

Rock Music

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Rocks near Mousehole, Cornwall.

Ecocriticism

Ecocritically-inclined discussion has been exploring how ancient literature uses the environment: human creations deploying the non-human. Mammals and birds have obvious affinities to people; to people trees and flowers are easily related: they live, grow, and die. Interaction with living things throws up ethical questions. Rocks are (as it were) harder. They are lifeless, unshaped (usually), unmoving (usually); their relation to humans seems less obvious and less ethical. They are used by humans, but typically have to be transformed first.

It's worth a look at what ancient literature does with them. Latin poetry, especially Virgil, has particularly attracted exploration ecocritical and quasi-ecocritical; it will be particularly considered.

Relatively recent rocks

But a quick look at some later works will get us started. Rocks are universal; but the ancient literary tradition is often sensed when they are used. In Hartmann von Aue's late twelfth-century *Gregorius*, Gregory (no relation) discovers he has married his mother, so lives voluntarily chained on a bare, desolate rock ('ûf den durren wilden stein', 3247), for seventeen years: he separates himself from all human contact—though eventually he becomes Pope. In Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (1790), Fiordiligi's mock-heroic aria depicts her soul, constant in love, as like a rock unmoved by wind and storm; a long note portrays the rock's enduring fixity, extreme intervals between notes its craggyiness (no. 14, bars 9-14). In Annensky's play *Фамура-куфарэд* (*Thamyris the Citharode*, 1906), Thamyris says he does not need to give rocks life like Orpheus: they have their own life, of deep contemplation (созерцание); they are silent and love nobody (IX.4-23). Various preoccupations surface

already.



Caspar David Friedrich, Felsenriff am Meeresstrand (reef of rock by the sea) (c.1824), Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, no. 2261

Roughness and a night on the bare mountain

Rocks are not part of city life. In making a city, men search for hard rock (*silex*) to make walls from (Manilius 2.779-80); but unworked rocks are not part of the normal civilized environment. Scipio says Hannibal's men, after time in the Alps, are shadows of humans, weakened *inter saxa rupesque* (Livy 21.40.9), 'amid rocks and crags'. Even rural pastureland is spoiled by *lapis . . . nudus*, 'bare stone', in Virgil's *Eclogues* (1.47-8). Propertius' Milanion lives in wild places to win Atalanta; wounded by a Centaur, he 'groaned on the rocks of Arcadia', *Arcadiis rupibus ingemuit* (1.1.14). The rocks give a deserted landscape—and are vividly uncomfortable. Later the poet himself is forced into the wild by love. An unkempt

(*incultus*) path leads him to a hard sleep and *frigida rupes* ‘a cold crag’ (1.18.27-8); *frigida* tangibly evokes stone at night.



Wall-painting, New York, Metropolitan Museum 20. 192. 16, from Villa of Agrippa

Postumus, Boscotrecase, Cubiculum 19 (c.11 BC): Andromeda chained to a rock.

Throwing rocks

As we have seen, men do things with rocks and stones. Many stones (λίθοι) from far-flung natural settings are worked by craftsmen into Posidippus' jewels—but not the massive rock produced from the depths by Poseidon, grimmer even than the rock Polyphemus used to keep his cave shut (19 Austin-Bastianini). Especially archaic and impressive is throwing rocks in battle. Aeneas hurls a huge one at Turnus (Virgil, *Aeneid* 12.896-902); a simile shortly afterwards confronts us with the advance in military τέχναι (science), as siege-machines throw rocks (921-2). Aeneas' rock had been put there to settle land-disputes: an ironic contrast with its violent use now. The versification lingers on the immense rock as seen by him: *saxum circumspicit ingens*, | *saxum antiquum ingens* 'he looks round and sees a huge rock, a huge, ancient, rock'—repetition, elision, long syllables. But its age is especially highlighted; this conveys the long and separate existence of the non-human object (not quite à la Thamyris).

Statius, not to be outdone, has Tydeus kill four Thebans with a *saxum ingens* 'mighty rock' (*Thebaid* 2.559), at one point called a *mons* 'mountain' (565). Through a comparison, it is set against an elaborate man-made artefact, a vase thrown by a Centaur (563-4).



Wall-painting, Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica (50-40 BC), scene 2 (detail): Laestrygonians; one gets a rock to throw at Odysseus' ships.

Your real parents

The interaction of the human and the completely non-human reaches its height in claims addressed to an unfeeling person: they were given birth to by πέτραι . . . ἡλίβατοι, 'steep rocks' (Homer, *Iliad* 16.34-5, Patroclus to Achilles), or—with geographical and verbal enhancement—the *duris* . . . *cautibus horrens* | *Caucasus*, 'the Caucasus, bristling with hard rocks' (Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.366-7, Dido to Aeneas). The outlandish parturition takes impassioned fantasy to an extreme point. Dido externally matches her own rebuke in the underworld, where she shows no more emotion at Aeneas' words than if she were *dura silex* 'hard rock' or *Marpesia cautes* 'the crag of Mount Marpessa' (6.470-1). Mount Marpessa comes closer to civilization and art than the Caucasus: it was the source of Parian marble (Stephanus of Byzantium μ 77 Billerbeck). The narrator on Dido, unlike Dido on Aeneas,

does not criticize this seeming impassiveness. And *nec magis . . . uultum sermone mouetur | quam si . . .* ‘she is no more moved *in her face* by his words than if . . .’ (470) and *inimica* ‘hostile’ (472) suggest no inner absence of emotion.

The sea

The hardness of rock is given more drama when the waves of the sea assail it. In Homer, the rock μένει ‘stands firm awaiting’ the winds and waves (*Iliad* 15.618-20), with a quasi-human determination like the Trojans it is compared with. Such images convey not lack of emotion but a lack of ignoble emotion. Latinus resists the crowds of his people *uelut pelago rupes immota . . . , | ut pelagi rupes magno ueniente fragore* (Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.586-7), ‘like a rock unmoved in the sea, a rock as the sea’s loud roar comes on’. The repetition again makes the mighty object imposing. The Lesser Ajax is sublimely but impiously unmoved by thunderbolts, *ardua ut cautes*, ‘like a lofty crag’ (Seneca, *Agamemnon* 538). He is like a rock in the sea, but then himself reaches a rock in the sea (*rupes*, 544, 553, cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 4.507 πέτρη). It becomes hyperbolically a *mons* ‘mountain’ (555) when it is broken apart by the god Neptune.



pelagi rupes magno ueniente fragore, ‘a rock as the sea’s loud roar comes on’.

To and from rockhood

Metamorphosis from or into rock often plays on the usual contrast between unfeeling rock and feeling person, and on the similarity or difference in form. When humans are created from stones or rocks, Virgil finds his own play to equal the Greek *λαοί* ‘people’ and *λᾶοι* ‘stones’ (Pindar, *Olympian* 9.46, Callimachus fragment 496 Pfeiffer): humans are a *durum genus*, ‘hard race’ (*Georgics* 1.63). Ovid’s rocks, on the other hand, grow softer as they turn into people (*Metamorphoses* 1.401-4). In a transitional stage they resemble unfinished statues (404-6); previously, then, they were less human in shape. Anaxarete’s body is taken over by the *saxum* that was long in her cruel heart (14.757-8). This, though, is rock the substance; the human shape seems to be kept in the final result, a statue, *signum* (759). Niobe’s shape and

essence after transformation are differently presented in different authors (Homer, Sophocles, Callimachus, Propertius, Ovid . . .); almost constant is her continuing emotion, ‘stone though she was’, λίθος περ ἔοῦσα (Homer, *Iliad* 24.617). Almost—at Ovid, *Ex Ponto* 1.2.29-30, Niobe, ‘when she became a rock, ceased to be conscious of her misfortune’, *posuit sensum saxea facta mali*. Usually, the water pouring from that rock is tears (Sophocles, *Antigone* 831-2, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.312, etc.). The normal contrasts of rock and human produce paradox in these pointed or haunting conceptions.

What rocks?

Shklovsky famously said that literary art existed to make ‘the stone stony’ (камень каменным).¹ But the rocks that poetry revivifies are not just actual rocks: the reader’s mind combines the rocks of experience with the rocks of literature (and perhaps of visual art). The rocks of literature have their systems, their set of potent scenes and concepts; these rocks are rich with antithesis and paradox, especially in their relations to people. Criticism can help us to see them more freshly, and can revivify the poetry which, from these rocks, makes music.

A little reading: Fundamental for near-ecocriticism and Latin is R. Armstrong, *Vergil’s Green Thoughts: Plants, Human, and the Divine* (Oxford, 2019). For ecocriticism and antiquity see recently Chr. Schliephake, *The Environmental Humanities and the Ancient World: Questions and Perspectives* (Cambridge, 2020). On rocks, see N. Dietrich, *Figur ohne Raum? Bäume und Felsen in der attischen Vasenmalerei des 6. und 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.* (Berlin and Boston, 2010).

¹ *О теории прозы* (Moscow, 1929), 13.



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