1. Introduction to the Ancient Canon

At the beginning of time, following the reconstruction of Norbert Elias (1983), naked and defenceless as we were, we had no choice but to face, with a strong emotional charge, any event which, according to our understanding, could be of great importance for our existence, hostile or favourable. Caught, therefore, in the trap of the double-bind in which the more emotionally involved we are, the less we are able to rationally detach ourselves, and the less we control the situation, we remain at the mercy of events. The first symbolic Canon, therefore, could only be formed at the end of the very long process which, over tens of thousands of years, led our species from its distant prehistoric origins to the great civilizations of the ancient world.

After a brief description of some recent paleoanthropological studies that have changed our perspective on the history of knowledge, we will take a close look at a passage from a tragedy by Aeschylus, which the historian Johann Jacob Bachofen used as a reference in the 19th century to argue for what he saw as the historical transition from the “matriarchy” of our origins to the ancient patriarchy (cf. Engels 1884).

We will then introduce the hypothesis put forward by Erich Neumann, a notable disciple of Carl Gustav Jung, regarding the existence of a history of consciousness that is still well within the era we usually define as historical. This is a suggestive hypothesis and even though it is difficult to substantiate given the inalienable uncertainty of the empirical basis, we will use the historical-psychological perspective with the aim of starting an in-depth study of ancient sociological imagery.

It is with this interpretative background that we will examine the three central myths of the Ancient Canon. These correspond to the three levels of stratification found in ancient religions, particularly Greek religions, but with a more general scope. The central myths are three collective representations developed by humanity in response to what we have called the three fundamental concerns about individual consciousness, social organization and cultural production. They can be considered the peaks of the sociological imagination of antiquity and constitute the profound legacy for humanity, which to some extent still survives today.

In accordance with the general aims of our investigation, we will therefore look for traces of these myths within contemporary imagination.
1 THE AESCHYLEAN SOCIAL REVOLUTION

Paleoanthropologists and evolutionary biologists state that the origin of humanity goes back to well before the appearance of our species. In fact, many species with distinctly human characteristics appeared on the planet by the process of hominization, which began around six million years ago. Our story, however, cannot reasonably be assumed to begin before the birth of the biological species to which we belong, i.e., 200,000 to 300,000 years ago. There are, however, consistent traces of symbolic and technical productions well before this date. In addition, there are traces of exchanges between our species and other similar species (genetically similar, if not culturally) occurring a few tens of thousands of years ago. With our current knowledge and capabilities, if we have to put a date on the start of our social history, the biggest migrations out of Africa, around 100,000 years ago, are as close to the idea of our beginning as we can imagine. Our most distant direct ancestors arrived in Europe at least 35,000 years ago. The first building blocks of the sociological imagination we have called the Ancient Canon date back at least to this time. We do not know about cultural contributions from the species our ancestors met while migrating. However, around 12,000 years ago, i.e., after the end of the last great ice age, agricultural practices began in the geographical area known as the Fertile Crescent, and within a few millennia they spread to every corner of the world where the great migrations subsequently brought our species. It was then that the first social revolution in our history took place, consisting simultaneously of the development of agriculture and the formation of the first cities. Indeed, if agriculture required sedentarization, the development of which led to cities, the latter needed food supplies and professionalism, which led to the development of agriculture. As a result, communities began to grow in size and complexity, to diversify from one another, while the individuals within them also diversified. Clearly, knowledge was accumulating and developing.

The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas described the culture of these Neolithic societies as strongly holistic, deeply bonded with the Earth, expressing matri-focal imagery (omnipresence of a great goddess of the Earth), accompanied, probably, by matrilocal family organization (centrality of the house of an old woman, the Mother) and by matrilineal succession of property that had developed with sedentarization (Rodríguez 1999). To be clear, this is not a matriarchy based on the rule of women over men (nothing like a “female polis”), but rather this is a society less differentiated in gender and roles. The prestige of women was certainly strong; the symbolic value of the feminine was central and the masculine was marginal, as were the men within the group. Such a society is called gylany (Gimbutas 1989; cf. Cantarella 1996), but we can also simply call it matriarchy of the origins.
This phase of archaic Europe, inhabited by populations that can be defined as pre-European, was followed by a series of at least three major invasions. These occurred between the middle of the fourth and the end of the second millennium BCE, and involved (proto) Indo-European peoples. These people identified with the *Yamnaya* culture, part of the Kurgan culture originally named by Gimbutas after the characteristic mounds which they used to cover the bodies of the deceased. Through these migrations, a patrifocal cultural layer was slowly superimposed, giving rise to what we know as ancient patriarchy. The newcomers had lived for a long time in the area from the Black Sea to the Caucasus and had spread in successive waves toward both the west (the Atlantic and northern Mediterranean shores) and the east (India).¹ They were semi-nomadic warriors, devoted to breeding the animals that could be taken with them on their long journeys. They worked with metals to make weapons (such as the fearsome double bit axe, the *labrys*, one of their most characteristic symbols) and to plundering other groups to survive.

These people had limited agriculture, but very sophisticated techniques for the time. It was not the land that was vital, but the technical, military and organizational capacity of physical strength to be able to move toward ever new lands. Their culture was *patrifocal* (the religion was Uranian, with dominant male divinities, always fighting for dominance) and the social organization was probably *patrilineal* (children were given to the adult male who recognized them, and the transmission of inheritance followed this line) and *patrilocal* (spouses settled close to the father of the groom or the new family maintained a clan link with him by enlarging its area of influence, eventually coming to compete with him for supremacy).

Faced with a rising human tide, those who see it coming and are not immediately exterminated, can follow various paths. They can seek refuge in inaccessible and better defended places, as was perhaps the case with the Etruscans, and as certainly happened with the Basques in the Pyrenees and the Picts in the Scottish Highlands (Gimbutas 1999). They may gradually retreat until the threat disappears altogether through incorporation (this may also have happened to the Etruscans and the Minoans). Alternatively, they may maintain a clear presence in the original culture beneath the prominence gained by the victor (this was the case with the culture of the Celts, Germans and Balts) (cf. Gimbutas 1999, Part II). Sometimes, however, a new culture is produced that comes to terms with the past, neither mere substitution, nor homogeneous fusion (*melting pot*), nor even juxtaposition (*salad bowl* or *mosaic*), but a metabolization of different cultural formations into a new one, in which the previous ones are still discernible as limit cases (Cerroni 2002) or survive with particular diffused traits.

In this way, individual identity finds new spaces of expression and corroboration, while a new community identity is constructed which can be valid...
for a larger group. The broadening of the cultural horizon associated with these processes also requires and tends to stimulate creativity in individuals. The ability to integrate increased differences into an innovative solution can coalesce around a cultural institution capable of sustaining a society that makes the historical becoming an engine of its civil development. To use Lévi-Strauss’s famous definition (1962), such a society is characterized as a hot society. This was certainly at the root of the exceptional case of Rome, whose long birth lasted at least ten centuries, and, for a much more limited time, of the Greek world. In both Greece and Rome, the path of affirmation of the individual within society only emerges with the very slow, uncertain but progressive acquisition of universal and inviolable autonomy and of personal and inalienable participatory capacity. With Greek cultural syncretism and the constitutionalism of monarchic-republican Rome, both the abstract idea and the historical embryo of what we understand as the inviolable values of the *in-dividuus* and the public character of personality, were formed. It was from here that social and cultural innovations of universal significance were born, both in Greek polis and systematic philosophy, and in Rome, law and *humanitas*. These developments took place well before Christianity and this is where Europe’s cultural wealth originated. For our present aim we may limit ourselves to only address with the polis, also if Rome is even more interesting for a theoretical modeling, against a sort of cultural oblivion.²

However, the network of the Greek polis was the cradle of the rules of both political and intellectual games (cf. Vernant 1966 in Vernant 1979). Looking at the civilization process from a detached and coarse-grained perspective, we can agree that democracy and knowledge are the two long-term tracks of the development. It is no coincidence that in those trading zones where cultural diversities met and were taken over by an institutional core capable of metabolizing them, a leap in human civilization took place through creolization (Hannerz 1992). Cultural diversity converging in an attractor and integrator institutional center (e.g., city, university, cenacle, state) to unify against centrifugal forces and to universalize cultures through innovative abstraction is the secret of civilization.

The peculiarity of the Greek adventure at this time is of particular interest to us, because there are traces in this intellectually innovative culture within historical times, of both the primordial pre-Indo-European stratum and the first uncertain deposition of the proto-Indo-European stratum. These traces miraculously took the form of written evidence and reached us to a considerable extent.

By the end of this era, there was a melting pot of ethnicities and cultures on the shores of the Northeast Mediterranean Sea, making it an exceptional case in human history. First of all, there was an archaic-agricultural humus, particularly evident in the pre-Hellenic Mediterranean civilizations, but also
widespread throughout the known ancient world. It was here that a slow transformation began toward a city civilization on which a culture developed along a completely different line. This was a patriarchal society, but we must be careful not to view it as the same as the patriarchal family of the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe. To distinguish it from the latter, by analogy with what we did with *gylany*, we should perhaps use the term *androlania*, where the organization of political, economic and family life was almost exclusively male. It is correct to refer to it as a patriarchal society, even in its typically ancient form.

The context that was created in that small region of the planet was therefore peculiar, but it is a peculiarity of generalization. The Neolithic culture that emerged found particularly high expression in Greek mythology, in which the traces of historical sedimentation are particularly well recognized. It therefore becomes inevitable that any study of the ancient world must take more than a local perspective. In fact, the sociological triad of the individual, the social species and the intellectual genus became fully developed in ancient Greek philosophy. It is from this that Western modernity has developed, often in opposition.

In this regard, three founding nuclei of Greek mythological elaboration stand out: fertility, i.e., birth in general, and therefore the cosmos and the birth of each individual in particular, whose elaboration is circumscribed in the great symbolic circle Earth–Moon–Water–Woman; sociality, with the symbolic circle World–Time–Order–Law; and knowledge, to which the symbolic circle Sky–Sun–Eye–Intelligence refers.

Jean-Pierre Vernant, in his famous inaugural lecture of the chair of *Comparative Studies of Ancient Religions* at the Collège de France (originally given on December 5, 1975), makes a key point about the relationship between the individual and society while comparing the sociological imagery of Greece and India (Vernant 1991, p. 283):

My final contrast concerns the place of and the part played by the individual in these sacrificial worlds, and the type of individualization that occurs. In India, paradoxically enough, the individual is in some respects more powerfully delineated, but it is in a hollow way, a negative fashion, and in the shape of religious experience suitable to the renouncer. In order to be, the individual must have severed all ties that were part of him previously and that, by his own desire, bound him to others, to society, to the world, and to his own acts. The affirmation of the individual takes place on a plane and in such ways that the fulfillment of oneself can equally be conceived as total emptiness, the abandoning of everything that constitutes the singularity of the being in his relations with the world. In Greece, the sacrificer, as such, remains solidly included in the various domestic, civic, and political groups in whose name he carries out the sacrifice. This integration into the community, and especially into its religious activities, gives such steps toward individualization a completely different style: they occur in a social framework in which the individual, as he begins to emerge, appears not as one who renounces the world, but a person in his own right,
a legal subject, a political actor, a private person in the midst of his family or in the circle of his friends.

We are therefore faced with two very different set of beliefs.

In the Hindu belief, an individual can only emerge outside or against society in the name of a community of individuals-in-abstract (i.e., neither passively dragged by dynamics that socialize them nor actively involved in the governance of social life). At the point of blurring with nature, each individual in isolation is still de facto in a process of replication within a lineage, a neighborhood, a cohort, a speech community, in other words, a social matrix.

All are individually and identically “naturalized,” that is, de-personalized or de-natured, following the intimate spiritual path toward the same abstract subject of no action at all, a hallow, immutable statue. We are therefore faced with a social organization based on a “naturalistic” confusion. This is true for both the vast majority of individuals without decision-making power who live in a condition of rurality and contiguity with nature and for the very small elite characterized by naturalistic despotism. Karl A. Wittfogel (1957), theorist of oriental despotism, sees this as a characteristic feature of the great hydraulic civilizations of antiquity (from Mesopotamia to the Egypt of the pharaohs, from Hindu India to China and Mexico), founded on the control of water, both during floods and droughts. Hydraulic or agro-bureaucratic despotism has this naturalistic character as the source of both the symbolic world and unlimited power, since this is conceived of as an unpredictable and indomitable force, typical of those cataclysms for which this political form was generated. It is the unlimited power and naturalism, both political and symbolic, that shatters societal dynamics and delineates the contours of an immobile society, fixed in a naturalistic harmony and therefore alien to, or rather adverse to, an autonomous transformation in the direction of an industrial society.

In the Greek belief, the universality of humanity has to be gained whilst confronting different human types. It is an intellectual effort across histories and cultures, a real and continuous discovery, acknowledging possible new parts of oneself.

In what sense, to what extent, and in what way, would it be possible to trace such ancient symbolic products today within our post-industrial sociological imagination? Attempting to answer this question means tackling Greek mythology in search of those fundamental harmonic frequencies that still resonate or contrast today. On many occasions, we hear about innovation. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is the myths that found their greatest expression in Greece that allow us to outline an Ancient Canon that is still vital, active and productive, and that often resonates in the face of innovation. Without falling into a Eurocentric deformation, we can say that Greece is the place of new beginnings (Vernant 1974). This is, of course, only the beginning of a single
history, but nevertheless a long history that brought about the maturation of that first Canon, around the 6th to the 4th centuries BCE. From here the second long history took off very slowly and eventually led to the constitution of the Modern Canon, which came to completion in late modernity during the 19th century. Let us therefore enter the Greek world. Let us enter it at the precise moment when the process of cultural stratification is coming to an end.

Let us begin to clarify the three dimensions of sociological imagination in this era, again with the words of Vernant (1974, pp. 103–4):

It is I who am distinguishing between these different spheres because they do appear separate to us today, but the religious thought of the Greeks made no such clear-cut distinctions between man and his internal world, the social-world and its hierarchy, the physical universe and the supernatural world or society of the Beyond made up of the gods, the daemons, the heroes, and the dead. This is not to say that the Greeks confused everything together and that theirs was a kind of primitive mentality where everything participated in everything else. The Greeks made distinctions in their religious thought, but not the same ones as we make. They distinguished in the cosmos between different types of powers – multiple forms of power that could take action on every level of reality, not just in one of the domains we have mentioned, making interventions within man himself as well as in society, in nature, and in the Beyond. Thus their religion and their pantheon can be seen to be a system of classification, a particular way of ordering and conceptualizing the universe, distinguishing between multiple types of force and power operating within it.

As already mentioned, it is precisely because Greek culture has kept the distant past so alive and witnessed change so clearly, that Greek tragedy is the ideal laboratory for studying the development of the Ancient Canon. In fact, we have received an intact testimony that has the value of a testimonial of the great transition between the pre-Hellenic civilization (paleo-European), and a fully Hellenized civilization, following the absorption of Indo-European migrations. Tragedy still speaks the language of the myth, and therefore this revolution is handed down to us in the elaborate form of a change in religious beliefs still in progress. Thus, in the course of our research we come across the epochal turning point between the Homeric era and that of Aeschylus, between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE, after which the polis flourished. We have already encountered major changes in the economic order (from hunting and gathering or pastoralism, to systematic agriculture), in the social order (from the matriarchy of the origins to the ancient patriarchy), in the demographic order (from small isolated communities to an inclusive polis), in the religious order (from the Great Goddess to the Olympic deities), in the political order (towards democracy, albeit at an embryonic stage) and, finally, in the legal order (from oral tradition to written law). At this time the law became resolutely written, and in other parts of the
world too, sacred texts appear. In Greece, philosophy, tragedy and democracy were born at the same time; they are children of the same spark.

It is at this precise time, a time that is now historical and historicized by the progressive focusing of the Ancient Canon, that the individual conscience begins to unfold (especially in a small elite that could afford to *otiares*), the process of civilization of the collectives is now underway in the public agora (and in the forum), and the critical-systematic rethinking of mythical thought begins, thereby creating a distance from it. Around the three fundamental questions already introduced, the answers that will mark the development of so much of subsequent history are now being developed. Public criticism, understood as methodical reflection and open discussion, was the indispensable premise, the most tangible manifestation and the verifiable effect of being conscious and being civil, of being properly human.

The consequence of this path is not just a patriarchy that continues until the 20th century, but also the cultural masculinization of the world. Thus science and society were masculine, and all the rest was feminized, in particular the inner sphere of the *in-dividuus* (whose etymon is also an imperative not to violate its secrets!), emotionality, affectivity, intuition and creativity. At this point it can already be anticipated that, when the time is ripe, i.e., well into modernity, science will remain without a theory of scientific discovery, as will innovation, because there will be a concept that Ludwig Fleck (1935) defines as the *spontaneous generation of ideas.*

Society (masculinized) will be opposed to the community (feminized), so that the fundamental problem of social science will not be so much to understand “how” society functions, but “why” human beings get involved in a mode of associative life that generates so much discomfort. The psyche will remain the black beast to be tamed (by reducing it) or removed (by producing the Freudian discomfort of civilization).

We could add that the “soul,” logic, and consciousness were still in an unconscious form in Homer’s time. They did not exist in the true sense of the term (Snell 1946), or at least not in the sense that we have come to understand them during modernity. The same is true of the body, still seen as a collection of limbs (Snell 1946). It is now time to turn to a passage from Aeschylus’ Oresteia trilogy (cf. Bachofen 1861; Engels 1884). This is a summary of the story.

When King Agamemnon returns to Argos from his conquest of Troy, he is killed by his wife Clytemnestra, in conspiracy with her lover Aegisthus. Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, urged on by Apollo, avenges his father by killing them both. However, the matricide awakens the Furies (in the guise of the terrible Erinyes) from their torpor. Usually, they doze in a semi-conscious state, but when they are awakened they emit disjointed cries and pounce on their victims with primordial violence. Through the eyes of the Greeks, who we can
Imagine were terrified at the mere mention of the Furies, we see the spectacle of humanity’s departure from its primitive stage. The Furies represent an ancient social (and inner) order that has been submerged, i.e., the archaic form of matriarchy. Once awakened, in the psychological form of vengeance and remorse, they throw themselves resolutely into the pursuit of Orestes to punish him for what is in their view, i.e., within the matriarchal value system, the most horrendous crime a human being can commit. They reach the Areopagus in Athens where they could easily have defeated Orestes, and the new world just created by Zeus, if only another great goddess, Athena, had not intervened by promptly siding with Orestes and his protector Apollo. It is precisely through Apollo’s intercession that the goddess is called upon to judge the actions of Orestes. However, who is Athena and why didn’t a male god resolve the scabrous situation in a patriarchal male way? She is, indeed, a female divinity (like the old Gaia) but is also an expression of the new generation of gods (she is the favourite daughter of Zeus, born from his head and, literally, motherless), and therefore is the only possible impartial judge in a forward-looking society. We are, however, at a time when history has turned over a new leaf, and so the outcome is obvious: Orestes will be saved. Anyway, it is important for us to understand how this happens.

Athena calls all “the best” among the Athenians and asks them to form a civic tribunal to judge Orestes; the matter is serious and the decision must be taken by the whole city. She then organizes a public trial in which the Furies and Athena set out their opposing positions: the punishment envisaged, if Orestes is found guilty, can only be death. What happens next can be interpreted in two slightly different ways: one interpretation is that Athena proclaims that she reserves the right to vote only in the event of a draw between those for and against Orestes, the other interpretation is that her vote counts as double. The fact is that the tribunal is split exactly in half and her vote is decisive in saving Orestes. Athena, however, does not underestimate the Furies (and Gaia behind them) and cautiously placates them with the promise that if they calm the black wave of their instincts against Orestes, they will be hosted and honoured forever “in the ancient cavities of the Earth” as befits an “ancient goddess.” After some hesitation, they calm down (becoming Eumenides, the benefactresses) and everything ends well. However, the game has a value that will remain epochal.

All this happens on the Areopagus, which from then on becomes the site of a permanent assembly. The political meaning of this clash is made very clear in the words of Pier Paolo Pasolini (The Orestiad, pp. 177–8, my translation), who in the Curator’s Note wrote:

The plot of the three tragedies of Aeschylus is this: in a primitive society, feelings dominate which are primordial, instinctive, obscure (the Erinyes), always ready to
overwhelm the crude institutions (the monarchy of Agamemnon), operating under the uterine sign of the mother, understood precisely as an inferior and indifferent form of nature. But against these archaic sentiments, reason rises up (still archaically understood as a virile prerogative: Athena was born without a mother, directly from her father), and overcomes them, creating other modern institutions for society: the assembly, suffrage. However, certain elements of the ancient world, which has just been overcome, should not be completely repressed, ignored: rather, they should be acquired, reassimilated, and naturally modified. … The existential uncertainty of primitive society remains as a category of existential anguish or fantasy in evolved society. This, and no other, is the plot of the Orestiad. And, as you can see, its political allusiveness was as suggestive as could be given in a classical text, for an author such as I would like to be.

This is what Aeschylus records in the only Greek trilogy that has been handed down to us and was performed for the first time in 458 BCE. Homer knew of the trilogy, but dismissed it without mentioning the matricide. It is not known whether he deliberately fails to mention it or if he knew another version. Anyway, the story is subsequently taken up by Sophocles and Euripides, but in their version it is Orestes’ sister who progressively becomes the protagonist, and it is not by chance that the tragedy is named after her (Electra). In Sophocles’ version, Electra becomes Orestes’ planning accomplice. In Euripides’ version, it is Electra herself who kills her mother, implicitly but definitively recognizing her father’s superior authority. Between the 6th and the 5th centuries BCE, therefore, patriarchy triumphed not only in the Greek skies, but also in the social life of the Greeks.

However, it should be noted that, even with this change in social perspective associated with a move away from naturalness and the symbolic world more closely linked to it, the Greeks maintained an organic and insoluble bond with nature (cf. Pohlenz 1947). We cannot ask history too much. The escape from philosophical naturalism was too recent and confined to the sphere of a too small elite. Too brief and uncertain was the state’s path to universalisation, confined to a paltry percentage of the inhabitants of Attica with full political rights, fearfully acquisitive and jealously anchored to their particular ethnic base. The aesthetic search for the human world was too much consigned to beauty as ecstatic and contemplative harmony. The sources of Greek philosophy, indeed, were outside Attica and the apogee was represented by Aristotle, from whose metic ashes, not by chance, arose the Alessandrine drive toward Roman civilization, more inclusive by far since its origins. Moreover, from his works the course of European civilization could restart, but only after many centuries, multiple contaminations, rarely peaceful, after dramatic retreats of civilization and at other latitudes.

This Aeschylean passage, then, tragic though it was in the eyes of the Greeks of the time, and no less so in ours with the hindsight of such a long
time, is justly famous as historical evidence of a new cultural phase that brings the Ancient Canon to full maturity. We can summarize the essential elements of this landmark social change as follows.

First, an early matriarchy, intrinsically prescriptive and characterized by a certain universal egalitarianism, gives way to the ancient patriarchy. The latter is certainly despotic and discriminatory, but it shows acquisitive possibilities intrinsic in the complexity of the familias structure and, in particular, of patriarchal marriage, that is, of a contract of reciprocal services between two families and two persons, accompanied by the recognition of paternity, patrilineal transmission, divorce, the practices of affiliation, marriage and concubinage, etc. (Vernant 1974). Justice is no longer administered in accordance with the interpretation of some god’s response, but is instead based on the interpretation made by certain men of the law received from other men. Appeals are no longer made to the magnanimity of the gods, but to the intelligence of the best of men. This is, albeit at an embryonic level, the first step toward a fundamental institution of the nascent political democracy.

If the eponyms for works of the intellect began with the lyricists, it made the authorship of the tragedy emerge in contrast to the primordial indistinctness of mere inspired executors. It is from the representation of the story of Orestes that we learn about individual action, the burden of responsibility, the uncertainty of its outcome, and even social consequences (cf. Snell 1953). With the philosophers, man is finally able to liberate himself. No longer “in contrast to God, appears as an ape in wisdom and beauty and all things” (cf. Heraclitus, DK b83), but becomes “in His image and likeness.” We are, therefore, at the historical emergence of consciousness, as is evident in the scansion of the three versions of the tragedy of Orestes; barely fifty years after Aeschylus, the Furies in Euripides are definitely conscientized, symbolically sublimated in Orestes’ remorse.

However, the story of Orestes is destined to yield the primacy of fame to that of Oedipus. The anguished burden of the choice overflows from a single dilemma: either the world of the Mater or the world of the Pater. This dilemma arises in the face of every choice, it befalls each and every one of us. It is from Oedipus, in fact, that the feeling of anguish over every choice spreads, without interruption, into modernity, where it takes shape in Hamlet’s dilemma. Here the anguish becomes that of isolation from the lineage from which one inherits a tradition that has become worn out when one is faced with a public choice, when the destinies of the individual and those of the community to which one belongs, come into irremediable conflict. The new destiny is thus established in the logic of modern affairs.

In the Oresteia, just a first historical emancipation is symbolically elaborated. We read of individuals one step away from holding firmly on their shoulders the responsibility for key decisions for a collective life and being
Introduction to the Ancient Canon

endowed with the intellectual capacity to plan both personal and collective paths. They already oppose those who believe in the irrational and bloody fury of brute violence, the ancestral call for blood in the earlier stages of confusion, of instinctual immediacy and the reduction of the human to the biological. While the former are almost modern, champions of the “masculine,” the latter is a force that can be traced back to an ideological twist of the still powerful “feminine” which exercises, now subterraneously, its arcane arts in order to engulf humanity in the prehistoric cavern of its womb. We are thus at the physical and yet internal struggle between the Knight and the Dragon to save the Lady (i.e., his conscience), so characteristic of the medieval world and of our representation of it.

Across the centuries, guilt will change its target: from what was done for hybris, to what was not for irresoluteness, the missed opportunity for redemption. Remorse will give way to performance anxiety and attention will move from learning from the past to forecasting the future: history will be removed and the new oracle will be a silicon algorithm. The ajar loophole to salvation will be within the instant moment of choice. For Western people (and only partially for Easterners) the end result of the Old Canon is, in short, the so-called modern man.

2 CONSCIOUSNESS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

According to our approach of stratigraphic processual sociology, we will now follow the path outlined by Aeschylus.

In the words of Vernant (1979), we must, however, guard against the error of anachronism and of projecting onto the people of that time the modes of feeling and forms of thought appropriate to contemporary people. Human nature itself is a stratigraphic process: first it had a biological evolution and then a history marked by the various structures of social life. In all this phylogenetic evolutionary history there is a trace in the ontogenetic development of each individual. In this sense, as notoriously stated by Karl Marx, history is but a continuous transformation of human nature.

But this is only one way of looking at our human world. To a development of individual consciousness over the long term, it is possible to link a similar development of both social complexity (groups of increasing size, number of interactions and roles, etc.) and cultural production in the form of shared knowledge. In the face of a common, albeit not monotonal, trend line, however, there could not be greater variety in the short term, on an eventemental scale. In other words, there is not a single development for all individuals, nor a single development for all societies, but it can be highlighted an overall convolution between, on the one hand, the individuals of a certain collective in a certain contingence and, on the other, the contingent social structure of this
same collective, in a direction that is that of a common recognizable trend over the *longue durée*.

We will now have to enter into these processes, that is, into the complex skein of psychogenesis and sociogenesis of humanity, of the development of individuals and their social aggregates, seeing the path unfolding of our common human genus.

Precisely because we are interested in the symbolic world, we will do so by first recalling the framework provided by current human biology and palaeoanthropology, and then a fundamental study by Erich Neumann on the development of consciousness. We postpone to a later chapter, however, the subsequent development of society and individuals, for which we will follow Norbert Elias’ reconstruction of the process of civilization, which is the natural extension of Neumann’s work into modern history.

The people we will come across are, therefore, individuals in the process of developing their personal individuality within groups that are also in the process of civilization.

On the basis of the archaeological material that has been found and what we can see emerging from the ideal folds of the myths of classical antiquity, it is possible to draw a historical profile of the change in Western civilization, or rather, of the ancient civilization that spread from the Hindu East to Western Europe on several occasions. Moreover, given the similarities with archaeological findings in almost all the great ancient civilizations, we can venture the hypothesis of a common fund of knowledge for the whole of human civilization, represented by a cultural endowment characterized by the same great mythological themes developed in different cultures. It is myths that mark the path of humanity in this anthropological era, constituting both the expression and the instrument of this change (Neumann 1949, 1956).

The psychologist Erich Neumann believes that studying antiquity enables us to see the progressive development of consciousness through its archetypes. By focusing on the primordial images that preside over the development of consciousness, we can thus trace a grandiose evolution of the dimension that we call the human genus. We will follow Neumann’s approach, however, only in broad outline, in particular taking up the four stages of this development, making appropriate additions, and extending the reconstruction with mythological and anthropological considerations.

At the end of this archaeological-historical development, the description that will emerge in the following pages will be sufficient for the heuristic requirements and historical plausibility in our best reconstruction, and will be in accordance with an attempt at interpretative sociology applied to the constitution of the Ancient Canon. It will be a path that seems “natural” for people of that time and that provides us with predictive tools, through a unitary perspective on different phenomena and epochs. Although, with our current
state of knowledge (and perhaps forever), this path remains nothing more than a hypothesis, it does not seem to be an interpretative gamble. It is not an arbitrary hypothesis, and is more than the result of a mere fictional activity only of use to our contemporary sociological imagination.

We will return to the stratigraphic hypothesis that we formulated earlier, namely that the products of the imagination elaborated in a given epoch remain below and within the subsequent ones, similar to the deposition of a series of layers that altogether define a tendential vector of development.

We start from an early era of mankind that begins with a prehistorical “ancestral fusion” that Neumann (1949, p. 5) describes as follows:

The mythological stages in the evolution of consciousness begin with the stage when the ego is contained in the unconscious, and lead up to a situation in which the ego not only becomes aware of its own position and defends it heroically, but also becomes capable of broadening and relativizing its experiences through the changes effected by its own activity.

In the primitive stratum of the Ancient Canon, the Earth is to be understood as the main matter of work, i.e., both manual and symbolic work. Here, then, is the presence of a single great divinity linked to the feminine, to fertility, to natural cyclicity, to the contradictory forces of nature, potentially both creative and destructive.

In this era, the “oceanic feeling” dominated. In a famous letter to Sigmund Freud which gave rise to the essay Civilisation and its Discontents (Freud 1930, p. 15), Romain Rolland writes:

In this way, then, the ego detaches itself from the external world. Or, to put it more correctly, originally the ego includes everything, later it separates off an external world from itself. Our present ego-feeling is, therefore, only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it.

We do not know how far back this phase of humanity goes, but it reached its apogee in the era from which we have numerous Palaeolithic Venuses, reproductions of Gaia found on almost every continent. These statuettes of stylized female figures (maidens, pregnant women, elderly women), with conspicuously reproduced female attributes, are found in large numbers, particularly in Europe, and date back even more than 35,000 years (e.g., Conard 2009). Marija Gimbutas (1999, p. 33), speaks of a distinct phase in the history of Europe that begins then and remains in vogue until around 3,000 BCE.

The events narrated in the myth seem, in illo tempore, the “natural” way to think of the human being, still imbued with nature, without a constant and definitive break with the animal world, literally immersed “in the Earth.” This
must have appeared to be a natural part of the world. People were literally immersed in the Earth which was imbued with intentional forces and the will of superhuman presences. A human being is an individual because it is not divisible (lt. *in-dividuus*, i.e., undividable), not only because a person cannot be divided, on pain of ceasing to exist (the set of detached parts of a body cannot be considered to be a human being), but also because a human being cannot yet be distinguished from the rest. Nature and humanity are somewhat blurred, almost fused together: what only exists is a primordial *synolos* of both. At that time, the light of consciousness could have been the exception, while a state oscillating between that of the first months of our lives and being half-awake to the consciousness of proto-human, semi-animal life. In short, a primordial twilight blurred the contours of outer experience into an inner experience traversed by rumblings of all-consuming emotion and flashes, or little more, of rarely focused awareness as we conceive it.

We usually associate consciousness with light, with clear day, but one of humanity’s earliest and greatest discoveries was probably the night, so full of solitary emotion with its stunning heavenly vault and surprising creatures, its astronomical manifestations and, above all, the *queen of the night*, the Moon. The first real religion must have been lunar, not solar as an “enlightenment” anthropological tradition would have it. A lunar religion is linked to fertility and therefore to the Earth (Durand 1963). Central to this must have been the symbolic figure of the woman, the mysterious junction between the Moon evoked by its cycles on the one hand, and the Earth evoked by its generous fertility on the other.

Lightning presences stand out in the night, capable of arousing sparkling emotions and focusing brilliant thoughts. While the Sun remains the same, the Moon grows, wanes and disappears, resembling human life (Eliade 1948). The eruption of the Sun, rather than illuminating, must have dazzled; the Moon, on the other hand, must have appeared slowly, colouring the lives of our ancestors with the shades of humanity.

This distinctive lunar nature can be found in the triads (birth-becoming/maturity-death) found in all religions, including monotheisms (Durand 1963). The Moon, with her luminous face and unmistakably human features, with the ages of her “life cycle,” almost always considered as a female entity, represented the first glow of consciousness, the first light of reason. She taught the time of life and the harvest, the fertility of the Earth and of women, the rhythms of nature, and the rhythms of nascent social life. There was continuity between man and nature, living and dead, human and non-human, male and female. Ambiguity and indistinct confusion marked everyday life. The link between sex and birth, in particular, must have been difficult to grasp. Promiscuity was common and obscure; the orgiastic and nuanced event of fertilization too distant from the incontrovertible event of birth.
The great goddess of that epoch is the Great Mother who came distinctly into ancient mythology in the personification of woman-as-mother, i.e., in the form of the White Goddess (Graves 1948). There are three distinct representations of the goddess. The first is a virgin, wild, charming and combative (later to become Artemis/Diana, Aphrodite/Venus, etc.). The second is an imposing and warlike goddess (in particular Athena/Minerva). The third is an underworld goddess (Persephone/Proserpina). This tripartition (Graves 1948, p. 81) is widespread among all the cultures of the ancient world that we call Indo-European and is linked to the lunar trinity composed of the New Moon (white goddess of birth and growth), the Full Moon (red goddess of love and battle) and the Old Moon (black goddess of death and divination). These ideas spread over a vast peri-Mediterranean region until the second millennium BCE, and probably even beyond that. We can trace a one-and-threefold mother-goddess worshipped from India to Ireland, sometimes accompanied by a child god, as repeated in countless other later female figures such as Isis (with Horus), Hera/Gaia (with Zeus), Madonna (with Child) (cf. James 1960).

At this point we must consider the original myth of Gaia, that of the Earth “within” which, even before being “above” her, everything happens.

As Hesiod writes (Theogony): “In the beginning, everything was Gaia and everything was in Gaia.” We will therefore refer to this powerful and continually revisited maternal archetype, a reservoir not only of primordial vitality, but also of death, symbolized by a female super-organism of irrepressible strength, seen as unpredictable, changeable, humoral and dense, oscillating between the hard telluric rock and the still waters or tidal cycles.

Moon, Earth, Woman, Water must have been surprising and therefore at the centre of subjective attention and at the centre of the emerging social organization. After all, the mother is objectively the first firm centre of gravity for each of us (mater semper certa). We are in an era in which the cultural role of the feminine was certainly very powerful. However, it is not easy to establish the actual role of women in the social organization of a small community with a subsistence economy, often exhausted by hunting and gathering. This is the gylanic culture, which corresponds to a family organization centred on the eldest woman of the clan, who on her death is buried under the family hut or in a temple. There are many archaeological traces of this (cf. Gimbutas 1999). It is possible that originally there was no differentiation between house and temple; a certain house at the death of its main occupants could become a temple for posterity, as in fact still happens today for illustrious personages. In this society, with little or no hierarchy, perhaps it was the women who matrilineally, i.e., from mother to daughter, passed on the ownership of a house, its furnishings and the land on which it stood. However, if we want to think of this social organization as a matriarchy, we should do so with caution.4

Andrea Cerroni - 9781800882904
Downloaded from PubFactory at 09/16/2023 10:12:15AM via free access
If the figure of the feminine was dominant in this era, with society changing toward the form of the polis, what was the general cultural climate in which humanity lived? Neumann speaks of maternal Ouroboros. The term refers to the symbol of a ring-shaped figure (typically the serpent with its tail in its mouth, it might perhaps also be identified with the embrace of the Milky Way of the night skies) also widespread in prehistoric and later iconography with magical significance, often representing political and magical powers. On the other hand, the term also refers to individual origins, to the maternal containment of our foetal stage and, first and foremost, to the self-containment of a developing individual and his/her involvement in the kaleidoscope of external sensations and internal emotions. The dragons of fairy tales (similar to large snakes, after all) would be nothing more than representations by magnification of this primordial force against which the hero must fight to free the world from a nightmare, breaking the spell that keeps the princess segregated, which blocks the “natural” course of generations and thus the progress of “souls.” In other words, what is at stake is the further historical development of individual consciousness.

In this epoch, the basis is established from which consciousness will gradually become tangible. Intangible products that are more and more detached from naturalness are therefore suitable for the slow start of the individualization process. Artificial products detached from naturalness include symbolic products. We live and think without watertight compartments, and therefore without mysterious interventions by the glandula pinealis. We are not, therefore, dealing with the “primitive mentality,” prelogical and irrational, of that old anthropology swept away by Lévi-Strauss. On the contrary, art, technology and most of what we call humanity made an appearance a long time ago. As we said, it can be argued that these were still, more than anything else, flashes of light in the darkness, in a darkness that survives today for long stretches of our frenetic daily lives.

Moreover, the entire construction of civilization in subsequent epochs will tend to collapse through layers and substrata, in the direction of this ground level (no more into the abyssal depths just below it), whenever it is not nurtured by the interweaving of individuals and societies and stabilized by adequate cultural institutions of knowledge. This is an auroral epoch for both individual consciousness and collective sociality. The symbolic elaboration would lead to the first universal divinity, clearly recognizable as Mother Earth, Tellus Mater and especially Gaia (Ge, Gea). Hesiod’s cosmogony dates back to this period.

Gaia is a very ancient religious figure, a primordial mythological complex (Potnia) that was certainly dominant until 3,000 BCE in Europe and Anatolia (and elsewhere, too). Gaia may have been the only divinity worshipped there, albeit in many forms. Unique and omnipotent, Gaia is nature, the Great.
Goddess, the Great Mother in her double “diurnal” declination as Lady of Fertility, of Beasts and of the Harvest, and in her “nocturnal” declination as the Lady of Death, in telluric or aquatic symbolism (Durand 1963).

The affinity between nature and the mother is obvious. We read, for example, in the Book of Job (1:21): “Naked I came out of my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return thither” and this seems to be unequivocally understood as a return to the womb of the Earth-Mother.

Both mother and Earth are the container and vital principle for the new-born individual, but also they are the principle and reference for emotions and feelings, as noted by Melanie Klein. The child not only feels gratitude and devotion toward nature, and toward the mother but also curiosity and amazement. Therefore, the child also assumes an exploratory attitude that can reach the threshold of rebellion. Thus, what in the first phase of humanity takes place “in” the Earth is progressively shifted to “on” the Earth, i.e., primarily outside it. Discovery and primordial fear of the world are thus encapsulated in the iconography of the mother-goddess with the divine child in her arms, “the waking ego of humanity” (Neumann 1949, p. 39) still maintaining an uncertain autonomy.

Even when “the Child” comes to develop into the figure of the young lover, that divine child, symbol of the new-born consciousness, will still be destined for sacrifice and resurrection through the return to the mater larum, the mother of death (Neumann 1949, p. 44). Only in a later phase does the development of the ego foresee, at the same time, the separation “of” parents and “from” parents, first with the killing of the mother and then of the father, where the latter is on the way to becoming the primordial patriarchal father (personified in Kronos).

During this epoch, there is still a focus on the female figure in the guise of a divinity to whom fertility and all the power of the vital forces of nature are brought back, in their destructiveness and in their very cessation. A trinitarian goddess, one might say of birth, war and death, or the Lady of the Animals, the ambiguous sovereign “perverse and tolerant” (à la Mary Douglas), the Lady of the Night and of the Underworld.

This complex and pervasive divinity, whom we shall refer to from now on simply as Gaia, unifies the entire human experience of populations that have recently become settled, in training to become farmers but still organized in small rural communities.

Neumann writes (1949, p. 48): “In a word, the woman first exists as a mother, and the man first exists as a son.” Only when consciousness grows individually and civilization progresses collectively, will we have a full release from this first phase. This gives rise to the sadness of the adolescent who has been abandoned or has metaphorically (mythologically) killed his parents: this will be for ever the visible trace of it. The very objects with which the
ego enters into a relationship will, in turn, become increasingly structured (Neumann 1949, p. 46).

Thus, the separation of the individual ego from the parents simultaneously reveals an individual who is increasingly autonomous from others, as well as distinct from the objects and events that surround him, which until recently flooded him emotionally. This will produce the detachment (à la Mannheim-Elias) necessary for the specific distinction appropriate to reflective thought, categorization and abstraction, and therefore the most evolved cultural production, including art and science as we understand them at our current level of development of consciousness.

We are dealing with a religion that is adapting to the explanatory/predictive needs and reassuring hopes of a people who are beginning to work the land while still maintaining a simple social structure. Moreover, the type of relationship one has with one’s territory is fundamental for the culture that develops there. As long as this relationship is occasional or loose, as was the case with the ancient nomadic peoples, there is neither time nor motivation to cultivate it, to develop a knowledge of the land and how to make better use of its resources. One remains at the mercy of the natural elements against which defence is arduous and salvation precarious. However, when one begins to establish ownership of the land, first perhaps as a collective and then as an individual, one develops a new way of life, a new way of conceiving one’s being in the world and, consequently, one’s work.

In addition, a settled community, enriched by the experiences gained over generations, develops organic knowledge about its territory, and can grow in number with increasing complexity. In this historical layer, deposited over thousands of years, memory and tradition are more relevant than development (of consciousness and society). After an initial acceleration, life begins to flow in search of subsistence, and social organization focuses on governing the cyclical nature.

The very symbol of time is cyclical in the dual sense that it is an imprint of the cycle of the seasons on the idea of time and that human progress is imperceptible. However, this will continue until, as we saw earlier, a new people with a different cultural background arrives unexpectedly. This was the case with the arrival of the Indo-Europeans who had grown up on the Eurasian steppe. From the encounter between the two ideal types, “nomadic shepherds-warriors of a patrifocal culture” and “proto-citizen farmers of a matrifocal culture,” we can see the origin of what we have called the Ancient Canon.

Anyway, a second epoch begins, continues Neumann (1949, p. 29):

When the ego begins to emerge from its identity with the uroboros, and the embryonic connection with the womb ceases, the ego takes up a new attitude to the world. … Detachment from the uroboros means being born and descending into the
lower world of reality, full of dangers and discomforts. The nascent ego becomes aware of pleasure-pain qualities, and from them it experiences its own pleasure and pain. Consequently the world becomes ambivalent. … The world experienced by the waking ego of humanity is the world of J. J. Bachofen’s matriarchate with its goddesses of motherhood and destiny. The wicked, devouring mother and the good mother lavishing affection are two sides of the great uroboric Mother Goddess who reigns over this psychic stage.

The world slowly began to fill up with gods (cf. Plato, *Laws* 899b). By the 7th millennium BCE, society had become so complex that a single great goddess was no longer sufficient; she began to manifest herself in thematically or geographically diverse forms. The symbolic world developed and defined individual figures appeared. This started with the transformation of Gaia into the goddess of vegetation and harvests (Eliade 1948; Pohlenz 1947), or into Demeter the Most Powerful (*Potnia, Polypotnia*). The latter, in particular, is a goddess of the cultivated Earth and no longer simply the fertile Earth (Vernant 1974); the work of men (and real women) had evidently begun.

Gaia, therefore, began to take on various forms,7 particular divinities who no longer symbolized the whole Earth, but their own land, the particular place over which they became the master and protector. Little by little, the imagery of the feminine coagulated into a multiplicity of figures destined to survive for a long time. These included, sometimes in subterranean vestiges, an important part of the magical imagery, of the monotheistic undergrowth up to the fairy tales we still read to our children today.

In Europe, an archaic form of matriarchy, which may have been characterized by matrilocal matriarchal marriage, may have been replaced first by matrilocal patriarchal marriage and then by true patriarchal marriage (Neumann 1949, p. 181). At the same time, the law regulating everyday life may have been conceived as being inscribed in nature. Therefore, it was not written down, but simply interpreted (from the flight patterns of birds, the entrails of sacrificial victims, etc.) and for this reason also only later transformed into written law. An implicit cosmic order, immersed in experience with high emotional involvement and low rational detachment, would then be followed by an explication that would be the antechamber of public life.

Neumann (1956, p. 49) writes:

The accent of a symbol depends in large measure on the matriarchal or patriarchal culture situation in which it is embedded. In a patriarchate, for example, the *mater* character of the symbol *materia* is devalued; matter is regarded as something of small value in contrast to the ideal – which is assigned to the male-paternal side.

The *mater* in this epoch would begin a process of decay that would progressively reduce it, literally, to *matter*. In the new conception, each person would
be the son of the father alone (the bearer of the seed) and the mother, from an all-pervasive principle, would gradually be reduced to a passive receptacle (Aristotle, Reproduction of Animals I, 716a). Moreover, Pandora, the first patriarchal woman, is a dreadful gaster (Vernant 1999), i.e., both a generating womb and a belly with insatiable appetites. Not very human, and reduced to a breeding animal, in the symbolic world she is handed down to us, through the Middle Ages, as the fairy and the witch of fairy tales.

The link between mother and matter will remain and the decay of the former will be accompanied by that of the latter, progressively reduced and devalued until it becomes the product of a degeneration with Neoplatonism. Together with the feminine world and the material world, the body will also be devalued, reduced to a burden, a burden that inhibits and contaminates the spiritual dimension, the “tomb of the soul” (Plato) from which, in the West and in the East, one can only free oneself with death or with a radical suspension of life.

Even if the germs of this decay could already be inherent in the limits (demographic, economic, cognitive) intrinsic to the socio-cultural system of the agricultural communities of the millennia preceding the Indo-European invasions, it was these that gave the coup de grâce to what, despite our caution, we have called matriarchy. By the end of the second millennium BCE, in the great area around the Mediterranean, symbolic power passed definitively from the hands of the Potnia to those of the Pater. At first there was simply a masculinized version of Gaia, a gaster-father who is merely a generator and devourer, what we call the natural father or biological father, a figure who will come to us like the wizard and the ogre of fairy tales.

Quickly this representation was historically supplanted by the paterfamilias, “the one who holds dominion in the home” (Ulpianus), i.e., the “dominant male” in the complex social cell called familia, where neither sex nor generation nor private relations dominate, but private possession and public representation are exercised by a citizen (obviously of a certain gender).

From cultural matrifocality, characterized by the cycle of telluric fertility (birth/adolescence, bursting maturity, death/inhumation/resurrection), we move on to Uranic patrifocality, characterized at first by the power represented in the mythological figure of Kronos/Saturn (time, order, law). This magical and despotic sovereign is the prelude, however, to a new heroic figure, personified in Zeus. By exercising absolute power qualified by justice and intelligence, Zeus must continually reclaim the sovereignty of the gods over that of men.

An enemy of the ancestral Ouroboros, Kronos emerges laboriously as an uncertain counterpart to Gaia, retaining many of her traits. He himself is Lord of the Harvest and Fertility, but also Lord of Time, characterized by an ambiguous magic and an uncertain sexuality. Like his Roman counterpart Saturn,
he is therefore lord of the worked earth and of the temporal order, the lord of socialized space-time.

The myth of Kronos is well-known and well-articulated. This is despite there being no surviving religious rites connected to him, apart from the chronian festivals. He is the first king of the gods, the first astute politician, a magician capable of arousing primordial forces. His sons leave their mother’s womb and enter their father’s. Kronos, on the one hand, is the prototype of the ogres of fairy tales (see also the horror paintings by Goya and Rembrandt that portrayed him). On the other, he reigned over the Golden Age, the equivalent of Eden or the time of dreams, and is therefore also the prototype of the good god. Thus, he is inherently ambiguous in his unstable individuality, between despotic social presence and still immanent naturalistic order.

During this phase, as far as the history of consciousness is concerned, the ego struggles to free itself from the ancestral confusion and is represented by the hero forced to fight the dragon all his life, a figuration of the Ouroboros that dismembers, fuses and digests everything. Even the sovereign divinity of this world cannot yet be firm or secure. Kronos is forced to be a terrible and suspicious father, violent but transient. Terrible because he is suspicious, violent because his transience is foreshadowed. Kronos is still charged with the magical power of Gaia, but we can predict that he will hand over science to a new god.

It is perhaps from this epoch that the first two powers begin to distinguish themselves: the central political figures in the community become a religious leader and a warrior leader. We are coming out of prehistory, but we are still on the threshold of that consciousness which we have learnt to recognize in history, and we are waiting ever more fervently for a messenger of reason.

The archaic paradise is now lost because of an individual responsibility, as in the story of Adam and Eve, two individuals who represent the entire human race. Hence begins a “nostalgia for Paradise” (Eliade 1948) for a loss attributed to individual autonomy, knowledge, civilization. Since a sin of social matrix (human emancipation) can be healed only through a social mission, the premises are already set for an imaginary that, much later, will conceive the ideology of progress and the political project of the romantic nation-state (Herzfeld 1987).

Similarities can already be seen between Kronos and the God of the Old Testament, whose terrible vengeance came down on the children who dared to challenge the order.9 In the Roman variant of the myth of Saturn, we have a significant junction with the myth of Janus, Lord of Space and Time, and also of boundaries, and the space-time order.

With Christianity, the Edenic perfection from transfiguration of a pre- or proto-social reality, becomes instead an alternative model of life, a model sometimes explicitly anti-social. The saint, in fact, may be a hermit who
isolates himself from society or even someone who, having denied the values of the social world of his time, hands himself over completely to the revolutionary mission of a community of values fighting against a temporal order. At other times, the model to be inspired will be an alternative *civitas*, a futuristic (or utopian) city of God. Christianity, of course, could not fail to clash irremediably with the very concrete Roman Empire, heir to the first constitutional monarchy in human history.

For full social development there is a need for planning, for criticism, for self-government in private personal life and in participation in public civic life; this requires an increasing development of knowledge. Indeed, the fourth epoch considered by Neumann is that of the full development of consciousness.

We are now in the classical epoch of Greece that we know well and to which, rightly or wrongly, we usually refer as the origin of Western civilization. We are in the polis, where the written law is the “principle at once common to all, a rational standard that was subject to discussion and modification by decree but which nevertheless expressed an order that was understood to be sacred” (Vernant 1962, p. 53).

This development goes to the extreme of devaluing matter in order to divinize knowledge and oust magic from daily life and public space, to relegate it to the top of a mountain. In this way, the foundations are laid (still sacralized) of a disenchanted, secularized society, which many centuries later, only with the advent of modernity, will begin to realize itself as a full society of citizens. However, as long as some people remain the property of other people on a par with things and animals, all people will remain halfway between animals and gods, between automatata and inhabitants of Olympus. Animals, slaves and the human body itself will be reduced to the rank of “things” as opposed to conceiving of a human being as a metaphysically founded entity, that is, with the foundation “elsewhere.” It is due to this schism that the binary nature of social development will remain narrow-gauge until technical development gives a glimpse of the goal of Aristotle’s great prophecy (*Politics I* 4, 1253b–1254a): “if thus shuttles wove and quills played harps of themselves, master-craftsmen would have no need of assistants and masters no need of slaves.”

Returning to the symbolic world of the polis, it is now occupied by the personification of a new god, a child who has now become an adult and uses his omniscience to ensure the maintenance of order in the world: it is Zeus/Jupiter, whose first task is to ensure order in the community of the gods. In his Olympus, each divinity must find their rightful place. So it is – and must remain – even in the human world. *Zéus patér*, archetype of the *paterfamilias* (this is how the celestial father is invoked), is a variant of the Indo-European divinity, uranic, typical of a nomadic people, shepherd-warrior. Symbolic of his power, as well as of his uranic nature, are the attributes of thunder and lightning, i.e., the control of fire. It is precisely this control that Prometheus
stole from Zeus to give to humans as a “source of industry,” the harbinger of technology and civilization.

We can be more precise and identify a component of the imagery linked to Zeus that is for us even more significant since it inaugurates a third pillar in the Ancient Canon. To identify it, we must consider that the most ancient gods used violence to conquer and maintain power, whilst in this era, it is now knowledge that emerges as the main power. The apotheosis of Zeus, in fact, is in the act of giving birth to a woman who symbolizes intelligence, the ability to know, generating her without external mediation of a woman. This is Athena, the goddess who will protect the city that became the fulcrum of Western civilization.

She not only represents intelligence, but also power; she is literally “the extract” of Zeus and his most “abstract” product, his concentrate and his sublimation: knowledge.

The development of consciousness was in parallel with the affirmation of patriarchy, and occurred, therefore, in the Greek polis at the expense of the legal capacity of women, which was progressively reduced (Pohlenz 1947). In Rome, on the other hand, the legal autonomy of women began to grow again. In the 2nd century CE, Heliogabalus established a sort of “senate of women” (senaculum mulierum), although confined to issues related to senatorial privileges of ex-wives of senators. It is from this second fulcrum of ancient civilization, that the very concept of a person, i.e., an individual conscious of his or her being a social subject, continues to evolve even in historical times, and claims increasing rights.

That there exists a history of (taking) conscience is evidenced by many other facts. For example, by the fact that there is a traceable history of reading, that is, the ability to exhume and recontextualize meanings coagulated by others into written signs. It is often underestimated that in Greece at the end of the 5th century BCE silent or endophasic reading was not yet widely known (Svenbro, in Cavallo and Chartier 1995, p. 21). In addition, if it is true that a continuous archaic writing without separation of the words requires an oral scansion by syllables in order to identify the words and understand the meaning of the whole sentence, the opposite is also true: as long as there is no capacity for silent reading, the intervention of the voice in producing the meanings of individual words can be taken for granted. It is by silent reading, on the other hand, that a more interior relationship is established, one of complicity between reader and text, the antechamber to free interpretation and creative cooperation. Saint Augustine seems to have been struck by Saint Ambrose’s amazing ability to read without vocalizing (Confessions, VI), and even throughout the Middle Ages it did not definitively supplant reading aloud (Saenger, in Cavallo and Chartier 1995, p. 121). Reading, as Karin Littau (2006, p. 2) writes, is
a work of the body, so its mode is not only physically conditioned, but also historically variable.

For “us children” at the beginning of learning, after all, as well as for those adults who have not become accustomed to reading, oralization is necessary, together with following the words with the finger so as not to miss the mark. How much is silent reading due to the ability to concentrate, and therefore to activate consciousness, and how much is consciousness itself developed by assiduous reading. Furthermore, is the brain physically/physiologically modified by silent reading?

Traces of this history are also found throughout the history of science, which is very rich with evidence of thoughts that are taken for granted and temporarily unthinkable. There is a history of the capacity for abstraction, for modelling, reasoning and governing one’s own consciousness. Each scientific revolution has involved overcoming common sense data, as in the striking cases of non-Euclidean geometry, evolutionism, the discovery of the unconscious, the Copernican Revolution, and so on. Progressive awareness, both witnessed and stimulated by theoretical development, has occurred through repeated use, hence habit, and through the application of the work of other “consciousnesses,” hence communication. Therefore, an improving understanding of the real meaning of a scientific discovery has been obtained, even beyond the intellectual capacity of the brilliant author, thanks to the work of their successors.

However, even today, the historical development of consciousness should not appear to us as having reached its conclusion. There is a whole non-conscious world; countless are the occasions in daily life when we are not fully aware of what we are doing, as the ethnomethodologist would say and even in economic behavior, against the current mainstream, and if our life is no more brutish, and short (Thomas Hobbes) it is also for the considerable part of our life course in which we cannot really feel that we are masters of our lives, that we are Olympic maximizing or satisficing reasoners (à la Herbert Simon), that we are subjects fully conscious of our being actors on the world stage. First of all, we should exclude the years that have passed since the beginning of our existence and throughout our early childhood. We should also have doubts regarding our adolescent upsets and all the irruptions of our emotions in the sphere of thought, especially in all those creative instants of discovery and innovation. And this is no small matter.

What can we say, then, about those states in which wakefulness does not even exist (deep sleep, drowsiness, trance, pathological and terminal states of life, etc.) or about those activities in which we mechanically put into practice knowledge that we would not even know how to express linguistically (Michael Polanyi’s tacit knowledge, cf. Polanyi 1958/62), those automatisms acquired through habit and imitation (e.g., when we ride a bicycle and drive
a car, absorbed in our most diverse thoughts and far from the events before our eyes)? Or of those situations that absorb us deeply, in which we are absorbed by the daily grind (when we read a book, listen to music, watch a film, converse pleasantly, surf the web, follow a deep thought etc.), so much so that we lose all sense of time and are left with the impression that time has flown by?

Finally, to what extent is our individual behavior related to the specific way in which we live a collectively constituted experience? How much does “society” fit inside “mind”? How can we confine all this learning, communication and the symbolic world, to mere heuristics and the bias of an essentially one-dimensional rationality (à la Kahneman and Tversky)?

The mind changes, the brain changes, our whole organism changes, and in these changes we find effects and causes of social change. Indeed, effects and causes are so closely linked in change, that at a certain level of detail the search for “temporal antecedents” or “causal factors” of the observed phenomena is no longer of any help: both “effects” and “causes” are phenomena to be explained, and can only be explained together.

The so-called “causal arrows,” although of greater impersonality and less involvement, are still the imputation of an “activity,” a term adequate to deal with human subjects who keep themselves “equal to themselves” by acting on objects taken in their “objective” existence, so to speak, as “essential.” In other words, they are the building blocks of a way of reasoning specific to a cognitive style that has asserted itself through certain historical processes. This style, like all activities cognitive or not, relative to the internal or external world, is part of the phenomena (including the fragmentation of our world into internal and external) that a Sociology of Knowledge must propose to explain because, properly speaking, it is no more the individual who thinks within his/her mind and body than it is society within its langue through his/her parole.

What we ideally refer to with the term “consciousness,” central to all modern philosophy and probably due revolutionary developments from neuroscience, concerns something to which we can aspire for a very limited portion of our lives. A Cartesian contraposition is completely wrong, as if everything that does not respond to our abstract criterion of rationality is irrational, nothing more than a bias or a disturbing effect. We should instead think of differences in terms of the degree of detachment from the world outside of us, which, nevertheless, changes with us: our detachment both as subjects inquiring and as objects of our inquire. We have thus reached the frontier of our current knowledge, or rather, the boundaries of its horizon, and it is therefore better to stop here. It is time to return to our core theme, and to consider more fully the extension of ancient reasonings into our contemporary reason.

We now have all the ingredients of the Ancient Canon, a legacy of this grandiose phase of human history, in the form of the answers to the three fundamental questions repeatedly raised in classical culture, especially
Greco-Roman. In many ways, these are linked to the syncretism created in previous millennia on the shores of the central and eastern Mediterranean with contributions that refer to cultures across the whole ancient world.

Greek people responded, with Beauty understood as harmony with nature, Good as respect for the order established in time and True as a divine gaze cast on the world (cf. Pohlenz 1947; Snell 1953). These are the three cornerstones of the ancient sociological imagination, which were personified by the three great mythical beings we have introduced: Gaia, Kronos and Athena. They symbolize, synthetically, a holistic conception of the world in which we live, the nomos that governs human society, and the episteme that oversees it all. We can also see them as the institutional solutions given to the three areas in which human beings, as we know from Aristotle (Rhetoric), are particularly sensitive: Pathos, Ethos and Logos.

The symbolism of the myths of Gaia, Kronos and Athena, circumscribes the horizon of the imaginary characteristic of antiquity within an atavistic nomos: from the most empathic harmony between individual and cosmos, to the order of a despotic tradition that must be maintained so that humanity does not fall with it, to a dialogic reason that, as soon as it is discovered, becomes without any mediation, i.e., Olympic. These myths need to be clarified a little in order to understand their survival in the contemporary imagination.

The difference between the way that experts and non-experts perceive technological risk, is highlighted by the research of the last few decades on the public perception of new technologies. It can in fact, be traced back to a contrast between the survival of these ancient myths and the continuation of myths developed by modernity in relation to innovation. While experts tend to reduce it to numerical levels of “acceptable risk,” possibly in balance with readily quantifiable benefits, others show a qualitative horizon that contains “factors of cultural, social and psychological significance” (Otway and Winterfeldt 1982; cf. Brun, in Wright and Ayton 1994; Renn 1990; Sandman et al. 1993; Urban and Hoban 1997). It is in relation to this that one can find the presence of the Ancient Canon in the contemporary imagination. However, not even the experts escape a Canon, as we will see later.

We all have a more or less naive conception of the reality in which we live, even if we are not philosophers. We all have a naive ontology, a naive sociology, a naive epistemology. If one of these conceptions remains unconscious, it is an implicit anthropological vision that can survive underground; if it is made explicit, it can become the object of reflection, of systematization, perhaps even become a philosophical tradition or a strand within modern science.

Let us consider the three concerns mentioned at the beginning of our journey, and translate them into more common terms. Here, then, are the fundamental questions: What do we think about the place of the individual in the world, the guiding values in the social world and, finally, the status of our knowledge?
To these questions the ancients gave an answer that the moderns, in opposing a Canon mirroring their own, began to feel literally “in step with the times.” It should be noted, however, that the mythological figures we encounter will always be characterized by the well-known paradoxical convertibility or *coincidencia oppositorum* (Eliade 1948). This is the same ambiguity characteristic of the sun, which illuminates and blinds, of time, which gives life and devours, of the Earth, which generates and dissolves.

Today, as we anticipated, the confrontation between the two Canons seems to have reached a showdown.

NOTES

1. For recent confirmations see Narasimhan et al. (2019).
2. Rome as the epitome of a city as a homeodynamic knowledge organism is sketched out in Cerroni (2020, pp. 97–100).
3. This is where an attempt to re-gender science must start (Cerroni and Simonella 2012).
4. In this regard, the historian of ancient law Eva Cantarella (1981, pp. 28–30) argues that it is neither a question of “female power” nor of “matrilineal law,” but rather of a society characterized by a strong female presence in society, in religion, and thus in the imagery of the symbolic world. Anyway, we can agree that symbolic power was matrilinear.
5. As hard and laborious as the work of building a civilization is, the barbarization generated by its emptying is rapid, in an environment where change is the only persistent fact. However, there is a difference, as we shall see, between this stage placed at the beginning of the phylogenetic formation of the individual and society, and the same stage toward which a subsequent barbarization may tend to fall. There is, in fact, a sort of path-dependency of this stage as of every other human stage, whether individual or collective. What, at first, are the glimmers of a kindled consciousness, opening up a range of possibilities to the individual, social and intellectual world with progressive developments, become at a later stage the re-emergence of archaic substrata, the fossil traces of a failed development that resurface due to the uncertainty of the course of time. So it is that these same arrangements are subsequently loaded with individual and collective perversions, with progress being succeeded by regression, tragedy by farce. There is, indeed, a sort of “gravitational force”, individual and collective, against which consciousness must constantly struggle to erect its (self)productions and continue its “natural” development. As Céline wrote: “In the chaos of the world, consciousness is but a small light, precious but fragile.” It takes very little to lose one’s character as a civilized human being and to fall back to primordial stages, as is evident in collective behavior (especially in states of panic and in crowds). This has been tragically witnessed in the 20th century, and experienced as the “fraying” of mass society. Since “I” is nothing more than becoming conscious, a process and not a “substance” that is autonomous from the conditions of concrete and historical life, it is not a “state” that has been achieved and forfeited once and for all. Rather, it is a process that must always be nourished, indeed it must be equipped with a system of nourishment that meets the new vital needs of the moment, of the individual, and of the group in which s/he lives. In this
way it is continually renewed. All the characteristics that make the ego a social process are thus revealed. We also understand how the development of the idea of divinity, as already noted by Durkheim (1897) has had a parallel history, insofar as ego and God are “principle of connection and unification.” We should add that there are, in addition to ritual practices, beliefs and collective memories. More precisely, traditional knowledge that the individual finds available and whose imperative value derives, not only from the authority entrusted with the care of the sacred, but also from the “impossibility of thinking alternatively.” There is a sort of “rituality of thinking,” consolidated and sacralized cognitive habits, a historical horizon of the thinkable. If religion is, as in every social phenomenon, as much action as it is thought, historicity at both the individual and collective level can come to entail “historicity as an intrinsic and constitutive dimension of theology itself” (Bof 1995, p. 5).

6. According to Hesiod’s theogony, in the beginning was the abyss of Chaos; then came the Earth, personified by Gaia, stabilizing, solid, secure and generating everything else. Out of this came mountains stretching toward the sky and chasms plunging underground. Thanks to Eros, and by parthenogenesis, the Earth gave life to the sky, Ouranos, which stretched out over it, covering it entirely. From the first mating in history (in that time before time proper, the time of myth, in illo tempore), the Titans were born (together with Cyclops and Centimanes), the last of whom was Kronos. Ouranos hid his children in the womb of the Earth, where they suffered painfully, until the last born, Kronos, at the instigation of his mother, took the initiative and emasculated Ouranos, putting an end to the mother’s torment. A prophecy predicted that a son of Kronos and his sister Rhea (a sort of “reincarnation” of Gaia) would overthrow Kronos as he had overthrown his father. To protect himself from this fatal event, he swallowed all the children that Rhea bore him until Zeus, the last born of the new progeny, was hidden by Rhea and deceitfully saved. Once grown, Zeus fulfilled the prophecy. Behind the three generations of gods, we can clearly see the symbolic stratification of the successive populations that overlapped in the Mediterranean basin.

7. See, among others: Kopaka and Boelle, in Laffineur and Haegg (2000); Vernant (1965); Gimbutas (1999); Durand (1963).

8. There has been some uncertainty in the past about identifying Chronos (the Lord of Time) and Kronos (the son of Uranus), but the link seems all too obvious.

9. The most substantial difference between the two representations of the Supreme Deity, however, is the monotheistic pact that unites the Uranian god to a Chosen People who have a vital need to feel him humanly close to them.

10. Aristotle can be considered a remarkable exception when dealing with a sort of relativity about universals (see Cerroni 1999).