

## THE NILE OF SURREALISM

### Surrealist activities in Egypt

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#### I

In his first letter to Georges Henein, sent on April 8 1936, André Breton had this to say : *The imp of the perverse, as he deigns to appear to me, seems to have one wing here, the other in Egypt (1).* Here André Breton foretold in a sense the course the surrealist intention would take in Egypt from 1936 to 1952.

The purpose of this paper is to present a critical survey of surrealism in Egypt, in which we will see that, in spite of the protagonists' original aim to allow surrealism to break through Egyptian reality in the hope of making it respond to the needs of a society undergoing what some historians have aptly phrased *the crisis of orientation* (2), their efforts finally turned out, ephemeral, to be, though very resounding, flappings of Breton's wing .

What seems to have happened was a settling of accounts in favour of surrealist creation as part of the French presence in Egypt, rather than a communication with the native that would take account of the emancipatory message of surrealism. On the contrary, what was communicated to the Egyptian public was rather the narrative of progress under the sign of Reason than the liberating sign of the Irrational. We will see in due course that the blame for such a paradox should not be placed entirely on the proponents of surrealism in Egypt, but rather on the inherently closed character of Arabic society in the face of occidental innovation, the fact being that this society would dismiss any such form of innovation. Our concluding remarks will address the question of the inherent failure of Occidental modernity in so far as it dreams of playing a significant role in an alien context. For though it may play such a role, it is on condition that it renounces, both in theory and practice, its fundamental given.

## II

Instead of addressing its essential condition that *reason cannot appreciate the true value of reality*, surrealism in Egypt was vainly forced to bear witness to a desire to utilise such an accursed reason to be able to elucidate a so called progressive role in a society motivated, as was that of Egypt of the time, by a superstitious belief system. In other words, the surrealist instance as it flickered in the Valley of the Nile takes credit as being an example of what I prefer to call an inevitable shift lurking within (indeed inherent to) this surrealist experience. Rather than being a ravishing critique of Reason's revolutionary claims it was transformed into being a mere component part of the positivist project. I am thereby less concerned with the Egyptian contribution to surrealism than with their failure to realise an effective stance of modernity in Egypt; a failure which would lead them to turn against what they wanted to effect, and would lead them to criticize their marxist-surrealist past, and to move from collective to individual action.

Before tracing this epistemological problem, let me make two points clear: in the first place, I prefer to call this surrealist endeavour an intention rather than a movement. For the main characteristic of a movement is to be a natural outcome of the theoretical turmoil situated in time, thereby accomplishing a necessary change of outlook. An intention, on the other hand, is always a proposition which certain individuals introduce into public debates thinking that they effect a movement of ideas that can bring about a sought-for change. In the second place, although I would like to thank Mr. Serge Guilbaut for inviting me to this conference I find myself here in the presence of people more objective than myself in calling the past history of modernity into account. My considerations of this endeavour should be taken as a poet's notes, a poet who has, from the beginning of the seventies, tried to bring to light these very neglected efforts with the intention of presenting them as a valid cultural reference for a new confrontation with a given situation; a poet who has found himself submerged in the same feeling of failure.

## III

As is well known, Egypt was the first Arab country to be drawn into the process of modernisation. Napoleon Bonaparte is credited with stealing from the Vatican the Arabic printing machine and bringing it to Egypt (3). This essential element of modernisation has, subsequently, not only animated her cultural life, but also caused the cultural awakening which permitted the revival of Arabic literature. Newspapers were issued for the

first time in Egypt in the early 1800s. Lebanese and Syrian immigrants played a great role in both literature and publishing. *Bulaq Press*, for example, which was created in 1830 in the town of Bulaq, close to Cairo, by Nicola al Mazabki, of Lebanese origin, was the first to publish European works in which new literary genres alien to the Arabic sensibility such as the novel, drama, etc.- were introduced. Again, the true efforts at modernisation were, in fact, undertaken by Muhammad Ali and Khedive Ismail during the British occupation. Indeed, each member of this nonindigenous Trinity should be remembered for his part in modernising Egypt : revolutionising the governmental structure, inculcating constitutional principles, and giving importance to urban developments such as piped water and gas, which were introduced into Cairo and the larger towns. Education, public health and prisons, were reformed ; a new district called Ismailia was founded, and parts of Cairo and Alexandria were converted into European-style sectors. Even so all this was done while leaving untouched the urgent problem of the slums where the majority of the people lived (4). Each of these carriers of modernisation *had used modernisation as a means towards attaining a personal end... and never looked upon it as having an intrinsic value to the population*, as Afaf al Sayyid-Marsot put it in her interesting account of *Egypt's Liberal Experiment 1922-1936* (5). The dialectic of these efforts is very well summarized in her book and I would like to quote her at length : *Muhammad Ali*, Afaf points out, *wanted an independent kingdom, therefore he needed a modernised army and bureaucracy, and, if as a by-product of such a policy an intellectual movement was born, it was one to which he paid little heed and which was dismissed as irrelevant to his interests. Ismail had pretensions of becoming a monarch in the European style, of joining the royal club, so to speak. Newspapers were necessary in order to project his image as an enlightened ruler. But when the newspapers sought to emulate their counterpart and criticized the ruler, he deemed them impertinent and subject to censure, if not to exile. While the British occupation authorities in Egypt from 1882 on, did not appreciate these efforts at modernisation at the hands of the Egyptians, which they labeled "trying to make a western purse out of an eastern sow's ear", they girded themselves, Afaf believes, to take up the White Man's Burden, which meant in practical terms that they would supply a ventre plein policy to the masses and would scotch the pretensions of the elite to selfrule by taking it upon themselves to act as absolute authority in government by example of good government* (6).

At any rate, as these stages of modernisation were implemented by *nonindigenous agents* and were reinforced by a colonialist spirit which invariably manifested its substance as foreign power encroaching on Egypt, so currents of nationalist opposition and socio-economic resentments emerged in the form of insurrection, i.e. the unsuccessful

rebellion of Ahmad Urabi in 1882, or in the form of the publication of a vast array of polemical-minded literature that flooded the intellectual scene, thereby exposing the divided self of Egyptian society : Divine revelation of Islam or the scientific mind of the Occident ? If Egypt wished to create an independent way of life in the modern world, the choice was between a return to the principles of Koran, or, as Taha Hussaine put it in his *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, “to share western civilization in its good aspects and its bad aspects, in what we like and what we do not like” (7).

All this resulted in a religious-nationalist uproar which loomed on the horizon the beginning of the twentieth century. Its first victory was the liberation of Egypt from the Ottoman lordship. And by the beginning of the 1920s, when the British troops withdrew and the kingdom of Egypt was declared, a liberal-nationalism reigned under which European culture was promoted, liberal intellectuals dared to confirm the Pharonic past as the source of Egypt's national heritage, in the process revealing their true standpoint, i.e. rationalism and a western cultural orientation (8). Furthermore, the cultural activities of the French expatriates had been restored to vigour : new periodicals were founded and many associations originated, such as *Les Amis de l'Art*, *Les Argonautes*, and especially the *Essayistes* club, which was the most active in launching conferences and organising exhibitions. Its organ *Un effort* was very open to cultural creations (9).

#### IV

When the futurist poet E. F. Marinetti presented his lecture : *La Poésie Motorisé*, in the *Essayistes* club, on 24 March 1938, Georges Henein, a member of the club, stood up and violently denounced the products of Fascism (10). This caused such a scandal that a split took place, and Henein moved away with the intention of establishing his own independent group. One should bear in mind that the presence of Marinetti had coincided with a general fear prevalent in Egypt of Italy's ambitions following her invasion of Ethiopia.

In another instance, on December 22 of the same year, a tract, in Arabic and French, probably written by Henein himself, and signed by 40 artists, writers, journalists, lawyers, etc., was distributed all over the streets of Cairo and sent throughout the world, as a protest against the Nazi regime's condemnation of modern art as *degenerate* and ripe for the bonfire. This tract which was entitled *Vivre l'Art Dégénéré*, had clarified that *one knows with what hostility the existing society looks upon any creation, literary or artistic, that, more or less directly, threatens the intellectual disciplines and the moral values on which its very duration -its*

*survival- depends .This hostility manifests itself, today, in the totalitarian countries, especially in the hitlerian Germany, by the most abject aggression against an art that galooned brutals pro•moted to the rank of omniscient arbiters, call degenerate (... ) Intellectuals, writers, artists, let us all together take up the challenge. We stand for this degenerate art.It is in it that reside all the chances of the future. Let us work for its victory over the middle ages which is rising in the very heart of the Occident (11).*

These were the initial factors which necessitated the official formation, on 19 January 1939, of the *Art et Liberté* group, the name being chosen in implicit agreement with the Breton-Trotsky manifesto, *For an Independent Revolutionary Art*. This had been laun•ched on 25 July 1938 in Mexico, inviting revolutionary artists of all nations to unite in a federation of independent revolutionary art commonly called the FIARI (12).

Georges Henein and Ramses Younan had, in fact, already been trying to circulate surrealist ideas : You•nan in his pioneering Arabic book *The Objec•tive of the Contempo•rary Artist*, in which he traced analytically the up-to-date cur•rents of modern European art, concluding that *art, thanks to the magical means at its disposal for creating symbols and finding imaginary - but neverthe•less convincing – solutions,can help us to organise our disordered feelings, to define our position towards problems of life, and to open the way to the emergence of new criteria for the appreciation of the spiritual values of things* (13) ; Henein in his various expository articles in the magazine *Un effort* (1934- 1935) and in ephemeral publication such as *Carrefours* ; in his provocative lectures at the *Essayistes* club. Henein was the first to in•troduce surrealism into Egypt, through his first lecture *Bilan du Movement Surréaliste*, given on 4 February, in which he made the accurate remark concerning surrealism : *You know all these grey electrical boxes which contain high power transformer or high voltage cables, on the sides of which a no•ice warns you “Défense d’ouvrir: danger de mort”.Well, surrealism is something which a hand with innumerable fingers has written in response to the preceeding formula :”Prière d’ouvrir : danger de vie “* (14).

## V

On march 1939 a roneotyped bulletin called *Art et Liberté* appeared in French. It contained reactions concerning *Vivre l’Art Dégénéré*, polemics with a journalist, a list of recommended books and a text by Henein on *the Betrayers of Spain* . The second and the last issue appeared in May of the same year, not very different in its militant tone from the first, except that it contained three poems in Arabic written by the same illustrator of both numbers : Fouad Kamel (1919-1974), a talented painter who *sometimes*

*become a poet when he had no money to buy oil colours, as he declared. The absence of difference between, for example, a human body and a chair was reflected in the brilliant intensification of colours in his oeuvres plastiques thus giving expression to the hidden terror of social reality. Once, an art critic having asked him for an explanation of his scribbles overcrowded with colour, Fouad replied that he wanted to express the feeling of the chair when we sit on it (15).*

After overcoming a financial crisis, by the end of 1939 the group had become enthusiastic about publicly intervening as the only group capable of presenting some cure for the ills of Egypt by turning attention away from the concept of modernisation, always regarded as a synonym for westernisation, to that of modernity in which *art*, according to Henein, *is inherently in the midst of the great melée*. In other words, modernity is a *call to turn to reality not as something accomplished or fixed, but rather something dynamic, malleable and capable of being improved (16).*

## VI

The *Art et Liberté* group never specifically declared itself a surrealist group per se. It was *founded with the objective of affirming cultural and artistic liberties and keeping Egyptian youth in contact as much as possible with the latest literary, artistic and social events of the world, as their foundation platform declared (17)*. Their *oeuvres plastiques*, especially those of Kamel El Telmisany or of Fouad Kamel, show a closer affinity with social expressionism than with the imagery of surrealism. In brief, *the Art et Liberté* group had clearly adopted the Breton-Trotsky platform, and had become a lively segment of FIARI, indeed continued its activities for considerably longer than FIARI itself which was dissolved within a few months. *Art et Liberté* then, was a radical affirmation of the *interSubObjectivity*, anticipated in the manifesto, between the social determinant that *makes the artist the natural ally of the revolution*, and the immanent logic of creativity itself that accepts *no authority, no dictation, no orders from above*. For the radical mechanism of being a creative will, according to the manifesto, leads of necessity to the *independence of art-for the revolution / the revolution – for the complete liberation of art*. It is noteworthy that this search for a concurrent cause, on the part of Breton and Trotsky, hides, in fact, their concurrent *unrest*; the failure of *form* and the failure of the *historical agent of change* both in conjunction haunting the whole concept of liberation. Instead of questioning the concept itself they tried to escape the true crisis of the late thirties through an optimistic compromise. This crisis would resurface after the war as a total destruction of surrealist imagery thereby consecrating the fragmentation of its emancipatory content. It is true that the Egyptian

surrealists in applying this platform in Egypt over-emphasised the crisis, but, nevertheless, they were the first postwar surrealists to call for a radical critique of its *provisions*, having experienced the problems involved in a society which had neither a *form* nor an *historical agent* to lose.

## VII

The Egyptian surrealists' project was placed in evidence in the 17 numbers of their French weekly *Don Quichotte*, in the seven numbers of the Arabic monthly magazine *At-Tatawor* (evolution), and in the five exhibitions of *Independent Art* which they launched throughout the war years.

The first number of *Don Quichotte* appeared on December 6 1939. The title, although Georges Henein considered it to be awkward, was chosen as an homage to Gabriel Almor, the ex-ambassador of republican Spain, who had refused to make any allegiance with the Franquist regime (18). The tendencies evident in the newspaper were various and often confused and sometimes contradictory. There was no unanimous political vision. Social matters were tackled from stalinist and trotskyist angles, or even from the liberal point of view. In fact Henry Curiel, the founder, was soon to become the backbone of the Communist Party of Egypt, which was founded in 1942. Yet the literary page, controlled by Henein himself, was rich and coherent from a purely surrealist stand: insightful and critical articles on contemporary Egyptian artists by Kamel El-Telmisany (1910 ?-1962) an art critic and painter who was part of *Art et Liberté* from the day of its birth, but left in the mid forties, preferring to become a realist film-maker than a surrealist artist; witty articles by Henein on Vaché, Delvaux, and Michaux, and on poetical matters. His provocative essay *A propos de quelques salauds* (about a couple of bastards) was such a devastating critique of La Bruyère, La Fontaine and their like, that the editorial committee received dozens of insulting letters. As a matter of fact only the articles of Georges Henein had a lasting impact and universal flavour, as the French novelist Henri Calet told him in a letter (19).

On the other hand, in *At-Tatawor*, the Arab language magazine, the spirit was enlightening, educative and progressive from a positivist position. Here one could see the inevitable shift taking place. Writers touched on social problems such as prostitution, poverty, religion, taxes, etc., from a very rationalist angle. Prostitution, for instance, could not be done away with, according to Younan, unless we do away with poverty, since it is poverty which produces prostitution. Religious forces were attacked, by Anwar Kamel, for being too conservative and archaic. He could respect them only if they adopted the modern way of combat in

which *pen must be fought by pen and not by sword*. The theories of Freud were hinted at and simplified for the reader. Henein gave his account of *humour noir* and the problems of taxes. Together with a translation of some of Eluard's poems and an excerpt from his *L'Evidence Poétique*, there were two prose poems written by an Egyptian poet called Ahmad Ru•shdi, which were even worse than the Stalinist poems of Aragon. *Art for art's sake* was attacked by an external contributor, in which he recounted that men of letters were useless and in Egypt should be replaced by craftsmen, etc. It should, however, be noted that Ramses You•nan was the only member in the group, who had, in most of his articles, insisted radically on the importance of sexual education in Egypt, and on going dialectically beyond *the discourse of Reason* which was needed at the time. *At-Tatawor* had, never•theless, helped many marxist circles come into existence during the beginning of the second World War, in the hope of evolving a communist ideology. And they did. For during the war years, thanks to the Allies and the British occupation the situation was favourable for any group be it marxist, surrealist, or reactionary to bring its ideas before the public, without se•rious danger.

Anyhow, it lasted less than a year, for a split took place within the group. Anwar Kamel, the editor of *Al-Tatawor*, broke with the trotskyist tendency, and formed his *independent* Stalinist biased group *Bread and Liberty* which didn't leave any noteworthy trace. He would soon return to the group and publish the most virulent pamphlet ever written in Arabic against Stalinism : *Opium of the People* .

## VIII

Having been unable by the end of 1941 to bring out a publication of their own, they joined the editorial board of *El-Majjallah El-Djadidah* (the new magazine) founded – during the 1930s – by the liberal thinker Sallama Mousa, in order to continue what I would like to call the *social surrealism* of *At-Tatawor* magazine. A year later, Mousa, trusting in the revolutionary impulse of youth, decided to leave the journal under their control. The group ( Henein, Younan, Kamel El-Telmisany, Fouad Kamel etc.) determined to ef•fect a permanent revolu•tion and armed with *surrealism* this *last spark of European intelligence*, as Walter Benjamin defines it, had brought out many special numbers concerning democracy, contemporary arts, poverty, Stalinism, etc. in which their analysis was favourable to workers' strikes and im•plied an invitation to cut with the political zigzag of the official left groups. They even organised a small marxist demonstration against Bour•geoisie and its allies, which the police put to an end before the demonstrators had even finished the second couplet of *the International*, translated into Arabic by Younan. The group then revealed



not only its trotskyist colours in launching a very open critique of the USSR and Stalinism in general, but also its own libertarian intentions of violating the taboos. By the end of 1944, it was banned.

## IX

The five exhibitions of *Independent Art* were very large and have certainly left their traces on the history of modern Egyptian art, for they were very provocative and full of *humour noir* and spectacular. They contained all sorts of paintings, photographs, sculptures and ready-made objects, etc. The criterion was not surrealist, but rather a unity of artists from different backgrounds who sought to affirm cultural and artistic freedom, for these exhibitions were the only possible ways to confirm the importance and the validity of the Breton-Trotsky manifesto. In the French catalogue which accompanied their fifth exhibition in mid-1945, entitled *La Séance Continue*, they reminded the visitors of following categorical warning, reprinted from their first exhibition catalogue (1940) : *At the hour when almost everywhere in the world only the sound of cannons is taken seriously it is necessary to provide the possibility for the artistic spirit to express its independence and vitality.*

By the end of 1945 the political situation had become intolerable. A wave of arrests was launched by the police against all left wing groups. In mid-1946 Younan was arrested and then released on 8 September on bail of 10.000 old French francs; he then left for Paris, and remained there until the Suez Crisis exploded, when the French Broadcasting Service dismissed him for refusing to broadcast news against the Egyptian state.

## X

In the postwar years, and after much optimistic militant activity, a void came into view ; pessimism began to gain ground : *The taste of sand in the mouth. And the void, as a rule, does not undergo the dialectical process* (20).

The vital step was to break with the traditional forms of trotskyist militancy. A letter, written by Heinein, and sent to the *4th International* whispered this into the ears of the followers of Trotsky : *Concerning the result of several years of semi-legal activities, with large intervals of clandestine struggle, Younan, Anwar Kamel and myself consider the experience to be an almost complete defeat and wish that an end be put to this chapter. ( ... ) As to our attitude to the USSR in case of renewed conflict, a few of us would under no circumstances envision support of*

*the USSR, whatever the circumstances may be..On this point, our activity revolves around the Marxist tendency (21).*

The second step was to consider that *the marxist system itself is limited only to the analysis of the evolution of regimes, namely a life that passes from one prison to the next (...)* Thus historical materialism is incapable of describing scientifically that which is here and that which is beyond “life covered”, “disciplined life”, determined life”, or to sum up, *prison-life*. This critical diagnosis of marxism, made by Younan in his anti-dialectical materialist *Variations on the Verb to Cover*, and published in the first number of *La Part du Sable* (February 1947), was clarified collectively in their tract *Although I sowed dragons , I reap fleas* in which *the defeats of marxism* appeared to them *in a large measure as the expression of a mental routine incapable of making room for the reality of a world in a state of becoming* . And they ended their tract with the following three slogans, obviously inspired by Max Stirner:

*The individual against the tyranny of the state*

*The imagination against the routine of dialectical materialism*

*Liberty against all forms of terror.*

They brought out the first number of *La Part du Sable*, in concord with the *International Exhibition of Surrealism 1947*. It contained critical and poetical texts in which one senses the movement of their thought away from marxism and all the ready-made propositions of the left. For instance, Younan in his *Variations*, has pointed out that the slogan *Transform the world will lead to nothing more than a transformation of regime, unless it contains an appeal to have done with history once and for all... A tradeunion or a revolutionary party may, just like a church, act as an “envelope”, a “spare-womb”(22)*. While Henein, in his preface *Welcome to Elsner*, where he called for *female workers of all lands to be beautiful*, made this difference between surrealism and socialism : *Surrealism is the only modern moral project (without drafts, without traced-out roads, without rewards) which has been born ahead of rupture acquire . This is contrary to the moral of socialism which, in many ways, limits itself to transposing christian values (23)*.

## XI

As we will see, this distinction was going to tear apart the marxist basics of surrealism as the first initiative of a definitive rupture . For example, when the French surrealist group decided to settle its accounts with stalinism, christianity and existentialism, via the 1947 *Inaugural Rupture* tract, Henein and Younan had insisted that *notions such as dictatorship of the proletariat, permanent revolution, class consciousness, etc. which have already suffered such a grievous harm from history, should be avoided* (24).

This tract, doomed to be a dead letter in an intellectual milieu notoriously against surrealism, finally appeared with its marxist terminology much nuanced due to the contribution of Georges Henein.

Surrealists of the postwar had, in fact, *broken with marxism, though without having the courage to tackle any enlightening criticism of its ideological progression, in other words, without anything being learned from its defection*, as Henein had explained to Nicolas Calas in a letter (25). Conversely, a year later, the French surrealist group would find it necessary to bring out another tract, this time anticlerical, under the title *A la niche les glapisseurs de Dieu !*, which Younan would refuse to sign, arguing that the surrealist critique of religion had been made once and for all by Péret in his day. Younan, in taking the view that to stand still inevitably leads to regression, demanded that what had already been achieved should be left behind. From this point of view the Egyptian surrealists planned to bring out a magazine called *Septentrion*, which would contain a critique of surrealism *from within and with certain values of traditional, heroic and aristocratic order which surrealism had never dared to fully assert* (26). Breton's reply to Younan *that it was better than nothing*, had, in fact, helped pour oil on troubled waters. For *if surrealism had arrived at the point of being better than nothing, then all discouragement was permitted*, as Henein told Breton in his letter of rupture, dated 26 July 1948 (27).

The exclusions from the group in the winter of 48-49 doomed the surrealists to a situation which Henein considered more *wretched than desperate*. And here Henein made the important observation that *the*

postwar period was marked by non-creativity, as he clarified to Calas, and that surrealism should think twice about claiming the glory for certain of its works which were not by right its own, but rather those of Artaud or Michaux (28). Furthermore, when Henein was trying to suggest to André Breton, on his return from America, that a general consultation of surrealists throughout the world was more urgent than a show-off exhibition, Breton prevaricated, arguing that only confusion would arise from it. Yet, in spite of this peculiar way of despairing about the future of the surrealist movement (29), the confusion which Breton wanted to avoid was not very far from prevailing : peripheral surrealists (Cobra, Lyrical abstraction, Bauhaus Imagiste, Lettrism, etc.) had surfaced to show evidence of the new necessity for intervention. To an extent, their experiments, which were the *dernier cri* of the Cold War's aesthetic sensibility, did succeed in breaking through the traditional imagery of surrealism, putting it at stake. One could feel as if surrealism had run its immediate course. It is important to note that Henein, in his positive review of Breton's *Arcane 17* in 1946, already separated himself from Breton's excessive optimism. *The world, seemed to him, is pressing us to refute fact after fact : that poetry is not made by all but by one, that I is not an other* (30). Postwar society, then, was too strong, according to Georges Henein. *That it does not exclude those who are determined to subvert it, rather adopts them. Surrealism, therefore, cannot help being doomed to yawn in front of its own image* (31) unless it wipes away the reification of its social prerogative, i.e. *the optimist crumbs which had long been its staple diet* (32). This insolent critique gives an impression that if, to paraphrase a quotation (33) Breton used from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, surrealism has arrived in history as a sparrow hawk, it could not depart as a phoenix, for the new fire of the fifties is too cold to leave ashes that could recall external life.

## XII

The second issue of *La Part du Sable* came out in April 1950 as a *Cahier de Littérature appliquée*. It contained creative writings by R. Char, H. Michaux, E. Jabès, M. Hafez, G. Henein, etc. The whole number was silent on surrealism, and reflected Younan and Henein's deep wish to bring out a *publication that could be a healthy enterprise of mental itching*, supporting their belief that *downright subversion was to be disengaged, to instigate new subjects of pleasure* (34). At the end of this number, they promised the reader that the 3rd would be devoted to the theme of

Violence, but it never appeared. I hasten to add that the theme of violence was touched on only once, in Henein's *Prestige de la Terreur* (1945), concerning the atom bomb (35).

However, the 1952 revolution of the liberal officers broke out and not only put an end to all such circles of opposition, be they marginal, nationalist or religious, but also reoriented certain of their arguments according to the compass of the new state. Although the Egyptian surrealists welcomed this *revolution*, two years later they were to realize that the future is too reticent to be named. Their critical consciousness which had, already, been precluded from dialogue with its own origins, i.e. surrealism, here also suffered complete isolation, becoming cut off from any possibility of breaking into the dictates of the Egyptian masses' *immediate perception*. For what took place, in fact, was not a revolution brought about by the insurrection of the masses, but a transformation of power from the King's weak, archaic hand, to the firmer hand of the army, whose innumerable fingers, while kneading Egyptian society into one fitted to the new relations of power, have originated a new confrontation between the orient and the occident, the objective of which is, among others, to evacuate from Egyptian society any residue that could validate modernity as an attitude of spirit that can give birth to a critical consciousness towards the whole society.

In spite of all this, Henein, Younan and Fouad Kamel had from time to time been able to publish a *Cahier* on, for example, Kafka, Nietzsche, Kierkegard, etc., or to organise an exhibition.

### XIII

Ramses Younan was born on 10 August 1913, in al-Minya, in a poor protestant family, and died 24 December 1966. Georges Henein was born on 20 November 1914, in a very well-to-do Coptic family. He left Egypt for good, at the end of the fifties and went to Paris where he died on 18 July 1973; a few hours before his death, he had revealed to his wife that *baby elephants die alone*.

## XIV

We have witnessed the trajectory of the surrealist adventure in Egypt. These surrealist baby elephants were born – certainly to be wild – in an environment marked by regression and an internal *crisis of orientation*. Their aim was to effect the project of occidental (that is European) modernity, which emerged from a *constant revolutionizing of the means of production, i.e. permanent sweeping away of all earlier fixed, fastfrozen relationships* (as Marx put it) in a society where, on the contrary, the socio-economic structure had remained stagnant and undisturbed for centuries under the sway of the traditional archaic mode of production. Furthermore, their radical anticonformist ideas, written in French, revealed in an original way the emancipatory project of surrealism. It is appropriate that they should also have introduced this into practice in the Arabic language. However, this sort of innovation must have been difficult in a society where the main historical need was not primarily to affirm artistic liberty, since it had never passed through the trajectory of the European history of art. For example, if we compare Henein's review of Nicolas Calas' *Foyers d'incendie* which he had written in French for *La Revue des Conférences*, with the adaptation that was made into Arabic and published in *At-Tatawor*, we see how the critical vigour was reduced to an anodyne commentary (36). The main task in Egypt was to bring to the Arabic language innovation that had the power to liberate it from the tyranny of traditional Koranic structure. An innovation that must, as the early poetical products of surrealism had done to the French language, decipher the hieroglyphics of prefigured patterns of expression, in which the obstacle (i.e. the traditional Aristotelian distrust of invention and imagination) was crystalized. Such a task, certainly, would entail the sweeping away of the ultra conservative Islamic train of thought, which was *silent and alert like a sentry on duty* (to paraphrase Frazer). It was impossible for intellectuals to risk such a project, for the simple reason that most of them were Christians. Furthermore, the idea of the modern, be it modernity or modernisation, was, as we saw, imported along with the foreign domination which encroached on Egypt for more than a century. Therefore, in addition to the fact that the Arabic mind itself is branded by traditional rules of perception, any standpoint of innovation - as a by-product of the westernisation of the social life - would be taken as a Christian intrusion on the privacy of the Islamic spirit, without which the mental structure of Egypt would be inert. Even those Arabs who advocated occidental ways of thinking, and played a role in bringing about

the cultural awakening of Egypt from her Islamic past were Christians and not Muslims, and never dared go further in their aspiration towards innovation. *Islam*, as Grunbaum has rightly indicated, *for many a century continued liberal in accepting information, techniques, objects, and customs from all quarters; it was careful to eliminate or neutralize any element endangering its religious foundation, and it endeavoured consistently to obscure the foreign character of important borrowings and to reject what could not be thus adjusted to its style of thinking and feeling* (37).

The Egyptian surrealists were obliged to make this inevitable shift : that is, to play a part in Arabic publication in which their enlightenment was neutralized like *a knife that lacks a blade, and has lost its handle* (38). While in their French writings they were not only equal, most of the time, to the main stream of radical European thought, but often ahead of it.

We saw also how, before and during the war years, they declared an optimistic war of liberation, but this was rejected in the postwar period as invalid, or rather as an obstacle to liberation itself. These *pessimistic* declarations were thrown into the face of the most advanced currents of the Occident's revolutionary optimism. Up to this point the Egyptian surrealists had experienced these currents in an alien context. And to the degree that the content was shorn of its historical context and put into practice in circumstances where the majority were illiterate and in need of basic education, then this content would logically reveal its historical inadequacy all the more easily, since its rhetorical aspect would be evident. The shift was unavoidable. But it would lead to a schizophrenic state of mind which could not be overcome unless an act of sublimation was performed so as to go beyond the necessity of this dual critical approach. It is interesting to mention that their awareness of the historical importance of a shift towards a critique of the optimistic content of surrealism resulted in a concurrent shift in their own paintings and drawings, from the Dalían imagery of surrealism, in the case of Younan, and the futuristic expressionistic motorized drawings, in the case of Fouad Kamel, towards an abstractionism which would explode the figurative consciousness inherent in their pursuit, in the hope of finding, under the very ruins of its history, the fading segment of its own being.

## Notes :

1-Alexandrian : Georges Henein, Seghers, Paris 1981, p. 17.

2-See Nadav Safran's excellent book : Egypt in Search of Political Community. Cambridge, Mass. Press. 1966, p. 165-180

3-See the article concerning Egypt, in Encyclopaedia Britannica, William Benton Publisher 1969, V. 8, p. 64-77

4-Ibid.

5-Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid-Marsot : Egypt's Liberal Experiment 1922-1936., University of California Press, 1977.

6-Ibid. p. 217-218.

7-Cited by Hamilton A. K. Gibb in his *Studies on the Civilization of Islam*. Bacon Press, Boston 1962, p. 332.

8-Safran, op. cit. p. 141-164.

9-For a full detail of the history of the French literature in Egypt, see Jean-Jacques Luthi's important *Introduction à la Littérature d'Expression Française en Egypte (1798-1945)*, Editions de l'école, Paris 1974.

10-Aimé Azar : *La Peinture Moderne en Egypte*. Cairo 1961, p. 52.

11-Ibid. p. 53.

12-For the English translation of the manifesto, see André Breton : *What is Surrealism*, Edited and introduced by Franklin Rosemont, Pluto Press, London 1978, p. 183-187.

13-Ramses Younan : *Ghayat al-rassam al-'asri*. Cairo 1938, p. 49.

14-Georges Henein : *Bilan du Mouvement Surréaliste*, in *La Revue*



des Conférences Françaises en Orient, N° 8, October 1937, Cairo, p. 645.

15-Jean Bastia : L'Exposition de l'Art Independent, in Le Progrès Egyptien, 16 Avril 1941, Cairo.

3 Georges Henein : L'Art dans la Mêlée, in La Revue des Conférences, op. cit. N° 24, 1939, Cairo.

17-Published in the second number of the FIARI's bulletin; Clé, February 1939.

18-See my article on Don Quichotte, in Les Grandes Largeurs N° 11, Paris 1985, p. 5-8.

19-Les Grandes Largeurs, N° 2-3, Paris 1981, p.46.

20-Ramses Younan : Variations on the Verb to Cover, English translation published in Grid N° 5, Paris January 1987.

21-Unpublished letter dated 20 April 1947 ?

22-Younan, Variations, op. cit.

23-La Part du Sable, N°1, Cairo 15 February 1947, p. 11.

4 Georges Henein : *Quatre Lettres à Nicolas Calas*, published in *Hommage à Georges Henein*, Cairo July 1974. p. 45.

25-Ibid. p. 45.

26-Ibid. p. 44.

27-Alexandrian, op.cit. p. 54.

28-Henein, Quatre..., op. cit. p. 45.

29-Ibid. p. 45.

30-Valeurs N°5, Cairo, April 1946, p. 91.

31-Rixes N°1, Paris 1950, p.4.

32-Quatre, op.cit.

33-The quotation is "I arrive a sparrow hawk and depart a phoenix .Voice of the third soul". See Breton, op. cit. p. 281.

34-Rixes, op. cit.

35-It is worth noting that the 3em Convois ( edited by Yves Bonnefoy ) in which Henein was a frequent contributor, announced in its fifth number (1951) that n° 6 will be devoted to the theme of *Violence*, a number that never been published.

36 It is not within the range of this paper to make a comparative study of how the Egyptian surrealists translated their ideas from French into Arabic, although such a study would certainly bring to light the very problem involved in bringing about modernity ( that is European harbinger of a forthcoming change ) in an alien context such as the Arabic one. Here, still, for a bilingual reader, is an example in which a very ideologically precise attitude against the Stalinist methods of blacking- out the oppositional culture, was transformed into an uncritical educational project : One item from their foundation platform which was written in French for *Clé* ( N°2 ) , and the Arabic version of it published in *At-Tatawor* (N°1) : *La mise en lumière des oeuvre, des hommes et des valeurs, dont la connaissance est indispensable à la compréhension des temps presents* .

37 E. Von Grunebaum : *Medieval Islam* , The University of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 321.

38 Ch. Lichtenberg : *Aphorisms, in Surrealist Transformation* N °2, Oct.1968, p.20.

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