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Reading Stories Out of Rock

Not everyone would want to read as I do. I'm more than just an enthusiastic reader; I'm addicted to reading. At home I surround myself with books. I don't like leaving the house without one in my hand. Even on vacation trips I like to read a book while I take in the scenery passing outside the car window. On the pages opened on my lap words flow through my mind. To the uninitiated they are silent, black, arbitrary rows of letters, but to someone who knows how to read they evoke a whole world of people, events and places. I search for one experience in particular as I read, a feeling that, through the medium of the words, I've been granted access to a world that was previously unfamiliar, alien, and unexpected. My ideal reading experience is unattainable, but, if it could occur, I would want the book to speak to me, tell its own story, rather than simply echo back my own thoughts. This is never quite possible. What I read I have to understand in terms of what I have read before. I cannot always separate what I see from what I expected to see, and what I expected to see depends on something I read previously.

There is an explorer in me as I read who constantly searches for new insights, new experiences I have not encountered before. Like an archaeologist, I like to try to retrieve works from the past. I try to question them and make them speak. Like a detective I'm often skeptical of the stories they tell me. Too many times the voices I hear from the page echo words I have previously read myself. But occasionally I encounter puzzles or inconsistencies that alert me to a way of thinking quite foreign to my own familiar assumptions about life or books. Such an experience occurred this past summer as I was visiting the prehistoric Indian cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, Colorado. There I encountered inscriptions similar to writing, ancient petroglyphs, figures and symbols inscribed in the face of a sandstone cliff, left by the Anasazi before they abandoned their

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canyon homes around 1300 AD. I recalled my attempts to read these figures when I began working on a book review later in the fall. As I read the beginning pages of a new acquisition by the Sacred Heart University library, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Archaeology*, a definition of archaeology as a study of the “surviving traces of past human activity” reminded me of the special problems posed in “reading” the intentional, symbolic “traces” of petroglyphs in order to imagine the “human activity” to which they testify. Fortunately, in the case of these petroglyphs, someone had already offered an explanation of them. Hopi Indians, who claimed the Anasazi as their ancestors, claimed to know the stories behind some of the glyphs. In this essay I try to judge their interpretation in the light of what I had already read about myth, symbol, and prehistoric art. But first, let me recount how I came across the petroglyphs in Spruce Tree Canyon.

Suddenly, after hours of crowded tour buses and tourists pushing to see the sights, I paused with relief, alone, in a dry thicket of twisting gray junipers and dark pinyon pines to glance back at Spruce Tree Ruins. I could see a line of tourists strung out behind a National Park Service guide along the edge of the cliff dwelling, but I could no longer hear the bored chatter of their camera shutters across the dry distance that separated us. The air hung almost motionless in the heat of the June afternoon. Somewhere ahead of me, possibly on the next rock wall emerging around the bend as I began my descent along the bottom rim of the canyon, I would find rock carvings left by the Anasazi Indians, the goal of a quest I had anticipated since I began my trip out from Connecticut. If I was silent enough, if I was observant, if I could open my senses and imagination to this ancient canyon world around me, I might see beyond the obvious features a guide book pointed out to the inhabitants of the canyon who survived by avoiding our footsteps and our camera’s prying eye.

I was about to enter a secret, hidden world, one that would reveal itself only reluctantly to careful eyes. At the edges of the dusty trail, near the canyon wall where footsteps did not fall, I could see bird tracks and paw prints. I could hear faint scurrings in the dry juniper needles. Almost next to where my hand rested, along a twisted root, a lizard watched me, motionless except for the soft flesh

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of its throat rising and falling as it breathed. I walked swiftly, my eyes intent on any noticeable changes in the configuration of rock or any quick motion in the brush that might betray the presence of other living creatures or the traces of Anasazi dwellings.

The canyon wall came down in undulating sheets of sandstone on my left side. The pressure of water seeping down from the top of the mesa above had eroded out caves and overhangs along the edge of the trail where the sandstone rested on the even more ancient Mancos shale. At places the canyon seemed to come alive, calmly opening eyes and mouths in the canyon floor. To my right the canyon dropped over a rim to where the Mancos River cut its way through the mesa. Against the tans and oranges of sandstone walls the indigo sky was almost too intense to look at directly. The long space of air between walls of the canyon made the distant cliffs look turquoise, and zopilotes, turkey buzzards on long motionless wings, extended the slow drift of moments in long black spirals through the invisible currents of wind.

I felt rather than saw the shadow of their wings pass over the trail as I focused my attention on the sun-saturated stream of dust and light through which I walked. There was only a sudden flicker, a darkness come and gone, a hesitation in the flow of moments, as if something had been removed from the day and put back again too fast for the eye to attend to. For a moment the canyon world slowed down; the sun ceased to filter through pinyon branches and withheld its heat from the rock. Then the zopilote tilted back out over the immensity of canyon floor; he slid along the canyon wall, all speed and silence, tilting back and forth across the empty blue sky. The trees, empty to my vision a moment before, were full of the black birds, heavy, silent, lowering themselves from dead branches and dark granite into the air. I could not smell death. In this dry, thin air bodies wither and dry without decaying. A dark feather hung from a juniper bough, glossy edges still intact, each delicate strand of feather adhering as if it still could support a living wing out over the canyon rim where the stone cliff dropped away toward the river.

Something about the rubble of sandstone rocks along a ledge above the trail, a certain balance and placement of flat stones set into

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crevices and overhangs, suggested other presences along the canyon wall. At some time in the past an Anasazi farmer had sealed off storage areas in the overhangs to keep maize through the winter. Now only a few stones, the same yellowish sandstone of the cliff wall itself, remained in position here, hardly enough remaining to convince a skeptic that cliff ruins actually stood here. But along the ledges in the cool dark dust I could see broken pieces of pottery and tiny stones the builder of this granery had used to reinforce the adobe mortar in his wall. The pieces of sandstone he had placed one on top of the other were indistinguishable from the broken pieces worked loose from the canyon itself by wind and water, but where the slanting sunlight made the shadows stand out in wavering rows that only a human hand could have intended, the whole silent canyon, itself pressed out of the yellow sand left behind by a prehistoric ocean before man had even emerged as a form of life, seemed to breathe a life no longer completely alien and indifferent to human presences. The stone mouths of the sandstone stretched silently, widening and receding imperceptibly like the throats of the lizards, whispering a voice of weather, earth pressure, and water, but inscribed now with another voice, a human voice that left the trace of its activities in the way certain stones had been selected and placed, the trace of a human presence half glimpsed before it too rejoined the rock wall from which it had been selected.

Before I saw them, I had imagined that the petroglyphs would appear on the flat torpid wall of sandstone at about eye level, like a crude poster or billboard. My expectations had been influenced by photographs in *National Geographic* so that, without realizing it, I expected the rock carvings to be set before me like illustrations in a book. Instead I had to step off the trail, perilously close to the very edge of rock hanging into the canyon, and look up high around and over the surface of a bending slope of sand canyon wall, flat from a distance, but up close alive with curves and cracks gently lacing its sandy brown skin. Portions of the wall seemed to have broken loose and fallen out even before the figures had been incised in the remaining surface. The glyphs covered a vulnerable area, not the type of place a cautious artist might have personally chosen to preserve a story to last all ages, but a place perhaps revealed to him where a sacred presence could manifest and sustain itself through the

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inscriptions that revealed its presence.

In order to examine the petroglyphs more closely, I had to climb up to a slight ledge and hold myself close enough to the stone to smell the dust baking in its pores. A wandering line, irregular as the map of a canyon seen from above, stretched across much of the lower portion of the inscribed area. I reached over and cautiously ran my fingertip along the line that had been cut into the sandstone. Long after I had forgotten what the line looked like, my fingers remembered the dry sharp rasp of the sandstone's inner flesh as I retraced the ancient petroglyphs. What had looked to my eyes like a smooth unbroken line consisted of miniscule ridges so small and so evenly executed that the edges looked smooth and unbroken from a distance. Someone had patiently incised the line by gradually building it out of countless identical chips of stone across the width of the line. Toward where my hand rested it either began or ended in a square within a square, like a child's drawing of a labyrinth, then curled off into a blind circle before wandering back down over the rock face like a crack in the floor of the earth or a river, like the Colorado, cutting through deserts and mesas from the Sangre de Cristo mountains to the Grand Canyon. At one turn it became a lizard shape; at another place a human figure seemed to raise its hand; off to the side, just outside the border of the line, a dog or coyote barked in the sandstone. The line bent back on itself and ended in a spiral. Two crows could be seen conversing above it, head to head; further back, towards the beginning of the line, someone had carved a bighorn sheep. A human handprint, pale as bone against the darker skin of the sandstone, had been chiselled, the fingers spread out on the rock as if someone had just laid his hand there. Below, strange, human shapes waved hands in the air, leaped, danced, ran.

Before white settlers came to Mesa Verde, Hopis visited this canyon. But when the Hopis arrived, these petroglyphs had already been left by the people who lived here and abandoned the canyon around 1300 AD. They did not leave a name of their own, but the Hopis called them "anasazi" or "ancient ones" and claimed them as ancestors. Whether or not the Hopi are directly descended from the Anasazi can no longer be definitely determined. The identity of particular petroglyphs and the specific stories they have to tell may

have vanished with the last inhabitants of the canyon, but the Hopi interpretation may at least reveal the way of thinking that once animated the glyphs. Perhaps the experience they embody or the energies they release are common human experiences accessible to us all, even if expressed in a symbolism we are no longer able to decipher with certainty. Perhaps the sandstone wall was a place of special revelation during the course of a ritual of initiation, a place whose significance was not immediately apparent to the uninitiated eye which saw in the figures only the familiar shapes of dogs, sheep, lizards, hands, and birds, but a place which, properly interpreted, with its secret language uncoded, released powerful forces and insights.

The National Park Service guidebook tells us that four Hopi men came to the canyon in 1942 to identify some of the petroglyphs. From what the Hopi tell us, the glyphs were not exactly “pictures” of animals and events, but something like diagrams for recovering certain stories from the past. What I had originally seen as the beginning or end of the long, wandering line as a square within a square, the Hopi identified as “Sipapu,” the place from which the Pueblo people emerged from the earth, possibly the Grand Canyon in Arizona. The birdlike figure next to it is not supposed to make us think of eagles or zopilotes perched on canyon walls, but instead is a symbol of the Eagle Clan, indicating a separation of that clan from the other people and a settlement near their point of origin. What looks like a picture of a mountain sheep is not meant to be standing on a mesa, but set along a line of mythic migration to show that at this point in the tribe’s migration, the Mountain Sheep Clan dropped off in the vicinity of Shiprock, New Mexico. What had looked to me like two ravens conversing head to head is the symbol of the Parrot Clan and their place of settlement. The parrot is not found this far north, but perhaps it was traded up from pre-Columbian people in Mexico. Several figures have more than one story associated with them. The symbol for the Horned Toad Clan, marking the location of their split from the migrating Pueblos, also signifies a green collared lizard who led the people into a period of “wandering without direction — almost approaching lunacy,” the guide book reports. Was this lunacy madness or a kind of divinely inspired ecstasy? A human figure raising something in his hand is a “whipping

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kachina” who “straightened out” the people and gave direction to their later wandering. Other whipping kachinas are the figures that seemed to wave, leap, and dance. Outside the final turn in the symbolic line of migration, where to my eye a dog or coyote seemed to bark in the sandstone, the Hopi identify a symbol of the Mountain Lion Clan, an all-powerful spirit watching over the people in their travels. And, finally, the spiral shape in which the line ends is either the actual end of migration, Mesa Verde, or the prophesied end, the modern Hopi pueblos. We are not, in short, looking at pictures of typical animals and birds inhabiting Mesa Verde, a kind of quaint document of a primitive people’s delight in the natural world, but symbolically retracing the wanderings of a people through time, mythical history, and the actual geography of canyons and mesas in the Four Corners area.

I cannot help but conclude that the “human activity” that left its “surviving traces” in the petroglyphs of Spruce Tree Canyon was a ritual of initiation. Initiation performs a function in preliterate, archaic societies that is now performed by going to school. As Mircea Eliade writes in *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*:

Among the various categories of initiation, the puberty initiation is particularly important for an understanding of premodern man. These “transition rites” are obligatory for all the youth of the tribe. To gain the right to be admitted among adults, the adolescent has to pass through a series of initiation ordeals: it is by virtue of these rites, and of the revelations that they entail, that he will be recognized as a responsible member of the society. Initiation introduces the candidate into the human community and into the world of spiritual and cultural values. He learns not only the behavior patterns, the techniques, and the institutions of adults but also the sacred myths and traditions of the tribe, the names of the gods and the history of their works; above all, he learns the mystical

relations between the tribe and the Supernatural Beings as those relations were established at the beginning of Time.

The composition of petroglyphs the Hopi interpreted seems to constitute a sacred “map” of the Anasazi’s known world, a world that extends simultaneously in time, space, and mythic history. By tracing and retracing the glyphs with his fingers did the initiate perhaps “inscribe” their myths into his consciousness, incorporating a pattern and story he could use to guide himself through the vicissitudes of life? The petroglyphs reveal his identity by establishing his place as a member of a clan located in a specific place in a symbolic diagram of the world; they reveal the answers to the fundamental questions, “Who am I? Where do I come from, and where am I going?” By tracing the figures he “inscribes” his personal identity into the sacred, universal history of the clan’s migrations and settlements, and he confirms his identity by joining his unique mortal hand to the stone hand in the rock face. Perhaps this symbolic map of mythic migration prescribes a sacred journey the initiate actually retraced, visiting particular canyons, rocks, and mesas animated by the sacred presences and alive with the mythic history of the clans. The myths that accompany the petroglyphs may have revealed that the life the initiate has entered by being born into the clan embraces both migration and settlement, but that the changes the initiate will experience are not aimless or random. They are sacredly inscribed. They constitute a paradigm for life, a pattern of wandering and settlement, a model to account for change within a timeless, sacred pattern that embraces various vicissitudes of canyon existence. Will drought force him to abandon his familiar canyon and migrate to new places? It has happened before and will happen again. It is part of the sacred plan, a mythic journey through time and through the actual geography of his world.

One of the risks or limitations inherent in such a rite of initiation is the assumption that we are entering into a world that has already been established and ordered for all time. Yet the world changes, even for premodern people. If our myth of our world is too rigid, we may not be able to adapt to new circumstances. We need myths that

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can accomodate change, not deny it. Whether a people can conceive of life as a “wandering” in which unpredictable forces often lie in wait or whether they are fixed into a model of the universe that symbolically confines them to one canyon alone may well have spelled the difference between survival and extinction more than once in the history of Spruce Tree Canyon.