

“COMING AT THE WONDER ITSELF”: MISCLASSIFICATION,
MISUNDERSTANDING AND THE INTEGRATED VISION OF RUSSELL HOBAN’S
1967 NOVEL *THE MOUSE AND HIS CHILD*

by

Charles Richards

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Master of Arts

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s thesis advisor, Dr. Julieann Ulin, Department of English, and has been approved by all members of the supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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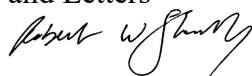
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ABSTRACT

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Title: “Coming at the Wonder Itself”: Misclassification, Misunderstanding, and the Integrated Vision of Russell Hoban’s 1967 Novel *The Mouse and His Child*

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In 1967, Russell Hoban’s first novel, *The Mouse and His Child* was published and reviewed as a children’s book, despite the fact that the author considered it not to be directed towards a child audience. Since that time, it has been generally analyzed and evaluated as a work of children’s literature (specifically) and not as *literature* in the general sense. Because the book deals with adult subjects and concepts it has not fared well with those who have measured its success solely on the basis of its being classified as a children’s book. This thesis hopes to liberate the work from this classification by carefully analyzing the concepts which underpin its action, specifically its ontological speculations, its personification of the fall from grace and the *felix culpa*, the relationship of the protagonists to their complex antagonist Manny Rat, and, finally, in the symbol of “the last visible dog” which represents the infinite and what lies beyond the self (which,

in fact, is actually the self). This thesis also examines how Hoban continued working with these themes and concepts in the novels he wrote after publishing *The Mouse and His Child*.

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to my parents, Robert and Miriam Richards, particularly to my father who encouraged me to return to school, complete my BA, and go for my higher degrees. Although he passed before he could see me graduate in 2019, I feel his spirit with me every day, and I hope he is proud of the accomplishments I have made. My mother was my first teacher and got me interested in researching and analyzing literature at a very young age. I saw the 1977 film version of *The Mouse and His Child* with her in the summer of 1978 and we both adored it; my mother followed up by writing an analysis of the book for a children's literature class she was taking. It was upon reading the book that both my mother and I agreed that the book was not really a children's book and spoke better to an adult audience; although I've since lost her own paper on the book, I hope she is looking down from the great beyond and smiling at my own conclusions. I also dedicate this manuscript to my beloved partner, Michael Hornsby, who makes every day a joyful experience for me.

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INTRODUCTION

When *The Mouse and His Child* was printed in 1967, everything that Russell Hoban had published to date had been picture books for children (Hoban began his writing career as an author of children's books, publishing the first of the "Frances" series, *Bedtime for Frances*, in 1960; his first wife, Lillian Hoban, supplied the illustrations). Although Hoban thought of *The Mouse and His Child* as his first novel, that is, as a *novel* and not specifically as a "novel for children," Hoban's publisher, Harper & Row, marketed it as a children's book, and herein lies the problem and a host of accompanying critical misunderstandings not only of the book but also of Hoban's career. For if *The Mouse and His Child* is, indeed, children's literature, it has not resonated as such among those who have reviewed and analyzed it. Its use of difficult themes regarding consciousness, being, the infinite; its satire of existential theater (particularly its satirical look at Beckett's 1957 play *Endgame*); its darkness, disturbing nature and unrelenting violence have made critics scratch their heads in bewilderment, either deciding to abandon the work entirely or to try to diminish these aspects for it to "fit" into the mold of the established library of "approved" children's books. As early as 1968, we find an example of the former in Barbara Wersra's *New York Times* review of the book which simply rejects the novel out of

Alas, these pieces do not fit even when the author has pushed them into place and resolved his plot. It is the mouse, his child and their search we care about not metaphysics--and the intellectual trappings of this story are unnecessary. The

writing is beautiful, the satire often profound-but the puzzle remains unworked.
(NYT 4/2/1968)¹

Note that Wersra here doesn't decry the adult trappings of the novel as being in poor taste in and of themselves (although others have), she simply finds them inappropriate for a *children's book* and therefore intrusive.² As an example of the latter attempt at "rationalizing" Hoban's novel, Valerie Krips' tantalizingly titled 1993 essay "Mistaken Identity: Russell Hoban's *Mouse and His Child*" acknowledges that there are things going on here which one does not find in a typical children's book and which make the novel "difficult to read" but which, ultimately, can only be neutralized by complete elimination to make the book comprehensible as a study of the "journey of the child." What Krips calls demystification is more like a complete replacement of Hoban's original ideas, thoughts and concepts. Strip these and all that is left is bare narrative (which appears to be what Wersra wants as well).

In determining whether *The Mouse and His Child* should be considered as and analyzed as children's literature we should take quite seriously Hoban's own statements on the matter. As stated above, Hoban maintained throughout his life that *The Mouse and His Child* was, indeed, his first novel (putting it some six years before *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin Boaz*, which is usually referred to as Hoban's first "adult" novel).

Gillian McMahon-Hill discusses Hoban's thoughts on *The Mouse and His Child*:

¹ It might be significant that the novel's first major American review would be such a negative one, as American critics and readers have never seemed to like the book. (Townsend 330)

² As will be seen throughout this thesis, the metaphysical issues which Hoban is mostly concerned about re-appear constantly in his work, particularly in his novels (of which *The Mouse and His Child* is the first), and therefore have pride of place, particularly if we detach this particular novel from its classification as children's literature.

Especially in these days of rational wood pulp, this admirably terse statement does not encourage yet another investigation of the confusing kernel of that elderly chestnut, 'when is a children's book not a children's book?' At the Exeter Children's Literature Conference in 1973 Russell Hoban was asked if he thought that *The Mouse and His Child* was 'a children's book'. Again the response was flippantly expressed, but essentially unanswerable: he replied that he had wanted the manuscript to be published, that Faber was interested, and if Faber had marketed tables and chairs, he would have sold it as a table or, if they preferred, as a chair. (41)

It would seem that Hoban, in his desire for an expedient publication of his first novel, agreed to its marketing and classification as children's literature. In his 1986 interview with Rhonda M. Bunbury, Hoban says, "in due course my children's writing began to expand and move from the simple to the complex with *The Mouse and His Child*, which was my first novel" (144). Even though Hoban seems to tacitly categorize the novel as "children's writing" here, he implicitly states that *The Mouse and His Child* was his "first novel." Earlier (in 1970), Hoban had this to say about his novel:

I wrote a book called *The Mouse and his Child* in which I made a world-picture that was an attempt to see the thingness of some things in a very narrow compass, a microcosm. It was published as a children's book and, for the most part, reviewed as such. Most adult novels are about clockwork dolls who copulate. Mine happens to be about clockwork mice who walk, and therefore it is a children's book. ("Thoughts on a Shirtless Cyclist" 13-14)

Hoban's characteristically sarcastic comment here should be evidence enough that the pigeon-holing of genre that had taken place with his first novel seemed to him to be silly, even confining.

As Hoban continued his career as a novelist, his thoughts on writing for children continued to evolve. Although in the years after the publication of *The Mouse and His Child* he focused mainly on novels marketed for an adult audience (perhaps wanting to avoid the problems associated with the classification of his first novel), he continued to

write short children's picture books, although his style gradually changed from his early didacticism (such as in the

"Frances" series) to a more philosophical approach that has much in common with the style and humor of *The Mouse and His Child*.³

Despite this, almost every critic reviewing or analyzing *The Mouse and His Child* has struggled to pin it within the confines of "children's literature." Even critics like Stephens and Nikolajeva, whose nuanced discussions of the book seem to take it seriously, ultimately try to force it into the mold of a "children's book." If we take Nikolajeva as an example ("Toward Linearity: A Narrative Reading of *The Mouse and His Child*") we find, after several pages of brilliant explication, a complete negation of Hoban's own thoughts of the novel:

The Mouse and His Child is written, like all children's fiction, whatever the author themselves may say, by an adult for young readers. Consequently, the notion of childhood and the ideas about growing, procreation and death that we meet in the novel reflect an adult's views which may not correspond to the real status of children and childhood in society. (75, my emphasis)

Nikolajeva's assertion here is weak and self-contradictory. She claims that *The Mouse and His Child* was, indeed, written for children even though Hoban stated, at several times during his life, that it was most definitely not. She even goes as far as to contradict Hoban's own thoughts on his writing process and state of mind while writing the novel, affirming that Hoban did indeed write it with a child audience in mind even if he, himself, has noted otherwise. She then goes on to admit that much of what is in the novel reflects an adult's view of life and therefore may not be suitable for children. Later in her

³ Of particular interest here are *La Corona and the Tin Frog* (1977), the ineffably beautiful *The Marzipan Pig* (1986), and *Jim's Lion* (2001).

essay, even though taking the stance that *The Mouse and His Child* is a children's book despite itself, she shows signs of doubt by remarking that "The fact that *The Mouse and His Child* is treated so radically differently by different scholars reveals the vague generic status of the novel." (76). And in her conclusion, she once again casts doubt on the possibility that the novel works as children's literature:

As always when speaking of children's fiction, we are dealing with double sets of codes. Unlike adult fiction, in children's fiction we have double naratees and double implied readers. An adult writer evoking and adult co-reader's nostalgia is merely one aspect. Hopefully, the child reader is targeted as well, although in a different manner. (77)

The final line here is the most telling: "Hopefully, the child reader is targeted as well." Although the tone of Nikolajeva's essay addresses the novel as "serious" literature, she continues to insist that it is a children's book and that it must be seen through that lens. She has doubts whether the novel may work as a traditional piece of children's literature, but "hopes" that it may. Why the word "hope"? If the book does not work on the child's level then could we not argue (as I do here) that *The Mouse and His Child* is not a children's book and is, indeed, Hoban's first "adult" novel? It is this problem, that *The Mouse and His Child* simply doesn't work as "children's literature," that has probably caused some of the negative reactions the novel has received over the years. Fred Inglis finds the philosophical musings to be too heavy-handed for a children's book: "Throughout the tale, Hoban's genially creative energy grates slightly upon his no less serious but awkward and effortful reaching for significance in his novel...it is heavy-handed as well as...obscure...if you try to unpack its meaning" (304) and Kuznets criticizes "its odd use of allusions to existentialist drama in a text purportedly for children" (176). Although, as we have seen, Hoban himself never professed that the novel

was “purportedly for children” which, then, makes this particular criticism moot indeed. As was expressed in the beginning of this chapter, it was the *publisher’s* decision to market and classify the novel as a “children’s book” that created the problem in the first place—perhaps, as Studer comments (and here she brings up the chief criticism just mentioned), it should never have been categorized as either a children’s or an adult’s book:” In fact the book should never have been labeled, though, except, perhaps with a term like ‘family novel.’ For certain critics, anxious to preserve the genre limits, did not fail to accuse it, above all, for those qualities which appeal to adult readers” (17). I would go Studer one better, however, and insist that *The Mouse and His Child* is not a “family novel” (as she terms it) but, indeed, an adult novel, for the very same reasons outlined above. Many aspects of the novel (and comments made by other critics) point in this direction. In particular is Hoban’s use of in-depth philosophical and metaphysical questions (for which, as we have seen, the novel has drawn criticism). Millicent Lenz notes that the novel, “is...a story rich in symbolic and metaphoric meanings of a philosophical nature. On this level it is a story of the significance of human existence, an illumination of the human condition.” (64) John Rowe Townsend comments along the same lines, saying that “beneath the book’s bright, busy surface lie philosophical and psychological depths.” (331) Susan Rosa Fisher sees the work as an example of Menippean satire, the definition of which includes “a preoccupation with ontological questions.” (9)

It is these ontological questions—the awakening of consciousness and the Mouse Child’s question of “what are we?”, the “is-ness” of being as well as Hoban’s own questions of “thingness,” and the nature of the infinite (as represented by the image of the

“last visible dog”) which will be addressed in the chapters to come. We shall also fully examine the Mouse Father and Mouse Child (putting aside the commonly held belief that, *The Mouse and His Child*’s main protagonist is the Mouse Child and not the Mouse Father, simply because this is a “children’s book”⁴) as characters and as the heroes of their own journey, as well as an in-depth look at our heroes’ chief antagonist, Manny Rat. Finally, we shall examine the novel’s much criticized ending. But even more importantly, we shall see how the themes Hoban began with in his first novel were picked up and continued in his later novels, particularly in the novels that followed soon after *The Mouse and His Child: The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz* (1973), *Kleinzeit* (1974), *Turtle Diary* (1975), *Riddley Walker* (1980), *Pilgermann* (1983), *Fremder* (1996), and *Mr. Rinyo-Clacton's Offer* (1998).⁵

Considering all this, my chief task, then, in this thesis will be to continue (and modify) the intention of Joanne Lynn in her 1986 essay, “Threadbare Utopia: Hoban’s Modern Pastoral”:

Indeed, *The Mouse and His Child* occupies a pivotal position in Hoban's career. Now that he has established himself as an accomplished, witty and serious novelist (at least in England), it is time to recognize the place of *The Mouse and His Child* in the context of Hoban's career and in the larger context of children's

⁴ As we shall see, it is the Mouse Father who truly grows the most during the course of the story and who really becomes the chief protagonist in the novel’s final chapters.

⁵ Bowers writes: “It is my contention that Hoban's works represent a unified aesthetic whole and that in both adult and children's books Hoban typically expresses his psychological and metaphysical concerns in fantasies involving animals. His children's books become increasingly fantasy-like as his philosophical concerns become more evident.” (80) Studer also observes, when discussing *The Mouse and His Child*, that “many typical ‘Hobanian’ concerns and stylistic features may be traced back to this work.” (18), and Lara Dunwell astutely comments: “The focal issues of [Hoban’s] novels have remained unchanged: Hoban writes of the individual displaced from both society and self; often the displacement is facilitated by language, which is, for Hoban, an unreliable vehicle of meaning ... Hoban is ‘a writer who patiently explores consciousness’ (Wilkie, 1989: 15), generally employing an isolated protagonist and a bizarrely animated universe whose conflicting voices clamor for recognition.”(4)

literature, giving it a literary home, and taking a hand at the unpacking job thus far avoided. (20)

Responding to Lynn, this thesis frees *The Mouse and His Child* from its stifling position as “children’s literature” so it can be carefully examined for what it is: Russell Hoban’s first novel.

To fully examine the many aspects of *The Mouse and His Child* which make it differ from conventional “children’s literature,” we will explore several themes in turn. Each chapter of this thesis, then, will focus on one particular facet of the novel: the concept of the awakening of consciousness, the intellectual, psychological and conceptual journeys that the Mouse Child and Mouse Father undergo, the rather disturbing portrait of its villain, Manny Rat, and the deeply complex symbol of the “last visible dog” (with its connections to Becket and existential drama).

CHAPTER 1: EDEN AND THE AWAKENING OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In this chapter we will closely examine the concept of the awakening of consciousness which appears at the beginning of *The Mouse and His Child* and re-appears throughout Hoban's major works of fiction throughout the 1970's, 80's, and 90's. By carefully exploring the roots of Hoban's thoughts on consciousness and the act of being (or the discovery of being) and tracing this through the growing awareness of this being demonstrated through the "thingness" of Hoban's windup mice, we will see what is at the heart, not only of Hoban's first novel, but also of his fiction in general. Secondly, we will examine Hoban's own particular take on the ancient story of Adam, Eve and the *felix culpa* by examining his clever revaluation of the story as the foreground of the journey of his toy mice: their fall from grace, their quest to regain the paradise of the doll house, and what this means in the larger context of the novel's message. The intention here is to, once again, make clear that the novel is not working on a primary child-like model, that it is not, as some have commented, a study of the journey of childhood but a study of the journey of the soul.

At the center of *The Mouse and His Child*, of course, are the novel's protagonists, the Mouse Father and the Mouse Child. Joined by the hands for the majority of the novel, these two wind-up toys must not, however, be observed as one character as they have two very distinct personalities. And, as we shall see, it is not the Mouse Child who is the primary protagonist of the two, but rather the Mouse Father who undergoes the greatest

changes during the course of their journey. This chapter will focus on the characters as toys and on the awakening of their consciousness (which, as will be shown, can be seen as an awakening of consciousness in general in a more primal way), the Eden that is the Doll House, to which they will eventually return, their fall from grace or *felix culpa*, their journey and their quest for territory.

In his essay, “Thoughts on Being and Writing,” Hoban displays some of his ideas regarding consciousness and its birth in the individual:

Even the form of matter is itself a kind of awareness: a stone, unconscious as it may be, is the awareness of the atoms maintaining the formal substance of the stone. A human being, even before consciousness or thought, is the awareness imprinted on the cells that maintain the formal substance of the human being. (“Thoughts on Being and Writing” 65)

For the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, two toy mice joined together by the hands, that moment of consciousness manifests itself in questions: “Where are we?” the mouse child asked his father. His voice was tiny in the stillness of the night. ‘I don’t know.’ the father answered. ‘*What* are we, Papa?’ ‘I don’t know. We must wait and see.’ (“MHC 4; emphasis in the original). This is, in many ways, one of the most important (if not one of the most startling) moments in the book. It is not the fact that the Mouse Child speaks which takes the reader by surprise, but the frankness of the Mouse Child’s self-awareness. Furthermore, the very “aloneness” which will follow the Mouse Child and the Mouse Father through their adventures also makes its presence known here as well — note Hoban’s comment that the Mouse Child’s “voice was tiny in the stillness of the night.” Consciousness awakens. It gains no comfort in the presence of the father, or in the presence of the other consciousnesses which surround it. It is utterly alone. Bowers

discusses this as a key theme in Hoban's writings, and the fact that it appears at the very beginning of Hoban's first novel should tell us something:

This feeling of utter "aloneness," in contrast to the cozy secure world of many children's books, leads to Hoban's adult books. In these he can deal with sexual matters that are taboo in young children's books as well as with his increasingly complex philosophical concerns (91)

The Mouse Father's initial role here is also important, as it clearly portrays the rather stagnant part he will play in the initial development of his son; here he provides no sense of comfort to his son, nor has he any knowledge beyond the here and now—they exist, they live in this thing which they will come to know as a toy shop, and they must wait to find out what they are. The Mouse Child's immediate longing for the nurturing hand of a mother figure (which he will later project onto the toy Elephant) is hardly inexcusable. But it is the Mouse Child's words which echo with us here; the Mouse Child's two questions, according to Stephens, are "versions of the central question of being" and have "resonated throughout the second half of the twentieth century" (45)

This basic "central question of being" that the Mouse Child asks with his first spoken words, has many parallels in Hoban's other writings as well. In a similar scene, and once again hitting upon images of the primal essence of being, Hoban introduces Jachin-Boaz's awakening of consciousness in *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin Boaz*:

He dropped through blackness, sank through time to green-lit ooze and primal salt...Being, he sensed, is. Goes on. Trust in being... "I am Jachin-Boaz, trader in maps, maker in maps⁶...Who am I? My father in his coffin lay with his beard pointing like a cannon from his chin. While he lived he praised me and expected

⁶ The map motif is interesting to note if we recall the Mouse Child's opening question, "Where are we"? Jachin-Boaz feels that maps are of great importance; his life's work is a master map of the world which he will leave to his son (ironically, he takes this map with him when he abandons his family) and a map of Hoban's microcosmic world does appear in *The Mouse and His Child*'s first edition (oddly, there is no map in the novel's 50th anniversary edition, which featured new illustrations by David Small—the first edition featured illustrations by Hoban's first wife, Lillian Hoban).

much of me...my father...wanted great things from me..." Jachin-Boaz felt a tightening in his throat—a sound, formed and ready and aching for utterance, a high-pitched note, a wordless plea. "Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa," he sounded it, a naked, wanting sound. The Lion's ears went back. (64-65)

The primal scream that announces the awakening of Jachin-Boaz's consciousness is a certain contrast to the tiny (and, most likely, tinny) sound of the Mouse Child's "*What are we?*" in the stillness and loneliness of the night, yet the effect here is very much of a pattern, especially as it fully introduces the father-son conflict which we have already seen beginning in *The Mouse and His Child* and which will continue in *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin Boaz*. Consciousness reaches an entirely new level in *Kleinzeit*, where, in a kind of hyperanimated universe, everything has consciousness, even abstract things such as concepts and ideas. On the novel's first page, we find the title character confronting his mirror: "He put his face in front of the bathroom mirror. I exist, said the mirror. What about me? said Kleinzeit. Not my problem, said the mirror." (1) Like the Mouse Father and the Mouse Child, it is the quest for the answer to this question that motivates Kleinzeit throughout the rest of the novel. As the Hospital states a little later on in the novel, "This is what what is" (32). And the Hospital's wisdom continues a few pages later when it reveals an ultimate truth to the novel's hero: "Nothing is yours. Even you aren't yours" (45).⁷

⁷ Hoban touches on the theme of consciousness even in his children's books. The Marzipan Pig's agonized, "There is such sweetness in me!" is a cry of "I Am!" from the depths behind the sofa where it has fallen and falls upon deaf ears: "No one heard him. He heard the rain beyond the window and the hiss of tires on the street but no one came for him. Day after day he waited as the months went by. 'I am growing hard,' he said, 'and bitter. What a waste of me!'" (*The Marzipan Pig* p.11). The 2nd Marzipan Pig, introduced toward the end of the story, in contrast, is a complete *tabula rasa* (like the Mouse Child and Mouse Father) but, sadly, does not seem to possess consciousness at all: "The pig was fresh from the confectioner's and had no experience of life whatever. There was not a single thought in him, just marzipan." (41). In a story that is full of mirror images, this 2nd pig is soon devoured as the first one was, and by another mouse.

Therefore, the Mouse Child's first question—*what* are we? —goes unanswered.

However, there is an answer to his first question: that is, “where are we?” As is made clear, they are in a toy shop, the central figure of which is a magnificent doll house:

On the counter, rising grandly above the heads of the children clustered before it, was a splendid doll house. It was very large and expensive, a full three stories high, and a marvel of its kind. The porches and balconies were elegant with scrollwork brackets, and the mansard roof with its dormers and cross gables was topped by tall brick chimneys and a handsome lookout. (*MHC* 1-2)

We are also introduced to two minor characters who, as will become evident, are connected to the doll house (or at least the dream of the doll house):

In front of the house stood a clockwork elephant wearing a purple head cloth, and when the saleslady wound her up for the watching children, she walked slowly up and down, swinging her trunk. Near the elephant a little tin seal balanced a red and yellow ball on her nose and kept it spinning while her reflection in the glass counter top smiled at her and spun its own red and yellow ball. (2)

The importance of the Elephant and the Seal as characters will be illumined a little further on; the significance to glean here is that the Mouse Child, as the mirror-image reference would suggest (and there will be further instances of this in his development as a character), is now in his initial Lacanian mirror stage of consciousness (see Chapter 4), a consciousness which the Mouse Father seems to deny. But, of course, the central image is the doll house which will remain a sort of “palace beautiful” in the mind of the Mouse Child throughout his quest with his father, while the Mouse Father will be more concerned with territory and the prospect of self-winding. The doll house is, in fact, the Eden from which the Mouse Father and Mouse Child will be expelled, and the drive to regain this paradise will be a prime motivator in their journey. Yet, like the Biblical Eden, we can ask ourselves, is this doll house, in its original, pristine state truly the be all and end all of existence for the Mouse Child and Mouse Father that it would appear to be?

Certainly, the Mouse Child, with no mother figure and with a rather non-responsive parent figure in the Mouse Father, sees it as such. But the doll house is, again like the Biblical Eden, a rather infantile and vacuous paradise. Here is Hoban's detailed description:

The house was certainly grand... The very cornices and carven brackets bespoke a residence of dignity and style, and the dolls never set foot outside it. They had no need to; everything they could possibly want was there, from the covered platters and silver chafing dishes on the sideboard to the ebony grand piano among the potted ferns in the conservatory. No expense had been spared, and no detail was wanting. The house had rooms for every purpose, all opulently furnished and appropriately occupied: there were a piano teacher doll and a young lady pupil doll in the kitchen. Interminable-weekend-guest dolls lay in all the doll guest room beds, sporting dolls played billiards in the billiard room, and a scholar doll in the library never ceased perusal of the book he held, although he kept in touch with the world by the hand he lightly rested on the globe that stood beside him. There was even an astronomer doll in the lookout observatory, who tirelessly aimed his little telescope at one of the automatic fire sprinklers in the ceiling of the shop. In the dining room, beneath a glittering chandelier, a party of lady and gentleman dolls sat perpetually around a table. Whatever the cook and butler might hope to serve them, they had never taken anything but tea, and that from empty cups, while plaster cakes and pastry, defying time, stood by the silver teapot on the white damask cloth. (*MHC* 4-5)

At once one could forgive the inattentive reader for assuming this story is going to be a child's fantasy, as the doll house, to a child's mind, would seem beautiful and delightful. But we must remember we are at the beginning of the story, and for all its beauty and coziness, the doll house, in its fantastic portrayal of 1920's landed gentry, is also a place of stagnation and utter emptiness. Despite its grandeur, the doll house and its inhabitants are in a permanent condition of stasis. And the occupants are just as hollow as their surroundings:

"Have another cup of tea" [the Elephant] said to one of the ladies. "try a little pastry." "HIGH SOCIETY SCANDAL, changing to cloudy with a possibility of BARGAINS GALORE!" replied the lady. Her papier-mâché head had been made of paste and newsprint, she always spoke in scraps of news and advertising, in

whatever order they came to mind. “Bucket seats,” remarked the gentleman next to her. “Power steering optional. GOVERNMENT FALLS.” (5-6)

and a little later: “‘Twenty-one-inch color television,’ offered the gentleman, ‘Nagging backaches and muscle tension. A HEARTWARMING LOVE STORY THE WHOLE FAMILY WILL ENJOY.’” (8) Hoban is, of course, having fun here (especially when one considers that the author himself began his career by writing ad copy), but the significance is deeper than that. Others have accepted the infantilism of the doll house and have made themselves part of its paradisiacal yet paradoxical prevalence in the microcosmic world of the toy store. The Elephant fancies herself the house’s owner and its mistress:

“Why haven’t they bought you?” asked the little tin seal. “How come you’ve stayed here so long?” “It isn’t quite the same for me, my dear,” replied the elephant. “I’m part of the establishment, you see, and this is my house.” ... It was the elephant’s constant delight to watch the tea party through the window, and as the hostess she took great pride in the quality of her hospitality. (*MHC* 4-5)

While it is natural for the Mouse Child and Mouse Father who, despite his protests, longs for the security of the doll house to see, in their state of just realized consciousness, the doll house as ultimate good, the Elephant herself has also bought into its alluring fantasy of the never ending party (“where all is feasting and fun” to paraphrase Lewis Carroll) and has even counted herself among Eden’s elite, a personage beyond the corrupting influence of the outside world. But for all its glory, the doll house is missing something. Stephens observes,

Hoban has presented the scene as characterized by kinds of lack...the doll house is a setting for social vacuity, its papier-mâché inhabitants uttering random phrases now separated from any referents. It is a moment of sharp satiric comment on the separation between information and understanding in a society with burgeoning mass communications. (46)

This is true, and Stephens' phrase "kinds of lack" describes the present situation brilliantly, but it is indeed more than this when interpreted in the context of the beginning of the journey of the protagonists. For, although the Mouse Child longs for his vision of the doll house as home, and even though the doll house will, at the journey's end, become his and his father's territory (even after they become self-winding and separate individuals), the doll house, in its present state, can never be their true territory as it is a place of non-growth.⁸ Even the Elephant's fantasy of being part of the "establishment" of this society will be exploded⁹, and her journey, while not central to the narrative, mirrors it as well.

A second doll house does appear a few pages later in the story after the Mouse Father and Mouse Child have been evicted from Eden by being sold to a human family:

When the mouse father was wound up, he danced in a circle as he always did, swinging the child up and down. The room, the tree, and the faces in the firelight whirled past the child as always, but this time he saw something new: among the other presents stood a doll house, a little one room affair with a red-brick pattern printed on its fiberboard walls...As the mouse child danced by with his father, he looked through the doll house window and saw a very small teddy bear and a pink china baby doll sitting at a table on which was a tea set bigger than both of them...How far away that other doll house seemed now! How far away that other tea party with its elegant ladies and gentlemen, and the elephant he had wanted for a mama! (*MHC* 9-10)

⁸ Lynn comments: "The mouse child's initial vision of Eden is the Victorian doll house presided over by Mama Elephant. This vision must be revised. Doll house and nurturing 'mama' are, in their bright perfection, not sufficient but stultifying. The elephant must undergo her own humiliations; the house must undergo almost complete disintegration and an equally thorough refurbishing by the 'rustics' (windup toys and animals)." (20-21)

⁹ Willkie points out: "The Establishment can boast base comfort, security, and solid satisfaction with its position in the scheme of things and a smug, self-sufficient indifference for the events and happenings of a world that threatens to be other than its world. The tension for the mouse and child is between the known comfort and the security of their well-ordered life of the toyshop world and the wish to stay comfortable, and the need to throw themselves blindly into the unknown quantity of the world outside." (23)

The Eden of the fancy doll house is completely unapproachable for the Mouse Child and Mouse Father, now in exile, and this “new” dollhouse, with its one room and cheap red brick-pattern, stands in mockery of the world to which the heroes of the story can never return. A come-down indeed, but the continuing history of the original doll house itself (which will, ultimately, be reinvented by the Mouse Father, Mouse Child and their new family) shows how incredibly unfriendly its original fanciful existence will become. Though the doll house is back in the picture, it is a much different doll house now, corrupted by careless children, fire, and its new position as the habitation of rats in the garbage dump:

The doll house, ravaged as it had been by a nursery fire that started when its youthful owners played with matches, became in its romantic ruined state a trysting place for young rat lovers, then a social and athletic club. Of the ladies and gentlemen all that remained was the globe the scholar doll had beneath his hand, and that was now a football for rats. Elsewhere in the dump the gambling dens and dancehalls prospered as before. (*MHC* 89)

And the shift here clearly shows how the setting of the novel, which begins very much like a children’s story, will become corrupted by the lack of adult supervision (resulting in a fire), and then overtaken by adult dilemma and adult peccadilloes, in what will gradually come to be a very adult story indeed. For it is not the story, as would seem by this opening chapter, of the Mouse Child’s yearning for a mother and for a family, but a yearning of release from the infantile dream of the doll house and its vapid inhabitants to a yearning for self-winding, territory, and the understanding of being. The doll house has been corrupted by the adult necessities of sex and money, has become a trysting place for sexual encounters between rats and has joined the company of rat dancehalls. It is hard to see how a child readership could comprehend all of this.

Earlier we saw that Hoban himself commented that *The Mouse and his Child* was immediately viewed as a children's book because "most adult novels are about clockwork dolls who copulate. Mine happens to be about clockwork mice who walk, and therefore it is a children's book." Overlooking Hoban's obvious sarcasm (ETA Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* comes to mind as an adult story about a clockwork doll who copulates—or at least does so in stage and screen representations of the narrative), but the fact that the novel features as its protagonists clockwork toys at all has stood in its way of being seen as an adult novel. Yet, it is important to see Hoban's own concept of the clockwork toy as a representation (or, perhaps, simulacrum) of the human being. In his 1969 poem "The Pedalling Man" Hoban presents the saga of a weather vane, shaped in the image of a man riding a kind of pedaled machine, who weathers his own set of life problems and, like others, must eventually rest: "Well, my father put him up on the roof again, this time without the propeller. / 'Let him ride easy,' he said. 'A man can only take/ just so much north wind, even if he's iron.'" (*Pedalling Man* 21) and, in the same collection, a Tin Frog tells us his own sad story: "I have hopped, when properly wound up, the whole length/ of the hallway; once hopped halfway down the stairs and fell. / Since then the two halves of my tin have been awry; my strength/is not quite what it used to be; I do not hop so well." (ibid. 38) This little gem, simple in its pathos, could have been uttered by an elderly person instead of an elderly toy (despite its references to tin and winding) and illustrates Hoban's fascination with the "thingness" of toys (and, particularly, windup toys) that makes the Mouse Father, Mouse Child, Tin Seal and Elephant captivating and very human characters. We may also consider Hoban's fascination with "things" in light

of “Thing Theory” which asks the reader or observer to analyze almost every aspect of “things” in daily life. In his essay on thing theory, Bill Brown writes:

But the very semantic reducibility of things to objects, coupled with the semantic irreducibility of things to objects, would seem to mark one way of recognizing how, although objects typically arrest a poet's attention, and although the object was what was asked to join the dance in philosophy, things may still lurk in the shadows of the ballroom and continue to lurk there after the subject and object have done their thing, long after the party is over. (3).

What exactly does remain for the Mouse Father and Mouse Child as “things” after their dance under the Christmas tree is done with? It is precisely this question which, I think, was running through Hoban’s mind when he conceived the novel. That “things” are as much human as we are “things” is also addressed by Bruno Latour:

Consider things, and you will have humans. Consider humans, and you are by that very act interested in things. Bring your attention to bear on hard things, and see them become gentle, soft or human. Turn your attention to humans, and see them become electric circuits, automatic gears or softwares. (20)

In his interview with Bunbury, Hoban talks about his views on windup toys as a metaphor:

Well, wind-up toys, I find, are a really good metaphor. Here is the mouse and his child that got me started writing the novel. (Hoban withdrew the toy from his rucksack.) This toy is covered with felt, but underneath, it is the classical tin toy that's made in two halves, fastened together with clasps. The two heads never meet quite precisely and if you undo the clasps to repair the thing, somehow you never get it back together properly and often the repair doesn't hold. So, the tin toy is for me a very powerful metaphor, and it has a lot in it. This used to be under the Christmas tree of some friends of ours. They had a collection of clockwork toys they put under the tree every year. I must have watched it for about three years before I began to write about it. (143-144)

It is the sense of stasis, the stasis, say, of the doll house and its vacant inhabitants, the constant motion of the winding and unwinding (from which the Mouse Father and Mouse

Child will never fully break free) that acts as a metaphor for our heroes.¹⁰ When the Mouse Father and Mouse Child first awaken to consciousness, they are told by the Elephant that the primary reason of existence for a windup is that “One does what one is wound to do. It is expected of me that I walk up and down in front of my house; it is expected of you that you drink tea. And it is expected of this young mouse that he go out into the world with his father and dance in a circle.” (6). The Mouse Father and the Mouse Child, however, like all people, want more than what they are “wound to do” and, as their consciousness grows, they find that they are not alone in this among their windup compatriots. Indeed, when the Mouse Father and Mouse Child are sold and find themselves among other windups in their new home, their newfound companions have the same complaints:

So, the mouse and his child danced under the tree every evening, and every night when the family was asleep they talked with the other toys. The monkey complained of being made to play the same tune over and over on a cheap fiddle; the bird complained of having to peck at a bare floor; the rabbit complained that there was no meaning in his cymbals. And soon the mouse and his child complained of the futility of dancing in an endless circle that led nowhere. (*MHC* 9)¹¹

As Scott observes, “These images are simply reconnaissance, mechanized performances that substitute for desire and yearning for real experience.” (7). “Substitute” may not be

¹⁰ Alida Alison makes this clear: “Why indeed? The winder has such power, the wind-ed such bondage to the clock of its inner works. When it winds down, it simply stops; it dies. The clockwork characters in Hoban's books are so compelling, their breaking free is so important, because they do replicate human actions; they do represent the human situation.” (193)

¹¹ About a decade later, in *La Corona and the Tin Frog* (1979), Hoban continues his exploration of the monotonous nature of the lives of windup toys and a breaking free from this experience. Its main hero the Tin Frog (most likely the same aging Tin Frog we encountered in *The Peddling Man*) takes a huge leap from its current condition to profess its love for a painting of a woman on the cover of a cigar box, a leap which leads it from monotony and uselessness to boundless happiness. Similarly, the windup Watchman, goaded by a windup Crocodile, advances its dream of writing for a local Mouse's literary journal, also finding fulfillment in leaving the stasis of its windup life.

the correct word here, though, as the windups are *forced* into these mechanized performances, and it is only by taking the leap (as indicated by Hoban's use of Auden's 1940 poem "Leap Before You Look" discussed below) that the Mouse Child and Mouse Father will grow as fully-developed characters, and it is the Mouse Father who will grow the most. Therefore, we cannot agree with Kuznets, who sees the novel's introductory scenes as standard children's literature fare:

The early pages of *The Mouse and His Child* echo traditional and familiar toy narratives, which move swiftly through the cycles of toy life from the first appearance at the gala Christmas toy store where the toys come alive at midnight, to the arrival at a home with children, to the eventual decrepitude, accidental batterings, and final trashing. (171)

For the metaphor is deeper than the traditional "lifeline of a toy" and will be taken in places that fall far beyond the reach of the traditional children's story.

As with the Biblical fall from grace, the fall experienced by the Mouse Father and Mouse Child is brought about by transgression. There is, of course, nothing transgressive about being purchased (as this is the fate of most toys, even the Elephant), but the transgression of expressing real and deep emotion—the Mouse Child "cries on the job" and it is this that gets him and his father expelled from the comfort of the human home they've come to live in. Upon seeing the "new" dollhouse, and being reminded of the original Eden, the Mouse Child cries, although he and his father had been warned by the Toyshop Clock about "crying on the job." The result of this transgression is real and immediate:

The mouse child was on the job and he knew it, but he began to cry. No one noticed his outbreak but the family cat...she dabbled at the toy, arched her back, jumped suddenly sideways, and, leaping onto a table, knocked over a heavy vase of flowers. It fell with a crash, landing squarely on the mouse and his child. The vase was shattered to bits, and the toy was smashed. (*MHC* 10)

The Mouse Father takes the role of the accuser, clearly laying the blame for the transgression on the Mouse Child. As they reach the first stage of their journey in “the world” (a world in microcosm, really), the Mouse Father speaks the first words that he has uttered to his son since they were in the toy shop,

At the dump the trash fires smoldered, red and smoky in the dust. The bridge lights went on, and beyond their unearthly blue glare the highway lamps spaced the twilight to the dark horizon... Far away the clock on the town hall tolled the hours, and the mouse and his child waited in silence until they heard the twelve faint strokes of midnight. “You see now where your crying has brought us,” said the father. (13)

As we shall see, the expulsion from Eden (even the sort of simulacrum of Eden’s doll house in their new home) has brought them to a kind of hell, and Hoban here sets the scene for the hellscape which the dump will represent, although it, oddly, will be a place of renewal and even home by the novel’s end. The trash fires are perfect symbols for the fiery pits of the Christian hell, and the sad tolling of the clock recalls the tolling of the clock in the toy shop and its iteration of the windup rule not to speak before midnight.¹²

The Elephant and the Seal will fall from grace as well and also transgress. Later in the novel we find that the Seal, having lost her ball, spent some time in an art colony, and is co-habiting with a Kingfisher in a relationship which, unlike the eventual one between the Mouse Father and the Elephant, is not sanctified by marriage, and has, like the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, “broken the rule of daytime silence” singing the lines of a popular song as she helps lure fishes for her Kingfisher boyfriend (*MHC* 123). The Elephant will fall even further, losing her position as “part of the establishment” in Eden:

¹² Clocks seem not only to represent time but also loneliness in Hoban’s fiction. In *The Marzipan Pig*, the first Mouse, after eating the Marzipan Pig, falls in love with a Clock, although the Clock does not return her love. After the mouse leaves it, the Clock muses on this gift of love it has missed and wallows in the “aloneness” of being.

How she had suffered! She who had thought herself a lady of property, secure in her high place—she had been sold like any common toy, while the gentlemen and ladies in the doll house never so much as looked up from their teacups. And thus, her world departed and reality was thrust upon her...She had been taken to a house much grander than the one on the counter, and there she had endured what toys endure...Still she endured, and deep within her tin there blazed a spirit that would not be quenched. Though the heavens should fall, she knew that justice one day would be done. That day, and that day only, was what she lived for: to pace again with swinging trunk beside the window of the mansion that was hers. (*MHC* 29-30)

The kind of hell inhabited by the Elephant is a far cry from the children's literature world of Margery Williams' *Velveteen Rabbit* (1922) where the child's "rough love" is seen as a path toward wish fulfillment and "being real," but here, in what is not a children's novel, is viewed, through a very adult lens, as a kind of torture which the Elephant has had to undergo in order to be "taken down" a peg or two. But even this has not helped—although the Elephant has suffered, she has not yet learned or grown as a character (as the Mouse Father and Mouse Father will do) and still thinks of herself as part of Eden's aristocracy; it is only servitude to Manny Rat (whose role in the novel will be discussed in Chapter 3) that will enable her to fulfill herself.

But it is with the Mouse Father's and Mouse Child's fall (both literal and figurative) that we are primarily concerned and, once again, we must insist that this fall is absolutely necessary to their growth as the novel's protagonists. It's hard not to think that Hoban had his windup mice in mind when he penned this passage in his 1983 novel *Pilgermann*:

What if Adam and Eve hadn't eaten of the fruit of the tree, what then? No Holy Scriptures, no story to tell. Who'd have wanted to know about them? They'd have stayed in their garden obedient and ignorant, bored to death with life and each-other and tiresome in the sight of God, they'd have been like a picture that is hung on the wall and after a time not looked at any more. God *made* us such that we would eat of that fruit, God would have been ashamed of us if we hadn't done it. God would never have bothered to make a man and a woman to live out their days dreaming in a garden. (24; emphasis in original)

Here, Hoban's eponymous pilgrim, in one of his many struggles in trying to understand God and Christ and the "isness" of being, is not far from the journey the Mouse Father and Mouse Child are about to make in understanding their "isness." Just as Adam and Eve were not made to "live out their days dreaming in a garden," the Mouse Father and Mice Child were not made to live out their days dreaming in a doll house in a toy shop and dancing in circles; it is their journey which will make them cease to be toys and begin to be "real", and it is this journey which will concern us next.

CHAPTER 2: OUR HEROES AND THEIR JOURNEY

Having thoroughly surveyed the concepts of consciousness, the *felix culpa*, and the “reality” of the two windup mice, we move next to the journey itself which is at the novel’s heart. This journey has within it certain elements which make it somewhat incompatible with the “children’s literature” model that critics have forced upon the work; it appears even as early as the novel’s W. H. Auden epigraph, before the narrative proper even begins. The danger of this journey, which continues the theme of consciousness and awareness, is ever present and is at times horrifying, resulting in occasionally graphic violence and bloodshed. That these passages are necessary if we are to be true to the theme which continues throughout Hoban’s following narratives should become apparent: the violence is part of the “isness” of being, and therefore is an integral part of it. Also, without it, the parallel theme of “territory” becomes meaningless. This chapter will deal with these rather disturbing dilemmas, and, hopefully, further the case for *The Mouse and His Child* as a novel and not as a children’s story.

Hoban prefaces his novel with an epigraph taken from W.H. Auden’s 1940 poem “Leap Before You Look.” It is important to bear this verse in mind when we examine the range and the significance of the journey which the Mouse Father and Mouse Child will take in the course of the novel:

The sense of danger must not disappear:
The way is certainly both short and steep,
However gradual it looks from here;
Look if you like, but you will have to leap. (Auden 313; ll. 1-4)

This journey metaphor is evident in the very first paragraph of the novel (which introduces us to the Tramp who will be discussed further on): “The Tramp was big and squarely built, and he walked with the rolling stride of the long road, his steps too big for the little streets of the little town.” (*MHC* 1). The “big-little” dichotomy is perfectly expressed here, for as the Mouse Child and Mouse Father are “tiny” and their world is presented in microcosm, the journey itself is enormous, as enormous as the towering Tramp who toddles through the “little streets of the little town.” Indeed, for the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, like many of Hoban’s other protagonists who will have to leap to fully actualize themselves to understand the meaning of the infinite and self-winding, the “looking” part of it is, in itself, pointless. As Studer comments: “Not only the recreative leaps made by the characters of *Lion*, *Kleinzeit*, and *Turtle Diary* are subsumed by the last line of Auden’s poem but also the leaps leading from Riddley and Pilgermann’s mystical moments to Fremder Gorn’s daring escape from the clutches of Pythia.” (22) But we should also note that this is not the last line of Auden’s poem in its entirety. Here is the poem’s final verse:

A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear. (ibid. ll. 21-24)

Although not included by Hoban, this verse has as much meaning for the novel’s heroes as the earlier one. Again, the insistence that this *dream* of safety “must not disappear.” Why? Surely the safety felt in the doll house in Eden was a false one (and even though they shall find safety in that same doll house at the novel’s end, it is a completely revamped version of Eden), and even the safety (though monotonous) felt in the house of the humans, mocked by the scaled-down paper and paste doll’s house eyed by the Mouse

Child on the night of their expulsion, was a false one. That their path will be dangerous, will even contain a certain kind of death and resurrection is, as yet, unknown to them. Yet the sense of danger must remain present. Lenz presents a further interpretation of Auden's poem:

These lines point up an important truth — the necessity life imposes upon us all to act without knowledge of the consequences of our actions, to take "the leap of faith" into the unknown. Caution, "the sense of danger," must also be present, but we cannot live by it: life requires of us that we do more than cling to whatever it is that represents our security. Hoban's entire fantasy is a concrete exemplification of the philosophy distilled in Auden's lines. (64)

Lenz's phrasing here, the "necessity" that life imposes, echoes a passage in Hoban's essay "Thoughts on Being and Writing":

The fear of the edge and the *necessity* of going over it is what is being looked into...All of us like to move away from the edge because the edge makes us uncomfortable...It's a double bind, really: if we don't go to the edge and over it as explorers, we go over it as hapless victims, because when we stand passive and still, time moves towards us and brings the edge with it. Man's lot is not, I think, to be comfortable except in the active encounter with discomfort (72; emphasis mine)

The Mouse Child and Mouse Father are certainly not hapless victims in this narrative, and as active in their own growth as Riddley Walker, as Kleinzeit, as Pilgermann are in *their* journeys. And, like these, they must lose, at some point, their identities as Mouse Child and Mouse Father, even as Wind Ups, in an existential search for the meaning of being, as Hoban puts it, the "isness" of things. As Hoban explains in the same essay: "Collectively we must possess and be repossessed by the past that we alter with our present, must surrender the vanity of personal identity to something more valuable. We must...go into the dark and through it to a place where time and the light lie before us." (76) And this is exactly what will happen to the Mouse Child and the Mouse Father on their expedition as the everymen of a narrative which embraces the passage of being and

not just the journey of the child. The reader must forget that the Mouse Child and Mouse Father are simply “windups” as they re-craft themselves as heroes. The Mouse Child and Mouse Father, even in the climactic battle scene in Chapter VIII, are never “mock heroic” and never do we find them funny—the terror is always real (“in the beginning was the terror” is a line we find in Hoban’s *Medusa Frequency*). The discovery in *The Mouse and His Child* and Hoban’s other novels, however, is, that despite its birth in terror, the ending usually brings about a kind of modified joy, as David Punter so admirably describes (in discussing Hoban): “Nevertheless there is always the possibility that, by following the mysterious clues, we shall be able to come at the wonder itself—which is simply experience, in its lion-like or turtle-like magnificence, huge, impenetrable, but unmistakably there.” (152)

The figure who sets our heroes on their journey is the Tramp. He is also the first figure seen in the novel (see above) and the last. It is the Tramp (not, as is usually stated, the only human figure in the novel; the humans who live in the house occupied by the Mouse Child and Mouse Father in the first chapter are briefly described as well and even have a few lines of dialogue, and the first chapter provides a brief cameo for a Toy Store worker who winds the Mouse Child and Mouse Father for the first time) who repairs the Mouse Child and Mouse Father and who stops them from always dancing in circles, enabling them to walk in a direct linear fashion (though they must be frequently rewound in order to progress). But (to paraphrase the Mouse Child’s first utterance) what is the Tramp and how is he pre and post figured in Hoban’s fiction? The Tramp appears on page one of the novel in the passage quoted above; his connection with the Mouse Child and Mouse Father is made clear when he mimics their movements (having seen them in the Toy

Shop window): “With his big broken shoes printing his footsteps in the fresh snow, he solemnly danced in a circle, swinging his empty arms up and down.” (*MHC* p.3) That the Tramp is not mocking the Mouse Father and Child is clear in Hoban’s indication that his dance is a solemn one; he respects these creatures and when he encounters them next by finding them in the trash he actively helps them continue their journey:

The Tramp looked at the battered wrecks around him in the cold, clear sunlight. He looked at himself in his ragged clothes. Then he sat down in the car he had slept in, and reached into his pocket for a little screwdriver...he took the mouse and his child apart to see if he could make them dance again. The junkyard lay silent, its wrecks upheaved like rusty islands in the sparkling snow. (*MHC* 11)

The imagery Hoban uses here is telling: the wrecks which “upheave like rusty islands” prefigure the hellscape that the junkyard will become for the heroes; yet, like the pond toward the end of the novel, it is also a place of rebirth, for the Mouse Father and Mouse Child are revived by the Tramp and with a significant difference: “Now when it was wound up the motor worked without jamming, but the mouse and his child danced no more. The father, his legs somewhat bent, lurched straight ahead with a rolling stride, pushing the child backward before him.” (*ibid.*) The gift the Tramp has here bestowed is the gift of progression; no longer cursed to dance in circles, the windup everymen can progress on their journey through the process of maturity and self-discovery. Studer surmises that the Tramp here “personifies the life force” (34), but this is not enough. What do his enigmatic words to the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, “Be tramps” (the first of two times in the novel when he speaks directly to them) mean? What was Hoban’s concept of the “trampness”? ¹³Neither carefree nor romantically indolent, the Tramp

¹³ We can learn a little from Hoban’s 1966 children’s picture book *Charlie the Tramp*; this text falls into Hoban’s early didactic period and follows the general pattern of his “Frances” books: the hero, Charlie (a beaver child), has a bizarre idea (that he wants to grow up to be a tramp) and, although his parents and

towers over the other humans in the town; he acts as life restorer, signpost and philosopher for our heroes and, at the story's end, gives them his blessing. Ten years later in *Kleinzeit*, Hoban presents Redbeard, a tramp-like figure who is similarly enigmatic: "A ragged man came along, lumpily dressed, with a full red beard and bright blue eyes. He had a bedroll slung on his shoulders with a rope and carried two carrier-bags. Probably half a bottle of wine in one of them." (*Kleinzeit* p.14). Redbeard (who eventually joins the title character in his journey through an anthropomorphous Hospital) doesn't seem nearly as towering a figure as the Tramp in *The Mouse and His Child* and his actions are a bit more mysterious: he takes up a sheet of paper, takes a pen out, and writes on it: "MAN WITH A HARROW FULL OF CROCKS." This is a strange twist on Kleinzeit's "man with a barrowful of rocks concept" which, when pitched to his boss at the advertising agency he works for, gets him fired. Like the world of *The Mouse and His Child*, everything in the *Kleinzeit* universe is inter-connected and, like everything else in the *Kleinzeit* universe, the man on the paper takes on a life of his own and speaks, "Here is the world. Here is the greatness in me. Why a harrow full of crocks? Will there be music?" (ibid. p.14). Once again, a birth of consciousness and a multitude of questions, themes that constantly haunt Hoban's fiction. Although the man with the "harrow full of crocks" in the later *Kleinzeit* seems to have an idea that there is a "thingness" inside him which is "great," the Mouse Father and Mouse Child have not yet discovered this. and

grandfather disapprove, they allow him to explore it so that he will learn a lesson. Charlie's concept of tramp life is certainly romanticized:

"Tramps don't have to learn how to chop down trees and how to roll logs and how to build dams... Tramps carry sticks with little bundles tied to them. They sleep in a field when the weather is nice, and when it rains they sleep in a barn. Tramps just tramp around and have a good time. And when they want something to eat, they do little jobs for anybody that wants little jobs done." (*Charlie the Tramp* 8-9). Like Frances, however, Charlie realizes his beaver-ness despite himself by instinctually building a dam and decides that, ultimately, he must be what he is, and gets flapjacks with maple syrup (and the respect of his grandfather) as his reward.

each leads to a new level of self-awareness; all of these stages are presented to answer the Mouse Child's initial question, "*What are we?*"

The conceit of the mouse and his child's facing should be commented upon here as well. As the Tramp has established their new existence, the Mouse Father continually looks forward, facing where the two are going, while the Mouse Child faces backward, looking only upon where the two have been. It is tempting here to once again view this within the context of children's literature, viewing the Mouse Child as a Peter Pan-like creature who does not want to grow up, as Nikolayeva mistakenly does:

During the journey, the father is looking forward, while the son is looking backward, although logically it should be the other way around. Apparently, the mouse child does not wish to grow up and become independent, but on the contrary seeks to go back to the security of his early childhood, symbolized by the doll house. (71)

Nikolayeva's mistake here is firmly planted in an insistence upon seeing this novel as a study of childhood; Nikolayeva forgets that the Mouse Father is an active agent in the journey as well. But more importantly, it is the Mouse Father who longs for the stasis of the Christmas tree and the human house with its discount-store doll house ("You see now where your crying has brought us"), and it is the Mouse Child's craving for the *promise* of the doll house which will keep the two moving. But why does the Mouse Child look backward? Because the Mouse Child's journey is within himself; self-acknowledgement will eventually enable him to see himself (in his tin can reflection in the bottom of the pond) and only then, in seeing himself juxtaposed with his father, will he be able to fully create the dream home and dream family, greatly evolved from the infantile doll house of the novel's first chapter. The Mouse Father plods along in a sea self-discovery as well

and eventually understands the true meaning of his son's vision—he trudges along but, for now, can only see in detail.

In his ubiquitous and much quoted 1949 best-seller *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell remarks that the hero's journey takes him/her through “the regions of the unknown” which are “free fields for the projections of unconscious content...not only as ogres, but also as sirens of mysteriously seductive nostalgic beauty” (65). This could, of course, be applied to the doll house of the Mouse Child's quest, but the course of this journey of self-discovery of Hoban's other heroes is riddled with these symbols as well. Yet, the idea remains the same. In *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*, the father, Jachin-Boaz, originally feels stifled in his own progress and, by use of a wonderful and all-encompassing map, hopes his son will start the hero's journey:

He wanted his son to go out into the world, and he wanted him to find more of a world for himself than he, Jachin-Boaz, had found. He had put aside some money for the boy's inheritance, but the map was to be the larger part of his legacy. It was to be nothing less than a master map that would show him where to find whatever he might wish to look for, and so would assure him of a proper start in life as a man. (5)

Later, the father himself takes the map and sets out on his own hero's journey:

Jachin-Boaz watched the smoke drift in the dimness of the room. He thought of stories, fairy tales from his childhood, in which a young man went out to seek his fortune in the wide world. Always the father was dead at the beginning of the story, and the young man went out with his few coins, his crust of bread, his fiddle or his sword...Now he, Jachin-Boaz was the old man out in the wide world seeking his fortune, the old man who wanted a new story and would not agree to be dead. (17)

Here we have a new twist on the journey of self-discovery presented in Hoban's first novel; in his second novel, the father and son figures are separated; the father knows what he wants, the son, Boaz-Jachin has no clue and finds himself in encounters with a gay

truck driver, a hypersexualized older woman, and the owner of a barge, until reconciliation with his father becomes possible and self-discovery is obtained. Certainly, this reflects the problems Hoban was having at the time in his first marriage, a desire to restart himself, and the conflicts he was involved in with his own son. But it also reflects a continuation of the linear journey of the Mouse Child and Mouse Father executed in Hoban's first novel. Further on in his work, Hoban also comments (through his journeying heroes) on the *inevitability* of the journey. Riddley Walker explains this (in Hoban's stylized idea of a post-apocalyptic English):

The worl is full of things waiting to happen. That's the meat and boan of it right there. You myt think you can jus go here and there doing nothing. Happening nothing. You cant tho you bleeding cant. You put your self on any road and some thing will show its self to you. Wanting to happen. Waiting to happen. (*Riddley Walker* 154)

Hoban continues to explore the journey in *Pilgermann*, a novel in which, like *Riddley Walker*, a journey forms the main stream of the narrative. The eponymous author hints at this in the novel's beginning: "The centre of time is, as I have said, the waiting. This is now off the centre, this is the motion of the everything, the action of the universe, the destined world-line of the soul, the living heart of the mystery." (*Pilgermann* 6). The passage is thoroughly Hobanic (to coin a phrase) because it indulges in concepts which seem to follow Hoban from work to work: the nature of time, the journey, the "living heart of the mystery" spoken by a disembodied voice from the 11th century who muses on his own pilgrimage during his years on Earth. *Pilgermann's* journey is as unconventional as that of the Mouse Child and Mouse Father and his traveling companions just as strange:

With my dead colleagues I was on the road to Jerusalem: with the sow Bodwild and her peasant master Konrad; with the bear shot full of arrows by his worshipper; with Udo the relic-gatherer; with the tax collector the husband of Sophia, and with us was Bruder Pfortner in his appearances and his disappearances. (92)

Even the dreadful accident that sets the Mouse and his Child free from their dreary life of dancing in circles has a parallel in *Pilgermann*. Pilgermann (a Jew), having had sex with the wife of the local tax collector, is, in a horrifying re-enactment of the fall from grace of the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, castrated by an angry mob of townspeople. It is this that sets Pilgermann on his journey to Jerusalem. Like the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, Pilgermann is “broken,” but it is only this breaking that sets him on his path, and as Jesus remarks, in a conversation with Pilgermann, “Life moves by exchanges; loss is the price of gain.” (*Pilgermann* 17).

The first stage of the Mouse Child and Mouse Father’s journey is a descent into hell and the first character they meet is the ubiquitous and Mephistophelean Manny Rat who cynically promises them “a jolly, jolly ball at the royal palace, where we shall all drink champagne and dance until dawn. How’ll that be?” (*MHC* 15). Although the Mouse Father senses that Manny is just “teasing” them, the actual description of the dump is a nightmarish (and very adult centered) hellscape indeed:

They were off the highway now, and at the dump. Stumbling over the snow-covered rubbish, they followed a path through a city of rats and other vermin, where little refuse fires tended by the inhabitants threw dancing shadows on the dirty snow. Tunnels and alleyways led through the trash to dark and filthy dwellings...Manny Rat snickered, and pushed the mouse and his child along through an evil-smelling huddle of gambling dens, gaming booths, dancehalls and taverns, all crudely built of scraps of wood and cardboard boxes. The bonfires in the alleyways threw moving shadows of the revelers large on the walls of open stalls; the dancehalls thumped and whistled savagely with tin-can drums, reed pipes and matchbox banjos, while the dim light of candles through the doors and windows sent bobbing rat shapes dancing blackly on the snow. Farther off above

the general din there rose the cracked voice of a windup carousel that played a waltz with many missing notes. (*MHC* 15-17) ¹⁴

Here we have a weird cross between Dante's *Inferno*, Dickens' seedier depictions of low London society, and Bunyan's *Vanity Fair*. It should be remembered that the broken-down carousel, now giving pleasure to drunken rats, probably once existed in a child's nursery, and it is chilling to remember that the Eden-like doll house of the novel's first chapter will eventually be moved to the dump and be desecrated by the rats as well. The mention of very adult pleasures such as gambling dens, dancehalls and taverns reveal the fact that we are not in a simple story intended for children. All the evils of adult life are on display for the Mouse Child and Mouse Father to observe, yet they are not corrupted by or traumatized by it. Instead, they undergo the dump's torment with astounding stoicism; at the Mouse Child's first utterance that he "doesn't like" this place, the Mouse Father reacts with a stern, "Hush...Crying won't help" (17) a reminder that it was crying, or the growth of emotion, that has brought them here. Yet the Mouse Child perks up two pages later while observing the night sky and the burning of the Dog Star (its first mention in the text):

At first the icy glitter of the far-off star was terrifying to him; he sensed a distance so vast as to reduce him to nothing. But as he looked and looked upon that steady burning he was comforted a little; if he was nothing, he thought so also was this rat and all the dump. His father's hands were firm upon his, and he resolved to see what next the great world offered. (*MHC* 19)

¹⁴ Compare this description of the dump with a similar one in the outer-space setting of *Fremder*: "We lifted out of Nova Central and flew over the ruins of Theme park West where the rides had rusted into tottering skeletons and the scenic river was stilted solid with sewage; over the huddle of London Outer Squats where the roads were choked with the gridlock shells of cars and lorries that hadn't moved for forty years...the rain intensified the stench of garbage, excrement, and decomposition as we flew over a pack of dogs dining on a human corpse." (69-70). Thirty years later, Hoban is still fascinated with the hellish decay of the dumpsite.

This is an important moment; it presents resilience in the Mouse Child, the beginning of solidarity with the Mouse Father, and it begins the “last visible dog” imagery which will continue throughout the novel (see Chapter 4). This imagery will take us from the dump to a theatrical stage, to the beaver dam, to the bottom of a pond, to the “out among the out among dots,” and to a place beyond the infinite as the Mouse Child and Mouse father progress on their journey.

The Mouse Father takes the first opportunity to get out of the dump and (possibly) out of the employ of Manny Rat who has conscripted him and his son into his army of unpaid scavengers. When Manny Rat decides to send his (rather intellectually challenged) minion Ralphie to hold up the Meadow Mutual Hoard and Trust Company in order to secure their stock of treacle brittle, he seeks out a couple of windups to go with him: “The mouse father heard, and he knew that here, for the moment at least, was a way forward and out of the dump. He could not look beyond that, and he did not attempt to. *Take us*, he thought; *take us*.” (MHC p.23; emphasis in original). Whether by chance or sheer will, Manny does choose them, they are taken to assist Ralphie in the robbery, and they find themselves free when Ralphie, having bungled the job, gets eaten by the bank’s security system (a badger). They are out of the dump (through acts of crime and violence), they resurface from their descent into the underworld of rot, decay, vice, slavery, and crime, and the journey continues.

One constant in the frightening world that Hoban has created in his first novel is the ever present and deeply felt violence that this world contains. It begins in the dump, in a scene which the Mouse Father himself refers to as an act of “murder.” Among Manny Rat’s slave army of scavenging windups, windups who have descended into the hell-

dump for the sin of no longer being able to fulfill their function as toys, is a windup donkey who has dared complain about his broken spring: “‘You’re not well, ‘said Manny Rat, ‘I can see that easily. What you need is a long rest.’ He picked up a heavy rock, lifted it high, and brought it down upon the donkey’s back, splitting him open like a walnut.” (20). The impact of this event not only on the impressionable Mouse Child but also the Mouse Father should not be underestimated. Indeed, in Hoban’s microcosmic universe of the windup this is, as the Mouse Father calls it, murder, and the windup donkey has undergone a kind of death. His works are put in a can of spare parts (our first vision of the Bonzo dog food can which will be discussed below) and clearly the windup donkey has ceased to exist, at least as a windup donkey. A similar death will await the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, but this will be followed by a resurrection of sorts. The second act of violence is the death of Ralphie referred to above, although here Hoban handles it somewhat more cynically. Having eaten Ralphie, the Badger casually remarks, “‘Them city fellows ain’t much at robbing banks...but they’re good eating. Young fellows nowadays, they don’t know how to pull a job. All they know is hurry, hurry, hurry’” (32). Here Ralphie’s death is dealt with in a rather heartless and even joking manner; even the Mouse Father and Mouse Child have a laugh at Ralphie’s expense (32) and it is telling (in regard to the dark nature of Hoban’s novel) that the first time the Mouse Father and Mouse Child do laugh (the only other emotions they’ve known up until this point are fear and sadness), it is due to a violent death.

Violence appears again in the episode of the war of the shrews, a war which the Mouse Father and Mouse Child unwittingly get pulled into as the next stage of their journey. This war, over the complex, almost abstract idea of “territory” held by opposing

bands of shrews, ends in an ironic utter defeat for both sides, but not before Hoban has given the reader (and the Mouse Child and Mouse Father) a vision of almost unbearable cruelty. This is yet another indication that Hoban was not writing his novel with a child audience in mind, and children's literature critics have found fault with the novel's brutality. As Bowers observes: "What seems to have caught critics off guard and made them question the appropriateness of the book for children are the book's unrelenting portrayal of nature's cruelty... This is no idyllic pastoral of rural life but a remorseless portrayal of 'Nature, red in tooth and claw.'" (89). Here is an example:

The musk scent was overpowering as the shrews regrouped to face the attack from the thicket, and the little fifer sent the notes of distress call piping across the moonlit meadow until a spear cut him short. The drummer boy snatched up the fife, and the piercing call trilled in the moonlight again, drawing another whistling flight of spears. Then the fife was once more silent as the drummer fell with a spear in his throat. He tried to shout, "Onward shrews!" but had no breath to say it and died without a word. (*MHC* p.48)

This reads as it could have come from any adult war novel. The cruelty of war is another subject which Hoban continues to focus on in his later novels; in *Pilgermann* the title character reflects on war thusly:

Now must I begin to speak of war, now must I make ready for dust and blood, for the smoke and flame of siege and battle... the quivering of severed limbs. Now must I see in my mind the secret colors of entrails sliding from the open bellies of warriors while their eyes look down in disbelief. (*Pilgermann* 96)

A further concept in this section which certainly takes *The Mouse and His Child* out of the realm of children's fiction and into the harsh realities of Hoban's adult novels is the author's emphasis on the cruelty of nature. And like the bank robbing episode and the shrew war, Hoban paints this plainly and unapologetically, even using a little bit of ironic humor. Consider this passage:

While the frog and the mouse and his child watched from the trees, two weasels came bounding over a rise of ground on the other side of the hollow... "I know you'll like this place," said the female to her mate..." Mmm! Smell those shrews!" "I don't know," said the male, "Shrew is what I had for lunch." "There's no pleasing you," said the female... Below them both armies were dragging off the wounded and the dead; as the moon sank low their moving shadows lengthened on the bloodstained snow..." Look," said the female..." they're all lined up in rows ever so neat..." The weasels flowed like hungry shadows down into the hollow, and once among the shrews, struck right and left with lightning swiftness, smiling pleasantly with the blood of both armies dripping from their jaws. Not a single shrew escaped. When the weasels had satisfied their thirst for blood they bounded away, leaving behind them heaps of tiny corpses scattered on the snow. "This is a *nice* territory," said the female. "It's the nicest we've had yet. I'd kind of like to settle down here for a while." "It's not bad," said her mate. "Not a bad little territory at all. I could see us making a home here." They nuzzled each other affectionately as they ran, and their heads were so close together that when the horned owl swooped down out of the moonlight his talons pierced both brains at once. (*MHC* 49-50)

The shrews' fight for territory is utterly undercut by the weasel couple, whose moment of domestic happiness in *their* new territory is likewise undercut by the attack of the horned owl.¹⁵ War is reduced to nothing, and even domesticity, as the nuzzling and cuddling of the weasel couple *almost* makes us feel for them, is terminated by an even more destructive force. The mentions of the bloodstained snow and the piercing of the weasels' brains only add to the horror. The harshness and bloodiness in Hoban's fiction, then, begins in *The Mouse and His Child*, and it is clear from this that Hoban was not consciously writing for children. More importantly, however, the war episode gives rise to the concept of *territory* which will become something of an obsession for the Mouse Father and direct his motivation for the rest of the novel. The idea is first brought up by

¹⁵ Like many of Hoban's symbols, this Owl will return in his later fiction. In *Fremder* an Owl makes its presence known in a projection program used by the title character (in a sort of prediction of the modern internet): "Again the owl appeared on the pixels; again, its eyes became eyes of otherness, eyes of becoming." (*Pilgermann* 76) and much later: "'See the grey sky over the Red Mountain, the grey air and the owl cruising low over the mountain; look at the owl, look at its ringed eyes of becoming.'" (*ibid.* p. 172). Amusingly, the owl even makes an appearance in his children's fiction: in *The Marzipan Pig* a horned owl, having eaten a mouse who had eaten the Marzipan Pig of the title, is suddenly consumed with love for a taxicab meter (recall that the mouse had fallen in love with a clock after eating the Marzipan Pig, another creature who is full of the pain of being).

the shrew soldiers that the Mouse Child, Mouse Father and the Frog (who we will discuss in the next chapter) fall in with. When one of the shrew soldiers tells the mouse child that the war is over “territory,” the mouse child (rationally) asks what territory is. The drummer boy shrew explains: “‘A territory is your place,’ said the drummer boy. ‘It’s where everything smells right.’” (*MHC* p.45). The words ring with meaning to the Mouse Father, whose development in *being* is now being tested:

The father walked in silence as a wave of shame swept over him. *What chance has anybody got without a territory!* he repeated to himself and knew the little shrew was right. What chance had they indeed! He saw now that for him and his son the whole wide world was someone else’s territory, on which he could not even walk without someone to wind him up. Frog wound him now as they marched, and the father felt the key turn in his back as a knife turns in a wound. (ibid, emphasis in original.)

There is much in this brief paragraph. For the first time not only has the Mouse Father truly developed his sense of self (“what are we?” a question he couldn’t answer in Chapter 1) but a despairing sense of both his responsibility to the Mouse Child and the incredible odds which the two face. Their utter helplessness in the world (they cannot go forward without someone else to wind them) speaks to Hoban’s sense of “thingness” and backs up the author’s instinct to make his characters the most helpless of “things” – windup toys. From this moment on, the quest for territory will keep the Mouse Father marching forward; later to this will be added the related pursuit of self –winding and, ironically, the desires of both the Mouse Father and Mouse Child will merge at the story’s end—the doll house (now in modified form and corrupted by Manny and his gang) will eventually become that sought after and hard-won territory. But for now, the mouse father’s humiliation in the realization of “what” he is has much in common with

the bloodiness and cruelty of the shrew war; each turn of the key in his back feels like a knife turning in a wound. The pain is palpable.

The possibility that the doll house is indeed the Mouse Child's and Mouse Father's rightful territory is, oddly, breached by the Mouse Child himself. Here the Mouse Child's longing for safety, home and family is combined with the Mouse Father's brooding thoughts on their territoriless-ness. Euterpe, a member of the traveling animal theatrical troupe "The Caws of Art" is describing the plot of their former "hit" production of the melodrama *The Woodchuck's Revenge*:

"The whole family loses its territory when the fox forecloses the mortgage and throws them out of their den." "Territory again," said the father to the child. "Must I always be reminded of our placelessness?" "If we could find the doll house, that could be our territory," said the child. "Couldn't it, Papa?" (60)

The shrew war episode ends with irony – everyone is eaten, it seems (except of course for the Mouse Father and Mouse Child who, if not indestructible, are, at least, indigestible). The last image we see, however, is one of hope. "Behind [the blue jay] on the battlefield two tin cans glinted in the sunlight, and from one of them a scrap of paper fluttered like a little banner in the morning breeze. BONZO Dog Food said the label..." (53). It is this dog food can which will ultimately answer the Mouse Child's question of being, and here it waves to him as a glorious foreshadowing in what is possibly the darkest section of the novel.

CHAPTER 3: ANTAGONISTS AND ALLIES

As important as perceiving the journey of the Mouse Child and Mouse Father is to understanding *The Mouse and His Child* as a straightforward novel (as opposed to children's literature) the characters encountered by them are also key to deciphering Hoban's concepts. The full revelations which the Mouse Child and Mouse Father receive in the later pages of the book will be explored in the next chapter, but here the prime antagonist, Manny Rat, who symbolizes all that is bad with the history of the world (which includes slavery and the desire for wealth) also shares an odd symbiosis with the Mouse Father and Mouse Child. By examining this antagonist and his motivation, we can perceive how deeply developed Manny Rat is, and that his complexities of character lie way beyond the fairy tale villain. Also, the rather multifaceted relationship between the Mouse Father and the Elephant will perhaps shed some light on why the novel doesn't satisfy simply as a tale told for children.

In *Fremder*, the title character writes:

If you happen to be one who is not good at confronting threats and menaces there will come, sooner or later, like a second planet in a binary system, that other one whose function is to threaten and menace you. The two members of such a system immediately recognize each other as predestined partners in a cosmic pattern (*Fremder* 15-16).

For Fremder Gorn, this second member of the binary system is Albert Stiggs; for the Mouse Child and Mouse Father this enemy is Manny Rat.¹⁶

Of all the characters in Hoban's first novel, next to our protagonists, the most fully drawn (and conceivably the most fascinating) is Manny Rat. Bowers describes him as "Dickensian" (90) and in many ways he is: quirky, multi-fascinated and, at the end, worthy of redemption (although some have described Manny's reclamation as more of a certain kind of emasculation). The theme of the adversary who as one who has "always been there" is hinted at when Manny is introduced: "He was there all at once with a look of tenure, as if he had been waiting always just beyond their field of vision, and once let in would never go away." (*MHC* 14). Manny's main symbol, his teeth, become prominent immediately, and his first action towards the Mouse Father and Mouse Child is to attack them: "In the eerie blue glare he peered beadily at father and son...His whiskers quivered as his face came closer; he bared his yellow teeth and smiled, and a paw shot out to strike the mouse and his child a rattling blow that knocked them flat." (*ibid.*) A few pages later, Manny comments, "'Notice my teeth, if you will...Pretty, aren't they? They're the longest, strongest, sharpest teeth in the dump.'" (*MHC* 22). So far so terrible, but it is his inhuman enslavement of the discarded windups that first moves the reader to both hatred and fascination. As we have seen, his destruction of the windup donkey is viewed by the Mouse Father as murder, while his subordination of the once proud and haughty Elephant is almost unbearable in its cruelty and humiliation:

¹⁶ Rats continue to symbolize evil in Hoban's later writing: the post-apocalyptic, bogey-man like folk character "Aunty" in *Riddley Walker* "rides a girt big rat with red eyes it can see in the dark and it can smel whos ready for Aunty." (*Riddley Walker*.91)

“Good evening, madam...Do we find ourselves quite worn out and thrown away? Do we lie here, lonely in the wintry waste and rot? The pity of it!” ... Still the elephant preserved her silence...” We have not been introduced,” murmured the elephant almost inaudibly...” Ah, but we shall be!” ...” We shall become, moreover, close friends and intimate associates...what better introduction could there be...than to take you apart and repair you so you can work for me?” He produced a rusty beer-can opener from within his robe and undid the tin clasps that held the elephant together. “Nothing more to say, madam?” he asked as he pried apart the two halves of her body...But the elephant was silent. She had fainted. (*MHC* 30-31)

Though the characters are a rat and a windup elephant, it is hard not to read this as a rape scene, and the invasion of the Elephant’s body brings with it a visceral reader response that any such subordination-through-violence interaction would. It is helpful to compare this scene with the cold-blooded murder of the windup donkey examined earlier—in each case, Manny sees the windup as somehow sub-human (or, perhaps, sub-existent) and the comparison with modern-era slavery and human trafficking cannot be ignored; in a later chapter we learn that Manny sells his windup slaves as well, having traded the Tin Seal to the Caws of Art Theatrical Troupe for three bags of jelly beans¹⁷ (*MHC* 59). Villainy, however, soon turns to obsession once the Mouse Father and Mouse Child escape his grasp after the failed bank robbery attempt: ““And those wretched windups have gone off...as if their single purpose were to make a fool of me. Now I’ll be the laughingstock of the whole dump unless I find them and smash them!”” (*MHC* 37). It is this obsession

¹⁷ Stephens comments that, under the thumb of Manny Rat as conscripts in his army of foragers, “the windups are placed in the same position as colonial subjects. This construction pivots on their essential difference: as windups they are not the ‘real thing’ but function as other, to that of which they are simulacra, and hence can be subject to domination. The fact of ‘windupness’ thus functions in the place of skin color as a key signifier of cultural and racial difference.” (53)

that drives Manny to the novel's climax¹⁸: the battle for the doll house in the dump which will result in Manny's fall and his eventual rehabilitation.

But Manny's relationship with the Mouse Father and Mouse Child is also somewhat symbiotic and sympathetic. As the Mouse Child and Mouse Father are simply simulacra of real-life rodents, Manny feels a connection to them. This is revealed when Manny catches up with the fugitives for the first time (shortly before the shrew war): "Manny felt himself by some strange magnetism drawn to the father and the son, felt that something was wanted of him, forgot almost that he was there to smash them." (*MHC* 41). There is further self-realization when he witnesses their destruction in Chapter VI; the two mice have been tied to a tree by the Muskrat by a mechanism that enables them to slowly chop down a tree in order to publicize the Muskrat's "much-in-little" theory, although this has them, once again, walking in circles. Manny cruelly tries to speed up the process which results in their imminent destruction: Manny lets go of the string mechanism on the tree which causes them to fly upward and into the bottom of a pond. "'Wait!' yelled Manny Rat, but they were gone. He felt a sudden pang and knew that somehow, he was going to miss them. His life seemed oddly empty, purposeless, and poorer." (*MHC* 98). His final recognition of the Mouse Father and Mouse Child as kindred spirits comes toward the end of the book, during Manny's rehabilitation and transformation into the almost disappointingly harmless "Uncle Manny":

¹⁸ Stephens quotes Chantal Mouffe in describing Manny's obsession with the destruction of the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, saying that "a crucial element in the creation of identity as membership of a community is that it is constituted as thus by what is *other, outside, or excluded*...Mouffe [further argues] that the foundation of democratic politics must not be an eradication of distinctions between 'us' and 'them'...but the establishment of an 'us' and 'them' discrimination 'in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.' "(44; emphasis in original) But, as we shall see, Manny shall discover that the Mouse Father and Mouse Child are not quite so much of an "other" after all, and it is this that may keep him from carrying out their total destruction.

He stole a sideways glance at father and son. They were not unlike him, he realized for the first time; almost they were tin caricatures of himself. In their long exposure to the weather, moss had rooted in the crevices of their tin, and now it covered them like soft green fur...perhaps they were becoming animals, and he, once the most powerful animal in the dump, would turn into a toy. (*MHC* 163)

In the text Hoban tells us that Manny laughs to himself as he considers this, but the thought surely must be horrifying as well; it is, perhaps, that the Mouse Father and Mouse Child are *so* like him which makes him afraid of them, as human beings are often afraid of uncanny human-like automatons. As Mr. Rinyo-Clacton says to Jonathan Fitch in Hoban's middle novel *Mr. Rinyo-Clacton's Offer*, "'Jonny, Jonny, you'd like to kill me because you're afraid of me, and you're afraid because you recognize in me an aspect of yourself that scares you.'" (139).¹⁹

The final fate of Manny Rat, however, has sometimes been criticized, and even Manny himself seems dissatisfied with it. His fall is anticipated by his disheveled appearance when finally catching up with the fugitives at the Muskrat's house:

He was thinner and sharper looking than before, and he seemed to be thrust forward through the fog by all the darkling midnights that had brought him to this gray misty morning. He bent to the trail with such concentration that he did not see the father and son until he was almost upon them. Then he lifted up his head, and his smile was that of someone who, after long and painful separation, finds his dearest friends. (*MHC* .94-95)

The last line, of course, is the most telling. The relationship between the Mouse and His Child and Manny could not be better hinted at—the desire for destruction is an almost longed for merging of souls, as the lover longs for the beloved; the destruction itself has

¹⁹ De Luca argues that Manny Rat and the Mouse and his Child represent "two kinds of energy...and just as the windups can't escape from their problems but rather have to face them, the rat, for all his furious intensity, can't smash them. Ultimately they have to reckon with each other...the rat's fury is an expression of violence against his own feared weakness." (214) The recognition, then, of the similarities between the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, simulacra of rodents, and himself, an actual rodent, may just be too much for Manny to digest; yet it is this recognition that will eventually lead to a resolution of his hatred for them (a resolution, however, which will develop in stages).

almost become like a lover's embrace, a reunion of "dearest friends." Later, upon realizing that the Doll House, now moved to the dump and corrupted by Manny and his gang, is the longed-for territory, the Mouse Father leads his son and their friends into a climactic battle which mirrors the war of the shrews (although it does not match it in bloodshed). The Mouse Father and Mouse Child are victorious, they have won their territory and, in his great fall, Manny has lost the one thing that helped him reign supreme in the dump—his teeth. His total emasculation is certified in a scene in which he pleads for mercy from his former victims, a scene which, oddly enough, is not entirely satisfying for the reader:

"Oh, please," he cried, "do not send me away! I am nuffing now, and nobody! I can do no harm. Everybody laughs at Manny Rat now...Have pity!" "He really seems quite harmless now," said the father. "I can find some lights and put vem in for you," said Manny Rat. "I can figure out all kinds of fings. I am handy and a willing worker." "You used to like the dark," the mouse child said. "No more!" said Manny rat. "Oh, a lonely fing is darkness! A fearful fing, and full of hateful laughs and whispers!" ... "Poor wretch!" the father said. "It's difficult not to pity him." (*MHC* 159)

Although the taming of Manny Rat seems like a thing most wished for, the scene is oddly disturbing. Is this a reformation of Manny Rat or a kind of breaking of his spirit; if the latter, the feeling created is most uncomfortable indeed. Lillian Hoban's illustration from the book's first edition is also somewhat disturbing—Manny rat now seen as a kind of domestic servant with mop and pail. A further downfall follows when Manny, almost against his will, solves the problem of self-winding for the Mouse Father and Mouse Child and is accepted into the family as one of the Mouse Child's many "uncles":

"Look, Papa!" said the child. "He did it! We're self-winding! Oh, thank you! Thank you, Uncle Manny!" Manny Rat dropped the wire and whirled around. "What's vat?" he whispered. "I didn't mean—" the child stammered. "I meant—" "He meant to thank you. That was all," the father said. (*MHC* 165)

And so the evil Manny Rat is transformed into the harmless and beneficent “Uncle Manny.” But Manny does have one last hurrah. It is as if Hoban himself was troubled by Manny’s emasculation and needed for Manny to have one last relapse²⁰ and Studer observes that “Manny will never be happy subduing the greater part of his nature” (31) Manny’s final attempt at destroying the Mouse and His Child and their family, a “gunpowder plot” of sorts, fails due to the Elephant’s diligent tidiness and this seems to result in his permanent place in the family as “Uncle Manny”; he seemingly dies in the attempt, is mourned by the Mouse Child and then, like the Mouse Father and Mouse Child before him, is resurrected in his new form. That his reformation is now assured is confirmed by the text after he once again hears himself referred to as “Uncle Manny”: “Manny Rat nodded, and smiled a toothless smile, and felt the darkness that dwelt in him open to the light.” (*MHC* 172)

Of the remaining characters, the one who most concerns us here is the Elephant, and this is due to the character’s extreme path of growth, much akin to the Mouse Father’s, a character who she will be suitably coupled with at the novel’s end. Kuznets criticizes the female characters of the novel as not being rounded, saying that the Elephant and Tin Seal are assigned “aggravatingly conventional roles” (177). This is true in neither case. The Elephant, for example, grows from thinking herself as part of the establishment to more than just a “lady of the house” or even as a conventional mother figure as Kuznets suggests. Her initial suffering as a toy, as a member of the aristocracy who has been brought down a notch or two has, as we saw, only solidified her belief that she is a wronged member of the establishment, and her only motivation is to regain her place in

²⁰ De Luca comments that Hoban “couldn’t quite get comfortable with the reformation he had allowed to happen.” (215)

society. By the time we see her again, her role as Manny Rat's slave has brought a newfound admiration for the Mouse Father and it is clear that the Elephant has grown; seeing the Mouse Father again for the first time since the toy shop, and now that Manny stands ready to destroy them, unselfish emotions begin to stir in her:

The elephant was completely overwhelmed. Until now she had thought only of herself and the injustice done her; the child and the father had been nothing to her. But now into her one glass eye there rushed the picture in its wholeness of the foggy day, the steaming snow, the black trees, the tired father, the tiny, lost, and hopeful child. A world of love and pain was printed on her vision, never to be gone again. (*MHC* 95)

Proof that the Mouse Father has grown as well, from an indifferent parent who cannot console his son to his current wish for empowerment, for territory, for the ability to self-wind are clear on the next page:

The elephant was shabby and pathetic; her looks were gone, departed with the ear, the eye, the purple headcloth and her plush. The father saw all that, and yet saw nothing of it; some brightness in her, some temper finer than the newest tin, some steadfast beauty smote and dazzled at him. He wished that he might shelter and protect her...He fell in love and he prepared to meet his end. (*MHC* 95-96)

The true beauty of this seminal recognition scene is an example of how Hoban is generally at his best when rejoicing in beneficial and unselfish male/female interrelations: this will continue, particularly in the moving relationship between Jonathan Fitch and Serafina in *Mr. Rinyo-Clacton's Offer*, which goes from breakup to alignment to mutual love and understanding, or the healing Neaera finds in her relationship with George in *Turtle Diary*. Furthermore, this is definitely a step forward for the Mouse Father as a father, and it is this that stimulates the Elephant's love. As always, we must forget (for the moment) that these two characters are windup toys, for their relationship is more of a paradigm of the male and female, and here they are very much human indeed. This will

lead to the very touching courtship scene after the battle with Manny Rat where the Mouse Father finally makes his intentions known:

“And does he still?” asked the elephant. Neither heard the other and both laughed...” I was saying, does he still want me for a mama?” ...” Oh, yes!” said the child. “And I know that Papa— ““Can speak for himself,” said is father, and forthwith lapsed into silence. “And will he?” prompted the elephant gently. “He hardly knows how to begin,” said the father. “He has come to admire—more than that, to love—someone so far above him that he dare not hope she will reciprocate his feelings.” “Ah!” said the elephant, “Though perhaps a little taller, she has never really been above him. Were he to speak, he might find an interested listener, a listener who has seen and learned much, who knows at last the true worth of the brave gallant gentleman she met so long ago when she was young and foolish and thought the doll house was hers.” (*MHC* 151-152)

Both characters have grown; the Mouse Father is, now, indeed brave and gallant, a supportive father and an excellent prospective husband. Although not yet self-winding, the Mouse Father has found himself, has won his territory, and is ready to share it with the humbled elephant, giving her the doll house which will be hers again after all.

The Tin Seal, however, is little more than a cipher. Unlike the Elephant, her character is never fully developed, and her subordinate role as “sister” is appropriate. She is not, however, as Kuznets insists, placed in a “conventional” role. Her history, as we learn it, paints her as a somewhat bohemian free spirit: she has traveled with a theatrical troupe, worked as companion for the academic Muskrat and, when we see her again, has taken up a sort of common-law marriage with a “stocky and handsome” Kingfisher, formerly an avowed bachelor now living in domestic bliss with the windup. Like the Elephant she is the worse for wear; unlike the Elephant there is no perceivable growth in her character.

Of the Mouse Father’s and Mouse Child’s other allies, the only other prominent one is the Frog who, at the end, becomes one of the Mouse Child’s many “uncles.” We meet him early on, and here he is a rather enigmatic figure: occupying an old glove, the Frog

makes his living in the dump telling fortunes and selling lucky charms. Although clearly a charlatan, Manny has a strange fear of him. What does the Frog represent in this tale? Is he the “representative of the unconscious deep” as Campbell describes the role of the frog in the fairy tale? (44) Or, rather, in this retelling of the hero’s journey the “helpful crone or fairy godmother” who provides the hero with prophecy and tools to help him follow his path? (Campbell 59) Clearly the latter: the Frog tells the Mouse Father’s and Mouse Child’s fortune, and here, for the first time, he seems truly inspired:

Frog stared harder at the seeds, his golden eyes unfathomable. His yellow throat swelled, gleaming in the opening of the ragged glove. He seemed to grow large and remote in the starlight, and his voice was distant when he spoke: “*Low in the dark of summer, high in the winter light; a painful spring, a shattering fall, a scattering regathered. The enemy you flee at the beginning awaits you at the end.*” The words stopped and the voice went quivering into silence. (MHC 28; emphasis in original)

What is remarkable is that, even though the Frog cannot explain these words, they have a definite meaning at the journey’s end. The Mouse Child and Father will experience a painful spring, a shattering fall into the pond, and the scattering of their family will be regathered. And Manny Rat does await them at the end. Secondly, the Frog gives the Mouse Child the lucky charm (“YOUR LUCKY DAY IS”... it pronounces without determining what this day actually will be) which the child keeps with him even in the final battle. Campbell’s description of the helper figure fits the Frog as well as his glove does:

What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny. The fantasy is reassurance—a promise that the peace of Paradise, which was known first within the mother womb, is not to be lost; that it supports the present and stands in the future as well as the past...protective power is always and ever present within the sanctuary of the heart and even immanent within, or just behind, the unfamiliar features of the world. (59)

Replace the words “mother womb” with “doll house” and we have a clear correlation with the Mouse Father and Mouse Child.

In the final chapter we will look at the novel’s most prominent and deepest symbol: “The Last Visible Dog” and examine the conclusion of the novel, drawing our *own* conclusions in the process.

CHAPTER 4: THE LAST VISIBLE DOG AND THE END OF THE JOURNEY

In this final chapter we will carefully examine the most “adult” aspect of Hoban’s novel: the concept of the “Last Visible Dog.” This symbol of the infinite is the most pervasive and, perhaps, most perplexing of all of Hoban’s symbols, as the dog not only represents infinity itself, but also encompasses the act of being, of “thingness” (which Hoban addresses in the novel’s opening chapter), and death and resurrection. What lies beyond the “out among dots”? If it is, indeed, ourselves, or “us,” as the Mouse Child discovers during his and his father’s descent into the depths of consciousness in the pond (and what better companion here than an aged philosopher turtle), then what does this signify for his and his father’s rebirth and retaking of their territory?

Furthermore, we shall discuss Hoban’s highly criticized ending. Is it “too cozy”? Have the Mouse Father and Mouse Child become simply the elites they have been fighting against through the novel? Or is Hoban’s ending satisfying in that it replaces the Mouse Child and Mouse Father’s dependence with experience, kindness, understanding and, most importantly, happiness?

The dog motif in *The Mouse and His Child* makes its presence known almost from the novel’s very beginning. As we saw, the Tramp is the first character to appear in the story; shortly afterward he is joined by a small dog which becomes his traveling companion throughout the book. As the Tramp dances in a circle, mocking the circular motion of the Mouse Father and Mouse Child: “A little black-and-white spotted dog trotting past

stopped and sat down to look at him, and for a moment the man and dog were the only two creatures on the street not moving in a fixed direction...the tramp stopped with his empty arms upraised.” (*MHC* 3)²¹ Here Hoban clearly draws attention to the prime predicament of the protagonists, that is, their lack of progression. The dog returns when the Tramp reappears in the dump, now having become the Tramp’s companion. But this is certainly not the last time we see it. For the living dog metamorphoses into a simulacrum of its own, this time a spotted black-and-white dog wearing a chef’s hat on a label of “Bonzo Dog Food.” This dog food can reappears throughout the novel and eventually has a metamorphosis of its own—as a *concept*. Its first appearance is a dire one: as a spare part can belonging to Manny Rat which is used to house the entrails of the various windups he has (to use the Mouse Father’s word) “murdered.” Hoban describes it thusly:

BONZO Dog Food said the white letters on the orange label, and below the name was a picture of a little black-and-white spotted dog, walking on his hind legs and wearing a chef’s cap and an apron. The dog carried a tray on which there was another can of BONZO Dog Food, on the label of which another little black-and-white dog, exactly the same but much smaller, was walking on his hind legs and carrying a tray on which there was another can of BONZO Dog Food, and so on until the dogs became too small for the eye to follow. (*MHC* 21)

Interestingly, the Mouse Child has his back to it upon its first appearance; symbolically, it will be only by facing the label and examining it that the Mouse Child will eventually find himself. The can reappears as a kind of “junk drawer” for the Muskrat, as a lift for the corrupted doll house in the dump, as the inspiration for the turtle Serpentina’s play

²¹ In the 1977 animated film version of the novel directed by Charles Swenson and Fred Wolf, the Tramp picks up the dog and dances with it, the two then becoming likenesses of the Mouse and His Child. The image of the Tramp, dancing alone, ending standing with open arms at the end of his dance is far grimmer and emphasizes the theme of complete aloneness which reappears in the novel. This is one of the many ways the creators of the film downplayed the heavier and more violent aspects of Hoban’s original work.

The Last Visible Dog and, finally, as a sign and name for the revamped doll house, now claimed by the Mouse Father, Mouse Child and their family as their territory.

But, before we examine *The Last Visible* dog as concept we might ask ourselves what the dog represents in Hoban's novel. The dog figure is certainly of some importance. Does this dog have any further meaning beyond the label? The black-and-white spotted dog is a companion to the Tramp, but dogs re-appear in a more threatening way in *Riddley Walker*. The title character is haunted by dogs after having killed "the old leader"; he feels he is being followed by them for some kind of supernatural purpose:

Id never seen that black dog til after I kilt the old leader. I dint think my dad gone in to no black dog but it did seam to me that dog musve come special from some where or be sent to tel me some thing some how...Plus I pernear did think it myt tern in to some 1 in front of my eyes...it wuntve snuck me at all to see that dog tern in to a man. (*Riddley Walker* 66)

Here the dog represents some kind of "retribution" for Riddley's act of murder, and sinister dogs continue to follow Riddley during his journey of discovery. But although Hoban clearly still has his mind on dogs here, the dog figure as companion/teacher in *The Mouse and His Child* has darkened in *Riddley Walker*.²² Dogs appear again in *Pilgermann*, and, once again, they are threatening: "Dogs go cringing with their ears laid back, they seem stricken with guilt and terror at seeing so many masters slain at once; some are in an ecstasy of blood-frenzy, they snarl and growl and tear back at the dead flesh." (*Pilgermann* 240). Here the dogs are seen primarily as indicative of the terrors of war which Hoban begins exploring in *The Mouse and His Child*, but, as in *Riddley*

²² A dog-human hybrid even appears in the mythology of *Riddley Walker*: "And all them years you heard storys of dog people. Peopl with dogs heads and dogs with peoples heads. Some said come Ful of the Moon they all run to gether in the Black Pack. Dogs and dog people to gether." (*Riddley Walker* 14).

Walker, they also appear to be figures of guilt and shame. Hoban seems to return to a more benign view of the dog motif in *Fremder* in this beautifully expressive passage:

Yes, but especially the rain. It remembers when the world was new, remembers how the seas filled up. Think of all the midnights and dawns the rain remembers, how many there were before a single word was spoken. Neither pleasant palaces nor wild dogs to howl in them, only the steam rising as the seas filled up, only the white mist on the water in the ancient mornings. (*Fremder* 77)

Not only has the wild dog been tamed here (howling at the most cultivated of places, a pleasant palace) but the passage also echoes Hoban's preoccupation with the primal earth, the beginnings of being and foundations of consciousness, concepts which Hoban addresses in the first chapter of *The Mouse and His Child*.

The dog motif also appears in *The Mouse and His Child* in the form of the Dog Star, Sirius. As we saw, the Dog Star, burning brightly in the sky, gives the Mouse Child some hope early on in the novel, and the connection between the Dog Star and the "Last Visible Dog" on the Bonzo Dog Food can continues throughout the novel. With a kind of Shakespearean irony, the Frog's uncanny fortune-telling skill refers to both Bonzo Dog Food and the Dog Star when the mystical amphibian pronounces: "A dog shall rise...a rat shall fall." (*MHC* 41) upon reading Manny's paw. And, indeed, both happen upon Manny's downfall when the Bonzo dog food can rises (it is being used as a lift in the doll house) simultaneously with the Dog Star upon Manny's literal fall which finally neuters him:

So [Manny] did not see...the star that for the first time rose to trace its circle in the end-of-summer sky. And had he seen it he would not have known its name, he who turned from sun and moon and stars alike...Sirius, called the Dog Star that steadily burned afar and looked down on the doll house and the dump. (*MHC* 139-140)

“The Last Visible Dog” appears as a term when the Mouse Child and Mouse Father find themselves among the animal theatrical troupe the Caws of Art. The play they intend to perform is an existential drama called *The Last Visible Dog*, written by an old turtle philosopher named Serpentina. The play, set in the mud at the bottom of a pond, features two empty Bonzo Dog Food cans from each of which a crow-actor rises (the characters they are portraying are named Furza and Wurza) alternately, uttering a line of dialogue. Wurza brings the dog motif back to the fore: “Dogs...A manyness of dogs. A moreness of dogs. A too-muchness of dogs. Also a jiggling and a wiggling.” (*MHC* 61).²³

At this point the question might be asked: what does all this dog imagery mean?²⁴ And the question is finally answered when the Mouse Father and Mouse Child find themselves at the bottom of the pond, in the presence of the author himself, Serpentina the turtle. The Turtle gives the Mouse Child the task of traveling “through the dogs, beyond the dots²⁵, and to the truth alone.” (*MHC* 104); to find the last visible dog on the label of the Bonzo Dog Food can which rests at the bottom of the pond. The pond itself

²³ Several critics have noted that here Hoban is specifically satirizing Samuel Beckett’s 1957 one-act play *Endgame*. Certainly Furza and Wurza in their tin-can homes reflect Hamm’s parents, Nagg and Nell, who Hamm keeps in tin-can like garbage cans onstage. The language here is reminiscent of Beckett as well, but, even more importantly, there is also a dog motif in *Endgame*: Hamm has a black toy dog who is brought onstage by his servant, Clov (47). Although the dog is black, Hamm insists that it is white (recall that both the Tramp’s dog and the dog on the Bonzo Dog Food can are both white and black), furthermore the dog, like the Mouse Father and Mouse Child, is not only a toy but also is, in a sense, not “self-winding”; it has only three legs and cannot stand on its own.

²⁴ Even Studer seems a bit confused by all the dog references: “Yet, what does this ‘too-muchness of dogs’ stand for? Is it loyalty, as the tramp’s dog suggests...or did Hoban think of the idiom ‘it’s a case of dog eat dog?’” (23) It is clear here that Studer is missing the final point which is revealed in the pond episode.

²⁵ Hoban continues this theme, the fact that printed pictures, when broken down in a kind of cellular fashion, are nothing but dots, in *Turtle Diary*: “Thousands of [dots] coinciding to make the face, the house, the tree, the whole picture. Every picture is a pattern of coincidence unrecognizable in the single dot. Each incidence of anything in life is just a single dot and my face is so close to that dot that I can’t see what it’s a part of.” (*Turtle Diary* 156). One could argue that the Mouse Father and Mouse Child in their seeming insignificance, even in the microcosm of their universe, are nothing but dots in the grand picture that nature and time are painting in the novel.

references the primal ooze of consciousness as described by Hoban in his essay

“Thoughts on Being and Writing”:

In all of us, I think, there remains some awareness, rudimentary and inchoate, far down, dim in green light through the ancient reeds and tasting of the primal salt, in which there is no “I,” no person, no identity, but only the passage, moment by moment, of time through being undisturbed by birth or death. We push away from it but it is there, containing self and struggle both. Far down and dim it is, not ordinarily accessible to us. I think we have to learn to feel for it, to go beyond our swimmer’s fright, to dive for it and touch it before returning to sunlight and the present (“Thoughts on Being and Writing”66-67)

And this is exactly what will happen to the Mouse Child and Mouse Father as they dive into the murky waters of consciousness, the infinite, and rebirth.²⁶

That the search for the “last visible dog” is clearly a search for the infinite has been recognized by others, but that it also a search for *self* has been overlooked. For, indeed, that is what the Mouse Child finds at the journey’s end. In the weeks that the Mouse

²⁶ Another animal motif that appears throughout Hoban’s writing is the lion figure which first appears in *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*. The novel opens with the sentence “There were no lions anymore” and the lion itself appears in Chapter 9: “[Jachin-Boaz] looked back over his shoulder and saw, less than a hundred feet away in the blue dawn, a lion. He was large, massive, with a heavy black mane...he stood motionless with one paw on the manhole cover. His eyes, catching the light of the street lamps, burned like steady pale green fires under the shadow of his brows.” (*Lion* 35). Just what the lion figure means to Hoban is difficult to decipher; Studer notes that the lion figure changes meaning during the course of the novel (46), first being a symbol of Boaz-Jachin’s rage toward his father (45) and then being a conduit for the resolution of the father-son angst and a symbol of reunion (46). The closest we come to the “last visible dog” in *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz* is the “being with the lion feeling” : “Suddenly the being-with-the-lion feeling came to Boaz-Jachin. He almost roared.” (*Lion* 87). Jachin-Boaz struggles to identify the lion’s symbolism early on: “ ‘Lion,’ he said, ‘Brother Lion! Boaz-Jachin’s lion, blessed anger of my son and golden rage! But you are more than that. You are of me and my lost son both, and of my father and me lost to each-other forever. You are all of us, Lion.’ “ (*Lion* p.65). yet the significance of the lion remains enigmatic. The lion returns in *Pilgermann* as the “hidden lion” pattern which the title character creates while living in an Armenian Muslim community at the end of his pilgrimage: “ ‘This Hidden Lion belongs to no one person more than to any other.’ I said. ‘It is simply the lion that remains hidden until it reveals itself.’” (*Pilgermann* p.168). Bowers believes that the lion represents “a primal life force” (92), but Hoban’s late children’s book *Jim’s Lion* (2001) reveals a more conciliatory aspect of the lion: here the lion is the title character’s “finder,” an animal that comes to him in a dream and gives him the courage to get a much needed but risky operation that eventually makes the ill child well again. There are connections in this book as well between lions and dogs—Jim sees the Lion “sitting on the beach the way a dog sits” (*Jim’s Lion* 54) and a pictorial dream sequence at the beginning of the book shows Jim’s encounter with dog-headed warriors who resemble the dog-men described by Riddley Walker. That the “being-with-the-lion” feeling and the discovery of what lies beyond the “last visible dog” are both symbols of self-empowerment surely makes a connection between the two quite obvious.

Child stares at the can, the water in the pond eventually erodes the can's label and, for the first time, the Mouse Child sees an image of himself:

As the paper of the label disappeared, the shiny tin behind it became visible, and the child saw a beady eye looking at him from the surface of the can. Gradually the area of exposed tin widened, and he saw his own face and his outstretched hands holding his father's hands...he had never seen himself before, but he recognized his father, and therefore knew himself. "Ah," he said, "there's nothing on the other side of nothing but us." (*MHC* 110-111)

The Mouse Child has never seen himself before, but he can recognize himself because of his relationship with his father, echoing Lacan's theory of the "mirror stage" through which all infants go during the development of consciousness. This concept is first hinted at when the tin Seal is introduced, admiring her reflected image (see Chapter 2) but isn't fully developed until this point in the narrative. In a sense, the Mouse Child's recognition of his reflection in the tin can in effect answers his initial question: "*what* are we?" Lacan himself comments in a passage that has clear connotations with Hoban's novel:

It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as an identification...namely the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—an image that is seemingly predestined to have an effect on this phase...the jubilant assumption of his spectacular image by the kind of being...the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other...its function as subject. (Lacan 76)

Words pop out here (although this is an English translation of Lacan's French):

"transformation," "jubilant," "primordial" all terms which pertain equally to the pond episode in Hoban's novel. "Coming at the wonder itself" is indeed a jubilant experience, and the Mouse Child's sudden realization here can be perfectly expressed as a joyful discovery of self. Similarly, the primordial atmosphere of the pond bottom, which relates to the primordial beginnings of consciousness, also relate to the "primordial form" of self-awareness as articulated by Lacan. This sudden realization echoes throughout

Hoban's other novels and clearly mark a differentiation from the story as something which we would consider to be a children's book.

It is also significant that the Mouse Child, made of tin, recognizes himself in a tin reflection; like reflects like. Here is the final stage of the Mouse Child's development and it is also the final stage in the development of the dog motif. The dogs have indeed symbolized many things: loyalty, companionship, theatrics, spare parts, the rising star of enlightenment, infinity...and finally, the dogs symbolize self-knowledge, which is exactly what the *felix culpa* in the Eden of the doll house was intended to bring about.

But that is not all. For the pond episode also represents a certain kind of birth and resurrection, and not only for the Mouse and his Child. The Mouse Child discovers a helper, a dragonfly nymph named Miss Mudd, who Hoban describes as looking like a "misshapen grasshopper" yet she as well expresses a desire for self-discovery:

"I know," said Miss Mudd... "And the odd thing, you see, is that I don't think that's how I really am. I just can't believe that I'm this muddy thing you see crawling about the muck. I don't *feel* as if I am. I simply can't tell you how I feel inside! Clean and bright and beautiful—like a song in the sunlight, like a sigh in the summer air. Do you ever feel that way?" (*MHC* 106-107)

It is Miss Mudd who, by using a long string of fishing line tied to the good luck medallion given to the Mouse Child by the Frog, ultimately saves the Mouse Child and Mouse Father by getting them drawn out of the pond by a bass who swallows the coin. And in this process Miss Mudd finds herself at last:

"There," she said...and she collapsed...on the lily pad. "I feel so odd!" she said. "I can scarcely catch my breath and my eyes are growing dim. Perhaps I'm dying...and I never was meant to be anything but what I was." Miss Mudd began to cry, and as her body heaved it split down the back...she climbed out of the

empty, muddy shell of her discarded self, a dragonfly now, new, and lovely emerald green.(MHC 113)²⁷

Miss Mudd's death and rebirth is also mirrored in a certain death and rebirth that these incidents give to the Mouse Father.²⁸ The Mouse Father and Mouse Child emerge from the pond greatly the worse for wear, waterlogged, and broken. They are taken for real mice by a hawk who, realizing his mistake, drops them back into the dump, smashing them into many pieces as Manny Rat had intended to do to them at the Muskrat's house. They have come full circle and are finally put back together by the mystic, the helper—the Frog. Here the Mouse Father reaches *his* rebirth, prefigured by his internal response to Miss Mudd's earlier question, "Do you ever feel that way?": "Ah!" sighed the father. How could he say how he felt? Far different from the tin mouse who had danced under the Christmas tree certainly, but less than whatever it was he needed to be, hoped to be, and now almost despaired of ever being." (MHC p.107). For the first time the Mouse Father sees when coming to is the doll house and it is at this point, even when it seems his journey has come full circle, that he finally finds himself:

The father was hastily put together...and speechless with relief, he looked into the face of the frog. Then he saw the elephant and the doll house. "Oh!" he said and "Oh!" again and wept. Then he felt a great rage growing in him, and he said...:

²⁷ Wilkie, in *Through the Narrow Gate*, compares Miss Mudd's rebirth with the "being-with-the-lion" feeling experienced by Jachin-Boaz in *The Lion of Jachin-Boaz and Boaz-Jachin*, remarking, "It is the same return to primal knowing and unknowing that was the experience in the mud, ooze, rubbish, and water plants of *The Mouse and His Child* and from which the response is the same mystic cycle of death and rebirth." (32)

²⁸ De Luca also sees the transformation of Miss Mudd as representing a recurring theme of death and resurrection in Hoban's fiction: "This kind of splitting apart occurs several times in the story-, expressing Hoban's sense of growth as a kind of continual death of one self and emergence of another." (219) Fisher also adds to this the metamorphosis of the Mouse Child and Mouse Father themselves: "The importance of metamorphosis in this novel is obvious: the mice are transformed from wind-up toys (that speak only between midnight and seven) into sentient, self-winding beings." (33) To this we could also add the "rebirth" of Neaera and William G. in *Turtle Diary* who, even though they do not connect for a lifetime as might happen in a conventional novel, are at least revitalized by their success in rescuing the turtles from the London Zoo. And, in an odd way, we can see *Turtle Diary* as a continuation of Serpentina's story as well. (See De Luca p. 216)

“Ours!”... The road had been long and hard indeed, but now he knew he had found what he wanted to find at the end of it. “Now we must fight for our territory,” he said. “I don’t understand,” said the seal, “Kingfishers have territories, and I know that animals do. But toys don’t.” “*We aren’t toys anymore,*” said the father. “*Toys are to be played with, and we aren’t.*” “What do you mean?” asked the seal. “Be my daughter,” said the father. (MHC pp.130-131; emphasis mine)

This may be the most important passage in the novel; it certainly is the most important moment in the journey of the Mouse Father. Indeed the windups are not toys any more (the Mouse Father and Mouse Child may never have been in the true sense) and the rage that is born in the Mouse Father is a transformative agent that brings him to full fruition as a complete individual: as both a father (to both the Mouse Child and the Tin Seal), a husband, and as a fully rounded being. He is now worthy of the Elephant and the Doll House. The battle ensues, as we have seen, Manny is defeated, and the territory is won.

Journey’s End

[Frog] reached for the father’s key, to wind him up again. “Not yet,” said the father. “It’s pleasant to rest for a little while. The road has been a long one. We have been low in the summer darkness of the pond, high in the winter light here in our house; time brought a painful spring, a shattering fall, and a scattering regathered, all as you foretold.” “And the enemy we fled at the beginning waited for us at the end,” the child said... “Will you tell our fortune again?” “Your fortune has been made,” said Frog, “and needs no more telling.” (MHC 181)

The end of the journey seems to lie simply in cozy domesticity, a return to the world of the “Frances” books, perhaps, but the above passage suggests otherwise. For in finding themselves the Mouse Father and the Mouse Child, in converting the doll house which was once the home to vacuous papier-mâché dolls stuffed with random newsprint, is a hotel to wandering migrants (the motto beneath the hotel’s sign reads “Migrants Yes”) who on their own journeys of self-discovery; fittingly, the hotel’s name is “The Last Visible Dog.” Yet some critics have had

problems with the novel's ending; Wilkie rails against Hoban's conclusion:

The new occupants of the dolls' house...have quickly and disappointingly assumed the mores and pretensions of the Establishment from where they began their quest. The dolls' house is sublimated in a nauseating ritual of decorating and inordinate attention to general comfort making...One would have hoped that their journey from innocence to experience might have brought some more lasting values; and one is left with more than a strong suspicion that the means might have corrupted the end. They are behaving like territory owners. (27)

McMahon-Hill remarks, similarly:

So I suppose they deserve a gentle slice of middle class comfort under the flag of the Last Visible Dog. But their enjoyment of it, after so many harrowing revelations, is a letdown, and the story's ending does not stand up to what the bulk of the book has been saying so strongly. (47).

And even Studer sees the ending as "too cheap to be satisfactory" (31). Hoban's own thoughts on the matter are a bit more ambiguous:

I was satisfied with the ending of the book. Now you might be thinking, if I were writing that book now, would I end it the same? The fact is I wouldn't be writing that book now. All of my books are how I could deal with what came to me where I was at the time... I stand by what I've written as the best I could do with what came to me at the time that I wrote it and viewed it that way. (Bunbury 142-143)

But one wonders if the ending truly needs defending at all. For in coming full circle, it is not only a matter of the Mouse Father and Mouse Child "deserving a good rest" as McMahon-Hill suggests, but their acting as a wayside guidepost to others.²⁹ The Mouse Father and Mouse Child refuse to publish a tome or conduct a class on the secret of their success, they say simply that "the whole secret of the thing...was simply and at all costs to move steadily ahead, and that...could not be taught." (*MHC* 178). It is not the goal of

²⁹ The notion that the mice have come full circle and that they are resting in the doll house of their original awakening is horribly short sighted. Nikolayeva, for example, refers to this new doll house as "substantially inferior to the initial dream," (73) but this is clearly the opposite of the case: the doll house, reimagined as "The Last Visible Dog" is a signpost of hope and intellectual activity, and even Manny Rat has reached a point not of reversal (i.e. servitude to the windups) but as a professor of sorts in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

the Mouse Child and Mouse Father to be rebellious outlanders, for the object through much of the journey has been achieved: the winning of their own territory on their own terms. They do not, like the shews, wage war on others for more territory, they *have* it; it is theirs and they are using it to help others discover territory of their own also, and on *their* own terms as well. In the process they have discovered limited self-winding, but, more importantly, they have discovered themselves. Riddley Walker makes this same discovery, as does Kleinzeit, as does Boaz-Jachin, as does Fremder Gore, and so on throughout Hoban's fiction: as McMahon-Hill remarks in discussing the ending of *Kleinzeit*: "Kleinzeit clamors for answers but has to discover, as the mouse and his son did and as Jachin-Boaz and his son did, that there are no ultimate answers and that acceptance of what is is necessary." (51)

The novel ends as it began, with the Tramp:

A rumbling freight went slowly clanking toward the town. One of the boxcar doors stood open, and as the train rolled on, a bundle was flung out into the snow beside the roadbed. The bundle was followed by a ragged man holding a little dog in his arms...As [the Tramp] looked across the yard at The Last Visible Dog the town clock sent strokes of midnight singing on the sharp, still air. "Twelve o'clock!" it called. "And Merry Christmas!" "Merry Christmas, Bonzo," said the tramp to his dog. Then he...found himself looking into the faces of the mouse and his child, the elephant, the seal, and the frog...The tramp saw father and son with their family and friends around them. He saw the Last Visible Dog in all the brightness of its lights against the night; he heard the singing and the merriment inside; and he smiled and spoke to the mouse and his child for the second time. "Be happy," said the tramp. (*MHC* 181-182)

Here Hoban not only brings all his characters together, but also all his symbols. The Tramp, for everything he represents: rugged individualism, rejection of the duties of living as hinted at in Hoban's earlier *Charlie the Tramp*, a kinetic force that sets the toy mice in motion, acceptance, loneliness or, rather, "alone-ness" that is eventually resolved

through the intervention of a black-and-white spotted dog. The “last visible dog” appears here not only as the name-place of the Mouse Father and Mouse Child’s territory, but also as concept; the Tramp can “see” the Last Visible Dog in all its brightness: as dog star, as the “nothing at the other side of nothing” where the self resides, as simply a can of dog food, as a representation of his own dog, Bonzo. The Town Clock, so unlike the miserable authoritarian Toy Shop clock in Chapter 1, sings its “midnight” instead of simply announcing it. And then, as the key figure of motion in the novel, the Tramp presents his benediction: “be happy.”

Somehow it is very fitting that the Tramp should get the last word here, for there is very little doubt that, having evolved and grown, all the characters will indeed find happiness. If this is perhaps seen as too optimistic an ending, one can only look at Hoban’s other novels, most of which end on a rather hopeful note. Jonathan Fitch no longer is afraid of death and is reunited with Serafina in *Mr. Rinyo-Clacton’s Offer*; Riddle Walker continues on his journey, having (literally) exploded one religion and founded a new one, Kleinzeit likewise makes a friend of Death and finds happiness with Sister, observing (toward the novel’s end) “What is harmony but a fitting together?” (*Kleinzeit* 180). In all these cases, *The Mouse and His Child* can very much be seen as a unit with these other novels. The question, perhaps, is not whether the book is suitable for children (there’s obviously *no* question that the book has been read by children) but whether or not Hoban’s original concept that he was working on *a novel* and not one specifically written for a child audience stands when we examine it carefully.

In his 1969 *Times Literary Supplement* review of the book, Marcus Crouch writes: “Like the best books it is a book from which one can peel layer after layer of meaning. It may not be a Children’s Book, but, my goodness, it is a *book*.” (357; emphasis in original). But this thesis has also examined that the work is integrated, not only with symbol on top of theme throughout the novel, but also with the rest of Hoban’s later fiction. As has been shown, integration of theme and subject (on being, on thing theory, on the infinite and what lies beyond) is what makes Hoban’s fiction unique among other 20th/21st century authors. This integration of theme begins in *The Mouse and His Child* which is why it is vital that we examine it, not as a children’s book, but as the first of Hoban’s adult novels. Hopefully this initial step will revitalize interest not only in Hoban’s first novel, but in the entirety of his output as well.

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