

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

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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, which Jerome Klinkowitz calls “a superrealism” (“Walter Abish and the Surfaces of Life” 419) or “an experimental realism” (“Experimental Realism” 63) can be easily observed in *How German Is It* (1980, hereafter, HG), too, though it adopts a far more realistic narrative than AA.

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. But the questions in this opening passage disturb the reader and make him wonder if there is something wrong in this familiar scene. Such a destabilizing interrogative sentence 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.

The nature of Abish's interrogative sentence 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 with any authorial opinion. It thus functions both as affirmation and interrogation.

Besides the unique usage of interrogation, HG also assumes the characteristics of postmodern narrative which Jean-François Lyotard describes as the conditions of the “delegitimation” of grand narratives (37-41).

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For example, HG 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. 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.

As a typical postmodern work, HG also lacks “great dangers,” “great voyages,” and a “great goal” and is an assortment of only loosely connected elements. And more emphasis is placed on how the book is told than on what is told in it. In other words, Abish 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,” a sudden change to a plot. One of the characteristic examples of it in HG is the destruction of a bridge by its watcher, Gottfried. At first he seems one of the most harmless men in the world, but one day, without any apparent explanation, he kills a couple of policemen, destroys his bridge and abandons his career and peaceful domestic life with his wife.

All through HG, Abish makes these literary experiments which defamiliarize the familiar or destabilize the reader’s recognition so that the reader cannot help doubting what he usually takes for granted and reconsidering everything in his life.

On the other hand, Abish’s sense of humor keeps the reader from desperation even in the grimmest reality and helps him 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 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). And 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 such as Dieter Saalman, Richard Walsh, Maarten Van Delden, Paul Wotipka, put their emphasis on his literary devices even when they examine social and historical materials in his work. For example, Van Delden is very conscious of Abish’s moral and historical concern but he will not go into the discussion of Abish’s personal feeling about the particular subjects, 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).

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. 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.

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 demonstrated 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. However, because this postmodern artifice is designed to make the reader sensitive to any danger in his life and to induce him to work for peace, critics tend to focus on Abish's literary devices and generalize the effects of his usage of Germany and the Holocaust, concluding with 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 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 towards 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. 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 the 18th 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 the 33rd chapter 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 buried bodies under an immaculate model city rightly delivers the same grave message that many other Holocaust works have ever told. 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, reject 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* (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). However, 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 daily life in order to overcome the difficulties in it. 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 exorbitant¹ and Jacques Derrida’s decentering² involve “a sense of openness towards the future” (299)³ which 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 daily life and think of the way to attain a better future and peace, because his 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”⁴. It is his way of discharging the moral obligation he owes to his experience of the Holocaust.

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

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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 *decentring*" (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 A-bomb in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park carries the epitaph: "Repose ye in Peace, for the error shall not be repeated."

