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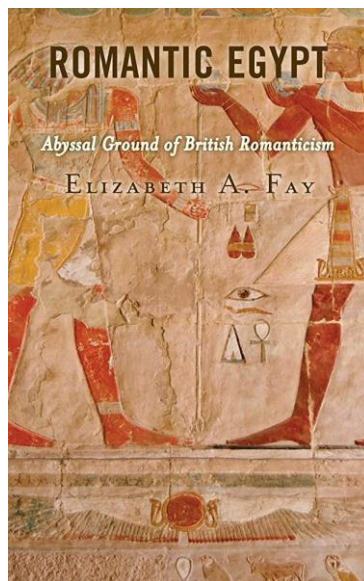
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Romantic Egypt: Abyssal Ground of British Romanticism

by Elizabeth A. Fay¹

TO ELUCIDATE THE CREATIVE MIND'S dialectical self-realization, Coleridge describes the rhythmic structure of poetry as serpentine, a spiraling he compares to the coiled serpents depicted in Ancient Egypt's temples and tombs: 'The reader should be carried forward . . . by the pleasurable activity of mind . . . Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power' (BL II 14). Such enigmatic declarations are shown to be aesthetically generative in Elizabeth A. Fay's *Romantic Egypt: Abyssal Ground of British Romanticism*, the only thorough study on the epistemic-metaphorical shift initiated by the advent of modern Egyptology after the Napoleonic confiscation of antiquities in Ottoman Egypt and their subsequent relocation in Britain. According to Fay, this decisive shift—which paved the way for Jean-François Champollion's 1821 breakthrough in deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs through the Rosetta stone—provided the archaic 'ground' for recuperating the knowable from the unknowable in Romantic literature and philosophy. Romanticism's 'neo-Egyptian mandate' projected onto a murky ruinous past a lost origin that grounded the West's aesthetic and philosophical quest for universal knowledge (13). This mandate is elicited through the sense of negation, chaos, and non-being, as implicit in Coleridge's indirect allusion to Apophis: the demonic snake that wages a cosmic battle against the Egyptian sun deity, Rā, at dawn and dusk. The continuous cycle of Apophis's attack, defeat, and counterattack recounted in this myth is comparable to the poetic-metrical movements through which human consciousness knows itself.²

Romantic Egypt provides new insights on the historical relationship between philology and colonialism to dislodge Romanticism from the nation-centered approaches that continue to delimit scholarly understandings of the period. The book's introduction and five chapters reconstruct the intellectual groundwork for understanding how poets and philosophers such as Coleridge saw in Egyptian antiques a figurative beginning for their speculative projects.



¹ Elizabeth A. Fay, *Romantic Egypt: Abyssal Ground of British Romanticism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021).

² Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 220–21.

Charting humanity's history became intellectually feasible in the *Ungrund* or 'unground', an 'abyssal pastness' in which Egypt functioned as the 'cryptographic text for political and aesthetic pronouncements' (13, 103). Scantly understood in previous scholarship, Egypt's and Egyptology's roles in grounding Romantic literature allow Fay to excavate the fantasy of a mysterious past that undergirds colonial philology, especially after Napoleon had his savants ransack Egypt's ancient treasures in 1798–1801—war booty, like the Rosetta stone, that was taken to institutions like the British Museum following Napoleon's expulsion from the region by British admiral Horatio Nelson. Whereas Edward Said argued that the Anglo-French incursion into Egypt would institutionalize the orientalist division between a progressive West and a regressive East, for Fay this event gave symbolic expression to a foreign contagion that destabilized Britishness.³ The Egyptian antique as colonial possession, she argues, threatened to unravel British national identity in the writings of William Wordsworth, William Blake, John Keats, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, Thomas De Quincey, and Felicia Hemans.

Yet the bulk of Fay's book traces Egypt-as-metaphor in the metaphysical speculations of Plato, F. W. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel—the philosophical texts she seamlessly weaves into her insightful interpretations of Romantic literary texts. These intertextual connections pivot around an idea of Ancient Egypt filtered through the Hellenic and Alexandrian era, from Alexander the Great's death in 323 BCE to Cleopatra VII's death in 30 BCE (the earlier dynastic period was not yet known). Fay discusses the ways in which this imagined geography became the site of magic, lore, and writing in Hermeticism, alchemy, Chaldean astrology, and freemasonry. Chapter one therefore devotes significant attention to esoteric and mystical cosmologies since Classical Greece, from the works of Herodotus (whose fanciful rendition of Pharaonic Egypt derived from unreliable Egyptian priests), the mythic Hermes Trismegistus, and the Catholic-persecuted heretic Giordano Bruno to those of French philosophe Comte de Volney, the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher, and German thinker Immanuel Kant. Translation is central to how Egyptian wisdom was imaginatively appropriated in these works, each reinscribing the scant information available about the cult worship of Rā, Horus, Osiris, and Isis to posit an originary archive. The translative process by which this wisdom became knowable to posterity was mediated by multiple empires, beginning with the grand library at Alexandria during the reigns of Alexander and Ptolemy Soter (Ptolemy I). This age gave birth to the 'Alexandrian Dream' that inspired Napoleon's eastern conquests and that of his British successors, when the circus strongman Giovanni Belzoni had transported the colossus of Ramesses II—the pharaoh mistaken for 'Memnon', as in Percy Shelley's poem 'Ozymandias'—to the British Museum with the permission of Henry Salt, Consul General of Egypt (5-6). For Fay, Egypt is

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

both an imperial palimpsest and an imaginative resource, a Hellenized Egypt beyond comprehension that re-emerges in Wordsworth's 'The Dream of the Arab' in Book V of *The Prelude*, Keat's *Hyperion*, and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. While the first chapter provides the necessary historical context for what follows, the constant back-and-forth among these authors/works and across millennia can occasionally feel overwhelming, if not haphazard.

The Alexandrian Library's destruction by Roman emperor Julius Caesar in 48 BCE and Islamic Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattāb in 640–41 CE was pivotal in the occultation of archaic knowledge and the condition for mapping the celestial onto the earthly sphere in post-Enlightenment thought. In chapter two, Fay calls this process 'geographica', the cosmic-terrestrial cartography that fueled the Romantic desire to know human civilization and its origination in Egypt's 'spirit' encyclopedically. The prime case study is Volney's *Ruins; Or, Meditations on the Ruins of Empires* (1791). Traveling in Ottoman Egypt, the *Ruin's* dreamer-philosopher ponders the rise and fall of past empires in an 'exo-terrestrial vision' about the dire fate awaiting present empires in the landmass between Europe and Asia—a dreamlike prophecy that renders Ancient Egypt the place prior to philosophical history on a cosmological rather than cartographic scale (42). Volney's narrative frame draws upon Neoplatonist, Hermetic, and Masonic conceptions of cyclical history, derived in turn from Hellenistic mystery cults, while anchoring the historiography of spirit or human consciousness in a bygone primordial age as retold by Schelling, Hegel, Mary Shelley, and Blake. The result is a re-encrypting of Alexandrian knowledge systems to narrate a negative theology, the basis for reading classical/Biblical myth as a modern heuristic in various Romantic geographica. Western Europe was thereby given a stable foundation for its historical progression, albeit haunted by the magic and mystery associated with its mythical founding by the Nile River.

However, in this chapter and in subsequent ones, works such as Schelling's 1815 *Ages of the World* (*Die Weltalter*), Voltaire's 1766 *Philosophy of History*, and Hegel's *Aesthetics* assume analytic priority to the extent that Blake's prophetic poetry and Shelley's *The Last Man* are treated as auxiliary to Enlightenment metaphysics and German Idealism, with little attention to how the latter works question an Egyptianism closer to home. Although the British Romantics relied on the same esoteric stock images as their French and German counterparts, they had different intellectual orientations. For example, the assertion that '*The Last Man* is a negative vision of Schelling's system, a devastating rather than transcendent realization of Hermetic Egyptianized knowledge' sidesteps the novel's satiric reflections on cyclical temporality in Percy Shelley's Hellenized epic *The Revolt of Islam* (1818), which prophesizes Ottoman (and British) imperial ruination (71). Fay instead considers his *Alastor* (1815) insofar as this poem's orientation toward negative spaces inside pyramids 'sounds like a condensation of western thought about Ancient

Egypt', for which the veiled 'Arab maiden' pursued by the titular hero functions as 'the representative of Isis and Nature in her infinite knowledge and wisdom' (104). Such interpretations are based on insufficient textual evidence. Likewise, that the 'self-difference initiated in divine essence' as thematized in Blake's mythopoetics recalls 'Schelling's *Ages of the World*' seems far-fetched, especially when Fay uses Book I of *Milton* as her main point of comparison (two pages are allotted for analyzing this highly complex poem!) (73). An alternative approach may have considered the Egyptian-centered dream prophecy in Blake's *Song of Los* (1795), in which universal history begins and ends with the groundlessness disseminating from Moses's 'forms of dark delusion' at 'Mount Sinai' to [Hermes] 'Trismegistus'.⁴ Focusing on these verses would not only help explain why 'Blake's repeated image for Egypt is of the emblem of enslaved humanity', but also why this image further problematizes the philosophical search for a secretive 'origin' rather than striving to 'resolve' this 'problem' as Schelling tried to do (75, 73). The same applies to the unsubstantiated claim that Hegel's tracking of Spirit's unfolding through a static Egyptian art, a dynamic Greek classical art, and finally Romantic art's self-consciousness 'is not unlike John Keats's dialectical resolutions in his odes', implying that the poet's investment in negative capability is reducible to Hegelian dialectics (78). Surprisingly, Coleridge—given his affinity for German Idealism—receives short shrift in *Romantic Egypt*; Fay mentions in passing that he negatively compares the 'Egyptian conception of divine immersion in form' to the dispirited head of Ramesses II in *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (87–88), while the above quote from *Biographia Literaria* is never analyzed as a positive antithesis. Apophis' chaotic cyclicity could have substantiated the resemblance Fay sees between the fragmentary dream vision of 'Kubla Khan' and the archaic language of poetic effusion that Julia Kristeva locates in the creative unconscious (91).

Opening with Coleridge's anti-Egyptian stance, chapter three nonetheless clinches the argument by detailing how images of ruins monumentalized Egypt as a trope for the abyss that lies within the Romantic sublime; a lingering un/knowability that vexes the transcendental subject, from Wordsworth's apocalyptic visions in *The Prelude* to Hegel's inconclusive tarrying with negation (Fay's reading here depends on Derridean deconstruction). Chapter four extends this analysis to Egyptian 'spirit magic', which Fay links to Plato's notion of the *chora* (in his *Timaeus*) as 'the translativ key' for reconciling opposites alchemically and hermetically (138). As such, 'the *chora* is the space of an otherness (Isis as magician) that occasionally is not just receiving but reactive', the semi-rational remainder coded as the waste that revives yet resists ontological containment (139). This 'feminine dark center' for delineating that which is prior in cosmology and theology became fiercely nationalistic with the

⁴ William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 67.

European rush to decipher the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the subject of chapter five (148). By this point, the book adopts a strong historicist flavor, grounding the preceding abstract discussions on spirit, magic, and ruination in scholarly debates before and after Champollion's discovery revolutionized Egyptology. For earlier intellectuals as diverse as Kircher, Diderot, and Rev. William Warburton, Egyptian hieroglyphics, however indecipherable, were a 'metaphor' for the transition from pictographic to alphabetic writing, a linguistic symbolization that contained the hidden key for understanding the Occident's genealogical roots in the Orient (174). The rivalry between British and French Egyptologists for the glory of their respective countries are salient for historicizing Orientalism's ground (194). In that respect, the book's most original research pertains to the little-known barrister and orientalist William Hook Morley, whose unsuccessful attempt to crack the hieroglyphic code Fay considers germane to modern philology: that universal truth is accessible via arcane Eastern languages in translation. She accounts for his institutional affiliations to the British East India Company (EIC) and the Royal Asiatic Society in London, as he tried (but failed) to secure employment in Britain's empire in India. Yet her argument that 'he clearly remained influenced by the Romantic imaginary' suggests that these affiliations are negligible (180). By disassociating Romanticism's 'longing for a general grammar . . . attuned to historical specificity' from similar undertakings by British orientalists invested in age-old Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian myths, Fay seems to suggest that Morley's work was not part of a broader epistemic shift inaugurated by EIC scholar-administrators (176). Ground-breaking scholarship by Siraj Ahmed and Padma Rangarajan (not cited in Fay's book) has shown that Romantic-era translations were driven by the colonial-philological urge to ground historical universality in recoverable ancient civilizations.⁵ Even though Egypt's pre-Alexandrian past was then unknowable in ways that South Asian antiquity was not, the methods for disclosing the Orient's secret through attention to language were fashioned from a common epistemology dependent on unequal power relations between Britain and India.

Despite these shortcomings, Fay's thesis that Ancient Egypt furnished Romanticism with the dialectical logic by which negativity (the groundless) equals positivity (the grounded) is ultimately persuasive. As such, *Romantic Egypt* is a remarkable work of interdisciplinary scholarship that spans several millennia to make a convincing case for Ancient Egypt's primacy in select Romantic-era texts. What is so useful about this approach is its potential to create new paths for future research. For example, Fay's conclusion that Morley is a 'romancer' akin to a 'knight' on a quest for the unknowable could help contextualize Wordsworth's *The Egyptian Maid, or the Romance of the Water*

⁵ Siraj Ahmed, *Archaeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundation of the Humanities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018) and Padma Rangarajan, *Imperial Babel: Translation, Exoticism, and the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

Lily (1828), which blends the legend of King Arthur and his roundtable knights with the Egyptian myth of the lotus blossom which arose from the waters of creation in time immemorial—a West-East fusion that Egyptianizes England’s fabulous past (194–95).⁶ Yet *Romantic Egypt* houses a deep abyss in its own brilliance; I believe that Fay risks undermining the Muslim world’s intellectual contributions to Romantic conceptualizations of Ancient Egypt at key points of this study. She does consider Islamic works such as Ibn al-Qifti’s *Ta’rikh al-bukama’* (*History of Learned Men*, an Egyptian historian’s account of the Alexandrian Library’s destruction by Umar) but only as mere backdrop to Ancient Egypt’s prominent place ‘in the western imaginary’ (ix, 45). By the same token, the Ottoman Empire that Daniel O’Quinn has examined as a crucial mediating factor in antiquarian efforts, since the 1760s, to locate Europe’s cultural patrimony in a ruinous Hellenic age, and that frames Volney’s *Ruins*, is never treated as its own epistemic ground.⁷ For Ancient Egypt to function as the ‘underground [that] intruded on and organized’ Romantic-era explorers’ perception of Ottoman Egypt, the latter must presumably have mediated this perception, materially and socio-politically, before it could become available for European aesthetic and philosophical appropriations (xiv).

Perhaps the most rewarding experience of engaging with *Romantic Egypt* is how the imaginative apparatus that it lays bare has been revived in the twenty-first century. A notable example is NASA, which in 2020 had success with the space probe OSIRIS-Rex (an acronym for Origins-Spectral Interpretation-Resource Identification-Security-Regolith Explorer), alluding to Osiris’s journey in the afterlife. The tossing of his fragmented body into the Nile was thought to have made its flood waters fertile enough to sustain Ancient Egypt’s agricultural life. Similarly, OSIRIS-Rex’s mission is to find the celestial origin of Earth’s carbon-based life by sampling rocks from a nearby asteroid named Bennu: a birdlike Egyptian god associated with the solar rotation of death and rebirth. This scientific expedition into the great unknown serves as a vivid reminder that post-Enlightenment geographica continues to ground Western epistemologies, making *Romantic Egypt*—a history of long-forgotten and obscure ideas—indispensable for interdisciplinary research on Romanticism’s relevancy in the future, our present.

⁶ On the symbolic significance of the blue water lily, see Wilkinson, 133–34.

⁷ Daniel O’Quinn, *Engaging the Ottoman Empire: Vexed Mediations, 1690–1815* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).