WALTER ABISH
& Po-Mo FICTION

Sometimes 'professional' writing does not offer nicely made, coherent stories with easy language, cosy ideas, sensible views and conventional characters. Sometimes it offers us a view into an unusual mind and the chance to encounter a very different world-view. Sometimes it takes us into unusual areas of language and creativity, makes use of disturbing experiences and uses unsettling styles of writing…

Carl Tighe

Walter Abish is best known as a writer of experimental Post-Modern novels, poetry and short stories. His books include:

- *Dual Site* (1970) poetry
- *Alphabetical Africa* (1974) novel
- *Minds Meet* (1975) short fictions
- *In the Future Perfect* (1977) short fictions
- *How German Is It* (1980) novel won the PEN / Faulkner Prize
- *99: New Meaning* (1990) short fictions
- *Eclipse Fever* (1993) novel
- *Double Vision* (2004) autobiography

His entry (number 2,700) in the *Columbia World Dictionary of Quotations* is for the line:

America fears the unshaven legs, the unshaven men's cheeks, the aroma of perspiration, and the limp prick. Above all it fears the limp prick.[1]

He was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1931, but as his family became refugees from the Nazis he spent his childhood in Shanghai. In 1949 his family moved to Israel, where he served in the Israeli army and developed a strong interest in architecture. Later he moved to the USA. He now lives in central New York with his wife, the photographer Cecile Gelb, to whom many of his books are dedicated. He has taught Creative Writing at Columbia, Yale, Brown and Cooper Union universities. He has received several prestigious fellowships including a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, a Guggenheim fellowship, a MacArthur fellowship, and a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest fellowship.

Ever since the 'semiological revolution' of the late 1960s, the growth of Critical Theory in university English teaching during the 1970s, and in Po-Mo (Post-Modernist) writing after that time, there has been a kind of warfare in the empire of signs. In the late

---

[1] W. Abish, *In the Future Perfect*, New York: New Directions (1977), p. 22.

1970s, under the influence of Critical Theory, the manipulation of language became a kind of tricksy little trap into which writer / teachers - particularly those on the staff of university English Departments – were invited to fall. It was a literary-linguistic trap, which, while it entertained a certain kind of academic intellectual, looked somehow 'rigorous and demanding' to the institution, and generally provided grist to the academic publication mill, in the long run chased its own tale with fiction about fiction and writing about writing, and did little for students. Or readers. Or writers.

For example, Critical Theory looks at texts as material for 'interrogation', and it examines 'meta-fictions' by questioning *sema* (signs), by 'othering' and by 'self-reference'. It concentrates on 'putting notions into question' and 'holding them under erasure' and thus constantly and inevitably arrives again and again at indecisive, hesitant *aporia* (gaps, holes), the un-knowable, which prove to be significant nothingnesses. With considerable smugness Critical Theorists informs us that 'meaning', if such a thing even exists, is 'permanently deferred'. Critical Theory does not really consider books to be by writers, but instead insists that once a book is written the author's intentions count for nothing. Indeed, Critical Theorists claim that in the encounter between the book and the reader, the author is 'dead': the reader is the real author and has the real creative talent. Po-Mo writers love this kind of approach.

In Walter Abish, however, what emerged was a slightly different type of text, one which constantly drew attention to itself as a text, as a literary representation, and to its own processes of creating fiction and constructing fictional meanings, but which was also:

- a rejection of traditional forms of narration
- a rejection of mimetic realism
- a rejection of mimetic pretension
- a kind of neo-realist style
- a determined minimalism of style
- a determined minimalism of expectations
- an intense self-examination
- a more daring and creative attempt to use language
- a troubling, disturbing (and possibly troubled and disturbed) approach to writing and the world in general

These things differentiate Abish from most other Po-Mos who have fallen under the influence of Critical Theory.

The novel *How German Is It?* is a detective story set in a town built on the site of an old concentration camp. As a Jew writing about Germany we might suppose Abish has important points to make. But I know of no town built on such a site, and Abish, although he was born in Austria, says at the time of writing he had never visited Germany. It is a Germany of his imagination, we are led to believe. So what is his point? The sole power of history, he says, does not lie in irrepressible memory, nor in the

power of given meanings and established facts, but rather in the meanings we choose to make or assign or the meaning we choose to ignore.
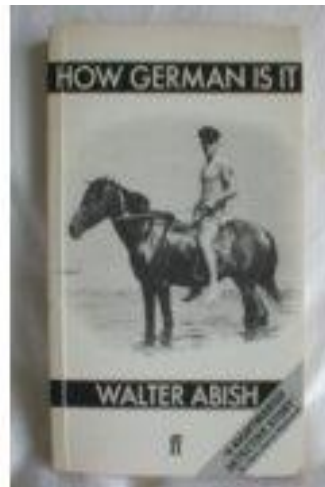
Alphabetical Africa is an exercise in ingenuity of form, the manipulation of words, sentences, metaphors etc. where the unfolding is according to a set of rules and theories, rather than into a narrative progression. He has 52 chapters each headed alphabetically A-Z, and then from the middle of the book from Z-A. The first chapter contains words beginning with A, the second with words beginning in A and B. By the time he reaches the middle of the book he allows himself to use all the letters of the alphabet, then the letters begin to disappear again until in the last chapter he is back to words beginning with A.

Most of the chapters and sentences make some sort of sense or build towards a cumulative sense of what the book might be about, but inevitably there are problems. One of these is that the narrator cannot appear before chapter seven simply because that is where all the letters of his name occur for the first time. And when he does appear, he assures us that he is 'not reliable' - he can't call himself an 'unreliable narrator because the letters u and n are not yet in the picture.

John Updike writing in *The New Yorker* said that *Alphabetical Africa* was: 'remarkable, ludicrous, programmatic… murky as well as absurd'. He said the novel made 'fettered progress...' and that Abish had 'performed as well as anyone could, given such extravagant handicaps'. As it turns out, however, Abish did not quite manage the task he set himself and perhaps inevitably there are several small mistakes:

- p.38 the O chapter has a letter P in the last but one paragraph
- p.138 second F chapter has an I in the first paragraph
- p.146 the second C chapter has an I near the end of the first paragraph
- p.147 the second C chapter has an I about half way down the first page.

Perhaps it should have been called *Almost Alphabetical Africa*. But then, perhaps the mistakes are a deliberate strategy. If so why? What for? Is it a PoMo joke?

The novel is definitely not a post-colonial commentary on the state of the continent, although it does concentrate on recording events and displays an awareness of some sort of African-ness. As Abish says in the novel: 'All History in Africa is hearsay… history can conceal assumptions. It can confound historians, authors, booksellers and also doom armies.'
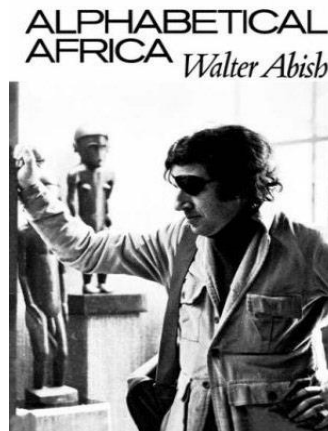
In *99: The New Meaning* he tries a different tack. He takes 99 segments of 99 books by 99 authors including Kafka, Flaubert and other French and German writers, and each passage of up to 200 words is taken from a page numbered 99. Abish uses these passages as ready-made material. He claims that for him a page bearing the number 99 is 'mystically significant', but he does not explain why. He says he 'orchestrates' each of the five sections of the collection, rather than writes them. In his story 'In So Many Words' from the collection *In the Future Perfect* he goes even further, and before he gives us the paragraph he has written – like a painter showing us his palate of colours before revealing his painting - he dutifully offers us a word count and shows all the words he plans to use arranged in alphabetical order - as if this means something - anything. For example:

31
Ageless American apartment bring claim cleaning cleans enough every grain have her in ingredient is known lays object of old out polishes precious scrubs she surfaces that the to Whitehead woman
40
The cleaning woman is ageless. She polishes, scrubs, cleans to bring out the American grain, that precious ingredient that lays claim to the surface of every object in her apartment. The cleaning woman is old enough to have known Whitehead.

He says he wants to:

> probe certain familiar emotional configurations afresh, and arrive at an emotional content that is not mine by design.… In each case the challenge was to generate a self-contained work that advanced a picture…[2]

Clearly Abish is using the technique of literary collage to point at literature and say: 'Literature' and to point at writing and say: 'Writing'. But he also seems to be probing questions of authorship, narrative, meaning, coherence, continuity, structure and language. He requires us to consider how we construct meaning in texts, to suspend our ideas of what a story might be and to see a text as an endlessly pliable object to be reconstructed at will.

Other writers, like Joyce and Becket, have tackled similar themes, but Abish pushes the boundaries further be asking us to reconsider our ideas of language, coherence, structure, our ideas about genre and form etc. and in doing so, rather in the manner of the Turner Prize, to reconsider what art might be, what art might do and what we get out of art. But, also, rather like the Turner Prize, whether that makes the work itself a work of art or makes Abish's writing a work of literature is another matter.

While his writing at first seems apolitical, it is in fact political fiction. Abish refuses to render reality coherent and rational, refuses to give credence to the explanatory force of narrative, and insists on exposing the incoherent and irrational. Abish asks several questions. One of these is about whether the myths we make about ourselves are adequate. He wonders if the key to the mystery of ourselves is inside us or outside us. And he wonders, wherever it is, whether it can ever be encapsulated in language, and perhaps if it can, whether we could ever grasp it.

---

[2] W. Abish, *99: The New Meaning*, Providence: Burning Deck, (1990), pp. 9-10.

His subject is often language itself. In the story 'Access' Abish insists that language is not and should never be a barrier to communication. But at the same time the story about 'access' makes it abundantly clear that he finds language to be a barrier. Always:

> Language is not a barrier. Language enables people in all circumstances to cope with a changing world; it also permits them to engage in all sorts of activities without unduly antagonising everyone in their immediate vicinity. Language also makes it easier on the man and woman who wish after years of separation to come together. Clearly, without language this would be a next to impossible task. Furthermore, language allows one to express a renewed interest in an object, a hobby, or a person, an interest that may admittedly be only a pretext for yet another and greater need.
> I'm not really concerned with language. As a writer I'm principally concerned with meaning. What for instance, does being a writer mean in the context of this society. For one thing, in this society, it is almost taken for granted that a writer, irrespective of sex, irrespective of age, irrespective of political conviction, irrespective of wealth or geographic location, will use the language spoken by the majority of the people in this country. He will be using the words that fill their days and nights with unbearable tension and dread. In that respect, writers perform a vital task, they resuscitate words that are about to be obliterated by a kind of wilful negligence and general boredom. Writers frequently are able to inject a fresh meaning into a word and thereby revitalise the brain cells of the reader by feeding the brain information it does not really require. For instance, I have recently revitalised a couple of million brain cells by referring to barriers. Barriers appear in my writings more frequently than they deserve. It is now on its way to becoming a new word again...[3]

But when Abish says - 'I'm not really concerned with language. As a writer I'm principally concerned with meaning' – we don't know exactly where he is headed, or whether to take him seriously. Aren't writers always concerned with meaning in language? Does he think meaning exists outside language? Is he being ironic in some way? There is also a certain element of complicity in his work – a complicity offered to the reader, an offer to share some kind of a joke, to appear to be 'in the know'.

The world of atrocity and violence hidden behind signs is a recurring concern in Abish. This has to do with the nature of words, as in the story 'Minds Meet':

> When a word is not understood, the person using it is obliged to spell it aloud…
> In the more rural sections of the US people do not resort to spelling difficult words… Instead they plunge a V-shaped knife into the other fella, who moans,

---

[3] W. Abish, *In the Future Perfect*, New York: New Directions (1977), pp.72-3.

'Ohhh.' O also happens to be the fifteenth letter in the alphabet. For some reason it is often used by insecure people. [4]

Are his books about finding, revitalising, developing and then losing a language? Words, it seems, may in themselves be something of a barrier for him. On their own, even in dictionary order, they cannot convey meaning. By the middle of *Alphabetical Africa* the narrator says he can speak more freely as more words are available to him, but even then the words are not enough to convey the meaning he wants and from this statement and the middle of the book the words themselves immediately start to reduce. These are very probably just the normal self-contradictions of a 'Po-Mo' at work.

For Abish language is a kind of post-modern perfection, but it is an unreliable perfection, which cannot be repeated, is merely coincidental and cannot be maintained. Language exists for and of itself: understanding is nothing more than a temporary coincidence, a moment of stasis; all understanding is false. The natural state of the world is perplexity. Also, for Abish we are alone. Language is not a means to make us less alone. It is not even a way of effectively getting an idea out of one head into another. Language is merely the medium of our loneliness, the way we name things that have no name, the way we order imperfection to perfection, a means of colouring and covering our aloneness.

Malcolm Bradbury in his superb introduction to *In The Future Perfect* wrote:

> This may make his work sound like some fictional Pompidou Centre, where the piping and ducts supplying the construction are visibly put on display, and that indeed is part of the point. But the narratives told are tales of crisis and psychic and linguistic deprivation, of a walk through the museums of words where pain is endlessly present, and violence is recurring.

---

[4] W. Abish, *In the Future Perfect*, New York: New Directions (1977), p. xii.

Bradbury's reference to the Pompidou Centre, where the wires, ducts, vents pipes and hatches normally concealed by the architect, are instead highlighted by external display and bright colours, is interesting. That is certainly the kind of thing Abish seems to be doing with his fiction.
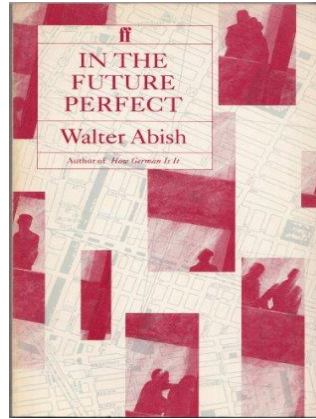
What we know for sure – well, at least we can be fairly certain - is that he is serious about what he is doing simply because he has written several books in this vein and has been working as a writer for many years now and he has been awarded several prestigious fellowships and at least one significant literary award. His work is not random. It is not casual. It is not meaningless. While he makes use of these elements – the casual, the random, the meaningless - he is not faking the use he makes of them. At the same time, while he is clearly making use of parts of his own life to create fiction and is very good at allowing the reader to create or discover meanings in his writing. However, while the endless ambiguity and uncertainty he offers are quite entertaining in short bursts, in the long run they are rather unsatisfying fare.

One reviewer wrote that Abish's techniques were 'good for keeping creative writing students going, but once the student has chosen their mystical page number the literary world might find itself in even more trouble...' The reviewer went on to suggest that Abish's experiments were something of a literary blind alley:

> ...a private pleasure, treasured all the more for not being shared with others (at least outside the classroom).[5]

There is also a temptation to think that what Abish does is easy and that if he can get away with it then anyone can. That sounds like a serious note of warning: don't try this at home. But in truth it would be very difficult to emulate Abish's success in terms of subject matter, control, ironic technique or style. If this kind of writing is to succeed, it demands great style, a steely intellect, considerable reading, a willingness to be called a fake and a readiness to be ignored. Abish is enormously well read, speaks several

---

[5] www.complete-review.com/reviews/abishw/99tnm.htm

languages and, even if he has a few readers fooled and this is a kind of fakery (which I doubt), he carries off whatever it is he is doing very elegantly. Abish is always an interesting writer, but he is easily misunderstood and definitely not to everyone's taste. It may be that he has cornered the market for this kind of writing… So perhaps the message should be: *do* try this at home, but whatever the result think very, very carefully before you risk handing it in as your Coursework.

Remember what I sad at the start of this article: 'Sometimes 'professional writing' does not offer us nicely made, coherent stories with sensible views and conventional characters. Sometimes it offers us a view into an unusual mind and the chance to encounter a very different world-view; sometimes it takes us into unusual areas of creativity and disturbing, unsettling kinds of writing…'

Follow-Up Work
- What was revealed to you in the course of the above article?
- Do you think knowledge of this writer will improve your writing?
- In what ways did this article re-direct your attention and the emphasis of the writing?
- What did it reveal about your writing?
- What else did you get out of the article?
- In what ways does this topic connect with the articles by Hanif Kureishi and others about Creative Writing?

Read some of Walter Abish's stories in *In The Future Perfect*, then consider the following questions:

- Did you enjoy Abish's stories on some level Yes / No? If yes - write 500 words on what you found 'liberating', 'formative', 'creative' and 'enjoyable' about his work. If no – write 500 words on why you did not find his work 'liberating', 'formative', 'creative' and 'enjoyable'.
- How do you think this kind of writing relates to notions of 'writing process', 'voice' and 'professional writing'?

Now complete the following exercise:

(7) *a be how modern post to writer…*
or
(7) How to be a Post-Modern Writer…

- Choose one of your own stories.
- For the first half of the story - rearrange the words for each paragraph in alphabetical order and set them beside the original paragraphs with the word count for each paragraph.

- For the second half of the story - rearrange the words for each paragraph in reverse alphabetical order and set them beside the original paragraphs with the word count for each paragraph.
- Number each paragraph.
- Have the characters make at least three statements about language and communication in the course of the story.
- Have other characters contradict those statements elsewhere in the story.
- Find an enigmatic sentence or quotation to place *in italics* at the start of each paragraph – preferably something concerned with words and / or writing and connected to the story. If you can't find a quotation, invent one, but be careful to invent a convincing source for it too.
- Find a catchy but bafflingly ironic title for the whole piece.
- Find a suitably enigmatic photograph of yourself or a picture related to some aspect of the story (preferably you in a location from the story) to accompany the text.
- Now write a convincing but intriguing publicity blurb.