Jerome Cohen


Animal, vegetable, or mineral? That was a guessing game I remember playing when I was young. And of course, back then, I didn't think much about the three categories and pretty much accepted them as equally different and distinct types of “things” that can be discerned within our surroundings. They constituted a trinity of the natural world, one that stood in contrast to the dichotomy of the organic and the inorganic, and the basic binary opposition between life and non-life. They therefore serve as a reminder that our systems of classification, if not entirely arbitrary, are neither absolute nor absent alternative ways of dividing up the same territory. Neither do they cover all of the territory, as this triad refers to forms of matter, as opposed to energy or consciousness or spirit.

Arguably, they also omit the category of the human, at least in the traditional sense in which that classification is understood. By this I mean the idea that the human person is unique: however much we may be considered to be animals biologically, the only other “persons” aside from ourselves are various manifestations of the divine and otherwise supernatural beings. Of course some argue that animals, or at least those mammals closest to us, ought to be granted the status of personhood, perhaps being more deserving than the corporations that have obtained similar legal status in the United States. And science fiction narratives have already portrayed a future in which technology, in the form of artificial intelligence, will be granted the rights and privileges of persons (not to mention scenarios concerning the legal status of alien life forms). Still, however mutable the category of “human” may be, it is generally viewed as a somewhat exclusive category, one that does not include things that are classified as animal, vegetable, or mineral (and all too often in our history has also excluded members of our own species). In this sense, “an ecology of the inhuman” might include much more than the inorganic and the non-biological, unless we want to differentiate between terms such as non-human and inhuman, the inhuman being at a greater distance on a spectrum from whatever it is that we consider to be human. It would certainly seem reasonable to imagine such a range that extends from human to animal (organisms similar to human beings) to vegetable (organisms not all that similar to human beings) to mineral (entities that are not organisms and therefore especially different and distinct from the human person).

Against this seemingly commonsense view of the world, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen asks us to look at things a bit differently. It may be that ecology is a
branch of biology, but as the study of environments, the ecological would also extend to the geological. Indeed the boundaries are not as clear-cut as they might seem, as Cohen reminds us that a significant portion of rock is formed out of organic matter, while organisms are in fact partly creatures of stone, this being most obviously apparent in our skeletal structure. Moreover, a quick glance at my daily vitamin reveals over a dozen minerals, including calcium, magnesium, copper, zinc, chromium, manganese, potassium, nickel, and silicon, all of which are needed to keep our bodies healthy and whole. Stone is neither grounded in the science of geology or mineralogy, however, nor the art of the lapidary, but rather presents us with a philosophical, historical, and literary meditation on the cultural, psychological, and spiritual meanings of that most solid aspect of our material world. I would add that it is a pleasure to read, packed full of intriguing insights, and with portions of it downright poetic.

Cohen is a medievalist, and consequently, European manuscripts from the Middle Ages, along with publications from the Renaissance and early modern era, are well represented in this book. Indeed, it could be argued that Stone is essentially a study of the symbolism of stone in medieval literature and its relevance for contemporary thought. I hasten to add that this makes the book no less interesting to read, but I was surprised by this emphasis, as there is no indication that this is a work of scholarship in medieval studies in the book’s title or back cover blurb. For this reason, I was at first puzzled when the book’s introduction began with a quote from the Book of Job, and the footnote provided the quote in Latin, followed by a statement that biblical quotations in Stone are derived from the Latin Vulgate. Why not go back to the original Hebrew if the point is to consider a perspective that comes to us from antiquity? Or if the point is the enduring relevance of the quote, why not cite a contemporary translation of the Tanach or Septuagint? It was only when I was well into the book and came to recognize Cohen’s focus on medieval Christian culture, that I understood that he was citing the Latin translation of the bible relied upon by the Roman Catholic Church from the fourth century on (replaced only during the twentieth century), that is to say, the Bible as it was known to medieval scholastics and the pre-Reformation reading public. It is almost as if this book started out as a more specialized study, but the author came to realize the topic’s broader appeal and relevance, and incorporated more general philosophical commentary and personal observations. The result is one in which medieval sources may appear to be overrepresented, which is not to detract from their value in representing alternative perspectives to our own contemporary worldview.

The main part of the book is divided into four major chapters, each with intriguing titles: “Geophilia: The Love of Stone,” “Time: The Insistence of