

live. And I stared at the room with the same, nervous, calculating extension of the intelligence and of all one's forces which occurs when gauging a mortal and unavoidable danger: at the silent walls of the room with its distant, archaic lovers trapped in an interminable rose garden, and the staring windows, staring like two great eyes of ice and fire, and the ceiling which lowered like those clouds out of which fiends have sometimes spoken and which obscured but failed to soften its malevolence behind the yellow light which hung like a diseased and undefinable sex in its center. Under this blunted arrow, this smashed flower of fight lay the terrors which encompassed Giovanni's soul. I understood why Giovanni had wanted me and had brought me to his last retreat. I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life. This life could only be my own, which, in order to transform Giovanni's, must first become a part of Giovanni's room.

In the beginning, because the motives which led me to Giovanni's room were so mixed, had so little to do with his hopes and desires, and were so deeply a part of my own desperation, I invented in myself a kind of pleasure in playing the housewife after Giovanni had gone to work. I threw out the paper, the bottles, the fantastic accumulation of trash; I examined the contents of the innumerable boxes and suitcases and disposed of them. But I am not a housewife—men never can be housewives. And the pleasure was never real or deep, though Giovanni smiled his humble, grateful smile and told me in as many ways as he could find how wonderful it was to have me there, how I stood, with my love and my ingenuity, between him and the dark. Each day he invited me to witness how he had changed, how love had changed him, how he worked and sang and cherished me. I was in a terrible confusion. Sometimes I thought, but this is your life. Stop fighting it. Stop fighting. Or I thought, but I am happy. And he loves me. I am safe. Sometimes, when he was not near me, I thought, I will never let him touch me again. Then, when he touched me, I thought, it doesn't matter, it is only the body, it will soon be over. When it was over, I lay in the dark and listened to his breathing and dreamed of the touch of hands, of Giovanni's hands, or anybody's hands, hands which would have the power to crush me and make me whole again.

THE WRITING OF STONES (1970)

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JUST AS MEN HAVE ALWAYS SOUGHT AFTER PRECIOUS STONES, SO THEY HAVE ALWAYS PRIZED CURIOUS ONES, THOSE THAT CATCH THE ATTENTION THROUGH SOME ANOMALY OF FORM, SOME SUGGESTIVE ODDITY OF COLOR OR PATTERN. THIS FASCINATION ALMOST ALWAYS DERIVES FROM A SURPRISING RESEMBLANCE THAT IS AT ONCE IMPROBABLE AND NATURAL. STONES POSSESS A KIND OF GRAVITAS, SOMETHING ULTIMATE AND UNCHANGING, SOMETHING THAT WILL NEVER PERISH OR ELSE HAS ALREADY DONE SO. THEY ATTRACT THROUGH AN INTRINSIC, INFALLIBLE, IMMEDIATE BEAUTY, ANSWERABLE TO NO ONE, NECESSARILY PERFECT YET EXCLUDING THE IDEA OF PERFECTION IN ORDER TO EXCLUDE APPROXIMATION, ERROR, AND EXCESS. THIS SPONTANEOUS BEAUTY THUS PRECEDES AND GOES BEYOND THE ACTUAL NOTION OF BEAUTY, OF WHICH IT IS AT ONCE THE PROMISE AND THE FOUNDATION.

FOR A STONE REPRESENTS AN OBVIOUS ACHIEVEMENT, YET ONE ARRIVED AT WITHOUT INVENTION, SKILL, INDUSTRY, OR ANYTHING ELSE THAT WOULD MAKE IT A WORK IN THE HUMAN SENSE OF THE WORD, MUCH LESS A WORK OF ART. THE WORK COMES LATER, AS DOES ART; BUT THE FAR-OFF ROOTS AND HIDDEN MODELS OF BOTH LIE IN THE OBSCURE YET IRRESISTIBLE SUGGESTIONS IN NATURE.

THESE CONSIST OF SUBTLE AND AMBIGUOUS SIGNALS REMINDING US, THROUGH ALL SORTS OF FILTERS AND OBSTACLES THAT THERE MUST BE A PREEXISTING GENERAL BEAUTY VASTER THAN THAT PERCEIVED BY HUMAN INTUITION—A BEAUTY IN WHICH MAN DELIGHTS AND WHICH IN HIS TURN HE IS PROUD TO CREATE. STONES—AND NOT ONLY THEY BUT ALSO ROOTS, SHELLS, WINGS, AND EVERY OTHER CIPHER AND CONSTRUCTION IN NATURE—HELP TO GIVE US AN IDEA OF THE PROPORTIONS AND LAWS OF THAT GENERAL BEAUTY ABOUT WHICH WE CAN ONLY CONJECTURE AND IN COMPARISON WITH WHICH HUMAN BEAUTY MUST BE MERELY

ONE RECIPE AMONG OTHERS, JUST AS EUCLID'S THEOREMS ARE BUT ONE SET OUT OF THE MANY POSSIBLE IN A TOTAL GEOMETRY.

IN STONES THE BEAUTY COMMON TO ALL THE KINGDOMS OF NATURE SEEMS VAGUE, EVEN DIFFUSE, TO MAN, BEING HIMSELF LACKING IN DENSITY, THE LAST COMER INTO THE WORLD, INTELLIGENT, ACTIVE, AMBITIOUS, DRIVEN BY AN ENORMOUS PRESUMPTION. HE DOES NOT SUSPECT THAT HIS MOST SUBTLE RESEARCHES ARE BUT AN EXEMPLIFICATION WITHIN A GIVEN FIELD OF CRITERIA THAT ARE INELUCTABLE, THOUGH, CAPABLE OF ENDLESS VARIATION. NONETHELESS, EVEN THOUGH HE NEGLECTS, SCORNS, OR IGNORES THE GENERAL OR FUNDAMENTAL BEAUTY WHICH HAS EMANATED SINCE THE VERY BEGINNING FROM THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE UNIVERSE AND FROM WHICH ALL OTHER BEAUTIES DERIVE, HE STILL CANNOT HELP BEING AFFECTED BY SOMETHING BASIC AND INDESTRUCTIBLE IN THE MINERAL KINGDOM: SOMETHING WE MIGHT DESCRIBE AS LAPIDARY THAT FILLS HIM WITH WONDER AND DESIRE.

THIS ALMOST MENACING PERFECTION—FOR IT RESTS ON THE ABSENCE OF LIFE, THE VISIBLE STILLNESS OF DEATH—APPEARS IN STONES SO VARIOUSLY THAT ONE MIGHT LIST ALL THE ENDEAVORS AND STYLES OF HUMAN ART AND NOT FIND ONE WITHOUT ITS PARALLEL IN MINERAL NATURE. THERE IS NOTHING SURPRISING ABOUT THIS: THE CRUDE ATTEMPTS OF THAT LOST CREATURE, MAN, COULD NOT COVER MORE THAN A TINY PART OF THE AESTHETICS OF THE UNIVERSE. NO MATTER WHAT IMAGE AN ARTIST INVENTS, NO MATTER HOW DISTORTED, ARBITRARY, ABSURD, SIMPLE, ELABORATE, OR TORTURED HE HAS MADE IT OR HOW FAR IN APPEARANCE FROM ANYTHING KNOWN OR PROBABLE, WHO CAN BE SURE THAT SOMEWHERE IN THE WORLD'S VAST STORE THERE IS NOT THAT IMAGE'S LIKENESS, ITS KIN OR PARTIAL PARALLEL?

EVEN SETTING SUCH SIMILARITIES ASIDE, HUMAN BEINGS ARE ATTRACTED AND AMAZED BY MANY MINERAL FORMATIONS: SPINY TUFTS OF QUARTZ; THE DARK CAVES OF AMETHYST GEODES; SHINY SLABS OF VARSCITE OR RHODOCHROSITE AGATE; FLORINE CRYSTALS; THE GOLDEN, MANYSIDED MASSES OF PYRITES; THE SIMPLE, ALMOST UNSOLICITED CURVE OF JASPER, MALACHITE, OR LAPIS LAZULI; ANY STONE BRIGHTLY COLORED OR PLEASINGLY MARKED.

CONNOISSEURS, IN SUCH CASES, ADMIRE THE QUALITIES OF A MATERIAL THAT IS CONSTANT AND UNCHANGING: PURITY, BRILLIANCE, COLOR, STRUCTURAL RIGOR—PROPERTIES INHERENT IN EACH KIND AND PRESENT IN EVERY EXAMPLE. THEIR VALUES ARE INTRINSIC, WITHOUT EXTERNAL REFERENCE. THE PRICE A PURCHASER PAYS FOR THEM DEPENDS ON WEIGHT, RARITY, THE AMOUNT OF WORK INVOLVED, JUST AS WITH A LENGTH OF SATIN OR BROCADE, A BAR OF REFINED METAL, OR A GEM. LIKE SUCH COMMODITIES, THESE STONES ARE EXCHANGEABLE, SINCE THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ONE OF THEM AND ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THE SAME KIND, SIZE, AND QUALITY.

THE WHOLE PICTURE CHANGES WHEN SINGULARITY IS WHAT IS SOUGHT AFTER. THE STONE'S INHERENT QUALITIES AND SPECIAL GEOMETRY ARE NO LONGER OF PRIMARY CONCERN, PERFECTION NO MORE THE SOLE OR EVEN THE MAIN CRITERION. THIS NEW BEAUTY DEPENDS MUCH MORE ON CURIOUS ALTERATIONS BROUGHT ABOUT IN THE STONE ITSELF BY MEANS OF METALLIC OR OTHER DEPOSITS, OR ON CHANGES IN ITS SHAPE DUE TO EROSION OR SERENDIPITOUS BREAKAGE. SOME PATTERN OR PECULIAR CONFIGURATION APPEARS IN WHICH THE IMAGINATIVE OBSERVER DESCRIBES AN UNEXPECTED, IN THIS CONTEXT AN ASTONISHING AND ALMOST SHOCKING COPY OF, AN ALIEN REALITY.

SUCH SEMBLANCES EMERGE FROM THEIR LONG CONCEALMENT WHEN CERTAIN STONES ARE SPLIT OPEN AND POLISHED, PRESENTING THE WILLING MIND WITH IMMORTAL SMALL-SCALE MODELS OF LIVING BEINGS AND INANIMATE THINGS. ADMITTEDLY SUCH MARVELS ARE THE RESULT OF MERE CHANCE, SUCH RESEMBLANCES ONLY APPROXIMATE AND DUBIOUS, OCCASIONALLY FAR-FETCHED OR EVEN ARBITRARY. BUT ONCE PERCEIVED THEY SOON BECOME TYRANNICAL AND DELIVER MORE THAN THEY PROMISED. THE OBSERVER IS ALWAYS FINDING FRESH DETAILS TO ROUND OUT THE SUPPOSED ANALOGY. SUCH IMAGES MINIATURIZE, FOR HIS BENEFIT ALONE, EVERY OBJECT IN THE WORLD, PROVIDING HIM WITH STABLE DUPLICATES WHICH HE MAY HOLD IN THE PALM OF HIS HAND, CARRY ABOUT FROM PLACE TO PLACE, OR PUT IN A GLASS CASE.

MOREOVER, SUCH A DUPLICATE IS NOT A COPY; IT IS NOT BORN OF AN ARTIST'S TALENT OR A FORGER'S SKILL. IT HAS BEEN THERE

ALWAYS: WE ONLY HAD TO FIND OUR WAY INTO ITS PRESENCE. ORDINARY ROCKS AS WELL AS VARIOUS TYPES OF MINERAL SPECIMENS MAKE UP THIS PREY OF PAN. IN CHINA, POETS AND PAINTERS WOULD SEE IN A CLEFT STONE A MOUNTAIN WITH ITS PEAKS AND WATERFALLS, ITS CAVES AND PATHS AND CHASMS. COLLECTORS RUINED THEMSELVES TO POSSESS CRYSTALS IN WHOSE TRANSLUCENT DEPTHS THEY DISCERNED MOSSES, GRASSES, AND BOUGHS LADEN WITH FLOWERS OR FRUIT. AN AGATE MAY SHADOW FORTH A TREE, SEVERAL TREES, GROVES, A FOREST, A WHOLE LANDSCAPE. A PIECE OF MARBLE CAN SUGGEST A RIVER FLOWING AMONG HILLS; THE CLOUDS AND LIGHTNING FLASHES OF A STORM, THUNDERBOLTS AND THE GRANDIOSE PLUMES OF FROST; A HERO FIGHTING A DRAGON; OR A GREAT SEA FULL OF FLEEING GALLEYS, LIKE THE SCENE THE ROMAN SAW REFLECTED IN THE EYES OF THE EASTERN QUEEN ALREADY PLANNING TO BETRAY HIM.

ONE KIND FREQUENTLY DEPICTS A BURNING TOWN, WITH ITS TOWERS AND STEEPLES AND CAMPANILES CRASHING DOWN. ON THE AGATE OF PYRRHUS ANTIQUITY MADE OUT APOLLO WITH HIS LYRE, SURROUNDED BY THE MUSES, EACH WITH HER SPECIAL ATTRIBUTES. IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY GAFFAREL, RICHELIEU'S LIBRARIAN AND THE KING'S CHAPLAIN, DEVOTED A WHOLE WEIGHTY VOLUME TO GAMAHÉS, HEALING TALISMANS MADE OF STONES INSCRIBED WITH NATURAL ASTROLOGICAL HIEROGLYPHS. PRINCES AND BANKERS OF THE SAME PERIOD COLLECTED UNUSUAL SPECIMENS SOUGHT OUT FOR THEM AT GREAT EXPENSE BY THE NUMEROUS AGENTS OF SPECIALIST MERCHANTS. [...] LEARNED MEN, AMONG THEM ALDROVANDI AND KIRCHER, DIVIDED UP THESE MARVELS INTO FAMILIES AND TYPES ACCORDING TO THE IMAGES THEY MANAGED TO DISTINGUISH IN THEM: MOORS, BISHOPS, LOBSTERS, STREAMS, FACES, PLANTS, DOGS, FISHES, TORTOISES, DRAGONS, DEATH'S HEADS, CRUCIFIXES — EVERYTHING A MIND BENT ON IDENTIFICATION COULD FANCY. THE FACT IS THAT THERE IS NO CREATURE OR THING, NO MONSTER OR MONUMENT, NO HAPPENING OR SIGHT IN NATURE, HISTORY, FABLE, OR DREAM WHOSE IMAGE THE PREDISPOSED EYE CANNOT READ IN THE MARKINGS, PATTERNS AND OUTLINES FOUND IN STONES.

THE MORE UNUSUAL, DEFINITE, AND UNDENIABLE THE IMAGE, THE MORE THE STONE IS PRIZED. STONES THAT OFFER RARE AND REMARKABLE LIKENESSES ARE REGARDED AS WONDERS, ALMOST

MIRACLES. THEY SHOULD NOT EXIST, AND YET THEY DO, AT ONCE IMPOSSIBLE AND INESCAPABLE. AT THE SAME TIME THEY ARE TREASURES, THE RESULT OF THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF CHANCES, THE WINNING NUMBER IN AN INFINITE LOTTERY. THEY OWE NOTHING TO PATIENCE, INDUSTRY, OR MERIT. THEY HAD NO MARKET RATE OR PRICE. THEIR VALUE IS NOT COMMERCIAL AND CANNOT BE CALCULATED IN ANY CURRENCY; IT LAUGHS BOTH AT THE GOLD STANDARD AND AT PURCHASING POWER. IT IS NOT CONVERTIBLE INTO LABOR OR GOODS. IT DEPENDS SOLELY ON THE COVETOUSNESS, PRIDE AND COMPETITIVENESS GENERATED BY THE DESIRE TO POSSESS OR THE PLEASURE OF POSSESSING THEM. EACH STONE, AS UNIQUE AND IRREPLACEABLE AS A WORK OF GENIUS, IS A VALUABLE AT ONCE POINTLESS AND PRICELESS, WITH WHICH THE LAWS OF ECONOMICS HAVE NOTHING TO DO.