

The Victorian Crisis of Faith and Guy Boothby's Eternal Egyptian

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Using the example of Guy Boothby's *Pharos, The Egyptian*, this article will contend that Victorian fascinations with the mummy can be traced to various anxieties surrounding the erosion of Christian faith. In the wake of worrying scientific theories proposed by Darwin and others, contemporaries were forced to adapt; some assimilated the new culture of spiritualism, whilst others turned to the belief system of Ancient Egypt as offering some comfort in the modern world. Boothby's novel brings a temporal and geographical outsider, an Ancient Egyptian mummy, to contemporary London. Here, he is resisted by some, but surprisingly well-accepted by others. By placing this anachronistic figure within Victorian society, Boothby demonstrates that it is possible to experience the corresponding ancient belief system and incorporate aspects of the Ancient Egyptian ideology into contemporary thought. Consequently, the article will argue that this text explores the concept of the afterlife through such relationships with this eternal Egyptian.

Guy Boothby

Pharos, The Egyptian was serialised for the *Windsor Magazine* between June and November 1898 and first published in novel form in 1899.¹ This text is often overlooked as Boothby is frequently dismissed as a pulp fiction writer, yet the narrative is historically telling as it exhibits Victorian anxieties concerning mortality.² Boothby moved to England from his native Australia in 1884 and subsequently split his time between London and Boscombe, Dorset. He died of pneumonia in 1905 at the age of just thirty-eight. Boothby was well-regarded by the popular press, and often gave light-hearted interviews that promoted his modern way of writing. He was an eccentric writer who worked through the night, dictating his works into a wax-cylinder phonograph. Two secretaries would later transcribe the recordings. Boothby was prolific, writing an average of six thousand words per day, and often several serials at the same time. This resulted in fifty novels in the course of just ten years. His novels, the most famous being the *Dr Nikola* series, were all commercially successful.³

Despite his popularity, Boothby was widely criticised in the broadsheet press. One journalist condemned his style, writing a piece slating his propensity to include enthusiasms from the previous decade. His 'fashionable fiction' could appear to be a melting pot of trends and public opinions of the preceding years.⁴ However, this was not

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¹ Guy Boothby, *Pharos, The Egyptian* (Great Britain: Amazon, 2013). The *Windsor Magazine* was a monthly, illustrated publication published by Ward, Lock & Co which ran between January 1895 and September 1939.

² The term 'pulp fiction' refers to low-brow fiction that is designed for the mass market. For a summary of pulp fiction, see the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: OUP, 1990), 278.

³ The *Dr Nikola* series of five novels was published between 1895 and 1901.

⁴ Charles Whibley. 'Fashion in Fiction,' *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 166:1008 (1899): 531-42.

simply a charming consequence of his fiction; it is a reason why his work should be analysed. In order to produce a rapid turnover of stories, Boothby needed a constant stream of ideas. Such ideas would be influenced by what he saw about him, enabling Boothby to write and react to the fears and concerns of the general public (not just the educated elite) and then explore them in extraordinary ways. *Pharos*, *The Egyptian* and the *Dr Nikola* series included recurrent themes of mortality and the afterlife; such recurrence indicates that these fears were highly prevalent at the time of the works' original inception and composition.

Pharos, the Egyptian

The novel follows the story of Forrester, a painter, who is the son of an eminent archaeologist. Forrester has inherited all of his father's treasures, including a mummy of Ptahmes, a powerful but disgraced magician to the Pharaohs. Forrester experiences a number of encounters with Pharos, an old, strange and sinister man, who has the complexion of a corpse 'after lying in an hermetically sealed tomb for many years.'⁵ Subsequently, the mummy disappears. Forrester correctly believes that Pharos has taken the mummy, and so begins a journey to recover his possession. Eventually, Forrester permits Pharos to re-enter the mummy in its rightful tomb in Egypt. Forrester agrees to accompany him as a witness, a task that is made more congenial by the beautiful but troubled violinist, Valerie, who is the ward of Pharos. During the trip both Valerie and Forrester have visions in which they are in Ancient Egypt witnessing the rise and subsequent downfall of Ptahmes. It is then that Forrester realises that Pharos is really Ptahmes, an Ancient Egyptian. In one of these visions, Forrester witnesses Pharos/Ptahmes's original burial. It is undignified and crude with his astral spirit cursed to eternal life in order to complete a task designed by the Egyptian gods. Forrester and Valerie unsuccessfully attempt to escape back to England. In doing so, they unwittingly spread the plague, causing an apocalypse across the Western world. The plague is released as revenge for the destruction of the sacred tombs of Egypt, and once the plague has completed its progress, Pharos is allowed to die. His metamorphosis back to his mummified state is described graphically, and the final vision reveals that he will not receive the salvation he desires.

Written in a period that was coming to terms with the after-effects of a crisis of faith, *Pharos, The Egyptian* tackled the concomitantly growing interest in spiritualism and the desire to contact the dead. The following discussion will examine both of these related areas in turn.

Crisis of Faith

The nineteenth century was an era of great change in the West. The century opened with a society that largely believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible. This interpretation included the concept of an afterlife as a principle tenet of the contemporary belief system. The idea of Christian resurrection promised life after death: a principle that was especially consoling given the high mortality rates of the time. This faith gave hope of being reunited with loved ones after they had died. However, in Britain, as the century progressed, such belief systems were confronted by certain scientific developments and so became problematic. From the 1830s theories of Lyellian geological developmentalism, closely

⁵ Boothby, *Pharos*, 8.

followed by sensational theories of biological evolution (the principle being established by Charles Darwin in 1859) informed a growing crisis of faith.⁶

The expansion of specialised fields of knowledge helped to re-conceptualise the knowable world by advancing the idea of evolution by natural selection.⁷ In astronomy, the discovery of the planet Neptune extended the known boundaries of the solar system, whilst Friedrich Bessel made the first successful measurements of stellar parallax in 1838.⁸ The collective developments in the disciplines of Earth sciences, life sciences and physical sciences, combined with German biblical criticism, weakened traditional Christianity, and more specifically Anglicanism.⁹ Each new discovery appeared to challenge the concept of divine creation and the location of heaven and hell. For many individuals these intellectual discoveries triggered mass internal conflict, as living their lives by the doctrine of the Bible appeared to have been suddenly discredited. If science could prove that the world had evolved, then divine creation in six days could no longer be an accepted truth. Consequently, the seed of doubt was introduced, rendering it problematic to accept the tenets of the Bible without critical evaluation. Being faced with such modern and revolutionary thought would have been traumatic, as with it came the realisation that no one could be guaranteed a place in the afterlife. Many Victorians therefore needed to reconcile their desire for an afterlife with scientific developments.

In parallel to the establishment of science as a modern academic discipline, the discipline of history was largely formed in the nineteenth century. Throughout the Victorian era, many gentleman-explorers became Egyptologists, returning from Egypt with a large number of artefacts. Museums, such as the British Museum in London, were developing to display these finds.¹⁰ The public was attracted to all things Egyptian, including Ancient Egyptian wisdom or teachings, and especially those relating to the attainment of eternal life after death. The Egyptian civilisation was scientific, and ancient Egyptians believed in reincarnation. The importance of both science and reincarnation is demonstrated by the significance the Egyptians attached to the mummy. Mummification is a scientific process that uses oils and surgical procedures to preserve the body. The Ancient Egyptians believed that this procedure would allow the body to remain earthbound, whilst granting the spirit the opportunity to achieve immortality in the afterlife. According to the information relating to the exhibition on 'Eternal life in Ancient Egypt' in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History:

⁶ Charles Lyell suggested that gradual geological changes had shaped the Earth's surface. See 'Charles Lyell (1797-1875): Gentleman Geologist,' Victorian Web, accessed 16 June 2014, <http://www.victorianweb.org/science/lyell.html>. For other nineteenth-century theories of evolution, see Jonathan Conlin, *Evolution and the Victorians* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁷ New ideas included Mendel's law of inheritance (1865), which formed the basis for modern genetics, and Rudolf Virchow's work on cell division (1855). Both of these specialised studies discredited the idea of biblical creation. See John Gribbin, *Science, A History* (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

⁸ Stellar parallax is the measurement of stars against the sun or the earth in order to disprove heliocentrism.

⁹ German biblical scholars of the Tübingen School applied 'higher criticism' to biblical studies. This involved analysing external documents from the Middle East that could either validate or refute the events in the Bible. See Grant Kaplan, *Faithfully Seeking Understanding: Selected Writings of Johannes Kuhn* (Baltimore: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

¹⁰ The British Museum, established in 1759, included 160 Egyptian objects. The British Museum houses the largest collection of Egyptian Antiquities outside of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. See 'History of the British Museum,' British Museum, accessed 21 May 2014, http://britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/general_history.aspx.

If all went well, the deceased would become a spirit in the Green Fields of eternity, while the soul joined the gods as a star in the sky and the mummy lived on in the tomb forever.¹¹

The Soul and the Afterlife

Pharos is an Ancient Egyptian who has displeased the Egyptian gods, resulting in his curse of eternal life, the curse being that he will remain earthbound. Boothby's mummy is more complex than those in such earlier nineteenth-century mummy texts as Edgar Allan Poe's 'Some Words With a Mummy' (1845) and Jane Webb's *The Mummy! A Tale of the Twenty-second Century* (1827), both of which depended upon the reader witnessing the reawakening of the cadaver. To be resurrected is to wake from the dead, which, for the public psyche, suggests the resurrected person furnishes evidence of the afterlife. Pharos's mummified body is not physically resurrected. Instead his spirit lives on in a double of his first incarnation, a 'second self.'¹² This intensifies the connection to the afterlife, as it conveys the idea that the body is just an encasement for the more important soul within. The soul is able to transcend an earthly mortal being to attain a place with the gods, while the gods exert power over the destiny of that soul. The connections to Christianity are striking, for the Christian God will also determine whether or not the soul will be admitted to heaven or hell.

Although Pharos is able to control those around him, he has no control of his own spirit, since it is unable to return to Ancient Egypt until the gods decide it is the correct time for this to happen. Consistent with the gods' power over Pharos, his control over the 'will' of Forrester and Valerie applies after they have died, as well as during their life: 'in life so even in death you are mine, to do with as I will.'¹³ Within the novel, the body and mind are easily manipulated and controlled by another. Death does not release the body from this control, implying that the physical form is only a part of existence. The conviction that the soul survives after the death of the body is also central to spiritualism.

Spiritualism

Surrendering Christian beliefs led many late Victorians to one of two positions: Agnosticism or Spiritualism.¹⁴ For those concerned about mortality, the choice was simple: Spiritualism. If comfort from a conviction in the afterlife could not be achieved legitimately through doctrinal beliefs, then another means had to be sought. Discussing the Victorian crisis of faith, the science historian Sherrie Lynne Lyons writes:

They turned to spiritualism for solace as well as hoping the séance would provide evidence for the existence of the immaterial world, most importantly for the existence of the immortal soul. It provided an alternative to what appeared to be an increasingly bleak, amoral world devoid of meaning.¹⁵

¹¹ 'Eternal Life in Ancient Egypt,' Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History exhibition homepage, accessed 25 February 2014, <http://mnh.si.edu/exhibits/eternal-life/index.cfm>.

¹² Boothby, *Pharos*, 95.

¹³ Boothby, *Pharos*, 51.

¹⁴ Agnosticism is defined as a principle that states there is no definite evidence for or against the existence of God. Spiritualism is a religious movement built upon the belief that the soul continues to exist after the death of the physical body. See entries for 'Agnosticism' and 'Spiritualism,' Oxford English Dictionary, accessed 5 May 2014, <http://oed.com>.

¹⁵ Sherrie Lynn Lyons, *Species, Serpents, Spirits, and Skulls* (New York: Suny Press, 2009), 88.

Accordingly, the desire for an afterlife could help account for the nineteenth-century fascination with spiritualism. Spiritualism, through séances, ostensibly enabled people to contact the dead with the aid of a medium. The medium would go into a trance and apparently become a channel to transmit messages between the worlds of the dead and the living. The role of the medium within the séance suggests a parallel with the resurrection of the mummy, as the mummy also represents something that lives in both in the present and the afterlife. The movement between the two states of life and death provides apparent evidence of the afterlife, a compensation for those whose beliefs had been eroded through science.

During his original incarnation as Ptahmes, Pharos was the chief of the king's magicians. His position was to advise and protect the Pharaoh using incantations and potions. Egyptian wisdom through magic was primarily used to command nature, especially the threatening phenomena of storms, plagues and pollution of water; however, magic was also exploited to control others. In-keeping with his role as a magician, Pharos was in his Victorian embodiment a mesmeric character. Originally mesmerism was the 'scientific' use of magnets on the body to control the magnetic force of the universe in order to promote healing. By the late nineteenth century, the term had become a byword for hypnosis and the control of the unconscious mind.¹⁶ The unseen forces that can command the magnetic potency of the universe as well as manipulate the body and mind were seen in this period as quite enticing, but were also viewed with distrust. For Pharos the transformation from magic to mesmerism is seamless, as both careers lend him the power to manipulate his environs for personal gain. It is through the use of magic, hypnotism and potions that Pharos orchestrates his surroundings.

Despite his repellent appearance, people from all walks of life, from the frequenter of the gin house to the society hostess, are drawn to Pharos, each taking 'a measure of enjoyment from his society.'¹⁷ He is a great raconteur and is able to discuss many varied topics. It is through his conversational skills that he is able to induce a hypnotic connection with those he wishes to manipulate. He uses these powers to dominate others by controlling their individual will and by not allowing freedom of consciousness. To gain such influence, Pharos shares magical cigarettes that heighten the senses and aid trust which, when combined with special liquids, renders the recipient 'powerless to disobey.'¹⁸ The control of the will presents itself through the victim having visions that are connected to Pharos. These episodes are reminiscent of descriptions of séances in which the medium is subdued and then mentally transported to converse with the dead.

Forrester's visions are more physical than a medium talking with the dead. He appears as a character within the historic episode, both narrating what he sees and helping to drive the action in Ancient Egypt.¹⁹ Pharos needs Valerie and Forrester to channel their trance-like visions to him as they resurrect a vanished culture in order to discover what is planned for the future of his soul. As Pharos's spirit becomes a second self (whilst retaining his earthly mummified body), both Valerie and Forrester maintain their bodies in the present. This, too, is reminiscent of the spiritualist contacting the dead whilst their body remains earthbound in full view of their public.

¹⁶ Antonio Melechi, *Servants of the Supernatural* (London: Arrow Books, 2008).

¹⁷ Boothby, *Pharos*, 35.

¹⁸ Boothby, *Pharos*, 54.

¹⁹ Boothby, *Pharos*, 55.

The concept of conversing with the dead, by appearing with them in these short episodes, is taken one stage further through Forrester being granted access to the Egyptian gods. He is taken to the Sphynx and told 'you enter a new phase of your existence. Here, under the eyes of the Watcher of Harmachis, you shall learn something of the wisdom of the ancients.'²⁰ This idea of a new phase implies that there is a system of layers which enable the individual to travel beyond the earthly and physical life. In a similar vein to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, there are several spheres of ascension before one can live with the gods. Forrester is forced to accept fluid from a silver cup and suddenly Ancient Egypt is alive before him. He is shown the 'splendour and degradation of the man Ptahmes.'²¹ Each scene is a snapshot of the important periods in Pharos' (Ptahmes') life, and the scenes explain how Pharos became an eternal being. The punishment for his crimes was to be buried at night and to be prohibited from crossing the sacred Lake of the Dead: the most degrading of all burials, which prevented the Egyptian dead from reaching the afterlife. Pharos' destiny is controlled by the Egyptian gods, who curse him to perpetual life. This decision can only be reconsidered if Pharos gets revenge on the 'alien lands' that have ravished the sacred burial sites.²²

To transcend his earthbound state and walk with the gods, Forrester is anointed with oils to the point of ecstasy, and again given the special cigarettes to smoke. He is told to rise as the son of an alien race, 'rise purified for the time of thy earthly self, and fit to enter and stand in the presence of Ammen-Ra!'²³ Forrester is mortal but allowed to walk among not only the dead but the powerful gods. He finds this transcendence pleasurable, 'in my new state my body was as light as air, my brain without a cloud, while the senses of hearing, of sight, of smell, and of touch, were each abnormally acute.'²⁴ The reader is promised that the afterlife will be a euphoric experience. Whilst the credibility may be controversial, desire is a powerful emotion and the promise of a wondrous afterlife would have been seductive at the time of the novel's publication.

The idea of the spirit transcending the body is central to the concept of the afterlife. Forrester states that 'time, fear and curiosity had been eliminated from my being.'²⁵ He is accepting that there is something beyond the physical body, a world where manmade constructs of time and history do not exist. In the course of the novel, Pharos is keen to prove that there is something larger than religion, and that nineteenth-century man was merely an atom in history. The visions he induces explore the transience of life as well as the differences between the ancient and modern cultures, whilst reinforcing a belief, shared between the Victorians and ancient Egyptians, in the immortal soul.

The Implications of the Eternal Egyptian

The nineteenth-century fascination with Egypt offered consolations for the contemporary crisis of faith. In his novel, Boothby affirms that the secrets to eternal life are beyond human control and that, rather than the spirit dying with the body, the spirit is able to live on in the afterlife with the gods. Had Pharos led a blameless life, he would have enjoyed the correct burial and would have been admitted to his rightful eternal existence. The reliance on the Egyptian god to control the afterlife reinforces the long-held belief that a

²⁰ Boothby, *Pharos*, 54.

²¹ Boothby, *Pharos*, 67.

²² Boothby, *Pharos*, 17.

²³ Boothby, *Pharos*, 65.

²⁴ Boothby, *Pharos*, 65.

²⁵ Boothby, *Pharos*, 66.

spiritual future is dependent on behaviour during the time that an individual is earthbound. This not only enables the consolation for the loss of biblical belief, but also provides a suggestion of heavenly afterlife. The mummy novel thus appeals to the past to inform the future. It enables ideas that link an archaic and idealised form of afterlife to the retrieval of something that was perceived as elusive in the late-nineteenth century.

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