

## WRITING THE UNTHINKABLE: NARRATIVE, THE BOMB AND NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST

By Adam Gyngell

In Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, Riddley enters 'the woom of Cambry', the epicentre of the nuclear blast that reduced England to a neolithic state over two thousand years earlier. Walking through the crypt of the devastated cathedral, he experiences a numinous revelation of the power that was at once the apex of civilization's achievement and the architect of its destruction. Riddley struggles to articulate the sense of annihilation, of absence, he feels: 'Some times theres mor in the emty paper nor there is when you get the writing down on it. You try and word the big things and they tern ther backs on you' (Hoban 2002, 161). Riddley finds it difficult to come to terms with the nuclear holocaust that constitutes his primitive society's point of origin. But his problem is also that of narrative: faced with the empty space that lies at the centre of this apocalypse, Riddley finds that the blank page expresses the totality of the annihilation better than any words could. Riddley's experience illustrates the extent to which nuclear holocaust resists representation, defies narrative structure and eludes the very words with which we write.

The detonation of the atomic bomb irreversibly altered man's relationship with the world he inhabited. Absolute finality had been the exclusive preserve of story-tellers, of fictions, of narrative; the bomb now threatened to end the human narrative itself, to put an end to not only history but the conditions by which history might exist. In 1948, Andre Breton admitted that he had once been seduced by the 'temptation for *the end of the world*.' Apocalypse had represented the thrill of revolution, the absurd carnage of meaningless devastation. Now, having come through another global war and the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Breton decided on behalf of his generation that '*we no longer want the end of the world*' (Conrad 1998, 39). Nuclear apocalypse would yield nothingness. The end of the world, Breton realized, could happen: but the event would be purely destructive. It would not be hermeneutic, it would not be revelatory; it would just happen. Insofar as we represent it at all, we are not representing it. Like Riddley's paper, nuclear holocaust occupies a blank space. We can write about it only by writing 'about' it, by writing around its perimeter, by circumnavigating an empty centre. Nuclear holocaust is intrinsically alien to narrative, aggressively extinguishing the very possibility of narrative itself. Nevertheless, we look to narrative to see what it can 'tell' us about nuclear holocaust, and to see *whether* it can tell us about it. Steven Connor astutely notes that 'apocalypse is as much a challenge to our capacity to conceive, represent and narrate it, as it is to our will to avert it' (Connor 1996, 201). Indeed, one might say that the atomic bomb and its aftermath have become suitable icons for the post-mortem condition of post-modernism because the post-modern, as Lyotard notes, is 'that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself' (Lyotard 1984, 81).

Narrating the annihilation of the world and its inhabitants, the writer occupies a liminal space after the end as a survivor and witness of his own apocalypse. In Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, the need to circumscribe an apocalypse that cannot be circumvented is taken as a matter of national policy. The government authorized a history of the nuclear holocaust to be written on glass bricks, encased in a cement cellar on Australia's highest peak. Nuclear holocaust is a (non)event that puts an end to history. Yet the decision to record the holocaust demonstrates an attempt to historicize an event that will put an end to writing, an event that has not taken place and that, in taking place, will end rather than initiate its historicity. No one will read this history; Dwight's belief that 'there should be something written, all the same' (Shute 2000, 77) is indicative of the impulse towards resisting the absolute finality of nuclear holocaust, towards providing the satisfaction of narrative closure that nuclear ending prohibits. Indeed, the document is characteristic of the way writers find means of framing the apocalypse, of defusing its finality: the recording of the holocaust strenuously resists the possibility that the catastrophe could be the end of this narrative, or the ending of narrative itself. Rarely does the end of the narrative coincide with the end of the world. In *On the Beach*, the existence of the ragged remnants of

humanity provides the psychic space needed to contemplate and articulate nuclear annihilation. Faced with the prospect of an end without appendix, with the task of imagining an event that is terminal, authors construct scenarios 'after the end'. Apocalypse must be displaced chronologically and ontologically.

In *Riddley Walker* and Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, nuclear holocaust is framed from the longer perspective of future time: the disaster is not the end but a distant point of origin, a cataclysmic past that is reconstructed through surviving texts and oral myths. The apocalypses depicted in these post-apocalyptic representations are historical events. Reminders and reminders survive: the people who inhabit these post-apocalyptic worlds try to discover, through deciphering its traces, the nature of war, and of our own situation before its outbreak. For Riddley's community, all quests for forgotten knowledge resemble the excavation of wrecks from the earth. These speculative fictions point back towards an apocalypse that is an erasure, a blank space that characters try to interpret and understand by articulating the fragments that remain. The worlds they portray are characterized by the absence of written texts and literacy. As a result, nuclear holocaust becomes an enigma which survives only outside the order of conventional discourse: in the songs and children's rhymes of *Riddley Walker*, in the shopping lists and circuit diagrams of *A Canticle*.

Nuclear holocaust thus exists on the margins of the text: the bomb falls in an unspecified past before the start of the narrative (like the shadow of nuclear destruction in George Orwell's *1984*) or beyond the last page of the book (as in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*). Authors invariably write about nuclear war without confronting it directly. Speculative fictions dodge the realities of human apocalypse by transferring it to other times, other species, and other galaxies. Nuclear annihilation itself is seldom portrayed in narrative: peering into the crater, writers nervously edge back to the narrative safety of solid ground. The most challenging narratives are those that attempt to render holocaust in the narrative present, rather than placing it in the assumed narrative past. Yet, in the present, it is an event that annihilates the very possibility of narrative representation. It can only be known in advance, in projections, in predictions, and in premonitory narratives: it exists in the speculative tense of science-fiction, the future-conditional of what ifs and maybes. The few works that take us through the blank of the atomic blast are forced to question their own capacities to represent. In Gee's *The Burning Book*, the blast arrives in faltering present participles and ellipses before incinerating the very pages we read. Nuclear holocaust takes the form of three charred, grey pages at the book's end. Whether it be set in the distant past or projected future, apocalypse finds a narrative frame. The end of narrative is signalled by and within narrative itself. In contrast, works that narrate the holocaust in the present tense find that frame shattered. In Briggs's graphic novel *When the Wind Blows*, this is explicitly realized. Normal life and its everyday routines are contained within the secure frame of the comic strip; when the bomb explodes, the page is scorched white, its edges tinged a reddish-pink. The frame itself is shattered and dissolved.

R. J. Lifton has observed that the hypothetical space of nuclear disaster cannot be inhabited by the imagination. Writers find themselves skirting round the perimeter of the gaping chasm of disaster, unable to conceive or represent it except by indirection. Nuclear holocaust offers a test of the limits of the human imagination. The Editorial in the 31 August 1946 edition of *The New Yorker* explained the editors' decision to print Hersey's *Hiroshima* in full, 'in the conviction that few of us have yet comprehended the all but incredible destructive powers of this weapon' (Hersey 1981, 15). The bomb and its effects are 'all but incredible'. The very language used to convey the power of the explosion is stretched to its elastic limits; one could not believe it were it not for the knowledge of its very real existence. Its consequences exert an even greater pressure on the resources of the imagination. Confronted with the picture of mass obliteration, radioactive contamination, and even human extinction, the mind recoils:

'Can you visualize it, Dwight?'  
'Visualize what?'

‘All those cities, all those fields and farms, with nobody, and nothing left alive. Just nothing there. I simply can’t take it in.’  
(Shute 2000, 59)

In Shute’s novel, Moira experiences the difficulties of conceiving such total destruction, despite living in a world that has felt its devastating effects. ‘It’s too big,’ she concedes, ‘I can’t take it in... I suppose it’s a lack of imagination.’ Riddley articulates a similar sentiment: ‘you never will get to see the woe of any thing you’re all ways in the middle of it living it or moving thru it’ (Hoban 2002, 186). Denied a cosmic perspective, the human imagination, trapped in the confines of the individual consciousness, finds itself engaging with something too big to comprehend.

If nuclear holocaust defies human imagination, then it constitutes an even greater challenge to artistic representation. Devoid of the symbolic or allusive mediations that dominate apocalyptic narratives, nuclear holocaust precludes the possibility of a narrative structure; by imagining the destruction, one is projected into a dead time that falls outside the human tenses of past, present and future. In Huxley’s *Ape and Essence*, the description of nuclear holocaust occupies just one sentence. ‘There is a little click, then a long silence which is broken at last by the voice of the Narrator’ (Huxley 1994, 31). It requires ‘the voice of the Narrator’ to give narrative shape to silent void: the terminal moment itself is a centre of absence, bordered by the ‘click’ that precedes it, and the voice that follows. In the novella, the holocaust is referred to by survivors only as ‘The Thing’, an event that remains indefinite, unspecified. In *A Canticle*, the Abbot informs a curious scientist: ‘I doubt if a single *completely* accurate account of the Flame Deluge exists anywhere. Once it started, it was apparently too immense for any one person to see the whole picture’ (Miller 2007, 188). Wandering through the Zone in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Slothrop encounters a scrap of newspaper which contains the novel’s only oblique reference to Hiroshima (Pynchon 2000, 822). He makes out the letters

MB DRO  
ROSHI

Staring at the distorted wire photo of the mushroom cloud printed on the soggy paper, Slothrop sits on the curb, blankly staring at the page. The report on the bomb dropped is fragmentary, a code that he is unable to decipher. Slothrop has no idea of the content of the whole headline, nor can the paper give him any. It seems apposite that he finds only wet scraps: the cryptic quality of this fragment perhaps goes further towards capturing the devastating nature of Hiroshima than the full, unspoiled page ever could. Lifton discovered in the *hibakusha* or ‘psychic numbing’ of Hiroshima survivors a metaphor for what one might feel if one tries to undergo and absorb the experience of nuclear annihilation: ‘the human mind cannot bear very much of this reality’ (Lifton 1967, 33). In a novel like *Gravity’s Rainbow* that deals with the aftermath of World War II, the absence of Hiroshima is conspicuous. In this episode, we see how Pynchon’s narrative seems to evade, even repress, the cataclysmic event. The memory of the Japanese holocaust acts both as a brake and a stimulus to the apocalyptic imagination, exposing the limits of our language and our imagination. Nuclear holocaust is ‘unthinkable’: in its destructive fire, it consumes all potential for meaning, all systems of human thought. Riddley believes that ‘The 1 Big 1 and the Master Chaynjis aint some thing you littl in to writing’ (Hoban 2002, 84). Nuclear holocaust points to a site past the possibility of signifying, of representing. It cannot be ‘littled into writing’; when we try to articulate the totality of the obliteration, we are left facing a blankness, or emptiness.

In Part One of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, ‘Beyond the Zero’, Slothrop explains to Tantivy his fears about living under the rocket’s arc: ‘it could happen *any time*, the next second, right, just suddenly... shit... just zero, just nothing... and...’ (Pynchon 2000, 29). At the moment of detonation, there is nothing, ‘just zero’. It is in the ‘and...’ that follows this ‘zero’ that *Riddley Walker* finds its point of origin. The thematic and geographical centre of the novel’s world is Cambry, the forbidden zone that lies at the heart of his culture’s genesis: ‘I knowit Cambry Senter ben flattent the werst

of all the dead town senters it ben Zero Groun it ben where the wite shadderd stood up over every thing' (Hoban 2002, 159). Cambry is the 'Zero Groun': erased and effaced by the 'wite shadder' of the nuclear blast, it is 'the woom' of his primitive society, encircled by the ring of dead towns. Riddley's choice of words is significant. Cambry is Ground Zero, the calculable point of impact of a nuclear warhead; it is the point at which the world as we know it ended, and the world as he knows it began. It is where a new year zero commenced. It is also 'Zero ground': uninhabitable, with radioactive decay tangible in the air; it is a mark of absence, a scar on the landscape, a locus of nothingness. In the novel, we are given a map that draws the Power Ring – the ditch left by the particle accelerator that once stood around the town – as a concentric circle around the crater, a topographical zero with an empty centre. The image is a fitting one for a novel that deals with nuclear annihilation. Spencer Weart has noted how the image of the ringed atom became ubiquitous in Cold War iconography and manifested itself in various forms: the cross-sections of the bomb, the rocket mandalas of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the extending continuum of circles that form the blast radius, the green light sweeping round a radar. Riddley first heard of this ring from the children's song 'Fools Circel 9ways' (Hoban 2002, 5). It soon becomes the circle that he must circumnavigate whilst interpreting his society's most primal myth: 'If we go to Fork Stoan weare keaping the circel thatw l be axel rating the Inner G you know. Thats what you do when you Power roun a ring' (Hoban 2002, 90). Riddley's journey and the narrative it produces resemble the atoms in a particle accelerator. For Jacques Derrida, the visual, philosophical and narrative depiction of the 'unthinkable' takes the form of a circle around a point designated as zero (Derrida 1978, 281). In *Gravity's Rainbow*, a range of characters are engaged in a personal crusade to 'try to bring events to Absolute Zero' (Pynchon 2000, 4). It is 'Zero' that forms the symbol for Enzian and the Zone-Hereros in Pynchon's novel. Architects of their own destruction,

they calculate no cycles, no returns, they are in love with the glamour of a whole people's suicide [...] The Empty Ones can guarantee a day when the last Zone-Herero will die, a final zero to a collective history fully lived. (Pynchon 2000, 378-9)

The survivors of von Trotha's brutal extermination campaigns in the Südwest, dispossessed and dislocated, are known as the 'Empty Ones': at their centre there is only absence. Rejecting the linear, teleological view of history propagated by his colonial oppressors, Enzian believes his people 'will find the Center again, the Center without time, the journey without hysteresis, where every departure is a return to the same place, the only place' (Pynchon 2000, 379). Like Riddley, they find themselves drawn by the gravitational pull of 'the Eternal Center [...] the Final Zero.'

In Mordecai Roshwald's *Level 7*, X-117 dreams that he is in a crowded city, seconds before the blinding light of a nuclear blast blots out the sky. When the brightness subsides, he gazes at a scene of annihilation: 'where I expected to see a mass of huge buildings there was nothing: what had been there was erased from the surface of the earth' (Roshwald 2004, 79). X-117's dream is a typical vision of nuclear nihilism: the awareness of absence, of erasure, of nothingness that lies at the heart of nuclear destruction. When proposals were being made for the Hiroshima Ground Zero Memorial, one survivor suggested a large, empty open space to represent nothingness – because 'that was what there was' (Lifton and Falk 1982, 108). The blast disintegrated human bodies, leaving white shadows on the walls and pavement; like these spectral outlines, narrative can only register a blank, a mark of absence, when it comes to delineating the bomb and its aftermath. Lifton notes that many Japanese survivors describe their state at that time with the phrase *muga-muchu*, 'without self, without center' (Lifton 1967, 26). Like the Zone-Hereros, the Japanese who lived through the blast are 'Empty Ones'; the words they grasp to give expression to their experience take the form of negation, of cancellation. In *The Burning Book*, after the blast at Hiroshima, 'the whole world turned white' (Gee 1983, 66). Gee draws an explicit analogue between the obliterating destruction of the bomb and the emptiness of the blank page. Just as the explosion leaves only white shadows, the page becomes a locus of absence, outlined by its margins. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Maurice Blanchot explores the problems of addressing a holocaust in language: 'it is that which, in thought, cannot make itself present, or enter into

presence, and is still less able to be represented or constitute itself as a basis for representation' (Blanchot 1986, 33). Nuclear holocaust manifests itself as ultimate absence, as an annihilation that is purely destructive, and as a return to the *nihil* from which the world was made. Indeed, in *A Canticle*, it is this recognition of absence that is supposed to be the key to the fallen civilization's sub-atomic wizardry. Brother Jeris asks Francis: 'What, pray, was the electron?' Francis replies that 'there is one fragmentary source which alludes to it as a "Negative Twist of Nothingness"'. Jeris scoffs at this response: 'How clever they must have been, those ancients – to know how to untwist nothing' (Miller 2007, 78). For the monks, this ancient science unleashed such cosmic power through their ability to 'untwist nothing'. *Riddley Walker* presents a similar picture of the past. Riddley eventually gives up his rhapsodic dreams of scientific progress, of 'boats in the air and picters in the wind' (Hoban 2002, 18), in favour of a nihilistic outlook, a new belief in nothingness. 'I went looking for no Hy Power no more I dint want no Power at all... THE ONLYES POWER IS NO POWER' (Hoban 2002, 167). Riddley's revelation takes the form of an awareness of absence – suitably, it takes place at the 'Zero Groun'.

It is significant that both Pynchon and Hoban make symbolic investment in the figure of zero. Zero is an empty character; at the same time, it is a character for emptiness, a symbol signifying nothing. Zero is, in Blanchot's terms, 'that which [...] cannot make itself present': it can be represented only as something that is absent or missing. Zero is an absent-presence; yet it is also a cipher, a number, a riddle. It is unsurprising, then, that the protagonists in these novels are engaged in processes of what Goodparley calls 'terpitation', of deciphering riddles, uncovering clues, and making connections. In *A Canticle*, the monks analyze diagrams and doodles, mathematical formulae and personal memos, meaningless texts that they hope will contain some revelation: 'this knowledge was empty of content, its subject matter long gone' (Miller 2007, 66). The knowledge becomes no more than 'a symbolic structure', devoid of meaning. In *Riddley Walker*, traces of a long-past nuclear war are misread in an effort to decipher its nature. Goodparley performs a critical interpretation of the Legend of St. Eustace manuscript, reading a piece of art-history as if it concealed the alchemical secrets behind the '1 Big 1'. Riddley tries to unriddle the coded myth of the *Eusa Story*: By deconstructing its words, he tries to find the hidden, possibly absent, knowledge that lies at the centre of his society. Slothrop, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, is an inveterate sign-reader. Slothrop's desk comprises 'lost pieces to different jigsaw puzzles' (Pynchon 2000, 27). His mission on the Riviera is to read, to delve through voluminous documents on rocketry, plastics, and propulsion, searching for clues. He applies a particularly paranoid mode of reading, in which everything connects to everything else in one grand design. The Zone-Hereros are 'the Kabbalists out here [...] the scholar-magicians of the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated.' This 'holy Text', Enzian concludes, 'had to be the Rocket' (Pynchon 2000, 616). The Rocket is known only as 00000: if it is a text, then it is a cipher, an icon empty of content, representing nothing. The 00000 must have meaning imposed on it, like the Memorabilia of the Albertan Monks, or the *Eusa Story*. Blicero believes it to be an escape from the chained cycles of death and destruction: the rocket is the white, plastic womb to which Gottfried returns. Blicero's symbolic investment in the 00000 carries a resonance for the task of the writer who addresses the 'Zero Groun' of nuclear holocaust. J. G. Ballard comments that

the catastrophe story [...] represents a constructive and positive act by the imagination rather than a negative one, an attempt to confront the terrifying void of a patently meaningless universe by challenging it at its own game, to remake zero by provoking it in every conceivable way. (Ash ed. 1977, 130)

Like Blicero, the writer must strive 'to remake zero', 'to confront the terrifying void' that the prospect of nuclear holocaust creates. Like Riddley, the writer finds that he has only words and writings on the page with which to fill the void, and to make sense of the abyss that yawns in front of him.

The narrator in William S. Burroughs's *The Western Lands* sits crossing out scribbled marks on the page: 'the old writer couldn't write anymore because he had reached the end of words, the end of what can be done with words' (Burroughs 1987, 258). The atomic bomb and the prospect of universal annihilation place an interminable stress on the capacity of language to articulate the realities of the nuclear age. Ideas that were formerly unthinkable now required a semantic structure, a new language. In *Physics and Philosophy*, Heisenberg questions how we might understand nuclear physics when we cannot speak about the atom in ordinary language. Even physicists found themselves confronted with a mystery, a power that defied the vocabulary that first tried to encompass it; the behaviour of sub-atomic particles could be explained only in the densest mathematical equations. Reading a pamphlet about the H-Bomb in *The Burning Book*, Angela stares in blank horror at '[the] exact mathematical formula of lethality  $k = y^{2/3} / (CEP)^2$ ': 'in her head, the whole world had just died' (Gee 1983, 241). Angela sees the human world replaced by a statistical one: death and destruction are reduced to a neat collection of fractions and figures. Her vertiginous sense of dislocation, her awareness of the helplessness of words to express such precise annihilation, is one shared by those whose task it is to narrate nuclear holocaust. Derrida observes how, faced by the bleak prospect of nuclear ending, we seek to neutralize its horror, 'to translate the unknown into a known, to metaphorize, allegorize, domesticate the terror, to circumvent (with the help of circumlocution...) the inescapable catastrophe' (Derrida 1984, 201). Just as Riddley walks in narrative circles around the Power Ring, so we find ourselves talking around nuclear holocaust. In *When the Wind Blows*, Mr and Mrs Bloggs, unable to comprehend the unprecedented destructive force of nuclear war, are reduced to rolling out clichés from the Blitz. The characters in *On the Beach* can do little more than exchange similarly dead metaphors. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pirate Prentice tries to find an adequate term for the 'end of burning, what's their word... Brennschluss. We don't have one. Or else it's classified' (Pynchon 2000, 7). Characters inhabiting these apocalyptic worlds are faced with the failure of language, the breakdown of communication. The monks of *A Canticle*, trying to explain the Flame Deluge that wiped out the previous civilization, find that they 'disagree violently in words about what we mean in words by something that isn't really meant in words at all'. Dom Pauli recognizes that such an event, if it can be understood at all, has meaning only 'in the dead silence of the heart' (Miller 2007, 173). To give verbal expression to that 'dead silence', one is forced to reformulate the very medium of expression itself, to reconstruct the language one uses. As X-117 tells us in *Level 7*, 'to try to describe how complete such complete destruction is, is to be reduced to playing with words – or with what was and is no more' (Roshwald 2004, 151).

Perhaps no novel engages in this task of 'playing with words', with reconstructing language, more thoroughly than *Riddley Walker*. The 'barms what done it poysening the lan' have similarly poisoned the language. In Hoban's post-atomic world, language, like the world around it, has been transformed by universal decay. The language of the novel, Hoban noted in an interview, 'carries in it the ghost of a lost technology' (Haffenden 1982, 28). Belnot Phist's experimentations are translated as 'spare the mending and tryll narrer' (Hoban 2002, 119); Goodparley, trying to find the secrets behind '1 Big 1', knows 'Ive got to work the E qwations and the low cations Ive got to comb the nations of it' (Hoban 2002, 48). In a post-apocalyptic world, the semiotic system of written and oral language is a teasing, enigmatic collection of signs whose references have been blasted to atoms and whose constituent parts have been mutated into strange new forms. The mutations which underwrote in this contaminated language have released untapped semantic energy from the corrupted jargon of technology, science and computers, fissioning and rupturing into new semantic systems. In *Riddley Walker*, the word itself is fissile material. Words break in two, uncovering the secrets latent in our contemporary language: 'tecker knowledging', 'new clear', 'inner fearants', 'deacon terminations'. The disintegration and phonetic fragmentation of language in *Riddley Walker* accompany society's quest for '1 Big 1', for the nuclear power that destroyed their long-dead predecessors, for 'the Power of the 2ness tryin to tear the 1 a part' (Hoban 2002, 156). Indeed, *Riddley Walker* is structured by the very matrix of binary oppositions that characterizes the atomic age. The dual impulses of the novel are those of fission and fusion. At the centre of the *Eusa Story* is the image of fission. Eusa pulls the 'Littl Man the Addom' in two: the Addom is a symbol of all that is broken, divided; he is the '2 peaces', 'hes jus what ever cant never be put to gether' (Hoban 2002,

41). The Addom represents that which cannot be recovered, the loss and ruin that are so poignant in the novel.

Whilst the very words Riddley uses are haunted by the fading images of human achievement, the distance from the past they evoke casts it as something unreachable and irreversible. The word that Riddley uses for 'breathe' is significant. Riddley writes 'breave' – in a post-apocalyptic world, the very act of existence, of respiration, is suffused with a sense of loss, of grief, of 'bereavement.' Yet at the same time, the Addom embodies the promise of fusion, of re-connection, the hope that 'what evers in 2wl be come 1' (Hoban 2002, 141). It is a promise that finds a parallel in *A Canticle*, in Brother Francis's dream that 'someday, or some century – an Integrator would come, and things would be fitted together again' (Hoban 2002, 66). The worlds of Riddley and Francis strive to put together what our world has taken apart; in doing so, they must make sense of the pieces. Frustrated by an inability to master 'Pre-Deluge English', the monks speak to each other in Latin, a suitably dead language for a dead civilization. Reading the Legend of the St. Eustace fragment, Riddley has similar problems with understanding our language: 'Wel soon I begun to read it I had to say, "I don't even know 1/2 these words. Whats a Legend?"' (Hoban 2002, 124). Reading the commentary, Riddley is confronted with the same problems of reading and interpretation that we ourselves encounter while reading his narrative. Riddley wrestles sense out of an inchoate written language, and in doing so demands that we as readers do the same. Composed in a phonetic English that slows the reader down to the same level of comprehension as the story's characters, the narrative is neatly reflexive: while we're trying to figure out Riddley's time, Riddley is trying to figure out ours. Berger writes that 'Apocalypse has an interpretative, explanatory function [...] The apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end' (Berger 1999, 5). In *Riddley Walker* and *A Canticle*, nuclear apocalypse, rather than acting as a moment of revelation, becomes a source of uncertainty, darkness and ignorance. Characters seek to discover 'the true nature of what has been brought to an end' – they seek illumination through processes of excavation and interpretation. Yet, what they find they cannot understand. Like us, they find that nuclear holocaust is something that cannot be revealed in words.

Nuclear war is 'unthinkable': it provides a site where language stops for reasons related to both internal logic and social proscription. If the unthinkable *cannot* be thought, it is both in terms of possibility *and* prohibition. Striving to reveal the secrets of apocalypse becomes an attempt to uncover forbidden knowledge. In *A Canticle*, the Collegium tries 'to pry open Nature's private files' (Miller 2007, 212), to unlock the secrets of the universe. In doing so, they discover the means by which the world might be destroyed. In 1944, while work on Oppenheimer's Manhattan Project proceeded, Niels Bohr arrived in Washington from Europe. He warned that the plan to release nuclear energy through a bomb constituted 'a far deeper interference with the natural course of events than anything ever before attempted' (Jungk 1958, 345). Scientists, Bohr reckoned, were dealing with something beyond their control, beyond their comprehension. A decade earlier, Szilard had been quick to realize the potential dangers of nuclear chain reaction, and called on his colleagues to keep the discovery secret from the Germans. Szilard was painfully aware of the need to restrict this knowledge. In *Riddley Walker*, the Eusa show narrates how the scientists discovered nuclear power: 'the Nos. of the sun and moon all fraction out and fed to the machines' (Hoban 2002, 19). The mathematical equations that laid bare the mechanisms of nature are fed into 'the box', a super-computer that performs the complex calculations required for nuclear fission. Faced with the devastating consequences, Orfing blames Eusa: 'I mean if you hadnt opent up the Little Shyning Man the Addom and let out the Nos. of the Master Chaynjis of the 1 Big 1 then if you hadnt put that knowing in the box' (Hoban 2002, 53). The 'puter' becomes refigured as Pandora's Box: splitting the atom unleashes 'a flash of lite', and turns everything to 'nite for years on end.' In Robert Aldrich's film *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), doomsday is a portable device, crammed into a brief-case, left in the perilous security of gym locker. Inside the attaché, private-eye Mike Hammer glimpses a furnace of radioactivity before snapping it shut. The woman who eventually steals the briefcase, ignoring all warnings and prohibitions, opens the case, and is torn apart by the searing explosion of light. Like the Seven Seals that lock

the Book of Revelation, we are not permitted 'to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon' (Revelation 5:4).

In *Terminal Visions*, Warren Wagar asserts that 'Knowledge of the end of the world is a gnosis, a secret pointing to salvation' (Wagar 1982, 170). In the New Testament, the end of the world is at once an Apocalypse – an unveiling, a violent disclosure – and a Revelation – a source of enlightenment, of realization. For Enzian, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Apocalypse and Revelation cannot be distinguished: the super-rocket 'comes as the Revealer' (Pynchon 2000, 864). Yet, unlike the Apocalypses of the Bible, nuclear holocaust precludes the possibility of a 'secret pointing to salvation'. It offers no revelation, no judgment, no definition. The title of Derrida's seminal essay, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now', does not imply that the world cannot be destroyed by nuclear war; rather, it underlines that there will be no revelation, 'not now'. Nuclear holocaust makes the revelation of meaning impossible; it represents 'the historical and ahistorical horizon of an absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge' (Derrida 1984, 27). As in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the apocalypse that will consume the world is an absurd accident. Death is accidental, random, meaningless. While Kermode envisions apocalypse as 'the provision of an end', an eschatology which allows us to formulate 'coherent patterns' to invest meaning in our time on earth (Kermode 1968, 17), Julia Kristeva offers a more realistic appraisal. For her, literary apocalypse is not a 'revelation' but is 'black with burnt up meaning' (Kristeva 1980, 195) – at the point of critical mass, the light does not illuminate, but incinerates.

From its scriptural origins, the textuality of Apocalypse is constantly underlined. The Biblical depiction of the end of the world is found in the Book of Revelation, which, in turn, transmits this vision through the seven-sealed book that John is shown. In Revelation, apocalypse is a book that must be read: John is at once a reader of and witness to this fictional day of reckoning. Derrida famously observes that nuclear apocalypse as a 'phenomenon is fabulously textual [...] a nuclear war [which] has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it' (Derrida 1984, 23). Denied its all-consuming reality, nuclear holocaust can exist for Derrida only within the secure confines of the text. It seems suitable, then, that the history of nuclear war itself seems to be so 'fabulously textual.' Over thirty years before the Alamogordo explosion, Wells' *The World Set Free* depicted a devastating global war fought with 'atomic bombs' – a Wellsian coinage. Dedicated to Soddy and his 'Interpretation of Radium', the novel would later influence Szilard in his development of the nuclear chain reaction: a discovery that paved the way for the first atomic bomb. The bomb was thus germinated in the mind of a writer of speculative fiction. By 1980, faced with the nightmarish prospect of human extinction as a result of global nuclear conflict, the American Office of Technological Assessment compiled a mammoth report called *The Effects of Nuclear War*. The report concludes by abandoning its hypothetical empirical assessments of a surviving society; the ending is ironic: 'In an effort to provide a more concrete understanding of what a world after a nuclear war would be like, OTA commissioned a work of fiction' (O.T.A 1980, 9). The bomb's genesis can be found in a work of fiction. Staring at a future more unbelievable and overwhelming than the most dystopian of novels, it seems appropriate that a work of fiction should be commissioned to find the solution.

Nuclear holocaust, far from burning books, creates them. In Barnes's story 'The Survivor', Kath reasons that it is only the excessiveness of the human imagination that makes it possible to devise means for its own destruction. For Kath, the very desire for narrative is deeply implicated with the drive towards self-annihilation. To create a narrative allows a writer to create a world: yet at the same time, it gives that writer the executive authority to terminate that world. This power is unnerving; nevertheless, it serves as an analgesic. The urge to bring on apocalypse is thus transported from the real world to the safe testing-ground of fiction. As Derrida notes, nuclear war becomes 'a speculation [...] an invention to be invented in order to make a place for it or to prevent it from taking place' (Derrida 1984, 28). Fictional holocausts simulate an end that cannot take place in reality, fabricating a future that cannot be allowed to become present. In *The Burning Book*, Guy enacts nuclear destruction in the virtual-reality of his local video arcades, playing *Missile Command*. In *Level 7*, the war itself is simulated: the annihilation of the world takes



the form of red dots on VDU screens. Jean Baudrillard conceives of post-modernity as a state of 'simulation': it is the condition 'after the end'. Gill, the tobacco trader in Philip K. Dick's *Dr Bloodmoney*, tells Stewart: 'It's a survival, not a simulation' (Dick 2000, 201). Yet the post-apocalyptic world is precisely that, a simulation. Narratives that project into a post-apocalyptic future are concerned with avoiding rather than promoting the apocalyptic event itself. In hastening the end in fiction, the narratives serve, at least indirectly, to put off the day itself. Like Scheherazade in *Arabian Nights*, we spin new stories to defer nuclear apocalypse. The ability to imagine the end of the world, to simulate nuclear holocaust in narrative, becomes the ability to survive it. As Lifton notes, 'the vision of total annihilation makes it possible to imagine living under and beyond that curse' (Lifton 1976, 281). In *The Burning Book*, the destruction of the text itself becomes a sacrificial substitute for the destruction of the world. When the bombs go off, 'something cracked, and the novel was torn in pieces' (Gee 1983, 39). The author, like Oppenheimer, becomes a fictional 'shatterer of worlds' (Jungk 1958, 201).

Apocalypse is a product of the imagination. The scientific imagination has produced weapons with the destructive capability to end the world, to leave no remainders, no aftermath. Within the artistic imagination, the end becomes a permeable boundary, an event that can be rehearsed, reversed and repeated – like the looped footage of blossoming mushroom clouds, accompanied by Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again', at the end of *Dr Strangelove*. In a world where no one is left alive to watch his film, Kubrick permits this primal scene, the sight forbidden to humanity on the pain of death, to repeat itself indefinitely. At the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, we are in the Orpheus Cinema: 'the screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out' (Pynchon 2000, 901). As the rocket is poised above the theatre, at its 'last delta-t', we realize that we are underneath it. 'Now everybody – ': the fate of the West hangs in midair, while the novel culminates, not in a definitive period, but in a dash. Inside a darkened cinema, we are watching the film of history, while outside, the real rocket falls. The reader becomes a spectator, a survivor: like the Zone-Hereros, he is *Mbakayere*, the passed-over.

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