

The *Book of the Celestial Cow*: A Theological Interpretation

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In certain Neoplatonic philosophers, such as Proclus, Damascius, and Olympiodorus, we find a mode of mythological interpretation we may term “theological.” This article attempts a “theological” interpretation of the Egyptian *Book of the Celestial Cow*, a text inscribed in five royal tombs of the New Kingdom. Although the concept of the “theological” hermeneutic comes from Neoplatonic thought, the point of this reading is not to impose Greek philosophical concepts upon the text, but to borrow Neoplatonic textual strategies the aim of which is to deploy the concepts *immanent* to a particular body of myth to illuminate myth’s specifically theological dimension, that is, the contribution its iconic content and formal narrative structure make to that culture’s picture of the dispositions of the Gods in a pantheon and the divine activities constitutive of the cosmos. The key issues arising in this reading concern the distance between Re and humanity; the relationship between Re and Nūn as that between the demiurgic principle and the preconditions of its emergence; the “Eye of Re” as an hypostatized site of divine agency occupied successively by Hathor and Sekhmet in the myth; and the meaning of the death or destruction of mortals in the myth.

This essay is not intended to offer a philological contribution to the literature on this important Egyptian text. Rather my aim is to explore a method for the interpretation of myth drawn from the thought of the Platonists of late antiquity. I have discussed the theoretical foundations of this method elsewhere,¹ but will summarise those results here. I have attempted to discern in the readings of myths that Neoplatonists incorporated into their philosophical works, as well as from programmatic statements by these philosophers about the nature and interpretation of myth, certain universal methodological principles

¹ E. P. Butler, ‘The Theological Interpretation of Myth’, *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 7.1, 2005, pp.27-41.

separable from the Neoplatonic metaphysics itself. In this essay, I attempt to apply these principles to the reading of a text unknown to Platonists and unconnected to their own, Hellenic traditions. If the method is successful, it should help to elucidate the text in a manner which does not constitute a “Platonising” interpretation.

I wish to emphasize that the choice of an Egyptian text constitutes no claim whatsoever to a necessary connection between Platonism and Egyptian thought. Nor, if certain Neoplatonists such as Iamblichus, for example, made specific reference to Egyptian myth, is this any part of the present essay’s concerns. Perhaps it would have reduced the potential for such confusion had a text been selected, instead, from the Andes, say, or East Asia. There still would have been occasion, however, for the misapprehension that my purpose is to uncover some universal theological contents. This reading seeks to apply *formal* Neoplatonic hermeneutical principles to an Egyptian text, not to conflate the *contents* of Neoplatonic ontology and Egyptian theology. It should also be understood that no claim is being made that *only* these hermeneutical principles can be profitably applied to this text. There is no *necessity* to the application of this hermeneutic; I will rather explain why it might be fruitful, and then hopefully demonstrate its fruitfulness.

The term “theological” for this mode of interpretation comes from the fourth-century CE Neoplatonist Sallustius. Sallustius is not himself an important figure in the history of Neoplatonism, but he expresses concisely certain principles pertaining to the interpretation of myth that, I would argue, are largely embodied in the interpretive practices of later Platonists like Proclus. These later Platonists do not derive these principles from Sallustius. Rather, Sallustius arrives at his classificatory structure by applying the fundamental principles of an evolving Platonic understanding in his day of the relationship between philosophy and theology.² In chapter three of his *On the Gods and the Cosmos*, Sallustius discusses five types of myth and ways of reading myths, namely the theological, the physical, the psychical, the material, and the mixed. These categorisations apply to the entities taken to be the

² For more on the relationship between philosophy and theology in Neoplatonism, see E. P. Butler, ‘Offering to the Gods: A Neoplatonic Perspective’, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* Vol. 2.1, 2007, pp.1-20, and ‘The Gods and Being in Proclus,’ *Dionysius* Vol.26, 2008, forthcoming.

myth's referents. A theological myth, or a myth *qua* theological, concerns primarily the Gods, a physical myth (myth *qua* physical) treats of nature in a universal sense, a psychical myth of the soul, a material myth of certain concrete substances, and a mixed myth of entities in all these classes. Sallustius speaks ambiguously of types of myths and modes of interpretation, but it is clear from his exposition that the hierarchy is of interpretive methods, that multiple methods can be applied to the same myths, and that the different methods are appropriate to different discursive contexts, the theological mode being particular to the philosopher but also, on that account, having the highest truth value, if not the broadest. The broadest truth value, on the other hand, belongs to the mixed mode of interpretation, which integrates interpretation on all the other levels, but this is the mode of interpretation practiced in an initiatory context, and thus not easily appropriated.

The theological method, by contrast, is quite practicable. Its fundamental principle is that myths reveal the nature of, and relations between, different classes of Gods, that is, Gods active on different planes of being and whose activities are constitutive of those planes of being. This involves, for the Neoplatonist, classifying the Gods in a myth in relation to a Neoplatonic taxonomy of divine orders, but the method does not require the Neoplatonic taxonomy, or indeed any abstract system of classification. Instead, the goal is to develop the theological categories immanent to the culture whose myths are being examined by analysing the structural relationships posited in the myth itself and in myths and iconography from the same tradition. Because the method cannot begin *ex nihilo*, certain minimal propositions about the nature of the divine are adopted as heuristic devices. Where these have been applied in the essay I have noted them. Should any of them be felt to be alien to Egyptian thought, they may be replaced by axioms deemed valid.

What matters for the method is that myths be interpreted as theological statements of their culture, rather than reductively. Examples of reductive readings in this sense are Sallustius's three modes other than the theological and the mixed. Reductive readings of myth have not lacked for modern practitioners. Interpretations of myths which understand their primary referents to be natural or psychological phenomena or socioeconomic dispositions are reductive in this sense.

For the theological method, the myths concern the Gods as actual existents, real agencies whose activities and relationships are constitutive of the order in the cosmos. One consequence of this is that the theological method of interpretation is effectively ahistorical, treating a deity's successive historical appearances, not as a development of the deity, but as an ongoing revelation of that deity's integral nature.

Theological interpretation does not rule out any other mode of interpretation, such as, for example, that which emphasizes a myth's role as a charter for certain social institutions, whereas other modes of interpretation, in their exclusivity, rule out theological interpretation by effectively interpreting away the objects of theology. Analysing the myths of a culture reveals immanent typologies and functions, positions which can be filled by different deities in variant versions of a single myth or in related myths. These positions or functions in turn can form the vehicle for comparisons between cultures; but these types or functions must be derived in the first place from myths presenting themselves as accounts of the actions of particular Gods, and in the second place, must derive their meaning from their own place in the holistic system of the culture in which they arise. Only in a third stage can cross-cultural comparison be envisioned, and only if genuine functional homologies between discrete theological systems can be established on the foundation of a sufficient understanding of the discrete theologies involved. The dangers of hasty comparativism are more to be feared than excessive caution in this regard.

The status accorded to "function" in the theological mode of interpretation offers a contrast between it and hermeneutic of "translation" discussed by Jan Assmann.³ Within the "translation" paradigm, functional equivalences between deities of different national pantheons, or even within the same pantheon, are treated as indicating that different names signify the same small set of deities, or the differentiated potencies of a single divine substance. For the

³ See, for example, J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp.2-3. For more on the "translation" paradigm in mythological hermeneutics and its sublation in late antique Platonism, see E. P. Butler 2007 cited above (n. 2), and also 'Polycentric Polytheism and the Philosophy of Religion', *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies*, Vol. 10.2, 2008, forthcoming.

“theological” mode of interpretation, by contrast, function derives from identity, and not identity from function. In this fashion the theological mode of interpretation seeks to avoid yet another form of reductionism, which we might label the “cosmotheistic” reduction, after the “cosmotheism” Assmann sees as the historical outcome of the translational hermeneutic of myth. In the “cosmotheistic” reduction, a unitary cosmotheistic philosophy effectively displaces the theologies of diverse cultures, whose *particularity* is treated as mere *materiality*. Such an approach, because it dualistically posits a substance or substances prior to or underlying the Gods themselves and external to the myths themselves, could never be regarded as the *primary* mode of mythological hermeneutics, if indeed it is even to be regarded as a way of interpreting myths, and not rather as a method of *demythologization*.⁴



The myth I am treating⁵ begins its narrative at a time when Re exercises a unified sovereignty over humans and Gods alike. The temporal process of mythic narrative is converted in Neoplatonic interpretation into a progression from lesser to greater differentiation within a static hierarchy.⁶ Hence the initial phase of Re’s sovereignty does not need to

⁴ Some mention at least should be made here of a method of interpretation which is perhaps not reductionistic in the sense that I have used the term here, namely structuralist interpretation, as demonstrated (briefly) by R. A. Oden, Jr. upon a text closely related to the one treated in the present essay, in “‘The Contendings of Horus and Seth’ (Chester Beatty Papyrus No. 1): A Structural Interpretation,’ *History of Religions* Vol. 18, No. 4, May 1979, pp.352-369. I believe that “theological” and structuralist interpretation are not necessarily at odds with one another, but the present essay is not the place to discuss their relationship.

⁵ For the text, I use the translation of E. F. Wentze, in W. K. Simpson, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, 3rd edition, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003, p.289-98. Citations of the text will give first the page number in Simpson, then the line number in the hieroglyphic text published in Ch. Maystre, ‘Le livre de la vache du ciel,’ *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale* 40, 1941, pp.53-115. For a discussion of other mythic accounts of revolt against Re and their similarities and differences from the account in the *Book of the Celestial Cow*, see M. Smith, ‘P. Carlsberg 462: A Fragmentary Account of a Rebellion Against the Sun God,’ pp. 95-112 in *The Carlsberg Papyri 3: A Miscellany of Demotic Texts and Studies*, eds. P. J. Frandsen & K. Ryholt, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000.

⁶ See the discussion of Olympiodorus’ remarks in Butler, ‘The Theological Interpretation of Myth’, 2005, p.35ff.

be understood as an early state of the world, but as a state of affairs true in a qualified sense at any and all times. The qualified sense in which it is true at all times is obtained by abstracting from the difference between humans and Gods. The development of the mythic narrative serves, however, to articulate this difference. Re learns that there are humans plotting against him because the furthest limits of his realm are far removed from his living divinity. The myth offers two immediate symbols of this distance or gap between Re and his subjects. The first is Re's elderliness and, the second, the mineral metaphors used to describe him: his bones like silver, his flesh like gold, his hair like lapis lazuli.⁷ Re is elderly, not as an absolute quality, but relative to those of his subjects who are much *younger* in the scale of being. The distance between creator Gods and worldly beings can be seen in the motif of the *deus otiosus* or "retired God,"⁸ or from Gnostic myths concerning the demiurge, who is seen, in the obverse of the type of myth presented here, as *provoking* rebellion on the part of his cosmic subjects.⁹ This distance can be seen as expressing the difficulty of reconciling the viewpoints of particular beings, their desires and strivings, with the universal or cosmic perspective: the good of the whole is, unfortunately, seemingly consistent with a privation of good in many of the parts. Formally, it presents a type of whole or manifold of which the cause belongs to a transcendent register, and identifies mortal beings with this manifold. In Proclean mereology, this relationship is expressed in the notion of a "whole-before-the-parts," as in proposition 67 of the *Elements of Theology*.

Re calls together the Gods in his retinue. They are to assemble at the Great Palace and propose plans for dealing with the rebellion. Re intends particularly to confer with Nūn, the watery abyss which pre-existed the cosmos. This makes sense inasmuch as disorder within the cosmos is the continued presence within it of the precosmic disorder.

⁷ On minerals in Egyptian theology, see S. Aufrère, 'Caractères principaux et origine divine des minéraux', *Revue d'Égyptologie* 34, 1982-3, pp.3-21.

⁸ On the applicability of this motif to Egyptian theology, see the nuanced discussion by Susan Tower Hollis in 'Otiose Deities and the Ancient Egyptian Pantheon', *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, Vol. 35 (1998), pp. 61-72.

⁹ Though philologically superseded, the philosophical reflections of Hans Jonas on the Gnostic myths in *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (3rd ed., Boston: Beacon Press, 2001) remain valuable.

This seems to be a matter of Egyptian theological doctrine, but also invites comparison with a Neoplatonic doctrine on causality, namely that the “higher” or more primordial a principle, the further “down” the scale of being its causation reaches.¹⁰ The lowest of Re’s subjects, therefore, over whom his sovereignty cannot be asserted with total effectiveness, manifest the broader, albeit more indifferent, causality of Nūn. This will be significant, too, in light of the artificial inundation with which the episode of the rebellion is resolved. Furthermore, the renewal of Re in returning to Nūn is a theme in the *Amduat* book, which treats of the nightly voyage of the boat of Re through the hours of the night and Re’s encounter with Osiris.

Re addresses himself mainly to Nūn, asking his advice: humans, who came into being from Re’s “eye,” plot against him. Re asks Nūn to tell him what he would do about it, remarking that he cannot slay the humans before having heard what Nūn will say. Re stresses the origin of humans (*rmḥ*) from his eye, namely from his tears (*rmyt*), a well-known pun in Egyptian. But his reference to his eye here anticipates that it is his “Eye” that he shall send against them. The word *ir.t*, or “eye,” evokes the participial form of the verb *ir*, hence *ir.t*, “doing” or “doer.”¹¹ Re’s “Eye” is thus a functional paraphrase for his action or agency, and not a part of his body, however metaphorical, but a sort of executive position in his regime (one might tentatively compare the position occupied by Athena with respect to Zeus). Nor is Re the only deity whose “eye” or agency is hypostatized in this fashion. The example of Atum’s “eye” is closely bound up with Re’s due to these deities functional assimilation and hence shall be dealt with below; but there is also Nūt, of whom it is said in utterance 443 of the *Pyramid Texts*, ‘O Nūt, the eyes have gone forth from your head ... O Nūt, you have mustered your children ...’.¹²

When Re expresses his intention to kill the humans, we should not jump to the anthropomorphic conclusion that Re takes such an action vindictively, or even reactively. An interpretation inconsistent with the goodness of the Gods as well as with their power of self-determination

¹⁰ See for example, Proclus, *Elements of Theology* prop.57.

¹¹ See the remarks of H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion: A Study of His Role in Egyptian Mythology and Religion*, 2nd ed., Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977, 47.

¹² R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, p.148.

(i.e., their power not to be other-determined through passions) would be excluded *ex hypothesi* in the mythological hermeneutics practiced by Neoplatonists.¹³ However, Neoplatonic axioms concerning the goodness and activity of the Gods may not be transferable to all other cultures. The basic principle in a theological interpretation is that every element of the myth be interpreted with reference to and consistent with whatever set of beliefs about the nature of the Gods or the divine can be discerned as basic or fundamental for a particular culture. Interpreters may differ with respect to the fundamental theological beliefs held in a given culture at a certain moment, while nevertheless practicing theological interpretation as long as they rigorously relate the narrative data of the myths to the theological principles they propose. The limits of theological interpretation lie, not in the substantive theological doctrines which are proposed, but in the abstention from reductive interpretations or from a scepticism so ascetic that no domain of principles is legitimate to postulate. This being said, it is not a bad heuristic or working hypothesis to assume, in advance of evidence to the contrary, that a given culture believed that its Gods were fundamentally good, each in their own way—even Seth, after all, exhibits goodness in certain contexts—and that the overall cosmic order was essentially providential. These are not proposed as universal theological postulates, but simply as potentially hermeneutically fruitful since they do not permit the hermeneutic to stop prematurely. Instead of simply assuming, therefore, that Re behaves like a jealous human sovereign, we must ask what is the cosmic problem the myth presents here in narrative form.

The rebellion is itself a manifestation of Re's inability to control certain aspects of his domain. It is not an accidental, but an essential effect of the structure of the cosmos, which is providential overall, but obviously requires divine activity at every level to resolve the problems which are constitutive of each plane of being. The plane of being treated in the myth, which includes mortal particulars, has certain constitutive tensions which are, if not resolved, then at least analysed in the myth. Humans, in plotting against Re, that is, against the cosmic order which he represents and has instituted, plot their own extinction;

¹³ For numerous examples, see the defence of Homer in Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Republic*.

and this is the problem with mortal beings. It is their nature to assert themselves against the cosmic order, that is, to require, and thus to demand, a disposition of things inconsistent with the universal disposition of the cosmos. In seeking to quell the rebellion, therefore, Re is not passively reacting to a breakdown in order but is seeking the resolution of a tension, a contradiction, which arises at the limits of his domain.

In asking Nūn's advice, Re opens the possibility that Nūn might assert ultimate control over the cosmos by expressing a will independent of Re's. Nūn refuses to become the primary power in the cosmos, however, by denying any claim based upon his own seniority, calling Re the God mightier than the one (Nūn) who produced him and telling him to retain his throne. Nūn seems to encourage Re to send forth his Eye against the humans, which is synonymous, apparently, with slaying them. Nūn's association with wine and beer implies that the resolution of the crisis, which will turn upon the use of an intoxicating beverage, involves his further participation in a way, but not in a way subversive of Re's will. Mortal particulars are perhaps to some extent irreducibly disordered, and thus akin to Nūn. But rather than stress an irreconcilable opposition between them and the universal order of the cosmos, the resolution, in evoking Nūn, perhaps affirms the availability of the precosmic chaos (the waters of the Nile's annual inundation) as prime matter for the demiurgic work.

The humans have fled into the desert, 'their hearts fearful over what I [Re] might say to them' (290/11). Here again we see that humans distance *themselves* from Re's communication, from an understanding of the cosmic order which is, in some fashion, available to them. It seems to have been a commonplace in Egyptian thought that humans possess an innate sense of right conduct which they alone are culpable for failing to respect.¹⁴ The other Gods encourage Re to send his Eye against the humans, for 'No eye is as capable as it to smite them for you' (291/12) An eye *strikes* something when it *perceives* it. And so it is in some sense Re's *gaze* or *viewpoint* upon humans which punishes them. It is not merely a question here of the sun's rays, but of the cosmic viewpoint which Re holds as universal sovereign. Hence the "Eye of Re" is a potency pertaining to the office of divine sovereign and

¹⁴ E.g., *Coffin Texts* VII, 462-464.

which Re exercises because he holds this office. For this Eye to punish the humans is for them, *qua* mortals, to lack any place in the universal order of the cosmos. This leaves one at the mercy of entropy, as one of the “nonexistents.”¹⁵ The rebellion and the punishment are thus two perspectives upon the same event of being. (By contrast, note that in virtue of his different sphere of activity from Re’s, Amun is hymned as ‘protector of that which is and that which is not’.¹⁶ This underscores the point that deities such as Amun and Re, though they may enter into relationships of “fusion” as, e.g., “Amun-Re,” nevertheless remain distinct.)

The Eye goes forth first ‘as’ or ‘in the form of Hathor’ (291/13). The preposition *m*, translated “as,” has a range of meanings which are insufficient to really determine the relationship between Hathor and the Eye. It is reasonable therefore to interpret the Eye as an executive function taken up by one deity or another, as long as they are in the proper relationship to Re and his cosmogonic works. Does the fact that the Eye is always embodied by a Goddess indicate that the Eye is something which not only *gazes* but also *attracts* or *elicits* Re’s gaze so as to awaken his creative *eros*?¹⁷ If so, it would provide an interesting contrast between Re and the primordial creator Atum, whose erotic power is awakened by no *image* at all but only by his *hand* upon his phallus, the hand being itself personified (or, again, turned into an office or function)¹⁸ as the Goddess Iusâas. That Re’s desire should involve

¹⁵ On the concept of nonexistence in Egyptian thought, see ‘Excursus: The challenge of the nonexistent,’ pp.172-185 in E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, tr. J. Baines, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982. Note in particular the remarks on p.176 concerning the *diversity* of the existent as opposed to the *undifferentiated unity* of the nonexistent, an opposition mediated by the creator deity or demiurge.

¹⁶ D. Klotz, *Adoration of the Ram: Five Hymns to Amun-Re from Hibis Temple*, New Haven, CT: Yale Egyptological Seminar, 2006, p.129.

¹⁷ Compare *The Contendings of Horus and Seth* 4.1-3, p.94 in Simpson ed. *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*. Re (actually the conjugate deity [P]re-Harakhti, “Re-Horus-of-the-Horizons”), having withdrawn from the scene of action after being mocked by the phallic deity Babi or Bebon with the charge that ‘Your shrine is vacant’ (3.10), i.e., has no cult image in it and thus embodies no efficacy, is induced to return after Hathor exposes her genitalia to him.

¹⁸ See, again, the remarks of te Velde 1977 cited above, as well as the article he cites by W. Helck, ‘Bemerkungen zu den Bezeichnungen für einige Körperteile,’ *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 80, 1955, 144. “Hand” (*drt* or *dʒt*) evokes the participial form of the verb *dʒ*, “to seize,” similar to *irt*, “eye,” evoking *ir.t*, “doer.”

images or *forms* speaks to the different level at which the primordial creator and the cosmic sovereign or demiurge (i.e., the one who *orders* the cosmos) operate.

Spatiality is prominent in connection with the Eye of Re as well, especially in the complex of myths concerning its absence and return, which is in turn often juxtaposed with the myths concerning the Eye of Horus, or *wedjât*, its wounding and renewal. These myths are not to be conflated with one another; rather, their similarities and differences allow us to discern the different registers in which myths can operate to give the maximum meaning to experience. This can be illustrated in a manner productive for the text presently under consideration by the myth-complex concerning (in its simplest terms) the *return* of his ‘Eye’ to Atum or, later, through a process of functional assimilation, to Re. The Eye is the effective will of deities such as Re in the world; its “return” therefore expresses the circling back to its source of this energy, which occurs in many different ways on different planes of being. Sometimes it has the sense of the God’s coming to awareness through the experience of separation and reunion. Hence in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus (27),¹⁹ Atum states that his Eye ‘followed after’ Shu and Tefnut, who, after having been ejected from his body, were ‘brought up by’ and ‘rejoiced in’ Nūn, the precosmic abyss, and were hence ‘distant’ from him. In returning to him, Atum says that Shu and Tefnut ‘brought to me my Eye with them.’ This leads to a new stage in the creation, for Atum states that ‘After I had united my members’—Shu and Tefnut being like parts of his body—‘I wept over them. That is how humans came into being from the tears which came forth from my Eye,’ a play on words I have noted previously. From another perspective, Shu states in spell 76 of the *Coffin Texts* that ‘Atum once sent his Sole Eye [lit. “his Sole One”] seeking me and my sister Tefnut. I made light of the darkness for it and it found me as an immortal [lit. “man of eternity”].’²⁰

This is on one level; on another level, the Eye which seeks out Shu and Tefnut may be identified with Hathor, as in spell 331 of the *Coffin*

¹⁹ R. O. Faulkner, ‘The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus—III,’ *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* Vol. 23.2, 1937, p.172.

²⁰ R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, Vol. 1, Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1973, p.78.

Texts, where Hathor, speaking in the first person, identifies herself with the Eye of Horus as well.²¹ The cosmogonic myth of Atum's Eye, in this more, so to speak, encosmic form, merges with a radically different myth which also, however, paradigmatically involves Tefnut and Shu, though it is told of other deities²² as well, and which is generally known as the myth of the Distant Goddess.²³ In the myth, Tefnut, who is residing in a vaguely-determined foreign land²⁴—hence she is a “distant” Goddess—is induced by Shu to return with him to Egypt. The return of the fiery/wrathful Distant Goddess involves her appeasement or purification, observed especially at Abaton on the island of Bigêh, the site of the “tomb” of Osiris.

Although only imperfectly understood, it is clear that the myth of the Distant Goddess unites cosmogonic and Osirian themes, as would befit the cosmogonic Eye myth's deployment on, or, better, *specification to*, the psychical plane. In a popular form of the myth, Shu's role is taken by Thoth, who convinces Tefnut to return with him by a series of arguments, fables, and hymns. Thoth's role in this popular narrative echoes his hieratic function of pacifying “wrathful” Goddesses, a role expressed in his epithet *sehetep neseret*, ‘the one who pacifies/propitiates the divine flame’. Thoth mediates in this way between the mortal and the divine, for the fiery blast of these Goddesses, which is called *neseret*, forms a barrier or veil of sorts between these realms; and this is perhaps a reason for his replacing Shu when the myth takes on this form.

I shall have more to say below about Thoth's role in the *Book of the Celestial Cow*, but it is important to connect his role in this particular

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.256.

²² Indeed, historically speaking it may originally have “belonged” to Mehyt and Onuris; on Mehyt, see S. Cauville, ‘L'hymne à Mehyt d'Edfou,’ *Bulletin de l'institut français d'archéologie orientale* 82, 1982, pp.105-125.

²³ On this myth, see D. Inconnu-Bocquillon, *Le mythe de la Déesse Lointaine à Philae*, Cairo: IFAO, 2001. The myth is alluded to in many temple inscriptions but not preserved in any early narrative form. Attempts have been made to reconstruct it with the help of a demotic text (part of which also survives in Greek translation) which tells what appears to be a highly narrative version of the same myth (see below). Inconnu-Bocquillon is properly critical of earlier, overly ambitious syntheses which obscured the very diversity of the source material which the present interpretation wishes to highlight.

²⁴ Often called Bougem or Keneset and regarded as lying to the south and east of Egypt—e.g., Somalia—but essentially a mythical place.

phase of the multivalent Eye myth to his role as the healer of the so-called Eye of Horus, the *wedjât*, or “Sound (Eye),” from *w-d-*, meaning healthy, flourishing, or prosperous, or, as a verb, to proceed or attain. The *wedjât* is a highly multivalent symbol, being used to represent everything from the moon to Egypt itself, but if we seek its essence, it seems to be that the *wedjât* represents the beneficial power contained within every kind of offerings to the Gods. Whatever the substance offered or otherwise utilised in ritual, once it has been ritually activated, it becomes the Eye of Horus. One can see this formula, for instance, throughout the *Pyramid Texts*, where the most varied offerings and ritual items are identified as the “Eye of Horus” in the act of deploying them. The *wedjât* is the most universal symbol in Egyptian theology for any helpful substance or object and a general term for any amulet. As the ritually effective substance as such, the *wedjât* can therefore, when it converges symbolically with the Eye of Re, be seen as harnessing and rendering beneficial to humanity the power of Re’s fiery “judgment” (that is, as I have argued, his disintegrative universal *perspective*) upon the chaotic forces that threaten the cosmos through the very deployment of *symbols* themselves. The wrathful Goddesses, in particular Sekhmet, are hence often understood to participate in Thoth’s regeneration of the *wedjât*. In the Tenth Hour of the *Amduat* book, for example, the healing of the *wedjât* is shown being carried out by Thoth, in baboon form, and eight forms of Sekhmet, four with lioness heads and four with human heads.²⁵ Hathor, a “wrathful” Goddess as the “Eye of Re” in the *Book of the Celestial Cow*, heals the injured Eye of Horus in the *Contendings of Horus and Seth* (10.8-10.11). In this way, we can see how the complex declensions, as it were, of a single mytheme can serve to virtually delineate the different planes upon which divine action is posited.

The arrival of the Distant Goddess is seemingly conceived in two ways: first, as Re’s daughter—extant references to the “Distant Goddess” identify her, not as the daughter of Atum, as Tefnut properly is, but of Re²⁶—coming to his defense against his enemies and the

²⁵ Th. Abt & E. Hornung, *Knowledge for the Afterlife: The Egyptian Amduat—A Quest for Immortality*, Zurich: Living Human Heritage, 2003, pp.116-123.

²⁶ On the significance of the Eye of Atum as symbolically distinct—or, at least, symbolically distinguishable—from the Eye of Re, see P. Koemoth, ‘L’Atoum-serpent magicien de la stèle Metternich,’ *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 36, 2007, pp.137-146.

enemies of the cosmic order he represents; and second as the theogamy, or divine marriage, of Shu and Tefnut, this being understood, not as that which produced Geb and Nūt at the beginning of the world, but rather as a reunion of Shu and Tefnut and an indwelling of each in the other which also, in its most theologically complex form, entails the reunion of Geb and Nūt with Shu and Tefnut.²⁷ This reunion thus confirms the creation, so to speak, closing a cosmic circle in which the conflict characterizing the “younger” generations of the Gods gives way to reconciliation and the spiritualisation of the cosmos. An ancient commentary on spell 17 of the *Book of the Dead* identifies the soul of Re and the soul of Osiris (i.e., the mortal being as such), who come together in the resurrection, as indwelling in Shu and Tefnut, because Shu and Tefnut embody the whole latter development of the cosmos, the order and harmony of which has as its prerequisite the development of complexity, for there cannot be order without complexity.²⁸

At the level on which myths concerning the Eye of Re seem to operate, the crucial issues seem to concern the ability for order and form to be established within a distinct and hence restive substrate. Re’s creative eros proceeds to a place far removed from him, extending his divine activity to its limits, into a domain where the mediating activity of other Gods is obviously indispensable. To return to the *Book of the Celestial Cow*, we read that humans are attacked first by Hathor, who reports back to Re that she has ‘overpowered’ them, and that it was agreeable to her. Re responds by affirming his intention to ‘gain power over them as king’ (291/14-15). The repetition of “power” (*sekhem*) by Hathor and Re in this exchange introduces Sekhmet: ‘And so Sekhmet [the Powerful One] came into being’ (ibid., 15). Wente and Lichtheim read after this an introduction to the following portion of the myth: ‘The nightly beer-mash for wading in their [humans’] blood starting from Heracleopolis’, but Piankoff reads here a continuation of the

²⁷ See especially the texts from Kom Ombo edited and translated by A. Gutbub, *Textes fondamentaux de la théologie de Kom Ombo*, Cairo: IFAO, 1973, e.g. 2f (monograph 709): ‘Shu, the son of Re, rejoices with his son Geb as Tefnut with her daughter Nūt, they are in joy here [Kom Ombo] eternally, having put an end to rebellion, having expelled calamity.’

²⁸ Hence the tendency to functionally assimilate Tefnut and Ma’et, the personification of right order, as in spell 80 of the *Coffin Texts* (p.83f in Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*).

previous sentence that refers to Sekhmet as the ‘Mixed/Confused one in the night,’ with *šbbt* in line 15 meaning ‘the mixed or confused one’ as well as ‘beer-mash.’²⁹ This could refer to the confusion which results from intoxication or to the substitution of coloured beer for blood which will resolve this portion of the narrative. But the concept of *mixture* is inherently relevant here inasmuch as Sekhmet’s intoxication is a consequence of her *mixing* with mortals: she ‘wades in their blood’ not merely as a metaphor for slaughter but pointing to her *immersion* in animal life through the element most symbolic of it, namely blood. Hathor has ‘killed humans in the desert,’ but Sekhmet will ‘wade in their blood.’ Hathor and Sekhmet represent here two potencies beyond Re’s own sphere of activity which he calls upon in order to integrate rebellious humanity into the cosmic order. Sekhmet’s sphere of activity is obviously relatively further from Re’s and more immanent than Hathor’s inasmuch as Sekhmet acts autonomously once Re sends her forth. This would be consistent with the more physical domain of action which is indeed characteristic of Sekhmet. She comes forth as a *total mixture*³⁰ or *infusion* of animal life by the divine, allowing the divine to operate in the “night” lying beyond the reach of solar form.

What is the difference between the “smiting” or “overpowering” of humans by Hathor and their slaying by Sekhmet, which is prevented? First, Hathor strikes as the Eye of Re, whereas Sekhmet is not explicitly designated in this way, although she is broadly speaking one of the bearers of this epithet; second, Hathor strikes humans “in the desert,” where they have fled, out of reach of Re’s speech, while Sekhmet strikes humans in a place where they ordinarily live. Rather than seeing Sekhmet’s attack upon humans as a simple repetition, a second wave, the two attacks can be understood as parallel, the same attack seen on two different levels. In this respect one might note that the word translated as “desert” can also carry the connotation of “mountains.” Hathor, as the Eye of Re, operates on a “higher” level than Sekhmet, whose simultaneous presence is symbolised in the verbal exchange between Hathor and Re by the word “power” (*sekhem*) which Hathor

²⁹ A. Piankoff, *The Shrines of Tut-Ankh-Amon*, ed. N. Rambova, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.28.

³⁰ Compare the Stoic concept of “total mixture,” on which see pp.290-4 in A. A. Long & D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* Vol.1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

and Re exchange. Hathor and Sekhmet are therefore not identical in the myth. The slaughter which, on the level at which Sekhmet operates, is a matter of *blood*, is on the level of Re and Hathor a matter of *words*. The “overpowering” suffered by humans to the degree that they are distant—or distance themselves—from Re’s formative utterance is actually carried out on the level of flesh and blood by Sekhmet, a Goddess associated both with illness and with healing; her mythic presence among humans can thus be taken as symbolising *both* simultaneously. That Hathor and Sekhmet are not to be regarded as identical in the myth is not to deny their analogous function in it. Thus, in the context of the “beautiful festival of the desert valley,” held in the necropolis, Hathor is referred to as “mistress of inebriety.”³¹ Such common functions between deities provide a medium for the articulation of differences in the interaction between cults.

Re’s next action involves stopping the slaughter of the humans. Theological interpretation as practiced by the Neoplatonists would not consider this an instance of Re having decided upon one course of action and subsequently changing his mind, nor of a punishment which is to stop at some arbitrary point.³² This is because of Neoplatonic notions about the essential nature of divine action and cognition, and of the orderly nature of the cosmos, which does not allow for sheer voluntarism at the level of high principles. These Neoplatonic ideas, however, are not incompatible with notions about mythic discourse which seem to be present in many cultures: namely, that the temporality of myth is a “mythic time” outside of and fundamental in relation to ordinary, linear time. Philosophically, it is the “time” of an ideal genesis which is not an actual, temporal coming-to-be. This idea was articulated quite early as an apologia for Plato’s seeming recourse to a temporal generation of the cosmos in the *Timaeus*.³³ The significance

³¹ C. J. Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth: Two Key Figures of the Ancient Egyptian Religion*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973, p.43f.

³² See, for example, the way in which Olympiodorus interprets the motif of Zeus changing his mind in the *Gorgias* myth, discussed in Butler, ‘The Theological Interpretation of Myth’, pp.35-37.

³³ Xenocrates, as reported by Aristotle, *De caelo* 279b 34: ‘They claim that what they say about the generation of the world is analogous to the diagrams drawn by mathematicians: their exposition does not mean that the world ever was generated, but is used for instructional purposes, since it makes things easier to understand just as the diagram does for those who see it in process of construction.’

of this for “theological” interpretation is that, as has been seen at several points in the present essay, the successive or diachronic events in the narrative have been interpreted as simultaneous and eternal, or synchronically.

Piankoff’s translation indicated that some slaughter of humans did indeed take place before Re takes action. This may be implied by the reference to the episode in the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*, which states that the God who ‘shines in the sky’ and of whom humans are ‘images who came from his body,’ ‘slew his foes, reduced his children, when they thought of making rebellion.’³⁴ A variety of outcomes—“smiting” by Hathor, “slaying” by Sekhmet, rescue through Sekhmet’s intoxication—is, from the point of view of the theological interpretation, not a difficulty, but rather a virtue of the text, since these are all regarded as simultaneous and hierarchically disposed, referring to the fates of different elements of the person or to the entire person as seen from a succession of distinct perspectives. The context of the *Instruction* is explicitly governmental, and different horizons of interpretation for myth are to be expected in any culture. From another viewpoint, if a quantity of humans are slain but a quantity saved, if, in other words, reference can be made to a distinction between some humans who are initiates or who accomplish some spiritual task and the rest; or from another viewpoint yet, the “elect” could as likely be those who are slain as those who are preserved. The latter is unlikely, but I mention it simply in order to illustrate the way in which a formally possible permutation of the mythic narrative could yield interpretive insights worth testing, even if they are subsequently to be rejected.

The question of an experiential dimension to the myth leads us naturally to the metaphor of intoxication which lies at its heart. Sekhmet becomes intoxicated by the beer which, due to the additives in it, looks like blood.³⁵ If Sekhmet is indeed here “the mixed one,”

³⁴ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings Vol. I: The Old and Middle Kingdoms*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973, p.106.

³⁵ It was once thought that the substance put in the beer to colour it red might have been a substance like mandrake, which could at once impart redness and intensify the intoxicating property of the beer, but the consensus among contemporary scholars is that the term used in the text, *didi*, can only refer to powdered hematite. On hematite in Egyptian theology, see the aforementioned article by S. Aufrère, ‘Caractères principaux et origine divine des minéraux,’ p.15f and n.124; on the rejection of the

then it is on account of “mixing” with us, i.e., on account of her immanence, that she is intoxicated. Our blood is her beer and her beer is our blood. The intoxication in the myth can therefore be interpreted as the intoxication of the embodied condition, which is both the cause of our failing to perceive Re’s speech, but also the route to recognising it, since the capacity to understand it is equally innate, equally “in our blood.” The real intoxication is the *ecstasy* which is symbolised in the myth, on the one hand, and in the ritual beer drinking at the festival, on the other. It is an ecstasy of embodiment for us and for the Goddess alike. The beer is poured out in such a manner as to create an artificial inundation. The inundation always invites comparison to the watery abyss of Nūn, from out of which the primordial mound emerges through the self-creating activity of the Gods. The pouring out of the beer is done while it is still night, Re rising early for this purpose. For the God of the sun to rise when it is still night is for illumination to emerge from out of the depths of confusion. Thus does Re, as he had said he would at the beginning of the myth, go into the Nūn, ‘the place where I originated’ (290/6). In the intoxicating inundation the Goddess sees her face reflected in the beer and drinks. This is said to take place when the Goddess set out in the morning (291/23), but the *morning* is none other than this very event, the Goddess’s self-recognition in the intoxicating abyss. She drinks ‘and it was just fine in her estimation [lit. “in her heart”]’ (291f/23), just as Hathor said overpowering the humans was agreeable to her “heart.” The brilliance of solar form, which is nevertheless mineral and cold, gives way to the “night” of confusion, blood and intoxication, from out of which, however, emerges a more profound spirituality born from the warmth and spontaneity of embodiment and feeling. Since they have transcended the condition of the *merely* human, Sekhmet becomes unable to *recognise* humans (292/24). People are thus able, through the very essence of their corporeality (blood), to transcend that inevitable destruction which attends the body. At the accomplishment of this, Sekhmet is referred to as “Beautiful One.” Humans thus come into true humanity; and in this way also the Eye of Re, through having undergone a process, becomes analogous to the restored Eye of Horus, the *wedjât*; hence the

identification of *didi* in this text as mandrake, see W. R. Dawson, ‘The Substance called *Didi* by the Egyptians’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1927, pp.497-503.

deceased affirms, in chapter 167 of the *Book of the Dead*, ‘Spell of Bringing the *Wedjât*,’ that ‘Thoth brought the Sound Eye, he pacified the Sound Eye, after Re sent it forth (when) it was greatly enraged ... If I stay sound, it stays sound.’³⁶ One might speak in this respect of a “greening” of Sekhmet, evident in the references in magical texts to Horus as the “sprout of Sekhmet.”³⁷ The word translated as “sprout” is *wadj*, literally “green,” referring to the green shoots of the papyrus; from the same root comes *wedjât* as the “sound/healthy” eye. Horus is thus literally the “greening” of the Goddess paradigmatically red with blood (note that the papyrus scepter which Sekhmet and a number of other Goddesses carry is also *wadj*).

The next event in the text, after the establishment of appropriate ceremonial commemorating the intoxication of the Goddess, is Re’s decision to withdraw from the immanent exercise of mundane authority. He seems to cite two reasons, the first being his bodily weakness and the second being the concern, apparently, lest he destroy all the humans. The notion of bodily weakness in a God presents a paradox. How can Gods share the frailty of mortals and yet be truly Gods? The Neoplatonic method is to attribute weaknesses or vulnerabilities in Gods to the points of closest interaction between the divine and mortal realms. Thus Hephaestus is lame because his zone of activity lies in the constitution of the physical cosmos, and Aphrodite receives an injury intervening on the battlefield to rescue Aeneas. Similarly, in Egyptian myth, injuries sustained by the Gods provide openings for mortals to participate immediately in eternal, mythic actions. The primary examples, of course, are the identification of the deceased with Osiris and the identification of substances utilised in ritual with the restored Eye of Horus. There are a host of minor examples, however—in a fragmentary spell from the Ramesseum Papyrus (XI), for example, the operator declares ‘My heart is for you ... as the heart of Horus is for his eye, Seth for his testicles, Hathor for her tress, Thoth for his shoulder.’³⁸ Whenever a God is injured, and

³⁶ T. G. Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974, p.162.

³⁷ E.g., spells no.13-15, 18, and 21; see J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978, pp.13-17.

³⁸ Sir Alan H. Gardiner, *The Ramesseum Papyri*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955. On the injury to Thoth’s shoulder, see also P. Jumilhac 17, 3-6/570-573 (J. Vandier, *Le Papyrus*

therefore shares in a mortal state, it would seem that it is a question of transmitting to mortals some share in a divine potency. Re himself participates in such an economy in the myth involving himself and Isis,³⁹ in which he must share with her a significant portion of his power in order to be cured of the sting or bite that has been prepared for him from out of the secretions of his own body—that is, once again as a result of extending his causality to the point where an opposition between core and periphery *in his own person* has arisen. Moreover, if Re remains fully immanent amongst humans, they shall all be slain; that is, there will be no genuine existence for mortals, who would be in immediate unity with him.

Re takes up his position upon the back of Nūt, who transforms into the celestial cow from which the text has received its modern title. Some humans petition Re at this point for divine sanction, as it were, to fight on his behalf, to fight themselves against the rebels. But Re rejects them, and hence when they go to fight anyhow, it is in darkness. This seems as though it is the same iconic moment as the slaughter of humans by Sekhmet, although a different aspect is articulated here. Re next asks Nūt to raise him up to a position of visibility over all things. Once there, he begins to establish a distinct celestial realm, including places important in the afterlife literature such as the Field of Offerings (or Field of Peace) and the Field of Rushes (293/39f), as well as the stars and the limitlessness embodied by the eight Hehu, the Ogdoad of Hermopolis. A strong contrast has now been established between the upper and lower world. This is underscored by Re's next action, which is to summon Geb and give directions for the disposition of the subterranean realm. Re summons Geb through the intermediary of Thoth, a small detail and yet one which emphasises the space for mediation which has been established between the different planes of being by the actions in the mythic narrative. The substance of Thoth's mediation can be seen in the fact that Re gives detailed spoken directions to Geb.

Jumilhac, Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1961, pp.106-108) where the incident supplies the aetiology for the *qni*, a kind of ceremonial cape worn over the shoulder by *sem* priests. On Hathor's lock, see G. Posener, 'La légende de la tresse d'Hathor,' in L. H. Lesko ed., *Egyptological Studies in Honor of Richard A. Parker*, Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1986, pp.111-117.

³⁹ Spell no.84 in J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, pp.51-5

The substance of Re's address to Geb is that Re directs Geb to cooperate with Nūn in order to establish authority over certain snakes that live in the earth and in the waters. Re affirms both the legitimacy of their presence and the necessity of maintaining control over them, control which he transfers to Geb and Osiris. Re warns Geb particularly about the magical power they possess. One should note in this regard that in the *Instruction Addressed to King Merikare*, in the same passage which mentioned the present myth, magic is specifically referred to as a gift conferred upon the God's "children" in the wake of his withdrawal from immediacy: 'He made for them magic as weapons to ward off the blow of events.'⁴⁰ Are the "snakes" in question then to be identified with the powers which belong to mundane or mortal beings as such, especially since they are placed in the charge of Osiris, and thus apportioned to the land of the dead? A comparison with chapter 175 in the *Book of the Dead* seems relevant. Here Atum states to Osiris—i.e., the deceased or the mortal *qua* mortal—that after the eschatological flood which returns the world to Nūn, 'I [Atum] shall survive together with Osiris, after I have assumed my forms of other snakes which men know not and Gods see not.'⁴¹

Next Re speaks directly to Thoth, allotting him a crucial position. He directs Thoth to create *writings* pertaining to the netherworld, where those who rebelled and were slain now reside. Here we see the divine charter for the composition of the very afterlife literature for which Egyptian civilisation is so famous. This body of texts serves to re-establish the communication between Re and his most distant subjects which was broken off at the beginning of the myth. Before Re's withdrawal from the mortal realm, access to his spiritual illumination was universal and immediate for mortals; after his withdrawal, this illumination is dependent upon their own wisdom and virtue. Thus mortals will require knowledge. The importance of the role Thoth plays here can be seen from Re's affirmation that Thoth, as his "vicar," will

⁴⁰ Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, p.106.

⁴¹ Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day*, p.184. Note that R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, New York: Macmillan, 1985, p.175, translates Atum's statement as 'I will transform myself into something else, namely a serpent [...].' Also, though he never comments on *BD* 175, valuable materials on the symbolism of the serpent form of Atum are collected in the aforementioned article by P. Koemoth, 'L'Atoum-serpent magicien de la stèle Metternich,' 2007.

possess authority to “send out” even those primordial Gods who are greater than he (295/71f), for it is no longer a matter only of the afterlife literature, but of the whole body of sacred books and ritual procedures, which were often known as the *bas*, or “manifestations,” of Re. Between Thoth and Re there is such a close relationship that Thoth is commonly referred to in later texts as the “heart” (i.e., mind) of Re.⁴² A text from Esna states that Thoth came forth from Re’s heart ‘in a moment of grief,’⁴³ in very much the same way humans are said to have come into existence from tears shed by Re or by Atum. Thus the distance between humans and the natural or cosmic order, a distance constitutive for the intellect, is nevertheless even painful on some level for the Gods themselves.⁴⁴ At any rate, the domain of ritual stands in the gap created between Re and the cosmos. A degree of power within the cosmos has been ceded to the autonomous operation of innerworldly beings; this was, in effect, already the situation at the myth’s beginning—for how else would beings have the power to rebel?—but now it has been regularised. Finite beings will not, on account of their finitude, be relegated to divine representation solely by “the Irascible One,” (295/69f) meaning presumably Seth, embodying disorder. Instead, appropriate provision will be made for liminal beings.

After Re’s address to Thoth, the text continues with prescriptions for the recitation of a formulary which follows. The address to Thoth thus effects the transition from a narrative mode of discourse to a ritually effective utterance. One could hypothesise a unity to the text such that the formulary encapsulates and, so to speak, renders operational the contents of the foregoing narrative portion of the text. In the formulary, Re is said to have embraced Nūn, and to have addressed the Gods coming after him with a discourse concerning the *ba*, which seems to have the value in this context of manifestation, that is, of something through which something else is present. Thus, in the most concrete examples, wind is the *ba* of Shu, for the airy divinity Shu makes his presence known through the activation of air; night is the *ba*

⁴² P. Boylan, *Thoth: The Hermes of Egypt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922, p.114f.

⁴³ S. Sauneron, *Esna V: Les fêtes religieuses d’Esna aux derniers siècles du paganisme*, Cairo: IFAO, 1962, p.266f.

⁴⁴ Compare the remarks of Proclus on the symbolic significance of Gods shedding tears in his commentary on Plato’s *Republic*, 124.23-126.4 (see A. J. Festugière, *Proclus: Commentaire sur la République*, Vol. I, Paris: J. Vrin, 1970, pp.144-5).

of darkness, its source and prime exemplar, so to speak; and crocodiles are the *bas* of Sobek, the crocodile deity, for this is how he is present in the world. Re identifies his own *ba* with Magic, *Heka*, thus affirming that it is the effectiveness of magic which is his presence. Furthermore, Re identifies himself as the *ba* of Nūn—thus the “embrace” of these two Gods. These two ideas can be conjoined in a single complex proposition stating that the cosmic order is the becoming-manifest of what was latent in the pre-cosmic chaos, while magic is the becoming-manifest of the providential ordering of the cosmos. Re also states in his utterance concerning the *bas* that the *ba* of each God and each Goddess ‘is in the snakes’ (296/86f). Does this perhaps refer to the snakes which were discussed in the address to Geb? In that address the disposition of magic was also discussed.

It would be unwise to venture too deeply into the details of texts whose very reading is in many respects uncertain, but there is a general significance to the discourse on the *ba* which relates it to the mythic narrative which has come before. The very concept of the *ba* expresses a distinction between the explicit and the implicit, signifier and signified, phenomenon and essence. Of course, the range of variation in its use shows that it is not a perfectly refined and specific term, albeit it was surely a good deal more refined and specific to the Egyptian thinker than it is for us. But we can understand enough of what is meant by the concept to see that it pertains to the world as constituted by Re’s withdrawal from immediacy. Indeed, the notion of the *ba* could be seen as the essence of all the mediating structures Re institutes to affect this withdrawal. For it is not a matter of a withdrawal and then the creation of mediating agencies to bridge the gap, but of the withdrawal *by means of* the mediating agencies, whether these are the Goddesses who function as the “Eye of Re,” or the celestial cow of Nūt, or the sacred books of Thoth, or the authority vested in Osiris with respect to the mortal *qua* mortal. It is significant in this respect that the text emphasises Re’s encounter with Nūn: Re consults with Nūn, embraces Nūn, goes forth to see Nūn. This suggests that a major theme of the text is the turning back of the formative principle in the cosmos upon its sources in latency and indefiniteness, so that these may after a fashion be incorporated into the cosmic order, an action precipitated by the state of the beings at the limits of the natural order. Thus a primary

axis of the myth connects the rebellious mortal subjects of the cosmic order with the primordial formlessness of Nūn.

This last point could provide matter for reflection regarding the relationship between the “metaphysics,” if indeed we might characterise it as such, which is immanent in Egyptian myth and theology, and some of the categories of Greek philosophy. For Aristotle says of the Hellenic theologians (*Metaphysics* 1091a30f) that they, like ‘some modern thinkers,’ meaning a Platonist like Speusippus as much as atomists and other “natural philosophers,” posit the good and the noble as having appeared ‘after the nature of things progressed ... saying that the good belongs not to those who were first, as, for example, to Night and the *Ouranoi*, or to Chaos, or to Ocean, but to Zeus, insofar as he is a king and a ruler.’⁴⁵ On the one hand, it could be said that the *Celestial Cow* text shares this quality with the works of the Hellenic theologians, for the chief goodness in the cosmos is clearly Re, rather than Nūn; hence Nūn does not contest Re’s legitimacy, despite the problem of the rebellious subjects. The inability of formation, which belongs to Re, to completely subordinate its other, which is associated with Nūn, does not subvert the authority of the formative principle. Rather, Nūn cooperates with Re. The distinction between form and matter is not dissolved, but matter is seen to be inherently cooperative with formation. Matter is sufficiently autonomous as to negotiate a contract, so to speak, with the formative principle. But it is not simply a question here of the relationship between a formative principle and a material substrate, but with any substrate or, indeed, any *superstructure* which escapes comprehension within a particular level or regime of formation. Only a concept this broad of the other of form sufficiently takes into account the priority of Nūn to Re. And this is where the metaphysics of the Egyptian text appears irreducible to either a strictly evolutionary formula, such as Aristotle attributes to the theologians and certain “moderns,” or to a view which would see the good as solely or primarily vested in the first principle, the procession of being amounting thus to a decline. The Egyptian model appears to be one which is both hierarchical and yet featuring many sites of power, with principles at different levels possessing distinct agency within an overarching structure in which these different agencies achieve

⁴⁵ H. Apostle, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979, p.244.

equilibrium. And this equilibrium, because of the ability for Egyptian theologians to shift their viewpoint among these different levels of organisation, can be seen either as a looser, “contractual” establishment based upon the settling of opposing claims, or as the concise manifestation of a single demiurgic will, and this will itself conceived in any number of ways (e.g., as more intellectual, in the Memphite Theology, or as more vitalistic, in cosmogonies associated with Gods like Khnum).

Also significant in Egyptian thought as it may be recovered from this text, is the ability of those at the end of the procession of being to actively appropriate for themselves the knowledge of this procession for practical benefit. I do not mean “practical” in a deflationary sense, but in the widest possible sense, for it is a question not in the first place of worldly benefit but first and foremost of the ability of particulars to stabilise themselves in existence. ‘If they ask, “What are your names?”’ (answer), “Eternal Recurrence and Eternal Sameness.” Then they are bound to say, “[He is truly] a God,” and to say, “He has reached us here by this route,”’ the text directs its operator (297/93f); and just below, the operator affirms that ‘I am one belonging to the flame, which is the *ba* of fire. I have no eradicators among men, Gods, spirits, and the dead or in anything in this whole world.’ The flame, which in being identified as “the *ba* of fire” is, one could argue, thus distinguished from mere natural fire, is typically the weapon of choice against those who rebel against the cosmic order embodied by Re, and is wielded by Goddesses bearing the designation “Eye of Re.” If we assume that rebellion and its punishment are not understood in Egyptian theology in crudely anthropomorphic and voluntaristic fashion, then this flame can be understood as nothing other than the forces of disintegration which are inherent to the natural world and require some special dispensation, not to be deployed, but to be arrested. Re grants such dispensation in the narrative portion through the device of the intoxicating beverage, but in the operational portion of the text, at the end, it seems that the operator goes a step further, identifying with the very disintegrative forces themselves. Through identifying with the agency of annihilation, annihilation becomes impossible, and indeed unthinkable in principle. Of one capable of mastering this insight, indeed, the text affirms ‘his provisions’ (or “entrance,” access) ‘cannot be diminished, nor can a net be readied against him’ (297f), for no contradiction remains between

the operator's particularity and the universality of natural (i.e., cyclical) being.



In closing, some remarks are perhaps appropriate on the reasons why such a method of interpretation as I have pursued here might be fruitful in the broader context of the social sciences. When the discourse of philosophy is delimited according to the manner in which it emerged historically in the West, and considered to be susceptible to extension only to those discourses which emerged in sufficiently similar disciplinary settings to the West (e.g., Indian and Chinese philosophy), philosophy seems as a discourse too narrow to accommodate the venues in which many of the most trenchant “philosophical” issues are addressed, discourses which are considered to be theological or mythological and hence to fall outside its disciplinary boundaries. And yet this seems in certain respects an illegitimate restriction, especially insofar as if the discursive boundaries of philosophy could be extended to include, under some rubric, theological and mythical discourses, then the philosophical dialogue would be universalised with respect to place and time, and immeasurably broadened as a result.

This is not to say that narrower and broader definitions of philosophy should not be maintained side-by-side. It is important to recognise, for instance, that in a culture such as Egypt, one encounters texts that address more narrowly “philosophical” concerns with a methodology distinct from mythological cognition. Some examples of this are the allegorical fragment concerning Truth and Falsehood, or the allegory concerning Sight and Hearing which is embedded in the Demotic narrative of Thoth and Tefnut mentioned above. Perhaps even a third category, drawing upon both “theology” and “philosophy,” but reducible to neither, can be glimpsed in the speculative literature attested in fragmentary form in the Demotic text which has been dubbed the “Book of Thoth.”⁴⁶

The practice of “theological” interpretation, however, can serve to bring purely mythic discourse into the dialogue about the nature of

⁴⁶ R. Jasnow & K.-Th. Zauzich, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005.

being on its own terms, and not merely as a desideratum of social structures. This is not to dissolve disciplinary categories, but to recognise the natural breadth of philosophy to incorporate a variety of disciplines, when these are seen as different methods for engaging a common body of problems. Thus Socrates, in Plato's *Meno*, acknowledges the influence of 'certain priests and priestesses who have studied so as to be able to give a reasoned account of their ministry.'⁴⁷ A distinction should be drawn, however, between "theological" interpretation and any exegesis aspiring to a strong universality, examining particular theologies for material to substantiate cross-cultural theses about a singular divine substance. "Theological" interpretation seeks rather, to the degree possible, to apply beliefs about the divine immanent to a particular culture to the interpretation of that culture's body of myth. It is thus a tool for making myth more productive as a tool for articulating the *unique* self-understandings of particular cultures, which can then be engaged in virtual dialogue, instead of being reduced to a common denominator.

⁴⁷ *Meno* 81ab, trans. W. R. M. Lamb.