

The Canon and the Anthropomorphic Measure

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Résumé: *Le canon est la preuve des universalia des activités de l’homme aussi bien que l’expression de la diversité des sociétés. Il est la mesure de la tradition isomorphe de la culture occidentale, mais ses racines sont profondes, remontant à l’Égypte ancienne, dont nous avons hérité le modèle anthropomorphique et anthropométrique. L’univers de nos activités a dans son ensemble comme mesure le canon naturel, le monde même étant constamment soumis à l’évaluation et à la hiérarchisation ainsi constituées.*

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While the canon is a foundational Western institution, its roots are to be found elsewhere, outside the Western pool of civilisation. Predynastic Egypt has left behind the *canonical tradition*, which in time has grown into as comprehensive a legacy as it is variegated and culture-specific. As a matter of principle, it could be said that the canon is at once evidence of the *universals* at work in human endeavours, works, practices, protocols and evaluations, and the manner in which variety and diversity assume shape in human communities. Ancient Egypt, rather than the Western world – this is as much as saying that the canon proposes an obvious extension of the *chronotopic* debate on Western Foundationalism. More simply phrased, the canon is much older and much more spacious than we have been in the habit of thinking.

All the way into the Renaissance – the first phase of what in my own critical vocabulary I call “the long modernity” (Irimia 2008) – European/ised canons or proportional systems from pre-pharaoh times were active. They were none but tables of correspondences meant to bring into prominence the relations holding between various parts of the human body. Customary working tools later on, in what we now call the *fine arts*, these mental projections confirm the thesis of what I call the *isomorphic model* of Western culture. Our culture. The culture to which we belong and in which, in the world down here, we are modelled following the norms and shapes of those peopling the world up there, whether this be organised according to Platonic or Christian values.

One *ontos* and two *ontogenies* is the premise underlying this cultural model. It is a model that has preserved the proportional equivalence referred to above, as it has done the strict numerical harmony of those peopling these worlds set in hierarchic relationship. Isomorphic worlds with paradigms ordered by precise relations, established

proportions and secured harmony – this is our Western *Weltanschauung*. According to Lovejoy (1936), the principle of plenitude is harmoniously accompanied by the principle of continuity and the principle of sufficient reason, all three wonderfully illustrated in the enduring Great Chain of Being model. Here is an image of the world that does justice to Whitehead's belief: the whole of Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato. Could one think of a better recognition of the rationality of the universe? From the Socratic *λογική τέχνη* to Roman *ratio*, the canonical tradition is a eulogy to the ordering vision of the world. Take Tillyard, for instance, as yet another illustration of the above-said in his capital work *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943). For him, too, a table-based cultural typology works as inter-paradigmatic correspondences. In a matter of years Barthes was to apply a similar analysis to the world picture in his *Mythologies* (1957), a study raised on Structuralist alignments of Jakobsonian extraction. There is nothing new under the sun...

Something was being raised under the Egyptian sun millennia before our classic antiquity. It was the canonisation of reality as vision and practice aiming at preserving the world with its things, people and – most importantly – its forms of power. The dynastic cult of the dead and of the other world, with their minutely orchestrated rituals, sanctify the *value* of the official canon: *anthropomorphic* and *anthropometric*, a geometric conservation system was put in place whose rationale is the essential proportionality and typology deriving from and reflecting the *human body*. Practised under all the great pharaohs, this system brought in the exhaustive *axiologisation* of the human, in the name of the divine instance, and taking into account that the pharaoh was the divine presence in the world down here. In other words, the canon – patented in predynastic and applied in dynastic Egypt – is coextensive with measuring the world with an anthropomorphic measure yet with a superhuman end in view. The canon is a standard in itself, way before decimal standardisation, not unlike the evolution of the period – a modern concept in Western thought – against the anthropometric backdrop of temporal evaluation. The body-head, finger-hand, arm-trunk ratios are all consistently and exactly calculated according to natural, so imperturbable proportions that give us, humans, a sense of security.

An anthropomorphic and anthropometr(ologic) measure, the basis of Egyptian canons is unconditionally supplied by the divine origin of proportions. These are illustrated in the pharaoh's and in his wife's body respectively, and are observed to the least detail in their sons' and daughters' bodies. The mature proportion of the infantile body remained unchanged along the millennia and did nothing but confirm the belief in the divine body being reduplicated at the royal-aristocratic level. It was not before the late seventeenth century, the time of the *crise de la conscience européenne*, that the Western world started to show the child as a distinct physical entity in the visual arts. Stable and inalterable, the *natural canon* embodied in the pharaoh's person was the guarantor of cosmic harmony. The statue of Pharaoh Pepi II as a child held in his mother's lap confirms the fix(ed) proportion in the adult and her offspring, conceived though as indifferent to the reality of nature itself and perfectly sanctioned by the superior nature of the absolute master. Mature as artistic accomplishment, the immature

pharaoh is propelled to the height of cosmic harmony on the assumption of his canonical proportions. Ancient Egypt's natural axiology was equipped with superhuman substance. This may account for the typical rigidity of figures in all the images that have come down to us, the behavioural "Egyptianism" with which the revisionist Nietzsche took issue and which to the viewer looks like the, at times, iconic "Byzantinism" of Romanian hieratic representations.

Transmitted into the Hellenic cultural space, the Egyptian canon finds another embodiment in the character generically known as *κοῦρος*. This was a "novelty," albeit chronologically its presence is central in ancient Greek art. Statues of this kind recalled preeminently divine, but also human instances. Apollo was the favourite god captured in such an "Egyptian" posture along the centuries. In the fifth century BC a relatively mimetic style of representation replaced this unquestionably fixed attitude. More or less referential representations came to the fore, with young bodies in movement and humans illustrated in relaxed practical activities becoming sites of interest. *Ανάθυσσος κοῦρος* (c. 530 BC) is a case in point, while the statue by Polycletes known as *Kavόν* (440 BC) proves the essentialist success of anthropometrology: *κανόν* is the very embodiment of the *right measure*. Later on given the transparent name of *Δορυφόρος* "the spear bearer," Polycletes's work represented a young athlete taking a rest. His left leg slightly bent, his right arm running along his thigh, while the right one laid the relay on his left shoulder, all these anatomical details suggested the beginning and end of an individually and collectively prestigious competition, all observing the spatial rigours of temporal succession.

Homologated as the image of the perfect human body, the statue was a model, the *model to imitate*. It was an elegant display of physical beauty deriving from the utmost harmony of the parts. By subtle references, it pointed to the measure of excellence, as confirmed by the great Roman physician, surgeon and philosopher Galen, whose knowledge in the field had an enormous bearing on Western thinking. Galen had seen in the *Δορυφόρος* the search for and identification of absolute harmony not so much as *symmetry* (the Latinisation of *συμμετρία*, or else, the proportions of the body), but rather as the measure of the parts of the body in proportion of the one to the other and of all to the whole. Polycletes's statue, Galen concluded, was, like the very concept underlying it, an exemplary *κανόν*.

Tautological, the formula can serve as argument for the numberless copies executed in Rome and acquiescing Vergil's famous saying, namely that the Greeks remained the great artists, authors of statues that seem to breathe and lookers in the stars for the world's harmony; the Romans, instead, were simple imitators, despite their military astuteness, engineering precision and administrative efficiency. The conquerors were, that is, conquered by the conquered, the latter more aesthetically capable than the former. Cosmically more capable, too, if we consider that the Greeks' artistic refinement imitated in Rome pointed to the same vision of world order. Inspired by Polycletes's statue, Phidias's *Man with a Helmet* (c. 44 BC) is a splendid reflection of the Polycletean work, with the wrestler's body shaped exactly after the "divine" canon.

Before this paradigmatic axiological operation became the rule in what we now call Western culture, the ancient Egyptians represented the human body proportionally by applying to it unitary squares as units of measurement. Indeed, Iversen speaks about the Egyptian as “a system of proportions representing an anthropometric description of the body based on the standardization of its natural proportions,” and sees in the said grid “a geometrical projection of the canon” (63). We are to conclude that the human body was perceived and conceived as an inalienable measure of the world, whether as the microcosm (*ανθρόπο-*) or the macrocosm (*γεό-*). The body served science (*λογία*) by quantification (*μετρία*). This *axiological model* marks the whole of Western cultural identity up until the breach known as the Scientific Revolution, or else, in Paul Hazard’s words, “la crise de la conscience européenne”. In my own critical vocabulary (Irimia 2006), I define it as the *collapse of the isomorphic model*. I see it as constitutive of Modernity as an overall Western project. Habermas looks at this comprehensive process as unfinished and still unfolding. If we relate it to its foundationalist phase, the isomorphic model is what underlies the whole Western view, with the world “up there” reflected in the one “down here,” the one supplying the fundamental and founding principles and force to the other. The supreme value of this model is *kalokagathon*, in which the good, the true and the beautiful are one. Immovable laws govern the world and secure its stability. There is no room for uncertainty or relativism in this scheme.

Superseded in the seventeenth century by the scientific way, this essentially metaphysical perspective gives way to experimental tests, the only ones held responsible for understanding and controlling the smooth working of things in the world. Disenchanted from its original source, to follow the Weberian thesis, the world is now set right with the human means of technicalism deriving from scientific rigour. Its main value is *correctness*. In the twentieth century relativism widens the breach thus wrought in the foundationalist project and humanly produced measures and measurements replace divinely-inspired ones for good. What matters is triumphant human *performativity*. This is the present-geared Western-produced project of modernity, to which anthropological perspectives are related, with their pragmatic consequences, among which classic colonialism, postcolonial developments, and globalisation, the latest and most sophisticated form of basically the same attitude.

Iversen sees in this *hiatus* the Neo-Classic rejection of the canon and its values on rationalistic premises. To this can be added the Romantic rejection with its cultivation of individual emotion, which is as much as saying suppressing standard supra-individual values. I call these attitudes *rational correctness*, and *emotional correctness*, respectively. In light of my theory of *the long modernity*, the first or early Modernity, a.k.a. the Renaissance, takes its axiological might from *το καλοκαγαθόν*, founded by *truth*. Classic Modernity, a.k.a. Neo-Classicism identifies its axiological basis in the *correct*. Our Late Modernity, a.k.a. Postmodernity, cultivates the *efficient*. I understand this “evolution” – a typically progressivist Enlightenment confection – as a neutral suite or succession in which the loss of the sacred nature of measure and measurement is only too apparent. What is not subject to loss are the desire, will and necessity to view everything through the *axiological lens*. Classic Modernity, a.k.a. the Enlightenment,

takes over the mythical-religious project by resorting to scientific precision and laicises it accordingly. Late Modernity applies to it further precision with a view to gaining in efficiency. I regard Modernity as a succession of symbolic violence(s) systematically playing the *progress* card. Its face looks at and into the future, like Paul Klee's famous *angelus novus*. It reconsiders its past with its own instruments and these are dis-en-chanted (Lat. *com-* "with", *sidus, sideris* "star, celestial body, astrum"): they have ceased looking up to the stars and reading them. Etymologically, this is a *dis-aster*.

According to Iversen, the uninterrupted and unquestioned functioning of the Western canon till the end of the sixteenth century stands proof to the strength of a model taken over on *technical* grounds and understood *stylistically*, as Panofsky would have put it in his "theory of human proportions as a reflection of the history of styles" (1955). If we accept that "the various canonical systems of Egypt, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, and the Renaissance were simple mathematical projections of the styles they reflect" (Iversen 56), we can look at canons as "geometries" themselves able to theorise and apply systematically observed proportions. This is a recognition of the numerical relationship established in Greek thought against the Pythagorean backdrop, which the Romans used successfully with engineering aplomb! For metrological reasons the human body functioned as the *natural canon* preceding cultural standardisation. Homogeneous and homologous, the human body could secure the unitary vision, once its *measurement value* (or else, in classic Greek, *μέτρον*) was observed. Linear measurement in the "fine" arts does nothing but pay this anthropometric service as in expressions of current use like "a palm of land", "a finger of wine", "a cubit (in the hedge)". To this day we measure the diversity of the world in pre-standard units like "a fathom", "an arm", "a head", "a mouth". What can such anthropometric remanence mean in our postmodern technological age, when there is hardly any reason for us to resort to it, if not the recognition of the inevitable *canonisation* of whatever we do, say and think?

Let us take a short etymological trip in the terminology. In classic Greek *κανών* was: 1. in general, any stick of straight rod; 2. rod used in weaving, a shuttle or quill, by which the threads of the woof (*πηνίον*) were passed between those of the warp (*μήτος*); 3. rule used by masons, brick layers or carpenters to trace straight lines; 4. the beam or tongue of the balance; 5. *κανόνες* (pl.), the keys or stops of the flute. In Homer's epics *κανόνες* were the metal rods running across the hollow of the shield, through which the arm was passed. In classic Latin *κανών* was translated as *regula* or *norma*, its semantic load pointing to regulation, standardisation and normativisation following an *evaluative* operation. Thus, *κανόνες χρονικοί* occurring in Plutarch was deciphered by the Romans as "chief epochs, main eras". By them were designated the times that, as a point of departure or origin (*principium*) of history, could also serve as *principle* of evaluation. How could we separate the "*Ubi sunt qui ante nos...?*" topos or, indeed Villon's "*Où sont les neiges d'antan?*" from the feeling underlying them: the irreversible loss of greatness, the irrepressible desire to return to origins, the belief that the times of yore were and have remained the *model* that we try to follow, not without difficulty, nor without the conscience of our own decadence or at least of our epigonic condition. We cannot, in other words, separate *αρχή*, "beginning, origin, prime cause" (as in *αρχαῖος*,

“of the beginning, originary, incipient”, or *ἀρχαϊκός*, “old, archaic”) from *ἀρχή*, “supreme place, sovereignty, supreme importance, domination” (as in *οἱ ἀρχαῖ* “the authorities, the magistrates”, hence also derivatives like *archetype*). Nor is the twinning in one and the same term of the idea of *origin* and that of *value* groundless or unmotivated (*οἱ ἀρχαῖοι* were the Fathers or Prophets of the New Testament). Such formulae as *princeps edition* or *the principal* (designating the schoolmaster) betray the Latin meaning of *princeps*. Nor is the logic of *pattern* as “model, type, cast” different from *patron*, itself a corruption of *pater*.

Late Latin *canonicus* “clerk”, was the name conferred upon one of the interpreters of the *Church canon*. Modern derivations of the term preserve the meaning of ecclesiastical rigour, as well as the importance of abiding by set institutional rules. In most modern languages the term *canon* covers the following semantic field: 1. rule, religious dogma (especially as part of the religious service); 2. general rule or principle, criterion, norm or axiom (for instance, a logical or grammatical canon, or the canons of criticism); 3. list of Biblical texts recognised by the Church as sacred, inspired, carriers of the revealed truth of God and, by way of consequence, serving as standard in the service, as in the faithful believer’s conduct; 4. official list of saints or catalogue recognised by the Church (as the effect of *canonisation*); 5. rule of faith ratified by the Pope in Rome; 6. the portion of the mass between the *Sanctus* and the Lord’s Prayer; 7. musical composition having voices or parts wherein each voice or part in turn takes up the same melody, called the subject, and all combine to make harmony, based on imitating the one musical structure thus interpreted; 8. list of authors deemed fundamental in a given bulk of literature; 9. list of works attributed to a significant author. Underlying all these meanings is the idea of *strictness* imposed on *evaluation* by one type of *canon* or another. Present in each and every of the rules, criteria, categories or taxonomies above, evaluation is inseparable from *hierarchy*. The primitive canon did nothing but establish a *scale of values* by mere and simple measurement.

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