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Simon C. Estok

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Environmental Horror in the Time of the Ancient Mariner

Simon C. Estok

Sungkyunkwan University, Seoul

Of all the analyses and interpretations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," there is precious little discussion about the compression of ecological time within the poem, a compression that makes the Mariner's anthropogenic environmental crises eminently tangible and comprehensible. Environmental attention to the poem has been increasing in recent years (Bergman; Estok "The Environmental Imagination;" "Environmental Lessons;" Kim; Moreno; Weng), and there is an increasing understanding that the poem seems to be raising questions about broad scale (rather than simply individual) environmental impacts. Miriam Herrera Moreno goes as far as to claim that the poem is "obra romántica que encarna poéticamente el primer programa ambientalista que haya nunca brindado la literatura" [a romantic work that poetically incorporates the first environmental program that literature has ever offered"] (95). Whether such is the case or not, the environmental importance of the poem has become increasingly clear. Given this fact, the translation of the temporalities of environmental issues from hyperobjectivity¹ to tangible comprehensibility is extraordinarily important.

Although there is a lot of mystery in the poem, the narrative voice maintains a simplicity that seems to rebuke the obvious questions. Why the Mariner should suffer so much, why the crew should all die, where the punishment is coming from – all of these are questions for which the poem offers no answers, but one might reasonably argue that such questions are irrelevant and that it is the simplicity of the verse (form and content) itself and how it truncates philosophical dithering that is important here. "That the Rime has [been] and can be read in a multitude of ways is beyond question" (Barr 874), Mark L. Barr explains, offering extensive persuasive comments and support describing some of this multitude. For Barr, a key narrative goal of the poem, however, a goal in which the glossing plays a central role, is to forestall questions and debate: "The gloss has the effect of taming and controlling the rebellious text, limiting its potential to foment discord" (875). There is a simplicity, directness, and speed to the message of the poem. John Worthen has argued indeed that "the simplicity of the poetry remains one of its greatest achievements" (23). Part of the poem's simplicity is in how it draws direct and unquestionable links between individual actions and broad environmental catastrophes. Of these links, there is no question, no mystery, and – importantly – no waiting.

For the audience (the Wedding-Guest and the reader), time moves at lightning speed, one day rolling into the next in seconds:

The Sun came up upon the left,
Out of the sea came he!
And he shone bright, and on the right
Went down into the sea. (ll. 25–28)

Even the suffering does not elongate time, and the days continue apace:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean. (ll. 115–118)

It is “a weary time” (143), to be sure, but time neither slows nor impedes understanding of causal relations: there is no dislocation between this weary time and the event that precipitated it. The clear causal connection between the environmental crime and the environmental crises is unmistakable. What enables this causal linkage are the temporal moorings of the poem and how these are or may be tethered to the period itself.

The Romantic period was certainly undergoing important transformations in how time was understood and represented. Christopher R. Miller has studied time among the Romantics, concluding that representations of evening often provide a viable method of condensing temporal expanses; this, however, is clearly not the case in “The Rime,” and Miller rarely moves into discussions about this particular poem. Some critics have dealt more directly with the poem in ways that often glance off the topic, ricocheting questions about time. One critic notes implausible mimetic aspects of the poem, but without mentioning time (see [Swanepoel](#)); another discusses narrative issues, but without analyzing the centrality of memory and how it works with the poem’s temporal manipulations (see [Shang](#)); and yet another notes how a rather formulaic plotting enables [Coleridge](#) to achieve “a refraction and humanization of [an] impossible event” ([Dyck](#) 591), again, however, without discussion of the centrality of time. [Daniel McDonald](#)’s comments about insight, on the other hand, come much closer to recognizing the function of time in the poem: “awareness comes suddenly” (549), McDonald argues, and “the [Mariner’s] message was . . . abrupt” (549). It is a message about the temporal and causal proximity of human action with environmental response, and “he carries this message of reality through the world” (549). Yet, there is here a paradox: the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest live at very different speeds, and the question about the scalar relationship between these paces reveals interesting theoretical issues about time.

There has been an enormous amount of recent theorizing about time, and [Wendy Parkins](#) has offered some provocative insights about “fast subjects and slow living” (to quote from the subtitle of her article). While Parkins is not investigating “The Rime,” her insights may be applied usefully to it if we consider the Wedding-Guest and the Mariner within the “fast and slow” paradigm. The ancient Mariner is an old man living at a different pace and moving at a much slower stride than the young man, the latter hurried, harried, and on his way to a wedding. It is thus surprising that it is through the Mariner and not the Wedding-Guest that time is syncopated. This paradox requires a rethinking of what defines “living slowly.” For Parkins, the speed of living is closely related with the degree to which the person is “engaging in ‘mindful’ rather than ‘mindless’ practices” (364). The very mindfulness of the Mariner implies recognition of the necessity of speed, of the urgency to convey his message quickly, and of the perils of dallying. The Mariner’s targeted interruption of mindless revelry results in a lesson within a time block, as if it were a seminar at a university. Time is different for the teacher and the student – or, in this case, for the Mariner and the Wedding-Guest.

The notion that time is relative, of course, is hardly novel. Einstein was working on this idea more than a century ago. Theorizing about time more recently, [Elke Weik](#) has explained that time “is neither unchangeable nor homogeneous, but depends on space, matter, and the reference system of the observer” (303). Demonstrating this relativity, “The Rime” undeniably does what all good narratives do: it manipulates time, since the story-time and the text-time are clearly rarely the same in any narrative. Obviously a story can cover decades or centuries or millennia (the story-time), but few readers will spend such amounts of time with the text itself (text-time). [Gérard Genette](#) theorizes extensively about time and about how authors and audiences navigate story-time and text time (see, [Genette](#), chs. 1–3 especially). What is going on in this narrative, however, goes beyond these conventions of balancing time issues with readerly patience, does not attempt to produce order or any sense of it, and is deeply committed to showing through form and content, through imagined space and temporality, through prose and verse the horrors that will come from abusing nature. This is a poem that is

extravagantly *disunified*, composed of interruptions, disruptions, and irruptions. Split between gloss and ballad, prose and verse, the two-column poem partitions commentary and narrative, philosophical and emotive languages. A disjointed, seventeen part story, the ballad concerns an interrupted wedding and describes abrupt appearances and vanishings, intense, unmotivated passions. (Williams 182–83)

Time is totally out-of-joint in this poem. Everything is out of whack. This is horror writ large. This is what it means to reap what is sown. This is the lesson that the time of the Ancient Mariner teaches. It is a “ghastly tale” (l.584) for which the Mariner has a “strange power of speech” (l.587). The horrors of scale are unmistakable: it is not just a surface of “slimy things [that] . . . crawl with legs/ Upon the slimy sea” (125–126); indeed, “the very deep did rot” (123). This is a world gone very bad, and the horrors are, to use Julia Kristeva’s words, the “perpetual danger” (9) posed by being immersed in and inseparable from that world. Central to the danger here is nonhuman agency.

Kristeva has much to say about this topic in her influential *Powers of Horror*. For her, the threat of being engulfed by abject matter is indeed at the very core of horror. She takes pains to define what the abject is and what it does: the abject “is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (4). The abject “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4), the abject is a threat to our very survival. It is the rot that surrounds the Mariner and his men, the water everywhere with “death-fires [that] danced at night” (l.128), “the slimy sea” and its creatures (l.126), the infection and rot that threaten both the “collapse of the border between inside and outside” (Kristeva 53) and human integrity itself, what Kelly Hurley describes in a different context as “the ruination of the human subject” (3). Horror is the zombieism of “the Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH” (l.193). It is the human inability to assert control over this other-than-human agency. Eugene Thacker echoes and builds on this proposition that the lack of agency over the natural world is at the core of horror: “to confront an absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all . . . has been a central motif of the horror genre for some time” (1).

Time is central to the horrors of this poem, to how the inevitable and unrelenting, the amoral and violent, the shocking and unpredictable agencies of nature play out across the spectrum of human incomprehensibility and impotence. In the twenty-first century, the relationship between human actions and environmental effects has often been denied. “Climate denial” is only possible because the temporal and material relationships lack proximity, climate change being a scalar event that scholars have sought to address in a variety of ways: Timothy Morton with “hyperobjects;” Rob Nixon with “slow violence;” Dipesh Chakrabarty with “species history;” and Paul; Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer with the notion of the “Anthropocene.” But the huge anthropogenic effects in the poem happen so quickly that there is simply no room for denial. The physical scale of the damage is vast, to be sure, but not so the temporality of the Mariner’s narrative. It is through the time of the Ancient Mariner’s narrative that the effects of human actions become tangible. It is the time of the Ancient Mariner’s narrative that offers a lesson about environmental mindfulness. And it is the time of the Ancient Mariner’s narrative that produces environmental horror.

Note

1. Timothy Morton defines “hyperobjects” as “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans” (1). It is their sheer size that presents conceptual and representational issues.

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