

ANALYSIS

How German Is It (1980)



Walter Abish

(1931-)

“All Abish’s titles are deliberately ambiguous, giving us several levels because of diverse meanings of a word, lack of punctuation, or groupings of words. *How German Is It*, lacking a question mark, is turned into a dubious assertion. *In the Future Perfect* indicates a tense with both future and past temporality, each pulling in a different direction.... These ambiguities are connected to Abish’s flattening out of his prose. As he explains in his interview in *Fiction International*: ‘In my writing I try to strip language of its power to create verisimilitude that in turn shields the reader from the printed words on the page that are deployed as signifiers. Writing as close as possible to a neutral content, everything, the terrain, the interiors, the furniture, the motions of the characters are aspects of a topography that defines the limits of the situation being explored’....

The immediate literary background for Walter Abish’s *How German Is It* (1980) is his story ‘The English Garden,’ which appeared in 1977 in a volume titled *In the Future Perfect*. Although the collection has several fictions not associated with Germany, the title suggests a world that ‘would have been’ if German values had prevailed. The ‘English Garden’ of the story is borrowed from John Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, in which he speaks of the English Garden effect as that which gives ‘the required air of naturalness, pathos and hope.’ The narrator of Abish’s story speaks of Germany as a gigantic coloring book: ‘Nothing is intrinsically German, I suppose, until it receives its color.’ The narrator’s desire is to establish the reality of Germany. ‘The question one keeps asking oneself is: How German is it? And, is this the true color of Germany?’ The coloring book metaphor is so significant because everything one sees now in postwar Germany differs from what existed before....

Durst concentration camp has been demolished, for it proved, after all, only a second-rank camp. ‘It would not attract a sufficient number of tourists to warrant the extensive repairs that were needed. Furthermore, the camp had only two gas ovens. For the price of rebuilding and maintaining the Durst concentration camp they could build 2,500 apartment units. A lot of kids from the neighboring townships

regretted the decision. They used to play soccer and other games on the grounds of the former concentration camp.

Germany is like a massive palimpsest, in which lower layers of life are struggling to be seen beneath colors piled on top. One tries to see as deeply as possible, but objects block the way, entire cities have emerged as differing radically from what preceded them. All is a cover-up, conspiracy, glossing over. Brumhold, the philosopher of German ideals and idealism, has been honored in the naming of Brumholdstein; yet he represents a thinker like Heidegger, who retreated from moral and ethical considerations in order to do 'meditative thinking' which indirectly justified the German past. 'The city is named after a German philosopher, who, like so many of his predecessors, inquired into the nature of a *thing*. He started his philosophical inquiry by simply asking *What is a thing?* For most of the inhabitants of Brumholdstein the question does not pose a great problem.' To probe the nature of a thing is another way of asking, How German is it?

In *How German Is It* (a statement, not a query), Abish tries to discover how a society effaces its past, how it remakes itself by way of loss of memory. Technically, the novel owes a great deal to French methods, especially to Michel Butor and his novel *Degrees*. Rapid cutting, seemingly disconnected segments, several narrative layers, introduction of new characters without warning, the use of a particular place as metaphor characterize both novels. Butor uses a school and its curriculum, students, professors; Abish moves on a larger scale, attempting to encompass a country, its history, its sense of itself as it shuffles off past, memory, its former roles.

The novel takes the form of a journey, of Ulrich Hargenau, back from Paris, where he is a novelist, to Wurtenburg, near Durst, now renamed Brumholdstein. Ulrich, however, is not an ordinary German, but one whose father was executed in 1944 for plotting against Hitler. That is Abish's control point, for while Ulrich is famous by way of his father, the incident in the past has fallen outside memory, into an area the Germans have eradicated. Further, Ulrich's brother, Helmuth, is an architect; he represents the new Germany, the master builder of a new society which bulldozes the past as if it never occurred. Helmuth is all energy, purpose, work ethic. He has no moral sense or ethical sense, only the need to accomplish.

He can live quite well without memory: 'Helmuth rose each morning at six-thirty. By seven-ten the entire family was at the table having breakfast. No one was ever late for breakfast.... The children listened intently. They were seeing at first hand the life of an adult world unfold. It was a real world. They were aware that each day their father contributed something tangible to that world. Each day a number of buildings all over Germany rose by another few meters and came closer to the completion that initially had its roots, so to speak, in his brain.' Germany is being recolored.

While Helmuth's life proceeds on tight schedules, at home and in his professional career, Ulrich's is messy, especially since his former wife, Paula, is involved in radical activities. Paula is somehow connected to a young woman named Daphne, who moves into Ulrich's building. A network seems in the making. Abish's sense of proportion is magnificent, as past and present combine, in Daphne now, Paula in the past, the elder Hargenau executed by Hitler in the previous generation. Time is layered and yet continuous. Furthermore, even as Helmuth designs and builds, radical groups bomb and destroy, sometimes the very buildings erected by Helmuth, like the new post office. As this is occurring, Ulrich receives letters threatening him, for he had testified against the radical Einzieh Group in the recent past.

Abish gains broad historical dimensions from his groupings. For at the same time the new Germany emerges, in Helmuth and those like him, and the former Germany is effaced, as Durst concentration camp has been eradicated, another Germany is also present, that of the radicals eager to annihilate whatever the new Germany represents. Ulrich leaves for Geneva, possibly to see Daphne, or to see Paula, or to collect material for another book; and while he is away a second bomb goes off in Wurtenburg, destroying an entire floor in the fingerprint section of the new police station, also designed by Helmuth. As he thinks of Switzerland, the land where Musil, Rilke, and Keller died, where Rousseau was born, where Nabokov recently lived. Ulrich sees it as a prisoner of the past, as much as he is a prisoner of the present.

There is still another line of development, that connected to Franz, the waiter at the elegant Pflaume restaurant. Franz lives in Daemling, not in Brumholdstein, where the restaurant is located; and he regularly takes a bus, whose precise schedule indicates how this Germany works. But Franz, while deferential and servile in person, has something of the maverick or madman in him, and in his spare time he builds a replica of the Durst camp....

All these events, however, are muted, part of Franz's replica, perhaps, part of the coloring book of Germany, but dim and faint in outline. In the present, Helmuth continues his assault on power, sleeping with the mayor's wife, running his household like a camp, never doubting his capacities to build. He represents the unthinking vulgarity of the emerging nation, the power that can let memories slip away, the materialism which enrages those who seek a different way. Juxtaposed to this are merciless radical groups which destroy whatever Helmuth attempts to build, totally nihilistic as a response to epidemic materialism. Germany, possibly, is our model of the future...

Ulrich, meanwhile, tries to negotiate his way. He is, like Hanno in Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, the sensitive element, as against Helmuth's insensitive success. Ulrich is a novelist, part poet, a dreamer, a man who wants to sort out his memories. He lives with language, and language for him refers to things. Egon and Gisela, friends of Ulrich's, stand for the new Germany in other ways, through acquisition and harmony. 'Clearly the Einzieh Group [Egon explains] intends to overthrow our system of government by destroying Germany's newly acquired harmony. For harmony spells democracy, if you will, but democracy, alas, is a word that has been depleted of its meaning, its energy, its power. If anything can be said to represent the new Germany, it is the wish, the desire, no, the craving to attain a total harmony....

The perfect philosophy for this 'harmony' is Brumhold, whose theories of German life and language aim at forging a national spirit. Brumhold, who refuses to visit Brumholdstein, wrestles with eternal metaphysical questions: 'What is thought? What is being? What is existence?' Brumhold prefers to remain in his forest hut, from which he utters his spiritual message: 'For in the forest are located our innermost dreams and desires. In order to re-establish our roots and our purpose and return to a simplicity of life that can no longer be found in the German community, we turn to the forest...confident that in what we are doing, we are coming closer to our past, to our history, to our German spirit.' He combines Heidegger's retreat from issues into being with Johann Gottfried von Herder's call for a national culture. He becomes part of the coloring book.

If *Alphabetical Africa* was Abish's attempt to deconstruct narrative by means of reducing all ideas to letters of the alphabet, *How German Is It* moves in the opposite direction. Here, he reconstructs Germany by way of its misleading use of language. Through metaphysical questions, Brumhold evades all discussion of the past, of German history, of Germany as the embodiment of modern death, a culture of death. He universalizes Germany, whereas Ulrich is endeavoring to comprehend it as a specific place at a particular time. It falls to Helmuth, not Ulrich, however, to make a speech on Brumhold at an outdoor memorial ceremony honoring the philosopher's death. Helmuth, the embodiment of the new, will pronounce on Brumhold, the defender of Germany's soul: Abish has his perfect coordinates. Helmuth stresses the German language, as the only way to understand the Teutonic *Dasin*...

Such a passion, Helmuth asserts, reached its apex in Bach, Grunewald, and Holderlin. Helmuth bypasses how language goes with history, or how the German spirit has gained other, destructive and self-destructive outlets. He ignores the entire question how German is it. Abish achieves many of his most compelling effects through rapid cutting. He dashes not only from scene to scene, but from person to person; or from event to event. These cuts occur like sequences in a Godard film, of a Butor novel, without preparation; as if all life were composed of nonsequential elements which succeed each other too rapidly for us to settle in. The verbal irony, the understated comments which carry such sarcastic thrust are complemented by shifting around, which has its own witty dimension.

Following the prolonged ovation for Helmuth's speech on Brumhold, Abish cuts to the photographing of the event; then to the mayor's young daughter, who asks why Brumhold lived in a cabin; after that to an evening at the mayor's house for refreshments; then to a sequence which is at a different time; and then to a sequence which is at a different time, with Ulrich standing next to the mayor at the Pflaume restaurant

while a mass grave has been uncovered. In the interstices, Ulrich is searching for Anna, the schoolteacher with whom he is having an affair. With the rapid cutting creating the opposite effect of Helmuth's building, Abish technically has a countering principle, whereby elements fall into disorder and anarchy even as juxtaposed events seek order. Musil and Mann come to mind as Abish's masters.

Violence is never far. A man with a rifle appears, a game warden, but instead of shooting Helmuth, he hits Ulrich in the arm. Threatening letters continue to appear. Ulrich heads for the East Friesian Islands, and an ominousness seems to accompany him. The East Friesian Islands, though east of Mann's Lubeck, do strengthen the *Buddenbrooks* association; for north is now juxtaposed to south, the two brothers distinguished from each other. Ulrich's visit with Egon and Gisela coincides with a terrorist group's activities, which are to blow up a bridge that will disrupt traffic, more an antibourgeois act than a political attack. They politicize the bridge-keeper, an indicator of their ability to win over those who are antithetical to their aims.

The drawbridge blows, two policemen are shot dead, the bridge attendant is wanted: all the details of a terrorist act. It drops, disconnected, into a vacuum; life continues as it always has. In the sequential follow-up, Ulrich discovers he is not the son of the man executed in 1944; the dates are wrong, and he is a bastard. He tells this to a doctor and indicates he is not who he is, that he was on his way to see a woman when the drawbridge blew, that all his coordinates are in question. The doctor asks him if he has ever been hypnotized, and when Ulrich says no, proceeds to put him under. The novel ends with Ulrich hypnotized: 'Is it possible for anyone in Germany, nowadays, to raise his right hand, for whatever the reason, and not be flooded by the memory of a dream to end all dreams?' The true state for Germany is hypnotic: the sole condition where all else has been turned into a coloring book."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 551-55

"Language is simply another source of manipulation, and here as we have seen we have a major theme; but intensified now until language is perceived as an agent for conspiracy, not as support for the individual or our institutions. A novel such as Walter Abish's *How German Is It* (in 1980) was ostensibly about the German attempt to use language to efface the Nazi past; but it was also about how language everywhere either buries or distorts the past and pollutes the present. Language becomes part of the conspiracy not so much as the deconstructionists have it—as unreliable and uncertain—but as something which can remake history; in the process, reinvent the present....

Walter Abish is concerned with cleansing words, renewing them so that we re-perceive and re-think. With his Viennese background, his adolescence in Shanghai, Abish is less American than (say) Davenport, Dowell, or the Barthelme brothers (Donald and Frederick). That he brings to short fiction something of Europe's traditions and thus straddles two cultures becomes apparent in his key volume of short fiction, *In the Future Perfect*, as well as in an earlier collection, *Minds Meet*. Characteristic are 'The English Garden,' 'Crossing the Great Void,' and 'In So Many Words,' which should be read along with 'Ardor/ Awe, Atrocity.' In the final two selections, Abish is not writing stories in any traditional sense: he is placing words on a page, as an abstract painter lays paint on a canvas. He uses words in sequences to explore verbal potential, ideas of narratology, information theory, and other determinants in our otherwise casual use of language. He is subverting casualness [causality] to destroy the idea of sequence (plot, story, narrative) which deadens language through expectation. In his sense of English as something special, he hears sounds, tones, and linkages which the ear born to the language neglects....

Eclipse Fever (1991) continues Abish's concern with disintegrating cultures so evident in his masterpiece, *How German Is It*. There, lies, deceptions, disguise, counterfeit, and perverse strategies cover up the complicity of nearly all Germans in their Nazi past; here, in the later novel, the various agents of what should be high culture are as corrupt in their ways as the average German who refused to recognize his and her guilt, or at least recognize his and her history. There is, seemingly, no cure for such ills. It is the end of civilized life, an eclipse."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000

(Xlibris 2001) 82, 277, 431