MODERNIST PRIMITIVISM: SEEKING THE LOST PRIMITIVE OTHER
IN WORKS OF GEORGES BATAILLE, MICHEL LEiris, AND RENÉ CHAR

Dissertation

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In the twentieth century, the so-called primitive played a crucial role in the modernist opposition to conventional modes of thinking and in its desire to affiliate with non-Western societies. In this work, I study Georges Bataille’s, Michel Leiris’s, and René Char’s modernist primitivism and the different ways they examined the notion of the primitive in their works. To do so, I begin by presenting the various meanings and connotations that the term primitive has acquired due to the interest of Western ethnologists, anthropologists, and naturalists in studying the mentality and rituals of non-civilized societies. The purpose is to illustrate how the subjectivity of some of these accounts resulted from the West’s comparison of its own way of thinking to the Other’s, basing this comparison on industrialization and progress as the evaluating standards of other cultures. The history of ethnological, anthropological, and naturalist approaches to the primitive is contrasted with the history of Western primitivism and its effect also on shaping the many connotations associated with the primitive, in the form of an allegory of a lost stage of existence. Primitivism, which began in the artistic field in the nineteenth century, characterized the surrealists’ desire to break with bourgeois society by exploring its opposite, the notion of the primitive, in its simplicity, rawness, liberated mind, and free imagination, away from science and civilization. This trend influenced
Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and René Char, who were, at some point in their career, active participants in the surrealist movement.

The three writers I study in this work share the view that so-called primitive societies possess what civilized societies covet and need; all three approach different aspects of these societies, according to the cultural or personal circumstances that surround their primitivism. From Bataille, whose main focus is to implement the processes of disorder, change, and political revolt, with necessary irruptions of a new value, the sacred, adopted from primitive rituals, to Leiris, who subjugates the African Other to his fantasies, hoping for self-transformation, to Char, whose nostalgia fuses the physical with the spiritual primitive living experience, I explore the motivations for and consequences of their primitivism. This dissertation opens a previously unexplored chapter in Bataille’s, Leiris’s, and Char’s works, offering new insight into the development of their primitivist approach to non-Western rituals in the case of Bataille, to African artifacts and practices in the case of Leiris, and to the notion of the primitive as a symbol of an idealized living experience that is coextensive with a spiritual one in the case of Char.
To Daniel, for bringing endless joy to my life,
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>章节</th>
<th>内容</th>
<th>页码</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.  Introduction</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Research and Originality of this Work</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Constructs the Primitive</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Primitivism</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.  Modernist Primitivism</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primitivism in Art</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Vanguard Primitivism”</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  Georges Bataille’s Primitivism: The Search for the Sacred between Sacrifice and Eroticism</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Surrealism to a Sacred Society</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sacred in Ritual Sacrifices</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sacred in Eroticism</td>
<td>无</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Michel Leiris’s Primitivism: A Search for the Self in the Other .................104
   Subjective Accounts and Sexual Obsessions ...............................107
   Attempts at Fusion ...................................................................120
   Disappointment .......................................................................125

5. René Char’s Nostalgia: Recovering the Primitive .........................133
   Anguish in Modern Times .......................................................135
   In Search of the Primitive .....................................................139
   A Return to Primitive Living ..................................................144
   In Celebration of Lascaux ......................................................150

Conclusion .................................................................................166

Bibliography ..............................................................................174
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Twentieth-century French literature witnessed an upsurge of interest by French writers, like Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and René Char in the so-called primitive. These writers explored the notion of the primitive in different ways. The primitive was for Georges Bataille an ideal sociological system that ritualizes sacrifices and allows the individual to break with cultural limitations, for Michel Leiris a means for self-scrutiny, and for René Char a superior way of living and thinking. As I shall argue, Bataille, Leiris, and Char shaped the image of what they wanted the primitive to be: free, mystic, untamed, and in tune with nature, depending on the cultural or personal circumstances that surrounded their primitivism. In the three writers, this primitivism was modernist because it “had the aim of assaulting conventional standards and attitudes” (Hawthorn) in order to change society, the self, or modern human’s perception of its own existence. In this work, my aim is to situate Bataille, Leiris, and Char in the discourse of modernist primitivism in order to bring into light, first, the many meanings the term primitive entailed with them and, second, the way they sought the otherness or difference of the primitive, by contrasting the self with the primitive Other that has become fundamental to the West’s development of its own sense of identity.
This chapter discusses the problematic use of the term primitive that has become a Western product. It traces the different definitions and, sometimes pejorative, connotations that the term has acquired due to the West’s interest in the so-called archaic societies, through ethnology, anthropology, and missionary accounts. This chapter suggests reading Western, even scientific, accounts of the primitive, as a result of what Claude Lévi-Strauss describes as “une difficulté à nous adapter au milieu social dans lequel nous sommes nés” (Entretiens 20), a reference to all ethnologists. In this frame of Western primitivism, two of the early French primitivists will be studied: the first, Michel de Montaigne, and his perception of barbarism and savagery in “Des cannibales,” and the second, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and his idea of the “bon sauvage.”

Chapter two examines Western primitivism with a focus on modernism as a continuation of the myth of the primitive as a savage and as a reaction against Realism and Naturalism. This chapter discusses two subjects: first, the modernists’ refashioning of art and, second, what critics call the surrealists’ “vanguard primitivism” (Taoua 3), that is, the “imagined recuperation of a lost primitivity” (Taoua 9) and desire to affiliate with non-Western cultures in order to break with bourgeois society. My objective in this chapter is to show how “vanguard primitivism” was individual in the way it aimed at concretizing Breton’s description of the unconscious and at expressing the surrealists’ self-conscious alienation from the writers and beliefs of the past, while laying claim to a social activism. Shedding light on “vanguard primitivism” establishes a basis for the three following chapters that demonstrate the influence of surrealism on the formation of Bataille’s, Leiris’s, and Char’s versions of primitivism.
The third chapter studies Georges Bataille’s intellectual primitivism that sprang from the surrealists’ modernist approach to the primitive. It traces the evolvement of Bataille’s definition of the sacred, first, in the 1930s, as communication achieved in collectively experiencing a loss in ritual sacrifices and potlatch, and later, in the 1950s, as continuity experienced in eroticism in ritual orgies. The first definition emerged from the period when Bataille advocated the implementation of human/animal sacrifices in order to found a “sociologie sacrée” (Œuvres complètes 1, 492) in contemporary French society. The second one conveyed Bataille’s later focus on the individual in L’Erotisme (1957), a work inspired in the Well Scene of Lascaux. L’Erotisme emphasized the importance of breaking with cultural rules, as in primitive festivals, and of reintroducing the excluded forbidden, such as erotic activities, into contemporary thinking, thus offering a new perspective on the vitality of erotic desires and the effect of their release on the individual’s existence.

Chapter four shows how Leiris, who shared with Bataille the belief in reviving the sacred in contemporary society, was interested in the primitive in a rather personal way. Leiris’s acceptance of Marcel Griaule’s invitation to be the secretary-archivist to the Dakar-Djibouti mission was motivated by a need to search for a cure for his anguished-self in Africa. His travel journal, L’Afrique fantôme, testifies to his subjective accounts of African rituals that are seen through the lens of the observer, who is haunted by what he calls his sexual obsessions. African artifacts and women are a projection of his fantasies, which I shall explain in light of his fascination with Cranach’s diptych painting of Lucrèce and Judith in L’Age d’homme. Unsatisfied with being only an observer, he attempts to fuse with local life in order to become Other, but realizes that real Africa
differs from what he imagined it would be. He becomes conscious of the gap that separates him from African life and returns to France, disappointed.

Chapter five deals with another version of primitivism where the first subject is also present, but expresses a concern with the condition of contemporary humans. René Char’s voice expresses a nostalgia for a primitive state of plenitude, which modern humans have lost due to cumbersome civilization. With Char, the primitive becomes a concept that signifies living in innocence, simplicity, and in direct contact with nature, which for him purifies the mind and ascertains the simplicity of one’s thinking that is no longer subjugated to rationalism. Primitive mysticism also plays a role in this nostalgia because it means to Char an antonym of confining philosophy. The culminating section of this chapter presents Char’s celebration of the recovery of the primitive way of perceiving the self and/in the world, represented by the meanings Char draws from the painting of the Well Scene of the Lascaux Cave.

**Prior Research and Originality of this Work**

Although the West’s interest in indigenous societies has been the subject of numerous studies, those studies have mostly focused on the artistic and anthropological levels. There is a widespread belief that Western primitivism is mainly an interest in tribal art,\(^6\) manifested in the wave of artistic experiment and transformation that swept through the arts in Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A quick look at the majority of the studies that have been done on the subject of modernist primitivism reveals this fact.\(^7\) For instance, when defining primitivism as ‘ethnocentric,’ William
Rubin uses the term exclusively in an artistic context, stating that “primitivism is an aspect of the history of modern art” (Primitivism 5). Also, several studies point out the outcome of the various definitions attributed to the primitive with the intention of underlining what the notion of the primitive promises among modernist artists. However, outside the artistic sphere, other aspects, such as the sacred, mysticism, harmony between the primitive and nature, which attracted French thinkers, have not been given such attention. This dissertation opens a previously unexplored subject by studying Bataille’s, Leiris’s, and Char’s subjective representations of the notion of the primitive, which situates them in the discourse of modernist primitivism.

Scholars have studied Bataille, Leiris, and Char from different perspectives. Bataille has mostly been referred to as a socialist and a political intellectual. Even when his theory of eroticism has been studied, it was either simply an attempt to examine his concepts of eroticism, death, and continuity, or to understand these concepts in light of Foucault’s “Préface à la transgression.” In this work, I analyze Bataille’s theories on sociological reformation and on eroticism in light of his approach to ritual sacrifices, potlatch, and orgies. For Leiris, his autobiography, L’Age d’homme, has attracted critics with its disturbing confessional mode, and his journal, L’Afrique fantôme, has been studied either in the colonialist discourse or as a writing of the self. In this work, I trace the development of his attitude towards African culture: first, the projection of his fantasies on the Other, thus bringing the Other to the self’s view of local life, then his attempt to fuse with the Other, and finally his disappointment in knowing Africa because of his ethnocentrism. As for Char, there does not exist an engaged study of the notion of nostalgia in his work, which is an apparent feature of his primitivism. Critics are rather
interested in exploring the influence of surrealism on his work or in elucidating certain poetics of his writing. His four poems, *Lascaux*, have been analyzed to prove the movement from a state of alienation to one of reconciliation between hunter and prey, the modern poet and the primitive hunter-artist. In my study, I first thread together all the elements of his concept of primitive living and, second, demonstrate how the first poem of Lascaux, “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant,” inspired in the Well Scene of Lascaux, encompasses this already established, and rather imagined, concept, which becomes with Char a model for humanity.

While Bataille, Leiris, and Char are differently interested in the notion of the primitive, this difference still relates them. For example, it is intriguing to know that Bataille and Leiris co-founded the *Collège de sociologie* based on sharing the same principles of the sacred, and yet they disagreed in their approach to indigenous cultures. In fact, Bataille homogenized the rituals he incorporated into his theories, by focusing on the idea of loss experienced in sacrifices and orgies, as a fundamental basis for establishing a social bond and for experiencing human continuity. Leiris, on the contrary, attempted to participate in African rituals, like “zâr,” to experience a sense of otherness. As for Char, his concept of the primitive is rather nostalgic and based on poetic imagination, although he shares with Bataille a fascination for the human ability to go beyond the world of things, as in ecstatic experiences. By bringing together Bataille, Leiris, and Char, whose interest in the primitive can be said to have grown out of their participation in surrealism, one can have an enriching view of twentieth-century French intellectual life, especially of such influential thinkers, who contributed to the Western
construction of the concept of the primitive and reevaluated their own culture/self in relation to the Other.

The West Constructs the Primitive

Although defining the primitive is not the main objective of this thesis, it is pertinent to emphasize the problematic nature of using such a term by showing how it has acquired several connotations throughout literary history especially due to the West’s interest in the so-called archaic societies. In L’Art magique, André Breton warns against the use of the term “primitif” and only uses it either between quotation marks or precedes it with the adjective “prétendu” or “dit.” Critics in the second half of the twentieth century, such as Mary Douglas, still notice that “we feel there is something discourteous” in the term (74). The primitive’s “natural relationship to [an assumed] mystical and timeless world was claimed with at times embarrassing innocence to be a viable alternative to contemporary civilization,” as Innes underlines in Holy Theater (26). Traditionally, the adjective “primitive” has meant original, especially in reference to “primitive art” and “primitive writing.” But the term refers also to the origin of species. For example, when speaking in general about primitive people, one refers to the earliest stages of development. In the following definition, the Dictionary of Anthropology alludes to the negative connotation of the primitive as an underdeveloped stage that lacks a culture of its own:

“Primitive” was formerly used to describe a “native” or nonliterate population. It is not so used today because it implies that nonliterate peoples are retarded and resist social change along the lines of western
civilization, that they have not undergone any cultural evolution of their own, and that their way of life is like that of our prehistoric ancestors. (437)

Primitive has thus often been set in the evolutionary frame of a pre-developed stage. Some of the definitions of the primitive set its social and moral characteristics. As Jules Monnerot states on the use of the term “primitif,”

“préhumains” ou “sous-humains,” “simiens ou thériomorphes” (tous ces adjectifs impliquent que l’on confesse quelque dogme évolutionniste), [. . .] inférieurs à la guerre, incapables de soutenir le choc d’autres collectivités [. . .] pris dans ce sens inavoué ou désavoué, peu rigoureux, mais très répandu, le terme est communément appliqué à tous les peuples illettrés, sans annales, que les blancs ont soumis. Lévy-Bruhl ne lui donne pas, malgré qu’il en ait, un autre sens. Le trait caractéristique par excellence du “primitif” est une infériorité bien établie sous le triple rapport de la technique, du rendement et de l’organisation sociale. (191)

There is no doubt that prejudices dictated the definition of the primitive as an object of study. Geographically, the West placed archaic societies in Central and Southern Africa, the Americas, and Oceania. Primitive people have been cursed and seen as a malediction living in an uncivilized, barbaric society.¹⁵ The ethnologist, Jean Cazeneuve, summarizes this malediction:

L’expression de “primitif” [. . .] présente un grave défaut. Elle semble impliquer un évolutionnisme assez simpliste, selon lequel l’humanité, dans son progrès, traverserait nécessairement plusieurs phases successives. Les premières, les plus proches des origines, seraient représentées par un état de culture dans lequel stagneraient les populations qu’on appelle primitives. Or, en toute rigueur, cette qualification ne pourrait s’appliquer qu’aux sociétés préhistoriques aujourd’hui disparues. (L’Ethnologie 17)

Even the general definition that Larousse offers on the entry “primitif” emphasizes the importance of industrial civilization to define the term: “Primitif se dit des sociétés humaines restées à l’écart de la civilisation mécanique et industrielle et qui ont conservé leurs structures socio-économiques propres, ainsi que de ceux qui les composent.”¹⁶ It
would be fair then to assess that industrialization and progress have been the main
evaluating standards of other cultures and that the term “primitive” emerged from the
West’s association with civilization and modernity. In his study of “The West and the
Rest,” Hall explains that what is referred to by “the West” is the type of society

that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern
[. . .] [and that] arose [. . .] roughly during the sixteenth century, after the
Middle Ages and the break-up of feudalism. [. . .] Nowadays, any society
which shares these characteristics, [. . .] can be said to belong to “the
West.” The meaning of this term is therefore virtually identical to that of
the word “modern.” (186)

Thus, any reference to the West entails another relevant distinction of what is not
Western, or what Hall terms the “Rest,” that is, any other society that is different from
Western societies. As a consequence of this opposition emerges the paradigm of
mirroring: viewing archaic cultures as different plays a dual role, first, in shaping the
West’s sense of identity throughout history and in the modern era, and, second, in
imposing a value judgment on “the Rest,” to use Hall’s term. In other words, the
realization of the existence of the different Other has not just drawn attention to the
question of who is primitive and as opposed to whom, but has also shown that “the
West’s sense of itself – its identity, [. . .] came to represent itself in relation to these
others” (Hall 188). The flip side of this consciousness of self-superiority was the
judgment inflicted on the Other by comparing it to the same. The collection of African
art and pictures, for example, illustrating material cultural objects, suggested especially
behavioral differences between Westerns and the so-called primitive people. Africans’,
Oceanics’, and Amerindians’ physical traits and lifestyles were judged inferior, being
“dark-skinned, small in stature, unattractive, unclean, promiscuous, brutal with their
women and worshippers of spirits, animating animals and even sticks and stones” (Odak
16). Human races started being ranked based on skin color, where the highest races were the Whites, whereas the lower ones included

the Fuegians (in the Tierre del Fuego in South America), the Australian aborigines, the Andamenese, the now extinct Tasmanians, the Pygmies and the San (formerly known as the Bushmen of South Africa) and Quena (formerly known as the Hottentots of South Africa) of Africa. (Tylor 273)

The general tendency to associate aborigines with certain geographical areas around the world faced some criticism due to the mistake ethnologists have fallen into, that is their “strange and uncritical manner in which all primitive peoples were lumped together in ethnological discussion – simple Fuegians with the highly advanced Aztecs and Mayans, Bushmen with the peoples of the Nigerian coast, Australians with Polynesians” (viii), as Radin puts it.

In the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin’s naturalist theory of evolution further complicated the representation of the aborigines. His evolutionist theory that suggested that humans go through a pre-developed stage ultimately belittled primitive mentality. Darwin’s explanation of the transformation of species in the theory of natural selection (The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, 1859) prepared for his general interest in the study of human evolution, especially in his later work, The Descent of Man (1871), where he focused on the single species, Homo Sapiens. Although much of The Descent of Man was directed at developing the evolutionary theory of sexual selection, that is the selection of a reproductive partner, one of its main arguments dealt with humans’ physical evolution. While Darwin did not represent humankind as deriving from apes, he did establish that humans must in all probability be descended from species that are classified among primates, and further, that humans and the higher apes resemble each other anatomically more closely than the latter resemble the lower primates. His
following statement from *The Descent of Man* underscores his conclusion of the descent of humans from a primal stage that is deemed inferior:

The main conclusion arrived at in this work, namely that man is descended from some lowly organized form, will, I regret to think, be highly distasteful to many persons. We are descended from barbarians. The astonishment which I felt on first seeing a party of Fuegians on a wild and broken shore will never be forgotten by me [. . .]. Such were our ancestors. These men were absolutely naked and bedaubed with paint, their long hair was tangled, their mouths frothed with excitement, and their expression was wild, startled, and distrustful. They possessed hardly any arts, and like wild animals lived on what they could catch; they had no government, and were merciless to everyone not of their own small tribe. [. . .] For my own part I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy to save the life of his keeper, or from that old baboon, who descending from the mountains, carried away in triumph his young comrade from a crowd of astonished dogs. (404)

In view of such a statement, it becomes clear that Darwin’s description of distant societies as “barbarians” implies wildness in a pejorative sense, as well as a lack of a creative artistic talent, an idea that will soon be revoked and denied by nineteenth-century primitivist artists, such as Gauguin. The credibility of the Darwinian theory was reflected in the widespread belief in the possible education of primitive societies and in their imminent evolution to become like Europeans. Missionaries went to Africa: the British group, Church Missionary Society (1871), went to Burundi and to other countries in Central Africa; the French Catholic group, Les Pères Blancs, went to East Africa where they founded a school. Also, in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century, Haeckel adopted Darwin’s theory but called it Monism (*The Riddle of the Universe*, 1899). Nevertheless, although the flip side of the Darwinian theory on humans’ mental evolutionism soon translated later in the nineteenth century into a nostalgia for that simplistic stage, rejecting naturalism and science and “imagining” a paradisiacal primate
environment, it remains clear that Western appeal for the original implied that the primitive carries a sense of rawness and stagnancy.

The outcomes of ethnology as a study of cultures increased Western awareness of the existence of the Other. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, often classified as a philosopher, psychologist, and ethnologist, incarnates the example of an anthropological researcher whose objective of understanding irrational factors in social thought and primitive religion and mythology was mainly based on a comparison between the West’s and the primitive’s way of thinking. His research is often criticized for its negative outcomes and negative impact on ethnology; thinkers have remarked that “son peu de curiosité des sauvages a scandalisé les ethnographes” (Monnerot 193). From his hypothesis on the evolution of the human mind in his famous book Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures (1910) to his thesis on mysticism in La Mentalité primitive (1922), Lévy-Bruhl asserts the irrationality of the mental function in primitive societies. His initial objective of explaining the primitive mode of thinking – where he reports the high intelligence of Eskimo or Bushmen – ends up declaring that those natives are incapable of either reasoning or interpreting events. The comparative element of Western approach to the primitive explains and justifies almost exclusively Lévy-Bruhl’s following assessment in La Mentalité primitive:

Les deux mentalités [primitive and Western] qui se rencontrent sont si étrangères l’une à l’autre, leurs habitudes si divergentes, leurs moyens d’expression si différents! L’Européen pratique l’abstraction presque sans y penser, et les opérations logiques simples lui sont rendues si faciles par son langage qu’elles ne lui coûtent pas d’effort. Chez les primitifs, la pensée, et la langue, sont de caractère presque exclusivement concret. (505-6)
Even though Lévy-Bruhl supports, in his final chapter of the same book, P. Steensby’s conclusion concerning the existence of different laws that dictate any system of reasoning – which might be a fair explanation of the different ethnic cultures – he still asserts the flagrant rupture between the two mentalities. In one famous example which Lévy-Bruhl relates, a French West African colonial judge could not understand the apparently contradictory claims of African witnesses in a murder trial that the victim was killed by a certain man (the accused) and also killed by a crocodile. Primitive people, he argues, are distinguished by a psychology that is different and inferior to that of civilized people. By concluding La Mentalité primitive with the following statement, “Il est donc extrêmement malaisé, sinon impossible, pour un Européen, même s’il s’y applique, même s’il possède la langue des indigènes, de penser comme eux, tout en semblant parler comme eux” [my emphasis] (506), Lévy-Bruhl confirms that primitive people do not possess the same thinking patterns that Westerns have. He overlooks these peoples’ behaviors and the way they envisage life, which proceed from magic and belief in influences that are imperceptible to the senses. In his entry on “Lévy-Bruhl” in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Jean Cazeneuve reveals that Evans-Pritchard did get Lévy-Bruhl to admit that he sometimes made savages appear more irrational than they actually are; he maintained, however, that it was not his intention to give a complete description of the life of primitive peoples but to highlight the differences between their mentality and ours. (264)

One can then sum up that violating the laws of logic was a major leading point in La Mentalité primitive, claiming that primitive mentality does not necessarily contradict our laws of logic, but it represents a pre-logical stage that humankind passes through. Being well aware if his erroneous past analogies, Lévy-Bruhl revised his theory and relied more
on “the work of the best ethnographers” (Cazeneuve, Encyclopedia 264) to focus on the analysis of the mystic experience, such as the study of beings and objects that bring bad and good luck, various magical practices, and the importance of the dead. As a result, he wrote between 1931 and 1938 three major books: Le Surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive (1931), La Mythologie primitive (1935), and L’Expérience mystique et les symboles chez les primitifs (1938). Although Lévy-Bruhl questioned later in his life the accuracy of his earlier analysis of primitive mentality in the notes published after his death under Les Carnets de Lévy-Bruhl (1949), his perpetuation of primitive mentality as inferior, in addition to the inadequacy of his records, remain unquestionable.

The West’s stance towards primitive mentality varied. Paul Radin, an American anthropologist and student of Franz Boas, contributed to the study of ethnophilosophy and questioned the validity of past ethnological studies. The principle argument of his respectable book, Primitive Man as Philosopher, was to show that “the judgments civilized peoples have passed on the aborigines, we may be sure, were not initially based on any calm evaluation of facts” (viii). Furthermore,

There has always existed a tacit assumption that there is but one true version of a myth, one true version of a rite. Where deviations or variants were present, this was to be ascribed to errors due either to forgetfulness or ignorance, or to general inert degeneration […] We are justified then in insisting that part of the uniformity postulated of a rite or a myth is due to the utter inadequacy of the ethnological record and that this, in turn, is due not always or predominantly to unfortunate circumstances but to tacit or expressed assumptions of the investigator. The most cursory glance suffices to show that we are indeed not here dealing with an inert degeneration but with the free play of participants and story-tellers. (Radin 47-8)

Archaic, uncivilized, societies have suffered value judgments, due to prejudices and bias, most surprisingly imposed by historians and ethnologists who have mistakenly imposed
their personal biases on their research. For Radin, some manuscripts that were, and still are, widely valued for their data on ethnological societies were most importantly failures “due to the scientifically accredited theories of the innate inferiority of primitive man in mentality and capacity for civilization as much as to prejudice and bias” (ix). For his part, Radin studied the Winnebago tribe for much of his life, writing classic accounts of this group: *The Winnebago Tribe* (1923). He studied the tribal view of life as philosophical in itself, by excluding any possible Western evaluation of tribal magical rites. What makes Radin’s contribution to ethnology valuable is his realization of Western prejudices vis-à-vis tribal cultures. As he confesses,

> To most northerners – and the overwhelming majority of ethnologists are northerners – the enjoyment of sensations as such is still the sign of inferior thinking powers. [. . .] What complicates the situation even further and weighs the scales still more heavily against a correct understanding of primitive peoples, is that this sensational view of life is accompanied by apparent contradictions of elementary logical thinking and of palpable fact. All the elements in the case thus conspire to reinforce the ethnologist [. . .] in his belief that the mentality of primitive people is essentially inferior to our own. (14)

In opposition to Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of a pre-logical mentality, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s research in Brazil from 1935-39 asserts that tribal forms of thinking are to be found in us all, providing a shared basis which is domesticated by our various cultures, as he notes in *La Pensée sauvage* (1966). As a social anthropologist and leading exponent of structuralism applied to the analysis of cultural systems, such as kinship and mythical systems, Lévi-Strauss represents one of the few anthropologists who maintained a scientific approach to his subjects devoid of any pre-existing judgment. In an interview with Georges Charbonnier in 1959, Lévi-Strauss states that, as ethnologists, “nous ne pouvons pas, à la fois et en même temps, réfléchir sur des sociétés très différentes, et sur
la nôtre. Quand nous réfléchissons sur celle-ci, nous utilisons un certain système de valeurs, un certain système de référence, dont il faut nous départir pour réfléchir à d’autres sociétés” (21). Reflecting on the primitive versus the civilized, he emphasizes that the West’s notion of progress is what obstructs an appreciation of each individual society:

Quand nous regardons [une société] du dehors, nous pouvons l’affecter d’un certain nombre d’indices, déterminer le degré de son développement technique.

Mais, quand on est dedans, ces quelques éléments très pauvres se dilatent et se transforment pour chaque membre d’une société quelle qu’elle soit, fût-cे la plus civilisée ou la plus primitive, cela n’a pas d’importance, cette société est riche de toutes sortes de nuances. (26-27)

It is in light of such an approach that he establishes that all systems of “lived” kinship and of “arbitrary” myths lead back to what one might describe as “mental.” In other words, Lévi-Strauss ascertains the complexity of the structures of primitive myth, thus equating them to the structures of European poetry and science. Lévi-Strauss’s reflection upon the primitive Other aims at scientifically studying the primitive’s patterns of thoughts, that is kinship structures, in order to have a better understanding of how all humans think and of what underlies social structure.

The Belgian missionary, Placide Tempels, took a different comparative approach in his study of the philosophical system in African tribes. His method of comparing White and African mentalities in Congo vis-à-vis their conception of the essence of being shed light on his treatment of the primitive Other as a way to capture the truth about human actions. Interestingly, Temples asserted in *Bantou Philosophy* (1959) that all human actions derive from the same source of forces and have a tendency to change, to destroy:
The Bantu soul hankers after life and force. The fundamental notion under which being is conceived lies within the category of forces [. . .]. To arrive at this reality common to all beings [. . .] it is necessary to [. . .] pay attention to [. . .] all elements which are common to all beings [. . .] e.g. the origin, the growth, the changes, the destruction, or the achievement of the beings.17 (34)

His conclusion suggested the existence of common roots to all human behaviors: “In the way among our Bantu we see the évolutés,18 the civilized, even the Christians, return to their former ways of behavior whenever they are overtaken by moral lassitude, danger or suffering” (13). That is to say, Tempels’ comparative approach, which was contrary to Lévy-Bruhl’s in results, served as a transition to reach a better understanding of the primitive’s patterns of thinking.

Needless to say, it is a fact that Western assessment of modernity and its consciousness of the opposition between the West and “the Rest” dictate the ethnological accounts of the primitive. Ethnology’s assumed goal of giving objective data of the object of study ultimately shifts into a value judgment, especially after the Darwinian evolutionist argument, rendering primitive mentality pre-developed, in need of evolution, like in the case of Lévy-Bruhl. The inadequacy of the ethnological record illustrates, first and foremost, Western interpretation of the way of life in the societies it studied. Nevertheless, regardless of the validity of their output that proceeds from either a scientific or a biased basis, what remains true is that Western interest in those societies is mainly the result of a need to explore that Other. Lévi-Strauss states that ethnologists embark upon their studies as a way of escape or as a result of urban dislocation. As he puts it, “On a souvent dit – je ne sais pas si c’est généralement exact, mais c’est probablement vrai pour beaucoup d’entre nous – que la raison qui nous a poussés vers l’ethnologie, c’est une difficulté à nous adapter au milieu social dans lequel nous sommes
nés” (Entretiens 20). Is that to admit that ethnology is partially a manifestation of Western primitivism, or Western glorification of the primitive, as much as it is a discipline that studies cultures? It is doubtless that the West’s comparative approaches, between its own way of thinking and the Other’s, opened the path for Western primitivism that saw in primitive life a lost stage of simplicity, incorruption, and all aspects that were missing in civilized society and to which the West wished to return.

**Western Primitivism**

Although the term primitive has often times suffered from some pejorative connotations, primitivism has not, simply because the implications of Western primitivism have been affirmative, holding out the prospect of a primal simplicity and purity that exist in unindustrialized societies and that the West covets. Yet primitivism poses sometimes a problem of definition. As William Rubin states, “the word was first used in France in the nineteenth century and formally entered French as strictly art-historical in the seven-volume Nouveau Larousse illustré published between 1897 and 1904: ‘n.m. B. –arts. Imitation des primitifs’” (Primitivism 2). Primitivism has also witnessed some inconsistencies and confusion with the arts of primitive peoples. Still, it was considered to be a belief in the superiority of primitive life. The Dictionary of Anthropology defines primitivism as “the glorification of an earlier stage of human development” (437). In this sense, it could be argued that Western study of other societies, such as Darwin’s, Lévy-Bruhl’s, Lévi-Strauss’s, Temples’s, and Radin’s, among others, cannot be classified as primitivist, since it was mainly conducted as an
anthropological science rather than as a nostalgia for the different. However, taking into account Lévi-Strauss’s later admission that ethnologists express difficulty within their social milieu and that this is the reason why they turn to archaic societies underscores the importance of the primitive’s role in the West’s attempt to seize knowledge of the self and of human thinking in general. Outside of the anthropological sphere, the idealization of the primitive, such as Rousseau’s idea of the “bon sauvage” represents an ideological understanding of primitivism as a glorification of primitive culture. In other words, there exist two sorts of interest in unindustrialized societies: the first is anthropological and is a discourse that tries to be value-neutral, despite the value-judgments it sometimes makes, and the second is literary and artistic and tends towards the nostalgic. Although the first type has widely uncovered some secrets about primitive thinking, as we saw in the previous section, it is the second one that can be described as primitivist because it is altogether positive as it is mostly a celebration of the lost stage of primitivity in the industrialized West. It is mainly the West’s literary primitivism that I am interested in studying in this work, since it characterizes Breton’s, Bataille’s, Leiris’s, and Char’s various approaches to the primitive in their works. This primitivism illustrates the different cultural and personal circumstances that accompanied it and that conditioned these writers’ different perceptions of the primitive, as I shall explain.

As a key word in this study, the term primitivism requires more clarification. French writers’ primitivism, in the sense it is used in this study, falls under the most agreed-upon definition, as a Western phenomenon, a quest for what the West hoped to find in the primitive. Whether this quest was a response to social and artistic needs or an alternative to rationalism, civilization, or progress, primitivism has always reflected an
individual interest in non-Western cultures, what the West aspired to return to, such as the childhood of humanity, its irrationality and yet its innocence. This aspiration constituted a leitmotif that expanded into almost all artistic levels: painting, sculpture, fiction, and theater. In these variable fields, Western primitivism also shaped the many connotations associated with the primitive. As I hope to demonstrate, it relativized the notion of the primitive, revealing the degree to which, for example, French intellectuals, like Montaigne and Rousseau, began to think of their society in relation to the primitive Other.

The history of Western primitivism goes back to Publius Cornelius Tacitus (born around 55 A.D), Rome’s historian, who studied Germany’s land, people, customs, and practices, in his famous manuscript, *Germania*, discovered in the 1420s, where he drew “contrasts, explicit and implicit, between the luxury and immorality of Rome and the stern simplicity of Germany” (Sleeman xxi). Comparisons of people’s morality were traditionally discussed by many ethnographers at the time, because ethical themes were an essential part of the writers’ training in the rhetorical schools of the Roman Empire. Germans, compared to their contemporary Romans, were viewed as “primitive peoples,” and thus, “were apt to be idealized” (Sleeman xxi) and admired for their bravery, war skills, and endurance. Although Tactitus wrote about the Germans and pointed out their threat to Rome, he did not visit Germany; he relied on “literary and oral” sources to describe Germans (Sleeman xxii) and concluded *Germania* by clarifying that “such is the account we have received” (quoted in Sleeman xxii).

Like Tacitus, Montaigne, in his essay, “Des Cannibales,” which is an exaltation of nature and a condemnation of civilization as an artificial product of reason, relied on
secondary sources in his description of the cannibals. As Pierre Villey’s edition of Montaigne’s essays reports: “il paraît parler des cannibales uniquement d’après des témoignages oraux” (202), a reference to Benzoni’s story of the Atlantides. Thus, the reader finds traces of Montaigne’s exotic imagination of what this people’s lifestyle is: “ils vivent en une contrée de pays très-plaisante et bien temperée [. . .], il est rare d’y voir un homme malade,” which he confesses he did not witness himself: “de façon qu’à ce que m’ont dit mes tesmoings” (207). Montaigne’s accounts of what was called the New World in the sixteenth century derived, as Elizabeth Bellamy notes in her study of Montaigne’s “exotic imaginary,” from “the representations and the travel literature of the time [. . . and] were themselves often directly influenced by classical ethnographies and their representations of the exotic land and peoples of the East” (69).

Although Montaigne did not set foot in the exotic lands he wrote about, his purpose of using secondary sources to depict those peoples’ lives is clear: those cannibals serve as a good subject to teach a moral lesson, “[ce qui] se rattache à une ancienne tradition chère aux moralistes de tous les temps” (Villey 202). This moral lesson ridicules Western reasoning and judgment of the cannibals as barbaric. In his essay, Montaigne begins by recounting King Pyrrhus’s perspective of the term barbarism and implicitly sheds light on its changing meaning:

Quand le Roy Pyrrhus passa en Italie, après qu’il eut reconnue l’ordonnance de l’armée que les Romains luy envoyoient au devant: “Je ne sçay, dit-il, quels barbares sont ceux-ci (car les Grécs appelloient ainsi toutes les nations estrangieres), mais la disposition de cette armée que je voy n’est aucunement barbare.” (202)

As Montaigne wants to point out, two meanings of barbarism are discerned in this passage: the first means stranger or different from the point of view of the subject or
observer, and the second means that which is not disciplined or has not lived in a social system. In illustrating King Roy Pyrrhus's dual perception of barbarism, which is based, in both meanings, on a material judgment, Montaigne seems then to be questioning the European myth of barbarism, which leads him also to question Western arbitrary association of cannibalism with barbarism.

Attempting to establish an objective definition of the word barbarism, by pointing out the effect of cultural relativism on the changing meaning of the term, Montaigne resorts to the account of a “simple” man who lived in Brazil with native Indians for the simple reason that, as he notes, the “simple” man “n’enseigne pas les mythes” (205) because he does not have preconceived judgments of Brazilian cannibals. In doing so, Montaigne subjectively classifies people as the “simple” ones and “les fines gens.” For him, each has a different mind: the first is an “homme simple et grossier, qui est une condition propre à rendre tesmoignage,” whereas “les fines gens” “ne representent jamais les choses pures, ils les inclinent et masquent selon le visage qu’ils leur ont veu, [. . .] amplification; inventions fauces” (205). He moves on from this unfounded judgment to affirming the relativism of defining barbarism, which he himself eventually equates with “savagery”:

Or, je trouve [. . .] qu’il n’y a rien de barbare et de sauvage en cette nation [. . .] sinon que chacun appelle barbarie ce qui n’est pas de son usage; comme de vray, il semble que nous n’avons autre mire de la verité et de la raison que l’exemple et l’idée des opinions et usances du païs où nous sommes. (206)

Trapped himself in this subjectivity, Montaigne defines the savagery of the cannibals in light of his own appreciation of the “simple” man’s mentality. In the following passage, he explains savagery in relation to nature on two different levels:
Ils [les cannibales] sont sauvages, de même que nous appelons sauvages les fruits que nature, de soi et de son progrès ordinaire, a produits: là où, à la vérité, ce sont ceux que nous avons alterez par nostre artifice et detournrez de l’ordre commun, que nous devrions appeller plutost sauvages. […] Ce n’est pas raison que l’art gaigne le point d’honneur sur nostre grande et puissant mere nature. (206)

First, savagery signifies that which is a natural product, and, second, it means that which is the result of artifice, opposite of nature. One can then deduce that Montaigne associates natural savagery in the cannibals with the simplicity of the “simple” man and savagery of contemporary people with the tendency of “les fines gens” to alter “purity” and “amplify” things.

As such, Montaigne’s initial “Il n’y a rien de barbare et de sauvage en cette nation” contradicts a few pages later his assertion that “nous les pouvons donc bien appeller barbares,” thus confirming the barbarism of the cannibals in opposition to the West’s rationalism, “eu esgard aux regles de la raison, mais non pas eu esgard à nous, qui les surpassons en toute sorte de barbarie” (211). Proceeding with his comparative system, Montaigne concludes on the barbarism of the cannibals in the sense of original naivety, purity, and lack of artificiality that characterizes civilized people:

Ces nations [les cannibales] me semblent donc ainsi barbares, pour avoir receu fort peu de façon de l’esprit humain, et estre encore fort voisines de leur naifveté originelle. Les loix naturelles leur commandent encore, fort peu abastardies par les nostres. (207)

In finally confirming the barbarism of the cannibals, not only does Montaigne confer upon it all the characteristics of a natural, as opposed to a civilized, society, but he also ascertains the ruthlessness of the civilized, which still implies, although on a minimal level, the ruthlessness of the cannibals. This is the case in his contrast of natural
cannibalism ("un homme mort") with what he describes as civilized cannibalism ("un homme vivant"): 

\[
\text{il y a plus de barbarie à manger un homme vivant qu’à le manger mort, à deschirer, par tourments et par geénes, un corps encore plein de sentiment, le faire rostir par le menu, le faire mordre et meurtrir aux chiens et aux pourceaux, que de le rostir et manger après qu’il est trespasé. (209)}
\]

In this opposition, Montaigne portrays the natural cannibal less ruthless than a civilized person. He moves then gradually from pointing out the relativity of attributing barbarism to a certain people to affirming the cannibals’ superiority to civilized people, despite their barbarism and savagery. In his study of the function of this comparative system in Montaigne’s inversion of the meaning of the term “barbare” vis-à-vis “civilisé,” Lawrence Kritzman concludes that “Des cannibales” “ne sert pas seulement à ‘condamner la civilisation hypocritique’ [. . .]. Cet essai souligne également la relativité du point de vue nomothétique, tout en retournant à la notion objective du mot ‘barbare’ en raison de la mise en question du signifié mythique” (86-87). In other words, in addition to showing Montaigne’s rejection of civilization and rationalism, the essay underscores how the subject’s culture decides on the definition of being barbaric or civilized. Thus, Montaigne’s comparative system, despite its inconsistency, engenders the two following oppositions: for him, a “barbare” is natural and thus civilized, whereas the civilized is artificial, irrational, and thus “barbare.”

Montaigne’s exotic imagination that idealized the cannibals was followed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s celebration of the primitive as the “bon sauvage,” the best-known embodiment of the Western affirmative attitude towards the primitive. Admiring Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s method of reasoning in investigating primitive societies, Claude Lévi-Strauss declares in his article, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau fondateur des sciences de
l’homme,” that Rousseau is to him an anthropologist “avant la lettre” (243). Despite this admiration, one would rather classify Rousseau, not as an anthropologist, but as a primitivist, given the fact that he explores the notion of the primitive in order to understand his own, away from scientific reasoning. Rousseau’s glorification of the primitive is a means of reconstructing society by returning to its original form, as opposed to Lévi-Strauss’s reflection upon the primitive Other, which aims at scientifically studying his patterns of thoughts, namely kinship structures, in order to have a better understanding of how all humans think. In the first part of Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes, Rousseau uses his imagination to praise the physical and moral advantages of “savage” life. In the second part of his Discours, he attacks intellectual progress because civilization has corrupted human primitive goodness and because science and the arts have polluted the manners and morals of people in society. He mainly argues that the true evil derives from the fact that humans ever founded society at all. Thus, despite the similarities between Rousseau’s and Montaigne’s main concern with their contemporary society, Rousseau’s treatment of savage life suggests, unlike Montaigne’s, a model for an original human society. Discours does not in fact offer a direct plan of social or political reform although it has been claimed that the revolutionaries of 1789 found inspiration in the pages of the Discours sur l’inégalité. In this primitivist’s work that draws comparisons between savage and civilized humans, Rousseau maintains throughout his book that, if ever there existed a primitive state, it must have been similar to the picture he portrays in his book. He warns his reader in the beginning of the book that

Il ne faut pas prendre les recherches dans lesquelles on peut entrer sur ce sujet pour des vérités historiques, mais seulement pour des raisonnements
hypothétiques et conditionnels, plus propres à éclaircir la nature des choses qu’à en montrer la véritable origine, et semblables à ceux que font tous les jours nos physiciens sur la formation du monde. (23)

While constantly pointing out that his references to savage life are a “supposition de cette condition primitive” (37) or are reported “selon les rapports des voyageurs” (34), Rousseau tries to back up his theories with facts drawn from travelers who described primitive peoples, such as M. de Condillac, François Corréal’s account of Venezuela’s Caribbeans, Kolben’s “Hottentots du cap de Bonne-Espérance,” and Andrew Battel's adventures in Angola and Congo. At other times, it seems conspicuous that Rousseau’s depiction of the “bon sauvage” is a product of his exotic imagination of a primal type of society. His objective, as the title of the book indicates, is to address inequality among contemporary people, who became “avares, ambitieux et méchants” (82), as a result of scientific progress that menaces morality, because “les plus puissants ou les plus misérables se [font] de leurs forces ou de leurs besoins une sorte de droit au bien d'autrui” (82).

However, in the middle of his condemnation of reasoning, “[qui] [rend] un être méchant en le rendant sociable” (64), one notices some assumptions made by Rousseau, where the savage is “seul, oisif, et toujours voisin du danger,” followed by another unfounded value-judgment, claiming that “l’homme sauvage doit aimer à dormir et avoir le sommeil léger, comme les animaux, qui, pensant peu, dorment, pour ainsi dire, tout le temps qu’ils ne pensent point” [my emphasis] (33). There is no doubt that Rousseau’s overall purpose is to praise the state of “le bon sauvage”; nevertheless, there are traces of some value-judgments that aim at supporting his argument on the closeness of the uncorrupted primitive to nature, such as the following statement that does not rely on any
ethnological fact: “il ne faut point s’étonner que [. . .] les sauvages de l’Amérique
sentissent les Espagnols à la piste comme auroient pu faire les meilleurs chiens” (34).

After reading the first part of Discours that deals with the primitive state, it is clear that
Rousseau’s social primitivism that objects the fallacies of the rationalist system and the
doctrine of scientific progress as a threat to human tranquility focuses on the study of the
physical and moral traits of “l’homme dans l’état de nature,” a study that mostly proceeds
from secondary sources or from Rousseau’s imagination. In the transition between the
first part of Discours and the second one, he admits that, in his attempt to portray savage
life, he is reduced to conjectures: “J’avoue que les événements que j’ai à décrire ayant pu
arriver de plusieurs manières, je ne puis me déterminer sur le choix que par des
conjectures” (64). As much as the sketch of savage life in Discours seems simplistic,
there is no doubt that Rousseau articulates well his message of how difficult it is to
civilize primitives, whose felicity is rendered difficult to understand by civilized peoples,
since happiness can only be realized by sentiment and not by reason, or as he puts it,
“l’estimation du bonheur est moins l’affaire de la raison que du sentiment” (139).

Although Montaigne and Rousseau commonly condemn corruption in their
contemporary societies, Rousseau’s depiction of the virtues of primitive life is more
socially constructive, although romantic, as opposed to Montaigne’s preoccupation with
the question of Western barbarism. In other words, Rousseau’s fascination with the
transition from nature to culture offers at least a hypothetical formulation of an origin of
society, recognizing the necessity to learn from archaic societies, which Montaigne does
not do as he focuses only on imagining the cannibals’ virtues. At the same time, one
cannot deny that Montaigne offers the basis for the quest for the lost values thought to be
found in the New World. Despite those differences, it remains true that both Montaigne and Rousseau were primitivists, who imagined primitive life through which they could illustrate their society’s imperfections. Whether viewed affirmatively or negatively, it matters little what the West’s representation of the primitive has to do with reality; “indeed, even among those having firsthand contact with tribal peoples, the fantasy of the primitive often overrode reality,” as Rubin underlines (Primitivism 6). Similarly, Bougainville, a French explorer and discoverer of Tahiti,

saw evidence there of cannibalistic practices. But all of this is forgotten in this classic description of the island as “La Nouvelle Cythère” [. . .]. By identifying Tahiti with the island of Greek mythology where, under the reign of Venus, humans lived in perpetual harmony, beauty, and love, Bougainville was equating the “myth of the primitive” with the already long-established but almost equally unreal “myth of the antique.” (Rubin, Primitivism 6)

The myth of the primitive, created by the West, for the purpose of reforming society, or simply due to a misinterpretation or a biased pre-judgment, had significant influence on writers and artists, especially in the modernist era in the twentieth century. The shift of focus from primitive life to primitive art was only a continuation of the myth of the primitive who lives in tune with nature. It is in light of this thought that I will study modernist primitivism in the next chapter.

Notes

1 The term primitive, one of the most problematic terms in anthropology, remains problematic throughout this dissertation, since the West historically gave it positive and negative definitions. I shall explain its many meanings and connotations in the section entitled “The West Constructs the Primitive” in this chapter. Although no agreed-upon substitute has been historically proposed for the term, I will use it interchangeably with other words, like the aborigines, natives, and archaic peoples. Whereas aborigines and natives are synonymous, “archaic” is a term usually applied to art and history, but I use it in reference to the cultures of all primitive peoples.
The term primitivism emerged in the West and has traditionally been defined as “the glorification of an earlier stage of human development” (Dictionary of Anthropology 437). The historical literary connotations that surrounded this term will be discussed, in this chapter, in the section entitled “Western Primitivism.”

Jeremy Hawthorn explains in his book, A Concise Glossary of contemporary Literary Theory (London: Routledge, 1992), the term modernism since its emergence in the field of art at the end of the nineteenth century. This term will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

In this work, the term Other will be capitalized whenever it refers to the primitive in terms of that which is “different” for the West. In chapter four, Other will be used in light of Leiris’s view of African rituals and women.

My use of the term ethnology is justified by its definition as a study of culture, including comparisons between cultures, which explains the subjectivity that results often times from these comparisons. According to The Dictionary of Anthropology, the theory in ethnology, which is composed of ethnos (race or people) and logia (science or theory), refers to “the effort to explain similarities and differences, among the world’s cultures, that is, ethnology is intrinsically comparative.” The dictionary continues its explanation of ethnology that could be “viewed as a branch of history especially concerned with documenting the often-disparaged (‘pagan,’ ‘uncivilized,’ ‘naïve’) arts, beliefs, and practices of hinterlands and small communities” (429). I will thus use ethnology not only as a discipline mainly concerned with the culture of unindustrialized societies but also as a source of power, the industrialized West, that constructed its definition of those Other societies based on its own standards of comparisons.

Tribal is another problematic term in anthropology, because not all the people indicated by the term tribal are formed in tribes. “They may speak the same languages and observe more or less the same customs, but they are not politically coordinated and have no pragmatic recognition or corporate identity. […] Anthropologists tend to agree that tribal groups are more of a European creation than a fact of life,” observes the Africanist Leon Siroto (quoted in Rubin, Primitivism 74). William Fagg, dean of British ethnologists of Africa, proposed in “The Dilemma Which Faces African Art” published in The Listener, September 13, 1951, that the term tribal be universally substituted for primitive (Rubin, Primitivism 5).


Colonialism and Avant-Gardes in Africa, the Caribbean, and France (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002) 26-44.


14 André Breton only wrote the introduction of L’Art magique, the rest of which was a collaboration with Gérard Legrand. L’Art magique was reedited by Phébus-Adam Biro, Paris, in 1991 by adding some notes to it.

15 The term uncivilized is also problematic since there is no existence of any objective standards used to measure civilization except for the West’s industrialization, as I shall explain later in this chapter. Paul Radin, an American anthropologist, emphasizes that the relativity of the term civilized and the subjectivity associated with it:

The term “uncivilized” is a very vague one, and it is spread over a vast medley of peoples, some of whom have comparatively simple customs and others extremely complex ones. Indeed, there can be said to be but two characteristics possessed in common by all these peoples, the absence of a written language and the fact of original possession of the soil when the various civilized European and Asiatic nations came into contact with them. But among all aboriginal races appeared a number of customs which undoubtedly seemed exceedingly strange to their European and Asiatic conquerors. Some of these customs they had never heard of; others they recognized as similar to observances and beliefs existing among the more backward members of their own communities. (viii)

16 As Rubin remarks, in the 1897-1904 Nouveau Larousse illustré in which the word “primitivisme” made its first appearance, “primitif” was given (as both adjective and noun) sixteen different definitions, ranging from the algebraic and geological to the historical and ecclesiastical. Two of the sixteen were pejorative in connotation, notably the one marked “ethnological”: “Les peoples qui sont encore au degré le moins avancé de civilisation.” The fine-arts definition, given as a noun, was simply: “Artistes, peintres ou sculpteurs qui ont précédé les maîtres de la grande époque.” (Les Demoiselles 75)

17 Due to the unavailability of the French text, I will refer to the translated version of La Philosophie Bantoue by Colin King.

18 Colin King points out the incapacity of the English language to offer a word equivalent to the word évolué.

19 Ekpo Eyo uses the word primitivism to characterize Europeans’ use of the word primitive in relation to non-Western art. He states that Western scholars “invented the notion of primitivism and spread it to wherever their influence reached” (Two Thousand Years of Nigerian Art 28).
CHAPTER 2

MODERNIST PRIMITIVISM

A whole people [. . .] immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image [. . .] or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream. (Yeats 392)

The West’s creation of the myth of the primitive, either as a symbol of the childhood of humanity and of its innocence or as an irrational savage living in tune with nature, had far more influence on artists and writers, especially in the nineteenth century, than did any facts of tribal life, of which little was known anyway. This influence translated into Western primitivism, which, as defined in the “Introduction” of this thesis, was believed to be an art-historical phenomenon, revolving around Western interest in, and reaction to, tribal culture, especially tribal arts. In other words, primitivism is about the inspiration that the arts and culture of indigenous societies have provided for Western culture, and mostly about the results of this cultural exchange. It is in light of this idea that I will establish how the intervention of tribal arts and culture in the nineteenth century awakened the artists’ imaginary exoticism, whose purpose of reevaluating and nurturing their artistic creativity played a main role in the unfolding of modernism.
Modernism came to defy simple definitions and classifications, signaling a conscious reevaluation of the literary traditions of Realism and Naturalism. Modernists systematically approached the major genres – art, poetry, fiction, and drama – with the intent of radically refashioning them so as to concretize their self-conscious alienation from the writers and beliefs of the past. Modernists’ alienation from the modern world was expressed in a sense of dislocation from their society to a new one that is anti-industrialized. Influenced by the history of the mystification of the primitive, this sense of dislocation unleashed in them an attraction to the so-called primitive societies, which embodied the modernists’ new fantasy of a return to a simpler life. Thus, the first part of my chapter will establish the artistic embodiment of the West’s subjective adoption of tribal art, and the second part will focus on surrealism’s “vanguard primitivism.”

**Primitivism in Art**

When evoking the subject of primitivism, one cannot ignore the role Western interest in tribal art has played in defining primitivism. That the “savage” is blessed with a simplicity denied to the civilized is one of the contentions of modernist art. Nineteenth-century primitivist painters defined tribal art in light of the conditions of their social *milieu*. For example, their idealization of primitive simplicity and rawness was an antagonism towards the bourgeois appreciation of the finesse of the salon styles. For the bourgeois public in the nineteenth century, any work of art defined as tribal was merely a symbol of an immature, uncivilized art; first, due to the increasing hold of the Darwinian theory, and, second, due to the belief in the inferiority of any art that did not emanate
from the Renaissance “[et qui] ne relevait pas de la tradition de vraisemblance en vigueur dans l’Europe occidentale, depuis les arts égyptien, oriental et byzantin jusqu’à celui de l’Occident médiéval” (Rubin, *Les Demoiselles* 401). However, Rousseau’s idea of the noble savage revived the nineteenth-century artists’ nostalgia for a simpler life, building the image of an earthly paradise, inspired primarily by visions of recently explored islands like Tahiti. The term “savage,” used in reference to the primitive, became a virtuous characteristic that Western artists used admiringly to refer to “any art alien to the Greco-Roman line of Western realism that had been reaffirmed and systematized in the Renaissance” (Rubin, *Primitivism* 2). Primitive, “when coupled with the word art,” as Goldwater states, was “a term of praise” (25), especially in the second half of the nineteenth century where primitivist artists turned indeed to their dream of reinstating innocence, simplicity, raw life, and nature. Their malaise of civilization translated into an escapism from reason towards its antinomy, the naive primitive:

> [Primitive art] represents an attempt on the part of Western artists to retreat from “reason” and thereby gain access to the very sources of creativity, which they believed was exemplified in its most authentic and liberated form in the minds of children, tribal peoples and the insane. (Rhodes 133)

That primitivism was an aspect of the history of modern art, not of tribal art, is true so long as it witnessed different interpretations from an artist to another. Looking for the roots of creation in rural life, Paul Gauguin, for example, stayed in Bretagne (1886) with his friend E. Bernard. Gauguin admired in Pont-Aven its primitive, natural scenery far from the modern industrial Paris. He depicted the simple peasant life of the region in his paintings *La Vase aux filles de Breton* (1886-1887), *Le Calvaire de Breton-Christ vert* (1889) where a peasant woman and her goat figure in the Holy group, linking religiosity
to landscape and to innocent simplistic people. In both paintings, simplicity is accentuated by the non-complex carving in the whole composition. This flight to rural life signified a desire to identify oneself with the morality of the simple peasant who stayed pure and uncorrupted by materialism. This trend continued in all Europe with the turn of the twentieth century and was reflected in paintings like Mackensen’s *Prayers in the Moor* (1895), Modersohn-Becker’s *Seated Nude Girl with Flowers* (1907) and the German painter, Gabriele Münter’s *Kandinsky and Erma Bossi at the Table* (1912). On arriving in Tahiti in June 1891, Gauguin chose to escape civilization, live outside the colonial towns, and explore the meaning of savagery. The letters he wrote in 1890 to his friend E. Bernard show that nature, women, and the simplicity of life are what attracted him the most. In 1893, he sends Bernard a letter where he describes himself “inférieur au sauvage” (*Carnet de Tahiti* 37). “Savagery” continued to carry an affirmative meaning in the paintings Gauguin sent to France from Tahiti depicting images of the noble savage. *Nave Nave Moe* (or *Fragrant Water*) (1894) offers an Edenic glimpse of Gauguin’s imagination of life in Tahiti before the discovery of the island: two native women wearing local costumes are sitting in a park and another woman behind them is naked while others are dancing. Gauguin’s desire to live like the natives in Tahiti and to present them in his paintings was not the same desire other artists had at that time. As Rhodes points out, “modern artists had no real desire to ‘go native’ – their aim was instead to present the primitive as a mirror to their notion of modernity, that is, to reinvigorate, rather than destroy Western society by confronting it with its deepest memories” (74). Artists, towards the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century, did not identify themselves as primitives *per se*, but rather wanted to pinpoint the
natural richness of the societies recently explored. Such a goal identified the concept of their primitivism in the history of modern art. Moreover, Gauguin’s imagery of non-Western styles such as the Egyptian one, which today are not called primitive, were mixed with contemporary Tahitian images of women standing in postures or sitting in those adopted from Egyptian painting. Te Matete (or Les Femmes du marché) is an example of Gauguin’s association of the Tahitian past with ancient Egypt; in the painting, the hand postures of the five women adopt pharaonic gestures. In other words, a non-primitive style dominated also his imagery more than the Polynesian styles he often cited, probably, as it is claimed, due to the degradation from which Tahitian life suffered as a result of French colonization. Gauguin’s visualization of art in his paintings definitely illustrates his created version of the myth of the primitive, the way he envisioned it.

This confusion of calling non-tribal arts primitive, such as Egyptian and Persian arts, persisted through the beginning of the twentieth century that marked the discovery of African art. The term primitive witnessed an indetermination when anthropologists, such as Delafosse (“Sur les traces probables de civilisation égyptienne et d’hommes de race blanche à la côte d’Ivoire”), found that West African art objects were influenced by Egyptian styles through migration and commercial exchange but he still referred to them as primitive. It is argued that when Matisse first showed Picasso an African carving in the fall of 1906, he called it “de l’art égyptien,” as Malraux noted in La Tête d’obsidienne (17), although Rubin confirms that in his conversation with Picasso about the same subject, Picasso’s “meaning [...] was not identical with what Malraux apprehended from this remark” (Primitivism 76). Also, Picasso’s Porteuse d’offrandes, in the Louvre in 1903, underlines his taste for Egyptian sculpture. He also defines as primitive the Roman
sculptures that he sees in the Ethnographic Museum of Trocadero (Les Demoiselles 401). It is at this moment that Picasso reveals: “A ce moment, j’ai compris ce que c’était le sens même de la peinture.” In any case, it is conspicuous that any non-tribal art was imprecisely called primitive.

Nudity, previously introduced in Western art, was another characteristic of primitivism that emerged from social circumstances. For modernist primitivists, nudity was associated with the return to nature and to the roots of creation, but was most importantly a symbol of freeing oneself from the social conventions imposed by the bourgeoisie. Nudity was reflected in bathing scenes, such as Heckel’s Bathers in the Reeds (1909-1910) and People Playing with a Ball (1911), Pechstein’s The Black and Yellow Bathing Suit (1910), Kirchner’s Nudes Playing Under a Tree (1910), Bathers at Moritzburg (1909) and Bathers Throwing Reeds (1909) and Nude Behind a Curtain (1910). In Bathers Throwing Reeds, for example, one sees a fusion between naked men and women and nature, which is analogous to Henri Matisse’s La Joie de vivre (1905-1906), where classic nudity is united with contemporary art symbolized by the drapery on the grass. In all these paintings, one can ascertain that the viewer is presented with self-reflexive images of the urban dweller celebrating his or her body in a setting that is seemingly closer to nature and free from bourgeois social conventions. Other paintings depicted nude women without any indication of cultural references. Schmidt-Rottluff’s Three Nudes – Dunes at Nidden (1913) carries no sign of the identity or race of the three nude women depicted. There is not even any conventional sign of either civilization or savagery. However, color and space are very distinct in this painting: the painter uses a non-naturalistic vermilion color for both women’s flesh, and the sand where the picture
plane has been tipped forward leaves no indication of any geographical reference. Other paintings of nudes, like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s *Five Bathers by a Lake* (1911), present primitive women with more curves on their nude bodies to reveal their sexuality. All these paintings show a primitivist inclination to the state of the primitive as original and nude.

In 1907, Matisse’s *Le Nu bleu*⁶ and Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* witness a new evolution in the adaptation of Oceanic art and African masks. It is especially *Les Demoiselles* completed in late June or early July of 1907 that was a revolutionary step towards the introduction of tribal objects. Sexual violence in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* is another interpretation of savagery inspired by tribal art despite many critics’ denial of this fact.⁷ *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* serves as a mirror of Picasso’s interior expression; he juxtaposes two different periods in the five figures of the painting. To the three figures created first on the left that reflect his classical art in 1906 are opposed the two figures on the right where barbarism is symbolized by violence in sexuality. Obviously, Picasso’s version of primitivism was erotic violence. Moreover, his *Nu couché*, which illustrates the facemask of Iberian sculpture, can only represent Picasso’s native Spain’s indigenous art. From these original masks, he believed he had grasped their hidden psychological meaning, thinking he uncovered the secret of the created object. Patricia Dee Leighten’s study of Picasso’s art proves that “les images ibériques représentaient des expressions du peuple espagnol le plus ancien et le plus primitif que l’on connût tant soit peu. Ces habitants de la péninsule seraient venus d’Afrique à partir de l’an 3000 av. J.-C. environ.”⁸ We can definitely assert that Picasso’s inspiration by those masks was a result of his own imagination and interpretation; it appears that he was searching for a
metaphysical power or a sacred value that only those masks, as he wanted to believe, captured. Just as masks serve as a mediation between the indigenous and their struggle to overcome exterior hostile forces, they were also considered a communication between the creative artist, his concerns before his palette, and the world. Picasso was searching in the masks for a metaphysical power in an era when the hatred of industrial civilization and of Naturalism on the one hand, and the fear of what would become World War I, on the other, caused a feeling of malaise and fear. Hiding behind masks served as a tool to overcome that fear, thus the artistic appreciation of indigenous masks:

Les masques, ils n’étaient pas des choses magiques, [. . .] des intercesseurs. [. . .] Contre tout; contre des esprits inconnus, menaçants. [. . .] Ils étaient des armes. Pour aider les gens à ne plus être les sujets des esprits, à devenir indépendants.  

In fact, one easily surmises that there is no universal meaning for African or Oceanic masks; they carry a relative signification based on every tribe’s religious practices. Nonetheless, their adaptation in modernist art was no more than the product of the artist’s imagination, as Jean-Louis Bédouin’s analysis of Masques indicates:

Les volumes et les traits de la face n’ont par eux-mêmes aucune vérité; ils sont des signes que le sculpteur peut librement combiner entre eux, selon l’ordre et le rythme de son choix [. . .] Dans un beau masque d’Afrique ou de Mélanésie, les lignes et les surfaces du visage, libérées de leurs fonctions anatomiques, sont reconstruites entièrement. Elles ne servent plus de miroir à l’expression intérieure; elles sont l’expression intérieure manifestée, à la fois fugitive et éternellement fixe. (103)  

Needless to say, there are many allusions in Les Demoiselles not only to African and Oceanic sculpture but also to Archaic (ancient Iberian) art which, when added to the many interpretations induced from introducing the masks icon in Picasso’s painting, confirm the many attributions made to primitive art.
Picasso’s treatment of primitive art inaugurated an artistic desire to demonstrate what André Breton calls a certain “primitivisme intégral,” (Le Surréalisme et la peinture 4). Inspired himself by Oceanic art, Breton made two statuettes in 1946-1947 in an attempt to revive primitive and original art in a concrete object rather than in a poem. In a letter that Jean-Michel Goutier sent to Jean-Claude Blachère on June 15, 1995, the latter confirms that

Les deux statuettes [. . .] sont bien de la main de Breton (confirmation m’a été donnée par Elisa qui se souvenait de l’exécution de ces pièces rue Fontaine) [. . .] L’influence des œuvres océaniennes qui peuplaient l’atelier est indéniable et notamment celle des personnages de l’île de Pâques. Mais je pense aussi au Breton attentif à l’art moderne et aux grands créateurs de ce siècle; celui qui a incité Jacques Douvet à acquérir Les Demoiselles d’Avignon n’était certainement pas insensible à la série de Femme(s) en sapin sculpté, de la période surréaliste de Picasso (statuettes de l’automne 1930 au château de Bois-Geloup). (quoted in Totems 232)

Calling a primitive “un artiste possible” (L’Art magique 138), Breton only wanted to see in the primitive way of life a source of artistic inspiration. Indeed, it is irrelevant to know whether modernist artists miscomprehended the essence and dynamics of tribal arts, or whether the outcome was still placing the primitive in a less-developed level due to the old measuring scale of evolution. It is more essential to capture the many aspects of modernist primitivism interested in African, Oceanic, and Amerindian arts. Although from 1870 to the end of the nineteenth century the concern with the question of origins “became the essential question for all the human sciences: what is the origin of the family, of the state, of the concept of god, of art, and so on” (Blocker 42), artists’ primitivism attributed to tribal arts some positive, although mythical, characteristics. Let us remember that the deliberate attempt on the part of some intellectuals, like Rousseau,
to embrace self-consciously the spontaneity and simplicity of primitive peoples did not point out their creativity. It rather reflected the West’s use of a scale of values which compares the Other to the same without objectively appreciating the dynamics of that society’s own artistic history until artists, like Picasso, Matisse, and Braque were aware of the conceptual complexity and aesthetic subtlety of tribal arts, which is simple in its nearness to nature and not, as was widely believed, in its simplemindedness. However, in the typically imprecise manner of modernist artists, they often mixed up different sources of tribal art with other exotic styles, as we saw in the examples of Gauguin and Picasso, which leaves no doubt of the individuality of the modernist artists’ primitivism. This does not still deny those artists’ admiration for the creativity and originality of tribal art. It is precisely this admiring sense for the primitive that has characterized its use in writing. Reference to non-Western culture, notably with Picasso’s fascination with African icons, is also what unleashed avant-garde primitivism.

“Vanguard Primitivism”

“Vanguard primitivism” is, as Phyllis Taoua explains it, an “expression of cultural desire, an affiliation with elsewhere born of disillusionment” that peaked among the intellectuals of Interwar French society, especially the surrealist group, “laying claim to a realm of primitive Otherness” (4-5). This trend was influenced by Picasso’s introduction of African masks. In a sense, non-Western cultures became a refuge to those who wanted to distance themselves from bourgeois culture; Breton traveled to Mexico (1938) and Haiti (1945) and Michel Leiris to Sudanic, Equatorial, and East Africa (1931-1933). The
purpose of these trips juxtaposed, for example, Lévi-Strauss’s objective to explore other societies in search of answers to his concerns with the so-called primitive mentality and structural society to help understand human thinking in general. Interestingly, André Breton and Claude Lévi-Strauss met on the same overcrowded ship in 1941 on their way to New York, fleeing the Nazi occupation and searching for a new land. But Breton wanted to envision, in light of primitive cults, the surrealist program and its principles of breaking down the barriers between dream and reality, the conscious and the unconscious, the rational and the irrational, as a way of recapturing a lost value. Breton’s vision also carried a reexamination of human knowledge and questioned the validity of the values of Western society and civilization. With the image of a primitive who breaks with reality, Breton’s following account of the malaise of the dissolution of his contemporary society conveys his dream to reestablish imagination as the only way of thinking. He describes the unconscious as capable of mysterious forces:

Sous couleur de civilisation, sous prétexte de progrès, on est parvenu à bannir de l’esprit tout ce qui peut se taxer à tort ou à raison de superstition, de chimère; à proscrire tout mode de recherche de la vérité qui n’est pas conforme à l’usage. C’est par le plus grand hasard, en apparence, qu’a été récemment rendue à la lumière une partie du monde intellectuel, et à mon sens de beaucoup la plus importante, dont on affectait de ne plus se soucier. Il faut en rendre grâce aux découvertes de Freud. Sur la foi de ces découvertes, un courant d’opinion se dessine enfin, à la faveur duquel l’explorateur humain pourra pousser plus loin ses investigations, autorisé qu’il sera à ne plus seulement tenir compte des réalités sommaires. L’imagination est peut-être sur le point de reprendre ses droits. Si les profondeurs de notre esprit recèlent d’étranges forces capables d’augmenter celles de la surface, ou de lutter victorieusement contre elles, il y a tout intérêt à les capter pour les soumettre ensuite, s’il y a lieu, au contrôle de notre raison. (Manifeste du surréalisme 20)

By declaring that civilized people live in a “pretense of progress,” he confirms their inability to exercise freely their imagination, an opportunity available only, as he wants to
believe, to people who live in non-civilized societies. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, who studied the patterns of thought in tribal societies in light of structuralism, Breton traveled to Mexico (1938) and Haiti (1945) in order to discover the psychic automatism or the power to think independently of conscious control. His definition of surrealism focuses on the human psyche as a path for a new way of thinking:

SURREALISME, n.m. Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d’exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l’absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale. (36)

In attempting to revive this creative imagination both mentally and artistically, poetry and artistic expression become the material for Breton to explore deep structures of the human psyche. By attacking reason, Breton continues his inaugural statement of the Premier manifeste where he expresses his disillusionment with reality: “tant va la croyance à la vie, à ce que la vie a de plus précaire, la vie réelle s’entend, qu’à la fin cette croyance se perd” (13). He decries the intellectual stagnation that follows the realist attitude and provocatively attacks Dostoyevsky’s Crime et châtiment as an illustration of the realism of descriptions and of common places (“l’auteur cherche à me faire tomber d’accord avec lui sur des lieux communs” [17]). Surrealism’s attack on reality coincides with the political environment at the time and expresses a disappointment in the reality of the oppressing record of the recent European history.

One way to understand “vanguard primitivism” is to approach it in light of its claim to political activism to change contemporary society. The surrealists’ appeal to the primitive, which sprang from a disillusioned desire to affiliate with the exotic, was carried out as a sentiment of resentment of French colonialist politics. In the same anti-
war spirit engendered from a fear of a Second World War, the surrealists adopted the same communist ideas of opposition to Western imperialism, supporting the group’s essential principle of revolution. And with the Moroccan rebellion against French colonialism in 1921, the surrealists, who dreamed of revising human rights, adopted the position of “nous les barbares” in “La Révolution d’abord et toujours” (56). In view of such a statement, the surrealists not only adopted a primitive identity, presuming that barbarians are also primitives who lack civilization, but they most importantly implied the necessity to “act” against that civilization. Among the famous publications reacting to the political situation were Philippe Soupault’s novel Le Nègre (1927) and Breton’s essay “Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution” (1933), which discussed primitive mentality.

The birth of surrealism as a revolutionary movement that promotes free self-expression, “la folie,” “les hallucinations, les illusions” (Premier manifeste 15) and attacks the realist tradition mainly associated with reason, or “le règne de la logique” (19), unfolded Breton’s understanding the primitive’s “dualisme de la perception et de la représentation,” as he points out in “Océanie” (278). In this essay, masks and statues symbolize to the surrealist, as Breton would like to believe, the release of one’s inner feelings. Surrealist primitivism is embedded in the artistic and political trends, but it mainly incorporates a serious focus on the self and on one’s faculty of imagination. Upon his return from America, Breton underlined in an interview with Jean Duché the surrealist’s need “de renouer avec la vision dite primitive [pour] parer au dessèchement des sources d’inspiration” (Entretiens 248). The surrealists’ imagination of the primitive always presumes the primitive’s innate ability of free self-expression due to the belief in
“innocence et [. . .] sa vertu créatrice originelle” (Entretiens 85), fulfilling the doctrinal concepts of the Premier manifeste du surréalisme: “exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée” (Œuvres complètes 1, 328). Spontaneity and freedom, which would describe the surrealist’s envisioning of primitive life, are the most apparent characteristic of the surrealist writing. The reflection on the self through the Other is by all means Breton’s plan where he brings the surrealist and the primitive together, as his following discourse in Savoy, Haiti, in 1946, clearly indicates: “[avec le] Surréalisme qui a consisté à se mettre à l’écoute de la voix intérieure qui habite chaque homme pris à part, nous nous sommes retrouvé renouer d’emblée avec la pensée dite ‘primitive.’” With Paul Valéry’s criticism of civilization, his allusion to an immortal Europe (“Nous autres, civilisations, nous savons maintenant que nous sommes mortelles,” “Crise de l’esprit” 988), and the fear of another war, Breton, a sojourner among Mexican and Haitian tribes, acclaimed the primitive’s view of death by saying: “L’homme dit civilisé continue à se faire de la mort un épouvantail, alors que sur ce point le sauvage peut lui être un modèle de dignité” (“Arcane 17” 40). As such, surrealism emerges from a sense of disillusionment with the past during interwar years and an idealization of non-civilized societies. This primitivism is a repercussion of the surrealists’ dreams; it is thus significant, but not surprising, that Breton’s implicit attack on reason and logic coincides with a corresponding celebration of primitive mentality, madness, and child-like naiveté. Ethnological societies are not only a model for the West to follow but also a mirror that allows them to see the surrealist dream of simplicity, dreams, trance states, and spontaneity. In its Rousseauistic celebration of the idea of the
noble savage, surrealism sees in all humans an original naïveté that is the only means of saving society from bourgeois reason.

As the surrealists considered their movement a positive step to achieve human freedom and a means of changing life, they were rightly accused of running away from reality to return to an illusionary paradisiacal past. In L’Homme révolté, Camus discredited surrealism’s quest for “la magie, les civilisations primitives ou naïves” that offer the world “quelques mythes étranges” (506). Also, Vailland accused ethnology of offering the West a deceptive ideal “[qui] fait douter l’homme de sa raison, pour rendre dérisoire sa croyance au bonheur possible, son espoir dans le ‘progrès,’ pour le convaincre de ‘s’évader’ au lieu de transformer le monde et sa condition dans le monde” (60). There is no doubt that the surrealist idioms of the unconscious, refusal of reason, and nourishment of imagination overlapped with the appeal of ethnological societies to the surrealists. Only in Breton’s mind can one let one’s unconscious discover the unknown forces outside of any control from reason on an imaginary terrain of primitive surprises. The surrealists appropriated characteristics of the unconscious and primitive life only to react to their social disillusionment and to be artistically inspired. In the colonialist discourse, the surrealists’ conceptualization of terms, like the unconscious and absence of reason, along with their political opposition to colonialism, faced the criticism of being antithetical. Phyllis Taoua ironically underlines the dissidence of surrealism and its failure to hold claim to the consistency of its principles in the political sphere:

Rather than a reservoir of painful experiences accumulated over years of humiliation and oppression, of which Aimé Césaire’s poetry offers an intense lyrical expression, the unconscious for Breton has very little to do with healing wounds of personal or political affliction. Culture and history do surface in Breton’s discourse when he establishes an association
between utilitarian reason and progress. [. . .] The unconscious and the Dark Continent overlap elsewhere in Breton’s semantics: the depths of the human mind have been “brought back to light”; new terrain is to be charted by a human “explorer”; the unconscious mind harbors “strange forces” that are mysterious sources of inspiration. The image of the Surrealist poet as colonial pioneer that emerges from Breton’s description of the unconscious is a perfect illustration of the contradictions inherent in the movement’s vanguard primitivism: this imagined recuperation of a lost primitivity is antithetical to the advancement of empire insofar as progress entailed inculcating Western reason in colonized pupils in the master’s schoolhouse. (author’s emphasis, 9)

In other words, if one is to indulge in psychic automatism, logic will suffer inconsistencies and cause one’s inability to act effectively. The term dream in Breton’s “Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme” is intended to create a mediatory stage between the wake and the sleep states, where one can capture reality. When practicing this form of distancing oneself from the world, one may suffer from passivity when one tries to record the free flow of thought.

It is interesting how the surrealists were thinking in terms of “surreality” when it came to solving social problems. Again, in his dictionary of surrealism, Breton proudly quotes Paul Eluard’s conception of surrealism as an “instrument de connaissance [. . .] qui travaille à mettre au jour la conscience profonde de l’homme, à réduire les différences qui existent entre les hommes” (Œuvres complètes 2, 846), while, in a similar social application of surrealism that he suggested earlier in his Premier manifeste, he asks: “Le rêve ne peut-il être appliqué, lui aussi, à la résolution des questions fondamentales de la vie?” (22). Even a decade later when he revised his Premier manifeste in an essay entitled “Qu’est-ce que le surréalisme?” (1934), Breton still incorporated terms like “la libération de l’esprit” and “la libération de l’homme” (Œuvres
complètes 2, 230). It is conspicuous that, even in an era where the world was recovering from the disastrous First World War, Breton ambitiously believed that automatism and a practical application of dreams could solve social and political problems. Even with an imminent war, Breton still considered mysticism and metaphysical powers necessary for changing the world:

> Le concept de surréalité, sur lequel on est venu nous chercher querelle depuis lors, et duquel on a voulu, pour les besoins de diverses causes, faire le lacet métaphysique ou mystique qu’il suffirait ensuite de nous passer autour du cou, ne prête dès ce moment à aucune équivoque et ne s’avère nullement en opposition avec le besoin de transformer le monde. (Œuvres complètes 2, 243, my emphasis)

If anything, his surrealist theory proceeds from fantasies that break with reality. Within this whole theory of dreams and automatism, the surrealist thrill of new horizons explains the group’s fixation on mysticism, which encapsulated, as the surrealists wanted to believe, the means to express one’s unconscious.

Exploring new horizons was extended to the surrealist writing. Automatism and free self-expression, as a way of destroying the conventional idea of literature, needed to be carried out in a so-called primitive way where one follows one’s instincts in writing. Since a primitive model was necessary to follow, Breton published with Paul Eluard in 1930 an essay that simulated some pathologic languages and where he addressed his concern with achieving a primitive writing. In this work, entitled L’Immaculée conception, issues like one’s rights to exercise freedom in self-expression, or “le droit de nous exprimer par les moyens qui nous sont instinctifs” (848), prepared the path for a mimetic writing of a primitive model while rejecting “le pittoresque” and “l’emprunt à des textes cliniques” – such as citing other texts – and producing “les manifestations les
plus paradoxales” (848). Their goal was not to imitate a tribal object, but to adopt a tribal style. *L'Art magique* insisted also on the original link between the writer’s creativity and his or her primitive vision: “un primitivisme sans remords donne à Arp la chance de recréer tout le langage” (229), an idea that Breton had evoked earlier in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* on the “poème-objet” “[qui] tend à combiner les ressources de la poésie et de la plastique” (284). Only primitive people, in the surrealists’ eyes, are able to capture that “innocence et vertu créatrice originelle” (*Entretiens* 85) that the poet needs. In that sense, Breton’s privileging of the pleasure principle over the reality principle extends the idea that automatism allows one to tap into the primitive aspects of the human psyche, repressed by rational thought. For Breton simply argues in *Entretiens* that whenever desire “est pris à sa source,” the poet is a “très proche parent [. . .] des primitifs qui nommaient” (263). Unsurprisingly, the surrealist dictionary liked to frame the primitive in the picture of a human being living in nature, away from civilization, and thus not in need of rationality, in the way Jacques Rivière has put it since 1920:

> Saisir l’être avant qu’il n’ait cédé la compatibilité; l’atteindre dans son incohérence, ou mieux, dans sa cohérence primitive, avant que l’idée de contradiction ne soit apparue et l’ait forcé à se réduire, à se construire; substituer à son unité logique, forcément acquise, son unité absurde, seule originelle: tel est le but que poursuivent tous les Dadas en écrivant. (218)

Breton’s references to the primitive as a source of inspiration are a constant emphasis on his fixation on magic, imagination, and even hallucinations. He certainly incarnates a Western primitivist representation of tribal life, and especially of tribal art. In *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, Breton cites the importance of the artist’s “besoin de remonter jusqu’à ses véritables sources le fleuve magique qui s’écoule de leurs yeux, baignant dans la même lumière, dans la même ombre hallucinatoire les choses qui sont et celles qui ne
sont pas” (7). He even gives into the romantic assumption that primitives capture the secret of life: “tout indique que les hommes des premiers âges eurent le secret [de cette] vie de relations” (Signe ascendant 7). It is thus a question of what the primitivist wishes to find in his subject, or, in other words, a matter of a primitivist fabrication of the Other’s image to satisfy his own dream. Invoking the main principles of the surrealist revolution, he explicitly incorporates an Eskimo mask to illustrate his new esthetic:

La vision nocturne a été quelque chose il s’agit
Maintenant de l’étendre du physique au moral
Où son empire sera sans limites
Les images m’ont plu c’était l’art
À tort décrié de brûler la chandelle par les deux bouts
[. . .]
Comme on verra je viens de voir un masque esquimau
C’est une tête de renne grise sous la neige
De conception réaliste à cela près qu’entre l’oreille et
l’œil droits s’embusque le chasseur minuscule et rose
tel qu’il est censé apparaître à la bête dans le lointain. (Signe ascendant 70)

The beginning of the poem that expresses a desire to carry out “la vision nocturne [. . .] / du physique au moral” can be understood as a need to go beyond the material and emphasize the intellectual; here, it is the act of writing “où son empire sera sans limites.”

In the second half of the poem, the choice of the color “grise” to describe the Eskimo mask, as an intermediary color between white and black, followed by “De conception réaliste à cela près qu’entre l’oreille et / l’œil” alludes to the surrealist need to capture, through language, that which is abstract and can be heard, but is also tangible and can be seen. To go even further, it is a point where primitive spontaneity and surrealist writing meet.
Nevertheless, the surrealist’s paradoxical objective of living fantasy while attempting to resolve social problems resonate with another surrealist paradox embedded in their idea of an automatic writing free of any conventional rules. To celebrate Oceanic art, Breton wrote the five poems of “Xénophiles,” some of which raise the question of whether he relied on ethnological records to adopt certain tribal objects in his poems. For example, the poem, “Tiki,” (“Tu me couches / par rapport au fait d’avoir vécu / avant et après”) unfolds the scientific mode of describing the Tiki which, according to T. E. Donne’s Moeurs et coutumes des Maoris – a text that Breton read, according to Blachère – and to Vincent Bounoure’s “Le Surréalisme et le coeur sauvage,” is “une créature macrocéphale en position foetale, [...] symbolisation de la vie anténatale et du cadavre, puisque les chefs maoris étaient enterrés le corps recroquevillé” (Blachère 241). Breton’s primitivism carries a paradox between its objective of practicing automatic writing without succumbing to reality. The primitive to him is a fantasy and a fabrication of a Western primitivist who regretfully fails to reconcile his artistic goals with his social ambitions and to grasp the characteristics of primitive mentality. Breton does not impose his ethnological knowledge in all his poems; rather, it is interesting to point out the way in which the primitive was constructed or fabricated to fit Breton’s primitivist intention to adopt primitive mentality in his writing. For, in “Dukduk, another poem in “Xénophiles,” a mask of dance is the motif around which circles images that evoke movement, colors, and forms:

Le sang ne fait qu’un tour
Quand le dukduk se déploie sur la Péninsule de la Gazelle
Et que la jungle s’entrouvre sur cent soleils levants
Qui s’éparpilent en flamants
A toute vapeur de l’ordalie
Breton’s mimetic presentation of emotions in the ceremony creates a dancing tone in the poem. The mask carrier is animated by emotions expressed by words like “le sang” while creating a chain of images: the dukduk “se déploie,” the jungle “s’entrouvre sur cent soleils levants,” the symbolic effects of the verb “s’éparpillent,” and the rising off in “vapeurs,” all convey the motion of the jumping deer. Also, the whole poem is one sentence that reinforces the intention of creating one image and one motion of a ritual dance. All the elements in the poem, especially those adopted from a primitive environment, underscore Breton’s vision of primitive objects “qui sont constamment prêts à fusionner” (Le Surréalisme et la peinture 184).

To summarize, the primitive was to surrealism a means of capturing its essential principles. “Vanguard primitivism” involved ironically a paradox between the spirit of its emergence and the way in which it was carried out; it indulged in fantasy while laying claim to a social activism aimed at changing society and implementing a new automatic writing. The kind of twentieth-century primitivism that alluded to the individuality of certain modernist primitivists in their choice of artistic styles and icons from different exotic societies and in their individual ambitions to reach their social and artistic goals, prepared the way for an intellectual primitivism, that of Georges Bataille. In the next chapter, I will examine how Bataille adopted the mechanism of primitive rituals of sacrifices, potlatch, and orgies, in his search of a reintegration of sacred values in contemporary French society.
Notes

1 As Hawthorn points out in Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory, “modernism describes that art (not just literature) which sought to break with what had become the dominant and dominating conventions of nineteenth-century art and culture. The most important of these conventions is probably that of Realism: the modernist artist no longer saw the highest test of his or her art as that of verisimilitude. This does not mean that all modernist art gave up the attempt to understand or represent the extra-literary world, but that it rejected those nineteenth-century standards of Realism which had hardened into unquestioned conventions.” On the other hand, modernism is also defined as an avant-garde movement which, in the context of cultural politics, was used in the beginning of the twentieth century “to refer to movements which had the aim of assaulting conventional standards and attitudes—particularly but not exclusively in the field of culture and the arts. Thus Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism and Constructivism are all conventionally described as avant-gardist in essence.”

2 I should add that modernist primitivism sometimes also refers to the trend in visual arts that sprung from the European colonization of Africa in the nineteenth century, followed by European artists’ fascination with this art’s simple geometric form, its plasticity or tactile nature, which embodied what they considered to be a raw, primitive truth about humans before the corruption of civilization.

3 For more on “primitivism” of the early twentieth century, see Gill Perry, “Primitivism and the ‘Modern’” in Charles Harrison’s Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: the Early Twentieth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

4 This article was published in L’Anthropologie 2 (1900): 431-51.


7 As Rhodes notes:

Because Les Demoiselles has often been seen as a crucially important picture in the history of modern art, many critics have tried to preserve its claim to originality by denying the direct influence of African art, or by claiming some sort of “affinity” — either formal, or psychological — between the art practice of Picasso and primitive carvers [. . .] One writer has attempted to rescue the artist from the Modernist claims and counter-claims for the work’s status as a piece of radial formal innovation by arguing that the picture was actually conceived as an overtly anti-colonial statement, and that his use of African masks was central to this. (90)

8 See Patricia Dee Leighten, Picasso: Anarchism and Art (1897-1914), diss., Rutgers University, 1983, 169, quoted by William Rubin, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, 399, n. 10. This note also tells us that “jusque vers le IVème siècle avant J.-C., les Ibères s’installèrent dans le sud-est de l’Espagne, en se concentrant en Andalousie et dans la province de Murcie, mais dès le IIIème siècle leur culture s’était diffusée vers la vallée de l’Ebre (une altération du mot iberus), gagnant ainsi la partie inférieure de l’Aragon et de la Catalogne. De ce fait, les Catalans pouvaient se dire les descendants des Ibères d’origine, dont l’art offrait la plus pure expression du génie “espagnol” ou “catalan” avant l’altération des temps modernes.”


11 André Breton, La Clé des champs, Œuvres Complètes vol. 1.

12 “Rêve: [. . .] faire valoir ce qui peut exister de commun entre les représentations de la veille et celles du sommeil. C’est seulement, en effet, lorsque la notion de leur identité sera parfaitement acquise que l’on parviendra à tirer clairement parti de leur différence, de manière à renforcer de leur unité la conception matérialiste du monde réel” (Œuvres complètes 2, 838).
CHAPTER 3

GEORGES BATAILLE’S PRIMITIVISM: THE SEARCH FOR THE SACRED BETWEEN SACRIFICE AND EROTICISM

One of the most salient and controversial theorists of French literature in general, and of modernist primitivism in particular, is Georges Bataille. Often termed a surrealist, a Marxist, or an existentialist, Bataille is first identified as a daring writer of eroticism and pornography, although he considered himself to be a sociologist. In this chapter, I would like to study Bataille the modernist primitivist whose interests in sociological reformation and in a revision of the notion of the sacred worked alongside his fascination with primitive cultures. In his primitivism, Bataille explored mysticism as a foundation for primitive practices of sacred values in rituals, such as human/animal sacrifices, women and gift exchange in potlatch, and orgies. Believing that the sacred was both pure and impure, he constructed his theories of sociological reformation and of eroticism; these theories were distinguished by their focus on the extreme states of ritual killings and erotic desires as forms of mediation between human nature and culture. In reviving the impure sacred abandoned by Christianity, Bataille’s concern with social action and
his project of creating a “sociologie sacrée” (Œuvres complètes 1, 492) in contemporary society in 1937 attracted several intellectuals, among whom were Michel Leiris, Roger Caillois, Georges Ambrosino, Jules Monnerot, and others. Despite the intellectual recognition of his sociological ideas, Bataille’s concern with the question of the social changed, as did his perception of the sacred. In the 1930s, his early definition of the sacred as communication achieved in collectively experiencing a loss or in going beyond the world of things (where humans are also things), as in ritual sacrifices or potlatch, was subject to criticism from his colleagues. His integration of primitive mysticism and rituals into the social body illustrated his primitivism rather than supported his sociological ambitions. After a visit to the Lascaux Cave, his shift of focus turned toward the individual, and thus his definition of the sacred was modified in the 1940s and crystallized into a well-elaborated theory on eroticism in his most influential book, L’Érotisme. In his later definition of the sacred, the idea of getting beyond the world of things still existed, but meant the need for the self to assert its independence from cultural limitations, an idea that he termed individual continuity, as I shall explain.

In this chapter, I am interested in studying Bataille’s primitivism and in pointing out the same evolvement in his treatment of primitive cultures in light of his changing perception of the notion of the sacred from his essays published in Documents in the late 1920s, and during the years of the Collège, to Lascaux ou la naissance de l’art (1955), namely his approach to the Well Scene, and L’Érotisme (1957). Bataille was a modernist primitivist in patterning his ideas on the sacred after primitive cultural practices. These ideas were perpetrated by a nostalgic ideology even though he attempted to build on Durkheim’s sociological method in Formes élémentaires that studied the power of rituals
and the return to the sacred to renew social bonds. This chapter begins by discussing the two factors that conditioned Bataille’s approach to the primitive – surrealism and the sacred – followed by an elaboration of the two notions of sacrifice and eroticism, in which he bracketed his perception of the sacred.

From Surrealism to a Sacred Society

In studying Bataille’s primitivism, it is necessary to acknowledge the role played by the surrealist group in directing Bataille’s attention toward the questions of the social and the primitive simultaneously, despite his frequent expression of discontent with their principles. Surrealism contributed, indirectly, to Bataille’s orientation to social activism and, directly, to his interest in primitive societies. His disenchantment with the surrealists’ negativism and lack of social involvement directed his thinking toward the needs of society. He “pre-judged [surrealism] as fraudulent,” as Michel Surya puts it (92), and considered Breton a pretender and his project of automatic writing a fabricated project far from being automatic, as his following ironic words indicate:

Breton déclare avec ce mouvement d’exaspération qui tend et détend habilement ses phrases: “Je ne fais jamais de projets.” [. . .] J’eus peine à croire ce qui me sembla dès l’abord mieux qu’un projet, une pénible prétention; [. . .] ces doutes me semblaient mesquins ! [. . .] L’écriture automatique m’ennuyaient ou ne m’amusait que lourdement. (“Le Surréalisme au jour le jour” 173, my emphasis)

In criticizing automatic writing as a way of living an individual dream experience out of reality, Bataille decided to take action “pour affronter ces êtres lointains, qui me communiquaient le sentiment d’une vie majestueuse, qui était cependant le caprice même” (“Le Surréalisme au jour le jour” 177). Reacting to the surrealists’ “pretense” to
reform society, Bataille founded with Michel Leiris and Roger Caillois the “Collège de sociologie,” whose activities of giving weekly lectures started in October 1937. This group rejected what they saw as surrealism’s excessive subjectivism and individual dream experience. Their main focus was to reintegrate scientific rigor with personal experience in the study of cultural structures and to implement the processes of disorder, change, and political revolt, with necessary irruptions of a new value that distinguished their lectures: the sacred. The activities of the Collège emphasized the rebirth of a necessary sacred inspired by primitive societies. It was in this context that surrealism played a partial role in orienting the former surrealist, Bataille, toward non-Western cultures. In addition, Bataille was a friend with the fieldworker and student of Marcel Mauss, Alfred Métraux, who wrote a report on Mauss’s Essai sur le don around 1925, and with whom Bataille collaborated to publish one of his first texts on pre-Columbian art. However, what appeared to be a surrealist nostalgia for the raw and the innocent in order to break up with rationalism became for Bataille a more serious project of setting primitive culture as an exemplary to implement similar ritualistic practices in his society, as he implied in “La Conjuration sacrée,” an article published in Acéphale: “Il est temps d’abandonner le monde des civilisés et sa lumière. […] il est nécessaire de devenir tout autres” (1, 443). The ideas developed in the “Note sur la foundation d’un Collège de sociologie,” written in March 1937 by its founders, including of course Bataille, summarized their project of putting the question of the social and the sacred alongside the primitive. The note began by questioning the role of science in studying social structures and in distancing civilized and primitive societies and called the object of its activities a sacred sociology that aimed at bringing the community together:
Dès qu’on attribue une importance particulière à l’étude des structures sociales, on s’aperçoit que les quelques résultats acquis par la science en ce domaine [. . .] sont généralement ignorés [. . .] la science s’est trop limitée à l’analyse des structures des sociétés dites primitives, laissant de côté les sociétés modernes. [. . .] Il suit qu’il y a lieu de développer entre ceux qui envisagent de poursuivre aussi loin que possible des investigations dans ce sens, une communauté morale. [. . .] L’objet précis de l’activité envisagée peut recevoir le nom de sociologie sacrée, en tant qu’il implique l’étude de l’existence sociale dans toutes celles de ses manifestations où se fait jour la présence active du sacré. (1, 491-92, author’s emphasis)

The goal of the group was set, although unclear, especially that the means of carrying out that sacred sociology were not specified in the program, leaving it up to the group members to decide which aspect of primitive culture to adopt in contemporary society in order to achieve a communal unity.

In their unified perception of the notion of the sacred, the most eminent founders of the Collège, Roger Caillois, Michel Leiris, and Georges Bataille, adopted the etymology of sacer in its medieval ambivalent meaning as sacred and syphilitic or accursed. This duality was designated by binary terms frequently used in their lectures, like “le mal et le bien,” “faste et néfaste,” “pur et impur,” and “sacré et sacrilège” (Collège 372). The group clarified that these antithetical meanings were rather complimentary than contradictory; the negative was needed to bring out the positive, or as Bataille explained, “dans l’ensemble, ce qui est gauche entraîne la répulsion et ce qui est droite l’attraction” (162). Bataille, who read Freud’s Totem et tabou, which showed “comment l’obsessionnel désire malgré lui un objet (ou un acte) qu’il ne peut pas se représenter sans répulsion, et comment dans les sociétés primitives le tabou [. . .] met en jeu un mécanisme semblable,” as Hollier puts it (Collège 120), adopted this same duality
of attraction and repulsion to the same object/act in order to define his perception of the profane and the sacred. In January of 1938, the first lecture of his series, “Attraction et répulsion: Tropismes, sexualité, rire et larmes,” discussed the importance of, not a general or a religious, sociology, but “très précisément la sociologie sacrée” (Collège 123). In this lecture, Bataille designated the profane to be “en quelque sorte ‘post-sacrée’” (124); anything untouchable is also considered, despite its unattractiveness, sacred and worth respect. To clarify this idea, the primitives’ perception of “les cadavres et le sang menstruel” (128) were his model: as he further explained, “tout porte à croire que les hommes des premiers temps ont été réunis par un dégoût et par une erreur commune, par une insurmontable horreur portant précisément sur ce qui avait primitivement été le centre attractif de leur union” (128). This statement corresponded to Freud’s thought, as Bataille quoted him, where “le sentiment social repose ainsi sur la transformation d’un sentiment primitivement hostile en un attachement positif” (Collège 128-29). In other words, the negative is essential for the positive, it assures its presence. This dual presence supported Bataille’s affirmation of the new sense of the profane that did not oppose the sacred, but rather complemented it. This new thought crystallized into the introduction of such ideas as the sacrifice of humans and animals as positive for the unity of society.

Similar to, although not as extreme as, Bataille, Caillois presented his perception of the sacred and the profane in a closer manner. Later in November of 1938, Caillois elucidated that “L’Ambiguïté du sacré,” as the title of his lecture indicated, resided in its double meaning: “l’un attire, l’autre repousse” (379) emphasized the importance of bringing out a positive outcome from a negative act, or “de faire de l’impur un instrument
de purification” (383). In his approach to the profane and the impure, in opposition to the sacred and the pure, religion played a central role in illustrating this opposition. On the one hand, Caillois relied on the general concept of religion in order to illustrate the idea of purifying oneself through sacrifice to communicate with what is holy: “il faut s’en purifier pour approcher dignement du monde des dieux” (375). On the other hand, Bataille’s idea of religiosity was different: he explored the notion of ritual mysticism in order to exemplify his understanding of what primitives viewed as sacred. Mysticism intrigued Bataille for its principle of acceding to a certain reality that was not perceptible to the mind, through intuition and myths.1 Mysticism, for Bataille, did not pertain to the existence of one God; instead, he explained, “j’emploie le mot théologique [. . .] indépendamment d’un Dieu unique. C’est pourquoi j’aime mieux dire athéologique, voyant dans le sacré et dans les dieux, en même temps dans le principe de la souveraineté, la négation d’un Dieu parfait, ayant les attributs de la chose et de la raison” (8, 394, author’s emphasis). Accordingly, Bataille founded his perception of mysticism on human standards, which produced myths as in primitive cultural practices, and not on the standards of one religion. It was indeed Bataille’s extremist idea of religiosity that unleashed his group members’ anger by accusing him of shifting from their sociological goal and focusing on his personal obsession with mysticism, as I shall clarify.

As mysticism revoked rationality, Bataille based his idea of the sacred on irrationality. Remembering Marcel Mauss who said “l’interdit est là pour être violé” (10, 67), Bataille used the adjectives “gauche,” “répulsion”, and “impur,” to complement “droit,” “attraction,” and “pur.” In this sense, the notion of the sacred was both the awareness of the forbidden and its violation, which satisfied his inherited surrealist taste
for violating the conventional and going against the grain.² For the surrealists advocated in the 1920s random pistol firing in the streets of Paris and, in 1933, Paul Eluard and Benjamin Péret welcomed in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* the famous crime of the Papin sisters who butchered their bourgeois mistresses as avenging angels who, in one brutal burst of energy, immolated their bourgeois oppressors, though it meant their own destruction. It was indeed this ambiance of crime and violence, often applauded as an imaginative equivalent of a sacred social bond, that nurtured Bataille’s ideas of releasing human’s energy, even in a brutal manner, so long as this energy simultaneously gathered a united group and violated what was not allowed.

Perceiving himself as a sociologist, it was in such an environment that Bataille defined his sacred as a “moment de communication convulsive de ce qui ordinairement est étouffé” (“Le Sacré” 562), implying an eruption in violence of a suppressed energy. His idea of a community was that of a group of people operating as a society. As much as it sounded positive in the building of a social bond, this type of sacred communication and togetherness between the individuals was, less typically, an irrational one, dictated by a holy and accursed sacred. Under cultural order that included both the rule and its violation, Bataille believed that, “sous l’impact de l’émotion négative, nous devons obéir à l’interdit. Nous la violons si l’émotion est positive” (*L’Erotisme* 10, 74). His lifelong project was to demystify this so-called positive emotion, by investing humans’ energy in rituals adopted from aboriginal societies. Not accounting for cultural differences, Bataille’s reference to the forbidden did not accurately indicate what was prohibited, in which society, or according to whom. As he put it in his lecture “Attraction et répulsion: la structure sociale,” given in the *Collège* in February 1938: “le noyau central d’une
agglomération est le lieu où le sacré gauche est transformé en sacré droit” (2, 330), leaving “le sacré gauche” unidentified and allowing many interpretations for the term. It was in this sociological context that Bataille idealized archaic cultural systems as means of capturing the authentic need to get the self to be independent from cultural limitations. Within this idealization, Bataille clearly conflated mysticism and his personal obsession with the power of sacrifice, proclaiming that only through primitive-like rituals could people freely accede to a world beyond social restrictions, where they can get beyond themselves, and come together in communication through their collective experience in this mystic world.

**The Sacred in Ritual Sacrifices**

Even though Bataille’s accounts of sociological reconstruction referenced Durkheim’s ethnological reports on primitive cultural structures in *Formes élémentaires*, his personal interest in the meaning of sacrifice can be traced back to 1922, when he witnessed the death of the bullfighter Manolo Granero in Spain. Despite the matador’s skillful maneuvering of the bull’s movements and energy, he ended up being sacrificed; his death acknowledged, as Bataille would see it, the authority of power in the universe. This incident that contradicted the tradition of the bull’s death, just as a calf was sacrificed in ancient religious rituals, caused Bataille to “rethink the notion of sacrifice, so symbolically important to the Roman Catholic ritual of the Mass” (Champagne 7), especially in terms of the value that sacrifice could offer for the community, rather than for God. Ritual sacrifice became a symbol of power in Bataille’s thinking, especially in a
time when he abandoned Catholicism and became less focused on God as the sacred principle behind sacrifice and more interested in the human emotions that generated the need to submit to religious beliefs and to rituals. It was the principle of collectiveness that gathered a group of people who believed in the supernatural traditions of rituals that attracted Bataille and supported his early insight of the sacred.

Since we are discussing Bataille’s examination of ritual sacrifices, it is relevant to present what the primitive, in general, meant to him. It is undeniable that Bataille’s abandonment of Catholicism and his search for new sacred values were juxtaposed with an admiration for what he believed was primitive religion. For him, primitive religion differed from Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism, simply because it had a material interest in serving the welfare of community. For him, primitive people were religious; their festivals, animated with trances, orgies, aimed at fecundity. “La Religion surréaliste” is the essay that best summarized Bataille’s fascination with the essence of religion for the primitives:

Nous avons dit que le primitif était un homme religieux, nous savons en même temps que sa façon d’être religieux était exactement matérialiste. [. . .] Les rites que nous avons étudiés chez ceux qui représentent le moins mal l’homme qui a pu peupler la terre au début de l’humanité, les rites qui les animent dans des déchaînements de passion, sont toujours commandés par le souci d’un intérêt matériel. Il s’agit toujours du bien d’une communauté. [. . .] Les fêtes qui les animent, qui les poussent au dernier degré de la transe, qui les amènent à l’orgie, ont pour fin la fécondation de la terre. [. . .] Il y a là dans le terme de religion [. . .] une sorte de sens de bataille. La religion n’est pas exactement ce que nous attendons lorsque nous songeons aux religions morales, au christianisme et au bouddhisme, lorsque nous sommes en face de l’homme primitif. [. . .] La religion primitive est intéressée. (7, 383)
As it is clearly suggested, rituals were part of primitive religions because they emerged from the group’s common belief in a higher objective that benefited society. As such, the primitive appealed to Bataille’s sociologically-oriented ideas as he wanted to emphasize the necessity of re-creating the notion of ritual in a society within which the value of community it represented was destroyed by the ideology of Christianity, which was the basis of capitalism.

Exemplifying primitive religions, ritual sacrifices were central to Bataille’s thought because they entailed the same mechanism of togetherness that engendered myths in archaic societies. In an essay entitled “Le Sens moral de la sociologie,” he acknowledged tribal practices in general as a myth and a new model for Western society, given the superiority of their collective creation: “l’intérêt aux mythes et aux diverses activités religieuses des peuples éxotiques a attiré l’attention à la supériorité de la création collective plutôt qu’individuelle, et par suite, à la sociologie plutôt qu’à l’ethnographie” (“La Religion surréaliste” 2, 393, my emphasis). For Bataille, myths were superior to reality and were no less true than science because they were products of community. People who created myths were the witnesses of their validity. In his conference text, “L’Apprenti sorcier,” given in the Collège in 1938, Bataille underscored the importance of togetherness in the birth of myths that derive their validity from the many versions of people telling them, maintaining that “le mythe [. . .] ne peut pas être séparé de la communauté dont il est la chose et qui prend possession, rituellement, de son empire,” and to which he continued, “le mythe est peut-être fable mais [. . .] si l’on regarde le peuple qui la danse, qui l’agit, [. . .] elle est la vérité vivante” (1, 535, author’s emphasis). This statement can help us, as Bataille’s readers, to understand the relation he
established between myths, the primitive, and the sacred: ritual practices were the myths that brought a society together and created a community. It was this unity that Bataille admired as a sacred value. Consequently, he recognized the absence of myths as a failure of communication; a society that was unable to communicate was no longer a society.

With the importance given to myths and primitive religions, one cannot help but notice Bataille’s contradiction of his own principles. Some critics, such as Michael Richardson, underline for example Bataille’s appreciation for the surrealists’ recognition of the essence of myths for a society.3 Yet, it was also because of myths that Bataille accused Breton of mental dysfunction when he emphasized the importance of myths in his manifestos. His accusations for Breton in an early essay written in 1929, entitled “Le Lion châtré,” belittled the latter’s surrealist project by calling it a disillusionment of religion and played on the word castration to accuse Breton of intellectual incompetence: “l’abominable conscience qu’a n’importe quel être humain d’une castration mentale [. . .] se traduit dans les conditions normales en activité religieuse, car le dit être humain, pour fuir devant un danger grotesque et garder cependant le goût d’exister, transpose son activité dans le domaine mythique. [. . .] personne ne veut d’une liberté mythique” (1, 219). The powerful lion, Breton, whom Bataille called “un faux bonhomme” (1, 219), lacked power and virility, “châtré,” so long as his refusal of rationality was inspired by myths.4 Bataille accused Breton of hiding a falsely religious enterprise behind a pretentious, and especially impotent, revolutionary phraseology, when he based his social activism – or virility, to use his term – on a primitivist nostalgia for foreign cultures, like the Aztecs, an American-indian society, whom he praised as a lieu of myths and religion in order to support his project of creating a “sociologie sacrée.” Yet, Bataille’s change of
position vis-à-vis surrealism suggests that the revolutionary movement opened his eyes to the value of myths, which he developed further into an integration of the notion of ritual so long abandoned by contemporary society.

In 1937, Bataille organized his first secret society, Acéphale, closely linked to the Collège: it incorporated his fascination with the outcomes of sacrifice in the group’s program. The goal of Acéphale was “the touching off in society of an explosion of the primitive communal drives leading to sacrifice” (Stoekl xix). Although its program listed its first objective to be forming “une communauté créatrice de valeurs, valeurs créatrices de cohésion,” it did not really address politics (2, 273). The sacrificial interest of the title Acéphale, a headless god worshiped by chthonic religions and featuring the male organ replaced with a skull, reflected in the foundation of the society on the myth of sacrifice around the “Place de la Concorde” in Paris where the guillotine was set up. Showing a personal obsession with sacrifice, Bataille claimed to have spilled blood and to have placed a skull in 1936 at the “Place de la Concorde,” where Louis XVI was beheaded, in memory of the last French king who was sacrificed for the sake of a new government. Bataille’s desire to celebrate the execution of Louis XVI each 21 January as an act of purification, by which the whole society would be renewed, materialized in a plan to organize a human sacrifice in 1937 in order to understand the intense motivation behind the idea of human sacrifice practiced in tribal societies. The group also advocated the possibility that streams of blood, in the streets of contemporary society, would be means to overcoming the stagnation of modernity. It was around this time that Bataille invited members, such as Georges Ambrosino and Colette Peignot among others, to perform strange rituals, including the sacrifice of a goat as a replacement for the human sacrifice.
that was once intended by the members of both Acéphale and the Collège. In keeping with the idea of willingly dying adopted from primitive sacrifices, Bataille and Colette Peignot climbed Mount Etna in 1937, thus introducing suicide, or self-sacrifice, as an alternative, but synonymous, to sacrificing another. With such an appeal for sacrifice, Bataille had to ground his group’s practices of animal killings and arrangements for human sacrifice on aboriginal culture to provide a more convincing argument for his communal notion of the sacred.

Throughout his sociological writings, Bataille was at pains to get the individual beyond his/her self. To do so, his attention was especially drawn toward primitive rituals that allowed such possibilities. For him, primitive festivals captured the moments of the sacred that were beyond any attempt to organize it: they were able to suspend their rules and become united as a community. And ritual sacrifice, whether of the self, of an animal or of another, was the example that fit into Bataille’s definition of a sacred communication, whose basis were attraction and repulsion. In other words, ritual killings satisfied both criteria of the positive and the negative designated by the dual meaning of sacer because they had a unanimous purpose, believing in regeneration through death, on the one hand, and broke the forbidden act of killing or murder, on the other. Bataille played on this sense of tribal social bond; his filter of primitive sacrificial cults included mass sacrifices practiced in Aztec society because the victims’ sacrifice was performed for the community. The Aztecs believed that if they stopped sacrifice, the sun would cease to give light. Bataille was clearly drawn to the social significance involved in sacrifice, where willing victims were offered up by the whole community in order to secure its own welfare. Offering the self to death in Aztecs’ practices recalled the
matador’s exposure to death, although Bataille had more appreciation for the former’s mystic beliefs.

Bataille did not namely distinguish between self-sacrifice, sacrificing another, or mass killings, so long as they meant a loss of life or, let us add, of a body part. The clear example that eliminated any separation between the different types of sacrifices was Bataille’s interesting, comparative approach to Aztecs’ mass sacrifices and Van Gogh’s self-mutilation in “La Mutilation sacrificielle et l’oreille coupée de Vincent Van Gogh,” written in 1930. In this approach, Bataille established a parallelism between the sacrificed and the purpose of preserving the sun, used as a motif for limitless self-generating energy, namely the sun light for the Aztecs and the sun as an inspiration for Van Gogh’s paintings. Bataille expressed his admiration for the painter’s portrayal of light, a symbol of the sun, as he stated in the beginning of his essay: “l’association que j’avais été amené à faire entre l’obsession du soleil et l’automutilation de Van Gogh” (1, 258). The motif of painting sunflowers in Van Gogh’s series of sunflowers instigated Bataille’s provocative emphasis on the former’s obsession with the sun and suggested that modern intellectuals and painters also captured the essence of sacrifice in regards to the sun. He quoted Van Gogh’s reiteration of the expression “le soleil dans toute sa gloire” (1, 260) and initiated his essay by telling the story of another painter, whose name was uncertain, “Gaston F…,” and who, in imitation of Van Gogh, cut off his index finger most importantly, as Bataille underlined, in a moment where “il se mit à fixer le soleil et recevant de ses rayons l’ordre impératif de s’arracher un doigt” (1, 258, author’s emphasis). Bataille was evidently the one who mythicized the sun, by creating a transition to his fascination with Aztec sacrifices for the sun in the second half of the
essay: “il est nécessaire de rapprocher des soleils, les tournesols, dont le large disque auréole de courts pétales rapelle le disque du soleil qu’il [Van Gogh] ne cesse d’ailleurs pas de fixer” (1, 260). The use of the idiomatic expression of necessity proves that we are dealing with Bataille’s subjective interpretation of the artist’s paintings, which, in addition to the offering of his ear, may appear to echo Aztec self-sacrifices, whereas they do not. For Bataille was in fact aware of Van Gogh’s madness, the reason for mutilating his left ear; he stated that “le peintre pris d’un accès de folie, s’était coupé une Oreille et l’avait envoyée à une fille dans une maison de prostitution” (1, 259), which would make Aztecs’ religiously-based sacrifices more valid and far superior to the painter’s. From his lengthy explanation of the importance of sunflowers in Van Gogh’s paintings in 1888, I would like to quote the following part:

nous savons par ailleurs qu’au moment de la crise de décembre 1888, Gauguin, qui habitait avec lui [Van Gogh], venait de terminer un portrait du peintre poignant un tableau de tournesols. [. . .] Cette association étroite entre l’obsession d’une fleur solaire et le tourment le plus exaspéré prend une valeur d’autant plus expressive que la prédilection exaltée du peintre aboutit parfois à la représentation de la fleur flétrie et morte. (1, 260-61, author’s emphasis)

Although Bataille overemphasized the motif of sunflowers in the first half of his essay, we cannot dismiss that, in his discussion of Van Gogh’s sunflowers, he succeeded in presenting an attractive visual analysis that showed his own appreciation of the association between the painter’s art (“le tourment le plus exaspéré”) and the depiction of the flower “flétrie et morte” (1, 261). Bataille’s primitivist fusion of the primitive and the modern crystallized even better in the notes he left on the composition of this article, departing from the second point on “L’oreille coupée et les tournesols de Vincent Van
Gogh” to suddenly “L’automutilation religieuse, la circoncision et le sacrifice.” In the essay, Bataille suggested that Van Gogh’s cutting off of his ear was no different from ritual circumcision, a symbol of sacrificing part of the genitals in “sacrifier leur virilité à l’aide d’un rasoir” (1, 265), or from “l’arrachement d’une dent” or “la pratique de l’ablation d’un doigt” (1, 266). Inasmuch as the idea of loss was reproduced in all the segments of the essay, the segments on the painter’s “religious” self-mutilation, ritual circumcisions, and sacrifices were forced into the structure of the essay and aimed at approaching two distant realities: circumcisions and sacrifices based on primitive religions, on the one hand, and modern self-mutilation based on madness, on the other.

Once we begin reading the second half of the essay, we realize that self and mass sacrifices were, for Bataille, analogous in the way human energy, symbolized by the sun, was invested to get the individual(s) beyond the self. He concluded on the intimate relationship between the religious purpose and the act of discarding (part of) the self (or the body), by using nouns like collectivity and religiosity, “les participants portés collectivement au comble de la frénésie religieuse” in reference to “la nécessité de se jeter ou de jeter quelque chose de soi-même hors de soi” (1, 265). It is noticeable that Bataille looked at both Van Gogh and Aztecs from the angle of religion to claim that they both acceded to a mystic mood by witnessing sacrifice. He managed to put the primitive alongside the modern by arguing that Van Gogh’s partial self-sacrifice did not differ from the Aztec priests’ performance of death with regard to the sun: “les rapports entre ce peintre [ . . . ] et un idéal dont le soleil est la forme la plus fulgurante apparaîtraient ainsi analogues à ceux que les hommes entretenaient autrefois avec les dieux; la mutilation interviendrait normalement dans ces rapports ainsi qu’un sacrifice” (262-63). His
sociological thinking remarkably conflated religion and primitive cultures in, first, fusing the terms “automutilation religieuse,” and second, in implying that sacred values derived from primitive religions and beliefs and existed in cultural sacrifices, whether of body parts or of individuals. One can also argue that Bataille over-used the sense of self-liberation inherited from surrealism by mythicizing self-mutilation and making it a ritual of exercising one’s freedom, in an attempt to validate self-immolation in Western society.

In reading Bataille’s primitivist fixation on archaic mysticism and sacrificial practices, one clearly notices his interest in sacrifice rituals reflected in his selection of practices that emphasized a religious value. Bataille also mentioned Aztecs’ sacrifices in “L’Amérique disparue,” an essay written in 1928, and described them this time as cannibalistic rituals, still emphasizing that they were religiously performed by Aztec priests, who participated in excessive acts of covering their body with the victim’s blood in an environment of “mystification” and “heureuse violence” (1, 156-57). Those sacrificed “victimes annuelles” among the Aztecs were depicted performing special dances that preceded their sacrifice by the clerics. Pointing out the victims’ consent to be sacrificed, by engaging in joyous dances, was Bataille’s way of underscoring their willingness to lose their lives for their society. By maintaining that terror and horror, accompanying the frenzied mode of these type of killings, defined archaic religiosity, Bataille found a ground for his longing for the holy/defiled sacred, and thus went from an assertion to another, from stating “ils mêlaient à la religion un sentiment d’horreur, de terreur” to concluding “il apparaît assez évident que les Mexicains prenaient un plaisir trouble à ce genre de mystification” (1, 156, my emphasis). Bataille’s conclusion
pinpointed first and foremost his personal attraction to their belief in the spiritual union with the divine through killing people of their own community.

In addition to Aztecs’ mass sacrifices, the phenomenon of amuck in the Malaysian Islands attracted Bataille. It consisted of a religious frenzy, where one struck randomly with a knife the first passerby. Amuck appealed to Bataille because it was a tradition, constantly practiced in those islands: “il ne s’agit pas là exactement d’un acte de folie puisqu’il y a tradition perpétuée” (“La Religion surréaliste” 2, 385). Amuck also recalled the surrealist passion in the early 1920s for firing a pistol into a crowd, which he adopted later to arrange for a human sacrifice in the streets of Paris. In explaining Bataille’s interest in amuck, Champagne stated that “for Bataille, amuck, like gifts, is an example of the crisis of violence that expresses a suicidal urge to sacrifice an unknown member of the community in order to change the individual’s anxiety about life within the community” (72). The equivocal reason of “the individual’s anxiety about life in community,” that Champagne left unclarified, held some truth because it alluded to Bataille’s preoccupation later in his intellectual career with the individual’s status in the universe. But as far as Bataille was concerned early in his idea of a society, his reasoning behind these essays was to re-create, in the name of his perception of the sacred, the value of rituals to bring a community together, even though this meant introducing such ideas as suicide or killings of others.

Based on the idea of consensus giving and loss, potlatch, a ceremonial feast among some Native American communities in which gifts were exchanged, held Bataille’s attention.\(^5\) First studied by Marcel Mauss in 1925, and later referenced by the founders of the Collège as a “mécanisme d’institutions” (Collège 831), this ritual
interested Bataille for its ability to engage a community together in excessive giving, even though it maintained a loss of the individual’s possessions, including women. He recognized a certain type of sacrifice occurring during this gift exchange, and concluded that “le potlatch rejoint le sacrifice religieux” (1, 309). Because gifts could change the relationship between individuals, they could provoke some into obligations and/or anger toward the giver, or as he put it, “la valeur d’échange du don résulte du fait que le donataire, pour effacer l’humiliation et relever le défi, doit satisfaire à l’obligation, contractée par lui lors de l’acceptation, de répondre ultérieurement par un don plus important, c’est-à-dire de rendre avec usure” (1, 309). His main fascination was in the voluntary and excessive, and not equal, giving. And since religious sacrifice involved also a will to give either one’s life or an animal, potlatch appealed to Bataille for its ability to engage tribal people in excessively losing their possessions. As such, potlatch seemed well in harmony with his concept of ritual giving as in a sacrificial cult.

If we look back at Bataille’s idolization of rituals sacrifices, especially human ones, we cannot ignore the possible consequences if his ideas were put into practice. With the outbreak of the Second World War, human sacrifice could not be the effective way to create a social bond. When the activities of the Collège began to fade, Caillois and Leiris questioned whether this organization actually fulfilled any of its roles toward society. Because of their initial proclamation to follow Durkheim’s scientific method, hoping to renew the sacred through the power of rituals, Bataille’s obsession with mysticism and death interfered with the objective of the Collège and was subsequently condemned by Caillois as irreconcilable with “le caractère fondamental de ce mouvement” (2, 335). Aware that his increasingly subjective attitude was inconsistent
with Durkheim’s rules, Bataille defended his method by repudiating other schools of thought like Kojève’s and Hegel’s, but still admitted his subjective interpretation of things: “la négativité dont je parlerai est d’une autre nature. Je l’ai représentée tout d’abord projetant son interférence dans le rire ou dans l’activité sexuelle. [. . .]. Je continuerai à donner des faits que je décris une interprétation qui m’est en partie personnelle, mais je me tiendrais très près cette fois des descriptions et des interprétations classiques” (2, 324, my emphasis). Also, in a reply to a letter addressed to him by Leiris, who questioned the validity of their subjective thinking in determining objective sociology, Bataille confessed the role of his personal experience in defining the sacred: “dans mon esprit, l’expérience que chacun de nous pouvait avoir du sacré conservait une importance essentielle. [. . .] Mais s’il est vrai que nous fassions entrer notre expérience personnelle dans les recherches que nous avons poursuivies, il faut en tirer la conséquence. L’expérience du sacré est de telle nature qu’elle ne peut rien laisser d’indifférent Collège 827). By admitting the effect of personal experience on his sociological method, Bataille’s confession gives us ample room to believe that not only his vision of a “sociologie sacrée” was nurtured by his personal obsessions with primitive mysticism and the idea of voluntary death, but that also these new sociological ideas could only make way for contradictions and inconsistencies.

The transitional phase between Bataille’s sociological interests and his following theories dated to the third trimester of the second year of the Collège, in the conference presentation he gave in July of 1939, in which he was the only speaker. Caillois’ travel to Argentina during this scheduled meeting and Leiris’s refusal to participate were clear indications of their opposition to Bataille’s deviation from any objective sociological
method and from their group’s original goal. In justifying his preoccupations with the questions of the social and the sacred, Bataille’s perception of losing the self, previously explained in light of a communicative experience between a group of people, began relating to a different perspective on erotic frenzies, still designated by terms like “se perdre” and “perdre autrui.” Discredited by his co-founders of the Collège for shifting from sociological issues to more personal ones, namely “l’accouplement,” Bataille defended himself saying that these issues were inseparable from one another: “l’introduction d’un point de vue sociologique jette une lumière imprévue sur cette obscurité naturelle [l’accouplement]” (2, 368). In this early text, he clearly opposed eroticism to the concept of procreation: “en effet d’autres besoins que celui de procréer sont rassasiés dans l’accouplement” (2, 368). In other words, reproductive sex was merely animal and there should be more for it to be erotic. Playing on the idea of self-loss, Bataille attempted to illustrate how losing the self in an erotic experience entailed a sacrifice that brought people together: “Lorsqu’un homme et une femme sont unis par l’amour, […] le besoin de se perdre dépasse en eux le besoin de se trouver” (2, 372).

Trying to hold on to his perception of the sacred as communication as in tribal sacrifices while initiating his new interest in primitive orgies, Bataille attempted to make his claim on the positive effect of frenzied sacrifice on community sound more plausible by combining in this same lecture the concept of sacrifice, sometimes with frenzy, and other times with orgy, where his argument proceeded in the following manner: “[Les hommes religieux] sont possédés peu à peu par le désir d’étendre par contagion leur frénésie sacrificielle. […] Il faut retrouver l’équivalent de la communauté sous la forme d’un dieu universel afin d’étendre sans fin l’orgie sacrificielle” (2, 372-73, my emphasis).
New fusions of love and sacrifice erupted in this new era of Bataille’s thought, departing from the idea that “l’amour exprime un besoin de sacrifice: chaque unité doit se perdre en quelque autre qui la dépasse” to envisioning both man and woman communicating through their mutual loss in the love experience: “ils ne communiquent que perdant une part d’eux-mêmes” (2, 369). The notions of loss and death directed Bataille’s attention toward a new perspective on the individual rather than on society and made him ponder the significance of these two experiences to the question of the erotic.

A month before this lecture, in June of 1939, Bataille’s essay entitled “La Joie devant la mort” introduced, as its title indicates, the element of joy that humans could experience while facing death; that is, death as an end to any type of sacrifice. In this essay, Bataille continued to emphasize that the value of sacrifice resided in its affirmation of the individual’s voluntary death: “le sacrifice est par excellence une attitude devant la mort: le mouvement qui le constitue est une violence exigeant que la mort soit (Collège 736, author’s emphasis), thus describing Aztecs and Amucks as “hommes de la mort religieuse” (Collège 736), and potlatch as an exchange system “d’une façon sacrificielle, [. . .] comme des destructions provocantes de sa propre richesse” (Collège 737). Although no specific reference was made to ecstatic feelings in this text, Hollier reported Bataille’s attainment of ecstasy through practicing ritual sacrifices. In quoting Jean Bruno, who saw Bataille, his colleague at the Bibliothèque Nationale, “soumis à un véritable entraînement mystique, à partir de 1938,” Hollier added that “la pratique de la joie devant la mort (les exercises d’Acéphale) serait le protocole des dramatisations que [Bataille] a utilisées pour atteindre l’extase” (Le Collège 730). Does this witness suggest that Bataille, even during the years of his social involvement since Acéphale, was
interested in the notion of ecstasy and in its effects on the individual? Bataille always pinpointed the mystic states in which Aztec priests found themselves, after human sacrifices. In the etymology of “ecstasy,” *ek* means “out,” and *stasis* means “to place”; the term therefore means “driving a person out of his/her wits” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This definition helps to explain Hollier’s account in “la pratique de la joie devant la mort,” confirming Bataille’s conflation of sacrificial and ecstatic moods.

Ecstasy, which indicates a state of emotion so intense that one is carried beyond rational thought and self-control, involves “a mystic trance” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). These meanings satisfy Bataille’s interest in the experiences of sacrifices and mysticism, and his adoption of the primitive belief in the power of sacrifices and mysticism, which was an inspiration for his new appeal for the effect of ecstasy in getting the individual beyond the self. One can then begin to understand the resemblance between his early perception of ritual sacrifices and mysticism and his later shift to ecstasy: all three provide a type of release from the self. In a time when Caillois was faithful to his commitment to the principle of sacred communication, by using terms like “l’extase collective” (2, 361) and by criticizing Bataille for being interested in individual ecstasy, Bataille was exploring pleasure in a gradual change of perspective on collectivity that was once his objective.

Between Bataille’s lecture of July 1939 on the erotic and self-loss, on the one hand, and his essay “La Joie devant la mort,” on the other, one can thread together two necessary elements that began appearing in Bataille’s thought: the erotic and death. His particular longtime interest in the notions of the sacred and mysticism, and in the idea of getting beyond the limits of the world, still continued to play a role in his new existential concerns with eroticism. From the Hindus, Bataille learned that the Tantrics used sexual
pleasure “non pour s’y perdre mais comme sorte de tremplin” (5, 30). And so, he admired in ecstasy that kind of forward projection that challenges the limits of the world. Thus, the idea of losing the self that Bataille long identified in his sociological essays, and that he termed, in “La Joie devant la mort,” death, set the direction for his following writings on the erotic, of which I intend to study, in the next section, his description of the Lascaux Well Scene and L’Erotisme. The complexity of Bataille’s theory of the sacred and ritual sacrifices during the Collège unfolded a more subtle analysis of human concern with eroticism. Although Bataille’s primitivist approach to sacrifices rendered his sociological project less convincing, especially in leaving some unanswered questions on the feasibility of implementing ritual sacrifices in contemporary French society, and consequently on the validity of the sacred defined in terms of communal communication, his subsequent revision of the sacred and its meanings for the individual was his most persuasive theory, which made him more known after his death.

The Sacred in Eroticism

Bataille’s theory of eroticism flowed from his writings on community and from the ideas of loss and death in ritual sacrifices. For him, erotic experience did not differ from an act of sacrifice: they both ended in death, “le monde érotique lui-même a pris soin de désigner l’acte dans lequel il s’accomplit comme un sacrifice, de désigner aussi le dénouement de cet acte comme une ‘petite mort’” (Le Collège 2, 370). Playing on the word “death,” the idiomatic expression “la petite mort” was the orgasmic moment by which Bataille portrayed erotic life as an imitation of death. It is interesting that Bataille
chose particularly death to define eroticism, especially since he did not use eroticism in relation to reproductive sex; rather, he saw in erotic desire a loss, similar to the loss entailed in the death of a person and to the self-loss experienced in ecstatic moments: “si le résultat de l’érotisme est envisagé dans la perspective du désir, indépendamment de la naissance possible d’un enfant, c’est une perte, à laquelle répond l’expression paradoxalement valuable de ‘petite mort’” (10, 592, my emphasis). From this point forward, Bataille’s main preoccupation was no longer communication between a group of people, but rather the individual’s view of eroticism with regard to death.

Although Bataille’s new subject of interest was not fully elaborated until L’Erotisme, the intermediary period between the Collège and this book witnessed an important event in his intellectual life: the discovery of the Lascaux cavern of France on 12 September 1940. Bataille visited the cave years after he was no longer involved in sociology, at a time he revealed his interest in the idea of pleasure and death that built on his previous admiration for gratuitous death in ritual sacrifices. Still idealizing the primitive, he called prehistoric people, who drew the Cave paintings, and whom he interchangeably termed primitives, “ces ‘primitifs’ authentiques [distingués] de ceux que l’ethnographie nous fait connaître” (9, 79). From the beginning until the end of the book, Bataille made it clear that the drawings of the Cave were fascinating to him because they exemplified a basic premise about humanity. He eagerly described the Cave as “ce lieu de notre naissance” (9, 49), where “notre” implied all archaic and civilized people, including Bataille himself, carrying a message about their origin, “ce message, à nul autre pareil, appelle en nous le recueillement de l’être tout entier, [. . .] la vision du plus lointain, [. . .] le signe sensible de notre présence dans l’univers” (9, 12, author’s
emphasis). This message was not directly articulated; to understand it was to follow what Bataille proposed to do: “recomposer le tout à l’aide de fragments” (9, 40).

Bataille’s writings in June and July of 1939, where new notions of sexuality, joy and death arose, anticipated a new orientation in the trajectory of his intellectual interests. If we regroup “La Joie devant la mort,” the article that praised the willingness to lose (like in potlatch) and to die (like in Aztec mass sacrifices), on the one hand, and the Aztec priests’ mystic enjoyment of performing death, on the other, with Hollier’s statement that death in sacrifices was Bataille’s way of attaining ecstasy, we can see why the co-presence of death and ecstasy in the Well Scene appealed to Bataille. This drawing shows a naked, ithyphallic man, with a bird head or mask, lying in front of a dying bison, and next to the man a bird. Bataille described this Scene as an enigma: “l’ambiguïté de la scène, énigme et drame, doit lui être laissé” (9, 60). Although he considered it confusing, “qui laisse confondu” (9, 65), “inexplicable” (10, 597), he found it to be “la plus chargée de sens” (10, 598). One of Bataille’s two explanations of the Well Scene referenced H. Kirchner, who suggested that the man was a shaman in a state of ecstatic trance, recalling the Yakuts’ ritual sacrifices of cows in northeastern Siberia.  

According to Bataille, in these rituals, Yakuts believed that birds were the spirits that led Yakut shamans to guide the sacrificed animals to heaven (“le chemin du ciel”): in Yakut rituals, “les oiseaux sont les esprits auxiliaires sans lesquels le chaman ne saurait entreprendre le voyage aérien qui s’accomplit tandis qu’il est inanimé” (9, 95). Sometimes the shaman wore a bird costume appropriating the bird’s spiritual power and that was probably why the shaman in the Well Scene had a bird-mask on, if, as it was suggested, he had killed the bison. And if ecstasy becomes associated with a mystic
experience, then the shaman of the Well Scene was, by extension, a priest and magician lying ecstatic, while spiritually leading the animal he had just sacrificed to heaven. In this case, the man’s sexual excitement should not be surprising because it was a natural result of the ecstatic feelings he was experiencing, for this was what Bataille suggested in concluding: “la nudité ne serait pas surprenante s’il s’agit d’un exercice chamanistique” (9, 95). Moreover, he initiated the explanation of the Well Scene in relation to Yakut rituals: “le sacrifice yakoute est en effet en rapport avec le ravissement en extase d’un chaman” (9, 95). Bataille would definitely support such an interpretation because it resonated with the same mechanism of sacrifice and mysticism in Aztec sacrifices and confirmed his longtime assertion that witnessing death could put people in ecstatic states as he previously attempted to prove through his personal practices and his sociological writings.

Bataille’s other approach to the Well Scene did not explain the relationship between the man, the bison, and the bird. His only focus was on the meaning of the man’s human-animal figure or “l’homme paré du prestige de la bête” (9, 62). His hypothesis was based on the idea that the man was hiding behind the mask of an animal because he had lost the grace of animality that did not distinguish between right and wrong. This man lay ithyphallic, seemingly dead, with his arms and legs stretched out, but also ecstatic, because he was aware of his erotic pleasure, and thus ashamed of his transgression of the forbidden erotic experience, in the same manner Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness once they sinned and were expelled from paradise. Bataille’s following analysis of “La Représentation de l’homme” referred to all the
human figures in the Lascaux Cave but pertained particularly to the man in the Well Scene:

Ces hommes de Lascaux rendirent sensible le fait qu’étant des hommes, ils nous ressemblaient, mais ils l’ont fait en nous laissant l’image de l’animalité qu’ils quittaient. Comme s’ils avaient dû parer un prestige naissant de la grâce animale qu’ils avaient perdue. [. . .] L’homme de l’Age du renne nous laissait de l’animal une image à la fois prestigieuse et fidèle, mais, dans la mesure où il s’est lui-même représenté, le plus souvent, il dissimulait ses traits sous le masque de l’animal. Il disposait jusqu’à la virtuosité des ressources du dessin, mais il dédaignait son propre visage. [. . .] Comme s’il avait honte de son visage et que, voulant se désigner, il dût en même temps se donner le masque d’un autre. (9, 62-63, my emphasis)

This explanation seems plausible although it is based on a hypothesis that presumes the man’s feelings of shame during sexual erection and that does not address the presence of the dead bison. We are then led to assume that Bataille either saw in the death of the bison a symbol of the death (or “petite mort”) coinciding with the man’s phallic state, playing on the idea of death as a portrayal of an erotic experience, or that the animal’s violent scene of death was what caused the man’s sexual excitement, in a disturbing association of pleasure and pain. Either case would not change the importance of the presence of the human-animal figure and the man’s ecstasy.

From his reflections on the Well Scene, Bataille concluded that prehistoric people were not inferior to us: “notre semblable, cet Homme du Paléolithique supérieur, le premier qui physiquement ne fut en rien notre inférieur, qui peut-être, et même il le faut supposer, put disposer de ressources mentales analogues aux nôtres” (10, 593). He maintained that they were mentally capable of perceiving some truth about erotic activities that modern humans did not, as his revised thoughts on the Lascaux Cave in Les Larmes d’Eros indicated. Bataille concluded that only the civilized made the erotic
forbidden; the primitive always knew that sexual union was a means of pleasure, regardless of any procreation: “Pour les premiers hommes [. . .], la fin de l’activité sexuelle ne dut pas être la naissance des enfants, ce fut le plaisir immédiat qui en résultait. [. . .] Le primitif ne voit pas dans l’acquisition, effectivement bénéfique, de l’enfant le résultat de l’union sexuelle. [. . .] Il est vrai, la recherche du plaisir envisagé comme une fin, de nos jours, est souvent mal jugé” (10, 592). Bataille’s message began to unfold: the civilized needs to reconsider the significance of eroticism: “[cette énigme désespérante] nous demande, étant la première humainement posée, de descendre au fond de l’abîme ouvert en nous par l’érôtisme et la mort” (10, 596). In thinking of eroticism in light of death in Lascaux, Bataille began showing interest in a new trajectory of ideas that addressed all people. For him, humans needed to take a different perspective on death, which had always had authority over them; they should eliminate the fear of death by rethinking their existence and the forces of an eroticism that was not limited to reproduction. The drawing of the Well Scene inspired Bataille’s argument on modern human’s profanation of eroticism by systematizing it in a moralistic fashion; this argument suggested a reassessment of what civilized people considered forbidden desires.

With the prehistoric drawing of the Well Scene becoming an inspiring icon for Bataille’s new intellectual interest and with his appreciation of primitives’ mental capacities, Bataille visualized free sexual expression in the face of death as a paradise. The idea of paradise that appeared before in Gauguin’s nostalgia for the primitive, by seeing in the peasant life of Bretagne an artistic inspiration of a paradisiacal environment, reappeared with Bataille in terms of sexual liberty. Bataille’s exposure to the ithyphallic,
ecstatic man of the Well Scene in the face of death left him with a visualization of
paradise: “Sans parler de l’homme mort du puits de Lascaux, beaucoup de ces figures
masculines, ont le sexe levé. [. . .] La liberté de ces premiers temps présente un caractère
paradisiaque” (10, 595). In a sense, Bataille saw naked humans as naked nature, simple,
natural, and free, which would not differ from Rousseau’s ideal, simple society,
Gauguin’s idealization of peasant life, or Breton’s dream of primitive spontaneity.
Unfortunately, not all critics of Bataille appreciated the depth of the Well Scene in
shaping his theory on eroticism and death; some critics do not do justice to Bataille’s
approach to the Lascaux Cave, such as Champagne, who notes that “Bataille discovered
and elaborated on an erotic mysticism for what appear to be naïve, heterogeneous
drawings of early cave dwellers” (22). Such a short view overlooks the importance of the
Lascaux Cave in forming Bataille’s most influential theory of eroticism, a subject that
sociologists, like Max Weber, also developed in light of the role of religious values in
shaping societies’ perception of sexuality.7

Indeed, ideas of such an influential theorist of the twentieth century as Bataille on
eroticism make one ponder the importance of erotic desires for human existence and the
essence of what he saw as the truth, “cette vérité [qui], sans doute, n’a pas cessé de
s’affirmer” (10, 597). The question that poses itself is where does that truth reside and to
what extent does it relate to Bataille’s previous assertion in “L’Apprenti sorcier” that
primitive rituals are the myths and “la vérité vivante” (1,535, author’s emphasis).
Bataille’s reference to truth surely pertained to the power of sexual forces in the shift of
his intellectual thinking. If ritual sacrifices exercised, in his sociological theories, an
authority in getting the individuals to experience collectively a loss, eroticism, he
believed, possessed this same power; but, in this case, rules that governed reproductive sexuality should be rethought. In stating in Lascaux that “nous éprouvons [. . .] le poids d’une civilisation dont nous sommes pourtant fiers. Nous avons soif d’une autre vérité [. . .]. Nous sommes conduits à [. . .] [donner] des règles aux forces sexuelles” (9, 70-71), Bataille shed light on the Lascaux man’s ecstatic feeling, alluding to the effect of mysticism that opposes rationalism and civilization. Bataille always associated ecstasy with mysticism, as the opening to L’expérience intérieure (1943) shows: “Par l’expérience intérieure j’entends ce qu’on appelle d’habitude l’expérience mystique: les états d’extase, de ravissement” (5, 57, author’s emphasis). In attempting to decipher the Well Scene, Bataille reconfigured mysticism through ecstasy in the erotic experience, evolving from his past fixation on ecstasy and mysticism engendered by sacrifice, which confirmed the interdependence of the two experiences of mysticism and ecstasy in Bataille’s theory of the erotic.

Critics recognize the centrality of mysticism in the reception of Bataille’s ideas. Peter Connor explains in his article, “The Emptiness of Intelligent Questions,” that, in order to understand the complexity of Bataille’s ideas, it is imperative to study Bataille’s interest in mysticism. He argues that Bataille “used mysticism as a weapon against what he saw as the confining and reductive positivism and philosophy, the dominant discursive field of his times” (179). This is true, especially if one takes into consideration Bataille’s appropriation of mysticism as an integral part of the system of beliefs of primitive cultures, thus critiquing modern society’s reliance on rationalism. Connor also makes an interesting point in arguing that Bataille’s recourse to mysticism was a way to
attain a philosophical mode of knowing, which, consequently, stresses the effect of mysticism on actually making Bataille’s writings philosophical:

No doubt [. . .] the exclusion of the mystical from modern philosophical discourse can be challenged. One could debate the exceptions: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger after the *kehre*. Or, like Bataille, one could argue in a more seditious manner that mysticism, as the repressed other of philosophy, lies buried at the heart of philosophical logic, unsettling in subtle ways philosophy’s march toward a rational and ordered view of the universe. Bataille makes such an argument on more than one occasion. (178-79)

Bataille’s frequent reference to mysticism and ecstasy did not decrease the level of credibility of his approach to the Well Scene or, later, to the subject of eroticism. On the contrary, his notions of mysticism and ecstasy in his writings after the *Collège* remained intimately connected to his quest for the meaning of the sacred in his theory of the erotic. Jürgen Habermas’s questioning of Bataille’s use of mysticism in saying that “eroticism led him [Bataille] to the insight that knowledge of what is essential is reserved for mystical experience, for silence with eyes closed” (236) overlooks the fact that Bataille advocated a positive silence in re-conceptualizing human sexual forces, that is, erotic forces, and reintegrated the power of mysticism that leads to ecstasy in modern human thinking. As to how mysticism, ecstasy, and the revision of forbidden desires related to Bataille’s approach to primitive cultures, the man’s ecstasy in the Well Scene and his mental projection unto a trance state simultaneously set the direction for Bataille’s following treatment of ritual orgies in *L’Erotisme*. His past confirmation of the mystic value and the experience of loss in ritual sacrifices reappeared in *L’Erotisme* with regard to ecstatic frenzies in orgiastic rituals.
What is singular about Bataille’s approach to orgiastic rituals is the same emphasis he placed before on ritual sacrifices: that is, the religious value of their practices and the ultimate attainment of ecstasy. For him, practices, such as sacrifices and orgies, were integral to the mystical quest to reach ecstasy. One of the primitive cultural phenomena that he stressed in his sociological and erotic writings was his admiration of the festivals, or les fêtes, for two reasons: first, archaic festivals were a lieu of sacred practices for primitive people and, second, they suspended the rules set by society. It was in the context of the festivals that Bataille classified sacrifices and orgies as a type of transgression that he depicted as “religious” due to its ability to put the individual in an ecstatic state, originating from mysticism. He designated transgression to be “une transgression religieuse, liée à la sensibilité extatique, qui est la source de l’extase et le fond de la religion” (9, 40). The originality of Bataille’s thought lay in his advocacy of a thinking heir to a mystical theology, but missing a God. In this thinking, ecstasy that originated from mysticism was provoked by any type of transgression or violation because, as he summed up in Lascaux, “c’est l’état de transgression qui commande le désir, l’exigence d’un monde plus profond, plus riche et prodigieux, l’exigence, en un mot, d’un monde sacré” (9, 41). At this juncture, primitive beliefs in sacred practices that proceed from mystic states to ecstatic ones inspired in Bataille a new perception of a sacred that unusually lies in what modern society considers forbidden. For him, the forbidden, like erotic desires, must be pursued and not repressed. If the primitive’s idea of religion allowed for a practice of the forbidden, then this was the religious model that the moderns should follow, abandoning the principles of right and wrong dictated by Judeo-Christian teachings: “la religiosité primitive a tiré des interdits
l’esprit de la transgression. Mais dans l’ensemble la religiosité chrétienne s’oppose à
l’esprit de transgression” (L’Erotisme 10, 119). It was in this way that Bataille defined
primitive cultural systems, which, consequently, shaped his theory of the sacred in his
writings on eroticism.

One can then ascertain that an essential conclusion of Bataille’s thoughts on the
erotic/death relationship in the Well Scene is his theory on the dialectic
forbidden/transgression with regard to eroticism and the two terms’ relation to one
another. L’Erotisme is where there is a more detailed articulation of this dialectic, which
built on the man’s awareness of his erotic transgression in the Well Scene and the wish to
return to the animal state insinuated by his masked disguise. Unsurprisingly, the drawing
of the Well Scene is reproduced in L’Erotisme, thus leaving no doubt about the influence
of this scene on shaping Bataille’s theory. The notion of pleasure that accompanied the
male phallus and the bird mask reappeared in L’Erotisme, but, this time, unleashed the
discussion of eroticism, called by Bataille “le problème des problèmes” (75). For him,
eroticism was forbidden because, first, it was based on pleasure for its own sake:
“L’essence de l’érotisme est donnée dans l’association inextricable du plaisir sexuel et de
l’interdit” (10, 108), and, second, because it was a violation of the rules of procreation:
“l’activité sexuelle de reproduction est commune aux animaux sexués et aux hommes,
mais apparemment les hommes seuls ont fait de leur activité sexuelle une activité
érotique” (L’Erotisme 10, 17). But why was it important for Bataille to develop the
subject of eroticism and to point out the relationship between the forbidden and its
violation? Bataille argued that, because erotic activity was normally tied up with the most
intimate human feelings (as opposed to animals whose sexual activity responded simply
to an instinctual need), people’s sexualized being responded to their awareness of death (that they will die), and thus they realized the discontinuity of their existence. Only the sexual act, he added, gave humans hope for the continuity they lost, because in the erotic activity people lose themselves in the other, and, thus, experience a loss, where they go beyond themselves, in the “petite mort,” or orgasm, similar to the ecstatic state that originates from the primitive practice of mysticism. In other words, humans should not fear losing themselves in eroticism that is an imitation of death, although it is a temporary one; for Bataille, they should overcome this fear because in the erotic union, for example, “les corps s’ouvrent à la continuité” (10, 23), and this is the height of experience. Although he did not directly define continuity, his perception of the term pertained to the existence of humans, and, in this sense, he posited transgression, entailed in the very act of eroticism, as a desirable act because it gave humans the feeling of control over the limitations of the self. In this respect also, his thoughts on eroticism were an extension of his previous ideas on sacrifice: what sacrifice achieved at communal level, by engaging a group of people in a collective experience of loss, eroticism performed at individual level in “the longing to dissolve our own separate personalities and consecrate ourselves in the body of the other,” as Richardson explains it (Essential Writings 95).

With the notion of human continuity, Bataille’s intellectual orientation shifted significantly from sociological to existential issues, as did his definition of the notion of the sacred. In L’Erotisme, his shift of focus seemed to be finally set on defining the sacred in relation to the erotic in stating that “le sacré est justement la continuité de l’être” (10, 84). Since all his theory was to affirm that eroticism was the most powerful intimation we have of the sense of continuity and of what is beyond the frame of life and
death, because “nous avons la nostalgie d’une continuité perdue” (10, 21), he concluded that modern humans must become like the primitives, who gave free reign to eroticism in their orgiastic festivals. He argued that the primitives suspended the fear of violating sexual taboos embodied in erotic activities in order to have a possible encounter with the continuity of existence. The orgies of the Maenads, the female followers of the Greek god Dionysus, were Bataille’s example of positing his ideas of the superior primitive, who seemed to capture the importance of eroticism that the civilized overlooked: “Dans la guerre ou le sacrifice – ou dans l’orgie – l’esprit humain organisa une convulsion explosive. [. . .] L’origine de l’orgie, de la guerre et du sacrifice est la même: elle tient à l’existence d’interdits qui s’opposaient à la liberté de la violence meurtrière ou de la violence sexuelle” (10, 116). To clarify this idea, he continued to underline the religious value entailed in eroticism: “[cette violence sexuelle] était devenue religieuse. Elle prit [. . .] un sens humain” (10, 117, author’s emphasis). By emphasizing the adjective “humain,” he sheds light on a certain primitive knowledge about human existence that civilized people lack. And by combining the above, orgies would become, for Bataille, a ritual of sexual violence that is, though, sacred or religious, consecrated in the contagion of sex that is their essence and that leads them to experience ecstasy.

There is no doubt that Bataille was intrigued by the primitives’ adherence to their religions and to their system of beliefs in mysticism and ecstasy that allowed them to go into trance states beyond the limits of reason. Through this type of experience, Bataille explored the sensations analogous in both rituals of sacrifices and orgies to support his definition of the sacred as communication and collectivity in the 1930s, as I have shown, and as continuity through erotic pleasure in the 1950s. Orgies held a special attention for
Bataille because they flew from his early analogy of ritual sacrifices and their relation to sacred moments, where ecstasy symbolized the loss of the individual. In *L’Érotisme*, Bataille saw the sacred continuity of being in the ecstatic state that primitives reached in orgies and, therefore, ritual orgies exemplified on a concrete basis his perception of continuity as sacred. He concluded that “l’orgie est l’aspect sacré de l’érotisme, où la continuité des êtres, au-delà de la solitude, atteint son expression la plus sensible. […] Les êtres, à la limite, y sont perdus” (10, 129). This loss that threw orgiastic participants into sexual frenzies was what characterized, as he argued, the profane aspect of their mystic loss of consciousness. In other words, the profane aspect, in its essential presence to define the sacredness of things, as Bataille explained earlier in the *Collège*, resided in the integral experiences of frenzy and loss of consciousness that accompany every ritual orgy: “l’orgie ne s’oriente pas vers la religion *faste*, tirant de la violence fondamentale un caractère majestueux, calme et conciliable avec l’ordre profane: son efficacité s’avère du côté néfaste, elle appelle la frénésie, le vertige et la perte de conscience” (10, 114). The essence of the sacred in orgies resided, for Bataille, in the aspect of repulsion and in the frenzied mood that allowed for a collective loss of consciousness. Although his approach to orgies appeared to draw on his long-term concern with the sense of collectivity, given his frequent allusion in *L’Érotisme* to “les membres d’une communauté” (10, 50) and to collectivity that shared a consciousness of death in “la collectivité a le sentiment de la mort” (10, 50), these references should not be confused with his social activism. At this point of Bataille’s intellectual interest, eroticism meant indeed communication between the individuals to the point where the participants in the erotic experience lost themselves, one in the other, in a movement of dispossession, which brought them
together in a continuity of being in the moment of a temporary death, or in the orgasmic moment of “petite mort.” Thus, Bataille’s interest in communication continued, but in favor of a different perception of the sacred. As I have mentioned earlier, his ideas of eroticism departed from his earlier theories on community and the sacred, traces of which still existed in L’Erotisme, although on a minimal level.

In arguing that eroticism, in general, and orgies, in particular, participated in the continuity of the individual who lost the self in ecstasy, Bataille illustrated in his book, L’Erotisme, two interesting photos relating to orgies. The first, entitled “Danse érotique” (10, Planche XIII), was taken of an African tribe from Oubanghi-Chari, where a man is shown to have an erection and a woman seems to be in a trance state among a group of mixed genders. Bataille commented on this photo by saying “l’orgie est le signe d’un parfait renversement” to indicate an overthrow of reason and sexual taboos. The next photo, , is focused on a Maenad female in front of a phallic man and is supplemented by Bataille’s following statement that pointed to the religious fusion with the spirit of the forbidden taking place in this orgy: “Le reflux des interdits libérait la ruée de l’exubérance, accédait à la fusion illimitée des êtres dans l’orgie. [. . .] Elle était dès l’abord effusion religieuse, en principe désordre de l’être qui se perd et n’oppose plus rien à la prolifération de la vie (Planche XIV).” By asserting, first, that the practice of the forbidden allowed for an access to a limitless self and, second, that this self is in the meantime lost, Bataille affirmed the presence of a common motif between orgies and sacrifices. Similar to Aztec sacrificial cults, the series of photos in L’Erotisme include illustrations of voodoo sacrifices, showing the sacrificer in a state of ecstasy following his sacrificial act. Writing on “le sacrifice vaudou” in Les Larmes d’Eros, Bataille argued
that “ce qu’a vécu le sacrifiant vaudou fut une sorte d’extase” (10, 626), emphasizing again that sacred moments (of continuous beings) would only be found in pleasure, achieved through sacrifices. Bataille reenvisioned the fusion between sacrifice (death) and pleasure in favor of the individual’s sacred continuity that led to a trance state. On voodoo, he added: “A travers le temps, le sacrifice sanglant ouvrit les yeux de l’homme à la contemplation de cette réalité excédante, [. . .] qui reçoit dans le monde religieux ce nom étrange: le sacré” (10, 626, author’s emphasis). Also, illustrations of animal killings in L’Erotisme aimed mainly at pointing out the sacrificer’s ecstasy: “Sacrifice d’un coq” showed a man covered in the blood of the sacrificed animal, enjoying its death, which Bataille described as sacred: “la victime meurt alors que les assistants participent d’un élément que révèle sa mort [. . .] le sacré” (10, Planche III). In the same spirit, this photo was followed by another one of a man drinking the blood of a sacrificed goat in “Sacrifice d’un bélier” (10, Planche IV). That these images made their way to L’Erotisme demonstrates Bataille’s fixation on the outcomes of ecstasy in the face of death, thus interpreting voodoo possessions and trances as means of overcoming limitations and experiencing continuity, in support of his new belief in the sacred in L’Erotisme as “la continuité de l’être.” This fixation on ecstatic feelings produced in front of a sacrifice, of death, and of blood, resonated with the Lascaux man’s phallic state, laying ecstatic in front of the dying bison, who might have been killed by the man, thus leaving him in ecstasy, wearing the bird mask that also symbolized an ecstatic trance in Yakut rituals of cow killings.

In fact, Bataille’s presentation of a frank view of eroticism gave rise to reflection on people’s control over and release of their desires; with Bataille, the authority of one
God is transferred to the individual and is considered sacred. Famous critics and theorists recognize the profundity of Bataille’s theory of eroticism. In “Préface à la transgression,” one of the earliest major essays on Bataille, Michel Foucault focuses on the concept of transgression evoked in erotic desires and pinpoints the importance of writing of sexuality in contemporary culture based on the idea of the death of God, which Bataille’s writings of the erotic emphasize. Foucault admires Bataille’s courage to speak of the meaning of limits and transgression for human existence in the erotic discourse and explores the possibilities of adopting such a technique in modern writing in a language that is “non-discursive” or that is integrated in everyday writing without being customarily called erotic. In praising Bataille’s “scandalous” ideas of eroticism, Foucault writes in “Préface à la transgression”:

Peut-être l’émergence de la sexualité dans notre culture est-elle un événement [...] [qui] est liée enfin à une mise en question du langage par lui-même en une circularité que la violence “scandaleuse” de la littérature érotique, loin de rompre, manifeste dès l’usage premier qu’elle fait des mots. [...] C’est notre sexualité qui depuis Sade et la mort de Dieu a été absorbée dans l’univers du langage, dénaturalisée par lui, placée par lui dans ce vide où il établit sa souveraineté et où sans cesse il pose, comme Loi des limites qu’il transgresse. [...] [La philosophie] est maintenant seconde par rapport au langage, [...] elle fait l’expérience d’elle-même et de ses limites dans le langage et dans cette transgression de langage qui la mène, comme elle a mené Bataille, à la défaillance du sujet parlant. [...] Peut-être définit-il [cet embarras de langage] l’espace d’une expérience où le sujet qui parle, au lieu de s’exprimer, s’expose, va à la rencontre de sa propre finitude et sous chaque mot se trouve renvoyé à sa propre mort. Un espace qui ferait de toute œuvre un de ces gestes de “tauromachie” dont Leiris parlait, pensant à lui-même, mais à Bataille sans doute aussi. (767-68)

Foucault’s observation contextualizes the concept of transgression in the domain of language, thus playing on the word transgression as far as its role in writing the forbidden and in human’s existence in the context of a dead God. He underscores the importance of
Bataille’s transgression of language in his writing of eroticism, which breaks with the tradition of writing that, since Sade, repressed human sexuality, “denatured it,” and imposed limits on the writing of sexual desires. Also, Maurice Blanchot, in “L’Affirmation et la passion de la pensée négative,” expresses his appreciation of Bataille’s expression of “une pensée aussi extrême et aussi libre” (301) as his writing of erotic desires. For him, Bataille’s books “lisent l’essentiel et ils sont essentials” (300). Blanchot specifically comments on the distinct aspect of combining eroticism, mysticism, and atheism by asserting that “mêler les mots mysticisme, érotisme, athéisme attire l’attention” (300-01). He underscores Bataille’s unique characteristics that are reflected in his writings; that is, being “un écrivain d’aujourd’hui comme d’un homme qui entra en extase, fit œuvre d’irreligion, loua la débauche, remplaça le christianisme par le nietzschéisme et le nietzschéisme par l’hindouisme, après avoir rodé autour du surréalisme” (301).

By affixing the adjective sacred to his concept of eroticism and human continuity, Bataille offered a new perspective on the vitality of erotic desires and the effect of their release on the question of human existence. And by stressing the profane side of this sacred manifested in the transgression of sexual taboos, he presented a new and daring conceptualization of erotic desires as sacred. In this new conceptualization, humans should no longer be restricted by reproductive sexuality while suppressing their natural desires; eroticism became, with Bataille, as sacred as reproductive sexuality and was restored as a natural phenomenon in the way prehistoric and primitive peoples conceived it. And since civilized people were once primitives at some point in the past, they must relive, in their erotic desires, the primal state they once had, as he advocated. And even
before the orientation of Bataille’s intellectual interests toward the individual’s existential question, by affixing sacred to his sociological ideas, Bataille underscored the active and dynamic characteristics of a collective society that is contingent upon individuals united through communication. Bataille concluded that the sacred was indeed discerned in the communication it engendered and, consequently, in the formation of new beings.

As far as the question of gender is concerned, Bataille’s attitude toward women in *L’Erotisme* is curious. As a female reader of a subject that involves women, such as heterosexual relationships, it is easy to detect that Bataille avoided mentioning women: they did not participate in the experience of sacred continuity, unless the female was part of mystic experience as in the case of Saint Theresa. He only recognized the existence of female ecstasy in the famous photo of Saint Theresa (Planche XX), in which he saw a fusion of mysticism with pleasure. Other than this example, the female was passive. At one point, Bataille stressed “le fait que le partenaire féminin de l’érotisme apparaissait comme la victime, le masculin comme le sacrificateur” (10, 25), when, at other times, he emphasized the passivity of the female’s role in the erotic experience, where “le partenaire masculin a en principe un rôle actif, la partie féminine est passive” (10, 23). In the intimate union between man and woman, Bataille’s portrayal of women was sexist for placing them in the vulnerable position of being victims of their lovers, just like sacrificed animals or humans in Aztec tradition: “l’amant ne désagrège pas moins la femme aimée que le sacrificateur sanglant l’homme ou l’animal immolé” (10, 91). Nonetheless, Bataille restored women’s experience of continuity in the frame of a primitive ritual such as orgies and voodoo sacrifices; he chose photos of women from Oubanghi-Chari in “Danse érotique” (10, Planche XIII), who joined the phallic native
male in an orgiastic ecstasy, while ‘Planche XV’ showed a female possessed in a trance state in a voodoo cult. By choosing to include only ethnic women, who participate in primitive practices that lead them to ecstasy, in the experience of continuity, Bataille continued to idealize the primitive belief in mysticism. From the photos of voodoo practices to that of Saint Theresa, Bataille fused mysticism with the erotic, referencing Dr Parcheminey’s argument that “toute expérience mystique n’est qu’une sexualité transposée” (10, 221). Consequently, in the context of mysticism, women were portrayed ecstatic; outside the mystic sphere of primitive cults, males were dominant in Bataille’s treatment of rituals. As such, Champagne’s conclusion that “Bataille does offer affinities to feminist interests” does not accurately position Bataille in the feminist sphere.

Also, early in his writings on potlatch, Bataille relied on Marcel Mauss’s “Essai sur le don” in discussing potlatch customs. Although Bataille succeeded in providing a positive interpretation of potlatch giving in order to illustrate the relevance of this ritual to the concept of loss and willing giving as a positive base for a community, he overlooked an essential part of this exchange, and that was the inhumanity of the treatment of women, an issue that Simone de Beauvoir developed at length in her review of Lévi-Strauss’s Structures élémentaires de la parenté (1949). In the same context, Bataille’s early writings, such as his essay on Breton, “Le Lion châtré” (1930), then his conference text “L’Apprenti sorcier” (1938), established that social action was to be linked with virility. In these two essays, his criticism of Breton as castrated because he lacked social involvement, then his affirmation that sociological issues interested only virile men (“les résultats de la sociologie puissent apparaître comme des réponses aux soucis les plus virils” (1, 523)) could only lead one to deduce that his interest in “lower
sources of psychic energy,” as Torgovnick sarcastically observes, was gender exclusive, an approach that has inspired criticism from feminist scholars, such as Susan Rubin Suleiman.

Nonetheless, Bataille’s negative stance toward women does not undermine his contribution to the history of ideas on the sacred, the social, and the erotic. Reading Bataille was, and still is, considered challenging for many readers because of the complexity and depth of his analyses. Marguerite Duras, for example, who also mixed themes of eroticism and death in her novels, noted in her chapter, “A Propos de Bataille,” how his writings intimidated many critics: “La critique, au seul nom de Bataille, s’intimide. [. . .] Les gens continuent à vivre dans l’illusion qu’ils pourront un jour parler de Bataille. Cette illusion les fait durer parallèlement à l’importance capitale de son oeuvre. [. . .] Ils mourront sans oser [. . .] affronter ce taureau” (34). Certainly, the Bataillean “taureau” is difficult to tame; part of this difficulty emanates from the divergence of his intellectual interests, moving from his sociological orientation in the 1930s to his shift of focus on the meaning of death and eroticism. Within this shift, there also exists a tension between his evolving theories of the sacred vis-à-vis community and the self, between the need to be concerned with community and the need for the self to assert its independence from cultural limitations. Nevertheless, his interest in ritual practices remains the thread that links all these theories and brings into light Bataille’s insight into primitive cultural systems.

Bataille’s early perception of a sociological sacred based on communication and collectivity was optimistic but did not change society as it aimed to. As a dissident surrealist, Bataille could not accomplish the social changes that Breton failed to do,
although he was a more effective social activist, especially around the years he organized *Acéphale* and the *Collège*. Undoubtedly, primitive cultures inspired Bataille’s sacrificial ideas and the constructive notion of collective communication, although these ideas could not fit into a modern bourgeois culture. However, Bataille’s remarks on the Lascaux Well Scene, then his writing of eroticism, began with an issue deeply in question in an era where human existence preoccupied several thinkers in the 1940s, such as Jean-Paul Sartre. Bataille’s study of eroticism was striving to shock and to explore the existential state of being: “Ce qui est en jeu dans l’érotisme est toujours une dissolution des formes constituées [. . .] de la vie sociale, régulière, qui fondent l’ordre discontinu des individualités définies que nous sommes” (10, 24). In asserting that eroticism entails a breaking down of the established patterns of the regulated social order basic to the human discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals, Bataille’s theory of eroticism challenged established patterns of bourgeois life and thought, or “les formes constituées de la vie sociale.” These transgressive ideas pertained indeed to all humans in any era regardless of the time frame due to their universality; as Bataille noted, “tout le monde sait qu’il existe un interdit sexuel proprement dit: l’humanité entière l’observe” (10, 54). Even though we feel at times that we read sacrifices, orgies, potlatch and other rituals, through the eyes of an outsider, there surely exists a message behind Bataille’s primitivism. His thoughts on eroticism and death are pertinent to any reader because they allow civilized people to rethink the force of the erotic and the ways to give free reign to it. Although ritual orgies experience frenzy and loss of consciousness, the primitives, nevertheless, believed in the power of mysticism that enabled them to accede to what is not perceptible to the mind, or, for Bataille, to Western rationalism. The attractiveness of
archaic mysticism in the erotic inspired in Bataille a living model of the sacred invested in erotic activity, and it was for civilized people, including Bataille himself, to see themselves in primitive cultures the way he did.

While there is a unity to Bataille’s work in terms of his consistent search for the meaning of the sacred, there is nevertheless a fundamental difference between his theories of sociological reformation and eroticism and his approach to primitive rituals: they belong to different discourses. While his theories are original, regardless of the unfeasibility of his early ones, his incorporation of tribal cultures are accounted for in the discourse of primitivism in light of his evolved definition of the sacred and not in the discourse of the science of ethnography. Bataille declared that he relied in his study of primitive cultures on historic and ethnographic documentation in drawing his conclusions on primitive life:

Pour le temps de la préhistoire, nous n’avons pas, nous ne pouvons pas évidemment avoir de témoignages nets: les témoignages qui abondent viennent de l’humanité que l’histoire ou l’ethnographie nous font connaître, mais ils indiquent clairement qu’un mouvement de transgression est la contrepartie nécessaire de l’arrêt, du recul de l’interdit. Partout la fête marque le temps soudain de la levée des règles. (9, 40)

Although relying on ethnographic secondary sources does not make a document ethnographic itself, the conclusion that Bataille drew from historic and ethnographic documents on the existence of primitive festivals reinforced his argument on the dialectic forbidden/transgression with regard to erotic desire, even though it did not produce scientific results that comply with “les règles de la méthode sociologique de Durkheim” or “la doctrine du phénomène total de Mauss” that Bataille referenced back in 1939 (Collège 801). On Bataille’s nostalgia regarding primitive freedom, Jean-François
Fourny observes that it was part of the antichristian rhetoric that reigned in the twenties and the thirties: “Que sous couvert d’ethnologie le ‘Collège de sociologie’ [. . .] ait reproduit la rhétorique antichrétienne de l’époque paraît peu douteux. Que Bataille y ait aussi eu sa part, et ce jusqu’à la caricature (le sacrifice humain projeté), est également évident” (153). Unlike Fourny’s association of Bataille with the science of origins, subdivisions, and classification of people that is ethnology, it would be more accurate to classify Bataille, not as an “ethnographer,” as Connor calls him (177), but as a modernist primitivist. Bataille’s adoption of primitive cultural systems into his evolving theory of the sacred fits in the discourse of Western approach to, and celebration of, primitive cultures, no different from Gauguin, Picasso, or Breton, although each one celebrated the primitive in a particular way. Distinguished from the artists’ search for an inspiration from native life, or for “a temporary frisson, a circumscribed experience of the bizarre,” as James Clifford puts it (120), and from Breton’s search for fantasy while laying claim to social activism, Bataille’s interest in primitive cultural systems began with the reality of social questions and ended with the issue of human need to break up with cultural limitations imposed on sexuality. Bataille idealized tribal practices to set a model for contemporary thinking, by homogenizing those cultures in order to explore their intimate perceptions of the sacred. Primitive life that inspired several thinkers since Montaigne of new ways to reform contemporary society also influenced Bataille. Bataille’s version of primitivism adapted ritual values to his vision of a communal society, which evolved later into a vision of the individual’s continuity in living the erotic moment to the full in face of death. In either perception of the sacred, what remains true is the unique aspect of Bataille’s incorporation of primitive sacrifices and orgies into his theories, by pointing
out the sacred value of lifting taboos, that is, human killings and erotic activities leading to ecstasy, in order to reintroduce the excluded forbidden into contemporary thinking. His use of the notion of the sacred in the sociological phenomenon and the erotic context was what made his incorporation of primitive rituals particular.

Bataille’s homogenization of primitive rituals in light of mysticism and ecstasy coincided with another type of primitivism, that of his co-founder of the Collège and friend, Michel Leiris. Interestingly, Leiris proclaimed to be an ethnographer. After setting sail to Africa as an archivist-secretary to the mission Dakar-Djibouti, Leiris wrote his famous book, L’Afrique fantôme, a supposedly ethnographic diary that revealed more about his personal emotions than about African life. As such, I intend, in the next chapter, to demonstrate how Bataille’s idealization of the primitive coincided with Leiris’s primitivism, which juxtaposes Bataille’s purposes to establish the notion of the sacred with Leiris’s personal projection into African life.

Notes

1 In a letter sent from Leiris to Bataille in 1939 questioning what the Collège had achieved for society, Leiris listed myth as one of the notions studied by the group and defined it in the name of his group in the following manner: “mythe en tant que représentation collective liée à un rituel” (Collège 831). It is in light of this definition that I will be using the term “myth” to mean a ritual of collective consciousness.

2 Although some critics tend to translate the French term “l’interdit” into interdictions, interdicts, prohibitions and taboo, which is a larger system that includes the practice of “l’interdit,” I will consistently refer to it by using the noun “the forbidden” to avoid any confusion.

3 Michael Richardson presents a convincing argument on the central roles of myth and the sacred in Bataille’s intellectual life from 1945 to 1951, which Richardson believes were more likely to be a surrealist tradition. In the meantime, Richardson pinpoints Bataille’s confusion of the terms myths and reality by underlining that they do not contradict each other because myths are real:

For Bataille, the profound sense of surrealism lay in the fact that it recognized the falsity of rationalism’s ideological claims to define what is “real.” Such a concept
destroys the notion of myth, just as it becomes itself what it denies: reality is a myth. A society that denies its mythical basis therefore denies part of its essence, and is living a lie. [...] The only reality we can know is defined by the use we make of myth to define our ontological principles.

It is in this context that the surrealists’ understanding of so-called “primitive society” should be understood. [...] Surrealism [looked] back to the “primitive” – not to re-create what had been lost, but to gain an insight into it, and as a means of practical knowledge to confront the “absence of myth” in contemporary society.

As Bataille emphasizes [...], it is necessary first of all to re-create the notion of ritual in a society within which the value it represented (that is, the value of community) has been destroyed. (Essential Writings 14)

For more on the surrealists’ and Bataille’s ideas of myths, see Michael Richardson’s introduction to, and translation of, Georges Bataille: The Absence of Myth, (London: Verso, 1994).

4 Interested in sociology in the 1930s, Bataille frequently used the term virility not only to mean a sexual condition, as in his early erotic novels (Le Bleu du ciel and Madame Edwarda), but also in terms of a moral characteristic that meant social activism. Susan Rubin Suleiman successfully presents a parallel and interesting study of both connotations of the term virility between Bataille’s novels and his political involvements. See Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Bataille in the Street: The Search for Virility in the 1930’s,” Bataille Writing the Sacred, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1995) 26-45.

5 Potlatch is also known to have provided Bataille with the anthropological basis for his theory of the general economy. But for my purposes, I will refer to the ritual of potlatch in terms of its principle of voluntary giving and loss as in ritual sacrifices.

6 Bataille relied on H. Kirchner’s Anthropos, in which, according to Bataille, Kirchner learned about the Yakuts’ ritual sacrifices from Sierozewski’s Iakuty (1896) reproduced in Lot-Falk’s Rites de chasse, Planche VII. For more on Bataille’s bibliographical information, see Œuvres complètes 9 (1970): 95.

7 Max Weber’s chapter on “The Erotic Sphere” offers a clear explanation on the role of religion in shaping societies’ perception of sex: “Originally the relation of sex and religion was very intimate. Sexual intercourse was very frequently part of magic orgiasticism or was an unintended result of orgiastic excitement.” He continues with the question of the erotic and with the evolvement of humans’ perception of sex and eroticism, saying that “the extraordinary quality of eroticism has consisted precisely in a gradual turning away from the naïve naturalism of sex. The reason and significance of this evolution, however, involve the universal rationalization and intellectualization of culture.” For more on Weber, see “The Erotic Sphere,” Essays in Sociology (1946) 343-50.

8 As far as the use of the term “philosophy” is concerned, Connor clarifies that Bataille “did not study philosophy formally” and “that his introduction to philosophy came via Shestov [...] who initiated Bataille into the study of philosophy in general, beginning with the works of Plato” (191).
CHAPTER 4

MICHEL LEIRIS’S PRIMITIVISM: A SEARCH FOR THE SELF IN THE OTHER

For many participants of the Collège de sociologie, Michel Leiris, the French poet and novelist, was looked upon as a professional ethnographer. His account of ceremonies of sacrifice in traditional African communities, for instance, was referenced by Georges Bataille in his lecture, “Attraction et répulsion,” given in February 1938. Close friends from 1924, when Leiris introduced Bataille to the surrealist group, they were “les deux seuls à se tutoyer au Collège,” according to Denis Hollier (94). Bataille revealed that they both had the intention “de fonder un mouvement littéraire” (2:170), mainly because they shared a common belief in the importance of reviving the impure sacred that had long been abandoned by Christianity, as was shown in the previous chapter. However, the only disagreement between them was documented in 1939 in a letter Leiris sent to Bataille, reproaching him for homogenizing archaic cultures, reducing them to the same thing, and establishing some “notions vagues et mal définies, comparaisons entre des faits pris dans des sociétés de structures profondément différentes” (“Epilogue,” Collège 820). Yet, Leiris’s approach to African cultures was not without its own shortcomings, for he used the primitive Other for self-scrutiny.¹ Some of these shortcomings can be seen, as
we shall explain in greater detail later, in *L’Afrique fantôme*, a diary in which he kept
notes on African life and on his personal thoughts, fantasies, and dreams during his two-
year stay in Africa (1931-1933) as a secretary and archivist to the mission Dakar-
Djibouti, a trip headed by Marcel Griaule and funded by the French government to
collect African art objects for French museums.

Leiris’s decision to accept the invitation to join the Dakar-Djibouti mission was
affected by several factors, among which was the twenties’ celebration of black culture,
“[betraying] the ethnocentrism of the Champs-Elysées [and] embracing everything from
African tribal masks to the spectacle of Joséphine Baker dancing, apparently dressed only
in bananas” (Hand, Michel Leiris 46). This nostalgia was designated by the term
*negrophilia*, from the French *négrophilie*, which describes the Parisian avant-garde’s
fascination with the “Negro” and his artistic culture in a defiant challenge to bourgeois
values. Leiris, an “Occidental mal dans sa peau,” as he described himself in the preface
to *L’Afrique fantôme* (7), and contemporary of this primitivist vogue that courted black
cultures for their sense of “otherness” or difference, goes to Africa in search of new skin,
holding out hope for “his own personal transformation by reconnecting with the wild
child within” (Taoua 27).

Besides living through the vogue of *negrophilia*, Leiris’s departure to Africa took
place at a period in his life when he was going through various personal and
psychological problems. In the late 1920s, he was suffering from “writerly inhibitions
and a penchant to abuse alcohol” (Taoua 26). In 1929, he had “a nervous breakdown”
(Torgovnick 107) and submitted, with the advice of his friend, Georges Bataille, to
psychoanalysis, “as a way of responding to his increasingly desperate feelings of genital
and intellectual impotence” (Hand, Michel Leiris 53). In one entry of his journal, on July 18, 1932, Leiris makes clear how his neurosis is related to his travel to Africa:

Diverses choses m’apparaissaient. Une grande partie de ma névrose tient à l’habitude que j’ai de coïts incomplets, inachevés, à cause d’un malthusianisme exacerbé. L’horreur que j’ai de la pharmacopée amoureuse et la crainte, par ailleurs, que j’éprouverais à pousser une femme à se faire avorter m’emprisonnent dans un imbécile dilemme. [. . .] Je ne me sens pas un homme; je suis comme châtré. Et voilà peut-être, au fond, tout mon problème. Pourquoi je voyage, pourquoi je m’ennuie.

This confession sheds light on Leiris’s sexual anguish, fear of sexual relationships, and castration-anxiety, which are his main preoccupations that underlie the surface objectivity of his field notes in L’Afrique fantôme. In the “Prière d’insérer,” a publicity flyer written by Leiris and quoted by his friend, Jean Jamin, Leiris expresses his disenchantment with ethnographic research, and his increased sexual obsessions: “Qu’y trouve-t-il? Peu d’aventures, répond-il, des études qui le passionnent d’abord, mais lui semblent bientôt trop abstraites. De plus en plus il est le jouet de ce qu’il fuyait: obsessions sexuelles, sentiment d’un vide à combler” (quoted in Jamin 205). These sexual obsessions are crucial in the development of Leiris’s writing of the self and in his writing of the primitive Other. His search for an identity in Africa is part of the search for a cure from his sexual preoccupations in African cultures. As a result, the reader sees Africa through the lens of the observer’s subjectivity and personal preoccupations.

This chapter discusses the different aspects of Leiris’s search for the self in the primitive Other in L’Afrique fantôme, with a reference to his autobiography, L’Age d’homme, for his autobiography’s data are based on the field notes that he kept in Africa, only “on carefully collated cards,” as James Clifford observes (167). The first aspect of Leiris’s quest is how his thoughts and sexual obsessions emerge in and permeate his
accounts of the rituals and stories he selects to tell, recount, and interpret, and how they
color his descriptions of African sites, artifacts, and rituals, viewed in erotic and phallic
terms. In writing his obsessions, he reflects, through his experiences in Africa, on his
relations with women; African women become also a projection of his fantasies and
sexual preoccupations, which I shall attempt to relate to his fascination with Cranach’s
diptych painting of Lucrèce and Judith in L’Age d’homme. Leiris’s main preoccupation
remains his search for an identity in Africa. He openly expresses reservations about the
traditional ethnographer’s position which privileges distance between the observer and
the observed culture, and opts instead to fuse with, and become a participant in, that
culture, rather than its detached observer. Thus, the second aspect of Leiris’s search for
the self is his attempt to bridge the split that separates him from the Other, by living the
African experience to the fullest. He participates in African rural possession rituals, like
the “zâr,” and has physical encounters with African women, seen as a mediatrix between
his alienated self and a longed-for state of primitivist plenitude. Finally, the third and last
section raises the question of whether Leiris’s attempt to “go native” succeeds, and, if
not, then why.

Subjective Accounts and Sexual Obsessions

Denis Hollier rightly describes the tone of L’Afrique fantôme as “trop personnel”
(97) due to Leiris’s permanent self-presence in the journal. The journal is, indeed, what
can be called, an autoethnographic document in the sense that it combines the
characteristics of autobiographic and ethnographic writings simultaneously. The term
“autoethnography” is a form of what James Clifford calls “self-fashioning,” in which the ethnographer comes to inscribe a doubleness within the ethnographic text, that of the self and of the Other: “Though it (ethnography) portrays other selves as culturally constituted, it also fashions an identity authorized to represent, to interpret, even to believe – but always with some irony – the truths of discrepant worlds” (94). This definition applies to Leiris’s journal since a common feature of L’Afrique fantôme is the first-person voice that is intently and unambiguously subjective. One year after his stay in Africa, Leiris sketches a preface to his journal, in which he summarizes his approach to African life, justifying his subjective analysis in the following manner: “Thèse: c’est par la subjectivité (portée à son paroxysme) qu’on touche à l’objectivité. Plus simplement: écrivant subjectivement j’augmente la valeur de mon témoignage.” The Other is presented through the imperial eye of Leiris, the observer, looking back on himself and becoming the subject of the document. In the meantime, one takes notice of the observer’s authority in representing and interpreting events. In Leiris’s quest, he confuses objective analysis with subjective narration; the result is his biased accounts.

The first evidence of Leiris’s approach to his new African environment and material is in his choice of stories and episodes for his journal, and in his interpretations of those that are told to him. One such story is about a wedding ritual, told by the local guide hired by Griaule, and which Leiris is interested in recounting two months after his arrival to Africa. The story is remarkably centered on the theme of violent sexuality:

Mamadou Vad, très lancé, raconte de belles histoires sur les Dyola de Casamance et sur les Bobo, qu’il qualifie de “sauvages.” Le mariage Bobo, selon lui, s’accomplit de la manière suivante: durant le tamtam, quand tout le monde est bien excité, le jeune homme qui brigue la main d’une jeune fille se jette sur elle, devant tout le monde. S’il ne la pénètre
pas d’un seul coup, il est considéré comme inapte et le mariage n’a pas lieu. (L’Afrique fantôme 74)

What seems to attract Leiris about this wedding story is its focus on the theme of sexuality and violence. The love encounter and the forceful penetration of the bride (“se jette sur elle” and “d’un seul coup”) resonate well with Leiris’s taste for violence and pleasure; for, in another entry, he expresses his private sexual fantasies of insulting a woman to sexually excite her: “J’ai rêvé quant à moi que je faisais l’amour avec une femme froide. [. . .] Pour l’exciter, je l’injuriie et la traite, entre autres choses, de ‘salope’” (367). In addition to violent sexuality, the groom’s ritual behavior, wild for Leiris, attracts the sexually-anguished ethnographer whose castration-anxiety was mentioned earlier in “je suis comme châtré.” Behind the simple narrative of the story, Leiris seems to reflect on the pressure put on the groom’s sexual performance in “s’il ne la pénètre pas d’un seul coup”: the possibility of the groom being called sexually “inapte” resonates with Leiris’s later confession of his fear of the “coïts incomplets” (L’Afrique fantôme 398). In addition, the theme of marriage is another concern of Leiris, who confesses one year later his fear of marriage and his lack of virility: “je parle toujours de me ‘marier,’ je ne le fais jamais; je n’ai aucune virilité” (396). There is no doubt that the Bobo wedding ritual relates to Leiris’s personal concerns and fantasies, whether it is the male’s sexual performance or the fear of sexual impotence.

Another episode similar to the wedding ritual is the one dated August 25, 1932 in the journal, about a forthcoming marriage ceremony, where he specifically allows himself to imagine a groom’s sexual encounter with his bride. Here is how Leiris envisions the details of the ritual marriage of an African priest: “Notre brave prêtre défroqué Abba Qèsié va se marier [. . .]. Pour le repas de cette nuit un bœuf a été tué.
Tout le sol, sous une des tentes, est tapissé de viandes saignantes [. . .]. Abba Qèsié lui-même, très excité, se promène, le torse demi-nu sous la chemise déchirée. Il tient en main un grand couteau, souillé du sang de quelle virginité?” (434). Clearly, the details of the wedding ritual are significant for Leiris: the groom holds a knife as a symbol of his violent penetration of his bride. The female’s submissive position is contrasted with the groom’s sexual dominance suggested in the metaphor of “se promène” that implies that he has control over her body. The background he imagines, where the animals are sacrificed for the feast and the groom’s knife soaked in blood, is contrasted with the woman, who is violated and metaphorically sacrificed in Leiris’s portrayal. This imaginary ritual shares with the previous story recounted one year earlier the same theme of violating a female, which apparently appeals to Leiris. If these two wedding stories, although one year apart, made their way into the journal, it is because they carry a sexual significance for Leiris and are evidence of the factors that shape the ethnographer/subject’s selection of information.

Leiris’s self-presence in his subjective accounts is also reflected in his conduct during a ceremony of sacrifice, recorded in the entry for August 31, 1931, five months after his arrival to Africa. In this ceremony, he observes a sacrificial offering, which involves the use of a fetish: “C’est une masse informe qui, lorsque les quatre hommes, avec précaution, l’ont sorti de son antre, se révèle, être un sac de toile grossière et rapiécée, couvert d’une sorte de bitume qui est de sang coagulé, bourré à l’intérieur de choses qu’on devine poussiéreuses et hétéroclites, muni à un bout d’une protubérance [. . .] et d’une clochette” (98). He sees a sacred terror in the fetish that he describes as religious, although dirty and simple: “Grand émoi religieux: objet sale, simple,
élémentaire dont l’abjection est une terrible force parce qu’y est condensé l’absolu de ces hommes et qu’ils y ont imprimé leur propre force, comme dans la petite boulette de terre qu’un enfant roule entre ses doigts quand il joue avec la boue” (98-99). Leiris takes part in the sacrifice and discovers that he identifies with what he considers to be a poetic saisie: “J’ai retrouvé enfin le sens premier que j’ai attribué au voyage: celui de la poésie la plus intense et la plus humaine” (100). At this point, the story ends. One week later, on September 6, Leiris and Griaule attempt to forcibly take another fetish. Faced with the natives’ refusal to bring this fetish, called “kono,” Leiris and Griaule decide to wrap it quickly, take it, and run away fast “comme des voleurs” (104). Upon arriving at Dyabougou, they unwrap it and find themselves in front of an enormous mask of an animal-like figure, described by Leiris in the following manner: “malheureusement détérioré, mais entièrement recouvert d’une croûte de sang coagulé qui lui confère la majesté que le sang confère à toutes choses” (104). Leiris clearly mingles his observation of the blood with a pre-existing fascination for it; it is the subjective voice of the narrating subject that passionately registers this event and adds: “la majesté que le sang confère à toutes choses.” Leiris’s fascination with the blood complements, in a sense, his special interest in the violent way Bobo wedding rituals are carried out, which he particularly chose to recount.

The narrative of the journal helps to reveal, through a careful choice of words and portrayal of actions, the narrator’s fantasies. On the next day, on September 7, 1931, while forcibly taking more African fetishes, which Griaule’s group could not buy or receive in exchange, especially in front of the angry crowd, Leiris expresses his nervousness in taking part in such action (“mon coeur bat très fort”). He depicts his
entrance into the cabin, where the fetish is, as an act of “penetration,” holding in his hand a knife: “Cette fois-ci, c’est moi qui me charge tout seul de l’opération et pénètre dans le réduit sacré, le couteau de chasse de Lutten à la main, afin de couper les liens du masque (my emphasis).” Although the verb “pénétrer” carries a literal meaning of entering, in addition to its possible sexual significance, one is tempted to understand it in light of Leiris’s previous use of it in the Bobo wedding in “s’il ne la pénètre pas.” Leiris must then be imagining a sexual encounter rather than an entrance into the cabin, which results in a personification of the act of stealing the sacred fetish as if he is violating a woman. This personification is confirmed even further when, in the following paragraph of the same entry, he describes this act of stealing as “le rapt” in “Très peu après le rapt,” a term that Le Petit Robert defines as an “enlèvement illégal d’une personne.” As such, Leiris equates the act of forcibly stealing an African fetish to an act of abduction where he is a dominating male subject, and where he is also a dominating subject of the French imperium, transgressing the sacredness of the fetish. This transgression empowers him and relates in his mind to the domination of the imaginary female, whom he “penetrates,” which could, consequently, be giving him sexual gratification. It is in this sense that Leiris envisions Africa as a lieu of self-exploration: Africa functions in his imagination as a woman. In another entry, he openly describes Africa as he would describe a man’s desire for a woman: “Etre loin d’une femme et vivre dans l’absente, qui est dissoute et comme évanouie, n’existe plus en tant que corps séparé, mais est devenue l’espace, la fantomatique carcasse à travers laquelle on se déplace” (182). This double view of Africa as woman is a result of Leiris’s narcissistic thoughts and of his reduction of
everything African to his imagination; his personal observations bring into light his sexual fantasies.

In addition to Leiris’s subjective selection of information, his interruptions of ceremonies of sacrifice, and his interpretations of certain actions, he also views African places, objects, and artifacts in erotic terms. For example, he calls “les maisons de sacrifice” (172) “les autels érotiques” (173), which remind him of Abba Qèsié, holding a knife “souillé du sang de quelle virginité” while consuming his marriage. The erotic significance of sacrifice explains the special attention Leiris gives to places, events, and tools related to sacrifices. For example, in visiting the “Habé” tribe in Nigeria, he takes notice of three objects that appeal to him: “vieux outils, coupes à sacrifice, instruments de magie” (112). Even in depicting the beauty of an African village, he uses the metaphor “ruisseaux de sacrifice” to describe it as a resource of abundant blood in “merveilleux fondement: [. . .] ses ruisseaux de sacrifice” (140). Also, the sight of African places or artifacts unleashes sexual images in his imagination. For example, he imagines seeing a vulva in a sanctuary near a cavern: “Encore pas de courrier. Mais un nouveau sanctuaire, en forme de vulve celui-là, avec deux masses de banco formant presque des lèvres, une glotte de même matière un peu plus en arrière, un œuf énorme enfin” (159). Also, the sight of wood carvings mingles in Leiris’s mind with the description of erect male organs of naked African men (“Il y a [. . .] des sauvages nus. [. . .] Grande variété d’étuis péniens: les uns, très longs, faits d’un tube de calebasse dans lequel la verge s’emmanche, se dressent en l’air, mimant une érection. [. . .] D’autres hommes ont le sexe engagé, [. . .] les testicules restés en l’air” (170-71). He gives further importance to this phallus by adding in his journal an illustration entitled “Étui pénien somba,” taken on December 5.
and showing an erect penis extended by a tube. A female organ (“vulve”) is contrasted with the imaginary erect penis (“le sexe engagé,” “testicules”): the first possibly reminds him of his encounters with women, while the second can be a reflection on his preoccupation with his own sexuality in saying: “je ne me sens pas un homme, je suis comme châtré” (L’Afrique fantôme 398). Such descriptions give way only to Leiris’s fantasies about sacrificial ceremonies and their possible erotic significance for him; as far as African life and objects are concerned, we only see them through the observer’s eyes.

The imperial eye of Leiris envisions more than just excited sexual organs in African icons. In fact, critics note the complexity of the theme of sexuality in Leiris’s writing. Torgovnick studies, for example, Leiris’s representation of African art as sexual icons in his later work, Afrique noire, in light of his earlier one, L’Age d’homme. She notices that “Leiris’s obsessions [. . .] ultimately join his obsession with the primitive: sex and blood, disfigurement, pain as the source of pleasure” (108). Douglas Smith analyzes Leiris’s writing of his castration-anxiety in the transition from adolescence to male adulthood and observes that “the terms which Leiris chooses to describe and explain this transition are ambiguous” (38). In fact, what Leiris calls his own “obsessions sexuelles” involves a tangle of associations, of pain and body mutilation inflicted on women, which, if read in light of his autobiographical information and field notes, indicate his conflation of pain and pleasure. He recalls in his autobiography some interesting and particular details of the physical traits of Emawayish, his Abyssinian lover, who keeps him company during most of his stay in Abyssinia:

A Gondar, je fus amoureux d’une Ethiopienne qui correspondait physiquement et moralement à mon double idéal de Lucrèce et de Judith. Très belle de visage mais la poitrine ravagée, elle était engoncée dans une toge d’un blanc généralement plus que douteux, sentait le lait suri et
possédait une jeune négresse esclave; on aurait dit une statue de cire et les tatouages bleuâtres qui cernaient son cou haussaient sa tête. [. . .] Peut-être n’est-elle qu’une nouvelle image – en chair et en os, celle-là – de cette Marguerite au cou coupé dont je n’avais jamais pu apercevoir, enfant, le spectre à l’opéra? [. . .] Amputée de son clitoris comme toutes les femmes de sa race, elle devait être frigide, au moins en ce qui concerne les Européens. (237-38)

Female body mutilation, presented as part of the female beauty, is evidently a primary focus in this depiction: at the moment the reader expects the lover to proceed with his admiration for the woman’s physical beauty (“très belle de visage,” “la poitrine ravagée”), the emphasis suddenly turns into her bluish tattoos and clitoral excision, reminding Leiris of the beheaded Marguerite in the opera “Marguerite au cou coupé,” which he never had the opportunity to see in France. Moreover, his initial comparison of Emawayish to his “ideal” double of Lucrèce and Judith brings into light the reason for his decision to put on the cover of his autobiography Cranach’s two figures, a painting which he came across in 1930, before his trip to Africa, while searching for a photograph of the beheaded John the Baptist. To understand the reason for this comparison, one needs to present first their stories then analyze why Leiris calls them “ideal.”

Lucrèce, violated by her brother-in-law, kills herself in front of her husband and her father after having told them her sorrowful story. In Cranach’s painting, she holds a dagger whose tip is already beaded, with a few drops of blood, which undoubtedly appeals to Leiris’s fascination with pain and sex. Judith, on the other hand, a powerful woman, is a widow, who seduces the enemy of her city, Holofernes, severs his head, and enters her home city carrying his bleeding head in her hand. In Cranach’s painting, she wears a necklace as heavy as a convict’s chain, holds in her right hand a sword, whose point is piercing the ground, and in her left hand, Holofernes’ head. As to why this
diptych painting is ideal for Leiris, he confesses that he finds it, disturbingly enough, sexually arousing. He explains:

"Leur côté profondément cruel" along with "l'érotisme – pour moi tout à fait extraordinaire – dont sont nimbées les deux figures" reflect how he finds the cruelty, blood, severed head, and sharp objects in the painting particularly arousing. Apparently, pain, suffering, and blood seem to affect Leiris quite deeply on two different levels. First, he envisions his African lover, Emawayish, circumcised ("amputée de son clitoris") as a double of the violated Lucrèce, raped, and thus figuratively mutilated. His reflections on Emawayish’s beauty and on her clitoral excision are inseparable. Second, Emawayish is a double of Judith because he reflects, through her circumcision, on ritualized castration, and on his fear of sexual impotence ("je suis comme châtré"); for Judith’s beheading of Holofernes signifies for Leiris an act of castration: “j’arrive à un peu mieux comprendre ce que signifie pour moi la figure de Judith, image de ce châtiment à la fois craint et désiré: la castration” (L’Age d’homme 240). The passage mentioned earlier on Emawayish’s physical beauty and circumcision can be juxtaposed to Leiris’s following assertion of her elegance, but also of his fear of her: “Un seul souvenir agréable, celui d’Emawayish, encore qu’à son allure de princesse se mêle un certain côté succube, à chair molle, moite, froide, qui m’écoeure, en même temps qu’il me fait un peu peur” (L’Afrique fantôme 430, my emphasis). Attraction to, and fear of, the female Other is certainly an apparent component of Leiris’s sexual obsessions; for, after all, he
chooses Apollinaire’s verses, “Cette femme était si belle / Qu’elle me faisait peur” (quoted in L’Age d’homme 138), as a theme for his autobiography. Undoubtedly, Leiris’s most intimate thoughts recorded in his journal and autobiography, when put together, are evidence of his egocentric preoccupations that are sustained in his writing of the Other.

In fact, Leiris’s interest in the ritual of circumcision is recorded even later in L’Afrique noire, la création plastique, where he attempts a more objective presentation of African rituals. In this book, he opposes boys’ and girls’ circumcisions in an interesting fashion. Underlying the surface objectivity with which he presents the following report, Leiris initiates his presentation of ritual circumcisions by first discussing scarification, which suggests that he links the two rituals through his fixation on the pain inflicted on the body. First, he writes:

Portant seulement sur la face ou bien ornant aussi d’autres parties du corps, tel l’ombilic chez la femme, les scarifications et les tatouages sont généralement des marques tribales ou les indices d’une certaine position sociale. (120)

Immediately following this remark, Leiris continues on circumcisions by saying:

La plus répandue des mutilations pratiquées en Afrique noire est la circoncision, à laquelle pour les filles correspond l’excision, portant sur le clitoris et éventuellement les petites lèvres. [. . .] C’est vers l’époque de la puberté que les garçons la subissent. [. . .] Premier degré franchi – douloureusement – dans l’ascension à la dignité d’homme, la circoncision est une initiation en même temps qu’une épreuve. (122)

Moving from scarification in the first passage to male circumcision and clitoral excision in the second, Leiris shows scarification to be as mutilating a ritual as circumcision. Despite the disappearance of the first subject “je” from the voice of the narrative, it is tempting to read his approach to scarification and circumcision, as two sources of pain, in
light of his previous confessional and passionate portrayal of Emawayish’s physical beauty and genital mutilation. In addition, he adds in L’Afrique fantôme an illustration of an African scarified woman, whose upper half is naked. “The woman lies open to the gaze,” Torgovnick remarks (114): through his position as an ethnographer, he freely gazes at the partially naked and tattooed African women as he did, in his childhood, by closely watching at the circus the body of a North African female dancer, “au torse entièrement dévêtu, dont je pouvais regarder à loisir les pointes de seins et le nombril, ce que je n’avais jamais pu faire sur aucune femme” (112). He focuses on the same body parts of both women: the photo shows the woman’s breasts and navel and Leiris describes the second woman’s “seins” and “nombril.” To this resemblance, one can add the implicit symbolism between the tools used to perform scarification and circumcision, on the one hand, and the blade and sword in Cranach’s painting, on the other. For, Lucrèce’s rape is signified in the painting by the narrow blade of a dagger she holds in her hand, which is a symbol of her violator’s male organ. Leiris views her rape as a mutilation or a wound caused by some sort of stabbing: “la lame effilée d’un poignard au bout duquel perlent déjà, comme le don le plus intime pointe à l’extrémité d’un sexe, quelques gouttes de sang” (165). As for Judith, she holds the sword with which she beheaded Holofernes: “Judith, à la main droite une épée nue comme elle” (166). Whether it is his Ethiopian circumcised lover, a tattooed African woman, or the symbolism of violence in his ideal diptych of Lucrèce and Judith, they all accommodate well Leiris’s interest in the pain inflicted on women through clitoral excision, tattooing, and rape. Leiris’s accounts are evidence of how the narrating subject implicitly selects information and uses his experiences in Africa to scrutinize self-Other relationships.
With these types of sexual fantasies and preoccupations, Leiris certainly reads everything around him, even personal relationships with the female Other, in terms of subject/object split. He reports in his journal moments of hopelessness of overcoming this tension, which he defines as a “sensation d’abîme qui, en Afrique comme en Europe, me sépare de tous les gens, des femmes principalement” (483). In a flash-back memory in his autobiography, he recognizes this tension as an “imprisonment” in the subject/object dilemma, where he has to either face the world that is, to him, a real object that he fears, or attempt to control a phantasmagoric world created in his imagination:

je reste prisonnier de cette alternative: le monde, objet réel, qui me domine et me dévore [. . .] par la souffrance et par la peur, ou bien le monde, pur phantasme, qui se dissout entre mes mains, que je détruis [. . .] sans jamais parvenir à le posséder. Peut-être s’agit-il surtout pour moi d’échapper au dilemme en trouvant un moyen tel que le monde et moi – l’objet et le sujet – nous nous tenions debout l’un devant l’autre, de plein-pied, comme devant le taureau se tient le matador? (L’Age d’homme 240)

Apparently, Leiris is aware of his separation from everything outside and envisions himself as a torero, who must face the world, whether it is the real world (“objet réel”) or the one which he constructs in his imagination, but cannot dominate. The real world “qui me domine et me dévore [. . .] par la souffrance et par la peur” resonates with his personal preoccupations and obsessions that accompany him to Africa. The world, “pur phantasme, qui se dissout entre mes mains, que je détruis” is the one he dominates through his writing: in this world, he fantasizes about wedding rituals, African artifacts, circumcisions, scarifications, and snatching sacred fetishes, but still realizes that reducing everything outside to pure fantasy does not help him overcome the split between self and Other. He decides to take the self to the Other and dreams of fusing with primitive life,
by openly expressing reservations about the ethnographer’s claim to objectivity. He exclaims: “J’ai besoin de tremper dans leur drame, de toucher leur façon d’être, de baigner dans la chair vive. Au diable l’ethnographie!” (L’Afrique fantôme 376).

**Attempts at Fusion**

At Gondar, in Ethiopia, Leiris is the ethnographer enmeshed in the Other’s culture. In his field notes in Ethiopia, he dedicates several entries to explain the details of the ritual possession, “zâr,” in which he participates. He also pays frequent visits to the woman who arranges the “zâr” (406) in order to fulfill his dream of “going primitive” and to overcome his erotic obsessions. On August 21, he reports the surge of an extraordinary appetite due to his participation in the dance of a “zâr”: “Il faut vraiment que ce soit le zâr qui mange, non le ‘cheval,’ car je ne me serais jamais soupçonné une telle capacité.” Toward the end of an intense period of research on “zâr” possession in Ethiopia, a sacrifice is made specifically for Leiris because of a dream he had of a jackal attacking him: he was told that this jackal is a “zâr femelle” that would leave him only if a “zâr” especially made for him would take place. Wanting to believe this himself, he adopts this Ethiopian explanation and presents it in his own words as a fact: “Le chacal est en effet une des formes sous lesquelles les zâr femelles se présentent en rêve. Pour me délivrer de l’obsession, un moyen sûr serait que je sacrifie moi-même ou fasse sacrifier un mouton couleur de l’animal en question” (476). His journal records that he tasted the blood of the animal but did not perform the “gourri,” the dance of the possessed. We see him seated among the “zâr” adepts, the room thick with incense,
sweat, and perfume. His head is smeared with butter, and – as required by ritual – the
dead animal’s entrails are coiled around his brow. He does not, however, interrupt his
note taking, which proves that he is not completely involved in the ritual. In other
instances, he refuses to attend a “zâr” that does not follow the ritual: “apprendre que tout
ne s’est pas passé selon les règles est pour moi un couteau dans une plaie. [. . .] J’en
arrive à me demander si je n’ai pas été dupé, [. . .] si l’on n’a pas joué devant moi une
misérable comédie, dans le seul but de contenter le “frendji” que je suis” (494). He does
not want to be fooled by Ethiopians, but desires to live the African experience to the full.

Within this participation in the “zâr,” Leiris’s personal thoughts interfere with his
detailed description of the practice of this ritual. He posits his appreciation of the
sacredness of this ritual by comparing it to Christian communion that believes in the
sacrifice of Christ: “Resté sur la banquette je me sens très séparé, très saint, très élu. Je
pense à ma première communion: si elle avait été aussi grave que cela, peut-être serais-je
resté croyant; mais la vraie religion ne commence qu’avec le sang” (L’Afrique fantôme
443). Because of his narcissistic thoughts, he is unable to dissociate the self from the
object he is observing. He interprets the effect of the “zâr” as a purification of his self
that becomes “très saint.” But he is interested in more than just a purification: he
seemingly recalls his past possession of the mask (the fetish) soaked in the “majestic”
blood, as he described it back then, and stresses the importance of seeing blood, by
ending his thought with the following statement: “mais la vraie religion ne commence
qu’avec le sang.” The voice of the narrating subject continues to impose its own
interpretations of local practices, where its thoughts on religion and the self appear to be
the center of events. In fact, the voice of Leiris goes even further and speaks out its
conflation of religion and sexual fantasies. He watches an African woman walk and notice that her hips throw him in erotic fantasies, which leads him to conclude: “Tout ceci est religieux, et je suis décidément un homme religieux” (L’Afrique fantôme 109). Through Leiris’s eyes, the reader accedes to the observer’s sexual conflation of religion and African female body.

One also takes notice of Leiris’s dream of “going native” in the way he covets sometimes Emawayish’s position as an African, who has the advantage of being deeply involved in local rituals, such as animal killing. Here is an example of how Leiris passionately describes in his autobiography Emawayish’s involvement in a trance state:

Ayant fait tuer un bélier blanc, [. . .] je la vis ahaner sous la transe – en plein état de possession – et boire dans une tasse de porcelaine le sang de la victime coulant tout chaud de la gorge coupée. Jamais je ne fis l’amour avec elle, mais lorsque eut lieu ce sacrifice il me semble qu’un rapport plus intime que toute espèce de lien charnel s’établissait entre elle et moi. (238, my emphasis)

Even though Leiris’s interest in Emawayish in this example is not sexual, he covets her entrance into a trance state, “en plein état de possession.” Even more, it is as if his dream of reconnecting with the primitive child within is a dream of transcendence, of going beyond the modern Western mind that is a product of rationalism. His view of local practices is that of a Western primitivist, who is nostalgic for an involvement in unspoiled, mystic nature. Even his sexual encounters with African women are a romanticized idealization of the primitive as pure and paradisiacal: “Après mon départ de Gondar, je finis par des relations [. . .] avec des filles Somali; pourtant, de ces amours ou dérisoires ou malheureuses j’ai gardé une impression de paradis” (238-39). This paradisiacal fantasy of an Edenic Africa is essential to Leiris’s dream of becoming Other, a dream that he owes to his surrealist beginnings in the early 1920s, when Breton, for
example, depicted Martinique as Eden with a “spectacle du luxe naturel, avec ce sentiment de bienfaits prodigués” (“Martinique charmeuse de serpents” 57). Even before setting sail for Africa, Leiris fantasized about going native: in 1929, he noted in his essay, “L’Ile magique,” published in Documents, the type of primitive life that he would like to lead: “la vie que devrait avoir tout homme de briser ses limites, quitte à se confondre avec les bêtes, les plantes, les minéraux, à s’abîmer dans la grande ombre du dehors, plus réelle et plus vivante que lui” 334). In L’Afrique fantôme, it is African children who in general break down Leiris’s inhibitions with their natural gaiety, curiosity, and desire for attention: “Voici enfin que j’aime l’Afrique. Les enfants donnent une impression de gaîté et de vie que je n’ai rencontrée nulle part ailleurs. Cela me touche infiniment” (34). This idealization of Africa as a site of innocence and incorruption is fundamental to Leiris’s dream of reconnecting with the innocent child within, but will have its own shortcomings, as it opposes the reality of Africa, as I shall explain in the last section.

Leiris’s nostalgia for the primitive goes along with his hope for personal transformation. He feels the need to fuse with the primitive as a means of escaping the subject/object, male/female, split that causes his sexual anxiety. Among the selective photos that he inserts in his journal is the illustration of cross-dressing, entitled “Le Masque ‘femme du cordonnier,’” which shows a man wearing a female mask and false breasts. Behind the simple act of wearing a mask and false breasts, Leiris, who dreams of breaking down sexual boundaries, more likely envisions in this ritual a way of hiding one’s identity, for the illustration shares with L’Age d’homme an interesting confession that Leiris makes regarding an incident, where he was at ease when he wore women clothes and make-up:
J’étais très fier d’être bien, plutôt que ridicule, en femme. Toute difficulté était pour moi levée, vu que, grâce à mon travestissement, je n’avais qu’à me laisser faire. Je trouvais aussi un plaisir positif dans cet apparent changement de sexe, qui transformait les rapports sexuels en jeu et y introduisait une espèce de légèreté. Feignant de me courtiser, Kay m’appelait de mon nom féminisé – Micheline – prénom que projetait de me donner ma mère alors que grosse de moi, elle souhaitait d’avoir une fille. Couchés sur le divan [...] nous passâmes insensiblement des baisers de théâtre à d’authentiques baisers. (L’Age d’homme 204-05)

Thus, tranvestism and African masks produce the same effect on Leiris: they accommodate well an interest in hiding one’s identity by hiding one’s sex. By eliminating the distinction between male and female, the roles of who is subject or object is no longer in question: the two merge and become one as Leiris attempts to do with African cultures.

The drama of reading all one’s experiences and encounters in terms of a subject/object dilemma, where the self is constantly distanced from the Other, played a major role in developing Leiris’s dissatisfaction with ethnography’s claim to objectivity and his decision to be involved in local life in order to overcome this dramatic tension. “Devenir à la fois soi et l’autre, mâle et femme, sujet et objet, ce qui est tué et ce qui tue – seule possibilité de communion avec soi-même” (L’Age d’homme 164) affirms Leiris’s dream of becoming Other, by uniting with African women and cultures. But the question that prompts the next and last section is whether Leiris’s subjugation of the primitive by bringing it to the fantasies of the observer/male/subject and his later participations in “zâr” possessions delivered him from his personal obsessions and anxiety and allowed him to reconnect with the primal state of purity and innocence within. And if they did not, then what were the reasons?
Disappointment

It is not difficult for the reader of Leiris’s journal to know, before reading the book, the answer to the question of whether Leiris’s search for self-transformation in Africa succeeded or failed. Indeed, in the preamble to *L’Afrique fantôme*, Leiris summarizes the purpose and result of his trip in the following passage:

De Dakar à Djibouti (1931-1933), tel aurait été le titre de mon ouvrage. [...] *L’Afrique fantôme* me parut s’imposer, allusion certes aux réponses apportées à mon goût du merveilleux par tels spectacles qui avaient capté mon regard ou telles institutions que j’avais étudiées [...] expression surtout de ma déception d’occidental mal dans sa peau qui avait follement espéré que le long voyage dans des contrées alors plus ou moins retirées et, avec l’observation scientifique, un contact vrai avec les habitants feraient de lui un autre homme, plus ouvert et guéri de ses obsessions. Déception qui, en quelque sorte, amenait l’égocentriste que je n’avais pas cessé d’être à refuser, par le truchement d’un titre, la plénitude d’existence à cette Afrique en laquelle j’avais trouvé beaucoup mais non la délivrance. (7, my emphasis)

First, he confesses changing the title from “De Dakar à Djibouti” to “L’Afrique fantôme,” an ironic title that he chooses, because the term “phantom” expresses his disappointment with knowing the real Africa. He clarifies that his expectations of being “guéri de ses obsessions” ended with a disappointment (“déception”), mainly due to his “égocentrique” attitude, which did not allow him to really discover Africa. Clifford points out the impossible fusion of writing the self and the Other in the same work and concludes how *L’Afrique fantôme* “undermines the assumption that self and other can be gathered in a stable narrative coherence” (173). In other words, either the self or the Other has to prevail as subject of the book; in Leiris’s case, he only depicted Africa through the lens of his subjective, sexually-anguished self. The result was his biased analyses of rituals, stories, and artifacts, his personal reflections on self-Other
interactions, and his projections of his nostalgic thoughts and fantasies unto the object of his study.

The increasingly anguished narcissism of Leiris in his journal found sometimes no exotic release in its phantom Africa. The reality of Africa opposes the myth he had constructed about Africa. Almost five weeks into his journey, Leiris finds what he would term later “le monde, objet réel,” which is here Africa, frustrating: “même existence mesquine, même vulgarité, même monotonie, et même destruction systématique de la beauté” (28). At times, he questions what he is doing there: “j’ai le cafard. Le but du voyage s’estompe aussi et j’en arrive à me demander ce que je suis venu faire ici” (33). After nine months of releasing his fantasies, he depicts Africa as a hallucinatory lieu of Western despair:

Voici enfin L’AFRIQUE, la terre des 50° à l’ombre, des convois d’esclaves, des festins cannibales, des crânes vides, de toutes les choses qui sont mangées, corrodés, perdues. La haute silhouette du maudit famélique qui toujours m’a hanté se dresse entre le soleil et moi. C’est sous son ombre que je marche, ombre plus dure mais plus revigorante aussi que les plus diamantés des rayons. (225)

The projections of his thoughts on local rituals, objects, and women do not satisfy Leiris completely: he still recognizes the reality of Africa, whose image differs from the nostalgic one he brought with him to the region. After seven months in Africa, he regrets that his experience there did not deliver the paradisiacal childhood he had hoped for. He notes: “l’existence ascétique que je mène ne me dispense aucun paradis enfantin. [. . .] Avec mon casque, ma chemise kaki, ma culotte de trappeur, je reste le même homme d’angoisse, [. . .] une sorte de bourgeois artiste” (162). At the end of his journal, he is prepared to return to Paris carrying with him “un retour offensif des phobies” (622). Still searching for a satisfactory way of reconnecting with the disappointed self, he sketches,
in the last pages of *L’Afrique fantôme*, a novel, where the hero, an egocentric character, enacts Leiris’s sexual preoccupations and self-reproach. Thus, Leiris’s journey certainly ends with frustration for several reasons. First, he is disappointed because he was unable to see Africa with an objective eye, due to his narcissistic, biased observations, as was shown.

The second factor that contributed to Leiris’s frustration is his romantic primitivist expectations of Africa. His writing of the self and the primitive Other leaves no doubt about his primitivism: he idealizes anything black or African and has cultural expectations of Africa. With a closer look at his writing of his object of study, one takes notice of his exotic idealization of black/African cultures, fascinated sometimes with American black women of Blackbirds in Moulin Rouge in 1929, and of his poetic portrayal of Joséphine Baker as an important icon of contemporary primitivist celebration of black cultures: “l’image d’une Joséphine Baker se déchaînant dans le charleston rejoignait, sous le signe du primitivisme, les ‘Christ inférieurs des obscures espérances’” (*L’Afrique noire* 30). To take part in this vogue, he decides he would only have children if they are not white: “Je ne verrais aucun inconvénient à avoir des enfants, si ces enfants – pas plus que leur mère – n’étaient blancs” (*Journal* 147). On the same scale, the African female body was part of his exotic fantasies, as we saw in his childhood memory of the North African woman, whose breasts and navel fascinated him, and in his enchantment with the African woman’s hips that threw him into erotic fantasies. Leiris thus took with him to Africa a pre-existing idolization of anything African or black. Taoua observes that Leiris’s representation of his experience in Africa in *L’Afrique fantôme* was “so typical of vanguard primitivism,” based on “an idealization of the primitive bush in
contrast to a civilized metropolitan way of life, the persistent desire to reconnect with a wild, untamed self, a penchant for the exotic and tropical at the expense of more accurate and realistic assessments, and so on” (31). Nevertheless, Leiris’s genuine interest in African cultures did not fill the void within or cure his personal obsessions that accompanied him onto the boat home: “En 1933 je revins, ayant tué au moins un mythe: celui du voyage en tant que moyen d’évasion” (L’Age d’homme 239). Interestingly, Leiris’s disappointment was conditioned by other factors besides his narcissistic observations and his romantic exaltation of the primitive: Leiris remained sincerely attached to metropolitan French life.

Leiris’s disappointment with Africa was a result of his inability to undo himself of his attachment to France. Even though he starts off his journey with a nostalgia for all things African, intent on being part of primitive life as a way of breaking up with Parisian environment, Leiris’s attachment to French way of life stayed with him in Africa: “lorsque j’ai quitté Paris, le désir de rompre avec la vie futile que j’y menais était le premier attrait qu’avait pour moi ce voyage en Afrique. Aujourd’hui, c’est la vie que je mène ici qui me paraît futile à l’échelle de la partie qui se joue en Europe” (232). Sometimes, he could not hide his pride in being of European descent, coming from a superior culture: “c’est nous qui sommes les champions de la civilisation” (L’Afrique fantôme 191). Even a dream of not visiting Paris before departing to Africa afflicts him, or as he describes it, “ce rêve m’avait laissé, tout ce matin, une impression pénible” (L’Afrique fantôme 131). Deep inside, Leiris remained a Frenchman: he may have had a primitivist dream of a simple, paradisiacal Africa where he would become Other, but this was due mainly to his conscious awareness of his sexual inhibitions. The moments when
he realized that he had to face the “monde, objet réel,” which contradicted his imaginary
“monde, pur phantasme,” were the true moments when the voice of Leiris, the French
man, spoke out his attachment to bourgeois metropolitan culture. Even in his intimate
relationships, Leiris’s recognized his separation from, and sometimes his superiority to,
his lover. The thought of the rumors about his relationship with Emawayish and how this
could be of benefit to her revealed the arrogant self of Leiris: “Je me demande, d’ailleurs,
jusqu’à quel point Emawayish est mécontente de ces bruits. Être femme d’Européen
constitue toujours un pedigree flatteur; peut-être cela lui rendra-t-il plus facile de se
remarier?” (535). This ethnocentric attitude and categorization of the self as European,
thus distant from the African object, explains the reason for Leiris’s inability to go
beyond the self and to find himself as Other. In other words, the split between the
dominating subject and the subjugated object, be it the female or Africa, was always there
and remained, despite every attempt to fuse with the primitive.

There is no doubt that L’Afrique fantôme witnesses a unique confessional mode
where the presence of the primitive Other is essential to Leiris’s writing of the self. Sean
Hand admires the singularity of Leiris’s works and notes that “one central effect of this
heroic singularity was the renewal and expansion in Leiris of the nature of self-writing”
(Michel Leiris 4). Also, James Clifford adds an interesting remark on the unique
“childlike innocence” that characterizes the writing of L’Afrique fantôme:

What remains inexplicable is the strange childlike innocence emerging somehow, each time, after experience. It is incredible that Leiris keeps on
writing, and that we keep on reading, dipping in and out of these pages. Yet every day the journal’s scrupulous entries appear — long, short, elaborate, terse — each promising that something will happen and that soon
we will see what the relentless series is leading to. We never do. No
While *L’Afrique fantôme* reads simply as some random, incongruous notes, it is Leiris’s confessions of the most intimate details of his thoughts and fantasies that make the reader continue reading the long journal of 648 dense pages, attracted to the personal details mingled with the ethnographer’s observations of African life. For Taoua, it is “the author’s unassuming sincerity and skepticism about scientific observations of culture [that] have made the work a classic for readers beyond the field of ethnography” (32).

Reading Leiris’s autobiography, *L’Age d’homme*, alongside with his autoethnography allows one to have a complete picture of the characteristics of his primitivism and his aims. In the autobiography, he articulates freely his sexual preoccupations, while in his autoethnographic document, he reveals, behind the apparent self-exposure and psychoanalysis of the self through his approach to primitive cultures, his many obsessions with the primitive in general, and with African women in particular. It is also in his autobiography that one finds necessary information that completes his accounts of his experiences in Africa. Torgovnick notes how *L’Age d’homme* helps illustrate the binary oppositions that distinguish Leiris’s general writing of the self and the Other:

> everything in Leiris’s *Manhood* becomes implicated in everything else, and one might say worlds about his obsession with bullfights and animal sacrifice – not to mention the spurious “equality” of matador and bull, a relationship that is another version of the deathly images that haunt him. But let us simply say, for now, that things African, black, primitive mesh thoroughly with Leiris’s fixation on subject/object relations and with the sexualized nexus of pain/pleasure/wounds/decapitation/death which he sees everywhere he looks. (112)
On the ethnographic level, the Dakar-Djibouti mission accomplished its aims by bringing back to French museums, as the French government sent it to do, over 3,600 artifacts, 6,000 photographs, and Ethiopian Coptic Church manuscripts. As far as Leiris, the ethnographer, is concerned, he is less interested in the scientific aims of the mission than in becoming part of an original, primitive culture: “Amertume. Ressentiment contre l’ethnographie, qui fait prendre cette position si inhumaine d’observateur, dans des circonstances où il faudrait s’abandonner” (L’Afrique fantôme 433). The result is the ethnographer’s biased reports of the rituals of animal sacrifices, body scarification, and circumcisions, in addition to his personal views of African artifacts, cross-dressing, and masks. Nevertheless, within the climate of subjectivity that distinguishes L’Afrique fantôme, one finds that African fetishes, artifacts, masks, and rituals summon a complete world of dreams and fantasies. Leiris’s primitivism contributes, indeed, to a wider modernist fetishism of primitive art, masks, transvestism, and rituals. His decision to expose his obsessions with the primitive is only an example of a more widespread primitivist nature that blossomed in the twentieth century in search of different models of humanity. It is undeniable that Leiris brings into the open, through his sincere accounts in L’Afrique fantôme and L’Age d’homme, some underpinning revelations of Western projection into primitive life: the search for identity and for a cure to some personal obsessions. In his egocentric project that aims at self-analysis through contact with the primitive Other, Leiris’s primitivism certainly differs from Bataille’s interest in primitive cultural systems. For, Bataille focused on issues like sociological reformation and human experience of continuity, written in theories that concern all modern people, as opposed to Leiris’s primitivism that was motivated by some individual preoccupations. In
addition to the examples of Bataille and Leiris, I shall attempt to show, in the next chapter, how René Char’s work can also be studied in the discourse of modernist primitivism, given his rejection of contemporary human condition and his nostalgia for a lost state of primitive existence.

Notes

1 I will capitalize the term “Other” throughout this chapter to use it as an equivalent for the so-called primitive or the African in general, and women in particular.

2 Sean Hand gives an interesting account on Leiris’s preoccupations with genital impotence and castration. According to Hand, Leiris co-founded, with his psychoanalyst, Adrien Borel, and with Georges Bataille, the Société de Psychologie Collective in 1937; “this collective was to publish a two-part article on circumcision as ritualized castration in 1938” (Michel Leiris 53). Leiris also confesses in several entries of his journal his complex of castration: “Je touche ici à l’un des aspects de ce que les psychanalystes appellent mon ‘complexe de castration’” (L’Afrique fantôme 602).

3 It is also important to mention what critics have underlined as Leiris’s possible homosexuality. Transvestism can suggest homosexuality, which he did not clearly confess in the writing of his autobiography. In fact, Sean Hand threads several statements by Leiris in L’Age d’homme, Journal, and Biffure, and sheds light on the latter’s liaison with Jouhandeau. Hand concludes that Leiris “has sought to erase all reference to homosexual travesty in general and his sexual act with Jouhandeau in particular” (146). In explaining Leiris’s sexual anxiety, Aliette Armel also gives an interesting account of Leiris’s possible (bi)(homo)sexuality: “après la rupture avec Daisy S. et une première demande en mariage rejetée par Louise Godon, il [Leiris] fréquentait les prostituées, il se retrouvait face aux demandes homosexuelles de Max Jacob et de Jouhandeau, il prenait des résolutions d’abstinence (“Sous le signe,” 53). One can then read Leiris’s subject accounts in his autoethnographic document and autobiography, not only in light of what he wanted to show as some heterosexual preoccupations, but also of his homosexual ones. Moreover, if he confesses his own sexual obsessions in the preamble to L’Afrique fantôme and in L’Age d’homme, one wonders why he chose not to reveal his possible homosexuality as part of these obsessions. It remains rather interesting to read Leiris’s interests in phallus, his fear of women, and his castration anxiety, through the scope of his suggested homosexuality.
CHAPTER 5

RENÉ CHAR’S NOSTALGIA: RECOVERING THE PRIMITIVE

If Michel Leiris’s interest in the primitive Other was motivated by a hope for personal transformation, as was shown in the previous chapter, René Char’s work expresses a nostalgia for the primitive that emanates from an “humanisme conscient de ses devoirs” (Feuillets d’Hypnos 172). In the etymology of the term “nostalgia,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first element, nostos, means a “return home,” where home entails other meanings, such as a place of origin or, as well, a foyer. A foyer, in turn, means a hearth and refers more specifically to the fireside of the home and thus to the use of one of the basic elements, fire. As for the second element of “nostalgia,” algos, it means “pain,” which connotes anguish. In Char’s work, one can trace out these two etymological elements in his expression of nostalgia: first, his wistful longing for the conditions of a past age, when humans lived close to the basic elements, and, second, his expression of anguish in modern times. In fact, Char’s yearning to return to what he calls “mon pays” (“Qu’il vive!,” Les Matinaux 305) emanates from his unease with contemporary times, where, for him, science and civilization caused modern
people’s alienation and separation from the simple life their ancestors used to lead. This imaginary pays, “[qui] n’est qu’un voeu de l’esprit” (Les Matinaux 305), has the virtues of primitive living, which is superior to modern living in its innocence, simplicity, and, most importantly, assumed natural relationship to a mystical world.

This chapter discusses how Char’s recovery, through poetic writing, of an assumed, lost state of primitivist plenitude is concomitant with his aim to restore in the present time the primitive perspective on religion, nature/animals, and the questions of life and death. As I shall attempt to show, first, his primitivism is an escape from wars, scientific progress, civilization, and philosophy. His sensibility to and apprehension of the rural environment of La Vaucluse (where he spent his childhood and part of his adulthood), the effect Rimbaud’s use of nature and sense of dislocation had upon him, and his acquaintance with the surrealists’ celebration of free primitive imagination shape, to an extent, his concept of the primitive, as the second section demonstrates. Char’s search for the primitive grows out of these factors and crystallizes his longing for a return to the lost stage of innocent and simple primitive existence, where his notion of simplicity takes on two meanings, as I shall present in the third section. The first meaning is physical: being in tune with nature and in direct contact with its basic elements of life, such as earth and fire, while the second one builds on the first and announces the mental superiority of those who lead a life, away from abstruse, intellectual living. In light of Char’s fascination with primitive mentality, the last section of the chapter examines his poetic celebration of the significance of, in particular, the drawing of the Well Scene of the Lascaux Cave, with regard to a prehistoric view of life,
mysticism, and animals. “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant,” the first poem of Char’s *Lascaux*, will be explained in light of Bataille’s concepts of sacrifices, transgression, ecstasy, and mysticism, discussed previously in the third chapter.

**Anguish in Modern Times**

Char’s nostalgia for simple primitive living resulted from his condemnation of wars: he visited Spain twice before the outbreak of its Civil War in 1936 and participated in the Resistance movement, under the name Capitaine Alexandre, the Maquis leader of a group of men in the area around Céreste. In 1937, he dedicated his group of poems, “Placard pour un chemin des écoliers,” to the children of Spain, regretting the changing times (“les temps ont changé”) and comparing his innocent childhood (“école buissonnière”) to the Spanish children’s loss of their lives as a result of the Civil War: “la chair pantelante d’enfants s’entasse dans les tombereaux fétides commis jusqu’ici aux opérations d’équarrissage et de voirie” (89). He condemned war-makers in Spain and called them “incomparables bouchers! Honte! Honte! Honte!” (89). The tone of resentment that underlies “Dédicace” continues throughout “Dehors la nuit est gouvernée,” another collection of poems that he later added to “Placard pour un chemin des écoliers.”

In “Dehors la nuit est gouvernée,” Char laments contemporary times for having subverted innocence and beauty and replaced them with horror and blood. “Tous compagnons de lit” is one of the most expressive poems of “Dehors la nuit est
gouvernée” that captures these meanings. “Tête d’agneau sanglant le coeur avait perdu toute sa laine” combines the peacefulness and gentleness of a lamb with the wound it suffers. The following line, “Et d’horreur en horreur atteint la beauté populaire aux horloges innocentes” (104), connotes an innocence and a beauty attacked and hit by the horrifying atrocities of war. For Char, the main reason for this lost innocence is the conflict and disunion embodied in war; the title, “Tous compagnons de lit,” conveys the idea of reunion and unity of all people. Towards the end of the poem, “Notre langue commune dans l’éternité sous le toit gardien de nos luttes” expresses a hope to establish a permanent reunion of all humans who share a common goal of resistance in order to change contemporary condition. The last line, “Nous ne nous avouons pas vaincus quand dans l’homme debout le mal surnage et le bien coule à pic,” announces that good will replace evil and people will see victory if they rise up from the sleep of passiveness and stand together (“l’homme debout”). This is the type of cosmic nostalgia for unity and harmony between the individual and the outside world that Char will express in his longing for a return to primitive living.

Living through World War II awakened Char’s consciousness to the devastating impact of the war on human existence. He condemned the barbarism of war and its gruesome atrocities, referring to the twentieth century as “ce gueux de siècle, ventre et jambes arrachés” (Chants de la balandrane 533), and believing that war degraded humans in the twentieth century: “Vingtième siècle: l’homme fut au plus bas” (La Parole en archipel 381). For him, contemporary people had become victims of themselves and of political perversions: “Je vois l’homme perdu de perversions politiques. [. . .] nommant
conquête son anéantissement” (Feuillets d’Hypnos 192). To show how war was motivated by individual interests that ended up deteriorating humanity, he discredited the goal of war-making in the name of humanity: “Combien sont épris de l’humanité et non de l’homme! Pour élever la première ils abaissent le second” (Fenêtres dormantes et porte sur le toit 578). “Les utopies sanglantes du vingtième siècle” (Fenêtres dormantes 578) draw a picture of the violence and foolishness of the twentieth century. His war poems, like Les Loyaux adversaires, published in Fureur et mystère, denounce hatred that results in those “implacables hostilités” (“Pénombre” 240). Verb tenses shifting from past to future oppose two different states of existence: the past in “j’étais l’égal de choses” (“Pénombre” 240) brings back the memory of a past unity of the individual and the world, whereas the future tense in “Ils reverront le grain de la moisson, [. . .] / Ils chériront le vide de leur cœur” (“Redonnez-leur” 242) holds out the hope for a different future. As for the present tense, it regrets the loss of what used to exist, as in the following negative structure: “Redonnez-leur ce qui n’est plus présent en eux” (242). Char rejects the present and yearns for a restoration of the past, of the original primeval state of existence that humans lost.

As much as Char condemns war, he also rejects science and civilization. For him, science is as barbaric as war. He pessimistically questions what would become of humans in a future where science reigns: “quelle barbarie experte voudra de nous demain?” (516). His 1959 poem, “Aux Riverains de la Sorgue,” published in La Parole en archipel, challenges bourgeois belief that only science can make modern dreams come true by conquering space. In this poem, the man-in-space confronts the Paleolithic man
of Lascaux and is shown less lucid than prehistoric man who preserves the secrets of primitive human thinking and living in the drawing of the Well Scene: “L’homme de l’espace dont c’est le jour natal sera un milliard de fois moins lumineux et révélera un milliard de fois moins de choses cachées que l’homme granité, reclus et recouché de Lascaux, au dur membre débourbé de la mort” (412). For Char, discovery outweighs invention: the invention of the space craft has enabled modern people to set foot on the moon but has not discovered how our ancestors used to perceive their existence and their relationship with the outside world. As Char explains, “celui qui invente, au contraire de celui qui découvre, n’ajoute aux choses, n’apporte aux êtres, que des masques” (La Parole en archipel 380), thus the importance of uncovering people’s identity by going back to their original state of existence. Inventions also blind people and drag them to their end: “L’homme, d’un pas de somnambule, marche vers les mines meurtrières, conduit par le chant des inventeurs” (205). The flip side of this condemnation of modernity will be a search for its opposite by returning to a simple, primitive life.

For Char, rationalism and philosophy go alongside science and technology: they all create civilization that causes human distress in modern times. He believes that modern people do not need philosophy, “l’optimisme des philosophies ne nous est plus suffisant” (Poèmes pulvérisés 269), because it symbolizes an abstract, abstruse intellectual way of thinking and living. Rather, intuition, which does not require conscious reasoning, should replace philosophy to help modern people “reason,” as he paradoxically states: “À l’expiration de la réflexion on se heurte à l’intuition. [. . .] Comme on abandonne volontiers la première pour suivre la seconde! [. . .] J’admets que
l’intuition raisonne” (Le Marteau sans maître 64). “Les Apparitions dédaignées,” a poem of Le Nu perdu or “lost innocence” as Virginia La Charité translates it, summarizes Char’s frustration with civilization: “Les civilisations sont des graisses. L’Histoire échoue, [. . .] le Temps se fourvoie. [. . .] / La science ne peut fournir à l’homme dévasté qu’un phare aveugle, une arme de détresse, des outils sans légendes” (466). Civilization imprisons people in bourgeois life and in the cumbersome demands of science and snatches from them their freedom to lead a primitive, simple life. In explaining Char’s view of modernity, Viegnes observes that “la tragédie de l’histoire moderne est qu’elle nous emprisonne dans son devenir collectif. Elle est donc foncièrement totalitaire” (530). However, the poet has a vision of how to recuperate one’s freedom: “La liberté se trouve dans le coeur de celui qui n’a cessé de la vouloir, de la rêver, l’a obtenue contre le crime” (466). The term “coeur” is important to one’s exercise of freedom, for “coeur” implies “courage,” which, in turn, is a “force morale: dispositions du coeur,” according to Le Petit Robert. In this sense, wedding “coeur” to “rêver” signifies having the courage and firm will to dream, to escape the gruesome reality of the twentieth century by creating a different world that restores freedom to humans. Char’s anti-modernism crystallizes his search for a world that he creates through the act of writing and that revives his childhood memories of living in tune with nature.

In Search of the Primitive

Char’s prose and poetry abound with various connotations of the notion of the primitive, such as the simplicity of having an unmediated contact with nature. Having
been brought up in Isle-sur-Sorgue contributed to Char’s longing for reliving his childhood in the midst of nature and to his appreciation of the inhabitants of the rural region of Le Vaucluse. In addition to the vocabulary of nature that permeates his work, especially *Les Matinaux*, such as “la terre” (286), “oiseau rural, le papillon” (294), “ruisseau” (305), Char shows his attachment to some natural features of either his hometown or other places he visited. For example, he repeatedly mentions the “rivièrè” of his native town in “La Sorgue” (*Fureur et mystère*), another river, “L’Epte,” from Saint-Clair-sur-Epte, a village that he often visited (“Le Bois de L’Epte,” *La Parole en archipel* 371), and “Le Thor,” another village in Le Vaucluse, where “le sentier aux herbes engourdies” reminds him of “la chimère d’un âge perdu” (“Le Thor,” *Fureur et mystère* 239). In his adulthood, Char left Paris in 1936, a year that witnessed political tension in Europe and the outbreak of the Civil War in Spain, and stayed in Haute-Provence until 1945, namely in Céreste, a village “peuplé de paysans pauvres” (1115), according to Georges-Louis Roux, who accompanied the poet for most of his stay there.² Of particular importance is Roux’s account of Char’s sensibility to nature and of the poet’s “présence inspirante” (1116). According to Roux, “l’expérience que nous eûmes à travers Char, au cours de ces années, fut exactement une expérience poétique en ce sens qu’il sut nous ‘donner à voir’ et nous rendre sensibles aux aspects insolites de notre réalité quotidienne” (1118). Char valued human relationship with nature and opened others’ eyes to the latent harmony in such a poor village, as Roux attests: “Quand on a vu et entendu parler René Char, le monde est différent et c’est pourquoi, dans notre village, une subtile métamorphose des teintes et des valeurs s’instaura” (1117). Char’s closeness
to nature thus nurtured his appreciation of the simple quality of rural life and formed, to a degree, his concept of simple, primitive living.

It is also possible that Char may have inherited his poetic harmonization of humans and nature from his ideal figure, Arthur Rimbaud, whom he calls “Le Poète” (727). In *Recherche de la base et du sommet*, Char expresses his fascination with Rimbaud’s writing of nature, which the latter calls a “spectacle de bonté” (“Mauvais sang” 224) and which Char views as a “fait rare dans la poésie française insolite en cette seconde moitié du XIXème siècle” (730). To explain this fascination, Char points out that nature, in Rimbaud’s poetry, plays the role of a creative force: “Nature non statique, peu appréciée pour sa beauté, [. . .] elle intervient avec fréquence comme matière, fond lumineux, force créatrice” (730-31). In addition to the influence of Rimbaud’s use of nature on Char, the former’s expression of dislocation from contemporary society awakens in Char a certain exoticism. In the third section of *Recherche de la base et du sommet*, Char speaks of Rimbaud “[qui] sent s’éveiller le passé perdu et moqué de ses ancêtres” (731), in reference to the latter’s statements “Il m’est bien évident que j’ai toujours été race inférieure” and “J’ai de mes ancêtres gaulois l’oeil bleu blanc, la cervelle étroite, et la maladresse dans la lutte. Je trouve mon habillement aussi barbare que le leur” (“Mauvais sang” 220). Char also mentions Rimbaud’s writing of “une civilisation non encore apparue” and creation of “un espace imaginaire, sous les traits d’un Orient légendaire” (732). In the same essay, Char establishes a link between three ideas: “l’instrument poétique inventé par Rimbaud,” “peuples primitifs,” and “retrouver les pouvoirs perdus. [. . .] remonter aux sources et se régénérer” (732). If considered
together, one can deduce that Char envisions in the revival of primitive life a foundation for a creative poetic writing, which is a concern of his that goes alongside his nostalgia for the earliest state of existence.

The idea of freeing himself from the literary poetic tradition and the search for the lost primitiveness in writing, in the sense of the simplicity and innocence often associated with the child-like quality of the primitive, continued throughout Char’s association with surrealism from 1930 to 1934. As was shown in the second chapter, the surrealist group believed that only primitive people were able to capture the “innocence et vertu créatrice originelle” (Entretiens 85) that a poet needed. The surrealists envisioned the primitive as one who lives more through imagination than through reality and André Breton believed that only people who lived in non-civilized societies could freely exercise their imagination. In Entretiens, Breton argued that whenever desire “est pris à sa source,” the poet was a “très proche parent [. . .] des primitifs” (263). This primitivist glorification of the sense of innocence, simplicity, and free imagination, which went alongside Breton’s privileging of the idea of automatism that allows one to tap into the primitive aspects of the human psyche, repressed by rational thought, fit well with Char’s rejection of philosophy and rationalism. The surrealist primitivist idealization of the assumed primitive exercise of imagination, free from the control of any rational thought, can be traced in Char’s choice of the title Le Marteau sans maître for his collection of works written between 1930 and 1934. This title is surrealistic in the way “marteau” signifies a tool used to smash constraints and conventions in order to forge a poem and “sans maître” translates the masterless, thus uncontrolled, instrument that creates a poem
without restraints. The surrealist praise of the primitive as a new inspiration for the poet was reflected in Char’s composition of *Poèmes militants*, written in 1932 and published in *Le Marteau sans maître*, declaring resistance and opposition to the literary tradition of poem writing. “Les Asciens,” in this collection of poems, announced subduing what was traditional and thought to be “idéal” and initiated a new primitive age: “Nous écrasons les derniers squelettes vibrants du parc idéal / [. . .] Nous apparaissions [. . .] / Envahisseurs du nouvel âge primitif” (35). It is in this spirit of questioning the bourgeois literary tradition and promoting primitive freedom of thought that Char was true to his surrealist beginning. Even though critics, like P.A. Benoît, Pierre Berger, Georges Mounin, and Virginia La Charité, question the influence of surrealism on Char’s work, claiming that he joined the group at a young age (22 years old), that he spent his four-year involvement with the group “in independent exploration and evaluation of the theme of poetic activity” (La Charité 41), it remains true that Char’s interest in the notion of the primitive shared with surrealism its imagined recuperation of, and nostalgia for, a lost primitiveness.

One can then deduce that Char’s concept of the primitive most likely grew out of the time he spent in rural environments, his admiration for Rimbaud’s appreciation of nature as a “force créatrice” in addition to the latter’s exoticism and articulation of dislocation from contemporary times, and the surrealists’ primitivist advocacy of the free exercise of one’s imagination. All three factors shaped Char’s nostalgia for the primitive as a symbol of simplicity, child-like innocence, freedom of thought, which all oppose, in his view, the contemporary inhabitable universe of abstruseness, corruption, and
subjugation to rationalism, which have caused modern people’s alienation from nature. For Char, only through poetry can one mediate with the lost primitive world. As such, his “vocabulaire nouveau avec les concepts nouveaux que cela impliquait,” as Roux observes (1119), challenges this alienation by recovering the lost simple, innocent, and free primitive world, close to earth and to the basic elements of life.

**A Return to Primitive Living**

In a conversation with Pierre Berger, Char calls himself “un homme [. . .] utopiste” (Berger 8). In addition to the well-known significance of being “utopiste” as someone who believes in the possible formation of a perfect society, *Le Petit Robert* equates “utopiste” to being a “rêveur.” It is not surprising to hear Char call himself a dreamer of a better, or even perfect, society, given his critique of civilization, which makes his utopian dream an escape from reason towards its opposite, the innocent primitive. This dream can be seen as an extension of the West’s creation of the myth of the primitive as a symbol of the innocence of humanity, a myth that was well represented in the artistic works of nineteenth-century artists, such as Gauguin who, like Char, looked for the roots of creation in rural life and appreciated innocent simplistic people, as we saw in the second chapter. In Char’s dream, there are also traces of what Breton terms in *Entretiens* “l’innocence et [. . .] sa vertu créatrice originelle” (85), for Char speaks of “une innocence où l’homme qui rêve ne peut vieillir” (*Seuls demeurent* 132). In other words, one can always dream so long as one is as innocent as a child, whose imagination
knows no boundaries, or, in Char’s words, “où commence l’enfance du peuple, j’aime” (La Parole en archipel 381). Child-like innocence is an integral element in Char’s conceptualization of the primitive; it assures the poet-dreamer’s ability to poetically recreate the primitive world for which he is nostalgic. The symbolism of innocence as an eternal youth in “ne peut vieillir” persists in another poem, “Le Requin et la mouette,” published in Fureur et mystère, which owes its composition to Char’s discussion of its theme with Henri Matisse in 1946. “Faites que toute fin supposée soit une neuve innocence” (259), the closing line of this poem, announces what critics identify as Char’s poetics of reviving “a state of existence known in the past, […] which Char seeks to make accessible in the present” (La Charité 112). If one envisions a beginning in what seems to be an end, one might as well believe that the lost primitive can be rejuvenated in modern times. In taking into consideration Matisse’s influence on this poem, one can read Char’s line and its implied hope for the return of what has been lost in a civilized society in light of the painter’s primitivism in La Joie de vivre. In this painting, the viewer is presented with self-reflexive images of the urban dweller celebrating his or her body in a setting that is seemingly closer to nature and free from bourgeois social conventions, like the examples of artistic primitivism we examined in the second chapter. Innocence is then an important element in Char’s nostalgic return to the primitive Other, who is not only a model to follow, but also a mirror in which the poet sees a reflection of his own dream to restore the simple life that modern people lost.

Concomitant with innocence, in Char’s nostalgia, is simplicity, which is grounded in nature. “Un oiseau chante sur un fil / Cette vie simple, à fleur de terre” (Fureur et
mystère 238) portrays the easiness of life and nearness to earth. With Char, human unmediated contact with nature takes on a primitivist idealization of the peasant lifestyle, as Jean-Louis Roux attests:

    il semble exister chez Char une confiance considérable dans les capacités d’appréhension et d’expression de la poésie chez ceux que nous pourrions appeler des “primitifs.” La terre et ce qui est proche d’elle est poétique, les êtres qui sont restés en amitié avec elle sentent, peut-être confusément mais certainement, la poésie qui sourd de la nature non encore soumise à l’emprise industrielle de l’homme. (1124)

Similar to the twentieth-century artists’ admiration for the sense of creativity found in tribal arts, as we saw in the second chapter, Char, as a poet, seeks the poetic subtlety in human direct contact with nature, which exemplifies, for him, the primitive’s life. This nostalgia calls, as in his poem, “Redonnez-leur,” for a restoration of the lost connection between humans and nature, “ce qui n’est plus présent en eux.” The last two lines of this poem, “Et qui sait voir la terre aboutir à des fruits, / Point ne l’émeut l’échec quoiqu’il ait tout perdu,” bring attention to what seems to be for Char the most touching experience in life, that is, finding in the fruitfulness of earth an inspiration for hope and revival, regardless of what has been lost.

In addition to earth, Char utilizes another privileged substance in his primitivist nostalgia for the basic elements of life. Fire, and its association with the home or foyer, complements his expression of a longing to return to the lost primitive named “mon pays.” At the same time, Char portrays fire as a mediator between humans and nature in his poem, “Un Feu dans un bocage aride”: “longtemps nos ancêtres ont dû regarder les orages se précipiter et la foudre griller les bois. De cet effroi et de cette contemplation est
apparu le feu conquis [. . .] cette connivence de la nature et de l’homme” (Sous ma casquette amarante 821-22). Moreover, fire takes on with Char the meaning of a driving force, liveliness, and vivacity. “L’Historienne” is an allegory of this meaning: “Celle [. . .] / Qui crève la semence [. . .] Dort au feu de terre” (Poèmes militants 39) signifies that, to seek life, suggested by the word “semence” with its dual meanings of seed and sperm, is to return to the basic element of fire, “feu de terre,” that embodies, like earth, the life sought by the woman, “celle.” Thus, fire, one of the first natural elements of life that brought humans and nature together, replaces the modern human sense of alienation in a world dominated by science with a reconciliation between the individual and nature.

Charian simplicity is distinguished by the poet’s use of opposition. In his interview with Paul Veyne in December of 1983, Char looks back at Orion, the mythological figure of Aromates chasseurs, and describes him as “la partie la plus lumineuse de la galaxie. [. . .] Orion n’est pas un philosophe, c’est un être fruste, simple, comme est simple un chasseur” (469). One finds it curious why Char chose to describe Orion as “not a philosopher” to illustrate his simplicity. Similarly, Char marvels at “l’homme granité, reclus et recouché de Lascaux,” declared “un milliard de fois [plus] lumineux” than man-in-space (“Aux Riverains de la Sorgue” 412). The Paleolithic man is exalted in his humbleness and given greater respect than man-in-space in his unparalleled accomplishment of invading space. The unpretentiousness and absence of artificiality of Orion and the Lascaux man translate, in the Char’s mind, into an easiness in perceiving one’s connection with the outside world.
Char suggests that contemporary people’s perspective on some of the vital questions in life, such as religion, death, and one’s existence, must begin with freeing one’s mind from contemporary ideologies. In his poetry, intuition, antinomous to reasoning, is an allegory of a favorable way of understanding the world. In *Feuilles d’Hypnos*, he exalts the insightful and skillful nature of the “braconniers de Provence” and automatically compares them to primitive people, saying: “Je remercie la chance qui a permis que les braconniers de Provence se battent dans notre camp. La mémoire sylvestre de ces primitifs, leur aptitude pour le calcul, leur flair aigu par tous les temps, je serais surpris qu’une défaillance survînt de ce côté” (194). The comparison established in “ces primitifs” conveys Char’s idea of primitive people, whose intuition helps them achieve an intellectual discernment and natural adaptation. Since he also emphasizes that intuition is a means of reasoning (“L’intuition raisonne”), the primitive thus becomes with Char idealized as a model for humanity for seeking knowledge of the world, freed from traditional rationalizing. For him, this mental freedom, where no arbitrary power dictates human thoughts, is inseparable from a physical one. In one instance, he acknowledges the courage of the people who sought freedom during the Second World War: “J’aime ces êtres [. . .] épris de ce que leur cœur imagine la liberté. [. . .] Merveilleux mérite du peuple” (*Feuilles d’Hypnos* 212). In another, he refers to freedom of thought, saying: “Les civilisations sont des graisses [. . .] / La science ne peut fournir à l’homme dévasté qu’un phare aveugle, [. . .] / La liberté se trouve dans le coeur de celui qui n’a cessé de la vouloir, de la rêver, l’a obtenue contre le crime” (*Le Nu perdu* 466). In both examples, “coeur” and “liberté” are placed side by side to suggest that one
must begin with one’s heart to restore the lost freedom: for Char, the heart alludes to one’s innermost thoughts and zealous search for liberty and, moreover, to one’s courage and firmness of will, given the linguistic association of the French term “courage” with “coeur,” mentioned earlier. Courage certainly plays an important role in Char’s nostalgia for a mind liberated from the cumbersome demands of civilization and contemporary ideologies. This attribute will be a key aspect in his admiration of prehistoric hunting traditions, as I shall attempt to show in the next section.

One can then deduce that, for Char, living in a simple environment, close to the basic elements of life, assures an unmediated connection of the individual and nature and, thus, opens venues for people to meditate on their existence and perspective on the world. In this primitivist frame, Char gives special attention to modern human understanding of death, which is interrelated to the question of religion, and advocates a change in this perspective as a sign of challenging the inevitable end of life and, thus, a way of assuring one’s freedom of thought. Certainly, witnessing the harshness of the Spanish Civil War and World War II and being exposed to death after a dangerous case of blood-poisoning in 1936 awakened Char’s compelling consciousness of death, as he later stated in *Feuilles d’Hypnos* “en fin de compte ‘l’affaire’ est une affaire de vie et de mort et non de nuances à faire prévaloir au sein d’une civilisation dont le naufrage risque de ne pas laisser de trace” (184). The primitive hunter’s dwelling in nature and exposure to death in search of his prey is an image that Char frequently evokes to pinpoint the former’s courage and attitude towards the outside world. The hunting tradition encompasses all the previous elements of Char’s nostalgia for primitive living: the innocent, simple, and
unmediated involvement of humans in nature, as well as the simple, yet lucid and superior, mode of thinking, and the intuitive abilities that assure the hunter’s natural adaptation. The two most eminent works that illustrate Char’s approach to the theme of hunting are “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant” of Lascaux and Aromates chasseurs. In the next section, I shall attempt to demonstrate the similarities between these works, but I will first illustrate why the discovery of the Lascaux cave comes, for Char, as a celebration of what he terms in “Aux Riverains de la Sorgue” “choses cachées” that reveal the secrets of prehistoric life and the noble patterns of primitive living and thinking, lost in modern times.

In Celebration of Lascaux

Breton’s acclamation of the primitive’s view of death, stating that “L’homme dit civilisé continue à se faire de la mort un épouvantail, alors que sur ce point le sauvage peut lui être un modèle de dignité” (“Arcane 17” 40), resonates with Char’s primitivist nostalgia for the Lascaux man’s attitude towards animals, life, and death in “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant.” This poem is the first of Char’s four poems entitled Lascaux and published in 1952 in his collection of poems, La Paroi et la prairie. It is inspired by the drawing of the Well Scene of the Lascaux Cave, which was also a source for Bataille’s theory of eroticism and sacred continuity. Since Char’s poem relies on ellipsis and is formed of six lines, it will be important to decipher some of the words in light of Bataille’s approach to the same Scene, discussed in chapter three.
Before discussing both writers’ treatment of the Scene, it is important to present a few facts about the two friends, former surrealists, and neighbors in Carpentras. As far as the dates of publication of their works are concerned, Elizabeth Bosch observes that, even if Char’s Lascaux poems were published before Bataille’s Lascaux ou la naissance de l’art, “les différents contacts entre les deux écrivains pendant cette période, comme le révèlent les témoignages littéraires [. . .], rendent tout à fait plausible l’hypothèse d’un échange de vues à propos de la grotte de Lascaux” (98). In any case, James Lawler confirms that Char “first visited the Paleolithic caves some years after writing his poems” (52) and that he relied in writing his poems on “photographs taken by his friend Christian Zervos as well as from text and reproductions in Henri Breuil’s monumental study of 1952” (52). Although Lawler does not mention the influence of Lascaux ou la naissance de l’art on Char, Bataille’s approaches to the Well Scene and his references to Kirchner’s, Eveline Lot-Falck’s, and Alfred Métraux’s accounts of primitive hunting rituals can help us to understand, to a certain extent, Char’s poem, “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant.”

HOMME-OISEAU MORT ET BISON MOURANT

Long corps qui eut l’enthousiasme exigeant,
A présent perpendiculaire à la Brute blessée.

O tué sans entrailles!
Tué par celle qui fut tout et, réconciliée, se meurt;
Lui, danseur d’abîme, esprit, toujours à naître,
Oiseau et fruit pervers des magies cruellement sauvé.

The most unique aspect of the drawing of the Well Scene, which attracted Bataille and, most likely, Char, is the unusual co-presence of sexual excitement and death, where the
bird-headed man lies ithyphallic in front of the bison, whose entrails are spilled out. Françoise Han observes that in this Scene “il ne s’agit pas d’un simple rituel magique destiné à envoûter le gibier, interprétation utilitaire d’hommes du 20ème siècle” (35). Although Char does not make any explicit reference in his poem to the man’s sexual excitement, the obvious ithyphallic condition intimately relates to the notion of ecstasy, which Char evoked earlier in Le Marteau sans maître. In one poem, “Cruauté,” Char expresses his interest in ecstasy and pleasure, which he associates with the primitive’s dancing ritual: “Les peuples danseurs obnubilés par le sentiment de plénitude / Après l’exaltation / Se dévêtent de la substance de jouir / Retournent à la projection permanente” (42). Ecstasy, a synonym for ‘exaltation’ (Le Petit Robert), accompanied with “jouir,” carries a sexual connotation of pleasure. Similarly, in the drawing of the Well Scene, it is more likely that Char related sexual excitement to ecstasy, for the man lies ecstatic, or as Bataille says, “dans le sommeil de l’extase” (9, 374), as if he has entered into a trance state. The association of ecstasy and pleasure in Char’s early poem, as well as in the drawing of the Well Scene, gives ample room to believe that the drawing appealed to Char’s nostalgia for the primitive’s ritualized respect for what moderns would consider an “insolite” behavior, which is here the sexual pleasure and ecstasy carried out in a mystic state during an act of killing. As was explained in the third chapter, ecstasy, which means a trance state associated with a mystic experience, is an unusual way to attempt to accede to a certain reality that is not perceptible to the mind. Thus, mysticism becomes, by extension, appealing to Char because it differs from contemporary belief in one God, which adds to Char’s nostalgia for the primitive a
metaphysical feature. Religion, with ecstasy and pleasure, has also been of interest to Char, who once wrote in *Le Marteau sans maître*: “Nous [. . .] qui ne savons pas désirer en priant” (“L’Historienne” 40), thus suggesting that modern people are unable to put together pleasure and religion. It would then be fair to aver that the Well Scene of Lascaux concretizes Char’s dream of uniting the distant elements of desire and religion, which are ritualized in primitive thinking.

In discussing the importance and uniqueness of conceiving of ecstasy and religion together in ritualized mystic experiences, Bataille’s view of the mechanism of sacrifice can also help to shed light on the man-animal relationship in the Well Scene, which Char captured in the title of his poem. Hollier ascertains death in animal sacrifices as Bataille’s way of attaining ecstasy. Moreover, Bataille’s account of Kirchner’s interpretation of the ecstatic state of the Lascaux man, stating that “le sacrifice yakoute est en rapport avec le ravissement en extase” (9, 95), resonates with the same mechanism of sacrifice and mysticism in Aztec ritual sacrifices. Because of these rituals, Bataille asserted that witnessing death in ritual sacrifices (of humans and animals) could put people in ecstatic states, as he previously attempted to prove through his personal practices and his sociological writings. In light of Bataille’s view of death and ecstasy, I would propose to read “mort” in Char’s title in the Bataillean metaphoric sense of “la petite mort,” or imitation of death, which explains the man’s sexual arousal. There is no doubt that this association of death and sexual excitement, adapted from primitive ritualized sacrifices, can be viewed by Char as a transgressive behavior. But since, in the discourse of modernist primitivism, it is mainly the otherness of the primitive that attracts
the primitivist, it would be fair to deduce that it is the difference, unusualness, and the
sense of transgression bringing together death, ecstasy, and religion in the Well Scene,
that Char enthusiastically underscores in “Aux Riverains de la Sorgue” as “choses
cachées” in “l’homme granité, reclus et recouché de Lascaux, au dur membre débourbé
de la mort” (412). Char’s choice of “mort” to introduce in the title of the poem the bird-
headed man, who is ithyphallic in the face of the dying bison, and the poet’s reference in
“Aux Riverains” to the “dur membre débourbé de la mort” (“dur membre” suggesting the
erect phallus) take on a new meaning if read in light of Bataille’s notion of “petite mort”
and of his erotic theory of ritualized sacrifice and ecstasy. Consequently, Char’s
statement that the Lascaux man is more “luminous” than man-in-space because he reveals
the hidden secrets about the essence of human experience suggests, by extension, his
appreciation of the revealing strangeness of the coincidence of pleasure, ecstasy, death,
and mysticism in the Scene.

Furthermore, the man’s sexual excitation in front of the dying bison, presented in
the opposition of “mort” and “mourant” in the title, entails an involved relationship of
hunter and prey and adds a dimension to the notion of transgression. In Bataille’s view
of the Well Scene, transgression emanates from the man’s awareness of the forbidden act
of having killed the bison. Desire emanates from this awareness of transgression: “c’est
l’état de transgression qui commande le désir, l’exigence d’un monde plus profond” (9,
41). But the question that poses itself is, if hunters expect to kill an animal, what
instigates in their mind this awareness of transgression? In Dossiers de Lascaux, Bataille
refers to Alfred Métraux’s account of hunting rituals in Brazil, where the hunters, after
having killed an animal, “attendiaient de l’animal traqué le pardon, comme dans un drame ordonné par une fatalité tragique” (9, 371). Why? Because animals are, for primitive people, divine creatures. Although hunters seek to kill those animals, they still honor them and ask them for forgiveness. According to Bataille: “On devait craindre que le bison mort ne voulût se venger de son meurtrier. Il fallait donc s’excuser près de la victime, il fallait la pleurer, l’honorer comme un dieu. Comme la mort la transfigurait, elle avait d’emblée le prestige surnaturel qui appartient à l’au-delà” (9, 371, my emphasis). The hunter’s expiation before the dying animal suggested in this account underscores the latter’s superiority and his “divine” nature in the primitive’s belief system. In Char’s poem, “pervers” illustrates that a crime or forbidden behavior occurred, since, in Le Petit Robert, this adjective describes the act of accomplishing “des actes immoraux.” And, Bataille certainly points out that “la mort de l’animal mettait en jeu le sentiment de crime et de transgression” (9, 374), which would lead one to conclude that “pervers” points to the man’s awareness of his killing of the animal. Thus, the flip side of this new understanding of the primitive hunter’s awareness of his transgression is the affirmation of the superiority and divinization of the animal, symbol of nature, in prehistoric times.

Moreover, Bataille notes that “la mort de l’animal dépend, au moins partiellement, de l’animal lui-même. Pour être tué, il faut qu’il ait au préalable, donné son consentement, qu’il se soit pour ainsi dire rendu complice de son propre meurtre” (9, 75, my emphasis). As to how this account relates to Char’s poem, the term “reconciliée” in the fourth line of “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant” can only make sense if
understood in light of this account of the animal’s “consent” to, and “complicity” in, death. By putting the adjective “reconciliée” between two commas, Char underscores the importance of reconciling the animal with the man as an essential condition for the latter’s salvation, which is reflected in “sauvé,” the culminating term of the poem. Char then is interested in the reverse of powers and in the man’s defeat by the animal and his need then of salvation. In this case, “sauvé” can be read in light of Bataille’s account of the man’s need for purification: “il [the man] tombait lui-même de ce fait dans le pouvoir de la mort et devait tout au moins se purifier d’une évidente souillure” (9, 375). The idea of seeking purification connects with the man’s awareness of his transgression, his crime of killing, or, even further, his sexual arousal instigated by the act of killing, which would make falling “dans le pouvoir de la mort” mean, as Bataille would see it, the force of sexual consummation or “la petite mort.” This hunter-prey relationship in the Well Scene becomes then, for Char, a celebration of the time when human-animal powers were reversed and of the honor given to animals.

One of the most apparent elements of Char’s nostalgia in “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant” is the emphasis put on the superiority of the animal in prehistoric times. This element is clearly reflected in the capitalization of “la Brute” and in calling it “qui fut tout,” thus duplicating Bataille’s statement that a wild animal “tenait essentiellement au caractère divin” (9, 373). The superior animal attributes are clearly illustrated in Bataille’s reference to Eveline Lot-Falck’s account of Siberian hunting rituals, according to which the hunter, despite his intention of killing the animal, still considers it to be equal, and even superior, to him:
Le chasseur [. . .] regarde l’animal au moins comme son égal. Il le voit chasser, comme lui, pour se nourrir. [. . .] D’un autre côté, l’animal est supérieur à l’homme par un ou plusieurs caractères; par sa force physique, son agilité, la finesse de son ouïe et de son flair. [. . .] Il accordera plus de prix encore aux pouvoirs spirituels qu’il associe à ces qualités physiques. L’animal est en contact plus direct avec la divinité. (Bataille 9, 75)

If it is the animal who partakes of the divine quality, then it would not be surprising to see Char begin his poem by pointing out the man’s taking on of an animal’s identity by wearing a bird’s mask, as if the man attempts to hide his own identity so as to appropriate the animal’s superiority and thus become his equal. This idea is also underlined in Lascaux ou la naissance de l’art that focuses more than anything else on exploring the meaning of “l’homme paré du prestige de la bête” (9, 62) in order to demonstrate that “l’homme de l’Age du renne nous laissait de l’animal une image à la fois prestigieuse et fidèle” (9, 62). In the traditional practice of magic by shamans or sorcerers, which Char refers to in “magies,” shamans wore a bird costume to appropriate the bird’s spiritual power in accompanying the killed animal to heaven, as was shown in the third chapter. This account emphasizes the bird’s superiority to the human. In Char’s poem, the title also suggests an interesting contrast: the present participle “mourant,” as opposed to the already dead man, described by the past participle “mort,” conveys the animal’s physical superiority in its endurance of pain. Moreover, the man’s “esprit toujours à naître” (reflected by his ithyphallic condition) signifies a regenerated spirit, which can be read as a result of his salvation (“sauvé”), after being reconciled with the animal. Char certainly identifies with this reconciliation, being the observer of the harmonious co-existence restored between human and animal, which signifies for him a reconnection with nature. As Minahen observes, “It is precisely just such a synthesis of subject and object that the

157
poet-observer envies from the isolation of his modern vantage, an estrangement that he, too, through a parallel act of art, namely the poem *Lascaux*, strives to overcome” (71-72). As such, life is asserted in the man’s rejuvenated spirit, which is only possible through a reconciliation of hunter and prey, or in the larger sense, of the individual and nature.

It remains important to identify the reason why animals were killed and its meaning for Char. Besides the obvious reason of survival in the hunting tradition, Bataille explains that “il s’agissait de dépasser la terreur de la mort en un mouvement de hardiesse malgré la terreur, en lui faisant face” (9, 373). There exists then an act of courage in facing an animal, where the hunter is exposed to danger and death. Char’s opening line of his poem conveys this attribute in saying “enthousiasme exigeant,” which alludes to the man’s daring act of approaching the giant body of the bison. As has been noted earlier, having the courage to liberate the mind from the fear of death and its force assures, in Char’s opinion, human freedom of thought; in the example of the Well Scene, killing the animal assures the life, the survival, of the human, which the erection denotes. What Peter Connor observes about Bataille’s interest in mysticism “as a weapon against what he saw as the confining and reductive positivism and philosophy” (179) applies to Char too, who advocates intuition as a way of reasoning and explicitly celebrates the Lascaux man’s “esprit toujours à naître,” along with the implied mysticism and ecstasy in the Scene. Char’s anti-modernism is a call to challenge bourgeois established religious and moralistic systems and to rethink the forces of what, in contemporary times, is considered a transgression. The primitives’ break with social rules in festivals can set for modern people a pattern of behavior, as Char suggests in the following poem: “tout en
nous ne devrait être qu’une fête joyeuse quand quelque chose que nous n’avons pas prévu, [. . .] qui va parler à notre cœur, [. . .] s’accomplit” (La Parole en archipel 377). The ecstasy experienced with mysticism in the Well Scene is to be restored in contemporary thinking, because, in any case, it can only assert life, whether through sexual ecstasy or through the belief in hunter-prey, thus human-nature, reconciliation.

The Paleolithic age, as Elizabeth Bosch observes, “était dominée par la civilisation de la chasse” (99). It is doubtless that Char’s anti-modernist attitude and appreciation of the primitive hunter’s view of animals, religion, ecstasy, and death fit in this type of civilization. Whereas Bataille suggests in Lascaux ou la naissance de l’art a new outlook with regard to the sexual forces as the basis for a new sense of civilization, exclaiming “nous éprouvons [. . .] le poids d’une civilisation dont nous sommes pourtant fiers. Nous avons soif d’une autre vérité [. . .]. Nous sommes conduits à [. . .] [donner] des règles aux forces sexuelles (9, 70-71), Char does not address the issue of eroticism in his poem on the Well Scene, but approaches the ithyphallic condition of the man on a spiritual level, translating it into a force of life. His celebration of the rejuvenation of the man’s spirit (“esprit toujours à naître”) not only emphasizes the man’s reconciliation with the animal, but also sheds light on the force of life that can be born out of “death,” playing on the word “mort” in the Bataillean sense of “la petite mort” or orgasm. This play of “death” and its assertion of life is echoed in La Parole en archipel by the question: “Mourir, c’est devenir [. . .] vivant?” (“La Bibliothèque est en feu” 382). This conflation of desire and life has been noted by Virginia La Charité, who observes the importance of sexual union and life in Char’s Le Poème pulvérisé, noting that “the consummation of
love reflects the universal pattern of creation, the dialectic of being-destruction-being” (La Charité 103). There is also another reference that Char makes in Arrière-histoire du Poème pulvérisé to human continuity, where he expresses his faith in the human will to confront destiny “pour assurer la continuité” of life (270). Needless to say, the correspondence between Char’s and Bataille’s thought on human continuity is apparent, although Bataille emphasizes “les corps [qui] s’ouvrent à la continuité” (10, 23) in light of ritualized orgies, while the continuity or rejuvenation in question in Char’s poem concerns the spirit (“esprit”) and not the body, as a way of opposing contemporary fixation on material needs. To this opposition corresponds his long-time celebration of the virtues of simplicity, of breaking away from what civilization and science have produced, and of returning to the basic elements of life.

If one threads together “mort,” “reconciliée,” “esprit, toujours à naître,” “fruit pervers des magies,” and “sauvé,” and reads them in light of Bataille’s theories of sacrifice, transgression, mysticism, and ecstasy, which Char may have been familiar with, but which are, in any case, consistent with the poet’s own view, one can assert that Char’s nostalgia takes on a transcendent element. Nostalgic for a reintegrated world where modern people rethink their relationship with nature, their idea of religion, and their attitude towards life and death, Char celebrates the discovery of the Lascaux Cave in general, and of the Well Scene in particular, in announcing that these values are still present (“A présent”), preserved in the drawings, and revived with the spirit of the man. This transcendent nostalgia does not aim at separating humans from earth; on the contrary, it continues its initial attempt to end modern people’s alienation from earth, by
recovering the primitive values lost due to civilization and by reminding people, as Bataille also does, of the superior attributes of animality.

Char’s celebration of the recovery of the prehistoric way of living and thinking continues throughout the other three poems of Lascaux. The concomitance of his images with the theme of celebration and with the ideas of “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant” is noteworthy. In the second poem, “Les Cerfs noirs,” “Cerfs, vous avez franchi l’espace millénaire” welcomes the prehistoric stags’ arrival into modern times. This poem shows the Paleolithic art as a vision of the world, where the Lascaux man (“le chasseur”), whose spirit is reborn in the first poem, becomes identical to the artist (“le génie”), who eternalizes his art. Char admires this genius and wishes he could live in prehistoric times to “see” what they saw (“Et si j’avais leurs yeux”). In poem three, “La Bête innommable,” the gruesome deformity of the unidentified animal is coupled with the affirmation of its superiority, introduced in the opening of the poem, and in the entrance of the cave, as “La Bête,” capitalized. Its ugliness is reversed by the poet’s allusion to its importance as the place of birth of humanity, contained in the abrupt change of tone and subject in the verse “Ainsi m’apparaît dans la frise de Lascaux, mère fantastiquement déguisée.” In other words, its appearance matters less than its importance as “le berceau de l’humanité” (Bosch 107). In poem four, “Jeune cheval à la crinière vaporeuse,” Char takes up again his celebration of the revival of the Cave and its coming back into light and life, as the verses “Que tu es beau, printemps, cheval / Criblant le ciel de ta crinière” restore the animation to the prehistoric horse of the grotto, and assure its rejuvenation like a spring. Finally, “Transir,” written in 1951, but added as
a conclusion to the four-part poem, *Lascaux*, in 1952, translates Char’s dream of reviving the age of the reindeer, the age of breathing – “l’âge du souffle” (352) – into modern times. This poem condemns the cruelty and ignorance of modern humans, “Insouciants, nous exaltons et contrecarrons justement la nature” (353), and culminates on the hope for a change and renewal, “la lutte contre la cruauté profane, [. . .] Sera t-elle notre novation?” (353).

The theme of hunting that Char admires because of its human/nature/animal complicity is pursued in the collection of poems, *Aromates chasseurs*, composed between 1972 and 1975. If the drawings of Lascaux portray to modern people the world in which their ancestors lived, *Aromates chasseurs* encompasses several aspects of Char’s nostalgia for primitive living and thinking. Orion’s story carries a moral significance for humans: the question, “Une certaine superstition n’ennoblit-elle pas?” (“Orion Iroquois” 525), announces that Orion’s mythical figure sets an example for the ennoblement of modern people. In living, Orion is a king, but also a hunter, subjected to weakness due to his blindness, and is pursued by animals and exposed to danger. Yet, he lives in harmony with nature, as a “charpentier de l’acier,” able to challenge the firmness of steel and to reshape it as easy as a carpenter carves wood. Orion incarnates human attachment to earth: he derives his satisfaction from living close to it, “un météore humain a la terre pour miel” (“Réception d’Orion” 521). He is a humble and simple, “roi serviteur” ("Réception d’Orion” 521), who lives in harmony with nature, for bees and flowers follow him. In thinking, the opening line of “Dieux et mort,” another poem of *Aromates chasseurs*, presenting the “Retour d’Orion à la terre des lombes,” sets the context of the
poem and maintains that what humans need is a liberation from the authority of a God and of death: “Nuls dieux à l’extérieur de nous, car ils sont le fruit de la seule de nos pensées qui ne conquiert pas la mort” (520). What Char seems to want to say is, once people’s thinking does not conform to the authority of a higher power that confines it, they will be able to conquer death, by exercising their freedom of thought, like the Paleolithic man whose ithyphallic condition attests to his ecstatic projection into a mystic state, and into life, whether through sexual satisfaction or reconciliation with the animal.

As Bishop concludes on the subject of mysticism in Char’s work, there exists a “divineness as always to be assumed within the self, privately, intimately, simply, unpretentiously” (183). To a certain extent, this is the same type of divineness that defines the superior attributes of animals, which humans have lost and need to reappropriate. “Retour d’Orion à la terre des lombes” suggests that it is Orion, “pigmenté d’infini” (“Evadé d’archipel” 511), that humans need to follow, for, spiritually, he duplicates the Lascaux man’s “esprit toujours à naître” through his infinitude. Char then affirms life in the hunter figure that carries the secrets of the ennoblement of the human; that is, within every individual lies an endless life, or so the following verse says: “Le merveilleux chez cet être: toute source, en lui, donne le jour à un ruisseau” (La Parole en archipel 383).

The elements that form Char’s nostalgia for the primitive complement each other, fusing the living and thinking experiences together. Living in innocence and simplicity and being directly involved in nature purify the mind and affirm the simplicity of one’s thinking that is no longer subjugated to the complexity of rationalism or to the authority
of a superior power or of death. Intuition and primitive mysticism allow one to be in
touch with “le coeur” of things, not just see the surface; as Char exclaims in Aromates
chasseurs, “nous inventons des forces dont nous touchons les extrémités, presque jamais
le coeur” (“Voyageurs” 519). Life is asserted in the hunter-like involvement in the
cosmos, which gives a new perspective from which humans can look at the universe; they
no longer need fear the limitations of death or conform to one authority. Religion takes
with Char, as with Bataille, a new meaning, advocating a thinking heir to a mystical
theology, but missing a God: “Nuls dieux à l’extérieur de nous.”

What distinguishes Char’s primitivism is his imagination that plays a major role
in defining the elements of his nostalgia. Although his childhood and adult contact with
nature was reflected in his vocabulary, it remains clear that he relied, for the most part of
his nostalgic expression, on a poetic language that mediates between the modern and the
lost primitive. Char’s sensitive awareness apprehended the subtle influences of nature,
elements like earth and fire, innocence, and simplicity on the human soul. Even though
his writing of the poems of Lascaux was not based on a visit to the cave, his language and
images captured, through an economy of words, the symbolic representation of
prehistoric life and what this life can offer to improve living and thinking in modern
times. Besides, the drawings on the walls of the grotto embodied Char’s previous
thoughts on freedom and courage, ecstasy and mysticism, and life and death. His
nostalgia emanated from a deep concern with humanity and its “rightful claim to
happiness” (Winspur 92), yearned for a return to the lost primitive Other, and recovered
the lost virtues of primitiveness in a “Rousseauistic celebration of Lascaux man’s wild,
unspoiled, mystical involvement in nature” (Minahen 68). Char’s primitivism resonates with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s, which was also nostalgic: he continues Rousseau’s romantic sensibility to nature, only in a modernist form of rejecting the worn tracks of philosophy and science and re-conceptualizing religion and one’s relationship with the outside world. In the Charian primitivism, we see the world through his poetic eyes.

Notes

1 All references to Char’s work are taken from his Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

2 All references to Jean-Louis Roux’s account of Char’s stay in Haute-Provence from 1936 to 1945 are taken from “Témoignages” in René Char’s Oeuvres complètes, 1115-31.

3 It is also important to add that, despite the association of Le Marteau sans maître with the surrealist influence on Char’s composition of this collective volume, Char does not reveal his position toward this association until Moulin premier, written after he distances himself from the surrealist group. This position is implied in his refusal to be instructed how to write, as he announces in Moulin premier “le poète a plus besoin d’être ‘échauffé’ que d’être instruit” (70). This position is also witnessed by Georges Mounin, who states in Avez-lu Char?: “ce n’est pas le surréalisme qui servira de Pierre de touche à la poésie, mais au contraire la poésie qui va servir de pierre de touche au surréalisme” (72).

4 In the notes she affixes to Char’s complete works, Anne Reinbold explains that “Ascien,” which comes from the greek word askios, signifies “sans ombres” (1237). The term refers to the “habitants de la zone torride, ainsi nommés parce que, quand le soleil est au zénith, leur ombre est sous leurs pieds; ils semblent ainsi n’en point avoir” (1237). For Reinbold, shadow in Char’s poem refers to one’s memory as a “métaphore qui associe l’ombre et la mémoire” (1238). In such a view, “shadowless” means no memory and thus no liaison with the past, which implies the idea of beginning anew.


6 My goal is not to analyze closely this poem since this has been done by other critics, including Elizabeth Bosch, James Lawler, and Charles D. Minahen; however, I will focus only on the elements that illustrate Char’s nostalgia.

7 Mysticism in Char’s work has been of interest to critics, like Michael Bishop, who defines the term as “an unknowing but intuitive (self-) initiation into” an action (179). The intuitive element in this definition supports my understanding of Char’s metaphysical nostalgia for a new way of thinking that defies rationalism. For more on Bishop’s article, see Michael Bishop, “Char’s Mysticism” Figuring Things: Char, Ponge, and Poetry in the Twentieth Century, ed. Charles D. Minahen (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1994) 175-89.
CONCLUSION

Ethnologists and anthropologists have studied different aspects of the so-called primitive societies, such as their mentality and the mechanism of their rituals, but no agreed-upon definition has been given to the term primitive. It remains obvious, though, that the West has been unable to agree on one definition of the term because of its use of industrialization and progress as the evaluating standards of those Other cultures. Nonetheless, despite Darwin’s naturalist theory of evolution and Lévy-Bruhl’s belittling study of primitive mentality, it is primitive cultures’ non-exposure to civilization that has made them an allegory of a longed-for state of plenitude and a projection of the West’s feelings about the present. Even the most objective social anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, attests to the West’s need for those Other cultures to explore its own sense of identity. His statement, “la raison qui nous a poussés vers l’ethnologie, c’est une difficulté à nous adapter au milieu social dans lequel nous sommes nés” (Entretiens 20) resonates with the history of Western, especially French, ideas with regard to the primitive. Primitivism was not only manifested, as was widely believed, in the field of Western artistic adaptation of tribal arts, but also in the development of the literary history of ideas.

The idealized primitive has been a significant motivation for primitivism in modern times. In Bataille’s, Leiris’s, and Char’s works, it is clear that they all shared the
belief that the most vital aspect of the primitive was to wed the physical living experience to the spiritual one. In this shared admiration for the primitive, their primitivist thoughts were, to a certain extent, related. Bataille’s exploration of the vitality of ritual sacrifices that lead to ecstatic states and accompanied an inspiration in mysticism meant for him a type of release from the self, but also a way to explore pleasure. He homogenized all sacrificial rituals, from Aztec mass sacrifices to Yakut cults, fascinated with the priest’s/shaman’s attainment of ecstasy in the face of human or animal death. This homogenization included also orgiastic festivals, where participants experienced a collective loss, going beyond themselves, in the “petite mort,” or orgasm, similar to the ecstatic state that originates from the primitive practice of mysticism. For him, this experience gave humans a sense of the continuity they have lost because of their awareness that they will die. There is no doubt that, in reading Bataille’s theory of sacred sacrifices and eroticism, there is a tacit message addressed to all modern humans, which underlies the apparent homogenization of primitive rituals. He sheds new light on eroticism to which the primitives gave free reign in their orgiastic festivals. In this sense, eroticism becomes for Bataille the most powerful intimation we have of the sense of continuity and of what is beyond the frame of life and death, because “nous avons la nostalgie d’une continuité perdue” (10, 21).

This nostalgia was explored in Char’s primitivism, only in a more poetic frame. His nostalgia for a primitive “vie simple” (Fureur et mystère 238) was carried out in the physical act of leading a simple life, near the earth and its basic elements, which are vital and productive. This life, for Char, allows the individual to think clearly, away from the complexity of philosophy and rationalism and from the authority of one external power.
Man-in-space and his representation of scientific progress is not what modern humans need; with Char, the Paleolithic man regains attention with the discovery of the Lascaux Cave and the recovery of the most intimate secrets about prehistoric human relationship with the outside world, particularly with animals. Animals, previously divinized and honored, set a model for modern people, who lost the “prestige naissant de la grâce animale” (Bataille 9, 62). The vitality, explicitly examined in Bataille’s theory of human continuity through erotic experiences, is implicitly present in Char’s poem, “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant,” in the interface of sexual erection and death, especially in the word “mort” that can refer to the Bataillean sense of sexual pleasure achieved through the shaman’s ecstasy or due to his awareness of killing the animal. Char celebrated this vitality not only in his first poem, in the rejuvenation of the man’s spirit, but throughout the other three poems of Lascaux, announcing the revival of the prehistoric animals and their rise from the dark depths of the grotto into the light.

Leiris’s primitivism is different; he forges his own way with the primitive, searching for means to transform himself in Africa. His awareness of his sexual anxiety distances him from his object of study, with which he attempts to fuse to become primitive. Leiris may have had a primitivist dream of a simple, paradisiacal Africa where he would become Other and overcome his sexual anxiety. But, once he faces the “monde, objet réel” – Africa as a place of despair and poverty – which contradicts his imaginary “monde, pure phantasme,” the voice of Leiris, the Frenchman, speaks out and reveals his attachment to bourgeois metropolitan culture. Nevertheless, despite Leiris’s failure to become Other, the fact remains that he appreciates the vitality of local rituals, like “zâr,” by giving sometimes passionate, certainly subjective, descriptions of African
wood carvings and phalluses. With Char, he shares a dream of transcendence in the sense of reconnecting with the child within, thus regaining innocence, which, for Leiris, translates into finding a cure for his sexual inhibitions. Char’s nostalgia, as was shown, is transcendent, since his voice speaks out a wistful desire to go beyond the modern Western mind that is a product of rationalism. But, unlike Leiris, Char envisions innocence as a basis for attaining a primitive-like character that would benefit, not just the self, but all of humanity, by freeing the mind from traditional rationalizing and exploring intuition as a new, free way of thinking.

In the versions of Bataille’s, Leiris’s, and Char’s primitivism, transgression played a role in reflecting their opposition to contemporary cultural rules and longing for change. In Bataille, transgression was best exemplified in primitive festivals, which he envisioned as a lieu for reintroducing the excluded forbidden, such as erotic activities, desires, and the meaning and effect of their release on the individual’s exercise of his/her freedom, away from any moralistic pressure. For Leiris, transgression was a fantasy but certainly a lived experience; he actually transgressed the sacredness of the many African fetishes that he forcibly took. This transgression empowered him and related in his mind to the domination of the imaginary female, whom he “penetrated,” through his entrance into the cabin where the fetish was, holding in his hand a knife. This transgression was all the more enjoyable for the autobiographer, who finds in Lucrèce’s and Judith’s stories a certain “érotisme – pour moi tout à fait extraordinaire – dont sont nimbées les deux figures” (L’Age d’homme 60). The object of Leiris’s fantasized transgression was Africa, which functioned in his mind as a female body. This erotic, lived experience of transgression was made possible through Leiris’s exposure to African life. In Char’s
work, transgression was rather carried out on the mental level, aiming at reconfiguring modern human’s idea of religion, life, and death, recalling Bataille’s theory of eroticism. In addition to the sense of transgression that is present in Char’s advocacy of a new way of perceiving the outside world, thus defying the imposed patterns of abstract rational thinking and philosophy, his poem on the Well Scene of Lascaux makes an implicit reference to the superiority of prehistoric thinking. As was examined, the identification of the Lascaux man as “mort” in the title of “Homme-oiseau mort et bison mourant,” in addition to the allusion to this man being saved from death in “Aux Riverains de la Sorgue” (“au dur membre débourbé de la mort”), thus confirming the interface of erotic pleasure and death, gives ample room to believe that Char was interested in the type of transgression that was witnessed in the coincidence of phallus and death. This interest may not have been explicitly expressed, but it is certainly present in the precise choice of words, like “mort” and “dur membre débourbé de la mort.” In his allegory of primitive intuition and mysticism as the new model for modern thinking, Char restored, along with Bataille, what Lévy-Bruhl declared an inferior primitive mentality.

In the three examples of primitivism, the erotic question is given attention, which is not surprising, since the history of primitivism in French literature, beginning with Montaigne and continuing through to Char, unfolds a male view of non-Western cultures with a desire to explore one’s sexuality. This interest has its own shortcomings in the feminist sphere, where the female is positioned as an object of the male’s attainment of a continuity of being through eroticism, as in the example of Bataille, and as a projection of the male’s fantasies, as in that of Leiris. Seldom does one read of a female thinker who visited indigenous cultures or approached them in a literary work. Texts by female
writers, which may still be unexplored in the primitivist discourse, would certainly require attention and analysis to reveal a different female perspective of the notions of death, transgression, and eroticism in non-civilized cultures. Thus, the question arises: what meaning would the primitive acquire in a female primitivist point of view and would she also, perhaps, express her own sexuality in this game of mirroring between the self and the Other?

In this work, Bataille’s, Leiris’s, and Char’s different primitivist approaches to the primitive’s vitality and transgression in this game of mirroring brings them together and yet distinguishes them in this respect. There is no doubt that it is the Western eye that evaluates and presents the primitive and thus has the authority as a subject to present what it “sees” as different or Other in the object observed. The observer’s outsider position shapes the primitive object by comparing it to one’s own cultural or moralistic system. This is particularly important to our initial discussion of how the primitive has been a product of the West that has constructed its many meanings. In the examples of Bataille, Leiris, and Char, and even before them, in the example of André Breton, the primitive attracted them mainly because of its otherness, thus offering them new paths to explore their Western identity. Their common opposition to the present way of expression, living, or thinking instigated their primitivism and their desire to change a present situation. They sought what was missing in themselves, in their writing, or in their society; in a sense, they coveted what they did not have. Marianna Torgovnick summarizes this search for difference in her study of Western primitivism:

Those who study or write about the primitive usually begin by defining it as different from (usually opposite to) the present. After that, reactions to the present take over. Is the present too materialistic? Primitive life is not
– it is a precapitalist utopia in which only use value, never exchange value, prevails. Is the present sexually repressed? Not primitive life – primitives live life whole, without fear of the body. Is the present promiscuous and undiscriminating sexually? Then primitives teach us the inevitable limits and controls placed on sexuality and the proper subordination of sexuality to the needs of child rearing. Does the present see itself as righteously Christian? Then primitives become heathens, mired in false beliefs. (8-9)

This is particularly true of Bataille’s discontent with the surrealists’ lack of social involvement and with contemporary systemization of sacred values, of Leiris’s sexual anxiety, and of Char’s condemnation of wars and rejection of rationalism, philosophy, and science. As a result, Bataille, Leiris, and Char turned towards the primitive and idealized it as a place, respectively, of a practice of the impure sacred, of purification of the self, and of intuitive abilities.

In this Western shaping process of the primitive, the writers I have studied in this work are, more or less, positive representations of Western primitivism. Even though Leiris depicted Africa sometimes in his journal as a place of despair and poverty, he still wished to fuse with its culture. It is doubtless that the notion of the primitive took different meanings with the different authors studied in this work. However, on a more general level, one notices that from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to René Char, the notion of the primitive did not evolve; it remained idealized as the premise of humanity and the lost place to which modern people must return. Four centuries after Rousseau, Western civilization is still accused of having spoiled the innocent nature of the individual. Western thinkers still seek in the lost primitive the answer for modern people’s recuperation of their lost innocence and harmony with the outside world. With Bataille, Leiris, and Char, the primitive has certainly become a common means of expressing one’s unease with the present and exploring one’s identity. As such, one would certainly
join Torgovnick in affirming that “the real secret of the primitive in this century has often been the same secret as always: the primitive can be – has been, will be (?) – whatever Euro-Americans want it to be” (9).
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