If there is a single term poststructuralism could not live without—at least within the intellectual circles associated with the review Tel quel—it is “transgression,” inherited from Bataille. “God-meaning,” Philippe Sollers writes in an early essay, “…is a figure of linguistic interdiction whereas writing—which is metaphoricity itself (Derrida)—transgresses … the hierarchic order of discourse and of the world associated with it” [“La science de Lautréamont” 808, my emphasis]. In their Dictionnaire des sciences du langage Ducrot and Todorov declare grandly that text “has always functioned as a transgressive field with respect to the system according to which we organize our perception, our grammar, our metaphysics and even our science” [443–44, my emphasis]. They describe the advent of poststructuralism as a “Copernican revolution,” and it became customary to characterize the before and after of this break by referring to Bataille’s distinction between “restrained” and “general” economies.

An influential essay by Foucault, “Préface à la transgression” (1963), might be considered the opening move in what would become Tel quel’s appropriation of Bataille. Foucault’s essay examines Bataille’s L’érotisme (1955), a study that theorized transgression in a complex elaboration which articulated philosophical discourse (Hegel/Kojève) with a “sociological” discourse of the sacred (Caillois). Foucault’s reading of the text removes the transgression of eroticism from both these discursive horizons and moves it toward late Heidegger (an ontology of the limit) and Nietzsche. If one of Bataille’s most radical gestures was to insert the ethnographic distinction sacred/profane into philosophical discussion, Foucault’s analysis reinscribes transgression within the intertextual field of philosophy, radicalized, of course, through the inclusion of the “marginal” figure, Nietzsche, and the philosopher who announced the end of philosophy, Heidegger. Foucault’s rewriting of Bataille may read philosophy against itself, may even propose the transgression of philosophy; nevertheless, it is structured by the vicissitudes of philosophical discourse. Bataille on the other hand had confronted philosophy with something radically other—tout autre.

In “Préface à la transgression,” Foucault defined transgression as “a gesture concerning the limit.” He presented it as a flash of lightning, an image that not only figures transgression but also emblematizes the move into what will become the philosophical register of poststructuralism. It traces a line, a line that figures the Heideggerian ontology of limitation, the coming into being (or appearance) of beings on the horizon of Being; it suggests the limit of the ontological difference between Being and beings.

Anticipating Derrida through Heidegger, Foucault analyzed transgression as an event of difference, alluding to Blanchot’s “principe de contestation” and to a Nietzschean notion of affirmation. “Might not the instantaneous play of the limit and transgression be today the essential test of a thinking of ‘origin’ which Nietzsche bequeathed to us … a thinking that would be absolutely, and in the same movement, a Critique and an Ontology, a thinking that would think finitude and being?” [Foucault 759]. Transgression becomes identified with a “philosophy of eroticism” (which plays on Sade’s “philosophie dans le boudoir”), a gesture that transvalues philosophy from the realm of cognitive or rational activity to “an experience of finitude and of being, of the limit and of transgression.”
“philosophy” of eroticism is thus a “test/ordeal [épreuve] of the limit,” one that “no dialectical movement, no analysis of fundamental laws [constitutions] and of their transcendental foundation [lieur sol]” can help us think. Foucault then asks a rhetorical question that could be said to structure much of the discourse of theory in the next decade: “Would it be an exaggeration, to say,” he asks, “... that it would be necessary to find a language for the transgressive that would be what dialectic has been for contradiction?” [759].

In this way Foucault established transgression as an alternative to the machine of dialectical contradiction. Attuned to the recent discoveries of structuralism, which had begun to reverse the conventional understanding of relations between the subject and language (the subject is no longer considered master of his or her language but structured by it), Foucault announced that “the gesture of transgression replaces the movement of contradiction by plunging the philosophical experience into language” [767]. Here is where the paradox of the transgression of philosophy comes in. For if Foucault poses transgression (or eroticism) as a philosophy, the position of the philosopher (and to this extent philosophy itself) is said to be transgressed by the limitlessness of language: the philosopher, Foucault writes, finds “not outside language, but in it... the transgression of his philosophical being” [767]. From this point on, theorists will look to transgression as a way of getting beyond the constraints of Hegelian dialectic. Taking their cue from Foucault, they will begin to identify transgression with language. Foucault’s interpretation of transgression anticipates—we could even say programs—the role Bataille will be assigned in the context of poststructuralist theory. It prepares the way for the appropriation of Bataille—librarian, writer, editor, militant, “madman”—as theorist.

From here it is but a short step to the identification of transgression and text. Philippe Sollers takes this step four years later in “Le toit: Essai de lecture systématique” (1967), an essay that updates Foucault’s analysis of Bataille from a perspective informed by more recent developments in poststructuralist thought, since Derrida’s De la gramma
tologie had appeared in the interim. Sollers follows the basic lines of Foucault’s interpretation, but he adds an important element by interpreting interdiction as a discursive constraint upon language. “The world of discourse,” he writes, “is the mode of being of interdiction... interdiction is the signifier itself (in the world of discourse)” [“Le toit” 29]. This interpretation, implicit in the Foucault essay, is not unjustified, but Bataille does not restrict the meaning of interdiction in this way. In L’érotisme, for example, interdiction is said to open up the world of a rational and ordered civilization which it marks off from the animal world of nature, but it is also characterized as an affective experience of horror before the sacred. It is precisely the otherness of the sacred which resists the conceptual unity of philosophy. In L’érotisme, interdiction is not so simple. It belongs to the profane world it opens, but also to the world of the sacred. Sollers insists on an exclusively linguistic interpretation of interdiction, while at the same time retaining the broad philosophical (or ontological) claims Foucault had made for eroticism. The net effect is an inflation of the claims made for transgression in the textual or poetic register, claims that then inform poststructuralist theory of writing and text.

Once interdiction is isolated from what Bataille had referred to as the “dual operation” of interdiction/transgression, and once it is interpreted as discursive constraint, the next step is to articulate what Foucault had baptized the “philosophy of eroticism” with psychoanalysis, the discourse that theorizes eroticism. Interdiction is identified with repression, which reveals its operations through linguistic parapraxis. It is then associated with language in the mode of representation and opposed to transgression, now characterized as “a space of organic effervescence of language” by analogy with various practices of avant-garde poetics. A play of the signifier resists the constraints that structure meaning in the ordinary course of useful communication: this is the meaning given to transgression in the formula “eroticism is the antimatter of realism” [“Le toit” 36].

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When transgression is analyzed in exclusively linguistic terms, that is, in relation to the "fundamental scandal of the arbitrariness of the sign," it becomes writing (in the emerging poststructuralist sense), as Sollers announces bluntly at the end of his essay. "Eroticism represents a reversal," Sollers writes, citing Bataille. He then adds this programmatic commentary: "writing takes charge of this reversal from this point on... it then has the same status and ultimately the same meaning as eroticism." With Sollers, then, as he states categorically, "writing finally takes over from transgression" ["Le toit" 41].

Construed as writing, transgression (or the now-theoretical term "eroticism") is inscribed within the polemical opposition that pits writing, as what Sollers calls "l'envers de la littérature," against "literature." The subversion of "literature" by theory, charged with energies of cultural revolt, remained at the heart of Tel quel's agenda. Not only does the polemical edge, discernible in Foucault, become more pronounced in this context; in "Le toit" Sollers stages an epic polemos within eroticism itself, a "dialectic of war" between transgression and interdiction.

In L'érotisme, Bataille insists that the two moments of the dual operation of eroticism are so intimately bound up with one another as to be all but indistinguishable. The terms "interdiction" and "transgression" become meaningful only subjectively, that is, as affective experiences of attraction and repulsion, which distinguish the two realms of the sacred and the profane. Bataille presents this as a dance, a ronde, for the experience of seduction that moves us toward the sacred object and the feeling of horror that repels us from it are closely interrelated. When Sollers stages the relation between interdiction and transgression as conflict, it becomes a matter of choosing sides; in spite of his disclaimer to the contrary, "Le toit" becomes an apology for transgression. Once a dialectic of war replaces Bataille's intimate dance (ronde), and transgression is set against interdiction, other binary oppositions are pulled into the argument. On the side of interdiction, "literature" comes to stand not only for representational discourse but also for bourgeois oppression; writing, which is transgressive, belongs with poetry, madness, excess, and revolution—or at least a "revolution of poetic language." When "Le toit" transposes Bataille's notions of eroticism and transgression into the register of language, writing, and text, the signifier replaces the woman as erotic object and language provides a field of theory—or what Sollers will call, looking back on it "the dream of theory"—where linguistics, psychoanalysis, deconstructive philosophy (Heidegger, Derrida), and a certain marxism interact.1

Transgression is thus reformulated as text, and text (considered in relation to the productivity of signifiance) is analyzed on a model of modern poetry that devolves from Mallarmé. In the context of poststructuralist theory, poetry is construed as action, in an unusual displacement of Valéry and Sartre. In philosophical terms (Hegel) action implies negativity (see, for example, Kristeva's "Poésie et negativité" [1968]) and is endowed with the force of critical negativity, which Adorno theorized in his analyses of modern art. Theory, in the context of Tel quel, radicalizes the modernist moment we find in Adorno, pressing it toward a certain avant-gardism, and it does so with the help of Bataille. The negativity Kristeva ascribes to writing is double. In addition to the Hegelian negativity of consciousness and of action that Blanchot had brought to bear on language in "La littérature et le droit à la mort," Kristeva affirms that another "irrecuperable" negativity is at play on the level of genetext, or of signifiance proper. In "How Does One Speak to Literature?" she writes:

Writing establishes a different legality... it brings together in a heteronomous space the naming of phenomena (their entry into symbolic law) and the negation

1. See Sollers's preface to the reedition of Théorie d'ensemble (1980).
of these names (phonetic, semantic and syntactic shattering). This supplement-
tary negation (derivative negation, negation of the homonomic negation) leaves
the homogeneous space of meaning (of naming or, if one prefers, of the
"symbolic") and moves, without "imaginary" intermediary... towards what
cannot be symbolized (one might say toward the "real"). [111, my emphasis]

This is Kristeva’s passage to the sacred (via psychoanalysis), for this account of the
legality of writing repeats the movement of Bataille’s account of interdiction/transgres-
sion in L’érótisme and, even more explicitly, in an earlier version of that text subsequently
published as “L’histoire de l’érótisme.” Here interdiction is presented as a negation of
nature (le donné) which founds culture, marking the emergence of man from animal. This
negation then announces another (“un mouvement... de contrecoup”), a negation of the
order set up by the first negation. The first step corresponds to interdiction and the second
to transgression in this (almost) narrative version of the “dual operation” of interdiction/
transgression. This is the movement Bataille calls a “renversement des alliances,” to
which we shall return, momentarily, in relation to the miracle of Lascaux.2 Kristeva’s
“negation of the homonomic negation” repeats the second-order movement of transgres-
sive negation. In theory, this becomes the law of writing.

As Foucault had anticipated in 1963, then, transgression did become the paradigm for
a “nondialectical thinking,” one characterized by the “irreconcilable negativity” Kristeva
theorizes first in connection with the rejet and then with the abject.3 In order to obtain a
“poststructuralist” (some would say “postmodern”) Bataille, however, it was necessary
to subject him to readings that evacuated from his writing not only the dimension of the
sacred, but also every trace of the constellation of terms associated with what Bataille calls
the fictive—the image, the figure, representation, dramatization, and so forth.4 When he
is portrayed as a dialectical opposite—a kind of “antimatter”—to Breton (whose fascina-
tion with the image is well known), he can be identified with the law of writing. So intense
was the resistance to realism—and the distaste for Surrealism—that all modes of image
and figuration became suspect. It was necessary to subject Bataille to what I call
“modernist” readings, where “modernist” is understood in the sense of Adorno and also
in the sense of “modern art,” as this term was deployed by the art critic Clement Green-
berg and by those who called themselves “new critics” in the literary domain.

When French theory migrated to the United States, it was received within this
modernist atmosphere. In Blindness and Insight (1971) Paul de Man analyzed the contact
between American literary criticism and French structuralism, an amalgamation he
labeled “new new criticism.” As he points out, both new criticism and stucturalism

alliances” narratively (sequentially), Bataille qualifies this gesture: “I want… to insist on the fact
that this double movement does not even imply distinct phases. For clarity of exposition, I can speak
of two moments [deux temps]. But it is a question of an ensemble [ensemble solidaire] and one
cannot truthfully [en vérité] speak of the one without indicating the other” [“L’histoire de
l’érótisme” 67]. The “ensemble solidaire” is presented in L’érótisme by the metaphor of the ronde.

3. In La révolution du langage poétique and in Pouvoirs de l’horreur, respectively. The term
rejet is invoked by Bataille in “L’histoire de l’érótisme” (in connection with the negation of the
donné associated with the movement of interdiction) [66].

4. Here are just a few of the many references to such terms in “Histoire de l’érótisme” alone:
“the privileged domain of love is fiction” [141]; “A sacrifice is no less fictive than a novel... it
is not a crime but a representation, a form of play [un jeu]” [92]; “What excites animals directly
... affects men through symbolic figures. This is not a secretion, but a meaningful elaborated
image” [128]. In this connection see also the discussion of the object of erotic desire, in contrast
to the eroticism of the orgy which “has the defect of not being clearly limited, of being informe and
of never offering any clear feature [aspect saisissable] to desire” [123]. Concerning the erotic
object and its dialectic, see Guerlac, “Recognition, by a Woman!”

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refused authorial intention and referentiality or representation. For the new critics, de Man writes, literary language was “entirely autonomous and without exterior referent.” Criticism involved an “an ironic reflexion of the [formal] unity it had postulated” [28].

Modern painting was likewise considered as an autonomous object, endowed not merely with aesthetic but also with existential force. Modernist criticism shared with Tel quel an appreciation of Mallarmé’s purification of meaning and of the aesthetics of difficulty associated with it. The two also shared an aversion to Surrealism. The common ground, then, between modern art, new criticism, and French theory was a critique of representation that implied a refusal of figuration in all its forms. All of this contributed to the reformulation of transgression as “antimatter of realism.”

Bataille’s study of Lascaux presents transgression quite differently, that is, in relation to a “sacred moment of figuration” that involves a visual realism. Children were playing, Bataille writes, near a great tree. A tempest turned this tree—tree of knowledge, perhaps—upsidedown, uprooting it, and where the roots had been, the entrance to a cave was suddenly exposed. “Lascaux ou la naissance de l’art” is a parody of origins—the story of a miracle that links the origin of art to the origin of the species, that is, human beings as subjects of transgression. Bataille rewrites the miracle of Greece, substituting a primitive world for the classical one, a world of the sacred for a world of reason. We are carried back in time to another threshold, that of the archaic and the animal—la bête humaine. If the miracle of Greece gives us the rational animal, the miracle of Lascaux yields man as “religious animal.” Lascaux transfigures us, Bataille writes, and it does so through a force of figuration that transfixes and fascinates, trans-figures and trans-fascinates.

Lascaux transfigures us—and doubly so. First there is the question of origins, of a passage from animal to man that opened up our future (and our present). From bête humaine, we are transfigured into être humain. But there is also the question of our ends, that is, of our transfiguration into our proper selves, “religious animals”—“the man of work and of technique reduces himself to a means, of which the being who is not subjugated by work, the animal being without technique, is the end” [“Lascaux” 78]. The defining characteristic [le propre] of the human species is a “desire to be filled with wonder,” an “anticipation of miracles” [16]. This is the miracle figured on the walls and ceilings of the cave, where, at the same time, this desire and anticipation receive their response.

If Lascaux transfigures us (of course much is at stake in the identity of “us” and “them”), it also transfigures animality, and once again, this involves a double gesture. The paintings in the cave transfigure the animal they figure, giving it not only beautiful form but also a force of prestige. It is precisely this transfiguration—one that passes through the figure—that transfigures us. But at the same time, the very seductive force of the painted figures also transfigures the artists who created them, transforming the cavemen from animal (bête humaine) into man, that is, into someone who “resembles us.” Following in the footsteps of Bataille, moving through his text, we enter the ronde, the circular dance of the animals set in motion by our movement through the cave.

At the sight of these figures we are overwhelmed: “this incomparable beauty and the sympathy it awakens in us leave us painfully suspended [suspendu]” [14]. Our religious emotion is doubled, according to Bataille, by our sense of the prestige the images must have held for those contemporary to their creation. If art “is born of emotion and addresses

5. De Man speaks of “American formalism” in this context.

6. I am referring to the critical writings of Greenberg (in practice, artists in New York felt the impact of Cubism and of Surrealism more or less together).
itself to emotion” (in a dynamic circularity figured by the animal ronde), the sentiment experienced by prehistoric man is felt by us to parallel our own; it is a question of the “sense of the miraculous [sentiment de miracle]” declared to be the identifying trait [le propre] of man as opposed to the animal. What overwhelms us at Lascaux is the “useless figuration of these signs that seduce” [13]. The emotional communication of these figures requires the temporal leap of millennia and is catastrophic in its effect. It overwhelms us (nous renverse) like the tree overturned (renversé) by the tempest at the entrance to the cave and exposes our roots, leaving us suspended. Our emotional response to the communication of these figures—our renversement—is the sign of our transfiguration, which performs or completes the transfiguration of the other—that of the bête humaine into être humain. This circuit of emotion, of émerveillement, is the miracle. Communication, the one that links art and the sacred, performs the origin of art and the origin of man at the same time—it is a veritable origin of the work of art, in the double sense of the genitive of the difference.

All this meanders, but the conceptual starting point is simple: man is opposed to beast. The opposition is performed linguistically in the pronominal distinction between nous and il—pronoun “of the nonperson” [see Benvénieste]. If the question is, how to pass from nonperson to person? the answer we receive is this: through an act of figuration received (by Bataille) as an act of address. It is a question of the origin of the species, but here we are dealing with a quite different kind of survival—an afterlife of images. Figuration performs the “enduring survival” of an address, an address that crosses time, figuring across death with the kind of posthumous reach that so moved Victor Hugo. What Bataille calls “the sacred moment of figuration” [63] is catastrophic in its effect, according to the specific meaning Bataille gives to this term when he speaks of sacrifice: it collapses linear time.7 The painted figures communicate to us, transferring intimate emotion, and through this operation the nonperson that was the man-beast comes to resemble us—“nous pouvons dire qu’il nous ressemblait.” The nonperson—il—passes to the discursive position nous. The imperfect tense of the verb ressembler traces the trajectory of the image, its survival to the present. It signals the “enduring survival” of figuration, which lets art communicate “from afar” and “through time [dans le temps].”

“Every profound spirit needs a mask,” Nietzsche wrote [Beyond Good and Evil 51]. Aurignacian man was such a spirit—“to designate himself he had to give himself the mask of another . . . he hid his features beneath the mask of the animal” [63]. At the same time, these images of the nonperson give us the “sensible sign of our presence.” Thus, if part of the miracle of Lascaux involves the survival (durabe survie) of an address—the fact that, miraculously, “these paintings have reached us [nous sommes parvenues]”—this arrival marks our arrival too. When the animal (bête humaine) passes across to resemble us, this marks the moment not only of our origin but also of our end. We also come to resemble it as subject of transgression, or “animal divin”; this is the “secret” of the cave.

Lascaux involves “the paradox of man adorned with the prestige of the beast” [63], but it also involves a temporal paradox. The cave artists, Bataille writes, created what they represented. The figuration that survives to arrive at us (nous parvenir) is at the same time a return: “They returned to this world of the savagery [sauvagerie] of the night.” Bataille writes of the cave artists, “they figured it with fervor, in anxiety” [70]. The Aurignacian man-beasts come to resemble us just at the moment that we find traces of ourselves—the sign of our sensible presence—in them, that is, in their way of becoming what they are by

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7. The question of time is crucial to Bataille’s notion of sacrifice. See “Sacrifices” concerning time and catastrophe: “La catastrophe—le temps vécu” [94]. The discussion of time here refers us to Bergson (as the abrupt passage to the question of revolution suggests Sorel). For an extensive discussion of Bergson see my Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton [forthcoming, Stanford UP, spring 1997].
figuring where they have been. “Could we miss the fact that, entering the grotto, in unusual conditions, we are, deep in the ground, in some way lost [égarés] à la recherche du temps perdu?” [43]. “Lascaux ou la naissance de l’art” puts us à la recherche du temps perdu as we enter the marvelous grotto à la recherche d’un instant sacré, only to meet our primitive counterparts and to find ourselves inscribed through their act of remembrance and sensible return. Lascaux is a parody of the miracle of Greece, and of the miracle of art (Proust).8 It is a question, as Nietzsche wrote in Ecce Homo, of “how one becomes what one is” [253]. At Lascaux, this happens through figurative art, and the movement occurs in two directions at once, forward and back like the ronde. In “trans-figuring” the human through the animal across time to us, Aurignacian man se transfigure en nous and at the same time transfigures us—transforming us from rational man into religious animal by these figures that transfix.

It is not by chance that Lascaux is the miracle of a double transfiguration—of the animal and of the human being. For the story Bataille projects in the cave presents the two moments of the renversement des alliances already mentioned, that is, the dual operation of the sacred: interdiction and transgression, through which it is possible to renew contact with the sensible world—retrouver le sensible. In L’érotisme this movement is figured metaphorically, as we have seen, by the ronde, a two-step dance of attraction to and repulsion from the sacred, the same dance refracted by the prism of the cave (“this cavern is a prism” [17], Bataille writes, in what could only be called a surrealist image) and danced over the millennia.

What Bataille calls “transfiguration” at Lascaux, then, is linked to transgression. Both require the figure—not the resembling (imaginary) one, where resemblance follows the path of address in a gesture of mirroring—as if, for example, prehistoric man had spoken directly to us by sending us a self-portrait—but the useless one, the image of the nonperson. It requires a trans-figuring which passes across the system of enunciation and through the third person, “il,” the animal and the mask—figure inutile. These figures carry prestige in the etymological sense of the term, as “illusion,” to be understood not as mimetic representation (in the service of instrumental reason) but in its derivation from the Latin word for play: ludere. Transgression involves the passage from homo faber to homo ludens. It is in this sense that figuration (along with representation, parody, and the fictive) is transgressive in Bataille and that transgression finds its origin (if not its end) in figurative art. “Transgression,” Bataille writes, “only exists from the moment art itself appears [que l’art lui-même se manifeste]” [41].

The figural and the fictive have been suppressed in Bataille by readings that identify transgression with writing. If “Lascaux” presents more or less the same story of the sacred that returns in L’érotisme, what it adds is the relation between transgression and figurative art, an art of the image—even a “naturalism of the marvelous [merveilleux].” For the reversal of alliances is presented here before it is theorized as eroticism, which will then be transposed into the register of text. “Lascaux ou la naissance de l’art” reveals that what became the law of writing for Kristeva—antimatter of realism—emerged more primatively in relation to visual realism. Although various types of signs are present in the cave—“grotesque” representations of the human male, “deformed” sculptures of the female form, and “abstract” markings on the wall—Bataille identifies transgression with the iconic sign. Transgression occurs in and through the “sacred moment of figuration,”

8. The full citation—a veritable pastiche of Proust—reads as follows: “Upon entering the cave, could we mistake the fact that, in unusual conditions, in the depths of the earth, we are somehow à la recherche du temps perdu?” A vain search, it is true: nothing will ever enable us to authentically relive this past which loses itself in the night. . . . What these dead have left us would matter little to us, were it not for the hope we have, even for a fleeting instant, of being able to make them live again in us” [43].
figuration of the nonperson in the mode of "divine" animality which is the spiritual truth of man—"le divin, dont le caractére infini s'exprimait sous forme animale."^{9}

Bataille's interest in the genesis of figurative art can be traced back to his article "L'art primitif" (1933), which examined G. H. Luquet's theory of primitive art. Luquet, whose method was to compare prehistoric art to children's art and make inferences from the latter to the former, had introduced a concept of "intellectual realism" which he distinguished from "visual realism." Visual realism is mimetic; it aims to show things just as they appear. Intellectual realism represents things as the mind knows them to be. Since a human head is known to have two eyes, for example, the representation of a human profile might include both eyes. Intellectual realism was a way to account for primitive modes of figuration, which are mimetically inexact. For Luquet this concept was the defining characteristic of prehistoric art.

In his review of Luquet's book, Bataille expresses both his admiration for Luquet's theory and his reservations concerning methods and results. He is concerned that Luquet's analysis necessarily neglects prehistoric sculpture, which was not realist at all. He is also concerned that Luquet's theory cannot account for the art of the Aurignacians, where the animal images, for the most part, display visual, not intellectual, realism. If one were to follow Luquet, Bataille observes wryly, one would be forced to conclude that "[the] first men who made what we call a work of art would have known nothing of primitive art" [25, original emphasis].

Inspired by Luquet, Bataille proposes a revised theory of primitive art and of the genesis of figurative art, one that turns on a notion of alteration adapted from R. Otto's study of the sacred. This concept, defined as a desire to alter whatever is at hand, can encompass everything Luquet gained from the comparison between primitive man and children, but it also enables Bataille to find a place for the art of Aurignacian man within the domain of primitive art, and to include the sculptures neglected by Luquet. For even if the animal paintings display a visual realism, the representations of human beings (especially the "alterations volontaires" of the sculptures of female forms) are informe and display traces of the process of deformation Bataille calls alteration.

This reformulation of Luquet's thesis leaves Bataille with a new puzzle, however, namely the fundamental difference between representations of humans and representations of animals in prehistoric art. In "L'art primitif" Bataille makes a stab at analyzing the "categorical duality" he has brought to light. He sketches out the basic lines of a theory of primitive art that enables him to overcome the fundamental opposition between figurative representations and nonfigurative (or informe) ones, though he cannot yet account for the fact that the first represent animals and the second, human beings. The genesis of figuration, he argues, is an instinct of alteration, a desire to alter whatever is at hand—existing objects, such as toys, in the case of children, or surfaces such as walls or paper. In the process, figures are recognized in (or projected onto) the random scribblings, yielding a virtual object of representation which is then altered and deformed in turn. Art, Bataille writes "proceeds by successive destructions" [253].^{10}

But it can also take another path, or go in the other direction:

another way out is available to figural representation from the moment imagina-
tion substitutes a new object for the destroyed support. Instead of treating the
new object in the same manner as the support, it is possible, in the course of

9. In "L'histoire de l'érotisme" Bataille distinguishes between "l'animal banal" (before interdiction) and "l'animal divin," linked to transgression. In "Lascaux" the presentation of the former occurs textually, in Bataille's depiction of the stereotype of the cavemen as subhuman, as "classes inhumaines." This description is crucial for the figure of divine animality to emerge.

10. Rosalind Krauss discusses the notion of alteration (and the informe) from a quite different angle in The Optical Unconscious.
repetition, to submit it to progressive appropriation with respect to the represented original. In this way one passes quite rapidly to the increasingly resembling image [l'image de plus en plus conforme] of an animal, for example. It is a question then of a real change of meaning at the beginning of the development [il s'agit alors d'un véritable changement de sens au début du développement]. [253, original emphasis]

Bataille argues that such a change of meaning occurred for the Aurignacian man in relation to representations of animals, but not to representations of human beings [253]. However, and this is the important point, both in the case of the images he will characterize as informe (the representations of the human) and in the case of the images that are “de plus en plus conforme” (the animal images), the fiction of a form is presupposed. If the inhuman images are characterized as informe, this is not because there never was a figurative moment, but because the figure projected into the scribblings that alter the given material (in a mode reminiscent of what Max Ernst calls the “Lesson of Leonardo” in Beyond Painting, and which Valéry had alluded to much earlier in his study of Leonardo) is subsequently negated or deformed and in this sense rendered informe. The alternative gesture is to appropriate this fictive figure and to develop it until it is with form, that is, until it conforms to the virtual or fictive figure.

If we consider this analysis in theoretical terms, what Bataille appears to have discovered in his adaptation of Luquet’s theory of primitive art is the basic structure of the movement he will subsequently call “renversement des alliances” in “L’histoire de l’érotisme.” Bataille closes his short essay by noting the importance of considering “psychological motives” that might account for the categorical duality concerning the two modes of representation and their meaning. This is precisely what Bataille will return to two decades later in his study of Lascaux, where interdiction and transgression are associated with the representation of human beings and of animals, respectively, and analyzed as “ways of seeing.” The “reversal of alliances” provides a “psychological motive” (in Bataille’s sense) for the “change of meaning” he discerns in the movement of alteration that yields the figurative image. The first mode of alteration, the negative one, opens the world of interdiction; the second opens the world of transgression as an appropriation of the image. This corresponds to what Bataille speaks of as renewed contact with the sensible world in the experience of religious transgression.

“Lascaux” gives us “the image of the origin of art” [36] inasmuch as it gives us the origin of art as image. It also suggests one origin of the meaning of the story of interdiction/transgression, namely Bataille’s meditation on the origin of prehistoric figurative art. Interdiction and transgression do not give us the key to Lascaux. Rather, primitive art yields the secret of the theory of alteration—and provides the interpretation of its “change of meaning”—through the dual operation of the sacred. “Lascaux” is the story of this story, that is, the origin of art as origin of transgression. It is perhaps in this sense that we are to understand Bataille’s otherwise puzzling remark: “transgression does not exist before the moment when art itself appears” [41].

The reason Bataille gives a special place to the figurative images of the animals is not only that they illustrate his theoretical fiction (especially the hybrid figure of the man-beast) but because, when they are interpreted as a reversal of meaning through the theory of alteration, they bear witness to the refusal of the human world of work, which corresponds to the moment of sacred transgression. The visual realism of the animal figures gives a meaning of refusal to the informe representations of the human, which are construed as having been denied the light of appearance or subjected to “willful deformation,” since the animal images attest to the figurative powers of the prehistoric artists. The difference implies that the human was represented as inhuman and guides Bataille’s interpretation of this gesture as a refusal of the human world of work.
This all depends, however, on the uselessness of these figures, for it is only as such that they can inscribe the sacred moment of transgression in their figuration. Bataille refuses the conventional interpretation of the animal paintings, which endows them with magical force in an instrumental sense, placing them in the service of a ritual whose aim was to enhance hunting prospects, for example. He allows that the creation of these figures was a magical operation, but he insulates this notion of the magical from any instrumentality. For Bataille, the magical nature of artistic creation implies that a value of work has been superseded by a value of the sacred; it implies a recognition that no amount of work could obtain the desired result, and hence abnegates human instrumental powers. Bataille wants to convince us that these paintings were useless to primitive man, created in sheer exuberance as a celebration of the magical per se, the sacred.

What he does not explicitly say, however, is that it is just as important that these images remain useless to us. Otherwise they would lose their power of seduction and cease to communicate. "[O]n pouvait dire qu'il nous ressemblait," Bataille says of the primitive artist, bête humaine. But the paintings do not operate this resemblance by a self-portrait that would allow us to see ourselves in an image of him, and so verify the resemblance. Instead it is the inhuman figure that marks the passage to the human; we see only the nonperson. As Bataille wrote in "L'art primitif":

*The reindeer, the bison, or the horse are represented in such perfectly minute detail that if we could see equally scrupulous images of the men themselves, the strangest period in the metamorphosis of the human [la période la plus étrange des avatars humains] would immediately cease to be the most inaccessible. But the drawings and sculptures which have been charged with representing the Aurignacians are almost all informe and much less human than those that represent the animals.* [251, original emphasis]

The paintings do not give us the image our curiosity demands: the portrait of the caveman. They convey no useful information, yet in their uselessness they seduce us and enable us to find our "sensible presence" in the cave. It is the mask, the inhuman (all too human) figure of the animal that guarantees the uselessness of these images—to us. And it is the figural image that bears witness to transgression and performs our transfiguration into "divine animal."

We enter the cave "à la recherche d'un instant sacré" [42]. Once inside, "a feeling of presence imposes itself [un sentiment de presence s'impose]." A sensible sign of our presence is given as temps perdu—not only time past but time lost, lost in uselessness. This is the sacred moment of figuration, of la fête, and of sacrifice. Sacrifice liberates lived time (le temps vécu) ordinarily locked in (enfermé), absorbed by useful tasks and systems of measurement. Sacrifice opens up a different dimension of time—lost time—for sacrifice is "the catastrophe of time" as experience of being, that is, of time as being, or being as time—"il y a le temps." Toward the very end of his career, Heidegger reaches a similar conclusion: "time is a kind of Being" [13]. He writes that the future dimension of time (as the withholding of presence) and the past dimension of time (as the refusal of presence) together "grant and shield presence in a reciprocal relationship," and he adds, "nowhere do we find time as something that is like a thing" [3]. Heidegger's remark can help us read Bataille's statement concerning art as an expression of religious transgression. "The forms of art have no other origin than la fête de tous les temps" [41], Bataille writes, and sacrifice is the moment of paroxysm of this carnival. *La fête de tous les temps* is to be understood in terms of sacrifice as catastrophe of time, and thus as a carnival de

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11. "Sacrifices" [96]—"there is neither being nor nothingness there, there is time [il y a le temps]."

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tous les temps—of past, present, and future times. “Being as presence,” Heidegger writes, “is determined by time”—the catastrophe of time, Bataille would say. In “Lascaux,” transgression occurs through the figure or the fiction—for Bataille there is nothing less like a thing than the useless figure. Figuration is necessary so that the play of dissimulation can occur and inscribe the animal (the nonperson—il—excluded from the structure of linguistic enunciation) into a second-order circuit of address which passes through the image. The figure is necessary for an act of address to communicate across time—to transfigure. It is the fictive figure—figure inutile—that operates the reciprocal relationship of future, past, and present time in the afterlife of images.

Tel quel had much to gain by reading Bataille as a kind of (anti)matter to Breton’s “idealism.” As transgression became writing, the fictive and the image in Bataille were suppressed, just as they were within Tel quel itself.12 In his study of Foucault, Deleuze alludes to “a reaction against phenomenology” that resulted in a “a privilege of the word over the visible” [58]. In this context, the fictive was considered on the realist model as a simulacrum of the real and was therefore implicated in relation to discourses of truth or reference. In the world of digital imagery, however, where images no longer guarantee truth, there is no longer a need to draw back from the visible.13

WORKS CITED
All translations of French works are mine.

12. The suppression of the image or the fictive in Bataille corresponds with an erasure of the term “fiction” within the pages of Tel quel. In an early essay, “Logique de la Fiction,” Sollers appealed to the visual dimension of the fictive in the phenomenological register. He cites Mallarmé concerning language as instrument of fiction which he construes in relation to imagination, dream, and the surrealist image. After the publication of Derrida’s critique of phenomenology, the elaboration of the fictive dries up. We hear no more of what Barthes had called a “chaîne de signifiés” in his early essay on Sollers’s Drame (“Drame, poème, roman” 599). By 1969 (“Survol/rapports (blocs)/conflit”) the notion of fiction has been rephrased in terms of the signifier; it has become “the ongoing movement [mouvance] attained by inscription itself whose oscillation [battement] is presented to us... by Un Coup de dés” [11]—something like what Valéry called a “figure de la pensée” when he too looked at this book.

13. As William Mitchell put it in The Reconfigured Eye, if “photographs seemed to bond image to referent with superglue” [28], with digital imagery “the referent has come unstuck” [31]—“We have now entered the age of electrobricolage” [7].


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