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## **Petroglyphs in and out of perspective**

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The archaic is one of the great inventions of the  
twentieth century.  
— Guy Davenport

Our study of petroglyphs responds to the challenge of those carvings in rock, found on all continents, which to an untutored eye at least seem strikingly similar, and entirely alien. My contribution may be found to dissent, to be less than enthusiastic about the possibility of learning anything about petroglyphs, even with the help of the most advanced technology. As conceived by Emmanuel Anati, our aim is to study petroglyphs 'as a single phenomenon to be treated globally and not simply as a series of local phenomena' (Anati 1994). The scope is vast; we presently know of approximately 100,000 sites with prehistoric carvings, consisting of a total of some twenty million figures. Contemporary technology offers the possibility of assembling all these figures in a single database, where comparisons of style and technique could for the first time be made conveniently and comprehensively. In advance of the realization of such a database, we may take this opportunity to address some theoretical implications,

and to wave some cautionary flags.

First, I would like to consider the use and abuse of the term 'global'. For Anati, prehistoric art throws light 'on the collective memory and on universal conceptual processes' (Anati 1994). We may entertain 'psychologism' — for which a term such as 'the human mind' is unproblematic and indeed axiomatic — as a hypothesis. Certainly it would be strange, even absurd, to study prehistoric culture without speculating on the possibility of the universality of mental and cognitive processes. But we cannot accept such a universality as the premise of our inquiry. 'Collective memory' is no less problematic, though one respects the strategic value of this term in leaving undecided the old archaeological debate between diffusionists and parallelists.

In these days of political correctness we of course know which side ought to be right. Parallelism acknowledges the separate development of independent cultures, and allows that colonization may not be the only instrument of cultural change. We ought to be parallelists, and one anticipates the revival of the archaeological equivalent of 'polygenesis' — of each ethnic group claiming responsibility for its own self-motivated history (Trigger 1989: 112). However 'correct', this position is no more appropriate or acceptable than psychologism as a premise. Yet we should be equally open to speculation even beyond polygenesis, to the position that there is no such thing as 'humanity' or 'human experience', and that these are merely imperialist constructs. That is to say, while biologists and ethnologists may determine whether there is a biological species labeled 'human', it is for students of culture and of artefacts to determine whether anatomy and organisms are more than contingently related to mental and cognitive processes. The study of prehistory may yet lead us to the post-human.

Somewhere between universalism and localism we have to pitch our methodological tent. Yet even a method of the local is comprehended within a theory of the global, and it is hard to see how a theory can be anything but global. We might be tempted to endorse at least Anati's wish that in the great database of petroglyphs all the figures 'should be classified using universal standards so that comparisons can be made' (Anati 1994). Of course one must use or assume 'universal standards' in the making of the simplest comparison; and we usually find it inconvenient or unnecessary to challenge the source and validity of those standards. What other standards

might we have by which to measure the universal ones?

And this leads us from the well-known dangers in the politics of theory to the more subtle and less often articulated problems in the politics of knowledge.

What is it that we want to know? Prehistoric artefacts may fascinate us and play on our curiosity at least as much as on our aesthetic sense, yet the end of all our intrigue and perplexity is surely not to assimilate these things either as works of art or as documentary evidence. That would be, either way, to reduce the prehistoric to the historic, to rest in the untheorizable local of history. The otherness of the prehistoric must be observed always; I would say even the absoluteness of the prehistoric, thereby to resist the imperialist modes of cognitive and aesthetic Darwinism which would maintain that knowledge and representation both follow a noble track of progress, from then to now, from them to us.

'Prehistoric' is a word coined in 1851 by Daniel Wilson, a Scottish antiquarian who was to become the first professor of History and English at the University of Toronto. The first holder of a chair of anthropology in the English-speaking world, E. B. Tylor (at Oxford), subsequently (1871) coined the word 'prehistory', and the citation given by the O.E.D. is redolent of the universalism and imperialism of the ideology which such a word was formed to serve: 'The history and pre-history of man take their proper places in the general scheme of knowledge'. The O.E.D. also indicates that it was in the same period that the word 'primitive' was first applied to art, in 1878, and that it was in the 1890s that early Italian art was first described as 'primitive'. On the model of cognitive and aesthetic Darwinism, in which both knowledge and representation are constantly developing and 'improving', European painting follows the example, on a tighter schedule, of the art of the species.

It is easy to renounce the aim of assimilation, as it is easy in the abstract to note, disapprovingly, the models of universalism and development already inscribed in our vocabulary. We can begin by thinking of history not as the sequence to prehistory but as simply different, conditioned by the fact of writing. And instead of seeing the pre-historic as cut off from the historic by the absence of writing, we should attempt to imagine the historic as cut off from the prehistoric by the absence of whatever it was that writing replaced. Petroglyphs may

play a part in the shift from non-literacy to literacy, but it would be foolish, and triumphalist, to assume that that is the most important or the most interesting thing about them. When Wilson, Tylor, and others spoke of the 'prehistoric' they assumed that 'unlettered savages' were 'living fossils', witnesses and relics of the early stages of mankind (Ackerman 1987: 77-78). Better, surely, to speak of the 'ahistoric' instead of the 'prehistoric', and then note that 'ahistoric' also serves well for 'illiterate'; by the word 'ahistoric' we might avoid the pejorative, and the Darwinian tendency.

We are still left with the problem of setting ourselves a task, and a method. In the matter of petroglyphs, even the most basic curiosity is hardly to be informed. Most archaic representations may be subjected, however imprecisely, to radiocarbon dating. But the scratch in the rock leaves only an absence by way of a record. There is, precisely, no *matter* of petroglyphs. Dr. Ezra Stiles, D.D., of Yale, as early as 1789 took an interest in the petroglyphs at Kent, Connecticut, and reported that 'the Lacunae or excavations are from a quarter to an inch wide; and from one tenth to two tenths of an inch deep' (Mallery 1972: 76). The evidence is present not in matter but in significant lacunae. And we should note that the word 'lacuna' first enters English in the late seventeenth century to denote a gap in a manuscript.

Even to want to know the date is of course a historical question, for the answer would tell us more about the shape and duration of history than about the nature of prehistory: a date would fix prehistory in historical time, dissolving the otherness of prehistory. We should treat the gap between prehistory and history as itself a lacuna separating an order we know from something unknown. And there is a third order of gap, fracture, absence. At least in North America there is no petroglyph that can reliably be attributed to a particular tribe or nation; there are no living Native Americans who preserve the tradition of interpretation, either of petroglyphs in general or of those in specific locations.

This may strike one as very odd when one considers that some petroglyphs are of recent date, almost as recent as settlers' curiosity about their meanings. We cannot date the matterlessness of petroglyphs; yet the design, that which is left in place of matter, can occasionally be a useful and safe guide to dating. Horses are frequently depicted at the Milk River site in Alberta, in an area where we know that the horse was not introduced until c. 1730 (Barry, 1991: 19). Yet even with these

petroglyphs, instances of prehistoric art perhaps less than two hundred years old, there are no native people today who claim descent from the nation or band that created them, or who assert any sort of interpretive privilege. It is as if a radical rift occurs, a breakdown of tradition and memory, with the move from 'ahistory' to history. All our task concerns lacunae.

Even at the practical, usually sub-theoretical level, there are special obstacles to scholarly study, at the level of representation. Petroglyphs are seldom satisfactorily reproduced in photographs, and they cannot be transported for exhibition. (They can be, in fragments, and they are exhibited as fragments in, for example, the National Museum in Copenhagen, in a manner that is peculiarly unsatisfactory — almost unrecognizable — for anyone who has seen petroglyphs *in situ*.) Not that a visit to the site is itself entirely satisfactory — the shape of the rock, with its curvature and fissures and hollows, usually means that the simple act of looking becomes a problem, quite apart from the problem of interpretation. As for scholarly (and more general) studies of petroglyphs, one could write an essay on the ingenious devices to which publishers and designers have had to resort to obtain graphic representations. While fully respecting the enormous difficulties involved, I should point out that certain published representations of petroglyphs have gone beyond the inadequate to the dishonest — as if the technical difficulties justified the obscuring or omitting of quite unobscure sexual features. Computer technology promises certain improvements, notably in three-dimensional representation. Yet there will always remain the conundrum of depiction in negative space: how much of the surrounding material is the picture? Of a figure carved on a rock, one may well ask where the ground ends.

Why not, then, give up, surrender our curiosity to the satisfactions of mystery and wonder, and leave the petroglyphs to the weather and to an oblivion that could hardly be less significant? We would at least be ethical in resisting the temptation to cultural appropriation. Thus self-righteousness would — yet again — be invoked to justify ignorance. One's complacency in and with one's own culture would be absolute, almost pure.

Yet 'appropriation' is only one side of a process whose obverse may be called 'reflection'. Our acquaintance with prehistoric artefacts is probably determined less by archaeologists than by the 'cultural appropriation' that

has already occurred, undertaken by Picasso, Klee, Brancusi, Miro, Campigli, etc. That appropriation transformed Western aesthetics, exposed its limitations, and disclosed the parochialism of its universal. As soon as we pose the possibility, we realize that it is now too late to recover that sense of the universal and the absolute in Western culture. It was the rediscovery by artists of the 'primitive' (even so named) that overturned the notion of artistic development: we can no longer go back to 'primitive art' in order to measure complacently the advances we have made. Nor should we settle for the easy, most seductive paradigm of relativism: each to her own style and taste. As Bakhtin insisted, relativism is only a devious, manipulative form of imperialism, for it presupposes a transcendent vantage point from which styles or tastes could be judged relative to each other. Relativism is thus guaranteed to preclude any reflection or self-criticism. For Bakhtin, relativism is the specific enemy, the deceitful double of the dialogical.

We may then take as the ground of our investigation into petroglyphs the dialogue which has always already begun between cultures and styles of making. More specifically, I should like to consider how our appreciation of 'primitive' art (whether 'prehistoric' or of the Trecento) has been determined by modern art, and to note the readjustment, in modern art, of the boundary between the aesthetic and the sacred. Only since the beginnings of modernity may representations be said to have served a purely aesthetic purpose. One might assert that modernity itself has been constituted by the freedom of its representations from cultic or ideological obligations. It has been the fixity of the boundary between the aesthetic and the sacred in modernity which has produced our apparently neutral and universal terms, 'art' and 'culture' — terms which somehow cross the gap between the historic and the ahistoric.

As early twentieth-century art was provoked to its innovativeness by 'primitive art', of the Middle Ages, Byzantium, and the ahistoric, so our sense of the primitive has been transformed. Before Picasso, the ahistoric necessarily appeared 'primitive' and undeveloped in terms of aesthetic canons then accepted. Picasso and others who found inspiration in the primitive were themselves accused of being savage and wild, barbarians and traitors to civilization. The acceptance of Modern Art entailed the rejection of the aesthetic canons which would discriminate between the primitive and the sophisticated.

Most obviously we are no longer concerned with pictorial space as governed by a set of rules and hierarchies. It is now 'almost universally' accepted that 'natural perspective' (in Shakespeare's phrase: 'a natural perspective, that is, and is not' — *Twelfth Night*, V, i) is as conventional and as unnatural as everything else we make and take for granted. Yet if one sort of perspective no longer holds a monopoly, we remain dependent on the *idea* of perspective. For we recognize that as an idea, perspective was the very condition of the scientific revolution, and thus of the cognitive revolution by which knowledge became 'objective'. 'Point-of-view' allows for the play of subjectivity, while precisely defining the object.

Though we no longer demand of a painting that it observe the rules of natural perspective, we still like to retain a perspective in our view of non-perspectival art. While we honor the Trecento altarpiece, and celebrate tribal art, our affirmations are compromised. Altarpieces, crucifixes, totem-poles, masks, all become objects in a museum. The museum is the meeting-place of all the tendencies of universalist ideology: appropriation, comparison, and objectivity. Any thing is welcome in a museum once it has become an object. And the function of a museum is to preserve the objectivity of the objects it contains, to allow nothing to disturb the absolute cognitive security.

That cognitive security, that sense of objects harmlessly arranged to be looked at, I should like to call 'second-order perspective'. We would find it intolerably reactionary if anyone expected a modern painting to 'look like something', or required that its pictorial space be continuous with the space we suppose ourselves to occupy. Yet a museum does make all its disparate contents 'look like' things in a museum; and a bland homogeneity of space is precisely what legitimates acquisition and renders comparisons significant. The very convenience of a museum obscures the fundamental problem that all artefacts are not supposed to be looked at in the same way, and that some artefacts are perhaps not meant to be looked at at all, or if at all, then perhaps not by us. It is the absurdity of even thinking of removing petroglyphs — the entire rock, not the sliced image — to museums for safe-keeping (that is, the safety of the spectator, not the rock) that prompts these reflections. If their removal were physically possible, we would still not be able to display petroglyphs adequately, for their unboundedness would render disproportionate and irrational the space of a

museum. Petroglyphs are no more meant to be looked at and studied as objects than are the finely-carved statues high up on a cathedral façade, out of range of merely human viewers; or the cave-paintings of the Dordogne, invisible by natural light, and awkwardly visible even with modern technology. Yet the idea that artefacts are made to be looked at, that any object, whatever its cultic function, necessarily possesses also an aesthetic aspect, has become axiomatic. Because some of the hill-figures of England are best viewed from a point well above the ground, cranks have argued that their designers must have operated from flying saucers. Von Däniken and others are of course not taken seriously, but the counter-arguments merely mock the speculation, and often excuse the absence of a good terrestrial viewpoint precisely by invoking the primitive, the undeveloped, the incompetent (Marples 1981: 21-27). It is worth noting that the flying-saucer speculations began only after World War Two, when the hill-figures became such useful landmarks for enemy aircraft that they had to be filled in with turf. Hill-figures provide a useful analogue to petroglyphs in that they also cannot be moved or dated, for their design is only a lacuna, an absence of turf.

Prehistoric artefacts which cannot be moved are therefore singularly instructive, for they compel us to do without the second-order perspective of a museum — and to recognize that, for all its convenience and objectivity, a museum appropriates and assimilates. Petroglyphs insist on immobility at the expense of visibility. And that lack of respect for visibility is related to another aspect of second-order perspective: the boundary between the aesthetic and the sacred in modernity which presupposes, in the primitive, the concomitance of the aesthetic and the cultic. It is merely a modern prejudice that whatever had a sacred function must also have an aesthetic function. The student of petroglyphs may be instructed by the editorial in *The Art Newspaper* (October 1991), concerning the controversy over certain artefacts which are portable, and which were appropriated after the Russian Revolution and placed in museums. Icons and liturgical objects are now being handed back by the state to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Heritage items, tourist attractions, priceless art treasures, cultural property, examples of the opiate of the people — choose whichever profane and flattering terminology you dislike least — have



suddenly been transubstantiated. These buildings, this painting, are no longer mere art but partake of the divine and become again the focus of intense devotion. The painting you studied in the museum under optimum viewing conditions is now up on high, in the shadows of the ancient church (bad luck if you're writing your thesis) for clouds of incense to rise before it ... for lips to be pressed against it (shudder, all you conservators)....

After the first romantic thrill, this seems actually rather a shocking and retrograde step to us in the materialistic West, where the quasi-religious experience of contemplating paintings in public galleries has taken the place of the true religious experience of praying before them ....  
(Anon 1991)

This passage is striking for its recognition that the endemic disputes over the appropriation of artefacts do not concern ownership as such, but context and function. We might here note that the weakness of the Greek claims for the restitution of the Elgin Marbles lies in precisely what the Greek government assumes to be its strongest point: its undertaking to provide a museum in which the Marbles would be displayed and protected. In other words, a replica of the British Museum would be built in Athens, as if we had forgotten that the British Museum itself pretends to be a classical temple by some far northern sea. How much more unarguable the Greek case would be if it showed contempt for display and protection, and protested only that the marbles were needed in Athens to reinvigorate the cult of Diana. Unlike Classical artefacts, the icons and crucifixes of Europe are still, socially, collectively, on the cusp between the cultic and the aesthetic.

Unlike prehistoric artefacts in Europe, but like mediaeval ones, the petroglyphs of North and Central America are still, or have become again, the focus of cult. The most famous petroglyph site in Ontario — near Peterborough — was discovered in 1954, and the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources undertook to preserve 'this important part of our national heritage ... for future generations of Canadians' (Sweetman 1955: 108). Fences of increasing seriousness were built to protect the site from visitors — not only from wear, but from the graffiti that graffiti always invites — until it

was recognized that the main damage was caused by the weather. Before their discovery the petroglyphs had been well protected by moss and undergrowth. In the late 1970s the Ministry built a large structure over the entire rock surface; the atmosphere inside is now fully controlled. In 1976 the site was designated a Provincial Park . I first visited the petroglyphs in 1984, and my thought then was that as the petroglyph would not go to the Museum, the Museum had gone to the petroglyph. Sometime between then and my next visit in 1990 a wooden sign appeared, on the path between the car-park and the site, and visitors are now informed that this is a sacred place, honored and used for ritual purposes by Native Americans; non-Natives are asked to behave with respect. Native people are now the guides and wardens of the Park, and there is talk of the Ontario government 'handing back' the petroglyphs to Native Americans.

The way we view these petroglyphs has changed radically. No longer a museum, ideologically neutral and spatially homogeneous, the structure belongs to others and is to be entered on sufferance. Should one remove one's hat? One's shoes? Voices are lowered. And one certainly gets a 'romantic thrill' from seeing on that great rock, at a discreet distance from any carving, the traces of a tobacco offering. Visiting in 1992, however, I noticed not only tobacco and feathers and stones, but also red, yellow, and white ribbon. These ribbons are traditional and authentic, but my aesthetic sense inwardly protested that the effect was tawdry. With petroglyphs as with icons, offerings must be placed in contiguity with the object of devotion, and thus become part of it; one cannot open a site to cultic devotion and then ask that offerings be left elsewhere, to the side. As a visitor, one knows that one's aesthetic protest would be, if voiced, a mark of disrespect. In a museum, of course, complaints are expected.

Here we have a rare and spectacular instance of a prehistoric artefact which is now serving what we might call a 'first-order purpose'. Obviously there has been no continuity of cult; the Ojibway Anishinabe band, who now revere the site and care for it, do not pretend that it was ever associated with their ancestors. Whether the contemporary cult is the same or similar to that practiced in prehistoric times is of course unknown; indeed, not everyone is agreed that these petroglyphs ever had sacred significance or were at any time the site of a cult. Probability certainly favors the Ojibway, and whatever the authenticity of the present cult, it must be

considered 'first-order': there is a consensus among Native people which legitimates the cult, and the ritual has nothing to do with 'second-order purposes', the aesthetic and cognitive practices of non-Native viewers. Viewers, spectators, scholars, helpfully raised on the ramp that encircles the rock, prevented by railings from falling (or straying) onto the rock, we notice the little gate through which Natives may pass: the way in, not for viewers but only for participants.

Perspective is the way out of participation, our protection from confusion and involvement. Being left outside is the price of objectivity. There is no perspective for those sitting on the rock, any more than there is for the worshipper venerating the icon. The relationship is one of contiguity, or in Bakhtin's phrase, of 'maximal proximity'. Art from the Renaissance onwards — 'art' as we know it — is directed to the detached. We stand back, we look, we admire, and move on. The condition of a thing being labeled as 'art' is our expectation to be able to negotiate it at such a distance. In this we resolve all important distinctions between aesthesis and cognition: distance (a point of view) is the condition of both, and the means of their reconciliation. A painting by Picasso or Klee works because in spite of its lack of natural perspective it still allows for the second-order perspective in which it will be viewed. There is a frame, a uniform surface, and mobility — the prerequisites for hanging it on a museum wall. A petroglyph has none of these; we cannot even speak of 'a' petroglyph without asking whether we are designating a single figure or an entire surface. Objectivity and detachment have yielded little in the presence of petroglyphs: much in the way of mystery, but little cognitive or aesthetic gain. I do not propose that students of petroglyphs should join the cult, 'go Native' as it were, but I honor the petroglyph for so confounding our assumptions and resisting our appropriations.

In the presence of a petroglyph we cannot even be certain what is a sign. Put another way, we may sometimes be all unwittingly in the presence of petroglyphs. We assume that what is scratched, scored, marked, has value as a sign. But there is great uncertainty in determining whether a visible 'mark' has been made by a human, or is the result of weathering, or of a rock-fall, or of any number of natural causes. Sweetman describes the problems in determining which of the features on the rock were glyphs: 'The subtlety of the problem of glyph designation certainly tests the

patience and endurance of the researcher, and produces at times a condition and attitude which may be described as "glyph happy", where one is quite prepared to doubt his own perceptions' (Sweetman 1955: 104). Our proof that a mark is a sign comes with the recognition that it is a sign of something. If we see a bird, or a turtle, or a horse, or a human figure, or a hand, we can safely assume intentionality. Other marks are a little less certain: near-perfect circles and regular crosses may be no problem, but as the figures become less precise, so our uncertainty grows. They may be depictions of man-made objects, 'originals' of which are no longer extant, or abstractions (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973: 112). As our capacity for recognition diminishes, so we depend increasingly on evidence of tooling. The tools that have been found near the Peterborough site suggest that percussion — pecking or pounding — rather than scratching was the method used (Sweetman 1955: 111; Vastokas and Vastokas 1973: 17-18). This leaves in general a less distinct impression than scratching or incising, and those who first had to identify the glyphs depended heavily on the angle of the sun at dawn and dusk, and on touch: 'feeling by hand for the outlines of the figures was often almost as useful in delineating the figures as searching for them visually' (Sweetman 1955: 104). We should consider that glyphs are available equally to the haptic as to the optic sense, and that touching them would be as important as seeing them. Nor should we assume the indistinctness of some of the figures to be the result either of inadequate tooling or of subsequent natural abrasion: it might be that indistinctness deliberately invited the touch, or rendered the images visible only when the light was raked.

The glyphs that we acknowledge can be divided into two orders of marks: marks that we recognize as signs of something, and marks that we know to have been made, to be signs. Even here there is a problem, for it is obvious that the makers of petroglyphs would use natural features as part of their design. The Peterborough petroglyphs are noted for being on a rock whose presumed 'untouched state' is rich in cavities and hollows and fissures. When the outline of a human figure is scratched around a fissure, the fissure will be read as a vagina. The 'unmarked' will have become a sign. The impression, speculative as this must be, that one receives from the Peterborough petroglyphs is that the great fissure would have prompted the first scratch of a human figure, and that this figure subsequently occasioned all the other marks. This was indeed

supposed at once: 'The actual erosion seams in the rock appear to have been incorporated as part of the sexual detail' (Sweetman 1955: 106). Vastokas and Vastokas go further: 'The rendering of this image was no doubt directly inspired by the crevices and the red seam and, perhaps, the female itself was seen as pre-existent at the site' (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973: 80). Barry writes of the Peterborough site 'where the dominant element of a design filled with eggs, animals, and personified spirits is a large female figure incised around a natural vagina' (Barry 1991: 15). Barry's phrase 'natural vagina' and Vastokas's idea of the 'pre-existent female' further prompt one to speculate, merely, that made signs might have been less valuable, less significant, than those unmade, already there.

This leads us to question whether, for the makers of petroglyphs, anything is not a sign. We should therefore resist the conventional semiotic distinction between an arbitrary natural mark and an intended sign. Rather we might suppose that the human glyph merely augments, clarifies and brings forth the signs already present or latent in nature. This hypothesis was ventured by Garrick Mallery over one hundred years ago:

although there is thus established a distinction between those markings which are natural and those which are artificial, it is possible that there may have been some distant connection between the two, and that the depressions worn by wind and rain may have suggested the idea of the devices, now called cup-markings, to those who first sculptured them. (Mallery 1972: 189)

It is even possible that the marks are of the nature of commentary or gloss on and about the rock; our isolating of the figures from their ground would then be as absurd as a Martian treating a printed book as merely mechanical and becoming fascinated by scribbled annotations and marginal comments in isolation from the text itself.

We must therefore address the notions of intention and agency, which have led to much confusion in writing about petroglyphs. The Native phrases for petroglyphs consistently deny human agency. The term in Ojibway is best translated as 'Stone talking'; in Blackfoot as 'It has been written' (Barry 1991: 22). Barry points out not only that 'the passive voice and the pluperfect [sic] tense denote a vanished agent' (Barry 1991: 22), but that any

Native would therefore be bound to deny responsibility for and knowledge of the making of petroglyphs. This throws an interesting light (or shade) on our ignorance of any Native band which claims (or admits?) continuity of association with a particular petroglyph site.

And it renders altogether problematic all attempts at interpretation, for (cultural) interpretation is founded on the premise that what we are interpreting is the product of the human mind. The Natives' interpretation, however, is posited on the belief that the rock itself is speaking, or conveying messages from the earth, or from animals or spirits. We may then allow the glyphs to have come into being through a reduced and oblique form of human agency or mediation — the shaman in a trance, helping the stone to bring forth its speech. We need not be concerned with the phenomenon and claims of shamanism as such. Our suspicions, that the medicine-man might be fully conscious while pretending to be in a trance, should be balanced by the Natives' suspicions. Too readily recognizable a glyph, too clear a sign, might betray too conscious a shaman. Our hermeneutic suspicion is aroused by the possibility of significance; yet an obvious significance in the glyphs might awaken in Natives the contrary suspicion — that the medicine-man was inadequately entranced.

This is speculation, of course, but it is not speculation intended to prove a point by projection; it is rather speculation in the service of caution. We should not assume that glyphs are meant to mean anything: as signs they may have the primary function 'to look like' signs, rather than to be signs *of* something. Furthermore, what intentionality we can trace in petroglyphs may be in the intention not to clarify but to obscure. Petroglyphs also have a prophetic function; again, with prophecy, where we find intention at all, it is the intention to be vague, not to be precise, for a precise prophecy is more easily falsified than a vague one. Native traditions cover immensities of (ahistoric) time (quite apart from conceiving time in ways entirely strange to us), and a sign that has no meaning today may be expected to have a meaning 'at another time'. The site as a whole would have no stable meaning incorporating all its signs for all time, any more than does a major text, the Bible, or Shakespeare, of our culture, our cult. Native medicine-men today are sometimes asked the meaning of particular petroglyphs; the response is frequently given in terms of prophecy, of the prophecy of a time when the meaning will be manifest.

A further qualification needs to be entered in our understanding of 'Stones Talking'. Natives speak usually of 'talking' and 'speaking', not of writing, for all Native American nations are oral societies, alphabetic. As Native Americans convey signs through speech, so, analogously, do the rocks: without the concept of writing, their signs are signs of speech. (Whether 'it has been written' is an accurate translation of the Blackfoot 'Aysin Weep' [Barry 1991: 22] I cannot say, though I suspect 'it has been scratched' or 'marked' would be more exact.) Within our (literate) culture, only artists interpret pictorial signs by means of other pictorial signs. The rest of us transform pictorial signs into verbal signs; and most of us, including semioticians and theorists, until very recently have assumed that literacy follows orality as age follows youth. It is one of the residual prejudices that survive even among thinkers otherwise alert to the idiocy of developmental models. Unlike most colonized peoples in the world, Native Americans have resisted literacy even when it was imposed on them. Some Native Americans are today determined to become 'illiterate' once more; not of course by 'forgetting' anything, but by recovering that power and versatility of memory that makes literacy superfluous. Whatever the reasons for this, it forces on us the recognition that we can hardly guess at the value and significance of pictorial signs when there is not also an alphabet. However hard we try to challenge and resist our preconceptions in front of petroglyphs, we shall always confront the obduracy of our own inescapable literacy.

Another speculation: pictorial signs that are interpreted as signs of speech may have a connection with natural sounds quite unknown to us, for whom pictorial signs and acoustic signs belong to distinct orders. 'Synaesthesia' is for us a highly sophisticated notion, yet it may be the norm for non-literate or 'ahistoric' peoples. And if the stone is talking, then so may everything else have a voice, or be the sign of a voice. At the Peterborough site we are told that there is an underground stream, below the rock, which is a torrent in winter — when the site is closed to the public — and whose purling can be heard in the summer — but only when the atmospheric controls are switched off. We should at least allow — speculation aside — that an interpretation of the petroglyphs must take into account not only the entire rock, but also the disposition of the landscape, the horizon, the varying angles of the sunlight, the noises of water and wind and birds and animals, the position of stars, and here, as elsewhere in

northern climes, the presence or absence of snow, which would, with the changing seasons, conceal and disclose the signs.

A final speculation. We take pictorial signs to be static and stable, and to endure independently of their maker. We do not make such an assumption about acoustic signs, whose cause must always be present while the sign is present. If the Natives were 'listening' to the rock 'talking', 'hearing' the glyphs in counterpoint to the noises of nature (i.e., the rest of nature), they would necessarily be attentive to the source of the message. The origin, intention, and cause of the message would not be traced back in time to the mind of the person who had made the scratch. Origin, cause, and message would all be present, concealed, as presence is always concealed, by its signs. We, accustomed to textuality, displace origins of pictorial and written signs on the temporal axis; the Natives would displace the origin of all signs on the spatial axis, as we do only with acoustic signs: 'When was that written?' but 'Where is that noise coming from?' And the latter question presupposes the answer that the maker of the signs is present, behind the signs, within the rock, or elsewhere, but not far away.

Here I should like to return to the idea of first- and second-order perspective. While 'perspective' has become synonymous with 'natural perspective' (aerial or orthogonal), we should recognize that every pictorial sign depends on some sort of perspective. The only exception I would allow is a text. A text is a set of visual signs (letters, numerals, symbols) which is entirely free of perspective. The absence or presence of perspective marks the crucial difference between 'pictorial' and 'symbolic' signs, both of which are 'visual'.

When we speak of Trecento art as lacking perspective, we ignore the conventions by which pictorial space was then understood. Space was not in the Middle Ages thought to be homogeneous and uniform; this makes it altogether less odd that figures should have been depicted larger or smaller according to their importance. Something very similar is at work in petroglyphs, as Mallery asserted — without reference to medieval art (Mallery 1972: 182). Some sort of perspective is employed, and we could do worse than take another hint from medieval art, and consider the applicability of the system of 'inverse perspective', known to us through the analysis of Trecento and Byzantine painting. Inverse perspective puts the viewer in the position of the vanishing-point, and takes the true viewer to be where,



in 'natural' perspective, the vanishing-point is. An icon, for example, depicts a figure who looks directly out of the picture, from a space in which natural light is absent. The luminosity of an icon (the same could be said of Trecento art) is unnatural, as the sign of uncreated transcendence. Furthermore, as B. A. Uspensky has demonstrated, left and right often appear reversed in iconic depictions; this is because the position of the 'external viewer' is that of a 'non-participant' in the world of the icon, which should properly be seen from the 'internal viewer's position' — that is, from 'the other side' of the pictorial plane (Uspensky 1975: 33). As John White has shown, inverse perspective requires just as much optical and geometrical sophistication as 'natural' perspective (White 1957; Lock 1991: 11-12). Neither the maker of the petroglyph nor the iconographer is considered to be an artist; both are regarded as mediators, bringing out the image from a point beyond the picture-plane, or within the rock. To create an image from the other side of the picture-plane would not seem problematic, except to those who assume that pictures are made from the same side as that from which they are viewed. Such a supposition is of course very recent, and definitively secular.

In Garrick Mallery's extraordinary and still rewarding work of ethnography and profound anthropological self-reflection, *Picture-Writing of the American Indians*, first published in 1893, one is intrigued to read this about the petroglyphs at Machias in the state of Maine :

Several years ago Mr. H. R. Taylor, of Machias, who made the original sketch in 1868 and kindly furnished it to the Bureau of Ethnology, applied to a resident Indian there (Peter Benoit, then nearly 80 years old) for assistance in deciphering the characters. He gave little information, but pointed out that the figures must not all be read 'from one side only' ... (Mallery 1972: 82)

Mallery assumes that this means that the viewer must walk all round the rock, and not try to read the signs from a single direction. In the instances of petroglyphs that I know, one would never try to read all the marks from a single direction. What the aged Indian must have meant is that the figures should be read from the other side of the rock, seen as if from within the rock. There, within, would be the source and cause and intention of the rock's 'speaking'.

And there, except by an act of faith or devotion, we may not pass. This does not mean that we should withdraw our interest and be concerned only with that which is properly ours. For knowledge is irreversible, and what we know we cannot know is precisely what makes us dissatisfied with what we know we can know. Klee wrote in his diary, responding as did so many of his contemporaries to the incomprehensible wonders of African and pre-Columbian art: 'I want to be as the newborn, knowing nothing, absolutely nothing, about Europe ... to be almost primitive'. Klee's contemporary, the poet Hugh MacDiarmid, found in stone his alienation from Europe and from humanity:

the truth we seek is as free  
From all yet thought as a stone from  
humanity.

Petroglyphs fascinate us by hinting that such freedom may not be absolute; that a mere scratch might violate that sacred untouchable of modernity known and unknown as the Ding-an-sich.

It is when we are conscious of our alienation from the archaic that we become alienated from the civilized, from Europe . In the presence of petroglyphs semiotics may find itself exposed, as universalist, even imperialist discourse. In seeking for a theory and a method that are valid without being global, we might try to develop a semiotics of alienation, of the gaps and spaces and fissures between what we know and what we do not know: a semiotics of the lacuna.

That was not what Garrick Mallery was working toward when, in 1880, he acknowledged that the study of Native American picture-writing would require the help of 'our native semiotics'. In the current meaning of 'semiotics', this phrase of Mallery's happens to be the earliest instance cited in the O. E. D.

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