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of the Prehistoric Body

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1. This article is a revised version of a paper delivered at *The Darwin Effect: Evolution and Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*, a symposium held at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, in April 2001. I would like to thank my advisor, Linda Nochlin, for her guidance and support, and Ellen McBreen for her critical reading of early drafts.

2. The Musée des Antiquités Nationales at Saint-Germain-en-Laye opened in 1867. Located twenty-three kilometres northwest of Paris, the museum reflects the growing interest in prehistoric archeology and national origins during the late nineteenth century. One of the most popular exhibitions presented prehistoric weapons as they may have originally appeared, based on 'reconstructions' by the artist and amateur anthropologist Ludovic Lericq. On Lericq's interest in prehistoric archaeology and involvement with the museum, see H. Buchanan, 'Edgar Degas and Ludovic Lericq: An Impressionist Friendship', *Cleveland Studies in the*

The sensation of the 1880 Paris Salon was *Cain*, a monumental canvas by Fernand Cormon (Fig 1).¹ The painting depicts the **first murderer** and his family fleeing God's wrath—a traditional enough subject—but dares to present them as a dishevelled, prehistoric tribe. Clad in animal pelts and brandishing Stone-Age weapons, with wild manes, the tribe trudges across the desert hauling its cargo of bloody carcasses. Cormon's picture was an entirely new interpretation of this biblical story, and Salon audiences were well-prepared to recognise the signs of its refashioning. With the discovery in 1879 of Paleolithic cave paintings at Altamira and the continued uncovering of ancient fossils, prehistory was enjoying a certain vogue in Paris. Viewers would have seen the ancient weapons carried by Cain and his tribe illustrated in the pages of popular science reviews, or in Ludovic Lericq's recently published *Les Armes et les Outils Préhistoriques reconstitués* (Fig. 2). **Prehistoric artifacts were on view at the newly established Musée des Antiquités Nationales, and the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris featured an enormous collection of Stone Age and Iron Age tools.**² At the 1880 Salon these mere synecdoches of prehistoric existence were suddenly reunited with their lost referent; the unimaginable history of early man came to life in a thrilling panorama that, with its scientifically-accurate props, seemed of the utmost



Fig. 1. Fernand Cormon, *Cain*, 1880, oil on canvas, 380 × 700 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.)

veracity. As one critic remarked, 'M. Cormon . . . has certainly read more than one book on the prehistoric epoch'.³

Even with the public's fascination for all things prehistoric, Cormon must have felt that such a bold new conception required a reassuring literary alibi; three lines from Victor Hugo's epic poem, *La Légende des Siècles*, accompanied his entry in the Salon brochure: 'While with his children covered in animal skins, / Unkempt, livid in the middle of a storm, / Cain fled before Jehovah.'⁴ Yet the meanings Cormon's picture produced were not secured by the explanation offered in Hugo's narrative. The critical reaction reveals that while

History of Art, vol. 2, 1997, pp. 32–120. On the early history of the Musée des Antiquités Nationales, see M.-T. Moisset, 'Les origines du Musée des Antiquités Nationales', *Antiquités Nationales*, vol. 9, 1977, pp. 92–9.

3. 'M. Cormon . . . a lu certainement plus d'un livre sur les époques préhistoriques.' E. About, 'Salon de 1880', *Le XIX^e Siècle*, 18–19 May 1880.

4. Cited in G. Lacambre, 'Le Cain de Cormon', in *Gloire de Victor Hugo* (Grand Palais: Paris, 1985), pp. 625–7.

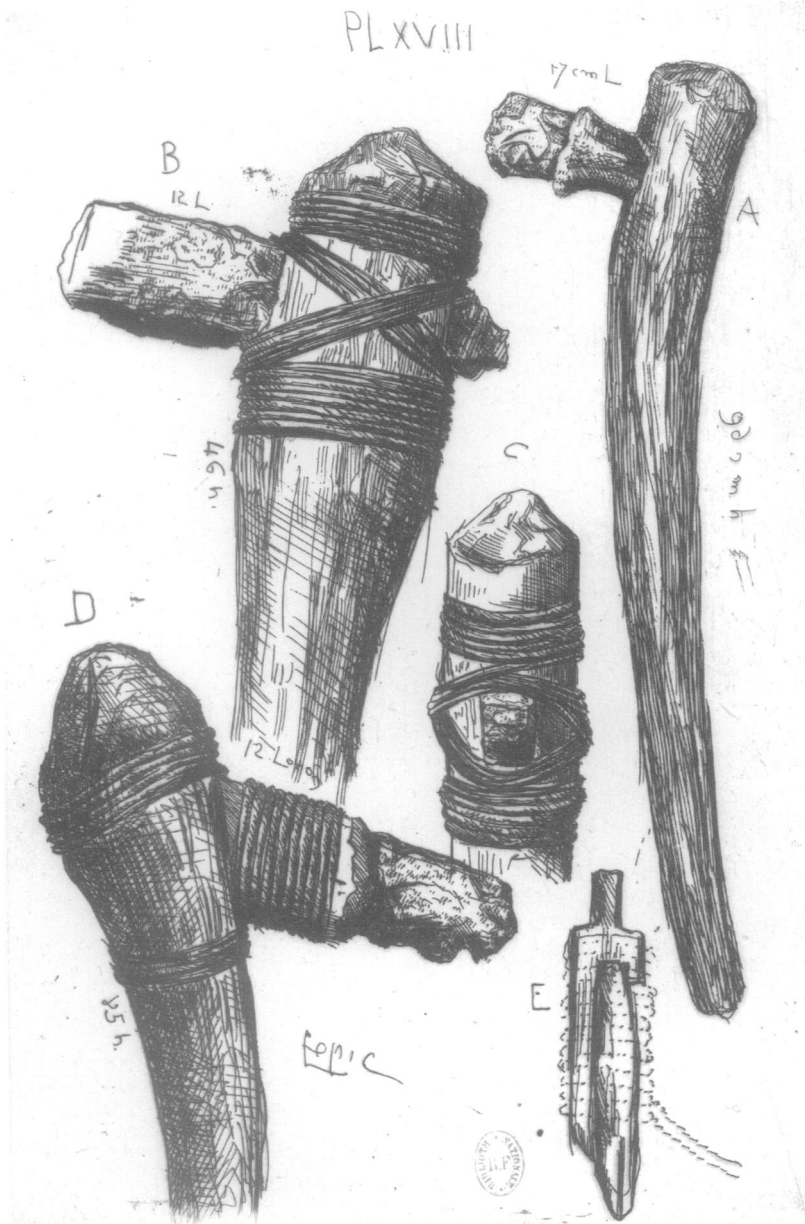


Fig. 2. 'Haches diverses' from Ludoric Lepic, *Les Arms et les outils Préhistoriques reconstitués* (Paris, 1872). (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.)

5. 'Malgré des qualités d'invention et de force auxquelles j'ai du plaisir à rendre justice, tout cela est trop repoussant et viole les lois les plus naturelles. . . . A moins qu'il ait eu l'intention d'étonner le monde, je ne comprends pas les motifs qui ont dicté la détermination de l'artiste. . . . Il y a certainement là un parti pris. M. Cormon n'a pas fait oeuvre d'artiste seulement. C'est une leçon d'anthropologie qu'il a voulu nous donner. Il a voulu soutenir à sa manière les idées des disciples les plus aventureux de Darwin. Mais si l'homme descend du singe, il ne fallait pas le prendre si près de son origine.' C. Clément, 'Exposition de 1880', *Journal des débats*, 1 May 1880.

6. See especially Lacambre, 'Cain de Cormon' on the critical reception of the painting. See also Buchanan, 'Edgar Degas', p. 86; and R. Rosenblum, *Paintings in the Musée d'Orsay*, (Workman Publishing: New York, 1989), p. 388.

contemporary audiences were dazzled by Cormon's vision of prehistoric times—the painting earned him a Médaille-d'or and a flood of commissions—they were also deeply unsettled by it. No other work that year generated so much controversy, so much critical reflection or public scrutiny. While *Cain* certainly offended simply for twisting the conventions of a traditional biblical subject, I think the critical anxiety owes more to the fact that **the subject seemed not to have been merely reshaped, but rather to have shifted** entirely. Cormon positioned himself within the familiar bounds of history painting, but what he produced was, in effect, **an unprecedented history of the body**.

This suspicion is laid bare in Charles Clément's 1880 review of the painting:

In spite of the qualities of invention and force which I am pleased to acknowledge, [Cormon's painting] is too repulsive and violates the most natural laws. . . . Unless he had the intention of shocking the world, I do not understand the motives that have inspired the determination of this painter. . . . There is certainly a set purpose here. M. Cormon has not only done the job of an artist. This is an anthropology lesson he wanted to give us. He wanted to support in his own way the ideas of the most adventurous disciples of Darwin. But if man descended from ape, he didn't have to take us so close to his origins.⁵

Cain is a picture that tests the boundaries of human form, challenges expectations about the body, and that in the end, seemed to reveal man's repressed evolutionary history. Several scholars have noted that for contemporary audiences, the experience of viewing Cormon's picture was bound up in the fears of the evolutionary age.⁶ However, what has not been discussed is how these fears were **specifically connected to Darwin's troubling new conception of corporeality**. The emergence of evolutionary thought made the human body a site of particular anxiety for nineteenth-century French audiences, posing specific problems for representation that are especially evident when the subject is prehistoric man.

The Problem of the Prehistoric Body

Among the long-held 'natural laws' disrupted by the emergence of Darwinian thought was that of the body as a stable, fixed entity with absolute limits. In his 1735 *Systema Naturae*, the zoologist Carl Linnaeus had defined species as immutable units springing from distinct original pairs, which maintained throughout time the form they were given at the moment of creation. This central assumption of the French biological doctrine was challenged early in the century by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's theories of species transformation. Lamarck's ideas, however, were largely dismissed by the scientific community, and the principle of immutability remained firmly in place throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, asserted primarily in the work of the influential paleontologist Georges Cuvier. It was not until the publication in 1859 of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, which provided exhaustive evidence of species variation and explained the mechanism by which evolution occurs, that the foundations of the immutability doctrine were seriously shaken. Translated into French in 1862, *The Origin* overturned the traditional notion of species as distinct, unrelated units, presenting them instead as points along a continuum of varieties. Species were modified descendants of other species, evolving gradually from one original source. Darwin portrayed the natural world as fluid, unfixed, with landmasses that flow and change, and forms that continually blend into other forms. In Darwin's view, the naming of organisms into distinct categories called 'species' was perfectly arbitrary. The term was

nothing more than a hypothetical construction, he argued, invented by biological systematists for classification and convenience.

While support for Darwin's theory grew within the more progressive sectors of the French scientific community—most notably in the Société d'Anthropologie—the establishment remained vehemently opposed to the mutability theory throughout the 1860s and 70s.⁷ Pierre Flourens, a prominent naturalist and disciple of Cuvier, typified the official opposition. His 1864 *Examen du Livre de M. Darwin* assailed evolutionary theory on all fronts, asserting especially that Darwin had failed to note the limits to variability in bodily structure. The increasing popularisation of science enabled the French public, too, to form its opinions; the evolutionary debate was diffused through newspapers, public lectures, and popular science journals such as *La Nature*.⁸ Flourens described the public reaction: 'We all know that species do not change . . . and yet a man arrives . . . a Monsieur Darwin, who tells us that species do change. . . . And already I see a certain public, at first astounded, then stupefied.'⁹ It was a notion that had profound implications for man's concept of his own corporeality, as the boundaries of the human body, once fixed and absolute, were now rendered unstable.

In the debate on the mutability of species, the anatomical structure of prehistoric man was central. Paleontologists such as Édward Lartet and Jacques Boucher de Pérthes had uncovered ancient tools and weapons in the same geological layers as those containing the bones of prehistoric animals, proving the antiquity of man's existence. And with the shocking discoveries of the fossilised bones of early man himself, crucial testimony was introduced into the evolutionary debate.¹⁰ The first fossil to be accepted as evidence of early man's physical form was the Neanderthal Man, discovered in the Neander Valley near Düsseldorf in 1856. The skull's most distinctive feature was its prominent, ape-like eyebrow ridges, profile renderings of which proliferated in popular science journals throughout the 1870s and 80s. In 1868 several prehistoric skeletons that came to be known as Cro-Magnon man were found in Dordogne, France. For supporters of evolutionary theory, the physical peculiarities of these fossils were regarded as confirmation of the mutability of species. But Darwin's opponents dismissed such findings, maintaining that structurally, prehistoric and modern man were indistinguishable. The anatomical structure of early man was the principal question of the 1867 Congress on Prehistoric Archeology held in Paris, with Paul Broca, among others, presenting controversial papers on the subject.¹¹

The prehistoric body, then, was a hotly contested site in post-Darwinian France. 'Man bears in his bodily structure', Darwin wrote, 'clear traces of his descent from some lower form'.¹² Because it was the body itself that bore the signs of man's mutable nature, the representation of the body—especially the prehistoric body—was always ideologically loaded. As the central piece of evidence in the debate on man's origins, the prehistoric body had the potential in representation to carry specific meanings, to become an index of a scientific and moral view. One of the first instances in which prehistoric man is given pictorial expression occurs in Louis Figuier's *L'Homme Primitif* of 1870, a popular science book devoted to imagining the particularities of prehistoric existence.¹³ Describing with fascination the crude habitat and hunting methods of our earliest ancestors, Figuier determines that man of the Stone Age was certainly more primitive and savage in behaviour; however, in one of the most aggressive attacks on Darwin of his time, the author adamantly rejects the possibility that prehistoric man was anatomically less evolved. 'Are we compelled to admit', he asks, 'that man, by insensible transformations . . . is

7. The Société was established in 1859 under the leadership of Paul Broca, whose numerous articles on transformism and influential studies of the anatomical relationship between man and beast enabled the diffusion of Darwin's ideas within the scientific community. See, for example, P. Broca, 'Sur le Transformisme', *Bulletin de la société d'anthropologie*, 1870, vol. 5, pp. 76–84; reprinted in F. Schiller, *Paul Broca: Founder of French Anthropology, Explorer of the Brain* (University of California Press, 1979). Broca took issue with many of Darwin's ideas, however. In particular, he attacked the theory of natural selection, arguing that while species certainly evolved, natural selection had not been the agent of their transformation.

8. See, for example, 'Le Darwinisme: ce qu'il y a de vrai et de faux dans cette théorie', *La Nature*, vol. 2, 1877, pp. 27–31. The first French review of *The Origin of Species* appeared in 1860. August Lagel, 'Nouvelle Théorie d'Histoire Naturelle. L'Origine des Espèces', *Revue des deux mondes*, April 1, 1860, pp. 644–71. The author discusses in detail the basic tenets of Darwin's theory and considers their scientific, moral, and philosophical implications. For another early (and particularly hostile) review see Sudre, 'Des origines de la vie et de la distinction des espèces dans l'ordre animé', *Revue Européenne*, vol. 10, 1860, p. 599.

9. Cited in T. Appel, *The Cuvier-Geoffroy Debate: French Biology in the Decades Before Darwin* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1987), p. 233. On the reception of Darwin in France, see George Stebbins, 'France', in *The Comparative Reception of Darwinism*, ed. T. Glick (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1988); Y. Conry, *L'introduction du Darwinisme en France au XIX^e siècle* (J. Vrin: Paris, 1974); J. Farley, 'The Initial Reactions of French Biologists to Darwin's Origin', *Journal of Historical Biology*, vol. 7, pp. 275–300; C. Grimoult, *Evolutionnisme et fixisme en France: Histoire d'un combat, 1800–1882* (Paris, 1998).

10. As John Reader explains it, Darwin's theory 'suggested that [man's] origins were shared by the animals of the jungle. An outrageous idea. But if it were true then the proof would be found in the fossilized remains of early man, which would link man to an earlier form. And since the theory of evolution proposed that man and the apes share a common ancestor, then the link could be expected to bear some attributes of both.' J. Reader, *Missing Links: The Hunt for Earliest Man* (Penguin Books: London, 1988), p. 1.

11. Broca's paper was titled 'Sur les caractères anatomiques de l'homme préhistorique.' See *Congrès d'anthropologie et d'archéologie préhistoriques, tenu à Paris, 1867* (Brussels, 1868).

12. C. Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (AMS Press: New York, 1972), p. 65.

13. Science books aimed at general audiences on the subject of prehistoric man proliferated

during the 1870s and 80s, and just a few examples are: P.-J. Hamard, *L'Âge de la Pierre et l'Homme Primitif* (R. Haton: Paris, 1883); H. Du Cleuzion, *La Création de l'homme et les premiers âges de l'humanité* (Flammarion: Paris, 1887); and N. Joly, *L'homme avant les métaux* (Paris, 1883).

14. Figuiet was one of the leading scientific popularisers of the day. As Robert Fox notes, 'By the 1860s no cultivated drawing room would be complete without its handsomely bound volumes of . . . Louis Figuiet's *La terre avant le déluge*.' R. Fox, 'The *savant* confronts his peers: scientific societies in France, 1815–1914', in R. Fox and G. Weisz (eds), *The Organization of Science and Technology in France 1808-1914* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York, 1980). On Figuiet's work and Bayard's illustrations, see M. Rudwick, *Scenes from Deep Time: Early Pictorial Representations of the Prehistoric World* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1992); and C. Blanckaert, 'Les Bases de la Civilisation: Lectures de *L'homme primitif* de Louis Figuiet (1870)', *Bulletin de la Société Préhistorique Française*, vol. 90, no. 1, 1993, pp. 31–49.

15. 'Le torse de Cain manque absolument de pureté académique.' A. Silvestre, *L'Estafette*, 5 May, 1880.

16. 'Peut-être aussi aurait-il dû atténuer quelques détails d'un goût douteux; certainement enfin le dessin des articulations de ses personnages gagnerait à être moins accentué.' E. Michel, 'Le Salon de 1880' *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1 June 1880.

17. 'L'un porte dans ses bras une femme jeune et bien faite dont le corps, tout moderne dans sa beauté, contraste avec les horreurs et les vulgarités exagérées du cortège.' E. About, 'Salon de 1880'. And after lamenting the overall ugliness of the picture, Clément also singles her out. 'Il n'y a pas trace [de style] dans cet ouvrage, ni de beauté, quoique la supine femme que son mari porte dans ses bras ait une élégance de galbe.' Clément, 'Exposition de 1880'.

18. 'Cette bande maudite de gens hâves et exténués . . . ces armes de l'âge de pierre, ces corps qui tiennent plus de la bête que de l'homme . . . ces types simiens et affreux . . . forment un ensemble sauvage, dramatique, saisissant.' Clément, 'Exposition de 1880'.

19. 'Le dessin est grossier, vulgaire, quelquefois intolérable, comme dans l'épaul de Cain.' Clément, 'Exposition de 1880'.

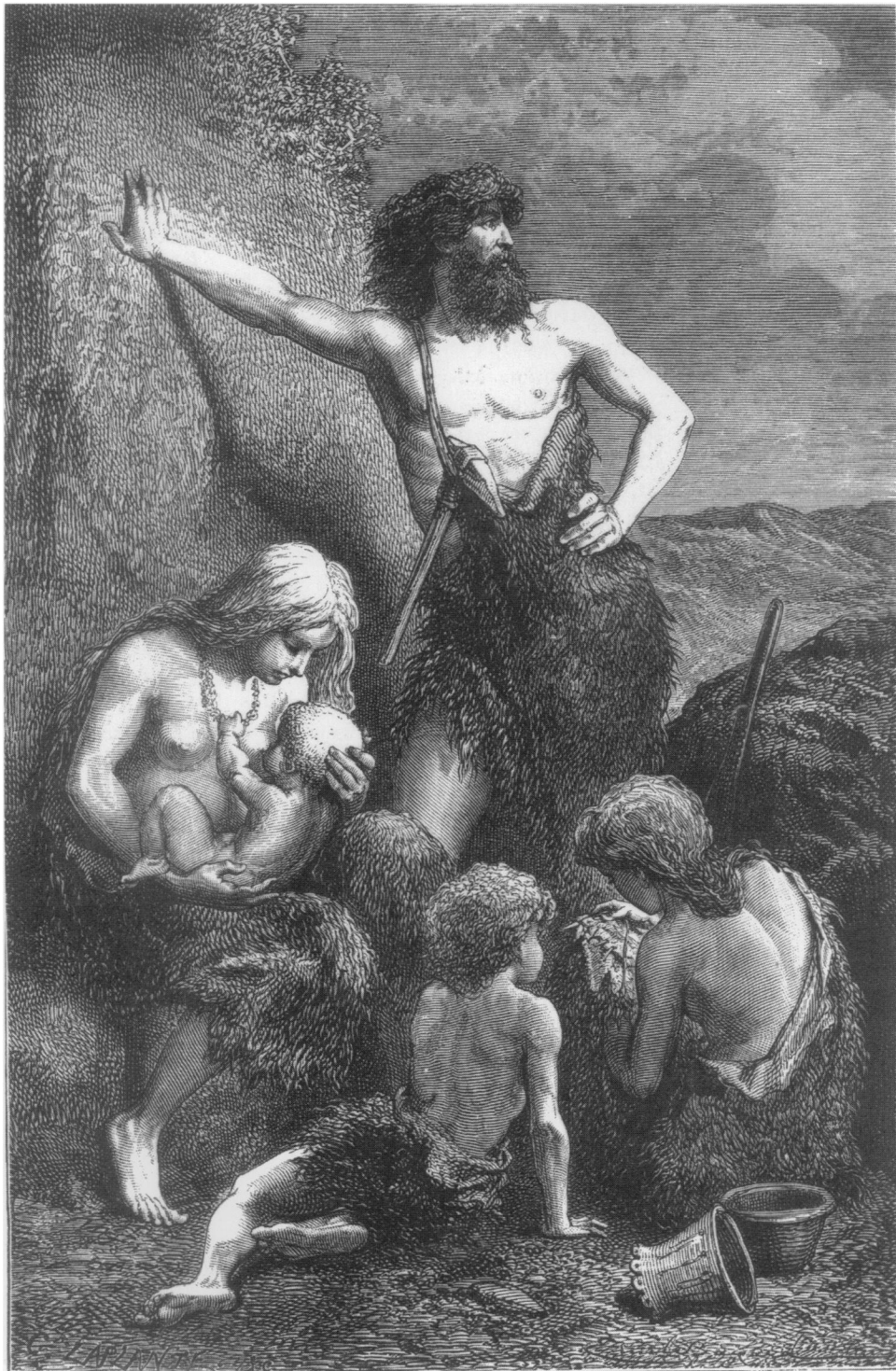
derived from some other animal species, and particularly that of the ape? We strongly repudiate any doctrine of this kind . . . The skull of the man of the stone age is almost entirely similar in appearance to those of the existing Caucasian species.'¹⁴ In the thirty engravings by Emile Bayard accompanying Figuiet's text, visual form is enlisted in the campaign against Darwin. *L'homme primitif* is shown wearing animal pelts, working with prehistoric tools and battling antediluvian animals. Actions and objects alone mark these figures as prehistoric, while **the human body remains exempt from evolutionary coding. Instead, bodies are almost Raphaellesque**—Adam and Eve extracted from paradise and reinserted in a prehistoric landscape (Fig. 3).

Reading the Evolutionary Sign

While Figuiet's illustrations were accompanied by text elaborating the author's specific position on evolution, *Cain* appeared in the (relatively) neutral context of the Salon. In Cormon's canvas the body becomes the text, the sole signifier of Darwinian meanings, and consequently, a source of fear and dread. Charged with the job of decoding that text, critics reveal a marked anxiety when discussing the physiognomy of Cormon's figures. 'Cain's torso absolutely lacks in academic purity', Armand Silvestre wrote.¹⁵ And another complained, 'Perhaps he should have minimised certain details of questionable taste; after all, certainly the articulations of the figures deserved to be less accentuated.'¹⁶ Critics found some relief in the woman carried in the foreground, whose smooth, ivory skin is a shade lighter than those of her more weathered companions. She seems uniquely delicate and refined, a welcome reminder of the traditional tropes of the female nude. Edmond About calls her body 'completely modern in its beauty, contrasting with the horrors and the exaggerated vulgarities of the tribe'.¹⁷ The ideology behind these aesthetic concerns soon reveals itself, however, as in Clément's remark: 'This damned tribe of emaciated people . . . these weapons from the Stone Age, these bodies that suggest more beast than man . . . these frightening, simian types . . . form an ensemble that is savage, dramatic, and striking.'¹⁸

In Cormon's picture, prehistoric times, more than inscribed *around* the body through scientifically accurate details, penetrate the boundaries of the body itself. This is particularly evident in the Cain figure, whose retreating forehead and protruding brow immediately announced his lower evolutionary status. Equally disturbing was Cain's slouching posture. His head slings forward, the torso is collapsed, and the curve of the back exaggerated, its crescent-shaped contour made even more pronounced by the shoulder that seemed to begin too far below it. Critics commented specifically on this area, one remarking that 'The drawing is coarse, vulgar, often intolerable, as in the shoulder of Cain.'¹⁹ In comparing the final painting to his study for the Cain figure, we see that Cormon deliberately revised the shoulder to emphasise the curvature of the back (Fig. 4). Although the most obvious change occurs in the position of the left arm—which originally pointed up instead of extending horizontally—subtle but significant adjustments were also made to the right arm. Slightly flexed in the study, it is straightened in the final version, the hand extending further toward the knee. Fingers that are bent in the study dangle lifelessly in the finished painting, and the result is a limb that hangs brutishly, ape-like.

The similarities between the Cain figure and anthropological drawings of ape skeletons are striking, as in this illustration of a chimpanzee from Paul Broca's *L'Ordre des Primates: Parallèle Anatomique de l'Homme et des Singes* of 1870



UNE FAMILLE A L'AGE DE PIERRE

Fig. 3. Emile Bayard, 'Une famille à l'âge de pierre'. From L. Figuier, *L'Homme Primitif* (Paris, 1870). (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.)

20. 'Ce jeune peintre sait très bien que ses personnages sont antérieures à l'âge de pierre, qu'ils précèdent d'une infinité de siècles le peigne et le savon, et qu'ils l'emportent de bien peu . . . sur les grandes singes de l'Afrique équatoriale. Il est donc tenté de les faire sordides, énormes, grossiers, intermédiaires entre l'homme et la brute; rien de plus naturel à son avis que de donner au vieux Cain l'enclature et la clavature d'une gorille.' E. About, 'Salon de 1880'.

21. Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 160.

22. M. Cotteau, 'Les Sciences Anthropologiques à l'Exposition Universelle de 1878', extrait du *Bulletin de la société des sciences historiques et naturelles de l'Yonne* (L'Yonne, 1879).

23. 'Parmi toutes ces merveilles, ce qui excitait le plus la curiosité des visiteurs, c'était, des trois salles qui composaient la section, la plus petite, celle où avaient été rangés les planches, les moules, les préparations et les squelettes nécessaire à l'étude des différences et des analogies de structure entre l'homme et le singe. . . . Le public voyait face à face des squelettes, des cerveaux des crânes, d'hommes et de singes. Vous vous doutez des réflexions sans nombre que soulevaient ces objets, des questions qu'ils provoquaient!' H.-M. Vincent, *L'Homme et le Singe à l'Exposition Universelle* (1878), *Section d'Anthropologie* (Nîmes, 1879).

(Fig. 5). This is not to suggest that the Cain figure is based directly on this drawing, only that such imagery was circulating and likely informed Cormon's conception. Both reveal the same curvature of the spine, bending knees, the straight limp arm that hangs between the legs—an analogy that was not missed by critics. Edmond About complained that Cain has 'the neck and shoulders of a gorilla'. The same critic remarked, 'This young painter knows very well that these figures predate the Stone Age, that they precede, by an infinity of centuries, both comb and soap, and that they are but little removed from the great apes of equatorial Africa. He has therefore tried to make them filthy, enormous, boorish, bony, intermediaries between man and beast.'²⁰ The slippage between man and animal evident in the figures' physiognomies is reiterated through the structure of the composition. Animals are casually woven into this travelling tapestry of human bodies, slung across backs, worn as garments. Cain at the front of the pack is mirrored by a mangy dog at the rear. At the painting's centre a ring of carcasses is completed by the slumping figure of Cain's wife; in her passive proximity to animal flesh she is virtually equated with it, and the hierarchies separating man and beast are startlingly destabilised.

But the meanings Cormon's painting held for contemporary audiences were perhaps most effectively expressed in visual terms. In a cartoon published in Nidrac's *Salon Comique de 1880*, Cormon's figures are recast as a tribe of apes, complete with tails and hairy bodies, and his painting granted a new title: 'Famille d'orangs-outangs en déplacement' ('Family of Traveling Orangutangs') (Fig. 6). Nidrac's figures almost precisely matched Darwin's description of prehistoric man: 'The early progenitors of man were no doubt once covered with hair, both sexes having beards; their ears were probably pointed and capable of movement; and their bodies were provided with a tail . . .'.²¹ Nidrac takes the Darwinian overtones implicit in Cormon's figures and turns them inside out, exposing them to full view; the result is bodies that are ridiculous, comical, impossible. In this way he reminds his audience of the absurdity of evolutionary theory and condemns what was perhaps a more serious infraction: Cormon's attempt to give the theory visual form in the arena of high art, across the familiar bodies of the academic tradition.

The man/ape anxiety surrounding this picture was no doubt heightened by the fact that in 1878, the same year Cormon began working on *Cain*, the Exposition Universelle was held in Paris and included a section devoted to anthropological sciences. Organised by the École d'Anthropologie, the pavillion was filled with prehistoric tools and bone fragments; vitrines along the walls displayed more than 1,400 skulls arranged chronologically, from Neanderthal to modern man. In one room, human and ape skeletons were presented side by side.²² A review by H. M. Vincent describes the public reaction: 'Among all the marvels, that which excited the most curiosity from the visitors was the smallest of the three rooms comprising the anthropology section, where engravings, casts, and skeletons were arranged enabling the study of the differences and similarities of bodily structure between man and ape.' He continues, 'The public was face to face with these skeletons and brains and skulls of men and apes, and they were struck by the analogies. Imagine the innumerable reflections that these objects raised, the questions they provoked!'²³ Constantine James' review of the anthropology section was titled 'Le Darwinisme à l'Exposition Universelle'. He describes the exhibition as 'deplorable', infused by 'the language of Darwin', concluding that the 'simian miasmas' it creates are 'nauseating'. As part of an 1878 series called 'A



Fig. 4. Fernand Cormon, *Study for 'Cain' figure*, 1879, oil on canvas, 63.4 x 48.4 cm. Musée Anne de Beaujeu de Moulins. (Photo: Musée Anne de Beaujeu de Moulins.)

travers l'exposition', *Charivari* published a cartoon titled 'The Darwin Machine' ('Appareil Darwin'), which clearly referred to the anthropology section (Fig. 7). Showing an ape entering the machine and emerging as man, the essential threat of Darwinian theory for nineteenth-century audiences is comically distilled.

Cormon had, in fact, read Darwin's theories, as Émile Michel's 1898 article on the artist attests: 'All that he could know about these matters, Cormon learned. With an always lively curiosity and a penetrating mind, he read all the serious works written by naturalists such as Darwin and John Lubbock.'²⁴ Cormon went frequently to the Musée des Antiquités Nationales to study the collection of prehistoric tools and weapons. His research also took him to the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, where prehistoric skulls were on view, along with reconstructions of extinct antedeluvian creatures. He did a

24. 'Tout ce qu'on peut savoir sur ces matières, M. Cormon l'a appris. Avec une curiosité toujours en éveil et un esprit très pénétrant, il a lu tous les livres sérieux écrits par des observateurs tels que Darwin ou John Lubbock.' E. Michel, 'Les Peintres Décoratives de M. Cormon au Muséum', *Revue de l'art ancien et moderne*, January 1898.

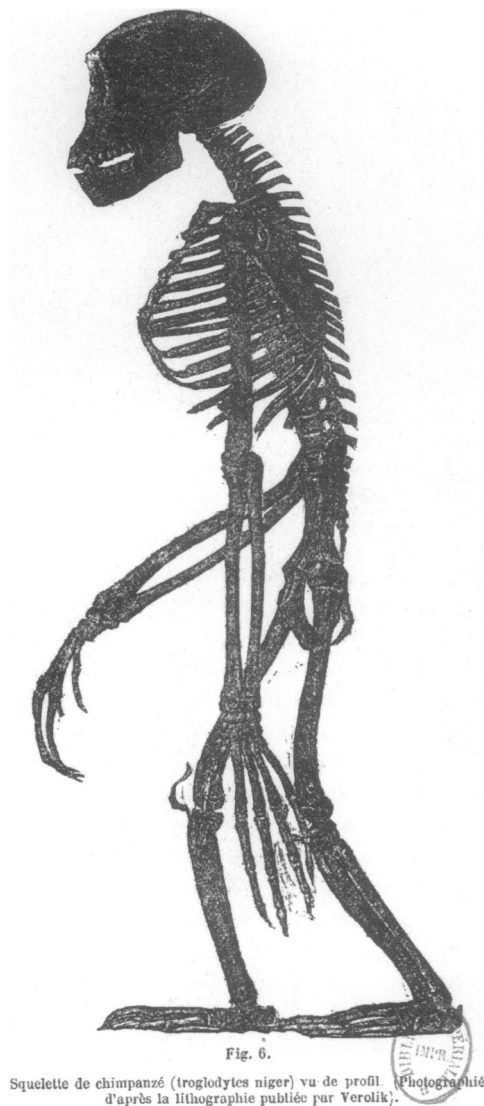


Fig. 5. 'Squelette de chimpanzé, vu de profil'. From Paul Broca, *L'Ordre des Primates. Parallèle anatomique de l'homme et des singes* (Paris, 1870). (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.)

comparative study of two of these skulls, labelling one 'race de Néanderthal' and the other 'Cro-Magnon', recording their profiles. The drawing is annotated with the words 'brachycephale' and 'dolichocephale', terms used by anthropologists to refer to skull length, revealing Cormon's familiarity with the scientific vocabulary of the time.

A cartoon by Caran d'Ache presents Cormon in his new identity as the painter of prehistoric life, standing before his canvas as the caveman artist. His painting, meanwhile, has been translated into a map of its offending elements, all of which are related to bodily form (Fig. 8). Cain's forehead hangs eave-like over his face, while arms and hands bear ape-like proportions. Impossibly splayed limbs protest the bending knees of Cormon's figures, an anatomical



Fig. 6. 'Famille d'orangs-outangs en déplacement'. From Nidrac's *Le Salon Comique de 1880* (Paris, 1880). (Photo: Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie Jacques Doucet, Paris.)

25. 'Les emboîtements des jambes . . . sont accusés avec une violence qui dépasse les possibilités de la structure humaine.' E. Michel, 'Le Salon de 1880'.

26. The frontispiece is reproduced in J. Herbert, *Fauve Painting: The Making of Cultural Politics* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1992).

peculiarity that drew much critical comment. Émile Michel lamented that 'the joints of the knees are charged with a violence that ignores the boundaries of human structure'.²⁵ While this bent-kneed stance in Cormon's painting can be explained by the narrative—the burden of the tribe's cargo, their fatigue, the moral weight of Cain's crime—its persistence as a motif, conspicuously repeated in each figure, transports its meaning from the realm of narrative to that of the biological. It is a posture that announces the strain of walking, hinting at beings that are barely bipedal, pulled down to the earth.

Indeed, **Cain and his tribe seemed to be the visual analogue of descriptions of Neanderthal man,** whom scientists had determined was a being with distinctly bent legs and that lacked the convex spine essential for upright posture. Cormon's figures are insistently earth-bound, more horizontal than vertical in orientation, from the lateral plane of Cain's neck and back, which is then mimicked in his left arm, to the sagging breasts of his wife—all of which is reinforced by the constricted horizontal space of the canvas itself. That gravity or horizontality could function as a symbol of early man is confirmed by an illustration published almost thirty years later, in 1908, as a frontispiece to Edmond Pierre's *La Femme dans la Nature*.²⁶ Titled 'The Physical Evolution of Woman,' the illustration pictures the milky-white body of modern European woman floating triumphant (and childless) in the clouds. The lower third of the composition reveals her earth-bound prehistoric counterpart, a slumping beast with child in arms and knuckles brushing the ground. She is a figure whom Cormon's matriarch seems to anticipate. In both images the prehistoric female body is signified through a wilting posture, beastly facial features, and drooping breasts; and in each, the body is relegated to its biological role as mother, preserver of the race. **Cormon's picture is, after all, a fantasy/nightmare of the human body in its purely biological, physical state.** With the exception of the Cain figure, whose furrowed brow seems to suggest an awakening moral conscience, any and all intellectual dimension is eclipsed. **The members of this tribe, despite their physical proximity, do not interact.** Eyes are cast down or stare blankly ahead. **They are bodies and only bodies, engaged in a Darwinian struggle to survive.**

In approximating the physiognomy of early man, *Cain* was a watershed

27. The illustration was published often during the nineteenth century, appearing, for example, in Thomas Huxley's *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (London, 1863).

28. 'Comme je donnerais volontiers toute cette mise en scène désagréable pour le torse ou la nuque d'un simple statue grecque!' L. Enault, *La Press*, 16 May 1880.

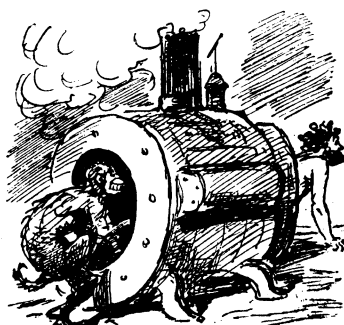
29. The work presented at the Salon was actually a cartoon for the final painted version at the Musée d'Amiens. The cartoon is now in the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels.

30. 'La grand tableau de M. Cormon . . . est placé vis-à-vis de la toile de M. Puvis de Chavannes et forme avec elle le contraste le plus singulier et le plus complet.' Clément, 'Exposition de 1880'.

picture; but there were, of course, several precedents contributing to a vocabulary of evolutionary signifiers from which Cormon could draw. The frontispiece to **Pierre Boitard's 1861 *Paris Avant Les Hommes***, a novel in which the narrator travels back in time, is titled 'Fossil Man', and offers the full range of beastly markers (Fig. 9). Prehistoric man is boldly imagined with hair covering his entire body and **elongated toes that signify his ability to climb**. As in the Cain figure, a profile rendering makes his receding forehead and protruding mouth immediately legible. His mate huddles in the **cave nearby**, her simian body wrapped protectively around her offspring. In his *Histoire de l'habitation humaine*, the architect and theorist Eugene Viollet-le-Duc included a profile of prehistoric man, whose sloping facial angle marks him as clearly less-evolved. Naturalists had imagined hybrid creatures long before theories of evolution and prehistory had emerged. An eighteenth-century illustration by a disciple of Linnaeus titled 'Les quatre anthropomorphes' pictured hairy, hunched beings with beastly facial features and elongated limbs. Though not intended to represent man in a lower evolved state, the creatures in this well-known illustration certainly participated in building an iconography of the evolutionary body.²⁷

The Classical Antidote

If the evolutionary body had specific formal signifiers, so too did its opposite. The critic Louis Enault concludes his review of Cormon's picture with this remark: 'How I would gladly trade this disagreeable scene for the torso or neck of a simple Greek statue!'²⁸ Interestingly enough, the desires and tensions implicit in Enault's imagined swap were effectively staged at the 1880 Salon, for Cormon's canvas hung next to Puvis's celebrated and unmistakably classicising *Ludis Pro Patria*.²⁹ While the two pictures were similar in monumental scale and in depicting a remote age in human history, they were otherwise vastly disparate interpretations that collided on the walls of the Salon. One critic noted that the pairing formed 'the most singular and complete contrast' of the exhibition.³⁰ Puvis' vision is of a remote but timeless



APPAREIL DARWIN,
Y entrant singe, en sortant homme.

Fig. 7. 'Appareil Darwin'. From *Le Charivari*, 19 May 1878. ©Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.



CORMON (F.). — Escouade de sapeurs préhistoriques.

Fig. 8. Caran d'Ache, 'Cormon, F.—Escouade de sapeurs préhistoriques'. (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.)



Fig. 9. 'Fossil Man'. Frontispiece for Pierre Boitard's *Paris Avant les Hommes* (Paris, 1861). (Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.)

utopia, one in which classical, idealised figures coexist harmoniously, in which athletes celebrate the grace of human form, and in which physicality is both liberating and morally elevating. In his picture the human body is unrestrained and unburdened, perfectly erect, composed of graceful lines and contours that drew the admiration of critics. Mirroring the exhibition's physical juxtapositioning, critics frequently set Puvis' picture against Cormon's in their reviews. Emil Michel remarked, 'Although the subject here is still the primitive ages of humanity, the contrast between the two works could not be more striking. [Puvis] shows that in two analogous subjects, the will of the artist can, depending on the nature of his intellect and talent, bring about great diversity in the manner of conceiving and representing them.'³¹ Though perhaps inadvertent, the pairing of these two paintings in the 1880 Salon

31. 'Bien qu'il agisse encore ici des âges primitifs de l'humanité, le contraste entre les deux oeuvres ne saurait être plus franché. Il [Puvis] montre ce que la liberté de l'artiste, en se prenant à des sujets analogues, peut, suivant la nature de l'esprit et du talent, amener de diversité dans la façon de les concevoir et de les représenter.' E. Michel, 'Le Salon de 1880'.

32. 'Je me place au pôle opposé de l'École anthropologique d'aujourd'hui, qui veut donner à l'Homme des origines simiennes . . . qui, si elle grandissait, conduirait à la négation de tout ce qui est noble et grand dans la nature humaine. . . . Cette école barbare et cruelle . . . inventent UN MONSTRE!! Oui, un monstre! Produit de leur cerveau, moitié homme, moitié singe, qu'ils appellent effrontément *notre ancêtre*. . . . Voilà ce qu'on enseigne en pleine École d'Anthropologie, à Paris, comme étant principe d'étude, et vérité de doctrine. Voilà ce que les disciples de Broca et les continuateurs de Darwin proclament, à travers le monde et dans tous les congrès, comme étant la grande vérité du dix-neuvième siècle!' C. Rochet, *Traité d'Anatomie d'Anthropologie et d'Ethnographie Appliquées aux Beaux-Arts* (Paris, 1886), pp. 106–7.

33. 'L'artiste peut rectifier beaucoup d'erreurs de nos savants qui ne dessinent pas . . . ces moyens-la ont si peu de pris quand il s'agit de l'Être humain vivant et de la définition de ses caractères physiques.' Rochet, *Traité d'Anatomie*, p. 25. 'Notre aïeul a été tout de suite un grand et beau type, en fin de compte, nous sommes tous la reproduction exacte and fidèle, sauf la légère particularité qui sert à constituer l'individualité sur chacun de nous.' Rochet, *Traité d'Anatomie*, p. 108.

34. Perhaps the most graphic example of this opposition dates from the late eighteenth century, in Petrus Camper's *Dissertation sur les variétés naturelles qui caractérisent la physionomie des hommes des divers climats et des différents âges* (Paris, 1791). One illustration in this influential physiognomic treatise was titled 'From Ape to Apollo Belvedere'. It presents a succession of heads intended to show the facial angles and thus, he claimed, the relative intelligence of various races. Though not meant to suggest an evolutionary trajectory, the spectrum is buttressed by an ape on one end and classical icon on the other.

illustrates a polarity that was actively constructed and theorised during the late nineteenth century. The classical body was, in certain contexts, consciously invoked as the evolutionary body's opposite.

In his influential *Traité d'Anatomie d'Anthropologie et d'Ethnographie Appliquées aux Beaux-Arts* of 1886, a manual for artists, Charles Rochet explicitly addresses the implications of evolutionary theory for representing the body of prehistoric man. Rochet had attended several lectures at the École d'Anthropologie and was horrified by the transformist teachings he encountered there; even more distressing was the school's notorious anatomical comparisons between man and ape. His treatise is punctuated with stinging condemnations of Darwin and his followers:

I place myself at the pole opposite the École Anthropologique of today, that wants to give man simian origins . . . and which, if it grows, will lead to the negation of all that is noble and grand in human nature. . . . This barbarous and cruel school . . . has invented a MONSTER!! Yes, a monster, a product of the imagination, half man, half ape, that they shamelessly call *our ancestor*. . . . This is what is taught openly at the École d'Anthropologie in Paris. . . . This is what the disciples of Broca and the followers of Darwin proclaim . . . as if it were the great truth of the nineteenth century.³²

In his campaign to re-establish the eroding boundaries separating human and animal form, and to reassert man's primacy as God's chosen creature, Rochet devotes much of his treatise to outlining the anatomical differences between man and ape. Through his analysis of primate anatomy the signs of the evolutionary body are essentially identified—the narrow skull, the rounded back—and he urgently cautions artists against allowing these signs to penetrate their renderings of prehistoric or modern man. Moreover, Rochet emphasises the role of the artist in falsifying notions of man's simian origins, insisting, for example, that if sufficient attention is paid to the rendering of the skull, 'the artist could rectify many of the errors of our scholars . . . those measures are so little to ask when it concerns the living human being and the definition of his physical characteristics', he writes. According to Rochet, our earliest ancestor was 'immediately a great and beautiful type, of which, all things considered, we are an exact and fidelitous reproduction, except for the slight particularities that constitute the individuality in each of us'.³³ Guidelines for rendering this ideal form, with special attention paid to the skull, were summarised in a section called 'The human prototype: fundamental laws for the geometry of form in the human species'. Significantly, the female prototype was epitomised by the Venus de Milo, a classical icon that for Rochet embodied not only ideal female form, but the visual antidote to Darwinian conceptions of man's origins.³⁴

Several representations of prehistoric man emerged during the 1870s and 1880s, and in these the disruptive potential of the prehistoric body is nullified through its inscription within the familiar limits of classicism. Fremiet's *Stone Age Man of 1872*, for example, was slightly controversial because the artist claimed to use the exact measurements of a fossil skull, as an inscription on the sculpture's base attests (Fig. 10). Yet whatever idiosyncracies the prehistoric skull measurements may have given the figure, they are certainly not visible, and are ultimately subsumed within the artist's overall treatment of the body according to the laws of classical form. Classical associations are further evoked by the figure's pose, which recalls dancing fauns from antiquity. Through bodily form, Fremiet announces his position in the evolutionary debate; indeed, the artist's statements situate him clearly on the side of fixity of species. 'The prehistoric man or animal is very easy to reconstitute', he told



Fig. 10. Emmanuel Fremiet, *Man of the Stone Age*, 1872, bronze, 210 cm high. Jardin des Plantes, Paris. (Photo: Bibliothèque centrale du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris.)

Thiébault-Sisson in 1896. 'We have found human skeletons that clearly establish that early man was the same as man of today, with only slight differences.'³⁵ Leon Faivre's *Les Deux Mères* of 1888 presents a cavewoman who, like the bear mother in the background shadows, displays her primal instinct to preserve the race by protecting her offspring (Fig. 11). She is marked by the now familiar attributes of Stone-Age existence, but if not for her axe and animal pelt Faivre's prehistoric woman would be right at home among the bathers and nymphs dominating the Salon walls. Her body is thick and muscular yet not brutish, and her fierce expression occurs across a reassuringly classical profile. Perhaps most significantly, the figure's breasts are round and taut, in striking contrast to the sagging breasts that elsewhere function as a primary signifier of the lower-evolved female body. And then, of course, there are the Figuiet illustrations, in which l'homme primitif maintains

35. 'La préhistorique, animal ou homme, est d'une reconstitution très facile. On a retrouvé des squelettes humains qui établissent nettement que l'homme d'alors était pareil à celui d'à présent, à de légères différences près.' Cited in C. Chevillot, *Emmanuel Fremiet, 1824–1910: Le main et le multiple* (Musée des Beaux-Arts: Dijon, 1998). Fremiet is known mainly for his *Gorilla Carrying off a Negresse* which, produced in 1859, was assumed to have Darwinian implications. However, Chevillot has argued that Fremiet wouldn't have known about Darwin's theories at this early date, and that he was probably more influenced by the 'fixist' ideas of paleontologists such as Cuvier at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, where the sculptor studied and worked. See Chevillot, *Emmanuel Fremiet*, p. 35.

36. There were several others who took up the subject of prehistoric man. Paul Richer's *First Artist*, a bronze sculpture in the Jardin des Plantes, shows prehistoric man in the act of creating, thereby emphasising early man's intellectual rather than physical dimension. Paul Jamin was known for his prehistoric genre scenes.



Fig. 11. Léon-Maxime Faivre, *The Two Mothers*, 1888, oil on canvas, 242 × 182 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.)

a graceful contrapposto stance even as he engages in the most primitive of tasks.³⁶

It seems, then, that within the context of evolutionary debate, a new significance is added to the catalogue of meanings assigned to the classical body. During an historical moment when long-held assumptions about the fixity of species were quickly giving way, it becomes emblematic of permanence and immutability. It may be that the appeal of the classical body for representing prehistoric man was predominantly cultural, especially in light of the French nation's ongoing project of asserting its classical roots. In refusing to locate human origins prior to the classical body, a work like Fremiet's *Man of the Stone Age* claims classical culture as man's true origins, turning evolution into a cultural rather than biological discourse. However, I think what we must also consider is that the classical body is an archetype that by definition refuses the volatility of human form. According to Alex Potts, the

classical body serves as a universal paradigm because it transcends the particularising effects of environmental context and is therefore 'unmarked by history.'³⁷ Unmarked and abstracted, the classical body refuses to be located temporally; it is this timelessness and its attendant notions of permanence that makes it immune to the proclamations of science. Through its very form—unwavering contours, secure lines—it signified boundaries, limits. And finally, as the offspring of fixed, canonical laws, the classical body in all its nineteenth-century incarnations was the very opposite of Darwinian arbitrariness and variation.

The Problem of the Evolutionary Body

James Krasner describes Darwin's portrayal of nature as 'a set of unstable forms that slip into new forms even as they are being named and represented'.³⁸ In the Darwinian universe forms are constantly in a state of flux, blending into one another, refusing to conform to the rigid categories that want to hold them in place. The impossibility of stable form proposed by Darwin is reiterated in the structure of his writing, especially in his descriptions of the natural world. In one example, several species are crammed together in one protracted sentence, their bodies described only in fragments, their forms sliding into one another: 'Hairless dogs have imperfect teeth; long-haired and coarse-haired animals are apt to have, as is asserted, long or many horns; pigeons with feathered feet have skin between their outer toes.' As Krasner puts it, 'It is a visual field so crowded with animal parts that everything seems to be linked to everything else. The reader's vision is overwhelmed by a mass of natural fragments that are disassociated from any stable, recognizable forms.'³⁹ Darwin's writing presents a vision of nature so unstable that organisms can only be described in parts, and the resulting image is a jumble of pieces that never add up to a whole.

The evolutionary body, then, always in a state of formation, whose boundaries are never secure, is essentially metonymic in structure. Evolution implies lack, and the threat of the evolutionary body resided in the fact that, by definition, it was never a complete body. Looking again at the critical language used to describe Cormon's bodies, we see that the focus is very often on their formal insubstantiality, on their perceived incompleteness. Louis Enault complained that 'Cormon shows us beings barely formed, contemporaries of the mastodon and other pachyderms that floundered around in the prehistoric morass'.⁴⁰ Paul Mantz's unfavorable review likens Cormon's figures to the 'roughly hewn men that were the preface to civilisation'.⁴¹ Early man was feared to be not merely anatomically distinct, but somehow *less formed*.

If the classical body is a fantasy of wholeness and permanence, it is this fantasy that is violently shattered in Cormon's *Cain*. In his monumental scene of prehistoric life, Cormon not only dares to imagine our earliest ancestors but essentially exposes the perpetual state of lack that is the nature of the evolving body. In *Cain*, the inclusion of the classically proportioned female body—the one singled out by critics—only serves to articulate Cormon's disavowal of the wholeness that body represents. The mutable nature of human form erupts throughout the painting, and the slippage between man and animal is continually performed. We see, finally, that the painting's physical centre is also its symbolic and psychic centre: beneath the body of Cain's wife a bloody carcass emblematises the ultimate rupturing of bodily coherence. The circular structure of this passage, linking Cain's wife to the animal world, is also the circular structure of metonymic lack and perpetual desire. Even as our eye

37. Potts explains that the eighteenth-century theorist Winckelmann 'made the Greek ideal a universal paradigm by defining it negatively, as the relatively empty image of the human figure that emerged once the "inadequate" particularities determined by custom and environment were purged.' A. Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1994), p. 160.

38. J. Krasner, *The Entangled Eye: Visual Perception and the Representation of Nature in Post-Darwinian Narrative* (Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford, 1992), p. 35.

39. Krasner, *Entangled Eye*, p. 57.

40. 'Cormon nous montre des êtres à peine ébauchés, dignes contemporains du mastodonte et autres pachydermes qui pataugeaient dans les marais préhistorique.' Louis Enault, *La Presse*, 16 May 1880.

41. 'Cain et son groupe sont . . . comme les hommes mal dégrossis qui furent la préface de la civilisation.' Paul Mantz, *Le Temps*, 16 May 1880.

42. 'Se gardant de pousser trop loin l'analyse, il évite ce qui aurait pu nous choquer dans la reconstitution trop cherchée de l'homme d'alors.' J. Comte, 'Salon', *L'Illustration*, 3 March 1884, p. 287.

travels upward, along the foreshortened carcass leading to the 'whole' body of Cain's wife, her gaze only redirects the eye back down, to the symbols of the unformed—her children, animal parts—and the body is once again undone. As Darwin challenged the ideals of permanent categories of thought, exposing the idea of species as an arbitrary historical construction, Cormon exposes the ideal of the complete, immutable body as fiction.

Cormon's Retraction

Yet four years later, in 1884, we find Cormon himself invoking classicism to negotiate the volatile terms of the prehistoric body in his first explicitly prehistoric theme. Called *The Stone Age, Return from a Bear Hunt*, the painting was commissioned by the Musée des Antiquités Nationales, where it hung among collections of artifacts from the most remote ages of human history (Fig. 12). In this genre scene we are once again given many of the requisite signs of early civilisation: ancient tools, animal pelts, a carcass at the centre. However, as one critic noted, Cormon 'keeps himself from pushing the analysis too far, he avoids that which might offend us in the too sought-after reconstitution of man from that epoch'.⁴² In what seems to be a retraction of the Darwinian statements made in *Cain*, the scientifically-informed bodies of



Fig. 12. Fernand Cormon, *Stone Age, Return from the Bear Hunt*, 1884, oil on canvas. Musée des Antiquités Nationales, Saint-Germain-en-Laye. (Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux.)

his earlier picture are exchanged with figures bearing elegant classical profiles and physiques. To the right, a female member of the tribe stands like a Greek sculpture, while the pose of the hunter bandaging his arm in the foreground is a quotation of the famous Apoxyomenos statue.⁴³ Even the setting draws from a neoclassical vocabulary: the tree anchoring the composition performs the role of a column, and the log running along the top of the hut stands in for a cornice. It appears, then, that even after his early moment of transgression, Cormon could not quite abandon the fantasy of man's classical origins and the tenacious resistance to mutability offered by the classical ideal. Cormon would eventually present prehistoric man with explicitly ape-like features in his 1898 cycle for the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle depicting the evolution of man; by this time, in a society that had reinterpreted evolution as a march toward progress, Darwinian notions were not so threatening.⁴⁴ But in 1884, as in 1880, French audiences were not ready to be confronted with their repressed evolutionary history.

43. The similarity in pose to the Apoxyomenos statue is pointed out by Mayumi Kamada in 'Fernand Cormon: Sa Vie et ses oeuvres peintes' (Thèse, Université de Paris IV—Sorbonne, 1987).

44. Cormon's studies for this cycle are reproduced in: *D'Ingres à Cézanne: Le XIX^e Siècle dans le collections du Musée du Petit Palais* (Musée du Petit Palais: Paris, 1998).