Narrative and Entangled Rhythms: An Econarratological Approach

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Abstract

A contribution to the emerging field of "econarratology," this article argues that rhythm has a pivotal role to play in narrative's confrontation with the nonhuman environment, and should be given more sustained attention in ecocritical discussions. In line with other essays in this special issue, I build on the assumption that rhythm is an inherently multiscalar phenomenon: the reader's experience of narrative rhythm derives from interactions between patterns existing at multiple textual levels, from prosody and syntax to the overall speed and organization of plot. Further, narrative can evoke the extratextual rhythms of nonhuman phenomena—from the seasonal cycle to tidal motion—that are being increasingly disrupted by human activity in times of climate change. I show that, by creating an interplay of textual and extratextual rhythms, narrative can engage the reader's environmental imagination and question Western notions of human mastery over the nonhuman ecology. I illustrate these claims through readings of contemporary short stories by Lauren Groff (*Boca Raton*) and China Miéville ("Covehithe"), both of which use rhythmic patterning to entangle the audience's attention and prompt a reconsideration of human-nonhuman relations.

Introduction

"I am writing The Waves to a rhythm not to a plot," wrote Virginia Woolf in a 1930 letter to composer and suffragette Ethel Smyth (quoted in Flint 2000, xxi). Indeed, *The Waves*, the novel that Woolf would go on to publish in 1931, presents a variety of striking rhythmical motifs. Perhaps most overtly, the book is interspersed with italicized sections that describe a deserted seascape at different times of the day. These chapters, known as "interludes," frame the book and bridge between its unnumbered chapters, which focus on the inner lives of six characters. Following Daniele Barbieri's definition of rhythm as the "iteration of some sort of schema" (Barbieri 2004, 65; my translation), the alternation between italicized interludes and roman text thus represents an important rhythmic principle in *The Waves*. This alternation also involves a switch between two profoundly different modes of narrative. In the interludes, the nonhuman space of a coastal landscape takes center stage in the absence of any perceiving characters or even an overtly anthropomorphic narrator: there are no human characters taking in the scenery, and even the house that is described in passing by Woolf's prose seems uninhabited.[1] The protagonists are the wind, the sun, the clouds, the animals that populate the scenery—and of course the waves themselves, with their regular motion (which is in itself rhythmic). All these are nonhuman entities, and most of these will be seen as inanimate and unconscious by modern Western readers. The other chapters, by contrast, feature six human characters and detail their conscious experience by displaying their inner speech.

The rhythmic return of the interludes invites the reader to attend to resonances between the nonhuman- and the human-focused sections of Woolf's work, for instance by realizing that the regular

[1] For more on these sections and how they are uncoupled from human subjectivity, see Banfield (1987).

transitions from one character's consciousness to another resemble a wave-like pattern, with one protagonist's voice "breaking" and another voice taking over. Read in this way, then, the rhythm of interludes and chapters connects a nonhuman seascape to the range of human experiences voiced by the protagonists. This "bridging" function of rhythm vis-à-vis the human-nonhuman distinction is widely recognized in scholarship on Virginia Woolf and literary modernism more generally (see, e.g., Martin 2013). Melba Cuddy-Keane, Adam Hammond, and Alexandra Peat write that in "its most general and wide-ranging modernist usage, rhythm stood for harmony not only between sounds in a line of verse, or formal elements in a poem, or individuals in a group but between the human body and the natural world" (2014, 206–7). After all, rhythmic patterns exist in the nonhuman world (the day-night cycle, the seasons, tidal motion, and so on) as well as in the human body (e.g., breathing and heartbeat). The convergence of these rhythmic patterns blurs the dualistic separation between nature and human subjectivity that underlies Western modernity.

Paying attention to the shared patterning of our body and the nonhuman world "out there" can challenge the binaries of Western thinking, particularly its implicit belief in the exceptionality of the human (its existence outside of nature, and in opposition to it). Such binaries have been increasingly questioned by posthumanist philosophy.[2] Steven Shaviro puts it straightforwardly: "We can no longer think of Nature as one side of a binary opposition. In an age of anthropogenic global warming and genetically modified organisms, not to mention Big Data and world-encompassing computing and communications networks, it makes no sense to oppose nature to culture, or a 'state of nature' to human society, or the natural to the artificial" (2012, 205). The modernist interest in rhythm resonates with this posthumanist insight into the deep imbrication of human societies and nonhuman phenomena. Highlighting shared rhythms across the human-nonhuman divide is an important means of complicating and challenging binary thinking and the anthropocentrism that accompanies it. Fostering this sense of entanglement—or "enmeshment," to use Timothy Morton's (2010) metaphor—with the nonhuman is essential in times of ecological crisis: as humanity rushes towards climate catastrophe, unprecedented cultural efforts are needed to place human subjectivity in a constitutive relationship with the Earth's geology, climate, and ecology. These efforts represent an important part of the agenda of ecocriticism (or environmentally oriented literary criticism), and of the environmental humanities more generally.[3] Because of how rhythm establishes direct linkage between human bodies—including *readers'* bodies—and the temporalities of the nonhuman world, this article argues for the significance of textual rhythms to ecocritical discussions. Conversely, it seeks to show that the recent surge of interest in rhythm in literary and narrative theory—as exemplified by this special issue—can speak to larger debates within today's humanities.

I am not the only scholar to theorize the intersection of formal devices and ecological issues, of course. Erin James's (2015) "econarratology" also operates under the assumption that narrative can reshape what James calls, building on Lawrence Buell's (1995) work, readers' "environmental imagination": "storyworlds can expose us to new *environmental imaginations,* or conceptions and experiences of a place based upon a subjective understanding of a particular environmental site" (James 2015, xiii). More precisely, narrative can help shift the Western environmental imagination from notions of human superiority and mastery to a sense of profound entanglement with the nonhuman—where

[2] For an introduction to posthumanism, see Wolfe (2010).

[3] Garrard (2004) offers an overview and broad-ranging discussion of ecocritical work. See also Rose et al. (2012) for an influential formulation of the environmental humanities' goals.

"entanglement" evokes both reciprocity and interdependency. In *Narrating the Mesh* (2021), I write, in an econarratological vein, about how narrative may contribute to that shift through formal complexity. In this article, I develop that argument in relation to rhythmical patterns and how they may also help convey human-nonhuman entanglement.

While rhythm is, as work by Barbieri (2004), Andrea Fenice (2018), and others has shown, an intrinsic dimension of narrative, some stories seek to put rhythmic patterns to ecological use, by hinting at a convergence of textual and extratextual rhythms.[4] Rhythmic devices can evoke particular affects in readers.[5] Through stylistic or thematic means, narrative can then steer these affects towards the nonhuman world and its (extratextual) rhythms, such as the cyclicity of the seasons (which is disrupted by climate change) or the slow rise of sea levels in times of global warming. In this way, the rhythmicity of narrative becomes a means of directly implicating readers' bodies—and their affects—within the nonhuman world and its temporal patterns. As always in narrative, this effect is produced by a combination of formal (structural) devices and semantic cues at the level of subject-matter and plot. What I am outlining is, admittedly, a particular interpretation of narrative rhythm and not a conclusion all readers of a certain story will arrive at. Nevertheless, I argue that cultivating attention to rhythm—not just in scholarship but also, for example, in educational contexts—is an important means of bringing out the ecological significance of literary narrative.

While modernist writing à la Virginia Woolf has been a source of inspiration for this argument, my focus is on more recent narrative in which rhythmic patterns suggest human-nonhuman entanglement. Thus, in the final part of this article, I offer an econarratological discussion of rhythmic devices in two short narratives: *Boca Raton* (2018), by Lauren Groff and "Covehithe" (2011), by China Miéville. The former is a realist narrative focusing on the anxieties of a young mother who confronts an ominous climate future. The latter is representative of a different strand of contemporary literature engaging with climate change—namely, speculative or "weird" fiction.[6] Miéville's fantastical premise is that oil rigs in different parts of the world come to life and cause widespread disruption of the globalized economy. In both stories, syntactic and narrative rhythms work together towards a destabilization of human mastery. Before turning to those close readings, I will unpack further the concept of rhythm, discuss its embodied underpinnings in narrative comprehension, and explain why rhythmic patterns speak so powerfully to human-nonhuman relations. The model I develop centers on creative entanglements between textual and extratextual rhythms, and more generally between the human and the nonhuman in times of ecological crisis.[7]

Rhythmic Patterns: Scalability and Embodiment

Why is rhythm a useful concept for econarratology? The answer, I will argue in this section, comes down to two dimensions of rhythm: its scalability and its embodied resonance. The concepts of scale and embodiment loom large in recent discussions in the environmental humanities: to imagine a

[4] Also relevant here is Caroline Levine's (2015) discussion of rhythm in a New Formalist vein. I will return to Levine's work in the conclusion.

[5] Here, and throughout the article, I use the term "affect" in a broad sense, for any affective experience—including emotional responses. I thus diverge from theorists such as Brian Massumi (2002), who draw a sharper distinction between emotions and affect.

[6] For more on weird fiction as a genre particularly well equipped to engage the ecological crisis, see Kara and Langill (2020).

[7] "Entanglement" is a very productive metaphor in the environmental humanities. See, for instance, Tsing (2015).

phenomenon as vast as climate change, we need to gain insight into its planetary scale and also into the multiple rifts and tensions that separate this abstract planetary level from our day-to-day experience (Heise 2008; Woods 2014). At the same time, embracing this more-than-human scale requires a profound rethinking of how human bodies relate to the nonhuman environment that is being altered dramatically by human activity. As Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker write, "To bring climate change home, in this context, entails reconfiguring our spatial and temporal relations to the weather-world and cultivating an imaginary where our bodies are makers, transfer points, and sensors of the 'climate change' from which we might otherwise feel too distant, or that may seem to us too abstract to get a bodily grip on" (2014, 559; see also Hildyard 2017). Although Neimanis and Loewen Walker do not spell out that point, literary and artistic creativity can play an important role in "cultivating" this new "imaginary" of the body. Rhythm is an important concept to this end, because it is able to operate flexibly across scales and directly implicates the reader's bodily experience.

In her account of rhythm in (narrative) prose in this special issue, Yonina Hoffman presents rhythm as an inherently "scalar" phenomenon. Keeping in mind Barbieri's broad definition of rhythm as any iterated formal pattern, iterations are possible at multiple levels, which involve textual units of different size and nature. In particular, Hoffman distinguishes between the following scales in rhythmic phenomena: (1) prosody; (2) word-level effects such as the repetition of specific words or types thereof; (3) phrase- and sentence-level patterns; (4) even larger textual units, such as paragraphs, which may also present rhythmic patterning. These stylistic scales apply to any text; *narrative* texts bring in additional rhythmic levels. One of these rhythms is the "speed" of narrative progression or plot, which is the most discussed dimension of rhythm in narratology. In *Narrative Discourse* (1980, 94), Gérard Genette uses an ideal "ratio" of story to discourse time to discern between four different speeds in narrative: the ellipsis (where discourse time is zero, because an event is not narrated), the pause (as in descriptions, where the story time is zero, because "nothing happens" that advances the plot), the scene (where story and discourse time are more or less equal, as in—for instance—a dialogue-rich passage), and the summary (where story time appears to accelerate, and a number of events are reported in a comparatively short sequence). For Genette, the "fundamental rhythm" of novelistic narrative "is defined by the alternation of summary and scene" (1980, 97).

Later narratological discussions have refined and extended Genette's account, with particular emphasis on the *effects* of narrative speed (Hume 2005; Kukkonen 2020). However, this account fails to capture other rhythmic effects in narrative that are unrelated to the speed of plot, as my discussion of Woolf's *The Waves* has shown: for instance, switches in narration or focalization or periodic flashbacks and flashforwards (which Genette studies under the heading of "order," ignoring their rhythmic qualities). Perhaps more importantly, current approaches to rhythm in narrative theory tend to downplay its multidimensionality—that is, the way in which the speed of plot interacts with the stylistic levels or "scales" identified by Hoffman. Also overlooked in narrative theory is the way in which the *semantic* level of narrative may invoke rhythm through references to rhythmic practices (e.g., dance or music) as well as—crucially for my purposes—the cycles of the nonhuman world (day-night, the seasons, wave formation, tidal or astronomical patterns, etc.). Thus, extending Hoffman's discussion yields the following distinction between scales on which rhythm operates in narrative, ordered here in terms of increasing scope:

(1) Prosody
(2) Word level

(3) Sentence level
(4) Paragraph level
(5) Narrative level (speed, focalization, narration, etc.)
(6) Semantic level (references to extratextual rhythmic phenomena)

Arguably, narrative audiences are always engaging with a plurality of rhythmic patterns on all of these scales. While only some of these rhythms will be foregrounded in the reading experience, understanding their interaction is a central element of rhythm analysis in narrative (see Fenice 2018, 51–54). These interactions may travel in either direction, from smaller to larger rhythmic scales or vice versa. Repetitions at the word- or sentence-level may help readers interpret rhythmic patterns occurring on a smaller scale. Take this passage from Woolf's *The Waves*: "Now I tie my pyjamas [sic] loosely round me, and lie under this thin sheet afloat in the shallow light which is like a film of water drawn over my eyes by a wave" (2000, 18). The double alliteration "sheet / shallow" and "water / wave" (word level) may draw attention to the staccato prosody of this passage, which consists mostly of one- or two-syllable words. Conversely, rhythms existing on the level of smaller textual units may have an accumulative effect, impacting the reader's understanding of larger rhythmic scales: for example, the repetition of the titular word "wave" in Woolf's novel may shape our reading of the soliloquies (narrative level), as if the succession of characters' voices was wave-like in form. This analogy is of course reinforced semantically by the numerous references to nonhuman cycles in *The Waves*.

Both top-down and bottom-up effects are possible, depending on the text as well as on the reader's expertise and predispositions. The takeaway, here and in Hoffman's account, is that "an attention to rhythm means a sensitivity to *scale*: the experience and recognition of rhythm occurs at a variety of scales, from the very small to the very large, and so a theory or model for approaching rhythm will benefit from specifying the scale at which it operates and from being self-conscious about this choice of optic" (this special issue). However, current conceptualizations of rhythm in narratology haven't paid sufficient attention to its scalability, which is an essential element for my discussion. Because of its ability to operate across textual scales, rhythm is uniquely able to bring together the formal level of narrative and its semantic dimension. In environmentally engaged narrative, this means that rhythmic effects can serve as a bridge between textual devices and the rhythms of the nonhuman world that are invoked at the semantic level: the last level of my account thus "colors" the reader's interpretation of stylistic or formal rhythms on a smaller scale, foregrounding these formal patterns and simultaneously linking them to questions surrounding human-nonhuman relations in times of climate change.

To understand why narrative rhythm is capable of creating connections between the formal and the semantic, we need to consider another aspect of rhythmic phenomena—namely, the way in which they speak to the audience's bodily experience. That the rhythm of music directly resonates with the body is a well-known phenomenon studied by psychologists under the heading of "entrainment" (see, e.g., Phillips-Silver, Aktipis, and Bryant 2010). Dance is perhaps the clearest manifestation of this deep link between rhythmic patterns in music and bodily movement: by dancing, we attune or "entrain" our bodily motion to the rhythmicity of music. Even when audience members do *not* overtly move their bodies in response to musical rhythm, it can be argued, in Noël Carroll's words, that "the impression of movement in music . . . engenders feelings that in one way or another *bring to mind* certain kinds of movement" (2003, 549). In the case of narrative, the link between rhythm and the audience's bodily experience is perhaps less straightforward, but still present. Think about a fast-paced narrative in a thriller or action film, for instance: the speed of these narratives will register in bodily terms, as a

particular kind of tension located in the viewer's body. Affectively, this tension may take on different qualities depending on more local stylistic, narrative, and semantic cues: a slow-motion sequence, for instance, may produce very different effects if it captures a budding romance between two characters or the aftermath of a tragic accident. More generally, as I argue in Caracciolo (2014) and Caracciolo and Kukkonen (2021, chap. 5), the overall rhythmic patterning of narrative resonates with the audience's bodily experience by enlisting a number of affective feelings and emotions: rhythm, from this perspective, doesn't present itself as abstract pattern, but as a sequence of affectively charged sensations. This sequence represents an important component of what we typically call "absorption" or "engagement" in narrative—a state of heightened attention and emotion that distances the audience, temporarily, from their physical surroundings.[8] Absorption is a fully embodied experience that can be elicited by a number of textual factors, including rhythmic patterns.

The interactions between scalar levels examined above apply to this embodied dimension of rhythm, too: microtextual rhythms—at the level of prosody or word choice, for example—may capture the reader's attention and give rise to subtle patterns of embodied tension, creating anticipation of the next iteration of the pattern.[9] In themselves, these patterns have no intrinsic emotional quality. It is only when they are enlisted by rhythms on a larger scale—for instance, those of plot—and by the text's subject-matter that bodily tension starts to carry particular emotional connotations. Thus, at the end of chapter 2 of Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, one encounters a "prophetic gentleman's opinion" that "that boy [Oliver] will be hung." The narrator adds: "As I purpose to show in the sequel whether the white waistcoated gentleman was right or not, I should perhaps mar the interest of this narrative (supposing it to possess any at all), if I ventured to hint, just yet, whether the life of Oliver Twist had this violent termination or no" (1982, 13). The convoluted syntax of the narrator's comment slows down the pace of the reading, which creates a particular kind of bodily tension (suspense about the gentleman's prediction). The emotional significance of this tension, however, is not determined by the syntactic rhythm per se, but by the context in which the sentence appears—namely, the narrator "teasing" Oliver's death.

In this way, the reader's bodily involvement in narrative ripples across scalar levels: microtextual patterns contribute to the foregrounded macrotextual rhythm, which in turn—as a feedback effect—infuses small-scale rhythms with emotional qualities. In sum, rhythm in narrative derives from the orchestration of multiple rhythmic patterns, existing on multiple scales, which feed into and underscore the foregrounded rhythm. These rhythms are entangled insofar as they coexist and interact with one another, as we have seen; they also contribute to *entangling* the audience's attention in the narrative by creating bodily involvement and absorption.

This general account of rhythm in narrative helps explain why econarratology needs to pay attention to rhythmic phenomena. First, as argued above, econarratology builds on discussions in the environmental humanities in which questions of scale and embodiment play a pivotal role. To reimagine human-nonhuman relations in times of climate change, we need to grasp the way in which human-scale actions and decisions—from driving to work every day to voting for a particular political party—shape the future of the planet and of the nonhuman species with which human communities are entangled. Climate

[8] See Bilandzic and Busselle (2017) for more on the dimensions of embodied involvement.

[9] I am inspired here by David Huron's (2006) account of anticipation in music. For discussion, see also Caracciolo and Kukkonen (2021, chap. 5).

change thus confronts us with spatial and temporal scales that may seem unfamiliar and distant from the world of everyday experience. In turn, as suggested by Neimanis and Loewen Walker (2014), bridging this gap across scales requires reimagining the human body in its relationship with the nonhuman environment.

Paying attention to rhythm in environmental narrative can help readers and scholars address these challenges raised by the ecological crisis. In different ways, both James (2015) and Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) argue that immersion and affective involvement are central to narrative's ability to reshape the reader's environmental imagination. If we want to attune readers to non-Western and non-anthropocentric ways of thinking about the nonhuman, we need to expose them, immersively, to narratives that question ideas of human mastery and exceptionality. However, the approaches developed by James and Weik von Mossner tend to foreground the role of spatial immersion and empathy for characters in narrative's impact on readers. Shifting the focus to rhythm can reveal broader patterns in narrative engagement, disclosing the affective dynamics that connect formal choices at the local level, the interpretation of larger textual units, and a narrative's overall effects (including spatial immersion and empathetic perspective-taking). By learning to value rhythms *in* environmental narrative, readers also become more attuned to the nonhuman rhythms that ensure the well-being of human communities—rhythms, such as the seasonal cycle, that are being dramatically altered by anthropogenic climate change. The formal and the emotional, as well as story-driven and real-world experience, converge in rhythm. In the next two sections, I illustrate the theoretical claims advanced so far by commenting on rhythmic patterns in two contemporary short stories that stage ecological issues: Groff's *Boca Raton* (2018) and Miéville's "Covehithe" (2011).

Enumeration and Climate Anxiety in *Boca Raton*

Written for an Amazon-sponsored series of digital fiction dealing with climate change, *Boca Raton* puts the ecological crisis front and center. The protagonist is Ange, a young single mother living in the titular Floridian town. Ange suffers from extreme anxiety over the threat of rising sea levels—a thought that shapes her relationship with her daughter and intrudes on her personal and professional life, depriving her of sleep for several nights in a row. In the first scene, Ange and her daughter, Lily, are busy cleaning up a polluted creek: "Out of the mud and from under the foliage, Ange had wrested license plates, condoms, popped balloons, Ping Pong balls, beer cans—the effluvia of disposable lives" (2018, n.p.). These discarded things are a reminder of humanity's catastrophic impact on the nonhuman environment, and as the text spells out Ange's insomnia originates from this discovery of human debris that includes, shockingly for the protagonist, dead chicks that had been fed "knots of bright plastic" by "the poor crazed mother bird."

Ange's experience is captured by an enumeration ("license plates, condoms," etc.). This paratactic series establishes a basic syntactic rhythm that sets the tone for the whole narrative and conveys the gradual build-up of the protagonist's unease. In fact, we encounter similar enumerations throughout the narrative. Here, for instance, Ange lists the species that are threatened by climate change, including human beings: "Poor alligators. Poor ibises. Poor stupid, greedy human beings. Boy, are you all in for it." This enumeration is what Pieter Vermeulen (2020, 4) would call a "litany," a common device in environmental writing. In another key passage, Ange sees the future as "a hurricane of so many elements—plastics and sea risings and drought and hunger—that it was hard to know from which direction the true full stop would come." In this case, the list is separated by the conjunction "and," not

by commas, reflecting the exacerbation of the protagonist's psychological struggles: usually introducing the final item of an enumeration, the repeated "and" here signals the impossibility of exhausting the list of ecological threats that jeopardize the protagonist's (and her daughter's) future. The metaphor "the true full stop," which draws from the domain of punctuation, foregrounds the significance of Groff's syntactic choices in this passage, and throughout the novella.

This basic rhythm of the series, established at the syntactic level, serves as a commentary on both the causes and the effects of environmental catastrophe: at the root of climate change is the accumulative greed of capitalism, which keeps burning fossil fuels and polluting the environment as if the perverse consequences of such practices weren't known; past a certain point, these activities are bound to escalate into the countless disasters imagined by Ange. An accumulation of wealth thus leads to an accumulation of adverse effects, with both being encapsulated at the syntactic level by Groff's enumerations.

Two further aspects of *Boca Raton* underscore this logic of paratactic juxtaposition. At a macro-textual level, the story is broken into sixteen short segments, all of them unnumbered, untitled, and preceded by a simple section break (which, in this book and in other books in the same Amazon series, takes the form of a curly separator reminiscent of sea waves). The narrative itself thus functions as a list of sorts, a series of disjointed moments that render Ange's apprehensive and confused mental state through their lack of overt structure. "Everything took longer after a night without sleep," the narrator remarks, and the loose juxtaposition of the sections does create a slow pace for the reader as well, because there is no clear-cut teleology that "orients" their experience of the story.[10] Just as the rhythm of the sections amplifies the basic enumerative form of the syntax, another narrative pattern traverses the story: repeatedly, the text reminds us that Ange hasn't slept for three, four, five nights—a gradual progression that doesn't coincide with the subdivision into sections and complicates further the enumerative looseness of the story's rhythm.

This slow and chaotic crescendo of tension does not find resolution in the ending, which remains open, just as Ange's anxieties will not be silenced or channeled towards more hopeful affect. In the novella's final scene, Ange leaves her house for a nighttime walk, during which she realizes that her insomnia is directly mirrored by the ocean's relentless activity: "Only the ocean was always awake. Ange and the ocean. Ange being eaten, the ocean that will eat everything." These hallucinatory allusions to the ocean serve as another rhythmic device: they occur, at the sentence level, throughout the story, whereas semantically they speak to the extratextual rhythm of gradually rising sea levels. *Boca Raton* thus combines two basic rhythmic forms, the enumerative series and the crescendo, in a way that hints at both the repeated actions responsible for climate change (burning fossil fuels, discarding plastic) and their looming consequences. These rhythms intersect, uneasily, in the protagonist's mind, but they also register in the reader's body as we follow the slow and fitful progression of the text. Further, the rhythm travels across scales, from the material objects experienced by the protagonist—the debris of the opening scene—to human bodies and the threat of the ocean as a metonymy for climate change. These rhythmic devices bring together the human-scale world and the nonhuman, but also contribute to entangling the reader with the protagonist's predicament, fostering an empathetic connection with her that may tinge the audience's real-world attitude towards the climate crisis.

[10] For more on slowness and lack of teleology, see my discussion of Groff's short story in Caracciolo (2022, chap. 1).

Shaggy Prose and Weird Rigs in "Covehithe"

Like *Boca Raton*, "Covehithe" (2011, n.p.) revolves around parenthood: the protagonists are a man named Dughan and his daughter, who is referred to simply as "the girl." Also like *Boca Raton*, "Covehithe" stages the disturbing rise of a nonhuman entity. But while Groff's story features the nonhuman in a realistic form, via the slowly advancing ocean, Miéville—a noted writer of so-called weird fiction (see, e.g., Luckhurst 2017)—builds on an entirely fantastical conceit: namely, that around the world oil rigs have come to life and are disrupting human activities. They follow vaguely animalistic patterns of migration and reproduction that remain inscrutable to human beings. Governments have tried fighting against these Godzilla-like oil rigs, and Dughan has even participated in some of those battles. Ultimately, however, these rigs appear to be less interested in waging war against humanity than in getting on with the lives. Governments have thus given up attempts to destroy the oil rigs. Instead, they adopt a containment strategy, with the rigs' "breeding grounds" being cordoned off and made inaccessible to the public. Miéville's animate oil rigs thus serve as a strange, grotesque inversion of humanity's devastating impact on the nonhuman environment. Oil rigs are, after all, part of the machinery through which global capitalism exploits the nonhuman world and contributes to its destruction. In "Covehithe," the rigs are transformed into giant organisms that cause damage to human societies as if accidentally, without any overt premeditation, like oil spills in reverse (some famous spills, like the Deepwater Horizon accident, are even mentioned in the story).

"Covehithe" discloses this environmental backstory gradually, though, and for the first few pages the reader is kept in the dark as to Dughan and his daughter's intentions. The narrative opens at night in Dunwich, Suffolk, where father and daughter are seemingly taking a vacation and watching "wintering geese through binoculars so heavy they made her laugh." When Dughan wakes the girl in the middle of the night and tells her to get in the car, the reader can only wonder what they are after. The suspense grows as the two illegally enter the area surrounding Covehithe: "Exceptional laws applied in that little triangle"; armed guards are patrolling the coastline. The ground feels "greasy" and "heavy," and although Dughan points out that the "sea's taking it all back," there is something far more bizarre than climate change at work here. Dughan and the girl hide in trees close to the water and wait for something to happen. It is at this point that the reader is offered a first glimpse of the oil rigs: "A tower. A steeple of girders. Streaming, and rising. The girl stood. The metal was twisted. Off-true and angular like a skew-whiff crane, resisting collapse. It did not come steadily but lurched, hauling up and landward in huge jerks. After each a swaying hesitation; then another move higher, and closer." If the enumeration was Groff's stylistic signature of *Boca Raton*, Miéville's prose favors fragmented, alliterative phrases that vaguely resemble the "shagginess" of the rigs themselves (described, a few lines later, as "shaggy with benthic growth now lank gelatinous bunting"). At the narrative level, this opening sequence is marked by the expanded temporality of expectation and, later, surprise at the discovery that the characters are observing oil rigs rising from the sea. The effect is profoundly different from the slowness of Groff's novella, which reflects lack of teleology and inability to break the vicious circle of the protagonist's anxieties.

The second part of Miéville's story shifts gears, going over the global events that have led to this bizarre sighting of animate oil rigs. Narratively speaking, the pace changes abruptly here, with the acceleration of what Genette calls a summary. But just as the speed of story time picks up with this flashback, the geographical scope expands considerably: the reader learns that, in the years preceding Dughan and his daughter's nighttime outing, oil rigs have broken free of human control around the world: "The world

was still reeling, investigation barely begun, when the Ocean Express, capsized in 1976 with 13 dead, which must have been quietly recomposing itself at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico, stood upright in relatively shallow water and strode landward." A temporal acceleration is thus accompanied by a shift to a planetary scale—a vast stage on which the rigs become the unlikely protagonists. The foregrounded rhythm here is not that of human action, but reflects the rigs' elusive nonhuman processes—their simultaneous and sudden coming to life, which is seemingly independent of any human plan or intention. This summary follows memories stirred up in Dughan by the sight of the oil rig; at the end of the flashback, the focus moves back to the beach near Covehithe.

Here Dughan and his daughter are discovered and searched by a guard, and we also learn a key element of the scene that is unfolding before their eyes: Petrobras, the rig that has just emerged from the ocean, is laying eggs. This animalization of the rigs is in line with the story's premise, but the ending complicates the weirdness of oil rig reproduction significantly. We are told that Dughan "stared not at the twitching Petrobras P36 with its concrete in the mere, not at its drill ovipositor injecting slippy black rig eggs into England." This disturbing and grotesque sight interests him less than the "remains of a . . . church fallen apart to time and the civil war and to economics"—remains that the protagonist has to imagine, because they are too far to be seen on the other side of Covehithe Beach. This remarkable ending spins the bizarreness of the story in a new direction.

"Covehithe" builds on the fantastical idea that oil rigs acquire planetary agency and destabilize human communities, which is an inversion of the anthropogenic ecological crisis we are facing. Through the rhythm established by the text—and especially the suspenseful opening—the reader comes to share the girl's marvel at the novelty of these nonhuman "creatures." The middle section, with its flashback and accelerated pace, helps the audience establish linkage between the textual rhythm and the global scale of the oil rigs' rising, which will deepen their interest in this strange event. However, the ending abruptly shifts the narrative focus as well as the affective tone *away* from the weird rigs—a gesture captured by the protagonist's gaze, which is directed elsewhere. Instead of the girl's wonder at nonhuman agency, the reader is confronted with the ineluctable "economics" causing the collapse of this church (and, symbolically, jeopardizing Western society as we know it). This ending thus qualifies the magic of nonhuman agency significantly: the story performs a speculative inversion of humankind's impact on the planet, but ultimately the economic forces of capitalist greed cannot be sidelined. The weird spectacle of the rigs' coming to life is thus turned into something far darker and more complex: a sign that the nonhuman world can easily escape human control even as it is deeply shaped by our oil-centric civilization. Rather than a fantasy of inversion of anthropogenic impact on the planet, the story thus shows the rigs' behavior to be a direct result of modernity's disruption of global ecosystems.

Through the story's rhythmic variations, the reader is directly implicated in this conclusion. These variations amplify the unevenness of Miéville's syntax, generating a series of narrative fits and starts that paint a compelling picture of human-nonhuman entanglement in times of ecological crisis. Multiple textual rhythms here work together towards complicating the affectivity that surrounds the rigs, which ranges from surprise at the story's bold premise to the grotesque of the egg-laying scene to a new kind of surprise as readers realize that humans are no mere observers of this strange event, but deeply complicit in it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that rhythm in narrative is no merely "formal" affair, if we take the word "formal" to mean—as it sometimes does in literary scholarship—"uncoupled from the social and political relevance of literature." Following, implicitly until now, the suggestions of New Formalism (see, e.g., Levine 2015), I have argued that the formal patterns traced by literary narrative engage complexly with cultural assumptions. Rhythm is a particularly fruitful area of formalist investigation because of how it brings together (and potentially stages the clash between) patterns existing on multiple textual scales, from prosody and syntax to the orchestration of larger narrative units. But literary rhythm, in general and in environmental narrative specifically, is never sealed off from questions of ideology, as Levine (2015, chap. 3) has convincingly argued. Just as, for Levine and other New Formalists, literature employs formal devices that are capable of probing the organization of social life (which is in itself patterned and therefore "formal"), the relationship between human communities and the nonhuman world involves a wide range of forms and rhythms. It is precisely because rhythm works flexibly across scales (textual *and* extratextual) that it should be a primary focus of an econarratology, to borrow again James's (2015) coinage. Rhythm, as I have argued, is an important resource for narrative that seeks to push the audience's environmental imagination beyond the confines of the human-scale world, connecting it to vast phenomena such as rising sea levels (in Groff's *Boca Raton*) or the imaginary threat of animate oil rigs (in Miéville's "Covehithe"). Because of its embodied and affective dimension, rhythm is also deeply implicated in the experience of immersion or absorption, which econarratologists see as central to narrative's impact on readers. By speaking to the audience's bodies directly, rhythm can ask them to reimagine human-nonhuman relations along the lines of deep entanglement instead of buying into fantasies of human control and superiority. As I have suggested through my close readings, rhythm can achieve this experiential impact by creating alignment between the internal, formal rhythmicity of narrative and more-than-human, extratextual processes that are in themselves patterned.

It is important to stress, in concluding this essay, that this experiential impact is by no means an "automatic" effect of narrative. On the contrary, it is a way of reading, a sensibility attuned to the entangled rhythms at work in narrative. Not all readers will perceive rhythmic patterns to the same degree, and it is our task as scholars and teachers of literature to cultivate the experience of rhythm. By devoting more attention to rhythm, as this special issue as a whole is doing, we may find new ways of deepening its relevance to questions that reach far beyond the "formal" in the narrow sense of the word.

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