

# The Cultural Symbols of Stone and Eco-poetics

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**ABSTRACT.** Stone metaphors and different cultural codes highlight the transformation of natural philosophy, which is closely related to eco-poetics. In the Western tradition, the ponder of subject in front of a stone is ascetic meditation of natural philosophy, which makes the stone take on the meaning of Stoicism and influences the creation of nature poetry of subsequent generations. In the reflection on the subject and centralism, stone became a metaphor for breaking ontology, which also promoted the arrival of post-humanistic era and laid the foundation for eco-poetics. In the context of the post-humanist material shift, ecocriticism also pays attention to material and proposes the “stories in stone”. This kind of material activity and material narrative view has become an important aspect of post-humanist eco-poetics.

**KEYWORDS:** Stone/rocks, Nature, Metaphor, Eco-poetics

## 1. Introduction

It is difficult for us to directly link the ordinary material “stone” in nature with a poetic theory of “green thinking” (eco-poetics) facing environmental crisis, but if you read carefully the relevant books of ecocriticism, you will find The image of “stone” widely exists in theoretical books and literary works. Then, we have to ask, what is the connection between “stone” and eco-poetics?

Eco-poetics is a discipline that studies the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Stone, a combination of culture and nature, has become an important cultural symbol of eco-poetics. Stone's cultural symbols are closely related to the transformation of Western humanistic thoughts, including ontology, epistemology, linguistics, etc. It can be said that the history of Stone's cultural symbols is the history of ideas about nature and culture. The cultural symbol of stone has deepened people's understanding of nature, and more or less influenced eco-poetics. This article attempts to cut in from the ecological perspective of stone, discover the coexistence of stone's cultural codes and eco-poetics, and peek into the final formation of post-humanist eco-poetics in order to better understand the relationship between “man-things” in nature and reflect on the theory and cultural practice of eco-poetics.

## 2. “The Meditation in Front of a Stone “:the Origin of Stoicism and the Tradition of Nature Poetry

The image in front of a stone is closely related to Stoicism's asceticism. Stone has grown up to be a symbol of “metaphysics” in Western humanistic spirit. Stoicism advocates the subject to meditate on the nature, emphasizes the interrelation between nature and the universe, and then expresses an animistic spiritual humanistic viewpoint. The nature of the subject's body experience represented by stone has influenced the creation of naturalistic poetry and has a certain influence on the philosophical thinking of subsequent generations.

The stability of stone as a substance holds the meaning of “eternal”. In the period of ancient Greece, the limitation of human life and the worship of the gods made the stone a spokesperson and a messenger of the gods, with the symbol of divinity. In the myth of Prometheus, Heracles finally relieved Prometheus from a rock. To carry out Zeus's sentence, Prometheus always wore an iron ring set with a pebble, so that Zeus could watch over him as a god. Stone has become an essential medium to the gods in the world, which also brings the divinity of the stone. Stone formed the Greek cosmology and natural world view. For the opposite of God, the real material world and the difficult challenge they face is not fertile soil or “Eden”, but a solid stone.

The Stoicism followed the ancient Greek legend, paying great attention to the experience of the body and the gods. It thinks about the world beyond the universe through stone and can be called the school of stone meditation. Thales countered Pythagoras by saying that “the whole universe is alive.”Based on Thales'

experiments with stone, the Stoics tried to explain the connections among all things. Stoicism held that there was a definite natural law between universes, albeit in the logocentric sense. Things exist according to natural law and nature, but the smallest “things” also have the logical nature of logos. In the philosophy of confronting the stone, the Stoicists emphasized the use of the subject's virtue and combined the driving force of the soul with the laws of nature. In other words, to a certain extent, the meditation of stone is the meditation on nature, and the definition of nature is the definition of Stoic. Viggo Rossvaer divides nature into three types: (a) wild nature; (b) nature as dynamic activity and (c) nature as Stoic.[1] Stoic nature is a combination of wildness and cultural symbols. As a special medium, stone belongs to both nature and culture. Stoic philosophy believes that the natural forces in the universe is the foundation of human civilization. The process of the subject's meditation on the stone is also a dynamic process of the communication between man and nature. In this way, the meditation culture of the evangelist confronting the stone becomes a metaphorical tradition. People's tenacity, calm spirit and stone have reached a blend. Stoics closely connect man and the natural world through metaphors between man and nature.

The natural philosophy of Stoicism turned to metaphysics by analyzing the “pure forms” that existed in creation. Although the natural philosophy it interprets is still natural theology and does not probe into the intrinsic value of natural entities, it affirms the reality and authenticity of nature itself as the reliable objects of knowledge inquiry. The tradition of his natural philosophy on the nature of life has influenced the later poets' philosophical thinking on nature, especially on how to rethink the relationship between man and the natural world in the philosophy of natural ethics. It recognizes the importance of natural law and can be regarded as the prototype of ecological ethics. The source of environmental problems in today's society is precisely the result of not following the laws of matter. This shows that the natural ethics embodied in the Stoic meditation on a stone is quite consistent with the viewpoint of early ecopoetics. Confronted with stone meditation, Stoicism became the prototype of the communication between man and nature, which inspired people's perception of things in the natural world, and how humans experience nature to give some inspiration to the ecological thoughts after industrial civilization.

Following in the tradition of stoicism natural philosophy in ancient Greece, the later naturalist poets are more or less influenced by it. In the Middle Ages and the pre-Renaissance period, there were a large number of poems about nature in Europe. The cultural image of stone is common in the writing of wilderness poetry and pastoral poetry. During the Renaissance, the sound of nature was obscured after the rise of rationalism, but by the eighteenth century to the period of romanticism, stone existed in the work of a large number of poets as a metaphor for contemplating nature. Stoicism influenced romantic poetry. We just have to admit that romantic naturalism and idyllic poetry are the prototype of ecological poetry. Stone has become the main medium for romantic poetry to connect nature and think about nature. There are many stone images in Edwardsworth's poems, such as “*Michael a Pastoral Poem*”(1800); “*The Primrose of the Rock*” (1831); “*The Plain of Donnerdale*” (1820) etc. [2] Wordsworth believes that only through Stoic meditation can one understand the material world and reveal the secret spirit and immortality for the mind. Later naturalist and the new rural poet William Barnes (1801-1886), Matthew Arnold, etc all followed the nature writing tradition of stone images. At the same time, there were numerous stone images in the nature poetry of the American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892). The “stone” in “*Song of the Road*” and “*Song of Self*” (Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*) was also carried in the poet's meditation. The dual color of nature and culture.

The most representative is Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), known as a poet of natural philosophy. His poems are in line with the natural philosophy of Stoicism, linking the “body” with the “Tao” of the natural world in his reflection on god. The stone imagery in his poems has a theological vision and the symbolism and metaphor of the stone unifies the poetic experience with the religious experience. Eliot is very good at using metaphors in poetry. “Rock” is originally the language of Christianity, and its metaphor is closely related to religion and the body. In its famous poems “*The Waste land*”, “*Rock*” and “*Death to St. Nasisos*”, the sentence “red rock” appears frequently, such as “a shadow under this red rock” / (*Come on, please walk into the shadow under this red rock*)” (*The Wasteland*, lines 26-27). [3] John Hayward, a Eliot's friend, interpreted it as a metaphor for the “Holy Grail”.

To a certain extent, these nature writing poetry formed the tradition of stone imagery. Rocks, mountains, and the sea are among the literary images that poets pursued in their spiritual search, and which Geoffrey L. Meldahl called the “former heart.” [4] This wasteland style of nature writing is accompanied by physical trauma from Descartes' separation of the human body from the soul and the contemplation of the stone is the poet's attempt to bridge the gap when the body experiences the world. Therefore, like the wasteland, stone is a multiple expression of body and spirit, culture and nature in Eliot. The stone and the human body experience always have some kind of kinship, with the metaphorical tradition of the body. In the mythological tradition, rocks in nature are referred to as the “bones” of the human body. The parts of the body correspond to different types of the stone. As Michael Jackson pointed out: “Different rocks and stones stand for different parts of the body, so that

one rock balanced on another is the 'chest' and small white river pebbles are 'toes' ".[5]The stone is the metaphor bearer of the poet. Only when seemingly lifeless of the stone have some kind of soul can all things be said to have the spirit. Through stone's contemplative meditation, poets began to truly understand the existence form of things and the immortality of the soul and the close connection with things. Although these naturally-written poems still do not break away from anthropocentrism, this kind of contemplation and experience of the natural world in the stone reflects an ecological perspective.

Environmental activist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) was obviously influenced by Stoic natural philosophy to romantic nature poetry. His declaration of "Thinking like a mountain" has been becoming an important enlightenment of ecological poetics and an important discourse to deal with environmental crises. As Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome said "thinking like a mountain" stresses the stability achieved by diffusing biomes and the dangers of their disruption. [6]"Like a mountain" emphasizes the natural origin of the stone rather than the industrial civilization represented by architectural stone. This tradition of Greek Stoicism has always influenced ecological literature, ecological philosophy, and the study of physical experience in later generations. For example, John Muir, a nature writer and ecological practitioner, is a true son of earth. He walked through nature's mountains and practiced the habit of stone sermons. He was firmly convinced that the stone was a material living being, and in listening to the stone was fully integrated with nature. Holmes Rolston, the creator of environmental ethics and pioneer of environmentalism, also obviously absorbed some of Stoicism's natural philosophical traditions. The ethics and nature, experience and nature embodied in his book "*Philosophy gone Wild*" are in line with Stoic philosophy. American scholar Richard Sennett's *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* is also expressed in a stone-like meditation worry about modern civilization. It can be said that the subject's meditation on the stone reflects the natural origin of ecopoetics.

### 3. "Throwing Rocks At the Sun": Deconstruction of Anthropocentrism and the Coming of the Post-Humanism Era

After the birth of rationalism, the voice of nature was suppressed, and in the celebration of the rationality of the human spirit, anthropocentrism was unprecedentedly concentrated. Cultural symbols of stone correspond to Sisyphus's story of persistent push of stone against god, and have the meaning of "revolution". In the context of post-humanism, people doubted traditional centralism and began to deconstruct anthropocentrism. The metaphor of "Throwing Rocks at the Sun" was set up. Among them, the stone is no longer interpreted as Sisyphus's "fatalism", but as a weapon to challenge the mainstream and authority, and the sun is the metaphor of "centralism". An important task of ecopoetics is to deconstruct anthropocentrism and take the value of nature into consideration. The challenges of anthropocentrism and the embryonic form of post-humanism have become the "horn" of ecopoetics.

Heidegger also opposed the over-intensified anthropocentrism of humanism, and advocated that the nature of things should be shown freely and the "original form" of the dwelling of things should be disclosed to view in his poems. The natural attribute and original nature of stone can better understand his thought of "Existentialist inhabitation". The question of the meaning of existence raised by Heidegger is the beginning of disassembling the theology of existence. In the *Die Grundbegriffe Der Metaphysik*, three conclusions are formed: Stone has no world; Animals are lacking in the world; Man is the builder of the world. [7] Although Heidegger has seen the significance of the existence of stone, his anti-centralism is not radical, and "stone" is not like Sisyphus as a tool to resist theology. Compared with Heidegger, Derrida's criticism of centralism is more radical. To a certain extent, he threw the "rocks" at the authority that represented centralism-the "sun". Derrida criticized Heidegger for the difference in the spiritual world to a degree rather than an essence. That is to say, under Derrida's deconstruction, stone, animal and man may have some kind of homogeneity in spirit being, and stone and man have the same existence spirit of materiality. If Heidegger has narrowed the distance between stone and man in the sense of being, then Derrida has completely declared the "end of man" to some extent. The era of post-humanism has been arrived.

Post-humanism continues the tradition of deconstruction, further challenges the rational subject based on "stone thinking" and "Je pense, donc je suis" (René Descartes), and criticizes the existence of human beings. Focusing on the "non-human" has become a typical feature of post-humanism. Animal research expert Cary Wolfe discussed it in his monograph *What is Posthumanism?* [8] Post-humanism reflects on the dualism caused by humanism's pursuit and definition of essence. Its sign is the death of the ontology and the subject. The elimination of anthropocentrism promoted the transformation of post-theories. Fundamentally speaking, post-humanism is the further development of the thought of existence. Latour sees humans as a member of the network of world actors. In this network, there is no absolute subject and object, which makes non-human material stand out. "Subjectivity also seems to become a fluid ability, becoming something that can be partially

gained or lost in connection with a particular practice.”[9]Graham believes that in Latour's theory of actor networks, stone also has the power of action.”So that even the smallest stone can trigger consequences disproportionate to its scale: ‘a pebble can destroy an empire if the emperor chokes at dinner.’[10]”“Hurl a rock’ and youll shatter an ontology, leave taxonomy in glistening shards. “(stone: an ecology of the inhuman,2.)Cohen pointed out that due to “its density, extensiveness, tempo, and force, there is something in rock that is actively unknowable, something that will not surrender itself to stabilities, a truth behind the trope that stone rebukes epistemology. In that reproach inheres a trigger to human creativity and a provocation to cross- ontological fellowship.”(Stories of Stone,56-63.)We will inevitably understand why Jonathan Kahler and Latour say that “we have never been modern”.Among the cultural codes of “throwing rocks at the sun”, stone represents the philosophy of regulation of experience. “Throwing rocks at the sun” is a fundamental revolt against ontological existence. It is in this anti-essentialist “man” thought that post-humanism gradually has been deconstructing the anthropocentrism.

After breaking the centralism, post-humanism recognizes the subjectivity of non-human species, but this does not imply that the rational tradition has been completely abandoned. In the 1970s, Norwegian philosopher Alan Nais proposed “deep ecology”,which further deconstructed anthropocentrism.Deep ecology is one of the important theoretical sources of ecopoetics. It “throws rocks at the sun”, challenges the anthropocentrism, and promotes the arrival of the post-humanism eraDeep ecology integrates the values of human and non-human, organism and non-organism into the natural network, which makes the stone establish their representativeness in the context of living bodies.

In the post-humanist cultural context of social change, stone represents the power of change.”Throwing rocks at the sun” has long been a metaphor for ontological challenges.Lowell Duckett, in his study of nature writing, mentions that “what I call oral writing-stone-subject objects does not eliminate the human/non-human boundary through the act of vulturism, but actually challenges the ontological existence of that boundary.”[11]The theory of environmental justice which pays attention to environmental injustice directly inherits the symbolic cultural tradition of “throwing rocks at the sun”. “The Environmental Justice Reader “features an interview with Teresa Leal by ecocritic Joni Adamson, entitled “*Throwing Rocks at the Sun: An Interview with Teresa Leal.*”[12]When talking about the environmental justice movement, Teresa Leal said that “There were some contemplative friars who, with their arms crossed as if they were praying, were forming barriers so that the military couldn't get past them to reach the demonstrators”.(The Environmental Justice Reader,53)Obviously, the resistance represented by this evangelist still has the shadow of Stoicism.Teresa Leal believes that “change comes only when a few brave hearts dare to throw the first rock.”(The Environmental Justice Reader,57)Stone has become a powerful weapon of change to fight against the central force.Just like the oppressed nature, these people participating in the struggle are marginalized groups and disadvantaged groups in the society.

#### 4. The Stories of Stone: the Materialism of Post-Humanist Ecopoetics

While re-recognizing the relationship between the subject and the world, post-humanism focuses on the relationship between man and nature, so it can be said that ecopoetics is one of the post-humanist theories.Under the impetus of “decentralization”, post-humanism formed a material turn.Ecopoetics recognizes the permeability of things and the legal status of non-living objects on this basis to formulate its own material turn.In the materialism of post-humanist ecopoetics, the cultural symbolism of stone is weakened and evolved into the ontological expression of material, or, academically call it “the agency of stone”and”the narrative of stone”, which also marks the object-oriented The paradigm of post-humanist ecological poetics.

In the field of ecopoetics,stone becomes the object of a real material discussion, which is different from the previous imagistic representation of “specious” stone.Stone became the center of attention to nature in the post-humanist turn, which was presented in realist poetry in early nature writing. A group of nature writers showed an unusual fascination with stone.As the pioneer of ecopoetics, Edward Abbey metaphorized the ultimate truth as “rock bed” in his work “*Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968)”.

In Kjell Espmark's poem “*Skrivet I Sten*”, stone has also become a medium for understanding the world. “Jag trevar mot dig inifrån stenen kan du känna pulsen från en värld)” (*Skrivet I Sten, Femtio dikter i eget urval av Kjell Espmark*).Robinson Jeffs' poem “*Oh, Lovely Rock*” has endless appearances of “inhuman imagery”. The poem uses “stone” as an inhuman perspective to reveal the wonders of the natural world.Brophy, Robert commented on the imagery of stone in Jeffers'work, saying that “Rock is consistently a divine image, a mysterious, chthonicpresence and stoic endurance; its volcanic origins make it “bones of the mother (earth).”The sea is mind-subduing expanse, life and death, matrix of all life.”[13]

Why can stone represent the intrinsic value of the true nature? As Abram's question: "What of stones- of boulders and mountain cliffs? Clearly, a slab of granite is not alive in any obvious sense, and it is hard to see how anyone could at-tribute such openness or indeterminacy to it, or why they would want to?"[14]We made a conjecture that, As a rule, stone in human experience is lifeless, but if the stone has intrinsic value as physical beings in nature, then why should we not respect nature?As Christopher Manes said in his study of *Nature and Silence*"In contrast, for animistic cultures, those that see the natural world as inspirited, not just people, but also animals, plants, and even 'inert'entities such as stones and rivers are perceived as being articulate and at times intelligible subjects".[15]Nature writers express their thinking about nature from the perspective of a stone and often describe the construction process as "writing with stone", which reflects their analogy of finding nature in seemingly lifeless stones.Geologists often describe tectonic processes as "writing in stone" for that analogy recounts their task of learning natural history.[16]Ecocritics often use the image of stone as an example of the existence of material spirit, and thus read the book of nature."The remains of things-animals and plants, the clay and the stones-were treated with respect. Based on the value of stone's eco criticism, ecocritic Scott Slovic believes that stone is the real place of nature in the analysis of stones in ecological poetry, so he advocates ecological writers and ecological critics to "go away to think" .[17]

As an agent, stone has its peculiar activity. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen gave many convincing instances when exploring the activity of substances.For example, in the example of stone and toad, he believed that stone and the living toad had material symbiosis and homogenization of the body."The stone-like toad discloses its inti- macy to toad-like stone. Both are part of a material world that challenges the or- ganic bias of the adjective "alive".[18]We see the involvement and integration of stone in life.In general, we will not be able to regard stones as living things more than we do" (Hallowell).Stone may be an agent as a medium, whether it is the lines engraved on its body or the remains of life, it makes it a carrier of stories, and it awaits people's listening in history. Stones, on the other hand, are not natural. They may have been formed in the soil from bones, deciduous trees and other materials.The stones have material energy, just like volcanic rock, in an active state.Diehm pointed out:

*To call these beings "alive" is not to demand that we think of them in the same terms as the biologically living; it is to assert that they are active forces in the world, expressive entities that exert a kind of 'elemental influence' on their surroundings,imposing themselves on the landscape and making certain demands of those in their presence. These are beings that tell different stories and present different perspectives that must be taken into account, navigated, and integrated into the life of the self.*[19]

Stone is the subject of the narrative and tells the story. Cohen found out that the stone had an expressive desire and became a part of the narrative subject. This is an significant manifestation of post-humanist ecological poetics.As Jeffrey Cohen discovered, there is a noticeable narrative mechanism in the stone.Stone has an expressive desire and possesses a creative ability. Whether it is moving or deforming, it means that stone is not a silent object in the natural world.Stones "are neither inert nor mute, but like all life are forever flowing, forever filled with stories" ("*Stories of Stone*",62).Stone abides at the origin of the story, but a narrative in which it might figure as something more than an ancillary device, a protagonist rather than prop, has yet to appear.(*Stone: an ecology of the inhuman*,3)Bloomwood also tells a series of stone-centered "stories". He discovered the extraordinary nature of stone in his nature's journey.He realized what the stone could say and "conceptual journey that moved stone from the back- ground of consciousness to the foreground, from silent to speaking, from mind- less vacancy to intentional actor, from the ordinary to the extraordinary, thewon- derful, even the sacred" .[20]From the remains of creatures to the carving of steles, stones carry cultural changes, so as long as stones exist as material, they must carry a certain cultural symbol, and if they are willing to listen, its story will be presented. Jelle Zeilinga de Boer's *Stories in stone* is a typical example of interpreting stories from stone symbols.

Stone is the spokesperson of local ecocriticism and material ecocriticism in post-humanist ecopoetics. Stone is an symbolic eternal existence of the place. It not only carries inherent attributes (shape, pattern) in a geographical space, but also carries cultural symbols in the representation of different regional cultures.The stone has a sense of homing because the material itself is expressing itself.When it's there, it can tell us all kinds of things.According to the sense of homing of stone, we can link it with the regional concept in environmental literature. This kind of local ecological advocacy is the core of indigenous ecocriticism.We suffer an unforgettable sentiment for a lasting thing like "stone" in the "Land of Love" plot, just as the scholar James Karman commented on the "granite feeling" of Jeffs's stone writing. The blood relationship forms the basis of his love for the coastal areas."[21]Because the stone has witnessed the landscape and ecological evolution of the place, as Slovic said, "Stone is the root of the homeland."(Scott Slovic, *Going Away to think*)The narrative of the stone has almost become the manifestation of material criticism of ecocritic Serenella Iovino Opperman agrees with Cohen's view of the story of stone. He sees that in the physical world, stone has the capacity to respond and speak, or to say, to act.When matter is decomposed again, both molecules and atoms may be located in a

state of motion. With the advent of the post-human era, the sign phenomena that can be seen all convey information, and the material world are full of signs and meanings. It can be said that material ecological criticism is a major turn of post-humanist ecopoetics.

## 5. Conclusion

So far, I have divided the correlation between the cultural codes of stone and ecological poetry into three stages: from the early Greek Stoic philosophy's attention to nature and its influence on the poet's natural writing; Stone as a metaphor for change, breaking anthropocentrism Towards the enlightenment of post-humanism on ecological poetry; The material turn of post-humanist ecopoetics embodied in the stone narrative. In the focus on natural things, stone has an influential position. We also found that there is an internal connection between the artistic code of stone and the metaphor tradition. Behind the stone image contains rethinking about the nature, world, body, material, etc., which ultimately affected the formation of post-humanist ecopoetics.

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