

## Can We Get Inside the Aesthetic Sensibility of the Archaic Past?

by Frederic Will

### ABSTRACT

This essay is about getting inside the sensibility of the archaic past. [1] Can we get into the creative mind of the painter of *The Sorcerer*? Can we reconstruct the sensibility of prehistoric humans? Can we recover the humor of the prehistoric artist? Can we do it? After all, sense equipment is the same in men and women of all ages, and though each age inflects its sense usages uniquely, there should remain an underlying continuity among sensibilities. Shouldn't we be able to return into earlier forms of those usages? Can we tell whether we have been successful in accomplishing that return? Can just getting inside the sensibility of the past be of use to us in our own quest for humanity? [2] Or is there some other justification for a regression into the sensibility of the past? I tackle those questions here.

### KEY WORDS

archaic past, cave paintings, George Bataille, imagination, prehistoric art, shamans, *The Sorcerer*, word pictures

### Introduction

In the first panel I confront a famous prehistoric cave painting, *The Sorcerer of the Dordogne*. [View additional illustrations [here](#) and [here](#).] I ask whether we can get back inside the creative spirit of the artist of that painting. Can we know what the painting is about? And of course, how can we know whether we can know the painting? In the second panel I try to think ourselves back, through three small prose pieces, into the everyday prehistoric aesthetic sensibility. The kinds of people internalized here might well have been the kinds who created *The Sorcerer* cave painting. Can we get inside their creative instinct? In the third panel I look back again at the Sorcerer himself in an effort to grasp the painting. I query whether that painting is humorous and, if so, whether we can interact with its creator through his or her humor. Is that a way of getting back inside *The Sorcerer* and inside the painter of *The Sorcerer*? In the fourth panel I look back again at the Sorcerer himself, and at other prehistoric cave paintings, through the lens of Georges Bataille, the French philosopher and historian of culture. I see what Bataille has to say about the way we can get inside the archaic mind. Bataille's *Lascaux* is a study of the imagination required to go back into prehistory and divine its *mode d'opération*. Bataille takes us back, or raises the issue of taking us back, into the inner workshop of the prehistoric artist. In the fifth panel I look briefly at the distance separating us from incrementally more distant levels of the interiorized past. In this process of recovering the past inside us, extremities of regress raise issues of actually remembering the past we deeply are. Can we do it? In the sixth panel I inquire into the issue of the creative past as knowable inside us. I look to scholarship as a means for that kind of return into the sensibility of the archaic. Finally, I imagine what it can mean to get inside the inorganic. I project the template of a global historicizing imagination, thanks to which we might speculate on a whole person return to our Big Bang origins. I wonder out loud what the value is of approaching our primal creative past.

### Panel 1. *The Sorcerer*

*Seen from the front, this head has round pupilled eyes, between which descends the line of the nose; that line ends in a small arch. The upright ears are those of a stag; from the black band that surrounds the forehead emerge two powerful branches without frontal antlers . . . . There is no mouth, but a very long striated beard falling onto his chest . . . . A large black band surrounds the entire body...the feet, including the nails,*

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are cared for, and are stepping out into a motion like that of the 'Cakewalk' dance. The male organ, highlighted but not erect, is folded back . . . .

(Vu de face, cette tête a des yeux ronds pupillés entre lesquels descend la ligne nasale se terminant par un petit arceau. Les oreilles dressées sont celles d'un cerf; sur le bandeau frontal peint en noir émergent deux fortes ramures épaisses. . . . Il n'y a pas de bouche, mais une très longue barbe striée tombant sur la poitrine. . . . Une large bande noire cerne tout le corps... Les pieds, orteils compris, sont assez soignés et marquent un mouvement analogue à celui de la danse du 'Cakewalk.' Le sexe male, accentué, non érigé, est rejeté en arrière . . . .[3])

Word paintings of artworks mix genres and invite us to see with our ears. In the passage above, what is spaced out across the levels of syntax and sentence succession is to some degree what is given all at once in the visual. (The inner logic of "reading the visual" needs to be plotted carefully, for in certain details such reading resembles reading a text.) In great word-paintings, such as those of Winckelmann, of Lessing in the *Laokoon* and of Walter Pater in *The Renaissance*, we seem truly to see, while in textbooks describing visual art we see only in part, hearing at the same time. As a standard text puts it: "At Les Trois Frères, a site in the French Pyrenees, a human body with its interior muscles and anatomy depicted supports an animal head with antlers."[\[4\]](#) To feel let down by such passage is no more than to register the power of the word *sensibility*; an original art work is infused with a whole sensual-intellective energy that no mere description can do justice to.

How can we get back to the sense-wiring and artistic sensibility of an era distant from us? In the passage we began with, L'Abbé Breuil tries to surmount 14,000 years of time with some clear French sentences. But the effect is obtained with difficulty and only after the reader has supplied some imaginative gymnastics. So much for even a skilled verbal effort at description. Such a verbal effort may be equipped for returning with us to some aspects of pre-historical mind, but what about prehistorical sensibility? Isn't that quite different from prehistoric mind? What about a good visual reproduction? Will that vehicle take us farther than language toward summoning up *The Sorcerer of Les Trois Frères* as an expression of its creator's sensibility? We live in the age of visual reproduction, as Walter Benjamin said, and might incline to a natural preference for the visual replica.[\[5\]](#) Does the visual replica satisfy us more fully than the word picture? Does it seem better designed than words to encounter what is sensuously fine in the original? Or is there not still in the visual the aftertaste of limit, of not truly seeing the cave painting itself? If there *is* any truth in that sense of after-blink limit, can we say that the visual reproduction, as well as the verbal, tends to leave us unsatisfied, short of the real thing, reaching not quite to the sensibility level? Even though the real thing is visual and might seem to welcome the reproducer more readily than would a verbal target object? But why should the visual reproduction leave us as unsatisfied as does the word-painting? We ought to be able to get at the visual object more conclusively through a visual than through a verbal reproduction of a visual object. Can it be because we bring to the Sorcerer representation a hunger that can't be satisfied by looking at *any* kind of images of that cave painting, and a hunger to rejoin an earlier expression of our sensitivity? Have we run into the blank wall of the philosophical unreachable other, of that other turned grail-of-the-philosopher that has haunted the speculative thought of the last two centuries? Have we drawn a blank on getting inside the workshops of the creator of *The Sorcerer*?

What if we actually went to the Dordogne? Could we bring ourselves closer to re-experiencing the real thing by a trip to the *Grotte des Trois Frères*? Here the question before us becomes insistent: What is meant by "getting closer to the real thing?" Maybe there's no way of reaching *The Sorcerer* and its maker with educated feeling. What if we do reply by saying that there is no getting closer to the real thing, in this case *The Sorcerer*; that the real thing is always the same distance from us? We will then have to justify our counter-intuitive response. Did we really mean that taking a trip to Dordogne didn't bring us closer to *The Sorcerer*? That justification will take either of two forms. We may claim that this sensuous-cognitive appetite we feel for *The Sorcerer* is insatiable, and that therefore we can never know the object of our attention. No matter how close we get to *The Sorcerer*, we would not be close enough. Or we may claim that such an appetite is not an appetite at all but is something else. It is not the kind of thing that gets clear to its object and then knows its object. Either answer to the questions, "Does our sensibility ever perfectly embrace the archaic painting or ancient text? Does it ever truly get inside the archaic creative spirit?" will require a close look, for both alternatives open the whole issue of what historical cognition and sympathy are. They expose that whole dilemma of "getting inside of" that I referred to at the beginning. Either we don't really want to consume the other in a reincorporative act, or the knowing act is not exactly a striving to grasp the other. Both alternatives cast a radical query onto the issue of recapturing the archaic sensibility and undermine any benign metaphysics of a world in which part is perfectly harmonized with part (for example, the kind of pre-established harmony Leibniz imagined in his *Monadology*, or Alexander Pope inscribed into his "Essay on Man"). According to either alternative, it will make no difference in our recapturing of *The Sorcerer* if we go to Dordogne. Face to face, eye to eye, with the cave wall, it will make no difference. There is considerable doubt whether we can reincorporate *The Sorcerer* at all.

But we cannot quickly dispense with the desire to re-know and re-feel the archaic sensibility by dismissing that desire as too voracious or lacking desire for satisfaction, or as something other than a desire to grasp the other, perhaps a form of the knower's self-expression or a stage in psychic self-construction. Nor are we ready to dismiss the value of a trip to Dordogne for getting to know *The Sorcerer*. We easily understand the kind of case that can be made for this viewpoint, and in fact that case, so seemingly simplistic, is in the end one kind of winner, against all odds. I will assert that victory rather than prove it here. The defense of a theory of knowing is rooted deeply in many sets of assumptions, and I am not plowing those deep grounds here. I am trying a kind of sweet talk. I am trying to cozen us into believing that the sensibility of the artist of *The Sorcerer* is available to us in the cave itself.

The face-to-face is after all our native viewpoint. A simple scenario will remind us why this stance is native to us. Let's put it this way: We have come a long way from our bourgeois homes; we have spent bourgeois money; we have risen early on this particular morning. We are at the entrance to the grotto; we are watching our footing; we are coming out into the unexpected vast cave in which *The Sorcerer* is illuminated. We are replicating the adventure of the three young men whose serendipitous discovery of the cave is itself enough to make us gasp.<sup>[6]</sup> And then, with an insuck of breath, we are in the narrow labyrinth that leads to the cave painting. We are *in* the myth world. A global

experience surrounds us; we are indifferent to the tour guide, the German families rapturizing beside us, the chilly temperature. We are rapt. This being caught up by the face of the real past remains one of the transcendent moments available to the *homo viator* in us all, a moment hard to demystify. Is this not a privileged moment in which we know head-on the sensibility behind and within the archaic artwork and its maker? Is this event not a genuine encounter with the other? Is not a reproduction only a simile and never the metaphor that carries us into the heart of an object?

A discussion of the issues engaged here, such as what are encounter and incorporation, and can we realize through them the experience of an archaic cave painting, will go on. The argument itself will be freeing, forcing us to review the meaning of historical/archaeological forays. The argument will help keep our minds open to the complexity of accounting for our access to the past and to the issues involved in getting inside the past at all. What does our recovering of archaic sensibility involve? Naming? Confronting? Restating? Do we recover the past by being able to map it with the coordinates of dates and places?<sup>[7]</sup> Do we recover by placing the new object of knowledge on the chart of the newly learned, satisfying that desire for a chartable history that led Vico and Spengler to include exhaustive diagrams of the events of world history, in their studies of history? Do we recover by including an increasingly wide harvest of known details in the net of our cognitive imagination? Or do we recover by face-to-face contact? Above, I accorded a tentative privilege to the face-to-face. But the fact is, we live our epistemological aporias directly into the face-to-face. Like the philosopher, we think by accretion rather than by resolution. Our awareness of these cognitive questions will inflect whatever we say about the quarrel of reproduction versus original. We may be left with the anthropological query of whether we can escape ourselves while returning to the other, but we will have established a beachhead for understanding what is involved in addressing the sensibility of the past.

## Panel 2. Sensing Archaic Social Roles

There are many avenues of access for us as we questingly explore the imaginative life of the archaic past. In the first panel I assessed the claims of face-to-face contact. I came out affirming the power of that contact. However, especially in view of the earlier epistemological queries, we have to remain open on the issue of what the encounter can be that presses us up against the archaic wall painting. Face-to-face brought us as close as we could be. Did it embrace knowing? Did it get us inside the archaic? In the present panel, I offer three panels of word-dramatization in which I try putting myself inside the life-way (*Lebenswesen*) of prehistoric humans. In so doing, I am querying critically the possibility of sensing that archaic past of which *The Sorcerer* was our first representative. Can we know what it was like to live and sense and think as an archaic creator? I will conclude this panel by evaluating our experiment, then by relating it to the questions highlighted in Panel 1. I will still be asking whether we can recapture the prehistoric past, and what such an achievement would be.

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*I am one woman among many in the group. I have no special prowess in fighting, hunting, or planning the strategies for either. One day, though, I am carrying out a mission to gather firewood. I am walking alone along a ridge. When I have collected my armful I turn back toward the village. I look with*

*surprise into the setting sun. Streaks of ochre fire line the scarlet ball of the sun god. I catch my breath. I don't know why. The sight moves me. I will think back to this moment. It will be one of the disclosures of my world to me. I am for the first time touched by the aesthetic sensibility. It is not just a response of my senses but a response of my whole being to the jagged intrusion of something newly meaningful into the world. It occurs to me that my senses—sight, smell, touch, hearing—are portals to deeper meaning. What the painter of The Sorcerer discovered, in the eliciting of visual art from ground rock and cave wall, is in the same family with the awe I feel before the burst of sun. What I have just witnessed did not bring terror with it, as thunder and lightning do. It is not just any meaningful intrusion, either, but the scar of significance left by the passage of a god.*

The tale is of that awakening moment we can all feel, when the beauty of the created world forms unbidden before us. For me, the sunrise on the island of Delos, as I watched it for two months in 1952, remains the model. Never has the new day been more intensely given to me. Can we not fairly assume that prehistoric humans were there too, inside a similar kind of awareness? Can we not pursue our knowledge of the prehistoric sensibility by empathizing across an imaginative account like the foregoing? Can we not imagine that facing *The Sorcerer* itself our prehistoric ancestor felt the same kind of awe I felt before the sunrise on Delos? Mustn't the creative sense of the maker of *The Sorcerer* have been pregnant with the wonder and abundance that accompany any ambitious creative act?

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*I am at the entrance to a cave in the Dordogne. The group is milling around, some preparing fires for the roasting of an ibex, others collecting firewood and stones for grinding seeds. Children are playing. We are in an early stage of creating the amenities of a culture. On the rock wall before me I see geometrical forms which are in fact accidents of nature; the formal designs tracked by lichens, calcium drip, and tiny fissures in the surface of the stone. Do I think one shape resembles an animal? I pick up a slightly pointed flint from the ground beside me, and start to scratch on the sandstone rock. The outline of something familiar draws me. At first I was tracing the design made by the luck of natural process. I was tracing the contours left by geology. But now I am inventing a form of my own. It could be a version of the ibex we are roasting and that I helped track through the forest this morning. It could be a piece of my dreams, broken from the side of my head. Or it could be the spirit of the God of the thunder, which terrorizes us all, and which I've wanted to discipline. In any case I keep scratching. My brothers and sisters gather to watch me. They are taken by a strange interest and tell me to continue what I am doing. The same anxious cluster of observers may have surrounded the makers of the holy paintings that decorate the most hidden walls of this valley.*

*In the course of time I cover the rock face with my designs. I become the first artist of our group. But about me there is more than the frisson of special achievement. There is the insinuation that I can make strangely compelling forms out of simple materials and gestures. My work persists on the cave wall after my death. Is it immortal? No one thinks that, or is in a position even to formulate such a conjecture. But as persistence trumps time and the group tales continue to be told, a holy exemption starts to accumulate around the work I have created. One of my masterpieces is a foxy shaman/sorcerer like myself, who has acquired power by form. I have discovered from within me one of the secrets of art, that*

*we can only make what we are, but that what we are allows us to make a lot.*

The aesthetic disclosure met in the first word picture yields here to a mysterious upgrade: the impulse to doodle, coupled with delight in form. We all know what this is about. From childhood on we fool around with forms. We do things with paper napkins, collar cuffs, and shaped interior voices that it would be hard to account for through any synergy of causes. Can we return, through empathetic explorations like the one above, to the sensibility of the artist who created *The Sorcerer*? We have reason to believe so. Are we not in fact rehearsing a plausible artistic procedure of the painter of *The Sorcerer*? Or is our inner inquiry lacking that element of the sacred, which to the archaic sensibility may have added the surplus of engagement that broke the dam of everyday experience?

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*The night is deep and dark in the Savannah. We are without paths, without news, except of our group, and live by hunting or fishing in the streams around our huts. Our language? We have no signs, but sounds we have many: pointers to the mountain streams, the passes through the riverine areas, the trees most apt for climbing and spying and shelter construction. We can point out some of these places to one another. At the crawling pace of prehistorical time we come further out into the light. Our dwellings grow more adequate, keep out more rain and wind. Our clubs turn to spears and we are able to down more and better game. We ultimately discover that seeds produce some of the plants we need, for herbs and chewing. Finally we discover that our grunts and gestures, toward items in our world, can be clarified, subdivided, and made more usefully precise.*

*Are we symbol makers, language user, in the way we seemed form-impelled before our cave walls, in Panels 1 and 2 ? We are at the threshold of symbolic life, and one nigh—but this is much later—we will sit around the fire and historicize, tell the group in strings of words tales of our collective past, of a hunt here or a river crossing there. We will enlarge our accounts, add "okra to the soup," and before long advance on the final rung of what our descendants will call "epic creation." We have for some time been fascinated by art, have indeed adorned our cave walls, but now we have arrived at epic and history. (This advance has taken many millenia!) We all feel obscurely that a momentous threshold has been crossed. And we are buoyed in our growing confidence by the ramifications of our painting-traditions, which by now cover walls and recesses in many parts of the inhabited world, from the Sahara to Australasia to Central America.[8]*

The historian, I am guessing, comes later than the artist! Is there not an internal logic to this quest? Do we not first of all put our experience together in the organic form, the parts transcended by the whole, as in art? Do we not, after that, first start englobing the quality of our experiences with the sequential dynamic that interrelates them? Some of the pleasure in form that the artist feels is a crucial ingredient in the historical impulse. Whatever the answer, though, I am in the present panel offering a thumbnail sketch of the sensitive/cognitive development of archaic humans. I am giving a longitudinal view of the world into which, at some point, the maker of *The Sorcerer* found his or her imagination.

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Of what interest are such word probes? How do they compare to the Abbé Breuil's word picture of *The Sorcerer* of

the Dordogne? Do they reach as far as the archaic sensibility? Unlike *The Sorcerer* of the Dordogne, the objects of these word-pictures are intangible, collective, and fictive. Yet the sensibility appearing through these "photos" should share something of the sensibility of the creator of *The Sorcerer*; a wonder, a beginning of reflection, a sense for the aesthetic. But there is yet more going on, as we reach back in language. Like our probe into the *Grotte des Trois Frères*, these word-probes into our earliest social origins are efforts at imaginative self-recovery. Shall we say we are throwing out lines into the sea of our past, then checking them for haul? If we say that, aren't we addressing again the epistemological concerns that highlighted our discussion at the end of Panel 1? We are speculating on the relation between historical intuition and the incorporation of a distant sensibility that we ourselves are. Is there an *other* in the equation to serve as an object of knowledge? Isn't there at least the other that obliges us to continue asking whether there is an other?

### Panel 3. Archaic Humor

The identification of humor is difficult at best, and when it comes to the humor of the past the matter is increasingly hard. Nowhere are the intimacies of a sensibility more locally coded than in its humor, or the yield of understanding when once we do get the joke greater. In this panel, we make our way hesitantly back toward the humor of *The Sorcerer* painting. There, surely, the archaic sensibility will be inscribed.

There is a temporal fold on the far side of which the identification of humor is difficult. We whiff literary or visual humor back to the Renaissance, or thirteenth century: Shakespeare's Falstaff is part of us speaking; Erasmus' biting wit is just what we would have wanted to say ourselves; Rabelais says what we would have dreamed of saying—Gargantua peeing from the top of Notre Dame?—but would never have dared to say. All these humors are readable from our standpoint. But prior to examples of that kind, the inquiry becomes more difficult. Can we get back to mediaeval and classical humor?

With mediaeval humor the question becomes thorny. [\[9\]](#) There is a broad churchly disapproval of the bodily, and with it its humors and humor. On the other hand, and perhaps because the body knows just how to resent such imperialisms, there is the obscene humor of Chaucer and Dante, the release Bakhtin celebrated as an essential part of the mediaeval spirit. As with all humor, this 12th and 13th century version relies on shock and violation of expectation, but in the high Middle Ages, the color of humor—think of the gargoyles—grows increasingly corporeal. Humor is putting a not so fine point on the gross self-proclamation of the body. What about the Greeks? Think first of some of the ancient Greek literary sites at which we seem to be encountering humor: Odysseus in the Cyclops' cave, crying out that he is "no man" and carrying the trick to term; Elpenor falling off the roof in the *Odyssey*; even the blustering extravagance of Thersites, in whom the Homeric audience evidently found humor. Don't we feel at these points that Homer is winking at us, saying "This is what my culture is like?" Doesn't the humor portrayed here seem suggestively different from the humor on Olympus at the outset of the *Odyssey*, where the Gods play with mechanical toys but in a fashion suggesting only that they are *reia zoontes*, easy living? When we come to the post-Homeric grotesqueries of Euripides, we find downright belly-laugh humor, such as the grand Menelaus appearing in rags in Euripides's *Helen* and calling in vain for

the Portress to let him enter. The Euripides of hot themes and melodrama can wink too: *Here, he says, I can see the absurdity in the flux of the daily.*

Can we retrace our steps to the humor of the Paleolithic?

Look back at *The Sorcerer!*

What see we there? A mishmash of animal and human forms: "a painted figure that has an upright posture, legs and hands that look human, but the back and ears of a herbivore, the antlers of a reindeer, the tail of a horse, and the phallus positioned like that of a feline."<sup>[10]</sup> The inscrutable mask of a . . . joker? Or is it a priest, a shaman in sacred mode? The erotic telemere of a . . . rascal?<sup>[11]</sup> As our minds play with these possibilities, we remember masked dancers in Nigeria, grotesque or grimacing masks that to us may seem to verge on comical, but which we must allow to be part of the worshipper's sacred. *The Sorcerer* may tease us with just that sort of grotesque/comic/sacred blend.

The smile we see on M. le Sorcier may nonetheless be the smile we carry within ourselves, and for that reason are able to discover it in the actuality of the cave painting. We need not be smiling at the time we scrutinize *The Sorcerer*. We need only know what smiling feels like. We need thus to be rehearsing the central aesthetic gesture, feeling, touching, tasting symbolically, palpating the what-if with one or another of our senses. We will in the same gamut of awarenesses be sensitive to the awesome in the painting; we will need to be sensitive to fear. We will not need to fear at the moment of scrutiny of *The Sorcerer*, but we will need to know what fear feels like. We will need to be that interior miming actor, Diderot's *comédien*, who moulds himself to the vivid contours of the dramatist's text. These are aesthetic potentials that *in toto* congeal to form our imaginative capacity, the capacity that is constant in the physically conditioned, evolving human creature at every stage of development. At the level of the making-ego we establish in ourselves the *bizarrierie* of the created Sorcerer, build it out with the integrity we are, and batten on the reality we have given (and found in) it. Are we not, in this way, getting inside the archaic sensibility? Are we not reaching the humor, returning to the etymology of the word *humor*, that is rooted in biology<sup>[12]</sup>, that *The Sorcerer's* painter painted into it? In the first two panels I made a case that we *can* plausibly return to a grasp of the archaic cave painting and of its maker's sensibility; and that through word pictures we can work at getting back into the archaic creation. Naturally these inquiries were probes, nothing evidentiary. But they were probes carried out in the manner of sonar casting. Was there a return echo from the sea floor?

Panel 4. Georges Bataille and Imagination

The approach I use has its limitations. I accept them. This essay is an effort to characterize and evaluate various aspects of the enterprise of recovering the archaic sensibility. Can we get into the creative mind of the painter of *The Sorcerer*? Can we reconstruct the sensibility of prehistoric humans? Can we recover the humor of the prehistoric artist? I am making forays, nothing more systematic than that. And now I turn to another approach, going this time in the company of one of the daring cultural critics of our age, a judge for whom the broad significance of a culture could be embedded in the details of its sensibility.

Georges Bataille's *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'Art* (1955) marked his rethinking of the relation between art and



culture. [13] Bataille's line had long been that art comes into existence as a countering and even a thwarting of the natural; i.e. perversity generates culture. But when it came to producing for Alfred Skira a commissioned book on the cave paintings at Lascaux, Bataille was faced with addressing a general audience, and with the obligation to satisfy commercial values and interests. He could no longer play cultural bad boy. But it was not only these conditions of presenting Lascaux that deflected Bataille from his main themes; it was also the wish to establish a human pedigree for the vast Lascaux achievement. He wanted to see the creative achievement of Lascaux as continuous with our current aesthetic enterprises. He was interested in accounting for the humane impulse that created these works of art that, estimating roughly, predate *The Sorcerer of Les Trois Frères* by seven millennia, but which belong to the same Europe-wide outpouring of Paleolithic cave painting.

The ideological challenge for Bataille as he attempted to make this revised perspective convincing was to mediate between two different views of the way the great cave paintings came to birth. The great Southern French and Spanish discoveries were pouring in: Altamira 1875, Gargas 1906, Trois Frères 1916, Bayol 1927, la Baume Latrone 1940. There was on the one hand the perspective of the art historian, seeing the Lascaux work as part of the nascent great tradition of European painting. From this standpoint, stress was laid on the compositional intentions of the cave painters and their artistic skill. For this tradition, to get into the archaic sensibility meant to trace the form-inclinations of those design-directed forbears. From another standpoint, that represented by anthropologists like Salomon Reinach or Kurt Lindner, the cave paintings were products of ritual/shamanistic practices designed to assure plentiful game. To get back to this perspective would mean unfolding from ourselves a distant awareness of the economic fragility of the human enterprise. Neither of these perspectives was in itself satisfactory for Bataille, whose drive was to find cave painting at the base of the whole enterprise of human culture, thus for whom such secretive work, deep in the damp cave, was a fundamental aesthetic and functional act within culture. This equivocation is defining for the kind of sensibility search Bataille undertook. He finds the cave painting—he is talking Lascaux, but we can read *Les Trois Frères*—an act of marking and a depiction of movement (*mouvement*). Bataille is startled by the superimposition of paint levels, an *enchevêtrement* that throughout Lascaux (and *Les Trois Frères*) bewilders and bedazzles us. "At Lascaux, gazing at these pictures, we sense that something is stirring, something is moving. That something touches us, we are stirred by it, as though in sympathy with the rhythms of a dance; from this passionate movement emanates the beauty of the paintings." [14] While Bataille and his contemporaries were misinformed about the time-scale that rendered the cave paintings rather recent events in man's self-creation, the instinct of Bataille's work was to take the modern directly back into the making process within the cave, to the point where sensibility is at its most pristine, in its work of adapting to visual forms the accumulated inner sense of the world. Skirting those niceties of reproduction that we aired in Panel 1, Bataille invites the reader to participate in the ongoing intensity of the marking movements instigated by the painters at Lascaux. Bataille is working through the element of aesthetic imagination, to understand the imagination. He has his own strategy for intuitive grasp of the archaic sensibility.

Panel 5. Regressing into History

My method of approach has been essayistic. These panels

have raised aesthetic issues and deployed query probes. I have borrowed some of the imaginative efforts of a master student, Bataille, to take us back to the prehistoric, to open ourselves to the query of whether we can know the prehistoric sensibility through extremes of humor when, as it were, the ancient culture lets its guard down. In short, I have been working at a mosaic of approaches to the creative character of the archaic painter. In the following paragraphs I insert into this mosaic operation some personal experience of ground rules involved in reaching back to the sensibility of the distant past. Earlier I tried word pictures to get us into the mind of the archaic experience. In this panel I turn to word pictures directed at putting the archaic creative mind within our grasp. I am trying to render plausible an account of the availability, within us, of the remotest archaic past. These ground rules are measures of the ways we can begin to reincorporate occluded regions of ourselves. I have to tell a story.

*A veteran of academic life in American and foreign Universities, I have drunk many a coffee in the faculty lounge. Invariably the talk of the day has revolved around issues of the day: the dean's budgetary decision on this or that; the latest allegations of faculty misconduct; the gossip on so and so. Underneath these discussions runs a consistent tilt toward the latest social trends: valorizing of the contemporary lifestyle, careless indulgence in anomie, and a now routinized questioning of the "case for religion" or equally cavalier support for a subset of local religious values. None of these trends are universal; each carries along its small anti-trend faction; and yet certain observations get consistently confirmed. One is that the voice of older religious attitudes, such as traditional Nicene tenets, the notion of the sacred text, and eschatological buzzwords, is pretty aggressively silenced.*

*A vignette might look like this. I'm reading John Milton in my eleven o' clock class, then going off to lunch with Billy Swenson, in Business Admin, to hear him fulminate at the harms done by faith, and cite his rusty one line of Latin, "tantum religio potuit suadere malorum." I like Billy. I'm struck by his erudition. But I like John M. too, and something tells me that for all the world-historical changes that separate me from the sensibility of mid-seventeenth century England, there are probably intimate bonds I can establish with that time, still only two and a half centuries—ten or twelve generations—back. (La Grotte des Trois Frères, with its The Sorcerer, would have been ornamented some five hundred generations ago; seemingly distant but not an unfathomable depth of time, and within imaginative range for many Westerner, by a multiple of the perhaps ten generations traceable in their own family lineage. Think of the kinds of genealogical purview traced in the Old Testament.*

*Among those intimate bonds between me and the seventeenth century sensibility would be some understanding I could acquire from the seventeenth century theological world-picture. It doesn't follow from that understanding that I would care or be able to read the world through that picture, even if I shared the dominant belief of Milton's times, and even if I could interiorize that belief. It only follows that I would dispel the sense that the great religious sensibilities of the seventeenth century West are alien to me, that some unnerving break divides me from the values of the recent, not to mention the archaic, cultural past. If I could not dispel that sense of alienation in what concerns Milton, I could hardly hope to vault inward to the sensibility behind The Sorcerer.*

*It's that "not to mention" that leads me to the point of these lines. If we can empathize with John Milton—and I only raise*

the question here—can't we empathize with Ben Jonson . . . then with Edmund Spenser . . . then with . . . The Sorcerer of the Dordogne? *This kind of regressive incorporation of earlier stages of sensibility is tempting; at worst a kind of academic parlor game. It is easy to see the problems in agreeing to play the game; the historic understanding would seem rather to move by affinities than by steps. So be it. Even with that caution, we could envisage diverse mobility patterns to accompany the historian backwards to the prehistoric sensibility. I am far from wanting to imply that in my nostalgia for Milton's sensibility I can anticipate direct extension to the cultural world of the cave painters of Lascaux or Les Trois Freres. However, to exclude that possibility as some form of transgenerational recovery is timid. The palimpsest of human history can peel back, indefinitely. To the extent we realize this possibility in ourselves, we realize the power of the actual face to face meeting we enjoyed in Panel 1, where we stood before The Sorcerer himself in the damp cave. We include in our regression a response to those epistemological quandaries we opened with: the humor, the archaic rigor, the emotional availability of The Sorcerer. All these traits are powers to be trusted in.*

#### Panel 6. Scholarship and the Past Inside Us

Face to face, imaginatively recreating, casting sensibility against sensibility, directly reading humor; we have so far largely side-stepped scholarship, the organization of knowledge for, in this case, retrieval of the remote past. But of course scholarship is in the front lines of the present recuperative operation. Who *is* the Sorcerer in the eyes of scholarship? What kind of aesthetic creation *is The Sorcerer?* The researches of scholars like L'Abbé Breuil, Jean Clottes, David Lewis-Williams, Georges Bataille, Steven Mithen, [\[15\]](#) and a raft of distinguished prehistorians can take us to a certain point. They reveal all we know to date, in the positivist sense and more, about the cultural and material realia of the Sorcerer and his world. They provide their kind of answer to whether we can know the sensibility of the archaic creator; they assemble and interpret data. Without this research, the personal mosaic of this essay would be meaningless. The question with which I began, Can we get inside the aesthetic sensibility of the archaic?, would be a journey without maps.

The Sorcerer is for scholarship a reachable sensibility. Scholarship is not about what we cannot know; a mixed animal human shaman, drawing from the identities of several species. *The Sorcerer* is an emblem high on the wall of the sanctuary of Les Trois Frères, a watching and intent presence in whom the knowledge of the oneness of the human and the animal is embedded; and who smiles, or perhaps keeps a violent hilarity, at the wisdom he carries. Part of the Sorcerer's mystery, the scholar implies, is that which the magic-exercising shaman traditionally conveys through knowing the secrets of animals. In the caves surrounding *The Sorcerer*, throughout the complex which makes up Les Trois Frères, the walls are covered with representations of animals, many extinct now, the very pictures of which confer power on the central figure. That is, the depicted bison, deeply experienced as the painted form before him, can put a herd of bison under the control of the shaman. No wonder *The Sorcerer* is smiling from high on the wall that, according to Lewis-Williams, is actually the thin veil dividing the wired shaman from direct contact with the teeming world of spirits. No wonder the Sorcerer boils with that confidence of knowing that the success of the tribe depends on his efforts to enchant game through depicting and entrancing images of that game. The sensibility of the creator of *The Sorcerer* would be manifest in this creation.

Scholarship takes us far toward getting us back toward the sensibility of the archaic painter. It gives a variety of precisions to the quest we initiated in ruminations during lunch with Billy. Is scholarship enough of an inquiry vehicle? Or are the personal sonar castings of this essay an essential enrichment of scholarship? We think of the discovery power of imagination, Bataille's preferred vehicle. What in our observations marks them as the fruit of the imagination rather than of diligent scholarly empiricism? The imagination is a radiant act of will; its product in insight, consequently, will hallow and give autonomy to the objects of its perception. Where scholarly analysis picks apart in order to reassemble, imagination conceives whole, juxtaposing sensibilities. It is not that the imagination can forego the aid of reason and scholarship, for without learning the imagination is hollow. It is that the imagination reassembles and dignifies the data it encounters and makes a whole of the world through an act of will. Imagination recreates the data. In the present instance, imagination is what assembles the findings of empirical research, holds them against their object, and grows radiant with the perception of the embodied archaic sensibility. Scholarship is of many kinds, of course, and has its uniquely valuable place in the reconstitution of the past. Bataille is himself a scholar, after his fashion. But to attain its highest achievement, historical scholarship must blend knowledge with a surpassing glimpse of the intimate makeup of the other, that other to which, in Panel 1, we found access complex and guarded by pitfalls. *That* kind of scholarship it is, that takes us into something as distant but perennial as an ancient sensibility.

The imagination does not know more or less than the skills of the accumulated disciplines of scholarship, but the imagination makes a new whole out of the data acquired by the sciences. It is under the stimulus of imagination that we might want to go farther, to encircle *The Sorcerer* with the knowing that imagination illuminates. We might want to know why we are in this inquiry at all. Why do we want to know the aesthetic meaning of *The Sorcerer of Les Trois Frères*? Why do we want to grow closer to this haunting image? Why do we want to recover the archaic sensibility at all? It must be that we are drawn to establish a oneness between ourselves and a small part of the whole aesthetic enterprise, a part which lies toward our human historical roots.

And if imagination is of this power, will it not also create in us a hunger for our archaic sensibilities as part of the recuperanda? That, of course, is just what we find. The next steps back, over the threshold of self-discovery, take us to zones in which we abandon all but paleontology, the thinking of evolutionary biology, and historically recreative fiction. We have referred to the work of Mithen that brings together from different disciplines efforts to recreate the mindset and sensibility range of prehistoric humans. Mithen is now a researcher playing his part in a vast network of scholars of the Paleolithic sensibility. There have also been numerous fictional forays into the prehistoric: Vardis Fisher's *The Testament of Man* (1943), Vercors, *Les animaux dénaturés* (1952), and Bjorn Olof Kurten's *Dance of the Tiger* (1978). All these works have tried to recreate the early hominid daily life and cultural world.<sup>[16]</sup> All these works break ground for surmising the nature of Paleolithic sense-awareness. With all such work we track back into the evolutionary process, enduring within ourselves the first cautious steps into the world of the lemur, that lowliest primate winking through its goggle eyes at its reckless elder brother. That is, we come to the brink of the pre-Paleolithic. Does the lemur's goggle-

eyed smile resemble the inscrutable self-confidence of *The Sorcerer*?

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'Panels' has been the word. I have been erecting model forays into the perennially perplexing problem of whether and how we can know the past. I have circled around an artistic figure of great antiquity as a test case of our recuperative skills. Was I able to get into the sensibility of the maker of *The Sorcerer*? In Panel 1 I raised philosophical questions about what it means to know the other. I concluded that panel with a barrage of difficult questions, but in placing ourselves in the cave itself, by fictively confronting the aesthetic fabric, we seemed to lean at least toward the direct availability of *The Sorcerer*. By 'direct' I mean this: We seemed to pose our sense-awareness directly against the aesthetic whole, what Herder called "sensuous knowing." [17] When we came to Bataille's Lascaux, we met a vehicle, Imagination, endowed with the power to transcend time directly into the archaic cave painting. The fine-grained problems of knowing seemed to be overcome in an instant. Of course, we were comforting ourselves with a grand word, *imagination*, without reading its relation to the data of sensory experience. But the goal was to seek out a vehicle for comprehensive recovery of the archaic aesthetic sensibility. Were we thus able to get directly inside the sensibility of the past? Much remains to be fine-tuned here. Panel 2 cannot be allowed to override Panel 1, with its finicky philosophical concerns. What light do the other panels shed on an answer to the recovery of *The Sorcerer* and of the sensibility of its maker?

In the second panel I tried to sweet talk our way back into the creative mind of the past, through three word pictures. Those pictures were designed to reconstruct the feel of being in archaic discovery situations. I have no way to evaluate my haul. Was I singing in the dark? Any effort to justify a discovery, in this instance, would have to rely on a rightness embedded in the presumption that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, that we too, you and I, have that archaic sensitivity in us. But that presumption has been our guiding motif throughout. Our concluding observations on finding the pre-organic in ourselves were pure poetry . . . fictions. But were they not poetry embedded at the end of a justly imaginable regress, the kind I initiated during my talks with Billy in the University lounge? Aren't we all, and forever, trying out our memories as steps into our origins?

In the end, I surveyed. That's what the panels were, peep holes into zones of self-recuperation. Hard history of the archaic sensibility in us is hard to come by. Think how hard it is to reconstruct the lived time of yesterday. The panel on the regress to archaic humor may solace us here and hold out unexpected aid. There is a valence in the tone of the archaic aesthetic past, even the extreme past. There is a snicker, or is it a sacred grimace, on *The Sorcerer*. Those are the signs of the human, and not the smallest assurance we have that we are heirs to a long adventure. Whether that lemur winks or not, there is that in the lemur that we cannot imagine not calling us. And to hear that call is to hear the ultimate welcome home to the hearth of human existence.

And the value of listening for that welcome home? For the solipsist in each of us there is the beauty of once again being all that we have been. That new being is the point where the burden of solipsism is released. Locked in the ancient tunnel of genetic tradition, we glimpse a light at the end of the tunnel back, which may be the light of the future, a reversal of human time at its extremity, in which we can

intuit the shape of what is yet to be.

## Endnotes

The author would like to acknowledge with gratitude the invaluable help of an anonymous reviewer for *Contemporary Aesthetics*.

[1] *Sensibility* is the key term here. The word implies all the higher awarenesses of aesthetic intuition, including its rational outcroppings, but retains its closeness to the body, the base of sense. From its inception the notion of the aesthetic has been of a science of the finest edge on the bodily. It is along that edge that art walks in its quest to give sensuous material all the meaning it can bear.

[2] The problem of getting inside of the other, whether in intra-individual dialogue or tracking back into our own past, hovers around this entire essay. Cultural or social epistemology might be the term for this kind of inquiry on the plane of the human sciences; in terms of psychoanalysis, we are on the borders of *introjection*, the process by which we incorporate and make ours the behaviors and values of others, especially of parental or other authority figures.

[3] L'Abbé Breuil, *Quatre cents siècles d'art pariétal* (Paris, 1952). Translation by Frederic Will.

[4] *Janson's History of Art* (Upper Saddle River, 2007), p. 2..

[5] Benjamin, Walter, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936).

[6] The Grotto of Les Trois Frères was first rediscovered in 1914 by the three sons of the Count of Bégouen. Exploring an underground cave network, they came on extensive underground corridors. One of them broke through a *draperie stalagmitique* to reveal a lengthy hallway at the end of which was a chamber containing two clay bisons, 14,000 years of age. In 1916 the same brothers, this time fully equipped to explore, examined the entire *plateau calcaire* in which the Grotto had been rediscovered, and reached a complex of inner chambers and galleries at the end of which they discovered, among a profusion of wall paintings, the two foot tall depiction of *The Sorcerer*.

[7] Carl Becker's essay, "What are Historical Facts," raises doubts about any efforts to get the goods on history. "When we really get down to the hard facts, what the historian is always dealing with is an affirmation—an affirmation of the fact that something is true." Cited from *The Philosophy of History in Our Time*, ed. Meyerhof, New York, 1959, p. 124.

[8] Steven Mithen emphasizes the explosion of art and culture occurring at the outset of the Paleolithic. Cf. pp. 151-185 of *The Prehistory of the Mind* (London, 1996) for his account of this period.

[9] Ernst Robert Curtius, in *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1973), pp. 417-435, draws a swift but detailed picture of the wide range of Mediaeval humor sensibilities.

[10] Mithen, above note 8 , p. 16. A joker and a shaman are a possible formula for *The Sorcerer*. Dionysus, in Euripides' *Bacchae*, proves that ironic wit and deadly power can coexist in the same god. Cf. Lewis-Williams, David, "Harnessing the Brain: Vision and Shamanism in Upper Paleolithic Western Europe," pp. 321-342, in *Beyond Art: Pleistocene Image and*

*Symbol* (San Francisco, 1997).

[11] Guthrie, Dale, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art* (Chicago, 2005), qualifies the religious/magical view of Paleolithic cave painting. He portrays and discusses the profusion of daily, including erotic, motifs scribbled throughout the Paleolithic world. His realistic naturalism is a corrective to excessively spiritualistic interpretations of even the greatest cave paintings.

[12] In classical and mediaeval medicine the humors were taken to be the four constituent components of the body itself. The balance among these humors, which for such philosophers as Theophrastus were determinants of characteristic personality types, was essential to health. Our notion of the humorous is rooted in this ancient theory. The "funny" or "comic" are deeply related to the composition of the body; sensibility is the seed bed in which the humorous grows.

[13] Bataille, George, *Lascaux, ou la Naissance de l'Art, in Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1979), Vol. 9, pp. 80-81. (In English, *Lascaux or the Birth of Art*, Cleveland: World Publishing Company, no date.) The generally aesthetic direction of Bataille's account is picked up from the direction of cognitive psychology by John Halverson, in "Art for Art's Sake in the Paleolithic," *Current Anthropology*, 28, 1, 63-89.

[14] Bataille, *op.cit.* English edition, p. 130.

[15] L'Abbé Breuil, *Quatre cents siècles d'art pariétal* (Paris, 1952); Clottes, Jean, *Le Musée des Roches: L'art rupestre dans le monde* (Paris, 2000); Lewis-Williams, David, *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (London, 2004); Bataille, Georges, *Lascaux ou la Naissance de l'Art* (Paris, 1955); Mithen, Steven, *The Prehistory of the Mind* (London, 1996).

[16] In Volume I of *The Testament of Man (Darkness and the Deep*, New York, 1943), Fisher sets the stage with a lengthy portrait of the pre-human, and then nearly human, biosphere as it emerges from geological silence. Worth noting: Sandor Ferenczi, Freud's disciple, maintained that the evolutionary trauma of leaving watery depths for life on earth deeply marked humanity.

[17] Cf. Frederic Will, *Intelligible Beauty in Aesthetic Thought* (Niemeyer, 1958) for a study of the development from Plato through the nineteenth century of the idea that beauty gives knowledge.

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