A Stone Age for This Century

Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman **by JEFFREY JEROME COHEN**
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Reviewed by **JOEL WEISHAUS**

In a 1980 essay titled *Stone Soup: Contemporary Poetry and the Obsessive Image*, David Walker, presently a professor at Oberlin College, wrote, “Even a glance at half a dozen recent volumes yields enough stones to fill a geologist’s knapsack” (147). Among his several examples, one of my favorites, which Walker includes in its entirety, is Charles Simic’s poem, “Stone.” It begins, "Go inside a stone / That would be my way" (1-2).

Although, “From the outside the stone is a riddle,” after becoming a stone himself, the poet moves inside, where there is “Just enough light to make out / The strange writings, the star-charts / On the inner walls” (20-22).

Stone is both native to the cosmos and indigenous to the earth, where an entire epoch is named after it. “The Stone Age is neither distant nor unchanging” (197). Stones carry their weight forward in various forms, from common pebbles to precious gemstones. Engraved stones were found in the Blombos Cave in South Africa, dating back around 70,000 years. Mousterian protofigurines, popularly known as Venus—large bellied, large breasted women—were shaped more than 30,000 years ago.

Göbekli Tepe, in present day Turkey, the oldest temple uncovered so far, dating back to the 8th-10th millennium BCE, was built of more than 200 stone pillars. “In the Greek light,” wrote philosopher John Sallis, “the stone shines so brilliantly, not only because the light is so intense, but also because stone withholds all but its surface from the light, reflecting it rather than translucently admitting it” (90). To go inside a stone, then, to see the star-charts one would need a torch, or perhaps a wick floating in oil like our ancestors used to light their way into the pitch-black Pleistocene caverns to make their extraordinary art.

Although in his introduction Jeffrey Cohen mentions art, his intentions primarily lie elsewhere, because “Lithic sculpture tends toward the anthropomorphic. A cross, a cathedral, and a carved saint are all visions of the human figure” (13). Instead, the book “takes as its focus stone that may be hewn but has generally not been domesticated into cornerstone or sculpture, into a display of human craft” (13). However, Cohen writes, “Without a human hand to bestow meaning, rock is passionless” (51). But then he asks, “What if stone, so often thought of as uncommunicative in the density of its materiality, can also be affect-laden, garrulous, animated?” (51).

In the first chapter, “Geophilia: The Love of Stone,” Cohen turns biologist E.O. Wilson’s term “biophilia,” the love of life, into “geophilia,” which “goes farther and recognizes matter’s promiscuous desire to affiliate with other forms of matter, regardless of organic composition or resemblance to human vitality” (27). One would normally think of stone as a hard, not a flowing, substance; yet, Cohen is able to liberate this perception by expounding stone in geology’s concepts of “vast durations, slow movement, and inhuman scale” (27).

Short interstices between chapters he calls “Excurses” provide him with opportunities for more personal remarks. For example, in “A Heart Unknown” he is a father visiting Paris' *Mémorial de la Shoah* with his children. In the entrance hall they see cut into the "steep (stone) walls names we do not want to read," as it includes their own family name (127). They go instead to the *Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme*, where are "the shattered remains of medieval Jewish tombstones, whole lives readable from fragments of Hebrew on lithic ruin" (127). Here Cohen warms to his daughter's "stuffed dog (that) she carries as comfort" (128). And when his son says that he's sorry because they didn't enter the Holocaust Museum because of him, Cohen writes, "I can feel the fissure in my heart begin, the crack his sadness makes" (128).

"Might stone," Cohen asks, "also share with its human allies, forced and unforced, the suffering that attends exploitation and disregard?" (128). He cites Jean Kerisel, the professor of civil engineering "who oversaw the rebuilding of major French cities after the devastation of World War II" (225). Kerisel, Cohen says, "was long haunted by the possibility of (stones) suffering" (226). So architecture, too, is invoked. Earlier, Cohen writes that stone "pushes story into expanses too large to be contained by periodizations like 'classical,' 'medieval,' 'postmodern'" (8). Epochs, too, are breached, as are discrete academic disciplines. As if a confident archaeologist, Cohen opens the ground beneath his arguments and peers in.

As he engages various layers of his lithic sensibilities, the professor of Medieval and Early Modern Studies, comfortable in the company of Geoffrey Chaucer, is also familiar with the work of Roger Caillois (1913-1978), the autodidact who "devoted his life to exploring such mysteries as . . . why rocks are such accomplished artists" (169).

Although one can understand why Cohen seeks to separate unworked stones from human craftiness, it is of course an unnatural fissure, one that perpetuates the fantasy of a bright genetic line between the human and other-than-human, animate and inanimate, which is causing so much damage, not only to the planet's environment, but also to the very integrity of our species.

In an Afterward, Cohen travels to Iceland, where "Glimpsing landscapes known from medieval texts, hiking land shaped by abiding inhuman force, is a reminder that we dwell between catastrophes, between fire and ice" (257). Ranging between the poetic and the pedantic, heroically imagining beyond its academic constraints, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* presents a unique history that is central to some of our most urgent ecological concerns.

Works Cited

Walker, David. *A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, edited by David Friebert and Stuart Young, Longman, 1980: 147- 155. Print.

Sallis, John. *Stone.* Bloomington: Indiana University P. 1994: 90. Print.

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