saw that the ship had docked in Memphis, came pouring out from behind the fortress in a great mob; they destroyed the ship, butchered and dismembered the crew and carted the remains back inside the walls. They were duly put under siege and eventually brought to surrender. Meanwhile, the Libyans who bordered Egypt were so terrified by what had happened to their neighbour that they surrendered without so much as putting up a fight, accepted tributary status and started to send Cambyses gifts. So too did the people of Cyrene and Barca, whose alarm was no less than that of the Libyans. Although Cambyses looked smilingly upon the gifts he had received from the Libyans, he frowned upon those from the Cyrenæans – because, I would guess, they were so meagre. All that the Cyrenæans ever sent was 500 *minæ* of silver – which Cambyses scooped up in his hands and tossed out among his troops.

[14] Nine days after taking possession of the fortress of Memphis, Cambyses installed Psammenitus, the king who had reigned over the Egyptians for six months, in the outskirts of the city, with the aim of testing him by offering him insult – Psammenitus and a group of other Egyptians too. First Cambyses had the daughter of the king dressed in the clothes of a slave; then he sent her out with a bucket to fetch water, together with other unmarried girls chosen from among the daughters of Egypt's most prominent men, and dressed in a manner similar to the princess. As the girls went past their fathers, wailing and weeping, so all

the other men, when they saw the humiliation inflicted on their children, wailed and wept in answer; but Psammenitus, the moment he had seen and fathomed what was happening, only bowed his head to the ground. Then Cambyses, once the girls with their water-buckets had gone by, sent out the king's son, together with two thousand other Egyptians of the same age, all of them with ropes tied around their necks and bits placed in their mouths. They were being led to the place where they were to pay the penalty for the massacre of the Mytilenæans in Memphis, and the destruction of the ship, for it was the decree of the royal judges that, for every casualty that had been inflicted, ten Egyptians of the highest rank should die in return. But when Psammenitus saw the young men come out and pass him by, and learned that his son was being led to execution, he did not weep as all the other Egyptians who were sitting down around him did, nor betray any agony, but instead behaved exactly as he had done while watching his daughter. Once this procession too had gone by, it happened that one of his old dining companions, a man well advanced in years but who had fallen so far from his previous estate that he had been left with nothing more than a beggar might have, came asking for alms among the soldiers, and passed by Psammenitus, the son of Amasis, and all the other Egyptians who were sitting there on the city's outskirts. At the sight of this, Psammenitus let out a great wail of misery, and beat his head, and called to his comrade by name. Now there were men, it seems, who had been set to stand guard over him, and who had been keeping Cambyses informed about Psammenitus' response to all the various processions out of the city. His reactions astounded Cambyses; and so he sent a messenger to Psammenitus with a question. 'Psammenitus,' the messenger said, 'your master, the Lord Cambyses, wants to know why you neither cried out nor sobbed at the sight of your daughter being humiliated and your son going to his death, whereas a beggar who is not even a relation of yours, so he has been informed, solicited marks of respect from you.' To this question Psammenitus answered: 'Son of Cyrus, the evils that have afflicted my own household are too great to be wept over. Tears were, however, an appropriate response to the misery of my old companion, who on the very threshold of old age has been toppled from happiness and wealth, and come to beggary.' When these words were reported back by the messenger, they seemed to those who heard them well said. According to the Egyptians, tears rose to the eyes of Croesus¹⁴ (for he

too, as luck would have it, had come to Egypt in Cambyses' train), and to the eyes of all the Persians who were gathered there, and even into Cambyses himself there entered some spark of compassion. And straight-away, he gave orders that the son of Psammenitus should be spared the fate of all the other condemned men, and that Psammenitus himself should be raised up from where he had been sitting, out on the margins of the city, and brought into his presence.

[15] The men who had gone in pursuit of Psammenitus' son discovered that he had been the very first to be hacked down, and was therefore no longer alive; but Psammenitus himself was raised up and led into the presence of Cambyses. There he passed the rest of his days, and had to endure no further brutal treatment. Indeed, had he only had the good sense to avoid meddling, he would surely have had Egypt restored to him, and been appointed its governor, for it is the habitual policy of the Persians to honour the sons of kings, and even to hand back the rule of a kingdom to the sons of those kings who rebel against them. That it is their custom to do so can readily be deduced from a whole host of other examples. Particularly notable are the cases of Thannyras, the son of Inaros, who had the position of authority that his father had lost given back to him, and of Pausiris, the son of Amyrtaeus, who also had the rulership that his father had lost restored to him – and this despite the fact that there was no one who ever did more damage to the Persians than Inaros and Amyrtaeus. As it was, however, Psammenitus paid the price for all his plots and trouble-making: for he was caught red-handed inciting the Egyptians to rebellion. When all was made known to Cambyses, Psammenitus drank the blood of a bull, and promptly dropped down dead. That was the end of him.

[16] From Memphis, Cambyses proceeded to the city of Saïs; he was minded to do something there that he did, sure enough, put into practice. No sooner had he arrived in the palace of Amasis than he gave orders that Amasis' corpse was to be exhumed from its resting place, and brought outside. Once this had been done, he commanded his men to whip it, to pluck out its hairs, to stab it and to inflict on it any number of other insults. The corpse, however, because it had been mummified, stood proof against all this and refused to fall to pieces, so once the efforts of his men had brought them to the point of exhaustion, Cambyses ordered the body to be burned. Such a command was sheer sacrilege, for fire is believed by the Persians to be a god. Indeed, the

burning of corpses is contrary to the customs of both peoples: the Persians, following on from what I just said, claim that it is quite wrong to offer up a human corpse to a god, while the Egyptians hold fire to be a living, breathing beast, one that devours everything it gets in its clutches, until it is sated and expires after it has swallowed its final morsel. To give a corpse to any wild beast is absolutely contrary to Egyptian custom – which is why, to make certain that it will not be eaten by worms, they embalm it before laying it to rest. So the orders given by Cambyses broke the laws of both peoples alike.¹⁵ The Egyptians, though, claim that this outrage was inflicted not upon Amasis, but upon some other Egyptian of a similar age – and that it was actually this man whom the Persians were insulting when they believed themselves to be insulting Amasis. The Egyptians say that Amasis had learned from an oracle what was fated to happen to him after death, and that in an effort to ward off what was coming, he had the man whose corpse had been whipped buried right by the doors inside his own tomb, and at the same time ordered his son to place his own corpse as deep as possible in the furthest recesses of the tomb. It is my own opinion, however, that these supposed instructions of Amasis about how he and the other man were to be buried did not in fact originate with him but were made up by the Egyptians in an effort to save face.

[17] Cambyses' next step was to consult with his advisers on the viability of three separate military ventures: one against the Carthaginians, one against the Ammonians and one against the long-lived Ethiopians who inhabit Libya, beside the Southern Sea. Cambyses' decision was that he should dispatch his war-fleet against the Carthaginians, and a portion of his land-forces against the Ammonians; but that his first move against the Ethiopians should be a campaign of espionage. Under cover of taking gifts to the Ethiopian king, his spies were to reconnoitre all that they could, and in particular to find out whether the reports of Ethiopia's 'Table of the Sun'¹⁶ had any basis in fact.

[18] This Table of the Sun, the story goes, is a meadow situated on the edge of the city, filled with the roasted cuts of every kind of four-footed animal. All those who happen to be serving as the city's officials at a given moment painstakingly deposit the meat there under cover of night; and then, come the day, whoever so wishes can go there and tuck in. The natives, however, say that the meat is generated every night by the earth itself. Such, then, are the claims made for the so-called 'Table of the Sun'.

[19] Cambyses' decision to deploy spies prompted him to issue an immediate summons to the city of Elephantine, to those men among the 'Fish-Eaters'¹⁷ who understood the Ethiopian language. His messengers went off to fetch them, and in the meantime Cambyses gave orders that all those in his war-fleet should set sail against Carthage. The Phoenicians, however, refused to do so: they declared themselves bound by the most solemn oaths, and that it would be the height of impiety for them to launch an assault against their own offspring.¹⁸ This reluctance of the Phoenicians to take part left the rest of the fleet quite inadequate to the task. So it was that the Carthaginians escaped being enslaved by the Persians. Cambyses, you see, did not feel himself justified in bringing force to bear on the Phoenicians, since they had freely submitted to the Persians, and because his entire war-fleet was dependent upon them. (The Cypriots had similarly submitted to the Persians of their own accord, and joined the expedition against Egypt.)

[20] Once the Fish-Eaters had arrived from Elephantine and come into the presence of Cambyses, he dispatched them to the Ethiopians, complete with instructions as to what they were to say, and a whole load of gifts: a purple robe, a necklace of twisted gold, bracelets, an alabaster box of myrrh and a jar of palm wine. It is said that these Ethiopians to whom Cambyses was sending his messengers are the tallest and most handsome men in the world. Their customs are reported to be very different from those of other peoples; and none more so than the one which determines who becomes their king. The man in their city who is judged to be the tallest and strongest in proportion to his height – that is the man who is reckoned worthy of the throne.

[21] These, then, were the people visited by the Fish-Eaters, who duly handed over their gifts to the king, and said: 'Cambyses, the King of the Persians, desirous as he is of tying the knot of friendship and mutual hospitality with you, has sent us with orders to come here for talks, and to make a gift to you of these things in which he himself takes most delight.' But the Ethiopian could tell that they were spies; and told them so. 'You are nothing but liars, come here to spy on my realm! As for these gifts that you have been sent by the Persian King to bring me, they suggest no great desire on his part to establish links of friendship with me, but rather that he has no sense of what is right. How otherwise to explain this longing of his for lands that are not his own, and his hauling into slavery peoples that never did him any wrong? You are to give

him this bow,¹⁹ and repeat these words to him: 'From the King of the Ethiopians to the King of the Persians, some advice. Only when the Persians can readily draw bows of an equal size should he think to lead an army against the long-lived Ethiopians – and even then, he should be sure to outnumber us. Meanwhile, let him feel proper gratitude to the gods that they have never turned the minds of the sons of Ethiopia to thoughts of adding other lands to their own.'

[22] And with these words, he unstrung the bow and handed it over to his visitors. Then he took the purple robe, and asked them what it was, and how it had been made. The Fish-Eaters gave him a truthful account of the purple-fish and the dyeing process;²⁰ but the king only told the men that they were as deceitful as their garments. His second question was about the twisted gold necklace and the bracelets. The Fish-Eaters began to explain that the gold was for decoration; but the king, who thought that the bracelets were fetters, burst out laughing, and declared that the fetters in his own land were stronger by far. The third question was about the myrrh. The visitors described how it was manufactured and used to anoint the body; but the king dismissed it as he had similarly dismissed the robe. When he came to the wine, however, and learned how it was made, he had a drink and was delighted by it. 'What does your king eat,' he went on to ask, 'and what is the maximum span of a Persian man's life?' 'He eats bread,' they answered, and then explained to him how wheat is grown. 'As for the span of a man's life, the fullest measure is set at eighty years.' To this, however, the king declared, 'I do not wonder that your lives should be so short, when all you eat is dung. Indeed, you would not even be able to stay alive for as long as you do, were it not for the restorative powers of this drink.' And so saying, he indicated the wine to the Fish-Eaters. 'For only in this do the Persians leave us trailing.'

[23] Then it was the turn of the Fish-Eaters to ask the king how long his own people lived, and what kind of things they ate. 'The majority', he answered, 'live to be one hundred and twenty, with some living even longer than that. As for our diet – we boil meat and drink milk.' When the spies expressed astonishment at the number of years, the king led them to a spring from which there came a scent like that of violets; and when the spies washed themselves in it, the water left them with a sheen, as though it had been olive oil. So delicate was this spring-water, the spies reported, that nothing could float on its surface: wood, and even

things lighter than wood, just sank to the bottom. (Certainly, if the reports of this water are true, and assuming that the Ethiopians use it for everything, then it would indeed explain their longevity.) From the spring the spies were led to a dungeon full of men, where everyone was shackled with fetters of gold. (This because, among the Ethiopians, it is bronze which ranks as the rarest and most precious of metals.) Then, once they had seen the dungeon, they also saw the so-called 'Table of the Sun'.

[24] After this, and last of all, they saw the Ethiopians' coffins, which are said to be made of a translucent material. What the Ethiopians do with a corpse is to dry it out, either after the Egyptian manner or in some other way, and smear it all over with plaster and adorn it with paint, so as to render it as lifelike as possible; they then enclose it within a hollow column of translucent material (which they mine in great quantities, and which is easy to work). The corpse is now quite visible in the middle of the column, but without giving off any noxious stench, or indeed anything unpleasant at all. This column will be kept by the dead person's closest relatives in their home for a year, during which time they will bring him the first fruits of everything, and offer him up burnt sacrifice. Then, once the year has passed, they will carry it out and set it up among all the other columns which are dotted around the city.

[25] Once the spies had seen everything, they left for home. So angry did their report make Cambyses²¹ that he immediately launched an attack on the Ethiopians, without having built up any stockpiles of food, or taken into account that the target of his expedition lay at the very ends of the earth. Instead, mad as he was and quite out of his senses, he had no sooner heard from the Fish-Eaters than he went off with his army, the entire body of his land-forces, all except for the Greeks he had with him in Egypt, who were ordered to stay behind. Once the advance of his army had brought him to Thebes, he ordered a detachment of his men, some fifty thousand in all, to bring him back the Ammonians as slaves and to burn down the oracle of Zeus, while he himself led the rest of his forces onwards against the Ethiopians. The army had not even gone a fifth of the way, however, before everything that they had by way of provisions was gone; nor did it take long, once the food had run out, for the pack-animals to disappear as well, for they too were all consumed. If, once he had grasped the situation, Cambyses had only revised his plan and led his army back, then he would have

compensated for his original mistake, and shown himself a man of good sense; as it was, he took no account at all of what was happening but pressed on regardless. The soldiers, for as long as there was anything in the earth that could be scavenged, kept themselves alive by eating grass, but in due course, after they arrived in the sands, there were some of them who did a truly terrible thing: they cast lots, and devoured every tenth man among them. When Cambyses learned of this, such was his dread of cannibalism that he abandoned his expedition against the Ethiopians and went back; but by the time that he had returned to Thebes, he had lost a large part of his army. From Thebes he went downriver to Memphis, where he dismissed the Greeks and let them sail home.

[26] Such was the fate of the expedition against the Ethiopians. The invasion force sent against the Ammonians set out from Thebes, and was shown a route by guides that indisputably saw it arrive in Oasis, a city inhabited by Samians who are said to belong to the Aeschtrionian tribe, and who live seven days' travel away across the sand-dunes from Thebes. (The name of the place, in Greek, is 'The Isles of the Blessed'.) That the army made it as far as Oasis is a matter of record; but beyond Oasis we have no certain information about what happened to the Persians, since they failed to reach the Ammonians, and never made it home either. The only evidence derives, either directly or indirectly, from the Ammonians themselves, who have a story to tell. They claim that in the course of launching its attack against them across the desert from Oasis, the army arrived at a point approximately midway between them and Oasis; and as the Persians were taking their breakfast, a south wind of remarkable strength swept down upon them. Such a mass of sand was this wind carrying that when it deposited its load on the Persians, they were utterly engulfed – and so it was that they came to vanish. That, say the Ammonians, is what happened to the army.²²

[27] The arrival of Cambyses in Memphis coincided with the manifestation in Egypt of Apis, whom the Greeks call *Eppaphus*. No sooner had he made his appearance than the Egyptians began to put on their finest clothes, and to hold street parties. When Cambyses saw what was going on, he jumped to the conclusion that they were celebrating his own failures, so he summoned the prefects of Memphis. Once they had all come into his presence, he fixed them with a glare and asked them, 'Why, when the Egyptians never behaved in this manner the last time I was in Memphis, are they doing so now, after I have lost the greater part

of my army?' The Egyptians explained that a god had appeared to them, and that because these appearances tended to be separated by lengthy intervals of time, it was the practice of all the Egyptians to celebrate each one with festivities. But Cambyses, having heard them out, told them that they were liars – and that he was condemning them to death.

[28] Once the executions had been carried out, he summoned into his presence the priests, who reiterated the earlier explanation. 'So some pet god has turned up in Egypt!' Cambyses exclaimed. 'Then I want to know all about it.' And with this declaration, he ordered the priests to bring him Apis, and they duly went off to fetch him. This Apis (or *Epa-phus*) is a calf born of a cow which, from that moment on, evermore carries a barren womb. The Egyptians say that a beam of light descends from the sky onto this cow, and that it is from this light that Apis is born. The calf, which goes by the god's own name, has distinctive markings: although otherwise black, it has a white diamond upon its forehead and the likeness of an eagle upon its back, the hairs of its tail are double and it has a mark shaped like a beetle under its tongue.

[29] The priests brought in Apis, and Cambyses, who was teetering on the edge of madness, drew a dagger and struck at him, aiming for the belly but hitting the thigh instead. Cambyses laughed, then spoke to the priests. 'You poor fools! What kind of god is born a thing like this, nothing but flesh and blood, and vulnerable to a touch of iron? The kind of god, no doubt, that you Egyptians deserve! But do not think you will get away with fooling me!' With these words he commanded those of his men who were responsible for such matters to flog the priests without mercy and to seize and kill any other Egyptians whom they found celebrating the festival. So it was that the Egyptians' festivities were broken up and the priests punished. Apis, struck in the thigh, wasted away where he lay in the shrine. Once he had died of his wound,²³ the priests came and buried him without Cambyses knowing.

[30] The immediate consequence of this crime, the Egyptians claim, was that Cambyses went mad – although even before it he had barely been sane. The first victim of his criminal deeds was his brother Smerdis, who shared with Cambyses both parents, and who had already been packed off from Egypt to Persia. Smerdis had been the one Persian capable of drawing the bow brought back by the Fish-Eaters from the Ethiopian king, which he had pulled a distance equivalent to the length of two fingers, when none of the other Persians had managed even that.

This had provoked Cambyses to much jealous resentment. Then, after Smerdis had left for Persia, Cambyses had a vision as he slept, in which it seemed to him that a messenger came from Persia, and reported to him that Smerdis was sitting on the royal throne, and that his head was brushing the sky. This dream left Cambyses terrified that his brother might kill him, and rule in his place; and so off to Persia he sent Prexaspes, the man whom he trusted more than any other Persian, with orders to eliminate Smerdis. So Prexaspes went up to Susa, and killed him. Some say that he took Smerdis out hunting, and killed him then; others, that he led him down to the Red Sea, and drowned him.

[31] This, then, or so it is reported, was the first of the atrocities committed by Cambyses. His second victim was his sister, who had accompanied him to Egypt, and who not only shared with him both parents, but was his wife too: he had married her despite the fact that until then it had not remotely been the habit of the Persians to set up house with their sisters.²⁴ It so happened, however, that Cambyses had passionately lusted after another of his sisters, and longed to marry her, despite the fact that what he had set his heart on was quite without precedent. So he had summoned the Royal Judges, as they are known, and asked them whether there might not be some law which obliged a man who wished to marry his sister to do so. (The men who become these Royal Judges are a select band of Persians; they remain in office until they die or else are convicted of some offence. They preside over all the cases brought by the Persians, and are the interpreters of their ancestral statutes: everything is referred to them.) The ruling they gave in response to Cambyses' question satisfied justice without compromising their own security: they declared that, although they had failed to find a law which actually obliged a brother to marry his sister, they had discovered one which permitted the King of the Persians to do as he pleased.²⁵ So it was that they avoided being intimidated by Cambyses into breaking the law, but not to the point of sacrificing themselves in its defence; for what they had found was a quite additional law, supportive of his desire to marry his sisters. The consequence was that Cambyses had married the one he particularly lusted after; but then, after barely any time at all, he had taken another sister as his wife too. It was the younger of these two sisters who had accompanied him to Egypt – and whom he killed.

[32] As with the death of Smerdis, so with hers – alternative stories are told. Greeks say that Cambyses threw a lion's cub into the ring with

a young dog, and that this wife of his was one of those watching; the puppy was losing, but its brother [another young dog] managed to break free of its leash and came to its rescue, so that the one puppy became two, and the cub was duly vanquished. Cambyses was delighted by the show; but his wife wept as she sat beside him. When he noticed this, Cambyses asked her, 'Why are you crying?' 'I cried', she answered, 'because when I saw the puppy coming to the rescue of its brother, I was reminded of Smerdis, and it struck me that there is now no one to come to your assistance.' It was because of this comment, so Greeks say, that Cambyses killed her. The Egyptian version is that one day, when everyone was sitting down around the table, Cambyses' wife took a lettuce and plucked off all its leaves, and then asked her husband whether the lettuce was more beautiful stripped bare or as it had been when still thick with leaves. 'When thick with leaves,' he said. 'And yet what have you done,' she answered, 'if not strip bare the House of Cyrus, so that it precisely resembles this lettuce?' So angered was Cambyses by this that he leapt on her; and she, who was carrying his child in her womb, suffered a miscarriage, and died.²⁶

[33] Such were the ways in which the House of Cambyses was affected by the madness brought on him by the business with Apis – or perhaps, bearing in mind how many ailments there are to which mankind is prone, his lunacy was caused by something else altogether. Indeed, it has been claimed that Cambyses was afflicted from birth by a particularly terrible ailment, called by some the 'sacred disease'.²⁷ If so, it would hardly be surprising were a man afflicted by such a serious physical malady to be unsound of mind as well.

[34] His madness also affected other Persians. There is the story, for instance, of what he said to Prexaspes, a man whom he had always honoured above all others, appointing him court chamberlain, and his son as pourer of the royal wine – no small honour in itself. 'Prexaspes,' Cambyses is reported to have said, 'what kind of man do the Persians think I am? When they talk about me, what do they say?' 'Master,' Prexaspes answered, 'they praise you to the skies, except when it comes to one thing – for they do say that you take your love of wine to excess.' Cambyses, thrown into a rage by this news of the Persians, answered, 'So now the Persians are saying that I am too fond of wine, are they? That it has driven me mad? That I am not in my right mind? Then what they told me before was just a lie!' He was alluding here to a previous

occasion, when his Persian advisers, and Croesus too, were sitting in council with him, and Cambyses asked them how they rated him as a man, compared to his father. The Persians answered that he was better than his father, 'For you have everything that he had – but you have also won possession of Egypt and the sea.' That was what the Persians had to say; but Croesus, who was also present, judged this answer inadequate, and said to Cambyses, 'In my opinion, son of Cyrus, you are not alike to your father in all respects. This is because you do not yet have a son²⁸ fit to compare with the son that he left behind in you.' Cambyses, who was delighted to hear this, lavished praise on Croesus' judgement.

[35] This, then, was the episode that he had called to mind. 'Find out for yourself', he raged at Prexaspes, 'whether what the Persians say about me is true, or whether it is they, when they report such things, who have lost their wits. Do you see your son, standing over there, in the antechamber? Well, I am going to shoot him. Now, if I manage to hit him directly in the heart, then that will make it as clear as can be that the Persians have been talking nonsense. But should I miss him, then, yes, report as the truth what is claimed by the Persians, that I am indeed out of my mind!' So saying, he drew his bow to the full and shot the child – who fell to the ground. 'Cut the boy open,' Cambyses ordered, 'and identify where he was hit!' Then, when the arrow was found in the heart, Cambyses was put into such a good mood that he laughed, and said to the father of the child: 'You see, Prexaspes? It is as clear as clear can be. I am not mad! It is the Persians who have lost their wits! But tell me – have you ever seen anyone, anywhere in the world, hit the mark with a shot like that?' Prexaspes, seeing that the man was quite insane, and afraid for his own skin, answered him: 'Master, I doubt that even the god himself could have hit with such pin-point accuracy.' So much, then, for the behaviour of Cambyses on that occasion; on another, he apprehended twelve Persians who were equal in rank to the best, convicted them on some trifling charge and then buried them alive, head first.

[36] These actions prompted Croesus the Lydian to feel that it was his responsibility to have words with Cambyses. 'My Lord,' he said, 'rather than giving free rein to the passions of your youth, you should be keeping them under a tight control and getting a grip on yourself. Prudence is the best policy, just as forethought is the wisest. You are