

Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* and the Language of the Future

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■ Russell Hoban's futuristic novel *Riddley Walker* achieves a good part of its fascination through the language of the first person narrator. Riddley Walker tells his story in the English of the fairly distant future, a time when the society of Inland (or England) has existed for centuries after a nuclear war in 1997 and at a time when that society stands at a more or less medieval level. Hoban has created for Walker a language which has done what language always does—change with the passing of time. This Post Modern English looks different from Modern English and it is, in fact, different. In creating such a language, Hoban has walked a thin line between, on the one hand, incomprehensibility and, on the other, unrealistic similarity to standard twentieth-century English. On the one side, he would lose his reader through obscurity; on the other, he would lose the reader to incredulity. Hoban has successfully avoided these extremes; he has created a language that is a likely extrapolation of Modern English, a language that results from the same types of changes that have occurred in the development of Modern English from Old and Middle English.

In paying strict attention to the language, the form of our own language as it might exist centuries in the future, Hoban has done something that not all writers of science fiction have done. As Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin have written in *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision*, "Language itself has been both a problem and an opportunity for science fiction writers. Most of them have fudged the problem and thus missed the opportunity."¹ The field presents rare opportunities for authors to experiment with language and problems of communication, for in science fiction, encounters are inevitable between clashing cultures—of humans and aliens, of humans and artificial intelligences, of humans at various stages of language development.

Though some writers have sidestepped these issues, some have not; the more successful attempts to deal realistically with linguistic problems (along with some of the failures) are discussed in book-length studies by Myra Edwards Barnes and Walter E. Meyers. These books show that some science fiction writers are interested in language and communication, but they point to few attempts like Hoban's *Riddley Walker* wherein a first-person narrator speaks a language somewhat different from the English contemporary with the writing of the novel.² One example that comes to mind is Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*. Burgess employed a variant form of English, Nadsat, a teenage slang, but it is basically very similar to Modern English.³

Such is not the case with the language of *Riddley Walker*, as a look at the following paragraph suggests:

I give the kid back his fealys and we vackt our wayt out of there. We fas leggit out of Bernt Arse senter in to the outers in amongst a jumbl of stannings and rubbl jus to be out of site then we stoppit a littl to talk summit. The black leader and his 2 nexters stoppit with us the other dogs kep going. What they wer doing wer shaking foller for us. When I come to know them better I seen they dint do nothing randem they had tack ticks.⁴

In this paragraph, a typical passage from *Riddley Walker*, several features are immediately apparent. First, Hoban has made his language look different by altering spelling in many words—*senter*, *jumbl*, *site*, *wer*, *randem*. These eye-catching variants make the text quite alien in appearance, but they do not necessarily reflect real changes in the language. They are, in fact, like variant spellings seen in texts written or printed before the setting of standards in the eighteenth century. Hoban's novel shows much more than orthographic originality; other features of the language are more important because they suggest that more basic changes have occurred as the years have passed. For example, other words in the paragraph show some fundamental differences from their twentieth-century equivalents; words like *leggit* and, perhaps, *vackt* indicate a change in morphology. The voiced dental [d] in past tense markers, which exists along with a voiceless form in Modern English, has apparently disappeared; it has leveled to the voiceless form [t]. Phonological change is also apparent: in *fas* and, perhaps, *kep*, terminal consonant clusters are simplified to single consonants. Vocabulary changes are seen in the paragraph as well: *vackt our wayt* and *tack ticks* are formed by a kind of folk etymology, a new analysis of *evacuate* and *tactics*, while *stannings* is a portmanteau word, or blending of *stone* (cp. Old English *stān*) and *standing*. Changes in morphology, phonology, and vocabulary are significant in language history, as are syntactic changes, in ways that mere orthographic changes are not. Such changes are characteristic of the language of Hoban's novel. In the following pages, I have attempted to discuss the changes occurring as Modern English becomes Post Modern English in such areas as morphology, syntax, phonology, and vocabulary—the topics traditionally studied by students of language history.

Morphological change—change in the form of words and inflections—in the development of Riddley Walker's Post Modern English has not been great. Mentioned above is the leveling of the preterit suffix to the voiceless dental stop (with or without a preceding vowel). This change has occurred in almost all regular, or weak, verbs. Since Old English time (c. 450 to 1100) irregular, or strong, verbs have been weakening in English; for example, Old English *helpan* (infinitive), *healp* (preterit singular), *hulpon* (preterit plural), and *geholpen* (past participle) have become *to help*, *helped*, *helped*, and *helped* respectively.⁵ It is difficult to say that this trend continues in the development of Post Modern English on the basis of the evidence in *Riddley Walker*, but Walker's text reflects general chaos in the forms of strong verbs, as these examples suggest: *I give* (RW, p. 77); *I gone* (RW, p. 1); *When he come on my spear* (RW, p. 1); *When the shout gone up* (RW, p. 1); *I seen some I move a way* (RW, p. 76).

Another kind of change in word form results from the continued use of derivational morphemes in the transference of roots from one form class to another. (Morphemes are the smallest recognizable units of meaning in a language; derivational morphemes are those morphemes which are used in forming new words of one class from words of another class, just as *mobile*, an adjective, becomes *mobilize*, a verb, by the addition of the derivational morpheme *-ize*.) Several classes of words illustrate this kind of change. Adjectives and adverbs become nouns: *farness*, *notness*, *hevviess*. The last is similar to *heavy* as a noun in such uses in Modern English as "He usually plays the heavy in the movies," but in *Riddley Walker*, the word is apparently more restricted, meaning "guard" or "armed guard." Adjectives and adverbs become verbs, as in *uppit*, *overing*, *slying*, and *muching*. The verbs *tell* and *reveal* have become the nouns *tel* and *reveal* through the addition of a $\emptyset$ morpheme (i.e., a morpheme resulting in no change in the surface form of the word); in this case, both words, meaning the product of a mystical interpretation, can be identified as nouns by their function in the sentences, as when the question is asked of Walker, "Is there a *reveal* for this crowd?" (RW, p. 55).

The syntax, or word order, of the Post Modern English of *Riddley Walker* shows some variations that are not common in Modern English; however, with the possible variations in the syntax of our own language, it is just sometimes difficult to determine what qualifies as historical change in syntax in Walker's language. Generally his written language is less scrupulous with sentence punctuation, as might be expected in a society that is largely oral. While the sentence is a natural unit in speech, it is subject to various analyses, with full juncture (the pauses that mark the end of sentences often placed according to relatedness of ideas), length of syntactic units, and the importance of an expression. Perhaps the written English of today simply has more formal rules for marking sentences that apply in Riddley Walker's written English, yet his language is not terribly different in that regard from many early written texts. Inverted syntax

occurs fairly frequently, yielding sentences like "Starveling wer what they wer doing" (*RW*, p. 2) and "Freezing cold they wer" (*RW*, p. 2). Another anomalous construction, involving *that*, is seen in this example: "Which that must mean Lissner ben took by Orfing" (*RW*, p. 169). One additional characteristic syntactic development is the simplification of paraphrastic tenses, those tenses normally expressed with auxiliary verbs: "The pack ben follering" (*RW*, p. 1) and "The hevvys been talking" (*RW*, p. 110) illustrate this construction.

Phonological change, or change in pronunciation, is significant in Walker's Post Modern English. One type, metathesis, involves the transposition of sounds for example, Old English *brid* became Modern English *bird*. Metathesis has yielded many words in the language of the novel, including *girt* (great), *sturgling* (struggling), *parper* (proper, as in "Only not realy looking he dint have no eyes to look with he dint have no parper face" [*RW*, p. 76]), and *pirntow* (printout). This last example occurs in a sentence that reveals a good bit about the language: "Erny said, 'Rightway iwl tel you what i think Iwl tel you what I pirntow from my unnermos datter' " (*RW*, p. 13). *Pirntow* demonstrates not only metathesis in the reversal of *r* and *i*, but also shortening in the loss of the final consonant. *Datter* (data), used here and elsewhere in phrases derive from the long-lost computer, may or may not denote significant phonological change: the vowel has probably changed and, hence, the doubling of the *t*; since the language is derived from British English, the final *r* is not necessarily pronounced. "Rightway" is a name, a nominative of address.

Another type of phonological change involves the loss of sounds within words similar to the simplification of terminal consonant clusters seen above: *cern* (certain), *sepert* (separate), *come* (become), *parbly* (probably), *hisper* (whisper), and *oansome* (lonesome). The word *hisper* is particularly interesting; the *wh* (pronounced [hw] and written *hw* in Old English) is often pronounced [w] by speakers of Modern English. Walker's spelling suggests a complex process, a return to [hw] with a subsequent loss of [w]. *Oansome* may be influenced by *own* as this quotation suggests: "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" (*RW*, p. 7).

At least one sound shift seems to have operated regularly in bringing the phonology of Post Modern English to the stage seen in *Riddley Walker*, a shift from [θ] to [f], resulting in the following: *teef*, *froat*, *mouf*, *earf*, and *Norf*. One other example resulting from this sound shift is *healf* in "Be you going to healf me or you going to stand there wanking?" (*RW*, p. 185) The word may have developed from *health*, since in the passage the injured Orfing Good-parley is asking help from an old man who may have healing powers; but the word may also be influenced by interference from the word *help*. Such ambiguity occasionally leads to confusion in a reader more familiar with Modern English than with Post Modern English, but it is also rich in its suggestions.

One other change that might be considered phonological can be seen in a few words and phrases: *naminals*, *nindicator*, *nemminy*, *a nother*, and *a nuff*. These seem to represent a trend begun in Middle English times (c. 1100 to 1500); they reflect uncertainty over the analysis of *a* before words beginning with the consonant *n* and *an* before words beginning with a vowel. In the development of Modern English, this uncertainty has yielded *a newt* from early English *an ewte*, *an adder* from *a naedre* and *an apron* from *a napron* (cp. *napkin*, from the same root) (*Origins*, pp. 146–47). In Modern American English, one may occasionally hear “That’s a whole nother ball game,” apparently resulting from similar confusion.

Developments in the lexicon, or vocabulary, of the novel are also similar to those changes that have influenced our everyday language, though this area shows even greater change than the others, and I suspect that vocabulary is the area in which Russell Hoban had the most fun as he wrote the book. Some items in the lexicon of Post Modern English are coinages; others represent additional processes: blending, folk etymology, and various combinations of forces. Actual coinages are few: *Arga Warga* for death or the personification of Death; *iron red dy* for smelter; *gunge*, some crude building as can be seen in context, “It wer the useral thing basket and gunge with a thatch roof” (*RW*, p. 101). The world of Riddley Walker is a very wet world; when there is no rain, there is likely to be *girzel*. *Girzel* may be a blend of *grey* and *drizzle* with metathesis, or it may be a coinage. Similarly, *iron red dy* might be a coinage based on *red* or on both *red* and *ready*; or it may belong with a short list of old words with new meanings. Among these is *connexion*, referring to a sort of mystical explanation of a ceremonial drama; the word is apparently derived in part from *next* because the connexion man gives the connexion on the night after the performance, or Nex Nite. An interesting phrase is the collocation *pull datter*, in the sentence “Him and Easier pulling datter to see which 1 will walk away when theyre finisht” (*RW*, p. 219); apparently, all memory of the computer that spawned the image has been lost, since Easy and Rightway Flinter are engaged in a fight. Another combination with a new meaning is the phrase *dead mans iron*, denoting the compensation (*comping station*) paid the family or village at the death of a man. The phrase has ancient antecedents and seems closely related to Old English *wergild*.

One other source of lexical change results from “folk etymology,” the change in a word because of a mistaken impression about its origins. For example, Middle English *berfrey*, “tower,” has become *belfrey*, because everybody knows that most towers, or at least most common towers, have bells (*Origins*, p. 282). Several words in *Riddley Walker* result from the same kind of re-analysis. Some derive from scientific or technical terminology, though the initial meaning is nearly always lost: *strapplying the lates* (extrapolating), *party cools* (particle), *spare the mending* (experimenting), *comb the nations* (combinations), and *tryl narrer* (trial and error). The word *Addom*

is particularly rich in suggestion, in the context "many cools of Addom and party cools of stoan"; in it, both *Adam* and *atom* are involved, but the system works outward from the single word as the people of Riddley Walker's day combine fragments of old beliefs, both scientific and religious, in an attempt to bring back the wonders of the past—"boats in the air and picters on the wind" (*RW*, p. 19). The system of beliefs and half-remembered names is also an attempt to return to the time of power, of gun powder and of "the Master Chaynj is" and the "I Big I" (*RW*, p. 19), the atomic explosion that brought on "bad times," the dark ages that they are living through. The vocabulary of this system of knowledge is both amusing and poignant, as the characters manipulate the words to try to find their past.

Two other areas of linguistic investigation are suggested by the novel, onomastics and toponymics, the study of the origins of personal names and of place-names, respectively. In these areas, Hoban has shown a good bit of creativity, and the results are often amusing. Many personal names seem to result from something analogous to the medieval practice of using names that fit some characteristic of the person so named: Fister Crunchman, Abel Good-parley (the Pry Mincer), Straiter Empy ("Our Big Man"), Nimble Potter, and Jobber Easting. Walker says of himself: "Walker is my name and I am the same. Riddley Walker. Walking my riddles where ever theyve took and me walking them now on this paper the same" (*RW*, p. 8). The immediacy of names and their significance is at least suggested by these examples, but it is perhaps with place-names that Hoban has been most innovative. The children of Walker's village sing a song, a sort of nursery rhyme, called "Fools Circel 9wys," which accompanies a game vaguely reminiscent of "London Bridge":

Horny Boy rung Widders Bel
 Stoal his Fathers Ham as wel
 Bernt his Arse and Forket a Stoan
 Done it Over braok a boan
 Out of Good Shoar vackt his wayt
 Scratcht Sams Itch for No. 8
 Gone to senter nex to see
 Cambry coming 3 times 3
 Sharna pax and get the poal
 When the Ardship of Cambry comes out of the hoal.

(*RW*, p. 5)

As the story develops, Walker becomes aware that the proper nouns in the rhyme are based on place-names in the area, and that rather than being only a children's rhyme, the verse is a part of a ritual designed to bring back the old knowing from the time before "Bad Times." He eventually discovers that there really is an "Ardship of Cambry" (obviously, the Archbishop of Canter-

bury), who is one of forty-five mutant casualties of "Bad Time," Eusa folk (USA folk?), who are preserved through passing generations as oracles. (*Sharna pax* suggests something about the fate of the Ardschip at the end of the ritual if the reader sees the words as "Sharpen an ax.") A study of a detailed map of southeast England reveals that the names in the rhyme and other place-names given in a map that serves as a frontispiece in the book, are derived from real place names.⁶ Some of them are probably obvious to a person familiar with the area: Cambry is Canterbury, Sams Itch is Sandwich, Done it Over is Dover; but other place-names are not so transparent. Some refer to less well-known towns or places: Horny Boy is Herne Bay; Widders Bel is Whitstable; Fathers Ham is Faversham; Fork Stoan is Folkstone; Widders Dump, Wetherton; Moals Arse, Modasha; Harts Ease, Hartney Isle; Reakys Over, Reculvero; Rams Gut, Ramsgate; and Dunk your Arse, Dungeness. Bernt Arse could possibly be Ashford. In these cases of toponymic inventiveness, foreign or unusual names are replaced by more graphic and more common names. They further exemplify Russell Hoban's use of principles of historical linguistics in inventing the language of *Riddley Walker*; they join the examples of his creativity in morphology, phonology, syntax, and vocabulary. They all seem well within the range of possible developments from our own language, given the passing of the years.

In *Riddley Walker*, Russell Hoban has developed a language of the future that is reminiscent of the language of the past. He has followed lines consistent with parallel changes in the culture of his characters. The language of the novel has not been influenced by an influx of words borrowed from other languages, as Middle English was with an infusion of words from Latin and French; instead it employs words already in the language, changing them, usually in the direction of simplification. As the language has undergone these changes, it has come to look like an earlier form of English, and the reader sees the language as appropriate to the level of culture among the people of Inland; the language that resembles Middle English suggests a peasant people from the Middle Ages. In creating this correspondence, Hoban has depicted a society entering into a recurring cycle: from crude beginnings, small signs of progress become apparent and the logical development will be a repetition of the cycle that led to the bomb and the annihilation of 1997. Within the novel, gunpowder is rediscovered and death follows. We can assume that cultural "progress" will continue through subsequent levels until it again achieves a logical culmination—the Atomic Age. Thus Hoban has used language in somewhat the way Walter M. Miller, Jr., has used the Church in *A Canticle for Liebowitz*. In that classic futuristic novel, the three sections present successive ages of man, beginning with a world in which the Catholic church exists at a primitive, early medieval level and leading to the next age of the bomb.⁷ Both authors have found a way of placing their characters into an earlier stage of our culture, albeit at a time chronologically in the future. Both

writers then move their players to a stage where scientific progress, real and potential, repeats itself with all of its violent power. Miller produces the effect with a reincarnated medieval church; Hoban does it with a return to medieval language, which is nonetheless a logical extrapolation of twentieth-century English.

Notes

A shorter version of this paper was delivered before the Science Fiction/Fantasy Special Interest Group of the South Central Modern Language Association in Fort Worth, Texas, October 28, 1983.

1. Robert Scholes and Eric S. Rabkin, *Science Fiction: History, Science, Vision* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), p. 153.
2. Myra Edwards Barnes, *Linguistics and Language in Science Fiction/Fantasy* (New York: Arno, 1974); Walter E. Meyers, *Aliens and Linguistics: Language Study and Science Fiction* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1980).
3. Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker* (New York: Summit Books, 1980), p. 77 (subsequent references to this work cited parenthetically in text); first published, London: Jonathan Cape, 1980; subsequently published in paper, New York: Washington Press, 1982.
4. Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (New York: Norton, 1963), with an afterword by Stanley Edgar Hyman.
5. Thomas Pyles and John Algeo, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 3d ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), pp. 126–27 (subsequent references to this work cited parenthetically in text).
6. Emanuel Bowen, "An Accurate Map of the County of Kent . . .," in *The Royal English Atlas*, drawn by Emanuel Bowen, Thomas Kitchin, and others (London: 1760; rpt. London: David and Charles Reprints, 1971).
7. Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle For Leibowitz* (Philadelphia: J. P. Lippincott, 1959).

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