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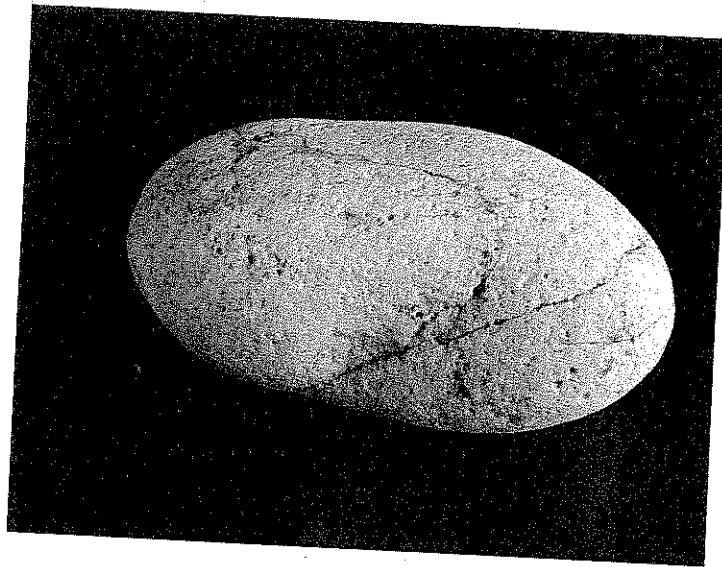
# The Object Reader

Edited by

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## MY ROCK



I can't help thinking of the rock as *my rock*. The rock is a shapely squared-off oval, about six inches long, which fits heavily in the hand; it weighs about a pound. It is creamy-colored and porous, composed of grains as large as a millimeter in diameter, veined with rust-colored cracks. Its color, weight, texture, and rough symmetry make it pleasing.

I found this rock on a beach in Cambria, California, in June 1996. I was driving up Route One USA, nursing a heartache, and I had stopped for the night. Walking Brontëesque on the dark shore as the wind whipped my heavy skirt about me, I glimpsed the rock, glowing among darker rain-wet stones. "Of all the gin joints in the world" — it just happened that I came by *that* stormy evening, just when the rock happened to be riding on the shore's edge.

I love the rock not only because it is beautiful and it lifted my heart when I needed it, but also because it is the living embodiment of time, philosophy in stone. Oscillating in my perception between metaphor and thing in itself, the rock deeply confirms what is dear to me, then radically negates it. I will show you that the rock is not an inanimate object—just very slow.

Even putting away anthropomorphism, the rock feels familiar. Of course we can identify with rocks, in the sense that we project a meaning onto them. Smooth stones like mine call up comparisons to organic and human-made things: eggs, fish, bowls, children, wise old heads. But the rock has aspects, in its independent entity as rock, that also call up a sense of shared being. It is smooth because it has been tumbled together with other rocks for eons. Its fissures show that eventually it will break up into smaller rocks, and finally to dust. As we humans undergo a polishing in the course of life, so the rock has suffered and endured. The rock is what we call an object, and so, in many ways, am I. The rock corresponds to me not because of my projections onto it but in our inter-objectivity (to use Vivian Sobchack's term).

Yet the insurmountable difference between the rock and me makes it terrible to know: sublime. Sublimity occurs when something that inhabits the space-time of my

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experience makes reference to a space-time I cannot comprehend. This smooth rock that corresponds so comfortingly to the shape of my palm comes from a time so ancient I cannot imagine it. The rock turns out to be between 5,000,000 and 23,000,000 years old. Attributing maximum youthfulness to the rock, it has lived 114,000 of my lifetimes. The rock has been in my company for one-quarter of my life; I have been with it for less than one-five-hundred-thousandth of its life. So far.

I confess that I have brought the rock to class for several years now, to illustrate to students the concepts of virtuality, monad, and plane of immanence. The rock, I suggest, is a node on the plane of immanence. Not the best node, not the one that yields the most actualizing activity, but a node nonetheless. It teems with virtuality, with places it might have been and events it might have witnessed, but we cannot know what they are. Monads are individuals that reflect the entire universe from their particular vantage point. The rock and I are both monads, with quite different capacities. The rock has witnessed a lot but can express little; I have witnessed a little but can express a lot. If the rock were a movie, it would have a shooting ratio of 5,000,000 to 1.

I began to feel that I was prostituting my rock to philosophy. Contemplating it abstractly began to seem misguided; I needed to understand it physically. Research led me to hypothesize that the rock might be limestone—an extremely common carbonate rock. But when I gingerly rubbed it with a cheese grater and poured some wine on the resulting particles, it did not fizz, as limestone would.

So, nervous as a matchmaker, I took the rock to my colleagues in the geology department. Three geologists hovered over my rock and praised its unusualness and beauty; I was quite chuffed. Each saw it from his or her point of view. James MacEachern, a specialist in sedimentary rocks, analyzed my rock. First he peered at it with a loupe. He rubbed it with a porcelain plate and dropped weak hydrochloric acid on the resulting powder; there was no reaction. His first guess was that it was quartz sandstone. He examined it through a reflecting binocular microscope, which showed it to contain many crystals that are idiomorphic, i.e. sharp-edged. This suggests it was not transported very far. It is so crystalline that it appears to have been partly cooked, as though it had been near a volcanic tunnel. It contains no fossils.

Robbie Dunlop, a specialist in volcanic rock, scraped the rock and smelled it, revealing the earthy smell of volcanic ash. She suggested it is *lapilli* tuff, a transitional form between sedimentary and volcanic rock. The third geologist, Kevin Cameron, determined the rock to be pyroclastic crystal tuff. This means it was formed of volcanic ash that settled while annealing, then sedimented. The rock would then have broken off from the sedimentary layer as a cobble or boulder, and been carried out to sea by a river. The geologists suggested it was from a former volcanic mountain of inland California.

A little more research leads me to the following hypothesis: My rock was created in a violent eruption from an island volcano off the coast of California sometime in the early Miocene, which began 23 million years ago. Rock and ash spewed out of the volcano, crystallized, then lay there sedimenting for several million years. It is a young rock in the scheme of things: it was not around for the dinosaurs, who became extinct 65.5 million years ago. Mastodons and horses might have galloped through the grass along its surface.

During the late Pliocene, just 2–3 million years ago, as portions of the Earth's crust shifted, the volcanic islands were lifted up and became the Gabilan coastal mountain range. As my rock tilted in its bed and joined a continent, over on another continent

*Homo erectus* was beginning to stand up. Erosion flattened these mountains, and streams washed their sediments toward the Pacific and the interior. I am guessing the chunk containing my rock washed inland at around the time of the Pleistocene Great Ice Age, which began 1.8 million years ago.<sup>1</sup> There it probably reformed in alluvial sediment, perhaps got buried under glacial debris, and when the Gabilan mountain range tilted westward and eroded, my rock washed into the Salinas valley. When the Mongols invaded Baghdad in 1258, my rock was riding toward the sea, perhaps on the Little Sur River, which empties north of Cambria. There it rolled along the coast for some hundreds of years, refining its smooth egglike shape, until I found it and took it away.

All of this is hypothesis, and invites a philosopher's respect for scientific caution: for the more carefully I try to ascertain the rock's trajectory, the more apparent it becomes that it is impossible really to know. My rock seems to represent virtuality, but to understand what it *actually* is, is tentative work indeed! Generalizing reduces my rock from a singular monad to a mere example, which I am loath to do. To misidentify it would be, in a certain way, to annihilate its actuality (from the human point of view), like putting the wrong name on someone's grave.

Rocks are extreme relativizers. How foolish we are to think a domesticated rock is holding down the papers on our desk! For in the big scheme, our desk and papers—and the invention of paper, and the origin of language—are but a whisker in the long and slow life of geology.

People like to wear gemstones, which are treasured for their literal crystallization of historical forces. A diamond ring is a tiny piece of absolute alterity on your finger. And people like fossils, which communicate specific, legible information about time past. The rock is halfway between fossil and diamond, and not valued as either of them is—the diamond for its abstractness, the fossil for its particularity.

But my rock is precious, too. Slowly, slowly, it took shape through cataclysmic events: volcanic eruption, tectonic shift, and erosion. It carries the distant echoes of all that occurred on the Earth in the last five million years. They are etched in its geologic memory. Wise and silent, it lies quietly on my windowsill.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

- 1 This information is gleaned from Arthur D. Howard, *Geologic History of Middle California*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.
- 2 I thank Sharon Kahanoff, Richard Coccia, and my colleagues in the geology department at Simon Fraser University for their insightful comments.

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