

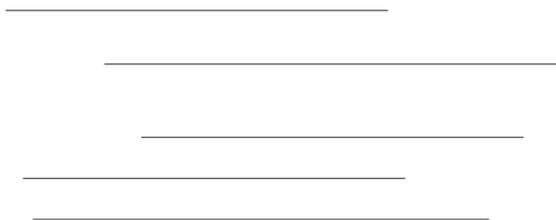
# *In a Trance: On Paleo Art*



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Jeffrey Skoblow

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for mary and hana  
*always*

for john h.  
*from the beginning*

for richard  
*even earlier*



The subject of the caves is problematic, of course, for reasons having to do with the caves themselves, as well as with the way in which the ground has previously been covered in over a century of scholarly and non-scholarly studies, treatments of various aspects of the caves themselves or of the human activity that left traces in them, including photographs and drawings of those traces and of the caves themselves. It is problematic as well for reasons having to do with the nature of representation and, no doubt, the mysteries of sentient experience. There is also the problem of expectations and intent: to whom does one speak about the caves, and for what purpose?

Before I go on perhaps I should say a word about my instruments. I write with the metal nib of a simple cartridge pen, a continuous flow of ink whenever I touch it to the page. I breathe any which way. A calligrapher's breath would be controlled by the strokes of the brush, held while the mark is made, then released while the brush is re-inked, writing and breathing, breathing and writing. Perhaps this would more closely approximate the breathing of the first artists at

work in the caves, or perhaps not. In many of the caves there are hand stencils on the rock walls and projections, which appear to have been made by placing the left hand, usually, against the rock, and blowing pigment through a bone tube, or directly from the mouth, through puckered lips, making a spray—the technique and its effect have been duplicated, each hand requiring half an hour for its stencil nimbus—in some caves, dozens of such hands together in one place, the same hand over and over sometimes, often with fingers missing, apparently, or bent, perhaps in some coded way. But their breath is otherwise unrecoverable, and this is of course a first theme.

I have books, learned and otherwise, in four languages, with pictures, illuminating and otherwise, and charts etc. I have specific, patchy, incoherent, vivid and fading memories of visits I made last year to six sites—the caves of Niaux, Bèdeilhac, La Vache, El Castillo, Las Monedas, and the shelter of El Cogul, plus the Neocueva at Altamira, a facsimile—and six years ago to three caves—Rouffignac, Font-de-Gaume, Barabahu—plus Lascaux II, another replica; and I have a photo of myself (though barely a memory)

fourteen years ago standing outside, or above, the hill of Altamira, holding a postcard of the cave ceiling up for the camera. I have a porch. I have time. The people in those caves—what their conception or experience of time was, I can hardly guess. They had fingers: they scraped the tips of them along the walls in places where the clay was soft, leaving meandering grooves in long, noodly lines, one fingertip or several at a time; and there are designs made in the same manner, arrows and other graphic forms, and drawings, such as the schematic bovine head at Altamira. They had torches which left smudge marks on the walls still visible after 30,000 years, and small lamps like shallow stone spoons, which have been found in considerable numbers—and duplicated and tested, with juniper wicks feeding on animal fat: they cast a smooth, steady glow on the walls, more illuminating than one might expect. They had scaffolds to get themselves up to good surfaces they couldn't reach from the floor: in Lascaux there are scaffolding holes packed round with compressed clay six feet off the ground, and traces of woody matter, where the high ceilings were glorified. (In other places they shimmied up cracks in the wall,

or climbed down shafts, or crawled or squirmed through unsuspected low apertures.) They had rope, of which a fossil imprint remains. They had flint shaped to various cutting and scraping ends, incisors and burins, fur paint sponges, brushes of horse-hair, pouches of ground pigments (mixed and bound, it was once thought, with urine) . . . a wide range of systematic behaviors. They had help from each other, plans and notions. They were doing something they understood, but what that was, nobody knows.

Methods of dating are also problematic. These methods pertain both to the manifestations of human activity in the caves—paintings, engravings and other markings, handprints, footprints, fires—and to various features of the caves themselves, their formation and development. Most painted images and markings, and all engravings on stone and other traces, like finger doodles in wet clay, are impossible to date directly, but only, occasionally, in relation to the stratigraphy in which they are embedded—like an engraved plaquette fallen from a cave wall or ceiling, found face-down in the soil under other

layers of soil, datable by other means. Sometimes the relation is drawn on the basis, never entirely convincing, of stylistic affinities: an image of a woman or bison etched into or out of a rock wall might resemble an image found in the same cave, etched on a deer's rib bone, or a piece of ivory, laid down in the sediment. The bone itself, or ivory, or antler—organic materials—can be dated directly, as can the game bones that remain unconsumed in the sediment, or paintings, even high on the ceilings, if their pigment contains charcoal, that is, carbon. Carbon-14, an isotope of organic carbon, decays at a predictable rate, apparently, beginning with death and lasting, measurably, about 40,000 years; the measurement of this decay is called radiocarbon dating, of which Accelerator Mass Spectrometry is currently the most advanced form, providing what experts assure us are reasonably reliable dates for organic materials at this distance from their death, give or take a few hundred years sometimes. At least one age thus obtained for a perforated fox tooth at Kostenki has been revised on the basis of thermoluminescence analysis of volcanic ash overlaying it, from 32,000 to 37,000 years, which is approaching the outer limit of our time frame when we speak of the caves.

There are also tests involving a uranium isotope by which dates are determined for the calcite accretions that cover certain pictures, from which one can then establish at least minimum ages for the images. Further tests, even more indirect, involve mineralogical analysis by infrared spectrometry, proton-induced X-ray emission, scanning electron microscopy, or thermoluminescence, among other methods, in conjunction with mineralogical and geological data gathered more broadly. The mind that gathers such facts, parallels, and distinctions, and that devises these tests and machines is the same mind that shaped flint blades, carved ivory beads to look like seashells, and painted in caves for something like 25,000 years, or longer. Or not the same mind, but the farthest mind we can imagine as our own, with the same mental habits of analysis and projection that lead to all technical refinement and cultural development. A mind shaped by culture.

Human layers of sediment are given names on the basis of developments in stone tool manufacture: Aurignacian, Gravettian, Solutrean, Magdalenian, with finer distinctions

upon request. These names belong to Franco-Cantabrian variations of cultural developments in stone technology, parallels to which occur elsewhere, named otherwise, over the course of what is generally commonly called the Upper Paleolithic. (Terminology can be a problem too.) Earlier stone cultures had led the genus Homo out of Africa close to two million years before, north and then west, and east, where yet further species types and cultural tool kits developed—from Erectus, Ergaster, Antecessor, Heidelbergensis, and Neanderthal, in Europe—culminating, in Europe, in the Mousterian, the final stone technology system to develop in this line, as sometime around a million years later, closer to 200,000 years ago if not a bit earlier, a second wave of Homo emerges in the horn of Africa (or South Africa, if earlier), Sapiens Sapiens this time, and comes to Europe around 50,000 years ago, whose culture, the Aurignacian, swamps and supplants the Neanderthal Mousterian over the course of 10,000 years, and drives them and it to extinction. . . . This is the story as reconstructed. The Aurignacian is the culture of the first imperial Sapiens, what we found ourselves carrying, so to

speak, when we found ourselves the only hominid left standing. The moment lasts 12,000 years and, seen from this far star, looks like an unprecedented explosion of a certain kind of representational activity carried out on cave walls and in portable forms, in or on stone, bone, or ivory. But of course any such explosion has a long preparation.

Further specific modulations and innovations in stone technology are identified as Gravettian, the first culture of *Sapiens solo*, a development of which, the Solutrean culture, appears some six or seven thousand years later in certain places. The perforated needle appears in the Solutrean, which lasts another four or five thousand years itself, before we find the Magdalenian beginning around 18,000 years ago, yet further developments in lithic craft and it seems yet a further explosion of representational activity in the decoration of the deep caves, coinciding in its onset with a period of relative warmth, a slight northward retreat of the glacial climates that prevailed at those latitudes for what must have seemed forever, for some thousands of years more. The Magdalenian, and with it the Paleolithic, and the Ice Age, are considered to have ended around 11,000 years

ago—there will be more, below, on what follows from that point.

In any case, and although evidently we did not lack the cognitive capacity for it, there is little trace of any suggestion that Sapiens knew much of art for the first 150,000 years or so—there is evidence of burial, and symbolic practices involving ochre going back deep into Homo, and a presumption of language, that most complex system of symbolic representation; there is also a stone tool industry that involves refinements of aesthetic attention to shape and symmetries of all kinds; there is music (bone flutes have been found) and presumably dance, beads, we know, necklaces and one must imagine decorated clothing; and all this is a great deal, but not art in the sense of images or abstractions drawn or painted or incised, for all that time—and then somewhere around 35,000 years ago those images and abstractions begin to appear everywhere, in fact ultimately wherever Sapiens goes (Africa, Asia, Europe, Australia, eventually the Americas) but perhaps first and most spectacularly in Europe (where, too, the caves and climate and politics have been conducive to preservation). Some

suggest that Sapiens art was in part a response to the 10,000-year encounter with Neanderthals, a way perhaps to help distinguish ourselves from them, who seem to have had little to no interest in symbolic representation themselves; but Sapiens seems to develop art everywhere at roughly the same time, whether Neanderthals are present in the habitat or not. That second wave of Sapiens came north and out of Africa—and remained in Africa, too—and some turned left and some turned right, east and north, east and south, north and west, several branches of us somehow developing similar toolkits and symbolic practices along roughly similar lines and timelines all over the world, with normal delays—the Americas aren't reached till later, near the end of the Paleolithic, the toolkit developing with different variations in the Americas from that point, as in Australia, Asia, Europe, Africa—but essentially the same sorts of development everywhere we went: not only in stone industry but in funeral practices, for instance, or bead making, the discovery of the needle, or handprint stencils on the wall. We can date the 'event' in Europe by Grotte Chauvet, some 32,000 years ago, its

walls fantastically covered with visions of horses, mammoths, lions, rhinoceros—and put the close of this longer moment more than 20,000 years later, at, for instance, Rouffignac, some 13,000, or Las Monedas, over 11,000 years ago. (There is no way to be sure how much has been irrevocably lost or how much is yet to be discovered.)

The caves therefore are only a specific form of expression given to or claimed by our kind back then, among the oldest, most studied, mysterious, and spectacular, but of the same cultural spirit, it seems, as graphic manifestations engraved or pecked on shelter walls or open-air boulders in landscapes without caves elsewhere in the world, or on sculpted ivory figurines, for instance, of equivalent antiquity. The cultures of the caves, the people who painted in them for over 20,000 years, more like 35,000 if we measure by the figurines and faux-tooth ivory necklaces instead of by the caves that have to date been discovered, seem to bear some broad relation to cultures further east where no such caves exist, like Dolní Věstonice, Brno, Vogelherd or Willendorf, as far as Sungir, just west of the Urals, and Malt'a, in Siberia. Hand-sized female statuettes extend from Malt'a all the

way west to the Atlantic coast, although none have been found south of the Pyrenees, and many other features of stone-bone-and-ivory work speak to, in some sense, a common stock across this wide range. Remains found at Willendorf in Central Europe bear relations to work on the Atlantic as well as to Kostenki and Avdeevo, on the Russian Plain, while Kostenki more closely resembles Avdeevo, which is otherwise rather unlike Willendorf in matters such as shouldered points and knife edges, development of bone industry, or specific modes of decoration. In Avdeevo there are more than a dozen figurines, mostly female, one or two with faces, that have been found preserved in pits dug around the hearths and living spaces of the settlement some 22,000 years ago, sculpted in ivory or stone, adorations of flesh and the amplitude of flesh. Nobody knows with what rituals or specific beliefs these figures were associated. There are ribs and other bones smoothed by use at one end, or sharpened to a point, with their handle-ends sometimes elaborately carved or sculpted in seemingly figurative as well as non-figurative ways, schematic female images, perhaps, or zoomorphic

forms, among the zigzags and cross-hatchings and perforations. There are mammoth figurines of mammoth bone and sandstone, an ivory horse, ‘needle cases’ made of bird bones, toothed objects, objects in ivory or stone resembling champagne corks or mushrooms with pointy stems, ‘hatted points’ and ‘diadems,’ bracelets, an ivory spoon, a long branch of reindeer antler carved to resemble a jaw bone, or a flower, or a phallus. There is a necklace of perforated arctic fox teeth, and several wolf canines with incisions made upon them. At Kostenki there are, to quote Gvozdover, “egg-shaped objects, a ‘rectifier,’ an ivory pendant shaped like a miniature deer tooth, an engraving with a picture of a woman, pebble-pendants, a series of so-called medallions with a female sign (13 pieces), and miniature figurines of different animals (except for mammoth and horse)” among objects not found at Avdevo, along with many objects found at both sites. But the caves are only found further west, and add an element of spectacle and an opportunity for immersion—a hook and a pull—that evoke a fuller and more immediate, perhaps more deeply helpless response.

Finally, the age of the caves themselves shapes the story of what humans have done in them for thousands of years if only by providing a further sense of scale, in that the caves themselves are very much older still, spaces to which human presence comes very late and with a powerful sense of entering another world beyond our own time, somehow obscurely underlying the world we live in day and night normally. These are the spaces in which the paintings and markings are seen, and from which they are inseparable. At Rouffignac the cave is long and regularly shaped, with even, rounded dimensions, in my memory, a tube through the rock. It reaches down a long way at a gentle angle and then turns sharply to the right and goes a long way at the same steady slope, then branches into two more irregular, widening and narrowing galleries before trickling off into tight crevices and small chambers below and beyond. Water running over millions of years, and millions of years gone, carried rock down into fine grains and jumbles clogging the ends, and out of sight, I imagine it a river for the round regular breadth of the passage, the flow of the walls as I remember them, though the process is more likely to have

been “longue et insidieuse,” in Plassard’s words, “essentielement chimique, . . . une dissolution des matières carbonatées [dans] la roche.” The rock itself, exposed now as the walls and ceiling and floor of the cave, is said to have been laid down in the Cretaceous Period, some eighty million years ago, when the place was under a sea which, some fifteen million years later, had withdrawn under the force of tectonic and climatic changes. The water that hollowed the rock is said to have begun flowing around sixty-five million years ago, and to have flowed for sixty million or more—there is water still in some of the more inaccessible reaches of the lower chambers and passages. Thousands upon thousands of generations of cave bears, over dozens of thousands of millennia, had found the space open and habitable to them, apparently three distinct species of them, all gone for thousands of years yet more before humans first came upon the place thirteen thousand years ago. The bears left what look like small, smooth craters, some near a meter deep and several meters wide, along a whole stretch just off the main channel, what the scientists call nests, produced by all those millennial generations of bears turning

circles before bedding down to sleep through deep long winters, and they left claw marks on the walls, 'griffades d'ours' in the once soft clay about the level of a tall man's head or a little higher. In some places the lines made by humans cross these griffades d'ours, which resemble one of the basic hash-mark patterns of the human engravings, naturally enough, which can easily make the bears appear to be one type of inspiration among others for those who decorated the cave. By the time of Rouffignac people had been gouging and painting cave walls for over 20,000 years, and must have had many and complex sources of inspiration.

The maps supplied by the Plassards confirm my memory of the structure of the grotte de Rouffignac, but raise questions too, as do the photos of "le train électrique." At Rouffignac you board a little train that sits on thin tracks and makes a quiet noise as it rides along. There's a little engine at the back, in the picture, with a light on a pole, which I remember, as well as two or three cars with a step or two up to wooden benches upholstered in some rough way, and painted iron bars, like a kiddy ride at an amusement park with room for twenty-five or thirty. I don't remember if

the driver sat at the rear of the train always, or only one way, down or back, or how the train turned around, if it did, for the return. (It is possible that we backed up into some passage of the Galerie Breuil and/or possibly after stopping under the Gran Plafond. One of the maps suggests as much, though it remains inconclusive.) I expect that as a rule the driver of “ce petit vehicule” rode at the rear, with only the possible momentary exception of a three-point turn, to prevent visitors from sneaking off for some reason and perhaps, inadvertently or not, doing damage to what remains. Certainly an iron gate or door is locked behind both entering and leaving any of the known caves. I remember facing forward, with the engine behind, as we descended into the cave, and I remember facing forward on our way back out as well, but the clearer of the two photos I have shows passengers sitting ‘backwards,’ facing the engine, looking over their shoulder at the frieze of three rhinoceros located near the main crossroads of the cave, from which direction the train had come and in which it would go remaining unclear. It is not possible, either, to judge the relative slope of the cavern from these or any other photos. The map however

suggests something which may be at odds with this memory of going down and down, something more confusing. The map is a picture among other things of the insidious, chemical flow of the water that hollowed this space, and shows clearly the spot where a “large fissure verticale” let the water in, and the “sens d’écoulement” of the water spreading out in radial fans from that point, two main forks from the point of entry, and further divisions and tangent diagonals branching off further on. . . . I assume water to proceed generally downward, although I know this is not always necessarily so simply the case, and I know too, as I am told, that some shifting in the stratigraphy and in its drainage has taken place. I would expect that all passages following from the sens d’écoulement of the water would slope down from that central point, like a hand with its fingers spread, pointing down, but this is clearly not the case if the little train rides downhill all the way in and uphill all the way out, since the train begins at the tip of the little finger, say, and travels to the tip of the thumb and back.

The map also shows areas of the cave where the track does not reach, and where nobody goes

now except a very few, carefully selected people, scientists, photographers, and where works of great beauty remain: the entire branching formation of the Galerie du Plafond aux Serpentes and the Salon Rouge, as well as the further reaches of both Galerie Breuil and the chamber beyond the Grand Plafond. Rouffignac has four images of human heads, very rare, and none of these is seen on the tour although some are in crevices off the central chamber of the Grand Plafond. One of these is called the Great Being, a human profile facing left, drawn in black near life-size, a bison above and a bison below it also in black but not to scale, among other bison and mammoths, six of each, and a horse. The bison below the human head is horizontal and stationary, the one above drawn vertically, its fore-hooves spread ramping, its head taut, its back and hindquarters not shown. The Great Being may resemble a kind of thought emerging from the head of the bison grazing at rest, below, and giving rise to the bison above it, with its different step, a different fire in its eye. Other caves have suggestive juxtapositions and seemingly transformational relations between humans and bison, in particular, although more

often these have to do with female bodies, as at Pech Merle, rather than heads. The Great Being would appear to be an androgynous figure, or rather, an ungendered figure almost mistakable for a skull, all the matter of a few deft lines: a slightly crumpled egg-shaped braincase with no representation of hair or other individualizing features, an overlarge eye and a blunt nose, a mouth curving in a long slow grin, maybe, of stupefaction or benediction, benign and spooky all at once. The gaze is forward and inward at once. This Being, with the mammoths and bison and horse around it, is to be found in a deep well at the edge of the Grand Plafond, dozens of meters down and difficult of access. There is a similar well called the Shaft at Lascaux with an enigmatic human figure drawn top to toe, with a bird-head beak and a phallus, in relation to an apparently wounded bison done with quite shocking verisimilitude and expressive freedom, as well as what looks like a kind of staff with a schematic bird at the top, seeming to match the head of the man with his extremities outstretched, and a little further away, a partial, vigorous rhinoceros, just a leg and the line of a back and a horn, alongside some

abstract markings, black dots in two neat rows, and a small horsehead on the facing wall, which may be different stories in themselves. This scene in the Shaft at Lascaux may be one of the holiest sites of the Paleolithic, that is to say, for us now. Its floor was layered with stone lamps turned face-down. At Rouffignac with one exception the head alone is figured when the figure is human. In one of the three photos I have of the Great Being, lit somewhat differently, a formation of rock seems to take the shape of its nose, more prominent but in the right position and of reasonable proportions, and the other, drawn nose takes the form of a squiggle mouth. The long line that had been the mouth becomes a jaw, and the jawline an indication of the neck.

The second and third heads at Rouffignac appear together at the end of one of the far reaches of the Galerie Breuil, just at the point beyond which the people of the Magdalenian seem not to have penetrated. They are referred to in the literature as Adam and Eve although no gender markings are evident. Both again are heads in profile, facing each other, both more fully grotesque or schematic, more cartoonish doodle,

than the Great Being, and both etched rather than painted, simple outlines, transfigured in some scene of weird mirth. The head on the left is bigger, over two feet tall, with a crumpled egg dome like the Great Being but facing the other way, with a comically elongated and sharply retroussé nose, a blank mouth open in a permanent grin, a chinless flap of a jaw like a puppet, and one big eye shaped like a broken kidney. The smaller head faces this eye as an infant may be held to face a parent, but with no eye itself. It has a more smoothly rounded dome, in fact a “visage tout en rondeur,” a somewhat less grotesque but still absurd nose, and a similarly empty mouth appearing a bit less rapacious, perhaps, than the other. They seem to be laughing and nodding together or in a shared dream of their mouths working, just heads with mouths and noses. In the photo of the Great Being in which its nose is seen to be figured in rock, not drawn but a facet of the rock wall catching the light, that nose resembles these noses, more burlesque riff than design, pliant appendages to go with the empty receptacles of the mouths of Adam and Eve. Human digital scratchmarks resembling griffades d’ours cross in horizontal bands of two

or three below the seeming scene, crossing the lines of the larger head itself in some places, most noticeably at what would appear to be its sinuous horizontal throat, and just touching the base of a line of the smaller head, at what would appear to be the back of a disproportionately long neck.

The fourth head I've only heard described. It is to be found in another far branch of the Galerie Breuil, not at but near the end of the explored area, like Adam and Eve and the Great Being on the verge of a darkness apparently never entered. A third far branch of the Galerie Breuil ends with a frieze of tectiform shapes, like an arrow pointing upward from a base, another unusual configuration at the limit of Magdalenian discovery, which Rouffignac shares with several nearby caves: Font-de-Gaume, Les Combarelles, Bernifal. In the case of the fourth anthropomorph, as Plassard calls it, what lies beyond, before darkness, is only an especially spare mammoth, a black line from the top of the trunk over the dome of the head and the hump and slope of the back, with a dash of an eye and a flap of an ear, one of the figures farthest from the exterior world. The human head is apparently hardly elaborated at all, marked only by a deep

mouth and a treatment of the back of the skull that don't permit identifying the engraved figure as any other kind of animal. This head, alone among the four, belongs to a body with extremities, which is however even more fully schematized, a body and extremities otherwise fully without detail, appearing to be crawling, or creeping, from a small hollow, or what in translation might be characterized as a chasm or abyss, in the wall. In what direction is not indicated in the text. The mammoth beyond faces left.

Thus end the three main branches at the end of the central passageway of the Galerie Breuil. The ends of the other main passageways are also unseen by riders on the little train at Rouffignac. Beyond the Grand Plafond at the point where the cave branches further is a figure known as the Pharaoh, which is generally grouped among the bison but which bears distinct humanoid elements in its face. An engraved profile facing right of a blunt bison face from the stylized hump rising behind the forehead, with two curving horns done in good perspective, down the slope of the nose and chin, to a prominent beard jutting forward. A similar beard can be found on an exquisite

bison drawn in black near the center of the Grand Plafond, but there the presence of forelegs and the less ambiguous indication of a back, behind the hump, make clear the nature of the animal in spite of its seemingly human eyebrow and expressive mouth. With the Pharaoh no legs are indicated, and the line made with a single finger moving back from the chin-beard recedes quickly as if the line of a sinuous thrusting horizontal throat, more elongated than on the bearded bison of the Grand Plafond, more like the throat of the large laughing head in the Galerie Breuil. And with the Pharaoh the line of the back crosses some other digital doodles, three fingers together in a meandering pattern, or two fingers, and a single such line crosses the entire figure at the forehead, between the horns. Apparently these doodles precede the Pharaoh, although at one point of crossing at least the evidence is ambiguous, whereas the doodles around the laughing head seem to have come after the head itself. The eye of the Pharaoh can appear to be oriented frontally, which has a particularly transforming effect. Further mammoths, a tiny bison, and what might be a saiga antelope lie beyond.

Another head, which Plassard classifies among the indeterminables, appears to lie right along the track of the train in the main channel where two blind galleries branch off and back, not far from the cave entrance, but I have no memory of having seen it. Plassard gives no photo but a line sketch, which suggests that the original may be less visible than other engraved figures. He calls it the bearded head, *la tête barbue*, and notes its resemblance both to human and to beast in a frontal view, the eyes well centered and close to the nose, evoking the Sorcerer of the *grotte des Trois Frères*, or the strangely upright horned figure of *Gabillou*. It has upright ears of unequal sizes and two upright horns, not of a bison. The humanoid figures of Rouffignac are like humanoid figures generally over these twenty thousand years, often in states of transformation or possibly transformative association with bison in particular, and always sketched or etched with a crudeness of design never seen in the animal images. *La tête barbue* is situated between two *gravures des mammoths*, suggesting the figuration of one bison among mammoths seen elsewhere at Rouffignac, as in the passage beyond the Pharaoh. It is not clear and

would seem impossible to determine if any of these images, especially the fourth anthropomorph for instance, represents a finished product of a foreseen end, or an unfinished product, or not a question of finish at all, rather the trace of a process in which it is subsumed. Nor is it clear why the anthropomorphic figures so systematically lack the kind of precision and nuance of the animal figures, nor what any of it precisely means.

The young man at Rouffignac who was our guide and drove the engine, wore a nondescript green parka and talked more or less continuously all the way down and, as I recall it, most of the way back up, explaining features of the cave, stopping to point out curiosities and reveal spectacles. He may have been one of the Plassards himself. His voice was quiet and vibrant and I understood almost everything he said even if I can't reproduce but the tiniest bit of it, from the very end. I remember him getting off the train from time to time and walking toward the wall explaining something to us while we watched, I remember him at one point turning off the light to show us what the utter darkness of the cave was like, and sitting in silence for a moment which was not very long but deep.

We saw the famous friezes, I remember people gasping as we pulled into view of the rhinos and mammoths, I had never seen them even in photos or heard them described, they would appear and the train would stop and the light be shined upon them. He showed us the three rhinoceros trotting left to right heading back the way we'd come, drawn in black silhouette on a band of creamy stone that seems to float above another band, very white, on the wall, with modern graffiti of the last two centuries or so blackening the ceiling just above, and nineteenth-century names scratched into the backs of two of the rhinos. He had us turn our heads to see the witty horse's head peering from above and behind them, drawn in black profile on an ochre outcropping of silex, not visible normally until one is on the way back out: this creature too has a very human eye directed forward, and a nose and mouth resembling a teddy bear. Plassard specifically says that this image is not shown on the tour, but this statement may be out of date. Our guide showed us too the ten mammoths facing one another just a little further on along the same wall as if a panel made for viewing, drawn in black with tusks and trunks,

broad creamy backs seeming to rise from a white fog. Some of them overlap, and the two that meet from left and right almost seem to merge into a single creature or other being. The overall effect is peaceful in the extreme. There was something else our guide pointed out in the Galerie Breuil on the opposite wall, at least I seem to recall so though I don't remember what, and the map shows nothing clearly. We must have been shown the Mammoths of the Discovery, as they are called, because they were the first ones seen in 1956, an engraved pair facing one another, and the two pairs a little further on, facing one another over a fifth in the middle, a fragmentary frontal view of diminished size on the way to the Grand Plafond, although I have no memory of having seen them. He showed us the great swirling dream of the Grand Plafond. I remember as if in a dream getting off the little train and walking about a bit under the great round panel spun with creatures in a crescent moon scattered across it. I remember the ceiling being white, although Plassard's photos show something even lovelier, a richly mottled creamy tan, against which the black line drawings of mammoths, horses, bison, rhinos, and ibex required us to walk

around in circles and backwards with our heads back, looking up and spinning to keep the images straight, to see them in their orientations as they crisscrossed and overlapped and spread across in their rough arc. All are filled with calm, even the ibex running with legs at full stretch, many with eyes that look back at you. Our guide answered questions and by way of wrapping up on the way back, he said, as I understood him, that “of the people who made these things we know nothing but one thing: they are us”—or he may have said “we are them” which, if not exactly the same, amounts to the same thing: what could only be called human. Whatever that means, this was it.

What we know and what we don't know are continuing themes. The photo on the cover of the Plassards' book shows an image which I believe is not one I saw from the train, though it returns me to the cave with something almost like immediacy: deux mammoths face à face, just the heads, cropped for the photo. If you didn't know what you were looking at you would still recognize it as the mark of a human hand: black lines as if of charcoal on a white field, a perfect

symmetry of design. But the symmetry itself, cropped so, might well look abstract: a pointed V with its tops curving up and down and curling at the ends, with scattered mirror image marks to either side—or a stylized goat’s head with its horns above, and eyes on the outside of its face, and sweeping mustaches. Two white blurs, calcite accretions, one quite thick, almost opaque, on the left, a wispiest one in the middle, filling the space between the figures, partially obscure the lines. As Plassard says, “le terme d’affrontement est généralement utilisé alors que l’attitude des deux animaux ne fait apparaître aucune agressivité.” The eye of the one regards the eye of the other regarding it, the great tusks of each one curving across the face of the other, and weirdly crossing their own faces, and the trunks, as if tenderly, cross at the bottom, or rather stop where they cross, as the lower parts of the animals have disappeared or never existed.

Of Font-de-Gaume I have virtually no information. Reservations were required and easily obtained when I went six years ago although I understand now that access to the cave has been more severely restricted, for most normal

purposes quite fully prohibited, as in the case of Altamira and Lascaux, the two grand chapels of Paleolithic polychrome art. Font-de-Gaume too is a polychrome cavern, one of relatively few and the only one I've seen, and the images, as I remember them, are very faint indeed. Perhaps this is why so few photographs of Font-de-Gaume apparently exist. It seems that polychrome images are perhaps more susceptible to fading upon exposure, over time, to air and light and heat and microscopic flora brought in from outside. Once visitors begin appearing, often in continuous streams, after the rediscovery of the caves in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the humidity of the visitors' human breath helps bring on the 'white disease,' a precipitation of lime from the rock wall that obliterates and obscures pigment, and microflora riding in on the visitors' shoes bring on the 'green disease,' a florescence of new life that covers and eats the images. Both processes manifest themselves quickly and lead eventually to the virtual closing or near total restriction mentioned above, as well as controlled access to other caves, some of which have never been available at all for public viewing. Font-de-Gaume may be among

the last of the polychrome sites to have remained open in a more or less unrestricted way. Our guide was a woman a little older than me with a fairly clipped French manner, no nonsense, but with a warm regard, a kind of contained fervor in her presentation. I don't remember a word she said, only her manner of standing apart, wearing heels, improbably, and a fashion scarf around her neck, as she lives in my memory, pointing out tight passages and decorated surfaces as we made our way through the cave. Font-de-Gaume is the cave I saw where at the end of one branch of a gallery there is a low aperture that someone thousands of years ago crawled through, belly to the rock, back to the ground, leaving pictures in a chamber further beyond, discovered (again) by someone crawling back there more recently, though not accessible, obviously, to general view. In a passage of the cave closer to the entrance the walls are very close together and go up high, quite sheer, out of sight, and apparently there are images or decorations left up there as well. The cave as a whole assumes the form of a single long, narrow fissure, in my memory, sometimes a tight squeeze for the shoulders, and generally tall although

sometimes stooping the head. I don't remember how it was lit: in my memory, the space seems lit as by a skylight, which is thoroughly absurd.

I remember a brief climb on a trail and then the iron gate and the iron door in the side of the hill. I remember there were images. There was a bison or bison, more than one, painted eye-level on the wall, a stunning stylization of the beast in motion, in that reddish brown and black, but very faint, very faint, almost invisible in my memory, mostly, when it doesn't leap suddenly into crisp and perhaps imaginary definition, moving vigorously left or right. The one book that shows photographs of Font-de-Gaume shows a pair of exquisitely robust bison fully modeled in rich oxblood tones, bearing nothing in common with anything I remember seeing except the feeling of silent awe they provoke in me looking at them. The book also shows a horse and some monochrome bison and reindeer under calcite, and describes a crossroads and lateral passageway that are no part of my memory. I do remember one image or set of images, which is one of the most extraordinary in all of what remains of Paleolithic art, one of the very few instances in which images are depicted

in relation to one another as in a scene, part of a story in a language we can (even almost, not quite) read. This is of two reindeer, a creature much consumed by humans in the Magdalenian, though relatively infrequently depicted. One is facing the other, a female with diminutive antlers at rest with her legs folded under her, a male with his great curving rack of antlers arching back and then forward, unramified in one straight curve, standing up and leaning forward with his tongue extended, licking the forehead of the female. Bouchard has a photograph of a similar male etched on the wall of Les Combarelles, which I have not seen, just down the road on the edge of Les Eyzies, where the tongue is extended toward the edge of the rock face and a dense pool of black shadow, as if drinking from it. My description of the Font-de-Gaume pair pertains to a colored etching of “Rennes Polychrome—d’après la peinture pariétals,” no. 970058L in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes, where the male is on the left, though in my memory the creatures were depicted the other way around, and of course much less marked in every way, barely there at all, just a dim stain of pigment and some faintly etched

lines, and a moment of something like tenderness or at least tenderly observed. Aubarbier and Binet also mention “negative handprints, tectiform signs, a human figure etc.” among other figures at Font-de-Gaume, and “red points on the left hand wall . . . marking the start of the decorated area” as seen in more elaborate form at El Castillo.

Bara-Bahau is also a vague image in my mind and also poorly documented in the available literature. It is the first cave I saw, as I was driving along through Le Bugue, en route to Les Eyzies, and saw the sign on the road, turned, and found it. The guide was an older woman who seemed to have been waiting with a deeply ingrained patience, content whether anyone or none came, and who said that she was making her last visit that very day as guide in this cave she'd lived beside all her life, and had worked in for thirty-five years. One felt as if it were her cave, and she spoke of it with a kind of remorselessly calm, dry devotion, pointing out the tumbled architecture of its chambers. I remember almost nothing but her tone, a glimpse of a threshold beyond which we would not go, where the stone overhead had come down in a huge slab, and one etched image of a bear,

hardly visible until she held her little flashlight far to one side and turned it on, then startling, leaping forward and still, all at once, at repose, fixed in place. Throughout Bara-Bahau the ceiling is low, and the entire space or brief sequence of spaces is wide, and not otherwise clearly shaped. Aubarbier and Binet give the place two sentences, mentioning “large, deep engravings in a very rustic style of several animal and tectiform figures” made with “flint, stick or fingers” in the “soft, crumbly rock—Abbé Glory likened it to cottage cheese”—and the fact that these figures “are very hard to date but could be from the Lower Magdalenian, 17,000 BP,” that is, before the present. The word ‘rustic’ appears almost comical in this context. I have photographs by Bouchard of two images, a human hand which is hard to make out fully and an aurochs’ head with a sensitive snout very finely done, as well as an uncredited photograph of an etching of a bear, garishly retouched in a way that makes it difficult to read, on a pamphlet from the Grotte de Bara-Bahau which also shows the same aurochs head, and mentions three spaces, a shelter at the opening, an inner room and a sanctuary, and images of “horses, bison, aurochs, Cervidae,

bears, human hands and enigmatic signs,” not to mention “fine marine strata dating from the secondary era, [and] strange looking concretions.” When I was there there was also a young woman with a video camera taking the tour, shooting digitally enhanced pictures in the lowest of light, and a couple with a small child who fell asleep, being held in the dark, in the strange, thin air.

Enigmatic signs and strange-looking concretions. Negative handprints, griffades d’ours.

The sign by the side of the road.

Time has passed: seven years since I last picked up this paper hand-axe/mental object, thirteen years since I first saw Bara-Bahau, twenty-one years since I stood outside Altamira holding a postcard.

I’ve been to El Castillo a second time, and Tito Bustillo in Ribadesella. I’ve been back to Rouffignac too, and to Les Combarelles and little Bernifal in the Dordogne, and nearby Cougnac and vast Pech Merle. I’ve read so much that I’ve stopped reading. I’ve forgotten most of what I’ve seen. I treasure vague impressions.

It's not exactly an explanation I'm seeking, or even an understanding—I'm content not understanding, in fact I insist on not understanding—

The anatomically modern head of 30,000 years ago would have been as constantly busy with thoughts, dreams, daydreams, memories, and projections of various kinds as ours are (if perhaps less jumpy than our heads are), full of attention to matters that do not present themselves in the immediate sensory surround. This capacity for being elsewhere, two or more places at once, is perhaps fair to call an incapacity to be *only* one place at a time, except perhaps in states of arousal or extreme concentration, and perhaps trance is an exacerbation or overstimulation of this condition, or a shattering release from it. In any event the explosion of symbolic activity in the Aurignacian would seem to speak to this condition in which the sensory world finds itself transmogrified, splitting off in emanations of past and future, in imaginations of itself, and one is helpless to resist. (The symbolic itself depends on the concept of two places at once, the present meaning of something absent.) As the present

splits off from itself in a world of possibilities, one begins to notice resemblances of rock surfaces, edges, and protuberances, for instance, to the form and volume of various creatures, as one might imagine a face in the twisted pattern of bark on a tree (something that happens to me all the time), or the presence of something moving with intent in the momentary configuration of light and shadow out of the corner of one's eye. Many caves show such figures, although not all of the images obviously are suggested by natural formations of this kind, or even most of them, to our eyes now, as the unmistakable head of the big Spotted Horse at Pech Merle, the concavities and convexities of the aurochs at Lascaux, or the humps of various bison elsewhere, among others. That the people who came to the caves felt the rock closely with their hands and fingers, and that they looked at it closely, and beyond it, we know. They would seem to have been seeking a kind of contact beyond themselves and through themselves at once, a world in which they moved while moving through the world. This is true of all acts of representation. They would have seen something we don't see. They would have wanted to make what they see

visible. To make what they see visible is a kind of ouroboros, snake with its tail in its mouth.

—It's something more like a communion I'm after. Of flesh, not spirit—or spirit, if by spirit you also mean flesh.

As Professor Gamble tells it, the story of Sapiens is one of an ever-widening social bond: we are the type of Homo that (so far has) best figured out how to extend our effective interpersonal and intergroup networks beyond the reach of face to face grooming. Compared to Neanderthal individuals, Sapiens “individuals extended the spatial and social scene of their action and interaction,” he says. “This was aided by the use of material resources as social objects”—these could be tools, or objects of any kind, including art objects. “Symbolic objects were the key to change. The web of networks was enlarged.” In other words, we learned how to be two places at once: with you even when I'm not with you. “The transition . . . is socially, technically and culturally the separation of the gesture from the body.” “This was achieved through the use of symbolic

resources and went beyond the limitations set by co-presence. Such system integration which . . . resulted in the extension of society, occurred selectively prior to 33 Kyr bp”—smack dab in the Aurignacian.

Among other things, seashells traveled in human hands from the Mediterranean to the Rhine at distances of 700 kilometers. And networks came to include the dead as well.

We understood, better than others before us, how to invest things with meaning. (We created fictions.) We understood things to be symbolic—to mean other things.

Bédeilhac I'd never even heard of. We were heading to Niaux and stumbled on Bédeilhac and La Vache. Our guide at Bédeilhac was a small woman with a warm, ironic manner, who spoke perfect English. At one point she was squatting and pointing to something etched on the floor—we were squatting looking at it, listening to her—and she looked up and saw another group being led through the cave entering now at the far end

of the long chamber we'd just come through—and broke off whatever she'd been telling us, to say “Homo Sapiens Sapiens”—as if to say “uh oh—let's go!”—as if that were the obvious thing to do—moving us down the passage and out of sight.

Groenen tells the tale of some Inuit visitors to the caves who pointed out that two things are essential for drawing: that the animal or individual represented actually exists, and that the image depicts a legend or a deed. Groenen says that they regarded the animals on the walls not simply as drawings, but as actually present.

She might have been showing us a vulva sculpted in soft clay on the floor of the cave, under a low overhang where it could still be reached (obviously) but wouldn't be stepped on. This was a replica of the original, similarly situated in an adjacent chamber inaccessible to the public. She pointed out the clitoris and thick, spreading labia as if, as she put it, in parturition. She also showed us replicas of a tiny bison sculpted in clay (evidently elsewhere in the cave, originally, and

then brought to the same inaccessible chamber, and pressed down onto the clay of the floor, its edges smoothed all around); and the etched outline of a horse's head and neck; and an ibex with an unfinished back—the originals, she said, all barely visible or invisible now. Further on in the cave a phallus calls attention to itself: a protuberant concretion carved away at the sides, its top broken off, and a ring of red paint around the tip. She made a joke of some kind.

Concave-convex bison sort of upside-down. Another black bison with engraved claviform symbol pointing into (?) its hump. Nearby, in a gallery so small only one person can fit, in Magdalenian times as now, a painting of something for totally private viewing—I forget if she said what it was.

A kind of signboard: long boxlike forms with dots at intervals inside, like striated muscles with cartoon nuclei. She says: it always means there are pictures further on. And often there are dots in between.

—Or an understanding, though not about them and what they were doing when they made these images, and why, but about myself when I look at them, about what I am doing, and why it gratifies and compels me so. By myself, I assume I mean ‘ourselves.’

The handprints which are found everywhere from Borneo to Patagonia would seem less representations than presentations. Especially the positive prints—paint on a palm and fingers pressed against the wall: the negative (stencil) prints are perhaps a little different. Ripoll points out that most prints, considered worldwide, are negative hands, and mostly left hands. In the French Pyrenees and Lot and Vézère, only negatives—in the French Mediterranean only positives—in Cantabria, both.

Bernifal too was a surprise. We had come back to the area, and were heading for Les Combarelles when we saw the sign by the side of the road. A small parking lot at the head of a trail, with a handmade sign nailed to a fence-post, with phone numbers to call—the only other people there, a

couple of young Dutch tourists, had a cell phone, and made an appointment for the following day, or we'd never have seen it. The trail leads up a lightly wooded slope and around a rise—the familiar 'halfway up' position of so many favored caves—and there is the familiar steel door and heavy lock. Our guide is an old man bent over almost horizontally, who carries a heavy backpack or satchel of some kind, and speaks no English or Dutch. (Later, I see his picture in a book and learn his name. The photo is dated later than our visit to the cave, but the man looks younger and more upright than I remember.) When he lets us inside he asks us to wait a moment and he returns outside, leaving the door open, and partially disappears around the corner. Was he peeing? When he returns he locks the door behind him, opens his bag and extracts a lamp which is powered by a little generator that sits in the bag, and which he cranks manually to light our way. He shuffles from one image to the next in a well-rehearsed pattern, sets the bag down, reaches in and cranks it up, and illuminates the wall. He explains what we see. Makes what we see visible to us.

Bernifal is one of the places where I did take some notes, if not in the cave then shortly after, perhaps in the parking lot. They show the futility of doing so, more than anything, though I'm glad to have them. A tiny page in a pocket notebook: words and sketches. Words: Bernifal. Mamut in ceiling / graven bear / graven head / of lamb or / goat. Written upside-down: silence/dark @ end of visit. Sketches: two handprints side by side one left one right. What appears to be a bison head—at least, there seems to be a horn on top, but with a forward-looking eye (I've drawn an arrow to indicate this) and a somewhat human slope to its profile. Nearby, perhaps as in association, a smaller plainly human face: two circle eyes a line for a nose and a dot for a mouth in a circle with a little smudge on top like a topknot. On a far corner of the page, with a short arrow pointing to it, another circle only slightly bigger and more irregular, with an enigmatic figure inside it, a spiky pod or aperture of some kind.

Desdemaines-Hugon describes the cave beautifully. She's been inside many times over the course of years.

I'm trying to understand how I can be in the caves all the time, when I'm not in the caves, and have only a remote chance of returning to them. I'm not talking about looking at pictures. They remind me of what I saw, but they don't remind me of seeing them.

For the same reason I have generally not wanted to take notes in the caves, though I have always been aware that as a result I'd be not remembering anything much. What was there to write? Graven head of lamb or goat. Mamut in ceiling. I somehow felt that encountering the caves in that way would *not* be encountering them—extracting notes from the images in their spaces would be not only to misspend my time with them but to misrepresent them too (in a sense as fotos do), as if pretending to capture some immediate presence. (I had to begin remembering them already, even standing in front of them, which means beginning to forget them first, standing right in front of them.) Somehow I was only allowed to stand breathing in their presence, that's the only thing that made sense. When I did make some quick notes, as with Bernifal or more elaborately when I returned to

El Castillo, this was hardly an effort to capture the experience before letting it fade. Letting it fade seems to have been a necessary part of the process for me. Submitting myself to the image, passively yet actively, in a kind of semi-paralyzed posture before it, with eyes intent, breathing, and then snapping out of it and moving on—letting it fade, thinking about it—and then, later, now, trying to write about it, so as not to let it go.

Professor Ammons: “grooming does for / baboons most of what words do for us.”

“The human figurations in Combarelles as a whole are open to wide interpretation because of their indeterminacy,” says Professor Eshleman. “Many look as if they were done in the dark. Lines straggle this way and that. Some of them suggest anatomical shapes, but never depict the human figure as a finished or closed unit, with a bounding line separating it from its environment.” Unlike the animal figures, which tend to have such bounding lines and be conceived as finished wholes. “The Combarelles figurations, more than any others, present hominids as wispy creatures, as unstable as fog.”

“The walls, wrinkled and furrowed as elephant hide, would seem to be very inappropriate for engraving. Yet, counting animals, hominids, signs, and indeterminate figures, there are more than six hundred engravings in Combarelles.” Many are superimposed in complex layers at times on clearly different scales—mammoth bison and horse, deer within deer, running and standing this way and that, or all pointing in one direction, as if a herd of bison, or a pack of horses—or marked with tectiform signs or other markings. A small ibex head sits on the shoulder of a bison turning its head to lick its flank. There are images of rhinoceros, reindeer, lion, bear, wolf, possibly fox, and possibly fish, too, but after horse and bison, human figures are the third most frequently found at Les Combarelles, according to les Archaubeau Monique and Claude, which makes the cave an exception among Paleo-sites.

At Tito Bustillo there are mostly horses and reindeer, bison, aurochs, and other quadrupeds, many brilliantly colored, including a large group arranged in a great panel where the background, if that is the word, has been vigorously colored as

well, a glowing red field upon or within which the animals appear. I remember a low moan which might not have been audible. We were not taken to see the large panel of spectacular vulva images, if that is what they are, which seem to be painted high on the wall of a gallery more difficult to reach, we were told. (It's possible that the bison and horse, and so on, are images of vulvas, and that the 'vulvas' are images of bison etc.) They are elaborately done, large red circular forms with intricate folds, openings and containers: one of them has what would appear to be pubic hair. Other red dots scattered about, and heavily worked red patches or clouds behind or around the figures.

The great panel of animals at Tito Bustillo would seem like the great panel at Chauvet (presided over by a bison-headed man drawn on a pendant of rock, who shares a leg with an unfinished female figure which consists largely of a vulva the size of the bison's head) or the great chamber of Lascaux, or the Salon Noir of Niaux—but unlike the minuscule room at Bédeilhac or the crawlspaces of Font-de-Gaume—a place where

groups of people together could take in the scene at once: a wall at just the right height, inclined slightly forward, curving round like Panavision, with ample space before it.

At Niaux you are each given your own lamp and are led a long way down a broad passage before turning off to the right and entering the Salon Noir. The ceiling is suddenly higher, which gives the space an immediate and distinctive acoustic power, and the walls close off in a series of rounded panels ideally situated for group viewing: a resonating chamber for voice as well as vision. On the right a group of images leads to an adjacent panel with more images, and on to another, and another—six panels in all, from right to left so to speak as you enter the chamber, with the last panel more or less straight across from the point of entry, and the whole left side of the Salon bare of images.

According to Le Guillou the pubic triangle/vulva with legs was the first part of the Chauvet figure to be drawn. There may have been more of the body above, hip/buttock or more—it's hard to tell as

there's been some scraping and the imposition of other figures above. A feline seems (from a certain angle—the rock pendant is circular/globular, and must be circled to be seen) to emerge from the left side. To the right, the bison man grows out of the woman's left leg, which is also his left leg, inlaid with his left arm, and his long human fingers resting on his knee. There are no feet. The bison head rests just above the vulva, where the womb would be, and turns to look back at us over its shoulder.

Eshleman speculates that making holes is perhaps the earliest kind of aesthetic act, beginning perhaps in an exploration of bodily holes, most notably through the vulva. “The earliest known man-made holes in Western European image making are the small, cuplike indentations in stone slabs, probably from the late Mousterian, that by the Aurignacian period appear in juxtaposition with engravings that are female genitalic in shape. It seems quite possible that the Mousterian cupules are proto-vulvas. In one Aurignacian block, both cupules and vulvas are arranged in a row leading to the incised male organ of an unidentifiable

animal.” He quotes Sheets-Johnstone: “Vulvas give entrance to miraculous insides. From them issue both blood and tiny living beings. A vulval shape depicts a bodily opening from which emanates *extraordinary* substances and forms.” He adds: “One would only be able to make a hole so deep. One might also gouge a furrow or cut a line. Once the line begins to curve, the possibility of a shape is around the bend. Curtailed or deflected penetration would thus be transformed into wandering, wavering, or enclosing lines, the latter of which offer endless netlike configurations evoking *insides* and other natural shapes. Initial sublimations redirecting sexual aggression may have flowed into these lateral glides. The empty, fractal space of the cave’s insides might, with bending and enclosing lines, become transformed into a womb with metaphoric animal parts (equine dorsal lines suggesting undulating hills) or animal bodies: *insides* sprouting heads and legs.”

Eshleman wants to get down into the muck and mire of human being, the terrifying crazy ooze of our psychosexual evolutionary mud bath. “We continue to be in multiphasic Expulsion from

a paradise we unconsciously rejected when we separated ourselves from animals,” he says. “It took thousands and thousands of years but we did create the abyss out of a seemingly infinitely elastic crisis: therio-expulsion—and we have lived in a state of ‘animal withdrawal’ ever since. The pictures from the abyss that flicker our sleep and waking are the fall-out that shouted us into dot and line and from which we have been throwing up and throwing down ever since.”

Eshleman also mentions one Dordogne cave that has only a single red dot painted on a back wall, and no other sign of human presence.

I don't remember what we saw at Les Combarelles. Even looking at the fotos in the Archambeau booklet, which must include the most prominent images shown in the cave, and though it's only been four years since we were there, I recognize nothing specifically. I remember our guide's face smiling at our faces looking at the engravings he showed us, holding his little flashlight up to the side so we could make out the images in their spindly lines among the cracks in the rock. He

impressed upon us that the lines, the engravings, images and signs, were everywhere throughout this long passage of the cave.

The booklet shows many images of human figures, mostly as facsimile line drawings since many would show up poorly if at all under the camera's eye. Faces head on or in profile, generally genderless, or without gender markings, and female bodies without heads or much in the way of appendages—thighs and buttocks connected by a trunk to breasts, the back bent over at a near-quadruped angle sometimes, sometimes the whole figure reduced to a featureless swoosh or crescent, adjacent in one foto to an engraved vulva—at least one hybrid creature identified as “l'homme-mammouth” with its huge tusks and seemingly upright gait, and one bizarre but unmistakable homunculus with all four limbs and an erect penis, superposed with another, smaller, and again limbless and headless human figure, facing in the other direction. There is also the “tête dite anthropomorphe” but which looks more like a bear to me, in the picture, if I'm seeing anything at all.

In one superposition (figure no. 109) inside a horse leaping to the right is a horse standing facing left, both of them both containing and contained by a bison standing facing right.

It's not simply a matter of getting up and going in—not the first time, anyway—but a matter of finding the way. That's just the way it is, torches or no. The cave doesn't exist at first—it's just a crack in the wall that continues opening into deeper darkness, forking and branching. What feels like a passage might be a pocket, and vice versa. So no question of just going in, as if 'in' already existed. Is there something on the other side or only the way back out again, and in either case what difference, if any, would it make, are only the most obvious possible questions. The space is a continuous threshold or membrane. "The hole that grows," Eshleman says, "in a way that is simultaneously transitive and intransitive," and that "may be one of the most fundamental versions of the logos, or story, of the soul."

Professor Gamble says: "There is obviously always scope for tightening logical procedures

and considering what exactly it is that makes a scientific account convincing in terms of verifying knowledge claims.”

He reminds us to see the caves and cave painters not so much in relation to ourselves, later on, but in relation to earlier ancestors, the hominid branch, the primate tree, to consider everything a question about social life, about becoming social, developing sociality, learning to live together. Time back way back, says Riddley Walker. The barest primate means of forming groups are themselves older than primate means, mammalian, really, or even older, since the social sense goes way back in the genetic stock—but mammals give it a new emotional spin.

One of his chief claims is that the invention and use of symbol is directed mainly to socially distant others, not to those closest to each other, among whom all is already known and routine, relatively speaking. He sees the human world divided into three concentric spheres of human relation—the intimate, the effective, the extended—and imagines language evolving out of symbolic

exchanges between those for whom other forms of contact (like grooming) are not available, a way of making contact with those with whom one lacks intimacy, lacks daily repeated gestures of emotional bond recognition: “Symbolic resources are dedicated to the effective and especially to the extended networks.”

Cougnac was on the way to Pech Merle. These are among the oldest images I’ve seen. Cougnac was evidently used as a place to leave images and no doubt conduct other human business over more than ten thousand years, with some images and other archaeological remains being dated as early as 25,000 years old, and some as recent as 14,000, spanning about half of the Upper Paleolithic.

Two striking, not to say stricken, human figures distinguish Cougnac, among many other distinctions. One is part of another grand panel showing three megaloceros deer, huge creatures in life, up to six feet tall at the characteristic hump of their shoulder, with astonishing antler racks spreading nine or ten feet across: two males and one female follow in a line facing to the left, the

first two, a male and the female, overlapping a bit, the third in line, with a splendid rack, all in red, the female all in black, the first male originally red gone over again in black in every detail. The human appears within the outline of the third, red megaloceros, facing the other way (if that is the right way to put it, since the figure lacks a face) toward three ibex, one of which appears within the outlines of the third big deer, and the furthest of which, like the deer itself, is incomplete. All are in red and on a smaller scale, facing in the same direction as the three deer. Another creature also in red, perhaps the “extinct long horned deer” referred to in the Monument Historique, appears (facing left like the other creatures) in partial form behind the human figure, within the neck of the third megaloceros. The first two overlapping deer are complete, though lacking feet (a common feature). A red mammoth—just the signature line from the dome of the head, facing left, along the back to the tail—appears under the hump of the first, and other signs and dots are scattered about.

The human figure is black. It is a matter of five lines, little more than a rump with legs (no feet),

a back and a belly (no arms, no head), with three additional lines emanating from (or penetrating) the rump and back, each of the three ending (or beginning) at the same point to the left. I remember looking at this image—I'd seen fotos of it, I'd forgotten which cave it was in, and there it was. I remember standing and taking my breath deliberately and slowly, and looking and looking as if in a series of snap close-ups except that the thing doesn't get closer, it stays right where it is though one seems to be zooming in. A matter of focus and re-focus (imperceptible drift and focus). Yet still I remember thinking too, looking at the image, that it was smaller and more insignificant than I'd imagined from the fotos, more faded and out of the way, that is, subordinated to the larger composition, not framed but enveloped. I felt a little disappointed, somehow, in myself.

Speaking of face to face contact (in the intimate sphere), Gamble says "Two is company, three's a crowd, and four it seems is time to start another conversation."

If all I really discover is that I love these images, that I feel an instantaneous and compelling

identification with them and with whoever made them—which I already know—well, is that nothing? In fact this may in part be exactly what the Magdalenian and Aurignacian people in the caves understood by the images they made: this image/sign means that I am connected to all who see this image/sign and feel an instantaneous and compelling identification with it. And want it. Wanting it: there's that hole again. Wanting it means noting its presence, which means noticing its absence—expecting it or seeking it, or not—holding it in the mind on distant rambles, gratified in its presence. (A hole is the sign of two places at once: inside and outside, present though hidden.) Of course there was more to it, much unshared understanding, specific rituals and beliefs and interpretations of images, all of it lost . . . but in one sense the image is not a sign of anything but *itself*, that is, it means “I mean,” “I have meaning,” and connects all who recognize it in one big social body, way bigger than any little one of us, even bigger than any group we could possibly see or meet in a lifetime of walking as far as our legs will carry us—which is also a connection, ultimately, to a cosmic order, or a vast beyond (a way of

coping with the hole of death). What Aurignacian people wanted was what I want and get from these images, in some pale radiation after-effect, a sense of membership in the human body.

Co-presence is what's at stake. We need each other close, and we need to know we won't be killing and eating each other, even though we're close enough, and perhaps at times motivated, to do serious violence to one another.

Again I've walked away from these notes and pages for a time—a week, this time—and I have to re-enter, I flip back and forth through the notebook again, reviewing bits of Gamble and other thoughts and notes on Cougnac I'd marked earlier, reminding myself what I was thinking, and scanning the notes I didn't mark, too.

In primate world, which is to say our world, “high-density affective ties among close kin and friends . . . depend upon face-to-face contact and frequent reaffirmation. It is from their intensity that the individual derives security.” Even as recently as 400,000 years ago, among the earliest Homo

species to inhabit Europe, the absence of face-to-face could only be stretched so far. What Gamble calls “these hominids” would return to particular places where less frequent encounters would take place: “individuals would be returning to the locale, introducing food, bones, stones, wood, fire, shells and plants as well as sounds, smells and opportunities to touch and groom, into the small, loosely defined spaces of attention and co-presence. As they returned to such places they performed the bonds that bound them into wider social networks.” But relative to Sapiens, these wider networks were as yet barely developed. By the Magdalenian, large gatherings were apparently being held regularly at Mas d’Azil, among other places, a cave in the Pyrenees in which the walls lack human markings, but where the floor has been a treasure trove of human materials, including portable art—small sculptural objects for ornament or practical use (beads or spear-throwers) or images scratched into bone, sometimes elaborate images like a man and a bear in mortal combat engraved on both sides of a small disk, part of a shoulder-blade belonging perhaps to some bovine creature. It was a place where people brought things, and left things.

At Abri Cap Blanc around the corner from Les Combarelles, the gate was locked, and a sign explained in French that the site was to be closed for some time. Underneath this explanation, a tourist had written in English, “Ever think of putting this in English,” and underneath that someone else had written in English “Because we are no English colony yet.”

“It is possible to see that the archaeological record changes after 33 Kyr. This involves not only the character of space-time constellations at a regional scale but also corresponding developments in the structure of locales as social occasions.” Occasions for extending the social bond are linked to the deliberate alteration of specific places, marking them with human signs, to make them present even in their (that is to say our) absence.

The second seemingly stricken human figure—these images are sometimes referred to as ‘wounded men’—is more tightly contained within the red outline of a mammoth on a different wall, filling its head and half of the body—both mammoth and human facing left. Various dots and seemingly random lines are scattered about. The

man is done in black and more or less complete, though without discernible feet or hands. Seven lines attach to this body, from various angles, at the shoulder, back, belly or groin, rump and leg, some beginning or ending at the line of the body, some crossing that line. Some lines cross the mammoth image too. Like the first human figure, this one is inclined almost horizontally, with short legs and a long trunk, quadruped-like. I don't remember seeing it, but maybe my eyes were rolled up inside my head.

“According to this view, culture came to organize our lives through its collective representations. It became our unique means of adaptation and during human evolution the individual became increasingly submerged within the group.” The whole story is the story of becoming social, or rather, more social.

A third 'stricken' human figure is generally not shown but appears in Ripoll (and barely so in Lorblanchet—invisible to me there until I saw it in Ripoll) at the rear haunch of the same mammoth that contains the second figure: this figure too

appears to have lines entering or emanating, two or more, it's hard to see. The figure is vague and poorly reproduced, barely legible, almost more seal-like than human in Ripoll, in Lorblanchet more like an elongated odalisque (without face or much of any limb) riding on the mammoth's rump. In Bernifal a tectiform design is barely visible except under infrared light where it is revealed to be composed of around five hundred red dots.

What matters, what grooming does and more distant social relations seek to do, is to “contribute . . . to our ontological security which occurs when the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be.” Is it possible to get more fundamental, without going chemical?

The “continuous development” of “every-day routines” and generalized behaviors “involves interactions between individuals where negotiation is achieved through display, gesticulation, grooming, language, performance, sign and symbol,” and functions similarly to grooming but at a distance: that is, it contributes to our ontological security, by reassuring us without our necessarily

even noticing that the way things and others appear is the way they are. “In other words the routinization of life, described as that ‘habitual, taken for granted character of the vast bulk of the activities of day-to-day social life; the prevalence of familiar styles and forms of conduct’” functions as a form of social reassurance. All of this, Gamble says, takes place in a space that is also ‘taken for granted’ or routinized, a “landscape of habit.” Eventually, though, and increasingly with *Sapiens*, and evidently even more increasingly with the Aurignacian, other spaces are apparently set aside and marked as “ritual,” that is, not routine, spaces, and these are places where the effective sphere of relations meets and grows. Mas d’Azil might have been such a place. Not part of the “landscape of habit” but part of a different landscape, in some sense a ritual landscape—belonging to a different calendar, a different dimension of relations—a place deliberately marked for the observation and enactment of human social purposes, a place to return to (if only in the mind), to take an interest in the minds and bodies of (relatively distant) others.

Pech Merle shows the same aviform signs, as they are called, as Cougnac. These would seem to be like the tectiform signs so-called for their resemblance to a little roof (with a single post supporting it, like an arrow pointing up, sitting on a horizontal base), but which may be a schematic representation of a horse's head and neck, the vertical line corresponding to a similarly placed line in other, less schematic representations of horses, as if marking a color change between the animal's muzzle and the rear part of its head. The aviform variation points the other way, and where the base would be, that is, on the top now, there is nothing. The arc of the arrowhead, which peaks like a roof in the tectiform, is here more rounded, less a true V shape and more a curving bow, and the tips of the arrowhead are elaborated with additional lines as if streaming back, which is what gives the figure its wing-like aspect. (Birds as we recognize them are rarely depicted in the Paleolithic. Some owls at Chauvet, among scant other exceptions.)

One or more of these aviform images at Pech Merle appear attached to a human figure which

resembles the ‘wounded men’ of Cougnac and which Lorblanchet calls “l’Homme blessé”: an upright body with a distinctly human head—round head dome and big frontal eyes, though no other facial features—with four lines piercing or traversing or emanating from the figure. Cougnac’s are in black, Pech Merle’s in red, like the aviforms. In its posture the figure bears more than a passing resemblance to St. Sebastian pierced by arrows—that is, its torso and legs are aligned, unlike the Cougnac figures, which are conspicuously bent over. This figure clearly has a penis, unlike the Cougnac images, as well (and unlike St. Sebastian, too, as usually depicted).

Lorblanchet speaks of “les tracés digitaux anarchiques et exhubérants” organizing suddenly into “une silhouette reconnaissable” (of a woman’s body, in fact) thus breaching “the space between gesture and symbol.” The image is reproduced as a line drawing.

In the little Pech Merle book, the image of a small mammoth drawn in black on the edge of a large panel made up of many overlapping animals of

different species—this mammoth is the only figure in the panel that is *not* overlapping (or immediately adjacent to) another figure, but set apart to the right and facing left, that is, facing all the other figures—in Lorblanchet's sketch, the only image I have of this, the tusks are clearly indicated, and the dome of the head and hump of the back unmistakable. Still, the figure bears momentary, flickering resemblance to a vulva as well, the arch of its legs and belly forming a little cavern, with hair above it, the familiar long hairs of the mammoth's coat. The effect is no doubt accentuated by the stark white background of the page on which the sketch is reproduced. In the Cougnac book a photograph of an image of an ibex—head and neck—which seems to follow some contour of the rock, also shows three holes in the rock which at first I took to be vulva images as well: rounded spaces as if outlined by the shadow cast on rock-edge, and open to the bottom, with two of them appearing to have a short vertical line marked inside, as if a cleft. But I believe these to be accidents of the photograph, or rather, simply (natural) holes in the rock wall.

Then there are the bison-women, or bison-woman. Our guide didn't hold with either concept. He pointed them out briefly as we passed by—they're located at an awkward vantage from the path, especially from the direction we were coming, and he didn't even stop with us to consider the figures: several very schematic red bison, all facing left, big hump of the back, highly arched tail, belly and legs (no feet, and no indication of a head or face). You have to look up and back to the left as you descend, and as you pass, another panel comes into view, or part of the same panel, marked by a grouping of twenty or so red dots at the edge (tho brighter red than the bison), a corner in the rock where the surface breaks, and two other figures in bison red. The lower of the two bears a strong structural resemblance to the bison, although the rear leg is ballooned in such a way that it resembles more a woman's breast, which turns the bison hump into human female rump, as in other schematic drawings (or engravings) we find scattered throughout the Paleolithic, some of which we've seen already, where breast and buttocks, back and belly, represent the whole. In this case the bison's front leg/woman's leg is not indicated, and the

head is truncated too—the figure merely comes to a point there, the line perhaps somewhat less fully extended or arched than the bison tails. We see the familiar horizontally inclined back and pendulous breast, and the transformation from bison form to human female form is startling for how little it takes to effect and how complete it seems to be, the matter of a line here and there. That the bison and the woman are facing in opposite directions adds to the effect.

Above this ambiguous figure is another creature which I take to be a mammoth, although it too seems to be undergoing some sort of transformation or transition involving human and/or bison bodies. Oriented as the supposed bison-woman below, the prominent forward limb of the mammoth mirrors the woman's hanging breast (it is almost the identical shape), both bodies extend from their heads to the left, directly above/below each other, and both lack clearly marked rear limbs. They seem to be forms of each other. The head on the upper figure however is not reduced to a line but inflated to mammoth proportions and given a long trunk-like projection, incomplete

but plain enough, reaching down (in fact, almost as if the mammoth were sniffing its own foot), and the back is straight, not quite a mammoth's back but conspicuously missing the hump of bison or of women's hips. The very rear of this figure, where the back curves down into the tail and leg, is drawn over the edge of the rock-face, onto the panel with bright red dots and seemingly schematic bison.

Later, when I asked him about the theory that these images represent some kind of transformation between bison and women, he dismissed the notion firmly, politely, a little wearily. I didn't press him on the details. I asked how many years he'd been going down into the cave, and he said about 25 years. I asked him how often he got to go down, he said almost every day, and we looked at each other and nodded.

“The earliest evidence for the deliberate piercing of items either for suspension as pendants or as parts of necklaces, or to allow attachments onto clothing, comes from level 11 at Bacho Kiro. The evidence in this Aurignacian/Bachokirian level consists of two pierced animal teeth and a

spindle-shaped bone pendant. . . . The range of raw materials used to produce Aurignacian pierced ornaments is impressive. White lists the following: ‘limestone, schist, talc-schist, steatite, mammal teeth, bone, antler, ivory, fossil and contemporary species of marine and freshwater shells, fossil coral, fossil belemnite, jet, lignite, hematite and pyrite.’” We were going all over the place, meeting with all different kinds of people, and exchanging all kinds of things, for all kinds of purposes, only some of them understood. “Investment of time in manufacturing display items and altering the taskscape through cave painting and music occurs for the first time,” Professor Gamble says, in the Aurignacian. “Neanderthals appear to have become prime-age hunters [i.e. not hunting young/old/weak prey, but adult prey] *without* developing an external system of symbols that either were inscribed on the landscape, to form a context for a social occasion, or involved objects at gatherings.”

At Cougnac we were with a group I would rather forget: a large tour group with a leader who translated everything our loquacious

and somewhat preening cave guide said into ‘American,’ adding more of his own material than you would have thought necessary. The cave guide himself would listen and smile—it was as if they were performing for each other—as if he understood when the man was moving beyond translation, which the tourists would not necessarily have known. It was as if we had disappeared as well, as if both guides were working for the one group, and we were just there to the side.

We went down and in together and studied extraordinary concretions from the thinnest filaments (only several thousands of years old) to thick pillars and everything in between, in every length from above and below, a dizzying glittering spectacle.

“Larger brains provided opportunities for enhanced communication, with vocal grooming now complementing other aspects of social grooming. The result . . . is that stable networks, larger than other primates can sustain, were possible even without a fully symbolic language,” the professor says.

The young man in the middle of the discovery foto of Cougnac Cave has the look of someone standing silent on a peak in Darien in 1952—his arm raised, his face lit with soft wonder and sweet achievement as he gazes out—but he’s standing, or half-kneeling, underground, wearing dark work clothes, surrounded by five other, mostly somewhat older and more impassive men wearing work clothes and overalls, one of them (looking straight into the camera) holding what looks like a flare, which might even be lit, but which might be a thermos or something else instead, two or three of them wearing berets, all gathered into a little corner with stalactites all around, and stalagmites rising in front of them.

“. . . in terms of what we see, organisms cannot be separated from their environment. A person is surrounded by his or her environment because we see that it literally touches them, the environment is the hominid. Therefore to mention one is to suppose the existence of the other. Thus a mutual environment surrounds an individual, moves with that person and provides affordances for action. It is only our brains which have been taught,

through such common analytical concepts as the mental template, to make the distinction between an organism and its environment.”

The spotted horses at Pech Merle can barely be described or even seen, even when looking right at them.

When I look at the Pech Merle mammoth (fig. 10, and on the cover of Lorblanchet’s booklet) and at the curved line below it which I believe is the tusk of a much larger mammoth drawn in that same big panel (fig. 19), but which also looks on the cover foto like the line-edge of a cavity in the rock, not a drawn line at all, or a line drawn by the earth (or by the mammoth), it occurs to me (looking back at the fig. 10 mammoth) that the drawings are holes in the rock—this one a mamut-shaped hole in the rock.

Speaking of the years 500-300 Kyr BP, time back way back, Gamble presents his colleague Mithen’s hypothesis as to the “firmly partitioned” nature of “the cognitive domains of these early hominids.” “Look at his proposition this way. A

tree is a tree. It affords shade, firewood, materials for spears, escape from hyenas, leaves for bedding and a territory to hunt for small animals such as squirrels. But at this stage of hominid evolution a tree is not transferred into another cognitive realm where it has social values of endurance, dependability and within which spirits are thought to dwell. In the same way animals, when encountered, are affordances for food and a source of other raw materials—hides, bones, sinews. Most importantly, the hunter does not take on the property of the animal [i.e. because the hominid still is an animal, not other]. The animal does not become the symbol for aggression, or the token by which networks and the stable groupings which emerge from them are identified, the image of the clan or the group. In short, there is no transference between these different cognitive domains which results in the kaleidoscope of human culture as we know it. If, and it seems highly improbable, Hominid 1 at Bilzingsleben thought she or he was a rhino, because that is what they encountered most, they kept the information to themselves. They never used it as a means to structure and augment social bonds by appealing

to a wider cultural principle that would have been self-evident to those in the network. Their mutual environment was not personified.” Time back way back.

Brother Mithen speaks of several cognitive domains which come together, or begin to communicate among themselves, in our brains: social intelligence, natural history intelligence, technical intelligence, general intelligence (memory, observation), language. In effect we become metaphorical in our thinking: what we know from social experience we map onto nature, for instance, and vice versa, we see them as versions of one another, the social and the natural and the technical, what we know from nature we use in thinking about technology, i.e. making or manipulating things, and vice versa, and our thinking about the making of things overlaps with our thinking about social interaction. . . . You are my sunshine. We can't make the relationship work. That rock is beautifully shaped. This flint is beautifully knapped.

A large salmon or pike appears to ride the back of the horse on the right. In some fotos it's invisible. I

remember seeing it faintly emanating or persisting under the thick black line and charcoal shading smudge of the horse's back, both there and no longer there, following the light undulation of the horse's back as if in motion together. In Fontanet, which I have not seen, Professor Groenen says the remains of a salmon were found on a ledge, undisturbed, as if uneaten and left as an offering of some kind.

Some sort of derangement or induced alteration of one's sense of self/world seems to have become part of the deep holy whole hominid experience, in the form of trances, as Lewis-Williams argues, cave-space dancing or who knows what, by the Aurignacian if not long before. Going into the cave space itself is a kind of derangement of the senses, and looking into these images meticulously made on the walls it's easy to imagine other derangements coming into play, conceptual, imaginary, fixations and transformations, imaginations of the world. That such derangement is part of the scene suggests that the un-deranged self, the normal sapiens self, imagines itself disconnected from others (beyond its immediate networks, perhaps, or beyond its

imagined species line), and seeks to overcome this disconnection. (This is essentially Eshelman's argument, I take it.) One disconnection to cancel or recuperate another.

The horses are stunning! Stunning! Sloping backs and rounded bellies, rounded rumps overlapping, at once in motion and still, with black (mostly) and red spots all over them and around them, and handprints in black stencil around them, life-size or almost on a large flat wall at the end of an open gallery, visible (with light) a goodly way off, too small, somehow, but too big to believe.

“New sounds accompanied the Early Upper Palaeolithic. Two bone flutes have been pieced together . . .” from the Aurignacian level “AMS dated to 36.8 Kyr BP so that these are very possibly the oldest musical instruments in Europe. The best preserved is made on a swan's radius and has three remaining sound holes. It is also rhythmically marked with seven surviving transversal cuts on its dorsal surface. It does not occur in a special context, such as a burial or hut structure, but was found in front of a flat rock along with stone tools and animal bones.”

In Niaux, in the Ariège, in the Black Salon the ceiling rises with a cathedral-like suddenness and roundness, and the acoustics of the space are remarkable and instantly notable. The Salon is a chamber off a long, broad passage we walked down, the Galerie d'Entrée, each carrying our own little battery-powered lamp the guide issued us. When we entered he lowered his voice and soon went silent, as if not to presume possession of the air.

In Montespan, which I have not seen, in the same area, a horse and one or two other animals are engraved in the soft clay of a wall, with holes poked all over it, like Pech Merle in three dimensions, also with long striations raked across it. The holes are deep and wide.

The horses' heads are exquisite. They shrink to a stylized perfection that carries all the force of full size, in fact they don't even appear to be less than full size though their painted contour is freakishly small, because the head of the horse on the right fits right in, as it were, to a formation of the rock support on the right edge of the free-standing

wall, a projection off to the right in the exact form of a horse's head, exactly the size to complete (or suggest) the animal body that stretches to the left. The space of the muzzle of the horse in this stone projection, and running down the front of the breast, the space between rock edge and the thick black paint of the horse's neck and chest, and the space above the thickly black head and brushlike mane, are all filled with rows of large black spots, like those inside the horses' bodies, if that is not the wrong way to put it, especially in this horse's body. These dots enlarge the head and front end of the horse, too, and agitate the space. The two horses' rumps intersect, though you can still see through to the one behind. The horse on the left, facing left, has a tiny painted head too, which seems to borrow the fullness of its size from the rock projection on the other side/horse. Both horses have rows of black spots under their bellies, and various hook-like and other indecipherable kinds of signs or markings within and around their contours. I can see it.

The writing is a way for me to keep myself in front of the thing (the image, the caves), or to

keep the thing in front of me—no más, no need to understand or to communicate to others, particularly, as if the act itself (and the unfinished nature of the act, unfinished all these years) was what mattered, not the finished product. In this sense the writing may be like the act of painting or engraving, obsolete once it's done. (I do picture what I write being read back to me when I'm old and blind and can't look at my big picture books myself anymore: this will be in effect everything I need in one place, another kind of ancient hominid dream.) Marías makes the general point that all speech can function in this way, “not even to tell stories or to persuade with reasons” but simply “to entertain someone else's ear as if pouring music into it . . . and thus avoid their departure. And this can be enough, to save oneself.” Más o menos.

“Based on experimentation,” Professor Gamble says, “it takes on average three hours to make a single Aurignacian basket-shaped bead. At La Souquette there are 400 such beads in the basal Aurignacian assemblage, adding up to 1,200 hours of work. The possible connection in this instance between the transfer distance of the raw material and the investment in production is noteworthy.”

More time has passed.

At Niaux we walked and walked.

I have to wait to see what comes to me next. It's waited so long, there's no hurry. I have to let it just sit there doing nothing for long stretches. I have to not rush it, let it sit and come to me.

One day I took a walk, I don't know why, down to the railroad track at the end of the street at the bottom of the hill. I hopped the little fence and walked along beside the tracks for a mile or so.

Niaux is only part of a network of caves—or one part of a much larger cave, the only part still readily accessible, connected to the other parts—le Réseau Clastres and the Galerie of the Grand Dôme among others—and cut off from them by watery passages not easy to traverse.

I have to back away from the professors.

El Castillo too is linked, though differently, to three other decorated caves—Las Chimeneas,

La Pasiega, and Las Monedas—arranged more or less around the same ledge halfway up a small but prominent conical mountain along the little river Pas—el Monte del Castillo because a castle once sat on top of it—as well as three other apparently undecorated caves, the Lake, the Arrow, and the Bear, scattered elsewhere on the mountain's flanks: these caves do not communicate internally as at Niaux or Trois Frères/Tuc d'Audoubert, but share associated points of access.

Looking into Trois Frères, site of the famous figure so-called The Sorcerer—another one of those, as at Chauvet, set apart as if overseeing or witnessing larger . . . compositions on adjacent walls—I see also another hybrid figure, upright walking or dancing bison-headed figure, in the midst of a profuse swirl of other animals—bison horse ibex aurochs deer reindeer and rhino spread in an arc as at Rouffignac. The upright walking bison-headed figure's nose seems to be doing something, a long enclosed oblong form seems to attach to it, an exhalation of some sort perhaps or a sound. The bison-headed man (it is clearly male, with a phallus more human than bison) is at the

center of the composition as if he were conjuring forth this herd of many species, or as if the herd were conjuring *him*, or simply as if some sort of communication were taking place.

Trois Frères also contains, if that is the right word, an image of two snow owls as if facing one another with a chick between them, all three etched into the wall. Birds were rarely depicted in the Paleolithic though frequently consumed. The man at La Vache held a bone to his lips and said in his French English Spanish “nyum yum yum.”

The tour at Niaux is basically a hike to the Black Salon and back, as I remember it. My big book shows me various things on the walls of the long Entrance Gallery along the way, which we may have seen some of, I have a vague memory or can almost imagine that we did. Prof. G.: “The eventual use of artifacts as symbols, be they handaxes or carved horses, is an exaptation, available for use by reason of their form rather than designed by natural selection for that purpose. What makes them symbols is their contribution to integrating and structuring what people do when they are separated.”

Is the Salon Noir to be read?

“The effect” of this use of artifacts as symbols “was dramatic. Rather than the familiar gestures, which empower an individual as an active social agent, being passed between parent and child and within intimate, or at most effective networks, they can now skip horizontally between networks. In a vertical system faithful reproduction of sequences and rhythms is expected. Culture and the individual are in the same evolutionary boat, so neither rocks it. Stasis and graduation are expected. But in a horizontal system such a benign relationship need not exist.” Brothers and sisters and their friends, and the friends of their friends, and *their* friends too and so on, making a world their parents never dreamed of. “That curious alchemy takes over where culture begins to negotiate us as much as we use it to moderate our lives.”

I’m only writing down what I remember and wish to remember. I’m trying to write down what I remember and wish to remember.

If the *Black Salon* is to be read, right to left as you enter on your right as if walking were the beginning of reading, or reading a continuation of walking, and further, if it were to be read as a sequence, one thing it appears to narrate is the appearance and disappearance of horses. It begins and ends with bison—another way of saying it—while the horses appear and seem to share dominance, in terms of numbers of them, and centrality of placement, and size (and beauty), with some ibex scattered in the mix as well in seemingly crucial or prominent positions, before the bison ‘reassert’ themselves as the dominant one in the end (of the *Salon Noir*), the only species remaining. What either horse or bison mean is entirely a blank. (A hole.)

El Castillo excavations extend back into the Mousterian, back into the hominid reaches before ourselves.

“I would argue that society at this time saw a shift in emphasis away from the dominance of the intimate network upon the actions of the individual. Negotiation increasingly used the

resources of the effective network to create new networks. . . .”

I still hear them, even as I step away.

Just beyond the last horse, that is, beyond the remaining bison, are two claviform shapes in red associated with a double row of red dots themselves arranged in claviform shape, following the line of “une petite fissure verticale” in the rock. This vertical fissure is more or less directly opposite the point at which one enters the Salon. I don’t remember it being shown to us. Beyond that, as noted earlier, on the left hand side looking from the entry point, the walls are ‘empty.’

Beyond this, the drawings are indescribable in their beauty. Bison forever. A profusion of bison.

I don’t remember if I saw snakes down there or if I only feared I might, but I called the place Snake Meadow, and still do—though it isn’t even there anymore. I climbed up to another track crossing above, which turned out to be no track anymore but a trail swallowed up in the woods going one

way, crossing a large creek and onward out of sight in the other. Just this side of the creek, a trail led down through the wooded shade to a big sunny meadow, and I followed it, but quickly returned. I never went back.

In the out-of-sight reaches of Niaux, three sets of footprints cross a broad bar of sand close to the wall, two showing a regular, mature stride (though apparently of young people, by the size of the feet) and the third a still younger person jumping around, not yet a stride. This must have been the only or virtually the only time this patch of sand was ever crossed, or else there would be traces of others . . . .

In Chauvet the footprints of a boy or girl cross the back chambers, with the apparent testimony of torch smudge marks on the wall alongside the prints—dated to around 25,000 BP, almost 10,000 years after the first paintings/markings were made in the cave. We go back 10,000 years from the present and we come to the end of the Ice Age, the beginning of the Mesolithic and sedentary cultures with ‘permanent settlements’

and all the rest—the kid in the cave goes back 10,000 years and comes to those horses and rhinos and handprints on the walls—still in some measure his or her own culture (and still in some measure our own, that is, human culture). Our 10,000 year look backward seems longer than the kid's, who seems, at least from our perspective, relatively speaking, to be looking back at his or her own contemporaries, while we look back at dim origins . . . though we too still are doing the same thing, that is, looking back at our contemporaries. All of history, that is, post-prehistory, fits into a space only half the size of the space that child at Chauvet was walking around in.

Another time I told my friend Jack about meeting the snake and he said “Did you do the dance?”

“At this time” (which is another time) “people lived within ready reach of water and only went to Niaux for their ceremonies, a half hour trip and heavy going” climbing that hill to the cave mouth, says Prof. Clottes in my loose translation of a Spanish translation of his French.

Dots and lines and claviforms mark the entrance, on both sides of the entrance, to the Salon Noir, and the panels themselves, in the Salon, are delimited by red signs, the claviform and dots already mentioned, and another set of dots. A trout is engraved on the floor in front of the Salon.

“Artifacts were no longer adjuncts to persons, meaningful only when attached in acquisition, manufacture or use and linked in action by rhythms. Artifacts now became personified since they represented either that person or the existence of an extended network *in absentia*.”

“It was what the objects symbolized rather than what they communicated visually that was important. They symbolized distant hunting grounds, future encounters and other social occasions.”

“The style of objects at these activities of building, greeting, killing animals and making things also presented an opportunity to pass on information.”

When I went back to El Castillo I took notes,

which include “super-imposed red neg. hands 35,000 years old, oldest images in cave,” perhaps the oldest images I have seen, along with “black head of deer 20,000 BP” and “ochre deer with bison 13,000,” and more enigmatically “the big bison like a stain, or encompassing all” and “over all the others/another (bison) to right.”

The Panneau Indicateur (no. 13) may be the most beautiful image of all. It is just where you turn sharply to the right to enter the long cul-de-sac that ends in the Black Salon. A scattering of red and black dots and dashes and other forms—claviform, and arrangements of dots in lines or rows or ‘boxes’ (with more dots inside)—how could we ever read that? The linear extensions of the claviforms are extremely reduced, so that the ‘bulge’ in the middle is virtually all there is: they look more like bells than like clubs. In El Castillo, a place almost delirious with signs, we find a panel of bell shapes, as they are called, which call to mind the many variants of vulva images we have already seen: some show a bifurcating line down the center of the bell. The claviforms themselves, in all their variants, have been imagined to represent

the female form, with the bulge that makes the sign claviform evoking the bulge of hip or breast in other less ambiguous representations.

The calcite concretions are part of the pathos of the experience too, the state of the walls, the degree of the damage. Damage has been done by previous visitors—the floor’s antiquity has been utterly compromised—and by natural events, the movement of water, etc., especially in 1978-79 when a brief water event over the course of several weeks did damage to dozens of figures in the Salon Noir. Water flow from within and above the rock has since been channeled somewhat in the formation of new, artificial, micro-stalactites and other forms of drainage. The micro-climate now is under constant supervision.

Peña and Ceballos del Moral say that “the first panel” at El Castillo “is without doubt the most interesting in that all the Paleolithic styles, covering many thousands of years, are represented on it. One can observe the evolution of art, from its beginnings up to the bi-color figures in Altamira, and even more recent, Neolithic representations.

One can also contemplate very varied fauna, represented by horses, deer, oxen, and goats.” And then they move on to Panel 2.

For Gamble flintworking is the beginning of symbolic behavior, this doubling relationship between ‘self’ and ‘world.’ “The outcome is a seamless construction between the mental and gestural activities of the knapper on the one hand and on the other hand the material being knapped.” I use the word beginning loosely. Before knapping, as Gamble shows, there was a long experience/discovery of fundamental operations like the making of series (of things, of actions, of spaces), and then groupings, repetitions and rearrangements forming a matrix of our being.

Both Niaux and El Castillo show a linear sign like an arrow or a feather or a broom, sometimes known as a barbed sign—a long stick with symmetrical projections at one end. In El Castillo it is in black situated among the red bell shapes, los campaniformes. In Niaux they are in red, and may be ‘pointing’ up or down, generally in association with markings of other kinds, dots and lines. This sign crosses the Pyrenees.

Las Monedas too contains a panel of many signs or markings, a flurry of seemingly simpler black hashmarks around strange scribbled circular forms, on the perfect edge of random and representational. Some see faces in them, or at least eyes.

In truth, signs abound in all the caves.

Unmistakably although almost invisibly, in part of that panel we see a small horse contained within a tectiform shape as if caged.

Ripoll Perelló quotes Leroi-Gourhan: “The whole arrangement gives the impression of those incoherent figures nevertheless linked one to another by a common rhythm that someone doodles on a piece of paper while talking on the telephone.”

I cannot say that our guide showed us this panel. I remember strong musical tones and spooky acoustics when our guide struck certain stalagmites in one chamber, offering this as a kind of natural xylophone. I remember the hole

in the ground where coins several centuries old were found one day long ago, and I remember the extraordinary horse and reindeer, especially the reindeer, back to back and vertically arranged—I remember having to bend a bit to see them. Our guide seemed like he was in a hurry.

In the Corner of the Tectiforms in El Castillo, repetition and variation seem in dialogue. Rectangular forms bisected once or twice horizontally and once or twice vertically, the lines single, simple lines or doubled, with the space between filled in solid, or with hashmarks, or empty, the patterns of lines and spaces between them never identical, one tectiform to the next. Some of the tectiforms are quite fully squared off, but any number are bowed, as if curving through space. Two have what look like swarms of red dots arranged to one side of them (the left), a thick stream of them several rows thick. (One such stream appears to cross a deep crevice in the rock, or to emanate from it in both directions, up and down.) One is simply a rectangular form with one edge marked by steady hashmarks all the way across like a piano keyboard. One is a

large rectangular form empty but for one tiny rectangular portion in the lower right hand corner filled in black. One square is made up of dots in neat rows arranged to form thick walls around an empty center. One oriented horizontally looks like a box containing two thickly drawn uppercase L's, arranged in mirror image, with the lower point touching the corner and the uprights separated by a 'blank' space. Las Chimeneas apparently has similar signs. Nearby Chufin as well.

I almost had a head-on collision coming around a blind curve climbing a mountain road trying to find Chufin. Never found it.

The panel of signs in Las Monedas is placed at the probable point of entry to the painted gallery in prehistoric times.

El Castillo ends in the Gallery of Discs, two long rows of large red dots all along a narrow passage more than a hundred meters long. Where it ends the ceiling rises abruptly and most impressively, dropping huge stalactitic columns, and there is a representation of what Peña and Ceballos del

Moral call “a proboscid (elephant or mammoth?),” one of only two such discovered to date on the Cantabrian coast. I don’t believe we were shown that image either of the two times I visited. I don’t remember following the red discs all the way down.

Bara-Bahau, Font-de-Gaume, Rouffignac, Niaux, Bédheilac, La Vache, El Castillo, Las Monedas, Tito Bustillo, El Castillo, Les Combarelles, Bernifal, Rouffignac, Pech Merle, Cougnac.

I remember a huge concrete pipe twice as tall as I am and as long as a truck, in the woods at the side of the trail when I first starting walking, covered in graffiti inside and out, sometimes with an old sleeping bag or a busted cooler in it, or new bits of trash scattered about.

In Las Monedas a beautifully drawn horse lacks head and neck and shoulder and stands in mid-air oriented toward another confusing scatter-cluster of signs, random-seeming dashes and loops, one prominent, darker line heavily ridged like a comb—a harpoon, Ripoll Perelló suggests, other

darker, filled-in forms, one possibly star-like, one possibly humanoid, two like a fat exclamation point.

This place, right here.

At El Parpalló near Valencia more than five thousand painted or engraved plaquettes were laid down over a period of 13,000 years from the Gravettian through the Magdalenian, “whereas contemporaneous habitation sites in the area had hardly any,” says Dr. Clottes.

My notes say “los discos / red // then neg. hand // then” a drawing of two diamond shapes touching at their midpoints.

“It is now time to examine how the common rhythms such as acquiring, making, walking, performing and attending now linked the different scales of regions and locales in the Upper Paleolithic to form new and specific skills for living.” (Gamble)

Many animal images lack heads. Missing ends of appendages—hooves, paws, feet—is even more

common, as much the norm as not. Incomplete figures abound in every manner of incompleteness, though whether the image is in fact complete, in some way completed in the act of making it, we will never know. Human figures virtually always lack feet and hands, whether drawn, incised, or sculpted as in the case of the female figurines. Heads are often missing or barely indicated and faces almost never present unless, as is often the case in human representations, only the head is present. Animal heads too sometimes appear without bodies: at Niaux among many other examples there is a hole in the rock in the shape of a reindeer head seen frontally, an impression helped along by the set of antlers drawn rising above it. (We've seen a reindeer drinking from a hole before too.) Sometimes too animal heads appear but in much reduced, microcephalic form, as the Spotted Horses of Pech Merle, or the famous and ravishing so-called Chinese horses of Lascaux.

Vertical orientation of images, as the back to back horse and reindeer of Las Monedas, is also very common, though by far the more common,

default position is horizontal, as if imagining the ground to be oriented as ours is.

“The activities of attending and attention are essential.”

At Kostenki, Ripoll Perelló says, Efimenko found a little statue of a herbivore deliberately made without a head.

“People were now structured by what they did, what they brought to a locale and how they performed. There was attention to the role of objects as independent agents structuring action, while in previous eras it had been attention only to other people. This change allowed attachment to social occasions and gatherings through the resources of the extended network. Previously, attaching to gatherings had been negotiated solely through the resources of the intimate and effective networks as at Bilzingsleben and Maastricht-Belvédère.”

Some of the female figurines at Dolní Věstonice appear to have been made expressly to explode in

the process of firing the clay—this is long before any evidence of ceramics for use as vessels of any kind, unless the making of the figurine and then firing and deliberately destroying it can be seen as a kind of vessel, which of course it can. This set or sequence of operations evidently held great interest for uncountable centuries, if it is not still ongoing.

In El Castillo a beautifully almost baroquely drawn upright male bison with a possible spear in its back has a distinctly human face—the whole front of its head looks like a human face—resembling the Pharoah of Rouffignac.

I keep thinking I'm getting to the end of it, when it opens up again from within and keeps going.

In El Castillo too between the tectiforms and the discs, isolated in a chamber in the middle of the cave, a bison emerges from a stalagmite with the help of some faint and finely incised lines to draw the image out. The bison is upright like a man is upright—erect on two hind legs—but these are bison legs, not human like *Trois Frères'* dancing

bison-headed figure clearly shows. The legs and tail and back and hump and head, and even certain features of the face, like the eye, are fully formed by the chemical and mineral processes of stalagmite formation, with black paint only emphasizing the hump (and traces of it elsewhere further modeling the body) and fine lines marking the face and head. A pair of horns is the only purely human addition to the image.

There may be one in La Pasiega too.

What he calls “thermal shocking was therefore intentional, something a modern potter would not contemplate . . . where the process of making and firing” (that is, making and unmaking . . . still a form of making) “was the most important activity rather than achieving a durable final product. It was the way the clay models exploded in the two kilns excavated at Dolní Věstonice I that mattered and not their future as long-lasting images [Figure 7.15]. Perhaps the analogy is with a firework which may look impressive as a rocket but its significance is an exploding, temporary star-burst in the night sky.”

For Gamble exploding figurines have to do with locations, with marking locations as gathering places, which means marking points in time, too—marking a kind of collective attention, a way of binding expanding networks of social relation. He speaks of rituals of attachment and detachment, including greeting and farewell rituals, attaching to and detaching from social spaces and encounters, and including burial, “an extreme case of a detaching ritual.”

A male skeleton from the Gravettian found in Brno in 1891 with “a complex array of grave goods. These included a mammoth scapula, tusks, horse teeth and the ribs and skull of a woolly rhino. There were also more than 600 *Dentalium* shells as well as two large perforated stone discs and fourteen smaller discs carved in a variety of raw materials” plus “three carved ivory pieces, the head, body and left arm of a marionette . . . the thread holes for the strings to attach the legs to the body are visible.”

I’m going.

In one grave at Dolní Věstonice, which is marked by repeated use as a locale for burial, “all three heads were covered in ochre as was the pelvic area of the central body. Plenty of charcoal was found in the grave pit suggesting that the bodies had been covered by branches, set alight, and then quickly covered by earth to extinguish the fire since the bones were not burnt.”

When I started walking I imagined and then drew a map drawn in a continuous line showing the sequence of walks I’d made from home and back every day over weeks and months: it looked like either an anus or a star or both: a place where dispensable/expendable stuff gets moved on through and wasted—and a vortex of another kind.

“In the immediate area of the grave pit two fragments of a small limestone rod with notational markings were found. The reconstruction proposes twenty-nine marks which are interpreted as the notations for a lunar calendar month. These are grouped in units of 5, 7, 7, 5 and 5 which, if correct, would reflect changes in the moon’s brightness

as it goes through its waxing and waning cycle, a tangible example of measured performance.”

In the Salon Noir, in what Dr. Clottes calls “the most secret place in the rock,” tucked away out of view behind the busy fifth panel or alcove, not far from the reindeer-headed hole in the wall but in a space only accessible crawling on one’s knees, there is “an isolated, mysterious and unfinished figure of an animal or man.”

“Attaching and detaching rituals helped create the Dolní-Věstonice-Pavlov locale as a place. This was achieved through people’s varied involvement and experiences with the locale as a social occasion rather than simply as a gathering or encounter. [Table 3.1].” In another grave “the heads of all four individuals . . . are heavily ochred. Attention is being drawn to the face, the focus for interaction, greeting and recognition and with spoken language the prime source of negotiation” and ochre is “plastered over their pelvic areas” as well. “Drawing attention to the head and the groin of the dead with blood red pigment in this detaching ritual echoed the archaeologically invisible

attaching ritual of birth and blood. Arrival and departure, attaching and detaching to social life, had a shared symbolism. These rituals partitioned the temporal continuum.”

I keep walking.

Beads decorate the heads, necks, wrists, waists and feet of the skeletons.

The figure of the hum/animal is located on a wall where any number of other figures would fit, and the Salon Noir is given to placing figures in groups, but this one is alone.

“Ambiguity and alternative interpretations of performances are introduced into social relationships. An individual’s intimate network is limited by time and numbers. But the quality of the ties which bind its members is such that relationships are more often than not unquestioned, unanalyzed and hence unambiguous. The effective component of an individual’s personal network has far more possibilities for competition, negotiation, creativity and hence ambiguity.”

One distinguishes well, Dr. Clottes says, the two lower limbs and knees and the beginning of a belly as if leaning slightly forward. But the line that seems to mark the rear reaches too far to be human, if you ask me, pointing in the direction of an animal's hindquarters and stopping just short of a tail, or perhaps forequarters, stopping short of a neck.

A matter of three lines.

Incomplete possible anthropomorph.

“Moreover, the association with fire draws the social occasion” of exploding figurines “into the domestic setting of the household, and the social/spatial context for the negotiation and performance of bonds in the intimate and effective networks extends into further networks.”

End of the hole in the rock face.

“The extended network became a source of power and . . . such categories as the ‘other’ were defined.”

“The dead, as ancestors, now formed part of the extended network of the living.”

“The elision between absence and distance and the expression of the extended network that has no practical limits is well demonstrated beneath the shelter of the enduring Pavloské hills.”

The reclining female reindeer at Font-de-Gaume being licked by the male contains the outline of a mammoth. Tectiforms are nearby. A bison elsewhere in the cave harbors a ghost face: another such stares out behind a bison facing a line of mammoths.

“The most obvious archaeological example of this occurs within the landscape of habit where raw materials start to be transferred over greater distances and in more altered states.”

This is such a place.

It was a beautiful bright June day, I had a car and a map, I was looking for the cave and came upon it unexpectedly, suddenly around a curve, not where

I thought I was (in fact coming from the opposite direction). But there it was: a sign, a path, the wide square mouth of the cavern off the road against a green hill. There was nobody in sight: a few cars parked along the edges of the road, wildflowers I had no names for. There was a ticket booth and a souvenir counter built up against the rock wall just inside the cave mouth, I paid a quiet man sitting there, there were some other people standing about, a young couple with a small child, a couple of others on their own, waiting under the curving wall inside. Soon they opened the iron door and led us on foot to the little electric train.

On the way back I went a different way, and took notes obsessively as I went. I don't know why but suddenly I started walking in the watershed almost every day. "My thought world is jumpy these days" (my notes say) "though whether jumpier or less so than at other times, or than other people or the human animal generally, I can't say." That first day I could feel my mind sliding and shifting as I walked along the trails: at times it felt like this shifting was my main awareness, the thought that most preoccupied my mind. But then I would become aware of it again,

because my thoughts had turned elsewhere. Or I would see something that arrested my attention.

I hadn't been out in a while but thought it was time for a walk, figured I'd walk down to the shed and go around the lake a couple of times. I picked up the trail the usual way at the bottom of Poison Ivy Lane, hopping the little chain and over to the tracks, walking along in broiling sun and dead muggy air. Five minutes to the big black trestle that crosses overhead, just beyond where the trail I remember cuts through the woods to the watershed loop around the lake, but when I got there I saw there were three different trails so I walked on ahead to the trestle and stood under its shade. This is something I had never done. Then I saw another trail on the other side, climbing up behind the concrete abutment, and I followed it. "I don't know where my mind is this whole time: this is the first moment I can recall taking spontaneous action." There were lots of spiderwebs crossing the trail, I picked up a stick to sweep them aside, but the path was otherwise clear, a rising track of beaten dirt, on which I slipped once, sliding back on my wrists and knees. That arrested my attention. At the top there was a broad

trail, back over the trestle or off into the woods. I went left, crossing back between the tall black steel walls of the structure to the other side of the tracks below, and kept going. “I can’t say what I was thinking: for some time already I had been considering how to make use of this walk somehow in a piece of writing, if possible as a way of writing about the caves—thinking up titles, or openings, conceptual frameworks flitting through my brain. Perhaps at this point I was thinking along these lines, or else castigating myself for doing so, telling myself that a walk is for walking, not writing, that I am cursed with writing and with my jumpy mind.” On the other side the trail passed through a thin patch of woods. The shade was good and I was glad to find such a path around a simple corner not far from home. Was there a trail down into the woods there? There was an opening somewhere, maybe there, but I kept on and came to another bridge, a long broad concrete slab with just a low concrete lip on either side, suspended high above a clearing, a kind of meadow of tall grasses screened by a stand of trees, and then the creek beyond. The meadow was a crescent of bright green seen from that

height: I expected to see a moose walking through it, though there isn't a moose around here for a thousand miles. "I do have faith that something's going to come of this, though I have been at it for months with nothing to show for it—pages and pages of nothing. I have doubt as well. It is a question of faith and doubt I suppose after all. Also a question of: Going In—and Coming Out—or Going Out, and Coming Back. A question of some big metaphors, in other words, and the metaphor feels like distance, somehow, indirection, deformation, and then the subject becomes the opposite of distance—presence, the unspeakable absence of distance. Muteness is all." Though metaphor also feels like an absolute collapse of distance—or maybe just a partial collapse—in either case, it keeps on keepin' on. "The elision between absence and distance and the expression of the extended network that has no practical limits. . . ." People or the people as a form of language, in other words, a metaphor of themselves. But I wanted to pierce the woven shade or whatever whoever says with my green thought I wanted to keep walking with my mind full of gnats to imagine ourselves myself, to

imagine it with my body. So I went out every day, each day extending the network of my trails, finding them laid out before me, and making them myself. (What else could I do? I'd be doing that even without trying.) I crossed over the creek as far as Refinery Road before turning back and descending the way I'd come and through the woods to the watershed ponds, and walking around them. "Hyacinths. Pond being pumped into ditch around back." The next day the same path was covered in spiderwebs again, and after climbing up and crossing over, I found the trail leading down again and followed it to a broad sandy beach beside the creek, with treadmarks in the sand, and a giant cookout circle (fairly recently but not very recently used), and coming back up and over the trestle again, I pushed through the woods on trackless railbed to where the old line split in two, and followed both: I could hear and then see trailworkers and their trucks down to the left, where they were opening further stretches of the trail, clearing away dense overgrowth, and to the right brought me on ankle-rocking gravel to an overpass I knew, linking one map with another. "Back down to tracks and home." I saw new things

that day, most notable the isolated section of a large concrete pipe along the side of the trail to the right. For a long time this marked 'the limit' in my mind, tho it quickly came to be invisible, assimilated to the familiar, a point at which I'd barely gotten going... as my trails extended... and one day it disappeared entirely. "The cut in the meadow running with water—from the shed? Smashed glass on lower bridge parapet." A dead dragonfly along the tracks. Words painted on the trestle walls I hadn't seen the first day walking between them: CAMERON IS GAY and RIOSCHOO. Coming out of the woods, a train went by, as on the day before. In the next days, I climbed down into the meadow under the bridge, that bright green crescent, not so magical from down below—"Snakes? Murderers? Fugitives? Poison ivy, spiders like at home. Snake burrows? Mosquitos." I found workers with their trucks, "alright if I come through here?" "It shore is!" I'm trying to feel something out the way water felt its way into Rouffignac, like I feel my way along these trails, "the hole that grows," what doesn't exist yet but is always there, a question of discovery. I'm doing reconnaissance out on the trails, scoping out the

paths and directions and conditions, the specific possibilities of the local terrain, something like a hunter's or gatherer's impulse, to find and know what's around, but also the impulse of prey, self-protective and contingent, "a post-arboreal impulse though no doubt related to arboreal ways, sitting perched with eyes and ears open... continuous discovery even of familiar trails" or especially so. A whole ganglion of impulses that run counter to a sense of the world as already given, known, and as it appears to be—that deepest desire countered by another deepest recognition: that the world is not ever entirely as it appears to be. "Not clear why this is such a problem, or how to say what the problem is." I deliberately leave pen and paper behind, go look, come home and write. Why write? It's the back and forth. I call the places to mind, and set down later what I saw. "Enough with the constructing of sentences!" I see that it's RUIESOO, also other texts on the concrete lip of the high bridge: JESSE HAD HOT SEX WITH CAMERON and BIG HAK THA BUTCHA. "In the meadow I see a kind of trail, then realize it must be an animal trail—I can't quite picture it clearly now, a few hours later,

a trampled path through lower grass from the trees to the high grasses along the edge of the cut? and then it disappears—something like that.” One day I head down further beyond where I’d gone the first time and find a sign “Warning: Petroleum Pipeline” and a field of what looks like corn but isn’t corn, then looks like the bank of a creek, then I hear water, then see it but can’t quite tell its flow. Branch or tributary? I walk up further to see if there’s a better vantage, and suddenly see a small valise with a couple of bundles of clothes atop it, placed carefully against a tree trunk off the trail overlooking the creek. I immediately step back and turn around and head back—the ground is a bit muddy and I’m looking to step carefully and realize I’m looking at other footprints alongside my own, heading the same way. (The valise and clothing were dry—recently placed.) “I got back up on the ridge and out to the trestle and stop and pause and down.” Sudden appearance of a dog, not unfriendly, unstopping—“always forget how long this trail is”—then a man approaching from the shed. The Can Man? No, a kid I’d seen around, pale face and pale blue eyes, matted blond dreadlocks and a knitted rasta cap, carrying and in

the process of dropping two cardboard cases of beer coming apart and spilling cans on the ground. “Hey man.” He’s zonked, dull-eyed, friendly, says something about his friend who’s gone to get a backpack to haul the beer back to “our camp” he calls it, “yeah man we’re bums but we’re just camping it’s cool but it’s a long-ass way just to get our beer.” We were standing in the sun, he’d picked up the cans but the cartons were shot and some cans fell again. I picked them up for him and noticed again the beautiful drum tied to his belt, “hey beautiful drum, man,” yeah thanks, from Indonesia, he told me, they have a bunch of drums and crystals, they buy crystals and sell them and they have drums, they’re just camping out, his friend went to get the backpack. He’d stood for a long moment with the cans on the ground before bending to them. He invites me, I think, to come hear them play, or to look at crystals, and tells me there’s a bike in the woods up ahead, if I see it, it’s his. Take care, man. Then he calls to his dog in some other language, dog language maybe, and I find my way back to the watershed trail. Scare up a big heron out of the ditch on the other side, flies off toward back woods so slowly along the wall of

trees it looks like it's going nowhere, but far outpacing me. "Also the business of leaving the sticks—3 days worth of spiderweb sticks, today I used the first one again, left it again on that flattened crust of shirt by trackside." An egret flew right over me, its feet together out back make an arrowhead shape at the end of leg shafts. My territory had shrunk a bit, come up against a constraint, an anxious condition with flashes of imagined terror. I could imagine if the guy with the backpack would kill me (or, I imagined him, oddly, stealing my shirt, or my camera if I brought it), the blond kid would say "That is so weird, dude"—or would join in. "These are just possibilities conjured by the space of the creek trails. ... But I don't want to intrude on their camp, which cuts off that trail for a while." Though I enjoyed meeting him. "Walking along back of loop by overlook I catch myself humming the Beverly Hillbillies theme in my head while I'm talking, in my head, about something—how to hold it in my head to write about it, maybe—while my eye and attention is also constantly snagged by this and that provoking little sparks and shooters of thought—seems less jumpy even after a few

days, but still—like I hardly see what I’m looking at.” That’s about when the heron jumped. I’m always constructing sentences in my head. One day the clock and the camera: shot graffiti under overpass: I have no legs. Work Sucks. We are here. Poo Nanny. Beyond—a trail off to right, to creek branch, and further down two trails off to left, for later. A kind of super speed in slow motion. “The watershed is at the edge of town.” Continuing hominid thought as I walk, territories, encounters, fears, excitements of terrain and biosphere, of others and ourselves, collecting primordial impulses. Back another way through city service and repair vehicle area, strange pumps and hummings of water treatment, “large heron standing tall in little back pool flaps off. Don’t know which way I’ll go.” Found another way through from one railbed to another up and over a thickly wooded ridge, following a clear zigzag trail completely overgrown. RUIES111 or RUIES0111. Meet You at the Station When the Train Comes Along, or whatever it’s called, also some Marines Fight (or Recruitment) Song, and Green Icy Mountain. “Territory shrinking (with crystal bums and trail workers) and growing . . . every day scope out new trails and

rework/cover familiar ones. Plenty more walking to be done. Draw a map.” Coming back out onto tracks one day after two hours walking through woods I had no idea what I’d been thinking about that whole time which put me in a kind of panic although it’s exactly what I set out to do, to lose myself. I immediately started thinking about how to describe this state of thoughtlessness (if that’s what it was). What is my mind doing? Bad question. I know you don’t want to hear about it. I don’t want to hear about it. I’m going for a walk. I try to start again. North and south, east and west don’t have much bearing when I think about the trails and creeks, the trails and creeks curve and diverge by infinitesimals of degree, and when I think about them in terms of cardinal directions I only end up surprised by where I find myself. “The experience of walking the trails and creeks is of relations that are not foursquare but consecutive, variable and repetitive.” Nothing but old news, that northeast-southwest belongs to maps, and that walking belongs to the earth. Another element of walking is that much of what comes to mind along the trails and creeks—to my mind, anyway, among the garbage and flickering shadows

of daily life—the stuff that feels like thought or even insight bears the quality of old news, simple, even stupid recognition. For instance trails and creeks go every which way. Being in the woods I see that the town has edges, and that there is no end to walking along them, or away from them (to the edges of others). There is a perimeter to the space, marked by roads and properties, but no end to the woods, fields, creeks, trails, which are different every day. It is all infinitely small. There is nothing to be afraid of (no news). I'd been out walking for three weeks. "Yesterday a small heron (young) up and uncertainly away, then a big one with a fish or frog in its beak up and out of the ditch and back, long and slow, in a curve, to the wee back pond, where it stood, with the thing in its beak, motionless. Two big black dragonflies approaching and then zipping overhead joined—front to rear?" Another carton of beer cans tumbled at the side, unopened. Sometimes it's geese my heart calls to. "Always a matter of standing against, resisting something that threatens to envelop, some deadening of the mind, attention, spirit, feeling. Another old story: deadening of spirit, go to the woods." So many old

stories we live them simultaneously but at different speeds. Deep riches but part of the deadening also, the old familiar default categories of thought, too many ready-made stories that it's hard to understand you've never done this before, that it's meaning doesn't already exist—whatever: walking in the woods, clearing away spiderwebs, having hunter-gatherer thoughts . . . all old stories. “Mr. Plenty wants to be able to see what's in front of him. It's his perennial obsession. The oldest story: or second: first there was the story of coming out of the woods, then there was the one of going back when life in the savannah towns gets too buggy—back to the woods to cleanse the mind and senses. School of presence and attention and calm.” One day I took the lower railbed out from the old overlook to the school—a path I hadn't walked because I knew where it led, out to the road (I could see it)—now I saw a wooden footbridge down in the woods. “Then across behind school back through those woods—there's a pond back there too, and various watercourses down off the neighborhood and back to the shed—and imagining the thread of woods that follows on the other side of Union, where I came out in the sun,

over into downtown by the jail and Lust Park.” I have to come back day after day to begin to be able to see what I’m looking at, where I’m at. “Today I significantly increased my territory of trails, looping a thread around a whole unexplored area tho most of it is wasteland.” Up and down and up and back to sunny meadow snake meadow grassy footpath piles of dirt muddy treadmarks sudden vistas. “Already I can’t reconstruct some of this.” I don’t know where I am sometimes. Music in my head. Rhythms of the walking stick touching down every third or fourth step, then the breath is going too, another syncopation. (Meanwhile also a song from somewhere floating in my head.) My feet, my legs want to go walking, never mind what I’m going on about in my head, never mind what I see (the path in front of my feet, often as not)—my legs want to go walking. “(sens d’écoulement)” I watched today from the high bridge over the creek. It had rained hard a couple of days ago and then I didn’t get out yesterday, and I wanted to see what water was flowing. The upper pond, once a lima bean, had become a pork chop or the face of a porpoise. For two weeks I made a map every day. Sometimes the whole system of trails and woods,

fields and creeks, sometimes smaller sections at higher resolutions, sometimes just the way the water went (off the streets by tributaries to the creek), and at several orientations to the compass. “I’m afraid all I can hope to do is describe (by some fashion of description) what it is I have not done, and cannot do.” I started out on the porch, like my people’s people before they were people in the trees, appreciating the vantage, developing my senses, fears and pleasures. It felt like desperation—I liked being there, but had no choice—and now looks like invaluable research. I can’t begin to say what a mess my mind is. What the maps leave out—streets don’t align, only trails in relation to each other, and the unreal spaces created in between like spaces of infinite dream—is the useful part: not maps of caves but caves of maps. “The places in the world are infinite in variety, number, and extent, although they may be disappearing. There are different-sized infinities, as mathematicians affirm.” I go out every day. “Kids in the playground sound like a forestful of starlings, grackles, crows, and higher, longer shrieks, all the way down the lane almost to Union.” The creek rises, the fallen cottonwood

gone. It's taken hardly any time at all to turn the feeling of discovery and exploration into the feeling of routine. I started walking during the hottest days of August and this is November, four months from unexpected excitement to pleasant mechanical ritual exercise. "I get dressed and walk into town without my keys, wallet, coins, pen, scraps of paper in my pocket, and belt. It's even better than spending all day in pajamas. (I feel more naked and indolent.)" I write something yesterday and today it looks like nonsense or stuttering noise or bald misconception—between yesterday and today the meaning of my little scrawls is transformed beyond recognition (tomorrow this will seem like bombast). For a long time I wrote nothing. When speaking of the caves . . . The subject of the caves . . . . The caves are, first, perhaps . . . "The ground has been covered and the chamber echoes. The space has been entered and changed and something remains." Echo chamber in which I hear the voices that have gone before me speaking and singing our way in the world: our feelings and imaginings, and what we know of going in (going down) and coming out, of mouths of caves and journeys into darkness,

a continuous background hum of archetypes and metaphors ramifying like the branches of an underground cavern: broaching of the unknown, crossing of thresholds, tales of exploration, discovery, pursuit . . . “Fear.” Forward. “. . . (I am no longer myself) . . .” First time out in six months walking the tracks what I take to be a miniature horse at first, then a deer, or a fox, turns out to be a dead dog, with a collar still around its neck, fur on its face and some of its torso and limbs, but ribs and legbones exposed clean white, and a big hole in its abdomen, all hollowed out under gleaming white ribs. Still in a running position. And later, a raccoon—just the tail and hips. The maps I made eight and nine months ago were never very accurate or complete as representations of what the watershed was at the time, but now they are without relation to the place. “(It’s the coming back to the place.)” The basic questions ramify like the hominid family tree or any other branching, rooting thing: what are we asking? why? “I can only step a step.” Walking over the creekbridge, looking down, something orange bright scrap of fabric on a log? seems deliberately stowed there, not washed up—the eyes adjust—a

person sitting there? the orange thing attached to the belt of a person sitting there? the eye seeks out patterns, like figures in cave walls or faces in trees. Inchworm hanging from the brim of my cap (“my totem”)—I leave it be, then carefully remove it to a leaf placed on the ground—doesn’t seem to be moving along anymore but still looking poised, humped up, ready to go—inert. Coming back later I find the leaf and inchworm’s still there, looking more inert still, and another bug right there too, its face up against inchworm. Caves are holes in maps, also to be mapped: spaces not under the sun. (stepastep.) Looking back over maps made months ago—some of *them* look like faces, or other things, molecular diagrams, fried eggscapes . . . one looks like a running man, some resemblance to myself, big head on a stick figure, with an arrow and words “Schema for Daily Threads.” Returning repeating going over the same ground over and over, going back again and again. Two days later, sprays of false honeysuckle bending over the pathway now cut down—where I left inchworm on a leaf. Scales of time and space. Walking up new paved path from lower railbed trail to upper, come across a white ball of a bug—

like the tiniest pebble of Styrofoam—hanging by an invisible filament at about my eye level and dropping slowly but steadily. (Scales of speed, too.) Totally ball-like, hardly an indication of any differentiation in form—tho on the side facing up, a slight depression, and less purely white. I watch it descend, slow, slow, almost leave a few times but force myself to watch it all the way down. Finally it reaches the blacktop and rests a moment, but instead of uncurling and crawling off, as I expected, it seems not to like the surface it has landed on, and it ‘bounces’ up—eating up some filament, I guess, to lift itself off—and drifts an inch or two and settles again—repeating this maneuver several times. (The filament is anchored at an invisible point high above, one of the trees arching over the path.) I leave. Later I see three or four of these white bugs hanging, farther up the path. They look like pillbugs curled around themselves, with hardshell facing down—only smaller, and stark white, and swinging from invisible filaments. Later still I wipe my arm with my other hand—some tickling sensation, feels like some web I must have walked through—and come away with a thickish white smear on my hand—one of those

bugs—a sort of white powder, a bit greasy. Scales of frequency: no more of those white bugs hanging ever since: just that one day. Pipeline being laid between tracks and creek, heavy equipment flattening Snake Meadow into a scar, and trees all along the bank on the other side of the bridge being chewed up, spit out, hauled away. Pipeline worker “oh they’ll put all kinds of crap through that pipe.” Now there’s a bright fresh yellow stripe on the blacktop of the biketrail. “stuck figure”? All true! All true! Two guys sleeping by the track behind watershed near overpass—sleeping bags, beanies, invisible, bright blue lump of sleeping bags from afar—some roll of possessions beside them, I didn’t want to look too long. Two human individuals in transit, waiting for the next train. “Aft: guy with bow and arrows in a kind of racklike holder, plus camouflage, ‘Hi.’” What looks like a weedwhacker or some such gardening machine turns out a green plastic lid to a cup, and a red (opaque) plastic cup laying up against a long thin stick. Climb down around creekside down Snake Meadow trail, under bridge and up the other side, a bulldozed slope formerly steeper and impassible with trees and brush—leading up to another

broader leveled area still up above the old dirtbike campfire site by creekedge. Up above, bump into a guy who knows a lot about pipeline—had worked on it, and “walked the whole thing, 57 miles”—he was out walking with a woman, his wife maybe, never said a word, both of them had walking sticks, tall sturdy ones, as I approached them near the bridge I had a primitive impulse that I should have a stick too—I overheard him saying something about the pipeline, so I asked him if he knew how they were going to get the pipeline under the little cut that runs from the watershed to the creek, and the other bigger cut that comes in under the railway bridge, alongside the meadow called Sunny Meadow—the guy said “it’s already done, it’s under there,” and described a boring mechanism—a machine to bore tunnels in earth, that lays the pipeline down there. No trace of pipeline except the large flat scar of leveled dirt, which will look like nothing again in two years . . . but enchanted Snake Meadow all gone. Pipeline comes from Lake Tomás, to South Roxana, for gasoline to flow the other way—gasoline brought up river from Oklahoma or the Gulf and beyond, on barges, to Roxana, then inland through this

pipe, which at Lake Tomás hooks up with other pipes that reach the Ohio and from there, points further east. “. . . from the rational mind of alert consciousness, eventually, to the autistic mind of hallucinating consciousness . . .” The little spiral I thought I saw—I saw—in the mud, on a little prominence of mud on the ground, glistening, when I looked back there was no spiral. Begin to hallucinate the spiral everywhere. Electrical transformer looks like a towel someone’s draped over a line to dry, a basketball backboard and hoop looks like . . . a basketball backboard and hoop, then not like that, then like again—which is what it is. Reading Sanchidrián, late in the book, on the verge of history, after Neolithic into Bronze Age, Schematic Art—thinking of the development from Paleolithic motifs from Chauvet to Rouffignac or Las Monedas, then Azilian and the Epipaleolithic, then the geometric-linear and Macroschematic and the Levantine modes, followed by the shift to Schematic, which feels like a kind of writing, like a kind of syntax, or at least the basis for one—reduced symbolic . . . and thinking of the container of the act of making them, and how the Levantine seems more

narrative and less specific in a way, more formulaic, and the Schematic—a progress away from the spiritualized act of each moment and toward a kind of formulaic application . . . and now in writing, further down that road into abstraction, the mark disappearing in the meaning of the mark, even still the act (of writing, even) carries forward that paleo-spiritual thrust or yearning. Mark of the living, irreplaceable moment. “The lack of reality of the human figures—cartoon heads, or later, stick bodies of the Neolithic.” Black tights crumpled on the ground along traintracks, each day as I pass I see it’s been moved. “(hey) what’s (up) Jack?!?” like one sound, exclamation in the form of a question or a clearing of the throat, one crackling sound with a preparatory preverbal vocalization at the front end and a small hiccup in the middle—answered by “how’s it goin” deep primate utterance. Watching the creek—watching the sky moving in the creek. Cold day, creek frozen at the edges, still, but moving it seems like a frictionless slide as if upstream and to the left sliding across the surface of the still water the image of clouds drifting in the barest of breezes, barest of clouds, big old grey sky just sliding along

made visible only in reflection. Today I was out there again, the creek is more frozen now, almost entirely so, only an occasional big hole in the ice where the water is visible. Sens d'écoulement. Sky again grey and featureless, and I now see it's the creek that's moving, as it was yesterday, the surface of the water rendered invisible by the featureless grey reflection, so it seems the grey is moving—but looking up, the sky is motionless—you're expecting clouds, which aren't there. Water moving invisibly as water, not so much reflecting clouds as embodying them. "It's a kind of religion, really, walking." A world beyond myself in which I have my roots, myself and the cosmos held as if in one order, a kind of trance, in fact, low-key religious ecstasy (the eyes pulsing on a bright day looking down through the awkward safety slats of the bridge to the frozen creek below), not a form of exercise in the contemporary sense of tending to the temple of the body for health or beauty or both, which may be a religious impulse itself, but not mine—not exercise but a kind of prayer, or better, ritual engagement of an elemental self. Without making too big a claim for it. Half the time I'm walking with the theme song from The

Beverly Hillbillies in my head, hardly a tale of the sublime on the face of it, tho who can say . . . elementalities too. “Who we are—all those generations coming down to us, all those hands and eyes and tongues.” My shadow passes over a snail . . . I don’t notice any reaction on the snail’s part, but I imagine that maybe there was one, some slightest slowing for the tiniest moment . . . and I imagine that this might alter events further along, somehow, in confluence with other micro-events, some bird arriving to eat the snail or not, or whatever—a version of the story of the butterfly’s wing in Sumatra ‘causing’ a storm in the Amazon—thinking of how each step, or non-step, engages in a world of consequences, tho by the time I’ve thought about it I’ve already taken dozens of other steps (and not taken countless others, interacting with countless others taken by countless others), incalculable and imponderable all of it. “Sometimes the shadow of a leaf falls on me. Everything matters.” I was walking in the woods today and I heard a sound that could only be human—turned out to be two boys (I only ever saw one, fleetingly) splashing rocks into the creek under the footbridge—I saw the head of

one of them, looking up at me as I crossed over and he disappeared under, looking down into his face for a moment—and I saw their two bikes leaned up against the railing of the bridge—one was an Aggressor model, the other a Zazz: and who says we aren't still living in a world of totems and amulets and magic incantations and spectral identification of ourselves with magical beings . . . gaining power through our imagined relationships? Horse and bison everywhere. Then there was the silent flash smile on the trail, a simian smile—coming toward me she smiled once which I saw out of the corner of my eye but she must have been unsure whether I'd seen it so she did it again just as we crossed, and I gave the same smile back—a quick chimplike closed-mouth smile, a flash, the ends of the mouth go up, the eyes do nothing. We still live in the world the Magdalenians lived in as well as our own—hell, we still live in the world chimpanzees live in, to some extent. “Focusing my mind on the what's-not-there, the not-present, the remembered and imagined—the caves in this case, the whole tradition of paleo art, not present to me but recalled to my mind on the porch . . . a living in the not-there and a conjuring—

imagining the cavewall painters engrossed in the diaphanous membrane between the there and the not there, thinking of images we carry in our minds, how present they are and not present at the same time, putting them on the wall (or portably, on bone or antler) was not to put them there but both to put and not put them there, to evoke their not-thereness too.” (Bone or antler or paper.) The mind is a border zone. It’s all one string drawn out over several billion years, Homo through the hominid line and the whole mammalian ramification all the way back to Uncle Slime Mold, tho we try with our nomenclatures to mark distinctions, set ourselves apart, mark degrees of kinship that mark distances elsewhere. “To whom am I speaking, and why? And why do you listen, if you are listening?” The beautiful unity—apparent unity—of Niaux is the result ultimately of separate actions, not the fruit of a pre-determined plan. The walls at Chauvet and elsewhere are often prepared by vigorous scraping—removing brownish surface soft rock, exposing whitish, harder underlayer, to draw on. Le Guillou says “all the pubic triangles occupy a privileged and perhaps essential position in the

construction of the parietal layout. They provide strong evidence for the real thematic structure that is closely associated with the cave's topography." "A labyrinth," Eshleman says, "is a folded (or crumpled) abyss." Space, altered by humans, becomes ritual/sacred, a place to return to for human/social purposes, says Gamble. "A break in the homogeneity of space" Eliade calls it, which "take[s] the form of an opening, by means of which passage is possible to some other realm." A hole. "All caves are dead ends, every cave is a dead end, a blind passage with blind branches." I started walking. "Poetry does the same thing, though more immediately on a contemporary global and then all-of-history scale, which maybe obscures/seems to crowd out the deeper past connections, which nevertheless persist—poetry, like the images in caves, like those early hominid gatherings to butcher a large beast together, a matter of engaging the mystic body beyond ourselves, the complex of empathy, dependence, recognition, and identification with one another and with the world 'around' us." The Deep Holy All Hominid Mind Body Historical Continuum Church of the Constant Communion is, like any

other, a metaphor. But prayer is continuous. Driving screws into hinges on cupboards under sinks, down on my haunches praying to my grandparents' greatest grandparents or in any of many other postures, doing things with wrists and fingers, ankles and knees. "The transition, anatomically from Neanderthals to Crô-Magnon peoples, behaviourally from an ancient to a modern pattern, and culturally from the Middle to the Upper Palaeolithic, represents, in evolutionary terms, the Other becoming Us," but to the extent that the Other does become us it is no longer other, and Us has no end—the mystic body of hominid history is only the beginning. Knowing us all as one flesh—the same claim any religion makes, though the All Hominid Church does without deities and fancy afterlives, does without the soul, even—enormously comforting even so to feel membership in this mystic body, exciting and soothing at once—forgiving, too. The comfort of the group, that animal comfort, and that largest of groups, including all the dead. Years ago I worked in a tower at the top of the stairs, and walking out the door of the office I reflexively glanced over my shoulder to the left at

the little bit of hallway extending that way—though there were no further offices down there, just some custodial closets, and never any foot traffic—before I headed to the right to the stairs . . . and I realized that I learned that gesture on the Serengeti, so to speak. (I have never been to Africa.) Leaving the protected space, venturing out into the vicinity: before you go one way, look in the other so you're not surprised by something coming up behind you. I extract a walnut from a shell with particular specialized and improvised movements of fingers and hands, instantaneous and effective. I find a date in a plastic bag under a towel on the kitchen counter—mmm, a date, sweet substantial thing—I don't smell it, I see it in my mind without even thinking, I know where it is because I know where such things are and because I know something (without even trying) about Mele's ways with towels and bags and bowls and fruit—I have to work hard, in a way, to lift the towel seize the bag identifying its contents unravel the plastic and retrieve the date with a swift manipulation of fingers and wrists—a complex process—all without thinking, hardly paying attention—and pop the date into my mouth and

take my time chewing it. These are all hominid skills. I turn and bend to throw away the empty plastic (there had been only one date left), swinging open the door to the trash container, tossing the trash into the bag (one bag into another) inside the container, then swing the door shut and straighten up, standing and turning . . . flat feet and swiveling pelvis, arms and hands and rhythms of coordination—all without deliberate thought, automatic behavior—hominid body mechanics. Gestures and acts tied to hominid preoccupations and tendencies, as in hiding trash away (and we're not the first to have thought of that problem), the plastic bag inside the trash bag inside the trash can inside the cupboard under the sinktop in the kitchen in the house, where we live, in this town, etc., not to mention the date is in my mouth and down in my belly—dealing with containers and the transporting of things, the making of hinges and plastics and papers . . . foraging. . . . “Carrying artifacts, be it a hat or a handaxe, is part and parcel of being a hominid.” Complex social arrangements beyond the house too inform my use of the trash container, group organization and reliability of

social systems to truck this trash out of here when the time comes etc., all evoked by these gestures. Almost any little thirty-second sequence like this would be similarly endless—even sitting alone motionless or sleeping we are still hominids—part of the power of the all hominid church community mystic body to me this endlessness in one continuous flesh and in every moment linking back vertically through all time in almost every gesture, all of us always one (a type of container, too, this body). Enumerating things, too, as Gamble discusses at length, which certainly has something to do with fingers as well. Counting and telling, your beads and your tale: accounting. I go back through old email files, deleting stuff, leaving lots and deleting lots, moving some . . . like scratching an old hominid itch: the hands itching, hands itch to hold, to carry, to have and to hold, to line up and count, to tell over and over . . . going through old email, straightening up the hoard of accumulated stuff, this is a stone that's been polished for a couple million years or more, operating here even in the (abstract electronic management form of thinking) mind, not even ordering literal stones or whatnot, bones . . . but

our hands have taught our brains to think. Our hands and our part in the social organism—our others—make our brains happen. Using a twist-tie, the skills and natural movements of joints and appendages involved in twisting one on or off—the kind of thinking involved (along with further skills and natural movements) in opening the drawer underneath the counter, and dropping the twist-tie in among other containers of containers (boxes of plastic lunch bags, foil and plastic wrap) and rubber bands, and then shutting the drawer (with the back of the hand) all in one swift ‘thoughtless’ motion: “. . . a cave, a subject that cannot be named, a ‘location’ in the mind, a gathering or proximity of several (or countless) considerations, related in ways that are essential to the understanding of each, and that are also inexpressible.” The brain, as Gamble tells me, citing many, is not in charge. Long way to come to discover what I already know, but ‘nothing new’ is exactly the point.

The cave images engage me in an experience of ‘pure presence’—an old tune—an experience of representation (instantly readable and profoundly indecipherable) which is also not a representation,

but (paradoxical image beyond the image) mere presence, the thing in itself—that transcendental dream—not appropriated, reframed, put to use, ‘understood,’ bought or sold, mastered, accounted for, not even named or i-den-ti-fied, fit into any schema—but the condition all art and love and faith aspires to: pure presence. The thing in itself, the as yet unknown. (Philosophers have explained it; understanding doesn’t help.) Of course for the Aurignacians these images and signs and markings did represent things (ideas, feelings), and were put to use, understood—still, some dimension of that pure or mere presence must have been at play for them too, or at least this is what I imagine, which is to say, I suppose, what I hope. The entrancing quality of the images—I can’t take my eyes off them—is an expression of that presence. You can try to think about them but the mind keeps collapsing on itself and you’re just looking or, sometimes it seems, not even looking but facing. . . . It’s a short step from there to walking off, and carrying them away in the mind as impossible objects—but what you’re carrying is the ideal of (ironically) presence (lost, since you’re walking away, but lost even when you’re looking at them). Being two places at once. Long way to come. Here

too I seem to myself stripped bare, no meaning, plain being. Staring.

“No meaning, plain being,” not really—but pointing in that direction, like an arrow or a long row of dots. Signs emptied of meaning, a kind of dream, a salve and a reassurance, possibly terrifying, too. A plunge into signs.

I saw the caves and didn't know what to do with them. So I started writing in Spring '01 to try to figure it out. The first words I wrote were “The caves themselves.” A few pages later: “The caves, no doubt, blah blah blah. To find a way to talk about them: impossible.” It wasn't going well. A few pages further on and I've begun walking. This was still summer, it's undated but headed “Coming Back to It.” (There are no caves or cave paintings here, or images of images, only words regarding my encounter with them, and recounting my efforts to process and express the experience of being there and seeing them.) It's twelve years later, sixteen since I first saw Rouffignac, twenty-four since I stood outside Altamira.

The cave images are central texts in the All Hominid Church, the scripture of our being, where the connection leaps furthest and roots the

faith. They are inarguable. They are immediacy itself, or pictures of immediacy, or both the thing itself *and* its image: conjurations of a state beyond the mind. If the Aurignacian rock wall was porous, breathing between worlds through the images that joined them, the modern rock wall is too: the other world, behind the rock, in the rock, of the rock, is not a spirit realm where creatures of various kinds communicate, but (maybe the same thing) a conceptual world where nothing is named, and where all that is, is nothing but all of us. There is no shaman to make that journey, or maybe every artist is one, or every one of us. When we listen in at that threshold, what do we hear? We place our ears against the rock, our eyes, tongues, noses, and skin. The unnamable brushes up against us. Not silence and darkness but not anything else, either. It flows and sustains.

All have mercy on ourselves and on each other.



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