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THE SIGNIFIER AS TOKEN: THE TEXTUAL RIDDLES OF RUSSELL HOBAN

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Fantasy has often been described as being concerned with the union of this world and the world beyond the mirror, the alternative yet non-existent paraxial world.¹ Perhaps an even better analogy is that of the Moebius strip, the seamless, single yet double sided, unified and yet reversible, figure of eight ring which symbolises infinity. The seamless juncture of the real and the virtual, the self and the Other, is an unending circle and yet that circle is constantly twisted. Folds in time and space permit a sliding or transfer from the real to the virtual, hence the constant thematics of the passageway, the hole or twist in the fabric of reality which can either permit the exit of the human into the world of the marvellous 'out there', or allow the incursion of things or beings representative of the outside virtual world 'in here'. It is this latter phenomenon which has earned the specific title of the 'fantastic'.

Now, in spite of Todorov's theory of hesitation², in many stories this move, this slippage on the Moebius strip, requires proof, a token either that the human has visited the virtual world, or that the virtual or supernatural has somehow penetrated the everyday. The token provides a concrete link between the two worlds, the two sides of the ribbon, the human and the 'alien', the present and the paraxial, the self and the other. The move between the two demands a proof, which can either be seen as validating the story which has preceded it, like the silver key brought from beyond the grave in Villiers' 'Vera' or the two white flowers brought from the world of the future in Wells' *The Time Machine*, or as providing an enigma to which the story endeavours to supply a solution, like the tinder box in Andersen's tale. Since the token is metonymic of

otherness, the alien element present in our world, it is open to the almost limitless interpretations of desire. Indeed, in conformity with the thematics of lack ably analysed by Irène Bessière³, an absence can figure as token as much as a presence. The classic example of this negative manifestation is the token in Maupassant's 'le Horla' which is the *non*-appearance of the narrator's reflection in the mirror, obscured by the presence of his invisible visitant.

Of course no genre or mode worthy of the name can exist without inviting transgression, no conventions, including those of the fantastic, but demand their inversion or overthrow. So it is with the rule of the token. The beauty of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*⁴ is that it stands our habitual conceptions of the fantastic on their head and produces an inversion of the usual model of the other or alien invading our human here and now. It does this by taking as its norm, its living present, another recognizably human and yet totally different world of the future. The Inland of the story is a land bombed back into the stone age, only just returning to a form of settled culture, dominated by rituals which dimly record past customs and past history, and where man and woman have returned to the primitive pattern of breeding at twelve and dying at thirty. Apart from the dubious literacy of a small 'guvment' group and the village shamans or 'connexion men', it is a society completely reliant on oral transmission.

This is the reality: when it is contravened and put into question, it is because there are tokens present in this primitive world. These tokens come from an alien, outside, forgotten world: our own. The most obvious one is the manuscript telling the story of Saint Eustace, which stands as an isolated message, almost totally incomprehensible, from an age so far distant as to be like another planet. The future world, 3000 years on, endeavours to decipher its meaning, partly as would archaeologists working with inadequate tools and blurred memories, partly as would cryptographers forever seeking a second hidden meaning, and partly as would alchemists endeavouring to reduce the mystical to the scientific.

The notion of using a manuscript as token, a sort of message in a bottle or signal from outer space metonymic of otherness, is not new. What is new is that Hoban subtly changes the language of the future world, producing 'a *latent, as yet unspoken future word*'.⁵ This is part linguistic extrapolation and part phonetic sleight of hand. In many cases he manipulates not so much the sound as

the form and spelling of the signifier to produce variations in orthography rather like those common in Elizabethan English. The abbreviations, phonetic spelling and colloquialisms are presented as characteristic of a society where 99% of the population are illiterate. This new language is flexible and capable of remarkable rhythms and moments of living poetry. Now, in this extrapolated linguistic environment the token is a manuscript written in that alien tongue, the English we speak. *They* in the future are the norm, *we* are the aliens; our world is the fantastic, the other, theirs is reality.

From this token, the manuscript text, there then spring, or have already sprung, a series of further texts, variants, readings and misreadings, interpretations and allegories, which assume many textual guises, plays, songs, stories, rituals. What *Riddley Walker* replays and uses as paradigm is in fact the life of the literary text as such, and particularly its accretion of multiple interpretations and the gradual growth of an intertextual network of further texts, a rhizome⁶ to which the original text belongs without in any way controlling it. And the 'original text' itself is part of another such network:

...you cant make up nothing in your head no moren
you can make up what you see. You know what I mean
may be what you see aint all ways there so you cud
reach out and touch it but its there some kynd of way
and it come from some where ... That story cudnt come
out of no where cud it so it musve come out of some
where. Parbly it ben in that place from time back way
back or may be in a nother place only the idear of it
come to me there. That dont make no odds. That
storys jus what ever it is and that what storys are.⁷

The point that is being made is that over the centuries a text gradually becomes a token, the metonym of another world. Such links may even lose any semblance of the meaning or purpose they originally had, and come to function as texts independent of their original context and artefacts magical in their own right. The classic example of this is the mutation and variation both the text of the Bible and its interpretations have undergone over the centuries. Such texts become to later generations what an aeroplane

may be to a savage tribe or the paintings at Lascaux to us, objects of veneration the greater for our mystification.

However, Hoban's most deep-seated innovation is that he takes this semiotic alienation one step further and shows us how the token functions within the lexemes of language itself. In his world of the future the spoken tongue, itself subject to phonetic and semantic evolution or devolution, contains certain strange relics, weird mutations which are in fact the tokens of another distant, infinitely alien, almost magical or marvellous world, the realm of high technology in which we live. These phonetic and semantic mutations from words whose true purpose has been forgotten are the equivalent of the genetic mutations, the deformed Eusa folk and the tribes of hyper-intelligent dogs which live beyond the pale. Each normal community has its 'fents' or pale which separates it from the bad lands, the nuclear waste land, and this thematics of the double world is a *mise en abyme* of the redoubling between the real and the virtual. Both the verbal mutations and the genetic mutations are the legacy of the splitting of the atom, an event of which only mythological traces remain. The token words, like the mythology, are not pure nonsense but emerge, as it were, from the gap between the past and the present. Thus to leave in a hurry has become 'vack his wayt', to collect dues has become 'revvying the noos', to speed up has become 'axel rating'. The 'pry mincer', who with his 'guvment hevvys' has been following up the memory of a great computer says:

We ben looking for Eusas head 1 way and a nother this long time. We ben digging in the groun for it we ben spare the mending we ben tryl narrering for it we ben asking roun the circel for it.⁸

Hoban's model for these linguistic transformations may be found in that ignored sub-culture, rich in its own traditions and in its own language, the life of school-children. As Douglas Newton said, 'The world-wide fraternity of children is the greatest of savage tribes, and the only one which shows no sign of dying out.'⁹ Children have their part phonetic, part mutated language, their variable yet basically unchanging formulae handed down through the centuries, and their savage rituals. As in all oral cultures their language uses exaggerated rhythms, doubling and tripling of speech patterns, and simple rhymes and metres to ensure the passage of language and

ritual from generation to generation. Whether Hoban used the mine of information in Iona and Peter Opie's classics, *The Lore and Language of School children* (1959) and *The Singing Game* (1985)¹⁰, directly or whether his thinking simply ran parallel to theirs, it is from this base that he extrapolates not only much of the language but some of the structures of the book. To take one example of the mutation of the signifier in the play ground, the demand for a curtsy and a bow as the price of entrance, in a Scottish children's game mentioned in *Rob Roy* (1818) and obviously much older, brings the reply:

Here's a beck and here's a boo
Open your gates and let us through.

A massive move in time and space, to London 1974, and the refrain has mutated to:

Here's my black and here's my blue
So open the gates and let me through.¹¹

Here, as in *Riddley Walker*, the changed form has acquired a whole new set of connotations while remaining a token from a vanished age. Ritual language, and ritual signifiers, remain as unknown factors, but, just as dead elements in a language can acquire new force and new connotations, so elements of a lost world gradually mutate and change.

Particularly interesting here is the way the text exploits the notion that the memory of the signifier may be completely separate and evolve in completely different ways from the memory of the signified. The fact that mutations may be either phonetic or semantic according to the vagaries of memory explains the persistence of certain 'meaningless' formulae such as 'Eeny, meeny, myny, mo'. This use of the signifier whose signified seems absent is quite different and distinct from the absent signified of the unsayable, the unnameable, and other formulations which are generally seen to characterise the fantastic.¹² It is the cleavage between the memory of the signifier and the memory of the signified which allows the deconstructive process constantly at work in the defiguration and the refiguration of language.

The free-floating signifier can become the token which permits and validates the passage between radically different worlds. In *Riddley Walker* language at once looks back to a forgotten alien world and forward to a new and terrifying one. Like all language, it betrays as much by what it represses as by what it keeps against all odds. It is the forgotten but also the repressed world, our world of technology, the world of 'boats on the air and picters on the wind'¹³ which represents the fantastic, the 'unconscious' of this new race. In this text the very split between signifier and signified stresses and parallels another split, that between the narratee and the reader. Identification between the two is totally debarred. We, as readers, link up with an immensely complicated and erudite pattern of intertextuality which belongs to our own age, the context of the *énonciation* of the text. The narratees on the other hand, look forward or back only to the limited memory stocks of their own time, the context of the *énoncé* of the text.

To take one example, two constellations of connotation are built up around a key 'tel' of Riddley's father: 'A littl salt and no saver'. The reader is encouraged to draw upon Biblical associations, 'When the salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?' but also 'saver' is phonetically linked in the text with 'saviour', a word incomprehensible in the later age, and salt with Salt 4, an expression which has remained in the language as a meaningless signifier. For the narratee, on the other hand, salt is linked with the saltings and the takeover of such land by the more aggressive inlanders (the folk of the saltings find no saver). Then too, the saying forms a clue in the hunt for the salts, which, when amalgamated, will provide the formula for entry into a new scientific age. This ingenious exploitation of two levels, two networks of intertextuality and connotation, is what gives the text its depth.

It also reminds us that the reader is constantly an intruder from an alien world, an excluded third, as Michel Serres suggests in *The Parasite*.¹⁴ The point is stressed here by making the reader the representative of a forgotten past. The narratees of *Riddley Walker* moreover are themselves representatives not of the present but of the future. Riddley, one of the tiny minority which can read and write, is consigning his story to paper, 'Walking my riddels where-ever theyve took me and walking them now on this paper the same'¹⁵ not so much for the benefit of his contemporaries as for that of a future generation when reading will again be possible.

The reader here and now, unlike these future narratees, *cannot* identify with the message of the text or with the models of reading set therein. This is because the readings of texts preserved from our own time, such as the St. Eustace manuscript, or the Punch and Judy puppet show, are obviously aberrant to our ears, accustomed as we are to a totally different context. We know, or think we know, the meaning of 'the crucified Saviour' and 'an ascent to heaven'. The question is of course raised whether our reading of these terms is not as distant from that of past ages as the reading of 3000 years hence is distant from us. In any case this doubling drives home the fact that there must inevitably exist a disjunction between the reader and the narratee, that the reader is always the 'other' spying on the messages conveyed within the text.

Riddley Walker uses an immensely detailed pattern of self-reflexivity, doubling and redoubling the text in the mirrors of stories, songs and puppet shows. We can perhaps extract from these self-reflexive models one which is intelligible and perceptible only to the reader and not to the narrative audience, the structuring model of the pilgrimage to Canterbury. The singing game 'Fools Circel 9wys' is one of the structural models within the text. It represents the widdershins circle of the ritual which moves around the ring of dead towns from Horny Boy (Herne Bay) to Sams Itch (Sandwich) until it comes to rest in Cambry (Canterbury), the site of both the recurring sacrifice for which the axe must be sharpened and the original disaster which that sacrifice must expiate; since Canterbury was the centre of the nuclear explosion which devastated Kent (the Inland of the story). The children's game, which echoes the hidden bloody ritual recurring on a twelve yearly cycle, is also the model for Riddley's journey of initiation, a positive quest for the self knowledge which is only to be found in Cambry, the womb of the world. All this is perceptible to the narratees, but only the reader can draw the further parallel with a tradition going back to and well beyond Chaucer.

Reminded of this tradition, we are also reminded that the notion of the pilgrimage to Canterbury has already suffered mutation in our own minds. The text of the *Canterbury Tales*, for instance, is already to some extent a token: a magically preserved and religiously conveyed text in which the signifiers are gradually breaking free from an immediate relationship to their original signifieds and assuming a life of their own. Thus, on the one hand, they can lead

us back into a world half grasped and more than half misread, in an archaeology and an hermeneutic rapidly becoming as tentative as that of Abel Goodparley, the aptly named 'pry mincer' of Inland. On the other they can be seen as opening on to new sets of signifieds, new connotations, depending on the context of the readers, which have more to do with the intertextuality of the canon of English Literature than with the original context of the Tales.

Thus the question of the changes and blanks in context, in intertextuality and above all in memory, viewed both as a positive and a negative, a creative and a destructive force, raises the problem of closure. The Saint Eustace story gives birth to the Eusa story which is open-ended because it is the base of a recurring ritual. But the texts describing it and derived from it, the puppet shows, songs and folk tales, are also open-ended because they will change in transmission. Even if written down, as the narrator is putting them on paper, their signifiers will still acquire different signifieds as the process of textual mutation, which we call interpretation, moves on. Every embedded text in this story, every self-reflexive segment, *must* be interpreted, they are the 'riddels' which give the book its name, and hence they become models for the interpretability of the text itself.¹⁶

Hoban provides a model for a certain sort of deconstructive activity which both looks back to the series of linguistic mutations which lie behind key words of a text and also forward to the possibility of new significations springing from ever-changing literary and social contexts. In certain circumstances signs themselves can be read as tokens. A token has power merely because it is a token, a manifestation from another world. It is not necessary for it to claim any status but that of signifier. Because of its special claims as validation or as enigma, the reader/decoder is bound to supply a signified, and each generation of readers may apply different perceptions to the task. Thus the doubleness of signifier and signified finds its fantastic extension in the unending, constantly reversible Moebius strip which links the real and the virtual, the self and the other.

NOTES

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2. Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Tr. R. Howard (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve, 1973, 1970).
3. Bessière, Irène, *Le récit fantastique: la poétique de l'incertain* (Paris: Larousse, 1973).
4. Hoban, Russell, *Riddley Walker* (London: Picador, 1980).
5. Dostoevsky, cit. Jackson, op. cit., p. 19.
6. Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), pp. 663-4.
7. *Riddley Walker*, p. 90.
8. Ibid, p. 138.
9. Opie, Iona and Peter, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford and N.Y.: O.U.P., 1959), p. 2.
10. Opie, Iona and Peter, *The Singing Game* (Oxford and N.Y.: O.U.P., 1985).
11. Ibid. p. 45.
12. Jackson, op. cit., p. 39.
13. *Riddley Walker*, p. 138.
14. Serres, Michel, *The Parasite*. Tr. L.R. Schehr (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1982, 1980).
15. *Riddley Walker*, p. 8.
16. See Chambers, Ross, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1984).

POLITICAL ATTITUDES IN NADINE GORDIMER'S FICTION

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This article will examine the political attitudes embodied in Nadine Gordimer's longer fictional writing and will seek to show that whereas hers is commonly classed as an unambiguously liberal voice¹ in the chorus of writers examining South Africa's political and social dilemmas, her novels on the contrary can be interpreted as critical of many of those who oppose apartheid in South Africa, while giving limited support to some who live within the apartheid system, Afrikaners in particular. I will seek to demonstrate that Gordimer's attacks on opponents of the present government in South Africa form a consistent pattern, and that this pattern can be interpreted ultimately as a pessimistic prediction of the future of all whites in the New Africa, that Africa whose ineluctable emergence she anticipates with deeply divided feelings. Gordimer, far from working joyously and confidently for a revolutionary black South Africa, is a deeply pessimistic moderate, unable to accept the human price of apartheid but fearful of what black rule will bring.

It is perhaps inevitable that a writer of Gordimer's stature would be 'claimed' by groups seeking to promote essentially political causes. Given the fact that she is a woman who writes about the experience of women, it should be no surprise that she features largely in university courses devoted to the study of feminist approaches to literature, or that respectful attention should be paid to her work in many critical studies of women's writing. Nor is it a surprise that political messages have been sought and found in her writing; much of her fiction (particularly her longer work) is set in South Africa, and deals with people, black and white, living out

their lives against the background of the apartheid system. The South African government itself has been in the forefront of those who detected a radical political message in her books, as it showed when it banned several of them, including (briefly) *The Late Bourgeois World* and *Burger's Daughter*. A growing body of criticism has sought to link the feminist and revolutionary strands which it is claimed can be found in her writing.²

Gordimer has not tried to discourage those who believe her to be politically committed to the overthrow of apartheid: quite the reverse. Alan Ross quotes her, in 1965, as referring to the struggle against apartheid as 'my war',³ and she has also remarked, 'I have no religion, no political dogma—only . . . my conviction that the colour-bar is wrong and utterly indefensible'.⁴ In a lecture in New York in October 1982, she was even more forthright, calling apartheid 'the ugliest creation of man', and affirming that she is committed 'as a white South African' to the struggle for black liberation.⁵

Critics' references to this stance, however, beg the question of whether Gordimer is committed as a writer, in her writing, to the cause of apartheid's overthrow. She herself has given many warnings that it is unsafe to assume that her writings in general mirror her personal political views. Taking issue with Sartre's view that political commitment is an overriding responsibility for the artist, she has said 'I believe . . . the temptation to put one's writing at the service of a cause—whether it is fighting the colour-bar or "the momentary renunciation of literature in order to educate the people" etc—is a betrayal'.⁶ This is not to say, however, that her writings are apolitical. On the contrary, close examination of her longer fictional work reveals a definite pattern of political argument, and one well worth elucidating. That argument is not to be found in the form of authorial comment; one of the difficulties which faces her readers is that, as M. Tucker has remarked, much of her fiction 'so astutely avoids comment that a seeming reportorial indifference is evoked'.⁷ Instead her views are to be traced through her subtly ironic treatment of her characters, which, shading as it occasionally does into outright satire, allows her to manipulate our view of her protagonists.

The confines of this paper make it impossible to deal in detail with all Gordimer's output, but in an effort to follow Gordimer's development over time and look at some of her work in sufficient

depth, I have chosen to focus on two works spanning twenty years: the short novel *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966) which was written in the aftermath of Sharpeville and the Bram Fischer trial, and *Burger's Daughter* (1979) written against the background of the Soweto uprising and the subsequent violence in South Africa. In each of these important novels, Gordimer is dealing with a female narrator who takes her political views from a dominant man, or men, in her life, and in each of them, as I shall show, both the female narrator and her male guides are so completely undercut by Gordimer that the views they espouse are deliberately called into question.

* * *

The action of *The Late Bourgeois World* takes place on a single day in the life of its narrator Elizabeth van den Sandt, the day on which she hears that her ex-husband Max has killed himself by driving into the sea at Cape Town. Because it is concentrated on that one day, the novel has virtually no plot in the conventional sense: instead Gordimer is concerned to present us with a situation, and allow a set of finely visualised characters to move within it. The external events of the day are trivial, but they are the details on which hang the real interests of the novel, interests which the reader only gradually uncovers.

Those real interests concern the life and death of Max, who is the central representative of political activism and opposition to apartheid in the novel. It is worth stressing at the outset that Max has none of the moderation implied by the term liberal; he would be on the far left of any western country's political spectrum. He was an active communist while at university; subsequently he leaves the Communist Party because it is too disciplined for his liking, and too timid in what it is willing to do. Max at this stage in his career is sliding towards anarchism. He is passionately dedicated to the overthrow of white South Africa, and, more than that, to the overthrow of what the novel calls 'the late bourgeois world', the whole western system of capitalism which sustains white South Africa. The planting of Max's ineffectual bomb, his imprisonment and betrayal of his former comrades, his release and his guilt at what he has done, combined with the breakup of his marriage to Elizabeth, bring him at last to suicide.

Christopher Heywood, in an important study of Gordimer's novels, has argued that Max's motivation for attacking white South Africa is a political one, having its roots in a hatred of apartheid and a desire for a link with black South Africans: 'His striving for closeness to the blacks springs from his struggle to escape the isolation which is imposed on white children when they are severed from their black playmates'.⁸ This is perhaps a logical assumption, given what is known of Gordimer's own loathing of apartheid, but it is not one supported by the novel. On the contrary, Max's motivation is shown to be not political but personal and deeply self-centred.

Like so many of Gordimer's protagonists, Max comes of Afrikaner stock, and the members of his family are to be seen as examples of the worst white South Africa has to offer: they are powerful (the father is a Member of Parliament, and for a while Chief Whip of the Opposition party) and they are also rich and corrupt. They have spoilt Max by showering on him everything he could have wanted in the way of material possessions, while depriving him of love. His parents' wealth and his own loneliness and deprivation are repeatedly linked:

His parents had their farm—what the estate agents call a country estate—on the edge of the city. His father was a member of parliament and they used to have big Party receptions there. They bred pointers and ducks—for the look of the thing, Max used to say. But he told me that when he was a child he would come back from solitary games in the veld and at a certain point suddenly hear the distant quacking of the ducks like a conversation he couldn't understand.⁹

This sense of alienation pursues Max throughout his life, as Elizabeth makes plain twenty pages later, when the quacking duck image is continued and expanded as Elizabeth and Max are sitting in silence amid the conversation of the Van den Sandts and their guests:

Max had grown up in that silence; the babble was perhaps what he heard in the distant conversation of the ducks, when he approached the farm alone over the veld.¹⁰