

The Lascaux Notebooks, Jean-Luc Champerret, ed./tr. Philip Terry (Carcamet)

Whilst dedicated cavers continue to dive and squeeze further and further underground, mapping new networks and entering underground 'rooms' no-one else has ever seen, others have always preferred to consider archaeological and anthropological findings in depth rather than simply move on. Jerome Rothenberg has translated and anthologised texts under the term ethnopoetics; Clayton Eshelman has synthesized theology, psychology, creative writing and what would now be called eco-criticism to explore the 'Upper Paleolithic Imagination'; whilst the first (and for a long time only) monograph about the Lascaux caves was written by Georges Bataille.

Much, of course, was made of the 20,000 year-old art found (or re-discovered) in 1940 at Lascaux and other caves in the Dordogne region. It fed into fine artists' obsessions with 'primitive' cultures, as well as providing an argument that art had always been important, perhaps pre-dating spoken language, and allowed much conjecture about art as magic, celebration, wish-fulfilment, prophecy, celebration and documentary. What seemed to be missing was any coherent study of the smaller marks in the caves, which were overshadowed by many larger animal images and silhouettes of hands.

Enter Jean-Luc Champerret, an obscure and largely forgotten French author, who took it upon himself to document the symbols found in Lascaux, eventually producing a set of 70 Ice-Age hieroglyphics. He had visited the caves as a member of the Resistance soon after they were found, and upon returning soon after the war was able to translate the groups and grids of marks into word clusters, and then extrapolate them into more and more complex texts or poems. Ignored at the time, Champerret's neglected research was eventually given to Dr. Terry, a translator and Oulipean writer, when visiting an architect friend in the Dordogne region who had found a crate of Champerret's papers in a chateau he was then remodelling.

It wasn't until a few years later, when moving house, that Terry realised what he had been given: a highly original and invaluable work which had not been widely disseminated in its original language, let alone translated and published elsewhere. His academic inquisitiveness and imaginative prowess facilitated this marvellous 400-page edition, which reproduces in full the original cave markings, as well as translated versions and reversions of the cave texts produced by Champerret.

Many are first translated from the images – often found in a 3 by 3 grid, a kind of visual magic square – into simple language, which provides a basic word pattern to build on:

call birds trees

call deer plain

call bear mountains (p 82)

It is then a small step to work this up into a denser, more complex work:

the call

of the birds
fills the trees

the call
of the deer
fills the plain

the call
of the bear
fills the mountains

and on, through a third version to the more poetic fourth and final text:

The shrill song
of the birds
fills the swaying trees

the hoarse bellow
of the red deer
echoes in the river valley

the rasping road
of the cave bears
fills the black mountains

There is, of course, an element of authorial assumption and intervention, not to mention poetic licence here, something Terry notes he is aware of, but the effect of 'filling out' the basic written utterances of our ancient ancestors offers us a new and invigorating insight into our past.

Elsewhere, there are texts expanded into prose poems or stories, as well as more fragmented works (sometimes reminiscent of the works of Sappho) which spill across the page. It is an exhilarating and thought-provoking book that foregrounds the world of Ice Age people, a world that is, as one of the poems says, 'still etched in the dark earth'. This book will, I am sure be of interest to not only poets but all those interested in history, shamanism, ethnography, codes, caves, dissimulation, creative writing and the roots of documented utterance. It will, I am sure, become an influential and seminal book, one which will illuminate the previously dark and shadow-filled caves of formative language.

Rupert Loydell