

## **Evolution in Context: "Deep time," archaeology and the post-romantic paradigm.**

**Jacques Boucher de Crèvecoeur de Perthes is a name as foreign to discussions of literature or literary history as it is common to textbooks on archaeology. Boucher de Perthes, the customs official and part-time archaeologist--who also wrote plays, novels, poetry, political satires, travelogues, feminist tracts and pamphlets on free trade--is historically credited with the archaeological establishment of human antiquity. In 1859, as the direct result of his findings, a scientific consensus was reached, according to which the existence of human beings on earth acquired a vastly expanded historical dimension that challenged the scientific assumptions then in place. With the radical collapse of the previous authoritative date--circa 4000 B. C. E.--for the origin of humanity's appearance on earth, human history suddenly expanded from a time frame of some six thousand years to one that extended hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of years into the past (as far back as the fossil evidence would allow). A major contribution to the discipline of archaeology, the scientific establishment of human antiquity--an event that can also be described as the discovery of the prehistoric time span of humanity's life on earth (or as I will call it, the emergence of "deep time")--marks an historical juncture whose impact on intellectual life in the later 19th century is significant, and generally unexamined.**

**Perhaps the best explanation for the relative obscurity of Boucher de Perthes's archaeological breakthrough is that his thesis regarding the vast age of the human race lies imbedded and occulted in the evolutionary theory proposed by Charles Darwin in The Origin of Species, a book that also appeared, by coincidence, in 1859. Although The Origin**

of Species omits explicit reference to the origin of humans (a topic later taken up in the 1871 The Descent of Man), the idea of deep human antiquity is inextricable from Darwin's argument. In The Origin of Species, however, a new time frame for both human and natural history serves as the necessary premise for evolutionary theory's larger and more controversial claims regarding the mutability of species over time, and the natural selection and accumulation of random mutations in the struggle for existence. Moreover, The Origin of Species is written in a prose style that made it accessible to the general educated public of its day; it was an instant best seller.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Darwin's argument concerning humanity's place in the order of nature--by challenging Natural Theology's governing belief in the fixity of God's creation--diverted public attention away from the no less crucial issue of humanity's place in the order of time.

On the basis of his excavations in the Somme valley, Boucher de Perthes advanced his thesis regarding humanity's deep antiquity--"Dieu est éternel, mais l'homme est bien vieux"--in his 1847 Antiquités celtiques et antédiluviennes. Mémoire sur l'industrie primitive et les arts à leur origine.<sup>2</sup> The complex series of events whereby, in 1859, a panel of distinguished and influential British scientists came to corroborate and to accept the truth of "deep time," on the basis of archaeological evidence found in Brixham cave that included stone tools in the same geological deposit as the bones of extinct mammals (e.g.

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<sup>1</sup> 1250 copies of The Origin of Species were printed, which sold out on the first day. A second edition was rushed out and appeared in January 1860. A total of six editions appeared in Darwin's lifetime. See "Editor's Introduction" (Darwin, Origin 34).

<sup>2</sup> The second and third volumes of Celtic and Antediluvian Antiquities appeared in 1857 and 1864, respectively. The quotation, "God is eternal, but mankind is very old," is the concluding line of the second volume.

elephant, rhinoceros, cave bear, hyena), is carefully chronicled in Donald K. Grayson's valuable study, The Establishment of Human Antiquity (1983). As Grayson observes, and as is perhaps not immediately obvious today, "before about 1859 most Western natural historians and philosophers were as certain that the advent of the human species was a fairly modern event as they are now quite certain that it is a fairly ancient one" (2).

As Grayson notes by way of introduction (3-9), the concept of a deep human antiquity is itself ancient, and has long been the subject of debate. The oldest argument in support of human antiquity took as its premise the magnitude of human knowledge, as in Ecclesiastes 1:10: "Is there anything of which one can say, 'Look, this is new?'" The reply, "No, it has already existed, long before our time," stemmed from the belief that all major inventions and discoveries were already made, and pointed to a time frame in which humanity had been in existence for a vast period of time, perhaps even eternally. Plato provided the seed of this argument in the Timaeus (its later use reappeared in such writers as Diderot and Voltaire). However, this same argument, based on an analysis of the magnitude of human knowledge, was also used to support the opposite contention, viz. that significant inventions and discoveries were still being made, and were therefore indicative of the recency of humanity on earth.<sup>3</sup> Historically, both positions were often taken to combat Aristotelian eternalism. Early arguments in favor of human recency are found in Lucretius's De Rerum Natura, Macrobius's Commentary on Scipio's Dream, and Saint Augustine's The City of God. The point is, however, that as long as a set of dated time

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<sup>3</sup> Assertions of human recency or human antiquity based on assessments of the quantity of knowledge were similar, and complemented by, the same assertions made on the basis of human physical or linguistic diversity. See Grayson, Chapter 7, 139-167.

markers from the past were unavailable, the results provided by all of these approaches remained equivocal.

Grayson summarizes the sequence of events leading to the establishment of human antiquity as follows:

In retrospect, the establishment of human antiquity can be visualized in terms of a series of discrete steps, each of which made the discovery of truly ancient human beings more likely. Stone tools became widely recognized as such during the early 1700s. At about the same time, the order of deposition of strata began to be used to extract sequences of events in earth history, opening the door to placing human remains in that sequence. In the early 1800's, it became widely recognized that the fossil content of strata could be used to link those strata together across wide expanses of earth. When it became recognized as well that the superficial strata of western Europe and many other regions of the earth contained the remains of extinct animals, including creatures as the woolly mammoth and woolly rhinoceros, and that the remains of these animals were often associated with a set of distinctive gravels and clays, geological markers became available for assessing the antiquity of people on earth. Fifty years later, stone tools were found tightly associated with those time markers, and general agreement was reached that people were, in fact, ancient on earth. (8)

Before considering some of the effects of "deep time" on contemporary literature, a few comments seem in order regarding this slow and intricate change in temporal perspective, particularly in regard to the difficulties attending to the agreement reached "fifty years later."

The near-indistinguishability in our own time between Darwin's theory of evolution and the emergence of "deep time" reflects the historical force with which "deep time"

destroyed the Biblical link between an allegorical earth history and a genealogical Adamic history, as these are presented in the Book of Genesis. Yet, it is clearly the distinction drawn between Biblical allegory and a Biblical record of genealogy that set the stage for the collapse of prevailing assumptions regarding human recency, in that it brought into question the relation between the presumed recency of humanity's remains and the profound age of the geological deposits and paleontological context in which they surfaced.

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, estimates locating the date of Creation at the onset of the fourth millennium B.C. gained common acceptance and authoritative status on the basis of a tallying of Biblical genealogies.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the passage of time was measured by the number of generations descended from Adam. By derivation, the literal reading of the word day, in the first verses of Genesis, became the means by which the origin and date of Creation could be deduced backwards from the time span of Adamic history. For example, Luther took 4000 B.C. as the date of Creation; yet there was support for other dates of Creation such as 4032, 3949 and 3946 B.C., based on varying combinations of the genealogical tallies with other historical documents and different astronomical calculations. The astronomer Kepler declared that he had found an error of four years in the Biblical chronology, and it was the acceptance of this that produced the date 4004 B.C. in the margin of the Authorized Version of the Bible published in 1611. Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656) held the opinion that "from the evening ushering in the first day of the world, to that midnight which began that first day

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<sup>4</sup> Attempts to translate Biblical chronology into a hard absolute chronology date back to the early Church fathers. Jerome's additions to the chronology of Eusebius provide the basic time scale from which the concept of a universe six thousand years old was later derived (Daniel 34).

of the Christian era, there were 4003 years, seventy days, and six temporarie howers."

Similarly, Dr. John Lightfoot, Master of St. Catherine's College and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, wrote in 1642 that "Man was created by the Trinity about the third hour of the day, or nine of the clocke in the morning on 23 October 4004 B.C." (Daniel 34).

The eventual decoupling of an allegorical/genealogical Biblical chronology in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, under the auspices of the French Enlightenment and the work of the natural historian George Buffon in particular, made possible the discovery of human antiquity as the necessary corollary to the earth's own long history.<sup>5</sup> Romanticism, in this sense, oversaw a historical period in which the earth was recognized to be ancient, but humanity not yet so; and Nietzsche's "death of God," in a literal sense, became the radical discrediting of the Bible as a scientific standard of reference in the matter of human history and natural history alike.

The Biblical account of Noah's Flood made the discovery of "deep time" complex. It became the site of a scientific struggle to reconcile the empirical evidence with Biblical authority--the same struggle that evolution theory faced in more dramatic terms. In George Cuvier's Recherches sur les ossements fossiles de quadrupèdes (1812), the demonstration concerning the extinction of numerous large quadrupeds (e.g. mastodon,

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<sup>5</sup> It is primarily Georges Buffon's 36-volume Histoire Naturelle (1749-1789) that laid down the uniformitarian idea of an ancient earth, an earth that was once a molten, incandescent globe, and that continues to change and pass through a series of epochs, in conformity with certain fixed, quasi-Newtonian principles (Grayson 27-41).

wooly rhinoceros, giant sloth),<sup>6</sup> as well as Cuvier's association of the most recent of these extinctions with the gravel deposits later identified as diluvium by William Buckland in Reliquiae Diluvianae (1823), provided the first widespread time markers by which human antiquity could be judged (Grayson 59-69). However, as long as neither human bones nor stone tools were found within or beneath the diluvium together with evidence of an extinct species, or, more significantly, as long as such discoveries remained limited to the misleading geological conditions found in caves--which, crucially, was not the case for Boucher de Perthes's archaeological finds--it continued to be possible to read the separate presence of (ancient) extinct animals, on one hand, and (recent) human remains, on the other, with consistent reference to a geological catastrophe of global proportions, a universal Deluge that wiped out the extinct species while serving as historical background to post-diluvian humanity. According to this catastrophist and generally accepted scenario, the remains of ante-diluvian peoples, i.e. the humanity that God destroyed through the Flood, existed in central or southern Asia, the theorized cradle of the human race: as suggested by Scripture, the human race was recent in the West and archaic in the Orient.<sup>7</sup> It was not until the idea of the universal Flood as a cause for the deposits of diluvium was

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<sup>6</sup> Cuvier was also the first to discover the remains of a dinosaur, which he found in the outlying region of Paris.

<sup>7</sup> The intimate connection between colonialist expansion and the advancement of archaeology is suggested by the building of the Suez canal. Begun in 1859, the Suez canal, while serving commercial and military interests, also significantly furthered the science of stratigraphic analysis essential to archaeology. Indeed, the rise of archaeology as a whole remains closely associated with the mining ventures of the Industrial Revolution (Grayson 18-25).

In addition, one might note that 1859 was also the year when petroleum was discovered in Pennsylvania (Olson, Ishmael 18).

abandoned--following the realization that diluvian deposits of different regions were not of the same age, and that diluvium of a given area had been deposited at different times (as Louis Agassiz's Etudes sur les glaciers (1840) would help explain)--that explicit concern with Biblical chronology receded into the far background. Vide, Rimbaud: "Aussitôt que l'idée du Déluge se fut rassise..."<sup>8</sup>

The emergence of "deep time," in its relation to contemporary literature, suggests Walter Benjamin's well-known image of the "angel of history" in Thesis IX of "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (Benjamin 257-258). Caught in the storm of "deep time," the contemporary writer is like the Angel, who is caught by the wings in the storm called "progress"--a storm blowing out of Heaven--and who is being pulled backwards into the future: s/he bears witness to the mounting pile of humanity's remains, and is faced with the jinxed, but sacred, task of tending to their worth. And the techne by which the writer achieves this elusive goal is a form of archaeological or "archaeologic" (A. Kuspit) writing that rediscovers archaic modes of perception.

In his essay "The Symbol of the Archaic,"<sup>9</sup> Guy Davenport considers the inter-relation of literature, on one hand, and what might be described as the joint disciplines of historic and prehistoric archaeology, on the other (Daniel 13). He conceives of the archaic as a great "invention" or "discovery" in our time: "As the first European renaissance

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<sup>8</sup> This is the opening line in Rimbaud's Illuminations (pub. 1886).

<sup>9</sup> This essay is reprinted in Geography of the Imagination. In addition to writers and poets, Davenport's argument includes references to Picasso, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Brancusi, Corbusier, Buckminster Fuller, and other artists and designers. "The Symbol of the Archaic" is inspired in large part by the work of Charles Olson, to whom Davenport devotes another essay in the same collection.

looked back to Hellenistic Rome for a range of models and symbols, the twentieth century has looked back to a deeper past in which it has imagined it sees the very beginnings of civilization" (21). Davenport refers to Heraclitus, for example, in whose work science and poetry stay fused, as "a genius loci everywhere, in Hopkins, Spengler, Pound, William Carlos Williams, Eliot, Olson, Gertrude Stein" (21). Similarly, Pound's first Canto translates the most archaic part of the Odyssey, itself a record of Descent into the Underworld traceable to the Gilgamesh epic; like Pound's Cantos, or Kazantzakis's The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel, Joyce's "long chord" in Ulysses, in which the epic equation of the modern and the archaic resounds, evokes the most ancient pages of Western literature (Davenport 22-23). The return to the archaic can also be noted in such writers as C. P. Cavafy, Hermann Broch, D. H. Lawrence, H. D., Robert Graves, Antonin Artaud, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Marguerite Yourcenar, Jorge Luis Borges, William Burroughs, and others--writers for whom the archaic serves both to resuscitate literary genres and to inspire new ones.

Davenport observes that "the heart of the modern taste for the archaic is precisely the opposite of the Romantic feeling for ruins" (22). He draws a broad distinction between the generally negative value that Romantic sensibility assigns to the archaic, and the positive value that the archaic acquires in the post-romantic age.

As a reaction to an Enlightenment discourse on origins, Romantic writing used ruin and fragmentation as a means of pointing to a greater truth beyond the vicissitudes of history--the truth of the "imagination," which it valued over and above the "reason" of a preceding age. That Enlightenment spirit was exemplified, for instance, in the work of Joachim Winckelmann, the so-called "father of archaeology," whose History of Ancient

Art (1763-1768) appeared at a time when the European collection and classification of artifacts from the Ancient World were on the rise. In contrast to Enlightenment reflection on the distant past, the Romantic sense of awe and wonder attendant to the perception of ruins (an effect similar to the experience of the sublime) underscored the power of the imagination to grasp the organic wholeness uniting Nature and human consciousness. For the Romantic writer, the archaic functioned as an image for historical obsolescence in the face of Nature's regenerative power.

In such works as Thomas Love Peacock's "Palmyra," John William Burgon's "Petra" (winner of the 1845 Newdigate Prize), Volney's Les Ruines, Shelley's "Ozymandias" ("Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!"), the diverse spectacle of the distant past inspired a deep awe and a Romantic melancholy that posited a new vocabulary of images for poetry, and that brought into perspective a certain arch-limit before which the spirit of scientific inquiry and rationalist argument were found wanting. Despite its new view of the archaic, however, the Romantic response to the Enlightenment discourse on origins continued to function as an appropriation and extension of that same "enlightened," progressivist discourse. For both Wordsworth and Blake, as a case in point, the neolithic monuments of England (viz. Stonehenge) belonged to a savage world that practiced human sacrifice--a world far removed from the one that their writings envisioned and worked to achieve.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Blake, Jerusalem; also, Wordsworth "Salisbury Plain" and The Prelude (1805), Book XII (l.331 and ff.).

In his essay "Olson," Davenport notes that the first mention in English poetry of Cro-Magnon polychrome painting appears in a sonnet by Wordsworth from 1846, in which the poet objects to the proliferation of illustrations in Victorian magazines, and criticizes the regression to the crudity of communication by pictures (Cf. Davenport 84).

By contrast, in a post-romantic moment subsequent to the emergence of "deep time"--and especially in the modern and post-modern wakes of the First and Second World Wars--the archaic acquired positive value as a source of inspiration and energy. After the cataclysm of World War, society looked for its lost vitality in the distant past. As a widespread response to the ruin of Romantic aspirations, the twentieth century's "renaissance of the archaic" rediscovered and deployed "critical tools for analyzing reality such as the ancient cultures kept bright and sharp" (Davenport 20). An archaic sense of the world became the mirror-image of a possible fulfillment on the horizon of future history, a fulfillment with its roots in civilization's deepest strata. For an industrial or post-industrial society aware that it had abandoned the energies, certainties and values first expressed by humanity as poetry and design, the archaic represented a spring-like moment of birth into culture, manifesting itself throughout all cultures.

The radical collapse of Biblical time frames served as historical context for the "strange fact," as Davenport puts it, "that what has been most modern in our time was what was most archaic" (28). With a greatly expanded notion of historical time, cultures and civilizations once deemed remote acquired a contemporary aura by virtue of their relative proximity to the present, within the larger vista of human prehistory. Moreover, Darwin's radical vision of nature, in which Divine harmony and fixity were replaced by randomness, struggle and change, had worked to destabilize Nature as a basis on which to model the organization of society.

Both before and after the emergence of "deep time," the archaeological record supplied mounting, often spectacular evidence of archaic societal models from which contemporary writers could draw: a panoramic view--as in the Bible or Homer--of older

forms of social organization. Reinforcing a trend that began with the 1709 excavation of Pompeii and Herculaneum,<sup>11</sup> the growing success and popularity of archaeology throughout the Romantic era can be traced to milestones such as the discovery of the Rosetta Stone (found in 1799, deciphered in 1822), the excavation of the Biblical sites of Babylon, Nineveh and Nimrud, the decipherment of cuneiform, the discovery of Etruscan tombs, and the discovery of ancient civilizations in Central America. Similarly, in the last decades of the 19th century and in the first of the 20th, the emergence of "deep time" served as background to the discovery of Cro-Magnon painting (including the art of Altamira in 1879), and to Schliemann's excavations of Troy and Mycenae, as well as to the discovery of the previously unknown Sumerian, Minoan and Cycladic civilizations. The year of Ulysses and The Waste Land--1922--was the year of the richest archaeological find ever: the tomb of Tutankhamun. After the Second World War, archaeologists found the Dead Sea Scrolls, and deciphered Linear B; in 1959, carbon 14 dating established that the megalithic monuments of Britain and Malta were older than the pyramids of Egypt and the ziggurats of Mesopotamia. In 1974, the discovery of "Lucy" identified the genus homo as over three million years old.

Stephen Daedalus's statement, "History... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,"<sup>12</sup> could serve as a sort of motto for those writers who assigned strategic value to the archaic. The return to the archaic represented a common effort to restore a living

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, the history of archaeology can be traced back to Nebuchadnezzar and Nabodinus (the last king of Babylon)--both of whom dug and restored Ur in the seventh century B. C. E. The term archaeology (Gk. archaiologia, `discourse about ancient things') was introduced into Western scholarship in the seventeenth century by Jacques Spon (1647-85), a German doctor in Lyons who traveled widely in the Ancient World (Daniel 13-14).

<sup>12</sup> This quote appears in the "Nestor" section of Ulysses (Joyce, Ulysses 28).

notion of the sacred, while functioning also as a political metaphor for the openness of the future. It served to help writers oppose a form of society where technology and the institution of Science, and the hegemonic discourse that the so-called human sciences were taking over from the physical sciences, stood accountable for the shambles of history, particularly in the 20th century. By defining the archaic in counter-hegemonic terms that opposed the forces of positivism and scientism, these writers addressed what they saw as a discursive threat posed to the genuine "progress" of human society.

The return to the archaic in literature advanced the vision of a coherent society that would cease to produce the type of large-scale systematic contradictions of which World War seemed the expression. Invariably, the envisioned coherence was to be achieved through an improved understanding of, and conformity with, human nature. For certain writers in the 20th century, the very question of what it meant to be human called for a new account of Genesis, in which homo sapiens would come to life. Freud's Civilization and Its Discontents (1930), Joyce's Finnegans Wake (1939), and Bataille's Lascaux, or the Birth of Art (1955) offer three salient and contrasting visions of a constitutive moment in human evolution. Each speaks for the Angel of History.

In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud introduces a footnote immediately before his review and discussion of Totem and Taboo (1913), an earlier work in which he described the passage of a "primal horde" ("Urhorde") into the communal life of a totemic culture formed by bands of brothers who have killed and consumed their all-powerful

father ("Urvater").<sup>13</sup> The footnote retroactively offers an evolutionary context to Totem and Taboo, and considers the passage of homo sapiens's "ape-like" ancestors from a species of quadruped to the higher species of upright biped: "The fateful process of civilization would thus have set in with man's adoption of an erect posture." This primal moment in evolution is fateful, for Freud, because it serves as the scene of an "organic repression" by which the memory of an earlier stage of development, where sexual urge was based on the sense of smell, is relegated to oblivion. According to this scenario, primal man, learning to raise himself up, is no longer attracted to the smell of the female's genitals, but rather finds his sexual urge obeying a visual stimulus.<sup>14</sup> The smell of the menstruating female is cause and content for repression. However--like "the gods of a superseded period of civilization," who "turn into demons"--repression and taboo, at the threshold of civilization, are not without their price. Man's genitals, which were previously concealed, become visible and in need of protection. They are the object of shame. From the moment that he adopts an "erect posture" ("raises himself from the ground") man is not happy either with what he was or what he is:

From that point the chain of events would have proceeded through the devaluation of olfactory stimuli and the isolation of the menstrual period to the time when visual stimuli were paramount and the genitals became visible,

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<sup>13</sup> The footnote in Civilization and Its Discontents appears at the beginning of Section IV (Freud, Civilization 46-47). The ritual murder of the Father in Totem and Taboo appears in Section V of the chapter "The Return of Totemism in Childhood" (Freud, Totem 140-146).

<sup>14</sup> The constitutive importance in the history of civilization that Freud attributes to the 'organic repression' of the human sense of smell is broached as early as 1909 in the penultimate paragraph of "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis," a.k.a. "The Rat Man" (Freud, Notes 247-248).

and thence to the continuity of sexual excitation, the founding of the family and so to the threshold of human civilization. (46-47)

Therefore, as Freud explains in Civilization and its Discontents, mankind founds civilization on the basis of work and its collective organization.

(It should be noted that Freud, in this footnote, does not consider that the type of biological change attending to the evolutionary passage from quadruped to biped, or from the estrous cycle of primates to the menstrual cycle of humans, might intervene in the structure or chemistry of the proto-human/human brain. "'Organic repression'" describes a physiological change whose scientific observation assigns the value of a constant to an epistemological construct--or way of knowing--that humans would share with their "ape-like" forbears. In this respect, Freud's primal scene remains prior to anatomy, biology or chemistry.)

Where Freud is concerned with humanity's place in nature, Joyce, in Finnegans Wake (as in Ulysses), focuses on humanity's place in textuality, and on the imbrication of the text within the text--The Odyssey in Ulysses, Vico's Scienza Nuova in Finnegans Wake. Joyce's two masterworks seize on two founding moments in the archaeology of Western civilization: a Graeco-Roman Classical moment in history, and a global Paleolithic moment in prehistory. For Joyce, the return to Greece (and Rome) in Ulysses leads back to a universal source of authority in Vico's primal scene of the Thunder, a scene that Joyce rewrites at the onset of Finnegans Wake: "the fall (bababadalgharaghtaka-mmminarronkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoo-

hoordenenthurnuk!)... retaled."<sup>15</sup> The Big Bang of the first thunder clap, according to Vico, caused the "first founders of gentile humanity" to raise their eyes and become aware of the sky: "They pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the greater gentes, who meant to tell them something by the hiss of his bolts and the clap of his thunder" (Vico, 117).<sup>16</sup>

Joyce at once begins in ricorso, or Thunder as unfinishable chaos, from which corso, or Thunder as the voice of Jove, emerges, calling upon humanity to 'wake again.' Thus, the primal scene is always already an act of interpretation--primal man's interpretation of thunder, Vico's interpretation of history, Joyce's interpretation of Vico. Recycling Vico's fourfold scheme, according to which history moves from corso to ricorso and back--from an Age of Gods to an Age of Hero-Poets, to an Age of Man whose destiny is original Chaos --Joyce construes the primal scene in the Scienza Nuova as the absence of primal scene for which Vico's text and his own substitute in turn.<sup>17</sup> In the first paragraph of Finnegans Wake, the prelude to the sound of the Thunder is a primal scene forever in recession: "Sir Tristram... had passencore rearrived from North Armorica... nor had topsawyer's rocks... exaggerated themselfe... nor avoice from afire bellowsed mishe mishe... not yet, though

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, in light of the Thunder in Finnegans Wake--prior to the identification of stone tools as such (in the early 1700s)--these stone objects, which were posited to have grown in the ground or fallen, meteor-like, from the sky, were often referred to as ceraunia, "thunderstone," in line with its derivation from the Greek keranos ("thunderbolt") and the Latin ceraunius ("pertaining to thunder") (Grayson 5).

<sup>16</sup> See paragraphs 374-381, esp. 377. In this opening section of Book II ("Poetic Wisdom"), Vico outlines his own Biblical chronology concerning the Thunder as follows: "As we have postulated, this occurred a hundred years after the flood in Mesopotamia and two hundred years after it throughout the rest of the world."

<sup>17</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Pellegrino d'Acierno of Hofstra University for his comments on Finnegans Wake's opening scene of the Thunder, and its relation to Vico's work.

venisoon after... not yet, though all's fair in vanessy... The fall (...)... retaled." The text is the product of glyphs, the trace of a trace of a trace... The authority of the speaking subject breaks down, points to a semiotic process that tends to go haywire because it is infinite. As recycled by Joyce's text, Vico's cyclic vision of history is no less a history of language, an anarchic master narrative that ends in the same archaeological ground where it begins.<sup>18</sup>

Bataille's "primal scene," as set forth in Lascaux or The Birth of Art, has elements in common with both Freud and Joyce. (Bataille's observations seem all the more timely in light of the recent discovery of the Chauvet cave near Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, one of the major archaeological finds of this century.) In Bataille's account of Genesis, "Lascaux Man" creates the world of art out of nothing, and becomes the divine or miraculous being of distinctly human proportions, who, like God in the Bible, creates order out of primal chaos: "'Lascaux Man' created--created out of nothing--this world of art in which communication between individual minds begins" (11; OC 9, 12).<sup>19</sup>

For Bataille, the "miracle" that is the birth of art at Lascaux marks the distinction between Neanderthal man and homo sapiens (i.e. between homo sapiens neanderthalensis

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<sup>18</sup> Two recent works on Finnegans Wake highlight the resonance of "deep time" in Joyce's text. John Bishop, in Joyce's Book of the Dark (1986)--while arguing that Finnegans Wake is most literally about the "evening world" of the night and of sleep (in the same way that Ulysses is about the day, the reconstruction of diurnal life)--points to the text's profound affinity with The Egyptian Book of the Dead (see Chapter Four, esp. 86-91). Similarly, Jacques Derrida in "Deux mots pour Joyce" (1985) sees Joyce's reprise of Vico's primal scene as referring to the Biblical name of God--YHWH--the god of fire who declares war on humankind, in what is at once an act of love. The speaking subject is divided from the onset, by the god in the house that Babel builds and whose dispensation to humankind is: I command you and forbid you to translate me.

<sup>19</sup> Page references are to Lascaux or The Birth of Art, in the series "The Great Centuries of Painting," published by Skira; this text, like its French equivalent, is amply illustrated with color photographs. In addition, page references are also given for the French text as it appears in George Bataille, Oeuvres Complètes, 9.

and homo sapiens sapiens). It is a distinction, first drawn by Johan Huizinga, that involves the primordial passage from homo faber ("man who works") to homo ludens ("man who plays"): "Homo ludens'... is not exclusively applicable to the man whose works gave human truth the virtue and brilliancy of art; the term befits all of mankind" (35; OC 9, 39).<sup>20</sup>

What preceded Lascaux, for Bataille, was a work-mentality--the world of homo faber--capable of assuring the ambush and slaughter of large, powerful animals. The making of tools for hunting big game conditioned the human thought processes that developed language and brought nascent humanity to the threshold of art (Bataille 28; OC 9, 30). In the Aurignacian "figures" and "magic-makings" ("opérations magiques") of Lascaux, humanity reinscribed the world of work within an animal kingdom whose arch-context was nature as Creation:

These magic-makings, these figures (probably made capriciously, not at the sole behest of dire necessity), correspond very poorly to our usual idea of means--of implements, tools. These figures expressed the moment during which man acknowledged the higher value of the sanctity belonging to the animal--which perhaps he sought to befriend, thereby dissimulating the naked desire for food that impelled him. That hypocrisy has its deeper meaning: it was the recognition of a sovereign value. This behavior's ambiguity conveys an important feeling: man considered himself incapable of attaining the end he aimed at unless he first contrived to rise to a level of parity with it. He had at least to feign equality with a power which surpassed him, which calculated nothing, never toiled, was always at play, and whose animality was not distinct. (127-128; OC 9, 78)

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<sup>20</sup> As Bataille notes, the term homo ludens is taken from Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (translated from the Dutch into French in 1951), which is listed in the Bibliography to Lascaux.

Lascaux's animal paintings (discovered in 1940) are evidence, for Bataille, of a different being, who has seen the light of a higher truth, and remains forever irreducible to the profane time of necessity, work and logic.

The darkness and winter of homo faber's world set the stage for homo luden's enactment, in the artwork, of a sacred transgression of religious taboos--a festive transgression that, for Bataille, is intimately linked to ecstatic sensibility, and that gives birth to human nature:

We may propose as fairly certain that, in the strongest sense, transgression only begins to exist when art itself becomes manifest, and that the birth of art fairly closely coincided, in the Reindeer Age, with the tumultuous outbreak of play and festival announced by these cave-painting figures. (38; OC 9, 40)

Bataille argues that for homo faber both sexual activity and death have the value of something entirely other ("ce qui soudain s'annonce tout autre" (OC 9, 35)). The tool-based work that founds the society of homo faber thus institutes vital prohibitions that assure the society's integrity, by sheltering it from the disturbances repeatedly provoked by death and sexuality. In this haunted world beholden to "sad necessity," art acquires the sacred value of a transgressive act. The painting of animals, combined with the systematic occlusion or encryption of human figures, represents a vital connection, made by homo ludens, between the otherness of the animal and the otherness of the forbidden realm to which taboos bar access. As a result, the violence of the hunt, setting humans against dangerous animals, is replayed in the transgressive violence of a sacred moment in which the art of homo ludens temporarily overcomes homo faber's subjection to prohibitions and

to the fear and awe that they inspire. In relation to homo faber, whose presence the animal paintings efface, the depicted animals acquire the suprahuman aura imparted to them through association with the otherworldliness safeguarded by taboos; and it is with this suprahuman aura, or power, that homo ludens in turn identifies.<sup>21</sup>

For Bataille, the art of Lascaux fulfills the same social function as sacrifice, in whose moment of paroxysm the sacredness of a richer, more profound order of being finds expression: "A work of art, a sacrifice contain something of an irrepressible festive exuberance that overflows the world of work, and clash with, if not the letter, the spirit of the prohibitions indispensable to safeguarding this world" (39; OC 9, 42). When Bataille describes the large gatherings in the Main Hall of Lascaux, with as many as a hundred people or more, it is to confirm the sense of exuberance and festivity that underlies art's playful transgression of the same prohibitions that it sanctifies. Moreover, although this is not specifically discussed by Bataille, the art of Lascaux would also highlight homo ludens's use of fire for purposes of illumination to paint, or view paintings--a non-utilitarian use of fire.

For Bataille, as for Freud, the prehistoric passage from animal to human is marked by primal violence. Prohibition and taboo potentialize transgression. Yet, the violence and transgression in Bataille remain linked to what might be described as a glyphic or Joycean economy of excess that overrides the reductive authority of a constitutive equation between transgressive violence and collective murder. Bataille's case for the birth of humanity and art at Lascaux stages an inaugural moment that preserves the mystery of origin, while

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<sup>21</sup> For further commentary on Bataille's Lascaux, see Steven Ungar, "Phantom Lascaux: Origin of the Work of Art;" also, Maurice Blanchot, "Naissance de l'art" (9-20).

highlighting the symbolic function (inherent to art) that lends authority to human order.<sup>22</sup> 21

Laughter has a constitutive role in this scheme:

Human laughter began somewhere. Perhaps not with Neanderthal Man; but Lascaux Man laughed, of that we may be sure. And we forget what a relief, what an unburdening new-born laughter must have been: it requires all of knowledge's weighty seriousness to make us forget it. (25; OC 9, 26)

Where Joyce points to homo ludens and to the birth of human laughter in the spectacle of a thunder clap from which homo faber recoils, Freud brings homo faber to light as the murderous background against which homo ludens struggles--while Bataille, in a sense, keeps both in play, presenting homo sapiens as the being whose sapience is born as much from laughter as from totemic bloodshed.

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<sup>22</sup> Bataille's work on Lascaux was published, also by Skira, in the same year as his study Manet. Of interest, in the present context, is the way in which Bataille's consideration of Lascaux as a primal scene in (pre-)history has as a corollary of sorts the critical attention to a painter whose life seems to center around, and whose major work seems to follow upon, the emergence of "deep time" in 1859. For Bataille, insofar as Lascaux and Manet function as something of a paired set--like Finnegans Wake and Ulysses--the birth of art at Lascaux would seem to remain intimately linked to the post-romantic birth of modern art, and to modern art's rupture with received notions of the Classic.

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