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The Myth of the False: Ramses Younan's Post-Structuralism *avant la lettre*

Andrea Flores

One of the founding members of the group "Art and Freedom" (Art et Liberté), Ramses Younan (1913-1966) was a painter, essayist, critic, and translator. He came from Minya, Egypt to study painting at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo from which he earned a diploma in 1933. After many exhibitions in Cairo in the 1930s and having published an essay on modern art in 1938, he became known as one of the most prominent figures in the contemporary art scene in Egypt. His paintings were mainly non-realist but figurative, especially before 1956 when he returned from France after an eleven-year stay. Younan's innovations, both in illustrative "dreamscape" painting as well as in his abstract paintings after 1956, had a significant impact on the development of modern art in Egypt.

In 1939, along with the prolific francophone poet and critic Georges Henein, Younan founded the group "Art and Freedom" in Cairo. The artists of this group, and more specifically Ramses Younan and Georges Henein, were responding to the art and theories of the French leftist avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s headed by André Bréton in his surrealist movement. Henein and Younan, along with painters Kamil al-Tilmisani, Fu'ad Kamil and several others, founded a group whose central focus was clearly inspired by the revolutionary spirit of surrealism in Paris. Their group photo mimics the famous one taken of the surrealists, leaving out the French group's feature of the beheaded female dummy hanging from the ceiling. The group's early manifestos, exhibitions, and pamphlets appear to constitute no more than an Egyptian "bureau" of the Parisian surrealist movement. That this is not the case becomes clear upon closer inspection. Their terrain of artistic and intellectual struggle remained to a large degree Egyptian. These intellectuals had contact with French culture and periods of residence in France, but always explicitly addressed the specific problems they faced as Egyptian artists.

Contrary to the claims of some critics who view "Art and Freedom" as a pure reproduction of the Parisian movement, it is clear that they maintained a critical perspective vis-à-vis surrealism. "Art and Freedom" was initially constituted by a group of Egyptian modern artists as a reevaluation of the European left based on a critique of the avant-garde. From its inception, the group published articles against the Italian avant-garde because of its fascist tendencies and against the French

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avant-garde for its bourgeois compromises as well as for its blind acceptance of communism. The movement itself was founded as a form of resistance against a rising fascism in Europe and, perhaps more importantly, against the restrictions on artistic expression they felt were dominating their own society. The members wrote many articles in the 1930s critical of the fascism looming in Europe but always included, occasionally implicitly, the elements of religious and political repression they themselves were facing as artists in Egypt. Just prior to the inauguration of the group, Georges Henein verbally and violently protested against fascist influence on avant-garde art on the occasion of Marinetti's visits to Egypt for his lecture on art on 24 March 1938. Criticizing the paradoxes of the European avant-garde was a way for Egyptian artists to struggle for freedom on their own front.

The members of "Art and Freedom" grew increasingly critical of surrealism, particularly after the Second World War, and officially broke with the movement in a letter written by Georges Henein and addressed to André Breton dated 26 June 1948. The group insisted on the total freedom of the artist, whether French or Egyptian. There were abstractionists as well as figurative artists in the group, and one of its members even produced a realist film.¹ The group also wrote more directly about European and Egyptian politics and history as well as the economic problems they felt were crippling the creativity and general well-being of the Egyptian population. Their notion of freedom included an articulate discourse against the oppression of women, which was not the case for the surrealists in Paris. Politically, the members of this group were closer to anarchism than to communism, although their political writings show an intense influence of Marxism, and their Trotskyite tendencies are evident from their concurrence with the Breton-Trotsky Manifesto and the FIARI (International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art). However, they published many critiques of Communism and of Marxism, notably Ramses Younan's "*Variations sur le verbe couvrir*," published in *La part du sable* in July 1947. From this overall anarchistic political tendency, as well as their complete tolerance of different forms of artistic expression, in addition to the critique of the surrealist technique of automatism (letting the unconscious mind direct artistic production), we see that the Egyptian "Art and Freedom" group has only superficial resemblance to the surrealists of Paris.

The Problem of Working in the Cultural Interface

Ramses Younan's work, both pictorial and written, is not as well-known as one would expect given the perspicacity of his vision. He was marginalized by Egyptian society and too radical for the French, at least in the matters of international politics. In a general way, the artistic avant-garde in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s was too risky to have been absorbed by the Egyptian culture of the time. However the taboo against figurative representation was, if not lifting, at least being relativized. As Oleg Grabar writes, the restrictions on representation were a matter of cultural practice and not, strictly speaking, stated in the sacred texts. Grabar concurs with the insights of Shaykh Ahmad Muhammad 'Isa from al-Azhar University, who states:

*Le monde nouveau des Arabes musulmans avait rejeté les images non pas pour des raisons doctrinales, mais par refus de s'engager dans les discussions si complexes d'un monde qui prenait les images trop au sérieux.*²

[The new Arab-Islamic world had rejected images not for doctrinal reasons, but because of a refusal to engage in complex discussions taking place in a world that took images too seriously.]

Many, but not all, of the members of "Art and Freedom" were Christian. They lived, however, in a predominantly Muslim society and could not have been immune to the restrictions imposed by that society. Ramses Younan was precisely engaged in debates around theories of the image, and these debates were marginalized as part of Western cultural preoccupations. Indeed, Younan's Christianity and francophone orientation was enough to isolate him from mainstream and acceptable cultural debate, although he wrote and translated many texts into Arabic.³ He was, in addition to his marginal identity, extremely radical in his views. From this weakened position, his critiques could not penetrate the monumental sacredness of the Word in Arabo-Islamic culture. The intellectual impact of "Art and Freedom" publications in Arabic has been described as "*un couteau sans lame auquel il manquerait la manche*" [a knife with no blade whose handle is missing].⁴

Younan in particular was seen as a threat to the emerging state, ironically, because of his revolutionary ideas. Younan was responsible for the content of the radical journal *al-Majalla al-Jadida* [The New Magazine], founded in the 1930s by Salama Musa⁵ and interrupted by the state in 1944. The journal published articles on topics such as democracy, poverty, the arts, and Stalinism. Younan, and none of the other members of the group (for reasons that do not seem to be documented), was arrested in 1946 for his political activities and ideas. After his release he traveled to France where he remained until the Suez Crisis. He was again exiled, this time from France, for refusing to criticize the nationalization of the Suez Canal on the French radio where he worked between 1952 and 1956. It would seem that a figure such as Younan is caught between the politically revolutionary, yet culturally conservative, Egypt and a still imperialist France not yet willing to accept criticism, especially from an Egyptian intellectual, one such as Ramses Younan.

Critique of Surrealist Automatism

In 1948 *La part du sable* in Cairo published an astonishing dialogue between two Egyptian intellectuals. Ramses Younan and Georges Henein engaged in a dialogue that seems, at first glance, to be about how surrealist automatic writing betrays its revolutionary project by returning slavishly to what Henein calls "*une bourgeoisie du hasard*," or a bourgeoisie of chance. In fact, the depth of this dialogue, inaugurated by Younan's unprompted and explosive part of the essay, measures far deeper than expected into the origins of the deconstruction of the image and anticipates debates in aesthetics that would take place in Europe during the two following decades. This dialogue, entitled, "*Notes sur une ascèse hystérique*" [Notes on a Hysterical Asceticism], concerns the relationship between Truth and Fiction and the ensuing

problem of narrative forms and constructions of images. I hope to illustrate that Younan's theory of the image constituted a precocious and fundamental critique of the European avant-garde that was not merely quantitative but essential and revolutionary. This surprising insight on the part of Younan can be seen most clearly in the dialogue with Henein. Contrary to some critics' writing about "Art and Freedom," I will explain here how the Egyptian avant-garde, and specifically this movement, was extremely critical of the European avant-garde from the very outset.⁶ Silvia Naef claims that European modern art was simply appropriated in the Arab world in order to compensate for the "lost time" due to the Islamic culture's resistance to representational art. These modern aesthetic forms that were being appropriated, she states, were already out of date in Europe.⁷ However, a much more complex relationship was developing between the European and the Middle Eastern avant-garde. For, as we will see below, Ramses Younan, leading a general trend in the movement at that time, would constitute a critique of the European avant-garde at a very early stage.

Bourgeois Mythology

The critique was launched through the creation of a new mythology that destabilized the surrealist and modernist aesthetics. Yet, the definition of Younan's mythology must be clarified immediately. Younan's articles, "*La désagrégation des mythes*" [The Disaggregation of Myths] and "*Notes sur une ascèse hystérique*" [Notes on a Hysterical Asceticism] provide the most fruitful examples. The latter essay, explained in detail below, ends with the proclamation that,

tant d'essais d'interprétation [what we need is a new mythology] *une sorte de MYTHOLOGY DE CHAMBRE, en attendant la naissance—peut-être!—du Grand Mythe . . .*

[after so many attempts at interpretation, what we need is a new mythology, a kind of MYTHOLOGY OF THE BEDROOM, while waiting for the birth—perhaps! —of the Grand Myth . . .]

This call for a new and "grand" myth must be situated in relation to another well-known definition of the myth—the form analyzed by Roland Barthes in his 1957 *Mythologies*. At this point it is worthwhile to reiterate Barthes' exact thesis, in order to show the similarity between Barthes' and Younan's visions of the bourgeois myth. Barthes analyzes the bourgeois ideological manipulation of a linguistic semiology—a deformation that produces the myth. Barthes explains that the myth is a deformation ("*métaphores détournées*," or deformed metaphors, in Younan's words) of the linguistic sign (composed of the signifier and the signified). The sign, emptied of its meaning, becomes simply an empty and useful form. This emptied form is then used (and this is where the ideological deforms the semiotic) in cooperation with a new signified, a concept (imperialism, a grammatical example) to form a new signification that is the myth. This process of deformation occurs precisely at the moment when the linguistic sign is separated from its meaning and attached to a new signified that is historically defined and ideologically charged. This ideological meta-language of

the myth can be deciphered, and that is precisely what Barthes does, thereby losing its transparency. The production of meaning in the historical period dominated by the bourgeoisie, through analysis, loses its illusory character. We come to see how deformation of meaning produces ideologically charged messages.

In his essays of the late 1940s, ten years before Barthes publishes *Mythologies*, Younan anticipates the death of bourgeois mythological and transparent language. He writes as his concluding paragraph of the article “*La désagrégation des mythes* :”

Ainsi, plus aucun artiste conscient de l'époque ne peut plus s'imaginer de demeurer au sein de la nature car celle-ci a perdu, à ses yeux, sa transparence, pas plus qu'il ne peut se satisfaire d'une vie dans le cadre illusoire des formes géométriques ou des métaphores détournées.

[In this way, no conscious artist can ever again imagine that he dwells in the breast of nature since nature lost, in his eyes, its transparency, nor can he content himself with a life in the illusory context of geometric forms or deformed metaphors.]⁸

The artist, in the wake of the demystification of the bourgeois symbolic, becomes what Younan writes in 1948, “à nouveau confronté aux cryptogrammes de l'univers, comme s'il en était revenu à son point de départ” [once again confronted with the cryptograms of the universe, as if he had come back to his point of departure].⁹ This is the innovation that thrusts the painter into a new vision of representation that we will find spelled out a decade later in Europe. When he calls for a new myth, Younan is not calling for the resuscitation of the form that would later be analyzed by Barthes. Younan, in a performative act of writing, precociously states the death of the mythological illusion; the contemporary artist perceives the passage from “semiology to ideology” and “history into nature.”¹⁰ The contemporary Egyptian artist, according to Younan, has perceived and thereby produced the death of this deformation: “*la nature a perdu, à ses yeux, sa transparence*” [nature, in his eyes, has lost its transparency].¹¹

In another essay, “Beyond the Mind’s Logic,” Younan writes more directly about the deformation produced by the bourgeois hegemony. His critique of the alienation endemic to capitalist societies is coupled with his remarks about the myth-making process. Younan claims that from capitalist myth-makers have emerged imperialists and dictators. The bourgeoisie “disfigured and manipulated instincts, and repressed emotions—that naturally search for pleasure—either through the trade race and competition, or through military songs and hysterical slogans that dictatorial and imperialistic governments drill into their people.”¹²

Younan’s Myth of the False

In “*Notes sur une ascèse hystérique*” and “*La désagrégation des mythes*,” Younan is speaking of the artists’ role of creating and drawing on a new mythology. This new mythology will be the myth of the false and implies a deconstructive reconfiguration of the binary Truth-Illusion. The mechanisms will be different, for the categories upon which the bourgeois myth was constructed will in themselves be transformed. In the bourgeois myth, illusion was used in order to create a naturalized image of the

real, which is in fact historically determined. Instead of illusion being at the service of a capitalist, bourgeois reality (narrative of Truth and Science), the new mythology will use illusion to uproot, de-center, and de-range the state of things. Both reality and illusion begin to lose their identity as such and thereby disrupt the power structure that formerly organized their relationship within the bourgeois mythology.

The surrealists, according to Younan, were part of the bourgeois mythology that he had so clearly identified and critiqued. Writing about visual arts and the poetics of the image, Younan engages a shift from one epistemology of the image to another. This shift signals a movement from the modernist dilemma in which the surrealists eventually found themselves trapped. Surrealist artists were ostensibly caught in the myth-making machine produced by the bourgeoisie. Younan's critique of automatic writing begins in his 1938 book, *Aims of the Contemporary Artist*. In this early text he begins to identify the dangers of surrealist automatism, stating, "The art of these surrealists is susceptible to dwindling into an artificial, deliberate art, the elements of which are produced by the conscious mind more than the imagination of the unconscious" (in other words, still within the ideological world conditioned by a bourgeois, scientific discourse of Truth). Younan will depart from what he perceives as the mystifications of automatism and enter into a contemporary or post-structuralist theory of the image.

At this embryonic phase in post-structuralism, Younan's main concern was personal and political. He was seeking to release the image from a totalitarian reign of Truth, a project that reached its most elaborate theoretical culmination in Gilles Deleuze's work on cinema in *L'image-movement* and *L'image-temps*. Younan's particular dismantling of the surrealist's methods of artistic production, despite his otherwise favorable posture vis-à-vis this moment in the European avant-garde, bears a striking resemblance to Deleuze's visual and philosophical analysis of the cinematographic image of new-wave cinema.

In the dialogue "Notes on a Hysterical Asceticism," the artist's relationship to reality comes under scrutiny. Both thinkers concur that the oppressive relation that continues to exist between Truth and automatic art must be dealt with in order to save the dignity and freedom of the artist.¹³ Henein writes (in a beautiful, long parenthetical phrase that winds almost to the extent of its own disappearance) about the "tragic" fate of automatism:

(l'expérience automatique, grisante à ses premiers pas, impossible à poursuivre sans que se forme aussitôt une syntaxe et un vocabulaire, c'est-à-dire une bourgeoisie du hasard . . .) Mais c'est le propre du comportement moderne de n'arriver à s'affirmer qu'en fonction des dilemmes. Il est temps de rejeter Kafka.

[the automatic experiment, intoxicating from its first steps, impossible to pursue without forming a syntax and a vocabulary, that is to say a bourgeoisie of chance . . .) But it's the nature of the modernist comportment to only affirm itself by way of dilemmas. It is time to reject Kafka.]

To this extent, Henein and Younan agree: automatic writing leaves the artist in the dilemma of his art falling back into the schemas where Truth and Fiction are

mutually working at each other's reification and ossification. Truth remains the final judge of fiction's authenticity. The sovereignty of the artist is once again sacrificed to the Truth, leaving him alienated while his own dreams have organized themselves against him.

Henein's Narrative of Truth

If the two writers seem to agree on this much, what is noteworthy here is that upon closer examination, Henein remains faithful to the surrealist mode that relies on an opposition between the essence of the independent real and the reality of the dream. He seems to stand in for the old model of visual representation. Paradoxically, what has been interpreted as Henein's radicalism in this debate¹⁴ is actually a sign of his conservatism wherein he "*conservait et sublimait pourtant un idéal de vérité*" [preserved and sublimated an ideal of truth].¹⁵ Henein's disappointment with the contamination of the dream narrative, the automatic creation by the rules of "reality," leads him to call for the artist to plunge into "nothingness"—*le vide*. This nothingness alone precludes any co-optation of the representation by the forces of interpretation and thus is the only way to protect the integrity of fiction, of the human fantasy. He is effectively sacrificing the dream, to protect its purity, its Truth. The position of judgment remains intact—he opts for the exclusion of the false. Curiously, Henein's posture foreshadows the classical model of the cinematographic image elaborated by Deleuze. What Deleuze calls the "organic image or narrative" implies a certain relationship between the real and the imaginary. Like the "organic image," Henein's refusal of Younan's "apparitions" reinforces Truth as the arbiter of fiction's authenticity, of fiction's "truth."

*Le régime organique comprendra donc ces deux modes d'existence comme deux pôles en opposition l'un avec l'autre: les enchaînements d'actuels du point de vue du réel, les actualisations dans la conscience du point de vue de l'imaginaire . . . C'est une narration véridique, en ce sens qu'elle prétend au vrai, même dans la fiction.*¹⁶

[The organic system will, therefore, consist of these two modes of existence as two poles in opposition to each other: linkages of actuals from the point of view of the real, and actualizations in consciousness from the point of view of the imaginary.]

This "*narration véridique*" is what prompts the urgency with which Henein suggests the artist's flight into nothingness, for he aims to protect the truth, both of reality and of fiction. Henein's position of judgment between that which is true and that which is false in the representation of reality remains within the parameters of the classical form of representation that Deleuze describes as the "organic system" or "organic narration." In this system, the relationship between reality and fiction is one of opposition. The value of the dream, of the fantasy (or the lapsus) is determined by its relationship to Reality, the object that remains independent of its description. Within this schema, Henein is criticizing automatic writing of having relegated the

dream sequence and the representation of the fantasy to the ghetto surveyed by the guardians of Truth. According to this “organic regime” that identifies, and thereby legitimates, the dream by opposition to an ever-present reality (Truth), the Truth again triumphs since it is the judge of fiction’s authenticity. This “organic narrative” that depends on the sensory-motor and establishes the veracity of the dream by opposition to the Truth, or reality, indeed constitutes the dilemma out of which the artist must escape as if from a prison or a camp.

Henein opts for emptiness, nothingness, instead of the dream that he mourns as “false,” paradoxically since it succumbs to the habits of reality. He cries out that the words we have freed through the mechanisms of the unconscious have been enslaved by the verbal mechanism. These words have betrayed us. In “Notes,” he writes: “*La parole est une plaie dont on ne peut se défendre que par un grand silence noir . . .*” [The word is a wound from which we can only defend ourselves by way of a great, black silence . . .]. Truth for Henein must be found in emptiness, the non-space beyond language and mimesis. The only existence that we can call authentic is that which cannot be named. Always to rediscover the dictatorship of the bourgeois order, Henein is fighting within the Truth/Falsity binary. On the other hand, Younan, in a radical gesture, seeks to remove that authority that Truth wields over fiction, the dream, the virtual. Younan writes:

Je suis amené à FAIRE L'AMOUR AVEC LES APPARITIONS . . . cela passe sur un plan précaire, suspendu quelque part dans le vide. Pas de ciel, pas de terre, pas de dictionnaire . . .

[I am inclined to MAKE LOVE WITH APPARITIONS . . . that takes place on a precarious plane, suspended somewhere in the void. No sky, no earth, no dictionary . . .]

This is the inaugural statement that incites Henein’s objections. At Younan’s call “to make love with apparitions,” Henein stands up for duty as if called upon to control the border between reality and dream. These separations must be controlled in order to prevent contamination of their discrete identities. For Henein, the only way to prevent contamination between reality and the dream (a contamination which would deprive the dream of its identity) is to lapse into silence, emptiness. We must not give in to formulas of going beyond the self, of facile, one-penny solutions, says Henein, and recognize the supreme rights of EMPTINESS, of that which cannot be named: “*Seul ce qui n’a pas de nom existe*” [Only that which has no name exists]. Fear of contamination of the myth forces Henein to abandon the human dream. He has more confidence in the colonizing power of the bourgeois reason than in the visions of fantasy. This is Henein’s concluding sentence to the debate, and his strength in this polemic is finally his weakness. That which he claims so triumphantly in this desire for radicalism is precisely what enclosed him in the realist epistemology of the image, where Truth remains the arbiter of artistic and, ultimately of human, freedom.

Younan’s Crystal-Image

Younan claims that the artist must create myths to produce the downfall of the bourgeois mythology. Instead of seeking to sacrifice the dream to save it from

“falsification,” he sets out to discredit Truth, to dislodge Truth from its immovable authority over fiction. In “Dreams and Truth” he writes, “If we put aside the enchanting girl that all the philosophers have been searching for in vain, the ‘truth’ means nothing but the ‘facts’ of the society in which we live, these facts are not static.”¹⁷ (This could be taken as a pointed critique of the surrealists who are known for their use of female forms for projecting their aesthetic and philosophical “discoveries.”) Younan’s project in many of his essays is the creation of a new mythology. In “*La désagrégation des mythes*,” Younan sings the praises of the mythological:

Une mythologie véritable . . . détermine la position de l’homme par rapport à l’existant, par rapport aux forces, cachées ou manifestes, de l’univers. Elle lui relève son origine et son destin. Elle lui désigne sa voie et ses fins. Elle interprète ses rêves, répond aux désirs de son cœur, de son esprit, de son imagination.

[A veritable mythology . . . determines man’s position in relation to the existing, in relation to forces, hidden or manifest, of the universe. It rises from his origin and his destiny. It draws his path and his destinations. It interprets his dreams, responds to the desires of his heart, of his mind, of his imagination.]¹⁸

The essential role of the myth for the artist’s freedom and for the individual’s fulfillment continues to condition Younan’s arguments and creations. His praise of the “false,” of the mythical, displaces at the same time the Truth as judge. Through a vivid, pulsating, and omnipresent mythology, explains Younan, the artist continues to create: “*Au sein des mythologies, se cristallisent les symboles, prend forme de l’expression artistique*” [In the midst of mythologies, symbols crystallize and take the form of artistic expression].¹⁹

In many ways Younan anticipates the Deleuzian crystalline image: the universe in which neither Truth nor falsity exists, just *la puissance du faux*, the power of the dream, of the fictional. Deleuze describes/theorizes this new regime in a poetic language that deserves ample citation here. In the crystal regime:

L’actuel est coupé de ses enchaînements moteurs, ou le réel de ses connexions légales, et le virtuel, de son côté, se dégage de ses actualisations, se met à valoir pour lui-même. Les deux modes d’existence se réunissent maintenant dans un circuit où le réel et l’imaginaire, l’actuel et le virtuel, courent l’un derrière l’autre, échangent leur rôle et deviennent indiscernables. C’est là qu’on parlera le plus précisément d’image-cristalle: la coalescence d’une image actuelle et de son image virtuelle, l’indiscernabilité des deux images distinctes.

[The actual is cut off from its motor linkages, or the real from its legal connections, and the virtual, for its part, detaches itself from its actualizations, starts to be valid for itself. The two modes of existence are now combined in a circuit where the real and the imaginary, the actual and the virtual, chase after each other, exchange their roles and become indiscernible]. It is here that we may speak the most precisely of crystal-image: the coalescence of an actual image and *its* virtual image, the indiscernability of two distinct images.]²⁰

Younan describes precisely this shift in the relationship between the real and fiction. The authority of the real over the fictional (that the real makes fiction what it is) changes. The true and the virtual are not opposed, but are *impossibles*.²¹

That is, different possibilities that would have emerged from different planes of time exist at the same time. The reign of falsity opens the creative flow. Younan's new mythology is the mythology of the false where the impossible, the virtual, is true. Younan writes:

Le secret était dès lors divulgué et tous ceux qui ont des yeux pour voir savent désormais que la vérité et l'illusion sont une seule et même chose, que les sirènes et les chevaux ailés ou ces arbres pourvus de poitrines sont le plus fidèle miroir de ce qui se passe dans l'esprit de l'homme.

[The secret was henceforth divulged and all those with eyes to see knew that truth and illusion are one and the same thing, that sirens and winged horses or trees without chests are the most faithful mirror of what happens in the mind of man.]²²

In a like manner, Deleuze, in describing the poetic cinema that developed from the 1960s, explains that it is not a new separation between reality and fiction that is carved, but rather the new relation between them. One discovers fiction liberated:

[D]u modèle de vérité qui la pénètre, et retrouver au contraire la pure et simple fonction de fabulation qui s'oppose à ce modèle. Ce qui s'oppose à la fiction, ce n'est pas le réel, ce n'est pas la vérité qui est toujours celle des maîtres ou des colonisateurs, c'est la fonction fabulatrice des pauvres²³

[The model of truth which penetrates it, and on the contrary to rediscover the pure and simple storytelling function which is opposed to this model. What is opposed to fiction is not the real; it is not the truth which is always that of the masters or colonizers; it is the story-telling function of the poor]

This is precisely the call of Younan, the freedom of the artist resides in his departure from the relativity of falseness: falseness itself, illusion itself is the power of his creation.

In this new mythology neither the real nor the imaginary reigns over the other. Younan writes:

Et peu importe que les mythologies s'enracinent dans la réalité, ne serait-ce que de façon ténue, ou qu'elles soient pur produit de l'imagination. L'important est qu'elles combient en nous un vide et soient source de lumière et d'inspiration.

[No matter whether myths are rooted in reality, even slightly, or are pure products of the imagination. The important thing is that they fill a void within us and be a source of light and inspiration.]²⁴

Heinein praised *le vide*—or nothingness—that would be the only remaining site of Truth because emptiness could remain pure. In contrast, Younan reclaims the sovereignty of the illusion that will fill the void created by life in a scientific, dehumanized society. A similar reference to Nietzsche's glorification of the will is present in Deleuze: "*Il n'y a que du devenir, et le devenir est la puissance du faux de la vie, la volonté du puissance*" [There is only becoming, and becoming is the power of the false of life, the will to power].²⁵ According to Younan, the power of the artist

will emerge from his role as myth-maker. Younan's notion of the artist in his new myth of the false corresponds to Deleuze's description of the filmic relation of the crystalline image. Deleuze writes:

C'est le devenir du personnage réel quand il se met lui-même à "fictionner," quand il entre "en flagrant délit de légender." Et contribue ainsi à l'invention de son peuple.

[It is the becoming of the real character when he himself starts to "make fiction," when he enters into "the flagrant offence of making up legends" and so contributes to the invention of his people.]²⁶

Here in the Younan-Henein dialogue, "*Notes sur une ascèse hystérique*," Younan describes the same value of the "false." In his search for a new myth, Younan enters into the world of the crystalline image produced there where the real world does not exist. Younan's initial statement to "*FAIRE L'AMOUR AVEC LES APPARITIONS*" reminds us that he is speaking in an entirely different register in which creativity and freedom are actualized through a new relation of falsity to reality. To "make love with apparitions" is to create, in the "true" sense, through the reflexive simulation between the objective and the subjective.

The artist thrusts off the oppressive, colonial presence of truth that formerly gave legitimacy to his dreams. The sovereignty of the "social fabulous," of the collective apparitions in all their falseness, in their glorious fakeness, will liberate society through the artist. Throughout his writings, Younan, differing from Henein, insisted on the people's dreams as true in and of themselves.

Une mythologie qui fut source de lumière et d'inspiration pour des âmes affligées, altérées, en proie à toutes les formes du doute, de la confusion et de l'angoisse que suscite cette époque.

[A mythology that was the source of light and inspiration for afflicted and impaired souls, at the prey of all the forms of doubt, of confusion and anxiety that this epoch creates.]²⁷

Deleuze would use these same conceptual terms to describe Picasso forty years later.

Bref, le faussaire ne peut pas être réduit à un simple copieur, ni à un menteur, parce que, ce qui est faux, ce n'est pas seulement le copie, mais déjà le modèle. Ne faut-il pas dire alors que même l'artiste, même Vermeer, même Picasso, est un faussaire, puisqu'il fait un modèle avec des apparences.

[In short, the forger cannot be reduced to a simple copier, nor to a liar, because what is false is not simply a copy, but already the model. Should we not say, then, that the artist, even Vermeer, even Picasso, is a forger, since he makes a model with appearances.]²⁸

The difference we perceive between Henein's and Younan's positions represents a significant split in perspective during the following two decades. *Mythologies* seems to reflect back on the divergences of the Younan-Henein discussion. Barthes explains

the uselessness of opting for silence in order to escape the myth of the ideological (Henein's position). "The subversion of writing was the radical act by which a number of writers have attempted to reject Literature as a mythical system . . . it is well known that some went as far as the pure and simple scuttling of the discourse, silence—whether real or transposed—appearing as the only possible weapon against the major power of the myth: its recurrence."²⁹ This is what Henein was suggesting through his position in the "Notes." The idea of the new myth based on falsification (Younan's position) is also discussed by Barthes. Barthes explains: "Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial myth* . . ." ³⁰ Indeed, the only way for the artist not to be subject to the bourgeois mechanism of mythification—the trap surrealism has been caught in, or at least accused of being caught in—is to state the truth of illusion, of the dream, what Deleuze calls *la puissance du faux*.

Conclusion

The importance of Ramses Younan's insights into what we now know as post-structuralism may not be self-evident. My main purpose here has been to re-examine some of the avant-garde art and theory that was being produced in Egypt in the 1940s. As I mentioned above, some art historians who work on this material have asserted that the Middle Eastern avant-garde mainly appropriated Western art of the period, in order to compensate for a cultural taboo against mimetic representation, and that the forms being appropriated were already "out of fashion" in Europe. In fact, upon closer inspection, these Egyptians, with Younan as arguably the most important example, were innovating and transforming the European avant-garde prior to critique on the part of the Europeans themselves (such as Tel Quel in the 1960s, for example). The significance of this observation does not lie in "who did what first" on a linear time-line of modern art. Rather, reexamining the Egyptian avant-garde shows us that there were many divergent and complex influences on the avant-garde that may not have been carefully considered.

The "Art and Freedom" group of Cairo inflected and problematized Western art of the period, introducing a new, local iconography as well as theoretical considerations that emerged from a social, political, and religious context that the French, for example, were not grappling with. Even more interesting is the way that this reworking and critique of the Western avant-garde produced an internal development in art and aesthetic theory in Egypt. For example, following the disillusionment with French intellectual and artistic tendencies of the 1930s and 1940s, Ramses Younan and other Egyptian artists who were influenced by him turned to abstract art. The abstraction of these years was a development that incorporated the freedom of the imagination, of the individual that was fought for so militantly by the surrealists. The new abstract art also established a relation to previous abstract Egyptian art that was both new (introducing the dream, desire, the individual into the picture) and ancient. The abstraction of most traditional Egyptian art would now be endowed with the spirit of the unconscious and with the drives of revolution that previous forms of abstract Egyptian art did not necessarily express.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Kamil El-Tilmisani, *al-Suq al-Sawda'* [The Black Market], (1945).
- ² Oleg Grabar, "L'Islam et les arts," in *Les sociétés musulmanes au miroir des oeuvres d'art* (Tunis: Centre d'études et de recherches économiques et sociales, 1996), p. 26. Grabar, a specialist on the history of the image in Islamic art, does not provide the exact date or source of this statement, but writes that it dates back about forty years.
- ³ Among his many translations between Arabic and French, we will mention only his translation into Arabic of Albert Camus' *Caligula* and Arthur Rimbaud *Une saison en enfer*.
- ⁴ 'Abd al-Qadir al-Janabi, "Le nil du surréalisme," in *Entre nil et sable* (Paris: Centre national de documentation pédagogique, 1999), p. 60.
- ⁵ Younan was editor of the journal *al-Majalla al-Jadida* between 1941 and 1944, the year it was shut down by the government. In it he published articles such as "From Dada to Surrealism" (1942); "The Problems that will Continue after the War" (1943); "We are on the Front" (1942); and "The Decision Belongs to the People" (1943).
- ⁶ Although this is not the main focus of their arguments, both Lilian Karnouk and 'Abd al-Qadir al-Janabi's work acknowledge the important criticisms of the European avant-garde launched by the "Art and Freedom" group. Silvia Naef only mentions "Art and Freedom" in a footnote. She does mention Jama'at al-Fann al-Hadith (Modern Art movement founded in Egypt in 1946) and the Jama'at Baghdad li al-Fann al-Hadith (Modern Art Group of Baghdad founded in 1951). When she mentions "Art and Freedom" in the footnote, however, she radically simplifies the objectives and developments of the movement by describing it as a "surrealist movement in Egypt in the 1930s." (p. 57) The movement was not simply a surrealist movement, but, as I argue in this article, a critique of surrealism with its own political and aesthetic project, characteristics, and application to Egyptian art and society. It was not simply a movement of the thirties but spanned from 1938 to 1956, and ended due to the Egyptian state's policies toward foreign language cultural production.
- ⁷ Silvia Naef, "Le turath comme expression de la modernité dans l'art arabe contemporain," in *Les sociétés musulmanes au miroir des oeuvres d'art* (Tunis: n.p., 1996).
- ⁸ Ramses Younan, "La désagrégation des mythes," *Les cahiers de Chabramant*, trans. Alain Roussillon, no. 5 (Cairo: n.p., 1987). Originally from *Nahw al-Maghul* (Cairo: n.p., 1959), p. 171.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989), p. 129.
- ¹¹ Ramses Younan, "La désagrégation des mythes," p. 171.
- ¹² Ramses Younan, "Dream and Truth," *al-Tatawwur* (March 1940). Unpublished translation by Marwa al-Nagggar.
- ¹³ For an excellent and thorough presentation of the publications, exhibitions, and activities of the "Art and Freedom" group, see 'Abd al-Qadir al-Janabi, "Le nil du surréalisme: le group Art et Liberté (1938-1952)," *Entre nil et sable* (Paris: Centre national de documentation pédagogique, 1999).
- ¹⁴ The unnamed author of this article states that Ramses Younan "does not go so far" in his critique of automatic writing as Georges Henein. The article was originally published in *Arts* (Cairo: n.p., 30 April 1948) and reprinted in *Ramses Younan* (Cairo: Organisation Egyptienne generale du livre, 1978).
- ¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), p. 195. *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 159.
- ¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps*, pp. 166-7. *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, p. 127.
- ¹⁷ Ramses Younan, "Dream and Truth," *al-Tatawwur* (March 1940). Unpublished translation by Marwa al-Nagggar.
- ¹⁸ Ramses Younan, "La désagrégation des mythes," p. 167.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps*, pp. 166-7. *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, p. 127.
- ²¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps*, p. 171. *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, p. 131.
- ²² Ramses Younan, "La désagrégation des mythes," p. 171.

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps*, p. 196. *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, p. 150.

²⁴ Ramses Younan, "La désagrégation des mythes," p. 171.

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps*, p. 185. *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, p. 141.

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps*, p. 196. *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, p. 150.

²⁷ Ramses Younan, "La désagrégation des mythes," p. 150.

²⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: L'Image-Temps*, p. 191. *Cinema 2, The Time-Image*, p. 146.

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989), p. 135.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Italics in original. ♦