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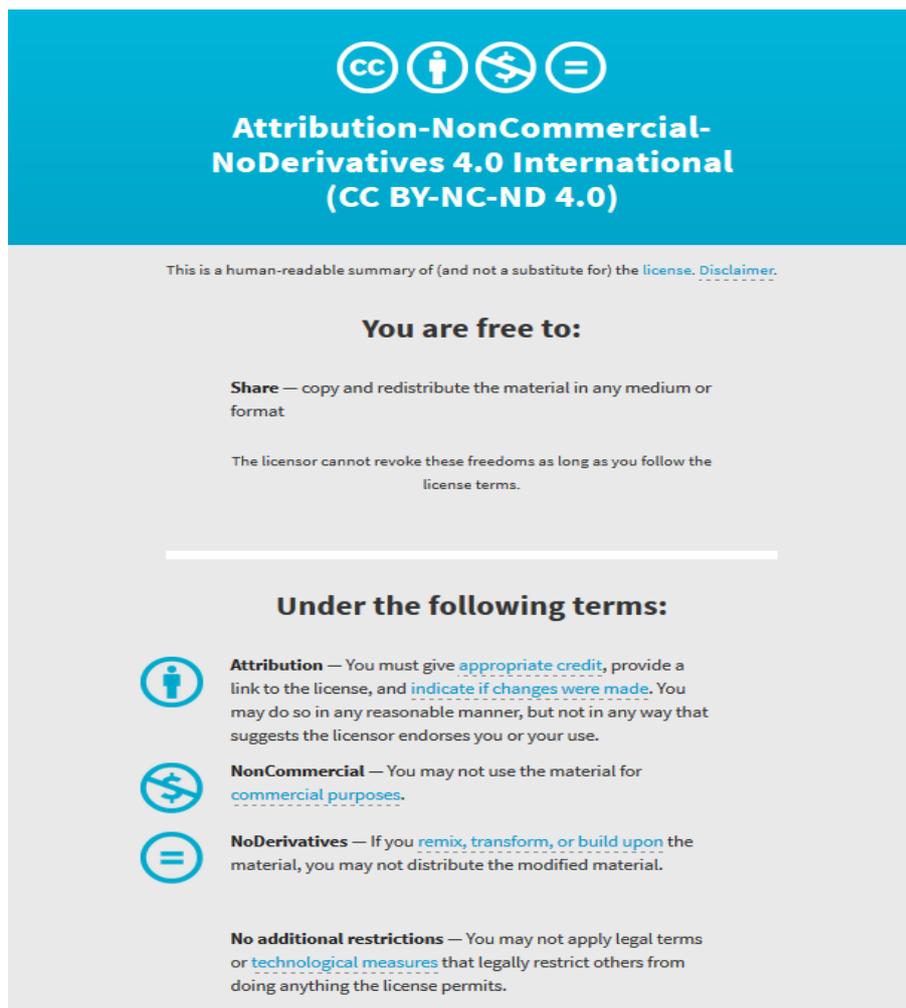
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Art and origin: Bataille and Blanchot's return to Lascaux

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Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot's mutual interest in the Lascaux cave paintings signals their common concern to construct a discourse of origin in relation to art. Both writers consider origin in terms of the anxiety-filled questioning surrounding the ontological and historical aporias that have plagued Western thought, including those that appear under the banner of the Modern and the Postmodern. Both ask: what kind of discourse presides over the disconcerting doubling of reality performed by the first artists? For Bataille, origin is bound up with the ritual significance of eroticism and death as these underpin all forms of artistic endeavour; Blanchot, for his part, focuses on the existential void that takes up residence at the centre of all poetry and art.

In attempting to break with tradition, modern art and literature heralded a period of anxious questioning in relation to origin. James Joyce, in *Ulysses*, illustrates the modern preoccupation with origin by making his young characters recall impertinently their forebears:

— Pooh! Buck Mulligan said. We have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes. It's quite simple. He proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father.

— What? Haines said, beginning to point at Stephen. He himself?¹

The youthful disdain of their illustrious forefathers brings the young men all the more surely to the question of origin: who are we to claim absolute knowledge, given that we have done no more than appear in the shadow of our fathers?

Joyce's insights find their theoretical underpinnings in the work of Michel Foucault, particularly in his historico-philosophical account of the Modern reconfiguration of the concept of origin. In *Les Mots et les choses*, Foucault points to the radical change that occurred around the middle of the nineteenth century in the manner of thinking about origin. From this moment, it was no longer possible to define origin solely in terms of the presence or absence of an external authenticating instance (such as God, Nature, Man). Instead, origin came to signify an enigmatic relation to being.² What one 'is', essentially, is a condition of the invisible founding principle from which one emanates.

This is a theme that permeated twentieth century thought via the human sciences in particular, inasmuch as the latter aimed essentially to redefine the workings of language, society and art in terms of a hidden principle that underlies all of their actual forms. Among the writers that came to the fore during this period, George Bataille and Maurice Blanchot are worthy of attention for the fact that, throughout this period, they continued to remind us that the search for the invisible logic that structured human experience is not a mere scientific pursuit, but is imbued with a persistent existential anxiety. In other words, behind the methodological innovations and empirical inflation, the pursuit of knowledge, when it became knowledge of the human realm, gave rise to the suspicion that the human is an encumbrance. 'Human, all too human', as Nietzsche entitles his anti-humanist essay³, as if the 'too much human' tended quite naturally to direct our attention to the nothingness from which it derives and to which it must return. For Bataille, then, the return to the origin, to the foundation of the 'all too human', requires that we renew our union with the erotic and destructive energies that civilised societies had quashed; for Blanchot,

1 J. Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. D. Rose (London, Picador, 1997), p. 19.

2 M. Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* (Paris, Gallimard, 1966). See the discussion 'Le recul et le retour de l'origine', pp. 339-45.

3 F. Nietzsche, *Human, all too human*, trans. M. Faber and S. Lehmann (London, Penguin, 1984).

it marked a desire to attain, via an austere redeployment of language, an essential solitude.

The concern of this study is to gauge how Bataille and Blanchot approach the question of the origin of art. To begin with, and to ward off the temptation of naturalistic empiricism, it is necessary to say what origin is not. It is not, firstly, to be confused with ascription. Ascription occurs when one imputes a work of art to a painter, a school, a movement, a period. As such, ascription does not identify an origin but merely attributes a value by association that ensures the work's place in the museum, and, ultimately, in posterity. Nor should one confuse origin with the reduction of the work to one of a number of universal concepts, such as Truth, Goodness or Desire. Here again, one is not addressing the question of origin, but merely engaging in ascription — that is, signalling the relation of the work to a general idea through which its particular forms and textures seem to become intelligible. Thus origin neither pertains to the external realities that inform us of the context of a work's production, nor does it take the form of a fundamental idea of which the work is deemed to be a spectacular illustration.

The origin of art must rather be understood by way of an examination of the ontological foundations of art — that is, the particular manner in which it appears as art. In his essay 'The origin of the work of art', Martin Heidegger opens with a definition: 'Origin ... means that from which and by which something is what it is and as it is'.⁴ Heidegger's sparse formulation suggests that origin is not merely a matter of establishing criteria by which one identifies a typical artwork in opposition to the familiar world of objects, such as one finds in Nelson Goodman's *The languages of art*.⁵ At the other end of the scale, Heidegger warns also against making art subservient to the higher-order values promoted by Idealist philosophies.⁶ Avoiding these diametrically opposed models of ascription, Heidegger focuses on the manner in which art 'is' as a mode of 'setting itself forth', and refers to the 'self-opening' by which the work brings into the 'clearing' that which was previously held 'in reserve'. This does not amount to saying that the artwork appears magically

4 M. Heidegger, *Poetry, language, thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York, Harper & Row, 1971), p. 17.

5 N. Goodman, *The languages of art: An approach to the theory of symbols* (Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1976).

6 Examples are Schelling's notion of art as an absolute, and Hegel's famous description of art as a concrete manifestation of the Spirit.

against a backdrop of nothingness, but rather that the 'being' implies a 'being there', and that this manner of occupying a position is disquieting because of the shadow it casts over its 'ground'. Art 'is', then, to the extent that in its relation to the visible it is beholden to the obscuring that conditions its appearance.

The question of origin has as much to do with the darkness against which the work appears as with the exalted instant in which it brings itself into view. However, one must not be content with simple binary oppositions. To understand origin in its complexity, one must apprehend the darkness in a particular light, and consider rather a changing, or more precisely a receding, darkness, one displaying a double movement of concealing and concealing concealment. The example of a heroic statue serves to illustrate the notion of double concealment. On the one hand, the statue makes visible the texture and colour of the stone, as it offers these properties to aesthetic contemplation. In this respect, the stone statue contrasts with a stone building or bridge in which the concern with functionality obscures most of the stone's natural qualities. However, the pendulum swings immediately the other way, as the stone statue also makes visible the idea, the actions or the story of the legendary character it portrays, precisely by making us forget the physical properties of the stone in which they are carved.

For Heidegger, art, more than any other area of experience, elicits the fundamental question of metaphysics: 'From what ground do beings come?'⁷ We have seen that art, as 'self-erection', as the constitution of an anxiety-prone modality of 'being', poses the question of origin via a scenario that articulates a two-sided, active relationship with darkness. This relationship is dramatised in two ways: firstly, as a retrieval (from a loss or disappearance), and secondly as a restoration (from a situation of rupture). Yet, as retrieval, origin remains attached to what, in the process of retrieval, remains 'in reserve'; and as restoration, it is still bound to the ruins that provide its justification. In both cases, a situation of double concealment is played out in such a way that the un-concealment is ultimately another form of concealment. It is in this way, I contend, that art maps out its particular itinerary in terms of its relation to origin.

In retrieval and restoration, one detects a double movement to and from darkness, which not only offers a model of the creative process but suggests also that creation occurs through crisis. It is at this point that we can gauge Foucault's contribution to

7 M. Heidegger, *Introduction to metaphysics*, trans. G. Fried and R. Polt (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2000), p. 3.

this view of art, particularly in relation to modern art. In outlining his 'archeological' method, Foucault invites us not to conceive origin as a single inceptive moment. It is not, for example, the first light of dawn in which a humanly created object of contemplation first appeared. Nor does it refer to the formless magma from which the object emerged and to which it is destined to return. Such views of origin, Michel Foucault explains in *Les Mots et les choses*, belong to Classical Thought, inasmuch as they suppose a series of representations that draws together, in a single uninterrupted line and in a perfect chronology, a reality that is in fact multifaceted. Modern thought departed from such a linear view of origin by way of the immense paradigm shift that saw areas of art and culture, among others, acquire their own founding principles. Art and culture were no longer grounded in a single external unifying concept such as God or Man. Because Modern thought no longer presented God or Man as absolutes, they were relegated to the level of objects of representation *among others*. Conversely, art and culture marked out a territory in which they were able to generate *within themselves* the principles that presided over the history of their emergence and decline.

Foucault's concern in *Les Mots et les choses* is to locate the epistemological break that gave rise to the radical new conditions for knowledge at the start of the Modern period. Here, knowledge no longer derived from a creator who dictated the rules of enquiry from above. Rather, the authenticating instance was now lodged within the objects and methods that defined an area of inquiry. This is particularly the case in the many human sciences that emerged in the early years of the twentieth century. Their aim was to examine human activity as a particular set of behaviours, proper to a social setting, in which there emerged a set of principles that could be classified as distinctly human. Significantly, this change of outlook enabled humans to pursue the source of knowledge within themselves, just as they could derive a particular ethical system purely on the basis of their own sense of self and other: 'la [pensée] moderne ... ne formule aucune morale dans la mesure où tout impératif est logé à l'intérieur de la pensée et de son mouvement pour ressaisir l'impensé'.⁸ A new question arises at this juncture: how can the human play both the role of the seeker of knowledge and that of its object? Does this situation not in fact give rise to an aporetic situation in which the seeker and the object of knowledge impede one another, casting a shadow (the inhuman?) over the entire enterprise? Such is the quandary that was brought to a head

8 Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, pp. 338-9.

when Western thought overturned past thought systems and produced an overhaul of conventional forms of art and literature.

Foucault's exposition of the problem of origin enables us to conceive of a self-generating system that is located at the level of the artworks themselves. Just as the source of thought for Foucault is the 'impensé' that subsists within its object of enquiry, so, too, does the origin of the work of art lie in that part of representation that escapes the play of graphic or pictorial substitutions. This paradigm informs Foucault's famous study of Velasquez's painting 'Las Meninas'.⁹ Foucault analyses the different components of the painting as the product of a gaze that appears to emanate from different positions, these being attached to the position of the king, the characters or the artist. Considered in their multiplicity, the different perspectives do not simply complement each other but seem curiously to point to an anomalous gaze that is unattributable. This, he writes, is the 'vide essentiel' or the blind spot from which the entire complex arrangement of mirrors and windows, people and objects, seems to emerge.¹⁰ The source of the gaze is not, then, a transcendent being such as God that orders its universe as it sees fit, nor the commissioning duke or duchess satisfying their vanity in such a display of wealth; nor is it the artist who arranges the entire scene according to the demands of his art. The source of this gaze is rather a faceless entity that escapes all three figures of authority. In this anonymous trace, which is barely discernible to the viewer, Foucault discovers the work's structuring principle, one that is 'intimement étranger' to its pictorial splendour.¹¹

Foucault adopts a similar approach in his essay 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' This text defends a position that had become synonymous with the structuralist movement, namely that discourse can only secondarily be reduced to the will, the intention, the personality or the repressed desires of the author. Essentially, discourse is to be defined in terms of the signifying mechanisms proper to language. Interestingly, Foucault regards the impersonal discursive logic that supplants the author not as a predetermined set of rules but as the scene of a crisis that takes the form of an authorial fade-out: 'il est question de l'ouverture d'un espace où le sujet écrivain ne cesse de disparaître'.¹² By portraying the author as the 'oubli non accidentel' that

9 Foucault's study, entitled 'Les Suivantes', is the opening chapter of *Les Mots et les choses*.

10 Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, pp. 30-1.

11 Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, p. 30.

12 M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 1954-1975, ed. D. Defort and F. Ewald (Paris, Gallimard, 2001), p. 821.

imprints itself negatively in the text¹³, Foucault, like Heidegger, subscribes to the notion of the double concealment inherent in being. Like Heidegger, he conceives of the text's inceptive moment as a concealing concealment, for in his view it is precisely that which removes itself from view, as it falls into a state of dereliction, that effectively organises the literary work and determines its ontological status.

The origin of the painting, for Foucault, is precisely the invisible centre around which the multiple perspectives organise themselves; and that of the written text is the place where the operation of the blanking-out of the author is most fully realised. It is notable that for Foucault, the origin — that is, the invisible principle that governs the form and significance of a work — partakes of both an outside and an inside. It represents the outside to the extent that it possesses a different temporal structure to that of the work. In this light, origin retreats into a time that is essentially prior to the forms, contents, materials and messages that appeal to the eye and the ear. Origin is external also to the extent that it corresponds to that which the realm of appearances must cast aside in order to become visible, committing it to a zone of alterity. However, the origin belongs also to the inside, in the sense that the principle from which the work emerges permeates the work's entire graphic, textural or pictorial space. This is certainly the case in Velasquez's painting, which encloses the fleeting shadow moving between the areas of light and shade, but also in texts such as autobiographies, in which the term 'I' serves both to announce the subject and to highlight, if not its absence, at least its dispersion within a network of symbolic substitutions.

Foucault's position is well known. My purpose in presenting it here is to show that we can apply it usefully to the way in which we think about the origin of art. If scholarship has not to this point manifested a great deal of interest in pursuing this question, it is because of the erroneous idea that origins must be singular, absolute and historically legible. This limitation, however, stems from the Classical construction of origin. It ignores the manner in which Modern thought transformed the notion of origin. It is, then, from Foucault's 'modern' determination of origin that I shall examine two different accounts of the origin of art: firstly, Georges Bataille's theory of the beginnings of art in relation to the paintings of the Lascaux caves, and secondly, Maurice Blanchot's treatment of poetry and art, in which he places the poetry of René Char against the Lascaux cave painting that inspired it. I shall finally draw together the two accounts of origin by considering the work of Philippe Lacoue-

13 Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, p. 836.

Labarthe, whose posthumous *Écrits sur l'art* seeks to gauge how contemporary and indeed future art conceive their relation to origin.

Bataille's study, 'Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art' (written in 1955), is in some ways a precursor of Foucauldian 'archaeology'.¹⁴ Bataille outlines a theory of origin that, by drawing on different clues provided by historical and archaeological research, offers a model of continuity and discontinuity. Firstly, how would it be possible, Bataille wonders, for present-day viewers of the cave paintings to feel wonder and astonishment if there did not exist, in the *homo sapiens* artists, an intense exuberance and joy at the moment they created them? In other words, there must exist in art an emotional resonance that enables it to speak to humans over a 30 000-year time span. Secondly, how could this joy express itself in this *homo sapiens* community and in this particular form, if there did not exist at that time a system of rules to which it was necessary to oppose a form of resistance? Art appears, therefore, essentially as an act of transgression. It is from these two suppositions that Bataille derives his account of the origin of art as a moment of religious fervour that entails a radical upheaval. This he explains by noting that forms of social control and the demands of productive work which were introduced into human communities in that era gave rise to a need to release excess energy through activities that were regressive, non-directed, pleasure-driven, playful and creative. Art functioned similarly to the pagan festival inasmuch as it served as an opportunity to deny, subvert and overturn the social order for short periods set aside for this purpose. 'La fête levait le couvercle de la marmite', writes Bataille.¹⁵ Similarly, art would not have been born without lifting the lid of social disciplines.

This being the case, why did the artists choose to depict horses, cows, men, women, tools and weapons? If anthropologists tend to explain these pictures as forms of preservation that replicate the function of mortuary rituals, Bataille is more likely to link them to the context of sacrificial rites, thus making artistic activity an extension of the religious significance of objects. In this light, one can understand Bataille's interest in the astonishing hybrid figures that bring together different animal and human features. One such figure, known as the Sorcerer, has the body of a bison, the face of a bearded man, inflated genitals and feet that appear, Bataille

14 In *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris, Gallimard, 1969), Foucault claims that he bases his historical research not on a preconceived discursive unity proper to each historical period, but on the discontinuities of the discourses it produced. He proceeds not with the aim of identifying a historical period's single centre, but of mapping out 'l'espace d'une dispersion'. See p. 20.

15 G. Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 9 (Paris, Gallimard, 1979), p. 40.

notes, to be dancing the cakewalk.¹⁶ For Bataille, the hybrid figure is a distortion of perception that results from the proto-artist's excess of creative energies and spiritual intoxication. Beyond the idea of unlimited exuberance, Bataille's insights raise the question of the origin of artistic representation in the sense that the figure presents an image of the human that makes visible its lost animalness. By honouring, in its pictorial space, the animal energy, the unchannelled sexuality and the destructive rage against which human society had to barricade itself in order to create its civilised forms, the hybrid figure shows what humanity had to conceal in order to become itself. In doing so, it brings into particular focus humanity's ambiguous relation to the animal. For hybridity combines not just forms, but the affective traits of fear and fascination, and the notions of proximity and distance, and it does so within a ritual space in which dangerous inclinations are formally cordoned off from society. In other words, art, through its first experiments with hybridity, connects its viewers to the undeclared and unthought truth behind their humanness.

Far from offering a clumsy first attempt at representational art, such paintings articulate, forcefully and eloquently, the anxiety surrounding the question of origin. What the figure shows, in the strange combination of horns, tail and genitals alongside recognisable human traits, is the persistence of a thought that society can no longer countenance, namely that the human originates from the inhuman that it is at pains to deny. Bataille seemingly takes pleasure in constructing on this basis an account of Christianity and Christian art in which, as he states in 'Les Larmes d'Eros', truly diabolical forces are at work. Indeed, he intimates, without being fazed by the anachronism, that the Lascaux cave paintings are the first expression of original sin. 'Retrouvant, ou au moins disant que je retrouve, au plus profond de la caverne de Lascaux, le thème du péché originel, le thème de la légende biblique! la mort liée au péché, liée à l'exaltation sexuelle, à l'érotisme!'¹⁷ For Bataille, art makes accessible the erotic and destructive impulses that negatively structure our social habits and moral systems. Art's origin, then, lies in the revelation, via a double concealment or at least the (partial) concealment of a concealment, of an obscure thought that is as intolerable as it is inescapable.

Bataille's account of the origin of art proceeds by sketching out the history of human socialisation and marking its limits. However, following Foucault's model of

16 Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 9, pp. 68-70.

17 G. Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 10 (Paris, Gallimard, 1987), p. 586.

a split origin, should we not also consider the origin of art on the other side of its relationship with the human, where it deploys its abyssal logic in a time and place that is totally removed from our experience? Such is the position from which Maurice Blanchot departs when he claims that art is art, essentially, when it retreats from all the voices that seek to speak through it, when it takes its leave from those that have a message to deliver, a lesson to teach, an idea to promote. It is enlightening, in this respect, to examine his piece *La Bête de Lascaux*, written in 1958, in which he discusses the Lascaux painting known as the Pregnant Cow in tandem with the poem, 'La Bête innommable', that René Char wrote in homage to it.¹⁸ Blanchot approaches pictorial art through the mediation of poetic language in order to determine the way in which painting and poetry commonly articulate the notion of the inceptive moment. His argument begins by declaring that poetry is essentially impersonal. In this, it resembles the ancient oracles who seemed to make their pronouncements from a distant, un-locatable past and address a future that was equally non-determined:

Quand l'inconnu nous interpelle, quand la parole emprunte à l'oracle sa voix
où ne parle rien d'actuel, mais qui force celui qui l'écoute à s'arracher à son
présent pour en venir à lui-même comme à ce qui n'est pas encore, cette parole
est souvent intolérante, d'une violence hautaine qui, dans sa rigueur et par sa
sentence indiscutable, nous enlève à nous-mêmes en nous ignorant.¹⁹

The haunting, severe and indifferent tone of the oracular voice has the effect of tearing its listeners away from their familiar world. So, too, does poetry, and in particular the poetry of René Char, which Blanchot describes as a language 'qui ne dicte rien, qui n'oblige en rien, qui ne parle même pas, mais fait de ce silence le doigt impérieusement fixé vers l'inconnu'.²⁰ Such is the peculiar configuration of commandment and affect that Blanchot also associates with art. Here, art actualises a time that exists outside of time. It is a representation that carves out an 'inactual space',

18 *La Bête innommable* ferme la marche du gracieux troupeau, comme un cyclope bouffe.
Huit quolibets font sa parure, divisent sa folie.

La Bête rote dévotement dans l'air rustique.

Ses flancs bourrés et tombants sont douloureux, vont se vider de leur grosseur.

De son sabot à ses vaines défenses, elle est enveloppée de fétidité.

Ainsi m'apparaît dans la frise de Lascaux, mère fantastiquement déguisée,

La Sagesse pleine de larmes.

— R. Char, 'La Parole en archipel', *La Paroi et la prairie* (Paris, Editions GLM, 1952).

19 M. Blanchot, *Une Voix venue d'ailleurs* (Paris, Gallimard, 2002), p. 62.

20 Blanchot, *Une Voix venue d'ailleurs*, p. 62.

where the disturbing alterity of the pictured characters hammers into insignificance the preoccupations of the familiar world.

Blanchot's attempt to think together poetry and art as a particular relation to origin is based upon a metaphysics of violence. The hieratic quality of poetic language and visual representation implies a connection to origin that is not at all stable or assured, but is, as Blanchot stresses, in fact traumatic. In this respect, Blanchot shares René Char's admiration for the pre-Socratics, particularly Heraclites, insofar as they claim that poetic language belongs to the state of flux, chaos and conflict which originally comprised the universe. This is the original *logos* that Platonic philosophy, through its invention of a translucid language, had abandoned.²¹ But poetry, thanks to its eviction from Plato's *Republic* on the grounds of its emotional instability²², actually preserves its connection to violence. This is where it connects with art:

Il est un moment, dans l'expérience de l'art et dans la genèse de l'œuvre, un moment où celle-ci n'est encore qu'une violence indistincte tendant à s'ouvrir et tendant à se fermer, tendant à s'exalter dans un espace qui s'ouvre et tendant à se retirer dans la profondeur de la dissimulation.²³

By virtue of their reliance on appearances, poetry and art lead us back to the 'violence indistincte' that orders the operation of double concealment. Blanchot's discussion of Char's poetic treatment of the painted beast highlights a fatal attraction that is equally apparent in its verbal or graphic forms. The poem presents the beast's nature as unruly, unknowable and unbearable, and above all, as the title indicates, unnameable (*innommable*). The beast occupies a space that is uninhabitable to humans because it denies the order of logic and the clarity of vision. In a text devoted to Blanchot's early novels, Foucault sets out some of the characteristics of this space:

Cette pensée qui se tient hors de toute subjectivité pour en faire surgir comme de l'extérieur les limites, en énoncer la fin, en faire scintiller la dispersion et n'en recueillir que l'invincible absence, et qui en même temps se tient au seuil de toute positivité, non pas tant pour en saisir le fondement ou la justification, mais pour retrouver l'espace où elle se déploie, le vide qui lui sert de lieu ... [C]ette pensée, par rapport à l'intériorité de notre réflexion philosophique et par

21 Blanchot, *Une Voix venue d'ailleurs*, pp. 64-5.

22 Plato, *The Republic*, book 10, trans. D. Lee (London, Penguin, 1955).

23 Blanchot, *Une Voix venue d'ailleurs*, p. 65.

rapport à la positivité de notre savoir, constitue ce qu'on pourrait appeler d'un mot 'la pensée du dehors'.²⁴

This space is inhuman in a manner that differs from Bataille's anthropological account of primitive terror because here it plunges the human subject into a void, trapping it between two impossible demands. For here the subject can gain no foothold. It can neither appeal to the world of intuition and imagination by which the subject becomes present to itself, nor claim knowledge and eventually mastery of the empirical universe that it seeks to turn into a projection of its will. As such, 'la pensée du dehors', according to Foucault's formulation, is an alienating and alienated discourse that one might well describe as the modern equivalent of the oracular pronouncements to which Blanchot alluded in *Une Voix venue d'ailleurs*. Like the oracles, it marks a space that deploys an aura of contemptuous indifference, before which the subject is sentenced to an anxious and uncertain future. It is interesting to note the manner in which Blanchot radicalises his position in his later texts. As his writing matures, he is no longer content to present discourse as an obscure space inassimilable by the subject, but sees it as a vector of the principle of destruction that corrupts the subject from within. It is not so much the outside (*le dehors*) rejecting interiority as it is the outside eating away the inside. As he writes in *L'Écriture du désastre*, literature and art carry the possibility of a ruinous moment that comes into effect the moment the subject asserts itself as a self-standing, self-sufficient agent of creation: 'Nous n'avons pas accès au dehors, mais le dehors nous a toujours déjà touchés à la tête, étant ce qui se précipite'.²⁵

The above outline of the metaphysics of violence that informs art serves as a prelude to Char's poetic treatment of the cave painting. Char dwells initially on the animal's inordinate suffering. Likened to a 'cyclope bouffe', the cow that trails behind the more nimble elements of the herd is seemingly weighed down by its surplus flesh. The poem foregrounds the stagnant organic mass that envelops the animal in a deathly torpor, emphasising its slowness, its defencelessness and its fetid stench. The overdetermination of the idea of physical imprisonment (in contrast to spiritual liberation) is brought to a head in the closing line of the poem, 'La Sagesse pleine de larmes'. At the same time, the sheer immovable weight of the animal tips over into its opposite, namely the ethereal reign of semblances that constitute art. The represented

24 Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, p. 549.

25 M. Blanchot, *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris, Gallimard, 1980), p. 16.

cow becomes a 'mère fantastiquement déguisée', an object not of ridicule but of fascination. Art, through its brilliance, does not simply overshadow the suffering, but rather subjects it to a double concealment, a concealment of concealment such that the artifice, in obscuring the formless ugliness of the beast, actually preserves in its visual space the raw expression of suffering. It keeps painful memories alive through a small detail — the cow's expressive eyes. In the line 'Sagesse aux yeux pleins de larmes', the tear-filled eyes shining through the picture transcend, by their artistic quality, the platitude of the pregnant animal. But, by this very process, the poem locates the thread that connects art to its traumatic origin. By retaining the monstrosity of the 'cyclope bouffe' and making it resonate in 'La Sagesse aux yeux pleins de larmes', 'La Bête innommable' delimits a tragic space in which the spiritual elevation implied in the term 'Sagesse' both masks and reveals the hidden principle that lies in the impurity of the cow's rampant flesh.

Origin, one might recall, is the hidden structuring principle that defines art ontologically. The above discussion endeavoured to show how Bataille and Blanchot approach the question of origin through the study of art. In Bataille, the hybrid figure with an animal's body and tail and a human face and feet highlights the capacity of art to bring into view the energies that human society had repressed. This is not in the Freudian sense of wishing to redress an imbalance, but in the more extreme and provocative sense of harnessing the creative and destructive forces to which children, primitives and poets appear to hold the key. Blanchot's treatment of René Char's poetic interpretation of the Pregnant Cow rests upon a conception of origin as a shift of scale, whereby the familiar world recedes into an anonymous grey, and time collapses into a void. Though the anxiety produced by the expulsion towards the 'outside' of thought and speech may well be mitigated by the harmonious forms produced by art, it remains none the less true that the pleasurable illusion cannot put a halt to the forces of disaggregation. For the promised 'erection' of the work is possible only because it contains within it the seed of its imminent collapse. Within this conceptual framework, it is easy to see the point of difference between the two approaches. Bataille considers art as an area in which it is possible to liberate destructive energies and experience the joy that accompanies all transgressive behaviours; Blanchot, in contrast, highlights the rigorous demands of art as it makes us aware of what, metaphysically, is at stake behind the double concealment.

As I suggested earlier, the question of origin invites us to reconsider the way in which it is possible to account for the historical evolution of art. Following Foucault's archaeological method, history is a series of unstable tectonic plates that produce pressure points and eventually chasms. Such a model implies that the gains in knowledge of a particular historical period are defined paradoxically by the ideas that it finds impossible to formulate. For example, classical discourses on madness became inoperative amid scientific claims that there existed a connection between behaviour and the human brain, just as the procedures of law enforcement were overturned following the circulation of new discourses on human freedom.

In relation to art, it is possible to identify similar crises and disjunctions. It is universally accepted that art originates in religion. To demonstrate this, one need only consider the number of times objects of cult around the world are reclassified as art. The gods, or God, ceased to be an authenticating factor when the science of aesthetics was born in the eighteenth century, for at this moment rational discourse provided a complete set of criteria, such as sense, intelligence and imagination, for defining art. We know, however, that this appeal to the faculties and their interactions corresponded to humanistic ideals. Thus, through aesthetics, art confirmed its origins in the human. However, when the human ideal was discredited via the nihilisms of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, this collapse gave rise to new forms of art. Art rose from the ashes of the fallen human and presented itself as an independent value. Bataille's *souveraineté* and Blanchot's *solitude* are just two examples of the way in which art outlived the human ideal. But here a new crisis presented itself. When art became everything (as the Surrealists claimed), it necessarily became nothing since there remained nothing against which it could assert its difference. Once again, the pedestal art created for itself bore the conditions of its ruin.

In his essay 'La Littérature et l'expérience originelle', Blanchot retraces the history of art, or rather its anti-history, by focusing on the aporetic moments that punctuate it. Each of these moments corresponds to a loss. Art lost or forgot the gods, then it lost man, and finally it lost itself, but more importantly, at each stage, it also forgot the forgetting, such that it was obliged at each stage to reconstruct itself in terms of its essential solitude: 'Il était le langage des dieux et, les dieux ayant disparu, il est devenu le langage où s'est exprimée leur disparition, puis celui où cette disparition elle-même a cessé d'apparaître. Cet oubli est maintenant ce qui

parle seul'.²⁶ Art, then, defines itself with respect to a series of crises in which it loses sight of its grounding principle. Paradoxically, it is most itself when it endures this loss. Blanchot doubtlessly agrees with Heidegger's ontological determination of art, which states that art finds its essence when it divests itself of all contingent factors, all extraneous concepts, and having found the pure ether of nothingness, springs forth into itself. However, Blanchot is not content to say in such definitive terms that art immediately and fully extracts itself from the dark in order to reveal itself in the pure light of its being. Rather, he suggests that art's mode of existence is crisis. It lost the gods, then man, then art itself, and at each moment it is pushed up against the abyss of self-obliteration. It is here that it formulates with greatest urgency the question of origin. This question is: what remains, precisely, when art loses its ground? The answer, which all the proponents of the modern imagination from Manet to Debussy to Beckett relayed, is clear: art murmurs its distress, desists while it persists, and exists, finally, in the mode of survival.

Following Blanchot, the origin of art resides in the plight that is hidden behind its pictorial splendour. Such is the position that this study has tried to argue from the vantage point of a Foucauldian-style archaeology. One must keep in mind, however, that the quest for origin does not end triumphantly with the revelation of an eternal truth bound up in a work, but gives rise rather to more questioning. For as this study has tried to show, the origin is a split origin, divided between an outside source of legitimacy which art contests, and the internal principle of organisation which art conceals. As such, origin reveals itself via a double refusal. It opens its space only to the extent that it closes off another. Such is the impossible logic of a work's relation to origin: 'c'est l'impossible qui est sa tâche, et elle-même ne se réalise alors que par une recherche infinie, car c'est le propre de l'origine d'être toujours voilée par ce dont elle est l'origine'.²⁷

To complete the historico-ontological account, one might consider art's predicament in the wake of the turbulences of the Modern and Postmodern eras. What are the precise terms in which one must now formulate the question of origin? Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe grapples with this question in his posthumous *Écrits sur l'art*. At a time when art is more than ever the alibi of commercial interests, technological innovations and political agendas, and at a time when art is more than ever obliged to confront the desert of irrelevance to which it is consigned, the quest

26 M. Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris, Gallimard, 1955), p. 330.

27 Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire*, p. 314.

for origin can no longer take the form of the old metaphysical question 'What is art?', nor can it any longer be satisfied with the question 'What is a work of art?', with its productivist overtones. In the wake of what Lacoue-Labarthe, following Foucault and Blanchot, calls the disaster of the subject, the question must be formulated as 'L'art peut-il s'identifier?' ('Can art identify itself?')²⁸ The reflexive form of the question suggests that art now participates in the construction of the exploratory discourses which it previously left to philosophy and the human sciences. In this respect, the words 'peut-il' ('Can') that begin the question introduce a doubt about the outcome, or even a pathos of failure (to be true to art, this pathos may well be contrived).

Certainly, the form of the question indicates the event of an inward turn that confirms, by making more explicit, the retreat that had diversely characterised art throughout its history. Now, however, the retreat that was once contingent upon the revelation of the work's external, authenticating moment, is apparent at the level of the work's verbal and pictorial forms. As Lacoue-Labarthe points out, the retreat of art corresponds to a posture that is akin to autobiography in the sense that it directs the gaze to the catastrophe within, where the 'itself' loses itself precisely in the strategies it adopts in order to make itself visible. By way of the question 'Can art identify itself?', Lacoue-Labarthe exposes the paradoxical logic that constitutes art: the more it asserts itself in its visible forms, the more it loses itself. Such is the destiny of art when it announces itself as an anxious quest for origin.

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²⁸ P. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Écrits sur l'art* (Geneva, Les Presses du réel, 2009), p. 31.

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