§ Coda: The Riddle of History Solved

Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.74

~Karl Marx

The existence of an answer does, it is true, define the riddle, but not in the manner we might have thought.75

~Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman

“Mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already

exist or are at least in the process of formation.”76 In 1842 in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, and therefore nearly two decades before the better known passage of the 1859 preface, Marx wrote: “The fate which a question of the time has in common with every question justified by its content, and therefore rational, is that the question and not the answer constitutes the main difficulty. True criticism, therefore, analyzes the questions and not the answers. Just as the solution of an algebraic equation is given once the problem has been put in its simplest and sharpest form, so every question is answered as soon as it has become a real question.”77 “The existence of a ‘real’ answer follows from the posing of any ‘real’ question,” a scholarly commentary concurs. “But we can now see that the true nature of riddling lies just here,” it continues, “in the precarious opacity of the solution.”78 If “communism is the riddle of history solved,” what formulation of that “riddle” “knows itself to be this solution”? After what fashion, into what “precarious opacity,” does the riddle of history resolve itself?

A clue may be found in the contrast between two

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stories—between two instances of self-reference in those stories, specifically, and what the self-recognition in each instance implies for how the story plays out. “In the *Arabian Nights,*” first, “we hear of Emir Hārūn al-Rashīd,

who became very bored. Nothing could revive his spirits. His storyteller asked: ‘Do you want to hear the story of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, the mother of all stories, the story that relieves all boredom forever?’ ‘Do you know the story?’ asked the emir. The storyteller confessed that he did not, but promised to obtain it for the emir. The emir gave him one year and one day to accomplish the task, on pain of death. The storyteller dispatched his four disciples to the four corners of the world to find the story. They returned within a year, to be questioned by the emir. Each of the first three confessed to having failed to obtain the desired story, but told instead of other stories and adventures he had encountered. The fourth disciple announced that he had found the story.

‘There was once an emir who became very bored,’ began the disciple. ‘His storyteller promised to obtain for him the story that relieves all boredom and dispatched four disciples for the task. Three returned empty handed.’

‘You are telling me my own story,’ cried the emir angrily. ‘But wait, how did you know about
the others? You were not present when they came back. So perhaps it is a story after all!’ The emir became confused. He could not make sense of the situation.

“The storyteller suggested he be patient,” so ends this account of the fable, “and hear the rest. The emir refused. He ordered dancers and musicians to be brought in, to divert his mind and make him forget the story.”79 In contrast, another fable, “narrated by A. K. Ramanujan, tells of a man

who was prompted by his wife to go and listen in the evenings to the recounting of the Rāmāyaṇa. But each night he fell asleep as soon as the recitation began. When this happened for three consecutive nights, his wife scolded him thoroughly and commanded him to stay awake. On the fourth night, the man forced himself to listen. The storyteller described how the king of monkeys, Hanuman, sailed through the air over the ocean as a messenger from Rāma to the captive Sītā. As a sign that Rāma had sent him, Hanuman was carrying Rāma’s ring; unfortunately, the ring suddenly fell into the ocean. The storyteller turned to the audience and asked: ‘What will Hanuman do now? How can he retrieve the

79 Ilan Amit, “Squaring the Circle,” in Untying the Knot, 292 [284–293].
ring? How can he be of help to Rāma without it?’

The man was deeply moved by what he heard. He jumped up, ran to the ocean, plunged in,

“found the ring, and brought it back to Hanuman. He then returned to his seat,” our tale concludes, “and”—dripping wet—“continued to listen.”

**Explication de Texte**

*To believe in this world.*

~Gilles Deleuze

Into what then does the riddle of history resolve itself? According to Dan Pagis, a riddle is transformed by its solution into a work of art. Specifically, a poem.

Now at the end of the poem, the solution is transformed in turn.

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82 See Dan Pagis, “Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle,” in *Untying the Knot*, 81–108.
83 “If poetry is defined precisely by the possibility of enjambment,” Agamben writes, “with deceptive simplicity,” Heller-Roazen comments, “it follows that the last verse of a poem is not a verse” (emphasis added): Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University
Perhaps the solution to the riddle of history can be read, immanently, out of the history of the riddle: “As long as the riddle is a riddle, it has no solution. As soon as a solution is given, it loses its essence as a riddle.” Yet the story told by the riddle—to take the full measure of its poetry—insinuates us directly into its midst, challenging us, impossibly, “to oscillate between no solution and no riddle, between riddle and solution,” between poetry and philosophy, that is, vertiginously, between the poetry of the riddle of history solved and the philosophy the moment of whose realization was missed—the real movement, in sum, which abolishes the present state of things “to be in touch with all the world,” thereby, and “remain alive” to it.


Hasan-Rokem, “‘Spinning Threads of Sand,’” 120.

Theodor Adorno, “Introduction,” in Negative Dialectics, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Continuum, 1973), 3 [3–57]: “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed.” One should recall here, for its full sense, Wittgenstein’s dictum, “Philosophy ought really to be written only as poetry.”

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 280: “Becoming everybody/everything (tout le monde) is to world (faire monde), to make a world (faire
un monde).” To enter into a zone of proximity with all the world so that all the world in turn becomes something else: see Fradenburg, *Staying Alive*. 