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The Mingled Measure
Interpreting and Adapting S. T. Coleridge's
'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

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The following text is a re-worked version of a talk that I first gave at Falmouth University's 2011 Illustration Forum: *Metamorphosis: Interpretation and Adaptation in Illustration*. Shortly after that forum some of the themes I look at here were given a new and urgent contemporary twist in Nick Hayes' 2011 graphic novel *The Rime of the Modern Mariner*.¹

I haven't added a discussion of that here, having recently talked about Hayes' book at length in another article - *1000 Ladders: Ecocide, Empathy and the Eco-Fable*.² I'm currently in the early phase of a practice-led PhD, titled *Stories for Seeing in the Dark*, which looks to that leaky territory emerging between self-published authorial illustration and artists books - my preferred term for which is 'graphic literature'³ - and asks what it may bring to the work of cultural recuperation⁴ that we see reflected in the current proliferation of *eco*-genres: *eco-art*, *eco-poetry*, *eco-criticism* etc. It's this theme that I have principally tried to open up in the following discussion of Coleridge's *Rime*, and some of its interpretations.

A hard lesson

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1798 maritime ballad *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* we encounter the anguished voice of a medieval sailor, tormented by his own wanton killing of an albatross. As the plot unfolds we hear of how, cursed by this action, he and his shipmates endure an inexorable descent into horror, falling under the enchantment of a nightmare spectre-woman, the white-faced Life-in-Death. Only when the mariner is touched, in a fleeting moment of self-forgetfulness, by an upwelling of love for the myriad sea creatures that surround him, can he recover his withered ability to pray. That very instant he is delivered from the curse fallen over him. The body of the murdered albatross, hung round his neck by the ship's crew, now drops into the sea. He is free.

But the mariner's ordeal is far from over. Upon his return to land, he is thenceforth condemned to wander the earth, forever searching for the next one marked out to hear his convulsive reliving of the tale, and in the hearing, to be taught the lesson that he himself has learnt at such terrible personal cost: "He prayeth well, who loveth well... All things both great and small".⁵

Capturing the mariner's smell

Mervyn Peake, in discussing his *Gormenghast* novels, spoke of the need to match his characters' voices against their physical appearance - and of how he would sometimes keep a drawing of a character beside him as he wrote, "trying" as he put it, "to imagine if that kind of remark could possibly come from that sort of terrible mouth".⁶ In Peake's illustrations for *The Rime* perhaps we could say the reverse process applies, and we see him conjuring a visual characterisation of the haunted voice at the centre of Coleridge's poem, and of the hallucinatory realms of being that this character traverses. Peake once stated that it was for "the illustrator to make his drawings have the same smell as the book he is illustrating".⁷ The eight drawings Peake made for the 1943 Chatto & Windus edition of *The Rime* (which can be viewed at <http://www.mervynpeake.org/illustrator.html>) have been spoken of as the darkest of the poem's many visual interpretations⁸; how successfully their darkness evokes the smell of the poem itself, and to what extent they might have confirmed Coleridge's reluctance to see it illustrated at all⁹, through their saturating of its imagery with the unmistakable smell of Peake's own imaginative voice, are questions I want to look at obliquely, in briefly considering two children's books that also - I'd suggest - offer creative responses to *The Rime*. In particular, I want to look at how their contrasting handling of the poem's central theme of endarkenment and enchantment might illuminate something about the process of interpretation itself.

The Dark Island

In C.S. Lewis' 1952 children's book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, part of his Narnia sequence, is a chapter called *The Dark Island*. It tells of how, far out to sea, Lewis' protagonists encounter what appears at first to be a dark island or mountain, standing alone in the middle of the open ocean. As they approach it turns out not to be land at all, but a zone of impenetrable darkness. After some hesitation they row into it, and in the disorienting space inside, where both time and distance become confused, they pull from the water a stranded mariner. As he lies wailing and raving on the deck of their ship, the mariner tells of how he has been trapped in here for countless years. He then falls into despairing, hysterical laughter as it transpires that they too are now imprisoned in darkness - for they, like him, have strayed into a world where dreams become reality, where the ability to separate the two is lost, and where all who enter become fools enchanted by their own nightmares. And that is where they would have remained, were it not for Lucy, the youngest of the crew, who calls out in desperation: "Aslan, Aslan, if you have ever loved us at all, send us help now!".¹⁰

Aslan, Lewis' Christ avatar, promptly appears as a distant speck of light that projects a bright beam onto the ship, setting it apart from the surrounding gloom. From within that speck emerges an albatross, which circles the ship whispering words of encouragement to Lucy, before guiding them back to daylight, and back to the real. Once delivered from their own fearful imaginings, the crew turn back to see only the clear blue sea and sky. The darkness no longer exists, or is perhaps revealed as never having existed.

Modes of enchantment

I was first drawn into *The Rime's* world through discovering Ted Hughes' great essay on Coleridge's troubled relationship to payer and to the supernatural, *The Snake in the Oak*¹¹. When I came across C.S. Lewis' reworking of the poem's imagery in this short tale of soul retrieval, it struck me that Lewis presents us with a kind of mirror-image interpretation of the mariner's plight, to that suggested by Hughes.

Lewis and Hughes concur in reading the poem in terms of a spiritual crisis: for both, the mariner embodies a condition of inner desolation, helpless to deliver itself, which can only be redeemed by an experience of grace. But as to the nature of that desolation, as to its cause, and to its appropriate remedy, their responses to the poem might be said to take up opposite positions.

Coleridge's lasting obsession with themes of enchantment comes to one of its fullest expressions in *The Rime*, a poem that he revisited and continued to fiddle with throughout his life, seemingly baffled by just what it was he had written¹². C.S. Lewis' story likewise concerns a specific kind of enchantment: that of the enthrallment of delusional self-suggestion, those ensnaring fantasies which - Lewis implies - we are apt to fall prey to in the absence of a guiding higher power.

By contrast, in Hughes' empathic critical reading of the poem, the mariner's hallucinatory ordeal is seen as a necessary and *curative* descent - a visionary encounter which briefly prises loose the dead grip of his human-centred worldview. The "thousand thousand slimy things"¹³ that surround the mariner at his nadir are, in their very hideousness, a mirror for the anthropocentric blindness benighting his perception of the non-human, corporeal world. The mode of enchantment that Hughes presents us with, here, is far from the solipsistic lapse into self-suggestion caricatured in Lewis' little sermon. Rather, it is the universally recorded process of involuntary descent which characterises a shamanic calling.

Hughes thus reads the mariner's 'curse' as a redemptive enchantment, one that comes to awaken him to what the ecological philosopher David Abram has more recently called a "more-than-human" living cosmos¹⁴. It is an awakening that the mariner - and by extension Coleridge - tragically recoils from at the last minute, as the poem retrenches to the daylight certainties of the author's Christian conditioning. In the process, Hughes suggests, both mariner and poet are condemned to a state of perpetual wandering, forever possessed by a rejected but unretractable experience. The poem's weak, sentimental conclusion thus abandons both in the grip of an aborted healing. Having rejected a shamanic calling, they are now forced to relive it, over and over, in each compulsive retelling of the journey.

The profound difference between these two imaginative responses to the poem's central metaphors perfectly frames Hughes' own understanding of interpretation. Speaking of *The Rime*, he reflects: "Poems of this kind can obviously never be explained. They are total symbols for psychic life. But they can be interpreted - a total symbol is above all a vessel for interpretations: the reader fills it and drinks"¹⁵.

The Iron Woman

In 1993, the same year that he wrote *The Snake in the Oak*, Ted Hughes' children's book *The Iron Woman* was also published. Like C.S. Lewis' story, Hughes' also tells of a young girl called Lucy - and of her encounter with an enraged metal earth goddess. From the moment of her first physical contact with this strange being, Lucy becomes acutely attuned to the destruction and suffering being visited on the non-human environment by industrial pollution. She finds herself infected with an excruciating sympathy with the poisoned wild creatures surrounding her, a condition of heightened sensitivity that is both passed on, and triggered, by physical contact. Personified in the form of the giant Iron Woman, this violated non-human realm goes on to wreak an ironic revenge on the polluters, bringing them to awareness of the damage they have been causing by initiating an epidemic of empathy, one that eventually transforms all of the men in the country into wild creatures, in which form they are forced to experience the consequences of their actions, first hand. The story concludes with the Iron Woman's weird, visionary purging of our culture's obsession with growth and profit - her breaking of the toxic spell which has darkened our hearts, and despoiled our world.

Perhaps it stretches the point to read *The Iron Woman* as an interpretation of *The Rime*, although Hughes' story contains some intriguing echoes of his meditations on Coleridge's poem.¹⁶ Either way, I'd suggest that in *The Iron*

Woman we see Hughes' adaptation, for a child reader, of that same state of cultural and spiritual desolation which he reads into Coleridge's great ballad, in an ecological redemption story that enacts its own hallucinatory, curative enchantment.

But the parallels here reveal, perhaps, a more simple and all-pervasive truth. What is true of *The Iron Woman* is of course equally true of all three of the interpretations discussed – Peake's drawings, Lewis' story and Hughes' critical essay: in each case we see something grown from a permeable comingling of imaginations within the vessel of poetic metaphor. The resulting smell, in each case, is layered, complex, full of contradictions. We've heard a good deal now concerning the death of the author – perhaps in that rich, shifting stink, we might say that we smell the inexplicable life of a great poem.

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Mat's own practice consists of illustrated narrative poetry, self-published in the form of small-edition pamphlets by Strandline Books, as well as being published by third parties such as *The Dark Mountain Journal* and the Cornish Red River Poets' anthology *Murder of Krows*. Recent examples of this work can be seen here: <http://shop.dark-mountain.net>

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Notes

1. Hayes, Nick, *The Rime of the Modern Mariner* (London, Jonathon Cape, 2011)

2. The Dark Mountain Project Blog, Summer 2014 <http://dark-mountain.net/blog/>

3. I have borrowed this phrase from Audrey Niffenegger, who spoke at the 2009 Falmouth Illustration Forum of her alienation from mainstream graphic novel culture, and proposed the term 'graphic literature' as a better description of what she was doing.

4. The notion of a cultural 'recuperation' in the context of our collective adaptations to ecological crisis is proposed by David Abram in his 2010 book *Becoming Animal*. Abram acknowledges the crucial importance of direct political-environmental activism, but suggests that

there's another and equally important work to be done: "a necessary work of recuperation" fostered through our coming "more directly into felt relation with the wider, more-than-human community of beings that surrounds and sustains the human hub-bub." Awakening to such cosmic citizenship, Abram suggests, has real and practical implications for the way in which our collective body-politic *breathes*. Abram, David, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (U.S.A., Pantheon, 2010), p.9-10

5. Coleridge, S.T. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Part Seven (London, J.&A. Arch, 1798)

6. *Reader Takes Over* (radio broadcast), General Overseas Service 20 June 1947, quoted in Yorke, Michael, *Mervyn Peake: My Eyes Mint Gold*, (London, Faber and Faber, 2009), p.176

7. Yorke, Michael, 2009

8. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: the Poem and its Illustrators*, ed. by R. Woof, S. Hebron, S. Perry (Grasmere, The Wordsworth Trust, 2006)

9. R. Woof, S. Hebron, S. Perry

10. Lewis, C.S., *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (London, Geoffery Bles, 1952), p.158

11. Hughes, Ted, 'The Snake in the Oak', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by W. Scammell (London, Faber and Faber, 1994)

12. Warner, Marina, (2003 Introduction to) *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, with Illustrations by Mervyn Peake* (London, Vintage Classics 2004)

13. Coleridge, S.T., Part Four

14. Abram, David, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, (New York, Vintage 1996), p.6-11, 256

15. Hughes, Ted, 1994, p. 393

16. This rather speculative idea struck me when I read of Lucy's initial encounter with the Iron Woman, who first comes to her in a dream: not yet in her metal giantess form, but as a dark, oil-slicked animal – a seal, perhaps – with "black, shining eyes", that comes into Lucy's bedroom in the dead of night, there becoming a girl her own age who lays an oil-slimed hand on Lucy's shoulder, shaking her and crying out: "Wake up! O wake up! Oh, please wake up!". It's hard not to read, here, an echo of the nightmares that Hughes recounted, that same year, as having tormented Coleridge during his intense

struggle with *The Rime*: how he was repeatedly visited, in dream, by a "most frightful" woman "whose features were blended with darkness", and who in one dream caught hold of Coleridge's right eye, "attempting to pull it out". Hughes, Ted, *The Iron Woman: A Sequel to the Iron Man* (London, Faber and Faber, 1993), p.11/ Hughes, Ted, 1994, p.427