A Story of What is "Left Out"

> Long ago, when the Goddess *Nugua* was repairing Heaven she melted a great quantity of rock and molded it into 306, 501 large building blocks each measuring 22 by 144 feet square. She used 306, 500 of these blocks in her building operations, leaving a single block unused which lay all on its own at the foot of Greensickness Peak in the Incredible Crags of the Great Fable Mountains.

The following is a selection of excerpts and adaptations on the radical cultural philosophy and reading strategy called "intertextuality" from: Jing Wang, *The Story of Stone: Intertexuality, Ancient Chinese Stone Lore and the Stone Symbolism in Dream of the Red Chamber, Water Margin, and the Journey to the West:*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992.

Nugua's Building Blocks
Read separately, every narrative seems unique. Taken together they suggest a completely different reading strategy in which each text is "playfully" contained within the imaginative space of the Other(s). This way of reading is called intertextuality. It suggests pluralistic composition, multiple texts and heterogeneous signifiers - a non-historical field of play governed by what we might call the Lore in which "no text is ever completely free of other texts".

Subverting the Author
The first thing an intertextual reading strategy does is to subvert the nature of the "author", his/her "intention" and the traditional source criticism from which they come. Texts here are seen as having a project of their own, independent of both cause and effect and literal or literary history. The intangible terrain of intertextuality we are searching for exists as "traces" of both identity and *difference/deference* of meaning. Every text contains these referents from "elsewhere", quoted verbatim and effortlessly transformed. They are "traces" of past (and future) that exist independent of the author's awareness.

This dissolution of an anchored and identifiable authorial presence in a text sets off a con-textualizing process that frees the reader, inviting and legitimatizing self-projection. The sort of *intertext* that arises does not grow out of the reader's vicarious experience of authorial intention. It has "always already" been there and is reconstructed through the reader's own intertextual reading. It is the reader rather that the author who can activate and re-activate this intertext.

The Language of Then and Now
The shift of the center of signification from that of the theologically privileged author/subject to the text/reader breaks down the agenda of abstract historical continuity into two local manifestations: the reader/user's *experience of his or her*

own contemporaniety (our cultural "now") and the text's *experience of its own historicity* as the re-writing or re-contextualization of a "prior text" – its "cultural then."

Our consciousness of our own contemporaniety is born at the moment when we encounter an unfamiliar sign that speaks of semantic, cultural and ideological associations different than our own. We are drawn into a myth that does not agree with the reference presupposed by our own language. We become aware of the gap between them. This triggers our desire to "de-code" and thus turns on the machinery of intertextual reading. Our desire and our reading in turn presuppose that each image has a history of its own and that its "citation" is never direct but already-always both transformed and transforming. It is through this continual re-contextualizing dialogue that both reader and text can experience their own historicity as a transformative process rather than an original point of departure that waits to somehow be retrieved.

Re-containing the Past
Practitioners of the old concepts of *allusion and authorial intent* cite references from the past in order to *internalize literary models* that lend prestige and authority to their own texts. Intertextuality makes the specific historicity of such models conscious; it shows their *distance* from the vehicle in which the transformative process is actually taking place. The radical strategy of *recontaining* an old reference rather than internalizing a model means that an eloquent quotation can only truly come to life when it is neither seen as original nor located in a determined moment of genesis but *relocated*, re-appropriated and valorized within a linguistically and ideologically different context. This *rejuvenates* the monumental moments of the literary and cultural past.

This new context is the *intertext*. It "already-always" contains the energy field of a continual re-contextualization through which we learn to see the past not as a linear progression of fixed moments but as an endless series of re-creative fiction-making opportunities. What is relevant here is not the simple identification of homologues within a text but the contemplation of the deep cultural articulation the text involuntarily yields. This shows us how a cultural context limits and shapes the play of images and exposes the hidden centers that a given text represses.

Convergence and Divergence
The two viable mechanisms of intertextuality are *convergence* and *divergence* which operate simultaneously to ensure the continuity of the old and the germination of the new. Writing is the perpetual citation of words that form part of a pre-existing network of signification. A writer's choice of words depends on the awareness of what they already signify. The citation of each word evokes the entire spectrum of its semantic entries and involves the making of a decision that either deviates from or reinforces the previously established entries.

To establish this moment of convergence and divergence it is necessary to come to terms with The Lore, the stories of mythical origins that traditional storytellers use as curtain raisers to settle the wandering minds of their audience, drawing them into the make-believe world in which the laws of realty are rescinded, their place taken by the imaginary order of fiction. This is where we renew our acquaintance with the mytho-logic of "no known beginning and no known authorship". This encounter lets the reader recognize where the myths end and the new fiction begins. Intertextual *divergence* is not possible until the initial contact between the literary text and the composite of myths has been established. It is only out of this ground that a new reading can take place.

The Prior Text and the Lore
The notion of intertextual convergence and divergence presupposes the existence of what we call *prior texts*. A prior text is actually an ensemble of myths that provide context. It is a concept that transcends linguistic barriers and finds expression in all literate cultures. It has been called the "historical archive," *déjà lu*, sociolect, hypogram or *vraisemblance* and is associated with the Chinese concept of *you-chang zhi-ti*, "a body of constant essences." It traverses the vast territory of tradition that incorporates cultural, historical and literary paradigms regardless of the specific nature of the literate culture in which it operates.

These prior texts, traceable or obscure, make up the horizon and context of every text. They are often referred to as the "cultural unconscious", a reservoir of unconscious and conscious constraints. To comprehend a text is to bring it within the ken of these cultural and archetypal constraints, to place it in contact with an order of reality that culture makes available and acknowledges as natural.

The concept of prior texts is intimidating, for it points at a continuously expanding and therefore forever incomplete repertory of both traceable and untraceable old texts. For convenience, we call this intertextual configuration the Lore. It exists not as an exterior but a continuing interior presence, a set of contained "traces" alternating between and interconnecting the "folkloric" and the literary. It is intermingled with signs of accretion and transformation. Where we expect to find *convergence* we actually encounter cryptic overlays where the folkloric and the literary haunt each other, generating the fleeting mirage of integration (symmetry) but actually producing displacement, an endless similitude and *difference*.

"A single *Wu* does not create *Wen*"
What makes reading and writing a "possible pattern of motley assemblages" (*wen*) is not "a single anterior action that serves the origin and moment of plenitude" (*wu*) but an open series of acts, identifiable and lost, supplemented by an open series of evocative mythological personae. To function at all a symbol must be

given over to repetition, alternation and becoming other. It is the very nature of intertextuality to perpetuate this continuity and discontinuity at the same time. No matter how much the Lore may answer for continuous coherence, there will always remain something irregular that cannot be rendered into a unitary pattern by even the most ingenious scientific intelligence, an aura of gratuity and originality that cannot help extending, while reactivating, the history of the Lore.

This is how intertextuality operates: a word, a symbol or a text always brings back the residual and implicit (inter)texts of the past that never cease to reverberate in its textual space. The text undergoes an incessant intertextual communication with the Lore at the boundary of the oral and the written. Here every word re-activates and extends the histories of its own meaning. It both incorporates its intertextual relations with pre-existent semantic entities generated over the centuries and projects others.

This opened-ended character of intertextual space is impossible to enclose; it resists any attempt at recuperation, contradicting the principle of context as a complete and unified frame of reference. The interior of the intertextual network – the Lore – has already faded from the horizon of our common knowledge, escaped our conscious grasp. But we can retrieve it by collecting and explicating the body of myth and ritual, giving us a fuller perception of how the system of signification works.

The Tale of the Leftover Stone
Saussure said that language is a total system, complete and self-regulating at every moment no matter what altered it a moment ago. The same holds true for the Lore. Though its contents shift and evolve incessantly it figures forth a mythological pattern that will always escape a strictly systematic reading and the tenacious grip of convention. This pattern offers itself as a sort of pre-understanding of the events in a text, showing how meaning-units combine to allow texts to emerge, be read and be recycled, entering the system of signification. This system is a network of reciprocal intelligibility in which the content of each myth comes to consist more and more of other myths. Its signifiers resist total enclosure by any external constraint.

The interdependent arising of the parts and the whole of the system that defines their viability as signifiers is made possible by the omnipresence of a grouping of texts that precede the target-text and may in turn be projected by it. The convergence of meaning between a text and its predecessors always generates deviations and differences. It guarantees the continuity of culture while at the same time inviting and triggering (*ji*) its transformation. This continuing dialogue linking the mythical and the mimetic translates cultural ethics or ethos into symbolic terms. It opens a shifting and ambiguous landscape where "the Real becomes Not-real when the Unreal's Real" - the instantaneous movement that characterizes intertextual communication.