VISION'S PROGRESS: DISPLACEMENT AND DESIGN AT PAROWAN GAP

by
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ABSTRACT

Parowan Gap is remarkably single in its effect upon a visitor. It is one place, contentedly of and to itself, but the petroglyphs within it seem a miscellany of diverse styles and purpose quite at odds with the prevailing spirit of the scene around them. Is this contradiction apparent or real? If one borrows from literary history the notion of displacement as a process operating in all myth and makes use of Northrop Frye's schematization of this process to focus one's thinking about these petroglyphs, one begins to sense in these designs a coherent kind of working that is quite appropriate to the place where they are found.

Parowan Gap impresses the traveler though not with one or two spectacular features that stand out from all the rest but with the almost composed wholeness of the place. Inigo Jones couldn't have done it better. It takes eight or ten minutes for a slow drive through the Gap, a half hour or so for an easy stroll, and though the prospect changes regularly as one goes, nothing startles or tempts one to stop and stare. Cross the Parowan Valley, dip down and around the whiteness of Little Salt Lake, and you have entered the Gap by its eastern gate. The first set of petroglyphs looks down from a line of boulders one hundred or so feet above and to north of the road. A mile and a half takes you past the soft contours of Whitney Canyon, through the crest of the Red Hills with just one jog, and then the way opens easily into an absolutely flat plain. About a mile across this plain you can see the final wall of the Red Hills that surround it and the Gap's western gate, the Narrows. The best known designs are found on a large boulder to one's right just as one enters the Narrows; walk one hundred yards further on, with panels scattered here and there on both sides of you, and you come to the last set of designs on a spire thrust up above the road and on several boulders by it. Then you're out of the Gap looking as far as your eyes allow across the open flatness of the Escalante Valley. Distinct features punctuate one's journey through the Gap--the white lake, the gate, the very Red Hills, the contained plain, the tight V of the Narrows, the wide expanse beyond--but none of them interrupt it.

Against the composedness of these surroundings, the petroglyphs one finds here are all the more surprising, for they are as heterogeneous as the Gap is whole. No panel is quite a Newspaper Rock, but singly and together they make up a miscellany of diverse styles and purposes. Serpents and circles, blanket patterns, ladders and anthropomorphs, even what has been described as a pawn-shop symbol, a large question mark and an even larger V with a bulbous base (Castleton 1979:106): the mind boggles trying to contain them all--at least, mine does. And yet there is something odd here. Did the carvers of these ancient panels actually respond in bits and pieces to a scene that Nature made so evidently whole? That seems unlikely to one who has walked there and felt the place. Maybe these designs simply are the product of different hands at different times. That would be a sensible way of accounting for their diversity. However, such an explanation only accounts for it; it does not make it necessary. History provides too many examples of art that is coherent and whole having been made by

committee, as it were, even when the committee met every other century. At least, the possibility must be considered that the fracturing of these designs begins in the way that we perceive them rather than in the way they work. Perhaps we have lost sight of a wholeness that they do possess.

If this is the case, our normal means of proceeding with petroglyphs seem unlikely to help. Inventories of design elements, maps of their distribution, tables of frequencies are all too static to cope with any construct equal to the moving reality of this place where a focusing of energies is such a self-evident fact of what one knows there. One is left unsatisfied with conventional descriptive techniques and puzzled as to how to go beyond them. What we need is the myth that once structured the wholeness of these designs--rather, that modelled the coherences and energies their carvers worked to realize in them--and such a myth if such there ever was vanished long ago with those who lived and told it. There seems small chance that with the normal reconstructive techniques of ethnography, anthropology, and archeology we shall ever get enough of it back to help. However, a couple of notions borrowed from the way literary historians work with myth may be of service here not to recover precise details of a myth once lived at Parowan Gap but to provide a way of thinking that can suggest what the dynamics of such a myth must have been--i.e., how a model might work in these designs at this place.

I promise no more than a dip in the inky argot of my profession. However, I do want to use a handful of terms as precisely as I can, so let me lay them out with some care.

Frye's Scheme:

Myth

Myth	**Romance**
Displacement	**High Mimetic**
	Low Mimetic
	Irony

I'll begin with *myth*. To the literary historian a myth is not just a fiction or a folktale; rather it is his label for those categories at the center of a culture that are powerful enough to shape lives, paintings, stories. He takes the word in it root sense. *Myth, mystery* and **mutter** all are cognates: a **myth** is the **mystery** so deep in your life that you **mutter** when you try to speak it. Hence, literary history usually is quite careful to distinguish between myth as a system of coherencies and myth as a statement derived from this system. Other centuries have been more rigorous in maintaining this distinction. For example, the school of Platonic scholars at Cambridge in the seventeenth century used **archetype** to talk of the generative system and **ectype** to talk of the specific statement. Today we muddle along with one word, **myth**, for both

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senses, and in a minute I shall have to add yet a third sense to the burden of meaning it must carry. However, our century has added one powerful term to this vocabulary, **displacement**. We have come to think of mythic statements as displacements of an underlying mythic order, and some of the most original of our thinking has resulted from attempts to recognize displacements in various areas of experience and to trace them back to their underlying system or ordering. Not all of this work has been done by literary historians-Sigmund Freud jumps immediately to mind as does Claude Levi Strauss--but litterateurs have made their own distinctive contribution.

When one takes a centuries long view as students of a literature and a language must, one starts to recognize that displacement is not a haphazard process and to discern however faintly a pattern in the way that succeeding generations rephrase the myth that makes them a people. Remarkably, the same pattern seems to appear in language after language. The most convenient and, to my mind, the most convincing description of this development is Northrup Frye's who recognized that myth in the long course of its life goes through five distinctive stages of displacement. The first he calls, unfortunately, **myth** as if that word didn't already have enough work to do. These are stories of omnipotent beings, tales spun of the gods and their doings, and since omnipotence brooks no interference from contingency the categories that inform them are enunciated with great clarity. Sometimes, they are pure pattern or mandala humanized a bit as chrysanthemum or castle. Often they are creation myths announcing to the rest of the world the order that makes us what we are by telling of the manner in which we came to be. Instances of myth at this level are particularly clear in classical literature and in the book of <u>Genesis</u> for that matter. Sadly, we have lost almost all of the myth that must once have existed in our own language. Frye calls the next stage of displacement **romance**. In romances reality, the often sad facts of the lives we are forced to live, impinges upon our dreams of order limiting but not destroying them. There are still magicians in romance who are powerful if not all powerful, and there are islands of order to be remembered and talked about--kings who once were, walled gardens we once knew before we lost the key. English literature is particularly rich in romance as it is n all the remaining stages of displacement, so we need not look out of our language for examples. Just think of King Arthur and Camelot and John Kennedy. After **romance**, myth slips into what Frye calls the **high mimetic**--high because the protagonists in these stories while no longer gods or wizards are men whose hands are on the levers of power in their societies, and **mimetic** because the persons who tell these stories have felt the necessity of imitating the life around them. Plausibility has begun to count for as much as order. When we sit on the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings, we are in Frye's high mimetic mode. Shakespearean tragedy offers a host of examples. When it becomes more important to us that tales be familiar than that they be whole, we have entered the **low mimetic**. Instead of accepting myths displaced into stories about Oedipus or King Lear, we want to hear about ourselves or people we can recognize, and we much prefer novels or even soap operas to high tragedy. Charles Dickens and the Love Boat give us what we want in myths so loosened they can be published or presented as an endless series of installments. Displacement comes to an end when a myth has been loosened past the **low mimetic** to an **irony** known not just as a local effect in style--saying one thing and meaning another--but as stories whose joints are all unstrung and that make no sense at all. In Frye's scheme **myth** finally unravels into **irony**. Today, examples of irony
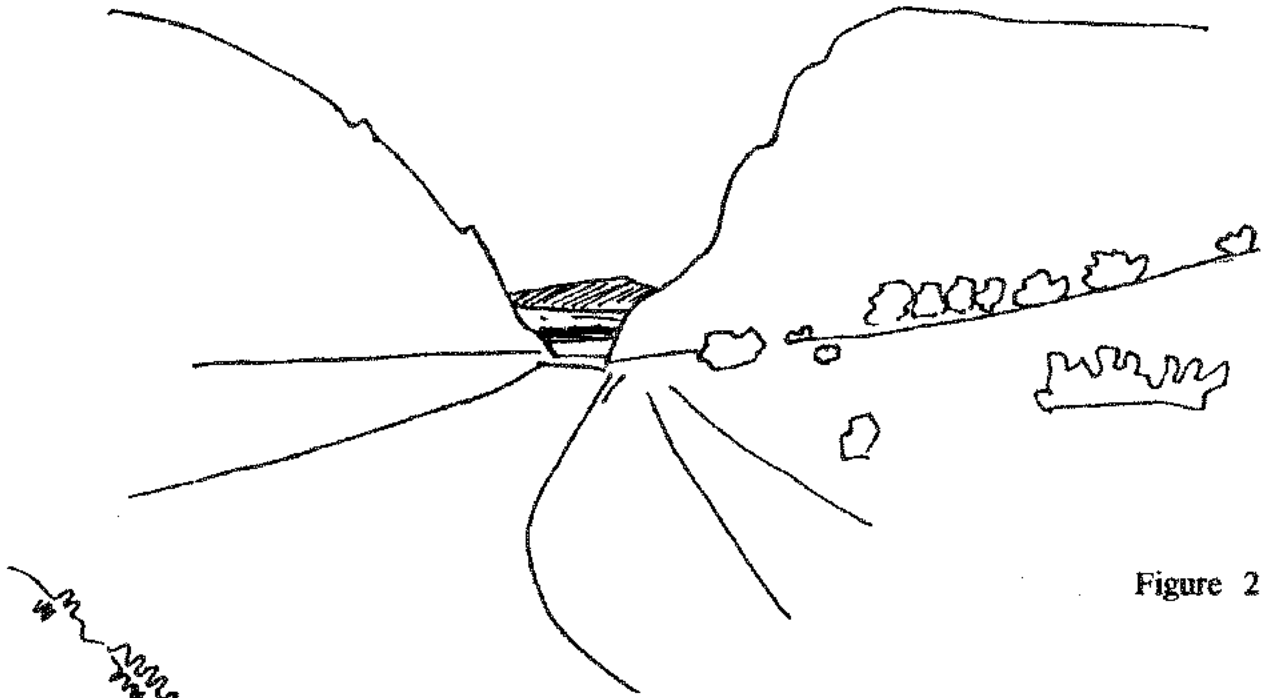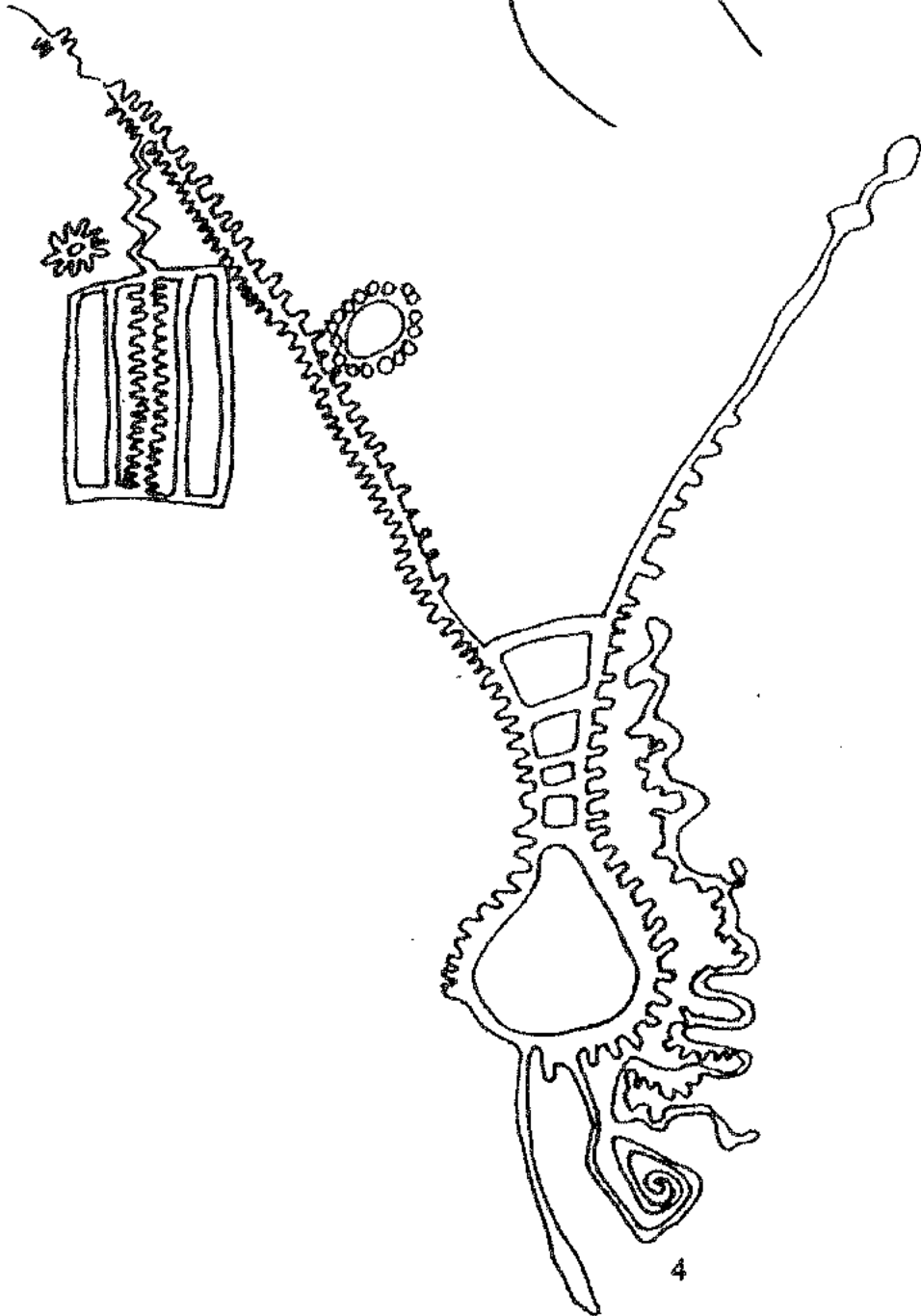
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Figure 2

Figure 1

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lie all around us in absurdist fiction, in sculptors who take a mallet in hand not to carve a statue of their own but to smash someone else's, in Apocalypses that are always now or about to be. Frye argues that all the world's great myths display in their courses the same five phases of displacement from the stories told in Hesiod's Theogenies to Petronius's Satyricon, from Genesis to Revelations, from Camelot to Animal House. He also suggests that if a people persist in their myth they will find themselves beyond irony and back at their own creation, but that suggestion runs beyond my immediate purpose in taking him up.

What does all of this have to do with the petroglyphs at Parowan Gap? Principally, it allows me to pose an answerable question about them. Given what we have to work with or are likely to recover, it is pointless to ask "What myth, if any, structures the designs at Parowan Gap?", but ask instead "What kinds of displacement are found at Parowan?" and the knot we've been tugging at unties itself. Just look around you.

Myth	Pattern
Romance	Couples
High Mimetic	The Narrows
Low Mimetic	Snakes
Irony	Hodgepodge

If myth is order without pause or questioning, what are the designs at the western end of the gap but mythic statement? In them pattern is asserted repeatedly against the contour of the stone if need be, against the fall of light and shadow, against everything but its own integrity. Romance is not nearly so ubiquitous, but there are now and then those coupled anthropomorphs so human yet so strange. The most famous design here (see figure 1) the large V, might be called high-mimetic, a simple statement of the grandeur of the place, for it's not a character at all but an outline of the narrows as seen from across the inner plain (see figure 2). And there are other instances of this scene painting: one within the Narrows of the Gap full of weathers (see figure 3) and two more on the large panel at the eastern gate. I am surprised they haven't been recognized earlier. Instances of the low-mimetic are everywhere in direct imitations of the simple creatures of the earth. Interestingly, I could find only five sheep, two pairs and one stray, and a single stick lizard whose wavy legs probably make him a dragon fly anyway. But the eastern gate is full of worms, some stylized and some not, and plants are everywhere, corn stalks perhaps or flowers, at least something growing. Irony I need not instance at all, for the appearance of irony where it didn't seem to belong was what started me wondering in the first place. What kind of displacement is to be found at Parowan Gap? Every kind! The answer that Frye's scheme permits me to give is so pat it embarrasses me, and I've not finished with it yet.
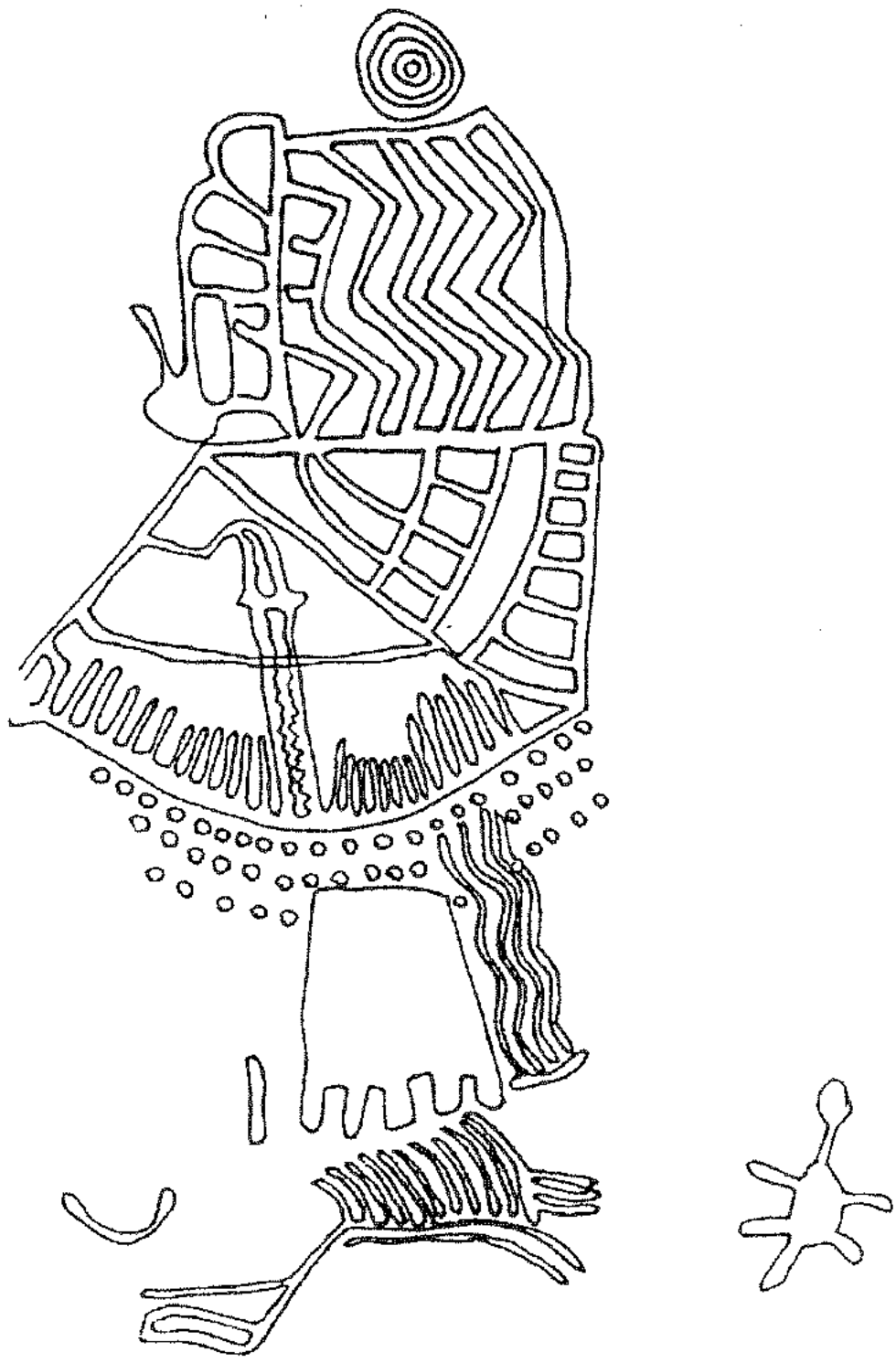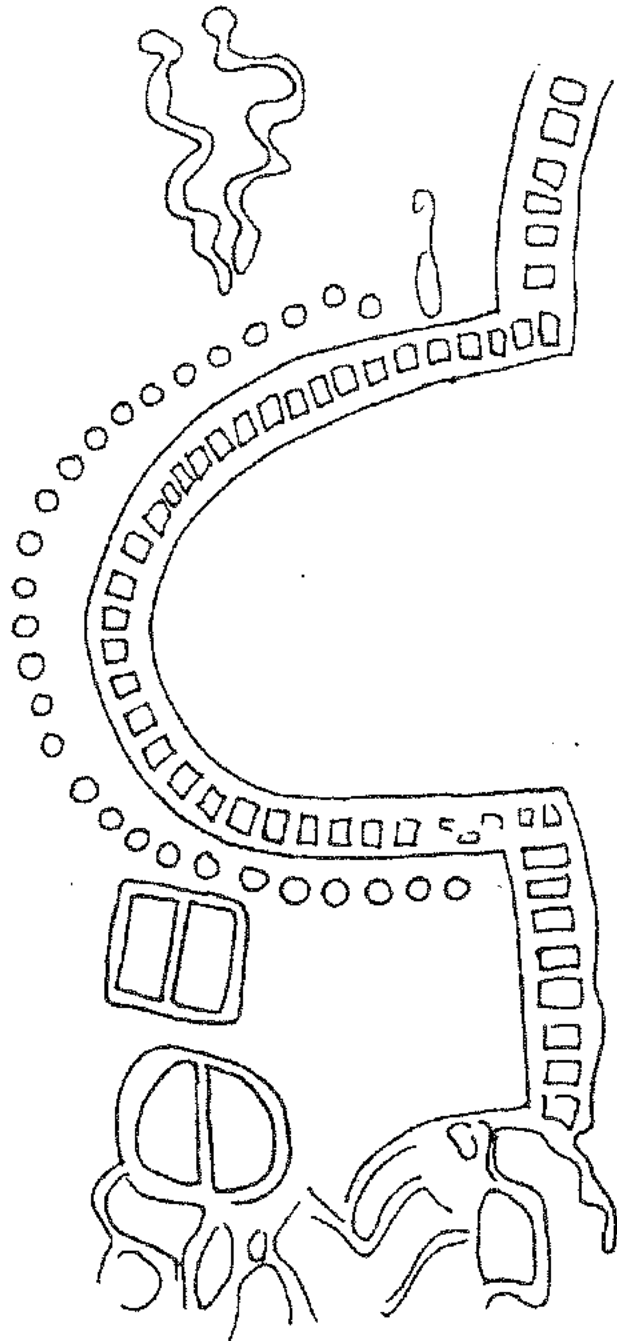
Figure 3

Figure 4

What makes me trust the tidy little chart I've drawn up is that it is no mere inventory but the mapping of an activity, a progress. Start thinking about any one entry on the chart, and soon you will find yourself thinking about all of them--and adding to them! Let me illustrate with the most familiar of all these lively images, the V with its bulbous base that I have identified as a representation of the Narrows. If that identification is correct, this picture should have a partner somewhere depicting the path through it, for Parowan is not just a gap but also a way, now a road. How about "the large question mark"; is it a picture of the road? (see figure 4) It's shaped right, for the way through Parowan Gap runs straight at the beginning and ends bending only in the middle where it finds its way through the Red Hills. And it does appear on a panel next to the picture of the Gap full of change, full of weather, already noted. But if this is the road, why the lines marked across it cutting it into chunks? Steinbring and Granzberg (1984) answer my question for me even before I ask it:

> There is one universal factor in any rite de passage that can be translated into recurrent forms of graphic representation. These rites always symbolize the end of something and at the same time the beginning of something else....Edges are the end of something and the beginning of something else. Throughout the American Southwest, and less extensively elsewhere, we note the presence of lateral abrasions or peckings across natural edges...it is suggested here that these may...represent the ritual act of marking the passage. The act itself is conditioned by the mystical boundary represented by the edge....This raises an interesting possibility. What if no edges are available? If the need is great, the edge can itself be symbolized--a straight line on a flat surface becomes the symbol of the boundary, and the marking may proceed across it.

The relevance of their remarks seems inescapable, especially when they go on to list as examples of boundaries stick ladders, half ladders with marks only on one side, and "the exceedingly important corn plant symbol which, only slightly abstracted is like a pole ladder too." All of these are found at Parowan Gap in abundance, but back to the question mark and the large V. The first of these is shaped like the road but cross hatched because it is a way in the oldest sense--_via_: a street, a discipline, a life. The V is shaped like the Narrows but cross-hatched, for it is not a way but an edge we must cross. Beyond it lies the Escalante desert and something more.

If way and gap are a high mimetic coupling, they invite us to look down to a low mimetic pair, serpent and den, and up to a similar coupling in romance. The paralleling of the segmented road with the serpent forms at the eastern gate is so obvious and the joining of road and gap so necessary, adding den to them merely completes the analogy in a natural way, and candidates for representations of dens are everywhere in the "enclosures" (Warner 1982, 1983a, 1983b) scattered throughout the Gap. My favorite is the bulbous form at the point of the large V; I wonder what the Narrows looked like before road fill choked its base?
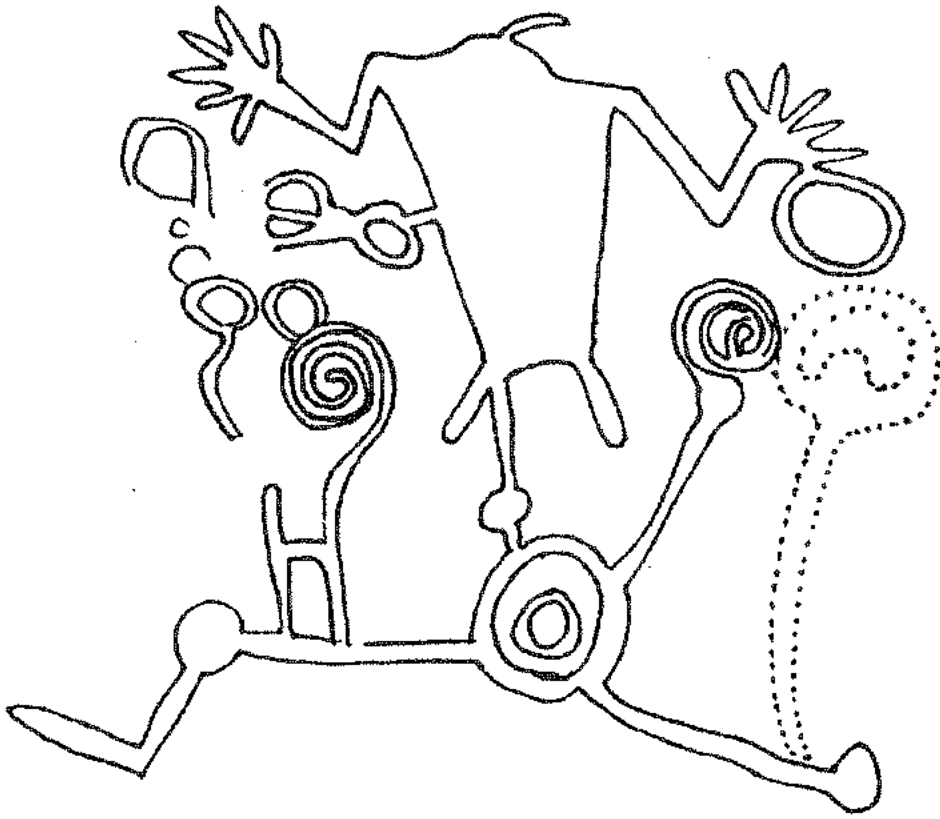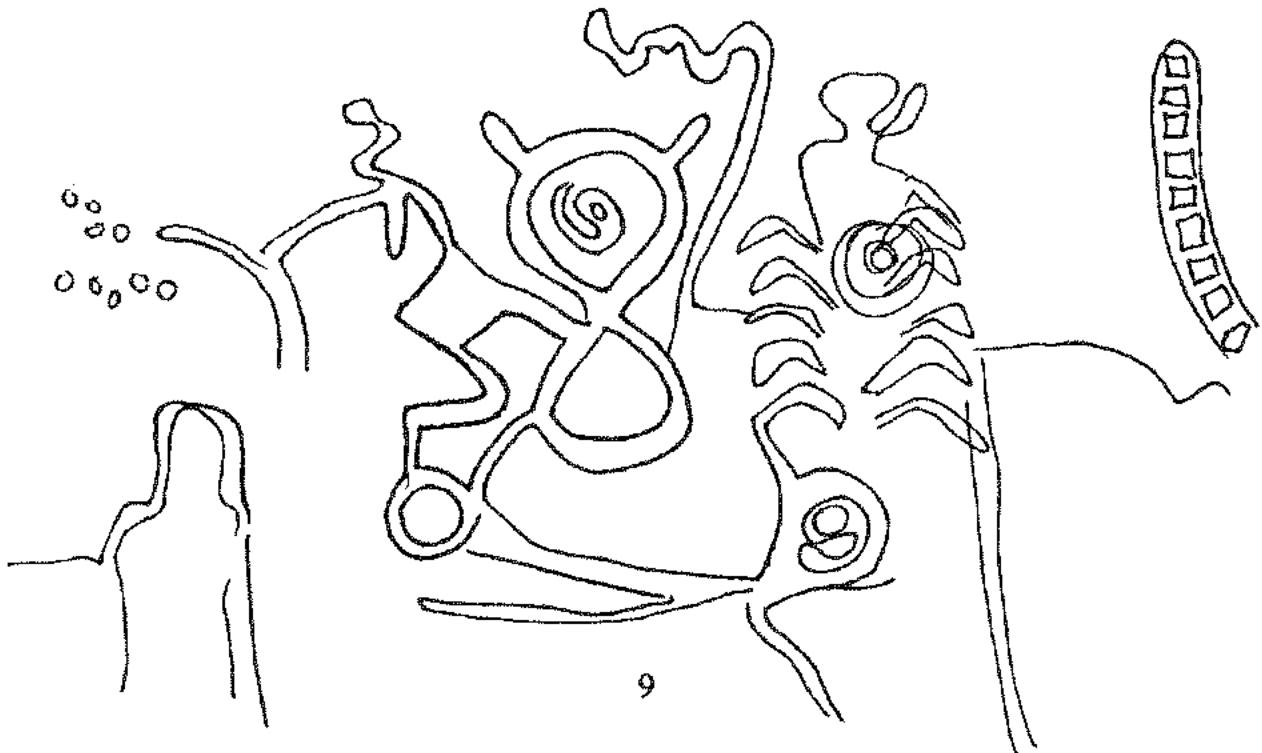
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Figure 5

Figure 6

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However, the pairing in romance takes more imagination to discover. Hopefully, not all of it is my own. Dens and snakes, gaps and roads, circles and lines--all are easily identified metaphorically as female and male even to the stone age mind; witness the male and female stones lining the approaches to Avebury. Without invoking anything as dreadfully phallic as Saint Sigmund and his trouser's dragon, a similar pairing and patterning does seem to occur along this avenue. The serpent forms so common at the eastern gate do not simply disappear in the west; rather, they are absorbed as zigzags into patterns or they are transformed into anthropomorphs, men of lines such as ladies made of circles dream of. We have already met such a pair in the east: one with his arms akimbo, lines on his wrists and dangling from his hand (see figure 5); the other with circles for a necklace, circles for ear ornaments, even a circle for the features on her face (see figure 6); and between them successive transformations of the serpent form into pattern, segmented worms stiffly curved, a sinuous literal rendering, and then the same form sharpened into zigzags. With a representation of the gap to the left of this and again to the right, the panel becomes an epitome of what is to follow as we move west--natural forms becoming patterns and everywhere doubling and meshing. But back to the serpent men (see figure 7). Here is one example, a segmented worm who has at one end a small head with ears such as we've seen on other anthropomorphs in the gap and at the other a tiny body with arms akimbo. If that instance is doubtful, there can be no mistaking this one, for it is the same anthropomorph we saw in the east now with a long serpentine neck.

Finally, in the west everything becomes myth. All the representational elements are transformed into patterns that imitate only what they are--comings together, completions, orderings. Serpents become zigzags meshing and turning into boxes that fill with dots and circles until at last pattern, only pattern, spills triumphantly down the Western spire like cloth of gold draped over the rock for a brave return (see figure 8).

Myth   Merging, meshing, marrying
                             (not a pattern but a process).

Romance   Lady Circle & Lord Line.

                                                              (ascending pairs
  + +High Mimetic + + + +Gap+&+Way. + + + + + + + + + + +over +a+ + +
                                                              boundary.)

Low Mimetic   Den & Serpent.

Irony   Apparent scatter,
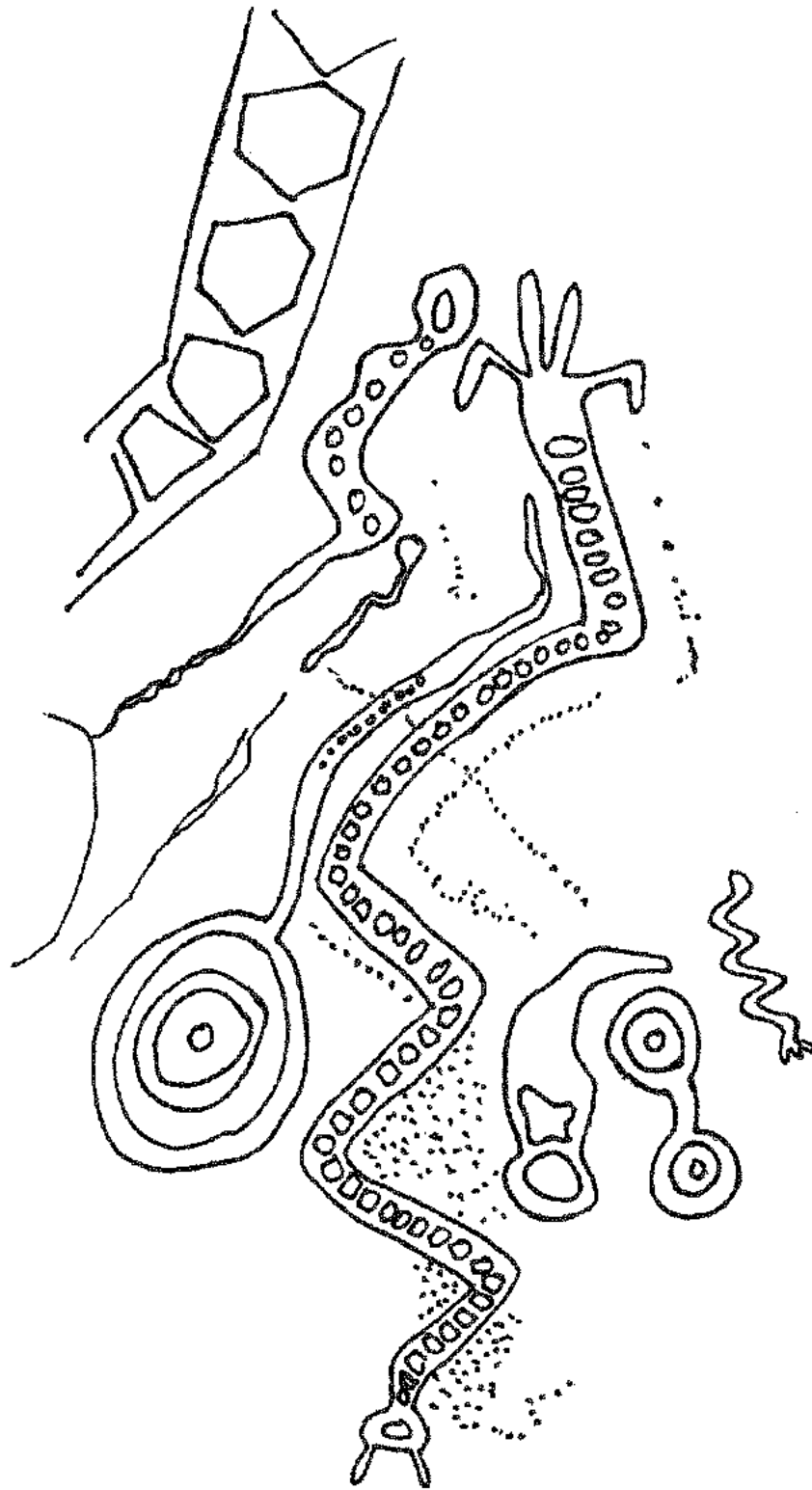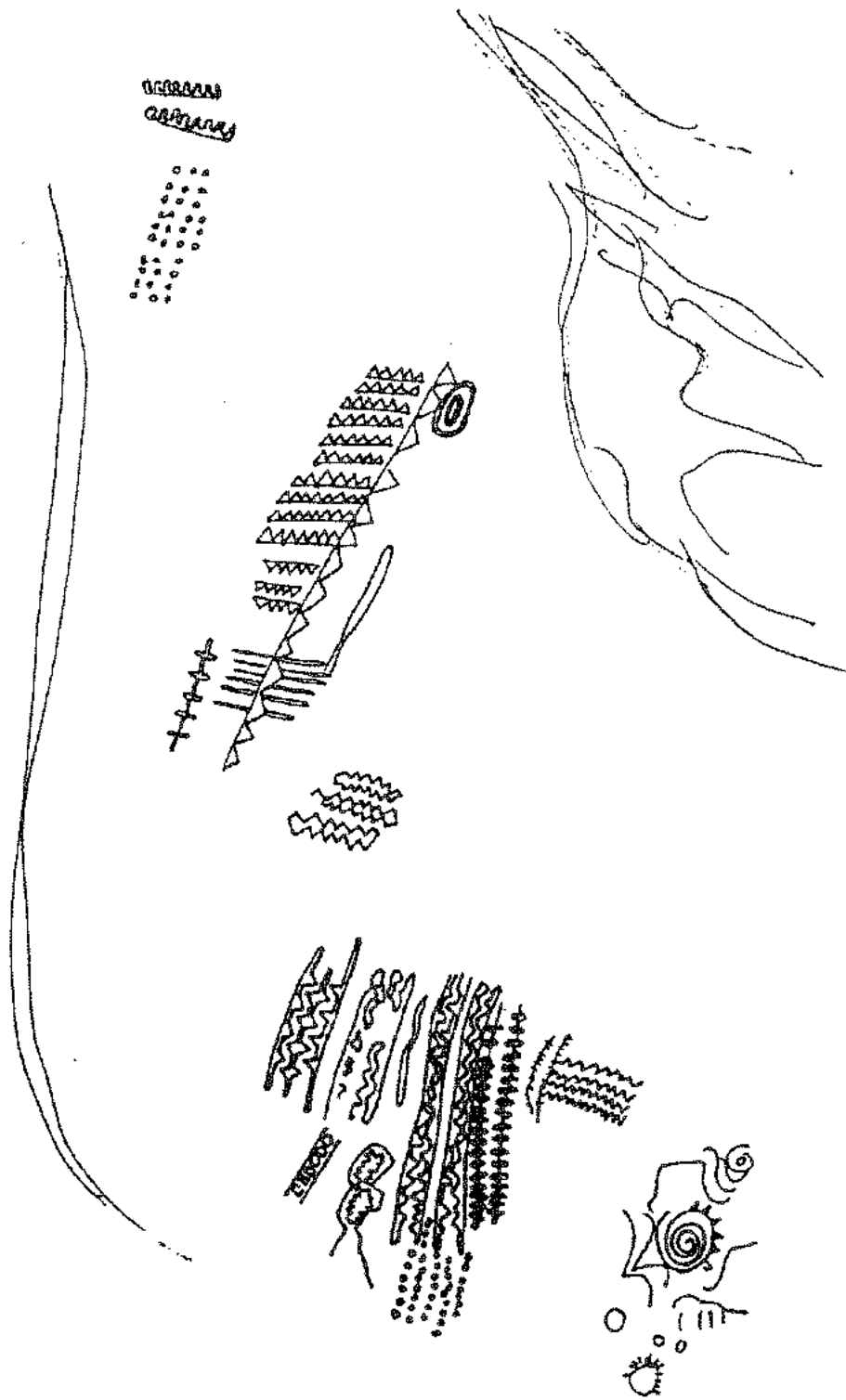   (the confusion where we begin).
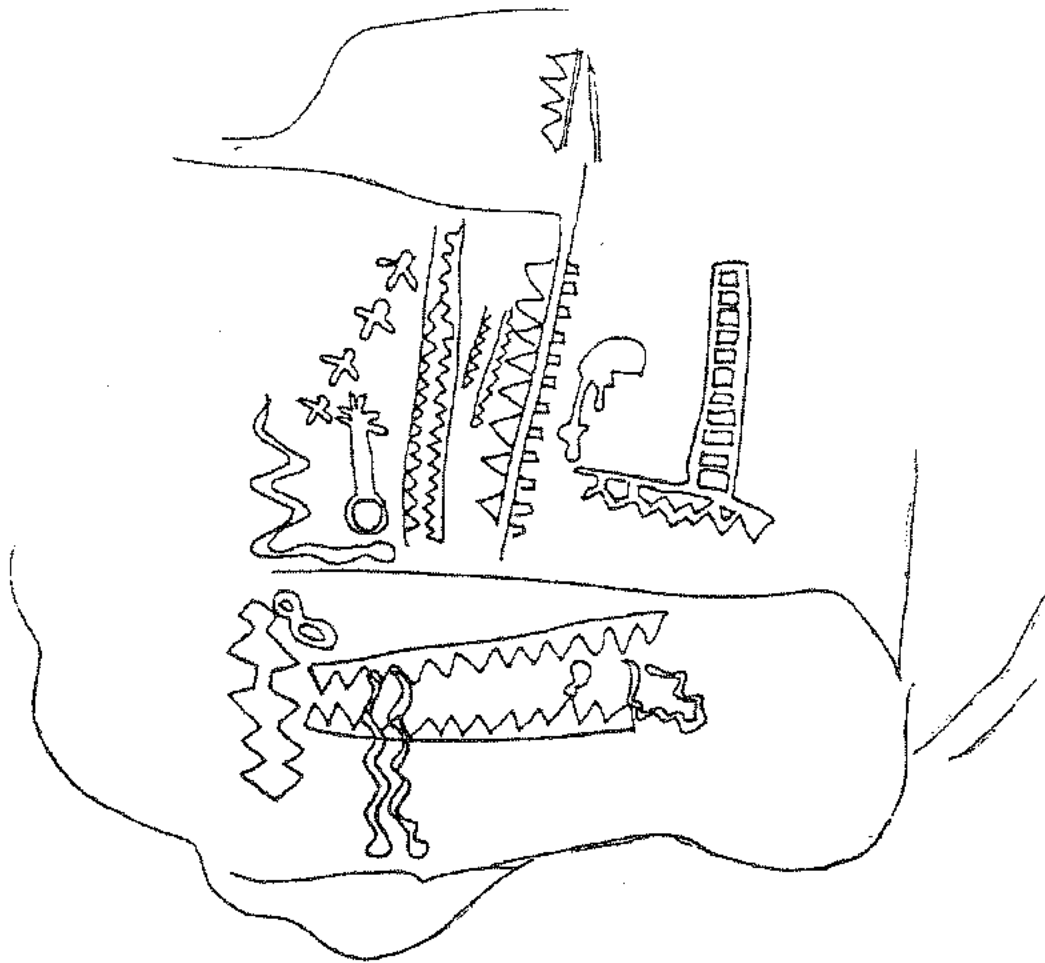
Figure 7

Figure 8

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Figure 9

Revise the chart to include all these additional images and transformations, as I have here, and the result is so smug and slick I want to hide. And yet I think it is right. We do travel through the Parowan Gap from irony to order with our feet or with our minds. We don't know where we're going at first, but afterwards we know we've gotten somewhere. Besides, the carvers at Parowan Gap have left us a summary as pat as my own (see figure 9). The last panel in the west is given almost entirely to instances of pairings and meshings: rows or triangles arranged like saw teeth close point to point or lay flat back to back. Lines sway in an even period and run carefully parallel. Combs fit into loops like velcro fasteners. In one particularly witty instance, a line of dots and a line of mounds are interleaved across a split in the stone. It's like a minuet here on the edge of the Escalante. The one apparent exception to all this dancing and doubling lies in one lower corner where a lonely snake fairly naturally drawn is approached by four bird tracks--,or is this the wittiest pairing of them all, low mimetic details evoking the coil of serpent and eagle without actually representing that ancient image of wholeness and power? It teases the mind that lingers on it. To one who has followed these designs in his progress, it's myth. To one who hasn't, it's irony. And that, perhaps, was always the purpose of the designs at Parowan Gap.

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