NARCISSI IN NEMESES

—

Self-Adoration
as a Timeless Tool
of Power and Propaganda
in Ancient Egypt

Piotr Kołodziejczyk

O Unas, you have not gone dead, you have gone alive to sit on the throne of Osiris.
Your sceptre is in your hand that you may give orders to the living […].
Your arm is that of Atum, your shoulders are those of Atum […].
The sites of Horus serve you, the sites of Seth serve you. [1]

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Pyramid Texts, Pyramid of Unas,
South Wall, Utterance 213

The largest surviving Egyptian manuscript, known as the Harris Papyrus, recounts the reign of the last great pharaoh on the Egyptian throne in the 12th c. BCE – Ramses III. Its seventh part provides extremely interesting information on events that took place in the eighth year of his reign (Grandet 1999). The emergence of invaders referred to as the 'Sea Peoples' along the northeast frontier of the pharaohs' empire and their defeat by Ramses III were perceived as momentous developments by the Egyptians. Of course what was considered of key importance in quashing the enemy was the role of the ruler – not only as the chief commander of his armies, but above all as the divine leader of his people. It is, however, worth remembering that such an image of the king was not invented by the rulers of the New Kingdom period. The origins of self-glorification and what – from our point of view – verges on pathological 'state narcissism' should be sought in the earliest beginnings of Egypt's history. The pattern was perpetuated and developed for nearly three thousand years while the only medium available at the time – art – made ubiquitous the image of the almighty, apotheosized and unerring ruler, positioned above all those living in the realm. The image became an element of the cultural genotype of the successive pharaohs, integrating the monarchy with its subjects, but sometimes also causing the kingdom troubles or even undermining its foundations.

To understand the Egyptian symbolism and the factors underlying the development of that specific mentality, one still needs to go back to the very beginnings of the pharaohs' kingdom. Around 271 BCE, the Egyptian priest Manetho finished writing *Aegyptiaca*, commissioned by one in the last line of pharaohs – Ptolemy I. It covered the history of Egypt between the time of the earliest kings and the death of Alexander the Great. According to Manetho, the first pharaoh of a united Egypt was Menes (Helck 1970: 952–953). Today we know that Manetho did not have access to all relevant sources when writing his work, and the history of royal Egypt had actually started much earlier. The monarchy was born in Upper Egypt, where a clear division into the poor and the rich can be discerned as early as around 3800 BCE. It is important because it was wealth that provided grounds for power and influence over the functioning of groups of people. Wealth was what enabled aristocracy to become the driving force of the earliest Egyptian communities. In the ensuing centuries, the life of the Upper Egyptian populace centred around several settlements – Abydos, Hierakonpolis, and Nagada. Those were the locations where the material culture and religion patterns as well as new technologies were developed. Wealthy residents invested in craftsmen, producers and merchants, wishing to maximize their

holdings of luxury objects – symbols of their power. Trade continued to grow, based on exchange with the neighbouring communities of Nubia and the Nile Delta, and through them possibly with the Levant region. Over time, the early Egyptian society also expanded demographically and geographically, occupying an ever larger area, with impact on Middle, and subsequently also Northern Egypt. The quiet, economico-cultural colonization made it possible to combine all the lands of Egypt into one highly-developed civilization, based on the Upper Egyptian model, and that became the foundation for building up royal power. The experience of their generations in exercising power over minor and major groups of people taught the Upper Egyptian aristocrats discipline and organization, which were indispensable not only to hold such a huge polity for such a long time but also to be able, a few centuries later, to conduct projects as large as the construction of pyramids, temples and sepulchral complexes. A moment came when some of the aristocrats – princes – were powerful and influential enough to desire the unification under their own rule of the whole territory that their ancestors had included within the sphere of Upper Egyptian influence. The question as to which of them was the first to control the whole country is almost as old as Egyptology. Based on Manetho's work, we know a history of Egypt divided into 30 royal dynasties. Being versant in hieratic script, the priest could easily use sources from all the periods of Egyptian history in his research. According to him, the man who united Egypt and created the first indigenous dynasty was Menes. Today's archaeologists believe that Menes should be identified in one of the earliest rulers of the 1st Dynasty – either Narmer or Horus Aha (Ciałowicz 1999: 137 et seq.).

It was probably still before the emergence of the first monarchs known to us by name that the Egyptians became aware of the power of visual symbolism. But it was only the first historical succession of pharaohs who put it at the top of the list of methods used to strengthen their rule and instilled it permanently in the Egyptian mentality. Over time, the Egyptians became masters at using a wide repertoire of visual means to shape the image of the ruler and his attributes. One of the most important was of course the hieroglyphic script, whose hybrid ideographic-phonetic nature made it perfect for manoeuvring the conveyed information and had great impact on the viewers, even those who, due to lack of adequate education, could not decipher its proper content. A special role was played by the royal titulature, in itself a unique expression of the royal characteristics, a demonstration of the ruler's supremacy and divinity. It took no time to understand the special role of art and its manifestations, and it was soon added to the range of means of propaganda, over time making it the most important of them all. A number of objects described in scholarly literature as both historic artworks and carriers of ideology date back to the reigns of the earliest rulers. Due to their limited quantity, state of preservation, lack of related written sources and other elements required for full reconstruction, the analysis of these finds is extremely difficult, and any attempt at assessing them should start with a definition of the notion of 'art' in reference to the history and development of the Egyptian civilization. This is so because the ancient artefacts that we tend to put up on the pedestals of aesthetics and art were of no artistic value to the Egyptians. It can even be conjectured that this way of thinking about objects that we now call works of ancient art was – at least until

the time of their first contacts with the Greek culture – completely unknown to them. What we call Egyptian art today was indeed a language of ideology, a medium for religious information, and a bonding agent for Egyptian mentality. This is why the art of ancient Egypt is an indivisible and original whole, reflecting the most important aspects of the beliefs and the social and environmental relations that were the most important to that civilization and evident from its very inception, as well as a whole range of behaviours and customs constitutive of its uniqueness. Still, the artefacts made by Egyptian artisans are, so to speak, milestones in the development of art and were doubtlessly outstanding works at the time of their making. Barry Kemp (Kemp 2009: 133–134) rightly points out that works of art are always the product of great and distinctive cultural traditions. A proper analysis of them takes us back to the world of Egyptian psyche and points to its narcissistic features, which, however, from the Egyptian rulers' point of view, have no negative meaning because they make it possible to control the minds of their subjects, living with a conviction of the king's superiority and the rightness of his decisions as well as the moral, intellectual, technological and military domination of Egypt over other contemporary societies and polities.

One of the most interesting examples illustrating the birth of that ideology, dating back to the very beginnings of Egyptian statehood, is provided by artefacts discovered at Tell el-Farkha in the Nile Delta (see. e.g. Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 2007). The find consisted of two statuettes, probably originally made of wood, covered with gold foil, two ceremonial flint knives, and a necklace made of carnelian and ostrich eggshell beads. Obviously, the statuettes are the most important: both represent a man wearing only a sizeable penis sheath. Both men stand with their hands hanging down along their bod- ies, legs slightly apart, which was probably important for the statics of the statuettes. The penis sheath on the larger figure has traces of finely-executed geometric decoration. Similarly, the toenails and fingernails, as well as the protruding ears, are very elaborately rendered, showing clearly the nails and the auricle cartilages. The large almond-shaped eyes of both statuettes are made of lapis-lazuli. The facial features are probably not per- sonalized, but their meticulous execution must inspire awe and admiration. The clearly, realistically marked mouths and noses make the faces somewhat idealized, or perhaps universalized. The discoverers believe that the statuettes may represent a pharaoh and his son, the crown prince, or possibly just the monarch himself during his Hab Sed (jubilee) ceremony (Chłodnicki and Ciałowicz 2007: 20; Ciałowicz 2012: 201–205). These representations fit well into the flourishing stylistics of depictions of the Egyptian ruler, of which the canonical patterns were to be continued for millennia to come. The image of a strong man, whose genitals, shown during erection or in a sheath that make them optically bigger, are proof of the power and supremacy over the community that he ruled. Initially, they were purely symbolic representations, not personalized, but over time they took on individual features recognizable in the faces of figures known from later artefacts. By no means were they meant to be portraits, but only slightly stylized images, idealizing the man exerting control over the community subordinated to him. We are dealing with a similar mechanism in representations associated with the Hab Sed festival, aiming to

symbolically renew or rejuvenate the king's supremacy after years of rule, or show the subjects his unflagging strength and power as well as unwavering support of the gods. The Tell el-Farkha statuettes are also one of the first examples of historic artefacts showing features of a breakthrough artwork, in the service of propaganda and legitimizing the centre of power, so characteristic of the pharaohs' kingdom, and also evident from its earliest times.

The myth of the state and the ruler that symbolized it was the most important for the existence of the Egypt of the pharaohs (Kemp 2009: 85). Without a shared ideology there is no state because there is no idealized identity of its participants, and then it is impossible to generate the energy required to create all the activities indispensable in the functioning of a state organism. The Egyptians were well aware of it and, as early as the reign of their first rulers, created an ideology that remained unquestionable for millennia, that of a social order based on divine laws, however instrumentally treated by them. The key concepts perfectly illustrating these phenomena and the Egyptians' ideological way of thinking are definitely the terms *n̲tr* (*netcher*) and *maat*, fundamental for Egyptian theology. The former designated all-embracing divinity, i.e. an impersonal power believed to be the source of all ethics and of all existence, as well as the controller of fate (Hornung 1983: 30–49). Interestingly, a similar concept was present in Sumerian religion (*nam-tar*, destiny, fate, power overseeing order in the world), which points to the universality of some early mythological conceptions. Egyptian records quite often convey an idea of a creator who engendered all being out of himself and is incessantly present in this being. The Egyptians added to this well-known conception a utilitarian, relativistic element. Known to them from their observation of the reality around them, the multiplicity of forms and entities found its explanation and justification in a dualistic, symmetrical conception of all things, where every whole is regarded as a composite of opposites (again, showing some affinity to the Sumerian and Indian cultures). This vision, so well known to Egyptologists today, was of course profusely reflected in the Egyptian people's art, myths and rituals. Another important concept describing the perennial ethical values and the laws of nature was doubtlessly the abstract notion of *maat*, in its personalized form represented as the goddess Maat (Hornung 1983: 65–67). Maat was a symbol of balance, guardian of order in the world, ensuring justice and punishment. Any violation of her attributes – any change to the eternal order – led to negative consequences, all the way up to and including the annihilation of the whole community. Keeping the balance was, in the eyes of the Egyptians, the only guarantee of realizing every idea and conception. These, being precedent to their realizations, proved to Egyptian thinkers that the reality that they knew could be subject to all manner of change and transformation without causing any loss to any entities of being or their elements, as long as the *maat* was retained, of course. This is why the transformations of Egyptian gods into animals, or of pharaohs into celestial bodies, were far from being expressions of a primitive religious ideology, but instead illustrated a complicated conception of a philosophico-mythological nature. This conception was actually continued by the Greek philosophers in the idea of metamorphosis – the changing of one form into another – and subsequently embedded

into European culture by way of Christian theology. Myth was therefore to Egyptians a kind of transmission of an idea conveying in an absorbable form an image of the world and its functioning, a visual representation of the Egyptocentric philosophical conceptions, inaccessible to everyone else.

The world of the Egyptians revolved around themselves, and the state rules and ideology prevented them from noticing any values outside Egypt. In social terms, this state narcissism shaped the perception of areas situated outside the domain of the pharaohs' rule and of the peoples living outside Egypt as barbarian and disorderly, unworthy of interest. No self-respecting Egyptian therefore desired to travel beyond the frontiers of their own country, and most definitely would not want to be buried in foreign ground. The balance of Maat applied to Egypt only because it was exclusively guaranteed by the Egyptian ruler, by his human and divine characteristics. The unflagging sense of superiority accompanied the Egyptians throughout the time of their history and was reflected in many elements of their art or literature, depicting or describing distant lands and their inhabitants as uncivilized, underdeveloped or primitive groups. Humanity is Egypt, while the rest are definitely physically and mentally imperfect beings, which should at most inspire vigilance in every Egyptian. In this perspective, the Egyptian narcissism was therefore a social feature, the way of functioning of society and of human relations, resting firmly on what we would call today chauvinistic foundations.

Such a philosophy of state and of building the collective sense of superiority had to be implemented by specially selected and proven means because it had to get through to everyone, be comprehensible to everyone, including those (after all, the majority) who could not read and had no chance of receiving any, even the most basic, education, which would be conducive to simultaneous indoctrination, as known to us if only from the premodern times. This task could only be achieved by art, whose products – visible to a large group of people – implemented the well-planned ideology, by visualizing patterns that carried very specific and unambiguous messages.

The foremost role was played by the formats used in depicting the rulers. Their stylized likenesses are known to have come from the beginnings of the Egyptian state, the Tell el-Farkha statuettes being one of their earliest examples. The pattern prevailing in the depictions of the ruler included both the manner in which the king's figure was represented and some specific scenes – the only acceptable situations that the pharaoh could be found in.

The pharaoh's body was a reflection of the power and majesty of the state (Ikram 2011: 172). It could not be imperfect or ravaged by the passage of time. The canon prescribed for depicting the rulers thus forced the use of the format of timeless youth and perfect proportions. While the makers of the earliest depictions from the archaic or Old Kingdom period had some occasional problems meeting this standard, from the Middle Kingdom onwards the royal figures were nearly identically perfect and well-proportioned. They were only rarely endowed with slightly individualized facial features, as is the case e.g. with the so called 'pessimistic portrayals' of Sesostris III (see e.g. Aldred 1970). This otherwise rare phenomenon was an ideological ploy aiming to highlight the ruler's experience and

wisdom: though fatigued by his long reign, he still emanated power and authority. Most kings, however, preferred to come through as eternally young and perfect in their portrayals. This is well exemplified by countless depictions of New Kingdom rulers (especially of the 18th and 19th dynasties), considered the most powerful of all Egyptian pharaohs (see e.g. Lipińska 1978: 127–171). These are without a doubt portrayals of individuals leading the most powerful empire of the time. Here the ideology of state narcissism was implemented unreservedly, consistently and according to plan. The subjects were supposed to see their rulers as strong and resolute, always ready to face adversities and unyielding to mundane weaknesses and illnesses, as was becoming to gods.

The pharaoh had unlimited authority, but also a lot was demanded of him. He had to bind the kingdom together and represent its dignity and power. In a way, he had continuously had to live up to his mythico-propagandistic image and exercise his rule through rituals and contacts with the gods, to whom he was, in the Egyptians' eyes, closely related. This is why the key element, as already pointed out, in influencing the Egyptians' mentality was a specific repertoire of scenes in which the pharaoh could be shown in reliefs, paintings, or group sculptures.

As the supreme and divine representative of the Egyptian state, the pharaoh could be depicted solely in situations building up that state's authority or legitimizing his claim to power. The latter took on a special significance at times of dynastic turmoil, or simply dynastic change, when one's pretensions to the throne, or skipping over a member of the royal family in succession, had to be substantiated or justified.

The most important representations of Egyptian rulers are therefore scenes of a religious nature, showing them in the company of gods, in most cases as their equals. In the paintings found in New Kingdom rulers' tombs, the king receives graces and symbols of his attributes, while often making symbolic offerings himself, but he never bows to or prostrates himself before any of the gods. He is a relative of theirs, a member of the large family of beings ruling over Egypt, and their earthly emanation. Conversely, he often receives offerings from his subjects. Sculptures are monumental symbols of power and might, usually set in and right outside temples. The king is shown seated in a hieratic, rigid, compact pose, impassive and inaccessible, insensitive, as it were, to the human world around him. He is often accompanied by statuettes of deities or one of his spouse – the mother of the successors to the throne.

Being the indestructible and all-powerful king must also have involved the ability to defeat external enemies and harness the natural world. Both these characteristics were present in art and propaganda already in the initial stage of the Egyptian state's existence. The oldest and very important example of such 'ideological narcissism' is of course the famous Narmer Palette, a well-preserved stone artefact decorated on both sides, found in Hierakonpolis and now at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (Quibell 1900: 10). The palette shows scenes of the ruler's triumph, figures of defeated enemies, a symbol of a destroyed fortress, as well as a triumphant procession and a number of references to deities. The most important scene depicts the king wearing the White Crown of Upper Egypt, holding a mace in his right hand while his left, which rests on his adversary's head, holds an object

which is possibly a cylindrical seal. Nermer is dressed in a type of tunic hitched over his left shoulder and girded with a belt that has a tail in the back. The captured prisoner is wearing only a loincloth, probably made of leaves. He has a beard and long hair, similarly as other defeated enemies depicted in other parts of the palette. This, however, is not all of its gory symbolism. Shown above the figure of the prisoner being massacred by Narmer is the head of another bearded and longhaired man, symbolically held on a leash by a falcon standing on stems growing from the base, symbolizing captured prisoners of war. The lowermost scene depicts two dead bearded men. On the other side of the artefact, shown next to several other symbols and figures, is also a bull trampling a naked, bearded enemy, and demolishing a fortress with its horns. The name of the fortress is probably stated by the centrally-placed hieroglyph. The Narmer Palette seems to be a perfect example of a symbolic work, a sign of the king's force and power, his rule over the whole country (see e.g. Ciałowicz 1993: 49–55). From that moment onwards, the image of the ruler defeating his enemies and slaying pitilessly his prisoners was to be one of the most popular formats for depicting pharaohs. It adorned the walls of the temples, seen from afar and used as a kind of screens to show the ruler's supremacy over others and his power that no one could ever resist. This is how we are greeted by Ramses III from the gigantic walls of his temple at Medinet Habu. This is also where we can find a depiction of the battle with the Sea Peoples, already mentioned in the opening paragraphs, serving of course as a propaganda story of the great pharaoh's unprecedented victories.

The image of the world owing its development solely to the ruler and the gods' protection would not, however, be complete without references to the forces of nature, i.e. scenes showing the monarch's ability to influence those forces. The issue was of major importance to the Egyptians, dependent on the capricious Nile and vulnerable to climatic volatility. No one knew better than the Egyptian farmers what tremendous power, capable of destroying man, was wielded by nature, whose real intentions and plans could be known to the almighty gods only. Thus the pharaoh had a very important role to play, by strengthening in his subjects the conviction of his influence over the cycles of nature and his supreme position in relation to the world and its elements. Scenes showing the king fighting and defeating the forces of nature were therefore present in Egyptian art from as early a time as other representations contributing to the whole complicated ideology of the pharaohs' rule. As early as under the first rulers, a scene was composed which was to become canonical, showing the so called 'Lord of Animals', a man combating or dividing two fighting lions, probably symbolizing the ruler who dominates over the dangerous world of the beasts (Ciałowicz 1999: 310 et seq.). Scenes of hunting for dangerous animals, such as hippopotamuses or crocodiles, were soon to become one of the most popular depictions of rulers, though not as a reference to courtly pastimes or methods of obtaining food. Their sense was much profounder and, like in all other cases where the king was depicted, it referred to his strength and superhuman powers, not even short of ruling over the most dangerous elements of the natural world.

The Egyptian state narcissism also had its cases of 'misfire' and bizarre metamorphoses, as can be seen today in ancient art objects or writings found by archaeologists.

This is most vividly illustrated by the so called Amarna Period, covering a section of the New Kingdom Period and the reign of Amenhotep IV/Akhenaton and his successors – Smenkhkare, Tutankhamon, and Ay. It was during that period that, through a decision of Akhenaton, the canon of depicting the pharaoh and his family was changed. According to some researchers (e.g. Lipińska 1978: 153, 154), the desire to stand apart from others and break away from what was a divine and elevated but also an imposed rigid image led the new ruler and his court to create a new, unusual scheme that remains a riddle to this day, while ever new ideas are offered to identify its sources. The changes decreed by Akhenaton were revolutionary in his time. He announced that the only god was Aton – worshipped in the form of the solar disk; the heretofore idealistic and anatomically perfect portrayal of the king was superseded by almost grotesque depictions. A perfect example of those changes can be found in the so called Akhenaton Colossi of Karnak, showing the ruler in un upright position, holding the regalia, with unnaturally elongated head, a long nose and thick lips, concave cheeks and an unnaturally long neck, protruding shoulder blades and slanted shoulders, as well as feminine-looking hips. The figures are clearly rid of the physical male sex markers, which may be indicative of the ruler's desire to be perceived as a hermaphrodite – both father and mother to his subjects. The members of the royal family as well as most officials were depicted in a similar manner in the Amarna Period. What may have contributed to the propagation of this unusual image was simply fashion and a desire to emulate the ruler blindly, but where did this bizarre scheme come from? No clear answer to this question is known. Perhaps it was brought about by causes of a medical – somatic – nature (some researchers suggest that Akhenaton may have suffered from the so called Marfan Syndrome (Burridge 2000: 8–13)), or the ruler's mental disturbances. What, however, seems quite probable is a narcissistic need to be different, better, original, to stand out not only from other Egyptians but above all from his predecessors on the throne. It needs to be remembered that the standardization of the depictions of successive rulers made them look very much alike. The desire to stand out from and above the others would therefore be hardly surprising here, just another proof of the successive pharaohs' powerful longing to be perceived as the greatest and be remembered for ages to come. That longing was often evident in grand architectural or military projects, but Akhenaton chose another path to immortality. He actually achieved his goal because, although these patterns were discontinued soon after his death and the previous ones were resumed, the Amarna Period attained a lasting place in Egyptian history while the images of the 'deformed' pharaoh continue to excite widespread interest. This Narcissus is definitely going to live eternally because his attempt to turn upside down the patterns followed by his predecessors and create a new format led him to the same place. The mental, individual and state narcissism tried to find a new skin but in its core it remained its old self.

The life of the Egyptian people unfolded in accordance with the model prescribed by an unformulated ideology of social hierarchy and balance. At the top of the hierarchy stood the ruler, responsible for ensuring the harmony, but also holding a position incomparable to any other member of Egypt's society. The bureaucratic machine was always watchful to make sure that the canonical patterns were followed and shaped the perception of the

world appropriately: the supremacy of the ruler and his successors was unquestionable and recognized by all. The method admittedly did work. With a few exceptions, Egypt was free from rebellions and insurgencies, and for nearly three millennia its people followed the model that ensured unity and consolidated all groups of society. Here, everyone knew their place and social role. The dominant sense was that of superiority over the peoples inhabiting neighbouring lands, largely as a product of the methodical narcissistic ideology which recognized Egypt as the only place in the known world that enjoyed the protection of the gods and reflected the divine order and harmony established by them. Self-adoration was therefore not a feature limited merely to the rulers, but an Egyptian social characteristic, a binding agent and a driving force, a generator of energy, and a channel to vent social tension and unrest. The key elements in shaping these phenomena included of course the image of an all-powerful and eternally young ruler, capable of defeating, harnessing the world of nature, and engaging in relations with the gods, and last but not least, well-grounded in the heritage of his predecessors. Achieving the latter goal required ploys legitimizing the king's position, showing him as a descendant of famous ancestors and continuator of great dynasties. The king was always the divine successor of the royal lines ruling over Egypt and another link in the greater scheme of the timeless empire. From this perspective, the role of the Egyptian propaganda of state narcissism could be compared to that played by the art of advertising in the modern twentieth-century totalitarian systems, occupying the position of total propaganda in them, depriving the audience of any intellectual autonomy whatsoever and becoming the only right opinion and way of evaluating the world around them.

The primary medium of that unique state ideology, based largely on the narcissistic conviction of its superiority, was art. Art understood by the Egyptians as an information medium and a kind of language which could be used to communicate effectively. They were right because art reflects the level of man's intellectual culture, points to the causes that have led to the rise of a certain style, aesthetic, fashion in a given society, under specific historical circumstances. Art doubtlessly expresses the form of the relations existing between people within the framework of a specific social system. According to Umberto Eco (Eco 1973: 255), art also reveals a series of relationships: between man and man, between man and objects, man and institutions, man and social convention, man and the world of myths, and finally man and his language. Under this approach, and probably as the Egyptians understood it, art was a means of communication, focused on delivering information, which was more of a communicational phenomenon and which we have elevated to the level of art. Thus it would indeed be a carrier of diverse and important, broadly defined social content, which is actually invoked by a number of our contemporary authors as the main characteristic of Egyptian art (e.g. Ciałowicz 1999: 294; Honour, Fleming 2006: 64). It is also notable in this context that the art of the Egyptian polity, which can after all be easily described as a total state – much like the art of all later totalitarian systems known to us – shuns realism (despite its seeming simplicity and naturalistic quality), becoming instead a screen for the projection of the self-admiration of both the rulers and the ruled.

The Egyptian state ideology appears to be a quite well-defined and described phenomenon. However, the very concept of 'art', through which we analyze it, eludes a fixed definition. It is a processual phenomenon, undergoing ongoing change throughout the ages. On the one hand, it is free, autonomous and offers individually-designed solutions; on the other, paradoxically, its creative capabilities seem to be limited as a result of its dependence on time and place, and thus are subordinated to cultural tradition. After all, art is profoundly contextual, always remaining in a close relationship with the environment in which it is born. On each occasion, in a new place and time, it leaves its mark on matter in a different way. This is probably its great secret, a mystery that we can also experience through science, looking for its traces and examining the circumstances and conditions in which it was created, trying to discover the dimension and shape of human life, making the effort to understand the complex operation and behaviour mechanisms of a single human being and whole empires of old.

The narcissistic properties of the Egyptian culture and mentality preceded by whole millennia the rise of today's understanding of the figure of Narcissus. In the European culture, it is based on the foundation provided by Greek mythology, pervaded with the negative image of an insensitive being in love with himself, whose bitter end is somewhat sweetened by his transfer into the eternal world of symbols and signs. It is, however, an image referring to individual characteristics, to phenomena limited by the mind of a single person rather than encompassing whole societies or nations. The Egyptian state narcissism, on the other hand, is an expression of the thinking and action of a whole group building their world on the foundation of self-adoration. The individual's role in ancient Egypt, though important – and sometimes noticed by the Egyptians themselves as it contributed to keeping the divine/mundane balance – was in most cases confined to emulating the models and attitudes believed to guarantee the stability and everlasting continuation of the state. An explanation of such a perception of their own polity is probably given in one of the so called Nag Hammadi Codices, discovered in Upper Egypt and dated to the 4th century CE. When writing about Egypt, the ancient authors use the expression *Aegyptus est imago caeli*, 'Egypt is an image of heaven' (Krause, Robinson, Wisse 1979: 418). Egypt is a mirror on Earth in which gods view themselves. Could the Egyptians avoid loving themselves and their state then?

The figure of Narcissus, shaped in antiquity into the form that is so well known to us today, actually seems to be much older. Its timeless and pancultural universalism, evident in the functioning of the first great civilization in human history, may be pointing to its roots extending into the dark prehistoric times, which are perhaps telling us quite a lot about what is a common and probably eternal characteristic of humanity. Much like we do today, when looking at the Egyptian pyramids or the monumental and impassive statues of the pharaohs, the ancient Greeks must have seen in them Narcissus, with his gaze riveted to his own likeness and oblivious to the passing time...

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