

Horus, Harmakhis, and Harpokrates
in Chapter III of V. and "Under the Rose"

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In both Chapter III of V. and "Under the Rose," Hugh Bongo-Shaftsbury appears at the Fink restaurant wearing a hollowed-out ceramic hawk's head. "Harmakhis," he explains. "God of Heliopolis and chief deity of Lower Egypt. Utterly genuine, this: a mask used in the ancient rituals. . . . Literally Horus on the horizon."¹ This casual reference to Horus is more important than it appears.

The phrase "under the rose" (in Latin, sub rosa) derives from the ancient custom of hanging a rose over the council table to indicate that everyone present was sworn to silence; hence, anything done sub rosa is done secretly. The application of this expression to Pynchon's espionage plot is obvious. Porpentine and Goodfellow, as well as their opposite numbers, are in Egypt to engage in certain sub rosa activities connected with the Fashoda crisis. Lying beneath the suggestion of secrecy, however, is the subtler implication of misinterpretation, for the entire sub rosa tradition was born out of an interpretational error. The rose originally became a sign of secrecy because it was associated with Harpokrates, who was thought to be the Egyptian god of secrecy. Harpokrates was conventionally represented holding a finger to his lips. But this gesture was in fact a sign of youth, not secrecy, in Egyptian iconography. We now know that Harpokrates was not the god of secrecy at all but, rather, "the young Horus,"² another manifestation of the same god whom Bongo-Shaftsbury impersonates in Pynchon's texts. If "under the rose" suggests truth lying hidden beneath a cloak of secrecy, it also suggests a more radical, and in Pynchon's world a still more pertinent, idea: that what we call truth may always be a matter of interpretation.

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Notes.

¹ Thomas Pynchon, "Under the Rose," Noble Savage 3 (1961), 233-34. Rpt. slightly altered in V. (Philadel

phia: J. B. Lippincott, 1963), 74; (New York: Bantam, 1964), 62.

² W. Max Muller, "Egyptian Mythology," The Mythology of All Races, ed. Louis Herbert Gray (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1918), XII, 243.