

LITERATURE

MAGRITTE, GODARD, AND WALTER ABISH'S ARCHITECTONIC FICTION

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We tend to regard titles as adequate or inadequate, and their appreciation oscillates finally between expectation-fulfillment and expectation-disappointment. Apart from everything else, a good title (particularly today) should be intriguing, it is felt, and there is no doubt that the title of Walter Abish's novella of 1975 — "This is not a film this is a precise act of disbelief" — is an intriguing one. Titles beginning with deictic pronouns are not encountered often, but exist: *This side of paradise*, "That evening sun", "These thirteen", *This sporting life*, "That Cosmopolitan girl", "This newspaper here". Abish's title, however, is not demonstrative, indicative or reflective, as the case might be, but seems to activate what is or used to be the proper function of titles, i.e., designation or acquisition of identity. But it is not comforting affirmation that we are offered here. Abish draws attention to the very act of naming, his title sets up a discourse, and thus the whole thing immediately becomes problematic. Abish is rather good at titles in general: "How the comb gives a fresh meaning to the hair", *In the future perfect*, "In so many words", "Inside out", *How German is it*.

René Magritte, justly famous for his titles, said he chose them "in such a way as to keep anyone from assigning my paintings to the familiar region that habitual thought appeals to in order to escape perplexity" (Foucault 1982: 36). One of Magritte's most perplexing works, whose whole impact depends in fact on its title, is his 1926 hyperrealistic representation of a pipe, accompanied by the legend: "This is not a pipe".

The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture "This is a pipe", I'd have been lying! (Torczyner 1979: 71)

And, as he has suggested in a broader context:

It is possible that one may be moved while looking at a painting, but to deduce by this that the picture "expresses" that emotion is like saying that, for example, a cake "expresses" the ideas and emotions of those of us who see it and eat it, or again, that the cake "expresses" the thoughts of the chef while baking a good cake (Torczyner 1979: 132).

Magritte's pipe-trick, indeed his larger strategy, appears to be as simple as it is effective. But, as Michel Foucault for instance has demonstrated, he is a difficult painter and his simplicity is misleading. The point in this particular painting is not just defamiliarization, certainly not as an end in itself. Magritte challenges both looking and reading; he challenges perception and finally signification.

What reveals itself here is not a mere title analogy. (It should be also noted in passing that Abish has actually named one of his stories after a painting by Magritte — "Alphabet of revelations" — and that the second part of his present title complements and refurbishes in turn Magritte's apparently negative 'pipe-discourse'.) The comparison can be taken a little further to suggest — with necessary caution — a more profound affinity. Abish's prose seems to operate in the spirit of Magritte's meticulous mock-realism, his cool sense of logic, dead-pan style, emphasis on the object (ordinary things), simultaneous perspectives, juxtaposition, alternation of proportions, dislike of symbolism and of the fantastic, rejection of psychoanalysis.

While René Magritte is referred to in Abish's novella only implicitly, Jean-Luc Godard features in it explicitly, physically, so to speak. "This is not a film" tells basically two related though essentially independent stories. In terms of incident, event, action — the narrative ostensibly lends itself (very much part of its impact) to a neat summary. As Abish has said in an interview, he likes to begin with "a simple, uncomplicated picture that will then allow for all kinds of changes" (McCaffery 1987: 11). Godard belongs to the shorter, apparently less important story which, however, in a quite real sense generates the entire text. A French director named Michel Bontemps comes with two young assistants to a small American town in order to film its new Utopian shopping mall. The goal of the project is to "taste as well as test the surfaceness of all American things"¹ and in general to explore materialistic concerns as an indication of capitalistic decadence. Right from the beginning the visit proves to be a disappointment; also, Bontemps's relationship with the female assistant, Jill, takes undesirable if predictable turn and, on the spur of the moment, he goes back to Paris.

¹ All references to the text of "This is not a film this is a precise act of disbelief" are from Walter Abish's collection of short fictions *Minds meet* (New York: New Directions, 1975, pp. 31–68).

Although Bontemps is introduced as "a difficult man to describe", his story yields something of a fictional biography of Godard. Abish mentions his characteristic dark glasses, his marriages, his accidents, his fascination with primary colors, his leftist politics and his fifteen innovative films (made in the 1960s). In the course of narrative we even get an accurate and only thinly disguised plot-summary of one of his best known works (*Breathless*). Finally, Bontemps's very disappearance from the novella might be seen as a reflection of Godard's sudden withdrawal from the commercial cinema after 1968. The key to the artist's aesthetics is to be found, again, in the titles and especially subtitles of many of his works: *Two or three things I know about her*, "a film found on the scrapheap", "fragments of a film shot in 1964", "15 precise acts", "a film in the process of making itself". We get here, actually, a sense of the orientation of the whole New Wave movement in the French cinema: intense self-consciousness, emphasis on the medium, liberation from conventional forms of storytelling. Godard's own orientation, as identified by various critics, has been specifically towards film as a total aesthetic object characterized by passionless tone, ostensible banality, fragmentation of narrative through elliptical cutting style and juxtaposition (textual unevenness), dissociation of sounds and images, conceptualization, as well as selection and concentration on ordinary things — whereby "A cup of coffee, a cigarette become more poignant, more affective than a human face" (Monaco 1976: 187). As Bruce Kawin has noted, in many of Godard's films "one is asked to consider the world as a self-actualizing visual structure" (1978: 87). As for his overall aim, it "is not to divorce film from life, but to distance it, so that we can integrate it into our lives" (Monaco 1976: 207).

Even though Bontemps's/Godard's is only a 'guest appearance', he certainly manages to impose upon the novella "the dynamics of [some of his] ideas and intentions". We hear of his "aesthetic purity", the welcome "acceleration of discontent" informing his films, and we are offered an interesting, highly pertinent comment: "Bontemps's most recent films... intensif[y] the meaning of every object, thereby creating a curious aesthetic of shapes and colors that diminish the meaningfulness of the actions undertaken by his characters. Actions become patterns...". It appears perfectly appropriate, then, that the narrator should make the following acknowledgment: "Without Bontemps it wouldn't have been possible. Thank you, Michel Bontemps". (It is here that we might also note that the epigraph of Abish's second novel is a statement by Godard — "What is really at stake is one's image of oneself".) All this is very persuasive. So much so that one reviewer has pronounced *How German is it* to be "a homage to Godard, almost a Godard movie in prose" (Kearns 1981: 304).

It seems to me however, precisely because the evidence is so abundant, that this analogy should be approached with some caution. All artists entertain

belief in a uniqueness of their work, and Walter Abish is certainly no exception here. Also, as Alain Arias-Misson has observed in a somewhat different context, "in the typical abishian ploy it is all [often] tongue-in-cheek" (1987: 156). If Abish is paying in "This is not a film" his dues, the payment is made with ambivalent feelings. For one thing, there is the uncomfortable fact that in the novella *Bontemps* happens to be also the name of a retarded child shunted off to an institution (at its mildest this can be seen as a parodic dramatization of Godard's main theme, alienation of the individual). More importantly, the narrator firmly declares quite early on: "This is my story", and is later clearly relieved to reflect: "Bontemps is a million miles away".

Subverting slightly this presentation of the artist, Abish is distancing himself, I believe, not so much from Godard's aesthetics nor from the cinematic technique but from the idea of film as such which, however avant-garde Godard's own work, is represented by him too. Film offers the ultimate reach in terms of verisimilar *re*-presentation. It is regarded as the most 'objective' art because it most directly records reality. Indeed, it has the optimal power of 'realism', evoking out of a flat celluloid strip a captivating sense of three-dimensional *illusion*. Furthermore, the popular appeal of cinema has basically to do with entertainment and it is essentially a mass-audience, commercial art. This is the larger context and rationale informing or unravelling Abish's baffling title. This is not a pipe — this is not a film — this is not a slice of life — this is a precise act of disbelief. The novella is not a troubled instance of the anxiety of influence. Its title sets up a self-conscious, dynamic dialogue between arts. With both Magritte and Godard "miles away", though assuredly somewhere 'there', it enables the writer to assert the autonomy of his own work by projecting it into regions of perception and sensibility that have been only provisionally explored in literature.

I have worked for several architects here and abroad, but chiefly as a planner. It's quite possible that my former work may have left its imprint on my mind, and influenced the way I see things. ... Coming to writing from another field gave me, I like to think, a decided advantage. I could pick or discover my antecedents and not have them thrust upon me (Klinkowitz 1975: 97).

The story proper of "This is not a film" is the mysterious disappearance, "in June three years ago", of the prominent local architect Mr. Cas Ite, one of the most powerful men in the town. Although the fact has become to all "utterly and totally familiar", the missing architect seems to be present throughout, and the immediate problem presented in the novella are the effects of his disappearance on the "stability of the entire region". This is, in fact, what signals the main related issues of Abish's whole fiction: presence vs. absence, familiarity vs. unfamiliarity, stability vs. instability. Although it does not feature a formal investigation, the novella takes on the guise of a detective story and is thus basically given to a re-construction of the past.

Actually, "This is not a film" proves to be eventually an anti-detective story in that it employs a failed 'central intelligence' or a 'doomed', comic detective (Cas Ite's brother Merce), comes up with only few and sparse pertinent details, proliferates false leads and conflicting interpretations; and the final discovery, which does not satisfactorily resolve the mystery anyway, is made quite accidentally. The architect's de-composed body, found in his study, in his home, by his own family, three years after he was shot or shot himself, clashes dramatically with the opening "This is a familiar world... crowded with familiar faces and events" which — notwithstanding the mystery convention — sets the prevailing tone of the novella. The reaction the scene evokes can be adequately expressed in the words of the dying hero of Godard's *Breathless*: "This is really disgusting!" (the narrator, as a matter of fact, identifies the ending of "This is not a film" as a Bontemps-/Godard-like ending). The point in both works is the concluding thematic defamiliarization. The result (specifically in terms of what-happened-next involvement) is "a tension, a sense of 'unbehagen', a discomfort" (Lotringer 1982: 160).

As much as it is a story about the architect's disappearance, it is a story about the *town* he helped develop. It was Mr. Ite, we learn, who "over a period of years shaped the town's needs by replacing many of the familiar landmarks with structures that have since become equally familiar". The story introduces us into the local real estate business, urban planning and architecture. Mr. Ite seems to be (or rather have been) an artist of sorts, 'donor' of a special perspective, with the town presenting itself as a self-contained visual field. There are a couple of references to other locales and the landscape, but they are quite effectively "obscured by the three- and four-story buildings across the street". All of this (the whole novella, in fact) is pictured within a clearly articulated system of the geometric and architectural co-ordinates. The sense of horizontal and vertical axes or planes derives from two static, seemingly marginal but as it turns out irremovable, essential figures: the gardner (usually mowing the lawn) and the elevator operator, who simply if unaccountably are always *there*. This precise, close circumscription and strong architectural decor serve to reveal an elaborate network of personal and social relationships — "access to the town hall, the public library, ... the public toilet" means "access to the people who could be found inside". In the building housing offices of the real estate firm, Mr. Frank Ol occupies practically an entire floor while Merce Ite's small office does not even have a window; "It was carved out of a much larger space. It is also the least desirable space on the ... floor. It is situated right across from the old-fashioned open cage-like elevator". At some fundamental level, characters in "This is not a film" are acutely aware of space, spatial properties and relations. As one of them reflects: "Coming to grips with one's life ... is ... a matter of recognizing the surfaces that surround one on all sides...". Mrs. Ite, for instance, "moves quite gracefully from

one ... interior to the next", since she knows how to divide her time and her roles "between the upstairs and the downstairs", "between the inside and the outside".

At this very moment she is arranging in her mind the sequence that is to be followed for the next few hours. She will start the evening in one room, then move to another, and finally to a third. The evening is divided by the three rooms in her mind. This division is not arbitrarily arrived at. The events are to a degree influenced by the familiar contents of each of these three rooms.

We might be watching people and events but our attention inevitably returns to the setting, surfaces, objects.

Mr. Merce Ite is sharpening his pencil. The pencil sharpener is attached to the right side of his desk. It is an old-fashioned sharpener and requires the use of both hands. The sharpener dates back to Mr. Merce Ite's first day in business as a real estate agent.

... Mr. Cas Ite was still missing, and also missing it had by now been determined was one plaid suit, one white shirt, lightly starched, one necktie, underwear, a pair of dark brown shoes, a monogrammed handkerchief, a wallet containing credit cards, driver's licence, and over one hundred dollars in cash. Also missing was one checkbook and all his keys.

Objects, things, especially personal possessions, certainly help define individual characters and their roles but at the end of the day they indeed diminish the meaningfulness of their actions. It is the challenging question of stability/instability, here: stability of objects vs. instability of human relations, disposition, perception.

When speaking to Hank she avoided looking at his face. Instead her eyes were focused on the familiar upstairs wallpaper, on the cut crystal vase, on the long narrow table. ... as he clung to Witty's perfume, ... [Bud] attempted to replicate, to the extent that the brain can reproduce, a kind of segmented Witty, the knees, the thighs, the parted legs, the hair, the open mouth, seen against the more stable and geometric features of the room and furniture.

They recalled what they had said to her, and what she had replied. They were able to remember the surfaces of couches, leather armchairs, the carpeted floor, and smooth white table tops. By stretching their memories ... they were able to bring to life the interiors in which they had first seen Geraldine in black bra and panties ...

All these surfaces and objects develop patterns of visual and conceptual significance but quite simply, we are told, there is also "a certain satisfaction to be derived from looking at [them]": "The bedroom is all in black and white. A white shag rug, white furniture, white drapes, a black dressing table with a large oval mirror, a built-in closet, a black headboard for the double bed". Obviously, this pleasure is ultimately a function of the medium capturing it.

As Foucault has observed with reference to Magritte's "Alphabet of revelations", "[he] allows the old space of representation to rule, but only at the surface, no more than a polished stone, ... the non-place hidden beneath marble solidity" (1982: 41). In Abish's fiction it is the word that assumes this marble solidity, with each sentence having a spare functional architecture of its own, and the whole text presenting itself as a self-actualizing visual structure. Central to Abish's overriding preoccupation with surfaces is his appreciation and use of language. As Arias-Misson has put it, he "deconstructs ordinary language and builds, projects a mathematical, artificial language in its place", language governed by meticulous mechanics and static grammar, where every word is calculated and positioned precisely (see 1980). It is a language practically devoid of imagery and dialogue, using very few subordinatives and connectors. Sentences are end-stop rather than run-on. It is paratactic, matter-of-fact style distinguishing itself by the hardness of its surface. The tone is detached, unruffled, overtly a-emotional; the narrative focuses with the same intensity on what is central and what may be less central. In his 1975 interview with Jerome Klinkowitz Abish explained:

I try to achieve a neutral value in my writing, that is to say, I avoid the intentional and sometimes unintentional hierarchy of values that seems to creep in whenever lifelike incidents are depicted. ... language has a chance [then] of becoming a field of action ... thereby diminishing the somewhat misleading proximity between words and what they signify. ... 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 (95 — 96).

What is being explored in "This is not a film" is also very much a *narrative situation*. This is what offers another engaging detective story of sorts (the story of all stories presented in the novella, in fact), and this is really what accounts for tension and suspense in the text. Schematically, involving various mechanisms though, it is a story of narrator-turned-protagonist-proved-to-be-creator. Lacking, as he has himself admitted, proper enthusiasm for the characters that appear in his work (Klinkowitz 1975: 95), Abish attends with greater care to his narrators, and "This is not a film" is probably the most interesting case in point. The novella opens as a simple, uncomplicated, i.e., conventional, narrative but after both main stories/strands of action have been sketched and set in motion the third person unexpectedly starts colliding with the first: "Everyone meeting Bontemps immediately wonders about his relationship to his two assistants. Michel Bontemps said to me before we left France, I hope you will have the good sense not to put on paper every word I utter". It soon becomes clear that it is Bontemps's unnamed assistant who is the narrator, and at the end of Part One with the aside "This is my story" he actually claims authority over the text. As a matter of fact, it is suggested that

it all might have been his idea to begin with: "There was a detailed description of the Mall in one of the Paris dailies ... [and] I brought the article to Michel's attention". Furthermore, since neither Bontemps nor Jill spoke English, "they [were], to a degree, dependent on me". The real thrust of narrative is to establish — apparently against the other two stories — the narrator as a character at the center of the novella. Like just about everything else in it, the maneuver is rendered in terms of basic spatial categories. When Bontemps (taking Jill with him) leaves, the film-project obviously falls through. Still, the narrator for no discernible reason (as a character, that is) stays behind and in the natural course of things (it seems) gradually enters the local community. For a time he sticks to his original 'without' location/disposition, the hotel room he shared with Bontemps and Jill, but eventually (no explicit indication of the passage of time is given, though) he moves to a new, 'within' location. It proves to be none other than the house of the missing architect; to be precise: its *second* floor converted (expressly for him, we are given to understand) into a self-contained apartment ("The new tenant will have a splendid view"), with a staircase at the *rear*. The house, "a large spacious building with two rather massive white columns framing the entrance" (a carpenter's gothic or a house of seven gables of sorts), is the single most important locale of "This is not a film". Not only is it the architect's HQ but with its ceremonial annual parties it can be said to function as the real town hall, absorbing and controlling the whole community. The house provides setting for the beginning and the end of the novella, and much of the action takes place inside and around it. If by disappearing Mr. Ite has affected the stability of the town/text or outright de-composed it, the narrator-protagonist is there to re-construct it, which he does by replacing the architect in his total capacity as a person and an artist-developer. He establishes himself comfortably in his house ("I also received ... a key to the front door, just in case I ever found it more convenient to enter that way ..."), gets intimate with Mrs. Ite ("If I understood her correctly she was anxious for me to stay") and develops mutually rewarding rapport with his on Bud. Bud is the only character whose duties remain "somewhat undefined and vague". It is the narrator-protagonist who, finding him more "receptive" than others, gives direction to his "practiced abandon" and orders the "needs ... colliding in his brain" by employing Bud as a kind of assistant, and indeed a buddy.

From the second floor it was possible to overlook the entire lawn where the garden party had taken place each year. Bud, the son of Mrs. Ite, was seated next to a young man in the garden. ... both men, seated at a small round garden table, were in animated conversation. They were laughing a lot. They also looked incredibly relaxed. The drinks in front of them were half empty. ... Hank, standing at the window, taking in the scenery, noticed that both young men wore white trousers. ... I looked up and caught sight of Hank's face at the window staring down at us. I looked to Bud for an explanation ...

Who is he, I asked.

Just a town character ... although at one time he actually was the local table tennis champion. At this we both burst out laughing.

I've heard all sorts of stories about his wife, Geraldine.

You must tell me more, I said ...

Significantly, this is the only really animated scene in the novella as well as the sole instance when somebody is seen truly relaxed. This is how Bud is 'brought to life' (although the narrator seems to be merely ironically doubling his own former role), and by comparison the other characters (of note are monosyllabic names here) appear to be ciphers or negatives that have not been developed. Slyly amused, in modest retreat, with a drink in his hand, the narrator (we feel) is almost about to reveal after one of Nabokov's Machiavellian surrogates: "I do everything ... I make everything, I alone"². Actually, at the beginning of the novella we get a statement to this effect which, however, passes unnoticed in the midst of the crowded introductory scenes, and it is only now that it rings with proper and full significance: "carrying a dictionary", "Michel Bontemps arrives in a place that may not yet exist".

The real 'trick' of creation in "This is not a film" depends obviously on the overall organization of the novella, on the patterns of its composition, which is to say on the authority of the text, with the narrator simply one of the elements of its total reality. (As Abish has said somewhat jokingly in an interview, a narrator is not necessarily reliable: "His self-interest might be at stake" [Klinkowitz 1975 : 96]). In the first place, what merits some attention is the outer organization of the text into discrete blocks of varying length. While it might be (and often is) expressive of the so called 'contemporary human predicament': boxed-in lives, empty spaces or gaps in consciousness, selae-off or enveloped communication, the block form basically appeals to the eye and its immediate thrust is the disruption of conventional linearity. To define this single most prevalent feature of the innovative fiction of the 1960s and 1970s Edward Marcotte has offered the term *intersticed prose*, and has pointed out that it "means to be the opposite of unfinished. A fragment is not merely an uncompleted something — the *intentional* fragment ... is meant to be taken as in its way complete. ... This means readjusting our participation and sense of the unit, the event, adapting to new narrational Gestalts" (1975 : 33). Most importantly, this emphasis on discrete segments provides for a shift from the temporal to the spatial. Another indication of the peculiar development or rather distribution of narrative in "This is not a film" is the detective story

² "... he knew perfectly well ... that the whole world was but a trick of his, and that all those people ... owed their existence to the power of his imagination and suggestion and the dexterity of his hands" (Nabokov 1968: 54, 227-28).

convention. As Stefano Tani notes — “There is no free time in a detective novel: the present is employed to explain the past, the past has already happened before the story started, and the future is not even taken into account” (1984 : 45). Consequently, this type of fiction “exhibits the beginnings of spatiality” — owing to the processes of identification, reassessment, putting together; the momentum is not so much forward as backwards and sideways (see Mickelsen 1981 : 67). The whole issue is much augmented, even convoluted here because it is not one, but three stories that we have to identify and assemble, each one of them, and all of them together. The novella assumes labyrinthlike condition where time, in its fundamental directional orientation, simply does not obtain. We are actually advised that the brain can: “digest, piece by piece”, “savor” a “particular sequence” but it “does not really know what three years are. It cannot tell the difference between say three or seven years. It has no way of measuring time ... it can only measure the receding glow of surfaces”. The outer organization of the novella, its thematic and stylistic relations all adumbrate its composition. Of the thirty-one sections merely three begin with words denoting progression or transition, and different stories (bits of stories) appear not infrequently side by side in individual sections. This is what indeed creates — given Abish’s commitment to description — the impression of advancing, receding, intersecting surfaces. The principles of addition, reiteration, juxtaposition, retraction instead of linearity, sequentiality, temporality, and the external-internal perspective retained throughout — generate a perfect condition of simultaneity. Thus, despite its immediate dependence on the past, the real tense of the novella is the present, the present of montage or construction. This is where we get the feeling of not so much narrational — to adapt Carl Malmgren’s distinction — as narrational action, accentuated by “This is ...”, “It is ...” and, most effectively, “This is an introduction to...” opening as many as eleven sections in all. Even though not a continuous reality, it is by no means a conditional or a provisional construct. Like the words and sentences, it is charged with positive solidity or, more appropriately, with “structural necessity” (Umberto Eco’s phrase). Besides the obvious harmony of stylistic repetition there is a larger sense of balance, symmetry, ratio and closure. The major characters are highly schematically distributed in the various plots, and all the figures sooner or later appear in formal or informal pairs: Bontemps and Jill, Mrs. Ite and Frank Ol, Geraldine and Hank, the Mayor and his wife, the narrator and Bud; the missing architect links with the often mentioned but never actually present lawyer (two functional empty spaces), and his ostracized brother with the child condemned to an institution; last but not least, there are the two ‘coordinates’ workers, two secretaries and two police officers. There is also a more abstract and playful system of numerological correspondences: three stories, three parts into which the novella is (arbitrarily) divided, three principal locations (the architects’

house, the Mall, the Main Street), three characters in the first story and three year old mystery in the second one³.

As Christine Brooke-Rose notes, when formal relations are highly developed, form in itself becomes the reality while the represented reality is made to seem unreal (see 1981 : 297). However, Abish contends: “As far as I’m concerned, the places I write about *can* all be located on a map, even if I have to draw it myself. ... I want [them] ... to help shape the text and not to serve as a ... backdrop” (McCaffery 1987 : 20). More generally, the entire work must convey meaning: “I would like all of the components to share equally in the presentation of the text’s reality” (McCaffery 1987 : 12). “This is not a film” successfully moulds the narrated reality and the narrative form to crystalize into a perfectly self-contained architectonic reality, at once abstract/conceptual and representational. And even if, as Ivo Vidan has suggested, “spatial form [in literature] cannot be objectively ascertained but only felt as being intrinsically present or not” (1981 : 136), it is tempting here to literally respond to Bontemps’s/Godard’s exultant: “Feel it, feel it ... doesn’t the surface feel different...”. The moment is opportune (‘bon temps’). As we hear in the last section: “The farmers are waiting to sell more of their land at inflated prices. They are waiting for someone to build another Mall...”.

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³ Also, the text is sealed, so to speak, with the author’s own playful signature: the total number of sections making up the novella and the age of the narrator’s Doppelgänger offer Walter Abish’s date of birth — Dec. 24, 1931.

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