

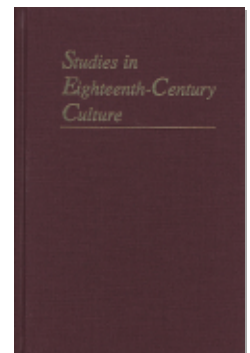


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: Natural Historical Facts and Historical Fictions

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Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, Volume 45, 2016, pp. 107-130 (Article)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2016.0015>

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Natural Historical Facts and
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DANIEL LEONARD

In *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* (1760), Charles de Brosses (1709–77) coined the term “fétichisme” in an attempt to synthesize contemporary evidence regarding the practices and beliefs of pre-modern societies. By compiling the reports of traders and travelers from the sixteenth century to the present, he concluded that the direct worship of things (such as rocks, trees, bodies of water and animals) was widespread and could be identified as a distinct species of religion, reflecting a savage and irrational “façon de penser.”¹ Furthermore, by comparing these practices to ancient Egyptian plant and animal worship and the rites of other pagans, de Brosses argued that fetishism was a universal phase of religious development: the oldest and most primitive form of religion, distinct from the later systems of polytheism and monotheism.

De Brosses's assertion that all religions began with fetish worship—a direct, affective and immediate attachment to things—established an origin so radically other and irrational that it challenged existing approaches, from orthodox biblical history to deism and natural religion, and even secular philosophical history. Indeed, much existing scholarship on de Brosses focuses on his contribution to emergent disciplines such as comparative religion, anthropology and the philosophy of history, and the disruptive

impact of what has become one of modern critical theory's most promiscuous and productive concepts—fetishism.² Although some studies of *Du culte des dieux fétiches* within the context of eighteenth-century discussions of myth and religion recognize de Brosses's unique and innovative interventions, he rarely escapes condemnation as a slipshod stylist or blatant racist, if not both.³ More recently, Aaron Freeman has convincingly portrayed de Brosses's affinities with what Jonathan Israel calls Radical Enlightenment and foregrounded de Brosses's contribution to the satirical anti-clericalism so characteristic of skeptics and the *philosophes*.⁴ However, these approaches have not fully explored de Brosses's materialist critique of the mediation of religious ideas and experience, nor the challenge it poses to the very possibility of a philosophically guided universal history.

In focusing on what William Pietz calls the “irreducible materiality” of the fetish and de Brosses's vigorous denunciation of both ancient and modern attempts to transform it into a representation, symbol or allegory of some higher spiritual truth, I have been inspired by recent scholarship that discusses how complex, varied mediations shaped the articulation of Enlightenment projects and values, such as the work collected in Clifford Siskin and William Warner's *This is Enlightenment*. Siskin and Warner define “mediation” as “shorthand for the work done by tools, by what we would now call ‘media’ of every kind—everything that intervenes, enables, supplements, or is simply in between” and provocatively call the Enlightenment “an event in the history of mediation.”⁵ Regarding de Brosses's text as a extended investigation of how religious beliefs are inevitably and inescapably formed through historic mediations, I propose to explore the tensions inherent in his materialist theory of religion. De Brosses's polemic distinguishes sharply between the immediate, primitive origins of religion in fetishism and the highly mediated, even devious, development of more advanced forms of worship. What is ultimately at stake in granting such an exceptional status to fetish worship?

In presenting his case for fetishism, de Brosses confronts a tendentious mode of historical narrative dominated by what he calls figurism. Like fetishism, figurism is a universal tendency, but these two -isms exist in an uneasy dialectical relationship. Whereas fetishism directly invests material objects with an inscrutable power, figurism seeks to repress the material origins of religion in fetish worship by retrospectively transforming fetishes into symbols and allegories of a purely spiritual and transcendent truth. According to de Brosses, as peoples become more civilized and adopt polytheism and monotheism, they attempt to erase or sublimate all evidence of fetish worship, employing figurism to create a new mythical origin that anticipates and prefigures their historical destiny.⁶

By identifying fetishism and figurism at work in mythology, the history of religion, theology and philosophical systems, de Brosses calls attention to both the material mediations and investments of power present in all forms of belief. At the same time, he identifies the diverse and historically determined figural strategies employed to disguise this mediation of power relations in the name of both spiritual and secular progress. In the end, I argue, *Du culte des dieux fétiches* presents a self-reflexive critique not only of the study of religion, but also historiography, identifying the persistence of mythical thinking in the age of Enlightenment, in myths of universal reason and enlightenment itself.

De Brosses's scholarly projects were strongly marked by the peculiar provincial milieu of Dijon, where an erudite philological humanism remained prominent, setting him somewhat apart from his Parisian contemporaries.⁷ As a member of the Royal Academy of Inscriptions, de Brosses was directly involved with archeological excavations in Italy, drawing up reports of recent discoveries in Herculaneum and elsewhere. More than any other work, he dedicated great time and effort to painstakingly collating Sallust's writings into a coherent corpus, to reconstruct ancient Roman history. But, as a state-of-the-art complement, he collected reports about recently discovered peoples in the South Pacific in his *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes* (1756).⁸ Together, these pursuits prepared him for the natural historical inquiry of *Du culte des dieux fétiches*, where he synthesized newly collected ethnographic observations and applied archaeological, etymological and philological methods critically to excavate evidence of fetishism. The result was a systematic classification of the varieties of fetish worship and the diverse mystifications of figurism.

Parallel to these antiquarian and ethnographic projects, de Brosses developed his own brand of materialist etymology in his *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues et des principes physiques de l'étymologie* (1765).⁹ He became convinced that his theory of the "mechanical" origins of language had wide implications, not only for the study of linguistic development and religion, but for all of world history. As William Pietz has emphasized, these eclectic and idiosyncratic interests defined de Brosses as an experimental archaeologist: combining excavated materials, eyewitness observations and his own scholarly research on language and religion, de Brosses uncovered a "space of nature" characterized by "brute materiality, mechanistic and capricious events."¹⁰ He then began the work of reconstruction, restoring the forgotten and fragmented material history of both ancient and neglected cultures. Working with physical artifacts, the dispersed traces of the primal phonetic forms at the origin of all languages, and an erudite textual hermeneutics, de Brosses devoted meticulous attention to the material mediation of thoughts and beliefs.

Figurism and the Excavation of Facts

At the start of *Du culte des dieux fétiches*, de Brosses diagnoses the deplorable state of mythological scholarship: “L’Assemblage confus de l’ancienne Mythologie” remains “[un] chaos indéchiffrable, ou [une] énigme purement arbitraire” because modern scholars have not been able to free themselves of the insidious influence of figurism.¹¹ Even before he introduces his own neologism, “fétichisme,” he deploys another recently coined term, “figurisme,” to characterize a general tendency in modern mythography and the study of religion as the main obstacle to his own investigation.¹² By suppressing or transforming the evidence that attests to fetish worship, figurism denies the true material origins of religion. As the term suggests, it is a sort of method: in general, it transforms fetishism and fetishes themselves into figures that anticipate, prefigure or symbolize a more exalted spiritual entity or idea. This enables teleological narratives of religious development that view the origins of beliefs from the perspective of an achieved state located in the present or future. Figurism constructs a past in conformity with the designs of the present moment, whether they are reactionary, reformist, metaphysical or moral.

For de Brosses, the main challenge is that figurism forms the basis of so much historical writing, whether the narratives are providential, nationalistic or philosophical. All of them transform historical evidence to suit their teleological schemes and ideological programs, through both broadly rhetorical and specific tropological strategies. In order to reconstruct the origins of religion in fetish worship, de Brosses must therefore work to counteract the effects of figurism. To do so, his investigation adopts four main strategies. First, employing a natural historical method based on ethnographic comparisons and painstaking erudition, he brings to light incontrovertible “facts” testifying to religion’s universal origin in fetishism. Then, he deepens his investigation, using critical etymology and textual hermeneutics to excavate the disfigured evidence of fetishism embedded in mythical narratives and systems. Next, in his own version of conjectural history, he puts forward a “mechanistic” psychological theory to reconstruct the way of thinking underlying fetishism. Finally, he mounts a critique of figurism as a tool for myth making, questioning not only longstanding historical narratives, but also the polemical and reformist philosophical histories that form part of the project of Enlightenment.

The Natural History of Fetishism

Although *Du culte des dieux fétiches* appears at first glance to be a narrowly erudite study of ancient Egyptian religion compared to the beliefs and practices of present-day “savages,” it quickly becomes apparent that de Brosses’s ambitions are much broader. In fact, he intends no less than a complete rethinking of the study of mythology and religion, based on his discovery of fetishism, which he defines as a “culte direct rendu sans figure aux productions animales et végétales.”¹³ In order to write a natural history of fetishism, de Brosses collects his evidence from a wide variety of sources, ancient and modern, arranging it according to “ce parallèle facile à faire des mœurs antiques avec les modernes,” which allows him to discover “le mystère d’une énigme dont on a si longtemps cherché le mot” and a key to understanding all mythology.¹⁴ However easily seen, scholars have neither recognized this parallel nor made proper use of it: blinded by their admiration of the ancients and exalted notions of pagan myth, they viewed “d’un trop beau côté la chose du monde la plus pitoyable en soi.”¹⁵ Thus, according to de Brosses, mythographers have been looking in the wrong place for their evidence, ignoring direct observations that can still be made in the present. Also, led by a false and idealized historical perspective, they misrecognize, misinterpret and distort the evidence of ancient fetishism, making a proper identification of the facts more difficult.

De Brosses’s parallel detaches the evidence of fetishism from the contexts in which it is embedded, transforming it into a collection of natural historical “faits.” [“facts.”] In his investigation of myth and religion, he applies natural historical methods to the study of humanity, as many mid-century French thinkers had begun to do. His childhood friend Georges-Louis Leclerc Comte de Buffon’s influential *Histoire Naturelle*, which began to appear in 1749, prominently featured accounts of the animal nature of humans intended to explain the variety and development of humanity.¹⁶ Like others, Buffon was inspired by Francis Bacon’s claim that if scholars created histories of every topic imaginable, by merely collecting and comparing facts they would discover new knowledge and reveal gaps that remain to be filled. However, Buffon cautioned that in drawing conclusions, natural historians must suspend judgment and maintain a keen critical eye; otherwise, they will generalize hastily, misidentify and improperly classify things, and appeal excessively to analogy. To avoid such dangers, Buffon advises natural historians to try to see as much as possible, “presque sans dessein,” succumbing to the apparently infinite irregularity of nature, rather than imagining in everything a seductively deceptive “espèce d’ordre et d’uniformité.”¹⁷

In opposition to historical chronicles, myths or legends, whose narrative form shapes and mediates their material for their own ends, de Brosses's natural history, like Buffon's, adopts a scheme proper to the material evidence itself. His facts are not only temporally and geographically dispersed, they also take on every conceivable form: material objects and scraps of information, alongside eyewitness reports and historical accounts. Words and things alike, once amassed and organized, reveal quite different and unexpected patterns—such as the universal primacy of fetishism. Thus, the facts required by de Brosses are revealed in the proper light only after he strips them of surrounding narratives, which integrate them into the fulfillment of providential schemes or the divinely imposed order of nature, and after he liberates them from the verbal contortions of scholastic systems and the remnants of Neoplatonism.

Adopting this point of view allows de Brosses to elucidate what was previously obscured in accounts of ancient myth: “en général il n’y a pas de meilleure méthode de percer les voiles des points de l’antiquité peu connus, que d’observer s’il n’arrive pas encore quelque part sous nos yeux quelque chose d’à-peu-près pareil.”¹⁸ Indeed, he had already discovered such evidence of fetishism in his *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes* (1756). Noting that the indigenous peoples of the South Pacific “adorent des pierres rondes, des troncs d’arbres et divers autres espèces de *fétiches*, ainsi que les nègres Africains” he recognizes ancient stone worship as “une espèce de *fétichisme*, semblable à celui des sauvages modernes.”¹⁹ In identifying this similarity, de Brosses sees himself as contributing new, “experimental” observations to the natural history of humanity, following in the footsteps of such pioneers as Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Francis Bacon, and Pierre Louis Maupertuis.²⁰ De Brosses undertakes an “experiment” when he challenges the privilege given to temporal distance in historical narrative, replacing it with spatial, or geographical distance: what may appear to be an artificial and arbitrary juxtaposition nonetheless produces valuable new observations. Considering reports from the recently discovered *terra incognita* of the southern hemisphere, which seems as strange as “another planet,” gives his readers the opportunity to travel back in time, as it were, to observe the ancients and their own ancestors as they once were.²¹ As Tom Ryan points out, this unfamiliar perspective enlarges the conception of humanity to include so-called savages, instead of viewing them as animals. It also displaces and defamiliarizes the ancient pagans that many enlightenment figures embraced as their contemporaries—they were all fetishists!²²

In *Du culte des dieux fétiches*, de Brosses develops his conception of fetishism in a much wider frame of reference, informed by a global and

historical awareness of human diversity. Like Buffon, who exclaimed, “il semble que tout ce qui peut être, est,”²³ when confronted with the variety of the natural world, de Brosses is faced with an information explosion that no existing method can fully master, a state of affairs most dramatically embodied in the encyclopedic knowledge projects so characteristic of the time. From this mass of facts, he identifies fetishism as a universal stage of religious development: “toutes ces façons de penser n’ont au fond que la même source, et que celle-ci n’est que l’accessoire d’une Religion générale répandue fort au loin sur toute la terre.”²⁴ This recognition establishes the basis for further comparisons and classifications, according to shared features, variations, and divergences within the category of fetishism.

In both part one and part two of *Du culte des dieux fétiches*, de Brosses begins with a single case history that provides a “thick description” and delineates fetishism’s distinctive traits. He also demonstrates that in time it develops into a fully realized form of religious life. In both his description of snake worship in Juidah and the meticulously detailed excerpts from Diodorus describing Egyptian religion, he sees the same essential features. Ancient and modern fetishism share similar practices, including rituals, processions, temples and priests. The functions are also the same: fetishists appeal to their objects for protection and knowledge of the future, but also identify themselves in relation to others based on their devotion to specific fetishes.

Following these exemplary accounts, de Brosses extends his inquiry to consider many other examples from both the present and ancient times. However, he must defend the singularity of fetishism by combatting the ubiquitous machinations of figurism. For example, Jesuit missionaries such as Joseph-François Lafitau claimed to have discovered “conformities” between the beliefs of the cultures he encountered and Christianity, which would facilitate conversion. Similarly, orthodox scholars employed formidable erudition in their study of the ancient pagans, finding conformities to support the diffusionist theory that all world religions were erroneous disfigurations of the one true religion revealed to Adam and Eve before the Fall.²⁵ De Brosses appropriates these conformities, transforming them into a loose assemblage of facts that reveal the ubiquity of fetishism. Deists used a similar strategy to replace Christianity and other priestly deceptions with their original, reasonable monotheism. But de Brosses refutes them in turn by using their own evidence to conclude that the original religion was far from reasonable. Despite their misrecognitions and attempts to transform fetishism into a more elevated form of belief, all of these sources in fact testify to the primacy and primitive nature of fetish worship. Since figurists

systematically disfigure the evidence, de Brosse's parallel is the only true conformity: fetishism shows primitive humans' "conformité" to their own nature and psychology (185), just as etymology demonstrates that "la vérité des mots, ainsi que celle des idées, consiste dans leur conformité avec les choses."²⁶

Critical Etymology and Textual Archaeology

To transform these suppressions, misrecognitions and forced conformities into facts that prove his claims about fetishism, de Brosse must methodically disassemble the misguided moderns' systems and excavate through many layers of historical revisionism. Apart from the overwhelming force of almost endless examples, de Brosse relies upon historical etymology and critical hermeneutics to reveal even more recalcitrant facts and reconstruct their proper context. But in his efforts to isolate facts from evidence, de Brosse confronts the mystifications of ancient cultures, which disowned their worship of fetishes by replacing them with anthropomorphic gods.

Through figural strategies based on metonymy and synecdoche, the Greeks and Romans transformed the rocks they once worshiped as fetishes into sacred places associated with gods. Animals once worshiped as fetishes became characteristic disguises used by the gods in their encounters with humans and other fetish objects were adopted as the Olympian gods' accessory attributes. Flatly stating that "Le Dieu Mars des Romains, dit Varron, était un javelot," de Brosse translates the deity back into a mere stick worshipped before the god of war was born.²⁷ Since almost anything can be adopted as a fetish, de Brosse uncovers many facts simply by reversing the figurist practice of transforming fetishes into anthropomorphic gods through a form of metonymy that was later granted symbolic significance. These insights often support one of the only mythographical methods he endorses: Euhemerism, which views the fables of mythology as an historical record, because so many polytheistic gods originated in hero-worship.²⁸

Other sources, such as the Bible, are more ambiguous. In the writings of prophets such as Ezekiel, de Brosse finds evidence of Egyptian animal worship and other forms of fetishism, and even a useful categorization of these different types of supposedly degenerate beliefs (131). However, he also identifies Abraham, Rachel and Jacob as fetishists; even the chosen people worshipped trees, stones and other objects in their rustic simplicity (135). Furthermore, the story of Jacob illustrates the ancient Hebrews' disavowal of their own fetishism: the anointed stone consecrated as *Beth-el*, "dwelling of God," is subsequently rebaptized as a Canaanite abomination,

Beth-aven, “dwelling of the lie” (135–6). Simple translation thus reveals how former fetishes were transformed into signs of righteous belief in the one true God. By discovering these facts in the historical books of the Bible, de Brosses imposes his own narrative of religious development on sacred history; significantly, he rejects the theological tradition that identified such practices with idolatry, which he insists is a mode of worship quite distinct from fetishism.²⁹

De Brosses's philological excavations can be seen in his attempts to reconstruct the original accounts of the Phoenician historian Sanchuniathon (c. 700–500 BCE), who assembled the “opinions vulgaires” of the Canaanites and transmitted a compendium of older writings, including material from the lost books of Thoth, the legendary “inventeur des Lettres” and “le plus ancien des écrivains.”³⁰ In keeping with his archaeological, materialist etymology, de Brosses insists that the most ancient sources are also the most reliable: “plus le témoignage est ancien, plus le fait est présenté d'une manière simple, naturelle, vraisemblable.” Indeed, here he believes he has discovered a sort of ur-text on fetishism, since “la première raison qu'on ait donné de l'introduction de ce culte, est encore la meilleure et la plus plausible.”³¹ However, in order to expose these invaluable facts, de Brosses must engage in a true textual excavation, digging deeper to the most ancient layer through the later accretions of three different sources: Sanchuniathon built upon the original foundations, but both the Greek historian Philo of Byblos (c. 70–160 CE) and the Christian apologist Eusebius (c. 260–339 CE) based their work on that of their predecessors.

Indeed, the remaining fragments of Sanchuniathon's text have only been preserved—in an adulterated form—by Philo and Eusebius, who both translated the earlier sources, supplementing and reconfiguring this material to further their own ends. Eusebius denounced both paganism and Platonism as simple veils disguising the “fornications” of idolatry. Therefore, he appropriated Philo's work, which was an attempt to present pagan beliefs in a more reasonable form, refuting it as part of his *Preparation for the Gospel*. Philo had translated Sanchuniathon to demonstrate the “frivolity” of allegorical and emblematic systems, and in this respect, would appear to be an ally of de Brosses (79–80). However, in mounting this critique, Philo only introduced more confusion by resorting to the elaborate syncretism of his times. Both Eusebius and Philo sought to reveal the true facts by stripping away distortions imposed by earlier forms of figurism. In his own attempt to restore the lost writings of Thoth to their historical purity, de Brosses discovers valuable evidence regarding fetishism. However, he also exposes the tactics of figurism, preserved in the material and historical mediations of writers who appropriated these ancient fragments to construct their own

polemical history.

De Brosse thus expands the scope of religious history to include a much broader, but also much less familiar conception of tradition. Fragmenting the historical narratives that established civilized Europe as the privileged inheritor of an ancestry stretching back to the admired ancients, he introduces a tear in the fabric of this cultural identity, inserting the “insane” fetishist’s “absurd” beliefs into the midst of these exalted forebears. In reality, they were all once fetishists who remained in “infancy” and “barbarism” for centuries until, through civilizing influences from the Orient or the slow progress of reason, they arrived at “une façon de penser plus saine.”³² De Brosse’s insistence that the ancient Egyptians worshiped fetishes, along with his refusal to grant these objects any symbolic or figural value, attacks at the very root of the supposed line of inheritance passing from the ancient Greeks and Romans on to Christendom. Because of its great antiquity, many moderns had assigned Egypt a privileged position in the European historical tradition; de Brosse directly challenges this preeminence as mere prejudice. At the same time, more covertly, he undermines the exceptional purity granted to the Hebrews as God’s chosen people. In the place of these exalted ancestors, he gives precedence to lowly fetishists, substituting physical and material origins for the glories of myth.

De Brosse’s empirical and materialist accounts of how both language and religion first emerged from immediate and unreflective experience challenge the traditional humanist distinction between history and natural history. For thinkers such as Hobbes and Vico, history properly speaking is limited to human creations such as civil, political and religious institutions, since we can understand them by identifying with the purposive, intentional agency of those who created them, in response to recognizable social needs. But both humanists and proponents of the new science such as Bacon and Descartes agreed that nature—whether based on divine creation or its own autonomous laws—could only be understood through methods of investigation created especially for this purpose.³³ Since de Brosse’s fetishism arises from a savage and exceptionally ancient propensity, it exceeds the bounds of recorded history and is beyond the scope of human historical self-understanding. It thus rightly belongs to natural history, which in its investigations of human nature focuses on the instincts, appetites and impulsive actions connected with the bodily necessities of animal existence.³⁴

But what if so-called “savages” were more than mere animals and actively engaged in the creation of culture? De Brosse’s natural histories of language and religion enter into the realm of human history itself, confronting the challenge raised by eighteenth-century Europeans’ encounters with otherness: both modern primitives and inhabitants of the past belong to

a foreign country. How can one identify with them? As Montesquieu demanded, “comment peut-on être Persan?” In turn, de Brosses asks, “comment peut-on être fétichiste?”³⁵

The “Mechanism” of Fetishism

Although de Brosses's discovery of fetishism opens up the possibility of a new form of universal history, it also raises the specter of the unthinkable, “[des] choses si absurdes qu'on peut dire qu'elles ne laissent pas même de prise au raisonnement qui voudrait les combattre.”³⁶ De Brosses adopts arguments from Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (1757) to develop his own, idiosyncratic conception of humanity in the state of nature, defining fetishism as a form of material automatism prior to thought itself.³⁷ According to his account, fetish worship arises from a simple and spontaneous reaction to unexpected, inexplicable misfortunes. Prompted by the primary passions of fear and wonder, the fetishist seizes upon whatever is closest at hand, endowing a visible, palpable material object with the power to communicate with, and perhaps control, invisible and inscrutable forces. But the fetish represents nothing beyond the immediate, affective relationship; it is associated with a traumatic experience, not an insight into cause and effect relations. Although this attachment appears random and senseless, it is not in any way arbitrary; it is the product of material necessity. The gesture of the fetishist results from the urgent demand of the passions for an outlet in a world where the most significant experiences arise from the cruel caprices of nature or chance.

In this respect, it resembles the spontaneous “interjections” that de Brosses considers to be at the origin of language. In his *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues*, he explains that the first utterances are automatic and constrained by “organic” necessity. Through a natural “mimesis”, they are created from sense impressions and passions whose effects are immediately expressed by the voice; the result is a direct, bodily imitation of nature that is neither an idea nor a representation (I:208–9, 234). As the product of a purely physical mechanism, the primal phonetic roots of language are independent of the will, intelligence and choice (I:x).³⁸ However astonishing and bizarre, they are not random; they simply reflect the poorly understood regularities of both nature and human physiology. Like the automatic gesture that creates the fetish, there is no distinction between thought and action; utterances represent nothing other than the externalization of a need or passion. Similarly, fetish objects have no symbolic or allegorical meaning. The logic of fetishism is strictly based on

associations between a traumatic event and the material circumstances in which it occurred. To speak of fetishes' meaning, symbolic or otherwise, is to assign anachronistically to their creators a self-understanding that they could not possibly have possessed.

Like Hume, de Brosses finds in the origins of religion evidence that the superstitious mind cannot reflect on its own operations: the first divine entities did not arise from any conscious reasoning or close observation of nature. Indeed, Hume emphasizes not only the disfigured alterity of the primitive mind, but also the "immediate" nature of its religious experience: "madness, fury, rage, and an inflamed imagination, though they sink men nearest to the level of beasts, are, for a like reason, often supposed to be the only dispositions, in which we can have any immediate communication with the deity."³⁹ However, it is precisely on the question of immediacy that de Brosses diverges from Hume. Although Hume acknowledges in passing that the ancients worshipped stones and other objects, his use of the term "deity" reflects the privilege he assigns to anthropomorphic polytheism, based on what he identifies as the human propensity to see ourselves reflected everywhere in nature: "[n]or is it long before we ascribe to [unknown causes] thought and reason and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men, in order to bring them nearer to a resemblance with ourselves."⁴⁰ By contrast, because de Brosses has established fetishism in sharp distinction from later polytheism and monotheism, he contends that fetishists exist in an "état naturel brut et sauvage, non encore formé par aucune idée réfléchie ou par aucune imitation."⁴¹ Thus, when de Brosses vehemently denies that the large, rough-hewn rocks worshipped by the ancients were "failed statues" (159), he refers to Hume's claim that it was probably because of the limited development of the arts "in rude and barbarous ages" that such stones lacked a more perfect resemblance to the human form.⁴² Resisting Hume's insinuation of mediated representation, de Brosses insists that the ancient stone fetishes worshipped everywhere by ignorant barbarians "ne représentaient rien" and "étaient divines de leur propre divinité."⁴³ Devoid of any "idée réfléchie" or "imitation," fetish worship cannot in any way be connected with a poetic or prosopopoeitic impulse; it is truly "immediate" — both instantaneous and unmediated by any image or idea.⁴⁴ In positing such a foreign and fragmentary relation to the material world, de Brosses asserts a startlingly different view of human nature quite at odds with the ideal of benevolent and reasonable perfectibility assumed by many Enlightenment thinkers.

Indeed, Hume privileges pagan polytheism not only because he conflates it with fetish worship and idolatry, but also for strategic reasons. He finds in the poetry of myth and the ideal of anthropomorphic sculpture a cheerful

humanism that willingly recognizes man as the measure of all things. The creative, easygoing, tolerant, cosmopolitan ancients, with their infinitely accommodating collections of stories and zest for life, form a sharp contrast to the dour perfectionism, intolerance and fanaticism of the monotheists who unfortunately gain the upper hand in history. The morbid personality of their abstract, distant and cruelly punitive deity is enough in Hume's eyes to condemn their religion as a parasitic accident, which hopefully with time, will be overcome through further enlightenment.

De Brosses's natural history of fetishism and his portrait of the mind of the fetishist create a remarkable paradox: fetishism, however irrational, takes on a new, world-historical importance as the origin of all subsequent religions. At the same time, the fetishist who "fabricates" the fetish does so without any creative or conscious agency, in a purely mechanical fashion. De Brosses's picture of the savage mind is utterly devoid of nostalgic notions of purity, wholeness and presence.⁴⁵ Instead we are confronted by an almost inconceivable otherness, a psyche unable to separate itself from the surrounding world to which it is subjected—desperate, dependent and riven by fear. Looking back on this sad spectacle, there is nothing that we can truly comprehend, and no useful origin to which we can appeal to improve the present. In his insistence on the intractable otherness of fetishism, de Brosses radicalizes universal history by introducing an historical horizon that resists rational comprehension, recuperation and self-recognition. History ceases to function as a mirror for the present.

The Natural History of Figurism

The perspective gained by a clear-sighted recognition of fetishism and figurism, along with the distinctive "façons de penser" that underlie them, enables a new understanding of history. It is not just a slow, progressive development towards more civilized forms of religion and ultimately enlightenment: this "progress" and the modern narratives that celebrate it have been built upon a systematic repression, denial or misrecognition of fetishism as the original religion. Figurism spiritualizes history by subordinating it to the fulfillment of a transcendent or transhistorical truth prefigured in the humblest of beginnings. In a way, fetishism and the material beliefs and practices that characterize it have been very useful for myth, theology and philosophy, allowing them to stake out their terrain by denying, justifying, or idealizing the fetish worship from which they originated.

But figurism in turn represents a limiting factor of human reason: the impulse to deny or mystify reason's inevitable reliance on sensations,

passions, the imagination, and the material mediations that make thought itself possible. De Brosses's critique of figurism marshals the "facts" and the "reasoning" established by his natural historical investigation and reconstruction of primitive psychology, to undertake what is, in effect, a natural history of figurism. Its aim is to restore the material culture in which figurism operated and to emphasize the specific forms of mediation that made it an effective means of producing beliefs and ideas.⁴⁶ This is an urgent necessity, because the machinations of figurism represent a true menace to the project of Enlightenment itself.

As we have seen, de Brosses strongly insists on the historical and psychological singularity of fetishism, demonstrating that in its original form, it represents a way of thinking scarcely comprehensible to us. However unreasonable and insane fetishism may appear, de Brosses insists that it be seen on its own terms and not transformed into a mere stepping stone on the inevitable path of progress. He notes that some people never emerge from fetishism, implying that the development of more "reasonable" forms of religion is not inevitable. Although this is not quite as radical as Hume's claim that societies exist with no religion at all, it does challenge teleological developmental narratives that assume that all cultures develop through a progression of definite, universal stages.⁴⁷ In any case, de Brosses considers the question of how fetishistic societies progress, if they do, as one in need of explanation. Not surprisingly, figurism plays a prominent and ambiguous role in this explanation.

In developing his conception of figurism to elucidate the origins of myth, de Brosses adopts an approach similar to the one he used in his natural history of fetishism. When he defines figurism at the start of the text, he warns his reader of the unfortunate parallel between ancient figurists and modern thinkers who have yet to free themselves of its seductive power. However, in opposition to his approach to fetishism, de Brosses chooses the past, rather than the present, as the privileged perspective for understanding figurism because its origins illuminate its essential nature and purpose as a mechanism of civilization. As he did with fetishism, de Brosses first presents a specific case study of figurism before identifying its many variations. In identifying both the Christian and Neoplatonic strains of figurism, he explains that they reached their apotheosis in a world-historical moment of great consequence: the clash between the ascendant power of Christianity and the pagan traditions that still held sway over the vast but disintegrating remnants of the Roman empire. In this decisive battle, the methods of figurism had "*une utilité marquée pour ceux qui les premiers en ont fait usage*."⁴⁸ But in comparing these apparently opposed positions and their distinctive forms of figurism, de Brosses finds an unexpected parallel: the Christians and the Neoplatonists made use of a surprisingly similar strategy

to reduce the apparent diversity of religious beliefs to the one transcendent Truth, to which they both laid claim.

When Neoplatonists interpreted the many ancient myths as mystagogical allegories, they transformed the gods into symbols, emanations through which the One (the divine intellect) progressed towards its gradual self-realization and revelation. Similarly, when the Christians appropriated pagan myths, viewing them as disfigured remnants of the one true revealed religion, they also reduced the history of world religions to a single temporal and symbolic scheme. In both cases, the destiny of the many paths of the past was to fulfill the one true spiritual reality; these disputing claims to universalism were thus part of a battle whose victors would be able to write history in such a way as to secure their hold on the future.⁴⁹

That both Christians and pagans should make use of figurism suggests its power and flexibility, much of which, according to de Brosses, can be attributed to the strategic use of the “universal instrument” of allegory. Allegory is in many ways the master trope of figurism as de Brosses defines it, because it transforms things into symbols or figures that represent a higher intellectual or spiritual world of ideas. Furthermore, when it employs personification, allegory becomes a highly versatile mechanism for producing truth claims in narrative form, including history: “Le système du sens figure une fois admis, on y voit facilement tout ce que l’on veut comme dans les nuages: la matière n’est jamais embarrassante; il ne faut plus que de l’esprit et de l’imagination: c’est un vaste champ, fertile en explications, quelles que soient celles dont on peut avoir besoin.”⁵⁰ Though it is all “ridiculous artifice,” de Brosses emphasizes that figurism and its allegories appear at decisive historical moments when different systems of belief clash, causing confusion and chaos. Recognizing the ideological power gained by defining the nature and origins of religion, “chacun les expliquait selon son propre génie ... Le champ était ouvert aux explications arbitraires.”⁵¹

In choosing this world-historical example of figurism in action, de Brosses implies that in times of uncertainty and change, battles for public opinion employ all available weapons of rhetorical manipulation, including the rewriting of history itself. Figurism and the myths it produces are tools of power and domination. Indeed, de Brosses’s frustration that figurism should persist “aujourd’hui dans ce siècle de raisonnement” against all “logic” and “common sense,” reminds his readers that the victory of the Enlightenment *philosophes* over the embattled orthodoxy of the Church and the ancien régime was far from certain.⁵² In this context, Hume’s suggestion that pagan polytheism emerges from a “universal tendency” to see ourselves projected everywhere in nature (“[w]e find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds”) seems quaint, in contrast to formidable *machine de guerre* that de Brosses describes here with such drama.⁵³

Curiously, when so many of his contemporaries were producing critical and philosophical histories to further advance the cause of Enlightenment, de Brosse provided no new narrative to explain how an insight into both fetishism and figurism might aid in the battle against superstition and prejudice. He occasionally evokes some vague notion of progress in religion towards more “reasonable” forms, but this hardly offsets the venomous indignity with which he denounces the endless machinations of figurism. Although his writing is not devoid of apt aphorisms, his plodding and exhaustive erudition—occasionally punctuated by outbursts decrying the “insanity” of fetishism or the “absurdity” of figurism—is a far cry from Voltaire’s cry, “écrasez l’infâme!” [“crush the infamy!”]

However, in the accumulation of examples that de Brosse gives of figurism, a certain sense of family resemblance emerges as figural tactics are repeatedly identified and refuted. Like fetishism itself, figurism represents a “façon de penser,” and it plays a major role in the development of all forms of western religion that follow upon fetishism. Because de Brosse finds figurism almost everywhere, one can find examples of other modes, beyond the Christian and Neoplatonist ones. Although he provides no coherent narrative of religious development, a few concrete examples illustrate the transformative power of figurism.

A first step towards figurism can be seen when fetishist tribes, like the snake worshippers of Juidah, adopt their fetish as a symbol of their privilege and power (29–30). As soon as the fetish is integrated into the symbolic and ritual order of a society, it brings about a reflective and mediated form of worship although it is still not fully anthropomorphic. Serving as a talisman, or a tutelary god, the fetish often acquires a priesthood to mediate between it and the people and collect tribute for its benefits, such as prosperity or victory in battle. Soon enough, fetishism reaches a stage of full maturity and can be compared to other forms of religious life. Not surprisingly, one of the signs of this advanced state of development is the appearance of a licentious and greedy priestly class, a standard feature in deist and rationalist critiques of religion.

Looking back on Greek and Roman mythology, which was such a source of inspiration for eighteenth-century culture, de Brosse finds that the development of their gods was largely motivated by pride and ambitions to extend their power. In addition to the metonymic and allegorical techniques they employed to disguise their base, and even shameful, fetishist past, in their later colonial and imperial encounters with other cultures, the Greeks and Romans often assimilated local objects of worship into their pantheon. Many were fetishes, which they simply identified with one of their own gods, anthropomorphizing them in the process. This tendency,

which Hume praised as evidence of the ancients' cosmopolitan tolerance, elicits exasperation from de Brosses: "C'est ainsi qu'ils défigurent tout ce qu'ils nous apprennent des Religions étrangères, et qu'ils brouillent tous les objets, pour peu qu'ils trouvent de ressemblance entre les noms ou les fonctions des Divinités barbares et des leurs."⁵⁴ By assimilating very different and particular objects to their own gods, the ancients both disfigured and transfigured them, applying a narcissistic form of universalism that suited their own expansive ambitions.

Biblical history is of course replete with denunciations of false gods and those who worship them, who often bring down the wrath of God upon them in the form of apparently natural disasters. Framing these events as facts that attest to God's providential plans for his chosen people is in itself a figural repudiation of the fetishist impulse, which in de Brosses's psychological account arises precisely when the monotonous order of tribal life is interrupted by catastrophes. Furthermore, his materialist and secular critique emphasizes the struggle for power that accompanied the progress of the chosen people, whose massacre of the Canaanites is compared to that perpetrated by the Spaniards in the New World (135). This sort of parallel would have been familiar to readers of earlier accounts of the effects of religious fanaticism; for de Brosses, it also supplies more evidence of how figural theology justifies all manner of violent atrocities in the name of divine providence.⁵⁵

Finally, although Neoplatonism exemplifies the figurist impulse in philosophy, it can already be seen in Plato's appropriation of myth as an allegorical vehicle for abstract ideas and continues, according to de Brosses, in modern metaphysical systems. Plato's critique of the misleading imitations of poets in the *Republic* subjected mythology to a radical purification, eliminating all of the anthropomorphic antics, imperfections and multiple forms assigned to the gods, transforming them into perfect, eternal and unchanging manifestations of the eternal form of the Good. Neoplatonic figurism followed upon this to develop both a secular and religious cult of the One. A good number of de Brosses's favorite targets came from Alexandria, where particularly daring forms of cultural syncretism and allegory were employed to synthesize all of the ancient world's beliefs into one universal philosophico-religious system. However, following the eighteenth-century trend of denouncing the factitious nature of metaphysical systems, de Brosses also criticizes as figurists those modern philosophers who apply abstract and supposedly universal principles of reason to subjects outside of the bounds of "reasonable" explanation.⁵⁶

Indeed, one of the chief aims of eighteenth-century materialists was to demonstrate how all human experience, including thought itself, is mediated through the body and its various organs—the brain included. De Broses's "mechanism" of language and fetish worship participates in these deflationary and demystifying projects by arguing that higher ideals, such as philosophical abstractions, moral laws, and religion itself all originate in bodily sensation and passions. They only develop into something more "reasonable" over very long periods of time, and most often through trial and error—the unintended consequences of human actions.

In diagnosing figurism as the strategic use of arbitrary allegorical schemes to corner the market on truth, de Broses mounts a critique of narratives of historical progress that are blind to their own conditions of possibility, in particular, what they repress. Just as establishing the origin of all religion in fetish worship reveals the material necessity governing primitive human psychology, so too does the critique of figurism and mythmaking uncover the true material forces at work in history. Polytheistic myths, the sacred books of monotheism and the systems of philosophers, seen as species of figurism, reveal struggles for political power and cultural prestige. Unlike the splintered self of the fetishist and the localized, fragmentary power of the fetish itself, in figurism de Broses uncovers another sort of affective and concrete dynamic of power, hidden behind flattering allegories and supposedly transcendent ideas.

The suggestion that progress in history involves a misinterpretation, forgetting or repression of the past, which is replaced by new myths of origin and development, certainly runs counter to the unproblematic faith in progress often attributed to Enlightenment thinkers. However, de Broses was scarcely alone in advocating a more cautious and skeptical—if not pessimistic—approach to understanding cultural development. Although he rejects figurist narratives based on a fall from grace or nostalgia for a pure and simple state of nature, he does see degeneration alongside, or even underpinning, progress. In this respect, he has affinities with figures like Bayle, Montesquieu and Gibbon, who revealed how, even in the most "enlightened" civilizations, reason itself could be used in the service of mythic thinking, and how power and deception contributed to ideas of national identity and greatness.⁵⁷ Like Hume, de Broses also remained skeptical about the ultimate triumph of reason, recognizing that an element of incorrigible irrationality and superstition persists in even the most enlightened eras and minds.

Thus, de Broses's historical vision runs contrary to the critical and revisionary enlightenment projects of philosophical history undertaken by the

likes of Voltaire, d'Alembert and Turgot. In their efforts to recover a useable past and ensure the victory of reason, they emphasized the moral value of studying history, which provided edifying examples of the perennial battle between obscurantism, fanaticism and superstition on the one hand and the forces of civilized and life-affirming cultural achievement on the other. In contrast, de Brosses confirms Marx's famous dictum: "men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please."⁵⁸

NOTES

I am grateful to Rosalind Morris, Dorothea von Mücke and Katarzyna Bartoszynska, who have guided me through my research on de Brosses and fetishism with patience, understanding, and helpful feedback. I would also like to thank Michelle Burnham and the anonymous readers at SECC, who offered invaluable suggestions. Their insights have contributed much to this article and are very much appreciated.

1. Charles de Brosses, *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* (Geneva: Cramer, 1760), 17. ("way of thinking.") Subsequent references to this work will be cited in parentheses. All translations are my own, from the full translation included in Daniel Leonard and Rosalind Morris, *The Cult of the Fetish: Charles de Brosses, the Concept of Fetishism and a History of Comparativism at its Limits* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

2. For Burton Feldman and Robert Richardson, de Brosses's approach anticipates the positivist science of myth, disabused of any romantic primitivism. Feldman, Burton and Robert Richardson, eds., *The Rise of Modern Mythology 1680–1860* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975). Tom Ryan portrays de Brosses's work as a precursor of comparative anthropology and ethnology in his "Le Président des Terres Australes': Charles de Brosses and the French Enlightenment Beginnings of Oceanic Anthropology," *The Journal of Pacific History* 37:2 (2002): 157–86. Some of the most developed and theoretically sophisticated treatments of de Brosses are found in work tracing the complex and often circuitous paths traced by the fetish and fetishism in western thought. William Pietz's masterful series of articles remains indispensable: "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES* 9 (Spring 1985): 5–17; "The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish," *RES* 13 (Spring 1987): 23–45; "The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa: Bosman's Guinea and the Enlightenment Theory of Fetishism," *RES* 16 (Autumn 1988): 105–24. Finally, Rosalind C. Morris has recently undertaken a wide-ranging reevaluation of the translational and historical permutations of fetishism from de Brosses's time to the present in "After de Brosses: Fetishism, Translation, Comparativism and Critique,"

in *The Cult of the Fetish*.

3. Madeline David argues for de Brosse's importance alongside Hume in challenging the Enlightenment tendency to intellectualize religion through ahistorical abstractions and allegory: as an "innovative and polemical" thinker, de Brosse deployed both erudition and philosophy to pave the way for the history of religion and a developmental account of human reason. Madeline David, "Les idées du 18^e siècle sur l'idolâtrie, et les audaces de David Hume et du Président de Brosse," *Numen* 24.2 (August, 1977): 81–94. Frank Manuel provides one of the most detailed accounts of de Brosse's work in relation to his time in *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), 184–209. In contrast to David, Manuel criticizes de Brosse for placing abstract spirituality above barbarous materialism, thus assigning to France and Europe a civilizing mission complicit with colonialism. Jean-Godefroy Bidima pursues a related critique in "The Dialectic of the French Enlightenment for Africans: Thinking Alterity in Abbé Gregoire, Condorcet, Ch. de Brosse, and Olympe de Gouges," in *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa*, eds. Frieder Ludwig and Afe Adogame (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), 97–107.

4. Aaron Freeman, "Charles de Brosse and the French Enlightenment Origins of Religious Fetishism," *Intellectual History Review* 24 (2014), 203–14. Jonathan Israel does not discuss de Brosse, but provides useful context in his *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001).

5. Clifford Siskin and William Warner, eds., *This Is Enlightenment* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010), 5, 1.

6. In this respect, de Brosse's project has affinities with Hayden White's analysis of the narrative "emplotment" of history, which highlights the inevitably tropological (or figured) nature of all historical arguments and explanations. Hayden White, "Literary Theory and Historical Writing" in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999), 3–26.

7. For more on de Brosse's life and writings, see Henri Mamet, *Le Président de Brosse, sa vie et ses ouvrages* (Lille: A. Massart, 1874); Yves Florenne, *Le Président de Brosse* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1964); and the essays collected in *Charles de Brosse, 1777–1977: actes du colloque organisé à Dijon pour le deuxième centenaire de la mort du Président de Brosse*, ed. Jean-Claude Garreta (Geneva: Slatkine, 1981).

8. Charles de Brosse, *Histoire des navigations aux terres australes* (Paris: Durand, 1756).

9. Charles de Brosse, *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues et des principes physiques de l'étymologie*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1765).

10. William Pietz, "Geography, Etymology and Tastes: Charles de Brosse and the Restoration of History," *L'Esprit créateur* 25 (Fall 1985): 86–94.

11. De Brosse, *Dieux fétiches*, 5. ("The confused assemblage of ancient Mythology;" "an indecipherable chaos, or a purely arbitrary enigma.")

12. The term "figurisme," was originally employed to denounce both the excessive syncretism of Jesuit missionaries and the Jansenists' use of scriptural

prophecy to support their reformist cause. See "Figurisme," *Trésor de la langue française*, 16 vols. (Paris: CNRS, 1980), 8: 868 and "Figurisme," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, eds. A. Vacant and E. Mangenot (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1913), 5.2: 2299–2304. For the Jesuit controversy, see David E. Mungello, *Curious Land: Jesuit Accommodation and the Origins of Sinology* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1989). For the Jansenists, see Dale K. van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: from Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996). For a classic account of the use of figura from ancient times, see Erich Auerbach, "Figura," *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays*, tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Meridian Books, 1959).

13. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 182. ("direct worship rendered without figuration to animal and vegetable productions.")

14. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 77. ("the easily seen parallel between antique and modern customs;" "the mystery of an enigma for which we have long sought the name.")

15. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 11. ("[they viewed] what is in itself the most pitiful thing in the world from too flattering a point of view.")

16. Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–88) published the 15 volumes of his *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* from 1749 to 1767; an additional 7 volumes, a *Supplément*, were published between 1774 to 1789.

17. These cautions are a crucial part of Buffon's methodological statement, "De la manière d'étudier et de traiter de l'Histoire naturelle," *Histoire Naturelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 37–45. The specific advice ("almost without design;" "sort of order and uniformity.") comes from 39–40, 42.

18. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 16. ("in general, there is no better method to pierce the veils of the little known points in antiquity than to observe whether somewhere before our eyes, something quite similar is still occurring.")

19. De Brosses, *Histoire des navigations*, II: 377. ("worship round stones, tree trunks and other species of fetishes, like the African negroes;" "a species of fetishism, similar to that of modern savages.")

20. De Brosses, *Histoire des navigations*, I:1–5.

21. De Brosses, *Histoire des navigations*, I:19.

22. Ryan, "Le Président des Terres Australes," 164, 185. For a discussion of Enlightenment thinkers' conception of themselves as "modern pagans," see Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Norton, 1966).

23. Buffon, *Histoire Naturelle*, 44. ("it seems that everything that could exist does.")

24. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 11. ("all these ways of thinking have at bottom the same source, which is merely the appurtenance of a general Religion spread very far over the entire earth.")

25. Joseph-François Lafitau, *Mœurs des sauvages américains, comparées aux mœurs des premiers temps* (Paris, 1724). For two examples of orthodox erudition, see Samuel Shuckford, *The Sacred and Profane History of the World Connected* (1728) and William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*

(1737–41).

26. De Brosses, *Traité*, I:30. (“the truth of words as well as that of ideas consists in their conformity to things.”)

27. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 165. (“According to Varro, the Roman God Mars was a javelin.”)

28. Writers such as John Toland, Antoine Banier and Etienne Fourmont revived the ancient euhemerist tradition. See Feldman, *Modern Mythology*, 167–70.

29. For a detailed discussion of the significance of this distinction between fetishism and idolatry, see Pietz, “Fetish II.”

30. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 116, 114. (“common opinions;” “inventor of Letters;” “the oldest of writers.”)

31. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 112. (“the older the testimony, the more the facts are presented in a simple, natural and verisimilar manner;” “the first reason that was given for the introduction of this worship is still the best and most plausible.”)

32. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 202. (“a more reasonable (or sane) way of thinking.”)

33. As Vico writes, “we can only wonder why all the philosophers have so earnestly pursued a knowledge of the world of nature, which only God can know as its creator, while they have neglected to study the world of nations, or civil world, which people can in fact know because they created it.” Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, tr. David Marsh (London: Penguin, 2001), 119–20.

34. Dipesh Chakrabarty, noting that the mid-eighteenth century has been identified as the beginning of the “anthropocene” era, argues that we reconsider how Enlightenment historiography attempted to reconcile the growing recognition of humans’ “deep history” as an animal species with notions of historical agency based on autonomy and “purposive human action.” The idea that non-historical, primitive humanity nonetheless “made” the beginnings of social institutions, such as religion, seriously challenges the humanist assumption that historians can think “into” and identify with historical actions. See “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (Winter 2009): 203, 215.

35. “How can one be Persian?” Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes* in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), 78. “How can one be a fetishist?”

36. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 183. (“things that are so absurd that one could say that they do not even provide any purchase to the reasoning that would combat them.”)

37. Diderot recommended Hume’s recently published book to de Brosses, who found it so helpful that he constructed much of his psychological theory of fetishism from translated excerpts of Hume, acknowledging only that he had borrowed some of his reflections from “[u]n célèbre écrivain étranger” (218). (“a famous foreign writer.”)

38. On the French tradition linking thought, language and mechanism together, see Jean-Pierre Sérís, *Langages et machines à l’âge classique* (Paris: Hachette, 1995).

39. David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (Stanford: Stanford Univ.

Press, 1956), 42.

40. Hume, *Natural History*, 30.

41. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 184. ("raw and savage natural state, not yet formed by any reflective idea or imitation.")

42. Hume, *Natural History*, 40.

43. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 158. ("represented nothing," "divine through their own divinity.") This is consistent with the earlier distinction between the direct worship of fetishes and idolatry, where works of art and representations are worshipped (64).

44. The notion that sensation is immediate and prior to any idea or representation was also developed by Condillac in his *Traité des sensations* (1754) and Thomas Reid in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764).

45. In contrast, for example, to Rousseau's image of human nature in the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755).

46. As White argues, an awareness of the rhetorical inflection of historical accounts "authorizes a search for and analysis of the function of the figurative elements in historiographical, no less than fictional, prose." White, *Figural Realism*, 4.

47. On Enlightenment stadial theories of history, see Nathaniel Wolloch, "The Civilizing Process, Nature, and Stadial Theory," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44 (Winter 2011): 245–259.

48. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 6. ("a marked utility for those who first employed them.")

49. For more context, see Eric Robertson Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1965).

50. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 6–7. ("[o]nce the system of figured meaning is adopted, one easily sees anything one wishes, as in clouds; the material is never a problem; one needs only wit and imagination: it is a vast field, fertile in explanations—whichever one might need.")

51. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 279–80. ("each explained these things according to his own ingenuity ... the field was open for arbitrary explanations.")

52. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 7. ("even today in this century of reasoning.")

53. Hume, *Natural History*, 29.

54. De Brosses, *Dieux fétiches*, 174. ("thus they disfigure everything they teach us about foreign Religions, and confuse all of the objects, insofar as they find a resemblance between the names or the functions of barbarian Divinities and their own.")

55. De Brosses also condemns the inhumanity of the Spanish conquest of the Americas in his *Histoire des navigations*, I:17–8.

56. Two examples are Hume's distinction between good and bad metaphysics in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) and Condillac's sustained attack on absurd metaphysical systems built upon abstract principles in his *Traité des systèmes* (1749).

57. Montesquieu, in his *Dissertation sur la politique des Romains dans la*

Religion (1716), argues that the Romans deliberately and rationally planned the use of religion as a means of social and political control, recognizing the power of traditional cults and mythology. Gibbon, in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89), depicted Roman magistrates as semi-enlightened despots, savvy politicians who understood the use of religion as a mechanism for social control.

58. Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” in Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and V.I. Lenin *On Historical Materialism* (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1974), 120.