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Requiem for a Harlequin: Two Perspectives on Time, and a Celebration of Kairos, in Three Stories by Harlan Ellison by Michael Spence

In Harlan Ellison's long career of resisting genre labels, none of his stories has proved more label-elusive than the one most frequently reprinted, "Repent, Harlequin!" Said the Ticktockman." The story is not precisely science fiction as opposed to fantasy: the world is presumably our earth, yet the society appears archetypal as well as the only one on the planet, with no explanation why. Nor is it precisely fantasy as opposed to sf: the setting is futuristic, the lifespan-controlling power of the Master Timekeeper is described in technological terms, and one also finds familiar sf devices such as slidewalks).

Perhaps the story is better categorized by dramatic form, in line with Ellison's experience as a dramatist in television and film. As his "Adrift Just Off the Islets of Langerhans: Latitude 38° 54' N, Longitude 77° 00' 13" W" (which similarly partakes of both quasi-realistic sf and outré fantasy) takes the form of a "sci-fi" monster-movie epic, so "Repent, Harlequin!" is an amalgam of medieval morality play and slapstick comedy. The players wear representational costumes (the Ticktockman's mask, the Harlequin's motley) and, when active in the story, are identified by representational names (even Pretty Alice, whose name suggests that she is as much a token as a person).¹ We are not intended to take its point in historical terms (as opposed to hard-science fiction) but mythic, not as *Historie* but *Geschichte*. There is indeed a point to this morality play, stated loudly and clearly.

The purpose of this article is to bring out in the story a nuance that is not always easy to see. For unless a combatant is a mere anarchist, he or she fights not only against something but also for something else. By invoking Thoreau's Civil

¹Oddly enough, in this light the Ticktockman's initial demand to know who the Harlequin is rather than what he is seems especially significant to us. We don't need to know who the Harlequin is, but what he is is all-important. By reducing the Harlequin from archetype to identifiable human being, the Ticktockman would break the morality-play form.

Disobedience at the beginning of the story, the author announces that the Harlequin is no simple anarchist, but is there to serve the state. Ellison belongs to the "if it ain't broke, break it" school of business management: when he announces that he is "foursquare for chaos" (Ellison, Letter) he is not favoring chaos for its own sake but as a means of clearing the way for a new, better order. The Harlequin, then, is not merely destroying, but replacing; in the exuberance of his campaign against the Ticktockman, we should not miss what it is he is campaigning for.

As with most if not all political disputes, the issue is perspective: in this case one's perspective on time. The two sides can be expressed in two words found in both classical Greek and New Testament *koinē*: *chronos* and *kairos*. Through the rise and fall of the Harlequin, Ellison demonstrates that a healthy appreciation of *kairos* is the solution to the tyranny of the clock.

Locus and Essence

The difference between the two terms is similar to that between the significance a happily remembered place holds on a map and in one's memories. The one is statistical, identifying a locus as positioned relative to other loci; the other is essential, looking at what is at that locus, its nature, and its virtues or faults. Robert Farrar Capon expounds the distinction thus:

For abstract time--for time as a diagram, a system of coordinates--the Greeks had *chronos*: a solemn, unworldly notion they finally kicked upstairs and made a god. We have it with us still in chronometers, chronology, and chronicle. But for human time, for existential time--for the time that is to *chronos* as place is to abstract space--they had a word which, to the best of my knowledge, has not come into English at all: *kairos*--season, high time, opportunity. The distinction is not airtight, but it is solid enough to pass muster. (Capon, 18)

This latter concept, Capon claims, is by far the more important of the two. *Kairos* "is not trapped within the coordinates of the clock. It does not answer the minor question: What time is it? It goes straight to the major one: What is it time for?" (ibid.)

We may also state the difference this way: *Chronos* is about seconds, minutes, hours--that is, the time-coordinates one would use to identify points on a t -axis.² It rules the logbook, the shift-activity report, the tape emerging from the seismograph or the polygraph. *Kairos*, on the other hand, is about moments, whether good or ill--the event that marks the turning of the tide in a battle or the fall of a kingdom, the tableau that shows a relationship in its essence. Its domain is the historian's record, the scrapbook, the photo album. Indeed, when advertisements proclaim "a Kodak moment" or a wedding song announces, "This is the moment I've waited for," they speak of *kairos*. Various lexicons credit the playwright Sophocles with giving *kairos* the added flavor of "the right moment," "the moment of opportunity" (e.g., Hahn, 3:833); such a distinction is quite appropriate, especially from a dramatist, for whom such moments are the tools of the trade.

²And, for all we know, a t_2 and t_3 axis as well. See Robert A. Heinlein, The Number of the Beast.

From the start one notices that the presence of Mind differentiates *kairos* from *chronos*. While intelligence is needed to set up a chronological structure, that structure is self-perpetuating as long as clocks continue to function. A deist would view the universe in this same mechanistic fashion--God only takes part in its creation, absenting himself thereafter from involvement as it continues to run on its own. For *kairos*, however, chronological location is merely a statistic; moments involve the observer's judgment, will, or appreciation. Indeed, the world of *kairos* might be more comfortable with quantum mechanics, with its focus on the observer, than with deism.

An Illustration: The Time the Clock Doesn't Tell

Two additional stories from Ellison illustrate this distinction, adding to it an idea not as prominent in "Repent, Harlequin!"--that the most complete moments are interpersonal.

"Count the Clock That Tells the Time" tells the story of two people who, like countless others, have not so much spent their lives as squandered them. Ian and Catherine have accomplished nothing in their years of life--each has gone through daily routines, doing whatever is expected, but has done nothing to give meaning, as it were, to either themselves or others. Each is drawn into a kind of limbo where they briefly encounter others like them: in their former world, according to a theorist Ian meets, time is composed of particles that must be used or else they are transferred to this place of refuse, taking the user with them, there to remain indefinitely. The world in which they had lived is apparently where potential exists; when that potential is finally exhausted without being realized, a person's store of time is fit for nothing more than this limbo, where time merely continues without the prospect of change--a world of pure *chronos*.

Defying the nature of this limbo, Ian meets Catherine, and the two discover that they not only are attracted to one another but can even take initiative to build a relationship. By doing so, however, they doom themselves: the time particles, now being used by the two of them, are returning to the natural world and taking their human possessors with them--but not intact. Ian and Catherine escape limbo, but in the process they dissipate and are no more.

Two principles may be derived from their story. First, the proper use of time is in intimate interpersonal, intentional relationships. The theorist Ian meets in limbo appears to be Benjamin Franklin, to whom history has given a reputation as not only an inventor and diplomat but also a womanizer. Although he was therefore no stranger to physical intimacy, his liaisons were not personally intimate--as Ellison would no doubt characterize many of his own physical relationships earlier in life, and indeed describes (in his introduction to "Count the Clock" in the collection Shatterday) his own recent but moribund marriage at the time he began writing the story--and thus would not allow him to avoid limbo. By contrast, Ian and Catherine's relationship does meet that standard, and so limbo has no place for them.

The second principle is that one should gather kairic rosebuds while one may. Ian and Catherine are able to spend a little while together, but for them the proper time

to do so had already passed. For us, that time is now.

Another Illustration: The Apocalyptic Minute

A third story addressing the nature of time and opportunity is "Paladin of the Lost Hour." As with "Repent, Harlequin!" the primary subject is not time; here it is responsibility, faithfulness, and the transfer of a charge from one faithful man to another. The charge, however, is of a particular kind of time.

At first glance the "lost hour" of the title appears to be clock-time, *chronos*. Its guardian, Gaspar, fulfills his charge by means of a special pocket-watch, complete with second hand. Its origin lies in the restructuring of the former Julian calendar by Pope Gregory XIII, who preserved the world by subtracting a single hour from the era tracked by the new Gregorian calendar. That hour, which, if it is allowed to pass, would bring all of creation to an end, is now cached by means of a special timepiece entrusted to a guardian. To the world of normal time that hour is "lost," and it is Gaspar's job to ensure that it stays lost.

As we hear about that hidden hour four hundred years later, however, we realize that something else is in view. By this time the designated timepiece is an ornately decorated turnip watch, and its trustee, Gaspar, explains to his new friend, Billy, that if that hour is allowed to run its course the end will come--existence itself will cease--with nothing at all to follow. At this point we see that mere *chronos* is not under discussion; if it were, then Gaspar's guarded hour is of no consequence. If the universe is simply allocated a set number of milliseconds that can be marked by any timepiece, then, like the team with the leading score toward the end of the game, all we need do is "run the clock out." Clearly, however, this is not the case. Our clocks cannot track that hour; such power is reserved for Gaspar's watch.

Confirming the difference of the guarded hour is what finally happens when one minute is allowed to play out. Realizing that Billy has been broken by his wartime experience and thus cannot function as guardian, Gaspar does what no custodian before him has ever done: he activates the watch. During the sixty seconds that follow, Billy is healed by an event that would be considered mundane if it took place between people on the street, yet here is extraordinary because of the parties involved. It is not a pyrotechnic display, not an earthquake, not a rending of the heavens; it is a quiet conversation. What is extraordinary is the one with whom Billy converses--the soldier who was killed beside him on the battlefield, thus inadvertently saving Billy's life. Two people are healed by that exchange: Billy, finally able to thank the other soldier for his sacrifice, and the other soldier, who hadn't realized that he had saved a comrade, and had thought his death to have been in vain.

Such is the nature of that minute. It holds the opportunity for two people who otherwise would be forever separated to meet and heal one another. In other words, it and the hour to which it belongs are not *chronos*-time but *kairos*-time. The world is allocated a specific number of encounters, of moments between individuals and between armies, before its story is all told and its time--in this special sense--is up.

Keeping and Wielding Time

"Repent, Harlequin!" is not primarily about time, of course, but about power: in its fundamental conflict one side is out to prove that power and authority are not the same, while the other insists that they most certainly are. We therefore hear the words of Thoreau supporting civil disobedience; we see the Ticktockman using what some regard as the ultimate power; we have the Harlequin's punishment described with direct reference to the totalitarian regime in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four.

The tools of power, however, have to do with time. In the world of the Harlequin, humanity has learned how to trace the world-line of an individual human being to its end, and thus everyone could, were it allowed, know the time of his or her death.³ In practice, that power is reserved by the Master Timekeeper--known colloquially (and surreptitiously) as the Ticktockman, whose nickname and characteristic purr when the schedule is in order suggest that he himself may be a machine. He keeps the master schedule of society; to him the ultimate crime is to disrupt that schedule, and for that crime he exacts the ultimate penalty (at least to those of us who deny life after death), subtracting the time of disruption from the offender's life.⁴

When the Dance Becomes a Frenzy

"Time," said comedian Woody Allen, "is nature's way of keeping everything from happening at once." By the same token, it is also our way of ensuring that events that are supposed to happen at once actually do. In our quest to bring order out of chaos, we decided upon units to measure how long it takes for steps or processes to run their course. By mechanically marking those units, we are able to synchronize (the very word says it) events in different parts of the world. We are also able to determine how long Step One in a process requires, and thus when we should be prepared to begin Step Two (or, as in the case of a cook bringing a complete dinner to the table, when to begin several processes step so that they end together).

When all the steps in all the processes in society are coordinated, the result becomes a kind of ballet.⁵ Each step is to be appreciated in its own right, each person's contribution enjoyed both for its own sake and as it provides the basis for the next person's activity. The two views of time combine to oversee the dance, with *chronos* acting as the conductor's baton hand, providing the beat, and *kairos* as the other hand, encouraging various aspects of the performance with expressive gestures.

How, then, did things go so dreadfully wrong? Two ways may be observed. Let us take as an example one of the statements given as symptoms of the problem: "I don't care if the script is good, I need it Thursday!"

³An idea popularized by Robert A. Heinlein's short story "Life-Line."

⁴If the repercussions of disrupting the schedule were added up, of course, the extent of the Ticktockman's wrath might be perceived as merciful. When we take into account the time lost by all x persons whose schedules are affected by an individual disruption t, the result would be more on the order of t times x--and the offender could be living on borrowed time even as he takes his next breath.

⁵Seen on the universal scale, it becomes the Great Dance of C. S. Lewis's Perelandra.

First, we lost the will, or perhaps the ability, to enjoy each step in the ballet. The individual stages in a given process ceased to be accomplishments of intrinsic worth and instead became chores to be done and dispensed with as soon as possible. Christians can trace this change to the Fall, because of which (according to Genesis 3:17-19) Adam's vocation to tend the garden in a perfect environment became a struggle to grow his food while hampered by thorns and thistles. In any case, what had been a delight has become tedium. One of Ellison's oft-mentioned complaints with the American entertainment industry in general is that creativity has been devalued by executives who, lacking creativity themselves, fail to appreciate it in others. Consequently, while they may wish for the script to be "good," that virtue is no longer a priority.

We should note that "needing it Thursday" is not intrinsically bad. The process has been scheduled to allow actors and camera crew interval *x* to rehearse, the production people interval *y* to assemble costumes, sets, etc., and everyone interval *z* to shoot the film or episode so that it can make its predetermined release or air date. Any delay in delivering the script deprives one or more of these other stages in the process. The problem comes when the schedule is the only thing considered important, not the quality or content or other attributes of the finished work. Similar problems arise when advertisers rather than viewers become the most important beneficiary of the process--or, in manufacturing, when a business produces cars or books not because the people involved love cars or books but because these are a means of making money, and the "bean counters" reign supreme.

Using our ballet image, we see that the conductor's expressive hand, the symbol of *kairos*, has been immobilized, leaving only the baton hand to operate--and that hand has been constrained to a regular, expressionless pattern. The conductor has, in fact, been replaced by a metronome.

Second, we demanded that the dance--now transformed into a machine--go faster. No doubt the motive is competition--at best, a quest to keep the other fellow from "eating one's lunch," as it were; at worst, a drive to eat the other fellow's lunch. We became obsessed with expansion, growth, doing more, rather than being content with what we were doing now. New time-saving technology did not help the situation, but instead allowed us to make it worse. Now that we could complete a process in less time than before, we did not use the opportunity to improve the process or appreciate its quality; instead, we decided (or our superiors decided for us) that we should use the newly-freed time to repeat the process through additional cycles--because if we didn't, our competition would, and we dare not let that happen, do we?

Thus the machinery goes faster and faster, the people who serve as its cogs move at an increasingly frenzied pace, schedules tighten to piano-string tautness, and in accord with what we may call Scotty's Law of Enabled Sabotage--"The more they overtax the plumbing, the easier it is to stop up the drain"⁶--eventually the system becomes a disaster waiting to happen, needing only a catalyst.

Enter the Harlequin.

⁶An observation made in the film Star Trek: The Search for Spock.

Fighting Fire with . . . a Squirting Flower

The Ticktockman is not the only one who uses a time-related weapon, merely the more obvious one. He enforces allegiance to the seconds, minutes, and hours of the master schedule, but the Harlequin creates memorable moments. Thus he serves as a necessary corrective to the Ticktockman's reign, fighting the clockwork system by reintroducing an appreciation of *kairos*.

Whereas the Ticktockman can produce only one kind of moment for a citizen of his society, the moment of death, the Harlequin creates a variety of moments using his chosen weapon: physical comedy. He buzzes high-society pedestrians, sending them scattering. He dive-bombs the city's transport system with jelly beans, giving riders a treat of colorful candy while also clogging the machinery. He catches the Master Timekeeper's minions in the very traps they set for him. His mischief is never lethal--indeed, were it to injure anyone it would violate the spirit of physical comedy--but it always produces enjoyable moments of fun for everyone except the Ticktockman and his minions, whom the Harlequin recasts as buffoons to be humiliated for the entertainment of the general public.

All the while, he calls upon the masses to turn their backs on the hyper-scheduled madness and enjoy life. The masses hear him. They think he's nuts, but they hear him, and many respect him.

As Ellison presents the ending to his story, it is quite downbeat, with a single glimmer of hope. The Harlequin's everyday identity is discovered, he is punished with Orwellian tortures, and finally converted to the Ticktockman's frame of mind. The one positive result of all he has done is to leave a crack in the façade of power. Deny it though the Ticktockman may, he is no longer what he was. He inadvertently delays the master schedule himself, and his once smooth purr--indicating the smooth hum of the societal machinery--has become a halting mrmeee, mrmeee, mrmeee, mrmeee.

Yet one cannot help but believe there is more to the Harlequin's legacy than a broken Ticktockman. The story's narrator claims that no one will remember the Harlequin, that the people's continual White Rabbit "oh wow gotta run gonna be late" frenzy will drive the memory of his pranks from their minds. One wonders, however, whether this is truly the case. As long as there are people, there will be relationships and the need for significant moments. And as long as people need to laugh, someone will recall the Harlequin, asking, "Do you remember the moment when those jelly beans gummed up the slidewalks?" Perhaps such memory is but a single light in the gathering darkness--but such is the nature of humanity that that light, and with it the need to use the opportunity one has to create moments, will resist all efforts to extinguish it.

Conclusion

"Today shall not be wasted." With this statement John Hodgman begins the first of "Six Oaths of the Virtuous Child," in his pseudo-almanac The Areas of My Expertise. Observing that Hodgman also writes about hoboes in that book, Mur Lafferty, in her podcast novella series "Heaven," uses him as the model for her hoboes' deity and

transforms that line into the Hobo Ethic, which distinguishes the hobo from a mere vagrant by showing that the hobo is a laborer who is continually itinerant by choice (Lafferty, Part One). For her hoboes, that statement is not only a prediction, it is a commitment of faith.

So should it be for us. In his afterword to The Essential Ellison, Ellison says, "For a brief time I was here; and for a brief time I mattered." We likewise should not be content merely to exist: we must matter. As we see in his portrayal of time in these three stories, our days are not here for us to drift through them without meaningful accomplishment. We have the ability to recognize *kairos* amid *chronos*, the moment within the ticking of the clock, the opportunity we have to do what is needed and right, and especially what will affirm someone else. We can declare--indeed, must declare--that this day, this moment, shall not be wasted. And in so doing, we affirm ourselves as human beings.

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