

## Walter Abish's Deconstruction of the Holocaust in *How German Is It*

Reiko Nitta

### *Walter Abish as an Innovative Writer*

Since his first startling novel, *Alphabetical Africa* (1974, hereafter, *AA*), Walter Abish has always been recognized as a provocative writer who challenges the limitations of language and literary expressions. His literary experiments can be easily observed in *How German Is It* (1980, hereafter, *HG*), too, though it adopts a far more realistic narrative than *AA*. Jerome Klinkowitz, who recognizes Abish's unique usage of realism, calls it "a surrealism" ("Walter Abish and the Surfaces of Life" 419) or "an experimental realism" ("Experimental Realism" 63).

*HG*, for example, begins with an interrogative sentence answered by questioning:

What are the first words a visitor from France can expect to hear upon his arrival at a German airport?

Bonjour?

Or, Guten Tag?

Or, Ihren Pass bitte? (1)

Thousands of people arrive at a German airport every day. It is a familiar scene that should not alarm anybody. However, the questions in this opening passage disturb the reader and make him or her wonder if there is something wrong in this familiar scene. Such destabilizing narrative is one of the most distinctive literary devices Abish adopted in *HG* and gives the initial impression that the book represents a new type of fiction.

Another example of this kind of narrative is observed when Anna Heller, a school teacher, one day asks her pupils, "What is familiar?" (119). She explains to

the children, "when something becomes terribly familiar we stop seeing it" (120). Then, the narration adds: "But why would Miss Anna Heller spend so much time discussing the familiar, unless she had some doubts, some reservations regarding the familiar, day-to-day events of her life" (121). Without a question mark, this interrogative sentence functions as more than a simple question and raises an alarm so that the reader cannot help but wonder with the children if there may be something important in the reader's own familiar daily life that he or she fails to recognize.

The nature of Abish's narrative in *HG* is aptly represented by the book's title, *How German Is It*. Its interrogative form without a question mark offers the reader a subject to consider while refraining from supplying him or her with any authorial opinion. It thus functions both as affirmation and interrogation.

Besides the unique use of interrogation, *HG* also assumes the characteristics of postmodern narrative, which Jean-François Lyotard describes as follows:

The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. (xxiv)

The characteristics listed in this passage are what Lyotard describes as the conditions of the "delegitimation" of grand narratives in a later chapter (37-41).

As a typical postmodern work, *HG* in fact lacks a "great hero," an authorized protagonist. At the beginning, Ulrich Hargenau may look intelligent, conscientious, and observant enough to be a protagonist who represents Abish's point of view. Later, however, he turns out to be completely blind to what is happening around him. At the end of the book, he even escapes into "a pleasant mindless state of inactivity" (235). He is simply another unreliable character, and the initial impression of his reliability is an intended fallacy, one of the tricks Abish uses to emphasize that nothing in this book is what it seems.

*HG* also lacks "great dangers," "great voyages," and a "great goal" and is an assortment of only loosely connected elements. Just as Lyotard says that World War II "has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means" (37), so Abish places more emphasis on how the story is told than on what it contains. In other words, he is more concerned with how the reader experiences the book than with the text's superficial message.

What is more, *HG* employs another postmodern characteristic, "peripeteia," which, as Frank Kermode explains in *The Sense of an Ending*, is "a disconfirmation followed by a consonance; the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route" (18). One of the characteristic examples of it in *HG* is the destruction of a bridge by its watcher, Gottfried. At first he seems extremely harmless, but one day, without any apparent explanation, he kills a couple of policemen whom he has known for a long time, destroys his bridge, and abandons his career and peaceful domestic life with his wife.

All through *HG*, Abish makes these literary experiments that defamiliarize the familiar or destabilize the reader's recognition so that the reader cannot help but doubt what he or she usually takes for granted and reconsider everything in life. On the other hand, Abish's sense of humor keeps the reader from desperation even in the grimmest reality and helps him or her to face it.

For example, when the bridge is unexpectedly destroyed, an exaggerated question is asked: "Can absolutely nothing be relied upon any longer?" (247). This question reveals the great uncertainty we live with in reality, but a playful tone in its exaggeration softens the tension, which it is supposed to express. It is, moreover, neither affirmed nor negated so that a quick cynicism and an easy optimism are both rejected. It is entirely up to the reader how to tackle the uncertainty, and by ascribing this responsibility to the reader, the book leaves many possibilities open for the future.

Thus, in *HG*, Abish presents the subjects to be considered but refrains from indicating what conclusion the reader should draw about them. *HG* is therefore what Alain Arias-Misson calls "an elliptical world" (154) where the book "is defined by the space between the elements rather than by the character of the elements themselves" (154). Dieter Saalman similarly refers to this characteristic by quoting Olga Bernal's phrase, "the 'novel of absence'" (106). In other words, *HG* is what Roland Barthes calls "le scriptible" (10) (the writerly text), which makes "du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte" (10) (the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text). Whether it is called "an elliptical world," "the novel of absence," or "the writerly text," this characteristic enables *HG* to achieve much more than one author could do in one book. Furthermore, it is predicated on a trust in the reader's appropriate response and human potential so that *HG* is fundamentally humanistic and, however cynical it may look, enshrines an infinite hope.

### ***The Analytical Emphasis on Abish's Literary Devices***

In the analysis of Abish's work, critics tend to put their emphasis on his literary devices even when they examine social and historical materials in his work. For example, Saalman observes: "Within the framework of Holocaust literature, *How German Is It* is unique in that Abish sees this controversial topic from a strictly *logos*-oriented perspective" (116).

The analytical emphasis is unmistakable in Richard Walsh's discussion, too. Though he admits that "[t]o suggest that Germany, and the idea of Germany, is not important in the novel is to disregard both its dominance in the narrative and the greater part of the novel's force" (118), he ultimately relates this particular historical element to its narrative structure and general theme: "The German national identity is the key to all other instances of the relation of structure and identity in the novel" (127).

Maarten Van Delden is more conscious of Abish's moral and historical concern and observes: "While postmodernists have often restricted the question of the

responsibility of their writing to the responsibility of language to itself, it is clear that the subject of Abish's *How German Is It* (1980) cannot afford such a limitation, that responsibility must here also be to history and to truth" (173). Still he will not go into the discussion of Abish's personal feeling about the particular subjects of German history and the Holocaust. Instead, he concludes by generalizing them: "The novel's secretiveness . . . reflects the troubled forgetfulness of a society that has not yet come to terms with its past" (192).

Likewise, Paul Wotipka willingly admits that "[t]he question implicit in the title of Water Abish's novel immediately alerts us to problems of history" (503), but he also seems to be satisfied with a generalized conclusion, "the novel itself moves well beyond the question of national identity to the broader problems of a multinational culture that characteristically suppresses or erases the terror of specific historical events" (504).

The analytical emphasis of these critics is in a way appropriate because Abish himself announces in the interview with Sylvère Lotringer, "I have introduced German signs" (161). He insists that everything German in the book is designed to represent more than Germany itself. Additionally, as to the reason why he used Germany as a sign, he explains in the interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory:

Everything German necessitates an explanation and, of course, it is invariably the same familiar explanation. I suspect that one brings up the subject of Germany only in order to arrive at the explanation. To me the literary challenge was to see to what degree it would be possible to write about Germany without fulfilling those obligations. (16)

Abish's intention of using Germany as a sign is also intimated by the fact that he wrote *HG* without visiting Germany. It is probable that he did not want to defile his literary intention by experiencing the real Germany beforehand.

### ***Abish's Moral and Political Responsibility***

Though Abish's literary devices tend to be emphasized, most of the critics agree that his work is different from those postmodern works with "historical deafness" (xi), which Fredric Jameson refers to as one of the typical postmodern characteristics. With his moral and political concerns, Abish would actually be more accurately characterized by the definition that Linda Hutcheon gives. She asserts that "[w]hat postmodernism does is to denaturalize both realism's transparency and modernism's reflexive response while retaining . . . the historically attested power of both" (341-42), and claims that postmodernism entertains a realistic approach to world and a modern approach to language in harmony with each other.

In fact, Abish's most experimental literary expressions reflect his moral and political concerns with the world and the age. Especially in *HG*, Abish brilliantly demonstrates his ability as an innovative writer by creating a new narrative to deconstruct the Holocaust. The description in this book is mostly limited to a peaceful-looking contemporary daily life, but each scene seems to hint of Nazi Germany

and the Holocaust and warns the reader against similar dangers elsewhere. Because of this postmodern artifice designed to make the reader sensitive to any danger in his or her life and induce him or her to work for peace, however, critics tend to focus on Abish's literary arts and generalize the effects of his use of Germany and the Holocaust, concluding by referring to a vague moral and political responsibility.

It is also true that critics are all the more careful in relating Abish to the Holocaust because it is too easy to do so. Abish was born to a Jewish middle-class family in Vienna, Austria, in 1931, and he was forced to flee from his native country soon after the *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. His family on his mother's side were rich enough to escape in time, but his father's family were all killed in the war. It is, therefore, quite natural if Abish has an irrepressible aversion toward Germany, but *HG* is too refined and sophisticated a book to express merely a tenacious hatred. This is why good critics feel obliged to generalize anything indicating Nazi Germany and the Holocaust into the novel's wider view of the world.

The influence of the Holocaust is, however, ubiquitous in Abish's work. Allusions to Nazi Germany are easily found not only in *HG* and *Double Vision* (2004), but also in *AA* and *Eclipse Fever* (1993, hereafter, *EF*), whose subjects seem at first glance to have nothing to do with the Holocaust.

*AA* deals with people who symbolize a thoughtless way of life and who are easily inclined to sex and murder when its background, the fictitious Africa, is ceaselessly exposed to invasions and erosion. The unsettled condition of Africa embodies the unstable reality of our life while the characters' thoughtless and irresponsible behavior, easily yielding to violence, suggests the past mistakes in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. For example, there is "Africa's antipodal ant annexation" (1), and Albert accepts it, saying, "ants are Ameisen" (1). "Ameisen" is a German word for ants, so that this annexation easily reminds readers of the *Anschluss*. Queen Quat, who rules Tanzania and has it painted in one color, is another reminder of the Nazi regime and its totalitarianism. In fact, Queen Quat resembles the double of Hitler when she decides to invade other countries and confesses, "I like having a lot of power, and exerting it over others" (98).

Similar allusions are found in *EF*, too, when Mexicans who heedlessly accept an odd creation by a foreign designer, only as "an anomaly" (21), are contrasted with Germans who adamantly reject its counterpart, "the unconventionally shaped golden Berlin Philharmonic Hall, erected on what had been an area devastated by the war, . . . as aesthetically at odds with Berlin's formerly rich architectural history" (21).

Though their attitudes seem to be opposed, they are in fact treated equally as representing a danger for the future. The Mexicans' thoughtless acceptance of changes could easily endanger their culture and cause the loss of their distinctive identity. German attachment to the brilliant past, on the other hand, is associated with a Nazi dream of governing the world, as is alluded to in the description of a reconstructed bridge after the destruction of the old one in *HG*: "Replicas of this kind testify to a German reverence for the past and for the truth, a reverence for the forms and structures upon which so many of their ideals have been emblazoned"

(7). Even when Abish writes a Mexican novel, therefore, his warning to the reader against a danger in his daily life reflects the influence of the Holocaust. Consequently, discussion of the influence of the Holocaust and his relation to it cannot be avoided in the close examination of his work.

### ***The Deconstruction of the Holocaust as a Postmodern Anti-war Novel***

In *HG*, there are many references to the Holocaust, but the most cynical one can probably be found in chapter 18 (and subsequent chapters) of the second part called "Sweet Truth." Chapter 18 innocently begins:

One day, after a particularly heavy downpour the pavement in front of the Karl-Mainz Bakery on the Geigenheimer Strasse in Brumholdstein caved in, exposing a ruptured sewage pipe. Things like that were bound to happen. They could happen anywhere. (136)

This ordinary-looking incident, however, reveals the most unusual and the grimmest fact, namely, that "all of Brumholdstein is sitting on one mass grave" (139). Then chapter 33 opens with an ironical comment, "*Past riches*" (190), and suggestively ponders how one should face the darkest history that a new German model city inherits from the past.

The morbid image of numerous bodies buried under an immaculate model city rightly delivers the same grave message that many other Holocaust works repeat. Yet the ironic contrast between an insignificant-looking rupture of a sewage pipe and the unprecedented genocide, and the farcical realization of a beautiful new city built on the mass grave, rejects the stereotypical reaction to the reality of the Holocaust. These comical elements mitigate one's difficulty in facing the reality of the abhorrent crimes human beings can commit, without reducing their atrocity. Abish's literary art thus enables those who do not know about the Holocaust to face it and understand it as it was.

In *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone explains that postmodernism developed out of the struggle with a special difficulty of language after the Holocaust: "These writers and survivors, and many others, believe that it is not possible for those who did not survive to understand, in a truthful way, the events of the Holocaust. Language is not enough" (18). Amy Hungerford refers to the same difficulty in *The Holocaust of Texts*, introducing Wendy Steiner's "claim about silence and the limitations of language after the Holocaust" (15).

Abish's artistic devices in *HG*, however, succeeded in making the unimaginable imaginable, not by directly describing the Holocaust itself, but by creating a fictitious Germany in a historical narrative with literary, ethical, and political importance, and then by deconstructing it to produce what Hungerford calls "the 'most important 'proof' of the merging of fact and fiction'" (15). To depict the Holocaust as it was is not Abish's ultimate purpose. As has already been noted, the book defamiliarizes the familiar and induces the reader to reconsider his or her daily

life in order to overcome the difficulties therein. It is in this generalized moral and political view demonstrated by his postmodern writing that the largest influence of the Holocaust resides.

Eaglestone asserts that “postmodernism in the West begins with thinking about the Holocaust, that postmodernism . . . is a response to the Holocaust” (2), and illustrates how Emanuel Levinas’s exorbitant<sup>1</sup> and Jacques Derrida’s decentering<sup>2</sup> involve “a sense of openness towards the future”(299)<sup>3</sup> that may help to prevent another incident like the Holocaust in the future. Being a writerly text, Abish’s work also possesses this attribute. In other words, his books always induce the reader to recognize dangers in his or her daily life and think of the way to attain a better future and peace, because Abish’s postmodern literary devices are shaped by a strong sense of responsibility to history and human beings, such as people in Hiroshima would share when they pledge that “the error shall not be repeated.”<sup>4</sup> It is his way of discharging the moral obligation he owes to his experience of the Holocaust.

As he proclaims in the interview with McCaffery and Gregory, “My work is indeed political” (21), *HG* is not only a writerly text, but also one of the most effective antiwar novels ever attempted. It is this effort for the future and for peace that makes Abish unique even among the best postmodern innovative writers.

## Notes

1 Eaglestone explains this as “to go out of the wheel track” (281), referring to Levinas’s important “wheel rut” metaphor.

2 Nicholas Royle observes, “if one were looking for a single ‘central ideal’ for Derrida’s work it might be that of *decentering*” (15).

3 Takashi Minatomich also argues that it is because of his Holocaust experience that Levinas tried to be a real thinker for peace (130).

4 The Memorial Cenotaph of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park carries the epitaph: “Repose ye in Peace, for the error shall not be repeated.”

## Works Cited

- Abish, Walter. *How German Is It*. New York: New Directions, 1980. Print.
- Arias-Misson, Alain. “The ‘New Novel’ and Television Culture: Reflections on Walter Abish’s *How German Is It*.” *Fiction International* 17, No. 1 (1986): 152-64. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970. Print.
- Eaglestone, Robert. *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*. New York: Oxford UP, 2004. Print.
- Hungerford, Amy. *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. “The Politics of Postmodernism.” *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel*. Ed. Bran Nicol. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U, 2002. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. 1991. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. Print.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending*. New York, Oxford UP, 1967. Print.
- Klinkowits, Jerome. “Walter Abish and the Surfaces of Life.” *The Georgia Review*, 35 (Summer 1981): 416-20. Print.

- . "Experimental Realism." *Postmodern Fiction*. Ed. Larry McCaffery. Westport, Connecticut: Movements in the Arts, 1986. 63-77. Print.
- Lotringer, Sylvère. "Wie Deutsch Ist Es." *Semiotext(e)* 4 (Spring 1982): 160-78. Print.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1979. Print.
- McCaffery, Larry, and Sinda Gregory. *Alive and Writing: Interviews with American Authors*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1987. Print.
- Minatomichi, Takashi. 港道隆、『レヴィナス 法-外な思想』、講談社、1997. Print.
- Royle, Nicholas. *Jacques Derrida*. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
- Saalmann, Dieter. "Walter Abish's *How German Is It*: Language and the Crisis of Human Behavior." *Critique* 36 (Spring 1985): 105-21. Print.
- Van Delden, Maarten. "Walter Abish's *How German Is It*: Postmodernism and the Past." *Salmagundi* 85-86 (Winter-Spring 1990): 172-94. Print.
- Varsava, Jerry A. *Contingent Meanings: Postmodern Fiction, Mimesis and the Reader*. Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1990. Print.
- Walsh, Richard. *Novel Arguments: Reading Innovative American Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.
- Wotipka, Paul. "Walter Abish's *How German Is It*: Representing the Postmodern." *Contemporary Literature* 30 (Winter 1989): 503-17. Print.

---

Reiko Nitta, Hiroshima University