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Ancient Egypt, Sacred Science, and Transatlantic Romanticism

By

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Professor Samuel Otter, Chair  
Professor Kevis Goodman  
Professor Whitney Davis

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Abstract

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Ancient Egyptian culture has been a powerful influence on a major tradition of English literature that runs from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596), one of whose major iconographic centers is the temple of Isis, to John Crowley's four-volume novel *Ægypt* (2007). My dissertation focuses on the Romantic period – the midpoint of this trajectory – because it is an extremely intense moment of this influence. In addition to the visions of Egypt presented in the Bible, Greco-Roman writers, and travel narratives, ancient Egypt reached American and British culture of the time through a variety of channels, such as (1) Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, which allowed a stream of Egyptian monuments to travel into Europe and America; (2) the deciphering of the hieroglyphics in 1822; (3) an Egyptian-inspired freemasonry, which wielded a major effect on political revolutions in the USA, France, and Haiti; and (4) revived interest in heterodox Alexandrian traditions such as alchemy, gnosticism, and hermeticism. These channels transmitted a mediated Egyptian "sacred science," which can be defined as a transdisciplinary form of knowledge that does not aim to study external objects or manipulate abstract signs and empirical processes, but rather strives to catalyze the transformation and expansion of consciousness itself, with the final goal being the divinization of the human. This project explores the work of a series of canonical British and American Romantic figures most deeply engaged with this legacy of ancient Egypt. In interlinked chapters on Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Ode on Astronomy*, *Kubla Khan*, and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, I argue that Egyptian sacred science provided a conceptual foundation for spiritualized representations of, respectively, the natural world, the self, and deific powers (or "gods") that link these two domains and situate them within a network of larger cosmic dynamics.

## **Introduction: Does a Theory of Literature Need Egyptology?**

I begin with a passage taken from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a second and third century CE Alexandrian collation of Greek and Latin texts that were attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, the “thrice-great Hermes,” whom the ancient Egyptians knew as Thoth, the wisest of the gods. In the dialogue *Asclepius* found in this anthology, Hermes Trismegistus provides an exposition on the nature of cosmology and hence, on the nature of God, time, and the cycles of life. In the midst of these thoughts, he boldly describes to his pupil Asclepius the symbolic significance of Egypt in the spiritual history of the world:

Do you not know, Asclepius, that Egypt is an image of heaven, or, to speak more exactly, in Egypt all the operations of the powers which rule and work in heaven have been transferred to earth below? Nay, it should rather be said that the whole Kosmos dwells in this our land as in its sanctuary.<sup>1</sup>

In ancient Egypt, it was believed that temple ritual not only mirrored, but sustained the workings of the heavens. The successful implementation of traditional rites insured the success of celestial causes on terrestrial effects, or in other words the bringing down of heaven to earth. Furthermore, Egypt is constructed as the temple of the world because the gods (or hypostatizations of these celestial powers) lived there. This excerpt is not a fanciful proclamation of ethnocentrism. Hermes Trismegistus says these words by way of introducing a prophecy, which falls into two parts.

First, he tells Asclepius that a time will come when Egypt, the “sanctuary” or temple of the Kosmos, will be left desolate. A grand apocalyptic scenario is spun as Hermes Trismegistus somberly states that “men will be weary of life, and they will cease to think the universe worthy of reverent wonder and of worship.”<sup>2</sup> The gods will depart from humankind, presaging a state where “darkness will be preferred to life.”<sup>3</sup> Destruction abounds everywhere as the world itself becomes shaken – soil turns barren, the very air sickens and stagnates, and old age comes upon the world.

However, the prophecy contains a subsequent moment of redemption. When all this has come to pass, says Trismegistus, through an act of grace there will be a renewal of human consciousness of the sacred. Wonder and reverence will once again fill human hearts. There will be a general reawakening to the divine, which will cause human beings once more to sing unceasing hymns of praise and blessing. This will amount to a new birth of the Kosmos, “a holy and awe-striking restoration of all nature.”<sup>4</sup>

The idea of a vast cosmic cycle, within which Egypt has a special symbolic importance, is presented here. As the temple of the Kosmos, ancient Egypt arguably crystallized in itself a peak of human spiritual attainment and relatedness to nature that has become a crucial part of Western cultural memory and the unfolding of this tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Scott, trans., *Hermetica Part 1: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings Which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings Ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 1995) 341.

<sup>2</sup> Scott 343.

<sup>3</sup> Scott 343.

<sup>4</sup> Scott 347.

(This text, I should emphasize, was written in Latin.) Yet at the same time, this prophecy, although ostensibly to do with the fate of Egypt, embraces a larger historical process than simply that of ancient Egyptian civilization, and perhaps Trismegistus's words imply that we make a mistake in regarding "Egypt" as belonging to an epoch essentially different from our own. Indeed, he seems to be describing, to use a Heideggerian term, the destiny of the West itself.

As we in the contemporary moment so obviously live in a disenchanted, polluted world, we might feel inclined to acknowledge that the first part of the prophecy has now been fulfilled: "Egypt" – standing allegorically for humanity and nature – has been desolated. Though this opening stage has been virtually accomplished, the second stage – the restoration of the temple – seems to be only just beginning. In many respects, this process of redemption was heralded by the Romantic period of literature, which will be the special focus of this dissertation. Although this is something of a broad generalization, to be tempered through the unfolding of the subsequent chapters, the Romantic agenda was deeply informed by this dialectic of dejection and redemption, and this period sees a concerted effort made to restore a destroyed unity among the self, society, and nature. In a poem such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, for example, the reconstruction of a particular temple of the cosmos – one envisioned with the help of an Abyssinian maid – is represented as a vital work in progress.

In order to harness their imaginative energies for this process of restoration, many Romantic writers turned to ancient Egypt as a model for spiritual regeneration, especially the Egypt linked as above in the hermetic prophecy to notions of liberation, renewal, and ideal forms of perception, sensation, and cognition. Inspired by this visionary Egypt, Romantic writers explored modes of transcendental experience that not only entailed transferring down into earthly spaces "powers which rule and work in heaven," but raising the human being to the level of divinity. These writers drew upon what can be called ancient Egypt's tradition of "sacred science" to engage in this task. In this project, I analyze how this sacred science influenced in particular the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville. For the rest of this introduction, I will distinguish the genealogy presented here from normative intellectual histories, lay out the historical background closely linking ancient Egypt and the Romantic period, and give a brief overview of the argument of the dissertation.

### **The Construction of the Western Tradition**

The traditional biography of the Western mind has posited that our own era began with the Greeks on the one hand, and the Israelites on the other. To simplify tremendously, the Greeks gave us science and reason; the Israelites gave us monotheism. The soul of the West, therefore, was forged by means of a heroic antipathy toward a previous epoch of irrational superstition and rampant paganism. In literary studies specifically, one can see this position taken in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, which provides a classic statement of this belief: "Hebraism and Hellenism, – between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them."<sup>5</sup> In his book *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation*, Vassilis Lambropoulos demonstrates how many major aesthetic positions of the twentieth century fundamentally return to this dialectic,

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006) 96.

including those of Auerbach, Lukacs, Adorno, Levinas, Derrida, and Benjamin, thinkers whose work still determine the agenda of humanities scholars in important ways.<sup>6</sup>

Turning to the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century American context, the figure who most forcefully asserts this paradigm is Harold Bloom. As he says in the introduction to a collection of essays on Homer's *The Iliad*,

[Homer and the Yahwist] compete for the consciousness of Western nations, and their belated strife may be the largest single factor that makes for a divided sensibility in the literature and life of the West. For what marks the West is its troubled sense that its cognition goes one way, and its spiritual life goes in quite another. We have no ways of thinking that are not Greek, and yet our morality and religion – outer and inner – find their ultimate source in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>7</sup>

This is, however, a picture of our cultural identity that carries less and less conviction with the passage of time. The complete picture must include the world that the Greeks and Israelites turned away from, as the history of the West is much older than these narratives might lead one to believe. Especially in the effort to understand how the Romantic period attempted to reclaim the depth-dimension of the soul, it is necessary to shift our perspective beyond the Judeo-Greek horizon. In so doing, one gains a more accurate perspective on the developmental path inexorably taken since those times.

In *The History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell says, “Much of what makes civilization had already existed for thousands of years in Egypt and in Mesopotamia, and had spread thence to neighbouring countries. But certain elements had been lacking until the Greeks supplied them.”<sup>8</sup> Contrary to these types of triumphalist accounts that see the Greek development of a certain kind of rationalist science and philosophy as a unique step forward for human thinking, one could argue that the Greeks did not so much inaugurate a new epoch of science and rationalism as let slip from their grasp an older dispensation. It was a dispensation of which the Egyptians were chief guardians in the ancient world, and according to which knowledge of spiritual powers that pervade the cosmos was assiduously cultivated and could be used to amplify the body, life, and existence. As the Greeks slackened the grip upon this older mode of consciousness, they had increasingly to orient themselves by reference to the narrower human faculties of logic and sense perception.<sup>9</sup>

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud claims that Hebraic monotheism represents a “progress in spirituality” because it favors abstract conceptual rather than lower, immediate sense perception of God, emphasizes the renunciation instead of the

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<sup>6</sup> Lambropoulos, *The Rise of Eurocentrism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.)

<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, ed., *Homer's The Iliad* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987) 2-3.

<sup>8</sup> *The History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945) 3.

<sup>9</sup> William Blake rails against relying on these faculties. As he says in “There is No Natural Religion”: “Mans perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. he perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover” [sic] and “If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character. the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things & stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again” [sic]. *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erman (Berkeley: University of California, 1982) 2-3.

gratification of instinct, and valorizes patriarchy over matriarchy.<sup>10</sup> Yet even from this text, one can derive the counter – that monotheism at its most rigorous is an extremely ascetic, uncompromising, and incomprehensible minimalism that even its original practitioners could barely incorporate into their lives (as evidenced by the “regression” to worship of the Golden Calf). Given the ancient polytheistic consensus, it could only effect overwhelming cycles of agonistic violence – which for Freud would include the murder of those who worshipped the calf, the murder of Moses, the erasure of Ikhenaten (Moses’ monotheist Egyptian precursor) from cultural memory, the murder of Christ which atones for Moses’, and the slaying of the primal father (which serves as a rebellion against a proto-monotheism).<sup>11</sup>

As Jan Assmann asserts in his book *Moses the Egyptian*, Europe has always been “haunted” by Egypt, and he adds for clarification: “There were, of course, several discoveries and receptions of China, India, or Mexico. But independent of these discoveries there was always the image of Egypt as the past both of Israel and of Greece and thus of Europe. This fact makes the case of Egypt radically different from that of China, India, or ‘Orientalism’ in general.”<sup>12</sup> To underscore the inadequacies of the Hellas-Jerusalem model, Martin Bernal, in his multi-volume work *Black Athena*, has traced in detail how Egypt was erased from Western cultural memory in the eighteenth century, arguing that the rise of racism as a result of the slave trade and the development of Enlightenment notions of progress served as major impetuses for this occultation.<sup>13</sup> One could provide additional reasons to explain this shift, including capitalism’s need to provide an account of European exceptionalism, the rise of rationalized research science and decline of belief in magic, and imperialism and war in the Near East (particularly with the Ottoman Empire).<sup>14</sup>

What would it mean to return Egypt from the margin to center of narratives of the rise of the West, and what are the implications specifically for literary studies? Why is such a shift necessary? To answer the last question first, and at its most basic level, after the deconstruction of tradition, reconstruction is in order. Although poststructuralist philosophy has remained indubitably Eurocentric – with a focus only on figures such as Plato and the pre-Socratics, Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche – its piercing analyses, particularly those of Derrida, lead one to infer that rationalistic and monotheistic imperatives, along with the transcendental signifieds around which they are organized, have run their course. Yet rather than remain in the mode of interminable questioning – “Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? But who, we? Are we (not a chronological, but a pre-

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<sup>10</sup> *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1955) 142. From a feminist perspective, Judith Ochsorn challenges this assessment, arguing that polytheism fostered “sexually egalitarian attitudes in religious life,” deemed gender “comparatively insignificant to the exercise of divine power,” and exhibited “a nonjudgmental, even favorable attitude toward active sexuality in the divine sphere, and in particular female sexuality.” See her *The Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) xvi, 238.

<sup>11</sup> For more on this topic, go to Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 9.

<sup>13</sup> Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> See Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989) for a lively account of the construction of some of these narratives.



logical question) *first Jews or first Greeks?*<sup>15</sup> – a more productive plan of action entails digging beneath the Judeo-Greek axis of the West to find sources on which to build new intellectual frameworks. And contra Derrida, it is not only “*écriture*” that is repressed by regimes of logocentrism; first and foremost, the Hellenic and Hebraic (read as Weberian ideal-types and not as exhaustive descriptions of the diversity of Greek and Hebrew cultures)<sup>16</sup> systematically stifle a mode of knowledge that can be called “sacred science.”

### **Sacred Science**

The term “sacred science” comes from the twentieth-century Alsatian mathematician and philosopher Rene Schwaller de Lubicz, a scholar whose views formulated what he called a “symbolist” interpretation of Egypt’s legacy – a term borrowed from the late nineteenth-century French literary and art movement, itself heavily influenced by Romanticism, that rejected realist and naturalist modes of representation. De Lubicz spent a significant part of his life in Egypt studying its monuments and culture, and his work has only recently become accessible in English.<sup>17</sup> Initially met with scholarly derision and rejection, de Lubicz’s ideas have nevertheless been gradually and clandestinely incorporated into mainstream Egyptology.

Fully conversant with contemporary discoveries in cosmology, physics, and anthropology, de Lubicz argues that Egypt’s endeavors – whether the erection of temples, governmental structures, literature, or mathematical systems – derived from a mode of knowledge not concerned with the study of external objects, but with using potent combinations of rituals and symbols to catalyze the deep transformation and expansion of consciousness, with the final goal being the divinization of the human. This sacred science was a rich fusion of science, religion, and art that was directed toward the embodiment of spiritual knowledge, and toward the internalization and corporeal expression of intellectual and spiritual powers, rather than the mechanistic utilization of power-knowledge for the exploitation and manipulation of the earthly environment. In his book *The Temple in Man: Sacred Architecture and the Perfect Man*, de Lubicz says, “However, there is a type of education that can awaken ‘consciousness’ of states that precede and transcend material forms...Ancient Egypt is in fact one of the major sources of these sciences: however, a true vocabulary of the Pharaonic language – or even a provisional one – will never be possible unless attention is given to those questions which we define as psycho-spiritual.”<sup>18</sup> This focus on consciousness from a psychospiritual perspective allows this knowledge system to resist the reduction of the world into empty, alienated time and space; celebrate the central, transformative power of the human imagination; and theorize human participation in an animated universe in which the cosmos itself is seen as a manifestation of the divine.

One should read Schwaller de Lubicz not only as an Egyptologist, but as a theorist of transdisciplinarity, prefiguring the work of the Romanian quantum physicist

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 153.

<sup>16</sup> Within Greece and Israel, there have been counter-currents that have encouraged attention to psychospiritual dynamics, particularly the mystery cults and kabbalah. Both, interestingly enough, have strong ties to Egypt.

<sup>17</sup> Though published in France in 1957, his major study, *The Temple of Man: Apet of the South at Luxor* (Rochester: Inner Traditions), was only translated into English in 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Schwaller de Lubicz, *The Temple in Man: Sacred Architecture and the Perfect Man* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1981) 17.

Basarab Nicolescu. In his *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, Nicolescu, building on what quantum physics has shown about the nature of the universe, passionately advocates for moving “beyond all discipline” to arrive at “the unity of knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> Attacking what he calls “binary logic,” he writes, “The transdisciplinary viewpoint allows us to consider a multidimensional Reality, structured by multiple levels replacing the single-level, one-dimensional reality of classical thought.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, he deplores the absence of reference to the sacred in much of today’s thinking because according to him, “the sacred, understood as the presence of something irreducibly real in the world, is unavoidable for any rational approach to knowledge...in view of elaborating a coherent discourse on Reality, one is always obliged to refer to it.”<sup>21</sup> Much of the book is devoted to a delineation of the complex relations present among the “sacred,” the “transdisciplinary model of Reality,” “levels of Reality,” the “transcultural,” and what he calls “transreligion.” De Lubicz’s work, preceding Nicolescu by decades, reveals a mode of transdisciplinary knowledge that has already existed in historical time – pharaonic science is “foremost an expression of the universal principles of organization and causation, which define not only the natural and cosmic creation but also the patterns and processes of the human mind and spirit.”<sup>22</sup>

The contemporary German Egyptologist Erik Hornung characterizes Egyptian thought in a way that resonates with de Lubicz’s argument here: “The holistic thought of the ancient Egyptians seems closely akin to that of modern science, to the world of quarks and bosons, which, in a rather Hermetic manner, is intensely concerned with the unity of nature... We meet with related structures that suggest fruitful comparison of quantum mechanics with Egyptian religious thought. Here, too, there is hope for further interesting and significant developments that will counter the growing fragmentation of academic disciplines.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, he is claiming that ancient Egyptian knowledge systems are transdisciplinary and offer an all-embracing, unified orientation as advanced and penetrating as any contemporary body of knowledge. Furthermore, Hornung claims that this body of knowledge can lay the foundation for a “post-postmodernism” and share a point-of-view “that can contribute to making sense of our modern world by seeking a direct connection with the original wisdom of the oldest cultures and with the core idea of all esoteric thought.”<sup>24</sup>

As rationalism, empiricism, and scientific materialism have consolidated their position at the vanguard of Western civilization, all concern with this “original wisdom” has been marginalized to the fringes of acceptable knowledge, and one can argue that ancient Egyptian sacred science is the quintessential Foucauldian “subjugated knowledge.”<sup>25</sup> However, this sacred science has never been completely extinguished.

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<sup>19</sup> Basarab Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) 44.

<sup>20</sup> Nicolescu 49.

<sup>21</sup> Nicolescu 125.

<sup>22</sup> Schwaller de Lubicz, *Temple of Man* 20.

<sup>23</sup> Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 200.

<sup>24</sup> Hornung 200-201.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault says, “But alongside this crumbling and the astonishing efficacy of discontinuous, particular, and local critiques, the facts were also revealing something... beneath this whole thematic,

Perhaps not surprisingly due to its use of symbolic methods as an instrument by which knowledge projects itself successively into generations and cycles of time, it has predominantly taken refuge in the arts, particularly literature. In his essay “In Praise of Polytheism (On Monomythical and Polymythical Thinking),” the German hermeneutic philosopher Odo Marquand presents a brief, but important, historical narrative useful to my purpose here: “Thus in modern times the – disenchanted – myths make (in every respect) the step into prose: from the cult into the library. There the history books and novels are present as the polymyths of the modern world.”<sup>26</sup>

With a focus on Egypt and its tradition of sacred science, literary history can be seen anew. I contend that a deep strain of Egyptian influence runs through a major tradition of English literature at least from Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596), one of whose major iconographic centers is the temple of the Egyptian goddess Isis, to John Crowley’s four-volume novel *Ægypt* (2007). In this project, I will focus specifically on the works of transatlantic Romanticism – the midpoint of this trajectory – as this period is one of the most intense moments of Egyptian influence in the tradition. I simultaneously ask two major questions – how is ancient Egyptian sacred science mediated to important Romantic writers (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville), and how can one use the intellectual and spiritual resources of Egyptian sacred science to provide new interpretations of their major texts – poems such as *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla Khan*; *Leaves of Grass*; and the epic novel *Moby-Dick*? To begin answering the first question, I will speak about the influence of one of the most important historical figures of the times – Napoleon.

### **Napoleon’s Invasion of Egypt and Its Aftermath for the Romantic Period**

In 1798, Napoleon invaded Egypt as part of the French Revolutionary Wars, and this military adventure made the ancient civilization more accessible to modern Europe and America. Imagining his campaign as a way to bring enlightenment to a once-glorious country now benighted and miserable, Napoleon hoped to oust the ruling Mamelukes and, as a bonus, disrupt the English trade route to India. The ambitious general presented himself as a new Alexander the Great, who would add fresh glory to his name in Egypt and revive the glory of Egypt. Accompanying Napoleon’s army was a large contingent of scholars, draughtsmen, and artists who eventually produced the formidable thirty-seven volume *Description de l’Egypte* between 1809 and 1828. This text brimmed with detailed engravings of Egyptian architecture, landscapes, and artifacts. The frontispiece bolstered French claims to the cultural legacy of Egypt by showing the general as an ancient conqueror raising a spear over a fabulous scene of monuments.

In his book *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, Simon Bainbridge discusses how Napoleon was used as an important symbolic and mythic figure by the Romantics “to figure their political hopes, to examine the relationship of political and poetic power and to investigate new forms of leadership.”<sup>27</sup> Napoleon’s relationship to Egypt was a crucial part of these imaginings. Alan Bewell says in the context of an analysis of Napoleon’s

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through it and even within it, we have seen what might be called the insurrection of subjugated knowledges.” *Society Must be Defended*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003) 6-7.

<sup>26</sup> Odo Marquand, *Farewell to Matters of Principle: Philosophical Studies*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 103.

<sup>27</sup> Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 20.

influence on Keats, “A distinctive feature of Napoleon’s Expedition of 1798 was that it was not represented strictly as a military invasion, but was more generally perceived as a major cultural and scientific event: the beginning of the process whereby modern thought would unlock the mysteries of the Orient.”<sup>28</sup> Bainbridge analyzes a wide variety of Romantic poets who responded poetically to this historical event – Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Southey, to name a few – but arguably one of the most vibrant takes on Napoleon’s Egyptian adventure can be found in the work of Walter Landor.

In his “Extract from the French Preface,” which opened his *Poems from the Arabic and Persian*, Landor is an example of a Romantic voice proclaiming support for Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign. He says,

No nation pursues with an equal alacrity the arts which embellish life. In the midst of a foreign, roused and resuscitated at the unextinguished beacons of a civil, war, while calamity constantly kept pace, and sometimes struggled with glory, her general meditated, and at once accomplished, the eternal deliverance of Egypt. Men of learning and men of science were the proper companions of Buonaparte. They are engaged at this moment of presenting to Europe the fruits of their several discoveries. Conquerors like him, posterity will declare it, have never been the enemies of the human race.<sup>29</sup>

Landor goes on to depict Napoleon as a hero who travels to Egypt in search of the ancient arts and sciences – he rejuvenates a decadent European civilization with the vast treasures he finds there, thereby bringing closer to fruition the republican vision of equality and fraternity on earth. While narratives like these might seem hyperbolic to contemporary readers, it is important to see that Napoleon was such an invigorating figure for the Romantic period because of his attempt to “seek a direct connection with the original wisdom of the oldest cultures” and to recover a mode of knowledge “which embellishes life.”

A different view of Napoleon is offered by Edward Said’s masterwork *Orientalism*:

With Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt processes were set in motion between East and West that still dominate our contemporary cultural and political perspectives. And the Napoleonic expedition...provided a scene or setting for Orientalism, since Egypt and subsequently the other Islamic lands were viewed as the live province, the laboratory, the theater of effective Western knowledge about the Orient.<sup>30</sup>

Said interprets Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt as the starting point of modern imperialism and orientalism. Beyond the one-sided account of surveillance and control that Said gives here, one should also question what it means mean to read the conflict between Napoleon and Egypt as a conflict between the “East” and the “West” and what it means

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<sup>28</sup> Alan Bewell, “The Political Implications of Keats’s Classicist Aesthetics,” *Studies in Romanticism* 25:2 (Summer 1986): 225.

<sup>29</sup> Landor, “Extract from the French Preface,” *Poems from the Arabic and Persian* (London: Warwick, 1800) 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 42-43.

to see Islam against Europe in the same manner. Although Said (and by extension much of postcolonialist scholarship) rails against Eurocentric dogmas and representations, his view of Western intellectual history remains implicitly, but stubbornly, Eurocentric. He relies on a narrative of the West that expels the non-European completely, as his “West vs. the rest” model ignores the interwoven, multi-lateral contributions of ancient Egypt and the Alexandrian elaboration of classicism, which sparked the intellectual flourishing of the Muslim cultural centers of Toledo and Cordoba (and in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries Europe and the Muslim world were extremely interconnected), which in turn laid the groundwork for the Renaissance and Romanticism, often called the renaissance of the Renaissance.

In addition to the figure of Napoleon himself as a mediator of ancient Egypt for the Romantic period, it is important to note that his invasion allowed for monuments to be taken out of Egypt and sent to museums around Europe and America. In his article “One of the Lessons Bordering Broadway: The Egyptian Museum,” Walt Whitman describes the scene of these monuments coming into New York: “When Napoleon took his army into Egypt, he took a battalion of savans [*sic*] also. Paleography (deciphering ancient inscriptions or signs) became the rage... They sent home specimens – they made literal copies of long strings of hieroglyphics, and had them engraved, and printed, and circulated, and offered prizes for translations and keys.”<sup>31</sup> Some of the monuments that most grabbed Whitman’s attention were a “figure in bronze of an Egyptian deity,” “slabs of limestone, some of them very large, each containing its spread of chiseled hieroglyphics,” “mummied cats, lizards, ibises, and crocodiles,” and “a colossal head in limestone, the face painted red... the whole face evidently of some great ruling person.”<sup>32</sup> These monuments mediated in part for him ancient Egyptian sacred science, which he called “vast and profound.”<sup>33</sup>

Whitman was not the only literary figure struck by these relics. While a statue of Ramses II was in route to the British Museum, Percy Shelley wrote his poem *Ozymandias* about it.<sup>34</sup> In her poem #531, Emily Dickinson meditates on obelisks in the town cemetery: “And the livid Surprise / Cool us to Shafts of Granite – / With just an Age – and Name / And perhaps a phrase in Egyptian.”<sup>35</sup> Material objects emerging from Egypt provoked considerations about monumentality, the permanence of media, and questions of power raised by acts of reading.

In addition to monuments, a plethora of mummies were taken from Egypt and sent to museums and the collections of rich dilettantes of the period, which Whitman also mentions. These figures, who sparked a concern with issues such as immortality, the construction of race (specifically in the work of figures like Samuel George Morton,

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<sup>31</sup> Walt Whitman, *New York Dissected: A Sheaf of Recently Discovered Newspaper Articles by the Author of Leaves of Grass* (New York: Rufus Rockwell Wilson, 1936) 36.

<sup>32</sup> Whitman 38-39.

<sup>33</sup> Whitman 38.

<sup>34</sup> For more on Shelley, see Edward Chaney, “Egypt in England and America: The Cultural Memorials of Religion, Royalty and Revolution.” *Sites of Exchange: European Crossroads and Faultlines*. Ed. by Adrianna Corrado (Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York, 2006), 39-74. See also John Rodenbeck, “Travelers from an Antique Land: Shelley’s Inspiration for ‘Ozymandias,’” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 24 (“Archeology of Literature: Tracing the Old in the New”), 2004: 121-148.

<sup>35</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960) 260.

George Gliddon, and Josiah Nott<sup>36</sup>), and the reanimation of life, are prominently featured in texts such as Poe's "Some Words With a Mummy" and Jane Loudon's *The Mummy! Or a Tale of the Twenty-Second Century*. In Poe's tale, the reanimated mummy Allamistakeo argues against the nineteenth-century protagonists who exalt their time as one of unprecedented knowledge and technology. Several times, Allamistakeo points out that the knowledge of ancient Egypt was not inferior, and often superior, to the modern equivalents. At one point, he exclaims about then contemporary America, "Why, I perceive – a deplorable condition of ignorance!"<sup>37</sup>

One of most famous "treasures" to come out of Egypt at this time was the Rosetta Stone, an ancient Egyptian granodiorite stele containing the same text in three scripts: hieroglyphics, demotic, and ancient Greek. The first ancient bilingual text recovered in modern times, this stone paved the way for the translation of hieroglyphics by Jean-Francois Champollion in 1822, whose deciphering allowed messages that had remained mute in monumental inscriptions to be read for the first time in centuries. John Irwin has written a monograph about the importance of this event, specifically for American Romantic writers. In his *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance*, he shows in great detail how hieroglyphics became a "focal point for their speculations on the relationships between sign, symbol, language, and meaning."<sup>38</sup> He provides readings of figures such as Poe, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville. Melville, to whom I will return to later in this project, followed debates about hieroglyphic script closely. As he says in *Moby-Dick*, "Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man's and every being's face... How may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can."<sup>39</sup> Beyond inspiring the use of the hieroglyph as a trope, the deciphering of the hieroglyphic system of writing opened the way for the experiential life and knowledge systems of the ancient Egyptians slowly to become more available to the modern world.

Napoleon's campaign served as the inspiration for a wave of Egyptomania that swept America and Europe. Egyptianized design motifs appeared in contemporary architecture, opera festivals (there was an Egyptian-inspired opera at Drury Lane in London in 1800 commented on by Coleridge in his *Notebooks*), furniture, crafts, and fashion. Robert Southey says in *Letters from England*,

Everything now must be Egyptian: the ladies wear crocodile ornaments, and you sit upon a sphinx in a room hung round with mummies, and with long black lean-armed long-nosed hieroglyphical men, who are enough to make children afraid to go to bed. The very shopboards must be metamorphosed into the mode, and painted in Egyptian letters...<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> For more on this topic, see Scott Trafton, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Literary Classics of the U.S., 1984) 814.

<sup>38</sup> John Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) back cover.

<sup>39</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003) 407.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Southey, *Letters from England* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1814) 449.

This Egyptomania set the context for a flurry of literary activity, including the competitive sonnets on the subject of the Nile River written by Keats, Shelley, and Leigh Hunt. In Shelley's poem, thoughts about Egypt are intimately linked to questions of knowledge: "O'er Egypt's land of Memory floods are level / And they are thine, O Nile – and well thou knowest / That soul-sustaining airs and blasts of evil / And fruits and poisons spring where'er thou flowest. / Beware, O Man – for knowledge must to thee, / Like the great flood to Egypt, ever be."<sup>41</sup>

The "Egyptian revival"<sup>42</sup> was very prominent in America as well. Many prisons, for example, were built based on the design of ancient Egyptian mausoleums. The most famous, the Manhattan Detention Complex, or "The Tombs," is featured prominently in Melville's short narrative "Bartleby the Scrivener," and the title character perishes there. The final reflection on the "Egyptian character of the masonry" figures Bartleby as the last representative of a lost race inhabiting architectural remnants of fallen grandeur.<sup>43</sup> Napoleon's mediation of Egypt, as one can see, influenced a wide variety of Romantic authors and works, and with his help, the cultural influx of ancient Egypt became finely woven into the texture of the period.

### **Romanticism and Hermetic Egypt**

In addition to physical monuments and the spectacular icons of Egyptian visual culture, other more subtle transfusions of ancient Egypt permeated European and American literary culture. After the demise of high ancient Egyptian civilization, its sacred science did not disappear completely. Fragments of it were disseminated through various channels and formed the basis of what is now called the esoteric or hermetic tradition, composed of strains as various as sufism, gnosticism, kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, Neoplatonism, freemasonry, and alchemy.<sup>44</sup> These holistic, psychospiritual knowledge systems also served to transmit a precise suprarational knowledge and intuitive vision that were used, in the words of de Lubicz, "in the

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<sup>41</sup> Percy Shelley, *The Complete Works*, Vol. 3: Poems, ed. by Roger Ingpen and Walter Peck (New York: Gordian Press, 1965) 199.

<sup>42</sup> For more about this phenomenon, see James Curl, *The Egyptian Revival: Ancient Egypt as the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> Herman Melville, "Bartleby the Scrivener." *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence-Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1984) 671.

<sup>44</sup> The study of the influence of ancient Egypt on the esoteric traditions is still burgeoning. An interested reader should begin with E. Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Ancient Egypt: Its Impact on the West* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002); G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993); R. Griffith, *Mummy Wheat: Egyptian Influence on the Homeric View of the Afterlife and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008); E. Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993); Dan McBride, "The Egyptian Foundations of Gnostic Thought," (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1994); Okasha el-Daly, *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium* (London: UCL Press, 2005); J. Lindsay, *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970). For scholarship on the interplay between Egypto-esotericism and the literary tradition in English, good monographs with which to start are F. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 1979); D. Brooks-Davies, *The Mercurian Monarch: Magical Politics from Spenser to Pope* (Dover: Manchester University Press, 1983); E. Tuveson, *The Avatars of Thrice Great Hermes: An Approach to Romanticism* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1982); A. Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); L. Surette and D. Tryphonopoulos, eds., *Literary Modernism and the Occult Tradition* (Orono: University of Maine, 1996).

expression of a vital philosophy, not a rationalist philosophy.”<sup>45</sup> Simson Najovits says in his *Egypt: Trunk of the Tree, Vol. 2*, “On a strictly historical basis, all the modern esoteric systems, with the notable exception of the Hindu, seem to have been influenced by the Egyptians in both real and imaginary ways.”<sup>46</sup>

During the Romantic period, there was a considerable revival of interest in various elements of the Western esoteric tradition, and the fact that this tradition exerted a significant influence on its leading personalities is not in any doubt. A range of groundbreaking historical studies, many written in French and German, have investigated the complicated avenues by which elements of hermeticism, Paracelsianism, Christian theosophy in the tradition of Jacob Boehme, various traditions of Illuminism, and so on became important to the thinking of such Romantics as Goethe, Novalis, Hugo, and others.

Let me focus on the specific example of the Swedish intellectual Emanuel Swedenborg, who was a major transmitter of esoteric thinking for the Romantic period.<sup>47</sup> His presence in particular can be detected in a staggering host of writers – from Balzac, Baudelaire, and Valery in the French tradition; to Coleridge, Blake, and the Brownings in the English; Emerson and Whitman in the American; Goethe in the German, etc. Swedenborg, in works such as *A Hieroglyphical Key to Natural and Spiritual Mysteries, By Way of Representations and Correspondences* (the link to Egypt is evident from the title), presents a visionary theology that literally opened up new worlds for writers of the time as he describes his journeys through multiple levels of heaven and hell and chatty conversations with various spiritual figures found there.<sup>48</sup> Emerson says in his *Representative Men* that Swedenborg’s genius “was to penetrate the science of the age with a far more subtle science; to pass the bounds of space and time [and] venture into the dim spirit-realm.”<sup>49</sup> This “subtle science,” linked to ancient Egypt, was an important part of the constitution of Romanticism.

Considering the abundant historical evidence for connections between Western esoteric traditions and specific Romantic thinkers, it is remarkable how few attempts have been made to establish in what sense the phenomenon of Romanticism *as such* is indebted to Western esotericism, and therefore to the ancient Egyptian sacred science from which those traditions derive. One of those few attempts includes Meyer H. Abrams’s large study *Natural Supernaturalism*.<sup>50</sup> For this project, this book is essential firstly because, to date, it represents one of the most impressive works of synthesis about Romanticism; and, secondly, because it is in any case the first major study to give explicit attention to the influence of esoteric traditions on Romanticism. He discusses, at some length, how the same esoteric thinking of the Renaissance period was revived in Romanticism:

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<sup>45</sup> Schwaller de Lubicz, *Symbol and the Symbolic* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1981) 27.

<sup>46</sup> Simson Najovits, *Egypt, Trunk of the Tree, vol. 2* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004) 301.

<sup>47</sup> For Swedenborg’s influence on literature, view Inge Johson, *Emanuel Swedenborg* (New York: Twayne’s Publishers, Inc., 1971); Lynn Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language: Emanuel Swedenborg & French Literary Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Erland Brock, ed., *Swedenborg and His Influence* (Bryn Athyn: The Academy of the New Church, 1988).

<sup>48</sup> Swedenborg, *A Hieroglyphical Key* (London, 1847).

<sup>49</sup> Ralph Emerson, *Essays & Poems* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983) 665.

<sup>50</sup> M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York and London, 1971).



Renaissance vitalism had envisioned an integral universe without absolute divisions, in which everything is interrelated by a system of correspondences, and the living is continuous with the inanimate, nature with man, and matter with mind; a universe...activated throughout by a dynamism of opposing forces....In this way of thinking some Romantic philosophers detected intimations of a viable counter-metaphysic to contemporary mechanism, elementarism, and dualism.<sup>51</sup>

Abrams accurately notes here that the esoteric tradition provided Romanticism with a metaphysical support that help it stand against a mechanistic science, one in which the world has been stripped of the numinous and sacred.

While Abrams's conceptualization is boldly presented here, he often backs away from the force of his insight:

Certain major poets of the Romantic Age, as we shall see, incorporated into their writings myths and imagery which are recognizably esoteric in origin. They used such elements, however, as symbolic conveniences, 'metaphors for poetry.' The older view of the world helped them to define the malaise of their own time, and they sometimes adopted its mythology to project and dramatize their feeling that they did not belong in the intellectual, social, and political milieu of their oppressive and crisis-ridden age.<sup>52</sup>

Here, Abrams grants the importance of esoteric traditions in the forming of Romantic literature, but turns around to say that this interest was simply ornamental, as if these bodies of knowledge did not provide serious knowledge claims, but only pretty, convenient metaphors. This unduly limits the force and reach of this material, and this position does not accurately reflect the stance taken by Romantic writers themselves.

For example, in a letter to John Thelwall on November 19, 1796, Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes:

I am *deep* in all out of the way books, whether of the monkish times, or of the puritanical era. I have read and digested most of the historical writers; but I do not like history. Metaphysics and poetry and 'facts of mind,' that is, accounts of all the strange phantasms that ever possessed 'your philosophy;' dreamers, from Thoth the Egyptian to Taylor the English pagan, are my darling Studies.<sup>53</sup>

Coleridge imagines an unbroken chain that runs from the *Corpus Hermeticum* – attributed to Thoth or Hermes Trismegistus – to Thomas Taylor, the most eminent contemporary Neoplatonist and enthusiast of mysteries of all sorts (including the Orphic, Bacchic, and Eleusinian), who claimed that even Plato was initiated into the "Greater Mysteries" of ancient Egypt.<sup>54</sup> In this letter and throughout his writing, Coleridge

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<sup>51</sup> Abrams 171.

<sup>52</sup> Abrams 171-72.

<sup>53</sup> *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, edited by Ernest Hartley Coleridge in 2 volumes, vol. I* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company 1895), 181.

<sup>54</sup> See his *A Dissertation on the Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries* (London: Gale and Fenner, 1816) 49.

emphasizes how important this tradition is to him. It links vast swaths of time and space (ancient Egypt to England, the “monkish times” to the “puritanical era”), hones in on the dynamics of consciousness (“facts of mind”), and takes precedence over all forms of historicism, which he has digested and moved beyond. Although this tradition is a major part of his “darling studies,” there is no school of literary criticism (not Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, phenomenology, structuralism, psychoanalysis, reader-response theory, etc.) that is equipped to explicate its claims or its long-lasting impact. This hinders us from fully understanding the non-instrumental and non-propositional *gnosis* that literature provides, its emancipatory force, and its performative effects in the world. This project, then, seeks to take esotericism more seriously as more than just a collection of quaint metaphor systems turned to in order to dramatize a sense of alienation, but as a central part of the literary projects of the period.

A newer generation of scholars – led by figures such as Antoine Faivre, Wouter Hanegraaff, Arthur Versluis, and Joscelyn Godwin – have participated in carving out a burgeoning area of academic inquiry that can be dubbed esoteric studies, and they are making fresh interventions not only in the study of literature, but also philosophy, art, music, sociology, and the history of science. However, although it is generally recognized that Egypt is the major backdrop and unifying support of the esoteric tradition, there have not been many attempts to bring Egyptological knowledge to bear as a larger syncretic framework from which to understand the evolution of these specific psychospiritual disciplines and their influence on literary and other cultural traditions.

### **Freemasonry and Revolution**

In providing a map of conduits through which the cultural legacy of ancient Egypt reached the writers of the Romantic period, it is important to stress that these lines of influence are not mutually exclusive. The influences of Napoleon and the hermetic tradition come together when one points specifically to freemasonry, a highly organized and hierarchical secret society which exerted a powerful force shaping the cultural, intellectual, and political life of the eighteenth century. I would argue that Napoleon’s participation in freemasonry and intense desire to discover the sources of masonic lore – which he believed lay in ancient Egypt, calling it the “cradle of the science and art of all humanity” – served as a stronger motive for his invasion of Egypt than the more prosaic wish to extend his empire.<sup>55</sup>

The revolutionary spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is usually cited as a major inspiration for Romantic authors, and lurking behind the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions was freemasonry. In her book *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, Sibylle Fischer lauds the “emancipatory ideas” of freemasonry and strongly asserts, “Egypt exercised enormous fascination, and Freemasonry in particular – a culture very much at the center of Enlightenment cultural practices – derived its ritual aspects, names, iconography, and so on from Egyptian sources.”<sup>56</sup> Particularly in revolutionary France, freemasonry explicitly fostered a turn to Egypt. The

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<sup>55</sup> This phrase is quoted from Neret Gilles, *Napoleon and the Pharaohs: Description of Egypt* (London: Taschen, 2001) back cover. For more details about the information presented in this section, see Paul Strathern, *Napoleon in Egypt* (New York: Bantam Books, 2008) and Darius Spieth, *Napoleon’s Sorcerers: The Sophisians* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) 53, 51.

Isis religion, which had once been the last major opponent of early Christianity, enjoyed another heyday in the French Revolution, recast as the cult of a goddess of reason or of nature, intended to replace Christianity. Concrete speculations were made deriving the name Paris from Isis, and it was believed that the cathedral of Notre Dame was built on the ruins of an earlier Isis temple. The archaeologist and politician Charles-Francois Dupuis, in his major text *The Origin of All Religious Worship*, interpreted the cathedral itself as an Iseum.<sup>57</sup> Under Napoleon, Isis would become the tutelary goddess of Paris.

The high point of this new veneration of Isis was the dedication of Jacques Louis David's *Fontaine de la Regeneration* on the ruins of the former Bastille on August 10, 1793. Here, regeneration water streamed from the breasts of an enthroned Egyptian goddess of bronze-covered plaster. The goddess was adorned with royal headcloth, and she also wore a king's loincloth. Herault de Sechelles delivered a speech in which he called her the embodiment of nature.<sup>58</sup> Plans to turn the Strasbourg Cathedral into a temple of reason began to take on reality with the erection of a statue dominated by a *multimammia*, a many-breasted goddess of nature assumed to be Isis. Furthermore, the new revolutionary era that temporarily replaced the Christian era employed the Egyptian calendar, with its ten-day weeks and its months of uniformly (as suited the idea of *egalite*) thirty days, though the epagomenal (five extra) days were now called *sans-culottides*. After the Concordat that Napoleon concluded in July 1801 with Pope Pius VII, France returned to the Catholic faith, and the remnants of the revolutionary cult disappeared. Yet in the meanwhile, the Romantic movement had already made Egypt its own.

Napoleon was by no means alone in his belief that ancient Egyptian spirituality had a direct bearing on the modern inner quest. It is well known that George Washington and most of the founding fathers of the United States were freemasons.<sup>59</sup> Nothing better symbolizes the significance that ancient Egypt was felt to have for the transformation of Western consciousness than the design of the seal of the United States, which subsequently appeared (as it does to this day) on the one-dollar note. The design in fact preceded Napoleon's invasion of Egypt by some twenty-two years. It shows a pyramid with a missing capstone, which we may assume is the pyramid ascribed to Khufu (or Cheops as he is more commonly known). Above the pyramid, the capstone miraculously appears in a blaze of light. In the middle of the capstone is an eye. Underneath the pyramid is written a motto in Latin: *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, which means "A New Order of the Ages."

This return to Egypt, used to declare a new order, has a peculiar potency, for it affirms – as does the prophecy of Hermes Trismegistus recounted at the opening of this chapter – that the Western tradition – its history and destiny – is firmly bound to ancient Egypt. With this quick survey ranging from fashion to the sociopolitical, I have sketched many of the numerous threads connecting these epochs.

### **Description of the argument of the chapters**

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<sup>57</sup> Charles Francois Dupuis, *The Origin of All Religious Worship* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1984).

<sup>58</sup> For a richer historical overview of these events, see David Andress, *The Terror: The Merciless War for Freedom in Revolutionary France* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), in particular chapter 8 "Saturnalia."

<sup>59</sup> Many books have been written on this topic, including Mark Tabbert, *American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building Communities* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

The spiritual reawakening hinted at in the proclamation of a “new order” should not be interpreted as an example of woolly-minded mysticism, amorphous feeling, or an orgy of religious emotionalism. By using the concept of sacred science, I emphasize that this awakening is to be supported by a mode of knowledge, one that uses technologies of transformation in order to synchronize and elevate natural, human, and divine realms of experience, a triple interface that organizes the structure of this project. With the genealogy provided above, it is clear that a large number of British and American writers could be chosen for the purpose of outlining the influence of ancient Egypt on the Romantic period. The focus here will be on three writers specifically – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville. They were selected so that their work and Egyptian sacred science could be used to mutually illuminate each other. Broadly speaking, this procession of writers moves chronologically, and in discussing their work, each chapter will focus on the gradually rising ascent enacted textually through different levels of experience – natural, human, and divine. Inspired by the example of ancient Egypt, these writers attempted to create a consistent, coherent, and interrelated system, where art, science, philosophy, and religion were intertwined and employed as a single organic unity to respond to a world characterized by the fragmentation of knowledge and what Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world,” exacerbated by an increasing societal rationalization that prevents “living in union with the divine.”<sup>60</sup> Deeply influenced by ancient Egypt, these writers – systematically exploring powers believed to be inherent in nature, humanity, and spiritual beings – all narrate the conscious and progressive transformation of the human form into a vehicle for higher, divine functions.

As a mode of knowledge, sacred science is grounded in a detailed attention to natural and cosmic phenomena. However, Egyptian works like *The Pyramid Texts* and *The Book of the Dead* were assembled not for the purpose of gathering a mass of alienated data about celestial bodies like the sun, moon, and stars, but for constructing initiatory paths of transformation modeled on the qualities and experienced effects of Solar, Lunar, and Stellar cycles. This is why the dissertation begins with an analysis of the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who claimed in a letter to his nephew that he had “for some time worked hard in Egyptian Antiquities”<sup>61</sup> and that his “darling studies” included a long tradition of works by authors stretching from “Thoth the Egyptian to Taylor the English pagan.” Coleridge builds on Egyptian precursors in his stated ambition to write a sequence of hymns to the sun, moon, and elements, and he outlines stages of initiation corresponding to each of their respective cycles in *Kubla Khan*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and *Ode on Astronomy*. Each of these poems is structured to work its way toward the transubstantiation of the body into a divine vehicle.

Sacred science joins the idea of a vibrant universe filled with multiple planes of existence with the idea of a multi-dimensional person, composed of several spiritualized components that simultaneously inhabit mundane and more subtle realms. I turn in the second chapter, therefore, to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman asserted, “The definite history of the world cannot go back farther than Egypt, and in the most important particulars the average spirit of man has not gone forward of the spirit of ancient

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<sup>60</sup> “Science as a Vocation,” *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969)155, 142.

<sup>61</sup> *Collected Letters of STC*, ed. Earl Griggs, vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 442.

Egypt.”<sup>62</sup> His mapping of the human personality in his poetry outlines many distinct elements he names My Self, My Soul, the Real Me, the Other I Am, the Me Myself, My Spirit, and the Real Body. His model is deeply rooted in the particulars of the ancient Egyptian construction of the individual, which is similarly divided into a multiplicity of constituent factors and likewise insists on the joined materiality and immortality of the body-mind complex.

From the perspective of ancient Egyptian sacred science, nature and human existence were interpenetrated and bound together by divine forces, “gods” who were conceptualized as indivisible energy dynamics that are embodied and mirrored through all phases of life. Maintaining the human-divine interface allowed the accessing of power that pushed human faculties to their fullest potential. Herman Melville viewed Egypt as a birthplace of sorts for the gods, and he explicitly stated, “It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah.”<sup>63</sup> In *Moby-Dick*, he uses Egyptian narratives about these divine forces as a means of ordering and defining the action of the novel. For instance, whaling, the major industry of the novel, is described as the goddess Nut, “that Egyptian mother, who bore offspring themselves pregnant from her womb.”<sup>64</sup> The novel structurally depends on a process of mythic investiture which seeks to “ascribe high qualities” to the characters, “lift [them] to the exalted mounts,” and touch them “with some ethereal light.”<sup>65</sup>

As one can see, in addition to tracing historical connections between ancient Egypt, the discourse it provoked, and Romanticism, this project also emphasizes inward links bridging these epochs, or a *homology of content* that goes beyond the connections verifiable by historical “causation.” This is fitting especially because sacred science operates in a transformational-synchronistic-analogic modality rather than a representational-sequential-analytic one. As Schwaller de Lubicz would say, sacred science – based as it is on the correspondences between the universe and human consciousness – is “ever-present and needs no discoverers. Constantly changing, it needs no revision. The keeper of time and genesis, it is never dated.”<sup>66</sup>

The German literary theorist Hans Gumbrecht has written an excellent essay entitled “Does Egyptology Need a Theory of Literature?”<sup>67</sup> I intend to turn that question upside-down in this dissertation – “Does a Theory of Literature Need Egyptology?” Focusing on different components of ancient Egyptian sacred science – what I will call a sacred astronomy, anatomy, and energetics – my aim is to deepen our understanding of the Romantic period, especially its concern with the expansion of awareness, and the possibilities for the human being and human futures opened up by an experience of that kind of expansion. Romantic writers, as I will argue, reinterpreted and extended the

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<sup>62</sup> Whitman, *Complete Writings*, ed. R. Bucke and T. Harned, vol. 6 (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1902), 103.

<sup>63</sup> Herman Melville, *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant, Oct. 11, 1856 – May 6, 1857*, ed. Howard Horsford (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) 118.

<sup>64</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick* 143.

<sup>65</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick* 150.

<sup>66</sup> Schwaller de Lubicz, *Sacred Science: The King of Pharaonic Theocracy* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1982) back cover.

<sup>67</sup> It is found in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms*, ed. Antonio Loprieno (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

tradition of Egyptian sacred science for the modern West, and this influence helped them represent, to borrow a phrase of Owen Barfield, a “felt change in consciousness.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952) 20.

## Sacred Astronomy, Paths of Transformation, and the Poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge

In the introduction, I quoted a letter Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote to John Thelwall on November 19, 1796. I provide it here again:

I am *deep* in all out of the way books, whether of the monkish times, or of the puritanical era. I have read and digested most of the historical writers; but I do not like history. Metaphysics and poetry and “facts of mind,” that is, accounts of all the strange phantasms that ever possessed “your philosophy;” dreamers, from Thoth the Egyptian to Taylor the English pagan, are my darling Studies.<sup>69</sup>

Several decades after the Thelwall letter, Coleridge remarks in a letter to his nephew, May 8, 1825: “I have for some time worked hard in Egyptian Antiquities.”<sup>70</sup> Coleridge’s career-long engagement with ancient Egypt has not been fully explored, and in this chapter, I argue that his work fundamentally reinterprets and extends a particular portion of the sacred science of that civilization that can be called sacred astronomy.

Coleridge describes his prose piece “On the Prometheus of Aeschylus” as “an Essay, preparatory to a series of disquisitions respecting the Egyptian, in connection with the sacerdotal, theology, and in contrast with the mysteries of ancient Greece” [*sic*].<sup>71</sup> Read at the Royal Society of Literature on May 18, 1825, it discusses the “French ‘savans’ who went to Egypt in the train of Buonaparte, Denon, Fourrier, and Dupuis”<sup>72</sup> and flags Coleridge’s familiarity with artifacts and monuments brought back to Europe from Egypt such as the Denderah Zodiac, which explicitly encodes an Egyptian celestial knowledge and which we will see referenced in Melville’s *Moby-Dick*. In this essay, Coleridge presents a brilliant reading of Egyptian sacred astronomy that will be our entrée into the analysis of his work. He claims, “Wherever the powers of nature had found a cycle for themselves, in which the powers still produced the same phenomenon during a given period, whether in the motions of the heavenly orbs, or in the smallest living organic body, there the Egyptian sages predicated life and mind.”<sup>73</sup> As a mode of knowledge, sacred science is grounded in a detailed attention to natural and cosmic phenomena – not for the purpose of gathering a mass of alienated data about celestial bodies like the sun, moon, and stars, but for imaginatively partaking in the movement of all astronomical phenomena, which represented for the Egyptians the visible dimension of divine forces. These phenomena, in their risings, culminations, and settings through the sky, demonstrated the ebb and flow of those forces, as well as their infallible return over long periods of time. Different calendars were employed to track the complex

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<sup>69</sup> *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, edited by Ernest Hartley Coleridge in 2 volumes, vol. I* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company 1895) 181.

<sup>70</sup> *Collected Letters of STC*, ed. Earl Griggs, vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 442.

<sup>71</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “On the Prometheus of Aeschylus,” *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: With an Introductory Essay upon his Philosophical and Theological Opinions*, ed. William Shedd, vol. 4 (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1853) 344.

<sup>72</sup> Coleridge, “Prometheus” 344.

<sup>73</sup> Coleridge, “Prometheus” 347.

movements and interactions of these cycles.<sup>74</sup> Yet, this was not simply for the sake of theoretical curiosity, but for maintaining the functioning of the state, community, and individual through ritual mobilization of cosmic energies, which allowed for the extension of “life and mind.” In the words of Egyptologist Jan Assmann, sacred science is led by “fascination, identification, and the desire to participate.”<sup>75</sup> For this reason, rituals and initiatory paths of transformation were modeled on the qualities, experienced effects, and types of invisible reality associated with Stellar, Solar, and Lunar cycles.

The movements of cosmic cycles were also tremendously important to Coleridge. In his notebooks, he often ponders the symbolic overtones and meanings of these cycles. In December of 1833, for example, he writes: “Sun=the Idea. Sunlight=the Light of Ideas. The Moon, Moonlight = the Understanding, as ‘Discourse of Reason,’ Conceptions reflecting the Ideal Light. The Stars (the Lesser Lights, 1 Genesis) = multifarious Notionality, opinions, fancies, that shine by a Light of their own, just enough to be con-visible but *give* no Light to any thing else.”<sup>76</sup> Although it is often claimed that he never fulfilled his large poetic ambition to write a sequence of “Hymns to the Sun, the Moon, and the Elements,”<sup>77</sup> his poetry suggests otherwise. I argue that many of the symbols and structural devices of Coleridge’s poems can be illuminated with reference to the Stellar, Solar, and Lunar paths as expressed in the traditional iconography of ancient Egypt. One can discern an engagement with the Stellar cycle in *The Ode on Astronomy*, Solar cycle in *Kubla Khan*, and Lunar cycle in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

These paths were mediated to Coleridge through very complex historical channels. In the introduction, I discussed the Hebraic/Hellenic dialectic, which has structured the majority of normative presentations of Western intellectual history. In his letters, notebooks, lectures, table talk, etc., Coleridge argues that both poles of that binary provide access to an Egyptian legacy that precedes them both. For Coleridge, part of the Pentateuch was translated directly from hieroglyphics. He says: “I have sometimes conjectured that the Chapter [Genesis 2] was translated into *words* from stone Carvings, or proper Hieroglyphs...The II Chapter of Genesis appears to be little more than a translation of Sculptured Figures into Words – the serpent being the Egyptian Symbol of intellectual Invention, idolized by the Descendants of Ham.”<sup>78</sup> Prefiguring Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, Coleridge also presents a Moses who is “Learned in all the learning of Egypt”<sup>79</sup> and a magus who is an “Alumni of the Temple of Isis.”<sup>80</sup> Several

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<sup>74</sup> The solar year was measured from one summer solstice to the next, and the lunar year was measured from the first crescent of a New Moon to the next, for thirteen consecutive moons. Their sidereal year was based on the observations of the annual Sothic cycle, the periodic movement of the star known to the Egyptians as Sopdet (but more commonly as Sirius). It was especially important because the rising of Sopdet preceded the annual inundation of the Nile.

<sup>75</sup> Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) 149.

<sup>76</sup> Samuel Coleridge, *The Notebooks of STC, Volume 5, 1827-1834*, eds. Kathleen Coburn and Anthony John Harding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 6849.

<sup>77</sup> *The Notebooks of STC*, ed. K. Coburn, vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1957) 174.

<sup>78</sup> Coleridge, *Marginalia I*, ed. H.J. Jackson and George Whalley, Vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 684-5.

<sup>79</sup> Coleridge, *Notebooks* vol. 5 6309.

<sup>80</sup> Coleridge, *Notebooks* vol. 5 6311.



other examples could be provided here, including his reading of the book of Job.<sup>81</sup> Later in this chapter, I will explore Coleridge's use of the serpent as an Egyptian symbol in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In a manner similar to the Bible, Coleridge uses his poetry as a form that can translate and embody "all the learning of Egypt."

When Coleridge turns to the Greek tradition, he finds similar connections to ancient Egypt. In his lecture on "Asiatic and Greek Mythologies," he discusses "the origin, the idea, of Greek necromancy. These mysteries, like all the others, were certainly in connection with either the Phoenician or Egyptian systems, perhaps with both."<sup>82</sup> Coleridge also finds deep Egyptian traces in Aeschylus' play *Prometheus*: "the Io of Eschylus is the Religion of Isis."<sup>83</sup> Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Coleridge's interpretation of ancient Egyptian knowledge systems from his essay "On the Prometheus of Aeschylus." In that essay, he discourses at length about Egyptian "pantheism, cosmotheism, or worship of the world as God."<sup>84</sup> This attention to the world, particularly its astronomical cycles, viewed cosmotheistically as a manifestation of the divine also structures and influences Coleridge's poetry.

For Coleridge, the "Egyptian system" is propagated most fully through the various strands of the esoteric tradition. Coleridge's thinking, from his intellectual history to political theory, is grounded in his "assumption of an esoteric doctrine delivered to the *capable* Minds...the Elect in each generation, even from the Patriarchal Age."<sup>85</sup> Implicitly, he views himself as such a capable mind to receive this doctrine, one that is trans-historical and trans-cultural. One can also assume that this doctrine is not only delivered to capable minds, but also helps deliver these capable minds, offering some sort of higher perception and transcendence.

Coleridge provides a variant of this genealogy elsewhere in his work: "The peculiar doctrines [of the mystery systems], however, were preserved in the memories of the initiated, and handed down by individuals. No doubt they were propagated in Europe, and it is not improbable that Paracelsus received many of his opinions from such persons, and I think a connection may be traced between him and Jacob Behmen."<sup>86</sup> The phrase "No doubt they were propagated in Europe" is an interesting formulation, one that suggests that while these esoteric doctrines were disseminated in Europe, they did not originate there. Indirectly, this gives some support to the focus on Egyptian genealogies that I provide in this project. Furthermore, the focus on initiation here provides a key theme for this analysis, as all the poems analyzed in this chapter – *The Ode on Astronomy*, *Kubla Khan*, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* – all revolve around initiations. In the pursuit of ordained paths closely mirrored in natural phenomena, the major characters of these poems follow a systematic process in which they are

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<sup>81</sup> On May 27, 1830, Coleridge remarks on the borrowing of Egyptian imagery in Job: "When God speaks, the tone is exalted and almost all the images are taken from Egypt – crocodile – war horse &c. Egypt was then the first monarchy that had a splendid court." *The Collected Works of STC*, vol. 14: *Table Talk I*, Recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge and John Taylor Coleridge, ed. Kathleen Coburn and B. Winer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 146.

<sup>82</sup> Coleridge, *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, vol. 1 (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1967) 187.

<sup>83</sup> Coleridge, *Notebooks* vol. 5, 6406.

<sup>84</sup> Coleridge, "Prometheus" 345.

<sup>85</sup> Coleridge, *Notebooks* vol. 5, 6746.

<sup>86</sup> Coleridge, *Literary Remains* 187-188.

transformed into divine beings. Ancient Egyptian sacred science provides a crucial model for understanding the symbolism and esoteric ideas that support this process, especially because Egyptian works such as the *Pyramid Texts*, *Coffin Texts*, and *Book of the Dead* serve collectively as the earliest known, and in many respects most robust, cosmography of many different types of visible and invisible reality; metaphysical codification of ideas concerning the transformation and transmigration of the body-mind complex through space, time, and distance; and collection of ideas about non-ordinary modes of being such as trance and liminal states.

When discussing the effects of the writing of esoteric philosophers who have participated in this narrative of historical diffusion from ancient Egypt, Coleridge proclaims:

They [esoteric writings] contributed to keep alive the *heart* in the *head*; gave me an indistinct, yet stirring and working presentiment, that all the products of the mere *reflective* faculty partook of DEATH and were as the rattling twigs and sprays in winter, into which a sap was yet to be propelled from some root to which I had not penetrated, if they were to afford my soul either food or shelter.<sup>87</sup>

Sacred science, according to Schwaller de Lubicz, circumvents the rational faculty in order to speak directly to what he calls “the Intelligence of the heart,”<sup>88</sup> and it is this intelligence that Coleridge works to cultivate. With the stance taken against the reflective faculty, Coleridge is pushing toward a type of knowledge that is not rational, one that provides “food” for the soul and transcends the power of DEATH. Egyptian funerary texts, of course, are explicitly addressed to the deceased and claim to guide the soul towards illumination after death. Yet even in life, these texts aim to use philosophical, religious, and magical means to arouse the awakening of innate consciousness, affecting in the process the body, soul, mind, and extended environment.<sup>89</sup> Several guiding questions now arise: How can we analyze Coleridge’s poetry in ways that move beyond the mere reflective faculty? In other words, how can we make arguments about the effects of his poetry in ways that do not merely argue that his poetry reflects a certain set of historical, linguistic, formal/generic or sociopolitical discourses? Is there a *productive* faculty that can be unfolded and explicated as such? How does Coleridge’s poetry, in the same mode as sacred science, produce various types of order through engagement with cosmic spheres? For the rest of this essay, I will explore some of the content of these “esoteric doctrines” delivered to Coleridge’s capable mind, and I will outline how his work can be interpreted through looking at its evocation of and attention to Stellar, Solar, and Lunar paths of transformation.

### **I. Stellar cycle – “A Greek Ode on Astronomy”**

Now, we turn to Coleridge’s poem *A Greek Ode on Astronomy*. It is an early work written in Greek in 1793 for a prize awarded by Cambridge University, and it was

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<sup>87</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Engell and W. Bate, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 152.

<sup>88</sup> Rene Schwaller de Lubicz, *Nature Word*, trans. Deborah Lawlor (Aurora: Lindisfarne Press, 1982) 71.

<sup>89</sup> R.T. Rundle Clark says: “On some of the tombs which contain funerary texts we are told: ‘This will be useful for a man here on earth as well as when he has died.’” *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978) 179.

translated into English by his friend Robert Southey. This poem embodies a physics of change and apotheosis that exemplifies the Stellar path of transformation, as it narrates the process of a speaker's soul flying out to explore and join the world of the stars. This journey can be divided into six stages: the hailing of the gods; establishing modes of transportation; banishing obstacles to travel; engaging in flight; returning to a moment of birth; and final deification.

The earliest esoteric ideas in ancient Egypt almost exclusively used Stellar symbolism. The Egyptian gods (conceptualized not as anthropomorphic personalities but as figurations of energy, as I will explain in more detail in my chapter on Melville) were understood to embody celestial phenomena, the deceased were believed to return to the sky, and magical concepts took the form of heavenly forces residing in the stars, appearing and disappearing cyclically. Rituals associated with the Stellar path conferred a process of metamorphosis to both body and soul, through a knowledge of, and a fusion with, the genesis of celestial life. This path was associated with the goddess Isis. She served as the conduit to a new existence and was intimately connected to the yearly rise of the star Sirius, whose appearance was linked to the return of the Nile floods and therefore evoked a renewal of creation itself (as the yearly flood recalled the primeval waters of Nun, which according to Egyptian cosmogonies appeared in timeless time and precipitated the genesis of cosmic life). In the Stellar path, the soul is fully renewed – it undergoes a series of cosmic transformations that emulate the genesis of the universe, and ultimately it becomes a cosmic entity existing in rhythm with celestial life. The Stellar Mysteries brought the sojourn of the transforming soul to its supreme destination, a field of time marked by the enduring cycles of precessional movement in the sky. Here, fusion with the cosmic intelligence that created the stars endowed the initiate with a new vehicle, the *Akh*, a body of luminous qualities that existed with the imperishable stars and became permanently incorporated into the cosmic landscape with them. These Stellar rituals also conferred the wisdom of parthenogenesis, a knowledge of bringing forth from oneself both the divine and infernal forces that engender existence in the cosmic worlds.

Primarily, texts from the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt (conventionally dated 2686-2125 BCE<sup>90</sup>), particularly *The Pyramid Texts*, articulate the aim of the individual's entry into cosmic life as a star, although salient elements of the Stellar theme were enigmatically revived and disclosed in the Hermetic writings of Egypt's last renaissance, the Greco-Roman period.<sup>91</sup> With the goal of transformation from human to divine existence, the Stellar symbolism of this funerary tradition also underscores another fundamental idea – that human existence can be transformed into a conscious reality that is cosmic in scope. Many Solar concepts are also expressed in Old Kingdom's *Pyramid Texts*, but they are subsidiary to the ultimate goal of entering the firmament as a being equal to the gods. *The Pyramid Texts* are made up of approximately eight hundred spells,

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<sup>90</sup> The dates I use throughout this chapter come from *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>91</sup> *The Pyramid Texts*, it bears repeating, are the oldest known religious texts in the world. Even at the beginning of the Old Kingdom, they were already considered ancient. For information on these ancient Egyptian texts, the bibliography is vast. One book I rely on here quite heavily throughout the rest of this chapter is Erik Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

or “utterances.”<sup>92</sup> While no single collection uses them all, the oldest version comes from the Pyramid of Unas and contains approximately 228. Together, these utterances are concerned with protecting the pharaoh’s remains, reanimating his body, and helping him ascend to the heavens.

Coleridge’s poem *A Greek Ode on Astronomy* walks the reader through the speaker’s flight to the stars, transubstantiation of form, process of identification with the gods, and assumption of their powers. He is restored to an original, unadulterated condition and taps into a primordial reality that is supremely vital and flawless. The poem begins with an apostrophe – “Hail, venerable Night!”<sup>93</sup> – and it stays at that elevated pitch for its duration. This mode of elevated address finds a precursor in *The Pyramid Texts*. For instance, see Utt. 587: “Hail to you, Atum! / Hail to you, [Khoprer] the Self-created! / May you be high in this your name of ‘Height...’ / Hail to you, Eye of Horus, which he has restored with both his hands!” These types of ecstatic speech acts are needed to mark a threshold, and they thrust the speakers directly into the realm of ritual experience. How do we know this is the case? Just as Coleridge says about Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, there is a “marvellous independence and true imaginative absence of all particular space or time [in the poem]. It is in the domains neither of history or geography; it is ignorant of all artificial boundary, all material obstacles.”<sup>94</sup> The initiate’s address to the personification of Night bursts forth out of the void, and as Angus Fletcher says in his essay “Threshold, Sequence, and Personification in Coleridge,” “Personifications come alive the moment there is psychological breakthrough, with an accompanying liberation of utterance, which in its radical form is a first deep breath.”<sup>95</sup> The path of transformation, then, has begun.

As befits the Stellar path, which moves back to the genesis of celestial life, Coleridge adds, “O first-created, hail!”<sup>96</sup> This extra epithet given to Night is the beginning of an attempt to identify himself with her powers and attributes – being “the eldest and latest,” surrounded by “lightning rays,” and adorned with “dewy lustres.”<sup>97</sup> Most importantly, his goal is to merge with her elevated state, which first requires a mode of elevation or travel.

In *The Pyramid Texts*, the pharaoh commands many modes of travel to the stars, which the spells outline: e.g., ladders, stairs, ramps, transformation into a bird or beetle, clouds, and lightning. As Utterance 305 says, “A ladder is knotted together by Re before Osiris, a ladder is knotted together by Horus before his father Osiris when he goes to his spirit.”<sup>98</sup> The gods are often invoked for help in the journey and threatened if they did

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<sup>92</sup> In this chapter, I will be using the following edition: R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Stilwell: Digireads.com Publishing, 2007). Citations will be made to the utterance number, not the page number.

<sup>93</sup> Ln. 1:1. All citations of Coleridge’s poetry in this chapter will come from Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. John Beer (London: Everyman’s Library, 1963). I will provide citations with line numbers.

<sup>94</sup> Coleridge, *Literary Remains* 94.

<sup>95</sup> Angus Fletcher, *Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) 185.

<sup>96</sup> Ln 1:2.

<sup>97</sup> Lns. 1:5, 8, 14.

<sup>98</sup> See Peter Levenda, *Stairway to Heaven: Chinese Alchemists, Jewish Kabbalists, and the Art of Spiritual Transformation* (New York: Continuum, 2008) for more information on how ladder imagery is passed down through other esoteric traditions.

not comply, for the journey was far from easy and straightforward.<sup>99</sup> The first section of Coleridge's poem ends in a state of longing: "But I with solemn and severe delight / Still watch thy constant car, immortal Night!"<sup>100</sup> This car is a literal vehicle of consciousness, akin to the ladders and stairways that transport the initiate higher and launches him into the process of the expansion of consciousness.

Is the speaker able to join this car and travel in it? Implicitly so, I believe, for the second section opens, "For then to the celestial Palaces / Urania leads."<sup>101</sup> In that leap, we have moved from night to daybreak, and Coleridge receives a vision of his future possibility: "Angelic myriads struck their harps around, / And with triumphant song / The host of Stars, a beauteous throng, / Around the ever-living Mind / In jubilee their mystic dance begun; / When at thy leaping forth, O Sun!"<sup>102</sup> Of course, we must point out that the characters who join the poem in this section, Urania – an appropriate choice as she is the traditional muse of astronomy – and the partner at her side, Wisdom, directly allude to Book 7 of *Paradise Lost*. In Milton's narrative, these figures please the "Almighty Father" with their "Celestial Song," and Urania descends to earth to assist Milton in his own imaginal journey to the "heaven of heavens" and back.<sup>103</sup> In this poem, Coleridge repaganizes these figures and restores them to their pre-Christian force. Whereas Milton makes clear that he means specifically "the meaning, not the Name"<sup>104</sup> of Urania, as if idealizing Urania purges her of any non-Christian connotations, Coleridge most assuredly proclaims her name and honorific titulary – "Queen of the Muses! Mistress of the Song!"<sup>105</sup> – which he calls as a necessary talismanic mantra to evoke her presence for assistance in the path he is undergoing. In addition to the telling absence of the Almighty Father addressed in those terms, Wisdom is described as a "Creatrix,"<sup>106</sup> and this pride of place given to female divinity removes these figures from a Miltonic/orthodox Christian frame and places them in line with a host of other feminine deities – such as Nut, Isis, Nephthys, Hathor, and Maat – who guide the initiate through the landscapes of the Pyramid Texts. In particular, Maat is a major benevolent presence in the journey, and one of the most constant of the feminine divine companions. As the personification of moral truth and cosmic harmony, she is the relationship that must be maintained at every step of the journey. Without her, the journey cannot proceed further. The same holds true for Wisdom.

Quite often in *The Pyramid Texts*, the initiate is required to stop by a force that serves as an obstacle, and he is compelled to provide the proper response, which proves his authority and purpose in attempting transformation, signals that he is equipped with the knowledge needed to survive and flourish in those regions, and affirms his connection to higher powers. One of the most menacing of these figures, for example, is the Great Wild Bull. Utterance 470 narrates this confrontation:

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<sup>99</sup> Utterances 273-74: "The King is one who eats men and lives on the gods, / A possessor of porters who dispatches messages."

<sup>100</sup> Ln. 1:19-20.

<sup>101</sup> Ln. 2:1-2.

<sup>102</sup> Lns. 2:10-15.

<sup>103</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara Lewalski (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2007) Lns. VII.11, 12, 13.

<sup>104</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost* Ln. VII.5.

<sup>105</sup> Ln. 3:2.

<sup>106</sup> Ln. 2:6.

‘O Bull of Offerings, bend down your horn and let me pass,’ say I. /  
 ‘Where are you going?’ / ‘I am going to the sky that I may see my father,  
 that I may see Re,’ say I. / ‘To the High Mounds or to the Mounds of  
 Seth?’ / ‘The High Mounds will pass me on to the Mounds of Seth, to  
 yonder tall sycamore in the east of the sky...because I am a living falcon  
 who explores the firmament; because I am the great steering-oar...because  
 I am one great of pace and far-striding.’

This collection of texts also contains spells directed against dangers one might encounter like snakes and scorpions (Utt. 226-27) and rituals performed to destroy enemies (Utt. 244: “break the red jars”), but also helpful dialogues with guardians of gateways and ferryman that supply needed knowledge.

After the evocation of Urania in the *Ode on Astronomy*, she descends earthward, in the process banishing all of those elements that would hinder the process of initiation on which Coleridge wants to embark.

Before thine awful mien, compelled to shrink  
 Fled Ignorance abash’d with all her brood  
 Dragons, and Hags of baleful breath,  
 Fierce Dreams that wont to drink  
 The Sepulchre’s black blood;  
 Or on the wings of storms  
 Riding in fury forms,  
 Shriek to the mariner the shriek of Death.<sup>107</sup>

Coleridge here stands in an imaginative realm – one composed of both psychic and postmortal elements. In this environment, he faces a range of archetypal states of the soul. Yet to join “the host of Stars, a beauteous throng,” all spiritually disharmonious elements have to be purged. Because of the relationship he has forged with Urania, she helps him maintain his inner resolve and purity. It is not the Great Wild Bull she vanquishes for him, but creatures just as deadly – Ignorance with its dragons and hags and very menacing Fierce Dreams.

With this hurdle tackled, and the presumable welcoming of Knowledge and Clairvoyant Dreams, Coleridge takes flight in section IV: “I boast, O Goddess to thy name / That I have raised the pile of fame; / Therefore to me be given / To roam the starry path of Heaven, / To charioteer with wings on high, / And to rein-in the Tempests of the sky.”<sup>108</sup> Section V follows him as he jaunts out into space, leaving “Earth’s lowly scene,” “the Moon serene,” and “wide domains” beyond Mars and Jupiter.<sup>109</sup> The next portion moves to a high moment of ecstasy: “Comets who wander wide, / Will I along your pathless way pursue, / Whence bending I may view / The worlds whom elder Suns have vivified.”<sup>110</sup> Ennobled by the rapture of his journey, the initiate has now gained the power to address and converse with cosmic objects such as comets. Moving to higher stages of sublime delight, he experiences a witnessing focus of consciousness allowing

<sup>107</sup> Lns. 3:10-17.

<sup>108</sup> Lns. 4:1-6.

<sup>109</sup> Lns. 5:4, 5, 7.

<sup>110</sup> Lns. 6:5-8.

for the direct perception of objective spiritual realities, and he gains knowledge of expansive worlds through this remote viewing.

The poem comes to a blissful conclusion in the last three stanzas. The initiate describes the paradisaical condition. Man, he says, “when comes again the natal hour,” shall “in undecaying youth, / Spring to the blessed seat; Where round the fields of Truth / The fiery Essences for ever feed.”<sup>111</sup> John Beer has suggested that the “natal hour” has a Neoplatonic connotation, especially when joined with the forthcoming reference to the soul’s “native home,” which references the world which the soul leaves when it descends into generation, and which it is constantly trying to regain in this life.<sup>112</sup> At the “natal hour,” then, one can argue that the speaker has come to the heart of the Stellar mystery, because he has learned the secret not only of cosmic genesis, but of bringing forth himself through a constantly renewed regeneration that allows for undecaying youth. Coleridge’s “fields of Truth” are structurally linked to the topography of *The Pyramid Texts*, particularly of locations such as the Field of Reeds and the Field of Offerings outlined in Utterance 180, similarly elevated lands of eternal life where the initiate is urged to travel by the stars: “Greet this King Unas’ entrance into the North of the Field of Reeds. Let King Unas cross the Winding Canal. He is ferried over to the eastern side of the horizon! He is ferried over to the eastern side of the sky! His sister is Sothis! His female sibling is the Morning Star!”

As Coleridge’s ode nears its final assumption of *gnosis*, the speaker hails a fellow initiate: “There, Priest of Nature! dost thou shine, / NEWTON! a King among the Kings divine.”<sup>113</sup> It might be a shock to see Newton of all figures represented here, but this is not the Urizenic Newton that Blake rails against for his single-minded scientific materialism and sterile geometric diagrams. This Newton is one who does not see a divide separating the pursuits of religion and science, but yokes them together in the pursuit of a higher sacred science as the “Priest of Nature.” For this reason, I would argue that Coleridge is channeling Newton the visionary (although this aspect of his work became suppressed and ignored by the “Newtonians” who came after him), Newton the alchemist,<sup>114</sup> the Newton who was fascinated with light because he thought it embodied the Word of God, as suggested by *The Emerald Tablet*, a Hermetic document which he translated. Coleridge himself pursues the same transdisciplinary knowledge, using as he does a rapturous, participatory engagement with cosmic phenomena to stimulate the development of his consciousness rather than producing distanced, “objective” accounts of them. The speaker of the poem not only hails Newton, but properly names his powers and attributes, showing his preparation and readiness for his own final transformation: he guides a star “with harmony’s mild force,” gazes “in the spring / Ebullient with creative

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<sup>111</sup> Lns. 7:3, 5-8.

<sup>112</sup> John Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959) 74.

<sup>113</sup> Lns. 8:1-2.

<sup>114</sup> The connection between Newton and alchemy is not generally well-known, although he wrote more on this topic than any other, granting it over a million words. For the argument that alchemy was actually more central to Newton’s practice as a scientist than his mechanics and mathematics, see Michael White, *Isaac Newton: The Last Sorcerer* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1997); F.E. Manuel, *The Religion of Isaac Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); and B.J.T. Dobbs, *The Foundations of Newton’s Alchemy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

energy,” and feels “his pure breast with rapturous joy possesst, / Inebriate in the holy ecstasy.”<sup>115</sup> With this said, we turn to the conclusion of this quest.

Utterance 509 of *The Pyramid Texts* proclaims the success of the Stellar transformation: “I ascend to the sky among the Imperishable Stars, my sister is Sothis, my guide is the Morning Star, and they grasp my hand at the Field of Offerings. I sit on this iron throne of mine, the faces of which are those of lions, and its feet are the hooves of the Great Wild Bull...I will lift up my hand to the sun-folk, and the gods will come bowing.” A similar success awaits the initiate of Coleridge’s poem. The finale is important enough to quote in its entirety:

I may not call thee mortal then, my soul!  
Immortal longings lift thee to the skies:  
Love of thy native home inflames thee now,  
With pious madness wise.  
Know then thyself! expand thy wings divine!  
Soon mingled with thy fathers thou shalt shine  
A star amid the starry throng,  
A God the Gods among.<sup>116</sup>

Here the Stellar transformation has been successfully completed. In this vision of eternity, the speaker soars in shamanic fashion to the highest heavens, where he revels in a complete self-knowledge (“Know then thyself”) and thrusts himself into a state of equality with the divine. The latter dynamic in particular pushes this poem beyond its Christian precedents and activates an older lineage. One element on which I want to focus is the split between the addressor “I” and the soul, the addressee. (This division of the self into a multiplicity of psychospiritual bodies is discussed more fully in the chapter on Walt Whitman.) The soul, with its wings divine, has metamorphosed into an *Akh*, a glorious spirit-body that makes its home in the higher reaches of the cosmic realm. Taking the place of the car of immortal Night from the beginning of the poem, it is the new vehicle of consciousness that facilitates an achieved immortality for the initiate. As I have said before, part of the Stellar mystery includes learning the secret of fathering oneself, so it is no surprise to find the speaker mingling with his fathers and becoming one of them “amid the starry throng.” The joining of the fathers is another motif that can be found foreshadowed in the Pyramid Texts. Utterance 373 says, “The gatekeeper comes out to you, he grasps your hand, / Takes you into heaven, to your father Geb... / Sets you before the spirits, the Imperishable Stars.”

As one can see, the initiate here raises himself into the cosmic landscape and crafts a subtle divine body, an illuminated vehicle that journeys through celestial regions and fuses with Stellar powers to bring them to earth. This Stellar path of initiation endows him with knowledge of the nature of the gods, in addition to the ability to absorb their forces and become incorporated in their universe. This is clearly far from the overt Christianity Coleridge professes in the notebooks, letters, etc., and the Egyptian framework provided here helps trace the movements and developments of the poem. Some of Coleridge’s other early poems can be read with the same lens, particularly “To the Evening Star,” which expresses a preparatory longing that perhaps precedes “A Greek

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<sup>115</sup> Lns. 8:3, 6-7, 8-9.

<sup>116</sup> Lns. 9:1-8



Ode on Astronomy”: “Then Hope perchance might fondly sigh to join / Her spirit in thy kindred orb, O star benign!”<sup>117</sup>

## II. Solar Cycle – “Kubla Khan”

Now I turn to Coleridge’s poem *Kubla Khan* in order to provide a reading of its engagement with a Solar path of transformation. Unlike the Stellar cycle, which was felt to disclose a reality of eternal, luminous duration, the Solar cycle was closely linked with the dynamics of social order, regeneration, and political stability, as the daily cycle of the sun was deeply experienced as a process that regularly sustained the world and prevented chaos. Through the technology of ritual, it was believed to be possible to tap into that solar energy in order to establish an achieved totality of human action, universal process, sociopolitical function, and deific power. In a manner reminiscent of the sun’s triumph over darkness every day (breaking forth in the east after the daily tragedy of setting in the west), so too could Pharaoh conquer his foes, the rule of law reign over disorder, the sick find renewal, and the deceased be continuously revived. As one can see, the evocation of the Solar firmly bound together cosmic work with multiple dimensions of existence – the political, social, individual, and even post-mortem.<sup>118</sup>

The preface of *Kubla Khan*, which is an integral part of the poem, begins Coleridge’s initiation into the Solar mysteries. Turning to Coleridge’s account of the composition of the poem, one finds: “The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*.”<sup>119</sup> The initiatory consciousness that Coleridge has slipped into here<sup>120</sup> – where the external senses are quieted (suggesting the internal ones are activated) – is linked to his account of the inspiration that came from ancient sleep temples:

I allude to the sleeps in the temple of [Aesculapius] and [Serapis] and other deities, but more especially those of Egyptian and Phoenician origin. We find in the Greek historians of the empire that it was habitual where persons could afford it to travel to those temples, where they prevailed on the priests to throw them into a charmed sleep, where they prescribed medicines for themselves, and the god appeared to them...<sup>121</sup>

Both Asclepius and Serapis were important Hellenistic solar figures. Presiding over the techniques of healing, Asclepius in Greek mythology was the son of Apollo, and he was associated with the Egyptian master physician, vizier, and architect Imhotep, a polymath

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<sup>117</sup> Lns. 13-14.

<sup>118</sup> See Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, trans. A. Jenkins (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002), 208: “In the governmental and political dimension of rule, the salutary aspect of the circuit of the sun lies in its affirmation of order over chaos through the victory of light over darkness and motion over standstill. In the social dimension, the salutary meaning of the course of the sun lies in the love with which god infuses the world. On the individual plane, it is the cycle of death and rebirth, aging and rejuvenation that makes the course of the sun the model of hope for the hereafter.”

<sup>119</sup> Coleridge, *Poems* 163.

<sup>120</sup> Most precisely, the “profound sleep” of Coleridge is aided by an anodyne, but drugs have been used since pre-historic times to invoke visionary states. See Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception: The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals* (New York: Sentient Publications, 2003).

<sup>121</sup> Coleridge, *Lectures 1818-1819: On the History of Philosophy*, ed. J. Jackson, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 444.

who was also the high priest of Ra at Onnu (Heliopolis). Serapis was often depicted as a bull with the solar disk and uraeus between its horns. Their spectacular appearance to initiates led to an enlargement of personal power that allowed people to “prescribe medicine for themselves.” This regeneration, as we will see, is pertinent not only for the individual, but for the entire community and state as well.

Sleep, with its relinquishing of waking consciousness, was sometimes interpreted by the ancient Egyptians as a descent into an imaginal realm that was named the *Tuat* (also spelled *Duat* and *Dwat*), a daily land of death from which one hoped to emerge.<sup>122</sup> It is the region through which the sun and those who identified with it travel from the darkness into the light, or from night into the day. It is a solar shadow world of sorts, as it encompasses the invisible and visible circuits of the Sun. The *Tuat* can also be conceptualized as the lower hemisphere, in reference to the cosmic depths of the natural world where the Sun is perceived as passing after it sets in the western horizon. By peering into this realm with his internal senses, Coleridge receives an intricately connected complex of esoteric images that simply rose up before him – including the sacred river, caverns, pleasure-dome, war, a wailing woman, a singing maid, a mountain, transfigurative speech, and flashing eyes – to use for the same restorative purposes as did the ancient parishioners he discusses.

In order to understand the power of these images and the work they perform, I will place them within a tradition of a much older complex of sacred symbols underlying a Solar path of transformation that emerges from ancient Egypt. Deployed in tomb and pyramid construction, royal iconography, and temple and funerary rites, the Solar complex is most vividly expressed in ancient Egyptian history from the First Intermediate Period (2160-2055 BCE) to the beginning of the New Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE). In textual form, one can see it expressed in writings as various as *The Coffin Texts*, *The Book of Gates*, and *The Litany of Ra*.<sup>123</sup> This complex of sacred symbols constitutes a large virtual archive of sorts, from which symbols can be recombined and reconfigured for different purposes.

For the purposes of simplifying the task at hand, I will attempt to outline some of the parameters of the Solar path of transformation by focusing on how sacred symbols are organized in a text called *The Am-Tuat* (alternatively known as *The Book of What is In the Tuat* and *The Book of Hidden Chambers*).<sup>124</sup> Dating from around 1500 BCE, this text is particularly distinguished because it is the first illuminated book (or graphic novel if you will) in world history, and in the words of Erik Hornung, it is the first “scientific publication” of humankind, mapping the dangers and regenerative capabilities of the night-world.<sup>125</sup> Divided into three registers of text, illustrations, and captions, *The Am-Tuat* traces the path of a barque containing various figures representing aspects of the sun

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<sup>122</sup> E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. J. Baines (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982) 179-183.

<sup>123</sup> *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, trans. R. Faulkner (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 2004). References to this work throughout this project will be to chapter, instead of page, numbers. “The Book of Gates,” vol. 2, *The Egyptian Heaven and Hell*, trans. W. Budge (Mineola: Dover, 1996). *The Litany of Ra*, trans. A. Piankoff (NY: Pantheon Books, 1964).

<sup>124</sup> In this chapter, I am using Wallis Budge’s translation: “The Am-Tuat,” vol. 1, *The Egyptian Heaven and Hell* (Mineola: Dover, 1996). Interestingly enough, Budge also translated the thirteenth-century Syriac document *The History of Yaballaha III and Rabban Sauma* in a book he entitled *The Monks of Kublai Khan: Emperor of China* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010).

<sup>125</sup> Hornung, *The Egyptian Amduat* (Zurich: Living Human Heritage Publications, 2003), jacket.

god Ra as it travels from setting to rising on a celestial river through twelve regions, which simultaneously represent the twelve hours of the night, the divisions of the zodiac, the interior region of the cosmos (the world of inwardness referred to as *Weltinnenraum* by the German poet Rainer Rilke), the unconscious, and the realm of the dead. Wallis Budge informs his readers in *The Egyptian Heaven and Hell*: “At one place the river of the Tuat joined the great celestial waters which were supposed to form the source of the earthly Nile.”<sup>126</sup> The celestial river, in other words, is a mirror of the famous Nile.

Just as *The Am-Tuat* focuses primarily on outlining the topography of alternative experiential spaces, organized around a sacred river, so too does “Kubla Khan.” In Coleridge’s text, the river’s name is Alph, which simultaneously enfolds within itself references to Alpheus, the sacred river of Greece; cabalistic speculation about the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph; the first letter of the Greek alphabet, Alpha; the Nile River; and more. John Lowes, in his *The Road to Xanadu*, expertly charts the uncanny resemblances between hundreds of years of speculation and legends about the Nile River – by figures ranging from Herodotus to Athanasius Kircher, Father Pedro Paez, the Thomases Maurice and Burnet, James Bruce, and others – and the details of “Kubla Khan.” He says, “The image of the sacred river, then, which rose up before Coleridge as a *thing*, was a dream-picture, foreshortened and reversed as if it lay in an enchanted crystal, of the tremendous Odyssey of the legendary Nile.”<sup>127</sup> This Odyssey was not merely a terrestrial one, as the river was linked to celestial waterways that branched out into the outer reaches of the Milky Way and otherworldly tributaries that traversed the Tuat.

Throughout “Kubla Khan,” we follow the circuit of the river from origin to end, and like the celestial river of *The Am-Tuat*, it mirrors the cyclical circuit of the sun. The reader is presented with a “deep romantic chasm,” from which “a mighty fountain momentarily was forced.”<sup>128</sup> This powerful scene, where boulders are tossed about like hail or grain, is akin to a birth, and its spasmodic force also seems to capture the vigorous daily emergence of the sun from the depths every morning. This is not the only place Coleridge has linked the quest for origins, fountains, and the Nile. In an excerpt from his *Notebooks*, he says, “N. B. to make a detailed comparison in the manner of Jerome Taylor between the searching for the first Cause of a Thing and the seeking the fountains of the Nile – so many streams each with their junction, etc., etc. – at last, it all comes to a name –.”<sup>129</sup>

The sacred river that emerges from the earth meanders for five miles and then plunges into “caverns measureless to man, / And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean.”<sup>130</sup> This lifeless ocean – or realm of the dead – is also referred to earlier in the poem as a “sunless sea,” and it is an excellent moniker for the imaginal realm to which the sun disappears at the end of the day and illuminates (a realm which truly is “measureless” as there is no empirically quantifiable limit to the internality of the self or cosmos).<sup>131</sup> The major questions of the poem then become in this reading: How can one bridge the

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<sup>126</sup> Budge, *Egyptian Heaven* 3:89.

<sup>127</sup> John Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu* (NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1927) 392.

<sup>128</sup> Lns. 12, 19.

<sup>129</sup> Coleridge, *Notebooks*, ed. K. Coburn, vol. 1 (NY: Pantheon books, 1957) 1056.

<sup>130</sup> Lns. 27-28.

<sup>131</sup> Ln. 5.

caverns back around to the fountain, thus ensuring the continuation of life? Will the circle be unbroken, and hence allow for a certain type of stability and immortality, or will the cycle lapse into defeat, leading to destruction?

The purpose of *The Am-Tuat* is to show the way to prevent the latter from happening. Following Andreas Schweizer's *The Sungod's Journey through the Netherworld: Reading the Ancient Egyptian Amduat*, I will break down the development of this journey into five stages, which are useful as a guiding rubric to further our exploration of Coleridge's poem.<sup>132</sup> The first stage, encompassing the first to third hours, presents a vision of paradise. The sun god Ra passes through abundant, fruitful watery worlds, greeted by all with jubilant adoration. This vision is an opening encounter with an image of a holistic totality that is a harbinger of the end of the journey and one that propels the journey towards its conclusion.

Coleridge similarly stations a paradisiacal image at the opening of his poem. Filled with lush forests and "sunny spots of greenery," Kubla Khan's polity encloses the site the sacred river's circulation, as if he seeks to memorialize a microcosmic example of the macrocosmic solar dynamic he wants to engage for the purpose of sustaining his utopian realm.<sup>133</sup> The "stately" pleasure-dome, a center of this space, is a machine for developing this divine energy.<sup>134</sup> As we will see through the course of the poem, it is a stage on which meetings are enacted between various deific powers and the initiate of the poem, and it is the locus from which cosmic energy radiates outward toward the land and people.

John Beer, one of the few critics who has examined Coleridge's work in the light of Egypto-hermetic traditions, explains that the pleasure-dome falls into a deep tradition of "sun-worship and pantheism" and that there is a long history of sun-worshippers building similar enclosed cities sacred to the sun.<sup>135</sup> (We should clarify that "worship" does not signify a primitive mode of thought here, but an active participatory engagement in cosmic life.) He mentions, for example, Onnu (Heliopolis) on the banks of the Nile, whose very name according to seventeenth-century English mythographer Jacob Bryant (with whose work Coleridge was familiar) means "fountain of the Sun."<sup>136</sup> Bryant also points out that the Alpheus, described earlier as an important Greek river, was sacred to the sun, traversed a region with an enclosed sun-city.<sup>137</sup> To think about the connection between domes and solar dynamics, Beer turns to late eighteenth-century oriental scholar and historian Thomas Maurice, who contributes that domes were the "epitome of the universe itself in which all the phenomena of nature [predominantly the solar circuit and the orbits of planets and the zodiac] should be exhibited at one glance to the astonished spectator" and their function was "to admit the fountain of life."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Schweizer, *The Sungod's Journey* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010). Schweizer's book also helpfully notes that *The Am-Tuat* was influential for millennia, providing the model for an entire genre of Egyptian literature that persisted into the Greco-Roman era, with its symbols and themes permeating hermetic tractates, gnostic texts, alchemical treatises, and early Christian portrayals of the beyond (all of which Coleridge was intimately familiar). See his chapter "Immersion into Darkness."

<sup>133</sup> Ln. 11.

<sup>134</sup> Ln. 2.

<sup>135</sup> J. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959) 217-223.

<sup>136</sup> Bryant, *Observations and Inquiries* (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1767), 114.

<sup>137</sup> Bryant, *Analysis of Ancient Mythology*, vol. I (NY: Garland Pub., 1979) 243-44.

<sup>138</sup> Maurice, *Indian Antiquities*, vol. III (London: W. Richardson, 1794) 504, 516.

Coleridge's presentation of Xanadu, resonating strongly with a plethora of important historical sites and radiating outward from there, is a political act in that it serves the purpose of, in his own words, "keeping life in the highest conceivable state of energy," giving the "hope of discovering an universal remedy," and "animating the universe."<sup>139</sup> This vision of paradise is meant to seize the reader,<sup>140</sup> and by provoking a reorientation to cosmic cycles, it compels a new utopian realm to emerge from an implicate state through the "magical power of the imagination."<sup>141</sup>

The second stage of the sun's journey through night as described by *The Am-Tuat* in the fourth and fifth hours deals with the healing quality of the dark. The existence of evil is explicitly thematized for the first time, and the sun god becomes powerless as the journey increases in difficulty. The solar barque reaches a dry, desert realm and encounters dark zig-zag pathways that are hard to navigate. We get a glimpse for the first time of the corpse of the sun god, which is taken for protection to a place called the cavern of Sokar that seems to represent the regenerative possibilities of the abyss (recall here Coleridge's "caverns measureless to man"). Darkness and melancholy reign as the depths are fully explored before the supreme moment of transformation.

The notes of chaos and disorder are sounded in "Kubla Khan" by the looming "ancestral voices prophesying war" that Kubla hears amid the tumult of the cosmic river and the "woman wailing for her demon-lover."<sup>142</sup> These details can be explained with recourse to the political mythology of the Isis/Osiris myth cycle. Isis is the paradigmatic wailing woman, and she can be seen in the third hour of *The Am-Tuat* as "She-who- weeps," "She-who-mourns," and "She-who-wails." Her brother-husband Osiris was murdered and dismembered by their sibling Set, who should be read as a hypostatization of the forces of negativity and entropy. Isis traveled over the entire Egyptian landscape mourning and searching for the limbs Set had strewn about. At each location where she found a portion of his body, she erected a monument memorializing the space, and in this way Osiris' body served as the literal ground of the unity of the state. In reassembling the body, Isis found all of the fragments except the phallus. As she embodies a principle of fruition, it is not surprising that she creates a simulacrum of it, animates the dead body, and becomes pregnant with her son Horus, whom she secretly raises in the marshes of the Nile to avoid Set's attention.

As Horus matures, he comes into his own as the Anthropocosmos, or Idealized Man, and mediator between the deities and humanity. He is the rising Sun/Son (often identified with Ra) who avenges the dead father, and he challenges Set for the right to the throne, leading to several challenges both physical and legal that are synonymous with the war that is prophesied for Kubla by "ancestral voices." Like Horus, Kubla is a solar figure whose kingship and establishment of law is primarily a metaphor for spiritual aspiration and attainment.

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<sup>139</sup> Coleridge, *The Philosophical Lectures* (NY: Philosophical Library, 1949) 282. These phrases come from Coleridge's description of a range of esoteric thinkers including Boehme, Agrippa, Bruno, and Pythagoras. His description of these visionaries provides a perfect summary of his own work.

<sup>140</sup> Here I return to John Beer, who says, "Crystalline and drowsy by turns, the poem, as a verbal structure, exists in a total mood of dreamy enchantment." Coleridge, *Poems*, ed. Beer (London: Everyman's Library, 1963) 166.

<sup>141</sup> This phrase comes from Anya Taylor, *Magic and English Romanticism* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1979) 104.

<sup>142</sup> Lns. 30, 16.

These personages are connected to each other through a plethora of other solar ruling figures. In an important section of eighteenth-century critic William Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*, he discusses the ascription of divinity to kings and law-givers, and he notes that Genghis Khan was the last of "the Race of these inspired Lawgivers" and dubbed a "son of the Sun" by his mother.<sup>143</sup> From Warburton's title, one can see that Moses is also placed in this divine tradition. Coleridge agrees and says that Moses was "beyond doubt a man of great intellectual powers naturally, a Man of commanding Genius: and his natural powers & gifts called forth and improved by the highest cultivation known in that age of the World, (Learned in all the learning of Egypt)."<sup>144</sup> Coleridge here follows a long tradition that sees Moses as an initiate in Egyptian mysteries, and many scholars have also noted connections between the narratives surrounding the births of Horus and Moses (who is also hidden in a reed basket on the Nile to avoid the persecution of the Set-like Pharaoh).<sup>145</sup> Coleridge's description of Moses applies to Kubla Khan as well. His natural powers and gifts are not only called forth by high cultivation, but also seek to call forth solar energy in order to maintain the "decree" that first established the sacred polity of Xanadu.<sup>146</sup> We get the intimations of his participation in ritual throughout the poem from the "incense-bearing trees" to the "holy and enchanted" landscape.<sup>147</sup> Yet can his work overcome the note of disharmony at play in the poem at this stage? Will the process of reconstruction take place, or will the woman wail forever? What will be the outcome of the war to be fought?

The next stage of the nightly journey of the sun-god – worked through in hours six and seven of *The Am-Tuat* – revolves around the reconciliation of opposites. During the sixth hour (the middle of the night where the journey has reached the absolute depth of the underworld), a tremendously significant event occurs – the mystical union of the sun with the mummified body of Osiris, the embodied principle of recurrence and resurrection. This event is the point at which the sun begins its regeneration, life is renewed and totality restored. However, it is also a moment of danger because in hour seven a demonic, serpentine figure named Apep (an avatar of Set who also represents opposition and negativity) arises to challenge the movement of renewed Light, only to be overcome "by means of the words of power of Isis."<sup>148</sup>

As we have seen, Kubla Khan's role throughout the poem is to keep the circuit of light intact, protected from forces of death and fixation, and thereby embody within himself the fusion of day and night – light and dark forces in the celestial sphere and the harmonization of order and chaos in the terrestrial realm. This fusion of light and dark is expressed in the very structure of poem itself. Every negative symbol in the poem is matched with a restorative one. Every descent into the depths is followed by a triumphant rise. The prophecy of war that Kubla hears is immediately overturned in the following stanza, where from the same river Kubla Khan does not hear tumult but the

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<sup>143</sup> Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, vol. 1 (NY: Garland Publishing, 1978) 103 and note.

<sup>144</sup> *Notebooks*, ed. K. Coburn, vol. 5 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002) 6309.

<sup>145</sup> See the work of Gary Rendsburg, particularly *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (NY: Norton & Co., 1997).

<sup>146</sup> Ln. 2

<sup>147</sup> Lns. 9, 14.

<sup>148</sup> Budge, *Egyptian Heaven and Hell*, 1:140.

“mingled measures / From the fountain and the caves.”<sup>149</sup> In other words, the circuit of light has been continued. The sacred river has been brought from the abyss of the caves back to the originary point of the fountain. This happened so quickly that one can only say with Coleridge that “it was a miracle of rare device,” and one can interpret the stanza break between these two sections as being the moment where the Khan carries on this war, a period of bleakness that Coleridge does not deign to represent fully (as he will in other poems like “Christabel” with its labored march of solar protagonist and serpentine villain Geraldine through gate, court, hall, stair, and chamber door).<sup>150</sup> Everything becomes counterpoised in harmony – the sunny dome and the caves of ice, the dome and the waves.

This duality of dark and light is also carried into the poem’s representations of Isis. In contrast to the negative version of her as the “woman wailing for her demon-lover,” Coleridge juxtaposes a positive vision of her as the “Abyssinian maid” playing on a dulcimer and “singing of Mount Abora,” which recalls iconographic representations of Isis playing the sacred sistrum (which Coleridge would have found in his reading of Plutarch and Apuleius).<sup>151</sup> Critics from many different eras of Coleridge criticism have made arguments about the symbolic meaning of Mount Abora. Leslie Brisman understands the meaning of Abora in the context of speculation about origins.<sup>152</sup> Others link Mount Abora to the Abyssinian Mount Amara found in Milton’s poetry.<sup>153</sup> I want to think not so much about the name “Abora,” but about the power of the symbolic image of the mountain itself, which strengthens the Solar reading I am providing of this poem. *Djew* is the ancient Egyptian word for “mountain,” and its hieroglyphic sign is drawn as two rounded hills (or “pleasure-domes” one might say) with a valley in between them. While this sign could depict two individual peaks in any mountain range, it approximated the mountainous land that bordered both sides of the Nile valley. It also bore a cosmic significance, as the Egyptians visualized a universal mountain split into a western peak and an eastern peak which served as the supports for heaven. Each peak was protected by a lion deity, who guarded the rising and setting sun which traveled directly between them. One can speculate, then, that the singing of Mount Abora (as a meditation on origins) is a celebration of the imaginative power brought by the renewed sun.

Politically, what does this reconciliation of opposites mean? Again I turn to Coleridge’s own words to interpret his work. In describing the philosophy of sixteenth-century Italian hermeticist Giordano Bruno, he echoes his poetic practice:

It was in a belief that every being, however apparently inanimate, had a life if it could be called forth, and that all along that was called but the law of likeness. In short, the groundwork of their philosophy was the law of likeness, arising from what is called the polar principle (that is that in order to manifest itself every power must appear in two opposites but

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<sup>149</sup> Lns. 33-34.

<sup>150</sup> Ln. 35.

<sup>151</sup> Lns. 39, 41.

<sup>152</sup> He says, “Even in its purely linguistic associations, ‘Abora’ points to first things. Coleridge, who was fascinated by the way the Hebrew *ab-ba* seems to father language (the sounds bringing forth the alphabet) as well as signify ‘father,’ delighted generally in the potential insights of word-sources.” “Coleridge and the Ancestral Voices,” *The Georgia Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1975): 474.

<sup>153</sup> L. Cooper, “The Abyssinian Paradise in Coleridge and Milton,” *Modern Philology* vol. 3, no. 3 (Jan. 1906): 327-32.

these two opposites having a ground of identity were constantly striving to reunite, but not being permitted to pass back to their original state, which would amount to annihilation, they pressed forward and the two formed a third something)...<sup>154</sup>

In calling forth the ideal state, Coleridge conjures symbols of war and wailing women only to overturn them. The chaos inherent in these images is necessary to signal a shift in framing worldviews and structures. They emblemize the dissolution of old structures and a complete breakdown that allows the forces of renewal to flourish. The forces of annihilation are acknowledged and respected, while countered with forces of generation, which allows a new state to press forward.

This realization of the new happens in the fourth stage outlined by *The Am-Tuat* from the eighth to eleventh hours. In the eighth hour, for example, a theme of new clothing is emphasized, and this investiture is the explicit symbol of physical, psychic, and spiritual renewal. In the tenth hour, the *utchat* (the name for the Solar Eye and the Eye of Horus) is rescued and regenerated.<sup>155</sup>

With the singing of Mount Abora in “Kubla Khan,” the poem moves toward its rapturous conclusion. The initiate proclaims: “Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song... / I would build that dome in air.”<sup>156</sup> “Revive” is the key word here, as the goal of the initiatory process the poem outlines with its specific combination of images, metaphors, and reveries is the regeneration of life. The work of Isis would be complete if only the protagonist could revive her song within himself. Not only would this be a restoration of Osiris in the form of Horus, but a restoration of the state his broken body supports.

I also interpret the call for revival as a plea for the reconstruction of the tradition of symbolic science explicated here. As shown earlier, Coleridge believes in an unbroken esoteric tradition that stretches from the ancient world to his own historical moment. He positions himself as the latest member of it, not through his simple regurgitation of others, but through the power of his own meditation and perception into the inner sense of things. In his comments written in the margins of Jacob Rhenferd’s *Opera Philologica*, he scribbled:

In my own instance, I solemnly bear witness and declare that every Idea, Law, or Principle, in which I coincide with the Cabbala, or the School of Plotinus, or the Christian Gnostics, or the Mystics of the middle Ages from Hugo de Sancto Victore to Tauler, or the Protestant Masters of the interior way, as Behmen, Zinzendorf &c, [and here we could add the

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<sup>154</sup> Coleridge, *Philosophical Lectures* 323.

<sup>155</sup> Budge, *Egyptian Heaven and Hell*, 3: 221: “To these goddesses who make the reckoning of his Eye for Horus in the Tuat, Ra saith:--‘Make ye strong your spirits by means of [your] strength, and make the reckoning of his Eye for Horus, stablish ye his Eye for Horus, and make ye Horus to unite himself to his emanation (or, to that which floweth from his eyes), praise ye Horus by reason of his Eye...and utter ye your words on behalf of Horus, O ye who cause to come into being the becomings of created things.’ The work which they do in the Tuat is to utter words on behalf of his Eye for Horus, and to cause radiant splendour to proceed from it each day.”

<sup>156</sup> Lns. 42-43, 46.



Egyptian *Am-Tuat* -- MR] I *recognized* in them, as truths already known by me in my own meditation.<sup>157</sup>

In other words, Coleridge has revived an entire tradition within himself, and through his poetry he encourages his readers to do the same, as his readers take on the position of the “I” as they read. By reconstructing this tradition, the initiate of this poem has learned with precision the sacramental and transfigurative speech that can intervene effectively in cosmic process. In “building the dome in air,” the creative and governing functions of the sun have been mobilized for establishing the full harmonization of the polity with the cosmos, and the soteriological meaning of daily sunrise has been fully captured and articulated.

The final stage culminates in hour twelve, and it is here that the transformation is complete. The originary moment of the creation of the cosmos is repeated, the sun god is reborn, and he emerges to triumphant rejoicing (although it is mixed with sadness for Osiris who remains in the realm of the dead). The fruits of the progress of this journey are made clear in the last lines of “Kubla Khan” with the initiate’s illumination: “And all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair! / Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes with holy dread, / For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise.”<sup>158</sup> There is much to explicate in these dense lines.

The “flashing eyes” are one sign of the initiate’s assumption of occult powers, and some variant of them returns in other poems like “Christabel” and “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” It is possible to historicize this image in reference to the Eye of Horus and the Eye of Ra, symbols whose iconography are so complex that I can only give a cursory summary of them here. As a sky deity, Horus’ eyes were said to be the moon and the sun. In the great battle between him and Set, Set emblematically ripped out Horus’ left eye (a narrative that in part relates to the waxing and waning of the moon). After Thoth restores Horus’ eye (in itself, a triumph of order over chaos), it is known as the *utchat* eye because it becomes a symbol for a state of soundness and perfection. According to George Hart, it symbolizes a plethora of ideas ranging from the strength of the monarch to the concept of kingship, a unit of measurement, protection against destruction, and purification.<sup>159</sup> The Eye of Ra was a negative counterpart to the Eye of Horus, as it was linked to the destructive heat of the sun and fierce warrior goddesses like Sekhmet. The eye, therefore, is not a passive sense organ, but one that is full of power. It is an agent of action, protection, or wrath (hence, the many traditions about the “evil eye”). The initiate here, with his flashing eyes, is full of this cosmic power, which is why others are warned to “Beware!” Because he has joined the body of the sun in order to liberate its energy for the sustenance of the state, one has to close one’s eyes when beholding him and protect oneself apotropaically (of course, the circle that is weaved to do this is also linked to solar imagery).

To explain the injunction to “Beware!” in a slightly different manner, any act of new creation and becoming manifest is joined by the necessity with the dissolution and sacrifice of the old, a process still in the midst of happening as we the contemporary readers are included in the “all” of the poem who act as viewers and hearers and who

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<sup>157</sup> Coleridge, *Marginalia*, ed. G. Whalley, vol. 4. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998) 258-59.

<sup>158</sup> Lns. 49-54.

<sup>159</sup> Hart, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses* (NY: Routledge, 1986) 93.

weave the circle of community together. Transitions of this sort are often painful, especially until readers realize that they too can partake of the transformation undergone by this illuminated figure. Coleridge says in a reading of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy, “There were mysteries; powers higher than those means [of the intellect], by which they could be united positively with the Deity, and live in him, and in that state partake at once of his omniscience and omnipresence.”<sup>160</sup> It is this positive unification that is explored in “Kubla Khan,” and its success leads to life in a state (both in the political and metaphysical sense) where the engagement with deific and cosmic force leads to the maintenance of natural order – free from the threats of chaos – and the enlargement of personal power. It is in this state that one drinks the milk of Paradise, or in other words, absorbs the powers of organic intelligence through an awakening of innate consciousness.

In a field of time that emulates the Sun’s revolution through the heavens, the initiate has fused with the restorative power symbolized by the solar light and been offered a new wisdom – knowledge of cosmic order and induction into a social pattern based on that order. Through highly subtle symbolic means, “Kubla Khan” arcs toward the future revival of that social order and the sacred science that supports its functioning. The esoteric background outlined here helps contextualize in a more thorough sense Coleridgean projects such as Pantisocracy, a radical egalitarian community planned in 1794 with fellow poet Robert Southey to be established on the banks of the Susquehanna River. David Levy is correct in placing this project in a tradition of “Hermetic social engineering,”<sup>161</sup> but Dennis Low is more to the point when he notes that it was “designed as a kind of solar energy source for universal, philanthropic benevolence.”<sup>162</sup> The complexities of this engagement with solar energy, which runs through many facets of Coleridge’s career, still remain to be fully explicated, yet it is clear that Egyptian traditions of initiation and sacred science provide transdisciplinary paradigms that can push forward our understanding of literature’s engagement with political and cosmic spheres, its contribution toward supporting the evolution of consciousness, its animation of the world at large, and its augmentation and transformation of life itself.

## **VII. Lunar path – “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”**

In the fourth section of Coleridge’s poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, there is a gloss attached to the main text of the poem:

In his loneliness and fixedness [the Ancient Mariner] yearneth towards the journeying Moon, and the stars that still sojourn, yet still move onward; and every where the blue sky belongs to them, and is their appointed rest, and their native country and their own natural homes, which they enter unannounced, as lords that are certainly expected and yet there is a silent joy at their arrival.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Coleridge, *Philosophical Lectures* 295.

<sup>161</sup> Levy, *The Economic Ideas of Ordinary People: From Preferences to Trade* (NY: Routledge, 1992) 217.

<sup>162</sup> Low, rev. of *Coleridge and the Idea of Friendship, 1789-1804*, by Gurion Taussig, *British Association for Romantic Studies Bulletin and Review*, no. 26 (March 2005): 5.

<sup>163</sup> Coleridge, *Poems* 180.

In this section, I analyze how *The Rime* invokes and participates in a Lunar path of transformation.<sup>164</sup> This quest to the journeying Moon, however, is not without its complications, and unlike Coleridge's earlier jaunts to the sky, as expressed in *The Greek Ode on Astronomy*, its success is much more limited and problematic.

With phases of growth and hibernation becoming the metaphors of spiritual experience, Lunar symbolism emerged in ancient Egypt as the foundation for a path of transformation in the New Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE) and continued until the Late Period (664-332 BCE). This path concerned organic transformation through an identification with natural life, and its knowledge was transmitted through the funerary rites of the House of the Dead, meaning that everyone who died participated in it to some extent. The Lunar path is represented by Osiris, who embodies the principle of awakening through the cycles of organic experience.<sup>165</sup> Commemorated in the temple and tomb, his death, restoration, and renewal are metaphors of all organic life, subject to cyclic law but nevertheless transcending it by virtue of its power of continuance. In the mythic narrative, Osiris is resurrected to govern timeless time, the world of the past and future. This attainment is reprised by the deceased (or "Osirified"), who transcend the temporal world and "go forth" into the next. Those who follow Osiris relive his passage through complex zones and regions of shadowy worlds, each of which presents an archetypal challenge to one's spiritual inheritance and simultaneously mirror earthly geography and the phases of the moon in intricate ways. The transformations assumed by Osiris and his surrogates through these processes represent the limitless manifestations of his power in the natural world, passed on to the individual soul in the form of continuous adaptation and regeneration – the power of reoccurrence. These regions pose many dangers to the sojourner, but in each phase of the journey they also awaken latent powers that mortal life had veiled with the envelope of the body. Now freed of this impediment, the soul can progress toward the perfect state attained by Osiris, receive the reward of his sacrifice and the promise of his perpetual existence, and partake of "higher" forms of earthly emotion and material benefits than those experienced in one's previous life on earth.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> There are Solar elements in this poem as well. Humphry House states, "It has been remarked for some time that the evil and disaster in the poem occur under the light of the sun, and the different phases of the redemption occur under the light of the moon. And Mr. Warren has developed this 'symbolism of the two lights' further than it had been taken before." "The Ancient Mariner," *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. by M.H. Abrams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 227. However, even when the sun appears in the poem, it is "No bigger than the Moon," which I interpret to mean that Lunar elements dominates this poem's cosmos.

<sup>165</sup> Plutarch provides an astro-mathematical reading of Osiris linking him to the moon in his *Moralia*: "The Egyptians have a legend that the end of Osiris' life came on the 17th of the month, on which day it is quite evident to the eye that the period of the full moon is over. Because of this the Pythagoreans call this day 'the Barrier,' and utterly abominate this number...Some say that the years of Osiris' life... were 28; for that is the number of the moon's illuminations, and in that number of days does she complete her cycle." "Isis and Osiris," *Moralia*, trans. Frank Babbitt (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2005) 42.

<sup>166</sup> See E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead (The Papyrus of Ani)* (New York: Dover, 1967) 110: "Here begin the chapters of the Sekhet-Hetepu, and the chapters of coming forth by day, and of going into and of coming out from the underworld, and of arriving in the Sekhet-Aanru, and of being in peace in the great city wherein are fresh breezes: Let me have power there. Let me become strong to plough there. Let me reap there. Let me eat there. Let me drink there...And let me do all these things there, even as they are done upon earth...I have power over my mouth, being furnished with charms; let not the fiends get the

One can see this path vividly outlined in a collection of New Kingdom spells commonly known as *The Book of the Dead*, but more accurately translated as *The Book of Coming Forth By Day* or *The Book of Emerging Forth into Light*. These spells guide the soul through its judgment, as it is balanced with its earthly past and freed of its physical exigencies, after which the pleasures of earthly existence are continuously dispensed. Lunar stages of incubation and transformation are described as the initiate becomes “Osirified” and his physical nature is elevated. Continuity of consciousness between these states or transitions is the final aim.

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* offers an visionary cosmos, and as the ship on which the Ancient Mariner departs heads down toward the South Pole, it meets a “STORM-BLAST” that propels it over the threshold of “the Line” into an imaginal realm, a land of mist and snow containing no one other than the crew of the ship, ice as green as emerald surrounding them, and indeterminate spiritual beings.<sup>167</sup> This quest into the imaginal is also a quest for origins, and John Lowes’ *The Road to Xanadu* documents how closely intertwined the journey to the fountains of the Nile (which influenced the creation of “Kubla Khan”) was in Coleridge’s mind with the voyage to the poles. It is here that the phantasmagoria of the poem begins to unfold, catalyzed by the Mariner’s murder of the Albatross.

In Robert Penn Warren’s canonical essay “A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading,” he says, “We cannot blandly pass by such a crucial event as the shooting of the Albatross with merely a literal reading...the kind of reading which makes the bird but a bird; the bird has a symbolic role in a symbolic pattern.”<sup>168</sup> In order to understand the literary iconography and symbolic texture of the poem, I turn to Coleridge’s notebooks for a clue on how to interpret this albatross. In one of his entries, he says, “There is a right use of Egyptian Superstition, that would convert into true Religion – No thing that God has created in the Microcosm but what may be united with some Idea as to become it’s Symbol – and the very Beetle and Serpent, with the Hawk and the Ibis may have a place in the Temple & be honored with due worship as so sanctified.”<sup>169</sup> The symbolic science of ancient Egypt, as one can see, is never far from Coleridge’s mind. He maintains a deep symbiotic relationship with it, although he tries to translate it into a more acceptable outward form that he dubs “true Religion.” The question that opens now is – what does the Albatross symbolize? (Along with this, what does the Serpent, mentioned in the excerpt above and also holding an important place in *The Rime*, symbolize?) What Ideas does it unite together? Is the Mariner’s crime a refusal to give the Albatross its “due worship?”

The Albatross, as we will see, is closely linked to the Ibis mentioned in the excerpt from Coleridge, and I will explore its connotations through an unlikely combination of Herodotus and Madame Blavatsky. She explains in *The Secret Doctrine*:

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mastery over me, let them not have dominion over me. May I be equipped in thy Fields of Peace.” All references to this book in this chapter will refer to chapter, not page, numbers.

<sup>167</sup> See the gloss to lines 131-34 (Part II): “A Spirit had followed them; one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels; concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted. They are very numerous, and there is no climate or element without one or more.” Coleridge, *Poems* 176.

<sup>168</sup> R.P. Warren, “A Poem of Pure Imagination: An Experiment in Reading,” *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1951) 221.

<sup>169</sup> Coleridge, *Notebooks* 5, 6851.

The *ibis*, for instance, sacred to Isis, who is often represented with the head of that bird, sacred also to Mercury or Thoth, because that god assumed its form while escaping from Typhon [another name for Set], — the *ibis* was held in the greatest veneration in Egypt. There were two kinds of ibises, Herodotus tells us in that country: one *quite black*, the other black and white. The former is credited with fighting and exterminating the winged serpents which came every spring from Arabia and infested the country. The other was sacred to the moon, because the latter planet is white and brilliant on her external side, dark and black on that side which she never turns to the earth. Moreover, the *ibis* kills land serpents, and makes the most terrible havoc amongst the eggs of the crocodile, and thus saves Egypt from having the Nile infested by those horrible Saurians. The bird is credited with doing so in the moonlight, and thus being helped by *Isis*, as the moon, her sidereal symbol. But the nearer esoteric truth underlying these popular myths is, that Hermes, as shown by Abenephius, watched under the form of that bird over the Egyptians, and taught them the occult arts and sciences. This means simply that the *ibis religiosa* had and has “magical” properties in common with many other birds, the albatross pre-eminently, and the mythical white swan, the swan of Eternity or Time, the Kalahamsa. Were it otherwise, indeed, why should all the ancient peoples, who were no more fools than we are, have had such a superstitious dread of killing certain birds? In Egypt, he who killed an *ibis*, or the golden hawk — the symbol of the Sun and Osiris — risked and could hardly escape death.<sup>170</sup>

While one does not have to accept all of Blavatsky here, there is a lot to take away from this quote.<sup>171</sup> Most obvious for our purposes here is the tie between the *ibis religiosa* and the albatross. It is perfectly fitting for an exploration of the Lunar path of transformation to begin and focus centrally on a bird so important to lunar power. Not only does the bi-colored plumage of the albatross resemble the waning moon, the ancient popular imagination also noticed a resemblance of the curved beak of the ibis to the sickle-crescent of the moon, according to Patrick Boylan.<sup>172</sup>

Even in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the albatross is closely linked to the moon, and they enter the poem together: “In mist or cloud, on mast or shroud, / It perched for vespers nine; / Whiles all the night, through fog-smoke white, / Glimmered the white Moon-shine.”<sup>173</sup> A symbol of the powers of the moon, the destruction of dangerous chthonian forces, and the bringing of occult arts and sciences to the nation, the

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<sup>170</sup> Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Volume I: Cosmogogenesis, ed. Boris de Zirkoff (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1978) 362.

<sup>171</sup> For one, Isis is not *often* represented with the head of an ibis. The only visual representation I have seen linking these two figures is the Orientalist artist Edward Longsdon Long’s (1829-1891) oil painting *Ale the Attendant of the Sacred Ibis in the Temple of Isis* (1888). Furthermore, the binary she establishes, Isis/Osiris=moon/sun, is a bit simplistic. Finally, the golden hawk is usually attributed to Horus, the son of Osiris, who represents the rise of the solar principle.

<sup>172</sup> Boylan, *Thoth, the Hermes of Egypt: A Study of Some Aspects of Theological Thought in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1922) 78.

<sup>173</sup> Lns. I.75-78.

ibis/albatross is clearly a sacred animal of a special order, and the Mariner definitely transgresses in murdering it. Most critics of this poem maintain that the death of one albatross does not justify the brutal series of events that happen in response to it, especially the death of so many innocent sailors. In *The History*, Herodotus provides a counter-position when he says “a man who kills an ibis or a hawk, whether of intent or not, he must die.”<sup>174</sup> With this murder of the albatross, the initiate puts his exploration of this path of transformation in jeopardy by his implicit degradation of the moon, fostering of chaos, and dismissal of needed esoteric knowledge.

Yet at the same time, the albatross is an ambivalent symbol. One might point out that while the birds discussed in the Blavatsky quote are black and both black and white. In the popular imagination, on the other hand, Coleridge’s albatross is completely white (although he never directly says so in the text). For proof of this, we can turn to another text analyzed in this dissertation, Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, and in particular Chapter 42, “The Whiteness of the Whale”: “Bethink thee of the albatross, whence come those clouds of spiritual wonderment and pale dread, in which that white phantom sails in all imaginations? Not Coleridge first threw that spell; but God’s great, unflattering laureate, Nature... I assert, then, that in the wondrous bodily whiteness of the bird chiefly lurks the secret of the spell.”<sup>175</sup> Might the whiteness of the albatross signify a malignant, evil presence, as it does in the case of the white whale Moby Dick? Katherine Tave would support that reading, and in her monograph *The Demon and the Poet: An Interpretation of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” according to Coleridge’s Demonological Sources* she argues that the albatross has diabolical and demonic overtones. She says that “anyone acquainted with the writings of Psellus [the Neoplatonic figure explicitly mentioned by Coleridge in a gloss to section II of the poem] will be aware that, according to that demonologist, one form most frequently taken by aquatic demons when they wish to manifest themselves to the sight of human beings is that of a sea-bird.”<sup>176</sup> Was the Mariner, then, justified in killing the bird? Ancient Egyptian texts shed an interesting light on this question, especially in light of the theme of the transformation of consciousness.

Most importantly, the Lunar transformation is a purgatorial one. Through it, the initiate attempts to free him or herself of all the internal elements that are inconsonant with *Maat* (cosmic harmony). First, negative energy presents itself to or is consciously objectified and visualized by the sojourner as an autonomous force, usually a beast of some sort (such as a group of baboons, crocodiles, wild pigs, or something more hideous that does not have an earthly manifestation). A fierce struggle ensues, in which the opposer wants to steal the initiate’s heart, magic power, or soul – that is, to cut him or her off from all contact with their spiritual source. The aim of the traveler, by contrast, is not to kill or eliminate the opposer, but rather to master it. (Think of the battles between the deific figures Horus and Set discussed in the previous section. Set is never murdered, but has to be conquered daily.) This is often symbolized in the act of “turning the face” of

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<sup>174</sup> Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Greene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 159.

<sup>175</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003) 232.

<sup>176</sup> Tave, *The Demon and the Poet* (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1983) 56.

the beast that opposes travel, which is the crucial thing that the Mariner does not learn how to do.

Chapter 39 of *The Book of the Dead* is called, “A spell for repelling a Rerek-snake,” a creature identified with Apophis, the eternal opponent of Ra. In an illustration, we see that the serpent is turned round and made to go in the direction from which it came, while in the accompanying text the initiate recites the following spell:

Get back! Crawl away! Get away from me you snake... Be far removed from that abode of Re wherein you trembled, for I am Re at whom men tremble; get back, you rebel, at the knives of his light! Your words have fallen because of Re, your face is turned back by the gods... your sentence is carried out by Maat.

The incantation continues with the initiate identifying the snake with Apophis and himself with Ra, or the servant of Ra. Apophis is lassoed, and the initiate sticks knives into key points of its body. It is then turned around so that it faces the direction in which Ra wishes to travel. By murdering the albatross, instead of accomplishing the more difficult feat of “turning the face,” the Mariner does not fulfill his higher purpose and win for himself all the negative energy by which he was initially opposed (if one wants to read the Albatross with a negative valence). And for this reason, he does not travel successfully through this transformation, but stagnates in it.

After the murder of the Albatross, the Mariner faces a panoply of horrific events. He experiences moving through these Lunar imaginal zones (which I will collectively term the Netherworld for the rest of this chapter) as punishment, and he does not have the necessary words of power to traverse through them. The horrors unveiled at this point in the poem include a range of archetypal states of the soul experienced as externalized environments that would not be out of place at all in *The Book of the Dead*. Coleridge participates in this same map-making tradition that seeks to serve as a guide to the unfolding of ever more refined and elevated levels of psychospiritual awareness, and one could say that his poem is influenced by a virtual archive of Egyptian metaphors, conventions, and representations.

For instance, the breeze drops, leaving the Mariner and his shipmates stationary in the middle of the ocean: “Day after day, day after day, / We stuck, nor breath nor motion; / As idle as a painted ship / Upon a painted ocean.”<sup>177</sup> This detail is crucial, as the netherworld is quite often described in Egyptian conceptualizations as an airless place. (See, for example, *The Book of the Dead*: “O Atum, what is this place to which I have gone? For it has no water; it has no air. It is doubly deep, and doubly dark.”<sup>178</sup>) This is because the only air that is breathed there is *Maat* (cosmic harmony/truth). This alone is what sustains the spirit; hence the gods were all regarded as breathing maat, the divine air that pervades the universe. To the extent that one lives oblivious of the divine air, as the Mariner’s actions show him to be, one must experience the Netherworld as suffocating.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Ln. II.115-118.

<sup>178</sup> *Book of the Dead* 175.

<sup>179</sup> Many spells in *The Book of the Dead* speak to this condition and seek to alleviate it. Most important is probably Chapter 59, or the “Spell for breathing air and having power over water in the realm of the dead.” (And keep in mind here that not only does the Mariner have a hard time breathing air, he has no power over water in the poem either.) This spell reads, “O you sycamore of the sky, may there be given to me the air which is in it, for I am he who sought out that throne in the middle of Wenu and I have guarded this Egg of

Furthermore, the Mariner has no control over water – “Water, water, every where, / Nor any drop to drink.”<sup>180</sup> The Book of the Dead also prefigures this calamity and speaks to this condition. Chapter 62, the “Spell for drinking water in the realm of the dead,” says, “May the great water be opened for Osiris, may the cool water of Thoth and the water of Hapi be thrown open for the Lord of the Horizon...May I be granted power over the waters like the limbs of Seth, for I am he who crosses the sky...the pools of the Field of Rushes serve me, limitless eternity is given to me, for I am he who inherited eternity, to whom everlasting was given.” Being granted water is synonymous with inheriting limitless eternity, the transformative goal that this path arcs toward. Unfortunately, as we will see, the only eternity the Mariner inherits is one of sterile repetition, telling the story of his experiences *ad infinitum*. Notice also that the focus on air and water here immediately emphasizes the perceptual threshold created by the abilities and limitations of the body in space, and we will see how the body comes to be more deeply understood as the core of experience and mortality.

The water is not only undrinkable – it rots, burns, and houses foul creatures: “The very deep did rot: O Christ! / That ever this should be! / Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs / Upon the slimy sea... / The water, like a witch’s oils, / Burnt green, and blue and white.”<sup>181</sup> First, I want to discuss the “slimy things [that] did crawl with legs upon the slimy sea.” The image of water that a traveler has to traverse in Netherworld mythology represents a great obstacle that must be overcome in order to find oneself in a different psychospiritual environment, and thus to attain a higher level of consciousness. The journey over it was by no means easy, and the difficulties that travelers faced were represented in an array of images of encounters with monsters, demons, and wild animals, all of which were thrown up by Apophis to confront the consciousness of those who sought to make headway through this discomforting zone. The element water, for the Egyptians, was the element the Sethian creatures inhabited – the crocodile, the hippopotamus, the water snake. And in encountering various animal denizens of the Netherworld in one’s journey, sometimes the animal forms that rise up to meet the traveler are not recognizable. They are so monstrous that nature could not find it in herself to give them physical embodiment, and yet they exist in the imaginal world, for the energies of the psyche and non-physical realms can be uglier and more bestial than those of any beast living in nature. To be accosted by such forms – whether of known animals or of unknown monsters – is to be accosted by energies that still cling to one’s psychic aura and have become objectified. The slimy things that crawl with legs harken back to the winged serpents of Herodotus (of whom he says: “The form of the snakes is that of the water snake, but their wings are not feathered but are pretty much like the wings of the bat.”<sup>182</sup>) and the snake demons of many kinds that inhabited the realm of the

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the Great Cackler. If it grows, I will grow; if it lives, I will live; if it breathes the air, I will breathe the air.” The Great Cackler is the earth god Geb, who, as a divine goose, lays the primeval egg from which the world hatches at the beginning of time. To breathe the divine air is to be reborn into the spirit world, and hence it is to recapitulate the essential first phases of creation. One must return to the egg in order to germinate afresh as a living spirit, breathing the air of the gods. The opposite happens in the course of this poem, as the sailors are not reborn through the power of the primeval egg, but instead all die one by one, although this is getting slightly ahead of ourselves.

<sup>180</sup> Lns. II.121-22.

<sup>181</sup> Lns. II.123-6, 129-30.

<sup>182</sup> Herodotus 163.



Dead, depicted in paintings sometimes standing up on their legs while spitting fire or armed with a knife.

Now that we have talked about the slimy creatures with legs, let us turn our attention to the rotting and burning. The image of the rotting sea is elaborated later in the poem when the Mariner looks “upon the rotting deck, / And there the dead men lay.”<sup>183</sup> The ship itself, as one can see, is not immune. Triumphant over death and achieving immortality means first and foremost means combating the processes of decomposition and decay, and this was the main goal of the process of mummification. One had to be wary even in the Netherworld. Chapter 45 of *The Book of the Dead*, “A chapter for not putrefying in the realm of the dead,” says, “Weary, weary are the members of Osiris! They shall not be weary...My body is not still; it has not rotted; it has not passed away; it has not dissolved. Do for me according as I am Osiris.” The initiate here identifies himself with Osiris, the god who overcame putrefaction in the Netherworld, and this course of identification is what the Mariner strives to learn throughout the course of the poem.

The image of the burning water is linked to that of the burning sun that is afflicting the crew at the same time: “All in a hot and copper sky, / The bloody Sun, at noon, / Right above the mast did stand.”<sup>184</sup> Here we can turn to Chapter 63A, “The chapter for drinking water and not being burnt by fire”: “I will be neither burnt up nor scorched, for I am Babai, the eldest son of Osiris, for whom all the gods have assembled within his Eye in Heliopolis; I am the trusted heir when the Great One is inert, my name will be strong for me, and assuredly you will live daily through me.”

Because of this panoply of horrors faced without proper protection or guidance (the lack of water and air, burning sun, etc.), the throats of the sailors are parched, so much so that it seems as if they “had been choked with soot.”<sup>185</sup> When they see a ship approaching near, it is hard for them to call out to it. The Mariner has to bite his arm and suck his blood in order to open his mouth and call out. Every major image of the poem, it seems, resonates with and extends through inversion the travails outlined in *The Book of the Dead*. The Opening of the Mouth was a major ceremony in ancient Egypt. Its function was to reanimate the initiate/deceased, temples, or ritual statues so that they could breathe and speak in alternative experiential realms, thereby sustaining the flow of life-power. Chapter 23 of *The Book of the Dead* (“The chapter of opening the mouth of Osiris, the scribe Ani”) forcefully says, “May Ptah open my mouth, and...loose the swathings, even the swathings which are over my mouth. Moreover, may Thoth, being filled and furnished with charms, come and loose the bandages, the bandages of Set which fetter my mouth...May my mouth be opened, may my mouth be unclosed by Shu with his iron knife, wherewith he opened the mouth of the gods.”<sup>186</sup> Coleridge’s poem presents a negative version of this scene.

Chapter 68 brings together many of the images we have encountered thus far in the poem:

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<sup>183</sup> Lns. IV.242-3.

<sup>184</sup> Lns. II.11-13.

<sup>185</sup> Ln. II.138.

<sup>186</sup> See also Chapter 21: “Homage to you, lord of radiance at the head of the temple, chief of total darkness. I have come before you; I am glorious; I am pure...Give me my mouth so that I may speak with it.” The Mariner has not yet reached the stage described here of glory and purity.

May I have power in my heart, may I have power in my arms, may I have power in my legs, may I have power in my mouth, may I have power in all my members, may I have power over invocation-offerings...may I have power over air, may I have power over the waters, may I have power over the streams, may I have power over riparian lands, may I have power over the men who would harm me, may I have power over the women who would harm me in the realm of the dead, may I have power over those who give orders to harm me upon earth.

Again, the Mariner's lack of preparation for this journey becomes truly deadly, as he has no power over men and women who would harm him in this realm. On the mysterious ship that approaches are the Spectre-Woman named Life-in-Death and her Death-Mate. What happens next is a parodic inversion of a Judgment scene.

According to the Egyptian mythic model, a central event of the Lunar path of transformation is the judgment of the dead, which took place in the Hall of Maat (goddess of cosmic harmony and balance). The Judgment Hall is possibly the most interior of interior spaces, entering which one comes directly before that which nourishes the divine in oneself. To the extent that one has transformed one's nature so that it is brought into alignment with the essential divine core of oneself, becoming conscious of having entered the presence of Maat provokes a feeling of homecoming. But to the extent that one is out of alignment with one's divine core, the experience is of searing pain, for Maat's gaze is like a knife that cuts through all false identifications. The initiate makes a declaration, usually referred to as the "Negative Confession," which states that he or she has not committed any of a range of possible misdemeanors. The second part of the twofold declaration is a positive one. It is a declaration of all that one has done that is good and true and in total accord with Maat. The heart of the initiate is balanced against the feather of Maat. If it is heavier than it, the initiate suffers a *second death* when devoured by a demon known as Ammit.<sup>187</sup> When these Life-in-Death and her Death-Mate appear in *The Rime*, there is no balanced scale for methodical weighing of the heart of the deceased; they are simply playing dice, leaving the decision of fate up to chance, not the force of harmony. Life-in-Death, therefore, is the exact opposite of Maat.

It is also pertinent that moon imagery is emphasized here again: "Till clomb above the eastern bar / The horned Moon, with one bright star / Within the nether tip."<sup>188</sup> The horned Moon is another densely packed, complicated symbol. Egyptians depicted the crescent moon with the horns turned upward either as part of the lunar deities' headdresses or carved sky-boats, such as the ones pictured in the temple of Isis. Furthermore, the horns of the Moon are emblemized in the figure of the bull (Osiris), the consort of the Great Mother who was sacrificed and resurrected in monthly cycles. According to Evans Lansing Smith, these two horns symbolize "the two poles of life and death over which the Goddess presides; the 'one bright star' is the evening beacon of death and rebirth. Along with these spiritual symbols, it is important to note that the

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<sup>187</sup> Some speculate that this second death is a metaphor for reincarnation, a return to physical life.

<sup>188</sup> Lns. III.209-11.

‘Spectre-Woman’ also represents those deep powers of the imagination (she is called a ‘Nightmare’) which are activated by the hero journey.”<sup>189</sup>

At the hands of Death and Life-in-Death, the crewmates experience the worst fate imaginable, that of dying a second time. Death causes all two hundred of the crewmates to drop dead immediately, and she begins her work on the Mariner. Chapter 44 – “The chapter for not dying again in the underworld” – is the crucial apotropaic gesture to prevent this from happening: “Your father lives for you, the son of Nut. I am your great son who sees your secrets. I am crowned as king of the gods; I will not die again in the underworld.” For seven days, the Mariner exists in limbo, suffering and surrounded by the dead bodies of the crewmen. When the moon imagery returns, it signals the end of the most traumatic part of the Mariner’s experience. Under the light of the moon, he sees multi-colored water-snakes, followed by trails of golden fire as they swim. He proclaims, “I blessed them unaware. / The self-same moment I could pray; / And from my neck so free / The Albatross fell off, and sank / Like lead into the sea.”<sup>190</sup>

Just like the albatross, the water-snakes are a symbol that contains a complementary binary range of meaning. On one hand, they represent Apep, the sea snake who seeks to stop the progress of the soul-boat traversing its way through the Netherworld. (Recall the spell against the rerek snake quoted earlier.<sup>191</sup>) On the other, Coleridge uses it in a positive sense, as when in *Biographia Literaria* he praises “the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power.”<sup>192</sup> He elaborates further in his notebooks when he adds, “The Serpent by which the ancients emblem’d the Inventive faculty appears to me, in its mode of motion most exactly to emblem a writer of Genius.”<sup>193</sup> Blessing the water snakes, then, can mark the moment of an ecstatic absorption and reclamation for the self of the genius they represent. The Mariner has assimilated their power and has somehow learned to perform the hieratic spell properly. Alternatively, this scene can be read as recasting the moment previously quoted from Herodotus and Blavatsky in the mode of blasphemy. There, the ibis helped defeat the evil snakes that represent chaos and destruction. Here, in a complete reversal of its terms, the snakes are blessed while the albatross falls into the sea. This duality of meaning works to give the poem its idiosyncratic shape, and it complicates the readings of this poem that see the moment of blessing the snakes as a straightforward example of Christian redemption.

After this climax, a feminine presence emerges that balances out Nightmare-in-Life and guides the initiate through the rest of the poem. At the beginning of section V, the Mariner states, “Oh sleep! it is a gentle thing, / Beloved from pole to pole! / To Mary Queen the praise be given! / She sent the gentle sleep from Heaven, / That slid into my soul.”<sup>194</sup> She is an Isis figure that exerts a purgatorial effect on the Mariner. Although he imagines that he “had died in sleep, / And was a blessed ghost,” the rain begins to fall and the dead sailors take up the ropes and strange sweet sounds rise “slowly through their

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<sup>189</sup> Smith, *The Hero Journey in Literature: Parables of Poesis* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1997) 288.

<sup>190</sup> Lns. IV.285-289.

<sup>191</sup> Also see Chapter 7, “The chapter of passing over the back of Apep, the evil one.”

<sup>192</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* II.14.

<sup>193</sup> Coleridge, *Notebooks* I.609.

<sup>194</sup> Lns. V.292-296.

mouths” as they cluster around the mast.<sup>195</sup> These images suggest resurrection and poesis: the Netherworld is a place where dead sailors rise again, and where sweet syllables find articulation, a place in fact of bird-song. For the Mariner hears the “sky-lark sing” and all the little birds seem “to fill the sea and air / With their sweet jargoning!”<sup>196</sup> In the iconography of the *Book of the Dead*, human-headed birds are the representation of one of the souls of the deceased (also known as the *Ba*, which will be discussed more in depth in the Whitman chapter). In Coleridge, then, this alternative experiential realm is the place where poems are born, and throughout the poetry of Romanticism bird-song and poetry are equated.

All of these symbols (Serpent, Bird-Song, Moon and Star, Albatross, Goddess and Death) comprise the opening stages of the Mariner’s initiation, the final revelation of which occurs just as the ship returns to English shores. Here too the initiation has to do with the spiritual dimensions of Romantic poetry and with the faculty of imagination as a means of apprehending the divine. When the ship is driven into the “harbor-bay” of the Mariner’s “own countree”<sup>197</sup> by the supernatural powers of the sea, he has come full circle. The same “kirk”<sup>198</sup> and hill rise above the harbor which he had left in the beginning of the tale, but before the return can be completed a final revelation and threshold crossing ensures. Seraphs rise out of each corpse on the deck, lovely, heavenly lights which wave a signal to the land. Although they do not speak, their deep silence sinks “Like music” into the Mariner’s heart.<sup>199</sup> It is presumably the music of these silent Seraphs and the bird-song of the spirits earlier in the poem that Coleridge has attempted to transcribe into the meter and rhyme of the ballad. It is a music activated, like the mythological symbols of the poem, by the journey into imaginal spaces by the Mariner, who has been transformed by the experience. As the Mariner crosses the return threshold, a rumbling maelstrom sinks the ship, leaving the old man floating “Like one that hath been seven days drowned,” another allusion to the descent into deathworlds in the poem.<sup>200</sup>

He is rescued from the whirling water by a Hermit, Pilot, and boy, in a scene that reconfigures many elements from ferry-boat sequences in *The Book of the Dead*. For instance, Chapter 99 – “The chapter for bringing a ferry boat in the realm of the dead” – says, “O you who bring the ferry-boat of the Abyss to this difficult bank, bring me the ferry-boat, make fast the warp for me in peace... O You who are in charge of the mysterious ferry-boat, who ward off *Apep*, bring me the ferry-boat, knot the warp for me, in order to escape from the evil land in which the stars fall upside down upon their faces and are unable to raise themselves up.” This spell is a very purposeful call for salvation and help in making progress through complicated psychospiritual terrain, while the Mariner seems to fall into his rescue by happenstance. He simply says, “But swift as dreams, myself I found / Within the Pilot’s boat.”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Lns. V.307-308, 352.

<sup>196</sup> Lns. V.359, 361-62.

<sup>197</sup> Lns. VI.468, 467. I link the Mariner’s “own countree” with the Neoplatonic resonances of the “native home” of the soul discussed in the *Ode on Astronomy*.

<sup>198</sup> Ln. VI.466.

<sup>199</sup> Ln. VI.499.

<sup>200</sup> Ln. VII.552.

<sup>201</sup> Lns. VII.554-55.

At the end of Chapter 99, we are told, “As for him who knows this spell, he will go out into the Field of Reeds, and there will be given to him a cake, a jug of beer and a loaf from the altar of the Great God, an aroura of land with barley and emmer by the Followers of Horus, who will reap for him...his body will be like these gods, and he will go out into the Field of Rushes in any shape in which he desires to go out.” In the context of Coleridge’s poem, the equivalent of the paradisiacal Field of Reeds is the Wedding Feast that is unfolding in the background while the Mariner relays his tale to the Wedding Guest, a feast that tellingly neither of these figures has access to by the end of the poem. Furthermore, the Mariner’s body is far from being in a god-like state, as the Wedding Guest comments in horror at his “skinny hand” and at the fact that he is “long, and lank, and brown, / As is the ribbed sea-sand.”<sup>202</sup> Now it would be appropriate to step back for a moment and draw larger conclusions from the symbolic pattern I have been analyzing in this section.

As a mythic figure who represents the Lunar path of transformation, Osiris embodies the dual powers of recurrence and transcendence. He is simultaneously the expression of cyclic time and the revelation of timelessness. What is represented in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is a process of “Osirian” recurrence without transcendence. The Mariner is doomed to simply replay his story over and over. Though he has made penance for his transgression and has been transformed by the revelations of his journey, he never fully reintegrates himself into the society he left at the beginning. His consciousness full of the heights and depths of human experience, as revealed in his vision and his torments, he will from now on possess a dual consciousness, drawing him away from everyday experience. He will even be invested with “strange [Lunar] powers” – able to “pass, like night, from land to land” – and forced to seek out those who will hear his “ghastly tale” and repeat it whenever his “agony returns.”<sup>203</sup> He will forever be daemonically possessed.

The Mariner, however, is not the only figure in the poem engaged in following the Lunar path of transformation. The Wedding Guest does as well. Transporting ourselves into his point-of-view opens the narrative universe from a completely different perspective. The Wedding Guest journeys to take part in the wedding taking place, but without any specific location in time and space, it is as much of an imaginal destination as the landscapes the Mariner traverses. And his movement through this imaginal space is fraught with as much danger as the Mariner’s. The most obvious connection between the two figures is that they both have no proper name, a calamity that *The Book of the Dead* tries to protect the initiate against. As Chapter 25, “The chapter of causing the deceased to remember his name,” says: “May my name be given unto me in the great Double House, and may I remember my name in the House of Fire on the night of counting the years and of telling the number of months. I am with the Holy One, and I sit on the eastern side of heaven. If any god advanceth unto me, forthwith I proclaim his name.” The name is an important part of the whole person and crucial for the achievement of immortality, as we will see in more detail in the chapter on Whitman.

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<sup>202</sup> Ln. I.9, IV.226-27.

<sup>203</sup> Lns. VII.586, 584, 583.

For the Wedding Guest, the Mariner is an enigmatic, daemonic figure who blocks progress in his initiatory journey, akin to the water-snakes that have to be overcome.<sup>204</sup> The Guest cries out: “By thy long grey beard and glittering eye, / Now wherefore stopp’st thou me? / ... The guests are met, the feast is set: / May’st hear the merry din.”<sup>205</sup> In addition to the “glittering eye,” the haunting images and hypnotic rhythms of the Mariner’s tale function as an abduction, since the Wedding Guest resists, resents, and is often terrified by the tale which he cannot help himself from hearing. This moment of confrontation (“wherefore stopp’st thou me?”) is quite literally a threshold battle. Will he be able to cross into the paradise that beckons him? Ultimately he does not, but he participates vicariously with the Mariner through his many revelatory initiations, which ultimately have a transformative impact on him as well. The Wedding Guest is unable to return to the domestic ceremonies, and is left “sadder and wiser” by the recitation of the poem that he himself is participating in while it is being recited.<sup>206</sup> In conclusion, he is “Turned from the Bridegroom’s door,” a detail which harkens back to the significance of doorways as symbols of ritualized crossing and passage through sacred space.<sup>207</sup>

Through a complicated mirroring effect, the poem opens a space for the reader to enter into it. The poem itself is a doorway, one can say, for both the poet and reader that leads away from the mundane world into the daemonic realm of the imagination. The Wedding Guest as reader-listener is presented in the poem as an initiate, and his journey becomes an allegory of reading as an ecstatic, regenerative initiatory process. This allegory by design then works to include our position as the reader, who by reading the poem are entranced in the same way as the Guest. The Mariner begins his narrative to the Guest with the image of a ship departing shore: “The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared.”<sup>208</sup> This ship is not only the Mariner’s, but a vehicle symbolizing the commencement of our particular act of reading the poem. The Mariner and the Wedding Guest both see deific power face to face, triggering a secret experience. As fraught as their initiations are with failure and negativity, they are still transformed, and they receive more life-power. Having faced judgment, they have been regenerated on Earth and prepared for postmortem experience. The poem therefore is an assertion, however qualified, of the power of mind over every universe of death, one in which the reader is beckoned to participate.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Coleridge’s poetry, as I have shown, is marked by an engagement with a variety of paths of transformation associated with distinct cosmic cycles. The symbolic science of ancient Egypt helps us understand Coleridge’s sacred astronomy and how he charts processes of metamorphosis, the awakening of latent spiritual powers already resident within the individual, and passageways into “higher” life. The Stellar, Solar, and Lunar paths are outlined in the written and constructed vestiges of ancient Egypt that remain today, but they are mostly viewed as contradictory, confused approaches by ancient man to understand himself and the universe. One Egyptological view expresses the confusion

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<sup>204</sup> Notice that toward the end of the poem, the Mariner takes on otherworldly overtones. On the boat that returns him to his home country, he is asked by the Hermit, “What manner of man art thou?” Ln. VII.577.

<sup>205</sup> Lns. I.3-4, 7-8.

<sup>206</sup> Ln. VII.624.

<sup>207</sup> Ln. VII.621.

<sup>208</sup> Ln. I.21.

about these spiritual paths succinctly: “new beliefs were continuously assimilated without older ones being discarded, so that the beliefs of the New Kingdom times were a curious mix of ideas based on the Association of the dead king with the sun god Re, the stars of the heavens and the netherworld deity Osiris.”<sup>209</sup> However, from a different perspective, one can see that life was multidimensional for the ancient Egyptians, an existence in concert with all the worlds in creation and all the beings enfolded in them. One can say that the Stellar, Lunar, and Solar paths were the three major initiatory routes by which those worlds and beings could be rejoined in the living, ecstatic moment of timeless time.

Hermes Trismegistus is one of the dreamers whose work served as the foundation for the “darling Studies” of Coleridge. There has been much speculation about what the “thrice-great” of his name means, although the meaning is deeply buried in the misty reaches of pre-history. Marsilio Ficino, in the preface to his Latin translation of *A Book on the Power and Wisdom of God, Whose Title is Pimander*, speculates that people “called him Trismegistus or thrice-greatest because he was the greatest philosopher and the greatest priest and the greatest king.”<sup>210</sup> I would not disagree with this reading, but simply provide in addition that this moniker might also refer to those who have accomplished the three major initiations described here: the Lunar-Osirian, Solar-Horian, and Stellar-Isiac transformations. One could claim that Coleridge devoted his poetic career to gaining that title, as his poems masterfully represent the transformation of the human into a divine being who, through the mediation of the cosmic world, is able to draw from the material and immaterial benefits of spiritual life.

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<sup>209</sup> Nicholas Reeves and Richard Wilkinson, *The Complete Valley of the Kings* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1996) 46.

<sup>210</sup> Quoted in Brian Copenhaver, ed. and trans., *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) xlvi.

## Sacred Anatomy, Polycentric Consciousness, and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

Along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and many others in the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman was captivated by ancient Egypt, and tropes associated with that civilization are scattered throughout his poetry. His masterwork *Leaves of Grass*, for example, describes “grass,” the major symbol of the poem, as “a uniform hieroglyphic.”<sup>211</sup> In an article entitled “One of the Lessons Bordering Broadway: The Egyptian Museum,” written for *Life Illustrated* in 1855, Whitman discusses his experiences as a visitor at the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in New York:

The great “Egyptian Collection” was well up in Broadway, and I got quite acquainted with Dr. Abbott, the proprietor<sup>212</sup>—paid many visits there, and had long talks with him, in connection with my readings of many books and reports on Egypt—its antiquities, history, and how things and the scenes really look, and what the old relics stand for, as near we can now get. . . . As said, I went to the Egyptian Museum many, many times; sometimes had it all to myself—delved at the formidable catalogue—and on several occasions had the invaluable personal talk, correction, illustration and guidance of Dr. A. himself. . . . The theology of Egypt was vast and profound. It respected the principle of life in all things—even in animals. It respected truth and justice above all other attributes of men. It recognized immortality.<sup>213</sup>

This high valuation of Egypt continued throughout Whitman's career. In a series of notes explaining the meaning and intention of *Leaves of Grass*, he says, “The definite history of the world cannot go back farther than Egypt, and in the most important particulars the average spirit of man has not gone forward of the spirit of ancient Egypt.”<sup>214</sup>

Whitman's poetry is fundamentally concerned with outlining the “important particulars of the average spirit of man,” and he precisely delineates major elements of the human individual, which he dubs (just to name a few components) My Self, My Soul, the Real Me, the Other I Am, the Me Myself, My Spirit, and the Real Body. In a brief quotation to which we will return later in this essay, three distinct elements appear: “I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other.”<sup>215</sup> In order to understand this cartography, in addition to the psychospiritual work Whitman's poetry performs in general, I argue that it is necessary to examine how his text engages with and extends the “vast and profound” sacred science of ancient Egypt.

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<sup>211</sup> *Song of Myself* 6.8. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from Whitman are from *Poetry and Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1996).

<sup>212</sup> Henry Abbott (1812–1859) was an English physician who had assembled an antiquities collection while living in Cairo and brought it to New York to sell. The collection was purchased and deposited at the New York Historical Society and eventually transferred to the Brooklyn Museum in 1937.

<sup>213</sup> Walt Whitman, *New York Dissected: A Sheaf of Recently Discovered Newspaper Articles by the Author of Leaves of Grass* (New York: Rufus Rockwell Wilson, 1936) 28, 38.

<sup>214</sup> Whitman, *Complete Writings*, ed. R. Bucke and T. Harned, vol. 6 (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1902) 103.

<sup>215</sup> *Song of Myself* 5.1-2.



In the chapter on Coleridge, I focused specifically on the concept of sacred astronomy, which signifies a mode of active participation in the multi-dimensional drama of cosmic life and all of the imaginal spaces disclosed by its cycles. Through engagements with natural, continuous process, a subtle system of interchanges in the physical body is effected – irrespective of the conditions of “life” or “death” – that promote deeper phases of awareness and the assumption of spiritual power. In ancient Egypt, the idea of a vibrant universe filled with multiple planes of existence and paths of transformation was joined with the idea of a multi-dimensional person, composed of a plethora of spiritualized components that simultaneously inhabit mundane and these subtler realms. This element of the sacred science – the complete body of ancient knowledge – that explores how the human personality complex can be divided into a series of bodies, or “vehicles of consciousness,”<sup>216</sup> which provide different foci for the multiple facets of conscious identity I will call a sacred anatomy.

Sacred anatomy outlines a rigorous process of transformation by which the personality moves from a nominal state to a deified one. Never wholly outlined in one place but scattered throughout metaphysical treatises, funerary writings such as *The Pyramid Texts*, and didactic narratives such as “The Dispute between a Man and His Ba,”<sup>217</sup> this system includes a complicated array of components, such as the ren (name), khat (physical body), ka (life force), ba (individual manifestation), akh (illuminated intelligence), ib (heart), khaibit (shadow), sekhem (personal will), and sahu (spiritual body). In this system, no dualistic separation is posited between body and mind, as these two factors exist in an unbroken continuum. To understand the multiplicity of the person that the Egyptian system theorizes, it might be helpful to use the analogy of the radio. Just as different frequencies can co-exist in the same “space,” the different rhythms of bodies, souls, and Others can inhabit the same space of the person, who assumes existence in an intricately layered universe. Whitman’s poetry is arguably the fullest Romantic recapitulation of this ancient system, and like it, he treats the components of his personality in ways analogous to the manner in which modern chemistry treats the chemical elements and compounds of carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen, but with the goal of dynamizing and animating life and amplifying the forces of the world.

Before exploring how Whitman localizes this anatomy in order to speak to nineteenth-century American concerns, I want to look across a range of Whitman’s writing in order to explicate an implicit theorization of the concept of sacred science that builds throughout this oeuvre. In his typical brash manner, Whitman asserts in *Song of Myself*: “Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration! . . . / Gentlemen, to you the first honors always! / Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling, / I

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<sup>216</sup> This term comes from the Dutch philosopher Johannes Poortman. In his four-volume *Vehicles of Consciousness: The Concept of Hylic Pluralism*, he explains the metaphysics underlying this sacred anatomy. The word hylc derives from “hyle,” which is Greek for “matter.” Hylc pluralism, then, seeks to understand the “several forms or subdivisions of matter,” or in other words, how matter is stratified into a number of labyrinthine layers that move from coarser to finer, more delicate strata of decreasing density with different aggregations that congeal on various levels of reality. *Vehicles of Consciousness* (Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978) 8. Hylc pluralism proposes that there grades of matter that are currently not detectable by humanity’s regular sense faculties and that the physical body is only one of several grades of embodiment available.

<sup>217</sup> This is anthologized in Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2006), 1: 163-69.

but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.”<sup>218</sup> The concepts and facts of “positive science,” in other words, are only portals to Whitman’s true abode, and the use of “positive” as a qualifying adjective suggests that there might be other types of science more in line with his “dwelling.” Despite the hurrah Whitman offers here, he relegates this positive science – elsewhere called “exact science”<sup>219</sup> – to the role of data collector for a higher muse. Implicitly, he charges it with being hampered by a sublunary narrowness of vision, which prevents one from “entering by it” to higher places of the spirit.

The facts of positive science, Whitman believed, had esoteric ramifications best elucidated by sages, seers, and philosopher-poets: “The highest and subtlest and broadest truths of modern science wait for their true assignment and last vivid flashes of light...through first-class metaphysicians and speculative philosophers [*sic*] – laying the basements and foundations for those new, more expanded, more harmonious, more melodious, freer American poems.”<sup>220</sup> The highest truths of modern science await a vivification from an even higher knowledge. This knowledge serves as the foundation for more “expanded and harmonious” poems, yet as we will see, it also bolsters the expansion of human consciousness as well.

In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman offers an explanation of the kind of science for which he is calling: “In addition to establish’d sciences, we suggest a science as it were of healthy average personalism, on original-universal grounds, the object of which should be to raise up and supply through the States a copious race of superb American men and women, cheerful, religious, ahead of any yet known.”<sup>221</sup> In a manner synonymous to de Lubicz’s model of sacred science, the science that Whitman proposes is not primarily about the study of external objects, but about providing a model for the “raising up” of the human, which will push those that follow its strictures “ahead of any yet known.”

In order to accomplish the goal of raising a new race, Whitman has to fully explore the contours and structure of the human body-mind complex, which leads him directly to discussing a sacred anatomy. He says in “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads”:

‘Leaves of Grass’ indeed (I cannot too often reiterate) has mainly been the outcropping of my own emotional and other personal nature – an attempt, from first to last, to put *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record. I could not find any similar personal record in current literature that satisfied me. But it is not on ‘Leaves of Grass’ distinctively as *literature*, or a specimen thereof, that I feel to dwell, or advance claims. No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Lns. 23.9, 14-16.

<sup>219</sup> See the introduction to the 1855 version of *Leaves of Grass*: “Exact science and its practical movements are no checks on the greatest poet but always his encouragement and support.” *Poetry and Prose* 15.

<sup>220</sup> “Darwinism – (Then Furthermore),” *Poetry and Prose* 1085.

<sup>221</sup> *Poetry and Prose* 985.

<sup>222</sup> *PP* 671.

By honing in on the *Person* in such an intense manner, Whitman offers a pointed challenge for literary critics. It would be easy to categorize this excerpt as nothing more than a typical Whitmanian ornamental flourish, full of brio and elevated rhetoric, yet I want to take Whitman's riposte here completely seriously. By asserting that *Leaves of Grass* is not to be "viewed as a literary performance," Whitman seems to be providing another hint to the reader that he wants his work to be interpreted as a sacred science.

With the use of terms such as "specimen," "advancing claims," and "putting on record," one might discern the scientific bearing in Whitman's aims, and this will resonate, as we will see, with the extreme terminological care with which he outlines the specific components of the human personality. Yet this mapping of the human personality is not merely aesthetic; there is no alienated distance between the mapmaker, territory being mapped, and readers who receive the map. This examination of the *Person* is meant to be a living model, one that reaches out to absorb and be absorbed by the reader. Whitman's poetry is a complicated psychospiritual technology, a ritualized attempt to model interactions (biospiritual and otherwise) happening within his consciousness, provide a guide for the evolutionary development of a new human race, and illuminate a process of revelation from more subtle realms of order.

I turn again to *Democratic Vistas*, where Whitman says, "The culmination and fruit of literary artistic expression, and its final fields of pleasure for the human soul, are in metaphysics, including the mysteries of the spiritual world, the soul itself, and the question of the immortal continuation of our identity."<sup>223</sup> In moving toward thinking about the "immortal continuation of our identity," Whitman is clearly treading on territory explored in depth in ancient Egypt. Indeed, this element of Egyptian sacred science is a major part of its attraction for him. Recall the quote from Whitman presented at the beginning of this chapter. He says that the knowledge of Egypt was "vast and profound" because it "recognized immortality." I will explore here the ways in which ancient Egyptian sacred science – particularly its sacred anatomy – influences Whitman's charting of the human personality. His poetry embodies quite a bit of this knowledge, yet it is transformatively localized to focus on and speak to "the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America."

Several critics have looked at the relationships connecting Whitman, the hermetic tradition, and ancient Egypt.<sup>224</sup> One of the earliest and most thorough explorations of this topic can be found in Stephen Tapscott's article "Leaves of Myself: Whitman's Egypt in 'Song of Myself.'"<sup>225</sup> In it, he traces Whitman's exoteric engagement with the tradition of ancient Egypt by analyzing the 1855 article quoted above, his extensive notebook entries about Egyptian religious concepts, and his very public self-identification with the Egyptian god Osiris and the decipherer of the hieroglyphics Champollion. With this as a

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<sup>223</sup> *PP* 1008-1009.

<sup>224</sup> Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001); Ernest Tuveson, *The Avatars of Thrice Great Hermes: An Approach to Romanticism* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1982); Esther Shephard, "Possible Sources of Some of Whitman's Ideas and Symbols in 'Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus' and Other Works," *Modern Language Quarterly* 14 (March 1953): 60-81; John Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980); Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage, 1979); and Rosemary Gates, "Egyptian Myth and Whitman's 'Lilacs,'" *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 5 (Summer 1987): 21-31.

<sup>225</sup> S. Tapscott, "Leaves of Myself," *American Literature* 50 (Mar. 1978): 49-73.

background, Tapscott examines Whitman's use of the trope of the hieroglyphics throughout his poetry (along with attendant themes such as translation, transcription, and ideographic representation), and he argues for Egypt as a source of Whitman's democratic vitalism (which sees a potent life-force surging through human, animal, vegetable, and mineral realms), his portrayal of an immortality closely tied to the materiality of the body, and his use of the catalogue as poetic technique. He astutely notes that in ancient Egypt, "an individual possessed, in effect, plural souls, each having different functions during the individual's life and, especially, after his death. This concept may go some distance toward explaining Whitman's notions of the self-soul split and of the multiplicity of spiritual personalities."<sup>226</sup> Following Tapscott's argument, this essay explores how this system of plural souls influences Whitman's poetry conceptually and imaginatively, even when there is no direct allusion to Egypt on his part.

The most recent attention given to the topic of the relationship between ancient Egypt and Walt Whitman's poetry comes from the critic Wai Chee Dimock in her article "The Egyptian Pronoun: Lyric, Novel, the Book of the Dead."<sup>227</sup> Disrupting all constructions of a national literature that do not take antiquity into account, she argues that Egypt should be seen as part of an "Afro-Asian nexus"<sup>228</sup> from which Whitman's work emerges. She focuses specifically on the question of genre, and she argues that the expansive Whitmanian "I" finds its primary precursors in Egyptian texts such as *The Book of the Dead* that integrate the categories of lyric, novel, epic, and autobiography. She notes: "In its plurality of forms, the Egyptian dead is a taxonomic nightmare, hard to pin down. The pronoun 'I,' used by such a being, can be any number of things: it can be either embodied or disembodied, still on earth or even back in the tomb, but possibly also afloat somewhere, in some indeterminate region in the vastness of the universe."<sup>229</sup> My goal is to begin sorting through this taxonomy. I will begin with elements of the personality that are relatively manifest and concrete and work upward through ever more rarefied and intangible psychospiritual bodies.

#### **Ren (the name)**

"I know my name, I am not ignorant of it, I will be among those that follow after Osiris."<sup>230</sup>

Inscription from the tomb of Petosiris – "I built this tomb in this necropolis, / Beside the great souls who are there, / In order that my father's name be pronounced, / And that of my elder brother, / A man is revived when his name is pronounced!"<sup>231</sup>

Philippe Derchain argues that the elements of the ancient Egyptian sacred anatomy cannot simply be divided along a body-mind dualism because "they [take] account of physical, social, religious, and magical relationships. Indeed, it is quite

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<sup>226</sup> Tapscott 62.

<sup>227</sup> Dimock, "The Egyptian Pronoun," *New Literary History* 39:3 (Summer 2008): 619-643. See also her "Epic and Lyric: The Aegean, the Nile, and Whitman," *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*, ed. David Blake (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2008).

<sup>228</sup> Dimock, "The Egyptian Pronoun" 619.

<sup>229</sup> Dimock 627.

<sup>230</sup> *Coffin Texts* 572.

<sup>231</sup> Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 45.

impossible to trace clear boundaries between these different fields.”<sup>232</sup> This is clear even when we consider the first determinant of personality – *ren*, or the name. Of course, naming something makes it a definable, locatable part of the temporal world, and it provides a material means through which society and the environment can work on the person. Treated with a certain reverence, names are inscribed over the vast majority of tombs and stelae in Egypt, and they are elaborated with magical formulae, genealogies, and requests that the living say them aloud in order to keep the dead one alive.

The true name was a vital component of the individual and was necessary for successful journey through life and the afterlife. Because it contained the complete identity and being of a person, it had to be closely guarded, as one could be destroyed if the name was obliterated or be subject to the manipulation of others if they possessed the name. The Egyptians, along with most ancient peoples, believed that knowing someone’s name allowed one to touch and control their individual essence. The name was eternal, and it was a word of power *par excellence*. A famous story in the Egyptian tradition tells of the conflict between Ra and Isis, who poisoned him for the express purpose of forcing him to reveal his secret name.

Of all contemporary literary critical methodologies, deconstruction has been one of only a very few that has given any sustained attention to the problematics of the name. Throughout his corpus, Derrida has emphasized how the play of the signature and the proper name catalyze the work of writing in texts. In his *Signsponge*, for instance, the poet Francis Ponge’s name morphs into *éponge* (sponge), *éponger* (to clean with a sponge), *ponce* (pumice), frankness, Frenchness, etc., which become the guiding terms of the analysis. *Glas* is his experimental juxtaposition of Hegel and Jean Genet, who respectively become the imperial *aigle* (eagle) and *genêt* (broomflower) and are then processed through an extensive line of signifying chains. As he says in that text, “The proper name does not resonate, losing itself immediately, except at the moment of its *debris*, in which it breaks, jumbles itself, skids in contacting the sign manual.”<sup>233</sup>

Whitman’s work can also be opened up with this play of homonym, anagram, antonomasia, and cryptogram. At the simplest level, the name “Whitman” can be broken up into its components – “whit” and “man” – giving us already a major contrast held in tension between something as small and insignificant as a “whit” juxtaposed directly with the cosmic stature of democratic “Man.” This fusion of scale is evident from the first poem the 1867 edition “One’s-Self I Sing” as he moves from the simple, separate self to the mass of modernity: “One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse... / The Modern Man I sing.”<sup>234</sup> Furthermore, the operation of “man” extends to the conception of his poetry’s utility, as Whitman proclaims that his poetry crafts “a basic model or portrait of personality for general use for the manliness of the States.”<sup>235</sup> (An offshoot of this reading would also have to explore “the manly love of comrades” which is of the utmost importance in *Calamus*.<sup>236</sup>)

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<sup>232</sup> Derchain, “Egypt,” *Greek and Egyptian Mythologies*, ed. Yves Bonnefoy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 220.

<sup>233</sup> Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John Leavey (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986) 41.

<sup>234</sup> Lns. 1, 2, 8.

<sup>235</sup> *Democratic Vistas*, PP 987.

<sup>236</sup> “For You O Democracy” Ln. 9.

One can also discern “white man” and the dilemma of race at work in the proper name of the poet who considers himself to be the “poet of slaves and of the masters of slaves.”<sup>237</sup> Intertextually, think of June Jordan’s “What in the hell happened to him? Wasn’t he a white man?”<sup>238</sup> The white man’s burden was something explicitly taken up by Walt’s contemporary Marcus Whitman, a physician and missionary who had disastrous relations with the Native Americans in Washington state (he was thought to be purposefully infecting Cayuse tribal members with measles and was murdered in his home). Beyond providing a different lens through which to read a poem like “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” his life story reveals the difficulty and underside of chanting the democratic en-masse, the problem of being a great *maw* (a word anagrammatically located in Whitman) that in the *wit* of D.H. Lawrence seeks to devour and absorb everything into the “awful pudding of One Identity.”<sup>239</sup>

In theory, this type of linguistic analysis is infinite, yet here I want to move beyond the semantic level of the proper name to think about naming as incantation, as a creative act. How does the name produce, command, and conjure? The 1891 version of *Leaves of Grass* addresses this question before even arriving at the table of contents. The book opens with a frontispiece illustrated with an engraving of a young Whitman urbanely dressed in laborer’s clothes. This image, an integral part of the whole artistic effort, is joined by a poem that appears as an epigraph on the title page:

Come, said my Soul,  
Such verses for my Body let us write, (for we are one,)  
That should I after death invisibly return,  
Or, long, long hence, in other spheres,  
There to some group of mates the chants resuming...  
Ever and ever yet the verses owning – as, first, I here and now,  
Signing for Soul and Body, set to them my name,  
Walt Whitman<sup>240</sup>

Crucially, the final “Walt Whitman” is inscribed directly onto the page in his cursive signature. Although this poem had been removed from the title pages of previous editions, Whitman made a special effort to ensure that it would be restored for the final edition.<sup>241</sup> There is a strict logic to this move, as this dense poem highlights the entanglement of the multiple facets of Whitman’s self – the speaking persona, Soul, Body, the spirit of “other spheres,” the verses, and finally, the Name. Whitman recognizes the way in which his name itself affixes a unity to the wide-ranging, non-local domain of his personality and structures the complete monument of the work.

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<sup>237</sup> Quoted in Kenneth Price, *To Walt Whitman, America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) 12.

<sup>238</sup> June Jordan, “For the Sake of a People’s Poetry: Walt Whitman and the Rest of Us,” *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, ed. Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Campion (Duluth: Holy Cow! Press, 1998) 411.

<sup>239</sup> Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1923) 178.

<sup>240</sup> *PP* 147.

<sup>241</sup> For more information on this textual history, see Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Harold Blodgett, Arthur Golden, and William White, vol. I: *Poems, 1855-1856* (New York: NYU Press, 1980) xxiii-xxiv.

This act of naming is a gathering of energy that activates the life-force of the poems. At crucial junctures, Whitman returns to the power of the name and its ability to cut through a vast swath of physical, social, religious, and magical relationships. In the *Calamus* cluster, which focuses on the theme of comradeship, two poems in direct sequence hinge on the name and its fate. Whitman hails “Recorders ages hence,” in a poem of the same name: “Come, I will take you down underneath this impassive exterior, I will tell you what to say of me, / Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover.”<sup>242</sup> This combination of the name and the picture harkens back to the frontispiece and title page of the edition, where these two elements are joined together, and the name here encodes an ensemble of sensuous and historical relations. In one sense, it exemplifies the function of preservation. The name is to be recorded and codified. One can think here of the pyramids, where if one goes underneath the impassive exterior, one will find inscriptions of the name, along with spells for its continual use and proclamation. Accompanying this monumentalizing gesture of publishing the name is an overtly epiphanic moment. Read in another way, Whitman’s promise to reveal what lies hidden beneath the exterior, one that would otherwise remain resolute in its opacity, is an enchanting, subtly sexual one.

In the very next poem, “When I Heard at the Close of the Day,” Whitman provides a gentle narrative: “When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been receiv’d with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy night for me that follow’d...And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy.”<sup>243</sup> Whitman’s decision to place these poems directly after each other seems to emphasize the importance of the shared theme of the name that unites these two works. Connections between them abound even in the titles: there are understated links aurally between “recording” and “hearing” and in the movement between the “close of the day” and “ages hence” that speak to the importance and power of the name’s proclamation, in addition to its place in histories social and private. There is a fascinating distance here between Whitman and his name, which has an autonomy of its own. He is very specific in establishing that it is his name that is received with plaudits, as opposed to himself or his soul, and that he is not made aware of its circulation until after the fact. In contrast with the last poem, this one moves from a function of preservation to one of retrieval and ritual performance. The name has a sociopolitical role to play, and people gather in government buildings to laud it and sing its praises. This is a process that does not seem to be under Whitman’s control, unlike in the first poem, and hidden between the lines lies a concern about the misuse of the name, the attempt to use it to bolster a certain social order that Whitman himself is alienated from. As the poem unfolds, he makes clear that he prefers a quieter politics of friendship and face-to-face intimacy.

There are also several relevant poems in the *Autumn Rivulets* cluster, a collection published after the Civil War in a moment of looking toward rebuilding and the future. Since the name incorporates and represents destiny, it is an appropriate place to return to thinking about its properties. Here, the name moves from preservation and retrieval to communication and collective participation. In “To Him That Was Crucified,” Whitman addresses a seemingly familiar, but unnamed, figure: “My spirit to yours dear brother, / Do not mind because many sounding your name do not understand you, / I do not sound

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<sup>242</sup> Lns. 2-3.

<sup>243</sup> Lns. 1, 6.

your name, but I understand you.”<sup>244</sup> There is clearly an act of displacement that substitutes “him that was crucified” for Christ, in a manner reminiscent of attempts of Egyptian deities to hide their true name. This poem takes place in a state of elevated consciousness, and Whitman provides words of comfort as he meditates on the importance of preserving the name, not abusing its power, and reserving its dignity.

A few poems later in the cluster, Whitman speaks firmly “To a Common Prostitute”: “Be composed – be at ease with me – I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature, / Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you.”<sup>245</sup> This is the only scene of identification in all of Whitman’s poetry where he pronounces his name to another character. (Other scenes where he describes himself for the reader or is addressed by another element of his self are more common.) Whitman here is enacting an archetypal relation with Christ, who scandalized his contemporaries with his defense of and dalliances with prostitutes. It is fitting that it is with a prostitute that Whitman can move underneath the impassive exterior of both his self and social mores. This act of declaration and communication opens a space of trance and possession – notice that the prostitute never speaks or responds in the poem. In this emotional state, Whitman can charge her to “be worthy to meet me” and to “be patient and perfect till I come.”<sup>246</sup>

This effect moves out to influence the reader as well. “What Am I After All,” Whitman asks in that poem, “but a child, pleas’d with the sound of my own name? repeating it over and over; / I stand apart to hear – it never tires me. / To you your name also; / Did you think there was nothing but two or three pronunciations in the sound of your name?”<sup>247</sup> This direct address presents us with a call to awakening and offers an invitation to live in his enchanted world of repetition and infinity, one in which we are attuned to esoteric dimensions of meaning beyond the average and given in our own names. In this way, the poetry is serving as a psychospiritual technology that catalyzes explorations of the self for the reader.

### **The Ancient Egyptian and Whitmanian Persona**

Now that we have discussed the Name, I will move to analyze the Persona, or the outward mask by which the named person engages with the world. One has to use the term *porous psyche* to describe how the consciousness of the ancient Egyptian functioned. To understand this term, it is necessary to relinquish many modern presuppositions concerning both the nature of human consciousness and the relationship of an individual’s consciousness to the objective or “public” world. Events that the modern mind would classify as occurring purely “inwardly,” in the subjectivity of a given individual or number of individuals, for the ancient consciousness had the possibility of acquiring a veridical force equivalent to that which we experience through sense perception. Not only did outer or sense-perceptible events have an “inner” aspect, but inner events that we would regard as taking place within the psyche could be experienced much as today we experience “outer” events.

I will provide a brief example. In Egypt, it was the king’s special responsibility to ensure that the Nile rose at the right time and to the right degree, as both texts and rituals demonstrate. The pharaoh Merneptah, for instance, was given the credit for the high

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<sup>244</sup> Lns. 1-3.

<sup>245</sup> Lns. 1-2

<sup>246</sup> Lns. 4, 5.

<sup>247</sup> Lns. 1-4.



inundation that accompanied his accession, while the earlier king Amenemhet I could state in wonderfully animistic terms: “The Nile respected me at every defile.”<sup>248</sup> During the Twentieth Dynasty, important rituals and offerings were performed to promote such “respect” from the river.<sup>249</sup> To the modern psyche, conditioned into viewing water as an inanimate substance obedient only to unchanging laws of nature, this is sheer fantasy and subjective projection. Yet to ancient Egyptians, everything in nature was experienced as ensouled and therefore as open to influence, persuasion, or even coercion. Due to a more porous psyche, people could enter into relationships with the soul or spirit of an object – in this case the Nile – and induce changes in its physical behavior. This means that our modern sense of what is “inner” and what is “outer” had not hardened in ancient Egyptian times into the either/or dichotomy of today. There existed a “public imagination” in ancient Egypt that acted as the mediatrix for a certain type of experience that no longer has credibility for the modern psyche. In the public imagination, people could experience things in common that were not confined to the private world of an individual’s psyche, and yet neither were these experiences sense-perceptible. Thus, contrary to our modern orientation, non-sense-perceptible events were not necessarily confined within the subjectivity of any given individual, but had, or at least had the possibility of acquiring, objective and public status.

In his poetry, Whitman deconstructs the Cartesian ego, breaking up all conceptions of a “unified” self-consciousness, and he resists reduction into a dualistic division between an “inner” self or ego and an “outer” physical body. Out of all the elements of Whitman’s psychic cartography, the persona – Walt Whitman, “one of the roughs” – has received the most academic attention. The frontispiece portraits of Whitman that preface the editions of *Leaves of Grass* (particularly the iconic image of himself in worker’s clothes with hat slightly askew) are stylized visualizations of the appearance he wishes to present to the public, and he is the Everyman who describes himself as such: “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son, / Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding, / No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them, / No more modest than immodest.”<sup>250</sup> This element of his personality undergoes a non-stop process of restlessness and transformation. Throughout the course of *Leaves of Grass* and beyond, we see Whitman become a tramp on the open road,<sup>251</sup> carpenter glowing with the aura of Christ,<sup>252</sup> quintessential “American bard,”<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> See “Hymn on the Accession of King Merenptah” in Adolf Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians: A Sourcebook of Their Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 279. Amenemhet I is quoted in Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) 57.

<sup>249</sup> Frankfort, *Kingship* 58-59.

<sup>250</sup> *Song of Myself* Lns. 24.1-4.

<sup>251</sup> See “Song of the Open Road.”

<sup>252</sup> See William O’Connor’s short story “The Carpenter,” which is based on this persona. *Three Tales: The Ghost, The Brazen Android, The Carpenter* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1892).

<sup>253</sup> This phrase comes from a review of *Leaves of Grass* written by Whitman himself. “Walt Whitman and His Poems,” *In Re Walt Whitman*, ed. Horace Traubel (Philadelphia: David McKay 1893) 13.

Civil War wound-dresser,<sup>254</sup> and “batter’d, wreck’d old man;”<sup>255</sup> he ends as the sage-like Good Gray Poet.<sup>256</sup>

To understand how Whitman charts the intricacies of the persona, it is necessary to focus on *Song of Myself*. This poem is an obvious choice, as it is purposefully named for “myself” or the persona. Completely different works would have resulted from the *Song of My Name*, *Song of My Soul*, or *Song of the Real Me*. (The latter two examples reference entities still to be explored.) It is conventional to think that *Song of Myself* is “a personal epic in which, with sustained narcissism, Whitman freely explores his ego in an original style” and a poem whose goal is to “celebrate the self’s continued presence and authority.”<sup>257</sup> Yet more specifically, in the representation of the persona, Whitman in his own words is trying to “to achieve spiritual meanings, and suggest the future.”<sup>258</sup> He charts a range of *in potentia* interactions between human beings and between human beings and the natural world, and he illuminates archetypal depths and heights of consciousness that have become obfuscated by modern self-consciousness and self-presence.

At one particularly rich moment, Whitman says, “These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me, / If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing \*\*\* / If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing. / This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is, / This the common air that bathes the globe.”<sup>259</sup> As one can see, there is no discrete interiority in Whitman’s persona. Thoughts move freely between individuals, across historical periods and distances. They are not the controlled, internal property of any individual, and they have a facticity equal to that of the environment at large – the grass, land, water, and common air.

Hand in hand with this, the Whitmanian persona cannot quite sever itself from others in the world in order to distance and craft a discrete exteriority, and the catalogues for which Whitman is famous exemplify this. Everyone and all identities are enfolded within him: “Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion, / A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker, / Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.”<sup>260</sup> After another particularly long catalogue, including a contralto, duck-shooter, deacons, and others, Whitman says, “And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.”<sup>261</sup> In his *The Uncertain Self: Whitman’s Drama of Identity*, E. Fred Carlisle mentions that these lines suggest “the equality of inner and outer as well as the objective reality of each.”<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of the Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) gives a fascinating account of this era of Whitman’s life.

<sup>255</sup> This is from the first line of his “Prayer of Columbus,” and it seems to be a self-description.

<sup>256</sup> This honorific was the title of O’Connor’s monograph on Whitman. *The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication* (New York: Bunce & Huntington, 1866).

<sup>257</sup> Mark Bauerlein, “Whitman’s Language of the Self,” *American Imago*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer 1987).

<sup>258</sup> *Democratic Vistas*, PP 994.

<sup>259</sup> *SOM* Lns. 17.1-2, 4-6.

<sup>260</sup> *SOM* Lns. 16.17-19.

<sup>261</sup> *SOM* Lns. 15.

<sup>262</sup> Carlisle, *Uncertain Self* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1973) 186.

The persona's series of identifications stretches beyond the human and reaches down to the vegetable and mineral: "I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots."<sup>263</sup> This sense of melding and universal unity would for Freud and Jung be relegated to the "collective unconscious," yet for Whitman it is part of a collective consciousness, and Whitman delineates an extensive capacity for the persona, one open to transpersonal dynamics and effects. Whitman, as one should recall from the opening quote, says that ancient Egyptian sacred science "respected the principle of life in all things." By representing his own porous psyche in this manner, he is able to identify with this same boundless principle.

In addition to objectivizing and universalizing the "interior" of the self, the persona can also peer into the "inner" spaces of explicate objects existing in the world. On one particularly glorious daybreak, Whitman engages the rising sun: "The heav'd challenge from the east that moment over my head, / The mocking taunt. See then whether you shall be master!"<sup>264</sup> The sun is having a dialogue with Whitman in the second line, but it is one that happens "internally," as there is no direct speech (which would be signaled with quotation marks) that happens between the two. This blurring of boundaries continues dramatically in the next few lines, where Whitman notes: "Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me, / If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me."<sup>265</sup> External reality has its origin inside the self, and it has to be pushed out from it. To synthesize this, then, all outer or sense-perceptible events and objects have an "inner" aspect, and "inner" interior spaces of the self birth and contain all outer events and objects. As Lewis Hyde says, "Moreover, by Whitman's model, the self does not come to life until the objects flow *through* it."<sup>266</sup>

In Whitman's construction of the persona, there is no sense of psychic centrality where the ego is a psychic center that embraces within itself a variety of functions such as thinking, feeling, desiring, and intending. These functions are granted their own autonomy and move through the vastness of Whitman's persona at will. In one particularly wrenching moment, Whitman says, "Agonies are one of my changes of garments, / I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person, / My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe."<sup>267</sup> Not only is there a fluid interchange with the wounded man, but the "hurts" that he feels as a result of this transaction are given a life of their own. They turn upon Whitman as he observes them.

This impulse to grant his desires, thoughts, feelings, and intentions their proper autonomy is expressed more fully in "A Backward Glance":

A desire that had been flitting through my previous life, or hovering on the flanks, mostly indefinite hitherto, had steadily advanced to the front, defined itself, and finally dominated everything else. This was a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit

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<sup>263</sup> *SOM* 31.8.

<sup>264</sup> *SOM* 24.62-63.

<sup>265</sup> *SOM* 25.1-2.

<sup>266</sup> Hyde, *The Gift* 189.

<sup>267</sup> *SOM* 33.135-137.

and facts of its immediate days, and of current America – and to exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book.<sup>268</sup>

This desire that acts on its own accord breaks up the Cartesian monocentric self and enacts the poly-dimensionality of the self as theorized by ancient Egyptian metaphysics. Interestingly, this desire that finally comes to dominate all of Whitman's other emotions is one that prompts him to do just what this chapter is arguing he does – express, tally, and exploit all of the dimensions of his Personality. In other words, he uses his poetry to articulate a sacred anatomy, yet one that is usable as a guide for others through the same realms.

One can turn to the poem “There Was a Child Went Forth” to see that Whitman is providing a universal model, not simply expressing the vagaries of his self: “There was a child went forth every day, / And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became, / And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day, / Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.”<sup>269</sup> So it is not only Whitman's persona that exhibits the precise interpenetration of inner and outer spaces, but others as well. Throughout his poems, Whitman maps a polycentric persona with a vast collective consciousness open and responsive to all types of transpersonal energies. He creates a public imaginal space in which the private world of an individual's psyche does not keep people from experiencing events/things in common (even if these events are not sense-perceptible) and in which people can purposively enter into the inner aspect of external things.

#### **Khat (the physical body)**

“O my heart, raise yourself on your base that you may recall what is in you.”<sup>270</sup>

“ See this heart of mine, it weeps in the presence of Osiris and pleads for mercy!”<sup>271</sup>

“The trusted man...does not vent his belly's speech.”<sup>272</sup>

“I am the all-seeing Eye of Horus, whose appearance strikes terror, Lady of Slaughter, Mighty One of Frightfulness.”<sup>273</sup>

It is a striking feature of ancient Egyptian literature – both religious and nonreligious – that qualities of soul were very often located in parts of the body. Limbs, sense organs, internal organs, even teeth and bones, all seem to have been invested with psychic attributes. They each carried relatively specific soul qualities. This means that when the Egyptians wanted to express a quality of desire, thought, or intention, they would often do so as if the quality were an attribute less of a unified self, and more as an attribute of a particular part of the body.

Qualities of will, for instance, were often referred to as belonging to limbs: powerful legs or strong arms indicated strength of will and the capacity to carry out one's

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<sup>268</sup> *PP* 657-58.

<sup>269</sup> *Lns.* 1-4.

<sup>270</sup> *Coffin Texts* 657.

<sup>271</sup> *Book of the Dead* 28.

<sup>272</sup> “Instructions to Kagemni,” *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1, 60.

<sup>273</sup> *Coffin Texts* 316.

wishes. There is a chapter in *The Book of the Dead* for “gaining power in the legs,” an expression that must, given its context, refer to the strengthening of the qualities of soul normally associated with the lower limbs. In it, the Netherworld traveler says: “My strides are made long, my thighs are lifted up; I have passed along the great path, and my limbs are strong.”<sup>274</sup>

While many parts of the body were invoked in ancient rituals, the mouth was by far the most important, and several chapters in *The Book of the Dead* are devoted specifically to opening the mouth or “giving” a mouth to a person so that he or she would be able to “speak with it” in the Netherworld.<sup>275</sup> The mouth, then, was endowed with important attributes in its own right. It was singled out as the symbolic representative of the interface between the physical and psychic realms, the mediator between life and death and between death and renewed life. As one can see from these examples and the epigraphs given above, the Egyptian anthropological system is characterized by what we can call a symbolic categorization of the body. It was the fusion of the psychospiritual powers of particular limbs and parts of the body that provided it with life and energy, rather than the other way around, and this dispersal of conscious intention allowed for deep interactions with transpersonal powers (which will be at the center of the next chapter on Herman Melville) and the bodies of other people.

As the most “external,” outward, or visible part of being, the physical body is the vehicle of the highest density within which the other bodies and spiritual sparks reside. After the process of mummification occurs, a transmutation happens as the corpse becomes reanimated as a symbolic whole. In a technological manner, it serves as a secure mooring for the more rarefied and intangible conscious states and co-relative bodies. Through rituals and magic, it becomes a portal and port of transfer from the physical world to the “underworld” and a place for the other non-immortal parts of the personality to live and come to be refreshed.

It is almost superficial to separate as I have the persona from the physical body for this discussion of Whitman’s poetry, as the two are clearly linked and depend on each other for their expression. While they both incorporate a blend of the psychic and physical, the everyday body tends more toward the physical. This section seeks to understand how Whitman focuses on the more physical elements of the mind-body complex and how the body itself structures the complete monument of the work (which we can see from the frontispiece).

Let us turn to one of the most masterful moments of *Song of Myself*:

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am  
touch’d from, The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,  
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.  
If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own  
body, or  
    any part of it,  
Translucent mould of me it shall be you! \*\*\*  
You my rich blood! your milky stream pale strippings of my life!  
Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you!

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<sup>274</sup> *Book of the Dead* 92.

<sup>275</sup> *Book of the Dead* 21-23. The Opening of the Mouth ceremony was referenced in our discussion of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

My brain it shall be your occult convolutions! \*\*\*  
 Sun so generous it shall be you!  
 Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you!  
 You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you!  
 Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!  
 Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounge in my winding  
 paths, it shall be you!  
 Hands I have taken, face I have kiss'd, mortal I have ever touch'd, it shall  
 be you.<sup>276</sup>

In this excerpt, Whitman is expounding a philosophy of life force and dynamism that is expressed through the physical body as a vehicle. This chant builds up energy with its exclamations and direct addresses, and Whitman uses it to amplify the force of his body. Whitman rejects the traditional, orthodox Christianity of the contemporary moment with its “churches, bibles, and creeds” for a more profound psychospiritual vision, and this poem definitely does not belong within any ascetic, body-negative tradition of withdrawal, but one that privileges enhancement, vitalism, and psychoenergetic discipline. Personalized consciousness is activated through the “rich blood,” “breast that presses against other breasts,” aromatic arm-pits, brain with “occult convolutions,” etc., and it is transferred out into nature, which takes on bodily attributes as well – the winds’ “soft-tickling genitals” are invoked in addition to the “muscular fields” and “sweaty brooks.” The body is a “translucent mould” because its parts shine through with an irrepressible psychospiritual energy.

One can say that Whitman provides a nineteenth-century American localization of the same symbolic categorization of the body articulated in the New Kingdom text *The Litany of Ra*:

I am one of you,  
 I have appeared as a vulture.  
 My face is a falcon,  
 The top of my head is Re.  
 My eyes are Two Women, the Two Sisters,  
 My nose is the Horus of the Netherworld.  
 My mouth is the Sovereign of the West,  
 My throat is Nun. \*\*\*  
 My liver is the the Living One,  
 My spleen is the One with the Beak.  
 My stomach is the Opening One,  
 My entrails are the One with the Secret Essence.  
 My back is the Weary of Heart,  
 My spine is the One on the bier.  
 My ribs are Horus and Thoth,  
 My anus is the Great Flood.  
 My phallus is Tatenen,  
 My glans is the Protected One in Old Cairo. \*\*\*  
 I am entirely a god,

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<sup>276</sup> SOM 24.28-32, 36-38, 42-47.

No limb of mine is without god.  
I enter as a god,  
And I exit as a god,  
The gods have transformed themselves into my body.<sup>277</sup>

This excerpt systematically works down the body, identifying each part of the body with a god – literally imbuing it with the energy of that god. Just as the subject of *The Litany of Re*, Whitman experiences himself as “divine inside and out,” and with a similar formal use of a catalogue technique, he lists specific parts of the body for special consideration as he breaks up the standard dualistic division between body and mind in his own manner.

One can be relatively sure that Whitman was familiar with texts of this genre. In his book *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*, Whitman’s friend Richard Bucke describes his reading practices, and the intensity with which he turned to Egyptian material. Bucke recounts: “[Whitman] seldom read any book deliberately through...He seemed to read a few pages here and a few pages there...Sometimes (though very seldom) he would get sufficiently interested in a volume to read it all. I think he read almost, if not quite the whole, of Renouf’s ‘Egypt,’ and Bruschbey’s ‘Egypt,’ but these cases were exceptional.”<sup>278</sup> Whitman’s own words support his avid interest and detailed following of contemporary Egyptology. He says, “The discovery of the celebrated ‘Rosetta stone,’ about thirty years ago, brought such a fresh impulse and light to the pursuit [of Egyptology], leading to the demonstrations of Champollion, Rosellini, and Wilkinson.”<sup>279</sup> He also mentions that he is waiting to “see when the work of Dr. Lepsius comes out.”<sup>280</sup> Mediated through the academic discourse of his time, Egyptian texts provided Whitman a model for the detailed symbolic presentation of his body and the consciousness that soars through its constituent elements in addition to a formal technique for organizing his poetry.

In the poem “I Sing the Body Electric,” from the *Children of Adam* collection, Whitman provides what can be called the beginning of a “symbology of the body,” to borrow a phrase from Harold Aspiz’s *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful*.<sup>281</sup> Aspiz argues that this poem “develops the metaphor of the body as an electrical attractor, energizer, and sublime mystery.”<sup>282</sup> I would contend that Whitman is being more straightforward and realistic than Aspiz allows with the taming of Whitman’s project enacted by the term “metaphor.” Section 9 provides an extensive catalogue that moves from the “Head, neck, hair, ears, drop and tympan of the ears” to the “thin red jellies within your or within me, the bones and the marrow in the bones.”<sup>283</sup> This catalogue

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<sup>277</sup> Piankoff, *The Litany of Ra* 12.

<sup>278</sup> Richard Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1969) 219-220.

<sup>279</sup> *New York Dissected* 36.

<sup>280</sup> *NYD* 37. Here, Whitman is referencing the work of Egyptologists Jean-Francois Champollion – who deciphered the hieroglyphics – Ippolito Rosellini, John Gardner Wilkinson, and Karl Richard Lepsius. Here is a collection of French, Italian, English, and German Egyptologists, a diverse grouping that speaks to Whitman’s wide reading in the subject.

<sup>281</sup> Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) 67.

<sup>282</sup> Aspiz 68.

<sup>283</sup> *SOM* 9.5, 33.

extends beyond what we would think of as the physical joints, parts, or organs of the body to also include such elements as sympathies, sexuality, love-perturbations, articulation, and the exquisite realization of health. Whitman's body is a complete, though shifting, assemblage that is unified by its vibrant power, and not by recourse to any mirror stage or centralizing machinery.

This attempt to animate and ensoul the body in order to use it as a psychospiritual vehicle is localized and made specific to nineteenth century America by Whitman with his particular devotion to phrenology, the movement that seeks to understand the personality of people through interpreting bumps and fissures in the skull, which were believed to be caused by the influence of different regions of the brain that controlled particular character traits. Nathaniel Mackey in his essay "Phrenological Whitman" explores much of the historical context behind this obsession of Whitman's.<sup>284</sup> Whitman's interest in what is disparagingly called a faddish pseudo-science has a deeper relevance, as the attention given to phrenology (in addition to pathognomy and physiognomy) helps motivate and ground his construction of the body as a receptacle of psychospiritual forces, and in particular helps us understand his particular fascination with the face: "These faces bear testimony slumbering or awake, / They show their descent from the Master himself"; "In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass."<sup>285</sup>

In the poem, "As Adam Early in the Morning," we see the fully realized psychospiritual body in motion: "As Adam early in the morning, / Walking forth from the bower refresh'd with sleep, / Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach, / Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass, / Be not afraid of my body."<sup>286</sup> The union that this poetic moment effects is difficult to describe. An internal space of the poem opens out to incorporate us as we enter virtually into it to touch this electric body as it passes. Concurrently, our touching the physical book as we read opens a portal for Whitman's body to come striding by for us to reach out and grab. In this fashion, the same interpenetration of interior and exterior spaces that the persona and body experience is provided for the reader.

**Ka (life force) – Real Me / Me Myself / What I Am**

"Horus has not kept away from you, for you are his Ka."<sup>287</sup>

"The mountain will hold out its arms to him and the living Ka's will accompany him."<sup>288</sup>

In moving upward from the physical body and its dynamics to the higher bodies of this anthropological model, one first comes in contact with the psychospiritual body known in ancient Egypt as the *ka*. According to the Egyptologist Erik Hornung, the *ka* is "all that enlivens. It is both a life force and the enjoyment of life."<sup>289</sup> In addition to "life force," the term has accrued several other definitions, including image, vital power,

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<sup>284</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, "Phrenological Whitman," *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

<sup>285</sup> *Faces* 4.10-11; *Song of Myself* 48.17.

<sup>286</sup> Lns. 1-5.

<sup>287</sup> *Pyramid Texts* 610.

<sup>288</sup> Quoted in R.T. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* 233.

<sup>289</sup> Hornung, *Idea into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought* (New York: Timken Publishers, 1992) 175.



disposition, daimon, and genius. Functionally, this concept represents the vitality and energy inherent in all living things that can be personified and accompany the person as a kind of double (see figure 1), and for this reason it can also be abstracted to signify the collective energy of the ancestral group, a wider consciousness that absorbs the health of the community and family. The Egyptians believed that all living and vital forms possess a *ka* – not just humanity, but the gods, plant life, animals, stars, temples, and even geographic places.



Figure 1 – In this figure, Khnum, the ram-headed deity and divine potter, is depicted modeling both the divine child and his *ka*.

In this system, the *ka* serves as the mould or matrix for physical metabolic functions. As a subtle or supraphysical formative life-force body, it lives after the physical body in a consecrated statue that was an idealized form of the deceased and requires “sustenance above all for its continued existence which was provided...as offerings or...in the tomb paintings.”<sup>290</sup> If it maintained its form, it served as the cohesive agent for all the bodies of the person’s after/inner life (which in ancient Egypt were the same).

In the entity that Whitman variously calls the Real Me, the Me Myself, and the What I Am, he provides his own unique variation of the *ka* concept. In the same manner as the *ka*, the Me Myself is a subtle life-force body that accompanies Whitman and serves as a vehicle for the expression of power, desire, and emotion. In effect, it is Whitman’s “double” and serves as his mirror image. Here is an excerpt from *Song of Myself*, section 4:

These come to me days and nights and go from me again,  
But they are not the Me myself.  
Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,  
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,  
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,  
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,

<sup>290</sup> Manfred Lurker, *Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984) 73. In the contemporary moment, the tradition of feeding the dead still survives in the presentation of flowers at cemeteries and the annual harvest festival of Halloween.

Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.<sup>291</sup>

A counterpart of the physical form, the Me Myself becomes visible to the nominal Whitmanian persona as an aura of sorts that stands removed from the rush and busy flux of everyday life. “Looking down” and “bending an arm,” it maintains the mold of Whitman’s physical characteristics and carries his body’s imprint.<sup>292</sup> Yet, the word “impalpable” reminds us that it is not wholly physical, but serves as an intermediary that sustains the physical body and connects it to “higher” bodies.

As a representative of vitality, its “erect” stance is one of power. It is both in the game, providing energy for the “pulling and hauling” Whitman describes, and out of it, embodying a sense of potentiality and possibility. One can also speculate that it is in and out of the game in another respect, participating in but not confined to the bounds of Whitman’s life. Even though the *ka* in Egyptian conceptualizations was separated from the physical world, it could still embody itself if the proper ceremonies and form to house it were available. It was believed to have an immortal nature, as it did not dissolve after death, which might explain the aloofness of the Me Myself as it “watches and wonders at” Whitman’s exoteric life.

Whitman is not the only figure during this period of American literature to explore this mysterious entity. Henry David Thoreau gives a similar explanation of this element of the personality when he says in his *Journal* that he is “sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you.”<sup>293</sup>

In Whitman’s poetry, the relationship with this capital “Me” is far from a smooth, conflict-free one. The most vivid manifestation of this entity comes in the shattering poem, “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”:

Before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch’d, untold,  
altogether unreach’d,  
Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows,  
With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written,  
Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.<sup>294</sup>

Under normal circumstances, the *ka* is supposed to be a guide and protector. (As *The Pyramid Texts* say: “Unas’s kas are about him, his guardian forces under his feet.”<sup>295</sup>) However, there is clearly a troubled relationship between Whitman and the *ka* figure here judging his poems, and it is this traumatic alienation from his vital power that causes the dreaded ebbing of life. When the proper relation with this entity is not cultivated, the dissolution of the self and poetry happens, as evidenced by the Real Me’s pointing to the sand that drifts away with the tide, a gesture all the more devastating to the poet because the Real Me is the element of the personality that has been immortal and always will be.

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<sup>291</sup> *SOM* 4.8-14.

<sup>292</sup> Because the *ka* bears and maintains the matrix of the body, this concept might help explain the phenomenon of phantom limbs, commonly reported in medical literature when patients report that missing limbs still convey the sensation or feeling of themselves.

<sup>293</sup> See Thoreau, *The Variorum Walden*, ed. Walter Harding (New York: Twayne, 1962) 122.

<sup>294</sup> Lns. 2.11-14.

<sup>295</sup> *Pyramid Texts* 51.

The Real Me is the muse / genius that the Whitmanian persona is constantly trying to touch and reach.

This process is complicated by the necessity of mediating interchanges between various components of the self. As Whitman says in section five of *Song of Myself*, “I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other.” According to this formulation, “the other I am,” another moniker Whitman provides for the Real Me, has the potential to enter into sadomasochistic relations of abasement with the other elements of the self. Stabilizing these relationships becomes a major goal of the poetry, and Whitman works to maintain a proper hierarchy within the sacred anatomy so that he can navigate various material and immaterial realms and mount to higher places of the spirit. To explain how he does this, we must turn to the Soul to which Whitman alludes here.

#### **Ba (individual manifestation) – The Soul**

“See that my Ba comes to me from wherever it may be...that it might see its body once more and alight on its mummy!”<sup>296</sup>

“If my Ba, my stubborn brother, will listen to me, and if his desire is in full accord with me, he will flourish.”<sup>297</sup>

The Egyptian word *ba* connotes the visible manifestation of any spiritual being, and it is often represented in imagistic terms as a human-headed hawk. This form is a psychic, non-physical body (but one still bearing a subtle materiality) that travels between different worlds or spiritual realms. While the *ka* has a close connection with the *khat* (or physical body), the *ba* is more ethereal and less gross than these lower bodies. Erik Hornung offers a helpful distinction between the *ka* and *ba* when he says that “the former embodies the causal principle and the protective power behind a person, while the *ba* signals one thing emerging from another.”<sup>298</sup>

In heightened conditions of psychic awareness, such as sleep, after-death experience, ecstatic or initiatic states, or altered consciousness, this element of personality can move into a non-physical relation with the usual body-mind complex, gain agency, and operate in the world at large. In popular parlance, the *ba* would be likened to the astral body and invoked to explain phenomena such as out-of-body and “traveling” experiences, remote viewing, and lucid dreams. Overall, the *ba* moves from the material-physical realm of the *khat* and *ka* to the subtle-physical realm of its movement between heaven and earth. Chapter 89 of the *Book of the Dead* implores, for example, “O thou great god, grant thou that my *ba* may come unto me from wheresoever it may be...grant thou that my *ba* may look upon my body.”

The Whitmanian Soul, especially when it is addressed with a capital “S” or referred to directly as “my soul,” is an entity that has much more in common with the Egyptian *ba* than orthodox definitions of the Christian soul. In Whitman, the Soul has a material, but deeply interiorized, reality, and like the *ba*, it is the psychospiritual body that moves and navigates between spiritual realms. The Soul for Whitman is a strong vehicle of ascent, and it carries him onward and inward to higher levels of meaning. In a

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<sup>296</sup> *Book of the Dead* 89.

<sup>297</sup> William Simpson, ed., “The Man Who Was Weary of Life,” *The Literature of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 181.

<sup>298</sup> Hornung *Idea* 183.

poem like “Starting from Paumanok,” we see the Soul being quickly hailed: “Here lands female and male, / Here the heir-ship and heiress-ship of the world, here the flame of materials... / Yes here comes my mistress the soul.”<sup>299</sup> But in “Passage to India,” the reader is given a more specific destination: “O soul, repressless, I with thee and thou with me, / Thy circumnavigation of the world begin, / Of man, the voyage of his mind’s return, / To reason’s early paradise, / Back, back to wisdom’s birth, to innocent intuitions, / Again with fair creation.”<sup>300</sup> The Soul’s movement is multi-dimensional and intricate, as it can traverse the entire globe while also moving back in time to points of origin, birth, and creation.

In *Song of Myself*, the Soul makes several crucial appearances when it is propelled into being after extremely ecstatic moments. The opening of the poem itself is a grand energetic celebration that prods Whitman to “loafe and invite my soul.”<sup>301</sup> In section 5, after calming fears about the abasement of the Soul and the Real Me, Whitman recalls a high moment of fusion with the Soul: “I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning, / How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart, / And reach’d till you felt my beard, and reach’d till you held my feet.”<sup>302</sup> This famous scene is quite bizarre – what does one do with the image of the Soul throttled above Whitman simultaneously grabbing his beard and feet? I contend that this moment recalls a well-known moment in Egyptian iconography – the return of the *ba* to the tomb, where it flies down on top of the corpse to bring it air and food and merge with it. (See figure 2.) Quite clearly, one sees it hovering down above the middle of the supine figure, lightly brushing his beard and reaching down to the feet. This fusion brings an increased strength and rejuvenation, and in his portrayal of this epiphanic moment, Whitman adds a characteristically sexual element with the parting of the shirt and plunging of the tongue.



<sup>299</sup> Lns. 5.10-11, 15.

<sup>300</sup> Lns. 7.5-10.

<sup>301</sup> Ln. 1.4.

<sup>302</sup> Lns. 5.6-9.

Figure 2 – Here we see the *ba* soul reuniting with the deceased, bringing an ankh (the symbol of life).

Further along, in section 25, once sun-rise has been dramatically purged from the self, Whitman reaches a state of peace: “We found our own O my soul in the calm and cool of the day-break.”<sup>303</sup> Referencing the Egyptian lamentation genre, which conventionally features a speaker conversing with his soul at the beginning of the day, Stephen Tapscott in his reading of this passage expresses his amazement at “how close this theme of Whitman’s poem comes to a genuine echo of Egyptian tradition.”<sup>304</sup> This calm achieved here is disturbed again in the conclusion, where I surmise that the spotted hawk that “swoops by and accuses” Whitman, complaining of his gab and loitering is a final emblem for the Soul, one that awaits Whitman’s bequeathal of himself to the dirt “to grow from the grass I love” so that it can fly off to the post-mortem world.<sup>305</sup>

The imagery explicitly linking the Soul with birds, in a manner following the pattern of the *ba*, occurs throughout many of Whitman’s poems. This happens very simply in the poem “My Canary Bird,” found in *First Annex: Sands at Seventy*. After meditating on the pleasures of penetrating the themes of mighty books, Whitman asks: “But now from thee to me, caged bird, to feel thy joyous warble, / Filling the air, the lonesome room, the long forenoon, / Is it not just as great, O soul?”<sup>306</sup> Whereas we get here a fairly straightforward identification between the Soul and a bird, in the poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” there is a more complicated mingling of this imagery. Moving from the depths of a depression catalyzed by the death of President Lincoln, the poem arcs toward an ambiguous, but triumphant, conclusion as it takes stock of the Soul’s inspiration by a hermit-thrush: “The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird, / And the tallying chant, the echo arous’d in my soul... / Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul, / There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.”<sup>307</sup> Whitman establishes a profound union between the bird and the Soul, whose chant is inspired by it. This reconciliation between the two initiates them deeper into the “sacred knowledge of death” and its transcendence.<sup>308</sup>

In “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” there is a conversation between the young narrator’s soul and the mockingbird that emphasizes the unity between these two and the importance of the Soul to the creation of poetry: “Demon or bird! (said the boy’s soul,) / Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?... / A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die. / O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me, / O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you.”<sup>309</sup> With the phrase “demon or bird,” it is clear that the bird images throughout Whitman’s poems are not supposed to be simply naturalistic representations, but emblems of psychospiritual forces. As in “Lilacs,” the process of recognition is a powerful one, and the Soul gathers strength on hearing the bird’s song, whose existence it interprets as being for the purpose of its inspiration. An intense process of creative

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<sup>303</sup> Ln. 25.4.

<sup>304</sup> Tapscott 63.

<sup>305</sup> Lns. 52.1, 9.

<sup>306</sup> Lns. 3-5.

<sup>307</sup> Lns. 16.15-16, 21-22.

<sup>308</sup> Ln. 14.12.

<sup>309</sup> Stanza 28.1-2, 6-7.

transfiguration melds the Soul together with the bird, and they consistently project and perpetuate each other.

One should notice also that in “Cradle,” the boy’s soul, introduced in parentheses, takes on a major speaking role, displacing the standard persona that is the narrator for much of *Leaves of Grass*. Moments like this emphasize how complicated Whitman’s cartography of the personality is and its elaborate involvement in the creation of his poetry. In the poem “Salut Au Monde!,” the Soul takes over as narrator without any overt signal from Whitman and addresses the persona boldly: “O take my hand Walt Whitman! / Such gliding wonders! such sights and sounds! / Such join’d unended links, each hook’d to the next, / Each answering all, each sharing the earth with all.”<sup>310</sup> The Soul is preparing to launch into a magnificent astral journey, and the world itself lies at its fingertips. External and internal spaces merge together as the persona Whitman responds, “Within me latitude widens, longitude lengthens, / Asia, Africa, Europe, are to the east – America is provided for in the west.”<sup>311</sup> At the end of the poem, after seeing everything from the Himalayas to Egypt (“I see Egypt and the Egyptians, I see the pyramids and obelisks”), Whitman proclaims, “All islands to which birds wing their way I wing my way myself,” which nicely insinuates the bird imagery into this map of the Soul’s journey.<sup>312</sup>

It is not a surprise that the late clusters of *Leaves of Grass* – “Whispers of Heavenly Death,” “From Noon to Starry Night,” and “Songs of Parting” – feature the Soul very prominently. It comes to the forefront as Whitman prepares for death, which will lead to its departure from the body to other realms. Whitman asks in the first poem of the “Whispers” cluster: “Darest thou now O soul, / Walk out with me toward the unknown region, / Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow?”<sup>313</sup> This is the entrance to death, and the poem is a preparatory chant that establishes the groundwork for the leap into the abyss. The poem works toward the emphatic conclusion: “Then we burst forth, we float, / In Time and Space O soul, prepared for them, / Equal, equipt at last, (O joy! O fruit of all!) them to fulfill O soul.”<sup>314</sup> Whitman lingers gently on this transition point. In “A Clear Midnight,” he says: “This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless, / Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done, / Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best, / Night, sleep, death and the stars.”<sup>315</sup> The Soul in Whitman is always in transit, and here we witness its movement into the wordless, traveling to an elevated realm of night and death. The word “flight” is a crucial one, and again connects the Soul with its Egyptian antecedent.

It is from this vantage point that the Soul turns to look down at the body it has left. In “O Living Always, Always Dying,” a superb post-mortem poem, Whitman says: “O the burials of me past and present, / O me while I stride ahead, material, visible, imperious as ever; / O me, what I was for years, now dead, (I lament not, I am content;) / O to disengage myself from those corpses of me, which I turn and look at where I cast

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<sup>310</sup> Lns. 1.1-4.

<sup>311</sup> Lns. 2.1-2.

<sup>312</sup> Lns. 10.10, 13.11.

<sup>313</sup> Lns. 1-3.

<sup>314</sup> Lns. 13-15.

<sup>315</sup> Lns. 1-4.

them, / To pass on, (O living! always living!) and leave the corpses behind.”<sup>316</sup> At this moment of death, a new group of psychospiritual bodies emerge and point the way toward the beginning of a new life after death.

**Sahu (spiritual body) and Akh (illuminated intelligence) – The Real Body and Spirit**

“The akh belongs to the heaven, the corpse to the earth.”<sup>317</sup>

“Shining Ra, in your celestial aspect, as an Akh, you are Atum within the sky...a judge within your palace – which is the heavens.”<sup>318</sup>

“Pharaoh Wenis’ lifetime is eternity, his limit is everlastingness in his Sahu.”<sup>319</sup>

“I say, O Osiris in truth, that I am the Sahu of the god, and I beseech thee not to let me be driven away, nor to be cast upon the wall of blazing fire.”<sup>320</sup>

According to the ancient Egyptian elaboration of the personality, if the series of ritual transfigurations following proper mummification are successfully completed after death, in addition to passing the judgment of the dead, one moves to the very highest level of existence, a transcendent realm of pure ideation. Released from the net of the *khat* (physical body), the *sahu* is an incorruptible body, the most subtle and elevated of them all. In the *Book of the Dead*, the deceased describes this body with phrases like “My flesh germinateth” and “I germinate like the plants.”<sup>321</sup> The *sahu*, therefore, is a vibrant, living thing, a new and superior body, the creation of which marks the liberation from the tomb and underworld. Consisting of pure feeling, thinking, and spiritual nature, this body parallels quite interestingly with the immortal golden light body of Taoism and the “causal body” as theorized by various theosophical currents. As A.E. Powell says in his *The Causal Body and the Ego*, “At its inception, the causal body, or form-aspect of the true man, is described as a delicate film of subtlest matter, just visible, marking where the individual begins his separate life...The causal body, as said, is the receptacle of all that is enduring.”<sup>322</sup> This is a perfect definition of the *sahu*. Whereas the *ba* exists between worlds, the *sahu* exists in a wholly spiritualized realm.

As a vehicle, the *sahu* houses the *akh*, a term which translates as “illuminated intelligence,” “divine spark,” and “shining one.” Other meanings include “exaltation” and “transfiguration,” denoting the process by which this vehicle is created. In *The Pyramid Texts*, an initiate who has undergone the necessary psychospiritual refining to reach this state proclaims, “Sun Atum, this Unas has come to you – an imperishable akh.”<sup>323</sup> As an imperishable form of light, the *akh* possesses the ability to transcend time and space, spans all material dimensions, and has access to the knowledge of all things earthly in the past, present, and future. Together, these entities (the “soul-body” with its “living soul”) reside on a very refined level in the remote heavens and commune with the spiritual essence of other deities.

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<sup>316</sup> Lns. 2-6.

<sup>317</sup> *Pyramid Texts* 474.

<sup>318</sup> *Book of the Dead* 15a.

<sup>319</sup> *Pyramid Texts* utterance 273-4.

<sup>320</sup> *Book of Dead* 89.

<sup>321</sup> *Book of the Dead* 64.

<sup>322</sup> A. Powell, *The Causal Body* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1978) 90.

<sup>323</sup> *Pyramid Texts* 33.

Whitman dubs the new body that continues after death the Real Body, or as he says in the poem “Eidolons” – “Thy body permanent, / The body lurking there within thy body.”<sup>324</sup> In “Starting from Paumanok,” he asks, “How can the real body ever die and be buried? / Of your real body and any man’s or woman’s real body, / Item for item it will elude the hands of the corpse-cleaners and pass to fitting spheres, / Carrying what has accrued to it from the moment of birth to the moment of death.”<sup>325</sup> With the phrase “item for item,” Whitman speaks to the detail of the psychospiritual work it takes to create, remember, and unify a Real Body and one might say the scientific precision necessary to release it from the physical body and its corpse-cleaners. It is in those “fitting spheres” that the Real Body can germinate, flower, and bear fruit.

Whitman provides one of the most stunning portraits of the regenerate spiritualized Real Body in American literature. Turning to the poem “Scented Herbage of My Breast,” located in the *Calamus* collection, one finds:

Scented herbage of my breast,  
 Leaves from you I glean, I write, to be perused best afterwards,  
 Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death \*\*\*  
 Death is beautiful from you, (what indeed is finally beautiful except death  
 and love?) \*\*\*  
 Grow up taller sweet leaves that I may see! grow up out of my breast!  
 Spring away from the conceal’d heart there!<sup>326</sup>

Again, Whitman is drawing directly on Egyptian iconography here, and the image of scented herbage growing from his breast revivifies the iconic representation of stalks of grain sprouting from the body of Osiris (figure 3). Whitman would have seen many images like this in the multi-volume publication entitled *Monumenti dell’Egitto e della Nubia* by Ippolito Rosellini (1800–1843), who is sometimes called the father of Italian Egyptology. Whitman referred to Rosellini directly: “Rosellini, of Tuscany, has issued a complete civil, military, religious, and monumental account of the Egyptians, with magnificent plates. This work is of such cost that only wealthy libraries can possess it. There is a copy in the Astor Library in New York.”<sup>327</sup> The grass that grows out of Whitman is associated here with his poetry, and it is the germination of his spirit-body that fosters prolific creativity and the evocation of power from the order of nature.

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<sup>324</sup> Stanza 20.1-3.

<sup>325</sup> Lns. 13.4-7.

<sup>326</sup> Lns. 1-3, 17-18.

<sup>327</sup> *New York Dissected* 37.





Figure 3 – Stalks of new plants shoot upward out of the transfigured body of the lord of the underworld Osiris.

In the “fitting spheres,” the Real Body takes its place as a vehicle for the pure feeling, thinking, and transcendent nature that Whitman calls simply My Spirit. Like the *sahu*, it is impermeable and immortal. In section 46 of *Song of Myself*, Whitman narrates a touching scene:

This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look'd at the crowded heaven,  
 And I said to my spirit *When we become the enfolders of those orbs, and  
 the pleasure and knowledge of every thing in them, shall we be  
 fill'd and satisfied then?*  
 And my spirit said *No, we but level that lift to pass and continue  
 beyond.*<sup>328</sup>

At this visionary moment, the Spirit speaks about reaching Enlightenment, in the truest, highest sense of the term. Filled with a transcendent pleasure and knowledge, the Spirit has reached the foremost level of psychospiritual development and then progresses even beyond that level. As “the enfolder of orbs,” the Spirit (like the *akh*) exists in a condition of radiance; it has contacted and become united with the source of spiritual light. As such, the Spirit contains the key to its own self-renewal, and it is this power of inner self-regeneration that is the hallmark of its divine status, which is the goal of this entire system.

One can interpret the famous poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” as being narrated by this glorified element of the personality. As the speaker says, “It avails not, time nor place – distance avails not, / I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence, / Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt.”<sup>329</sup> Later in the poem, he continues: “These and all else were to me the same as they are to you, / I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river, \*\*\* / What is it then between us? / What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?”<sup>330</sup> In these excerpts, all planes of manifestation are consolidated and joined together, and

<sup>328</sup> 46.20-22.

<sup>329</sup> Lns. 3.1-3.

<sup>330</sup> Lns. 4.1-2, 5.1-2.

with a rhetoric meant to comfort and soothe, this Spirit speaks of and enacts a movement beyond time, place, distance, and generations, which encompasses contemporary readers and all future readers to come.

### **The Poem and the Book**

To avoid confusion at this point, I should emphasize that there was not *one* simple map of the self that emerges from the ancient Egyptian perspective. It was believed that many schematics could be unfolded from the multi-dimensional and interpenetrating universe of the human. If one turns to an eighteenth dynasty text (c.1550-c.1292 BCE) from the Tomb of Amenemhet, there is a fascinatingly baroque inventory that registers the following elements of the individual – the Ka, the stela and the tomb in the necropolis, destiny, the duration of life, the birthing stool, the wet nurse, the creator of the embryo, the Ba, the Akh, the body, the shadow, and all of the forms of beings capable of benefiting from offerings.<sup>331</sup> (And other catalogues present different configurations.) An excerpt like this exemplifies, as Philippe Derchain duly notes, that “the limits of the person are not reached by the limits of the body and its faculties” and that the personality absorbs all of “the elements whose external properties were indispensable to the continuation of one’s existence and one’s memory.”<sup>332</sup>

In the listing above, the “tomb in the necropolis” is listed as a component of the human personality, and its important task was to assure the safe existence and immortality of the physical body, as well as the multiple psychospiritual bodies for which it served as an anchor. Thinking about the connection between the tomb, writing, and immortality helps us understand Whitman’s conception of the poem and the physical book. In his work, these two entities are also projected selves, spiritual bodies that serve as vehicles of consciousness for the preservation of his memory. After mentioning Horace, who compares his odes with pyramids, Jan Assmann makes broader points about the literary significance of the tomb in his *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*:

This comparison of books with tombs and with the cult of the dead not only stresses the memorial aspect of literature, with books as the truer and better pyramids; it also plays upon the bookishness, the literary nature of the tomb. One aspect shared by book and pyramid is the survival of the name: immortality in the memory of posterity... But the most important common denominator of tomb and book is authorship – a denominator without parallel in other cultures. Where else does the owner of a tomb figure as the “author” of his burial place and the life recorded within? ... The tombs belong to the constellation of pyramids, temples, obelisks, [etc.] with which the Egyptians attempted to create a sacred dimension of permanence, a place that was an assurance both of immortality for themselves and of visibility for what they held sacred. The Egyptians assured their entry into this dimension of permanence by means of the monumental form they gave their tombs and commemorations; and, above all, they wrote themselves into permanence through the medium of their inscriptions.<sup>333</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> A. Gardiner and N. Davies, ed., *The Tomb of Amenemhet* (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1915).

<sup>332</sup> Derchain 233.

<sup>333</sup> Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt* 68-70.

Whitman also very explicitly writes himself into permanence through the medium of his inscriptions. Two critics express this idea extremely well. Ernest Tuveson, in his *The Avatars of Thrice Great Hermes: An Approach to Romanticism*, says, “The very book *Leaves of Grass* is a projected self...and its creation is the counterpart of the divine out-moving.”<sup>334</sup> Nathaniel Mackey, in his *Paracritical Hinge*, offers: “There is a great deal in Whitman’s work that suggests that writing is a kind of dying, a disappearance into (in order to live on in) the book, that the alternate body afforded by the book is an improved, augmented body, the page a place of alternate growth.”<sup>335</sup> Let’s explore how these insights work within the poetry.

I want to begin with the celebrated moment from “A Song of the Rolling Earth”: “Human bodies are words, myriads of words, / (In the best poems re-appears the body, man’s or woman’s, well-shaped, natural, gay, / Every part able, active, receptive, without shame or the need of shame.)”<sup>336</sup> There is an intimate link drawn here between words, poems, and the bodies.<sup>337</sup> The poem works to virtually encapsulate and represent the body in linguistic form, becoming a psychospiritual body in its own right. As it captures the body at its most “well-shaped,” with every part still able and active, one can also surmise that the poem crafts an idealized version of the physical body, preserving it in a final form suitable for eternal preservation. This creation process is not an easy one, however. In the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman provides a grand list of instructions to follow – including reading his poetry in every season of the year, re-examining everything from church and school, and rejecting whatever insults one’s soul – so that “your very flesh shall be a great poem.”<sup>338</sup>

In a very explicit manner, the poem is the localized body in which are enfolded all of the other bodies that Whitman adumbrates and wants to sketch. This body is not static, stable, or self-enclosed. It is deeply embedded in the material world, acting upon and being acted upon by it. To see this dynamic unfold, one can turn to the opening cluster of the culminating edition of *Leaves of Grass*, cannily named “Inscriptions.” The poem “To Foreign Lands” simply states: “I heard that you ask’d for something to prove this puzzle the New World, / And to define America, her athletic Democracy, / Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what you wanted.”<sup>339</sup> A dizzying recursive effect is at play here, as Whitman is writing to say that he is sending a poem as it is being written. This bizarre formulation establishes an interpenetration of the poem with reality, as it is a psychospiritual body that moves through intratextual realms out into the extratextual spaces of foreign lands.

At times, the Whitmanian persona addresses the poems and the book in which they are collected, which emphasizes the separateness of these elements as their own autonomous element of the personality. Here is an excerpt from “In Cabin’d Ships at Sea”: “Then falter not O book, fulfil your destiny, / You not a reminiscence of the land alone, / You too as a lone bark cleaving the ether, purpos’d I know not whither, yet ever

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<sup>334</sup> Tuveson 240.

<sup>335</sup> Mackey 31.

<sup>336</sup> Lns. 7-9.

<sup>337</sup> I am reminded here of Emerson’s comments on Montaigne’s *Essays*: “Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive.” Emerson, *Essays & Poems* 700.

<sup>338</sup> *PP* 11.

<sup>339</sup> Lns. 1-3.

full of faith, / Consort to every ship that sails, sail you! / Bear forth to them folded my love, (dear mariners, for you I fold it here in every leaf;).”<sup>340</sup> The book is a moving monument, projected out into the world to fulfill its destiny. Not only does Whitman’s body re-appear here (the “You too” reminds that Whitman is also sailing out on the sea), but also his love, which is recorded in a very palpable and durable form.

“Starting from Paumanok” continues this theme. “Take my leaves America, take them South and take them North, / Make welcome for them everywhere, for they are your own offspring, / Surround them East and West, for they would surround you, / And you precedents, connect lovingly with them, for they connect lovingly with you.”<sup>341</sup> Again, Whitman is colliding multiple planes of perception and reality, as America is being asked to take and distribute the body of his book everywhere, although he is in the middle of its construction. It is also difficult to imagine a speaking voice separate from the words of the poem that encodes it, although this speaking voice takes for granted that we can. The space of the poem is constantly shifting as it absorbs and is being absorbed by the world. Whitman says that this body surrounds the East and the West, although those spaces can surround the book as well.

Finally, we come to a selection from the end of *Leaves of Grass*, “So Long!”: “My songs cease, I abandon them, / From behind the screen where I hid I advance personally solely to you. / Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man, / (Is it night? are we here together alone?) / It is I you hold and who holds you, / I spring from the pages into your arms – de cease calls me forth.”<sup>342</sup> At the moment of death, Whitman is at his most subtle. As the persona prepares to “depart from materials,” he appears to renounce the poetic body, but what happens is actually a fusion with it.<sup>343</sup> When Whitman addresses us to announce that “this is no book,” I believe that he means that this is no *mere* book. In other words, the poetic body in front of us that we touch has subsumed the man Whitman himself and now fully becomes the consummation of his presence. The boundaries between textual and extra-textual reality now become porous to the extreme. When Whitman springs from the pages into our arms, does he turn around to read the rest of the poem with us? Like the pyramid, then, the poem becomes a locus for the observation, thematization, and preservation of the self. It also fully inscribes Whitman into the full interactive network of the social world – there is reciprocal action (“I you hold and who holds you”), mutual affection (“Camerado”), and intercourse verbal and otherwise. By reproducing and recording Whitman’s acts and designs, his exits and entrances, his value and significance, his virtue and his standing, the poem serves as a vehicle that insures Whitman’s immortality.

## **You**

Now that Whitman has leaped into our arms, it should be easier to realize that *Leaves of Grass* has constantly referred to “you” as another crucial element of his full personality. The poetry reaches out to incorporate us within the Whitmanian complex and thereby transform us. In this way, it provides a psychospiritual map that has as its goal widening our perception to understand the complexity of our own selves and bodies.

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<sup>340</sup> Lns. 17-21.

<sup>341</sup> Lns. 4.1-4.

<sup>342</sup> Lns. 51-57.

<sup>343</sup> Ln. 70.

Whitman makes his presence known forcefully and directly in several poems that go by the simple name “To You.” The first one begins in the realm of questioning, and it is difficult to discern whether the tone is friendly or confrontational: “Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me? / And why should I not speak to you?”<sup>344</sup> The second is much softer and seems to take place in the hush of night: “Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you be my poem, / I whisper with my lips close to your ear, / I have loved many women and men, but I love none better than you.”<sup>345</sup> One must remember that if these poems are read aloud, the identities become more tangled than they already were.<sup>346</sup> The “you” who is addressed in the poem becomes the “I” that addresses an unknown “you” while at the same time remaining “you,” and this interactive drama constantly expands the identity. “You” becomes Whitman’s poem, while Whitman and several additional others become poems of the “you.”

Whitman becomes a little more explicit about this dynamic in the poem “Full of Life Now”: “When you read these I that was visible am become invisible, / Now it is you, compact, visible, realizing my poems, seeking me, / Fancying how happy you were if I could be with you and become your comrade; / Be it as if I were with you. (Be not too certain but I am now with you.)”<sup>347</sup> It is the “you” that seeks out Whitman and realizes his poetry, fulfilling and sustaining his immortality. I should point out transtemporal effect operating here. Not only is the reader caught up in the play of the “you,” the “I,” and the poem, but he or she is also interacting with the “you”s and “I”s of previous generations and those of future generations who will live after the reader has died.

Yet in this swirl of complicated identity transactions, Whitman does leave a gift for the reader. In “Starting from Paumanok,” Whitman says: “I may have to be persuaded many times before I consent to give myself really to you, but what of that?”<sup>348</sup> He drops the coyness in “To a Certain Cantatrice”: “Here, take this gift, / I was reserving it for some hero, speaker, or general \*\*\* / But I see that what I was reserving belongs to you just as much as to any.”<sup>349</sup> In the first instance, Whitman’s gift is himself. In the second, the gift is much more ambiguous. Lewis Hyde, in his *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, expounds on what this gift entails:

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<sup>344</sup> Lns. 1-2.

<sup>345</sup> Lns. 6-8.

<sup>346</sup> In the dialectic of speech and writing with which deconstruction works, alongside the attendant issues of semantics and materiality of the signifier, not much attention is paid to the particular situation of reading, and in ancient Egypt, reading traditionally happened aloud, which allowed for a variety of different meaning effects. Phiroze Vasunia explains that the “instrumental status of the reader heightens the ‘question of power’ that is raised by acts of reading. The reader lent his or her voice to the written text to allow the text to become meaningful, and the reader’s voice was the sonorous instrument necessary for the text to be realized. . . The writer knew that the text could be read in his or her absence, and accordingly the writer wove the *potential* of the reading voice into the text. . . Egyptian writing on monuments recreates, performatively, a relationship between reader and inscription” that allows the reader to identify, even if momentarily, with a chain stretching from the individual self to the pharaoh and Osiris. *The Gift of the Nile: Hellenizing Egypt from Aeschylus to Alexander* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 170-71.

<sup>347</sup> Lns. 5-8.

<sup>348</sup> Ln. 15.3.

<sup>349</sup> Lns. 1-2, 5.

A work of art that enters us to feed the soul offers to initiate in us the process of the gifted self which some antecedent gift initiated in the poet. Reading the work, *we* feel gifted for a while, and to the degree that we are able, we respond by creating new work...And once the imagination has been awakened, it is procreative...In this way the imagination creates the future.<sup>350</sup>

Through the logic of the gift, the “you” as a psychospiritual entity becomes attached concomitantly to the poet and the world of the future. I concur with Hyde that this is a process of initiation, which is filled with its own pattern of striking epiphanies and emotional moments. At one point in the “Song of the Answerer,” Whitman reveals how extensive the gifts he provides are: “The words of the true poems give you more than poems, / They give you to form for yourself poems, religions, politics, war, peace, behavior, histories, essays, daily life, and every thing else.”<sup>351</sup>

Even though Whitman often proclaims his presence directly and offers gifts, he is constantly escaping from view. Let us turn to three striking moments in the poetry that are worth meditating on:

[These leaves] will elude you at first and still more afterward, I will certainly elude you, / Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold! / Already you see I have escaped from you.<sup>352</sup>

I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping, turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face, / Leaving it to you to prove and define it, / Expecting the main things from you.<sup>353</sup>

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, / Missing me one place search another, / I stop somewhere waiting for you.<sup>354</sup>

How can one interpret these moments? Why does Whitman make a constant show of making himself available to the reader and then disappearing? Following Hyde, I would argue that Whitman is pushing his reader through a process of ritualized initiation. Through these psychoenergetic formulas, he places us on a quest with a mission to both find him and become self-sufficient while at the same time eluding others and waiting for them. In more direct terms, the poetry calls for and evokes in a technological manner the personal evolution of the reader. Whitman tells us to search for him, and if one truly follows him through all of the textual and extratextual spaces through which he leads us, including out “to the stars” and “more fitting spheres,” we will have developed a very involved, multi-dimensional view of our own selves.

Sparking this development is the fundamental aim of Whitman’s poetry, and he explicates this goal at length in his prose. These passages illuminate how the presentation of a sacred anatomy not only provides a graphic chart of the layout and

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<sup>350</sup> Hyde 193.

<sup>351</sup> Lns. 2.23-24.

<sup>352</sup> “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand,” Lns. 29-31.

<sup>353</sup> “Poets to Come,” Lns. 7-9.

<sup>354</sup> *Song Of Myself*, Lns. 14-16.

construction of vast realms of experience, but serves as a living, interactive model for the user attempting to navigate those same realms. This process begins on an individual level. In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman says, “Few are aware how the great literature penetrates all, gives hue to all, shapes aggregates and individuals, and, after subtle ways, with irresistible power, constructs, sustains, demolishes at will.”<sup>355</sup> By showing the reader how the dynamics of the name, physical body, soul, vital image, spirit, real body, etc. work, Whitman is molding and shaping his readers, as well as guiding them through territories that he has already penetrated. Yet with this crafting power, Whitman makes sure to construct maps that are incomplete, as paradoxical as that might sound. As he explains in *A Backward Glance*, “I round and finish little, if anything; and could not, consistently with my scheme. The reader will always have his or her part to do, just as much as I have had mine. I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought – there to pursue your own flight.”<sup>356</sup> Whitman, needless to say, means “flight” here very literally.

### Conclusion

By no means is this essay a full explication of the vast personality that Whitman maps throughout his poetry. Other elements constantly appear to make themselves known. For instance, in “That Shadow My Likeness,” even Whitman himself is surprised by a new arrival: “That shadow my likeness that goes to and fro seeking a livelihood, chattering, chaffering, / How often I find myself standing and looking at it where it flits, / How often I question and doubt whether that is really me; / But among my lovers and caroling these songs, / O I never doubt whether that is really me.”<sup>357</sup> Yet this essay is a start toward understanding how Whitman outlines a dense, multi-dimensional being composed of several different psychospiritual bodies, each interacting with others in energetic ways.

The complexities of this system illuminate not only the psychospiritual work this poetry performs, but also its sociopolitical function. Whitman claims in *A Backward Glance* (1888), “While the ambitious thought of my song is to help the forming of a great aggregate Nation, it is, perhaps, altogether through the forming of myriads of fully develop’d and enclosing individuals.”<sup>358</sup> In other words, it is through influencing the emergence of “grander individualities” that a grand Nation can be formed.<sup>359</sup> He continues a little further in this piece, “One main genesis-motive of the ‘Leaves’ was my conviction (just as strong to-day as ever) that the crowning growth of the United States is to be spiritual and heroic. To help start and favor that growth – or even to call attention to it, or the need of it – is the beginning, middle and final purpose of the poems.”<sup>360</sup> As I stated earlier in this essay, these Whitmanian statements should not be taken as mere ornamental flourish. Whitman is a writer who is one of the most self-conscious about the psychospiritual work that literature performs, and by cultivating and strengthening the individual, which he does by providing a living, interactive model for navigating oft-unexplored elements of the self, he cultivates and strengthens society as well.

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<sup>355</sup> *PP* 957.

<sup>356</sup> *PP* 666-667.

<sup>357</sup> Lns. 1-5.

<sup>358</sup> *PP* 668.

<sup>359</sup> *PP* 668.

<sup>360</sup> *PP* 670.

Finally, this Egyptian construction of the individual deserves more exploration in its own right. Many studies of the representation of the human personality in literary studies rely on a psychoanalytic or post-psychoanalytic frame. Yet with the focus of those theories on libidinal and intrapsychic development, they do not address the deepest collective psychic terrain or sublime transpersonal, transpsychic levels. A framework of this sort can provide a vocabulary to address issues related to transcendence and psychospiritual development, which opens the way to a full science of consciousness. This Egyptian system can also serve as a supplement to the urgent conversations about the self, subject positions, and identity effects that emerge out of post-structuralist, post-colonial, feminist, queer, and critical race paradigms by helping to understand the radical interconnectedness of all bodies (and not just human, but those of animals, plants, gods, and minerals), the non-locality of the mind (a concept being developed in certain strains of quantum physics), the self's composition of a coherent, but wide-ranging, heterogeneity of structures, and the participation of the human in the drama of sacred life. This chapter, along with the others in this project, also attempts to bring a non-Eurocentric epistemology to bear on a text of canonical Romantic literature, showing how expansive a literary criticism can be that seeks to widen its purview to include a longer sense of cultural history and interrelatedness. After all, this is an appropriate gesture for analyzing a poet who claims and forcefully shows that he "contains multitudes."<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> *Song of Myself* 51.8.



## Sacred Energetics, Levels of Deific Power, and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*

In chapter 35 of *Moby-Dick*, "The Mast-Head," Ishmael describes his first round of duty stationed at the top of the *Pequod's* mast looking for whales. He provides a history of mastheads and their role on whaling ships. In this narrative, Egypt has an important significance:

I take it, that the earliest standers of mast-heads were the old Egyptians; because, in all my researches, I find none prior to them...And that the Egyptians were a nation of mast-head standers, is an assertion based upon the general belief among archaeologists, that the first pyramids were founded for astronomical purposes: a theory singularly supported by the peculiar stair-like formation of all four sides of those edifices; whereby, with prodigious long upliftings of their legs, those old astronomers were wont to mount to the apex, and sing out for new stars; even as the look-outs of a modern ship sing out for a sail, or a whale just bearing in sight.<sup>362</sup>

In this passage, Ishmael pushes further and further back into time in order to uncover the history and deep roots of whaling – the industry in which he is engaged – and this quest for origins (one of many that happens in the course of the novel) takes him back to ancient Egypt. In coming to the conclusion that "the earliest standers of mast-heads" were from Egypt, he arrives at a sentiment very close to that articulated by Walt Whitman, who claimed (as quoted in the last chapter), "There is no definite history before ancient Egypt."

Ancient Egypt is important for Melville not just for its antiquity, however, but for its sacred science. The pyramids were not simply tall structures on which one could stand like contemporary mast-heads, but were used for "astronomical purposes." In the chapter on the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, I elaborated how ancient Egyptian sacred science was grounded in knowledge about solar, lunar, and stellar cycles. Melville is evoking that knowledge here, and I argue that it is used in this novel for the same "astronomical purposes" – synchronizing human life with cosmic life. With his emphasis on modes of ascent, "upliftings" and "mounting to the apex," Melville subtly allegorizes how this knowledge is based on a gradual psychospiritual evolution and a raising of consciousness. Furthermore, this Egyptian knowledge is not based on an alienated, distanced observation of celestial structures. Instead, one "sings out for new stars," as if the cosmos itself is a reflection of the outcry and internal longings of humanity.

However, *Moby-Dick* is not content solely with a meditation on ancient knowledge. It is a genealogical text that constructs intellectual histories, delineates movements of traditions, and constantly asserts its place in various lineages. In this passage in particular, Melville relays a narrative of decline that shows how this knowledge has calcified in the modern period: "Of modern standers-of-mast-heads we have but a lifeless set; mere stone, iron, and bronze men; who, though well capable of facing out a stiff gale, are still entirely incompetent to the business of singing out upon

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<sup>362</sup> *Moby-Dick* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003) 192-93. Every citation from the novel will come from this edition.

discovering any strange sight.”<sup>363</sup> Melville provides a list of these figures – statues of famous historical personages such as Napoleon, George Washington, and Admiral Nelson. There is grand comedy here, but it is laced with serious meaning. If one takes “stone, iron, and bronze” as references to the ages of man, gold is most noticeably missing. From the astronomical knowledge of ancient Egypt – filled with uplift and singing – one moves to modernity with its “lifeless” knowledge, characterized by a move away from a previous “golden” age.

This narrative of decline is presented throughout the novel. In a series of meditations on the whale in Chapter 79, “The Prairie,” Ishmael says,

And this reminds me that had the great Sperm Whale been known to the young Orient World, he would have been deified by their child-magian thoughts. They deified the crocodile of the Nile, because the crocodile is tongueless; and the Sperm Whale has no tongue, or at least it is so exceedingly small, as to be incapable of protrusion. If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; in the now unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove’s high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it.<sup>364</sup>

Melville borrows the description of the crocodile as tongueless from Herodotus (“Alone of animals it has no tongue”<sup>365</sup>), and again he gives us insight into a previous mode of knowledge that the modern world has occluded. Sacred science is built on a careful observation and profound knowledge of the natural world, whereby certain animals are identified with specific qualities that could symbolize certain divine functions and principles in a particularly pure and striking fashion. As such, certain animals were chosen as emblems of a particular aspect of divinity, or in other words “deified by child-magian thoughts.” Because of its “tonguelessness,” in addition to its ferocious cruelty and seeming invincibility, the crocodile was used as an image for the god Set in his role as devourer or divider, representing the purely physical, spiritually unindividuated and inarticulate rhythm of nature. Its image portrayed the unconscious, repetitious motion of material life, which swallows, absorbs, and elevates physical survival above all else. Guided by the symbolizing faculty, sacred science was the mode of knowledge production proper for “highly cultured, poetical nations.”

In subtle ways, Melville flags a general decline from this knowledge. The sky of modernity is now “egotistical,” and the hill is now “unhaunted.” Said in a slightly different language, the mythopoeic apprehension of reality is now missing. Instead of seeing the world as animated by divine force, it is either read as a projection of an inflated ego or simply blank. Melville, however, is not content with this state of affairs. His novel, as I would argue, is motivated by the goal of luring people “back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old,” or in other words back to this ancient sacred

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<sup>363</sup> *MD* 193.

<sup>364</sup> *MD* 407.

<sup>365</sup> Herodotus 160. This is the same Herodotus passage that we used in our discussion of Coleridge: “Egypt. . . is not very populous in wild animals. But those that there are, wild or tame, are all considered sacred, both those that have their living with mankind and those that do not. But if I were to say why it is that the animals are dedicated as sacred, my argument would drive me into talking of matters divine, and the declaration of these is what I would particularly shun.” Herodotus 159.

science. This chapter in particular will focus on how he promotes a re-cosmization of experience in particular through his concern with the “gods of old.”

In the Coleridge chapter, I talked about the natural world and cosmic cycles; the Whitman chapter focused on the self. In ancient Egyptian sacred science, the gods were figured as energetic forces that bound these two realms together, and in this chapter, I will show how Melville engages with a portion of this larger science that can be termed a “sacred energetics.” The Egyptian word *neter* (*neteru* in the plural) is usually translated as god, although more specifically it means “the divine principle,” “force,” or “power.” According to the ancient Egyptian conceptualization, *neteru* are not simply anthropomorphic personality figures, but animating forces of nature that also provide multifaceted paradigms to engage for honing and expanding one’s psychospiritual capacities. Embodying functions and principles such as purification, resonance, ascension, and creation, with each *neter* expressing a realm of action and experience as well as an idea, they interpenetrate human life and nature. As Claude Traunecker says in his book *The Gods of Egypt*,

As an awareness of the ways in which the universe functioned, Egyptian religion was a sort of physics that drew not on objective and reproducible data, but, rather, on plays on images, words, and metaphors. Myths described natural phenomena, and, like the models of modern theoretical physics, they employed a formal language whose symbols were deities and whose equations were the stories about their actions.<sup>366</sup>

In his introductory description of the *Neteru*, Philippe Derchain says, “The Egyptian gods are thus representations of the energies that are diffused throughout nature, . . . manifesting themselves everywhere in the real where those energies are sufficiently concentrated to act or to be visible, as in a tree, an animal, the Nile, a heavenly body, or even an image.”<sup>367</sup> Using myth as a meta-language to describe reality helps push beyond the aporias of binary, syllogistic logic.<sup>368</sup> Henri Frankfort talks about “the multiplicity of approaches and answers” as a guiding principle of Egyptian mythopoetic thought.<sup>369</sup> Working through a “superabundance of imagination,” quasi-contradictory mythic images are superimposed atop each other in order to meditate on the infinite complexity of divine power and to illustrate this complexity in motion.<sup>370</sup> The sky, for instance, can truthfully be represented both through the description of a woman’s body giving birth to the sun each morning and the image of a cow whose belly is covered with stars. Single objects, therefore, can serve as *points of emergence*<sup>371</sup> for different forces, and alternatively, a single force can reveal itself through different media. The Egyptian deity typically known as Osiris, for instance, is, as we will see, a hypostatization of the force of recurrence, meaning he can be seen in the periodical rise of the Nile, resurrection after death, waxing and waning of the moon, etc. Levi-Strauss’ position that mythmaking is “a

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<sup>366</sup> Traunecker, *The Gods of Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 11.

<sup>367</sup> Derchain 224.

<sup>368</sup> R.T. Rundle Clark says: “For the Egyptians, mythology was not a collection of texts but a language. This is fundamental.” *Myth and Symbol* 263.

<sup>369</sup> Henri Frankfort, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1951) 4.

<sup>370</sup> Frankfort, *Intellectual Adventure* 19.

<sup>371</sup> This phrase comes from Claude Traunecker.

logical model capable of overcoming contradictions” is completely flaunted by the comfortable juxtaposition of contradictions allowed by the multiplicity of approaches.<sup>372</sup> Although this seems like an inconceivable method of pursuing philosophical investigation, it is actually a flexible and supple one, as the Neteru resist dogmatic closure and are always open to further elaboration and expansion.

Several other critics have talked about Melville’s intense engagement with and knowledge about ancient Egypt.<sup>373</sup> In her book *Melville’s Orienda*, Dorothee Finkelstein discusses the impact of the adventures of the Italian explorer Belzoni in Egypt and the decipherment of hieroglyphics by Champollion on Melville. (Belzoni is mentioned in *Typee*, *Mardi*, and “I and My Chimney.” I will return to his use of Champollion in *Moby-Dick*.) Melville was also an avid reader of contemporary travel narratives featuring Egypt. James Bruce’s *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* is alluded to in *Mardi*, and elsewhere in Melville’s work, and the source of his information about the Denderah Zodiac, which will return later in this analysis, was Vivant Denon’s *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*.<sup>374</sup> Melville also used John Lloyd Stephens’ first book, *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land*, in texts ranging from *Redburn* to *Clarel*.<sup>375</sup> H. Bruce Franklin, in his *The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology*, traces Melville’s deep familiarity with classical sources about Egypt and contemporary comparative mythology, which all come together to help mold *Moby-Dick* into “an Egyptian myth incarnate”:<sup>376</sup>

The Egyptian myth explains much about Melville’s myth, and Melville’s myth, when compared with the Egyptian myth, explains much about Melville’s mythology. Hunting for all the direct sources of Melville’s knowledge of the Osiris myth would be as pointless as hunting for the direct sources of his knowledge of the Apollo myth. Egyptology had been a Western pastime for at least 2,300 years, and thousands of classical and contemporary versions of the Osiris myth were available in English. But the ultimate sources of Melville’s knowledge are beyond doubt Herodotus’ *History*, Diodorus’ *The Library of History*, and, by far the most important, Plutarch’s “Isis and Osiris”... The notion that Egypt might have been the birthplace of the gods was central to all Western comparative mythology, both ancient and modern.<sup>377</sup>

Knowledge about Egypt also comes to Melville through the literary tradition itself. Charles Olson, in his *Call Me Ishmael* for example, remarks that *Antony and Cleopatra* is the Shakespeare play most heavily marked by Melville.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Quoted in Phillip Stambovsky, *Myth and the Limits of Reason* (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004) 119.

<sup>373</sup> In doing revisions of this project, I discovered a book published in German in 2010 that is wholly dedicated to the question of the influence of Egyptian myth on Melville’s novel. Katrin Schmidt, *Melville’s Moby-dick als altägyptische Seelenreise* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand GmbH, 2010).

<sup>374</sup> Dorothee Finkelstein, *Melville’s Orienda* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961) 128-29.

<sup>375</sup> Hershel Parker, *Herman Melville: A Biography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 110.

<sup>376</sup> Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods: Melville’s Mythology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963) 53.

<sup>377</sup> Franklin 71, 72, 75.

<sup>378</sup> Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1947) 48.

Melville's references to Egypt are visible from the very first pages of the novel, when Ishmael speaks about "the old Egyptians," "their mummies," and their "huge bake-houses the pyramids."<sup>379</sup> He later describes the complexion of the hull of the *Pequod* as "like a French grenadier's, who has alike fought in Egypt and Siberia," and chapter 70 of the novel is called "The Sphynx."<sup>380</sup> The influence of Shakespeare that Olson accurately notes is there in the novel: "Like Mark Antony, for days and days along his green-turfed, flowery Nile, he indolently floats, openly toying with his red-cheeked Cleopatra."<sup>381</sup> These types of allusions are plentiful throughout *Moby-Dick*.

Furthermore, *Moby-Dick* is conversant with a wide range of esoteric traditions that also mediate knowledge about ancient Egypt to him. In chapter 42, "The Whiteness of the Whale," Ishmael says, "Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright."<sup>382</sup> This discussion about visible and invisible spheres comes from the cosmology of gnosticism, and Melville alludes to a particular Egyptian gnostic sect in the chapter before when he mentions "the ancient Ophites of the east [who] revered in their statue devil."<sup>383</sup> Captain Ahab, in one of his moments of high exultation, proclaims, "O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind."<sup>384</sup> The discovery of analogies between the macrocosm and microcosm is a traditional hermetic position – "as above, so below" – quite explicitly formulated in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. In Chapter 86, "The Tail," Ishmael discusses this appendage: "In an extensive herd, so remarkable, occasionally, are these mystic gestures, that I have heard hunters who have declared them akin to Free-Mason signs and symbols."<sup>385</sup> In Chapter 99, "The Doubloon," a special coin is analyzed in detail: "while arching over all [of these images] was a segment of the partitioned zodiac, the signs all marked with their usual cabalistics."<sup>386</sup> The focus on mystical symbols is here attached to esoteric traditions such as freemasonry (discussed briefly in the introduction to this project) and kabbalah, which bear close relationships with ancient Egyptian sacred (or symbolic) science.<sup>387</sup> This brief survey does not exhaust all of the links through which Melville is connected to knowledge about Egypt (one could also

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<sup>379</sup> *MD* 30.

<sup>380</sup> *MD* 101.

<sup>381</sup> *MD* 299.

<sup>382</sup> *MD* 238.

<sup>383</sup> *MD* 226. In the same vein, I also point to Melville's late work "Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem." Arthur Versluis' chapter on Melville in his *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* is a great resource for more information on this topic.

<sup>384</sup> *MD* 367.

<sup>385</sup> *MD* 441.

<sup>386</sup> *MD* 499.

<sup>387</sup> Melville's late poem "In the Desert" links Egypt, Napoleon, the ocean, and kabbalah: "Never Pharaoh's Night, / Whereof the Hebrew wizards croon, / Did so the Theban flamens try / As me this veritable Noon. / Like blank ocean in blue calm / Undulates the ethereal frame; / In one flowing oriflamme / God flings his fiery standard out. / Battling with the Emirs fierce / Napoleon a great victory won, / Through and through his sword did pierce; / But, bayoneted by this sun / His gunners drop beneath the gun. / Holy, holy, holy Light! / Immaterial incandescence, / Of God the effluence of the essence, / Shekinah intolerably bright!" *The Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Douglas Robillard (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2000) 338-39.

mention, for instance, his connections to Rosicrucianism and Paracelsian alchemy<sup>388</sup>), yet it should start to give the reader some idea of how densely woven his ties to the ancient world are.

Finding such a range of these sacred sciences at work in the novel should not surprise the literary critic, especially because Ishmael tells us that this text will include “the whole circle of the sciences.” He breathlessly declaims,

For in the mere act of penning my thoughts of this Leviathan, they weary me, and make me faint with their outreaching comprehensiveness of sweep, as if to include the whole circle of the sciences, and all the generations of whales, and men, and mastodons, past, present, and to come, with all the revolving panoramas of empire on earth, and throughout the whole universe, not excluding its suburbs.<sup>389</sup>

In *Moby-Dick*, one sees a transdisciplinary engagement with “the whole circle of the sciences”: evolutionary biology (Georges Cuvier) and cetology, geology and paleontology, lexicography (Samuel Johnson), zoology (particularly through debates with Linnaeus), political economy, and more. Melville is fueled by a drive to absorb and transcend the intellectual specialties of his day, which he refracts and expands through the images of his narrative. I argue that the sacred sciences play an important part of this “whole circle” for Melville, mainly because they have the same cosmological scope expressed in this excerpt, joining through correspondences and analogies as they do animal (“generations of whales”), human (“panoramas of empire”), and cosmic realms (“throughout the whole universe”). Furthermore, one does not read *Moby-Dick* solely for empirical detail about the whale that can be found in the fragmented disciplines (details which the novel does glory in reveling in and arguing about), but for its integrative approach in exploring how the whale resonates symbolically in human consciousness and functions as an open passageway for the divine.

Melville, of course, directs his symbolizing faculty to Moby Dick, who is seen as the carrier of everything that is malevolent:

The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them...That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning ...all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down.<sup>390</sup>

How can one define these agencies, malicious and otherwise, at work in the novel, and how do they function? I argue that the pantheon of Egyptian deific powers – what I have called a system of sacred energetics – can help interpret the types of cosmic forces that Melville alludes to in his crafting of character, setting, and plot.

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<sup>388</sup> Think of Melville’s poem “The New Rosicrucians.” There is a reference to Paracelsus and alchemy in chapter 92 of the novel: “And likewise call to mind that saying of Paracelsus about what it is that maketh the best musk” (476). William Dillingham’s *Melville’s Later Novels* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986) provides an in-depth exploration of alchemical imagery used throughout Melville’s work.

<sup>389</sup> *MD* 526.

<sup>390</sup> *MD* 226.

These forces are at work with great consistency and intimacy throughout *Moby-Dick*. Of the White Whale, it is said, “But in the great Sperm Whale, this high and mighty god-like dignity inherent in the brow is so immensely amplified, that gazing on it, in that full front view, you feel the Deity and the dread powers more forcibly than in beholding any other object in living nature.”<sup>391</sup> Ahab finds it wondrous that into his black cabin boy Pip “some unknown conduits from the unknown worlds must empty.”<sup>392</sup> And in his ruminations on Pip, Ishmael simply states that “we are all in the hands of the gods.”<sup>393</sup> Melville here mentions “dread powers,” “unknown conduits,” and “the gods” – all of which attest to his interest in cosmic forces that become localized and embodied in human and animal forms.

More broadly, Ishmael talks about the process of mythic investiture that guides his representation of all the characters in the novel:

If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave around them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman’s arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind!<sup>394</sup>

Throughout *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael steps in to contend that he and his shipmates warrant a ranking no less than divine. In the chapter “The Honor and Glory of Whaling,” he contends that not only are “heroes, saints, demigods, and prophets” part of this group, but that other charter members include “nothing short of the great gods themselves.”<sup>395</sup>

The Egyptian *neteru* are especially important to Melville, as he posits ancient Egypt as a birthplace of sorts for the gods. In a journal entry written during an actual visit to Egypt, after being overwhelmed by the geometric vastness of the Great Pyramid, Melville states, “I shudder at idea [*sic*] of ancient Egyptians. It was in these pyramids that was conceived the idea of Jehovah. Terrible mixture of the cunning and awful.... The idea of Jehovah born here.”<sup>396</sup> In the quest to learn who first discovered the gods, Melville arrives in Egypt. Melville intuitively feels the presence of these gods everywhere, and it seems that the goal of *Moby-Dick* is to “decipher the Egypt of every man’s and every being’s face.”<sup>397</sup> For this reason, this chapter seeks to systematize the large pantheon of Egyptian *neteru* for the purposes of using this paradigm to provide a reading of *Moby Dick* that both illuminates the Egyptian influence informing the text and shows how Melville’s text manipulates and engages deific forces in its construction of character, plot, symbol, and setting. There are several helpful compendia that define the *neteru* and their major attributes, and in this chapter I will rely heavily on George Hart’s *A*

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<sup>391</sup> *MD* 406.

<sup>392</sup> *MD* 605.

<sup>393</sup> *MD* 480.

<sup>394</sup> *MD* 150.

<sup>395</sup> *MD* 424.

<sup>396</sup> Herman Melville, *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant, Oct. 11, 1856 – May 6, 1857*, ed. Howard Horsford (Princeton University Press, 1955) 118.

<sup>397</sup> *MD* 407.

*Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses*. However, there is to my knowledge no scholarly Egyptological account that attempts to organize a large number of the neteru into a coherent intellectual system and show how all of these figures partake in a system of relationships that wholly images the universe. The framework constructed here is only a first step toward this task.

In his book *Serpent in the Sky*, John Anthony West, an explicit disciple of Schwaller de Lubicz, makes the following claims for Egyptian myth and myth more generally:

Myth may be the earliest known means of communicating information related to the nature of the cosmos, but it is also the most precise, the most complete, and perhaps the best...[It is] simultaneously science and theology, describing a natural process and at the same time furnishing a model for spiritual struggle...Any aspect of [it] may lend itself to the most exhaustive scientific or philosophical exegesis...Through color, position, size and gesture, the Neter reveals...a wealth of data at once physical, physiological, psychological and spiritual. And the data are always in action. It is this that constitutes the fundamental superiority of the symbolic science: it illuminates the living process without analyzing it, dissecting it, and killing it.<sup>398</sup>

For the ancient Egyptians, “living process” is composed of complex interlocking cycles that follow a fundamental process of birth-life-death-resurrection. In this chapter, I will arrange a discussion of the most frequently encountered Egyptian deific powers into six stages of a single complete cycle – from pre-creation, through the successive generation and regeneration stages.<sup>399</sup>

### **Stage I: Pre-Creation**

The first stage of deific power is that of Absolute transcendence; it is the level of existence that subsists before the cosmos comes into being. In effect, we are dealing with a primordial, boundless unmanifest energy of which all the other energies are various manifestations, and this holonomic sea of conscious energy can be seen as the representation of the implicate order itself. There are several pre-emergence Neteru that can be explicated at this moment, but I will focus on one, Nun.

#### **Nun**

Egyptian creation texts provide a plethora of narratives about the creation of the cosmos. They all contain one figure in common – Nun. An impersonal archetype of nature promoted to an imaginal godform, s/he represents the liquid primeval abyss, the ground state of matter from which all creation arises. Regardless of what deific figure is posited as the original creator, these texts agree that s/he sprang from the omnipresent primordial waters. Everywhere, endless, and without boundaries or direction, Nun is a limitless expanse of motionless water that symbolizes everything unformed, undifferentiated, or inert. Ontologically, Nun is insubstantial, void, and without organization. (This description of the universe originating from an abyss is also mirrored

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<sup>398</sup> West, *Serpent in the Sky: The High Wisdom of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 29, 128, 129.

<sup>399</sup> It should be emphasized, however, the role of the various forces mentioned here are often not limited to one particular stage, even though they will be listed here in one stage only for the purpose of simplicity.



in narratives from Genesis to the latest cosmologies crafted by research science.)

Although all of creation emerges from Nun, Nun continues to exist outside of creation as well as inside of it, as a part of every body of water from the Nile (which was believed to flow directly from Nun) to the temple pools. Because Nun embodies chaos and disorder, s/he is viewed as the source of the Nile's annual flooding. Vigilance is called for, through proper ritual practice and invocations, as the cosmos as an ordered, natural whole can always relapse into Nun. Though Nun is a being of chaos, s/he is thought to have a beneficial side. As the first source of creation, Nun is also the source of regeneration. As Hornung says in *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, "Regeneration is impossible in the ordered and defined world. It can happen only if what is old and worn becomes immersed in the boundless regions that surround creation – in the healing and dissolving powers of the primeval ocean Nun. The sun god in his bark is raised from Nun every morning... Those who sleep are rejuvenated in Nun."<sup>400</sup> Nun, as an ambivalent mixture of chaos and rejuvenation, is an everlasting, pre-existent, virtual state-of-no-state, and it is the first concept of all branches of Egyptian metaphysics.

*Moby-Dick* provides a powerful meditation on this mythic figure. Melville uses imagery of the whirlpool, vortex, and abyss when describing the sea in ways that evoke the always abiding, pre-emergent chaos. And in a novel inflection, whiteness becomes an additional lens through which Nun manifests in the phenomenal world.

At the beginning of Chapter 32, "Cetology," Ishmael proclaims, "Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored, harbourless immensities."<sup>401</sup> This chapter is an important pivot in the novel. Coming after the introductory chapters that establish the main characters aboard the *Pequod* and their social interactions, and leading to Ahab's grandiose statement of his quest against Moby Dick, this chapter is the first of the extensive analytic digressions that pepper the novel. Here Ishmael exhibits a strong fear of being lost in the "harbourless immensities" of the deep, which will soon be revealed as the proper villain that the novel itself attempts to keep at bay.

This chaos that Ishmael sees reflected in the deep is also a constituent part of the seemingly endless realm of fact and information, and Ishmael uses scientific classification and anatomical knowledge structures to keep from drowning in it. As he says, "It is some systematised exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that I would now fain put before you. Yet is it no easy task. The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed."<sup>402</sup> Elaborating this further, he provides quotes from previous scientists who have failed at the task of providing a science of the whale, the most telling of which comes from one who asserts his "unfitness to pursue our research in the unfathomable waters."<sup>403</sup> The architectonics of knowledge building for Ishmael become a way to rebut and resist Nun in some way, yet he still falls prey to the creeping nonexistence it symbolizes.

In Chapter 35, "The Mast-Head," Ishmael rhapsodizes: "Lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the

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<sup>400</sup> Hornung, *Conceptions* 161.

<sup>401</sup> *MD* 169.

<sup>402</sup> *MD* 169.

<sup>403</sup> *MD* 169.

mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature.”<sup>404</sup> The mystic ocean, in other words, is a visible image of the ambivalent pre-existence that lingers around the edges and in the midst of existence. This meditation on Nun leads directly to danger, as Ishmael quickly adds: “Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise forever.”<sup>405</sup>

For Ishmael, the corrosive and deadly side of Nun is not simply revealed through the abyss of the sea, but also through whiteness. He says,

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink?<sup>406</sup>

Although not really explicated as such by criticism, Melville is speaking a cosmic language here. Whiteness calls forth the “heartless voids” of the universe, even in the perception of something as seemingly innocuous as a landscape of snow. As it is the absence of color, it provides a vehicle for the remembrance of and an open portal for the transport of the chaos from which creation itself arose. This is what is frightening to Ishmael and summons images of his annihilation.

The images of whiteness and the sea combine in *Moby Dick*, particularly in the “snowy sparkling mist” of sea water sprayed from his spout – which is often described as a fountain – and the vortex he creates at the end of the novel by swimming in circles when attacked by the *Pequod*, which is described as a “creamy pool.”<sup>407</sup> In his commentary on the conjunction of fountain and whirlpool imagery in the novel, John Irwin, in his powerful *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance*, says, “Imaging the coincidence of origin and end, of source and abyss, the union of fountain and whirlpool alogically symbolizes a supralinguistic (nonsymbolic) reality as the fusing of opposites, as a primal conjunction/undifferentiation of the phallic spout and the womblike vortex.”<sup>408</sup> Although he does not articulate it as such, this is a perfect definition of Nun and how it functions in the novel. It is the source that threatens at every point to become the abyss, the origin that harbors intimations of the end. Yet Irwin goes on to add, “The fountain and the whirlpool are each images of self-conscious thought’s inability to conceive of its origin or end.”<sup>409</sup> I would invert this to argue that Melville’s novel depends on sacred science, a mythographic system that is very capable of conceiving its origin, end, and everything

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<sup>404</sup> *MD* 198.

<sup>405</sup> *MD* 198.

<sup>406</sup> *MD* 238.

<sup>407</sup> *MD* 435, 655.

<sup>408</sup> Irwin 292.

<sup>409</sup> Irwin 292.

that links those two terms, which it does through the use of potent symbols and figurations of deific energies.

Ishmael's fixation on the ontologically nonexistent cannot help but lead to devaluation of the existent world, which might explain his urge to commit suicide expressed at the beginning of the narrative. One major motivating drive of this novel is to help Ishmael come to terms with the negativity of Nun, so that he can discover the aspect of it that brings regeneration from the depths. And this is what happens, as Ishmael is the only figure who survives the drowning of the *Pequod*, ironically through the assistance of a coffin life-buoy. Although ostensibly the abyss that looms large at the novel's conclusion is the beginning of the actual plot, as it provides the impetus for Ishmael to reflect on the story of Ahab, Melville does not begin the novel there. I would assert that this is to dramatize the way in which Ishmael is able to integrate the creative potential of Nun into his way of life, so that he can acknowledge the nonexistent without falling prey to it and so that he can maintain living existence without abrogating the self and falling into nothingness.<sup>410</sup>

### **Stage II: The Conceptual Neteru**

As Erik Hornung states, "This is the intellectual foundation of Egyptian polytheism: insofar as it exists, the divine must be differentiated."<sup>411</sup> We begin to do that in the second stage of deific power as we move away from the abstractions of existence before the First Time. At this level, we focus on the conceptual Neteru who contain within themselves the world of intelligible being.

#### **Ra**

George Hart concisely states, "Ra is the quintessence of all manifestations of the sun-god, permeating the three realms of the sky, earth and Underworld."<sup>412</sup> He is the original light sustaining the life force that allows creation to be sorted out of the chaos of Nun. Like other sun deities, he is depicted as a falcon-headed human, over whom is placed the fiery disk of the sun. Although he can be said to represent the sun at all times of the day, during some periods of Egyptian history he was identified solely with the mid-day sun (while other deities represented the remaining stages of the sun's journey). The sun itself was taken to be either the body of Ra or his eye. The Eye of Ra, associated with the cobra goddess Wadjet, had many complex roles. While usually the sun represents a creative force, the Eye of Ra is a powerful destructive force linked with the fierce heat of the sun. (This duality illuminates how Egyptian metaphysics often synthetically pairs each principle with its inverse.) As the neter of the Sun in Egypt, Ra is shown traveling in a sailboat with other deific powers from east to west each day. After this daily traversing of the sky, the solar barque enters and passes through the Netherworld, which is why Ra is closely linked with Osiris. Ra, therefore, is the circulation of light that manifests through the function of rotation. The diurnal cycle he represents is also reflected in temple architecture, as these structures are created to engage and receive solar light at very specific moments.

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<sup>410</sup> A parallel exploration of Nun happens with the figure of Ahab. As he says in the opening of Chapter 37, "Sunset," "I leave a white and turbid wake; pale waters, paler cheeks, where'er I sail" (207). Providing a contrast to Ishmael, he is subsumed completely by the chaos around him.

<sup>411</sup> Hornung, *Conceptions* 176.

<sup>412</sup> Hart 133.

In one tradition of postmortem initiations, as described in the chapter on the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the deceased aims to ascend into the sky, be crowned like the sun god, and alight “upon the forehead of Ra in the bows of his boat which is in heaven.”<sup>413</sup> The concept of a cosmic ship, a popular theme in all local Egyptian traditions, is elaborated in *Moby-Dick*. The sun’s cycle structures the course of the novel and the *Pequod*. At one moment in Chapter 124, “The Needle,” the *Pequod* seems to be moving in perfect unity with the sun. Ahab intones: “Ha, ha, my ship! thou mightiest well be taken now for the sea-chariot of the sun. Ho, ho! all ye nations before my prow, I bring the sun to ye!”<sup>414</sup> Yet instead of replicating only the cycle of a day, the novel moves through an entire year or zodiac cycle. The ancient Egyptian calendar was divided into twelve thirty-day months, with five extra days called epagomenes added at the end. In his book *Tracing the Round: The Astrological Framework of Moby-Dick*, John Birk notices that this is mirrored “by *Moby-Dick*’s twelve-month voyage capped by a five-day interval of a three-day chase and two-day Epilogue.”<sup>415</sup> The *Pequod*, therefore, is always moving through imaginal spaces of day and night, death and rebirth.

In the Ancient Egyptian text known as *The Litany of Ra*, mentioned in the chapter on Walt Whitman, Ra is invoked through seventy-five different names and forms. These demarcated aspects are other neteru who participate in the creation of the universe through their energetic interactions and for this reason become a part of Ra. One often sees Ra participating in all sorts of syncretic combinations with other neteru, becoming Atum-Ra, Amun-Ra, and Ra-Horakhty, among others. Known as The One Joined Together, Who Comes Out of His Own Members, he is a perfect representation of Unity and in human terms represents our own ability to create.

In its own way, *Moby Dick* is filled with hymns and paeans to the sun similar to the *Litany*. As Ishmael says in Chapter 96, “The Try-Works,” “To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler, relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp – all others but liars!”<sup>416</sup> In addition to Ishmael, whales are also worshippers of the force that animates the sun. We are presented with a monologue from Ahab’s perspective in Chapter 116, who comments on “The Dying Whale”: “He turns and turns him [toward the sun], – how slowly, but how steadfastly, his homage-rendering and invoking brow, with his last dying motions. He too worships fire; most faithful, broad, baronial vassal of the sun!”<sup>417</sup> A little later, he adds: “In vain, oh whale, dost thou seek interceding with yon all-quickening sun, that only calls forth life, but gives it not again.”<sup>418</sup> For Ahab, the sun is a beacon for the life-force, which the whale seems to understand and implore for more life. Yet as the text relates, “Floating in the lovely sunset sea and sky, sun and whale both stilly died together.”<sup>419</sup> This is a very Egyptian mythopoetic construction, wherein sunset is equated with the sun’s death and the descent

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<sup>413</sup> *Book of the Dead* 136.

<sup>414</sup> *MD* 591.

<sup>415</sup> Birk, *Tracing the Round* (Miami : Minerva Press, 2000) 333.

<sup>416</sup> *MD* 492. In some ways, Ishmael himself is a stand-in for Ra, as the creative force behind the narrative who is as omni-present as the sun, narrating even scenes at which he could not have been present.

<sup>417</sup> *MD* 569.

<sup>418</sup> *MD* 570.

<sup>419</sup> *MD* 569.

of night presages the sun's journey through the underworld, and it is beautifully expressed here.

The sun, however, is not only a distant object praised by the characters in the novel from afar. Its power is localized on the *Pequod* in a very direct manner. According to Viola Sachs, "Now the doubloon, so intimately linked to the sun, is the ship's navel and the navel of Melville's cosmography."<sup>420</sup> When Ahab fastens the coin to the mainmast as a reward for the first person that sights Moby Dick, it becomes the *axis mundi* around which all of the characters come and rotate, and in this way they reenact a larger celestial pattern of orbiting around the sun. The coin, with its "cabalistic" markings, has engraved on it three mountains – topped respectively with a flame, tower, and rooster.<sup>421</sup> Above this, a partitioned zodiac is depicted, with the sun entering Libra. This provokes a discourse on the sun from all of the characters. Starbuck says, "Over all our gloom, the sun of Righteousness still shines a beacon and a hope."<sup>422</sup> Stubb adds, "There's a sermon now, writ in high heaven, and the sun goes through it every year, and yet comes out of it all alive and hearty."<sup>423</sup> (502). These characters are purposefully using the doubloon as a mechanism to draw the power of the sun, its recurrence and all the hope and stability it represents, into guiding the path of the *Pequod*, and they use it as a constant source of inspiration.<sup>424</sup>

Finally, I will briefly discuss Ahab's relationship with the sun. In Chapter 36, "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab rails at Starbuck,

I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For could the sun do that, then could I do the other... Who's over me?... So, so; thou reddenest and palest; my heat has melted thee to anger-glow. But look ye, Starbuck... I meant not to incense thee... Look! see yonder Turkish cheeks of spotted tawn—living, breathing pictures painted by the sun. The Pagan leopards—the unrecking and unworshipping things, that live; and seek, and give no reasons for the torrid life they feel! The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale?<sup>425</sup>

As opposed to the beautiful hymn offered by Ishmael, Ahab works more in the mode of blasphemy. The sun is an embodiment of the life force, and Ahab threatens to strike against it. It is this doom-eagerness and carelessness toward life that structures the novel and leads him to his tragic end. Yet at the same time, Ahab, almost against his will, begins to take on characteristics of his celestial enemy. He "incenses" Starbuck and melts him to anger-glow. And just as the animals of the wild are "living, breathing

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<sup>420</sup> Sachs, *The Game of Creation: The Primeval Unlettered Language of Moby Dick* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1982) 33.

<sup>421</sup> *MD* 499.

<sup>422</sup> *MD* 500.

<sup>423</sup> *MD* 502.

<sup>424</sup> In his *De vita coelitus comparanda*, the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino discusses how talismans can bring down the astral influence of the celestial bodies in whose image they are crafted. Ficino, *De Vita Libri Tres* (Lugduni: Rouillius, 1567).

<sup>425</sup> *MD* 203-204.

pictures painted by the sun,” Ahab illuminates the crew and binds them together with him in his mad quest.<sup>426</sup>

A little later, Ahab describes his warped relationship with the sun: “Oh! time was, when as the sunrise nobly spurred me, so the sunset soothed. No more. This lovely light, it lights not me; all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne’er enjoy.”<sup>427</sup> Because he does not engage the sun in the proper manner, it is not a surprise that he then cannot receive from it all that he wants. In Chapter 118, he expresses his frustration with the “cabalistical contrivances” of the quadrant that he uses to gauge his position in relation to the sun and directly addresses the “solar fire”: “Where is Moby Dick? This instant thou must be eyeing him. These eyes of mine look into the very eye that is even now beholding him; aye, and into the eye that is even now equally beholding the objects on the unknown, thither side of thee, thou sun.”<sup>428</sup> Again, the conception of the sun as an all-seeing eye that overlooks the landscape is a very Egyptian one, and tellingly, he gains nothing from this special pleading. And at the end of the novel, Ahab seals this blasphemous relationship to the sun (which stands in such stark contrast to that of Ishmael and the whales). As the *Pequod* is drowning and the futile quest comes to an end, Ahab says quite simply in his last speech, “I turn my body from the sun.”<sup>429</sup>

### **Maat**

Maat is usually portrayed as a woman wearing a headdress with an attached ostrich feather, and she personifies in purest form everything related to cosmic order, harmony, equilibrium, and justice. As such, she governs the patterns of seasons and stars, and she regulates the actions of humans and the other Neteru, who established order from chaos at the moment of creation. She provides structure and sets the ecliptic path on which the planets travel. For this reason, she is portrayed with the sun deity Ra on the solar barque that daily traverses the sky. By keeping the solar principle (or life force) on an unalterable course, she institutes divine order. As a celestial navigator, she is known as the “Lady of the Prow.” Maat is not only the patroness of divine order, but of societal order and harmony as well. She oversees the administration of justice, and her iconography has influenced conceptions of Lady Liberty. Maat is a force that has to be maintained and cultivated, which it is through ritual action and personal piety. Maat’s emblems are employed in representations of Pharaohs to illustrate how they function in maintaining order and the rule of law. Egyptian temples were all in some way organized to participate in a coordinated effort to maintain Maat, and their rituals were tightly patterned on astrological movement, which was seen as the expression of divine cosmic law.

Beyond her cosmic and social roles, Maat plays an important part in postmortem trials. She is the figure who weighs the souls of the dead in order to determine their fate in the underworld. If the heart of deceased is not lighter than Maat’s feather, he or she will not travel through the inner regions successfully. As a funerary Neter, she represents a principle of ethical morality and righteousness. The feather is a multivalent symbol,

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<sup>426</sup> This identity with the sun is also expressed in Chapter 87, “The Grand Armada”: “For a long time now, the circus-running sun has raced within his fiery ring, and needs no sustenance but what’s in himself. So Ahab” (443).

<sup>427</sup> *MD* 207.

<sup>428</sup> *MD* 573-574.

<sup>429</sup> *MD* 652.

and as it is also an instrument of writing, Maat is often paired with the divine scribe Thoth as her masculine counterpart. Together, they are associated with divinatory activities, and in particular the theomantic practice of using sacred names and words of power to augment and enhance life. Maat is also related to the harmonic laws of music.

The force that Maat represents is prevalent throughout *Moby Dick*. I follow John Birk's reading, from his essay "Unsealing the Sphinx: The *Pequod's* Egyptian Pantheon," of the Quaker Starbuck as the major figure in the novel who embodies Maatian principles.<sup>430</sup> In the first extended description of Starbuck in Chapter 26, "Knights and Squires," Melville says,

The chief mate of the *Pequod* was Starbuck, a native of Nantucket, and a Quaker by descent. He was a long earnest man, and though born on an icy coast, seemed well adapted to endure hot latitudes, his flesh being hard as twice-baked biscuit. Transported to the Indies, his live blood would not spoil like bottled ale... His pure tight skin was an excellent fit; and closely wrapped up in it, and embalmed with inner health and strength, like a revived Egyptian, this Starbuck seemed prepared to endure for long ages to come, and to endure always, as now; for be it Polar snow or torrid sun, like a patent chronometer, his interior vitality was warranted to do well in all climates... Yet, for all his hardy sobriety and fortitude, there were certain qualities in him which at times affected, and in some cases seemed well-nigh to overbalance all the rest. Uncommonly conscientious for a seaman, and endued with a deep natural reverence...<sup>431</sup>

In his person, Starbuck represents a harmonic synthesis of the human race. With the references to the Indies and Egypt, he embodies a blend of Indian, African, and European.<sup>432</sup> He is from an icy coast, yet can endure hot latitudes, and he equally braves Polar snow and torrid sun. He encompasses the continuity of space – by doing "well in all climates" – and time – by promising in his revived state "to endure always, as now."

"Uncommonly conscientious," Starbuck represents the moral balance aboard the *Pequod*, and much is made of the "honest eye of Starbuck."<sup>433</sup> As a resolute Quaker who holds tightly to his Christian faith, he often questions Ahab's judgment, both in public and private. Acting as a conservative force against Ahab's mania, he even contemplates forcibly removing him from command of the ship. He is described as the mate that is "by far the most careful and prudent."<sup>434</sup>

But in more than an abstract sense, balance is a crucial quality needed for the successful pursuit of whale hunting. The immense bulk of whale carcasses, if not managed extremely carefully, can cause the ship hauling them to drown through the uneven distribution of their weight. After a whale is harpooned in Chapter 81, it is positioned correctly on the side of the ship with the assistance of "Starbuck's orders."<sup>435</sup> Without his "very heedful management," it is clear that the whale's "body would at once

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<sup>430</sup> Birk, "Unsealing the Sphinx," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 5 (1991): 283-299.

<sup>431</sup> *MD* 148.

<sup>432</sup> In this respect, Queequeg is an important figure as well, as he contains a smorgasbord of traits: African, Polynesian, Islamic, Christian, and Native American.

<sup>433</sup> *MD* 205.

<sup>434</sup> *MD* 273.

<sup>435</sup> *MD* 419.

sink to the bottom.”<sup>436</sup> And even when it does still finally begin to sink, Starbuck’s “ordering of affairs” leads to it properly being disposed.<sup>437</sup> So even in the seemingly mundane work of establishing the level flow of the ship and its path in order to maintain Maat, we can see reflected the larger work that it takes to keep the cosmos balanced as well.

Ishmael recognizes this. A little earlier in Chapter 73, the crew kills a sperm whale (which, by the way, is valued by Ishmael for the symmetry of its head<sup>438</sup>) and attaches its head to the side of their ship, which causes an imbalance. They soon after kill a right whale. Ishmael says,

As before, the Pequod steeply leaned over towards the sperm whale’s head, now, by the counterpoise of both heads, she regained her even keel; though sorely strained, you may well believe. So, when on one side you hoist in Locke’s head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant’s and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds forever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunderheads overboard, and then you will float light and right.<sup>439</sup>

In this fascinating tableau, we see how quickly (and humorously) Ishmael moves from commenting on an everyday event to abstract philosophical discourse. Balance has to be maintained at all levels – the everyday, philosophical, cosmic, etc. It is when that does not happen that everything degenerates into chaos.

Melville also rewrites the biblical narrative of Jonah – an influential paradigm on which the novel draws – through a Maatian lens. Ishmael quotes from Father Mapple’s sermon on this figure:

Screwed at its axis against the side, a swinging lamp slightly oscillates in Jonah’s room; and the ship, heeling over towards the wharf with the weight of the last bales received, the lamp, flame and all, though in slight motion, still maintains a permanent obliquity with reference to the room; though, in truth, infallibly straight itself, it but made obvious the false, lying levels among which it hung. The lamp alarms and frightens Jonah; as lying in his berth his tormented eyes roll round the place, and this thus far successful fugitive finds no refuge for his restless glance. But that contradiction in the lamp more and more appalls him. The floor, the ceiling, and the side, are all awry. ‘Oh! so my conscience hangs in me!’ he groans, ‘straight upwards, so it burns; but the chambers of my soul are all in crookedness!’<sup>440</sup>

Interpolated into the biblical account, this scene evokes Maat in her aspect as a funerary Neter, ready with a scale to weigh the virtue of the deceased. The balance of the lamp frightens Jonah into a recognition of his own crookedness, which leads to the judgment of

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<sup>436</sup> MD 419.

<sup>437</sup> MD 419.

<sup>438</sup> From Chapter 74: “There is a certain mathematical symmetry in the Sperm Whale’s [head] which the Right Whale’s sadly lacks. There is more character in the Sperm Whale’s head” (386). There is a link between symmetry and the balance that Maat represents.

<sup>439</sup> MD 385.

<sup>440</sup> MD 74.



him being thrown overboard to be devoured by the whale. This is the horrific fate of those who do not maintain Maat and the harmonic order she emblemizes, and it will become the fate of Ahab.

### **Thoth**

The patron of science, language, and learning, Thoth was regarded as the original teacher of sacred knowledge to the Egyptians, and he was the divine scribe of myth charged with writing the secret books of the temples and possessing the magical words of power used in temple ritual. Often depicted with instruments used by the ancient scribe (particularly the reed pen and palette), Thoth records all the utterances of the Neteru but is also the originator of sound or the resonant vibration that sets all matter into motion in primeval time (which links him with later conceptions of the Logos).<sup>441</sup> Thoth is the divine communicator, who presides over the spoken and written word. He announces occurrences in both divine and earthly realms, marking all deeds into his great record book, making him the custodian of the universal record. The Neter who invented the sacred hieroglyphics, he enunciates the word which commands every living thing, and he is credited as the author of every work of every branch of human and divine knowledge, ranging from astronomy to magic, botany, architecture, geometry, and philosophy. Philippe Derchain adds more detail to the previous description:

Thoth is the model bureaucrat: he knows how to write and perform calculations, is invested with the highest functions in governing the world beside the sovereign Sun, and is conscious of his duties of justice and precision. Thus he regulates the course of the moon, checks the balance of the scale at the court of judgment of the dead, inscribes the name of the Pharaoh on the fruits of the tree of history, etc... The internal logic of mythic thought makes further expansions possible. It is known, for example, that the heart was considered the seat of memory and imagination. It may thus be said of Thoth that he is “the heart of Ra,” since he decrees laws, names place, and composes procedures.<sup>442</sup>

Not only is Thoth the means through which Ra's will becomes manifest in speech, he also accompanies Maat with him in the solar boat. Furthermore, he is the translator par excellence, ensuring transmission of the divine pattern into the terrestrial world, where it is employed as language, architecture, and sacred ritual. Thoth also impels the cultivation of Hermetic consciousness, the comprehension of the phenomenal world in context with its divine origin and the multiple realms in which it exists.

Thoth's animal avatars are the ibis and baboon. One can speculate that the first was chosen because of its migratory activities, which were a major ancient event marking the seasons. The ibis' beak resembles both a writing instrument and the crescent moon, which Thoth is also associated with as it allows time to still be measured without the sun.

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<sup>441</sup> Hans Jenny says, “The more one studies these things, the more one realizes that sound is the creative principle. It must be regarded as primordial. No single phenomenal category can be claimed as the aboriginal principle. We cannot say, in the beginning was number, or in the beginning was symmetry, etc. These are categorical properties which are implicit in what brings forth and what is brought forth. By using them in description we approach the heart of the matter. They are not themselves the creative power. This power is inherent in tone, in sound.” *Cymatics: A Study of Wave Phenomena and Vibration* (Basel: Basilius Presse, 1974) 25.

<sup>442</sup> Derchain 225.

The baboon might have been chosen as the animal totem of the neter because its loud expressions greeting the sunrise were considered evidence of the animal's intelligent recognition of celestial events.

Thoth appears in several complicated ways in *Moby Dick*. The novel opens with parodic, debased versions of Thoth – the late consumptive usher to a grammar school who provides an etymology of the word “whale” and is forever “dusting his old lexicons and grammars” and the sub-sub-librarian who is a “mere painstaking burrower” scanning books for any reference to whales and collecting excerpts from texts such as the Bible, Montaigne's *Essais*, and Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*.<sup>443</sup> Thoth represents the function of communication, yet here he is reduced from his exalted role to a series of mocked figures. (As Melville says, “Give it up, Sub-Subs! For by how much the more pains ye take to please the world, by so much the more shall ye for ever go thankless.”<sup>444</sup>) This emblemizes Melville's engagement with the difficulties of writing, even when it provides endless storehouses of information, as a medium for conveying the truth. The cosmic logos, reduced to an earthly one, cannot hold, and the powers of Nun (linked to chaos and nothingness) seem intent on transforming the book of the world into an empty cipher.

This can be clearly seen with the hieroglyphic imagery Melville employs throughout the novel. As John Irwin explains in *American Hieroglyphics*, these tropes (instead of serving their function as the magical words of the gods) signify the blankness of meaning. Ishmael repeatedly refers to hieroglyphics when discussing the unknowability of the whale. In Chapter 79, Ishmael says, “Champollion deciphered the wrinkled granite hieroglyphics. But there is no Champollion to decipher the Egypt of every man's and every being's face...How may unlettered Ishmael hope to read the awful Chaldee of the Sperm Whale's brow? I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can.”<sup>445</sup> In Chapter 68, Ishmael adds, “By my retentive memory of the hieroglyphics upon one Sperm Whale in particular, I was much struck with a plate representing the old Indian characters chiselled on the famous hieroglyphic palisades on the banks of the Upper Mississippi. Like those mystic rocks, too, the mystic-marked whale remains undecipherable.”<sup>446</sup>

This drift toward meaninglessness can also be seen in the figure of Queequeg. In Chapter 110, “Queequeg in his Coffin,” the narrator says,

The tattooing [on Queequeg's body] had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though in his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last.<sup>447</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> *MD* 9, 11.

<sup>444</sup> *MD* 11.

<sup>445</sup> *MD* 407.

<sup>446</sup> *MD* 360.

<sup>447</sup> *MD* 554.

The first thing to note is that the prophet – the Thoth-like figure who inscribed the hieroglyphs on Queequeg’s body – has departed, and his power can no longer be evoked because of this decline in the state of things. The hieroglyphs are supposed to function as a mode of communication with higher psychospiritual worlds, as an imagistic way of inscribing cosmic knowledge that, when interpreted, helps one perceive the rich, multi-dimensional layers of reality. Yet here, they inspire wonder, but only confusion. Unfortunately, the fate of the sacred letters seems to be set – they will decay and remain unread.

Even the sacred animals of Thoth do not fare well throughout the novel. His major bird, the ibis, is only imagined in its postmortem state. As Ishmael states, “It is out of the idolatrous dotings of the old Egyptians upon broiled ibis and roasted river horse, that you see the mummies of those creatures in their huge bake-houses the pyramids.”<sup>448</sup> And the name baboon is thrown around as a term of derision, not becoming of an animal typed to be an emblem of the divine. In Chapter 91, Stubb insists that a translator tell the French captain of a passing ship, “Why, since he takes it so easy, tell him that now I have eyed him carefully, I’m certain that he’s no more fit to command a whale-ship than a St. Jago monkey. In fact, tell him from me he’s a baboon.”<sup>449</sup>

Bridging together the beginning and ending of the novel is the image of the flag. The pale usher described in the etymology chapter dusts his old lexicons with a handkerchief “mockingly embellished with all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world.”<sup>450</sup> It closes with Tashtego nailing, at Ahab’s request, a new flag to the mast of the sinking ship to replace the one that had been lost. Tashtego’s name itself incorporates Thot, the Greek rendering of Thoth, and one might speculate that his power resonates in him. As he hammers the red flag, a sky-hawk gets caught in the process. The screaming bird, folded in the flag, goes down with everything else. Its “imperial beak” is emphasized, which I interpret as a link to the ibis.<sup>451</sup> This flag is the last human sign we see, which parodies Thoth’s role as a communicator.

Yet does this parody stand as the last word on the function of the sacred word? I would contend that it does not. One can discern a subtle pattern of defiance against this lapse into chaos. Ishmael survives at the end of the novel by floating on Queequeg’s coffin, which had been transformed into a life-buoy. It symbolizes not only resurrection, but the persistence of narrative. The tattoos inscribed on Queequeg that contain all the cosmic mysteries do not “moulder away” with his death. Before he died, he transferred them to the lid of the coffin, leaving the possibility of their translation and use open to the future. Just as Melville attempts to revive “the merry May-day gods of old,” the novel ruminates on how to repeat the paradigmatic act of Thoth, even as the forces of nothingness beckon.

### **Stage III: The Ennead**

Because this stage carries out the intermediary function of bridging from the conceptual Idea to the generation of material life, it is fitting to explicate here the Egyptian Ennead, a group of nine *neteru* genealogically organized in a manner that

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<sup>448</sup> *MD* 30.

<sup>449</sup> *MD* 472.

<sup>450</sup> *MD* 9.

<sup>451</sup> *MD* 653.

progresses step by step cosmologically from the moment of creation to the moment right before the establishment of the functional state. This Company of Nine was first codified in the ancient city of Heliopolis and forms the basis of what is known as the Heliopolitan Theology, which includes the famous Osiris-Isis myth cycle.

### **Atum, Shu, and Tefnut**

According to the ancient Egyptian conceptualization, Atum is the first member of the Ennead, born from itself, by its own will, from the waters of the undifferentiated state, Nun. In Nun, it becomes conscious of itself as vibration in the ocean of vibrations. By force of that energy, it projects itself into being in different directions or dimensions. There is nothing in this universe that is not originated or projected by Atum, the “Great He-She.” Atum is the principle of self-manifestation and self-creation in a universe where everything creates itself (which explains why it is sometimes fused with Ra to make the neter Atum-Ra). In this way, all the other cosmic principles are the children of Atum, in the sense that they depend on its power to make their appearance. And somewhere in ourselves we are Atum, and we can “become Atum,”<sup>452</sup> consciously and permanently. There are many accounts of Atum’s emergence. Some theorize that Atum creates itself and, looking about for a suitable place, comes to stand on a hill emerging from Nun. Others speculate that Atum itself appears as the primordial hill of the world, or corpuscular matter.<sup>453</sup> A late variant postulates that a lotus flower rises out of Nun and opens to reveal Atum. After the emergence, Atum creates Shu and Tefnut, the dual-gendered twins who are described as husband and wife, and they come forth as either his/her spit, mucus, or semen (produced by masturbation of the masculine phallus by the feminine, receptive fist). This pair emblemizes the balanced polarity that is characteristic of the Egyptian manner of thinking, and together they bring air and moisture into the cosmic landscape.

Atum, the dual-gendered deity creating worlds through masturbation, is an important model for the poetry of Walt Whitman. He says in *Song of Myself* 29, “Sprouts take and accumulate—stand by the curb prolific and vital: / Landscapes, projected, masculine, full-sized and golden.”<sup>454</sup> The turbulence of his body becomes part of a natural regenerative order. One can see the influence of this mythic figure briefly in *Moby-Dick* when Melville stops to reflect on the creation of the cosmos. In Chapter 70, “The Sphynx,” Ishmael describes the process of a dead whale’s beheading. After the head of the whale, severed from the body, is hoisted out of the ocean, he paints a placid scene: “An intense copper calm, like a universal yellow lotus, was more and more unfolding its noiseless measureless leaves upon the sea.”<sup>455</sup> Here, in the juxtaposition of a great mound rising out of the waters and an unfolding lotus, we are presented with an image of cosmogenesis. The whale’s death is redeemed, as it will not simply become the source of a capitalist product to peddle on the market, but an icon reminding Ishmael and us as readers about death’s obverse, the emergence of the cosmos itself.

### **Nut and Geb**

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<sup>452</sup> Alexandre Piankoff, *Egyptian Religious Texts and Representations*, vol. 5: The Pyramid of Unas (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 61.

<sup>453</sup> “Salutation to thee, Atum, / Salutation to thee, he who comes into being by himself! / Thou art high in this thy name High Mound, / Thou comest into being in this thy name Khepri (Becoming One).” Piankoff 158.

<sup>454</sup> *SOM* 29.5-6.

<sup>455</sup> *MD* 366.

From Shu and Tefnut are born the couple Geb and Nut. Geb is a representative of the earth in all its aspects, and he is the source of everything that comes from the soil, providing sustenance to human beings through his invention and maintenance of agriculture. He is often depicted as a being with green patches over his body, symbolic of the cultivated fields of the Nile Valley, or as a man bearing a goose upon his head. As to be expected, he is an ambivalent figure: on one hand, needed plants grow out of his back, yet on the other, he also holds the dead prisoner. He is the consort of Nut – the sky matrix – and is usually represented reclining under her, fallen yet raised on one arm with one knee bent.

Nut is depicted in several forms, but often as a naked woman, arched over the earth, in the act of swallowing the evening sun, which enters her mouth and passes through her entire body, and giving birth to the morning sun. As the firmament of stars through which the train of planetary *neteru* passes daily, she enfolds all creation and plays the major role in the continuous cycle of heavenly renewal. In the funerary literature, Nut welcomes the deceased into the sky after ascent from the netherworld. She is both the beginning and ending of the celestial cycle, bringing forth the living and receiving the dead. In many ancient cultures, the earth force is usually depicted as a female image and the sky powers are masculine, but in Egypt these roles are reversed. Together with Geb, Nut gives birth to the four terrestrial powers represented by the next generation of *neteru* – Isis, Osiris, Set, and Nephthys. (In this chapter, I will only discuss the first three.)

Nut is an important figure in the imaginal world of *Moby-Dick*. Melville refers to her explicitly when he states that “whaling may well be regarded as that Egyptian mother, who bore offspring themselves pregnant from her womb.”<sup>456</sup> According to Plutarch’s rendition of the Egyptian myth cycle, Nut is the mother of Isis, who is impregnated with Horus by her brother Osiris in the womb. Ishmael employs Nut here to explain how whaling as an institution has given birth to a large number of societal benefits. It has contributed to the exploration of some of the remotest parts of the earth, expanded the sphere of commerce, served as “the true mother” of the colonies of Australia and Polynesia, helped free Peru and other countries from Spain, and supplied the oil for the illumination given by lamps and candles.<sup>457</sup> As one can see, mythic patterns assist in the symbolic articulation of social patterns and relationships and help validate them. Myth has an organizational vitality that is able to bring the realm of the social into harmonic relation with the sphere of the cosmic.

The word “nut” also refers to the brain of the whale, and Melville devotes Chapter 80 to “The Nut.” It opens, “If the Sperm Whale be physiognomically a Sphinx, to the phrenologist his brain seems that geometrical circle which it is impossible to square.”<sup>458</sup> The creature’s brain equates the site of consciousness with the most ubiquitous of cosmic mother figures, and just a few chapters before, we see the head of the whale become a cosmic womb. In Chapter 78, Tashtego falls “head-foremost down into” the whale while tapping it to retrieve the highly valued spermaceti.<sup>459</sup> Queequeg dives in after him and manages to save him, and the scene is filled with birth imagery. He pulls Tashtego out

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<sup>456</sup> *MD* 143.

<sup>457</sup> *MD* 144.

<sup>458</sup> *MD* 408.

<sup>459</sup> *MD* 401.

“in the good old way – head foremost,” and the narrative comments on his “great skill in obstetrics.”<sup>460</sup> This scene reenacts the constant rebirth of the human through the body of the cosmic mother, yet even this cycle is threatened with stasis: “Now, had Tashtego perished in that head, it had been a very precious perishing; smothered in the very whitest and daintiest of fragrant spermaceti; confined, hearsed, and tombed in the secret inner chamber and sanctum sanctorum of the whale.”<sup>461</sup>

Melville’s gendering of the natural environment is also influenced by the Geb-Nut duality. In Chapter 132, the last chapter before the final climactic activity of the chase sequence, all is peaceful and bucolic: “The firmaments of air and sea were hardly separable in that all-pervading azure; only, the pensive air was transparently pure and soft, with a woman’s look, and the robust and man-like sea heaved with long, strong, lingering swells, as Samson’s chest in his sleep.”<sup>462</sup> Small birds gliding by are the thoughts of the “feminine air”; down below, leviathans and large sharks are the “murderous thinkings of the masculine sea.”<sup>463</sup> The scene enraptures Ahab:

But though thus contrasting within, the contrast was only in shades and shadows without; those two seemed one; it was only the sex, as it were, that distinguished them. Aloft, like a royal czar and king, the sun seemed giving this gentle air to this bold and rolling sea; even as bride to groom. And at the girdling line of the horizon, a soft and tremulous motion – most seen here at the equator – denoted the fond, throbbing trust, the loving alarms, with which the poor bride gave her bosom away.<sup>464</sup>

In this last moment of calm before the final storm, Ahab has this vision of the originary sexual division of nature. This is the milieu in which the whale makes its appearance.

### **Osiris**

The myth cycle of Osiris and his family was one of the most popular in ancient Egypt, yet it was constantly in flux (as, in truth, are all Egyptian myths). Different and contradictory elements of the narrative were employed in mortuary, magic, and royal texts, and people drew as necessary on the wide range of sequences and superimposed mythic episodes attached to these figures. The Greek essayist Plutarch has left the most comprehensive and detailed version of the narrative cycle, yet even he says that his account is only an “image of a certain truth that reflects a single thought in different milieus.”<sup>465</sup> Yet broadly speaking, the story goes as follows: Osiris was the first great ruler on earth, who introduced planting and harvesting to society and eliminated cannibalism. He peacefully established a Golden Age and a line of pharaonic theocracy that was to last thousands of years. He was slaughtered at the hands of his brother Set (in some versions, through drowning, and in other, through Set’s brutal dismemberment of Osiris’s body and scattering of its pieces throughout Egypt). However, he is raised from death by his sister-wife Isis, becomes the father of Horus, the new ruler embodied in every pharaoh, and transitions to his new role as the ruler of the Netherworld. Much is

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<sup>460</sup> *MD* 403.

<sup>461</sup> *MD* 404.

<sup>462</sup> *MD* 619.

<sup>463</sup> *MD* 619.

<sup>464</sup> *MD* 619.

<sup>465</sup> Quoted in Traunecker 87.

made in the myth of the search of his two sisters for his dead body, its burial and mourning, the process of postmortem conception (in some versions, Isis creates an artificial phallus for Osiris through which she becomes pregnant), and the upbringing of Horus which leads to his quest for revenge against Set. Some variants describe Isis's search throughout the entire country of Egypt for the fragments of Osiris's body in detail, and they explain how she erects a temple at every site where a body part is found, thereby transforming Osiris's body into the literal and symbolic glue that unifies the state.

A netter of tremendous philosophical and cosmological subtlety, Osiris symbolizes the function of recurrence, and he represents the cyclical aspect of nature – the physical creation and its cycles of becoming and renewal. This force crosses all spheres. In the realm of the physical, he is the force behind the periodical rise of the Nile and the renewed vegetation this promises. (This concept is illustrated in common images of Osiris with twenty-eight stalks of grain growing out of his coffin, which influenced Whitman's poetry very explicitly.) In the realm of the biological, he is the process of death, resurrection, and reincarnation. In the realm of the social, he is the constant succession of kingship, while in the realm of the cosmic, he is the expression of the phases of the moon and the daily route of the sun. (There is a complicated relationship between Osiris and Ra, as the sun passes through the netherworld every evening.) Furthermore, Osiris is a representation of anthropocosmic Man. All dead persons were equated to him, and his narrative exemplifies the fact that death is only a phase of natural existence, rather than a condition isolated from the rest of the cycle of life. Iconographically, he is associated with Hapi-Ankh, or the Apis bull. This animal was the most important of all the sacred animals in ancient Egypt, and it was ritually sacrificed, becoming the living deceased one.

Melville experiments with and modulates narratives about Osiris throughout his novel, using them at various times to animate the characters of Queequeg, Ishmael, Ahab, and Moby Dick. Through Queequeg, he expresses ambivalence about the social redemption associated with Osiris. In Chapter 12, entitled "Biographical," one notices the connections between the two figures. First, they both come from a royal lineage: "His father was a High Chief, a King; his uncle a High Priest; and on the maternal side he boasted aunts who were the wives of unconquerable warriors."<sup>466</sup> Yet unlike Osiris, Queequeg indulges in primitive practices rather than being the savior who delivers civilization from them. He is "George Washington cannibalistically developed," and he is "sadly vitiated, I fear, by the cannibal propensity he nourished in his untutored youth."<sup>467</sup> According to Plutarch, it is during Osiris's voyage away from Egypt to spread the knowledge of civilization that Set plots his death. Queequeg's "wild desire to visit Christendom" spurs the exact opposite of this civilizing mission.<sup>468</sup> He undergoes the trip for the purpose of learning the ways of Christians in order to enlighten his fellow countrymen, but this fails horribly when he realizes that Christians can be more miserable and mean than them. While on his mission, he realizes, unlike Osiris, that he can never go home again. He is afraid that "Christianity, or rather Christians, had unfitted him for ascending the pure and undefiled throne of thirty pagan Kings before him."<sup>469</sup> He also

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<sup>466</sup> *MD* 85.

<sup>467</sup> *MD* 80, 85.

<sup>468</sup> *MD* 86.

<sup>469</sup> *MD* 86.

reflects: “They had made a harpooner of him, and that barbed iron was in lieu of a sceptre now.”<sup>470</sup> His people, therefore, are still in a state of waiting for the salvation Osiris promises to bring.

Yet from another perspective, Queequeg represents a social redemption to come, promised in the future. According to Loren Goldner, Queequeg is the “antemosaic cosmic man,” meaning that he stands in a tradition of representations of the Unfallen, Primordial Man directly connected to the macrocosmos, a tradition that includes figures like “the Adam Kadmon of the Jewish Kabbala, the Iranian Gayomart, the Purusha of the Rg Veda, [and] the cosmic king of Egypt.”<sup>471</sup> In this reading, Queequeg concretely embodies the multiracial working class and represents the new universal that stands in radical antithesis to the capitalist state by embodying an earlier tradition of a cosmic state (fully engaged with the dynamics of the divine) lost in the modern bourgeois era. As Goldner says,

In showing...the modern working class, led by ‘Queequeg,’ as the heir to the realization of the totality of cosmic evolution and the symbolism of cosmic kingship, Melville is rejecting any restorationist nostalgia and is posing a *return on a higher level* (symbolized by the final scene of Ishmael’s rescue by Queequeg’s coffin) of a ‘cosmic’ sensibility, realized not in asocial, dreamy Transcendentalist fashion but as a *new form of activity* superceding the domination of nature by categories of work, of which the beauty and grace of Queequeg, Tashtego and Daggoo as they ply their difficult trade, constitutes the germ.<sup>472</sup>

By enunciating this vision of a society beyond capitalism, Queequeg promises in Osiris-like fashion a social redemption for which we are still in the midst of waiting. In him, we see a vorticist “return on a higher level” of elements usually stereotyped and rejected as primitive.

Beyond the dynamics of social redemption, Queequeg also expresses Osiris’s association with resurrection. In Chapter 110, “Queequeg in His Coffin,” Queequeg becomes ill with a fever. He believes he will soon die, so he decides to have a coffin made to fit his exact measurements (an interesting detail, given that Plutarch says that Set trapped Osiris in a coffin designed perfectly for him). Following Egyptian custom, he fills it with items he will need in the afterlife – his harpoon, idol, boat paddle, and other important possessions. Afterwards, he lies in it, and the cover is closed. Yet very soon, Queequeg regains his health and emerges from the coffin, saying that he has willed himself back to health: “He had just recalled a little duty ashore, which he was leaving undone; and therefore had changed his mind about dying: he could not die yet, be averred. They asked him, then, whether to live or die was a matter of his own sovereign will and pleasure. He answered, certainly.”<sup>473</sup> Ishmael is surprised to note that Queequeg “suddenly leaped to his feet, threw out his arms and legs, gave himself a good

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<sup>470</sup> MD 87.

<sup>471</sup> Loren Goldner, *Herman Melville: Between Charlemagne and the Antemosaic Cosmic Man: Race, Class, and the Crisis of Bourgeois Ideology in an American Renaissance Writer* (New York: Queequeg Publications, 2006) 15.

<sup>472</sup> Goldner 112.

<sup>473</sup> MD 553.



stretching...and poisoning a harpoon, pronounced himself fit for a fight.”<sup>474</sup> The power of resurrection is inherent in him throughout the novel. We have seen this in his rescue of Tashtego from the skull of the whale. In Chapter 13, Queequeg rescues someone who has fallen into the ocean.

Queequeg’s coffin becomes used as the general life-buoy of the ship after the old one, which has become dried out, fills with water and sinks. Meditating on this irony, Ahab soliloquizes to himself: “A life-buoy of a coffin! Does it go further? Can it be that in some spiritual sense the coffin is, after all, but an immortality-preserver!”<sup>475</sup> It is this coffin that rescues Ishmael at the end of the novel, as he cleaves to it to keep from being dragged to his death in the whirlpool caused by Moby Dick. The coffin is not only a flotation device; it keeps him safe from “the unharmed sharks [that] glided by as if with padlocks on their mouths” and “savage sea-hawks [as if] with sheathed beaks.”<sup>476</sup> In ancient Egypt, the dead all identified with Osiris in order to gain access to the promise of universal life, and if one successfully passed the postmortem judgment, one took on the neter’s name as a title or designation in front of one’s own and progressed to higher realms of the afterlife. Through Queequeg’s coffin, which resurrects him into new life, Ishmael also becomes an Osiris-figure. And it is this resurrection that is the novel’s true beginning. The novel proper ends with the total destruction of the crew of the *Pequod*, leaving some question for readers of the first British edition about how the story itself was actually narrated and if it was narrated from beyond the grave. The Epilogue dramatizes the cosmic rebirth of the narrator on the coffin, which ostensibly is the beginning of the plot of the novel as it implies that it is the result of Ishmael’s survival, reflection on, and ordering of the events narrated.<sup>477</sup> In that way, it is similar to what the crew carpenter calls (when upset about the request to refashion the coffin he had made into a life-buoy) “a cobbler’s job, that’s at an end in the middle, and at the beginning at the end.”<sup>478</sup>

Throughout the novel, Ahab can also be read as an Osiris-figure, but one who seems to represent a negative version of the qualities Osiris emblemizes. Similarly to Queequeg, Ahab is described as royalty in Chapter 30: “How could one look at Ahab then, seated on that tripod of bones, without bethinking him of the royalty it symbolised? For a Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea, and a great lord of Leviathans was Ahab.”<sup>479</sup> Yet for him, this royal status is always surrounded by the specter of death, even in mundane events like going to his cabin. Ahab comments that, “It feels like going down into one’s tomb...for an old captain like me to be descending this narrow scuttle, to go to my grave-dug berth.”<sup>480</sup> And in contrast to Queequeg who is the avatar of

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<sup>474</sup> MD 554.

<sup>475</sup> MD 605.

<sup>476</sup> MD 655.

<sup>477</sup> John Seelye calls this the “Epilogue of Resurrection” in his chapter of the same name. *Melville: The Ironic Diagram* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

<sup>478</sup> MD 601.

<sup>479</sup> MD 165. The leviathan imagery links Ahab with Moby Dick, and there are many such connections made throughout the novel. In Chapter 36, mention is made of Ahab’s “ribbed and dented brow” (199), which is juxtaposed later with Moby Dick’s “wrinkled brow and crooked jaw” (201). With his lower jaw, Moby Dick had “reaped away Ahab’s leg” (226), leaving him to fashion a leg “from the polished bone of the Sperm Whale’s jaw” (159).

<sup>480</sup> MD 161.

Primordial Men such as the risen Osiris and Adam Kadmon, Ahab is “Adam, staggering beneath the piled centuries since Paradise.”<sup>481</sup>

Of all the human figures in the novel, Ahab most clearly embodies Osiris in his role as the Dismembered One, but for him there is no transcendence of his bodily mutilation. There are three instances in the novel when we see Ahab’s body mangled. The first happens in a flash:

Suddenly sweeping his sickle-shaped lower jaw beneath him, Moby Dick had reaped away Ahab’s leg, as a mower a blade of grass in the field...The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them...that intangible malignity.<sup>482</sup>

As the narrative then describes, Ahab’s responding monomania (or desire to wreak revenge on the whale) is not focused directly after the attack, but in the long months he lies in pain as the ship travels around the Patagonian cape: “then it was, that his torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad...Though unlimbed of a leg, yet such vital strength yet lurked in his Egyptian chest, and was moreover intensified by his delirium, that his mates were forced to lace him fast.”<sup>483</sup> It should be easy to see with Franklin that as Ahab lies in pain (which, to my knowledge, is not described in any of the Egyptian mythic prototypes), his “madness [assumes] the torn body and gashed soul of the Egyptian god Osiris.”<sup>484</sup> Also, the “Egyptian chest” here holds a play on words. In addition to meaning Ahab’s physical chest, the word “chest” is also being used as a synonym for coffin, which contains the vital strength that resurrects Ahab from this symbolic death. Yet resurrection into insanity is a cruel fate.

A similar event of dismemberment happens in Chapter 106, “Ahab’s Leg.” Here is an extended description of what happened:

For it had not been very long prior to the Pequod’s sailing from Nantucket, that he had been found one night lying prone upon the ground, and insensible; by some unknown, and seemingly inexplicable, unimaginable casualty, his ivory limb having been so violently displaced, that it had stake-wise smitten, and all but pierced his groin; nor was it without extreme difficulty that the agonizing wound was entirely cured. Nor, at the time, had it failed to enter his monomaniac mind, that all the anguish of that then present suffering was but the direct issue of a former woe; and he too plainly seemed to see, that as the most poisonous reptile of the marsh perpetuates his kind as inevitably as the sweetest songster of the grove; so, equally with every felicity, all miserable events do naturally beget their like.<sup>485</sup>

Imagistically, this is so extreme that it almost verges on parody. We have Ahab, who not only personifies Osiris in his dismemberment, but who is further injured and lacerated by

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<sup>481</sup> *MD* 621.

<sup>482</sup> *MD* 226.

<sup>483</sup> *MD* 227.

<sup>484</sup> Franklin 81.

<sup>485</sup> *MD* 535.

his own limb. The fact that the groin is pierced is important. The groin is, of course, associated with fertility, meaning that Ahab's ability to figure forth the recurrence of life is called into question. The presence here of "the most poisonous reptile of the marsh" is a subtle allusion to Set and his role as the destroyer, but he is not necessary for this scene of dismemberment because Osiris handles that function for him. While Osiris emblemizes the function of recurrence, which in its highest form signifies resurrection after death, Ahab's life shows in a much more debased way how "all miserable events do naturally beget their like." With this realization, there is not much more for him to do but seek "speechless refuge, as it were, among the marble senate of the dead."<sup>486</sup>

At the end of the novel, Ahab is dismembered for the last time by Moby Dick. It is a shock how quickly his death happens: "Ahab stopped to clear it; he did clear it; but the flying turn caught him round the neck, and voicelessly as Turkish mutes bowstring their victim, he was shot out of the boat, ere the crew knew he was gone."<sup>487</sup> Unlike Osiris, however, Ahab will not rise again in a seasonal renewal of life.

To conclude this section, I want to explore the connections between Osiris and Moby Dick. In one of his many anatomical analyses of the whale, Ishmael compares the spouthole of the whale to a crown. Pushing the analogy we have seen used before, he dubs the whale a "royal fish" in chapter 90, and he expands on this to assert that "you will take great interest in thinking how this mighty monster is actually a diademed king of the sea."<sup>488</sup> Moby Dick, in his royal splendor, predates even the pharaohs: "Then the whole world was the whale's; and, king of creation, he left his wake along the present lines of the Andes and the Himalayas. Who can show a pedigree like Leviathan? Ahab's harpoon had shed blood older than the Pharaoh's."<sup>489</sup> For this reason, he should "only be treated of in imperial folio."<sup>490</sup> The Apis bull, as discussed earlier, is a major manifestation of Osiris, and male whales are also referred to as bulls. Just as Moby Dick precedes the pharaohs in time, the white whale exceeds all other bulls in glory: "Not the white bull Jupiter swimming away with ravished Europa clinging to his graceful horns; his lovely, leering eyes sideways intent upon the maid; with smooth bewitching fleetness, rippling straight for the nuptial bower in Crete; not Jove, not that great majesty Supreme! did surpass the glorified White Whale as he so divinely swam."<sup>491</sup>

Moby Dick is an idealized form of Osiris. At the end of the novel, in chapter 133, we are told: "the grand god revealed himself, sounded, and went out of sight."<sup>492</sup> He is the risen Osiris who never faces dismemberment or death at all. Those aspects of Osiris are projected onto the other nameless whales of the novel. When needing his false leg repaired, Ahab calls the carpenter: "He bade him without delay set about making a new leg, and directed the mates to see him supplied with all the studs and joists of jaw-ivory (Sperm Whale) which had thus far been accumulated on the voyage, in order that a careful selection of the stoutest, clearest-grained stuff might be secured."<sup>493</sup> In other words, dismembered pieces of whale's bodies lay in wait for their use in various tasks

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<sup>486</sup> *MD* 536.

<sup>487</sup> *MD* 653.

<sup>488</sup> *MD* 467, 391.

<sup>489</sup> *MD* 527-28.

<sup>490</sup> *MD* 525.

<sup>491</sup> *MD* 626.

<sup>492</sup> *MD* 627.

<sup>493</sup> *MD* 537.

around the ship. We can also see this in the “tripod of bones” mentioned earlier on which Ahab is seated. The novel describes in gruesome detail how the whales are slaughtered and processed for their valuable parts. A hook is inserted into the whale’s blubber, and it is peeled off in one long strip. The whale is also castrated and beheaded. But even they resurrect into new form, not as a reconstituted animal, but as the oil that fires lamps and candles and the ambergris that creates perfumes.

### Isis

Isis represents the principles of fruition and birth. As the female creative power that conceived and brought forth all living creatures, she is the personification of the Great Goddess in her aspect of maternal devotion, fidelity, and tenderness. At her most specific, she is the womb out of which new, Osirisian life will rise after death. Isis was given hundreds of epithets to describe her many roles: sister-wife of Osiris; collector and reassembler of his scattered parts; divine, virgin mother; the female principle in us all; principle of legitimacy; healer and protector; great magician; etc. As neter of magic, Isis acquired her power through invoking the sacred spells of Thoth, which enabled Osiris to be given new life and for his life force to be raised enough for her to conceive a child. In a myth derived from the solar cosmogenesis, she is the only neter to know the “hidden name of Ra,” meaning that she possesses the secret of the creative fire. Many spells of Isis are meant to heal injuries originating from adversarial forces; in this context, she presides over occult healing.

Plutarch discusses a statue of Isis covered in a black veil that was located at Sais. On the pedestal was engraved the following inscription: “I am all that hath been, and is, and shall be; and my veil no mortal has hitherto raised.”<sup>494</sup> Beneath this veil are hidden all the mysteries and knowledge of nature and the past. Pulling back the veil represents in some respect the revelation of light and the transition to immortality. The veil has been the most popular piece of iconography associated with Isis over the past few centuries. It has particularly stirred the imagination of figures like Kant, Novalis, and Schiller. In *The Critique of Judgment*, for example, Kant says, “Perhaps there has never been a more sublime utterance, or a thought more sublimely expressed, than the well-known inscription upon the Temple of Isis.”<sup>495</sup> Melville is no stranger to the trope either: “But clear Truth is a thing for salamander giants only to encounter; how small the chances for the provincials then? What befell the weakling youth lifting the dread goddess’s veil at Sais?”<sup>496</sup>

Now I will return to the figures of Ishmael, Ahab, and Moby Dick, who are not only animated by Osiris, but also provide pathways for the “enfleshment” of Isis. These characters enter into the energy fields of both masculine and feminine neteru, and in a sense, they all embody the primordial wholeness of the androgyne with its generative powers.<sup>497</sup> In the previous section, I read Ishmael as an Osiris-figure as he is reborn on the coffin of Queequeg. Yet if one examines the role he plays throughout the narrative, it is easy to see him as a conduit of the divine feminine at least three distinct ways. First, he serves as the wife of the Osiris-figure of Queequeg: “Upon waking next morning

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<sup>494</sup> Plutarch 25.

<sup>495</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Knutsford: A & D Publishing, 2008) 105.

<sup>496</sup> *MD* 397.

<sup>497</sup> See Diane Hoeveler’s *Romantic Androgyne: The Women Within* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990) for further exploration of how the theme of androgyne is treated in the period.

about daylight, I found Queequeg's arm thrown over me in the most loving and affectionate manner. You had almost thought I had been his wife."<sup>498</sup> They had been sharing a room and bed due to lack of space at the Spouter-Inn. Ishmael soon mentions, "For though I tried to move his arm—unlock his bridegroom clasp—yet, sleeping as he was, he still hugged me tightly, as though naught but death should part us twain."<sup>499</sup> After he succeeds in unlocking the bridegroom clasp, they decide to go to Nantucket together to find a whaling ship to board. Their bond strengthens as time goes on: "when our smoke was over, he pressed his forehead against mine, clasped me round the waist, and said that henceforth we were married; meaning, in his country's phrase, that we were bosom friends; he would gladly die for me, if need should be."<sup>500</sup> Queequeg does die by the end of the novel, and although Ishmael as Isis cannot resurrect him in the flesh, but he does provide a commemoration of his memory through the act of writing the text itself (which also brings Ishmael under the aura of Thoth). And in a striking revision of the Isis-Osiris myth cycle, it is Osiris's coffin that serves as a tool for Isis's resurrection, giving us in effect a resurrection of the principle of reconstruction.

In Chapter 72, "The Monkey-Rope," Queequeg and Ishmael are tied together, with Ishmael providing stability for Queequeg to lower himself down from the ship deck to the slaughtered whale in order to insert the blubber hook for the cutting-in of the whale: "for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake...Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother."<sup>501</sup> (376). The phrase "twin brother" is important, as Isis and Osiris are thought of as not only spouses, but siblings.

Isis embodies the force of reconstruction operative in all domains of the natural world. In reconstructing the dismembered strands of the narrative at hand, Ishmael also functions as a conduit for the divine feminine. Gabriele Schwab astutely notes about Ishmael, "But in his role as narrator, Ishmael nearly effaces his role as protagonist. As a consequence, Ishmael's subjectivity is not fictionalized under the conditions of immediate action, but under those of retrospective reflection."<sup>502</sup> It is this active reflection and reconstruction that brings Ishmael into resonance with Isis, and these modes operate in high gear in the famous "mariners, renegades and castaways" excerpt quoted earlier.<sup>503</sup> In this excerpt, Ishmael is debating with himself and the reader about the best way to construct the narrative and the characters in it. Should he ascribe them high qualities or not? It is easy to get lost in the labyrinthine relationship implicitly

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<sup>498</sup> MD 52.

<sup>499</sup> MD 54.

<sup>500</sup> MD 81.

<sup>501</sup> MD 376.

<sup>502</sup> Schwab, *Subjects Without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 61.

<sup>503</sup> "If, then, to meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways, I shall hereafter ascribe high qualities, though dark; weave around them tragic graces; if even the most mournful, perchance the most abased, among them all, shall at times lift himself to the exalted mounts; if I shall touch that workman's arm with some ethereal light; if I shall spread a rainbow over his disastrous set of sun; then against all mortal critics bear me out in it, thou just Spirit of Equality, which hast spread one royal mantle of humanity over all my kind! (150)"

existing here between the narrated “I,” narrating “I,” and the characters and events that each “I” shall narrate. Donald Pease helps with this exegesis:

The time in which this scene takes place is not continuous with the action as narrated or with the narrating instances of the subject of narration. Rather than continuing the narrated action, this passage opens onto a scene that involves the narrator in a deliberation over the means of its narration. It represents the intransitivity of the writing process as it is about to eventuate into the written narrative but before the narrating “I” has become committed to what shall be written. The passage stages the difference between the manner in which the narrating “I” is predisposed to narrate the crew’s actions and the constraints that the narrator-protagonist, Ishmael, has imposed. It gives expression to the possible enunciations of the narrating subject who aspires to accomplish a narration that has not yet been narrated and that Ishmael will not narrate.<sup>504</sup>

The process of working through all the possible enunciations, with all its attendant difficulties, is what allows Ishmael to reconstruct the novel that we are reading.

For Ishmael, the process of memorialization goes hand in hand with this reconstruction. In the beginning of the novel, Ishmael enters a Whaleman’s Chapel and sees several commemorative plaques dedicated to the memory of whalers who have died at sea. Channelling Isis in her quest for dismembered limbs, he says, “What despair in those immovable inscriptions! What deadly voids and unbidden infidelities in the lines that seem to gnaw upon all Faith, and refuse resurrections to the beings who have placelessly perished without a grave.”<sup>505</sup> While these marble tablets are displayed at the beginning of the narrative, Ishmael does not describe the types of disasters that lead to their creation (such as the drowning of the *Pequod*) until the end of the narrative. The novel’s beginning, in other words, is the epilogue to its ending.

Throughout the novel, Ishmael also reconstructs whales themselves. In Chapter 32, “Cetology,” Ishmael presents his own unique scientific system for the classification of whales. Not using the standard terms of Linnaeus (the classifications of family, genus, and species), Ishmael decides to divide whales into different “chapters” of three distinct “books”: the Folio, Octavo, and Duodecimo.<sup>506</sup> Interestingly enough, there are fourteen whales total that are entered into this “cetological system,” which is the same number of parts Osiris is sliced into by his brother Set. Ishmael’s intellectual effort here can be seen as restructuring the broken body of the whale. As John Irwin says, “The transformation of the god’s body into a written corpus is the governing trope for Ishmael’s translation of Moby Dick into *Moby-Dick* and the basis for his continuing image of the whale’s body as a book.”<sup>507</sup> One piece, however, is missing: “But I now leave my cetological system standing thus unfinished, even as the great Cathedral of Cologne was left...For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the

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<sup>504</sup> Pease, “Doing Justice to C.L.R. James’s Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways,” *boundary 2*, volume 27, number 2 (Summer 2000): 14.

<sup>505</sup> *MD* 65.

<sup>506</sup> *MD* 173.

<sup>507</sup> Irwin 304.

copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything.”<sup>508</sup> With the word “erections” as a hint, we might read the missing capstone as the missing member of Osiris never found after Set’s dismemberment. This reconstruction is not only textual, but organic. In *Tracing the Round*, John Birk points out that Ishmael moves in the novel through the physical body of the whale. He begins at “Spouter-Inn” and embarks on “a somatic journey through the creature, head to digestive system, phallus to tail.”<sup>509</sup> There is a full chapter on “The Tail” close to the end of the novel.

The Isis who journeys through the land of the dead is also reflected in Ishmael: “whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet.”<sup>510</sup> His quest for a room is likened to a quest through the underworld, with “blocks of blackness, not houses, on either hand, and here and there a candle, like a candle moving about in a tomb.”<sup>511</sup> He enters “a negro church; and the preacher’s text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there.”<sup>512</sup> Moving on, he finds an inn run by someone named Peter Coffin. “A Coffin my Innkeeper upon landing in my first whaling port; tombstones staring at me in the whalemens’ chapel; and here a gallows!”<sup>513</sup>

If Ishmael serves as an Isis figure reconstructing the narrative itself and the whale, Ahab serves as an Isis figure because he works diligently to construct a whole, virtual version of himself. Ahab is constantly engaging in rituals to reconstitute his body and to fuse that body with the collective body of his crew. This happens in the “Quarter-Deck” chapter when everyone on the ship drinks together and Ahab makes them all vow to assist in his quest to kill Moby Dick. He yells at Starbuck, “The crew, man, the crew! Are they not one and all with Ahab, in this matter of the whale?”<sup>514</sup> In similar ways, as Gabriele Schwab argues, Ahab turns Pip and Fedallah into prosthetic selves: “He forges them into a collective body through phallic rituals and magic ceremonies and refers to them as parts of his own person.”<sup>515</sup> This all comes to a peak in the final climactic confrontation with Moby Dick. The training has worked well: “They were one man, not thirty...All the individualities of the crew, this man’s valour, that man’s fear; guilt and guiltiness, all varieties were wedded into oneness, and were all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to.”<sup>516</sup> And in one of his final speeches, Ahab says to everyone, “Ye are not other men, but my arms and my legs; and so obey me.”<sup>517</sup>

Ahab incarnates the feminine principle in other ways than through his solipsistic reconstruction. In a chapter intriguingly called “Queen Mab,” Stubb relates a dream in which he has been kicked by Ahab. An old merman appears to him to point out the futility of struggling against him, and he even tries to convince him that he has been honored by Ahab: “In old England the greatest lords think it great glory to be slapped by

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<sup>508</sup> *MD* 182.

<sup>509</sup> Birk, *Tracing* 334.

<sup>510</sup> *MD* 27.

<sup>511</sup> *MD* 34.

<sup>512</sup> *MD* 35.

<sup>513</sup> *MD* 97.

<sup>514</sup> *MD* 203-204.

<sup>515</sup> *MD* 53.

<sup>516</sup> *MD* 636.

<sup>517</sup> *MD* 648.

a queen.”<sup>518</sup> Ahab brings this characterization closer to himself in Chapter 119, “The Candles,” when he says that “the queenly personality lives in me and feels her royal rights.”<sup>519</sup>

Finally, we end with *Moby Dick*. As we know, Isis is famously associated with a veil, which emblemizes the hidden secrets of nature. *Moby Dick* is associated with this famous piece of iconography. Coming to the end of the chase, the text relates: “Shrouded in a thin drooping veil of mist, it hovered for a moment in the rainbowed air; and then fell swamping back into the deep.”<sup>520</sup> Chapter 54, “The Town-Ho’s Story,” talks about the fate of Radney, who falls out of his boat in the process of trying to harpoon *Moby Dick*: “He struck out through the spray, and, for an instant, was dimly seen through that veil, wildly seeking to remove himself from the eye of *Moby Dick*. But the whale rushed round in a sudden maelstrom; seized the swimmer between his jaws; and rearing high up with him, plunged headlong again, and went down.”<sup>521</sup> *Moby Dick*, like Isis, is a symbol of the hidden secrets of nature.

### Set

Set represents the force of negativity in all aspects of life. All that opposes or obstructs takes place in his domain or under his aegis. Set and his innumerable cohorts represent the forces of darkness, chaos, barbarism, and war, and in the texts endless curses and imprecations are heaped upon his head. In the words of Derchain, “As a fratricide and a pederast, he disturbs the social order; as a rapist who is sterile, he disturbs the biological order. As the sun, he dries up the harvests; when he is water, he is the roaring flood that ravages villages. In the desert, he is solitude, thirst, and death.”<sup>522</sup> Yet at the same time, he is a great neter, for without opposition, there can be no creation or existence according to ancient Egyptian conceptualizations. To be born anew each day, Ra and his allies must, every night, overcome the marshaled opposition of Set. However, he is never destroyed. In the long series of battles between and Osiris’s son Horus, they contend over the throne of Egypt, magically annihilate each other’s possessions, and engage in a battle of cosmic proportion that affects the land of Egypt and the peace of the heavens. Horus eventually triumphs over Set, and then the two are reconciled. When properly engaged, it is possible to use the chaotic force of Set against others.

Set is portrayed in human form with the head of an animal that has never been identified, with an elongated snout and lopped-off ears – perhaps symbolizing the Setian refusal to heed the call back to unity. As lord of the wilderness and arid wastes, desert animals fall under his domain, as do the black pig, ass, coiled serpent, spotted leopard, oryx, scorpion, crocodile, and hippopotamus, each of which symbolizes different aspects of Set’s role as devourer or divider. He represents the purely physical, spiritually unindividuated rhythm of nature. These images all portray the unconscious, repetitious motion of material life, which swallows, absorbs, and elevates physical survival above all else. The Greeks identified Set with their image of Typhon, The Destroyer, but there are also deep links between him and the Christian Satan, a name derived from the Hebrew word for adversary.

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<sup>518</sup> *MD* 167.

<sup>519</sup> *MD* 580.

<sup>520</sup> *MD* 647-48.

<sup>521</sup> *MD* 307.

<sup>522</sup> Derchain 228.



As the dismemberer of Ahab, Moby Dick is the figure that most vividly represents Setian energy in the novel. Throughout the text, the whale is made to stand for all negativity in the world: “All evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down.”<sup>523</sup> In Chapter 41, “Moby Dick,” we are presented with a panoply of images of fragmentation: “not restricted to sprained wrists and ankles, broken limbs, or devouring amputations”; “the chewed boats, and the sinking limbs of torn comrades.”<sup>524</sup> Due to the death and destruction Moby Dick causes, many tales spring in its wake. The whale is thought to be “athirst for human blood”; “not only ubiquitous, but immortal”; and a bearer of an “unexampled, intelligent malignity.”<sup>525</sup> Another theory of the whalemens links Moby Dick much closer to Set: “No wonder, then...the outblown rumors of the White Whale did in the end incorporate with themselves all manner of morbid hints, and half-formed foetal suggestions of supernatural agencies, which eventually invested Moby Dick with new terrors unborrowed from anything that visibly appears.”<sup>526</sup> Set is the supernatural agency inspiring and becoming manifest in Moby Dick’s ferocity, which is directly linked with death in the final chase sequence: “The glittering mouth [of Moby Dick] yawned beneath the boat like an open-doored marble tomb.”<sup>527</sup>

In his representation of Moby Dick, Melville adds another animal to the pantheon of those highly favored by Set. In one of his usual digressions, Ishmael divagates about how animals were apotheosized in Egypt:

And this reminds me that had the great Sperm Whale been known to the young Orient World, he would have been deified by their child-magian thoughts. They deified the crocodile of the Nile, because the crocodile is tongueless; and the Sperm Whale has no tongue, or at least it is so exceedingly small, as to be incapable of protrusion. If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birth-right, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; in the now unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove’s high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it.<sup>528</sup>

There is so much to think about in this passage. First, Ishmael juxtaposes the whale with one of the favorite animals of Set, the crocodile. He realizes how mobile the sacred science of Egyptian myth is, as it is flexible enough to incorporate new data with which it was not familiar in an easy way. Furthermore, this is a meditation about how the mythopoetic imagination works. It uses all materials at its disposal to show how everything in the material world opens a portal for the recognition of the divine. If the white whale was part of the Egyptian natural world, it would as a matter of fact have become part of the iconography of Set.

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<sup>523</sup> *MD* 226.

<sup>524</sup> *MD* 221, 225.

<sup>525</sup> *MD* 223, 224, 225.

<sup>526</sup> *MD* 222.

<sup>527</sup> *MD* 627-628.

<sup>528</sup> *MD* 407.

Linked with the whale in its fight against the human whalers is another manifestation of Set, “the wide-slaughtering Typhoon,” which is constantly referred to in the text with a capital “T” (which emphasizes its personification and connection to Typhon, the Greek form of Set).<sup>529</sup> Toward the end of the novel, a Typhoon attacks, destroying a harpoon boat and damaging the *Pequod*: “Towards evening of that day, the *Pequod* was torn of her canvas, and bare-poled was left to fight a Typhoon which had struck her directly ahead.”<sup>530</sup> In Chapter 124, it becomes known that the storm has turned the compasses, frustrating the crew’s attempt to make it to Moby Dick: “During the most violent shocks of the Typhoon, the man at the *Pequod*’s jawbone tiller had several times been reelingly hurled to the deck by its spasmodic motions.”<sup>531</sup> Ahab seems to worship its destructive power. He also attempts to mobilize Setian energies in the novel, yet fails. He says, “The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and – Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one.”<sup>532</sup>

It is not a coincidence that the Typhoon strikes around the same time that Queequeg (the representative of Osiris) becomes deathly ill with a fever. After he procures a coffin and triumphs over the drift towards death, he transfers the tattoos on his body onto the lid of the coffin (following the Egyptian practice of covering sarcophagi with hieroglyphic narratives): “It was Queequeg’s conceit that if a man made up his mind to live, mere sickness could not kill him: nothing but a whale, or a gale, or some violent, ungovernable, unintelligent destroyer of that sort.”<sup>533</sup> The unintelligent destroyer, of course, I interpret as reference to Set.

#### **Stage IV: Models of the Realized Divine Principle – Horus and Hathor**

In this stage, I will discuss the two *neteru* who provide the model for human life – Horus and Hathor – and serve as the precursors of humanity’s future spiritual condition. We move away from the cosmic unfolding of the previous stages to focus on the faculties of sensation, imagination, and sensible memory, in addition to appetites rooted in the flesh.

##### **Horus**

The name Horus means “He Who is Above,” and he is the son of Osiris and Isis, conceived while the former slept in death through the magic evoked by his mother. He was born secretly in the swamps of the Delta to avoid discovery by the archenemy Set who murdered Osiris and ascended the throne of Egypt. When Horus reached maturity, he engages Set in battle, providing the archetypal struggle between opposing forces. In a series of legendary adventures that are related in a myth cycle entitled *The Contendings of Horus and Set* (containing castration, maiming, transformation into animals, and attempts to inseminate the other), Horus avenges his father and wrests the ruling power of Egypt back to reestablish the tradition of pharaonic theocracy.

Horus was worshiped under many forms and is an extremely complex deity, but his fundamental and overriding role is easily expressed and grasped: he is the realized divine principle on earth. Although this element has not been emphasized in this chapter,

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<sup>529</sup> MD 570.

<sup>530</sup> MD 576.

<sup>531</sup> MD 587.

<sup>532</sup> MD 208.

<sup>533</sup> MD 553-54.

all of these deific powers can be analyzed from a numerological perspective – in addition to cosmic, psychological, and social ones. (Plutarch, for instance, sees the relationship between Osiris, Isis, and Horus manifested in the 3:4:5 triangle.<sup>534</sup>) As the son of Osiris and Isis, Horus is the tenth god of Heliopolis. Ten is as it were a revisioning of the original unity of the One, and Horus recapitulates in himself the whole cosmogenesis on an earthly plane. In the death/resurrection drama played out by Set and Osiris, Isis and Nephthys, he is the fifth member. Throughout temples and texts, Horus is associated with the numbers five and ten, and these subsequently became the sacred numbers of the Pythagorean cosmography.

From the Old Kingdom onward, the pharaoh was the representative of Horus as the idealized man, as described in the “Horus name” he received after ascending the throne. Through this, he attained mastery of his realm as well as the spiritual heritage passed on from the legendary founders of Egypt. The king was considered Horus incarnate, the mediator between gods and men on earth and the living image of Osiris. Horus has several aspects that represent the stages of personal power and spiritualization attained by the divine heir. These aspects were symbolized in the diurnal cycle of the Sun. As Horus-pa-khart, he is “the Child” or rising Sun; as Horus-Khuti, he is “Lord of the Two Horizons” or the all-encompassing noon Sun (in this form, he is associated with the Great Sphinx); as Horus-Ur, he is the elder, retiring Sun at dusk. Sometimes Horus is depicted as a winged sun-disk, sometimes as a hawk-headed lion. Moreover, he is said to have four sons, who were guardians of the canopic jars containing the mummified organs of the deceased. They represent the four cardinal points, the four elements, etc., bringing us closer to the world of matter. They are also described as friends of the pharaoh, as they assist him in his ascension to heaven in the eastern sky by means of ladders.

In his person, Ahab embodies both Osiris and Horus. He is not only dismembered by Set in the form of Moby Dick, but he is also the agent of revenge against him. As Ahab says, “For forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep.”<sup>535</sup> Melville plays with the functioning of the Horus force, turning it inside out and evacuating it completely. As Horus, he does not conquer the Set-inspired Moby Dick. He is totally destroyed, leaving the forces of division to rule the world. Ahab represents the failure of a tradition of cosmic kingship, and Melville explores the repercussions of this in his representation of Ahab.

Just as Horus in the myth cycle has four sons, Ahab employs four harpooners who are to help carry out his vengeance – Queequeg, Daggoo, Tashtego, and Fedallah. It is telling that in the scene of his closest bonding with the harpooners, the quarter-deck chapter, one is missing. Without Fedallah, the group reduces to “my three pagan kinsmen there,” which is akin to trying to invoke only three elements or three cardinal directions.<sup>536</sup> Ahab cannot seem to maintain his role as Horus in any way. We know that this neter is associated with the sphinx, and in *Moby Dick*, we see Ahab confronting the

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<sup>534</sup> Plutarch 135-137: “Three (Osiris) is the first perfect odd number: four is a square whose side is the even number two (Isis); but five (Horus) is in some ways like to its father, and in some ways like to its mother, being made up of three and two. And panta (all) is a derivative of pente (five), and they speak of counting as “numbering by fives.”” As such, Horus, as number five, is the model for all.

<sup>535</sup> *MD* 620.

<sup>536</sup> *MD* 205.

decapitated head of a whale, which is compared to the “Sphinx’s in the deserts.”<sup>537</sup> Ahab talks to it, commanding it to speak and tell him of the secrets it possesses: “That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world’s foundations...O head! thou hast seen enough to split the planets and make an infidel of Abraham, and not one syllable is thine!”<sup>538</sup> And of course, there is no reply.

With his fierce glance, Ahab is given one of the main imagistic attributes of the hawk: “There was an infinity of firmest fortitude...in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance...they plainly showed the uneasy, if not painful, consciousness of being under a troubled master-eye.”<sup>539</sup> One can almost see him as the animal, perched above looking down at prey. As with everything else, this association becomes degraded by the end of the novel. In Chapter 130, “The Hat,” Ahab is keeping watch for Moby Dick, and he decides to climb the main-mast for a better view. While there, a black hawk steals his hat, which Ishmael interprets as a bad sign because animal does not return it. As Ishmael relates, when an eagle took and replaced Tarquin’s cap, it was declared that he would be the emperor of Rome. Here at the end of the novel, the major symbol of Horus’s authority (political and cosmic) is undermined, leaving Ahab to be destroyed at the end by Moby Dick. The divine principle on earth is not realized, and Ahab fails to secure the world from chaos. Further signifying this, a hawk is secured to the main-mast of the *Pequod* as the ship sinks.

### **Hathor**

Hathor is the divinity of love, music, and dance who presides over all amorous affairs. Her name means “House of Horus,” and together with him, the pair represents the ideal of conjugal happiness and the rhythmic joy of physical existence. After the earthly incarnation of spirit, expansion or augmentation proceeds on the physical, emotional, and psychic levels. Overseeing the corporeal form through the fluxes of its myriad transitional cycles from conception to sexual awakening and on to physical dissolution, Hathor embodies vital metaphysical principles at work in the human sphere. She is the Neter regarded through the ages as the figurehead of Egyptian “goddess worship,” and her realms of influence stretch from celestial regions to the geographic terrain and the necropolis. Her traditional crown, the solar disk resting between the two horns of a cow, is often lent to other female neteru (with whom she often merges in complementary ways) as a representation of the processes of nurturing and growth provided by the earthly mother.

Her role is complex and multi-layered, as she is sometimes portrayed, like Isis, as Horus’s mother. At times, she is described as the mother, daughter, and wife of Ra. Temple and tomb inscriptions dedicated to her reveal that her tradition was imbued with the practices of funerary observance, restorative healing, and astronomical science, especially at the remarkable temple complex of Denderah where the famous round zodiac was discovered with its carefully encoded sacred astronomy.

Melville takes us to this temple, and he invites us as the reader to stay and worship:

But not alone has this Leviathan left his pre-adamite traces in the  
stereotype plates of nature, and in limestone and marl bequeathed his

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<sup>537</sup> MD 366.

<sup>538</sup> MD 367.

<sup>539</sup> MD 159.

ancient bust; but upon Egyptian tablets, whose antiquity seems to claim for them an almost fossiliferous character, we find the unmistakable print of his fin. In an apartment of the great temple of Denderah, some fifty years ago, there was discovered upon the granite ceiling a sculptured and painted planisphere, abounding in centaurs, griffins, and dolphins, similar to the grotesque figures on the celestial globe of the moderns. Gliding among them, old Leviathan swam as of yore; was there swimming in that planisphere, centuries before Solomon was cradled. . . In this Afric Temple of the Whale I leave you, reader, and if you be an Nantucketer, and a Whaleman, you will silently worship there.<sup>540</sup>

As the neter of music and dance, Hathor's attributes can be found in Chapter 40, "Midnight, Forecastle." This is not a surprise, as it is one of the few chapters that removes the shackles of prose and slips into full dramatic mode, complete with stage directions and other devices borrowed from plays. Performance takes center stage, and Melville infuses Hathor's energies most strongly here into Pip, which is fitting because of his close relationship with the Horus-figure of Ahab. He is at the center of the gathered group of sailors, playing his tambourine for them to dance. In his book *African Culture and Melville's Art: The Creative Process in Benito Cereno and Moby-Dick*, Sterling Stuckey argues that the sailors here, all of different nationalities, are attempting to perform a quintessential African dance – the ring shout – complete with improvisatory chanting from the Azore sailor: "Rig it, dig it, stig it, quig it, bell-boy."<sup>541</sup> Stuckey claims, "Beneath much of the splendid surface of *Moby-Dick*, slave music and dance are subterranean forces, heightening its complexity and quality overall. The last half of the novel, especially, is written with slave art functioning as a kind of spiritual compass for the *Pequod*."<sup>542</sup>

This scene, however, is unfortunately perverted by the dynamics of race. Stuckey says that aspects of "slave performance style are appropriated and held up to ridicule," filtered through the lens of minstrelsy.<sup>543</sup> Before Pip can find his tambourine, other sailors mock him, commanding him to "Beat thy belly, then, and wag thy ears" and "Rattle thy teeth, then, and pound away; make a pagoda of thyself."<sup>544</sup> The racial tensions heat up as a Spanish sailor slurs Daggoo, "Thy race is the undeniable dark side of mankind – devilish dark at that."<sup>545</sup> At this moment, to no surprise, the ship heads directly into a storm, as if the atmosphere can divine what is happening. When Pip appears later in the novel in Chapter 110, his tune has changed. He shrieks, "Now Queequeg, die; and I'll beat ye your dying march."<sup>546</sup>

#### **Stage V: Growth and Prosperity Stage**

At the furthest reach of this model of creation is the world of matter itself. Here, I want to spend some time engaging with the teeming plethora of divine functions at work in supporting the growth and prosperity cycles of the material world, which especially in

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<sup>540</sup> *MD* 528-29.

<sup>541</sup> *MD* 215.

<sup>542</sup> Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville's Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 8.

<sup>543</sup> Stuckey 90.

<sup>544</sup> *MD* 214, 215.

<sup>545</sup> *MD* 218.

<sup>546</sup> *MD* 553.

Egypt are savored because they augment life and prepare one for the stage that happens afterward.

### Min

Min is a deity of fertility and sexuality, usually illustrated with an erect phallus and a flail cocked over his upraised arm. It should be noted that the erect phallus is depicted near his navel, which might express both the *cause* of fertility (erect phallus) and the *effect* – as the birth, represented by the navel. As George Hart says, “The pharaoh, in the celebratory rituals surrounding his coronation, participated in a major procession and feat in honour of Min whose powers of fertility and regeneration could be seen as symbolising the vigorous renewal of sovereignty.”<sup>547</sup> As such, Min represents the materialization of growth and prosperity.

In Chapter 94, “A Squeeze of the Hand,” one can say that Melville allows a certain Min-energy to run wild. The sailors gather here to squeeze coagulated spermaceti back into liquid. Ishmael is carried away into reverie:

While bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatever. Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it...I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-labourers' hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules...Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humour or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.<sup>548</sup>

An image of social utopia is presented in this scene. Through the medium of sperm and the fertility it signifies, Ishmael imagines a melting away of all social acerbities and divisions. A fraternal brotherhood is conjured through this sexualized contact that allows everyone to squeeze themselves together universally. Min, because of his fertility rites, was associated by the Greeks with the deity Pan, and much of the orgiastic power of those rites can be seen here, employed here to critique social norms of respectability and establish a homoerotic sociality as the basis for democracy.

In the next chapter, “The Cassock,” the phallic rituals continue. Three sailors lug the whale's penis onto the forecandle deck for the purpose of removing its black “pelt” of skin so that the mincer can wear it to protect himself while he slices the pieces of blubber for the pots:

The mincer now stands before you invested in the full canonicals of his calling. Immemorial to all his order, this investiture alone will adequately protect him, while employed in the peculiar functions of his office...Arrayed in decent black; occupying a conspicuous pulpit; intent on Bible leaves; what a candidate for an archbishoprick what a lad for pope were this mincer!<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> Hart 94.

<sup>548</sup> *MD* 484.

<sup>549</sup> *MD* 488.

This is why Ishmael euphemistically calls the phallus of the whale a cassock, or the long coat worn by clergymen in service. In this chapter, a satire of orthodox Christian religion goes hand in hand with allusions to ancient fertility cults. The pun in “archbishoprick” is used to anti-clerical effect, and through the innuendo aimed at “pulpit” and “bible leaves,” Melville parodies conventional ritual, replacing it with a focus on a life-giving phallus.

Alternatively, however, the representation of Moby Dick seems to be layered with an inversion of the qualities of fertility and regeneration sponsored by Min. On one hand, the white whale is consistently described with the fertility images of sperm: “he had gained his distinctive appellation of the White Whale; a name, indeed, literally justified by his vivid aspect, when seen gliding at high noon through a dark blue sea, leaving a milky-way wake of creamy foam, all spangled with golden gleamings” and “the glistening white shadow from his broad, milky forehead.”<sup>550</sup> And when the Leviathan emerges during the final chase scene, his presence brims with phallic overtones: “Crushed thirty feet upwards, the waters flashed for an instant like heaps of fountains, then brokenly sank in a shower of flakes, leaving the circling surface creamed like new milk round the marble trunk of the whale.”<sup>551</sup> With the “instant flash,” “creamed like new milk,” and “marble trunk,” it is not hard to discern the sexualized implications. D.H. Lawrence went so far as to call Moby Dick “the great American Phallus.”<sup>552</sup> However, instead of emphasizing themes of creation and regeneration, defiance and destructive power are brought to the forefront, which goes hand in hand with the “malignant agencies” mentioned earlier. Moby Dick seems to emblemize the *thanatos* that is the negative complement of *eros*.

### Neith

The name Neith comes from a root word which means to knit or weave. In her iconography, she is depicted variously with either a shield, bow, weaving shuttle, or crossed arrows, and she is thus connected both with the hunt and weaving. These activities are both mundane and metaphysical, as they describe her role of drawing together the vital spiritual and physical functions which altogether constitute the corporeal form. Neith selects living matter to nourish existing life, and she mends together or interfaces divine elements to renew life. In this manner, she sustains the body through the principle of fusion. Furthermore, the crossed arrows and the weaving shuttle symbolize a cosmic process, the action of the active upon the passive. Intelligence and perception are two other examples of this process in action; both are made possible by the crossing of nerves and fibers. In addition, Neith at times played the role of creator-goddess. According to Esna cosmology, she molds and established the world after emerging from Nun.

Melville is also deeply interested in how the simple act of weaving becomes a symbol for divine process and devotes a chapter to it, “The Mat-Maker.” Ishmael and Queequeg are weaving a mat to kill time in between whale sightings. The mundane task is elevated as Ishmael likens their weaving to work on the “Loom of Time”: the long yarns of the warps are fixed like necessity (emblemizing man’s limited free will, as he

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<sup>550</sup> MD 225, 626.

<sup>551</sup> MD 648.

<sup>552</sup> Lawrence 173.

can interweave his own cross-threads into the fixed structure).<sup>553</sup> An element of chance enters the picture, which is symbolized by Queequeg's sword, which hits the loom and alters the overall pattern. It is not an accident that this scene occurs directly before the first lowering for a whale.

### **Stage VI: Realms of death and initiation**

This chapter has outlined a hierarchical presentation of deific powers at work in levels of reality that become increasingly dense and material. Yet this system is far from uni-directional, as there is also an urge within the material that pushes it to strive to seek its origins and return to its Source. The final stage in this framework, therefore, will focus on the regeneration stage, in particular the dynamics of death and resurrection. The Netherworld, which is accessible through moments of initiation and death, is a space that allows for the perception of and engagement with more refined and rarefied energies leading back to the primordial state. Here I will explicate a few deific powers important for understanding this stage.

#### **Anubis**

Anubis is the Divine Guide of the soul that leads the deceased through the Netherworld. The initiate must first pass here in order to begin the journey of transformations which ultimately awakens the knowledge of one's spiritual heritage and empowers the traveler to ascend through the sacred regions. The animal representing him is sometimes called a jackal, sometimes a dog, and is probably a composite of both. This is an excellent example of symbolization at work, as the dog is famous for its reliable homing instinct, very useful in searches, and the animal guide of choice for the blind (which one is in these imaginal spaces). The jackal often stood watch over the ancient cemeteries and was seen as a prime creature of the night and the traditional guardian of secluded places. Furthermore, the jackal feasts on carrion, representing the natural processes of decay in living matter, the materials which eventually become food for other forms of life. This digestive structure is a definite precursor to alchemy, and for this ability to create sustenance from rot and transmute inert substance into life-giving elements, Anubis is associated with the embalming act, which employs art, science, and magic to preserve the physical form.

Anubis's origins present interesting connotations. Keeping in mind that he is said to be the son of Set, his association with decay and death becomes clear. Anubis represents the principle of transmutation, which he effects through biochemical changes in the physical form. He functions in the physical world as digestion, where the components in physical substance are broken down and transmuted into higher matter, in the cemetery as well as in the human body. Most importantly, he takes the soul toward the place of judgment where either redemption or annihilation is conferred upon it. As dogs are thought to represent absolute loyalty, he oversees the scene of the weighing of the heart, to make sure that it is carried out correctly.

Stubb is one of Anubis's avatars in the novel. In Chapter 29, Stubb asks Ahab if there was any way he could muffle the noise of his ivory leg echoing loudly on the wood floor. Ahab retorts: "Go thy ways...Below to thy nightly grave; where such as ye sleep between shrouds, to use ye to the filling one at last. – Down, dog, and kennel!"<sup>554</sup> In the first lowering after a whale, Stubb shouts the same insult at the crewmen: "Bite

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<sup>553</sup> *MD* 259.

<sup>554</sup> *MD* 162.



something, you dogs!”<sup>555</sup> Chapter 84, “Pitchpoling,” describes how whalers use a long lance to subdue fast, tireless whales that have been harpooned. Stubb is an expert at the “pitchpole” technique, and the novel describes the following scene: “Again and again to such gamesome talk, the dexterous dart is repeated, the spear returning to its master like a greyhound held in skilful leash”<sup>556</sup> There is a systematic association of canine and grave imagery with Stubb throughout the novel.

When “The Pequod Meets the Rose-Bud” (Chapter 91), Stubb exclaims: “There’s a pretty fellow, now...there’s a jackal for ye!”<sup>557</sup> In thinking about Anubis’s relationship to transmutation, we should consider Stubb’s role in this chapter. Stubb tricks the French captain into releasing a foul-smelling “blasted whale” by making him believe (with the help of a translator) that it poses an infection risk for the crew. Once they release it, he retrieves it in order to get ambergris, a valuable substance used in the making of various cosmetic products, from its intestines: “suddenly from out the very heart of this plague, there stole a faint stream of perfume, which flowed through the tide of bad smells without being absorbed by it... ‘I have it, I have it,’ cried Stubb, with delight, striking something in the subterranean regions, ‘a purse! a purse!’”<sup>558</sup> The ambergris, as he knows, is “worth a gold guinea an ounce to any druggist,” and he comments on the irony of members of the upper classes regaling themselves with a substance from this animal’s bowels.<sup>559</sup> On a more reflective note, he asks, “Now that the incorruption of this most fragrant ambergris should be found in the heart of such decay; is this nothing?”<sup>560</sup> This is emblematic of how Anubis retrieves gold and new life from the carcass of death, and for this reason we can understand why the ship’s second mate is always called “wise Stubb” and “erudite Stubb.”

One can also find Melville employing the mythic figure of Anubis in Chapter 49, “The Hyena.”<sup>561</sup> Instead of in his usual form of the jackal, Melville presents him as a laughing hyena, one who encourages man to take “this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody’s expense but his own.”<sup>562</sup> After experiencing the dangers of a whale hunt firsthand, Ishmael decides to prepare for death by writing a will. He asks Queequeg to be his “lawyer, executor, and legatee.”<sup>563</sup> (Anubis leads the deceased to Osiris for judgment, and here again, Queequeg is playing the role of Osiris.) In truth, he already feels dead. Every additional day he is alive at this point is a bonus: “Besides, all the days I should now live would be as good as the days that Lazarus lived after his resurrection; a supplementary clean gain of so many months or weeks as the case might be. I survived myself; my death and burial were locked up in my chest.”<sup>564</sup> This speech exemplifies the effects of Anubis’s guidance. Ishmael has reached a place of inner contentment where he

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<sup>555</sup> MD 263.

<sup>556</sup> MD 431.

<sup>557</sup> MD 469.

<sup>558</sup> MD 474.

<sup>559</sup> MD 474.

<sup>560</sup> MD 476.

<sup>561</sup> I was alerted to this connection by Mario D’Avanzo, “Anubis and the Hyena,” *Melville Society Extracts* 37 (1979): 5-7.

<sup>562</sup> MD 272.

<sup>563</sup> MD 273.

<sup>564</sup> MD 274.

can proclaim his resurrection. Earlier in the novel, he is plagued by doubts: “But Faith, like a jackal, feeds among the tombs, and even from these dead doubts she gathers her most vital hope.”<sup>565</sup>

### **Osiris**

We return to Osiris again to think specifically about his role as a postmortem deity, which he becomes after his murder by Set. In the underworld, he is the power of renewal, the bearer of the seed of resurrection, and the possibility of returning to the source. His principle function as the god of the dead is to judge the deceased. First, the heart is weighed against the feather of Maat (Truth). Afterwards, the “Negative Confession” is recited, which is addressed to the forty-two Assessors (judges assembled in the Hall of Judgment). The deceased is required to know the name and inner nature of each of the Assessors and to plead innocent of committing the specific undesirable act under the jurisdiction of that Assessor. If one passes and is found to be pure, the prospect of admission to higher levels of existence and communion with the *neteru* is offered.

Those who fail are thrown to Ammut, “Devouress of the Dead,” a horrid *neter* with the face of a crocodile, the front of a lion or leopard, and the back of a hippopotamus, who would quickly consume the soul with her frightening jaws, subjecting it to the agonies of a second death. Ammut symbolizes the world of unredeemed carnality, the oblivion that is the destination of the unspiritualized human soul. (One could also speculate that this vivid image is a metaphor for the process of reincarnation and the return of the unperfected in another physical vehicle to undergo earthly life again.) This determination of destiny is overseen by Osiris, who is thus the *neter* to which every soul has to answer after death, accounting for all aspects of the life lived on earth. In the underworld, Osiris also fuses with Ra, who as the sun traverses this territory during the night and is every morning born anew from death.

Chapter 93, “The Castaway,” gives Melville’s version of this judgment scene. We have already spoken earlier about the connections made between blackness and the underworld. This is developed in this chapter. Pip, the young black cabin boy of the *Pequod*, is chosen as a replacement oarsman for Stubb’s harpoon boat. (And with Stubb serving as an avatar for Anubis, this is the perfect choice.) While the boat is attacking a whale, Pip jumps out of the craft in fear, entangling himself in the harpoon line. They rescue him, which lets the whale free in the process, but Stubb sternly lets him know that they will not do that again. This is a judgment scene in which Pip’s life is spared.

Invariably, Pip jumps from the boat again, and he is left in the middle of the sea while the harpoon boat pursues another whale. This is the scene where he is thrown to destruction, with Ra serving as the only witness: “Out from the centre of the sea, poor Pip turned his crisp, curling, black head to the sun, another lonely castaway, though the loftiest and the brightest.”<sup>566</sup> Melville unleashes a torrent of phantasmagoric language:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that

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<sup>565</sup> *MD* 65.

<sup>566</sup> *MD* 481.

out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it.<sup>567</sup>

Pip's soul travels to the unwarped primal world, but unlike the Egyptian scenes of judgment, he is not completely annihilated. He returns to the *Pequod*, but in an outwardly mentally unstable form.

Although Pip is destroyed by the judgment scene, the possibility of further life after death is not one that is foreclosed by the novel. Ishmael lapses into a visionary reverie at the beginning of the *Pequod*'s voyage: "there was yet, it then seemed to me, many a pleasant haven in store; and meads and glades so eternally vernal, that the grass shot up by the spring, untrodden, unwilted, remains at midsummer."<sup>568</sup> This vision of eternal springtime describes perfectly what was known in ancient Egypt as the Field of Reeds, a paradisiacal realm discussed in the chapter on Coleridge. Placed in the east, where the sun rises, it is described in ways that mirror and idealize the earthly Nile delta, as it is a perfect hunting and fishing ground with no need for hard labor. Do Ahab and the rest of the crew make it there at the end of the novel? More than likely Queequeg does. He expresses an Osirian vision of resurrection when he describes "the custom of his own race, who, after embalming a dead warrior, stretched him out in his canoe, and so left him to be floated away to the starry archipelagoes; for not only do they believe that the stars are isles, but that far beyond all visible horizons, their own mild, uncontinented seas, interflow with the blue heavens; and so form the white breakers of the milky way."<sup>569</sup>

As I have emphasized throughout this chapter, this theoretical explication of the *neteru* is far from complete. Many deities are at work at each of the levels of reality that I outline, and it would be impossible to chart them all. I have chosen the ones that speak most closely to the work being done by *Moby-Dick*, while constructing a large enough frame to hold others. I close this section with a quick look at some other figures that would be appropriate to place in this level. The Bennu bird is better known by its Greek name, the phoenix. Usually portrayed as a composite between a heron and a stork or a falcon and stork, it is a symbol of ascension and anticipated rebirth in the underworld. It is the living manifestation of Ra, and according to some narratives, the Bennu created itself from a fire that was burned on a holy tree in one of the sacred precincts of the temple of Ra. Other versions say that the Bennu bird burst forth from the heart of Osiris, which would also make sense given its function. John Birk helpfully notes in *Tracing the Round*, "The Phoenix is a fitting constellation for us to affirm at last, for it expresses the divergent fates of *Moby-Dick*'s two principals: Ahab perishes from fiery zeal while Ishmael survives to reconstruct his life."<sup>570</sup> Upset with Ahab after he tramples the ship's quadrant underfoot, Starbuck cries out, "I have sat before the dense coal fire and watched it all aglow, full of its tormented flaming life; and I have seen it wane at last, down, down, to dumbest dust. Old man of oceans! of all this fiery life of thine, what will at length remain but one little heap of ashes!"<sup>571</sup> Tragically, Ahab does not rise again from

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<sup>567</sup> MD 481.

<sup>568</sup> MD 137.

<sup>569</sup> MD 551.

<sup>570</sup> Birk 316.

<sup>571</sup> MD 575.

the flames as the Bennu bird is famously known to do, but devolves into an ash-heap. Emerging from the holy tree of Queequeg's coffin, Ishmael, however, survives to commence a new cycle of life.

### Conclusion

Taken together, these *neteru* express the archetypal nature of cosmic action, the celestial alchemy that brings life into the world, sustains it, and regenerates it in divine cycles. Expressing the immense realms of pre-creation, creation, and post-creation, they constitute the natural principles of Egypt's esoteric philosophy, and Melville uses narratives about them – expanding, recombining, and providing negative versions of them – to structure his vast novel. Several intersecting narrative planes structure the broad temporal and spatial architecture of *Moby-Dick*, and each scene of the novel shows Melville's multi-dimensional engagement with these deific powers. In a densely compacted way, aspects of different *neteru* are layered in the characterization of a panoply of human and natural figures, and each human and natural figure serves as a point of emergence for several deific powers. For example, the white skin of Moby Dick evokes the primal chaos of Nun; the severed head of a whale being hoisted onto the *Pequod* repeats the emergence of the world from nothingness; and its phallus signifies fertility and the generation of the material world. Ishmael, to give another example, is animated at different times in the novel by narratives about Ra, Thoth, Isis, and Osiris that he variously invokes and embodies. I agree with the opinion stated by Alfred Kazin, who says of *Moby-Dick* that "It is the most cosmic book in American literature."<sup>572</sup>

Viola Sachs, in her book *The Game of Creation: The Primeval Unlettered Language of Moby Dick, Or, The Whale*, acutely describes the process of sinking oneself into the metaphysical and mythical content of *Moby-Dick*:

The book in its corporeal form (as a whale) is a sacred carving to be deciphered so that the revelation can occur...It is a three dimensional corporeal hieroglyph which can be heard, smelled, tasted, touched and seen...Thus, we see that to fully penetrate the deep structure of American mythic writings and, in particular of the romance, the reader must transcend the linear level of plot and the novelistic conception of character. However interesting, they constitute one of the many veils to be removed in the discovery of the pattern of intricate correspondences between the microcosmos and the macrocosmos. Attention should center on proper names of characters, on the parts of the body described, on postures and gestures, on elements of clothing, on the voice, on the relation of characters and objects to colors, numbers, cardinal directions, elements, metals, celestial bodies, zodiacal signs, geometrical and graphical figures, ascendant and descendant symbols. They will yield the hidden significance. In the final analysis, plot, characters, historical and geographical data constitute "the incomparable materials...the barbarism and materialism of our times" which Emerson considered in nothing inferior to the materials out of which Homer fashioned his poetry. Only, this material *prima* has to be submitted to a process of spiritualization,

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<sup>572</sup> Alfred Kazin's *America: Critical and Personal Writings*, ed. Ted Solotaroff (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003) 344.

which will dissolve the material context of the New World (literal text), and bring to light its inner kernel.<sup>573</sup>

This passage articulates some of the goals of this chapter, particularly my attempt to use ancient Egyptian sacred science as a hermeneutic support for understanding the “deep structure” of the novel – one that depends on the exploration of deific powers that link the macrocosm and microcosm.

In this dissertation, I have explored many aspects of ancient Egyptian sacred science – which I have termed a sacred astronomy, sacred anatomy, and sacred energetics – all of which work together for the goal of promoting a process whereby the human soul attains divine status and knows all the powers in nature, in addition to the realms in which they exist. These chapters have worked to show how important this body of knowledge was for providing Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville with a blueprint for the representation of realms of experience not accessible to orthodox systems of materialism and rational logic. In his own manner, each called for the restoration of ancient spiritual practice and used their literary work as a platform for that formidable task. There are many vibrant threads connecting the epochs of ancient Egypt and Romanticism, and in the most fundamental sense, Romantic writers discovered the ultimate realization of ancient Egyptian spirituality – the assumption of divine knowledge.

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<sup>573</sup> Sachs 238.

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