

## WRITING, MYTH AND CREATIVITY IN PHARAONIC EGYPT

The first term in the title of this study might give some surprise. As I hope to prove, however, hieroglyphic writing happens to be the only key enabling us to gain entry to the Egyptian universe. Not only art and mythology, but also the laws, institutions and even daily life itself were “thought hieroglyphically” on the banks of the Nile.

Writing in Egypt is not reducible to a system of signs developed with the aim of expressing word-sonority. In this respect, the Egyptians were perfectly well acquainted with many simpler and more practical scripts which existed in the Ancient World. They had, moreover, 26 monoliteral signs at their disposal that adequately transcribed all the consonantal sounds in their language. From the first dynasties onwards, they used, in their cursive script, the hieratic, virtually abstract signs that could be written easily. The juridical, administrative, literary, and commercial documents, on papyrus or ostraca, were usually written in hieratic.

Why is it that, from that time onwards, throughout their history of three thousand years, on monuments, and until the 22nd


Translated by Rosanna Rowland.




Dynasty, on religious documents, they preserved the hieroglyphic script requiring a drawing apprenticeship for the scribes, which from a practical standpoint was totally illogical?










I am aware that many Egyptologists attribute this phenomenon to a lack of maturity. According to them, the Egyptians never managed to develop a rational script. It is sufficient however, to study the various uses of hieroglyphics to realize that if the script was not reduced to a system of alphabetic notation, though the scribes, I must stress, possessed all the basic elements necessary, it is because the script assumed certain functions for which such a system would have been totally inadequate.

At this point it is necessary to give a very schematic outline of the workings of hieroglyphic script. Each sign can assume various functions, but I shall refer only to the three main ones.

The hieroglyph can be a word-sign, a phonetic or determinative sign.

The *word-sign* is merely an ideogram. In other words it expresses in writing the word it represents. This function is specified by a line placed after or underneath the hieroglyph. Example:  represents a mouth and reads *ro* because in Egyptian mouth is pronounced *ro*.

The *phonetic* sign designates a sound or group of sounds according to whether it is mono- or pluriliteral. Examples:  = *f*,  = *mn* and  = *khpr*. etc.

The *determinative* placed at the end of a word designates the category to which the beings or deeds designated by the words belong. Example: the hieroglyph of the man putting his hand to his mouth  specifies the terms which bear some relationship to the mouth:   = *to eat*.   = *to drink*,   = *to narrate*,   = *to be silent*, etc.

It must also be stated that the same hieroglyph can fulfill various functions, in common usage.

The use of word signs and determinatives may be justified by the existence of numerous homonyms. On the other hand, when considered only from this angle, there hardly seems to be any reason for duplicating monoliterals by pluriliterals. This fact seems even more incongruent, when it is ascertained that among

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these already superfluous pluriliterals, many may be translated into various sounds.  $\{$  may be read as *pds*, *W'rt*, *sbk*, *gh*, *ghs*.  $\uparrow$  may be read *dj'm*, *W;b*, *l;tt*.  $\uparrow$  *mr* and  $\uparrow$  *b*,  $\uparrow$  *b*,  $\uparrow$  *b*, *wsh*, *bnt*, etc.

Conversely, the same combination of sounds can be written with various signs  $\llcorner$  and  $+$  = *wn*;  $\llcorner$  and  $\uparrow$  = *mr* etc.

In an attempt to comprehend the reasons for these seeming absurdities, let us consider the example of seven phonetically identical words. They can be transcribed as *a.kh.t.* and, in Egyptian, could all be written in three monoliterals  $\mathfrak{A}$  = *a*,  $\ominus$  = *kh*,  $\blacktriangle$  = *t*, accompanied by the appropriate determinative to differentiate them. However, this is how these seven words are written:

$\text{Lotus} \ominus$  = *Season of the flood*.  $\text{Ibis} \ominus \mathfrak{A}$  = *uraeus, serpent*.  $\text{Ibis} \ominus \mathfrak{A}$  = *What is profitable, useful*.  $\text{Ibis} \ominus \mathfrak{A}$  = *The eye of God*.  $\text{Ibis} \ominus \mathfrak{A}$  = *flame*,  $\text{Sun} \ominus \mathfrak{A}$  = *horizon*,  $\text{Mountain} \ominus \mathfrak{A}$  = *a king's tomb*.

The last signs are determinatives which specify the category to which these things belong. We shall put them aside for the moment. The signs  $\ominus$  and  $\blacktriangle$  are monoliterals which express the phonemes *kh* and *t*; but it is the first sign which is most interesting. In each word, it represents the identical combination *a.kh*. In the first word, it is rendered by a hieroglyph representing land where lotuses grow. In the following four, the same sound combination is written with the Ibis Comata, symbol of blessed spirits. In the last two words, the same sound is rendered by the hieroglyph  $\text{Sun} \ominus \mathfrak{A}$  which represents the sun rising and setting between two mountains.

Thus the land with the lotuses is a perfect expression of the idea of a flood. The four following words using the sign of blessed spirits, "the bright ones" as the Egyptians called them, are either linked with light—the uraeus, fire-serpent, flame, the eye of God, or with happiness and what is profitable or useful. Lastly, as for the word *horizon*, what sign could have been more appropriate than this rising or setting sun?

But the most interesting word is the last one—a king's tomb. This group forms a truly symbolic tableau. In it are to be seen the bird, image of the blessed dead, and the "sun on the horizon," which assimilates perfectly the deceased king. Finally the determinative of enclosed space suggests the tomb. So, the

belief appertaining to the Pharaoh's *post mortem* destiny is summarized in this word by images. And it is with this aim that the two phonetically identical signs (𓆎 and 𓆏) have been used, when for all practical purposes such duplication would be unjustifiable, whereas only one of the two signs was used in the other words.

We do not have the time to consider other examples, particularly the famous expression 𓄏𓄏𓄏𓄏 *maa kberou* "fair in voice" which also represents a remarkable theological short-cut.

It can be seen from this example that even in the case of phonetic symbols the Egyptian scribe attempted to retain the figurative function of hieroglyphics as opposed to other ideographic scripts, which at a certain stage in their evolution, become abstract. Over the centuries, even Chinese writing drifted away from the use of the image, though it was never completely abandoned. The signs become schematic and above all they lose their ethnic character; the sign for man 人 in Chinese is the schematic image of a man, not of a Chinese. The hieroglyph of man is an Egyptian.

Indeed, it is not always possible to preserve this link between the figurative sign and the image, and Egyptian words do exist in which this link is broken. However, they are scarce and have mainly to do with terms without religious or philosophical significance. On the other hand, those which stem from myth or theology are always constructed with surprising subtlety. In particular the names of the gods stem from a truly initiatory science, and by the symbolic reading of their component signs reveal the very nature of the divinities.

Certain determinatives are also most interesting because of the connections that they create between terms determined by identical signs. I shall cite only one example: the sign of the standing mummy 𓆑 and the recumbent mummy 𓆒. These two signs determine the words *defunct*, *mummy*, *sarcophagus*, (also called "lord of life"), which is all very natural. But the same hieroglyph also determines *statue*, *image*, *resemblance*, *form*, *appearance*, *transformation*, and *stages of growth*. Thus these diverse beings or phenomena somehow belong to the same

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category. This is in fact confirmed by the funeral rites and the Egyptian myth of the hereafter.













The links between statue, mummy, and sarcophagus are so close that in the representations of funeral rites, it is impossible to distinguish them from one another. In the paintings which decorate the tomb walls, it is never certain as to whether we are dealing with the mummy, the statue of the deceased, or its anthropomorphous sarcophagus. The latter is described by the expression *lord of life* and the statue is also called *living image*. As for the words *transformations, metamorphoses, degrees of growth, forms, and appearances*, followed by the same determinative, their orthographic analogy is justified by a mythical correspondence. We know that all the ritually entombed dead are likened to Osiris, and resuscitated like him, able to assume any desired form and appearance. Now the sign of this resurrection is nothing other than the rebirth of vegetation, after the withdrawal of the flood-waters. We are familiar with the "vegetating Osiris," those figures of the god modelled in lemon mixed with seeds which germinated, thus symbolizing the rebirth of the god.

The example of the determinative of the mummy will allow us to leave the domain of writing as such—without actually abandoning hieroglyphs—for the realm of objects. In fact the anthropomorphous sarcophagus can be considered a true three-dimensional hieroglyph.

We have seen that the Egyptians linked these four words: *mummy, statue, image, sarcophagus*. The anthropomorphic sarcophagus combines them in a true synthesis. In the first place, it is an image, a portrait of the deceased. The face is alive, the eyes open; nevertheless, the deceased is represented as a mummy. Finally, the sarcophagus is at the same time a statue, though hollow. Thus the four elements—statue, image, mummy, and sarcophagus—are united in this object just as they are in the use of the hieroglyphic determinative. But what is the analogy which unites them so closely on the level of meaning?

The sarcophagus which holds the body of the deceased, represents him as a richly attired mummy, his face glowing with

beauty and life. It is a glorious body, a resurrected Osiris. The statue is called a living image. Let us note the association of these two terms: the image is called living, but it is an image. The statue is never determined by the sign of the man living on earth. Contrary to some interpretations there is, therefore, a difference between the living and the image, which is not identical to the model, its double, but neither is it, as in our culture, an abstract semblance, an ineffectual simulacrum, with no roots in the concrete. It is a hieroglyph, a word, and as such it is effective and alive.

There are numerous object-hieroglyphs in Egypt. I shall consider another example familiar to us all: the beetle: . It is used as a word-sign and reads *kh.p.r.r.* When followed by the phonetic complement , , it means *to be born, to come into existence, to become, to transform*. Followed by the divine determinative  or ,  , , , it is the name of the sun-god which rises, the sun which 'becomes.' Finally, with the determinative of the aforesaid mummy, when followed by a second determinative, that of abstract words and the plural sign    it means *form, appearance, and degree of growth*.

The model for this hieroglyph was a very common insect on the banks of the Nile. The ball of excrement containing the eggs, which it rolls in front of it, was assimilated by the Egyptians into the dawning sun, the sun which 'becomes.' As we have seen, beetle and becoming are designated by almost identical vocables. Without expressing our opinion on the origin and the anteriority of the similarities between the words beetle, dawning sun, and become, nor admitting it to be a coincidence, let us state that the hieroglyph associates the ideas of *become, be born, transform, form, appearance, dawning sun* which evoke various aspects of Egyptian mythology, whether solar or funerary.

But let us go from the hieroglyphic sign to the object-hieroglyph, which had various uses.

Beetles were issued to commemorate an event (Amenophis III's marriage for example). Is not an event that which comes about (or becomes)? And the solar character of the hieroglyph imparted favorable overtones to the event. By associating the

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images of becoming and that of the divinity, the ideas of time and eternity were united. Maxims were also engraved onto the beetles, linking the immutability of principles to the changes of history. Since the object was sacred in character, it was worn as an amulet. But there is another use of the beetle which shows how the meaning of the object-hieroglyph could be widened according to its application.

In funerary mythology, the innocent deceased would accompany the sun-god in his nocturnal bark, and rise up again with him in the morning in the glory of the East. Therefore a stone beetle, sign and token of this resurrection, was put into the sarcophagus with the mummy. Shortly afterwards, the beetle was inserted inside the mummy, in the place of the heart.

The beetle rolls his ball enclosing the eggs from which will be born the new beetle (or is it the same one?) just as the sun is reborn after it has crossed the kingdom of the dead. Thus the promise of solar becoming, of the great metamorphosis, is enclosed within the night of the embalmed body. To replace the heart of flesh, center of intelligence, but weak and corruptible, by a stone beetle, the incorruptible image of the god and the becoming of metamorphoses and rebirths: is this not an act which conveys, which summarizes, though not exhaustively, a whole metaphysical, mythical and poetic content?

Lastly a monumental stone beetle was erected near the holy lake of Karnak. This lake symbolizes the primordial ocean, and the beetle is no less than the sun which rises up from it at the dawn of creation.

It is easy for us to pass from the sarcophagus or the beetle to another sphere of the plastic arts: painting and bas-relief. Not only do we find here hieroglyphic inscriptions handled with exquisite delicacy and integrated into the compositions as explanations or dialogues between the characters represented, so much so that it has even been suggested that some Egyptian paintings foreshadowed comic strips, but enlarged hieroglyphs also appear in these pictorial compositions for the same reason as other representations. There are innumerable examples: the images of sceptres and symbolic attributes attached to the kings

and gods, those of the table of offerings and most of the victuals they bear, those of the baskets, of working tools and games which can be seen on the walls of the mastabas or temples, conform in every way to the hieroglyphic signs which are used to describe them. And what is most important is not so much the direct reference to hieroglyphics, but rather the hieroglyphic style of these works as a whole. The very spirit of Egyptian plastic art stems so directly from hieroglyphic forms, that he who knows nothing about this script is unable to distinguish the forms which refer back to it, from those which have no connection with it whatsoever.

Thus Egyptian aesthetics itself can be called hieroglyphic. Let us attempt to give a brief definition of it without forgetting that every thing we say about hieroglyphics applies perfectly well to all works—paintings, bas-reliefs, sculptures—in short, to the *conspicuum* of the plastic arts.

The aesthetics of hieroglyphs corresponds closely to the function ascribed to these signs. The first condition for reading was an immediate identification of each hieroglyph, for any confusion could lead to a misconception if it was a question of word-signs, or to a faulty pronunciation in regard to phonetics. Also, the creators of hieroglyphics consequently attempted to render the essential features of each figure with scrupulous precision. They found the most expressive line for gestures; they eliminated any superfluous detail which might attract attention to the detriment of the whole. They succeeded in avoiding bareness and simplification, as well as overloading and affectation.

If we owe to hieroglyphics the qualities of precision and exactitude which we rediscover in painting, can we still refer to the writing to comprehend certain specific mannerisms in Egyptian drawing? Yet the artist shows the same concern for accuracy, I was about to say realism, when he draws these strange silhouettes, the head in profile with shoulders facing, and when he combines in the landscape both flatness and relief.

These "eccentricities" stem from the fact that for the Egyptian, reality is to be found beyond that appearance which is subjected to the illusions of perspective and to the metamorpho-



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ses of time. When the artist wished to portray a being by an image, it was necessary for the representation to reveal the integral truth of that being, not his condition at a given moment and place, but his essence beyond space and time.

“Egyptian drawing is a definition, an account, involving the greatest amount of reality possible...” states R. Weill in his *Recherches sur la Ière dynastie et les temps pré-pharaoniques* (1961).

By comparing hieroglyphic and pictorial representations, we can say that they share the will to represent, as completely as possible and with the minimum concessions, the permanent and timeless essence of beings. But although this is the sole criterion which guides the scribe, the artist nevertheless embodies in it the temporal world, where the event represented takes place, with more immediately observed details, while keeping this essential truth foremost through the use of traditional mannerisms. Consequently, Egyptian art is characterized both by a marked continuity of forms and by details taken from life, tinged with humor, melancholy or tenderness.

Thus the hieroglyphic system, a true microcosm of the Egyptian universe, reveals through its aesthetic, the ‘beyond’ of this aesthetic, that is to say, how the Egyptian comprehended the reality of his universe. In order to prevail this universe had to submit to Maat, order-truth-justice, which governed the cosmos, constantly threatened by the forces of chaos symbolized by the serpent Apophis. Egypt, the “image of the sky,” was to achieve this cosmic harmony on earth. Egypt thus attempted to live out a happiness founded on the Maat, to establish an earthly golden age that was to blossom on the banks of the Nile as a living image, a hieroglyph of absolute, timeless reality, just as the Pharaoh who governed the country was the living image, the hieroglyph of the sun-god.

Thus the hieroglyphs express in writing the Egyptian world as it is imagined and desired by the Pharaonic people, as do the hieroglyphs of man and woman, inasmuch as they are the center of the hieroglyphic microcosm, because these two hieroglyphs underwent no evolution from the birth of Egyptian civilization,

right to the end of one of the most enduring civilizations known.

The image of man represents him in a ritualistic posture, as becomes evident from the examples given by J. Sainte-Fare-Garnot, in his work *Hommage aux dieux dans l'Égypte ancienne*. André Lhote had already been struck by the beauty of this figure:

“Therefore, from the first dynasty onwards,” he writes in a volume dedicated to the *Chefs d'oeuvre de la Peinture égyptienne* (1954), “some unknown astonishing creator wishing to give the human form its most solemn representation, the most revealing of its divine essence, invented for millennia this magisterial figure of eternity to which no-one has added the smallest modification without divesting it of all its nobility.”

Although a remarkable serenity emerges from this image, man is represented in an active posture which could not be maintained for more than a moment; a temporary respite, which describes a movement already foreshadowed in the position of the legs, of which only one is bent and about to be brought into action. One of the arms denotes the man himself, for this hieroglyph is used to write the first person singular pronoun. In Egypt, man is he who says *I*. The other arm reaches forth in a gesture of affinity with the world, for man is integrated into the cosmos.

The image of woman is quite different. Whereas the law of frontality is strictly observed in man's silhouette, that of the woman is entirely in profile, the shoulders sideways. Her hair and the necklace she wears emphasize her femininity. Her posture allows for prolonged immobility and suggests some kind of meditation, the preoccupation of inner thought. It is a posture similar to that attributed to the gods: ♀ ♀ .

All this reveals that hieroglyphs may be read at various levels. By maintaining the figurative dignity of their signs, the Egyptians avoided the breach between word and image, abstract and concrete, discursive and imaginary, which inevitably happens in the development of conventional script. Thanks to hieroglyphics and to the mode of thought they imply, the various levels of reality are bound by means of intersections that form the semantic constellations of word-images.

Up to this point we have considered only the domain of the

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plastic arts which could appear as a privileged area in relation to a figurative script. Does the influence of this script go beyond the representational?

I answer readily in the affirmative, and I shall use theatre and architecture to support my claim. I cannot speak of music since, through lack of documentation the Egyptian art of sound seems lost to us forever.

Up to the fourth decade of this century Egyptian theatre was also completely unknown. It was known only that it had existed, because the tomb of a professional actor had been discovered. In the forties, or thereabouts, E. Drioton discovered and published some fragments of a sacred drama, from which I take an example.

The mythological subject can be summarized thus:

Isis, having conceived by the resurrected Osiris, gives birth to her son Horus in secret, in order to keep the child from Seth, who wishes to murder it. In order to have her son recognized as the legitimate heir of Osiris, the goddess appears before the assembly of the gods. But while she pleads the cause for the young Horus, he rises higher than all the divinities and harangues them in a speech from which I select this sentence:

“I am Horus, the falcon, who is on the battlements of the castle of him whose name is hidden.”

The extracts were retrieved from papyrus which dates back to the IXth Dynasty, but the myth which inspired this drama is even more ancient. In fact, we can read in the *Textes des Pyramides* recorded at the end of the Fifth Dynasty, but which contain material dating back still further, these lines describing the ascension of the dead king to the sky:

“It is Neferkare Pepi, the great falcon that Khepri (the rising sun) demands... It is Neferkare Pepi, the great falcon who is on the battlements of the castle of him whose name is hidden, who seizes the divinity of Atum, because the sky is more exalted than the earth.”

What has this to do with hieroglyphics? I am coming to this.

Here is a sign called *Serekh*. During the first dynasties it

framed the "name of Horus" of the Pharaoh, and was subsequently replaced by the cartouche.

It involves a rectangle with a schematic representation of the divine falcon perched on a palace facade. The Pharaoh's name was written in the empty space left above the image of the edifice. If we compare this hieroglyphic ensemble with the previously mentioned extract, it can be noted that this sign is, on the one hand an exact illustration of the expression, but in addition, the meaning is remarkably enhanced.

The Pharaoh, who is always likened to Horus, is in fact to be found "on the battlements of the castle of him whose name is hidden," that is to say, the supreme god, (we shall come back to "names" later). But since his name is to be found inside the castle, he is therefore identified with this supreme god. As for the apparent contradiction which lies in writing a name in the castle of him whose name is hidden (and the Serekh's bolted doors corroborate this), this can easily be resolved by remembering that each god, as revealed by mythology, has several names, of which only some are known.

This mysterious castle leads us quite naturally to architecture, and it is easy to show, with suitable texts and representations, to what extent architecture depends on writing.

For Egyptians, as indeed for most ancient civilizations, the supreme architectural work, the one which exacts from architecture and from all the artisans who build and embellish it the greatest display of science and skill, is undoubtedly the construction of a temple. Thus there is nothing more important and more solemn than the ritual of foundation which marks the inauguration of work, a prime moment calculated by the soothsayer and sanctified by the king, sole priest worthy of this sacred function. The Pharaohs who presided over such a celebration consequently commemorated the event in symbolic representations. Now, what can we see in this? The king holds one end of the cord which was used to measure the proportions of the temple, image of the cosmos. But which divinity holds the other end? Perhaps Thot, vizier of the gods, heavenly scribe, god of wisdom, calculator and magician? No. Undoubtedly Maat, then, goddess of cosmic

harmony, and orderer of the world? No, not her either. The one who assumes this glorious role is none other than Sechat, goddess of writing and only writing. She plays no part in mythology, does not belong to any divine family, nor to either of the two Enneads, and her name is merely the feminine form of the word *written*. The importance of this modest goddess in the realm of architecture is confirmed however by an interesting extract from the *Textes des Pyramides*, which, while specifying her role, introduce us directly to Egyptian mythology. The dead king is told:

“Nephthys gathered your limbs together in the name of Sechat, mistress of the builders.”

This text requires an explication.

Unlike Sechat, Nephthys is an important divinity, belonging to the great Ennead. She is the sister of Isis, assists this goddess in the ritual burying of Osiris, and participates as a divine mourner during the course of the funeral ceremony. There is no connection between this goddess and the modest Sechat. Now, the above text informs us that Nephthys borrows Sechat’s name in order to perform a certain act. If it were merely to write a document or draft a text, we would understand the appeal to the goddess of writing, but would it not have been more natural to call upon Isis to gather together the limbs of the dead—an obvious reference to the dismemberment of Osiris with whom the king is identified—for it was Isis who fulfilled this function for her husband; or what of Anubis the god of embalmers, or the great Thot, master of the magicians? But Nephthys chooses Sechat as “mistress of the builders.” Therefore Sechat must rebuild the king’s body, as she built the temple on the representations of its foundation. This creates an interesting parallel with the words of Christ in the Gospel according to St. John.

This extract, which reveals how one divinity could become absorbed into another, is very characteristic of Egyptian mythology. It must be stated that Egyptian gods do not have such a carefully defined status as Greek gods. Instead, each one commands a privileged sphere with uncertain frontiers, which can easily be crossed. And when he borrows the personality of some other individual it does not happen in the same way that

Zeus transforms himself into golden rain or into a bull, for as long as it requires to seduce a mortal, without actually relinquishing his individuality, but rather by completely merging with the borrowed personality. Sometimes this union lasts just long enough for a certain act to be accomplished, as in the above-mentioned text, but sometimes the two divinities remain both dual and united. This was the case of Amon-Ra, Amon being the hidden, the invisible, the mysterious, and Ra, being Khepri the beetle or the child in the lotus, when it was the rising sun. When the sun was at its height, it took on the semblance of a man and thus became Ra; when the planet set, it was represented by an old man, Atum. One should not forget that Ra is also occasionally assimilated to Ptah. The deceased, on his journey through the land of the dead, also assumes the identity of multiple gods or guardian spirits, animal forms or even symbolic objects. He becomes not only falcon and serpent, but also the oar of the solar boat.

This applies to certain myths as it does to the gods. Egyptian mythology includes numerous accounts of one single event, in appearance contradictory and yet which coexist without incompatibility. There are at least five accounts of the creation, without counting the more or less directly derived variants which are perfectly acceptable and give rise to no theological dispute. Even better, we find references in the same text to two different versions of the world's genesis, fused in a single vision, but according to our logic, totally irreconcilable.

How can we explain such a strange attitude if we refuse to see it like certain eager Egyptologists as the result of a mental aberration contradicted by astonishing accomplishments?

But does not everything become clearer if we turn to consider language? In fact we can say the same thing in different ways. Is the lover who compares his passion to a flower and to a goddess contradicting himself? No, he is merely appealing to two *images* in an attempt to encompass a complex reality. Images?

Thus we are led back to hieroglyphics, and to the hieroglyphic imagination. The sun is *Khepri* the beetle, because the beetle is

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the hieroglyph of the verb *to become, to be born*. For the same reasons, the sun at its zenith is *Ra*, and then becomes *Atum*, the old man leaning on a stick, which is a hieroglyphic determinative, not only of words related to old age, but also of those which signify *great, noble, leader*.

The other Egyptian gods are also hieroglyphs: with animal heads, their poses, their attributes and their names. And, through the name, whose importance shall be revealed shortly, mythology itself also springs from the spoken or written word. It is the hieroglyphic word. We have seen how the serekh recapitulates with graphic precision, the Horus myth and the Pharaoh's divine nature; now the serekh is the sign which circumscribes the king's name, and who is to say which, the sign or the myth, comes first in the creative process? The name, the nomination, is so fundamental to Egyptian mythology, that there exist a large number of myths based on the following pattern: in certain circumstances a mythic character utters a word. Now because this word is a homonym, or phonetically close to a thing or being, this thing or being are brought into existence simply by having been incidentally named by the pronunciation of this phonetically similar word. Here is an example from among many:

In the *Livre de la vache du ciel*, a god says: "I shall ordain that you send greater ones than yourself. I shall ordain that you crush under feet greater ones than yourself." "This is how the ibis of Thot came into existence."

In effect *h'b* = to send, *hb* = to trample and *hby* is the name of Ibis. By uttering the first two words, the god creates the emblem bird of Thot, that same one whose head Thot borrows in his images. But sometimes the phonic and the visual are confused as they are in the hieroglyph. In fact, the Egyptians noticed that Ibis' body resembled the shape of a heart (the heart was the seat of intelligence); they emphasized this similarity when they mummified the ibis. Consequently we read in another text: "Ra has sent his heart out to you in his name *hebi*." Here there is a double analogy. Heart is pronounced *ib*, the phonetic analogy of *hbi*, as there also existed an analogy in

form, but hieroglyphic script completes these meanings, for the word *hbi*, ibis, is written as the sign of Ibis on the shield, that is to say Ibis-Thot, which in turn identifies Thot with the heart, the intelligence of Ra. Moreover, many texts confirm this interpretation.

This close correlation between the visual image and the spoken word suggests that voice and gesture have equal force. Indeed, in an extract from the *Textes des Pyramides*, we read; "When you said O Seth, it was he (Osiris) who drew near (sah), whence his name Sah (Orion) of the large foot, of great strides, the first in high Egypt."

Here, it is the movement of approach which bestows a new name on Osiris, that is to say, a new "*essence*," for the name is the very being itself, as is proved by one of these rare Egyptian myths handed down to us as a continuous account. For usually we do not have uninterrupted complete accounts. A myth as important as that of Osiris is recounted by Plutarch, at a time when Egyptian tradition was at the height of its decadence and markedly Hellenized. Egyptian sources are fragmentary, they are mainly to be found in ritual and magic texts, in representations, in references, or even in the form of popular tales in which the imagination of the oriental narrator, ancestor of authors of the Thousand and One Nights, embroiders the thread of the myth with witty or epic episodes which have little to do with the teaching of the temples. It is significant that it is *the myth of the name of Ra* which has reached us in its entirety. Here is a summary:

In the times when the gods inhabited the earth, Ra, their king, took pleasure in wandering over the world which he had created. Now, Isis, the great magician, wise in all things, devised a daring plan to master the king of the gods. To do this, it was necessary to know Ra's secret name, the one which no-one knew except the god himself, but which, of course, he refused to reveal to anyone so they could hold no power over him, the name being the essence of him who carried it. Isis, we are told in the text, "was intelligent above all others." Now Ra was old, his jaws trembled and his saliva flowed to the ground. Isis mixed this saliva with



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earth and from it she modelled a serpent, a cobra, which she placed in Ra's path. The reptile bit the king of the gods, and he for the first time, felt suffering and gave a loud cry which brought all the gods running to him. But no-one could relieve him. Isis also arrived and said she would cure him instantly if Ra revealed his name to her. The king of the gods possessed many. He was Khepri, Ra, Atum, and had many others besides, but he uttered them in vain, the goddess was unmoved; the real name, the hidden name was not among them, and it was the only one which would enable her to heal the suffering god. He finally told her. Isis healed Ra and thenceforth held supreme power.

What is this name?



Of course the myth does not disclose it and it was revealed only to Isis, and perhaps Horus. We are never told moreover whether the goddess ever made use of it. It seems therefore that she merely wished for knowledge and not magic power.

But if the myth remains silent, a hymn to Amon-Re speaks of this name. It is from the papyrus of Leyde, dating back to the New Empire, around the 14th Century B.C. It is perhaps one of the first examples in the West, of an apophatic theology; here is an extract:

“Unique is Amon who hid from the gods  
He hid from the gods; his looks are unknown.  
He is farther than the sky, he is deeper than Hades!  
No god knows his true form.  
His image is not displayed in books.  
There is no perfect witness to his being.  
He is too mysterious for his glory to be revealed.  
He is too great to scrutinize, too powerful to know.  
One would drop dead from fear  
If one uttered his secret name which no-one can know.  
There is no god who may invoke him by his name.”

Thus this unspeakable, terrifying name can only be expressed by silence alone. However, this negation of all form, this unknowable absolute—is it not the exact opposite of the

hieroglyph, image and visible sign? Yet this hieroglyph of silence can become incarnate in writing, and some examples do exist.

Amon signifies hidden, mysterious, and sometimes the name of the god or the verb to hide; instead of being determined by the divine sign  in the first instance, or the sign of the man who hides  in the second, is determined by a blank, an empty space. Moreover, writing is the silent word. That, the god of language is called he “who gives the spoken language and the written language” or “the god who makes writing speak,” whereas Ra, with the ineffable name is called “master of the house of images.”

What is necessary, I believe, still referring to hieroglyphs, is an extension of the notion of an image. When we read among the 75 names of Ra which constitute the great litany of the god’s names:

“The one who hides his body within himself, the image of the body of the god with the hidden body;” and again:

“The eternal essence who wanders the empyrean, who gives praise to spirits in their spheres, the image of the body of eternal essence” (tr. Naville) we can comprehend that a hieroglyphic thought in no way reduces the notion of image to that of line, or representation. Thus, not only does such a mode of thought not confine the spirit to the limits imposed by appearances, but has the capacity greater than any other to surpass them. And here is revealed the effectiveness of the hieroglyphic aesthetic itself, which is, as we have seen, that of Egyptian art as a whole. Its function as sign which embodies the timeless being of things makes it the mediating form of the transcendent. This explains why the Egyptian, more than any other people, glorified at one and the same time the word (oral and written) and silence. Here are a few texts:

King Akhtoes II, in his *Enseignement pour Merikare*, speaks thus to his son and future king:

“Be an artist of words to achieve victory  
Language is the king’s sword  
The word is more powerful than any weapon.”

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And in a collection of texts intended for a school of scribes, we read, to the glory of the written word in this instance:

“A book is more profitable than an engraved tomb-stone,  
Than a chapel wall, solidly built

.....

A book is more profitable than the house of the builder,  
Than those dwellings of the West,  
It is better than a tower of good foundations  
Than a commemorative stele in a temple... etc.”

And yet, how many hymns and prayers are there to celebrate silence and the silent man. And who is, therefore, the supreme silent being? None other than Thot, the god of “words and writing” who “makes writings speak.” Here is a prayer addressed to him by a scribe at the beginning of his career:

“O Thot, place me in Hermopolis where it is so sweet  
to live.

Give me my daily bread and beer.

And keep my mouth from uttering words.

May I have Thot behind me in the morning.

Come, o divine word, when I have entered before the  
god my lord,

So that I may leave fair in voice.

O great palm-tree Doum of sixty cubits bearing nuts

And water within the kernels.

O you who take water to a distant place

Come and save me who am silent.

Thot, o fountain sweet to the thirsty man in the desert.

It is sealed for him who finds his words,

It flows for him who is silent.

He comes, the silent one, and he finds the fountain.”

I think it is vain to comment on this astonishing prayer. This kernel which must be broken for water, this sealed fountain which is only to be discovered in silence, what fine hieroglyphs of wisdom! It is in silence that one reads and writes the universe. The cosmos is lived as an immense hieroglyphic script which unfolds in nature as well as in words, in writing and in rituals,

and also in the cities, the structures of buildings, in institutions, and even in common objects and in their daily use. It is with a last example that I shall attempt to show how, based upon hieroglyphs, the sensitivity, intelligence, and creative spirit of the ancient Egyptians was realized in practice.

The mirror is a toilet accessory which, in Egypt, as elsewhere, and in Pharaonic times as now was an article of feminine coquetry. Egyptian women used make-up and styled their hair with great care and refinement, and the mirror was indispensable for these delicate operations.

Now mirrors were essentially hieroglyphic objects, what I call "speaking objects." Each mirror was composed of a disc of polished metal, usually slightly flattened, supported by a handle in the form of one of the three hieroglyphs  $\text{𓏏}$  and  $\text{𓏏}$ . The disc was likened to the sun—which is why most of them were slightly flat in shape—to such an extent that one of the mirror's names was Aton, the very name of the solar disc, the other being Ankh, the living.

The hieroglyph  $\text{𓏏}$  has two meanings: *servant* and *king* (perhaps the second meaning is linked to the first, because the king was the servant, the priest of his king Ra, and alone worthy of creating for him a religion).

The second hieroglyph represents a bouquet of papyrus stalks or a papyriform column. It is used to write *green*, *young*, *vigorous* like vegetation. (We would say flourishing).

The third sign is called the shield or Horus's perch. Placed below an image, this hieroglyph signifies that the being it represents is divine. Thus  $\text{𓏏}$  is the hieroglyph of falcon, but  $\text{𓏏}$  signifies Horus or god.

Therefore, each of the three mirrors created a complete sentence which could be read, firstly: "servant of Ra" or "Ra is king," secondly: "Ra is young, strong, flourishing" and thirdly: "Ra is divine."

But when the user gazes at herself, her face, her "living image" is inscribed on the solar disc, is identified with Ra, and the meaning is modified. We could translate: "I am the servant of Ra and Ra himself" or "I am the king in that I am Ra or

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image of Ra” for the second type of mirror: “I am young and strong inasmuch as I am Ra.”

And this interpretation also confirms the notion of the man-image of god, explicitly affirmed in the *Enseignement pour Merikare*, cited above:

“They (men) are his images come from him.”

Of course the theological significance of the act of gazing at herself could be completely unknown by the young woman who smeared upon her eye-lids the make-up which would give depth to her glance. But this mode of hieroglyphic thinking formed the foundation of Pharaonic civilization, as much as logic, deduction, and the principle of non-contradiction underline our activities, words, laws and institutions: in short, the whole of modern civilization, even if many of our fellow-citizens are incapable of explicating these concepts and of using them correctly.

On the basis of their hieroglyphic thought, the Egyptians attempted to live out a myth. And it is because their mythology was not exterior, but was to be found in the heart of existence that it has rarely inspired continuous, definitive accounts. And it was because the reign of each Pharaoh, “living image” hieroglyph of the god, had to write the myth of the sun-god, that the royal chronicles do not attempt to conform closely to historical truth, but to mythical truth, making myths of events in order to recapture a timeless reality, this essence whose aspect is the revelation and the hieroglyph.