

ANCIENT EGYPT AND MODERN ESOTERICISM

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What is it about ancient Egypt that people today find so fascinating? Jeremy Naydler suggests that what really draws people to Egypt is less the great monuments and works of art than the religious consciousness that produced them. This religious consciousness of the ancient Egyptians exposes a tension in our own culture between the world view of modern scientific materialism on the one hand and a worldview that would connect us once again with the reality of the spiritual dimension. Looking back to the ancient Egyptians, we find that their awareness of the interior realms of gods, spirits, and archetypal images strikes a surprising chord with our own deepest longings. This essay is based on a talk given at the Theosophical Society, London November 27, 2003.

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The Fascination With Ancient Egypt

Today there seems to be an unprecedented fascination with ancient Egypt. We see evidence of this in the unceasing flow of books on ancient Egyptian history, culture, and art; in the seemingly inexhaustible TV coverage that ancient Egypt attracts; in the amount of journals and magazines, both scholarly and popular, dedicated to widening our understanding of the civilization; in the plethora of societies devoted to studying and celebrating it; in the numerous lecture courses being given in the adult education departments of our universities; and, not least, in the huge amount of tourists visiting Egypt each year. We might well ask: What lies behind this modern fascination with ancient Egypt?

Certainly the Egyptians produced some monumental buildings and stunning works of art, the grandeur of which makes the achievements of contemporary civilization seem paltry by comparison. Were we to attempt to build a replica of the Great Pyramid, I doubt that we would succeed.

We are good at mobile phones, washing machines, freeways and airplanes, but I don't think we could manage to construct the Great Pyramid, nor for that matter the temple at Karnak, nor the tombs of the Valley of the Kings. It somehow isn't in us to do the sorts of things the Egyptians did. We aren't motivated that way and have neither the patience nor the skill.

Could it therefore be due as much to our own deficiencies as to their genius that we feel attracted to the Egyptians? They did things that are to us extraordinary, almost superhumanly extravagant and at the same time deeply mysterious. While there are of course many things about the Egyptians that we can relate to, fundamentally they were *not like us*.

It seems to me, therefore, that in order to answer the question as to what lies behind our fascination with Egypt, we need to go beyond our feelings of awe and wonder at the great monuments and works of art, to the less comfortable feeling of ancient Egypt's utter strangeness, its *otherness*. There is something about Egypt that can strike us as positively *uncanny*.

This is especially the case when we encounter the religious world of the Egyptians, populated as it was by a multitude of gods and spirits. Despite the reassuring images of "daily-life" Egypt which are presented to us in the media and in popular books by Egyptologists, we can often feel that the ancient Egyptians inhabited a world that

was disturbingly different from our own. In order to understand that world, and to understand the consciousness of the people whose world it was, we need to stretch our imaginations away from everything that is familiar to us today.

Thutmose III's Coronation and Career Examined

There was recently (in the autumn of 2003) a particularly lavish drama-documentary series on ancient Egypt on TV. It reconstructed famous episodes from ancient Egyptian history with the aid of large casts, including actors who were supposedly speaking ancient Egyptian (made to seem all the more authentic by adding English subtitles).

One of the programs in the series was on Thutmose III's campaigns against the Syrians, his capture of the cities of Megiddo and Kadesh, and other spectacular military triumphs. It included an authoritative voice-over assuring us that the reconstructions were based on hieroglyphic inscriptions at Karnak. Needless to say it was all absolutely riveting, and the thousands (or hundreds of thousands?) of viewers must have felt themselves to be witnessing virtually the real thing—Egypt as it truly was.

The approach that was taken followed that which has been taken time and again by Egyptologists, in which Thutmose is presented as a great warrior and empire builder, somewhat akin to Napoleon, conceiving of bold and daring plans, and leading his armies from one victory to another.¹ The “Napoleonic” image of the Egyptian king is given credence by the fact that Thutmose III was indeed a daring and shrewd military commander, who significantly extended the overseas territories of Egypt and added vastly to the wealth and power of his country.

But if Thutmose III was a figure who we feel inclined to compare with Napoleon, then we must also take care to remember that there were important differences, not just between the two personalities, but between the two

cultures in which they lived. In ancient Egypt the kingship was not simply a political office, but was also religious. Even for a warrior king such as Thutmose III, the relationship to the invisible world of gods and spirits was fundamental not only to his power and success, but also to what it meant to be the king of Egypt.

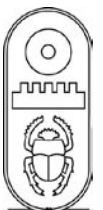
There is an interesting document that has come down to us that gives us some insight into what the kingship of Egypt actually entailed. It is a coronation text of Thutmose III in which he claims to have had a mystical encounter with the sungod Amun-Ra that was, as it were, woven into the coronation ceremonies. The key features of this experience were that the king transformed himself into a falcon, flew up to heaven and there had a vision of Amun-Ra, was infused with the god's spiritual power and assimilated into himself “the wisdom of the gods.” This is how the text reads:

“He [Amun-Ra] opened for me the doors of heaven and unfolded the gates of the Akhet [a place of spiritual transformation]. I rose to heaven as a divine falcon and saw his secret image in heaven. I worshipped his majesty. . . . I was infused with all his akh-power [luminous spiritual power] and instructed in the wisdom of the gods.”²

This text confronts us with a rather different image of Thutmose III from the favored Napoleonic stereotype. The text itself could go back to 1504 BCE, but it is similar to much older Egyptian texts (the so-called Pyramid Texts) found on the inside of certain Fifth and Sixth Dynasty pyramids, some 800 years earlier. There we find the same themes of the king of Egypt transforming into a falcon and flying up to the sky, where he has a vision of Ra, and becomes inwardly infused with the solar light and the wisdom of the gods.

Shamanism and Ancient Egypt

Anyone familiar with the literature of shamanism will recognize a shamanic undercurrent to this type of mystical



experience. One might say that it has a shamanic “prototype,” for in this literature we read of initiations in which the shaman transforms into a bird (often an eagle), flies up to the sky and becomes inwardly illumined after encountering the Great God, and then returns to his tribe with a newly acquired spiritual knowledge.³

Seen in this light, it would appear that during the coronation rites of the king, Thutmose III had an experience similar to a shamanic initiation, and was thus in touch with a dimension of reality that was beyond anything Napoleon knew. Because it does not fit our preconceptions of how we would like to see the great warrior Thutmose, it has been “screened out” of the mainstream portrayal of the king. It has indeed been screened out of the mainstream portrayal of Egyptian culture as such. Within Egyptology, there is still a great reluctance to accept that either mysticism or shamanism existed in ancient Egypt: this is the line taken by most Egyptologists today, with just one or two exceptions. So it is hardly surprising that the media follow suit.⁴

Nevertheless, behind the fascination with ancient Egypt today I would suggest that there is a deep longing to reconnect with precisely the aspect of ancient Egyptian culture that is oriented towards spiritual realities. This longing may be more or less conscious in those people who feel drawn to ancient Egypt, and many may wish to deny any such longing. But as time goes on and it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the spiritual foundations of ancient Egyptian culture, so it may also become harder to ignore what it is in the culture that works so mysteriously to draw people to it.

It is as if ancient Egypt has a certain karmic role to play in our times, and that this role is to expose the tension in our own culture between, on the one hand, our allegiance to the worldview of modern science, that seeks to account for everything in the world, past and present, in materialistic terms, and, on the other, a longing to escape

from the confines of this worldview and reconnect with spiritual realities once again.

Put in more general historical terms, this tension could be seen as living between our habitual deference to the worldview inaugurated by the religion of Judaism and the philosophy and scientific rationalism of the Greeks on the one side, and an underlying sense of dissatisfaction with the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman foundations of Western culture on the other.

Undoubtedly the latter have determined the way in which the consciousness of the West has developed over the last 2,500 years. But if we look back to Egypt with a sensitivity towards the spiritual matrix within which the Egyptians lived, then we may find that the pre-Judaic and pre-Greek consciousness of the Egyptians was a consciousness that strikes a surprising chord with our own deepest longings.

The Imaginary Versus the Imaginal

The tension that I have referred to in our own culture and sensibility has been noted by Erik Hornung, one of the most eminent contemporary Egyptologists who has specialized in the study of ancient Egyptian religious literature. He is also one of the foremost apologists for the non-mystical interpretation of ancient Egyptian religion. In his book, *The Secret Lore of Egypt*, he takes on the question of the relationship between ancient Egyptian religious life and those Western esoteric traditions that see Egypt as the source of an initiatory wisdom.

To this end, Hornung makes a distinction between “Egyptosophy” and Egyptology proper.⁵ For Hornung, “Egyptosophy” involves projecting onto ancient Egypt an ill-founded wish to see it as a repository of spiritual knowledge.

Egyptology, by contrast, shows us that there were no mysteries, no esoteric or initiatory teachings or practices in ancient Egypt. Western esoteric streams like Alchemy, Gnosticism, the Hermetic Tradition, Rosicrucianism, which in their different ways see their roots as going back to ancient Egypt, are all dealt with by Hornung in a summary

and deadpan manner. Chapter by chapter he sets out to demonstrate that their understanding of Egyptian religion has been tainted by illusory fantasies and fails to correspond with the facts as revealed to us by modern scholarship.

Hornung's stance is that Egyptology studies *real* Egypt, whereas "Egyptosophy" constructs an "imaginary Egypt" which bears only a rather "loose relationship to historical reality."⁶ Hornung's approach is very much that of the modern rationalist for whom what is real and what is imaginary form two sides of an irreconcilable opposition. It is scarcely surprising to find that, as a modern rationalist, Hornung fails to refer to—let alone utilize—an important distinction that many modern esotericists, as well as depth psychologists, make. It is the distinction between what is merely "imaginary" and what is "imaginal."

The Imaginal Realm

Whereas, what is imaginary is the product of personal fantasy and may therefore be regarded as subjective, what is imaginal gives access to a transpersonal content that has an objective reality, *even though* it may not correspond to any historical fact or physical event.⁷ The imaginal realm, or *mundus imaginalis*, as it is often termed, has an existence that is independent of those individuals who become aware of it. It thus possesses an ontological status that has a universal validity that the products of a person's private fantasies do not achieve.

Even people with the most slender knowledge of ancient Egypt will be aware that their world was populated by a very large number of gods and goddesses. These were essentially invisible beings who were given imaginative forms which were then represented in sculpture and painting.

If the question arises as to whether the Egyptians would have regarded these beings as imaginary or imaginal, we hardly need pause for an answer. It is quite obvious that these deities were regarded as both real and powerful agencies by the Egyptians, and that

it would have seemed to them most unwise to ignore their objective existence.

Whereas the "Egyptosophist" would concur with the Egyptians in seeing the gods as real entities, most Egyptologists would be far less willing to do so. As one specialist put it, they are to be regarded rather as the product of "vivid speculation" that is likely to "disappoint the modern enquiring mind" than as pointing to any objective reality.⁸

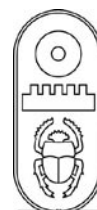
We are therefore entitled to ask where the problem of interpreting ancient Egyptian religion really lies. Is it with the so-called "Egyptosophists" projecting an imaginary Egypt onto real Egypt, or with the Egyptologists who are unable to recognize that, for the Egyptians, literal and historical reality was not the only reality: "imaginal" reality was just as real as hard-and-fast historical "facts."

Reality is both Visible and Invisible

So let us once more return to Thutmose III and his campaign against the Syrians. Undoubtedly, Thutmose III was a great warrior. But when we ask, "How did he learn to become such a great warrior?" the Egyptian answer would be that he was taught by the god Seth and encouraged by the goddess Neith.

Figure 1 shows the two deities instructing the young king. Both were renowned for their violent disposition—they were both warrior deities. If Thutmose III was a great warrior, then it was not, according to the Egyptians, by virtue of his human qualities as much as by virtue of his having been infused with the energy of these two deities.

For the Egyptians, there was a world of archetypal energies or powers that had to be called upon in order for the king to be a great warrior. Reality was for them twofold in this sense: it was both visible and invisible. What we see portrayed in Figure 1 is Thutmose III with two invisible beings. We could of course dismiss these beings as imaginary, but if we were to do so then we would no longer be seeing the world of the



Egyptians as the Egyptians themselves saw it. For them, these invisible beings were *imaginal* in precisely the sense that they were objectively real.

Let us stay with Thutmose III. A very different situation is portrayed in Figure 2. Here there are no invisible deities represented. We see a relief of Thutmose III in the midst of battle with the Syrians. The king is depicted as a veritable giant, grabbing the hair of forty-two paltry Syrians who are shown in three ranks of fourteen, with their arms outstretched, begging for mercy. In his right hand, the king holds a mace, with which he is about to dispatch them with one blow. They are all on their knees, helpless before the superhuman power of the king.



Figure 1. Thutmose III, instructed by Seth and Neith. Neith is represented abstractly in front of the king, holding a was sceptre.

One might be tempted to say that this hardly represents a realistic picture of the pharaoh doing battle with the Syrians, for, as we all know, it would be impossible for one man to grab hold of the hair of forty-two warriors and slay them all with one blow. The image, however, is evoking an *imaginal reality* that every pharaoh embodied, or sought to embody. This imaginal reality was portrayed from the very earliest dynastic period, and was represented consistently throughout Egyptian history as something far more than simply a picture celebrating a pharaoh's military victory.

Evocation of Imaginal Archetypes

To understand such an image we have to see its primary purpose as religious: it was not so much meant to record a historical event as to

magically evoke an imaginal archetype. While the image may have been engraved upon stone after the event, it was—precisely in so far as it served a religious function—present at the imaginal level and was utilized at that level to determine the outcome of the pharaoh's campaign.⁹

The magical efficacy of these images (for this is just one of a large number, from the very earliest dynasties, in the same genre) is due to the fact that they align the pharaoh with greater than human cosmic forces. What the pharaoh is shown as enacting is a cosmic battle between *Ma'at* (cosmic order, truth, and justice) and *Isfet* (cosmic disorder, untruth, and injustice). It is this archetypal reality that was made to supervene and, as it were, impress itself upon the historical events in order to make the pharaoh's power truly godlike and to assure him of victory.

Figure 3 shows a relief carving in the same genre, made about three hundred years after the reign of Thutmose. It portrays the pharaoh Merenptah almost single-handedly defeating the invading Sea Peoples. Surrounding the king is an aura of calm, quiet confidence, while the invading Sea Peoples are in total chaos.

Once again, what is portrayed here is the archetypal reality that each successive pharaoh actualizes. And in so doing, he manifests a spiritual energy-field on the physical plane. The kings of Egypt may have been great warriors, but their prowess did not rely solely on physical might. They also operated with magic, and it was as much through magic as through military skill that they defeated their enemies.¹⁰

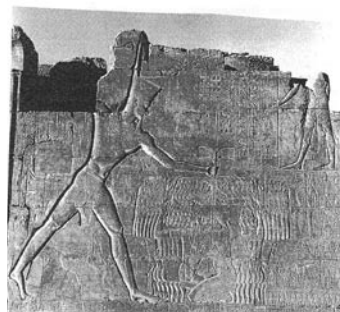


Figure 2. Thutmose III about to slay forty-two Syrians. From a relief at the temple of Karnak.

The mythological source of these images of the king single-handedly defeating the enemies of Egypt is the defeat of the cosmic python, Apophis, every day at midday and every night in the middle of the night.¹¹ Apophis is the

form taken by the cosmic forces of chaos, darkness, and disorder that would swallow up the light- and life-giving sungod Ra on the god's journey across the skies.

Sometimes Apophis is attacked and defeated by Ra's son Horus, sometimes by Seth. In Figure 4, it is Seth who stands on the prow of the sunboat and strikes the opposing serpent. Seth is here the protector of the principle of light, personified in the falcon-headed sungod, just as he was the instructor of Thutmose in the arts of war. Thutmose III was both the defender of Amun-Ra and his protégé and representative in his campaigns against the enemies of Egypt in the east.



Figure 3. King Merenptah defeats the Sea Peoples. © 1968 Oxford University Press.

The association of the king of Egypt with the sungod Ra has a further significance. In the coronation text of Thutmose III, to which we have already referred, the king was infused with the luminous spiritual power (the *akh*-power) of the sungod in a mystical experience of union with the mysterious essence of the lord of light and life.

This “solarization” of the king was an important initiatory event that was undergone not only at his initial coronation but in subsequent coronation ceremonies, particularly those of the Sed festival. The king was therefore more than just Ra's representative on earth, for he also mystically embodied the solar principle. One of the purposes of the Sed festival was to renew the inner union of the king with the solar principle.¹² In a



Figure 5. Amenhotep III is in the role of Ra as he sails with his wife in a ritual during his Sed festival.



Figure 4. Seth, on the prow of the sunboat, defeats Apophis.

representation of the Sed festival of king Amenhotep III, the king is clearly fused with the sungod in a ceremony that involved his sailing in a replica of the sunboat with his wife, who is probably in the role of the goddess Hathor (Figure 5).

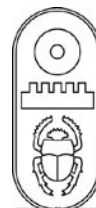
The Hidden Realm

On an inner level, this ritual sailing of the king occurs in the heavens. Just as in the coronation text of Thutmose III, the king flies up to the sky in order to worship Ra and be filled with his *akh*-power, so the context of the ritual sailing is cosmic. The ancient Egyptians understood that to become enlightened one must become aware of that which is cosmic in one's own nature. One must realize that there is something deep within human nature that is essentially not of this earth, but is a cosmic principle.

The cosmic being who presided over Ra's diurnal voyage across the sky was the heavenly goddess Nut. It was she who gave birth to Ra each morning, and who received him into herself again in the evening. Each evening, when Ra entered her interior realm, he entered the secret and wholly invisible world that the Egyptians called the *Dwat*.

The *Dwat* was conceived as being on the other side of the stars that we see when we look up at the night sky. The stars were imagined as being on the flesh of the goddess Nut, and the *Dwat* was in some sense behind or within the world of which the stars demarcated the outermost boundary.¹³

It was not just the sungod, however, that



entered the *Dwat* at the end of the day. All creatures were believed to return to the *Dwat* at the end of their lives, pass into its dark interior, and were born from it again, just as the sungod was born from the *Dwat* each morning. There was thus a very important mystical threshold between the outwardly visible cosmos—the stars on Nut’s body—and what exists invisibly in her interior. It is a threshold we all come to when we die, when everything becomes concentrated in a single point, and then disappears from view.

Figure 6 shows the stages of the sungod’s night-journey through Nut’s body, as he travels from death to rebirth. Knowledge of this interior world of the *Dwat* was considered by the Egyptians to be the most important, most profound knowledge, for people living on earth to acquire. The *Dwat* was not only the realm of the dead, but also the realm of the gods and spirits and, furthermore, the realm from which all living things emerge.¹⁴ All life issues from the *Dwat*. To know this mysterious interior world was to become truly wise, because then one knew both sides of existence—the invisible along with the visible.

It is interesting that Thutmose III had the complete text and illustrations of the most comprehensive guide to the *Dwat* (The Book of What is in the Underworld) painted on the inner walls of his tomb in the Valley of the Kings. As his coronation text reminds us, this was a king who was “instructed in the wisdom of the gods.” Unlike Napoleon, Thutmose III was initiated into a deep spiritual knowledge. It is not without significance that the name Thutmose means “born of Thoth,” the god whom the Greeks identified with Hermes, and from whom one of the most important

of the Western esoteric traditions—the Hermetic Tradition—derives its name.

The Three Tasks

I have tried to show that the Egyptians lived with an awareness of a dimension of reality that is best described by the term “imaginal”—a non-physical yet objective reality that we become aware of through the human faculty of imagination. For the Egyptians, the agencies and powers that can be reached through contact with the imaginal world are far more potent than anything merely physical, because through them physical reality can be transformed.

Thus we have seen how Thutmose III called upon Seth and Neith to infuse him with a superhuman martial energy that enabled him to go to war with an irresistible ferocity. In battle after battle, he and his accompanying priests could also magically invoke the

imaginal reality of the defeat of the powers opposed to the sungod and *Ma’at*, both of whom the pharaoh represented, indeed embodied, on earth. It was this according to his own account that brought Thutmose his victories.¹⁵

I have also tried to show that the Egyptians lived with an understanding that we are not just terrestrial beings; we are also cosmic. As such, our spiritual fulfillment is only possible in a cosmic setting. This understanding is to be found from the earliest sacred literature (the Pyramid Texts), to the coronation text of Thutmose III and the *Book of the Dead*, where, for example, such mystical episodes as flying up to the sky, seeing the image of the sungod, boarding the sun-boat and/or becoming inwardly “solarized,” are all recorded.¹⁶

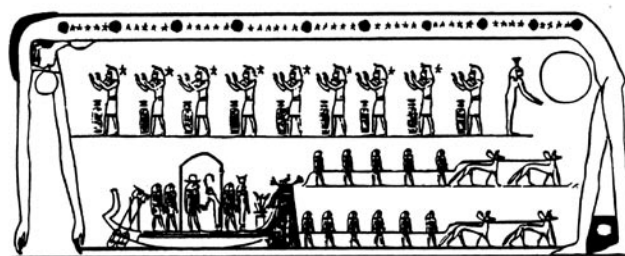


Figure 6. The sky-goddess Nut conceals within her body the mysterious inner region known by the Egyptians as the *Dwat*.

Finally, I have suggested that the Egyptians had an orientation towards the world of the dead (the *Dwat*) that saw it as being the source of the most profound wisdom concerning the nature of reality. There is a remarkably rich metaphysical literature concerning the *Dwat*, knowledge of which was evidently regarded as relevant not only to the dead but also to the living.¹⁷ All of this was “mainstream” ancient Egyptian religious consciousness.

The Egyptian Consciousness goes Underground

At the end of the Egyptian era it went “underground,” moving from the temple to the private household, and then to the small group meeting in secret, from whence it would pass into various esoteric traditions.¹⁸ Thus in the Alchemical tradition, there is a particular focus on the imaginal realm of archetypes and the path of inner transformation; in the Hermetic tradition there is a concentration on the realization of our cosmic nature; while in Gnosticism we find a particular emphasis on the invisible hierarchies of the spirit world. These three Western esoteric streams could be understood as each preserving in their different ways the ancient Egyptian wisdom into the next cultural era.

Meanwhile the emerging mainstream culture with its Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman basis increasingly rejected the old consciousness. The world became more and more impermeable to the divine, archetypal, and imaginal presences. In Judaism the notion of idolatry—which would have been incomprehensible to the ancient Egyptians—came to dominate the religious consciousness, while the Greeks and Romans saw the gods slowly fade away and become less and less easy to communicate with.¹⁹ The new consciousness meant that people experienced the world going through a kind of solidification, so that it was no longer able to transmit the radiant energies of the divine.

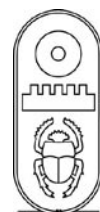
At the same time there emerged an increasing sense that human beings were simply terrestrial beings, and, consequently, our happiness was conceived less in cosmic terms and more in terms of satisfying our physical needs, desires, and comforts. The material world had to be mastered to this end, and this, in time, became the great project of science and technology, which involved an almost complete forgetfulness of our cosmic origins.

It also involved a forgetfulness of that part of human existence that belongs between death and rebirth. There was a growing identification of the human being solely with the life that we lead between birth and death. Already, both the Greek and Judaic conceptions of life after death expressed the conviction that the soul survived as a pale and ghostly reflection of its former self. As the ghost of Achilles says in Homer’s *Odyssey*, “the senseless dead” are “mere shadows of men outworn.”²⁰ This view, so very different from that of the Egyptians, culminated in the modern idea that there simply is no existence at all after death. Modern scientific materialism is founded upon a total ignorance of the spirit world.

At the beginning of this essay, I proposed that ancient Egypt exposes a tension in our own culture, and that in so doing we can see its karmic role today. The reason why it may be helpful to see Egypt in these terms is because we are now coming to the end of the Greco-Roman/Judeo-Christian era. It has achieved its purpose, which was to make us more individuated, more self-rather than god-centered in our soul-life, and thus more free.

Becoming Aware again of Inner, Spiritual Realities

But now there is a need to become aware again of inner, spiritual realities—but to become aware of them grounded in our own sense of self and with a clear and discriminating intelligence with which we can once more turn toward them. So I would



suggest that it is here that the profound karmic relationship is working between ancient Egypt and the new era that is beginning to unfold before us.

While our relationship to ancient Egypt is certainly based upon our acquiring a deeper and more accurate knowledge of its culture and religion, the relationship is by no means simply in the direction of the present to the past. It is also about how the past can support us in forging our own future by helping us to reengage with the spiritual dimensions which were so intrinsic to people's experience in times of old.²¹

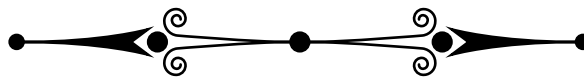
What ancient Egypt can do today is to provide both the impetus and the anchorage for a modern esotericism. By esotericism I mean knowledge of inner realities. There is no question of "going back" to ancient Egypt. It is rather the case that by wrestling with ancient Egyptian sacred texts, we are drawn *down* to a deeper level of awareness that we need to make more conscious. And feeling this need, we are driven to find our own new relationship to the spiritual dimension.

As I see it, there are three tasks ahead for contemporary esotericism. The first is to grow into a fully felt and participative relationship with the imaginal worlds that stand behind the physical. We need constantly to work at dissolving the density of the physical and literal world. We need to loosen its solidity in order to see through to the luminous world of spirits, gods, and archetypes that are its invisible matrix. They are, in a sense, the "dream" of the world that our modern, all too wide-awake consciousness has destroyed. There is a need today to return our waking consciousness to this dream, by bringing it

once more into a living relationship with the imaginal dimensions of the world.

Along with this comes the second task, which is to expand our conception of ourselves beyond the confines of the earth by developing a sense that the cosmos that surrounds us is not just dead matter, but full of soul. To do this, we need not so much to work *against* as to work *through* the materialistic conceptions that permeate modern cosmological thinking. We can develop once again a feeling for the soul-qualities of the planets and constellations, for the whole world of the stars. And the more we are able to do this—the more we are able to connect with the "world soul" or *anima mundi* as it used to be called—the more will we be able to reconnect again with our own cosmic nature.

I see the third task as being once more to become aware of the realm of death as the other half of life, as much a part of our existence as sleep is a part of our life between birth and death. It requires that we see this realm of death not so much as a place that we go to after we die, as a realm that we inhabit—or one might say *inhabits us*—alongside the world of the living. The world of death can be understood as a completely interior world, and yet despite the fact that it has no dimensions, it is not necessarily inaccessible to consciousness. For its interiority ultimately coincides with our own. The more we become aware of the source of what arises in our own consciousness, the more do we extend our consciousness towards this deeply interior realm of death. And in extending our consciousness towards it, we extend our consciousness towards that other half of existence without which we cannot fully participate in life.²²



Endnotes:

- ¹ Comparison between Thutmose III and Napoleon was first made by J. H. Breasted, in *A History of Egypt from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), chap. 16. Since then, it has been reiterated many times. See, for example, Leonard Cottrell, “The Napoleon of Ancient Egypt,” in *The Warrior Pharaohs* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd, 1968), chap. 6; and Peter A. Clayton, *Chronicle of the Pharaohs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 109-110.
- ² Quoted in Jan Assmann, “Death and Initiation in the Funerary Religion of Ancient Egypt,” in *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, ed. W. K. Simpson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 142n41.
- ³ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (London: Arkana, 1989), chap. 4.
- ⁴ For Egyptology’s denial of shamanism in ancient Egypt, see Jeremy Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts: The Mystical Tradition of Ancient Egypt* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2005), 15-17.
- ⁵ Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 3.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Henry Corbin, “*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, trans. Leonard Fox (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995), 1-33.
- ⁸ George Hart, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), x.
- ⁹ See Jeremy Naydler, *Temple of the Cosmos: the Ancient Egyptian Experience of the Sacred* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1996), 107-120.
- ¹⁰ As Christian Jacq, *Egyptian Magic*, trans. Janet M. Davis (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1985), 99, explains: “On the field of battle, the pharaoh’s enemies are not merely human. They are possessed by a hostile force against which the pharaoh must use magical weapons. Before any battle, one must proceed to put a spell on one’s enemies, part of the official techniques of war practiced by the State. The sacred model for this is supplied by the rituals which the priests celebrate in the temples for the purpose of fighting the enemies of the Light.”
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 95-99. For the double defeat of Apophis, see *The Book of the Day and The Book of the Night*, in A. Piankoff, *The Tomb of Ramesses VI*, Bollingen Series 40/1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 389-407.
- ¹² For a discussion of the solarization of Amenhotep III at his Sed festival, see W. Raymond Johnson, “Amenhotep III and Amarna: Some New Considerations,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 82 (1996), 67ff. See also Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, 87ff.
- ¹³ Naydler, *Temple of the Cosmos*, 26 and 215-217.
- ¹⁴ W. Brede Kristensen, *Life Out of Death: Studies in the Religions of Egypt and of Ancient Greece*, trans. H. J. Frankan and G. R. H. Wright (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1992), 28, comments: “The world of death secreted greater powers and contained richer possibilities than the world of finite experience. It was the basis for the whole existence which we are apt to call worldly life.”
- ¹⁵ The “Annals” at Karnak, recording Thutmose III’s campaigns, are couched in mythical and theistic language. The king is described as acting in consort with Amun-Ra against the “wretched enemy”—implicitly identified with the forces of cosmic chaos. The mystical

fusion of king and sungod is even more explicit in the so-called “poetical stela” of Thutmose III found at Karnak. Both texts are translated in Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 2:30-39.

¹⁶ *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, trans. R. O. Faulkner (London: British Museum Publications, 1972), chap. 130.

¹⁷ Alison Roberts, *My Heart, My Mother* (Rottingdean: Northgate, 2000), 174-178. It is explicitly stated in The Book of What is in the Underworld (Amdwat), div.1, that the text is “useful for those who are on earth” and similar indications can be found in *The Book of the Dead*, which has been compared by Terence DuQuesne, A Coptic Initiatory Invocation (Thame: Darengo, 1991), 52n112, with the *Tibetan Bardo Thodol*—a text clearly intended for spiritual practice.

¹⁸ Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), chap.7; and David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), chaps. 5 and 6.

¹⁹ See, for example, Plutarch’s essay, “The Decline of the Oracles,” in Plutarch, *Moral Essays*, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 31-96.

²⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977), 188.

²¹ In a series of lectures on the relationship of Egyptian mythology to modern civilization, Rudolf Steiner, *Universe, Earth and Man*, trans. Harry Collison (London: Rudolf Steiner Publishing Co., 1941), 250ff., makes the following statement: “What we call ‘future’ must always be rooted in the past; knowledge has no value if not changed into motive power for the future. The purpose for the future must be in accordance with the knowledge of the past, but this knowledge is of little value unless changed into propelling force for the future.”

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Illustration Sources

1. Thutmose III, instructed by Seth and Neith. Drawing from a relief carving at the temple of Amun, Karnak (18th Dynasty) from Adolf Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Dover, 1971), 282.

2. Thutmose III about to slay forty-two Syrians. From the rear of the seventh pylon, Temple of Amun, Karnak.

3. King Merenptah defeats the Sea Peoples. Drawing from a relief carving from A. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 286, fig. 11. Reprinted with permission.

4. Seth, on the prow of the sunboat, defeats Apophis. From the Papyrus of Her Uben (B). A. Piankoff, *Mythological Papyri* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957), 75, fig. 54. Reprinted with permission.

5. Amenhotep III is in the role of Ra. From the Tomb of Kheruef reproduced in J. Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts* (Rochester Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2005), 206. Reprinted with permission.

6. The sky-goddess Nut conceals within her body the mysterious inner region. From the abbreviated version of the Book of Night on the ceiling of the sarcophagus chamber of the tomb of Ramesses IX, Valley of the Kings, from Erik Hornung, *The Valley of the Kings*, trans. David Warburton (New York: Timken, 1990), 79. Every effort has been made to find the copyright owner.

