

The Cave and the Cathedral

IN 1994, THREE SPELUNKERS were looking for undiscovered caves in the Ardèche region of southeastern France. The region is named after the Ardèche River, which has cut through limestone for millennia and created hundreds of caves. On a summer weekend expedition they came across a place in a cliff wall where they sensed a draft of warm air near a pile of rubble. They dug around it but soon lost interest. Then in December they returned to the same place and felt a stronger draft. They began digging in earnest and entered a vast cave complex filled with dozens of cave bear skulls (a species that has been extinct for 12,000 years) and hundreds of prehistoric drawings on the walls—drawings of such breathtaking beauty they knew they had made a major discovery. Two of the spelunkers chose to name the cave after the third, Jean-Marie Chauvet, who had been exploring the region for three decades.

Like many people, I first learned about Chauvet Cave through the Werner Herzog documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. It's a typical Herzog film—personal and eccentric, marked by moments of insight and marred by a number of strange non sequiturs—but it may be the best footage of this cave the world is ever likely to see, given the French government's decision to refuse public access to it. When I saw the handheld camera lights illuminate the first image on the wall, I found myself transfixed.

Several things make Chauvet stand out among prehistoric cave sites. For one thing, the majority of the animals depicted are not those that would have been hunted for food, such as aurochs and mammoths. Rather, there are dozens of depictions of major predators like cave bears, woolly rhinoceros, cave lions, panthers, and cave hyenas.

But what really caused me to hold my breath was that this cave art was unmistakably art. These charcoal drawings are not mere stick figures; they employ shading and smudging that model three dimensions and perspective. One of the bison is rendered not in profile, but turned toward the

viewer, looking out from under a thick matting of fur. A cave bear's bulk and musculature is suggested by the alternating use of thick and thin lines. An owl, traced by a finger in clay, has its head swiveled 180 degrees, looking at us over its folded wings. A rhinoceros is depicted in cubist fashion—with multiple legs and a series of echoed horns—capturing movement in a single image. One of the creatures in the “Panel of Horses” is open mouthed, as if neighing loudly. A pride of lions crouches low to the ground as they hunt unsuspecting bison. Several of the drawings deliberately use the shape of the wall to emphasize the contours of what they are portraying. The other distinctive: though there has been some debate, scientists now generally believe that Chauvet may be over 30,000 years old, nearly twice as old as the cave art at Lascaux and Altamira.

What makes all this so compelling to me is that it runs counter to the received wisdom. Since the Enlightenment we've been told by anthropologists that art by early humans was utilitarian in purpose: cave art, they argued, was part of a shamanic ritual in which pictures of animals enabled hunters to gain power over the animals' spirits and thus kill them more effectively.

The same goes for the religious dimension of Paleolithic humanity, which is seen as little more than the manipulation of the environment. When an anthropologist in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* is asked what constitutes our humanness, all he can say is “the capacity for adaptation,” a purely functional explanation.

The operative word in the received wisdom has always been *power*—power over those animal spirits, power over the environment. But this seems to me to project the ideology of modern scientism—Francis Bacon's conviction that science involves power over nature—on rich, complex, ancient phenomena. It's hard to imagine anything less scientific than projecting a prejudice onto the evidence. But when I gaze at the drawings on the walls of Chauvet—when I see male and female cave lions (predators unlikely to become the Paleolithic tribe's next meal) shown gently brushing up against one another—all I can see is love. Welling up within this love I see wonder, awe, praise, and celebration—art that generates life, rather than seeking to take it away.

It is as if the artists sense in these beasts beings who are similar to themselves and yet mysteriously different—strange and enchanting cousins in the order of creation. Emblems of beauty, strength, speed, passion. If, as the saying goes, love is the opposite of power, then the underlying motive

behind art—the re-creation of the world—is something closer to Lewis Hyde’s notion of art as gift, offering, sacrifice. When Jean-Marie Chauvet and his friends entered the cave for the first time they came upon a block of stone that had fallen from the roof, and on that stone was the skull of a cave bear pointing toward them. What they saw was an altar.

The heart of our humanness is not merely the capacity for adaptation but the ability to perceive and make meaning, to experience the world as an altar upon which the divine enters flesh. From the proverbial dawn of time we have felt the need to withdraw from the bright glare of sunlight and enter into a dark space where we can re-imagine the world, drawing it on cave walls and embedding it in stained glass, where it can be contemplated by torchlight and candlelight. To truly encounter what is to be found in Chauvet, even vicariously through film and photographs, is to suddenly realize that words like *art* and *religion* are clumsy, ham-fisted abstractions that violate something whole and ultimately inviolable. It also tends to make the word *primitive*, with all the connotations that have grown up around it over the centuries, seem almost laughable, if not obscene.

One of the researchers interviewed in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* seems to understand this. In order to understand Chauvet, he says, you must go outside to other ancient cultures. He then relates the story of an ethnographer who accompanied an Australian Aborigine on an expedition to some very old rock paintings. The paintings had decayed because no one had continued the tradition of touching them up. This made the Aborigine sad, so he began to touch up the pictographs. The ethnographer asked him: “Why are you painting?”

The Aborigine answered: “I am not painting.”

What’s at stake here is nothing less than the nature of consciousness itself. Owen Barfield, one of the most incisive thinkers on this subject, once said: “Before the scientific revolution the world was more like a garment men wore about them than a stage on which they moved.” The Aborigine’s response is indicative of what Barfield calls “original participation,” characteristic of early humanity—an unselfconscious sense of unity between observer and observed, man and nature.

In his book *Saving the Appearances* Barfield notes that Greek philosophy and the religion of Israel profoundly changed the dimensions of participation. Both of these cultures pulled back from mythic consciousness, one through reason and the other through monotheism. For example, while the golden calf could be said to represent original participation, the

Israelites felt they had to reject it. But this only changed the shape of participation: for them the discovery that God is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire meant that he must be perceived as the mystery behind all of creation—that the mystery in some sense was more truly like each one of them, singular and personal.

Barfield holds that this new phase, far from eliminating participation, made it more inward. The synthesis of Greek reason and Hebrew monotheism in the Christian era (both stressing the need for human participation in a divine order through prayer and contemplation) continued through the Middle Ages. But with the scientific revolution, man separated himself from nature and embraced an abstract way of thinking. The modern West, Barfield says, exchanged meaning for literalism, turning the things of this world from signs into idols. Creation became a series of objects which operated like a machine. He illustrates this by imagining a clever child who is put inside an automobile. If he plays around with the instruments long enough he will be able to drive the car, but he will have only “dashboard knowledge,” not true knowledge of the car.

This could be taken as nothing more than a narrative of decline, but Barfield believes that even as modern, self-conscious individuals we can still experience what he calls “final participation.” Ironically, this is where those clumsy abstractions “art” and “religion” return, because for Barfield final participation comes through the creation of metaphor. He points to the Romantics, who sought to move beyond the mechanistic deism of the eighteenth century and reconnect to nature as an organic unity—only to fall into a sort of sentimental pantheism. Barfield’s friends C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien were engaged in a struggle to redeem Romanticism by grounding it in a more traditional theology.

Flannery O’Connor understood this at an even deeper level. Near the end of her novel *Wise Blood*, after the formerly nihilistic protagonist, Hazel Motes, has experienced traumatic humiliation and begun a series of penitential practices, there is a description of his landlady, Mrs. Flood. Increasingly disturbed by Hazel’s acts of penance, she worries that he has become like “a monk in a monkery.” This offends Mrs. Flood’s enlightened view of the world. “She liked the clear light of day. She liked to see things.” But Hazel, who once preached against the possibility of participation, now presents her with a mystery.

She could not make up her mind what would be inside his head and what out. She thought of her own head as a switchbox where

she controlled from; but with him, she could only imagine the outside in, the whole black world in his head and his head bigger than the world, his head big enough to include the sky and planets and whatever was or had been or would be. How would he know if time was going backwards or forwards or if he was going with it? She imagined it was like you were walking in a tunnel and all you could see was a pinpoint of light. She had to imagine the pinpoint of light; she couldn't think of it at all without that. She saw it as some kind of star, like the star on Christmas cards. She saw him going backwards to Bethlehem and she had to laugh.

Few of us these days are immune from thinking of our heads as switch boxes from which we operate the machinery of our lives, whether we are aware of it or not. That's the world we inherit. But the world of objects, the world of mechanism, the dashboard knowledge that has us all speeding around in circles, is hollow at the core, a desecrated altar, an abomination of desolation.

The good news is that a life of participation, however fitfully experienced, is still possible for us, albeit through discipline and effort. We can go back into the darkness of the cave and offer up our broken re-creations of the world on an altar and know that the broken, sacrificed god will meet us there.

We can walk backward to Bethlehem.