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"Wonderful Things": Surrealism and Egypt

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The Magic Powers of Ancient Egypt:

Georges Henein, André Breton and Horus Schenouda

Marc Kober

If we consider André Breton's long-lasting interest in the renewing powers of the human mind, as released by magic and in particular by magic art, Georges Henein, who introduced surrealism to Egypt, represents the ideal mediator with the Orient, and with ancient Egypt in particular. Several other Egyptian authors and artists could be said to share this mediating role, such as Ramsès Younane, but also Angelo de Riz, whom Henein rated highly in his 1937 "Bilan du mouvement surréaliste" ("Appraisal of the surrealist movement"): "Les récits de rêves tiennent une place considérable dans le poème et surtout dans la peinture surréalistes. Parmi les tableaux exposés ici même par Angelo de Riz, plusieurs ne sont que des instantanés de rêves […] De nombreuses toiles de Salvador Dalí ou d'Yves Tanguy paraissent autant de rêves pris sur le fait" (Henein *Œuvres* 371). ("Dream narratives are very important in surrealist poetry and especially painting. Among the pictures shown here by Angelo de Riz, several are just sketches from dreams [...]. Many paintings by Dalí or Yves Tanguy appear as so many dreams caught on the spot.") It is easy to associate Parisian surrealism with that of Cairo, in its most open, cosmopolitan dimension. Indeed, Cairo is often called "le Petit Paris". Among the writers, one should also mention first Edmond Jabès, Marie Cavadia and the now famous Joyce Mansour, who published her first poems while she was still living in Cairo with the help of Georges Henein, Gérald Messadié, and André Pieyre de Mandiargues, who visited Egypt in the 1950s. Despite these examples, the connection between the Parisian and Egyptian surrealist worlds was not very strong, and it depended on a few artists or writers, like Georges Henein and Ramsès Younane, or Fouad Kamel (Fall 101–105). The modern painting movement born in Egypt, however, is surrealist in its most accomplished part and has strong affinities with European surrealism, as reflected in the Egyptian sensitivity to daily magic, such as that found in the works of Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar.

However, despite these evident relations, a question arises as to what exactly Breton's attitude toward Egypt was. When Henein presented the

first reports of surrealism in a 1937 radio lecture, he pointed out a basic relation between Egypt and surrealism as lying in the interest in the occult, saying that "les surréalistes ne dédaignent pas non plus l'étude des superstitions orientales, de l'occultisme et affectionnent la plupart des troubles mentaux" (*Œuvres* 372) ("the surrealists have no objection to the study of Oriental superstitions or of the Occult and they find most mental disorders quite appealing"). According to Patrick Lepetit, surrealism played magic against religion, and consequently occultism against religion: "Contre le religieux, en conséquence, les surréalistes ont privilégié une autre forme de pensée magique, source de ce que Sarane Alexandrian nomme, après Cornélius Agrippa, la philosophie occulte" (17). ("Consequently, the surrealists privileged against religion another form of magical thought, the source of what Sarane Alexandrian calls, according to Cornelius Agrippa, occult philosophy.") Given that Egypt is said to be the cradle of occultism, an analysis of the relations between surrealism and ancient Egypt can be clearly established through the surrealists' interest in the occult, and an Egyptian writer as enthusiastic about surrealism as Georges Henein could be the perfect interlocutor. Moreover, because of his Coptic origins, Henein could be seen as a spiritual descendant of the Pharaohs who thus felt a great connection with Egyptian traditional thought. A question arises, however, as to whether Henein's interest in ancient Egypt was genuinely compatible with his commitment to surrealism. The answer undoubtedly derives from Henein's idea of poetry (and the plastic arts) from 1940 on, which was very close to that of the surrealists. He considered modern poetry as an efficient means of transforming one's knowledge of the self and the world. According to this viewpoint, modern poetry takes up the torch of ancient magic, with the hermeneutic Word considered the most important thing: "La poésie moderne ne pratique pas l'inconscient pour l'inconscient. Elle est une véritable marche vers la connaissance de soi, à la connaissance de tout ce qui en nous diffère de l'idée que nous nous croyions fondés à entretenir de nous-mêmes […]" (*Œuvres* 421). ("Modern poetry does not use the unconscious for its own sake. It is a real advance toward self-knowledge and the knowledge of everything within us that differs from the self-image we once felt was justified.") Such knowledge, described as a mysterious way into the inner being, and following in Novalis' tracks, retrieves the power of words and a quest for unity, as it is inscribed in various texts of the 1940s signed by Henein. Rimbaud was also an important reference for Henein, as he was for Breton and Aragon, who appreciated André Rolland de Renéville's 1929 publication *Rimbaud le voyant* as a reading of Rimbaud's intuitive affinities with Oriental traditional thought (see Roberts). Renéville points out the traces of the "inner experience," in Bataille's terms, of modern poetry.

In this article, we will focus on the meeting point between the Egyptian writer, Henein, and the surrealist idea of the affective power of the Word and

of poetry. Georges Henein understands "the Word" in terms of the relation between poetry and a quest for a renewed and unmediated communication with Nature that was established by Romantic thought. But, if Henein quotes Novalis and Rimbaud in his article "Condition de la poésie II" in *Don Quichotte* n°15, published in Cairo in March 1940, he ends this article with the imperative: "trouver une langue" (find a language). He also uses the term "message", instead of "word," maybe because these terms are Biblical. And, in the first part of this text, he gives a more anthropological definition of poetry: "Tout à fait à l'origine, la poésie sous forme de formules, je dirais presque de recettes, magiques, rythmiques, incantatoires, s'inscrit en marge et parfois au cœur même de l'activité sociale" (*Œuvres* 418). ("At the very beginning, poetry, as formula, I would even say as magic, rhythmic, incantatory recipes, was inscribed in the margins, and sometimes at the centre of social activity.") His conception of poetry is therefore quite particular, and is aligned with the ideas of Jules Monnerot (who is quoted in the same article) as defined in his *La Poésie moderne et le sacré* (1945). Henein prefers the term "langage" for poetry as a ritual, when the "word" (verbe) is transcended:

> La poésie se confond presque complètement avec le rite. Elle est la partie verbale du rite, elle est un rite parlé --- de même que la musique est un rite sonorisé. Cette naissance d'un langage spécial qui se différencie du langage usuel de la tribu ou de la cité s'explique aisément. Elle s'explique par la qualité de l'auditeur ou du destinataire. Les dieux, les forces de la nature, les mystères auxquels on s'adresse de la sorte, ont droit à un langage à part, singulièrement persuasif, un langage qui transcende le verbe quotidien dégradé par les services grossiers de tout ordre qui lui sont demandés. (*Œuvres* 419)
>
> Poetry is almost entirely indistinguishable from ritual. It is the verbal part of the ritual, a spoken ritual just as music is a sound ritual. The birth of a special language different from the tribe's or the city's usual language is easy to explain. It can be explained according to the nature of the listener, or the destinatee. The gods, the forces of nature, the mysteries thus addressed, are entitled to a separate, oddly persuasive language, a language which transcends the daily word, degraded by the vulgarity of every order it is given.

The initial contacts between Breton and Henein were based on the terms used by Breton in his first letter to the Egyptian writer, alluding to the sacred bird, the god Horus. We will first discuss the terms of this letter and associate them with the gods of ancient Egypt, especially the bird gods, as defined by Egyptologists, as well as writers such as Henein's contemporary Horus Schenouda, whom we will discuss later as offering another link between native Egyptian lyricism and surrealism. At a first general level, it is easy to

see how the multitude of major and minor gods of ancient Egypt, as described for example by the Egyptologist Jean-Pierre Cortegianni, might appeal to a surrealist mind, because it reflects an inexhaustible imagination. Moreover, the Egyptian pantheon is characterised by permanent creation. Indeed, the power of metamorphosis and that of the imagination are two of surrealism's cardinal values, as Breton writes in the "Manifesto of Surrealism": "La seule imagination me rend compte de ce qui peut être" ("Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what *can be*"), adding: "Pour l'esprit, la possibilité d'errer n'est-elle pas plutôt la contingence du bien ?" (*Œuvres Complètes (OC)* I: 312). ("For the mind, is the possibility of erring not rather the contingency of good?" (*Manifestoes* 5)). Furthermore, the "Metamorphose" (Metamorphosis) article in the *Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme* provides two quotations, one by Franz Kafka, the other from an unidentified "Egyptian text": "J'arrive en Épervier et je sors en Phénix" (*OC* II: 859). ("I arrive as a sparrow hawk and leave as a phoenix.") Breton also writes: "La faune et la flore du surréalisme sont inavouables" (*OC* I: 340). ("The flora and fauna of Surrealism are inadmissible" (Manifestoes 40)). And yet it was a non-Egyptian creature that Breton was thinking of when he responded to Henein, who had come to offer the surrealist leader the support of the Egyptian avant-garde: "Le démon de la perversité, tel qu'il daigne m'apparaître, m'a bien l'air d'avoir une aile ici, l'autre en Égypte." ("The demon of perversity, such as he deigns to appear to me, seems to have one wing here and the other in Egypt"), to which Henein replied, tellingly: "Oui, mais une aile qui bat bien faiblement" (Kober, "Le démon de la perversité" 377). ("Yes, but that wing is flapping very weakly.") This "demon of perversity" in point belongs neither to the surrealist nor to the Egyptian bestiary, but it establishes a totemic link between two men who had not yet met. Here, the word "aile" (wing) plays a pivotal role.

The importance attributed to winged creatures by Breton can be easily spotted from a distance. The imagination is often seen as "taking off" like a bird, or in danger of having "its wings clipped". Could surrealism be again at its zenith? A decade earlier, in "Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality," Breton had seemed to believe the Orient could come to the rescue against the oppression of Latin civilization. Alleviation turns into removal when light crosses crystal: "[…] Orient, bel oiseau de proie et d'innocence, je t'implore du fond du royaume des ombres ! Inspire-moi, que je sois celui qui n'a plus d'ombre" (*OC* II: 280). "...Orient, beautiful bird of prey and innocence, I implore you from the depths of the kingdom of shadows! Inspire me, so that I may be he in whom there are no more shadows" (What is Surrealism? 2: 28)). This quotation from *Point du jour* (1934) refers back to two elements: a bird and the light (or its opposite, the shadow), both of which are connected with Egyptian mythology, notably to Horus, who is the son of the Sun and the god with a hawk's head. *The Living Horus* was the first name to appear among the titles of the ancient sovereigns, the Pharaohs, and

the shadow of a bird silhouetted against the daylight, with the solar disc as his emblem, represents the god of the sky. It is a fascinating creature, one of the most powerful, and the bird of prey alluded to by Breton as the Orient can clearly be interpreted as Horus.

A contemporary of Georges Henein, Horus Schenouda, also alluded to the ancient significance of the hawk: "Le faucon Horus a toujours les ailes déployées dans les effigies, les bas-reliefs et les figures magnifiques qui ornent les temples, les édifices des Pharaons qu'on admire toujours…" (Untitled manuscript 2). ("Horus the hawk always spreads his wings in effigies, bas-reliefs and the splendid figures adorning the temples, these Pharaoh edifices that we still admire…")

Figure 1: Editions Horus Logo (Le Caire). Dir. Horus Schenouda.
This logo was drawn by Fouad Kamel. Marc Kober collection,
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Horus is another name for the Rising Sun, and the following comment by the same author emphasizes the importance Breton attributed to birds, especially from the perspective of idealism. Aside from that point, Horus Schenouda is an Egyptian writer important in this context because he was a

close contemporary of writers and artists involved with Egyptian surrealism. At the same time, he was deeply interested in the pharaonic past and the religious beliefs of old Egypt: "En Égypte, il y a toujours des oiseaux, bien qu'ils ne soient pas tous rares. Les milans descendent du ciel et écorchent la lumière en emportant dans leurs serres des ibis étourdis, déjà morts. L'épervier, plus vorace que le faucon, les bouscule et leur arrache les pauvres ibis tous blancs" (*Otage de Pharaon* 36). ("In Egypt there are always birds, and not all of them are rare birds. Kites descend from the sky and skim the light, as they carry off stunned, already dead ibises in their talons. The sparrow hawk, more voracious than the hawk, bumps into them and snatches away those poor snow-white ibises.") The Egyptians believed that the hawk who soared up into the heavens and disappeared out of human sight was off to join his father, the Sun.

After this analysis of the polymorphous imagination and flight as general points of intersection, we will now move to a more particular point about the word and magic art and question the relation between poetry and the occult. Among many references to Egypt in Breton's works, we will measure the importance of Egyptian art in his essay about magic art, written in the mid 1950s, and then the way in which Henein integrates traditional magic into his own poetics. *L'Art magique* puts into question the effectiveness of magic in our daily lives, independently of ancient rites, but above all it proposes a hypothetical art which would use (consciously or not) various magic means in order to master nature's forces or to restore the lost unity between man and the world. Like Novalis, André Breton calls up some aspects of the mind that elude the clear light of discursive thought. This is a common point between Breton and Henein, with the Egyptian writer also evoking magic, mainly that of ancient Egypt. In fact, two main points show their deep affinities: the field of magic in action and the field of the magic of the affective Word. According to André Breton, "une conscience lyrique fondée sur la reconnaissance des pouvoirs du Verbe" ("a lyrical consciousness based on the recognition of the powers of the Word") contradicts "connaissance discursive" ("discursive knowledge") (*OC* IV: 62). The 'Word' must be taken in the sense of that coined by Eliphas Lévi, the "word in action".

The term 'Word', then, is the precise meeting point between the poet, the artist and the magician, which had become part of Breton's vocabulary after his reading Eliphas Lévi and after having been initiated by Auguste Viatte's *Victor Hugo et les Illuminés de son temps*. As Etienne-Alain Hubert explains, "Le Verbe est la parole en action" (*OC* IV: 1229). ("The Verb is the word in action.") André Breton's examples are European, even though he recognizes "[…] l'idée d'une 'hiéroglyptique' généralisée" (*OC* IV: 68) ("the idea of generalized 'hieroglyphics'") within surrealist poetic images and, for example, in the "Jeu de l'Un dans l'Autre" ("Game of One into Another"). To Breton's mind it is something much more complex than the expression of a

simple symbolism, or the obscure nature of its message. In his meditations on magic art, André Breton quotes the Egyptian example gleaned from a book by François Lexa, *La Magie dans l'Egypte antique* (*The Magic of Ancient Egypt*, Geuthner, 1925), and he develops the idea of a blend of religion and high magic, which makes it difficult to distinguish one from another. Apart from Valentin d'Alexandrie and the Marcosians, Breton uses examples foreign to Egypt, which is not the case with the "Enquête" (investigation), where he lists the answers to a questionnaire including an Egyptian drawing ("Le livre de ce qu'il y a dans l'Hadès" / "The Book of what is to be found in Hades") (OC IV:110). The presence of the drawing indicates the very origin of the question that was asked by the author.

Breton's passionate interest in Oceanic art is well-known, and he considered Egyptian art to be less important. Although this hierarchy reappears in the synthetic table of *L'Art magique*, Egypt is nevertheless present – with four illustrations referring to it – particularily in the section entitled "L'Eveil de l'intellection: exploration du monde intérieur (Égypte)" ("Exploring the Inner World"). Concerning Egyptian art, Breton refers to "un retournement de l'homme vers lui-même" (*OC* IV: 200) ("man turning back towards himself"). This importance given to Egypt as an inner world is closely linked to the case of Georges Henein, author of a poem titled "De l'Irréalisme" ("On Unrealism"): "[…] le seul monde véritable c'est celui que nous créons en nous […] / artifice par rapport au réel / Vérité par rapport au moi, à l'extrême-moi" (*Œuvres* 40–41). ("[...] the only real world is the one we carry within ourselves […] an artifice if it is compared with the real, the truth according to the ego, or according to the ultra-ego.") This introverted narrative order would fit in perfectly with the birth of a magic art and with the creative power of the Word, as Breton states: "Chaque dieu créateur (et il y en a au moins autant que de grands centres sacerdotaux) crée le monde 'par la vertu de sa voix'" (*OC* IV: 201). ("Each creator among the gods (and there are at least as many as there are large sacerdotal centers) creates the World by virtue of his voice.") "Egyptian realism" naturally attracted Breton's attention as an antidote for Greek and Roman realism. However, according to Breton, Egypt's own form of realism seems somewhat inferior to the sublimation that characterizes the narratives in the Mesopotamian Delta.

In short, the "Voice of the Pharaohs," equal to that of the gods, fascinates Breton because it comes close to the esoteric concept of the Word that characterizes French romanticism. In the case of Georges Henein, the problem is how to conciliate the value of ancient Egyptian beliefs with those of surrealism. When Henein writes to the founder of surrealism, his point of view is quite French, Parisian even, because Paris was then considered as the capital of the mind. In Georges Henein's view, as defined in his essay "Fonction subversive de la poésie" ("The Subversive Function of Poetry"),

surrealism had a universal and immediate value, and it was a subversive movement for the mind precisely because of the importance given to poetry: "Elle est connaissance toujours plus accrue de soi, découverte ininterrompue de nouvelles régions de l'homme, renouvellement nécessaire des assises de la vie" (*Œuvres* 404). ("It is an ever-increasing knowledge of the self, a ceaseless discovery of new regions of the human geography, a necessary renewal of life's foundation.") In 1939, magic is not a priority for Henein, but poetry is. He would express himself a good decade later specifically about putting one's hopes in the magic of ancient Egypt.

Before broaching these considerations about ancient magic in Egypt, we will first refer to various short stories or poetical prose pieces by Henein that apparently keep at a distance the main ambitions of surrealism and the magic practice of ancient Egypt. Nevertheless, the way these texts can be understood remains equivocal: there is no doubt about their double meaning. They could even be read as magical texts, narratives working like talismans, designed to exclude the ignorant. They also hint at the misunderstanding of those whose rational scepticism makes them lose track of life's mysteries. Henein's short-story "Les Bonnes Adresses" ("The Right Addresses") puts forward the initiatory dimension and the pretence of retrieving certain lost traditional powers, through intrigues and characters. The question is inscribed in the title: "Who is the best person you can rely on?" or "How to knock on the right door?" In other words "Who should be trusted in, and considered as a guide? Who is a wizard and who is not a real magus?"

The texts we will analyse here have been read as a kind of parable of encounters with surrealism. In some of Henein's works, in which a master takes responsibility for a novice, an invisible world seems to draw closer to the reader and to the character, but the experience often proves disappointing. And the imposture of (false) magic appears in an obvious way. Having unwittingly come into contact with a group known as *Hypothèses* (*Hypotheses*), the narrator of "Les Bonnes Adresses" meets Herminia. She gives him the initiation kiss, but he appreciates that kiss more for its erotic than for its esoteric value. Herminia entrusts him to an instructor, a chemist by profession. The instructor disappears, with the excuse of his departure to the "Grande Forêt" (Great Forest). In other words, he transgresses "la limite de tout enseignement" (*Œuvres* 220) ("the limits of any form of teaching"). The magic seems to be powerless. The instructor pretends to prepare some "poudre de brouillard" (fog powder), and the alchemical quest is presented here as a joke. But at the same time, fog is a trick in order to escape from finite things, linked to the excess of precision required by modern life. The instructor is unable to help the narrator find a way to alter his destiny. The best he can hope for is to find consolation in an ordinary love-affair. Profane love becomes a substitute for a quest for the Absolute. In other words, for the uniniated, an insincere performance of magic rituals underlines their

inoperative or doubtful nature. In this tale, the reference to Gurdjieff is significant. When "Les Bonnes Adresses" was first published in 1956, however, Georges Henein was already far removed from surrealism, notably because the group, founded by medical students like Breton and Aragon and keen on hypotheses and experiments, was undertaking activities such as the *Comme* exhibition and the journal *Néon* which Henein found unconvincing.

According to Sarane Alexandrian, the story may describe the end of an initiation, concluding with a test and the risk of a significant break ("choc en retour") with the instructor. Alexandrian was close to André Breton in 1947, and was a member of the surrealist bureau *Cause*. If one agrees with Alexandrian that surrealism was a secret organisation, or "organisation initiatique" (*Georges Henein* 57), then the figure of the narrator would represent Georges Henein (or Alexandrian himself), now among the initiates of surrealism, after their break with Breton. One can also associate Breton with the instructor ("Moniteur" in the text), who disappears having been fully initiated, abandoning a group of followers. A great gap exists between the one who is not initiated (the narrator) and the great initiator ("Moniteur"). As for Herminia, she is a partly initiated character, located in an intermediate zone. Arguably, then, the *Hypotheses* group is another name for the surrealist group considered as a secret society. Its methods and their results, though not visible, are not insignificant. They can be seen only from the inside, if a disciple has decided to master the most secret rules of existence within the group.

Shortly after the publication of "Les Bonnes Addresses," Georges Henein organized a number of art exhibitions in Egypt. The first exhibition, held in Cairo on 20 January 1959, displayed abstract works by Ramsès Younane, a prominent Egyptian artist and close friend of Georges Henein, Fouad Kamel, Roland Vogel, Khadiga Riaz, Hassan Hassan and other artists. The second exhibition was held in April 1959 with organic and soft forms designed again by Younane, and many other artists, like Vasco Barbitch, Khadiga Riaz, and the figurative painter Hamed Nada. Among other texts in the catalog for the exhibition, Henein wrote in "Sur un Thème de Ramsès Younane": "Ceux qui sont dehors savent maintenant que la connaissance est fermée" (*Vers l'Inconnu* 3) ("Those who are outside know now that knowledge is closed"). And Roland Vogel wrote in a text 'Lettre de Bangkok': "Notre seul geste encore possible serait la définition de l'inavouable qui se situe entre le langage et le silence" (*Encore l'Inconnu* 7) ("Our only possible gesture would be to specify what is too shameful to mention that is located between language and silence"). The titles of these exhibitions, *Vers l'Inconnu* (*Toward the Unknown*) in January 1959, and *Encore l'Inconnu* (*Still the Unknown*), in April of the same year, are significant, and refer perhaps to esoteric worlds. To present the exhibition *Vers l'Inconnu*, Henein wrote a text with the significant title *L'Ultra-Lieu* (*The Ultra-Location*). These titles refer to the realm of the

invisible and to the idea of a "Supérieur Inconnu" (Superior Unknown). This last expression should be read in the sense of Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, the father of the "martiniste" movement, who called himself the "philosophe inconnu" (unknown philosopher). According to Alexandrian, this important author in the history of the occult could be considered as the French Novalis (Alexandrian *Histoire* 298).

Various titles chosen by Georges Henein have a magic and surrealist tone, such as "Le Signe le plus obscur" ("The Most Obscure Sign"), "Le Pacte noir" ("The Black Pact"), "Le Seuil interdit" ("The Forbidden Threshold") or "Le Message opaque" ("The Opaque Message"). Let us, then, examine a second story, "Le Supplice d'une existence meilleure" (*Œuvres* 272) ("The Torments of a Better Life"), wherein Henein introduces us to a parody of an initiate. This character spends his whole lifetime on an "after death" project whose results are denounced as futile. His "search for a better life" ("la recherche d'une vie meilleure") is also a protest movement in which one can recognize magic in action, but also a misguided version of the rebellions of Arthur Rimbaud and of the surrealists. Finally, the only tangible result of this project is the model for a villa, a "dream house", not very different from a *middle class*, materialistic American (and now universal) dream. The narrator's nervous collapse is triggered by certain gestures made by the villa's architect. This character insists on presenting his masterpiece as though he were a vulgar travelling salesman, and he lights up the model from the inside with a flashlight. Generally speaking, his attitude is a parody of the true search for superhuman powers, "[…] cette lampe de poche qui prétend éclairer *du dedans* les structures de l'avenir" (274). ("[...] the flashlight which was supposed to *light up* the structures of the future *from the inside*".) The italics are Heinein's, stressing the cruel irony of the situation. The highest peak of surrealist ambition is being mocked by the Egyptian author, not without a touch of bitterness.

From another point of view, the architect's clumsy gestures have perhaps an allegorical meaning. The architect slips away after having announced his new and ultimate project: an "exquise maquette funéraire (274) ("an exquisite funeral model"). The encounter with the architect could be read as an encounter with the narrator's *Kâ* , a copy of oneself who will continue to live in the Beyond in place of the deceased, according to ancient Egyptian beliefs. This character could also be read as a harbinger of death, bringing to mind preparations for the final journey. It is well known that the very precise way ancient Egyptians used to plan Death and the Beyond was geared toward a continuation of life in a different form, though with all the necessary material comfort. While still alive, a person had to undertake extensive preparations in order to ease his collapse into death, which was nothing but an empty world or a void.

From this esoteric point of view, the intricate preparations for a successful

material existence in this life and in death were never negligible. According to Henry Corbin, humor is the safeguard of the mystic, because it enables protection from a subjective danger, the development of a superiority complex, as well as protection from an objective danger, that of revealing the secret and losing one's spiritual guide (180). The story can therefore be understood as a modern transposition of old ritual requirements in the face of death. It reveals Georges Henein's anxiety and his deep interest in the psychic structure of his pharaonic ancestors.

Our author energetically defends the right of human beings to knowledge, and wholeheartedly subscribes to surrealism's peculiar hermeneutic ambition, as it blends with poetic activity. The ultimate goal would be, as it is defined by Breton in *L'Art magique*, "la libération sans condition de l'esprit" (*OC* IV: 289) ("the unconditional liberation of the mind"). In that case, how can the magic powers of Ancient Egypt be of any use to man in the present and the future?

Georges Henein gives us several answers in the article "Considérations sur la magie d'une Egypte à l'autre" ("Observations on magic from one Egypt to another"), published in December 1950 in the weekly Egyptian review *La Femme nouvelle*. At that time, Henein had officially broken all relations with Breton, though with dignity and respect for the main values supported by surrealism. This article shows an awakening curiosity turned toward a specific aspect of Henein's native land. The question of the relations between art and magic was linked to a concept of time perceived as degradation. In his essay, *L'Art magique*, Breton had also pointed out those stages, but with surrealist art as the only and ultimate conciliation. Henein also feels a nostalgia for a past reconciled with the present time, but without being convinced by the rebirth of magic as expressed through surrealist art, which would end the modern split between two parallel practices. In his 1950 essay, Henein considers magic as one of the greatest opportunities for the empirical mind, but he sees it as a lost opportunity. In Henein's view, magicians cater to a "need for the mysterious," especially in order to endow religions with an intriguing dimension, when in fact concrete remedies and means, in a "recherche de l'utilité immediate" (*Œuvres* 525) ("search for immediate utility"), are needed first and foremost. Worse still, magic has been used to exert temporal power. The ancient sovereigns enveloped themselves in a form of mystery that enhanced their prestige in the eyes of the ordinary people. Nevertheless, the reality of magic power was untouched. What Henein calls "Domaines reservés" ("secret subjects") remained intact (525). The magician stands between the priest and the scientist in a precarious and much envied position, one which, nonetheless, has been criticized at all moments of serious tension, including the 1950s.

Far from being driven to despair by the national and political role played by magic in Egypt, because it re-enforced the "great unifying myths" centered

on Thoth/Hermes, Henein reverted to Pierre Gordon's thesis, according to which "ontological knowledge," which was peculiar to the initial superman, had become degraded into "empirical knowledge" on the basis of which the figures of the Prince and the Magician had been defined. Ancient Egypt proves to have been especially rich in "magic resources": amulets, wax figurines, collective exorcism sequences, known as *Zâr* (526). And yet, in spite of the Egyptian people's remarkable "sensitivity to magic," Henein presents a disillusioned assessment of the present situation: "Ainsi donc, après avoir traversé les phases successives de l'initiation et du formalisme, la magie en Égypte ne peut plus se réclamer, pour le présent, que d'une superstition populaire sans portée veritable" (529–30). ("So therefore, after having passed through successive initiation and formal stages, magic in Egypt can now only claim to have its roots in popular superstition, which has no real influence.")

It is rather from an artistic and verbal point of view that an equivalence can be found between Henein and Breton when it comes to magic. As a matter of fact, Egyptian civilization attributed great importance to the Word. Henein cites Alexandre Moret's *Mystères* égyptiens. According to this writer, the Egyptians believed that a holy man, full of sanctity, was *Mâ-hrou*; an expression which signified that "he reaches the voice" (527). Magic formulae in particular work like weapons, and are a consequence of that superior status. Mastering the creative word endows one with unlimited power. Magic books, which used to be kept in temples, provide evidence of the ancient faith. The ancient Egyptians believed in the "verbe rendu agissant" (528) ("activated word").

Henein then begins to dream about the "poetic intensity" of the extant magic corpus: "Il s'agit là véritablement de textes chargés et si nous y voyons surtout de la poésie, c'est qu'il ne nous appartient pas d'en libérer la charge" (528). ("Those are truly loaded texts and if all we see in them is poetry, then it is not up to us to liberate their load.") In any case, nostalgia for a powerful Word, or for a poetry able to change the world, finds an echo in the demiurgic sense of surrealist art, as it is defined in *L'Art magique*.

For Henein, literature, especially poetry, has a very important striking force. It is part of an "esprit frappeur" ("striking spirit") (see Henein, *L'Esprit frappeur*). To quote an example, the "mendiante hautaine et dure" (*Œuvres* 262) ("tough and haughty beggarwoman") in "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," one of Henein's stories, seems truly endowed with powers akin to the "Domaines reservés," but those powers are at the same time poetic and magic. To quote the author, her gaze is sufficient to shatter any human being's substance. Furthermore, that uncommon glance reminds us of the Evil Eye in Mediterranean countries. That glance detains an enunciative power, combining "truth" and "poetry". The narrator gives various examples of her formulations, and they are poetically beautiful and at the same time loaded with magic power (*Œuvres* 263).

In that case, the confusing concept of the child-woman (*la femme-enfant*, as it is described in *Arcane 17*) with supernatural powers, and that of mad love (*L'Amour fou*) come close to the Egyptian sensitivity to magic, and to the specific role attributed to beggars in the daily life of cities such as Cairo.

Answering a questionnaire circulated by Jean-Jacques Luthi, Georges Henein explained his writing method in 1960: "Je travaille par élimination. J'avance en supprimant. Il me semble que, parfois, cette façon de procéder me permet de donner force de vie à des images de pointe, à des situations qui défont les bandelettes de l'être" (Kober, *Entre Nil* 314). ("I proceed by elimination. I erase things, as I progress. It sometimes seems to me that working this way enables me to strengthen and enliven key images and situations that strip the human being of its bandages.") The terms he uses here are steeped in Egyptian magic and they represent him as an author whose poetical langage works exactly like the texts of ancient magic. Words are lifeless and must be given a "life force." The mummy's bandages have preserved the flesh and body of the dead. Anything can be revived thanks to an effective language. Henein's poetic language strips the mummy bare.

If we leave aside the history of modern art in Egypt, which is very rich from a magical and a surrealist point of view, several other writers tend to express a similar convergence between Egypt and surrealism. Art was honoured by Henein from the very inauguration of his movement *Art et Liberté* (Art and Freedom), in 1938, in answer to the condemnation of "degenerate art" by the Nazis in Germany. *Art et Liberté* was a group composed of many artists as well as writers of various origins all living in Egypt. Other writers exist outside of this group, however, who also offer creative links between surrealism and Egyptian tradition. One example is Horus Schenouda, in whose work the magical and poetical uses of the Word are closely linked.

Schenouda (1917–2010) was a multi-facetted writer whose works are marked by the sign of the god Horus in a reformulation of a Coptic, Christian, Oriental and Mediterranean influence in the light of French literature. He inherited from his Roman Catholic Egyptian family a feverish Christian sensitivity, blended with an uninterrupted pharaonic *rêverie*. To all that he added a Greco-Latin and French sensuality, discovered while reading Pierre Louÿs, his elected author and the subject of the thesis he defended at the Sorbonne shortly after World War II. Horus Schenouda attached great significance to the powerful sovereigns of ancient Egypt, a viewpoint that was passed on to him by his grandfather and his father.

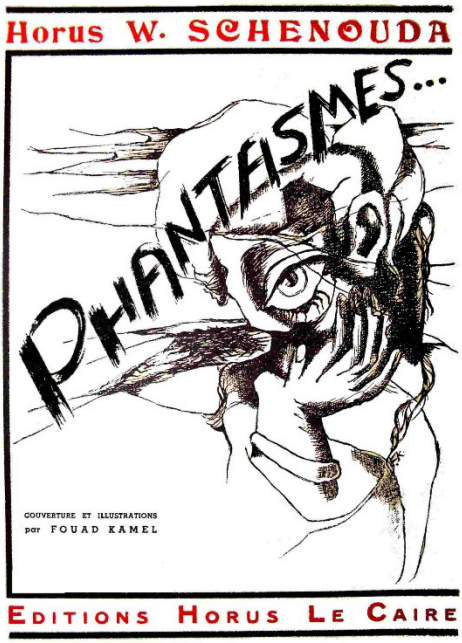

Figure 2: Horus Schenouda, *Phantasmes…* (Horus Editions, Le Caire,1942). Front cover. Original drawing from Fouad Kamel. Marc Kober collection, © Marc Kober and Marylène Farley.

Some of his collections of poems, such as *Le Cantique de la terre* (Hymn to the Earth) and *Vitraux du Ciel et de l'Enfer* (Stained-glass Windows of Heaven and Hell), are in a Christian vein, whereas *Le Pharaon sans tombeau* (The Tombless Pharaoh) or *Otage de Pharaon* (A Pharaoh's Hostage) call upon the prestige of ancient rites. Among Schenouda's literary works, which remain to be discovered by literary critics, the volume entitled *Phantasmes…*, published in Cairo in 1942, seems to be nurtured particularly on surrealist aesthetics. The author was then barely twenty-five years old.

Schenouda's poems describe a world of dizzy sensations resulting from the use of drugs, a world that could still be seen at the end of World War II in the semi-clandestine opium dens of Cairo. This theme, perhaps inspired by Baudelaire's or Thomas de Quincey's works, unfolds in images, following "la magie sombre du vertige" (*Phantasmes* 3) ("the obscure magic of intoxication"). Among other vivid poems, the author decribes a surprising animal sabbath, similar to the saints' visions in the Egyptian desert. Human beings copulate with animals, while remorse, shame and awareness of evil fall like a burden on a conscience tormented by drugs. In the first part, entitled "Opium," and the second, "Tombeaux" (Tombs), the imagination at work is not so much that of Bosch or Goya, as that of ancient Egypt's monomania:

mummies, dynasties, sarcophagi, temples, obelisks and sand everywhere. All these elements refer back to a profaned ancient order, but also to recent Egyptomania. The section entitled *Gouffres* (Abysses), introduces a seductive female figure – "Ses yeux vacillent dans la lumière/ de mon amour" (59) ("Her eyes flickering in the light/ of my love") – and this evocation of vice and sexuality in the poem is somewhat daring for Egypt at that period. This blasphemous and scandalous dimension and its oneiric display must have attracted Henein, who was naturally reading with interest what young Egyptian authors were writing in French at that time.

Georges Henein was three years older, much more aware of contemporary artistic activity, and was already an internationally recognised writer. The two men knew one another through their families and their fathers. They were both from a very wealthy Coptic background, but their relations would prove to remain limited, especially on the literary or artistic level. Henein's verdict concerning Schenouda's first personal work was crucial: it was very encouraging, like a hand reaching out and inviting him to join his group of friends. Horus Schenouda could have joined that small group of surrealist and non-surrealist artists. And yet, the trajectory described in Schenouda's book, in the last two sections, "Athéisme" (Atheism) and "Psaumes" (Psalms), is that of Christian redemption from carnal sin. The "insolvable problem of eternal nothingness" echoes with curious "Psalms", in which the sensual woman, a worthy replica of Aphrodite, calls for "purification" in the last part of the volume. Divine and maternal love merge in an almost angelical finale, contrasting sharply with the crude and obscene violence of the first poems. The Egyptian context and the moral atmosphere in the 1940s oppressed Horus Schenouda, torn between a free affirmation of his desire and a behavior still dictated by his social milieu, his pharaonic origins and his Christian religion.

Georges Henein had already been claiming his freedom as an artist in the fields of pornography and scatology, although he made little use of them in his works. According to Henein, absolute freedom, considered as a basic principle, and an uncompromised "amorality" were necessary for a writer. Henein wrote clearly about this in a 1935 text, "Scatologie, pornographie, literature," that he would never disavow (*Œuvres* 322). As a consequence, Henein's critical appreciation of Schenouda's first book of poems was expected. In 1942, Schenouda's Editions Horus published a short pamphlet, citing responses from the press to his work. In the newspaper *La Patrie*, one critic, Josée Mauer-Sekaly, stated of *Phantasmes…*: "c'est une œuvre déchirante, hurlante, effrayante, hallucinante de vie." (Untitled pamphlet 3) ("It is a harrowing, howling work, terrifyingly, hallucinatingly alive.") She praised "l'enchevêtrement des images démoniaques" ("an entanglement of diabolical images"). For his part, Henein, touched by the freedom of Schenouda's tone, was eager to include *Phantasmes...* in the corpus of

surrealism, of which he was the principal representative in Egypt. More precisely, he presented surrealism as the only key with which readers could penetrate such poems. In other words, without any surrealist background in Egypt, Schenouda's book could not have been published, and it could not be read if surrealism was not first understood by readers. Schenouda cited a comment by Henein published in the Cairo weekly magazine, *Images*: "Une œuvre spéciale contre laquelle buteront comme devant une porte fermée tous ceux auxquels le surréalisme n'a pas encore livré la clé de ses mystères…" (Untitled pamphlet 2). ("A special work, over which those who have not been given the key to surrealism's mysteries will stumble, as over the threshold of a locked door.")

Horus Schenouda, who, at the age of ninety, claimed not to know surrealism's canonical texts like *L'Amour fou* or *Nadja*, nor any of André Breton's works or ideas, represents an astonishing literary virginity, a case of natural, native surrealism, insofar as it has its roots in a family cultural background (a Coptic pharaonic nostalgia, Oriental Christianity and an attraction to paganism). His fascination with the world of dreams, eroticism and psychedelic vertigo, enabled him to shift the limits of ordinary realism. Nevertheless, in several poetical works, Schenouda seems closer to Pierre-Jean Jouve's world than to Breton's. The native religiosity of the one comes up against the other's anticlericalism and rejection of all religions. Maybe the originality of Schenouda's case as a surrealist in spite of himself stems from the alliance between religion and an unconscious form of psychoanalysis. It must be made clear that, for social and political reasons, any kind of rapprochement, let alone a true friendship between Schenouda and Henein was a sheer impossibility, because the first respected his milieu's conservative position, while the second supported Bakunin or Trotsky's ideology, after having praised Lenin. In the case of Schenouda, so strongly attracted by ancient Egypt, writing poems could be considered as a magical operation in which the author's life is at stake. And Henein, when he read Schenouda, considered surrealism as a key for opening poems filled with ancient magic. Thus, Henein saw in Schenouda a concrete manifestation of the link Breton had made between surrealism and ancient Egyptian magic.

Horus Schenouda cannot be exactly compared to Georges Henein, because his belief in magical powers as well as his use of poetical words is different. Maybe the way Georges Henein kept a distance from militant surrealist action in 1948 should be interpreted as a new experience in his life: the rediscovery of "Domaines reservés" ("Secret subjects") and magic powers of ancient Egypt.

Translated from the French by Georgiana Colvile.

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Except where noted, all quotations are translated by Georgiana Colvile.

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