

Life Transfigured Into Art:
A Critical Review of The Rock and Other Poems

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The Rock and Other Poems is a richly resourceful and highly sophisticated book of poetry that contains forty six short lyrical poems arranged in five sections entitled: "Palestinian"; "From Japan"; "Of Beauty"; "Meditations"; and "Occasional." The author is a most distinguished Saudi scholar and academician of King Saud University (now retired), Professor, a specialist in English poetry. The poems reflect the scholarly interests of its author as they materialize in a nice blending of several traditions of English poetry.

However, the most striking feature of the work is its combination of intricate artistry and truthfulness to life. The author skillfully manages to transform life into art, experience into an aesthetic object of contemplation, significantly without precluding the lyrical effect of the poems. An undercurrent of personal emotions both warm and sincere in its humaneness remains engagingly identifiable and easy to identify with despite elaborate art.

The poems achieve their complex effect of subjective transmission of personal emotions and aesthetic representation of beauty through subtle reliance on various literary devices such as personal symbolism, myth adaptation strategies and an invocation of literary instances of English poetic heritage charmingly merging with local cultural tones. The elaborate touch of bringing it all out in a highly imaginative, richly suggestive and exquisitely inventive use of the English language complements the beautiful image.

The book's first section concerns itself with the Palestinian cause and relies on the rock symbolism to introduce and discuss its intricacies. Though essentially symbolic of a pure and positive force, the rock symbol is engaging in its mobility and adaptability to multiple levels of meanings. It intricately partakes of the theological, the cosmic, the local, the natural, the social, the political and the personal. The holy rock of Palestine is an objective entity in the natural world with three theological associations. The most impressively significant one is the latest, the Islamic that lends the two rocks, the actual and the symbolic, their sublime associations with heavenly justice, divine order and power: "The rock of justice and blissful law" ("Jerusalem" 14). Being so sublimely situated, the vital symbol soon qualifies to evolve into an eyewitness of injustice and a chronicler of an "abject" story of "ethnic cleansing" of the Palestinian people ("The Rock" 16,15). In an act of further descent into, and a deeper penetration of, the human world, the rock interestingly acquires overtones of human power and becomes a symbol of different forms of the sufferers' resistance, of women "[g]ushing linguistic manna," and at the hands of "children stones" ("The Rock" 18,33).

The subtly expressive symbol forces minds to holistically contemplate the scene beyond its theological past, current political crisis and the resultant suffering of the Palestinian people. The multilayered nature of the rock symbol endows the situation with a lasting impression beyond its actual presence in the objective world. The symbolic representation takes both tragic scene and political cause into the world of art. The reader is thus enabled not only to share the poet's views of what is right and wrong, but is also compelled to meditate an image of a preordained suffering.

The “rock quality and purity” continue to sustain themselves even when the symbol shifts from the political to the personal level (“The Rock” 34). In the poem “Lost, Nearly,” from the “Meditations” section of the book, the rock becomes a symbol of a highly placed religious ideal that a conscientious persona aspires to attain or, at least, approximate. To “deserve [. . .] the sanctity of nearness,” to the “rock of the absolute,” “one has to be absolutely pure” (5,3,6). Against a subjective voicing of regret, confusion and shame, faith is set up in an aesthetically appealing symbolic form that inspires pursuit of the ideal without debarring sympathetic identification with a baffled soul.

Side by side with the steady, yet variable, rock symbolism, the work is replete with water imageries and symbols. Like the rock, the water symbolism partakes of both permanence and fickleness. Seeking an ideal imaginary city of an unknown geographical north, the traveler in “The Pilot’s Way” sails across anonymous seas to reach the “city of the north, / Originator of rich miracles” (30,31). The poem occurs in the “Occasional” part of the book but suggestively hints in the direction of the “Palestinian” and the city of Jerusalem. Still it is inconclusive on this matter. Advantageously, the city is not specified, which leaves the utopian ideal, attainable through water crossing, open to imaginative speculation and aesthetic contemplation.

Such images of sailing are habitual to this work and they usually lead to a desired psychological restructuring and a longed-for cultural regeneration that can become possible only through sea crossing. Good examples are found in “A Sequel,” to “The Pilot’s Way,” “Growing Old” and “Valediction.”

Without losing its essentially chameleon quality, the water symbolism gains depth through its association with time and process. A precious moment of love seized out of time flux during a farewell scene descends on an eager lover like a heavenly boon that “showers” (“The Last Meeting” 3). In a Keatsian, and a Browningsque, apprehension of transience, mutability becomes “the vulnerable showers of time” that invokes a “haunting ghost” of fear (8,7). The water symbolism becomes in this context appropriately representative of the fluidity of process and the flux of emotional exchange.

The two prominent symbols are not the poems’ sole means of bringing out personal experience in an aesthetically intriguing form. The poems resourcefully utilize well-known classical myths to coat the emotional states of their protagonists. “A Valediction” is a courageous facing up to vocational change as brought about by retirement. The persona’s intimation that he is “no longer needed [. . .]. / In young-souled language departments,” takes the form of a mythical departure Ulysses like, and Tennysonian as well, “to some unknown island, / Where Sirens are said to entice / The haggard warriors of old” (15-17). Without abandoning the mythical stance, the speaker volunteers a series of emotional revelations experienced on revisiting the old work site. New faces replace the old familiar ones and result in the persona’s inability to relate to the occasion. The faces even intrude on old memories, disrupt their flow and result in further disorientation of the speaker. He finds the gathering intellectually in-coordinate and tremendously lacking in spiritual communion, a response that defeats his attempts to explain the current event: “A feast here or a mourning [. . .]. / A jolly laughter or a dim requiem?” (25,27). Against the confusion about the occasion and its purpose, the speaker finds refuge in asserting old work ethics: of union of hearts and minds and uniformity of objectives (31). Significantly, his ethical assertions remain both emotionally oriented and mythical in reference: “Old warriors were not keen on praise, / Nor would backbiting shades their

memories” (28-29). Supposing the event some sort of a “memorial” for their “glories,” he still finds it short in “hearty love” (32, 33). The “old warriors” are now beyond reach for they “are gone to other worlds / Where love is faith and respect a prayer” (41,42). The mythical frame persists till the very end to artistically, and magnificently, sustain the poem’s voicing of the vocational crisis.

Besides utilization of well-known classical myths to artfully record emotional crises and climactic life events, the poems tap Japanese cultural resources for their “unfamiliar” myths to disguise feelings of loneliness of a persona traveling in that part of the world. The “pilgrim from the east,” as the “From Japan” section of the book frequently calls him, is doubly displaced partly because of his travel in a remote, foreign unsympathetic land, and partly because of an unresolved emotional tension he seems to have experienced back home (“Contraries” 7, “Koyoto”10, “A Confession” 2,7,10). His double displacement and emotional strain are articulated in a series of Japanese mythical allusions. Though esoterically closed to an uninformed reader, these allusions have a stabilizing effect on the emotional stream of living pain in the poems. Their unfamiliar, and consequently far-fetched, narrational details intellectually engage readers in a challenging quest of their thematic and structural relevance to the persona’s emotional experience. The intellectualizing process has a modifying effect on the emotional ache experienced by the “pilgrim” and inevitably transmitted to the reader. The Japanese mythical allusions thus help keep the frustrations of unrealized love skillfully in tact.

The intricate personal symbolism of rock and water, the well-known, widely-circulated classical myths of sailing figures, and the Japanese allusions of “Meiji lover[s] and Mikado heroe[s]” (“An Apology” 7,8) are all consolidated in their operation by a host of references to English poetic traditions and collaborate to bring out subjective expression of feelings in an aesthetically captivating manner. Among the traditions of English poetic heritage the poems invoke, both directly and indirectly, are the Romantic, Victorian and Modern streams as well as the post-Modern trends. The invocations not only coat, disguise or balance out the intensity of personal emotions, but they also steep the work, by virtue of the uniqueness of their combination, in beauty and originality.

One of the direct references to English poetry occurs in an invocation of Shelley’s “West Wind” in downtown Tokyo in the poem “An Apology.” The speaker can neither “abstain” from love nor “[d]isown the burden of passion” (7,8). Therefore, Shelley’s west wind is called forth to help resolve the emotional crisis. The wind resumes its normal Shelleyan function of simultaneous destruction and preservation. It will help eliminate an unpleasant conflict that has obstructed a smooth flow of a love relationship and will, consequently, preserve and regenerate love. Through the inspiration of the west wind, the speaker is guided to ask forgiveness and will thus “return to the gates of paradise” of his love (18).

The Romantic mood changes into a post-Modern critical commentary, amazingly through another direct Romantic allusion. A poem entitled “The Sick Rose” in the collection invokes the Blakean poem only to subvert its context. If William Blake’s symbolic rose loses her innocence through a secretive, unhealthy passion, the current rose meets a better destiny, a healthier love. She retains her innocence and does not fall sick. Consequently, she comes to epitomize the real rose that discards Blake’s from the species: “His was not a rose, / Mine is not sick” (3,4). The ultimate objective of the piece seems to be a repudiation of the Blakean psychological insights of physical love and

reducing his poem to a metaphor: “Neither she nor I are Blakeans [. . .]. / What to do with a metaphor?” (1,5).

Subtle, indirect invocations of English poetry also saturate the work. “Queries of a Palestinian Lonely Child” is reminiscent of Blake’s Songs of Innocence, especially of poems like “A Holy Thursday” and “The Chimney Sweeper,” in their depiction of the child’s imaginative unawareness of suffering from the viewpoint of innocence, without failing to simultaneously maintain an adult perspective that implicitly exposes and condemns exploitation of childhood and innocence. Interestingly, the post-Modern anti-Blakean attitude in “The Sick Rose” shifts to an adoption of the Romantic Blakean stance in this poem, an indication of a highly intellectual, thoughtfully meditative and carefully selective handling of the tradition.

William Wordsworth is also subtly invoked in the “Tsunami” poem in the “Occasional” section of the volume. A marvelous example of how great art transforms tragedy in life into an aesthetic object of contemplation, the poem relies on richly suggestive, highly imaginative and melodiously musical use of English to achieve its transformative description of the tragedy. The deluge is a “tidal geological dance” performed by the ocean in response to a “knock” that “came from deep, deep / Down the lava of life and death” (4,1,2). It also seems that the “currents of the deep were frolicking / After finishing their daily chores” (6-7). The beauty of the lines culminates in their invocation of a similar scene in Wordsworth’s poem The Prelude. Describing the deluge in the dream of the Arab, Wordsworth writes: “It is [. . .] the water of the deep / Gathering upon us [. . .]. / With the fleet waters of a drowning world” (bk.5; 130,31,37).

Both poems artfully depict the overpowering waves in terms of light, nimble, agile moves, but the current poem excels Wordsworth’s in envisioning a tidal dance. The outcome of the two cases also shows affinity. The “devastating human trauma” in “Tsunami” is an “apocalypse of global trance” (11,12). Similarly in Wordsworth, the drowning of the natural world is an apocalyptic triumph of the power of the imagination recognized by Wordsworth’s critics, like Geoffrey Hartman.

The “Tsunami” poem is significant in another respect. Besides its power to recall and excel an akin experience in a major Romantic poem, it demonstrates a capacity, frequent in this book of poetry, to include local cultural touches in the intricate web of rich and varied allusions to other cultures and literary traditions. Interestingly, the treatment of the local also partakes of the same scrutinizing handling other traditions were subjected to, with the result that the poems’ response to local cultural concepts varies between calling them into question and embracing their assertions.

“Tsunami” challenges the local traditional way of interpreting natural phenomenal disaster as a retaliatory act of moral degeneration in the human world. “No ill feeling, no avenging urge” had caused the tragedy (5). This challenge, however, never impinges on orthodox faith. Supposing that local tradition might have originated in some religious assertions, the lines open up gates of assessing such assertions when they interpret the “devastating human trauma” as an “apocalypse of global trance” (11,12). The theological connotations of the word apocalypse suggest, inconclusively, some heavenly ordained revelation implied in the disastrous phenomenon. Such ordination is not retaliatory in nature as the common local tradition would have it. It might as well be of a contrary nature. The poem does not elaborate. Leaving the apocalyptic revelation unspecified

stimulates meditation of the event, broadens perception of the situation and elicits a contemplative response to a beautifully portrayed tragic scene.

“The Pearl” is another poem that draws on traditional cultural heritage embracing, rather than challenging, its assertions this stance. The poem utilizes a common cultural saying to enrich its own symbolic texture. The culturally renowned “pearl of the mind,” commonly indicative of a mentally fostered preoccupation with someone, develops in this poem an intimate emotional relevance when transformed into a “pearl of the heart” (2). The metaphor thus becomes fittingly representative of a cherished daughter who is about to quit the parental home to matrimonial life. But the objective pearl preserved in the shell symbolically stands for the girl in another subtly refined context beyond parental emotional fondness: “The undivulged secret, / The holy mystery” of a virgin’s life (9-10).

The plenitude of the book is inexhaustible. Of each point raised in this article there can be numerous examples and multiplied elaborations. The post-Modern handling of “The Sick Rose” is also present, more impressively, in “The Intruder.” It is also evident in all provocative openings of most of the poems and more so in the tantalizing conclusions of the “Meditations” poems. To trace all meta-fictional and self-reflexive stances in the poems is a subject of another review. The principle holds true for literary invocations of English poetic heritage and classical allusions as well.

Similarly, the charming play with English as demonstrated in “Tsunami” would take us to each and every poem in the collection and in particular to those “Of Beauty” section, a stunning part of the collection not only in its phrasal turns, but also in its amazing capacity to transform emotions into art, love into beauty. The poems in this part of the book speak of feminine beauty more than of love, and of love as a beautifully coined expression rather than an experience of emotional exchange, or even display.

Of the first case one hears of a beautiful woman “coming down” from the angelic sphere of her beauty “to sweeten” the human world, “[t]o unworld the earth / To duplicate heaven / Unparadising the skies” (“She” 8-12). The inventive coinage and imaginative choice of English aptly lends representation of beauty striking touches. Similarly, love in “Of Beauty” section is enticing language: “Words, sentences transfigured / Into tantalizing beauty” (“Frustrations” 11-12). The case is more concretely so in “What Love,” a question that the poem answers by identifying it as:

A positive negativeness,
A blind clear-sightedness,
A strong-headed inability
An impossible possibility,
A possible impossibility. (2-6)

Love is transfigured into stunning phrasal turns and beautiful words that compel deliberation and control response through contemplation of playful and captivating usage of English. Significantly, the transfiguration is symptomatic of a self-reflexive, post-Modern stance, an indication of how a superbly uniform whole defeats analytical dissection.

Khattab, Ezzat. The Rock and Other Poems. 1st ed. Riyadh: Dar Almufradat, 2005.