

IN THE MOMENT OF DANGER:
BENJAMINIAN HISTORY AND THEOLOGY
IN RUSSELL HOBAN'S *RIDDLEY WALKER*

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*Walter Benjamin and Riddley Walker:
A Dialectics of the Future*

In a 1983 critique of the apparent contemporary prevalence of “private and hermetic” versions of “such actively radical positions as Marxism, feminism, or psychoanalysis,” Edward Said singled out “the current vogue for Walter Benjamin not as a Marxist but as a crypto-mystic” (1983, 292). In so doing, he was participating in another, longer-standing trend in the humanities, namely the critique of the scandalous misappropriation or misreading of Benjamin’s work to more or less politically problematic ends. This critical tendency suggests—if only by negation and implication—that the reception of Benjamin has somehow gone astray: that his oeuvre has not yet reached its proper recognition as one or another ‘kind’ of criticism. More recently, it also tends to encapsulate a wider anxiety about the appropriation of Marxist or dialectical criticism in the name of “Cultural Studies,” conceived as “too cinched in theory, too embroiled in schemas and arguments”: Cultural Studies in this perspective becomes “not the study of culture, but the study of studies of culture. It is too far removed from its objects, too negotiated. It forgot the world” (Leslie 2005, 337). Benjamin is one such “object” that scholars have allegedly forgotten. “The reluctance to engage the rigour of Benjamin’s thought,” contends Eli Friedlander, “is evident in the oft-encountered tendency to adopt his writings piecemeal,” in the form of those “[v]arious insights, images and even phrases drawn from his writings” that “lend themselves to the most varied interpretations and appropriations” (2012, 1). Even his “best readers,” such as Theodor Adorno and Hannah Arendt, are said to contribute to his problematic “posthumous fame” by propounding an “amazement at Benjamin’s marvellous richness of aperçus” that is in fact “catastrophic for the portrayal of the character of his thinking” (Friedlander

2012, 1-2). In order to counteract this fragmentary and fetishistic treatment of Benjamin, Friedlander insists that any interpretation of his work “must strive to explicitly lay out the philosophical armature that both holds his writings together and provides a measure by which to judge the significance of particular moments within them” (2012, 2). Only then will Benjamin’s oeuvre realize its proper political and intellectual fate: interpreted as a relatively coherent philosophical object, rather than “appropriated” or quoted “piecemeal” as a kind of “general cultural resource.”¹

However, this article will contend that any such attempt to resolve the tension between fragment and unity in Benjamin’s work—and consequently to resolve the issue of its “correct” interpretation and reception—is already predicated upon a mishandling of the dialectical treatment of history and theology therein. Indeed, if the likes of Said, Friedlander, and many others have largely been concerned with the question of what Benjamin’s work “will” or “should have meant,” then this article will suggest the value of reading Russell Hoban’s post-apocalyptic novel *Riddley Walker* (2002 [1980])² as a way of challenging the very foundation of such interpretations on the notion of a relatively stable relationship between past, present, and future.³ In this, I am taking something of a lead from Carl Freedman’s claim in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* that “science fiction is of all forms of fiction today the one that bears the deepest and most interesting affinity with the rigours of dialectical thinking” (2000, xv). As Freedman puts it, “science fiction, like critical theory, insists upon historical mutability, material reducibility, and utopian possibility,” and although “there is no question of merely ‘applying’ critical theory to science fiction, ...understanding these two modes of discourse together can reveal much about both” (2000, xvi). Also in the wake of Freedman’s method, which places Stanislaw Lem alongside Jacques Lacan, and Ursula Le Guin alongside Marx and Trotsky—and so on—the following pages build upon this broader critical framework by offering a close reading of Benjamin’s work in the light of Hoban’s novel, and vice versa.⁴ My aim,

¹In his “General Introduction” to what remains the most comprehensive collection of critical essays on Benjamin, Peter Osborne adduces four main periods in the reception of the German-Jewish thinker’s work: broadly, there is the initial struggle to deal with the “historical and philosophical idiosyncrasies—the profound individuality—of Benjamin’s method of interpretation”; followed by debates on his relationship with the various and competing strands of Marxism in the 1950s and 60s; then a period of consolidation marked by the translation of some of his major works into English; and finally, since the 1980s, the transformation of Benjamin’s “now widely available writings” into a “general cultural resource” (2005, xxiii-xxiv).

²Hoban’s novel will be referenced in parentheses throughout the essay.

³It should be noted that a number of other recent critical studies on Benjamin have approached his work more in the spirit of the present article—see, for instance, Hanssen (2000) and Andrew Benjamin (2013). However, rather than offering any kind of synoptic account of Benjamin’s oeuvre (no matter how dialectical), I am looking here to demonstrate the very *destabilisation* of such a possibility that occurs when the latter is placed alongside a literary text that possesses what we might call—for want of a more adequate phrase—similar dialectical impulses.

⁴It is a source of regret for Freedman that his study can mention Benjamin “only in passing” (2000, xx). Nick Hubble has also briefly considered the potential for reading Benjamin’s work

however, is not simply to offer another example of the benefits of Freedman's critical approach, which would anyway require an unnecessary reduction of the texts in question to those rather broad generic categories of "critical theory" and "science fiction." Rather, I want to make the specific contention that Hoban's novel enables us to think through the particular and myriad theoretical complexities that make Benjamin's work simultaneously so challenging and so important. Not least, this is because *Riddley Walker* might be said to depict the kind of catastrophic scenario that is one possible result of the powerful manipulations of history and theology so strongly opposed by Benjamin. Furthermore—and equally as importantly—the eponymous boy-protagonist of Hoban's novel emerges from this dystopian context as precisely the kind of "weak[ly] Messianic" (Benjamin 1999d, 254; emphasis original) figure that might be needed to piece together a rigorously dialectical account of past, present, and future, one capable of placing his post-apocalyptic historical moment into a dynamic and illuminating tension with our own. The central claim of this article, then, is not so much that the character of Riddley presents us with an exemplary fictional version of Benjamin's "historical materialist," as that his literally "revolutionary" journey around the nuclear blast site of "Inland"—known in the novel's similarly "blasted" English vernacular as "Fools Circel 9wys"—can help us to think through what such a claim might mean in concrete terms: how it is, for example, that we might attempt to articulate the past not as "the way it really was," but rather "as it flashes up at a moment of danger, ...crystallis[ing] into a monad" (Benjamin 1999d, 247, 254). In this sense, I am offering here not only a response to the idea that there was ever a particularly "appropriate" critical future available for Benjamin's work, but also a fresh interpretation of *Riddley Walker* itself, which has previously tended to be read in relation to somewhat underdeveloped versions of Viconian, Nietzschean, or Orwellian models of history.⁵

The article will proceed in three overarching sections. The next section reads *Riddley Walker* as part of the proto-apocalyptic cultural "phantasm" that emerged from both the nuclear ending to the Second World War, and the subsequent Cold War policy of Mutually Assured Destruction. Engaging with the work of Jacques Derrida, Paul K. Saint-Amour, and Slavoj Žižek, I posit Hoban's novel as a kind of "pre-traumatic stress syndrome": a post-apocalyptic version of the Lacanian symptom, which must return from the future in order to give meaning to the "meaningless trace" of nuclear annihilation in the present (Saint-Amour 2000, 60-63).

If Riddley's turbulent journey around "Fools Circel 9wys" participates in the conventional imaging of the nuclear blast (and its reverberations) as "a circle around a point designated zero" (Schwenger 1991, 251), then the subsequent section works through the illuminating congruence of Riddley's

alongside SF (2013, 6-7).

⁵For some examples, see Cowart (1989), Dowling (1988), and Swanson (1984). All three are discussed in the course of the article.

personal and political transformation with the philosophical impulses of Benjamin's writings on history, photography, and technological modernity. Even as Inland seems destined for intensified levels of violence and political unrest, we will see that Riddley mounts his own, fully political campaign of resistance in the form of both a travelling puppet show and the writing of a kind of Gnostic gospel (that is, the very text of *Riddley Walker*), which disperse a collective and newly secularised theology of "the idear of us": "that thing whats in us lorn and loan and oansome," and that apparently has the potential to join human beings into "1 girt big thing" (2002, 6-7).

Riddley first becomes cognisant of this "thing" during his epiphanic experience in Cambry (the centre or "Zero Groun" of the long-ago nuclear blast), where he meditates on the quasi-pantheistic potential of finding empathy with a simple stone: "You myt think a stoan is slow thats becaws you wont see it moving.... That dont mean its slow tho. There are the many cools of Addom which are the party cools of stoan. Moving in ther millyings which is the girt dants of the every thing"; "If you cud even jus only put your self right with 1 stoan youwd be moving with the girt dants of every thing" (2002, 163, 162). While such passages might recall, for us, the still relatively mysterious sub-atomic movement of quantum matter, or indeed the constantly shifting and seemingly infinitely interconnected version of language and identification espoused by deconstruction, nonetheless the concluding section of this article contends—in the light of Benjamin's work on translation—that we do a disservice to Hoban's text by simply reading it back against the apparent historical and empirical "realities" of the present. Rather, by reflecting on the parallels between Riddley and Benjamin as strongly oppositional and fundamentally "poetical" thinkers—whose writings, moreover, seem unusually resistant to settled interpretation or "proper" categorisation—the article finally adduces the importance of the thoroughly dialectical modes of historical interpretation practiced by both.

Riddley Walker as Future Symptom

For the moment, today, one may say that a non-localizable nuclear war has not occurred; it has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions. It may also be called a speculation, even a fabulous specularization.

—Derrida (1984, 23)

Russell Hoban began writing *Riddley Walker* in early 1974 and finished over five years later, on Guy Fawkes Day in 1979 (Hoban 2002a, 224-226). Despite the public advocacy of *détente*, these years saw a continuation of attempts by both the U.S. and the Soviet Union to develop increasingly destructive and

sophisticated nuclear weapons in the context of a still-escalating Cold War. The prospect of total nuclear war retained its oddly specular hold over the international imagination: the very concept of Mutually Assured Destruction, which played a pivotal role in U.S. military strategy after 1960, is based upon the strategic ability to imagine the catastrophic consequences of a nuclear event as a way of averting that event (Smith 1998, 108-114). As a novel which portrays the aftermath of a devastating, extinction-level atomic war, *Riddley* exists in the same imaginative space accessed by the Cold War's military and political diplomats, a part of Derrida's nuclear "fable" and therefore part of the invented "phantasm" which, he argues, constructs the "reality" of the nuclear age, and which triggered the "fabulous war effort" of the U.S. and the Soviet Union, "on the basis of an event that has never happened" (1984, 23).

According to Derrida, the American bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima did not mark a "real" nuclear war; rather, they brought an atomic end to a "classical, conventional" war (1984, 23). Nevertheless, Hoban was a part of the generation that witnessed something like a warning from the future in the nuclear devastation of Japan. This idea, of a nuclear trauma returning from the future, is identified by Paul K. Saint-Amour as a form of "pre-traumatic stress syndrome"; reading the accounts of people who survived Hiroshima, Saint-Amour is struck by their description of a kind of "uncanny" anticipation in the days before the bomb was dropped (2000, 60-61). As the testimonies recorded in Robert J. Lifton's study on the bombing show, Hiroshima had largely been spared until that day, leading its residents to speculate that their city was being saved for some kind of "special bomb" (1967, 17). Saint-Amour uses the work of Slavoj Žižek to theorise this anticipation as a repressed Lacanian symptom that returns "from the future," a condition which would come to structure everyday life during the Cold War (Saint-Amour 2000, 61-63). Žižek writes:

Symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively – the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning.... [T]he symptom as a "return of the repressed" is precisely such an effect which precedes its cause (its hidden kernel, its meaning), and in working through the symptom we are precisely "bringing about the past" – we are producing the symbolic reality of the past, long-forgotten traumatic events. (Žižek 1989, 55-57)

Furthermore, as total nuclear war offers the possibility of a future with no symbolic order, Saint-Amour argues that the nuclear condition can "only cause anticipatory symptoms": we must work through the horrors of nuclear destruction before it occurs, because there will be no survivors to mourn the loss (2000, 64-65; emphasis original). *Riddley* exists as one of these anticipatory, pre-traumatic symptoms: on its publication, one reviewer praised its "wrenchingly vivid report on the texture of life after Doomsday" (DeMott

1981, n. pag.). If our present, nuclear age represents the “meaningless trace” of the symptom, Hoban’s novel is that which must propel itself almost two and a half millennia into a post-apocalyptic future in order to give the symptom its meaning: it produces the “symbolic reality of the past, long-forgotten events” which belong, in fact, to our history, our present historical moment and our anticipated future.

Our nuclear age is so fundamental to the world of *Riddley* that, for the inhabitants of Inland, all of history and theology is re-routed through the splitting of the atom. As David Cowart notes, Riddley’s people are on the verge of an “Iron Age of the future,” a time when “a few last settlements of hunter-gatherers (the ‘fentses’ and ‘moving crowds’ of the novel)” are holding out against absorption by the “agricultural settlements (the ‘forms’) and their warrior elite (the ‘hevvies’ and the Ram)” (1989, 86). However, the survival of the technological jargon of high technology within an otherwise painfully mutated and deformed language—for example, to “printout” is to deduce (89), to “program” is to plan (117), molecules and particles have become “many cools” and “party cools” (95)—along with various relics of modernity like broken machines, a disused power station and the remains of Canterbury Cathedral, remind the novel’s characters that what they have come to inhabit is, as Jeffrey Porter puts it, a “world of loss” (1990, 454). Thus, coded into a historical repetition of the socio-economic conditions of Iron Age Britain is an awareness of the loss of precisely the high technology which, in the last century, has haunted our world in the spectre of nuclear annihilation, a prospect that remains ghostly to post-atomic man because any real understanding of advanced science was wiped out in the explosion that marked the limit of its destructive potential.

History in *Riddley* is a collection of heavily mythologized, fractious and contradictory accounts of the third and final World War and its aftermath. The historical “truth” changes radically depending on who Riddley is talking to. The government (Ram) of Inland depends on making revisions to the dominant historical and religious account, the Eusa Story, which it is possible for us to read as an allegory of the discovery and catastrophic consequences of atomic power at the end of the twentieth century, with the figure of Eusa broadly representing ambitious science (2002, 30-36). However, in Riddley’s post-atomic society, this history casts the dark shadow of theological guilt. As Porter puts it: “what for science in the past was simply a problem of know-how—nuclear fission—becomes for post-atomic society an ontological challenge that must, like original sin, be faced by all humanity from one generation to the next” (1990, 466). Eusa’s crime, the splitting of the atom, locks the people of Inland into a cycle of guilt caused by our own persistent search for the “truth” of the atom.

Despite the Eusa Story’s warnings against technological ambition, the current Pry Mincer (leader) of the Ram, Abel Goodparley, tells Riddley that he didn’t come into power “to stan in the mud and sing for boats in the air. Weare going to do things here weare going to get things moving” (2002,

41). Along with his reluctant assistant leader, Wes Mincer Erny Orfing, Goodparley travels around Inland performing politicised sermons in the form of Punch and Judy-style puppet shows, with each show enacting a new ideological variation on the Eusa myth for people to think about. Eusa's plight is adapted into a form of propaganda, corresponding with the current political agenda: as Goodparley wants to rediscover the secrets of the "1 Big 1" (nuclear power), he performs a show which attempts to absolve Eusa of the guilt of splitting the atom. Eusa's scientific discoveries are portrayed as signs of desirable human progress which have been gravely misused for political reasons (2002, 44-52). Orfing's trepidation about Goodparley's ambition emerges as part of the show. He asks the Eusa puppet (controlled and voiced by Goodparley), "If you dint make no barms nor drop no barms then whyd you say you did when you wrote down that story?" to which Eusa responds, "Erny you know how it is when you blame your self...youwl oversay wont you. Youwl say wersen you realy done.... If I hadnt [discovered the 1 Big 1] some 1 else wudve done" (2002, 52-53). Thus, the main theological and historical code of Inland is strategically revised by the government of the day, causing a disjuncture between actual political action and the very concept of history which Roy Arthur Swanson has described as a kind of Orwellian 'doublethink' (1984, 207).

Riddley goes on to hear a different historical account from Lissener, a deformed boy whom he frees from imprisonment by the Ram. According to this account, Lissener is the "Ardship of Cambry" (formerly Canterbury), a direct descendent of Eusa and the leader of the forty five members of a physically mutated community known as the "Eusa folk," the "Power Leat" or the "Puter Leat." These are allegedly the people who possessed both technological and political power when the atom was originally split. Now, they are imprisoned by the Ram in the nine towns which exist on the borders of the Power Ring, an enormous circular outline left behind by what was once a particle accelerator. Every twelve years, the Pry Mincer travels around the towns and brings the Eusa folk together in Cambry, the centre of the Power Ring (also known as "Zero Groun") in the hope that their historical knowledge of technology will somehow re-emerge in a surge of collective memory. Known as "Fools Circel 9wys," this process always fails, ending in the execution of the current Ardship in a symbolic re-enactment of Eusa's fate (2002, 77-82). Crucially, Lissener recounts a version of the Eusa Story which places the blame on the Ram for the continuing post-atomic guilt of Inland (82). Thus, the control of history is vitally connected to power: the ruling class modify their version in order to further establish their own dominance, while the underclass use orally transmitted accounts which radically depart from the "official" history in order to fight against the cruelty and hypocrisy of their oppressors. In this sense, history itself is a kind of futuristic Foucauldian "episteme," an unstable matrix of many contrasting and fragmentary voices or written artefacts whose ideological focus shifts according to broad theological, political or class boundaries.

Riddley spends most of the novel caught up in this violent stream of historical conflict. He initially favours Lissener's plight, regarding him as a "moon brother" and intending to help him and his people in their fight against Goodparley (89-111). However, after he is captured by Goodparley, he begins to side with him (156). Subsequently, Goodparley is ousted from power by Orfing, who is then ousted by the Eusa folk (174, 198). Lissener tells Riddley that before Bad Time, Goodparley's people "ben the maggits in the iron. My peopl ben the 1s as bilt the Power Ring.... [Goodparley] aint nothing only rottinness growt out of rottinness nor I aint leaving Inland to him jus yet"; at the end of the novel, it seems possible that the very same situation may arise again, and the oppressor/oppressed dynamic of Inland's society will merely be reversed (110). Riddley is the primary witness to the terrible prospect of a historical repetition, where history progresses blindly by turning back on itself and "starting again," until the next reversal occurs. If this violent future history is how *Riddley*, as Žižek puts it, "brings about" the "symbolic reality" of our present, nuclear moment, we might suggest that "working through" the "meaningless trace" (1989, 55-57) provides us with meaning in the form of meaninglessness, meaning that is present by its absence in the vision of a repetitive, circular and essentially "empty" history.

Indeed, Cowart argues that the lack of spiritual or historical salvation in *Riddley Walker* marks history as a "blind, oppressive, random yet deterministic mechanism," a cyclical sequence of "mass killing and meaningless bloodshed"; Fools Circel 9wys comes to represent the circularity of "history itself," and for the characters there is no escape from this cyclical terror (Cowart 1989, 85-87). Due to the fact that Goodparley manages to rediscover gunpowder, David Dowling argues that history in the novel is essentially repetitive (1988, 186). Here, we have a convergence between the way critics have read history in *Riddley Walker*, and how the "unthinkable" atomic blast has been conventionally imaged in socio-historical discourse. As Peter Schwenger writes: "whether the attempt to render the unthinkable is visual, philosophical, or narrative, the same icon governs the complexities involved: a circle around a point designated zero" (1991, 251). In *Riddley*, Ground Zero is Cambry; Fools Circel 9wys is the circle around this designated point. When Riddley walks around the circle and hears several, divergent historical accounts, he tells us that his head begins to feel as though it is widening like endless circles on water (2002, 122). Eventually, he arrives alone in Cambry and goes through a series of trance-like experiences and philosophical epiphanies about history, concluding with the paradoxical realization that "THE ONLYES POWER IS NO POWER" (2002, 167). Thus, Schwenger argues, Riddley's circling of the Power Ring "produces the epistemological equivalent of an explosion," a blast which leads not to power or knowledge but "an awareness of absence" (1991, 257-258). In this sense, the nuclear significance and epistemological potential of the Power Ring enact a vital re-figuration of the idea of circularity itself: rather than revering the meaningless "terror" of *Riddley*'s circular and repetitive history, it becomes possible to see the novel's cyclical formation

as the structural impression of its designation as a “future symptom” of our nuclear age. By “working through” (or “around”) the traces of historical circularity in the novel, we can hope to trigger an epistemological explosion of our own.

Riddley as Historical Materialist

The idea of a circular, epistemological explosion leading to fantastic knowledge is arguably as familiar to the popular imagination as it has ever been. In our post-Cold War paradigm, the ongoing quest to conquer the paradoxes of the atom takes place in an international and largely de-militarised setting. The Large Hadron Collider is a seventeen-mile circular tunnel beneath the French-Swiss border, our very own Power Ring capable of creating the “highest-energy man-made collisions ever.” Scientists are hoping to find the so-called “God particle,” a discovery that would potentially explain the existence of everything (Sample 2010, n. pag.). In the years before the LHC was switched on, doomsday theorists speculated that discovering the deepest secrets of the atom in this way would result in massive, earthly black holes, turn all matter into grey sludge and even create wormholes significant enough to be entered by time-travellers from the future (Sugden 2008, n. pag.; Connor 2008, n. pag.). So far, these scenarios seem to have been avoided, but such dystopian imaginings reverberate like echoes of the post-atomic guilt of Riddley’s people. Lissener insists that the knowledge of the 1 Big 1 isn’t something that you should ever “littl in to writing”: quantum secrets, for many of the characters in *Riddley*, are so paradoxical and wondrous that we should not even attempt to know them scientifically (2002, 84). Once more, meaning is created in the meeting place of present doomsday anticipation and Hoban’s novel, which itself enters into the wormholes of our imagination as a kind of time-traveller from the future.

In this imagination, the flow of history and time seems to bend and tear under the pressure of a figurative explosion, an idea which constantly recurs in the writings of Walter Benjamin. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin describes the historical materialist as “man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (1999d, 254). He continues:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly halts in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the suppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history. (1999d, 254)

There are recognisable parallels between Schwenger's account of Riddley's historical epiphanies and the historical theory put forward by Benjamin: both present thinking as a kinetic "flow" which results in a monad or "blast," leading to a fracture in the course of history. The post-atomic, circular guilt which seems to structure Riddley's thoughts can thus be read as giving him a "revolutionary" opportunity in his quest to understand the past through his present moment, in the sense that to trace the circle of the nuclear blast is itself literally a full, geographical revolution that leads Riddley to epiphanic realizations about the nature of history and power.

For Benjamin, to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it "the way it really was.... It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (1999d, 247). As we have seen, the power groups in *Riddley* claiming to know what "really happened" in history present divergent accounts that cannot all be true; and in our privileged position as readers who exist *in* the atomic history that Riddley is attempting to grasp, we know that the story of Eusa is a wildly inaccurate record of the history of nuclear fission. Riddley cannot "discover" the events of the past, but, as Benjamin puts it, he must grasp the "constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (1999d, 255). It is this constellation that Riddley attempts to understand in his "moment of danger" in Cambry, as he explores the mechanics of a nuclear blast from long ago, and it is a constellation as critical for us as it is for Riddley.

Standing in the centre of the blast site, Riddley sees the markings of the Power Ring "wite agenst the dark like broakin teef" (2002, 155). This is the place where "wite shadderd stood up over every thing" (159). In another part of Inland devastated by the atomic blast, Riddley sees a "wite shadder in the shape of a figger you cudnt tel if it ben man or woman it wer jus some 1 stanning with legs a part you cudnt make out no arms parbly the hans ben covering the face" (76). These spectral markings recall what Elin o'Hara Slavick describes as the almost photographic white shadows cast "by incinerated people and bridge railings, ladders, and plants at the time of the A-bombing [of Hiroshima]" (2009, 310). Like radioactive photographs taken during the moment of impact, these shadows bestow upon the nuclear explosion a ghastly form of historicity. Benjamin writes that the great revolution served as "a historical time-lapse camera" (1999d, 253); in this instance, it is the "great revolution" of the Power Ring that fractures and simultaneously preserves time.

Indeed, the white shadows in Cambry have the "auratic" quality that Benjamin saw in photography: they are a "strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be" (1999a, 518). As Esther Leslie argues, Benjamin saw photography as accessing "a differently constituted supercharged reality, a hyper-reality, with deeper, more detailed layers, layers that might be called unconscious, not available to the naked eye and only made perceptible by technological means" (2000, 56-57). The markings in Cambry give Riddley access to "the

goast of the Power what ben" (2002, 156). Riddley suddenly wants to be the "happener for that Big Power. I wantit to happen that 1 Big 1"; like the people who created the atomic bomb, he begins to call this devastated place Canterbury instead of Cambry (155, 158). In another figure of circular explosion, Riddley's dogs run around him in a circle and "the stoans gone wite the dogs gone all different shyning colours and the wite stoans shyning thru them" (159). The photographic traces of radiation in Cambry "supercharge" Riddley's reality, and in a typically circular movement, he begins to see white shadows of his own in the stones that shine through as the dogs imitate the frenzy of a nuclear reaction.

At this moment, Riddley writes:

It come to me what it wer wed los.... If you cud even jus only put your self right with 1 stoan youwd be moving with the girt dants of every thing the 1 Big 1 the Master Chaynjis.... Them as made Canterbury musve put ther selfs right. Only it dint stay right did it.... May be all there ever ben wer jus only 1 minim when any thing cud ever be right and that minim all ways gone befor you seen it. (2002, 161-62)

The "one minute" in which everything is "right" is that moment in which the fissional power of the atomic bomb exposes the "great dance of everything." Like a pioneering scientist looking into the microscope for the first time, Riddley writes: "You myt think a stoan is slow thats becaws you wont see it moving.... That dont mean its slow tho. There are the many cools of Addom which are the party cools of stoan. Moving in ther millyings which is the girt dants of the every thing" (163). Remarkably, Riddley could just as well be writing here about sub-atomic physics and its shattering potential to expose the molecular makeup of literally everything; he seems to have witnessed what Benjamin calls the "true picture of the past...an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again" (1999d, 247). Even Benjamin's metaphor of sudden thought as a "flash" is echoed by Riddley, whose realizations in Cambry "flashd" into his mind (2002, 158). The nuclear explosion, which accelerates particles into a sudden, almost photographic flash, makes itself available to Riddley in a vital "monad" of historical thought, in which he realizes not "what happened" in the past, but comes to glimpse the epistemological reverberations of a bygone nuclear science.

In the wake of this picture of the past, Riddley is completely changed: "I wer programmit diffrent then from how I ben when I come into Cambry.... I dint want no Power at all" (166-67). Porter argues that Riddley's survival "depends on his ability to understand what people smarter than he did not understand long ago—the nature of power" (1990, 455), and it is after his working through of a form of Benjaminian historical materialism that he comes to his ultimate epiphany, that "THE ONLY YES POWER IS NO POWER" (2002, 167). Riddley realizes that history is at its most powerful when it is

not being produced solely as a weapon in the battle for power. Instead, the "constellation" which he creates between his present moment and historical past acts as a kind of circular reversal of history: Riddley's historical past, which is our present moment, comes into immanent contact with his own present moment, so that our nuclear age is projected forward towards Inland at the same time as Riddley is projected back towards the modern world of fission and high technology.

The nuclear imagination consequently does something strange to Benjamin's figure of the angel of history. In Benjamin's ninth thesis on history, he writes:

[The angel's] face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise.... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. (1999d, 249)

On the other hand, when Jean Baudrillard writes about the nuclear blast, he describes a bomb that is "not content to strew things in space but would strew them in time. The temporal bomb. Where it explodes, everything is suddenly blown into the past" (1989, 34-35). In Riddley's future world, the storm from Paradise has been out-done by the nuclear storm; the angel of history is still turned towards the past, but now his direction has been violently reversed. Like the angel, as Riddley stands in the atomic wreckage he sees "one single catastrophe"; he wants to "make whole what has been smashed," that is, the Littl Shynin Man, the atom, the two pieces "that wantit to be 1 agen" (2002, 158). Leslie argues that, for the angel, "collecting the rubbish together, mending it all, would be the act that could renew the hopes for progress through technology, raised in the nineteenth century and so horribly betrayed at the beginning of the twentieth" (2000, 202-203). Here, the new technology that enabled what Benjamin describes as the "mechanical warfare" of the First World War, a "field of force of destructive torrents and explosions" (1999b, 84), comes into conjunction with the specular prospect of atomic warfare that manifests itself in the historical Third World War of Hoban's novel. Riddley is unable to fully "put together" the technological concept of nuclear fission, but his seeming glimpse into the fragile molecular nature of all matter becomes a kind of politico-religious experience, in which he momentarily transcends the ontological guilt passed down to his people by the Eusa Story. Thus, Riddley renews the hopes for progress through technology, not by desiring technological progress, but by allowing the epistemological potential of technology to come into mental harmony with nature, using the circular and historical echoes of the nuclear blast in order to recognise the "truth" of a simple stone in relation to the entire world. According to Leslie, this is the harmony that was missing in the twentieth century, a lack which Benjamin saw as a central

cause of the militaristic misuse of technology in his lifetime (2000, 35). This is also the discord at the core of the novel's primary historical and theological myth, which Riddley is able briefly to harmonise during his time in Cambry.

Riddley leaves Ground Zero and witnesses the rediscovery of gunpowder, the "1 Littl 1" that Goodparley sees as the first step towards the 1 Big 1 (2002, 188). The Eusa folk have overturned the Ram but lost their Ardship, Lissener, in the process. Riddley writes: "It looks to me like that Fools Circel is broakin now I dont think therewl be no mor regler hevvys and any Eusa folk whatre stil a live theyre all too binsy running a roun trying to go bang" (201-202). Inland is in a state of emergency, with the Ram's regional enforcers trying to maintain control of the farms as part of what Riddley calls a "care maker Mincery" (202). With the normal flow of life interrupted, Riddley decides to go on the road with a new puppet show and a devotional mission statement: "Ready to cry ready to dy ready for any thing is how I come to it now.... Not to lern no body nothing I cant even lern my oan self" (204). As Nancy Dew Taylor argues, the shows will reflect the "new philosophy" that Riddley has gathered on his travels, leading to the possibility that "art (the stories and the shows) will have a hand in shaping the future" (1989, 32-35). While maintaining the essential puppet show form of the Ram's historical and theological propaganda, Riddley intends to disperse a revolutionary message which extols the value of experience and dialectical thinking over unchecked political power.

We might recall here that Benjamin's allegorical model of historical materialism is also based on a puppet show. In this model, a chess-playing puppet is controlled by a hunchbacked dwarf, a chess master hidden from view by a "system of mirrors." According to Benjamin, "the puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology which...is wizened and has to keep out of sight" (1999d, 245). In the Ram's puppet shows, the theology of the Eusa Story is disfigured over and over again in order to present an equally disfigured political account of history. In Riddley's shows, however, the Eusa theology is removed from the equation altogether: his cast of characters does not include the traditional Eusa and Mr Clevver puppets, but the little-known figures of Punch and Pooty (2002, 215-219). Cowart argues that the normative religion of Riddley's time can only breed "spiritual impoverishment" (1989, 85); acknowledging this, Riddley does away with its trappings. The very "system of mirrors" that, in Benjamin's model is meant to "hide" theology, in Riddley's show comes to stand for a new theology, one which is based on Riddley's historical access in Cambry to what Derrida calls the "fabulous specularization" of our nuclear age (1984, 23). This specular theology does not require to be hidden, because it hides itself. As Riddley writes:

Thinking on that thing in us what thinks us but it dont think like us.
Our woal life is a idear we dint think of nor we dont know what it
is. What a way to live. Thats why I finely come to writing all this

down. Thinking on what the idear of us myt be. Thinking on that thing whats in us lorn and loan and oansome. (2002, 7)

This “idear” is a thing that is “looking out thru our eye hoals,” always “afraid of being beartht,” and that joins human beings into “1 girt big thing” in the same way that “all them tiny manyings” of a stone are brought together into “all 1 thing” (6-7). Riddley’s shows, and his writings, are intended precisely to explore the meaning of this enigmatic “idear,” the idea that he has conceived of by transcending the theological limits of his historical moment.

The new puppet show is an appropriate way for Riddley to scrutinize this oddly unknowable idea; as Schwenger writes, “at the puppet’s centre is an emptiness that is perhaps more important than the puppeteer’s hand” (1991, 259). Similarly in narrative, Schwenger argues, there is an “empty centre,” meaning that it is always “showing without knowing,” capable of producing “paradoxical circles” of language that help us to work through the ramifications of the nuclear age (1991, 260). And after all of the changes he has undergone, it is through narrative that Riddley chooses to supplement his new puppet shows, returning to Cambry before “sitting down to a tabel with a candl and putting some words on paper. That ben the beginning of this writing” (2002, 202). The epigraph to *Riddley* is a quotation from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus that has been excluded from the official Christian canon (see Freedman and Grant 1960, 85-87). When Riddley comes to write his own account of life in post-atomic England, it seems clear that this too will be a text excluded from the political and religious mainstream. He has difficulty even getting past the guards at Weaping Form with a puppet show that does not contain Eusa, and resorts to pronouncing “new show” like “Eusa show” in an attempt trick his way inside (2002, 208). But, despite the fact that Cowart describes Riddley as a “prospective but flawed messiah” (1989, 104), he is in fact possessed of what Benjamin describes as the “*weak* Messianic power” of historical materialism, a redemptive power which arises from making a contract between the present moment and the past (1999d, 245-246; emphasis original). As a figure whose “gospel” textually redeems the epistemological potential of our present moment of sub-atomic physics, and transcends the unredemptive dogma of the Eusa myth, Riddley takes on the role of a trans-historical (if somewhat tentative) messiah: whether the inhabitants of Inland shun his message or not, his text has found its way into our hands finally as Žižek’s meaningful symptom from the future, attempting to remedy the traumatic fallout of a nuclear holocaust that has yet to happen.

Conclusion: Translating the Future

Viewing the book in this way, it becomes possible to think about why it is, exactly, that Riddley’s mode of historical thinking might contain so many

parallels to Benjamin's. For a start, Riddley is a unique figure in his time, a thoroughly "oppositional" thinker who rejects his social role as a government-sponsored "connexion man" in order to pursue his own intellectual and moral concerns (2002, 22). Tomoko Masuzawa's essay on Benjamin examines the unique standpoint that the latter took in his writings: critics have been unable to fully understand the "adversarial relation between [Benjamin's] political and religious interests," and find even more difficulty in interpreting a body of work interspersed with Marxism, "messianism," Romanticism, "kabbalistic polysemy," "latter-day Jewish mysticism" and "pre-Marxist idealism" (1985, 514-516). Similarly, Hannah Arendt argues that there are difficulties involved in describing Benjamin as simply a scholar, a philologist, a theologian, a writer, a translator, a literary critic, a historian or a philosopher, all of which are terms that define him only to a limited extent (1999, 9-10). Although Masuzawa writes that Benjamin is now "at long last" regarded as "a major literary theorist of the century" (1985, 514), Arendt points out that there were "few who still knew [Benjamin's] name when he chose death in those early fall days of 1940" (1999, 7). She shows that he was a figure distrusted by the intellectual establishment in Germany and criticized by his Marxist contemporaries, only coming to fame and critical acceptance posthumously, a fame that he "probably never thought or dreamed about" (1999, 11-20). In a similar way, by the time Riddley has come to write his story, he is almost entirely isolated, and his idiosyncratic mode of thought is not readily accepted by the communities of Inland: he gives no indication as to what he considers to be his audience (if he considers this at all), and only comes to fame when *we* read him, a kind of "pre-humous" fame that, like Benjamin, he could never have anticipated.

Arendt argues that "the trouble with everything Benjamin wrote was that it always turned out to be *sui generis*" (1999, 9); of course, this might also be what endows his work with so much analytical potential. Attempting to categorise Benjamin in any normative way is a thankless task for precisely this reason: instead, it is more rewarding to treat the hermeneutic uncertainty of his work in a similar way to Schwenger's idea of the paradoxical circle, allowing its inherent contradictions to produce a kind of epistemological "explosion." Indeed, embracing Benjamin's ambiguity seems to be the only logical solution if we are to accept Arendt's proposition that, fundamentally, he was a writer who "thought poetically" (1999, 10). For Arendt, Benjamin's way of dealing with history "from the outset concentrated on the philosophy of language" (1999, 53). Riddley also defines himself as primarily interested in the potential of poetic language; it is the language that seems to define him: "Walker is my name and I am the same. Riddley Walker. Walking my riddels where ever theyve took me and walking them now on this paper the same" (2002, 8). The language of *Riddley* is what marks the book as truly singular: it is a form of English the significance of which cannot possibly be fully understood by the people who use it, full of puns and references that can only begin to be grasped once it is transported back to our nuclear age.

Indeed, Porter argues that *Riddley's* mutated language is "supported by the possibility that the word, like enriched uranium, is fissile material" (1990, 456). Words are split and joined together in a suitably atomic form of wordplay, and, as Porter puts it, "meaning has burst outward uncontrollably like neutrons in a chain reaction," a meaning that "often goes over the head of the punner" (1990, 457). A direct example of this can be found in Orfing's explanation of the discovery of gunpowder: "youve got to have the Nos. of the mixer then youve got to fynd your greedy mints then youve got to do the mixing...and youve got to say the fissional seakerts of the act" (2002, 201). By translating this post-atomic English into modern English, we can find mutated words that, once "decontaminated" and restored to their original context, bring layers of added significance to Orfing's speech. "Greedy mints" we can phonetically translate to "ingredients," and this fits into the logical sense of the syntax; but the way in which the word has split also suggests "greedy" and "mints," both of which hover like an accusation of the predominantly financially-motivated nature of technological discovery. "Fissional seakerts of the act," we can translate to "official secrets of the act," and this is a kind of alchemical spell uttered at the moment that gunpowder is mixed. But, as Porter argues, "official secrets of the act" is also a fragment of modern politico-legal language, and for "official" to become "fissional" and "secrets" to become "seakerts" transforms the phrase into "an ironic euphemism for power grabbing" (1990, 459). These are examples of the kinds of translations that constantly take place in a reading of *Riddley*, in which meaning is made to shift within a tense relationship between our time and *Riddley's* time, two semantic contexts vying for precedence without ever being able to attain it.

In this light, it is perhaps fitting to end this essay by considering the centrality of translation to Benjamin's conception of language and meaning: "of all literary forms, [translation] is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own" (1999c, 74). For Benjamin, the task of the translator is not to recreate the "meaning of the original"; rather, he must "lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification" (1999c, 79). In this kind of translation, "the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air"; the translated work "catches fire on the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language" (1999c, 75). Benjamin argues that only by ignoring the "intended" meaning of a text can a translator at least partially glimpse the "suprahistorical kinship of languages," the deeper "intention" that is only realizable when more than one language is considered: this is what Benjamin calls "pure" language (1999c, 74). Commenting on Benjamin's essay on translation, Paul de Man has described this as the disjuncture between "what is meant" and "what language means"; "it is this motion, this errancy of language which never reaches the mark...that Benjamin calls history" (1985, 39-44). In the same way that history is not about "what really happened," but a certain image of the past which forms a constellation with the present, translation is not merely about fidelity for Benjamin. As Arendt explains it,

Benjamin's thinking "delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was...the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallisation"; language and history survive in "crystallised forms," and Benjamin's methods are intended to "bring them up into the world of the living" (1999, 54-55).

Translating *Riddley* from the "crystallised forms" of post-atomic language into modern English is a unique task. Beyond the short glossary that Hoban belatedly provides (2002b), we must get by with approximated guesses: we can never be completely sure that we understand even the very basics of what *Riddley* is telling us. In this uncertain mode of translation, Benjamin's philosophy becomes increasingly important: because we are unable to precisely decipher the "meaning of the original / what is meant," we rely heavily on decoding the "mode of signification / what language means." This is the position that Goodparley finds himself in as he wonders over the only fragment of modern English writing that has survived the nuclear devastation. This is the apocryphal Legend of Saint Eustace, a narrative that would have originally accompanied a painting of Eustace in Canterbury (see Hoban 2002a, 223-224). In his reading, Goodparley interprets "fidelity," ironically, to be a type of paint; "St" becomes short for "sent"; "A. D. 120" becomes "120 years all done"; "XVth century" is "some kynd of senter where they done this thing theyre telling of"; "crucified Saviour" is a kind of salt that you examine in a "cruciboal," and so on, until we become aware that what is actually a relatively unimportant piece of writing about an apocryphal saint has, through translation, become the basis of both the central Eusa myth of *Inland* and also an alchemical recipe for gunpowder (2002, 123-129). In the same way that we can use phonetics in order to translate parts of *Riddley's* writing, Goodparley does guess some things "correctly" — "*creatures* thats creachers," "*Episodes* thats when you do a thing 1 part at a time" — but overall, "what is meant" by the text in our time succumbs to "what language means" in the future, so radically that this story has come to structure the majority of historical and theological thought in *Inland* (126; emphasis original).

Swanson describes Goodparley's interpretations as a humorous "misreading" (1984, 207), but this misses the vital point of this passage: in *Inland*, modern English can no longer be misread. The words that Goodparley struggles with have undergone a Benjaminian process of crystallisation. History has seen to it that "what is meant" no longer has a role to play; "what language means" is the only factor in the constellation that forms between Goodparley's moment and the past. In one simile, Benjamin writes:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (1999c, 80-81)

Once again, it is from the “one point” on the circle, like the “moment of danger” or nuclear explosion, that meaning flashes before us as crystallised language, a picture of history flitting by. In these moments, the most fundamental building block of history, language, violently breaks down and reforms over time, like the sub-atomic matter that twists and re-shapes in the collisions at Hiroshima, the LHC, and even in our imagination: matter that we fear could destroy or even explain the existence of everything, and that we depend upon for the laws of the universe whether they are physical or symbolic. What makes Riddley the hero of Hoban’s novel is that, unlike Goodparley, his attempt to make sense of the past – to recognise his world in the spark of “pure” language that lingers like the smallest quantum matter, its meaning changed but still meaningful – is based not upon power-grabbing or technological ambition, but the promise of historical “truth.”

“Thinking on that thing in us what thinks us but it dont think like us. Our woal life is a idear we dint think of nor we dont know what it is”: Riddley’s concern for this “truth” is rendered most sharply in his complex and dialectical understanding of language, the thing inside us that “thinks us” but does not think like us, that structures our symbolic reality, our history, but itself does not exist according to any inherent, stable structure (2002, 7). Like Žižek’s symptom that only gains its meaning “in the future,” when we retrospectively produce the “symbolic reality of the past” (1989, 55-57), the “idear of us” is always moving, flying around the signifiatory “flux” of history at unimaginable speed, ready to be violently stopped at any moment and made to mean. *Riddley* was published during a Cold War that, beginning after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, produced the “fabulous specularization” of total nuclear war in the international imagination (Derrida 1984, 23); and it arrives now as a kind of secular “gospel” from the future, a Benjaminian plea for a mode of historical interpretation that carefully works through (or “around”) its ideological and theoretical implications, rather than reducing it to an insidious and potentially disastrous play for political or discursive power.

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