

Extracts from *Stones*

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Dedication (January 1966)

I speak of stones that have always lain out in the open or sleep in their lair and the dark night of the seam. They hold no interest for the archaeologist, artist or diamond-cutter. No one made palaces, statues, jewels from them; or dams, ramparts, tombs. They are neither useful nor famous. They do not sparkle in any ring, any diadem. They do not publicize lists of victories, laws of Empire, carved in ineffable characters. Neither boundaries nor memorials, yet exposed to the elements, but without honour or veneration, they are witnesses only to themselves.

Architecture, sculpture, intaglio, mosaic, jewellery have made nothing of them. They belong to the planet's beginnings, have sometimes come from another star. So they bear upon themselves the distortion of space like the stigmata of their terrible descent. They come from a time before humans; and when humans came, they did not leave on them the mark of their art or their industry. They did not work them, intending them for some trivial, luxury or historic use. They perpetuate only their own memory.

They are not carved in the effigy of anyone, man, beast or fable. The only tools they have known are those that were used to uncover them; the hammer to reveal their latent geometry, the grindstone to display their grain or awaken their dull colours. They have remained what they were, sometimes fresher, more legible, but always in their truth: themselves and nothing else.

I speak of stones that nothing has ever changed except the violence of tectonic crushing and the slow erosion that began with time, with them. I speak of gems before cutting, of nuggets before smelting, of the hard frost of crystals before the stone-cutter gets to work.

I speak of stones: algebra, vertigo and order; of stones, anthems and staggered rows, of stones, darts and corollas, dream's margin, ferment and image; of this stone

curtain of hair opaque and straight like the locks of a drowned woman, but which does not flow down any temple where in a blue canal a sap becomes more visible and more vulnerable; of these stones uncrumpled paper, incombustible and sprinkled with uncertain sparks; or the most watertight vase where there dances and finds its level again behind the only absolute walls a liquid before water, to preserve which a series of miracles was needed.

I speak of stones older than life that remain after it on cooling planets, when it was fortunate enough to unfold there. I speak of the stones that do not even have to await death and have nothing to do but let sand, rain or ebbing wave, storm, time slip over their surface.

Human beings envy their durability, their hardness, their intransigence and their brightness, the fact that they are smooth and impenetrable, and entire even when broken. They are fire and water in the same immortal transparency, which is sometimes visited by the rainbow and sometimes by a mist. They fit into the palm, bringing purity, cold, the stars' distance, layers of serenity.

Like someone who, speaking of flowers, might leave aside both botany and the art of gardens and bouquets – and there would still be much to say – so I in my turn, ignoring mineralogy, dismissing the arts that use stones, I speak of naked stones, fascination and glory, where there lies concealed and at the same time revealed a mystery that is slower, vaster and graver than the destiny of an ephemeral species. (pp. 7–9)

V. Testament: *Inscribed suns*

Around the year 1100 the governor of Wou-Wei province was Mi Fou, also called Mi Nan-Kong, a great connoisseur of painting and calligraphy, an art critic and himself a painter and calligrapher. Like many literate people of the time, he loved and admired unusual stones. One day he put on his ceremonial robe to greet a rock standing in his residence. He bowed before it and called it 'Elder brother'. This extravagant behaviour might appear to be sacrilege. It was widely commented on and came to the ears of an imperial censor, who reported it. The *Annals of the Song* preserve the incident. According to other texts, the eccentric administrator was dismissed.

My pusillanimity would probably have prevented me from embarking on that somewhat provocative action, but I feel the same reverence for stones as that far-off Chinese.

Mi Fou did not stop at that. He portrayed the scene in a picture, perpetuating with bravado his spontaneous gesture. Three centuries later the painter Ni Tsan commented on the painting saying: 'We can see he didn't get his nickname *Topsy-turvy* without good reason.'

Mi Fou was irritable and aggressive, intolerant and foolhardy, contemptuous of the beaten track, fond of enigma, contradiction, challenge. He sometimes dressed in such a way that nosy bystanders crowded round in the street and catcalled. Occasionally cautious out of necessity, he normally could not resist his impulses.

Mi Nan-Kong T'an-che relates how, on another occasion, his love of rare stones made him gradually cease carrying out the duties attached to his post. He was then governor of Lien-chouei, not far from Ling-pi, a place renowned for the stones to be found there, which, when they were properly cut and polished, possessed musical properties. Mi Fou collected them, contemplated them, stroked them all day long, gave them names that matched their beauty and completely neglected the administration of the province. The censor Yang Ts'eu-Kong grew angry and came to reprimand him officially. The interview is recorded in the following terms: 'The Prince has entrusted you with a territory of 1000 li. Can it be that you spend the whole day playing with stones without giving the smallest attention to the territory's affairs?' Mi stood right in front of the inspector and took up a stone in his left hand. The stone was pierced with deep crevasses; there were complete peaks and caves; the colour was extremely beautiful. Mi turned it round in every direction to show it to Yang and said: 'A stone like this, is it possible not to love it?' Yang did not glance at the object. Then Mi withdrew the stone into his sleeve and brought out another. This one had the most extraordinary terraced lines of steep peaks. Again Mi took it back into his sleeve and for the last time produced a stone that was quite heavenly in its design, quite divine in its carving. He eyed Yang and said: 'A stone like this, is it possible not to love it?' Suddenly Yang said: 'Sir, you are not the only person who loves it; I love it too!' Then he snatched the stone out of Mi Fou's hands, leaped into his carriage and charged off. Thus bereft of the loveliest piece in his collection Mi was quite cast down and tried in vain for several months to get his property back. Many times he wrote to ask for it to be returned to him, but he never recovered it.

I am not, nor shall I ever be, responsible for a province. I spend less valuable, but just as irrevocable, time daydreaming over stones like Mi Fou. I understand his arguments, which he probably imagined were hard to resist. I think of the possibly feigned harshness and indifference of the censor Yang. I am persuaded that in the end he did not intend to teach the neglectful governor a lesson by taking away the stone he most loved, but that he was seized by the same passion and gave in to the temptation to grab the marvel. I share Mi Fou's despair. I sense that he suffered an irreparable loss and my guess is that he was never able to recover from it. Across the centuries and meridians, despite the differences in character and destiny, I feel a special sympathy with him that I have with no one else.

Like him I seek out exceptional stones. I do not give them beautiful names, but I do sometimes try to describe them. I prefer their designs to artists' paintings, their shapes to sculptors' pieces, for I find they are the works of an artist who is less deserving but more infallible than them. In their symmetries and whimsical curves my daydreams find the coherent archetypes from which comes, not beauty – which we all appreciate depending on the situation in which history has placed us – but lasting standards and the very idea of beauty, I mean the inexplicable and useless

addition to the complexity of the world, which also separates things into beautiful ones and ugly ones. (pp. 85–8)

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It remains for me to point out a last coincidence. When I scrutinize stones I sometimes try, not without naivety, to guess their secrets. I allow myself to slip into thinking how so many enigmatic marvels were formed, born of laws that they very often seem to flout, as if they had been produced by a tumult and in fact a celebration now banned by their mode of existence. I struggle to picture them in my mind at the burning moment of their genesis. There then comes upon me a sort of quite special excitement. I sense myself taking on something of the nature of stones. At the same time I bring them closer to mine, thanks to the unsuspected properties I happen to attribute to them in the course of speculations that are now precise, now vague, in which are formed the web of dreams and the chain of knowledge. There fragile, maybe necessary, edifices constantly rear up and crumble. Metaphor supports (or corrupts) syllogism; vision feeds (or misleads) rigour. Between the stone's stillness and the mind's effervescence is established a kind of current where for a moment, a memorable one indeed, I find wisdom and comfort. I might almost see the possible germ of an unknown and paradoxical kind of mysticism. Like others it would lead the soul to the *silence of half an hour*, it would cause it to dissolve in some inhuman immensity. But that abyss would not be divine, it would even be all matter and only matter, active, turbulent matter of lava and fusion, earthquakes, orgasms and great tectonic ordeals; and motionless matter of the longest quietude. (pp. 90–1)

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Note

These extracts are translated from the French publication, *Pierres* (Paris, Gallimard, 1966).