

Translating Silence/Traversing Death^{*}

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abstract

The Fayoum portraits, Egyptian icons from the Greco-Roman period, contest binary positions in viewing images from the past. Their execution had an aesthetic and ritual purpose, a paradoxical nature synchronizing sacred and profane, figurative and non-figurative languages, marking an intermarriage between Egyptian and Greek. Through excavation, the portraits have been ripped off their historical context, and thus silenced by colonial imperial powers and by reductive nationalistic claims founded on a politics of exclusion. Conversely, the portraits represent a site of multiple transformations in an early East/West cultural context tolerant of otherness. They signal the first move towards the representation of the plural/singular in the Egyptian visual language and raise questions pertaining to the One and the All. The translation of the layers of meaning embedded in the portraits engages us in crossing and re-crossing previously set demarcations dividing temporalities, historical locations and disciplines. As such, the translation of the silenced voices, becomes a postcolonial intervention in the established cultural and political systems. In addition, reading the portraits through a postcolonial translation is an intermediary strategy opening up a dialogue between different worlds. Such an activity becomes a re-enactment of the ancient's attempt to traverse death, or non-existence, the purpose for which the portraits were originally executed, albeit death is now practiced under different modes of subjugation or exclusion. It may also re-activate an East/West dialogue, that would act as a stimulant for re-thinking standardized organizational activity set on an imperial construction of the world.

Introduction

The national and international image of Egypt is always 'past' without present, silenced pasts and a de-voiced present. Its multiple pasts have encouraged archaeologists, anthropologists, art historians, and philosophers, at home and abroad to lay authoritative claims on its visual and literary texts. Their attempts resulted in strict classifications, and misreading continuities and discontinuities, misrepresenting Egypt's cultural identity, which has already suffered from the politics of exclusion, along a history of subjectification by different repressive powers. Although the histories of Egyptology, Greco-Roman studies, Coptology and Islamic art should be studied in continuum, they have always been considered as separate disciplines. Until this day, Greco-Roman and Coptic eras are not given much interest, and most Europeans do not acknowledge the

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Greco-Roman debt to ancient Egypt. The glorification of the Pharaonic era was part of the imperial politics to slight Muslims and Christian Copts, explicitly or implicitly denying modern Egypt's relations to its pasts. In a Western imagination implemented by nineteenth century Egyptology, Egypt is a glorious past divorced from a degenerate present,¹ an image lately fostered by the Egyptomania pervading the West. In response, nativist religious revivalism motivated by a politics of exclusion has developed to counter the image constructed by the West.

Furthermore, the reformist nationalist response to the colonial misrepresentations has also marginalised large sectors under the pretext of forming a unified national identity. The reformist claims are based on a transcendental history and determinate concepts of reality, to foster their power through knowledge. The alternative, in such a case, is to deconstruct a 'reality' constructed by Western liberalism, or nationalist essentialism through a postcolonial translation.² The translator's choice is determined by a historical crisis in the present, ensuing from rupture with the past, that may be mitigated through a translation process negotiating difference. In this paper I attempt a postcolonial translation of the Fayoum portraits (1st–5th century CE), Egyptian icons from the Greco-Roman period, executed at a transitional period in Egypt's history, and therefore, subject to misreadings de-voicing them. The fact that these portraits were executed in anticipation of death may explain their silence. They are representations of silence and translating them may help in forming links with other realms, or traversing death. In this respect, my practice will be speculative and interventionist as it will attempt the

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- 1 The study of the politics of archaeology is widespread nowadays as in, Donald M. Reid (2001) *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*. Berkeley: California University Press. In his cited works, Reid lists a number of relevant titles, among which I cite Neil Asher Silberman (1989) *Between Past and Present: Archaeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Modern Middle East*. New York. Jerry O'Sullivan. (ed.) (1996) *Nationalism and Archaeology*. Glasgow. Brian M. Fagan (1975) *The Rape of the Nile*. London. Peter France (1991) *The Rape of Egypt*. London, and John and Elizabeth Romer (1993) *The Rape of Tutankhamun*. London.
 - 2 Homi Bhabha has pointed that "all forms of cultural meaning are open to translation" because they resist totalization. Homi Bhabha (ed.) (1990) 'DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation'. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, p.314. Therefore, the term is used here in the sense of transportation between cultures, a metaphor to postcolonial writing, a writing of relocation. Maria Tymoczko (1999) 'Postcolonial writing and literary translation', *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (eds.) Susan Bassnett & Harish Trivedi. London: Routledge, p.19-20. The 'post' in 'postcolonial' is not restricted to the temporal sense 'after', implying the end of colonialism. It has become a heterogeneous term of interdisciplinary approach, that can be applied in a wide range of 'colonial' situations, since 'colonialism' is not only a foreign hegemony, but can be duplicated within the nation. Postcolonialism refers to an oppositional position, a resistance against colonising discourses by imperial powers and by nationalistic forces who have once struggled for decolonisation but have become sources of oppression after taking power. It generally refers to a structure of inequity, but is variable depending on the historical and geographical situation. Diasporic or displaced individuals or communities, living in-between two cultures, are also said to be living a postcolonial condition. This also applies to writers or creators from previously colonised nations, living in exile, mediating two cultures, and resisting both to find alternatives for established systems. For a detailed description of the postcolonial see, Ania Loomba (1998) *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge, pp. 7-19.

translation of ritual icons into profane language.³ As such, a postcolonial translation of the portraits may start new practices in reading tradition away from a conformist view, in order to locate it in a broader cultural context that safeguards it against death by a politics of exclusion.

The emerging interest recently taken in the Fayoum portraits in Egypt,⁴ and world wide,⁵ urges us to reconsider methods of viewing images from the past, to reassess the historical location of Egypt, as a site of intervention, past and present. Historically and stylistically the portraits belong to a period of transition between the Pharaonic masque and the highly stylised Coptic icon. In the ritual context, the portraits express the religious syncretism prevalent in an open society whose natives intermarried with immigrants from east and west. There were different forms of exchange and superimposition between the Egyptian, Greek and Asiatic cults. The portraits challenge essentialist notions of identity as they hold a strategic position in a changing world. They are a translation of identity 'under erasure', a condition defined by Stuart Hall as questioning the key concepts about identity, not by replacing them by another closed definition, but by rethinking identity as operating in a different paradigm.⁶ The portraits are artefacts marking the interval between the reversal of the traditional Egyptian and the emergence of the new. They deconstruct the idea of a stable Egyptian identity recurring throughout a changing history, by representing a process of becoming, merging elements from multiple cultures.

The portraits like the texts dating from late Antiquity and Greek times are produced in a cultural milieu where elements from Egyptian theology, Stoicism, Neoplatonism and Asiatic learning overlap in verbal representations, as evident in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The portraits excavated in Fayoum, are the first visual representations of the plural singular/individual in the history of Egyptian art, and raise questions around the One and All, a discourse that re-emerged in Western thought intermittently until the nineteenth century, under different 'isms'.⁷ The translation of the layers of meaning embedded in the visual language of the portraits dislocates them from their ritual context, to relocate them in the profane world. Being dead and alive, and belonging to the past and the present, they are representations that go beyond representation. The translation of their visual context should proceed through a chain of transformations,

3 In terms of organization issues the study of artifact opens possibilities in the forming of identity, and control of the sensory premises of choices and behaviour. See, Pasquale Gagliardi (1999) 'Exploring the Aesthetic side of Organizational Life'. *Studying Organization: Theory and Method* (eds.) Stewart R. Clegg and Cynthia Hardy, London: Sage Publications, pp. 311-26.

4 *Fayoum Portraits Exhibition* (1999), Mohammad Mahmoud Said Museum, Giza, Cairo.

5 The Fayoum portraits were exhibited in several Western metropolitan cities. Several art reviews were published on the New York exhibition. See, Bennett Schiff (1999) 'Haunting Faces from the Banks of the Nile'. *Smithonian*, 95 26 (November): 134; and Sylvia Hochfield (2000) 'Bringing life to the dead'. *Art News*, 99 3 (March): 98.

6 Stuart Hall (1996) 'Who Needs Identity'. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. (Eds.) Stuart Hall & Paul Du Gay, London: Sage Publications, p.1.

7 Martin Bernal (1987) *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. London: Free Association Books, 2 Vols.; Jan Assmann (1998) 'Mono-, Pan, and Cosmotheism: Thinking the 'One' in Egyptian Theology'. *Orient*, xxxiii: p. 130-143.

engaging us in crossing and re-crossing previously set demarcations, dividing temporalities, historical locations and disciplines.

The silent/silenced portraits communicate through in/visible language that calls for translation. Translation practised in this context differs from the traditional method used since the Renaissance, that considers translation as a transfer between linguistic texts. It is now agreed upon that translation as an activity mediating two code systems is not restricted to the linguistic level.⁸ This view stands against George Steiner's who defines and characterises translation as,

Intensely focused penetration, the establishment of mutual identity through confirmation, the heightening of a work's existence when it is confronted and re-enacted by alternate versions of itself – these are the structural features of translation proper.⁹

Conversely, translation should move beyond the dichotomy source/target in order to find a third dimension where original and translation become donors and receivers.¹⁰

The portraits are sites of competing languages that call for a postcolonial translation.¹¹ The translator should move amidst different language codes to make imaginative connections between separate worlds, in changing temporalities. Although the Fayoum portraits represent a traumatic situation in the past, they bear close relations to the present and need to be reread by natives and non-natives alike. In so far as the portraits represent the process of multiple transformations in an early East West cultural contact, their translation may set sign posts helping in the formation of a global language – at present – where diverse systems merge in the national and international arena. As the local vernacular of the postcolonial world continues de-voiced, it remains subjected to the master language of the coloniser, and equality between centre and periphery will only be achieved through a dialogue based on a proper understanding or translation of the other. In that context, a postcolonial translation of the portraits' in/visible language is an intervention in cultural and political systems, and in history.

'Egyreek' Creations

The Fayoum portraits, Greco-Egyptian artifacts of Roman times are not icons of worship, but still retain their hold on us as viewers. During the reign of Tiberius (14-37 CE), the three dimensional Egyptian funeral mask was replaced by painted portraits fitted on to the mummies. This came along with other aspects of intermingling Greek

8 André Lefevere (1999) 'Composing the Other'. *Post-colonial Translation: Theory & Practice* (eds.) Susan Basnett & Harish Trivedi. London: Routledge, p. 75.

9 George Steiner (1975) *After Babel, Aspects of Language and Translation*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 453.

10 Else Ribiero Ppires Viera (1999) 'Poetics of Translation', *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (eds.) Susan Basnett & Harish Trivedi, London: Routledge, p. 97.

11 A major study in postcolonial translation is Tejaswini Niranjana (1998) *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: California University Press.

and Egyptian religions. As signs of the intermarriage between Egyptian and Greek art there is something in them beyond mimetic representations of the dead. By doubling the funerary art of Egypt and Greece they interrupt both traditions: the Egyptian abstract tradition and the mimetic, taking after the Alexandrian school based on Apelles' naturalistic tradition. They are 'Egyreek' creations that egyptianised the Greek and grecised the Egyptian. Arch-shaped gilt stucco frames forming garlands interrupted the illusion of depth. Unlike the Roman imperial portraits, the Egyptian portraits concentrated on the face. The Pompian portrait is a social representation addressed to a social group. The Fayoum portraits are surrogates to people living, or remembered alive, and who appear to exchange glances with the living, because in some way they are still alive. Their large eyes inspired by an Egyptian iconography replete with eyes – the eyes being the windows of the soul – adapted maximum expressiveness in minimal space. The alternation of their silent eyes between the fixed gaze and the silent glances has incited many to speak.

By being ripped off their mummies, the context of death, these portraits have not lost their aura, nor has their gaze lost its energy. Conversely, they have pluralised, since their reading needs a constant temporal and spatial movement. These portraits do not simply bridge the gap between two traditions, but also engage in past and present temporalities. They act as points of junction and disjunction; by doubling two traditions they rupture both. As such, visualising the portraits needs going beyond the mimetic or symbolic interpretation; they are aesthetic and non-aesthetic. The mimetic Greco-Roman tradition suggests a backward movement since it refers to a past temporality, a farewell, and a closure. The Egyptian funerary iconography refers to an inevitable rupture with the past, its abstract style a sign of non-closure, a passage to the beyond. As we read traces of Greek, in the portraits, the Egyptian is erased, and as we preserve the Egyptian, the Greek is transgressed. The translation of the portraits should be quadrupled because of the paradoxical nature of their visuality. They are Greco-Roman and Egyptian; they belong to the past and the present. Although they are meant to have a performative function in the ritual context, we are also interested in their extra-contextual performance at present.

Now that the portraits are desacralised, secularised, by being excavated from the underworld, there are several possibilities of translating them. Visualising them needs a constant shift from the figurative/visible to non-figurative/invisible dimension within two cultures, along past and present temporalities. The backward forward movement pluralises the portraits, negotiating otherness by transgressing its fixation. They give room for the boundless experience of difference, and as such, their representation of death problematises their historical meaning, and our East/West historical location. A re-translation of the Fayoum portraits may re-evaluate the long held idea of the incompatibility of Egyptian and Greek/East and West.

Reading the Hieroglyph/Translating the Portrait

With Walter Benjamin's postulation that: "(e)very expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language,"¹² divisions between verbal and non-verbal language have been eclipsed by major questions waged by the indeterminacy of the visible and invisible. The translation of the hieroglyph or the portraits follows this approach. The hieroglyph, the Egyptian script, as visual/verbal representation cannot be expressed in any fixed sequence of words, and the message it bears, may only be reproduced via a process of enactment.¹³ Although the portraits are considered a rupture in Egyptian iconography, they bear several characteristics suturing¹⁴ the abstract and the mimetic.

However, at the time the portraits were executed, the hieroglyph, the script adapted for the requirements of a harmonious culture were in decline with the conquest of the last pharaohs who harmoniously combined political and religious power. Henceforth, the hieroglyph became the secret language of the priests, the custodians of a cultic tradition practised by an oppressed populace. The sacerdotal monopoly of the hieroglyph is held responsible for its decline. By making the script more intricate, the priests were practising a politics of exclusion safeguarding the hieroglyph against foreign invasion, while sustaining the myth of their professionalism, reinforcing their power among the practitioners of the old beliefs, the majority of the oppressed population (Iversen, 1993: 24). The transformations made in the hieroglyph bred false conceptions of its symbolic significance,¹⁵ attributing it to an obsolete tradition, stultifying its dynamic cultural role. Consequently, its reception in the Greek philosophic circles induced recurrent debates. Through Plotinus (204-270 CE) hieroglyphic studies were enmeshed with Neo-Platonism until the eighteenth century (Iversen, 1993: 45; Bernal, 1987: 163). Hieroglyphs were used by the Neo-Platonists to explain the allegorical nature of things, as they illustrated the relation between sign and meaning. This generated the notion of a symbolic system of writing expressing the abstract by means of concrete images or material objects (Iversen, 1993: 49). Eventually, the predominance of alphabetical writing set demarcations between word and image for several centuries. Mitchell propounds that the word/image divide only reflects the Western divide between spirit and body.¹⁶

12 Walter Benjamin (1978) *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephoh. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. 314.

13 Iversen, Erik (1993) *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 11.

14 I borrow 'suture' from Mitchell, who takes it after Lacan's definition of the term as the "junction of the imaginary and the symbolic", the process by which the subject (the 'I') is constituted both as a division and a unity. W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) *Picture Theory* Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 91-92.

15 Peter Daniels & William Bright (eds.) (1996) *The World's Writing Systems*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 73.

16 W.J.T. Mitchell (1987) *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Lately, with the deconstruction of the logos prevailing in Western thought since post-Platonic times, the hieroglyph has been re-evaluated by several thinkers, Jacques Derrida, Roger Cardinal, Martin Bernal, and Mario Perniola, among others.¹⁷ In his writings, Derrida praises the Egyptian hieroglyph on account that it is a form of writing, a muteness that replaces speech, in order to recapture presence, when speech threatens life (Derrida, 1974: 236). Derrida adds that as a design, the hieroglyph is closer to writing, not only because it traces a movement, but also because, “the signifier first signifies a signifier, and not the thing itself or a directly presented signified” (Derrida, 1974: 237). In my view, the pictorial turn from the hieroglyph to the portrait should be visualised as a sort of “picto-hieroglyph” (Derrida, 1974: 239) to expand on Derrida’s term in a different context, or a suturing of the image/word divide.¹⁸

Perhaps the Fayoum portraits, in some sense, mark a Renaissance of the hieroglyph, at a time when sacerdotal fanaticism reduced the hieroglyph to the condition of the ‘logos’. The portraits have filled a gap the newly acquired alphabetical language has created,¹⁹ by its linearity, by its effacement of the visual incorporated in the hieroglyph. In the former times, the hieroglyphs transmitted the solemn proclamations of royalty to gods and men. As pictorial representations representing sacred, royal or mundane inscriptions they have acted as artistic representations following the Egyptian artistic canon with its tendency to abstraction, a style suited to represent the in/visible divine. Hieroglyphs were called the “the writing of the divine word” (Daniels & Wright, 1996) and the Greeks called them ‘sacred letters’ (Iversen, 1993: 26; Daniels & Bright, 1996: 73). The visual language of the Fayoum portraits supplements the hieroglyph by representing the visible and invisible.

Accordingly, the Fayoum portraits often classified as mimetic need to be visualised from a different optics. Mimetic art tries to bridge the gap between reality and visual language, so that the most realistic portrait would be the most mimetically definitive, such that mimetic representation would stand for a pre-given reality. In a certain sense, the myth that mimetic representation is true to life claims a fixed mode of viewing that controls the future visibility. However, Derrida has already deconstructed the idea of a transparent reality, a transcendental signified available by representation, on account that the prefix ‘re’ does not mark a repetition, but refers to a presence that can “become-present”.²⁰ As representations of the dead the Fayoum portraits are positioned in-between the definite mimetic and the indefinite hieroglyphic language. They simultaneously valorise the visible object while being aware of its indefinite essence. As such, they do not control future visibility by duplicity, by mere repetition, but render

17 Jacques Derrida (1974) *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. Other works by Derrida on the hieroglyph will be cited in context. Roger Cardinal (1981) *Figures of Reality: A Perspective on the Poetic Imagination*. London: Croom Helm, p. 173. Mario Perniola (1995) *Enigmas: The Egyptian Moment in Society and Art*, trans. Christopher Woodall, London: Verso.

18 Communication studies have proved that rational knowledge progresses through “a systematic shuttling between intuition and rationalization...according to the heuristic value of one method vis-à-vis the other” (Gagliardi, 1999: 323).

19 For the development of script in Egypt see (Daniels & Bright, 1996: pp. 73-78).

20 Jacques Derrida (1982) ‘Sending: on Representation’, *Social Research* (Summer): 315.

present what is absent, thus questioning the relationship between nature – the physical/metaphysical environment – and human existence.

Determinate concepts of representation assume a source/target definite translatability that has already been deconstructed. Derrida has interrogated the concept of inter/intra-linguistic/semiotic translation by relating it to representation, or the desire for a “representative content (that) would keep its inviolable identity”, despite the diversity of the uses of the same word...or context” (Derrida, 1982: 303). Likewise, a postcolonial translation does not seek to attribute a fixed identity or determinate meaning to the portraits, but to dislocate them from the world of the dead to re-cite/site²¹ them in the present, in order to further the understanding of the trauma in local/global relations. It is a translation that reads against colonial and essentialist signifying systems, in order to address ambivalence and difference in global/local discourses, a translation that becomes a practice of resistance. To translate the portraits away from an imperial/essentialist discourse dividing between sacred and profane, is to see them in their own context, while crossing beyond a conformist reading of tradition, thus overpowering essentialist discourses.

Therefore, understanding the language of the portraits also needs a concept of translation founded on what Benjamin propounds as a “continuum of transformations” (Benjamin, 1978: 325) that can trace the “material community of things in their communication” (Benjamin, 1978: 330). For a proper reading of the portraits, they are to be visualised as points of accordance and discordance with the hieroglyph, before its decline. The hieroglyph proper bears semiotic elements, representing the world as an indivisible whole. Free from any message, it is the language of the secret knowledge, engaging the reader in reading what has never been written. Similarly, the portraits function in a double sense: as images that can be translated into communicable language; as well as images of “a non-sensuous similarity” that unfold mental meanings (Benjamin, 1978: 335), incommunicable in verbal language.

The portraits are not confined to the static aspect of the mimetic, but become a site for writing with a space for mobility. The viewer who enters the site of the image engages in the dialectic of the inexpressible expressed. This dialectic process re-enacts the act of representation and the generation of meaning in the image. In Derrida’s terms it becomes “a supplementary return toward a greater naturalness” (Derrida, 1974: 239) whose muteness brings it closer to death. The hieroglyph and the portraits are events, flowing over the borders of their limits, anticipating the after-life, and awaiting an encounter with death, inscribed in images.

Traces and Remains/Recollection and Repetition

The excavation of the solemn parade of portraits in the Fayoum district brings traces of the fable of eternal life inscribed in images of death. Fayoum is the historical location

21 Tejaswin Niranjana (1998) *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: California University Press.

where the portraits were executed and preserved. The mummies to which the portraits were attached were kept at home with their families for a generation or two until they passed out of memory. They were eventually sent to the cemetery when their memory ceased to have ties among the living. Still, the excavation and exhibition of the portraits in the present transforms them into a site of re-enactment that transgresses death as closure.

When buried, the portraits become mere figures of repetition, remains of the past. After being placed in the cemetery, the portraits are separated from their temporal environment, and their excavation augments their dislocation. As traces/images from the past, the act of seeing them is inscribed in recollection. Thus the figure of repetition escapes sameness or identification to become a point of departure. "Seeing the image, presupposes a distance, a separation that becomes an encounter."²² The portraits intrigue us urging us to draw back only to recollect the remains of the past, which have left their traces in the present. Such an act of recollection resists the museification of the portraits that would bring them to a standstill, as a mere act of repetition. Conversely, their excavation becomes an event mobilising a resistance to previous concepts of selfhood and history. The importance does not lie in the portraits or what they stand for but in their potential for translation.

The portraits represent those awaiting the unveiled secret and therefore abide in silence. They "touch the limits of truth", as Derrida would have it. The portraits become a "hieroglyph of a biography," an "allegory of the subject," for they hold a past life, an existence and at the moment of being painted they become "a fugitive crossing the line, all lines." in that sense, they are present and absent.

The absence/presence paradox has already been embedded in the mummies to which the portraits were attached. The mimetic features in the portraits simulate the presence of an absent, and mark the growing importance to the function of absence. The memory of the distant or dead conjures the image and places a great value on it.²³ Absence raises the possibility for the portrait, that becomes the sign of an unspoken word, the silence of a voice.²⁴ The Egyptians gave less concern to memory since death was an anticipation, a sojourn to the future; it, therefore, brought peace and resignation. For the Greeks, death meant residing in the darkness of Hades. The portraits mediate both concepts, at the point where the Egyptian vision of death picks up the thread that – out of despair – has already slipped off the Greek's hands.

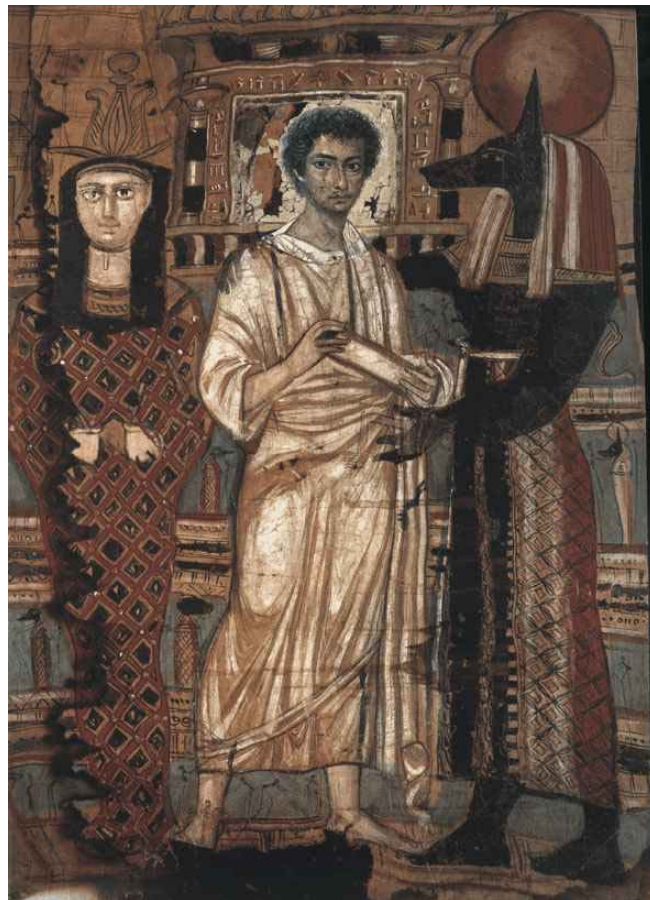
22 Maurice Blanchot (1989) *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, p. 32.

23 Jacques Derrida (1987) *Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington & Ian McLeod. Chicago: Chicago University Press, p. 179.

24 Jean-Christophe Bailly (1997) *L'apostrophe Muette: Essai sur les portraits du Fayoum*. Paris: Hazan, p. 80.

The Portraits as In-Between Location

The portraits occupy an in-between location, mediating Egypt and Greece, past and present, life and death. The in-between condition is represented in a three-figure shroud portraying the deceased, dressed in a Greek white tunic standing in a Greek posture, his weight on one foot signifying a forward step to the other world. While Osiris's mummy is represented in a frontal position, on the figure's left, Anubis receives him from a side posture, on the right. The three figures stand in a boat; that has landed at the threshold of a new world, marking the end/beginning of his journey.²⁵



The shroud represents the Greek secular world within a sacred Egyptian context, a chain linking existent and non-existent/visible and invisible. As such it fosters the silent language of the hieroglyph often abstracting what is beyond representation. The Egyptian gods are never visible to the living, and therefore represented in animal form, a sign of their difference; the animal form represents the visible part of the invisible. The unity of separate entities in the realm of the existent in Egyptian belief involves a duality. Egypt is the two lands, or 'Upper and Lower Egypt', and in the Moscow shroud, previously referred to, Osiris wears the crowns of both sites. In Egyptian

25 Three figure shroud, c. 125-150. Tempera on linen, 185 x 125 cm. Moscow, Pushkin Museum, n 5749 (purchased by V. S. Golenishchev in Cairo, 1888-89; acquired 1911) image reproduced from, Euphrosyne Doxiadis (1995) *Portraits du Fayoum: Visages de L'Egypte ancienne*. Traduit par Dennis Collins. Paris: Gallimard.

ontology the nonexistent/invisible is not simply transformed into the existent/visible, and thus erased; both coexist together. By analogy, death and life, sun and moon, day and night co-exist, an expanse which makes it possible for Egypt and Greece to co-exist as well. The deceased is participating in the death ritual, while the viewer who exchanges asymmetrical glances with the deceased is also at the frontier, where in the act of re-reading the shroud, he translates the encounters between time present and past, thus stepping into the future, the time beyond.

The Moscow shroud, as all portraits, reveals something beyond representation, which makes it difficult for the beholder to translate. The portraits transgress demarcations of archaeological, aesthetic and symbolic. They are in this world, and in the other, linking both and participating in each. Their paradoxical nature needs a different expanse that transgresses surface viewing, in order to capture the evasive relation between visible and invisible. Only then can the viewer break away from fixed methods of seeing, determined by the principles of art history or archeology, in order to modify ways of visualizing conceptual and pictorial images. At the time of their execution, the portraits were not simply meant for aesthetic effects, but had a ritual performative function. An appropriate reading needs to subvert the customary method of their viewing by dislocating and relocating them to syncretise sacred and profane spheres. This requires a translation that synchronizes the figurative and the non-figurative, in order to raise possibilities for re-presentation or making present.

By suturing sacred and profane, past and present the reading of the portraits cannot remain speculative. They require an intermediary strategy that reads them as ritually effective *ikons* at their time, as well as inexhaustible images with possibilities of representation or making present, such that a postcolonial translation of their quadruple dimension becomes the enactment of an event in our present history.

Death as Passage

You sleep that you may wake; you die that you may live. (Pyramid Text 1975b, Hornung, 1982: 155)

In Egyptian ontology life and death are not determinate opposites but ambivalent experiences. This does suggest the wholeness of living, as practice, while opening up potentialities for transformations and the transfer of centrality. Upon such terms, the process of life becomes an enactment of change, an alternation of the centres of activity, rather than triumph and conquest in a game of power. Aging is not a loss but a retreat from activity for the rejuvenation of the life energy. By analogy, the sun god retreats from his rule, leaving the space to the moon god Toth. For order to be established there must be an exchange of roles. A papyrus dating from the New Kingdom attributes to gods and kings a limited stretch of time, whereby the throne alternates from one to the other.²⁶ Later, in the New Kingdom, not only kings become gods after death, but all

26 Hornung (1982) *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, trans. John Baines, New York: Cornell University Press, p. 155.

men, as well, which emphasizes the exchange of roles, the state of flux, death becoming a passage towards a future journey. Re-creation is not an elimination of the negative elements, but their incorporation within life.

Interconnections between life and death take a new form in the Fayoum portraits. They represent an abstraction of the life span captured at the instance of death, the time in-between, the present that articulates past and future, the threshold to the other life. As early as the Coffin Texts, the present is felt to be both an evil time and a time full of promise, in Egyptian culture (Hornung, 1982: 154) and embedded in the Moscow shroud. The shroud represents Osiris – whose death is archetypal – mummified, sunken in the past. His son Horus takes over his role as the sun god signifying ‘tomorrow’, and is represented by a sun disc on Anubis’s dog head. Anubis, the supervisor of mummification, who hosts the deceased in the world of death, holds also Ankh – the key for the future – in his hand. The sun’s rebirth in the morning is renewal, a repeated renewal occasioned at the beginning of creation. The beginning of the world cannot have happened without the existence of death; birth corresponds to death. The sun’s daily death and rebirth is a promise that the blessed will pass via death into a new life. By negotiating past and present, death and rebirth, repetition and renewal, the shroud becomes the intermediate site merging distant realms and changing temporalities.

The notion of renewal in time has gradually developed in the Nineteenth Dynasty Turin Canon of Kings. Time became fixed in the world of history thus grounding the notion of eternal recurrence in a historical location rather than myth. Since then, the god Toth, the archivist assigns a fixed life span to all creations (Hornung, 1982: 155). This concept is represented in the Moscow shroud, where the deceased holds a scroll in his hand, probably an archive of his doings in his assigned life span, his passport to the other life. Life is not an unchanging endlessness, a repetition, but a renewal. Meanwhile, the written scroll of life shows that the deceased does not master historical knowledge, and is estranged to his own existence. He has lived not knowing what is to come, and by death his past life belongs to him no more. It becomes a writing traced in a scroll for others to decipher. In a related context, Derrida remarks that Toth mediates writing and death.²⁷ In the after-life – the other life – that life will acquire another meaning, which remains invisible. Derrida’s postulation generates the idea of death and writing involving process and stasis, the timed and timelessness.

Death occurs in time, but for rejuvenation one must step – somehow – outside time. The deceased represented in the portraits sees her/himself at a time beyond the temporal. The coexistence of the temporal and atemporal corresponds to the visible/invisible duality. The moment of death is the juncture at which the deceased will envision the other, when s/he takes the challenge to embark on the journey. The deceased’s gaze of anticipation and challenge is the unspoken word that carries the viewer to the threshold of death as passage, rather than prohibition. It is the starting point for the viewer to transmute a static presentness long remaining identical with itself into an outward experience. Exchanging gazes with the portrait arouses an enigmatic experience that involves subjectivity and estrangement, rationalisation and divination. At the threshold,

27 Jacques Derrida (1981) *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 96-107.

the deceased's anticipation arouses the viewer's enthusiasm, as he stands at an intermediate space raising a latent historical problem between self and other/East and West. Hence, the portraits become a virtual space where the ability to die becomes a "pre-requisite of history", in order to revive the memory of what has been long forgotten.²⁸ The mutual exchanges between viewer and viewed in the world of the living and the dead, past and present translates into a transfer of centres of activity, and a dislocation of the fixed gaze. It is not only the deceased represented in the portrait who is undergoing transformation, but the viewer as well. A postcolonial translation of the past involves an acceptance of difference opening up a dialogue with the other, guiding the viewer along her/his venture across the threshold, opening up to a local/global culture.

Difference as Challenge

The deceased represented in portraits are in anticipation of the event of dying, of seeing the invisible. Their proximity to death is an anticipation of the future life. Meanwhile, these portraits are images painted during a past life time, and kept as an inscription helping the spirit to identify the deceased before embarking on the voyage to the future life. Being is doubled, as that which is known in life and the unknown, the-would-be in death. The unknown is part of the nonexistent, which may be considered as the unconscious or the unarticulated unlimited, the limitless expanse in space and time that envelops creation. The encounter with the other self, the nonexistent means accepting the challenge of death. Most of the panels have 'Good Luck' written on them, as an amulet providing the moral support needed on such a hazardous voyage. Negation of existence is not only basic for rejuvenation, but for existence as a whole. Nonexistence is the complementary other of existence. Death alone reveals the ambivalence of the nonexistent.

The negative aspect of death is only experienced by the damned whose existence is extinguished after death. Negative elements in existence are a hostile challenge of constant duration. The damned, representing evil are expelled from existence but not eliminated; the existent cannot be totally released from imperfection. Transcendence is inconceivable, since it aims at total unity, an undifferentiated oneness, which in the Egyptian concept would be the condition of the world before creation. The creation of life means the birth of duality, a concept that accepts difference as complementarity. The starting point for the creator is generating the existence/nonexistence duality in order to diversify into a multiplicity. The Egyptian ontology is not founded on an abstract intellectual system, but generates concepts concurrent with everyday challenges. It is pragmatic in so far as it admits disorder, allows for reciprocal response between human and divine; the hieroglyph is the language that represents this system of thought. The silence of the hieroglyph in its incompleteness instigates an unmediated dialogue, an exchange with the other that re-starts as long as it is re-read.

28 I am inspired here by Perniola (1995).

Such an exchange is also present in the Moscow shroud. It represents the deceased and the gods on equal par, their partnership engaging them in the maintenance of their existence. As such life/death, man/god are dependent for a living order that opens a space for diversified creative acts. Likewise, the other portraits represent the deceased's equality with the gods, in terms of preserving their singularity. The unfixed gaze expresses their mutability, an anticipation of a would-be role in the after life. Though the portraits, in some sense, keep up the hieroglyph being aniconic or non-figurative, by touching the spiritual, their gaze speaks of a consciousness that is singular. Singularity as an aspect of solitude is unknown in the Egyptian tradition founded on the idea that individuality springs from an originally united nature (Hornung, 1982: 171). The one is incorporated in the All. At this point the portraits deviate from the hieroglyph, by becoming more expressive of their *divine* individuality, and man's *singularity* becomes an attribute for his immortality. The portraits combine the moment of anticipation of the self as would be divine, with enlightened consciousness that already claims deity. Hence the portraits advance another challenge that contains the other by confirming its presence, not by transgressing it. As such, the portraits are considered an event in the visualization of the self with regards to deity and deification.

By preserving the self as 'singular', the portraits advance the concept of the 'chosen' that complies with the idea of 'transcendence', a later outcome of the cosmotheistic turn of the post-Amarna theology, that matured in Late Antiquity with related movements in Stoicism and Hermetism (Assmann, 1998: 142-144). The pre-Amarna traditional Egyptian religion does not provide texts defining absolute conceptual borders between high and low, true and false, believer and non-believer. Religious texts are concerned with ritual, what to recite not what to believe. They do not condemn other religions, nor censor deviations from accepted rites (Assmann, 1998: 131). It was Akhanyati who founded a new religion in the middle of the 14th century based on the idea of divine unity, praising the sun as the source of light and time. However the concept of the One, according to Akhanyati had a physical meaning; it was a cosmological discovery.

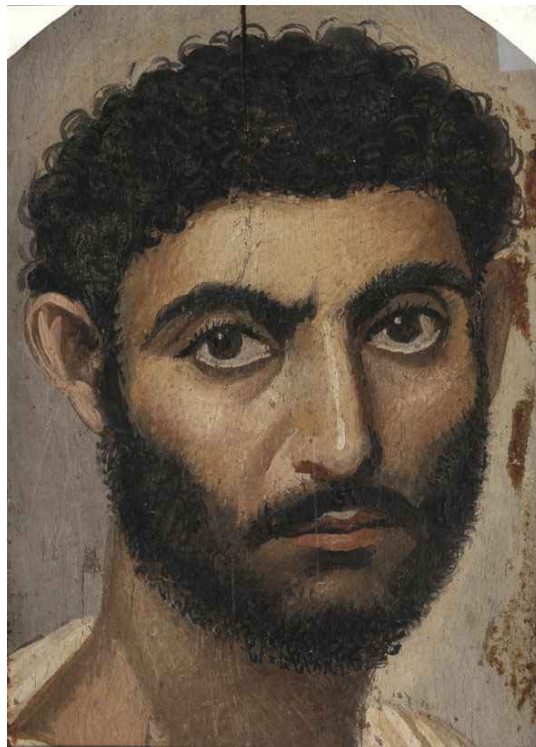
This concept gradually grows into an open monotheism as revealed in the Corpus Hermeticum. Speaking of the divine, it says that the divine has: "authority over the cosmos of mortals and unreasoning animals," and that he displayed "to lower nature the fair form of god."²⁹ God gives birth to a man like himself and wants "a person who is mindful to recognize himself" (*Hermetica*, 1995: 5), in order to reach up to god. Hence god is transcendent, and to reach him one has to transcend "the material body" to rejoice the presence of the father," for "(t)his is the final good for those who have received knowledge to be made god" (*Hermetica*, 1995: 6). Death for the chosen is another form of transcendence, and the anticipation of death is reaching the edge of transcendence. The earlier notion of the duality of existence and reciprocal exchanges within vital elements becomes at this stage an aspiration for identification with supreme power. Life's challenge that has once been for difference and rejuvenation is transformed into a need for sameness and repetition.

29 *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius* (1995), trans. Brian P. Copenhaver. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1.

Seeing the Other/Seeing Oneself

The portrait belongs partly to the hieroglyphic, partly to the mimetic. The face portrayed may be a hieroglyph of an existence, not a narrative biography.³⁰ Nevertheless, the mimetic aspect in the portraits incorporates a polarity that forms a rupture in the aesthetics of the hieroglyph. The portraits represent a self that remains the other: the other that sees the face witnesses the unknown side of the self:

The seer is seen while he sees, and thus there is vision in things... painting you... I who am speaking, but also I am the one to whom one is at looks speaking, and someone about whom one is speaking.³¹



Both painter/viewer and painted/viewed see, but remain mute, incapable of voicing what the other misses. Their silence involves a paradox: The reversibility of what is visible with what sees may either lead to a polytheistic experience or a monotheistic vision. The portraits are polytheistic to the extent that they combine different traditions. On the other hand, the mutual identification of seer and seen/self-and other lifts consciousness to a point of unification, a transcendence, concurring with a monotheistic vision. Awareness of the other as identity is in a sense, a negation of difference. Added to that, seeing the invisible as the singular individual entails isolation. As against the hieroglyph – the sign designed for re-composition, for re-integration – the portrait is a

30 A man, late Antonine – early Severan, c.180-211. Encaustic on panel, 43 x 22 cm x c.1.5 –2 mm. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, CG 33259 (Petrie excavation; acquired c.1889) (Doxiadis, 1995: 6).

31 Andrew Benjamin (1989) *The Lyotard Reader*. 'Philosophy and Painting in the Age of their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity'. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p.188.

rupture signaling the violent act of isolation. At this point, the portraits and the hieroglyph intersect.

The Egyptian masque or hieroglyph abstracted characteristic traits combining organic and inorganic in a combinatory system where places in life and the after life exchange and merge. This system has procured exchangeable locations enhancing the notion of co-existence. On the other hand, the Fayoum portraits witness a dislocation in place causing anxiety. An Egyptian ontology that has previously integrated soul and body, high and low, life and death is threatened to become a threshold to a divisive world dislocating the body and prioritizing soul. “The body mortal” can only soar when “the senses are restrained” (*Hermetica*, 1995: 3).

The portraits are material, and their very materiality reveals the soul, and the soul of the *great* gods is consciousness. The ongoing discourse that gradually overtakes restricts consciousness to a chosen few, whose mind can “contain so great a bounty... so the human mind shines with the light of consciousness... (and) never obstructed by darkness” (*Hermetica*, 1995: 77). The growth of such a divisive discourse places the One above the all, and breaks with an earlier Egyptian conception of the gods’ nature as limited in time, space, power and knowledge, and concomitant with the more general phenomenon of their diversity. This tenet fostering the notion that one is part of all, while difference is an attribute of the same, does not confer on the gods absolute qualities or absolute existence. Nonetheless, the portraits and the hieroglyph overlap in so far as they merge visible and invisible. Self-consciousness in the portraits is assertive, but their fixed gaze seems to be interrupted by some furtive glances exchanged with the viewer. By partaking in two realms, they are conjunctive and disjunctive sacred and profane. They are the gods that are scared of becoming, and by being apprehensive of the future, the beyond, they remain subject to an unpredictable present.

The Egyptian Turn in History

In the earlier Egyptian tradition, the hieroglyph remains anonymous, and the mask seeks a state of anonymity through the abstraction of singular features. The hieroglyph and the mask have an existence not situated in a fixed time, but in the present, a time that offers choices without expecting decisions. The viewer recognizes her/himself in the hieroglyph as the actor, as s/he takes part in completing that which remains unfinished in existence. This does not imply the impersonality or the dissolution of the self, but reveals the inexhaustibility of primal matter – or the non-existent – the life challenge germinating creativity. In fact, the incompleteness of the hieroglyph is derived from that same notion of the incompleteness of existence that calls for remodeling. The renewal continuum is not a repetitive procedure leading to a status quo, but a revolutionary process of rebirth. The notion of death as finality pertains to the nonexistent; what exists is always in motion (Hornung, 1982: 182-183). The portrait has made use of the invisible language of the hieroglyph to gain access to the invisible parts of the self, only to the extent that it retains the subject silent. Unlike the hieroglyph, the interpretation of the portrait’s silence may either induce the polarization or plurality of meanings.

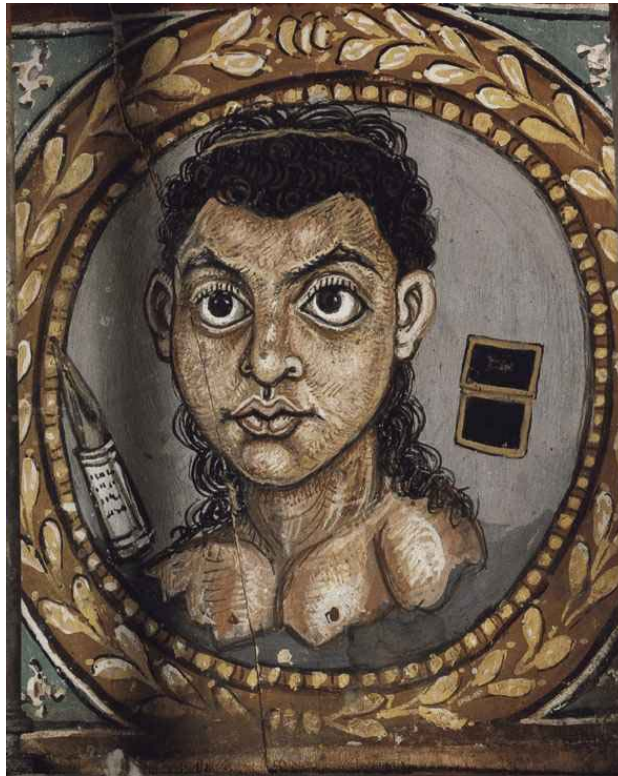
In this respect, the Fayoum portraits represent the tempestuous collapse in an ambivalent present, or what Mario Perniola defines as the “Egyptian enigma”, a condition resulting from a confusing encounter between past and future (Perniola, 1995: viii). It is the point where two apparently inverse visualizations of life and death hybridize while opening up to different horizons. The portraits are positioned at a point of intersection, where the singular self becomes a site of contradiction; difference may be a privilege conferred upon the chosen, but the privilege of singularity risks the mutability and the unpredictability of history. The portrait unveils a joy and fear of death; death may be anonymity or oblivion. The portraits’ eyes shift between the ecstatic gaze and enthusiastic glances, such that the moment of death becomes the true moment of life. Eyes silently transfuse an existence in time, trodden paths leading to the final passage that should be traversed. There is an awareness that death is not a given but must be attained. If a decision regarding death must be taken, this entails a possibility of death, a resolution that needs consciousness. Such a resolution gives man the power of a maker, and death becomes a possibility for transcendence. Hence the avoidance of death as repetition is not by rebirth – as in Egyptian ontology – but by the singular/individual *power* to begin.

Consciousness of singularity, transcendence and power concur with the apprehension of death, and with the awakening of responsibility.³² Responsibility comes along with the consciousness of difference, the necessity to draw borderlines in concession to the Law, a submission to an absolute transcendent. Whether this transcendent force is transfigured as epistemology or divination, its language will replace the hieroglyph by the logos, eventually leading to Babel.

Notwithstanding, acts of resistance to portraiture as an art, and the portrait as the ultimate truth, appear in the third century CE. An *Aedicula* of a boy probably painted by an autodictat local painter frees itself from the Greek mimetic technique. It combines the Amarna exaggerated features with Indian or Persian styles. The distortion of the figure attributes to the portrait an animalistic savagery, nostalgic of an art merging the species, vibrant with vigour rather than simulating the actual.³³ Deviations in the art of portraiture unveil more potentialities for reading the varied languages of the Fayoum portraits. As they bridge the gaps by partaking in two realms they can be viewed as an art of bricolage, a site synchronizing temporalities, and opening a space for resisting subjugation to the Law. Translating the portraits opens chances, possibilities to live the moment as actual but not final.

32 Jacques Derrida (1995) *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 40-41.

33 *Aedicula* of a boy, first half of the 3rd century. Tempera on panel, 38.6 x 24 x 15 cm. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, CG 33269 (acquired 1894) (Doxiadis, 1995: 109).



In order to resume reading the other, a postcolonial translation should be re-invested with the strategies enabling it to read the invisible in language, hence reviving the hieroglyph. By operating a system of “transversal taxonomies”³⁴ this may form junctures at points of disjunction. The Egyptian Greek/East West binary may be reassessed in the light of a new reading of the past image, a conceptual reassessment that may in turn remodel our standardized organizational activity that has inherited an imperial construction of the world. A postcolonial translation of the portraits shows possibilities of change beyond closed societies or globalism. It develops strategies of dialogue through translatability, an understanding of difference, and an ability to trace relations between the One and the All within a historical context. Such a dialogue may overpower the discourse of essentialism/modernity with its exclusive/imperial tendencies to naturalize power, a discourse that has effaced large sections of local/global history. The translation of the open-eyed portraits may transform them into channels, passages to sail through, away from the gaping abyss of the void, towards future possibilities.

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34 According to Perniola, this system is capable of uncovering affinities between apparently discordant aspects, while tracing oppositions among seemingly similar aspects. The inventory involves a conceptual and organizational activity that throws new light on the past (Perniola, 1995: 73).

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