

Man with a bird's head, detail from the scene in the pit of the Lascaux cave. Around 13,500 B.C.

Cf. G. Bataille: *Lascaux, or the Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse, Geneva, 1955.

WORK AND PLAY

1. EROTICISM, WORK AND THE 'LITTLE DEATH'

I should first of all take things up from further back. In principle, I could certainly speak about eroticism in detail without having to say too much about the world in which it plays a part. It would however seem futile to speak of eroticism independently of birth, independently of the first conditions under which it came about. Only the *birth* of eroticism, from out of animal sexuality, can bring forth what is essential about it. It would be useless to try to talk about eroticism if we were unable to speak about what it was at its inception.

I cannot fail to evoke in this book the universe of which man is the product, the universe from which he is in fact distracted by eroticism. If, to begin the history of origins, we look at history, the misunderstanding of eroticism has entailed some obvious errors. But if, in wanting to understand man in general, I want in particular to understand eroticism, I am essentially beholden to this initial imperative: from the outset, I must give first place to work. From one end of history to the other, in fact, the first place belongs to work. Work, beyond all doubt, is the foundation of the human being as such.

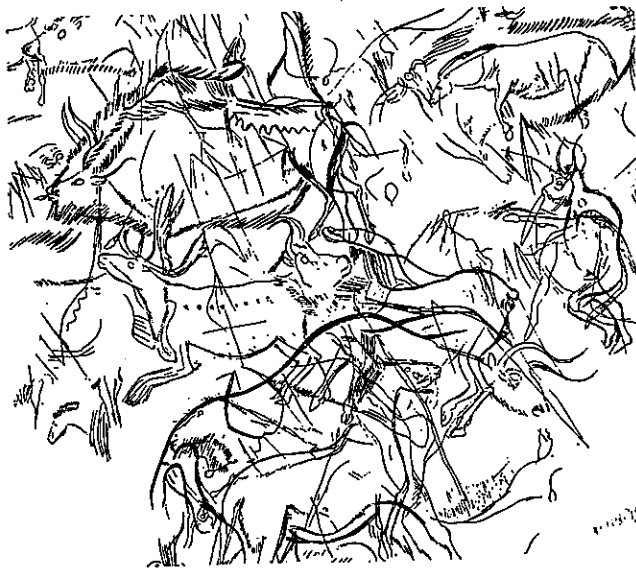
From one end of history to the other, beginning with the origins (that is to say with prehistory) . . . The field of prehistory, moreover, is no different from history except for the paucity of documents on which it is based. But on this fundamental point, it must be said that the most ancient evidence, and the most abundant, concerns work. Beyond this we



Bison with human rear legs and phallus. Caverne des Trois Frères, Sanctuary.

have found some bones, either those of the men themselves or of the animals they hunted—and on which, it seems, they nourished themselves. But among all the documents and evidence that enable us to shed a little light on our most distant past, tools made of stone are by far the most numerous.

The research of prehistorians has furnished innumerable carved stones, which can often be approximately dated according to their location. These stones have been worked so as to fulfill some use. Some served as weapons, and others as tools. The tools, which were used in the making of new tools, were at the same time necessary for the making of weapons: projectiles, axes, and arrow tips, which could be made of stone, but for which the base ma-



Scene from which the detail (above) is taken. Caverne des Trois Frères.

Cf. Heny Bégouën and H. Breuil: "Les Cavernes du Volp," *Arts et Métiers Graphiques*, Paris, 1958.

terial was sometimes furnished by the bones of dead animals.

Of course, it is work that separated man from his initial animality. It is through work that the animal became human. Work was, above all else, the foundation for knowledge and reason. The making of tools and weapons was the point of departure for that early faculty of reason which humanized the animal we once were. Man, manipulating matter, figured out how to adapt it to whatever end he assigned to it. But this operation changed not only the stone, which was given the desired form by the splinters he chipped from it, but man himself changed. It is obviously work that made of him a human being, the reasonable animal we are.



Mythic scene. Man-bison preceded by an animal which is half stag and half bison, and by a reindeer with palmate front feet.

Cf. "Les Cavernes du Volp," *op. cit.*

But if it is true that work is our origin, if it is true that work is the key to humanity, human beings, through work, ended up distancing themselves completely from animality. And they distanced themselves in particular on the level of their sexual life. At first they adapted their work activity to conform to whatever usefulness it held for them. But it was not through work alone that they developed: in all areas of their life they made their activities and their behavior respond to a given end. The sexual activity of animals is instinctive; the male who seeks out the female and covers her is responding only to an instinctual excitation. But human beings, having achieved through work the consciousness of a sought-after end, came in general to be distanced from the purely instinctual response, in that they discerned the meaning that this response had for them.

For the first humans to become conscious of it, the aim of the sexual act must not have been the birth of children, but rather the immediate pleasure which resulted from it. The instinctual movement



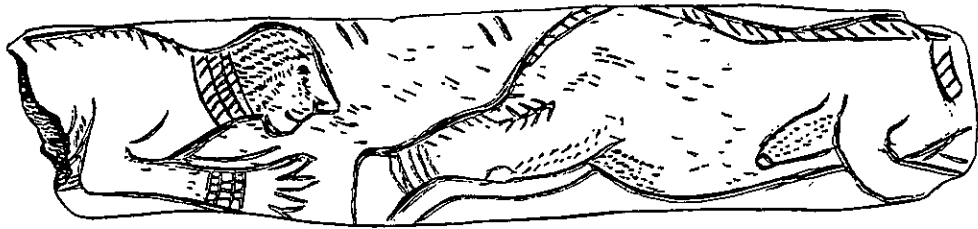
Cavernes des Trois Frères, Sanctuary. The horned god. Close-up view, greatly deformed by the perspective.

Cf. "Les Cavernes du Volp," *op. cit.*



The horned god, relief by H. Breuil after his tracing.

Cf. "Les Cavernes du Volp," *op. cit.*



Human scene (carved on bone, Isturitz grotto). Early Magdalenian.

Cf. René de Saint-Périer: "Deux oeuvres d'art," *Anthropologie*, vol. XLII, 1932, p. 23, fig. 2.

was shifting in the direction of an association between a man and a woman with the aim of nourishing children, whereas within the limits of animality such an association only took on meaning as the consequence of procreation. Procreation was at the outset not at all a conscious aim. When the moment of sexual union first came to be related to conscious desire by human beings, the end sought was pleasure; it was the intensity, the violence of pleasure. Within the framework of consciousness, sexual activity was at first a response to a calculated seeking after voluptuous pleasures. Even in our times, archaic tribes have remained unaware of any necessary relationship between voluptuous union and the birth of children. For humans, this union of lovers or spouses had at first only one meaning, and that was erotic desire: eroticism differs from the animal sexual impulse in that it is, in principle, just as work is, the conscious searching for an end, for sensual pleasure. This end is not, as it is in work, the desire to acquire something, the desire for increment. Only the child represents an acquisition, but primitive man did not see in this effectively beneficial acquisition of the child the result of sexual union. For civilized man, in general, bringing a child into the world lost the beneficial—materially beneficial—meaning it had for primitive peoples.

Sex for pleasure viewed as an end is no doubt often misprized in our times. It does not conform to

the principles on which this activity is founded today. In fact the pursuit of sensual pleasure, although not condemned, is nevertheless viewed in such a way that it is often not open to discussion. To a great extent, moreover, this reaction, which at first sight seems unjustifiable, is nonetheless logical. In a primitive reaction, which never completely ceases to be operative, sensual pleasure is the anticipated result of erotic play. But the result of work is gain: work enriches. If eroticism is viewed in the perspective of desire, independently of the possible birth of a child, it results in a loss, hence the paradoxically valid term "little death." The "little death" has little to do with death, with the cold horror of death. But is the paradox altered when eroticism is in play?

In fact, man, whose consciousness of death distinguishes him from the animal, distances himself further to the extent that in his case eroticism substitutes voluntary play, a calculation of pleasure, for the blind instincts of the organs.

2. DOUBLY MAGICAL CAVES

The burial chambers of Neanderthal man hold this fundamental significance for us: they testify to the consciousness of death, to the awareness of the tragic fact that man can, that he must, founder in death. But we can only be sure of this passage from instinctual sexual activity to eroticism with respect to the period when our fellow creature appeared, this man of the late Paleolithic, the first who was in no way our inferior physically and who was perhaps, and we must indeed assume so, possessed of mental resources similar to our own.⁸ There is even

8. In principle, a child of the late Paleolithic era, educated in our schools, could have reached the same level as we have.

nothing to prove that this very early man suffered from the (in fact very superficial) inferiority which we attribute to those we sometimes call "savages" or "primitives." Are not the paintings of his era, which are the first known paintings, comparable at times to the works of art in our museums?

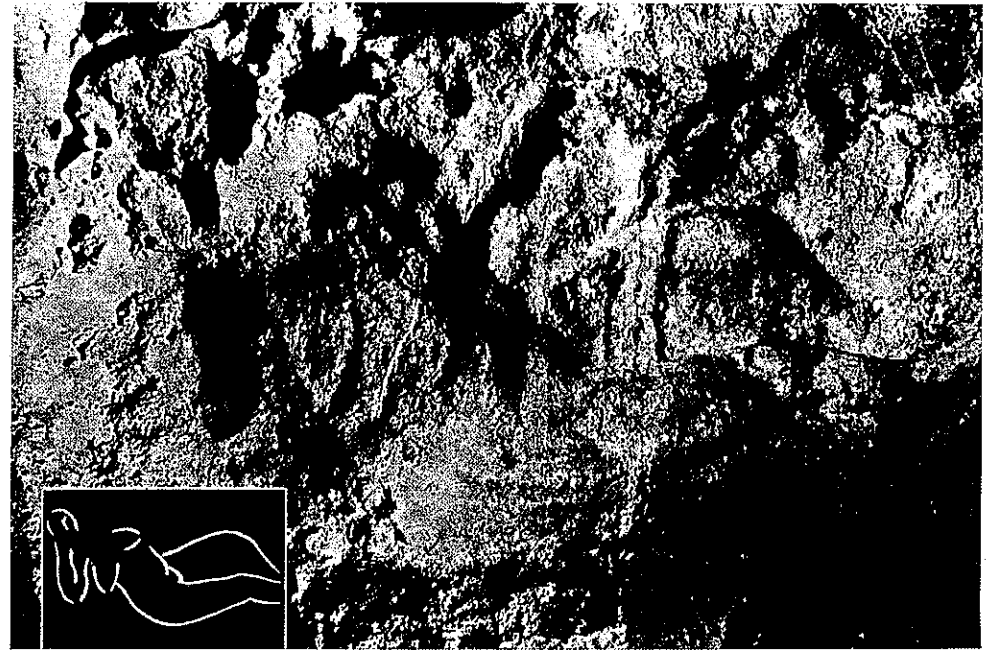
Neanderthal man manifested one more inferiority which distinguished him from us. Without doubt, like us (and like his ancestors) he stood in an upright position. But he still kept his legs a little bent and furthermore he did not walk "like a human;" he stepped on the ground with the edge of his foot and not the sole. He had a low forehead, a protuberant jaw, and his neck was not, like ours, long and slender. It is even logical to imagine him as being covered with hair as are apes and mammals in general.

We really do not know anything about the disappearance of this archaic man, except that our fellow creature occupied unchanged the regions that Neanderthal man had peopled. For example, he flourished in the Valley of Vézère and in other regions (in the southwest of France and the north of Spain) where numerous traces of his admirable talents have been discovered. The birth of art, in fact, followed upon the physical completion of the human being.

It is work that was decisive: it was the virtue of work that determined intelligence. But the ultimate consummation of man, this accomplished human nature, which at first began to enlighten us and ended up endowing us with a feeling of exhilaration, initiated a sense of satisfaction not merely the result of a useful task. At the moment when, hesitantly, the work of art appeared, work had been for hundreds of thousands of years a fact of human life. In the end, it is not work, but *play*, that marked the advent of art and the moment when work became in part, in

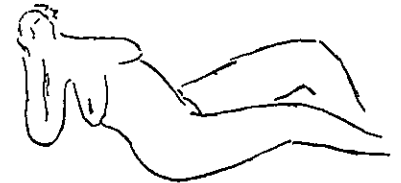
Opposite: One of the Venuses discovered in 1952 by Vesperini in La Magdaleine, a hamlet on the shores of the Aveyron. "... The most remarkable sculptures of the Magdalenian era" (H. Breuil).

Cf. B. Bétirac: "La Vénus de la Magdaleine," *Bulletin de la Société française préhistorique*, vol. LI, pp. 125-26. Cf. also two plates in R. Vergnes: *Gravures magdaléniennes*, etc. id., vol. XLIX, no. 11-12, pp. 622-24, 1952 (reliefs).



genuine masterpieces, something other than a response to the concern for utility. Indeed, man is essentially an animal who works. But he also knows how to change work into play. I would emphasize this in the context of art (of the birth of art): human play, truly human play, was first of all work, work that became play.⁹ What ultimately is the meaning of the marvelous paintings that untidily adorn these almost inaccessible caves? These caves were somber sanctuaries faintly lit by torches; these paintings, it

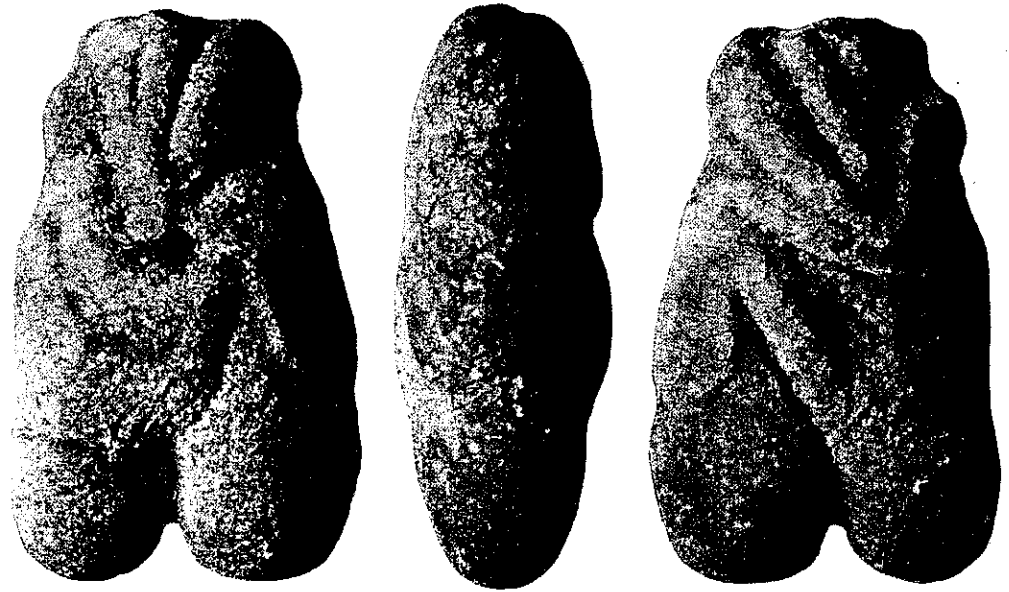
Two reliefs by two different scholars (Bétirac and Vergnes).



9. I am unable within the limits of this book to make any clearer the primary, decisive character of work.

is true, were supposed to bring about magically the death of the beasts and the birds they represented. But their fascinating animal beauty, forgotten for thousands of years, still has a primal meaning, one of seduction and passion, of wondrous *play*, of breathtaking play, behind which lies the desire for success.

These cave sanctuaries are, essentially, arenas of play. In these caves, pride of place is given to the hunt, by reason of the magical value of the paintings, and perhaps also the beauty of the figurines: the more beautiful they were, the greater their effect. But in the charged atmosphere of these caves it was seduction, the profound seduction of play that was no doubt preeminent, and it is in this sense that there are grounds for interpreting the association of the animal figures of the hunt with the human erotic figures. Such an association is certainly not in any way prejudicial. It would make more sense to invoke chance. But it is certain that these somber caves were actually consecrated above all else to what is, at bottom, play—play as opposed to work, play whose essence is above all to obey seduction, to respond to *passion*. Now passion, introduced, it seems, wherever human figures appeared, painted or drawn on the walls of prehistoric caves, is eroticism. The dead man in the Lascaux pit aside, many of these figures are masculine and have an erect penis. There is even a female figure who is quite obviously expressing desire. Finally, the image at Laussel of a couple sheltered under the rocks openly represents sexual union. The freedom of these early times has something of a paradisiac nature. It is probable that these rudimentary civilizations, which were however most vigorous in their simplicity, knew nothing of war. The civilization of the Eskimos today, who were themselves ignorant of war before the white man arrived, has none of its essential vir-



ties. It does not have the supreme virtue of the dawn of humanity. But the climate of prehistoric Dordogne was similar to that of the arctic regions where the Eskimos live today. And the Eskimos' sense of festivity was no doubt not foreign to those who were our distant ancestors. In response to some ministers who wanted to oppose their sexual freedom, the Eskimos said that up until then they had lived freely and gaily in a manner similar to the birds that sing. The cold, no doubt, is less of a hindrance to erotic games than we, with our present comforts, might imagine. The Eskimos give proof of this. Likewise, on the high plateaus of Tibet, known for a polar climate, the inhabitants are devoted to these games.

There is perhaps a paradisiac aspect to early eroti-

"Erotic statue from the desert of Judea" (found at Mar Khareistoun). End of Paleolithic era.

Cf. René Neuville: *Anthropologie*, vol. XLIII, 1933, pp. 558-60.

cism, naive traces of which we still find in caves. But this aspect is not clear, for its childlike naiveté was already beset by a certain heaviness.

Tragic . . . And without the slightest doubt.

At the same time, from the outset, comic.

Because eroticism and death are linked.

And because, at the same time, laughter and death, and laughter and eroticism, and linked. . . .

We have already seen eroticism linked to death in the depths of the Lascaux cave.

There is in that place some strange revelation, a fundamental revelation. But such that we surely cannot be surprised by the silence—by the uncomprehending silence which only so meaningful a mystery can harbor.

The image is all the more strange in that this dead figure with his sex erect has a bird's head, an animal's head which is so childish that perhaps, obscurely, tentatively, a laughable aspect emerges.

The proximity of a bison, a dying monster losing its entrails, a kind of minotaur which, it appears, this ithyphallic dead man has killed—there is probably no other image in the world so laden with comic horror; nor, moreover, so unintelligible.

We have here a desperate enigma, laughable in its cruelty, posed at the dawn of time. It is not really a question of solving this enigma. But however true it is that we lack the means to solve it, we cannot just turn away from it; it invites us at least to dwell in its depths.

Being the first enigma posed by humans, it asks us to descend to the bottom of the abyss opened in us by eroticism and death.

No one suspected the origin of animal images would be glimpsed by chance in some subterranean gallery. For millennia, prehistoric caves and their paintings had in some way disappeared: an absolute silence was becoming eternal. Even at the end of the

last century, no one would have guessed the astounding ancientness of those paintings that chance had uncovered. It was only at the beginning of the present century that the authority of a great scholar, the Abbé Breuil, confirmed the authenticity of the works of these early men, the first who were truly our fellow creatures but who are separated from us by the immensity of time.

The light has dawned on us today, without there remaining the shadow of a doubt. A ceaseless stream of visitors now animates these caves that have emerged little by little, one after the other, from an infinite night. They are drawn toward one cave in particular, the Lascaux cave, the most beautiful, the richest.

Of all of them, it is this one that remains partially mysterious.

In the deepest crevice of this cave, the deepest and also the most inaccessible (today, however, a vertical iron ladder allows access to a small number of people at a time, so that most of the visitors do not know about it, or at best know it through photographic reproductions), at the bottom of a crevice so awkward to get to that it now goes under the name of the "pit," we find ourselves before the most striking and the most strange of evocations.

A man, dead as far as one can tell, is stretched out, prostrate in front of a heavy, immobile, threatening animal. This animal is a bison, and the threat it poses is all the more grave because it is dying: it is wounded, and under its open belly its entrails are spilling out. Apparently it is this outstretched man who struck down the dying animal with his spear. But the man is not quite a man; his head, a bird's head, ends in a beak. Nothing in this whole image justifies the paradoxical fact that the man's sex is erect.

Because of this, the scene has an erotic character; this is obvious, clearly emphasized, but it is inexplicable.

Thus, in this barely accessible crevice stands revealed—but obscurely—a drama forgotten for so many millennia: it re-emerges, but it does not leave behind its obscurity. It is revealed, but nevertheless it is veiled.

From the very moment it is revealed, it is veiled.

But in these closed depths a paradoxical accord is signed, an accord all the more grave in that it is signed in this inaccessible obscurity. This essential and paradoxical accord is between death and eroticism.

Its truth no doubt continues to assert itself. However, no matter how it asserts itself, it still remains hidden. Such is the nature of both death and eroticism. The one and the other in fact conceal themselves: they conceal themselves at the very moment they reveal themselves.

We cannot imagine a more obscure contradiction nor one better contrived to guarantee disorder in our thinking.

Can we, moreover, imagine a place more conducive to this disorder—the lost depths of this cave, which must never have been inhabited, which must even have been abandoned in the earliest times of human life.¹⁰ (We also know that in the era when our forefathers wandered to this pit in the depths, wanting at all costs to get down into it, they had to lower themselves by the use of ropes.¹¹)

“The enigma of the pit” is certainly one of the most difficult to bear; at the same time, it is the most tragic one among the enigmas of our species. That it

10. About 15,000 years before our era.

11. A piece of rope has even been found in the cave at Lascaux.

arises from such a very distant past explains the fact that it is posed in terms whose excessive obscurity is at first sight striking. But it is an impenetrable obscurity that has the elementary virtue of an enigma. If we allow this paradoxical principle, then this enigma of the pit (which so strangely and so perfectly corresponds to the fundamental enigma, being the most distant one that a distant humanity poses for humanity today, being the most obscure in its essence), this enigma, then, might also be the one most laden with meaning.

Is it not heavy with that initial mystery, which is in itself the coming into the world, the advent, of man? Does it not at the same time link this mystery to eroticism and death?

The truth is that it is futile to introduce an enigma at once so essential, and yet posed in the most violent form, independently of a well-known context, a context that, however, remains in essence veiled by reason of the very structure of human beings.

It remains veiled to the extent that the human mind hides from itself.

Veiled, in the face of oppositions that vertiginously disclose themselves, in these nearly inaccessible depths which are, for me, “the extremities of the possible.”

Such oppositions would be, in particular:

The indignity of the ape, which does not laugh . . .

The dignity of man, who can however “split his sides” laughing . . .

The complicity of the tragic—which is the basis of death—with sensual pleasure and laughter . . .

The intimate opposition between the upright posture—and the anal orifice—linked to squatting . . .