

## MAPPING IT OUT. ABISH, PROUST, MRS. DIP, AND THE PUEBLO INDIANS

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Notwithstanding some intricacies of construction, Walter Abish's story of 1974 "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" appears to declare itself all at once, in a rush of pleasant inter- (or is it trans-) textual naïveté: Marcel Proust is alive and writing, in the New World; in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to be precise. Given the almost uncomfortably dispassionate tone of Abish's fiction and his notorious reluctance to humanize, the present work offers an amazingly benign approach to its central character: "Welcome back little Marcel, welcome back, cry ... [the] neighbors, as he returns from his walk, invigorated and filled with ideas for the next incident in his book".<sup>1</sup>

Relying for facts on George Painter's monumental biography of the artist, Abish describes in his characteristic shorthand manner Proust's all-important childhood memories, his hypersensitivity, innate shyness, tormenting attachment to his mother, delicate physique and allergic disposition, his peculiar working and sleeping habits, creative dilemmas, social aspirations, and his "determined stride" to "the peak of fame". We are told about Proust's poor knowledge of English, his knack for mimicry, fascination with automobiles, and his lavish tipping. Also, the story seems to make a tacit reference to Proust's involvement in the controversial Dreyfus Affair ("Marcel, for shame, says the count.").

This is where one might want to apply Abish's remark from his 1980 *Sub-Stance* essay: "In enlarging the topography of his new existence, the writer-to-be feeds on a literary past, his new history", in "his resolve to emulate and follow in the footsteps of the legendary heroes of writing".<sup>2</sup> However, "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" could hardly

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<sup>1</sup> All references to the text of "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" are from Walter Abish's collection of short fictions *Minds Meet* (New York: New Directions, 1975, pp. 143 - 57).

<sup>2</sup> Walter Abish, "The Writer-To-Be: An Impression of Living", *Sub-Stance*, 27 (1980), 108, 101 - 2.

be called a personal tribute to Marcel Proust, nor could it be really seen as an instance of the anxiety of influence, a poet-to-poet relationship, "a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man ... outrageously more alive than himself".<sup>3</sup> As Alain Arias-Misson has wisely cautioned the readers of *How German Is It*, "in the typical abishian ploy it is all tongue-in-cheek".<sup>4</sup> Immediately, the story is to be seen as a playful dialogue with Painter's study, quite literally an act of absorption, parody and reply. It absorbs Painter's investigations, parodies his approach to Proust and at the intersection of the two next advances its own reading of the artist's life.

Like so many sympathetic commentators, Painter highlights Proust's desperate search for love and his inability to find it. The problem is given according prominence in Abish's text:

Day after day people keep ringing Marcel's front doorbell.  
... The one thing they do not bring him is the love he craves.

...

For Marcel, longing is as familiar as the quilt on his bed.

The image of a frustrated and finally betrayed, wronged lover is what complements the ingratiating picture/idea of 'petit Marcel'. It must be stressed that Painter fully acknowledges Proust's homosexuality and documents it with many pungent details. At the same time, he is clearly at pains to counterbalance it with his hero's heterosexual impulses. Through a conspicuous presence in the story of retarded children, Abish might appear to sanction in effect Proust's own euphemistic appreciation of the whole issue in terms of a 'neurotic defect'. Still, the main narrative thrust of "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" is to expose some cruder depths of homosexuality which, to repeat, takes place at the intersection of the two texts, a fairly concrete point where they meet and relativize each other. This is what helps unravel Abish's title, whose significance is far from apparent.

The comb parts the hair and exposes sections of the white scalp underneath. The comb gives a fresh meaning to the hair. It serves as an indicator. It provides a sort of explanation.

Indications of often aggressive or repressed sexuality and outright phallic symbols are quite numerous in the story, and many of them are employed referentially rather than actively: foils, sticks, a solid phalanx, "The Mountain That Is Too Hot to Touch", piercing, splitting, penetration, a fencing lesson, French letters ("So much depends on it..."), sprayed, trickling or dribbling saliva; finally, to take up Milton L. Miller's observation on Proust's work, trains.<sup>5</sup> Still, the text contains only one plain reference to homosexuality

<sup>3</sup> Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Alain Arias-Misson, "The 'New Novel' and TV Culture: Reflections on Walter Abish's *How German Is It*", *Fiction International*, 17:1 (1987), 156.

<sup>5</sup> Milton L. Miller, *Nostalgia. A Psychoanalytic Study of Marcel Proust* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1956), p. 217.

– Marcel watching two women dance together at the Hotel Marigny. Although accompanied by "coarse, disagreeable laughter" the scene is innocent enough, but as a matter of fact it evokes the darkest episode of Proust's entire life. The Hotel Marigny was a house of male prostitution owned and run by one Albert Le Cuizat, Proust's confidant and procurer. Proust not only offered Le Cuizat financial assistance in purchasing the place but – a most staggering gesture – helped him furnish it with the chairs, sofas and carpets that had once belonged to his parents. Proust's association with Le Cuizat marks a period towards the end of his life when he decided to give full vent to his sexual proclivities, a moment used by Abish to bring up the other popular charge against the artist, that of being a snob, social climber and a neurotic idler.

Marcel Proust did not hesitate when the recklessness came pounding on his door. Despite the lateness of the hour, he permitted it to enter. ... Half groggy with sleep he dressed and left the house. ... he approached a man on the street and asked him where he might find members of the upper class. You'll find most of them hunting rats in the basement of the Hotel Marigny.

Where's the hotel?

Any cabby will take you there, said the man.

As Painter reluctantly admits, it is Proust's 'rat-fixation' that finally informs the degree of his homosexual degradation, and the story features it in a self-contained section called RATTING. However, Abish is no moralist and this critical passage proves that he really refers to a text, not to life situations, and that he is just as concerned with language as with meaning in his fiction.

Some attempts have been made to explain ridding. The rats were pierced with hatpins or beaten with sticks. The people who attended these hunting parties soon discovered that their everyday conversations took on a new significance when certain words, such as: return, rattle, retribution, startle, tar, rather ... were mentioned.

Dipping into the biography of Proust for evidence of his homosexuality, Abish chooses further to offer full identification of the literary character of Albertine Simonet with Proust's chauffeur Alfred Agostinelli. The heroine of *Remembrance of Things Past* is introduced here by a general observation on the unreliability of the first name, and in response to her teasing: "Tell me Marcel, would you still love me if I was someone else?" we hear the emphatic: "You are someone else, ... That's why I love you". Albertine is constantly accompanied by a double, "a strange man in boots" who "is not a member of the upper class, that's for sure". Marcel's interest in cars turns out to be but a pretext for befriending cabbies and especially chauffeurs ("He now feels free to call [them] by their first names."), and even if Alfred Agostinelli is never mentioned Albertine and Albuquerque provide for easy recognition of his initials. That the whole story of Albertine's captivity and escape from Marcel can be viewed as a chronicle of Proust's troubled relationship with his

chauffeur is finally suggested by the ending which recounts the actual circumstances of Agostinelli's death:

Albertine flies over Albuquerque in a single-engine plane. It is her first solo flight. The view from the open cockpit is exhilarating. Somewhere down below... [s]itting at his desk, ... Marcel doesn't even hear the sound of the explosion that rips the plane apart.

Though defictionalized here, the figure of Albertine Simonet indicates that to cross paths with Proust's life means, inevitably, entering his work too. And in a paradoxical feat "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" proves to be also a dialogue with *Remembrance of Things Past* as, admittedly, a prime example of the self-begetting novel. Abish emulates Proust's handling of time by not only showing his work journey backwards but by having it re-emerge again, move sideways and forwards. Events from the past are variously relived in the present and projected into the future only to return eventually to the original text. Consulting his notes and notebooks, Marcel Proust it seen busily working on his novel which however, as we learn at the very beginning of the story, had already been completed as an eight-volume project (a new English edition). Albertine is thus able to inquire into her ongoing fictionalization ("I'm dying to hear what you've written about me today."), is free to dispute it ("In volume six he discovers my secret life. It is a lie."), and even actively interferes with it ("He wanted me to be thrown by a horse, but I wasn't."); but she is obviously unable to escape her arch-fate: "I know her death will fill me with dejection. ... That much has been decided".

Abish's fictionalization of Painter's biography as well as de- and re-fictionalization of Proust's work certainly indicate and refresh some vital issues in Proust scholarship. Still, it is clear that Proust – to use Jeanine Plottel's remark made in a different context – can and really should remain only "an approximation, a theme, a concept, a voice, a trace, ... a cipher in the script of our civilization."<sup>6</sup> Abish's intersubjective approximation of Proust is a theme and a concept that properly belongs to the script of "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair", a point dramatized at the end of the story:

No doubt about it, Albuquerque has made a deep impression upon me, said Marcel, but it's time that I change my frame of reference. ... he packed his belongings, but when he opened the front door he saw a phalanx of cabs drawn up at both ends of the street. I am a prisoner, Marcel concluded. ... They won't let me leave.

Marcel cannot leave because there is simply nowhere to go. The story is a world unto itself. The cabbies are not only blocking all the roads leading out of the city but they are also "blocking with their battered vehicles ... "The

<sup>6</sup> Jeanine Parisier Plottel and Hanna Charney, eds., *Intertextuality. New Perspectives in Criticism* (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1978), p. xvii.

Elsewhereness of Things'". More important, Marcel may not leave since he is an essential prop of the text, adequately responding to and in fact promoting its ontological condition.

Marcel may have come here because the people of Albuquerque are well known to be tolerant and exceedingly friendly to strangers. However, odds are that he came here because of the stillness. He arrived at midday and was immediately overcome by the silence.

As Kenneth Baker notes, "Abish has been developing a style, or a writing process, that identifies a story with the telling of it as closely as possible".<sup>7</sup> The obvious connection to be made here is between the silence of the setting and the minimal, almost frozen speech of the characters. But there are other clues: the very displacement of Proust which negates historical time, the chronology-violating research into *Remembrance of Things Past*, the "standstill" lives of the retarded children. The most telling is probably the fact that the duration of Marcel's stay in Albuquerque is not specified; we learn instead that he both arrived and wanted to leave on a Thursday. All this adumbrates the compositional logic of "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair". It does not create a sense of progression from 'now' to 'then' but generates a synchronic present between 'now' and 'now', or THURSDAY (1) and THURSDAY (2); or better still between WHAT ARE THE RETARDED CHILDREN THINKING? (1) and WHAT ARE THE CHILDREN THINKING? (2). We find ourselves confronting here 'an order of coexistent data'.

Marcel, the only one to side with the cabbies' demands for "new streets" and "new regulations", acts largely upon spatial determinations. He is upset by his initial inability to locate the city center, is desperate to find the notorious hotel, "in his own inimitable manner ... track[s] down all the people with a Bentley in their garage", visits "several real estate agencies" and decides to buy "a three-story brick building in an overwhelmingly lower-middle-class neighborhood". Marcel's dependence on and in fact trust in spatial arrangements is most expressively illustrated by his grotesque reaction to the elopement of his lover:

Marcel doesn't waste any time on regrets. He doesn't challenge Albertine's not entirely unforeseen departure. He simply invalidates it by chipping away at the stone steps, and in place of the entrance he has a large bay window installed, obliterating all signs of her hasty exit.

What reveals Marcel's larger *Weltanschauung* is – presented centrally in the text – his confrontation with a map of Albuquerque. The scene signals actually the main related issues of Abish's fiction: presence vs. absence, familiarity vs. unfamiliarity, stability vs. instability.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Baker, "Restricted Fiction: The Writing of Walter Abish", *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, 35 (1977), 48.

The map shows ... squares and parks, museums and theaters, hotels and taxi stands, all within a thirty-minute drive from the large estates that surround the city. Once Marcel unfolded the map and discovered where he was located in relation to the estates, the future, it seemed to him, seemed more promising. The map also indicated the whereabouts of the small airport, and the garages where the taxi cabs are parked at night. The red circles on the map indicate where the cabbies wait for their fare...

Given his general dejection and profound scepticism ("There is no truth, no mythology, and only a few books of relative merit."), the map enables Marcel to strengthen his grip on reality. Though the map is oriented to him, its particular condensed projection absorbs, encompasses and controls both Marcel and his whole story. And the map is not just an expedient and slick metaphor here. In quite real terms, "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" depends to a considerable degree on quasi-cartographic organization, suggested by the very transformation of the eye-level or street viewpoint of the opening ROADS section to the bird's-eye or aerial view in the concluding AIRPORT section.

This is to attempt the query voiced by W. J. T. Mitchell: "If there were spatial forms in works of literature, what would they look like? How could we verify their correspondence to any given text? And what use would they be?"<sup>8</sup> Maps may flatten, distort and simplify, but they "appeal in a natural and logical way to our visual sense and to our need for conceptualization".<sup>9</sup> As Norman Thrower points out, the map is "a necessary tool in the comprehension of spatial phenomena ... permitting an understanding of distributions and relationships not otherwise known or imperfectly understood".<sup>10</sup> The network of distributions and relationships in "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" can certainly be better understood in the cartographic terms of selection, emphasis, fragmentation, schematization, opposition (proximity, distance), location, access, barriers, direction, closure. Also, it is quite illuminating to note here that "a map is always complete, even if it has blank spaces. The blank space ... is a space; it is circumscribed and has boundaries".<sup>11</sup> Probably the most singular quality of maps is discontinuity, naturally resulting from the basic cartographic operation — "addition of discrete entities rather than ... a fluid unity of transformations".<sup>12</sup>

Abish's text is organized or spaced out into 39 sections or blocks varying in length from three to twenty-one lines. These intentional units are meant to be

<sup>8</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, "Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory", *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (Spring 1980), 554.

<sup>9</sup> Philip C. Muehrcke and Juliana O. Muehrcke, "Maps in Literature", *The Geographical Review*, LXIV (1974), 319.

<sup>10</sup> Norman J. W. Thrower, *Maps and Man* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> John A. Jakle, *Human Spatial Behavior* (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1976), p. 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

taken as in their way complete. Each bears a title, and like areas of a map they are all confined at their respective borders. Hardly any two consecutive sections lend themselves to linear and sequential reading, and in the whole story there are no words or phrases explicitly informing cause-and-effect, and very few denoting simple transition. The substance of the narrative are paratactic, distanced, matter-of-fact descriptions, a more neutral surface of information: "the terrain, the interiors, the furniture, the motions of the characters are aspects of a topography that defines... the situation being explored".<sup>13</sup>

The above procedures and techniques call right away for qualification. We are obviously dealing here with subjective or cognitive mapping, the mapping which "reflects the world *as some person believes it to be*," fundamentally, a cognitive map is an abstraction, "a mental image in a person's brain".<sup>14</sup> Consequently Abish's story is not a topographic representation of the 'real'. It should be seen not so much as a representation of space but as a space of representation. In a deliberately disturbing aside we are advised that Albuquerque is "built on a large mirrorlike surface", which immediately brings to mind Calvino's invisible cities, Marquez's Macondo or Barthelme's Paraguay. In combination with the reference to "a wall-sized map of Washington" the setting's place-name offers the cartographer's monogram: W. A. — and one would like to add after Faulkner — sole owner and proprietor.

With due acknowledgment of proportions, Marcel might be called the text's center of consciousness or even its central intelligence, but he is not really the (traditional) *main* hero. His story is complex enough but the real challenge Abish sets for himself and for his readers is that "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" tells not one but — simultaneously — two different defocalized stories which, like cognitive mapping representations, are not related to each other in a simple hierarchical fashion. The other story features Mr. and Mrs. Dip, a young married couple in Albuquerque, the wife working with the retarded children who had been left in the care of the city fathers. The Dips are Marcel's neighbors, but this is a paradoxical propinquity, one of opposition and exclusion. It is only proper that "Marcel failed to see Mr. and Mrs. Dip move ... into the house next door". "Marcel is away at a resort hotel, said his mother when Mr. Dip knocked on their door. I'm your new neighbor, explained Mr. Dip. I just wanted to borrow a cup of sugar". In fact, they fail to *ever* meet as neighbors. Mrs. Dip is irritated whenever "elegant laughter" drifts over from Marcel's quarters because she "know[s] that she can't join in", and Mr. Dip self-protectively concludes: "I don't like to hunt rats, even if one gets to meet members of the upper class in an informal setting". Marcel is

<sup>13</sup> Jerome Klinkowitz, "Walter Abish: An Interview", *Fiction International*, 4/5 (1975), 96.

<sup>14</sup> Roger M. Downs and David Stea, *Maps in Mind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 6-7.

a gentleman Artist while Mrs. Dip's aesthetic contract with life is reduced to "musing over [the] choice of a wallpaper for the bedroom". However, the cartographic contract of "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" redresses the balance and in certain respects Mrs. Dip rivals Marcel's seemingly privileged position. She comes close to matching the number of his appearances, deploys so to speak the important sub-story about the retarded children, and likewise helps conceptualize the compositional logic of the text. On the first reading the narrative may appear like the "papers that are scattered all over [Marcel's] bed, "but actually it is meticulously assembled; it is more like the large "double" bed which Mr. and Mrs. Dip move "section by section" into their new house.

Probably because her life has been uneventful ("She has not read Proust."), Mrs. Dip encapsulates and stores in her mind all the evidence of her present "bliss": "Mr. Dip eating his breakfast. Mr. Dip mowing the lawn. Mr. Dip buying a five-hundred-dollar leather armchair". Referred to as major "landmarks", these curious, entranced non-events reflect Mr. and Mrs. Dip's perception of life through their favorite medium – slides; which in turn informs Abish's own photogrammetry-like re-representations. At the beginning of the story we are told that "many of the events that are to follow, [have] been preserved on slides". Incorporated into the narrative, they produce a most compelling effect of double remove from reality and of stopped time:

The children may be retarded, but they are quite capable of recognizing the glasses of milk and fried eggs on the table. ... Breathlessly the children wait for the breakfast shown on the slides to be consumed.

Maps, roads, mirrors, slides, beds, tables, wallpaper point out the all pervasive quality of surfaceness, and Mrs. Dip's life is identified as "a surface which she keeps traversing daily". To the public eye she may "somehow radiat[e] a purity and confidence"; however – contrary to what her first name, Clara, might suggest – Mrs. Dip's life is confused and simply unhappy. Again, it is a problem of physical and emotional emplacement, orientation, access, proximity. The cherished landmarks are "misleading": "on one or more than one occasion Mr. Dip has informed his wife that she smells of retarded children"; he is not planning to have any children in the near future", instead he is "planning to find a companion for his five-hundred-dollar armchair"; "Late into the night he thinks of the perfection of furniture". The area of Mrs. Dip's expectations and identity finally limits itself to a body space, a compact cubicle:

She can't bear to sit down with a book. She can't bear to remain inside a room ... [with her husband]. She can't bear to hear the laughter from next door ... She gets into her small car. She is protected by the windshield ... The shatterproof windshield increases the distance ...

But then Mrs. Dip only dramatizes the order of the day. The reality of "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" is not a public territory. Like

the text, all the characters are parceled out, boxed-in, compartmentalized. The cabbies may be naturally confined to their vehicles, but Albertine is held captive, Marcel virtually entombs himself in his legendary cork-lined room, aristocrats keep to their salons and bedrooms, the retarded children are tucked away in their "small adobe and stone house"; and Mr. Dip keeps longing "to go to work again, and for the safety of the office". Fundamental schematization reigns supreme and the situation is understandable enough; they/we all exist in the same grid system, within the same coordinates and control points.

In a parodying transcription of the famous scene from *Remembrance of Things Past* – the narrator elaborating upon the associations of a crack in the pavement, we learn that there are cracks in the mirrorlike surface on which Albuquerque is located. The cracks are "carefully disguised", the "streets are polished daily"; still the story could possibly be also read as illustrating in its minimalistic manner the well-known thesis: "What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? ... Everlasting layers ... have fallen upon your brain ... Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, ... not one has been extinguished".<sup>15</sup> But "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" does not really develop a psychological volume; the parting, dipping, combing and exposing has ultimately to do with cartoarcheological reality. The cracks in Albuquerque's surface might be directly referred for an explanation to G. H. Martin's observation from *The Study of Urban History*: "... the evidence that presents itself when we look at a town: the patterns of its streets and buildings ... If we think of what we see as a text, we recognise very soon that ... beneath the characters that we first trace, there are other words and phrases to be read: the town is a palimpsest".<sup>16</sup> The story's setting is just another "large sprawling city"; it cannot boast any distinctive features and is itself perfectly schematic, instrumental, anonymous and antiseptic. Especially that its name is obviously alien, 'artificial', a quality additionally articulated by Proust's presence there. "Albuquerque" is an act of European invention, naming, appropriation. At the local level, "all toponyms are haunted by a difference, ... enter into all kinds of signifying play ... are full of other times and words. Every toponym ... asks one to think the removed and the unwritten"<sup>17</sup>, a point Abish introduces by "the growing Albuquerque network of roads [which] ... encompasses 'The Brook of the Running Spirit', and splits into two 'The Mountain That Is Too Hot to Touch' ". Immediately, the stubborn, almost haunting, background presence of Pueblo Indians

<sup>15</sup> Thomas De Quincey quoted by Claus Uhlig in "Literature as Textual Palingenesis: On Some Principles of Literary History", *New Literary History*, 3 (1985), 497.

<sup>16</sup> G. H. Martin, "The Town as Palimpsest", in *The Study of Urban History*, ed. H. J. Dyos (London: Edward Arnold, 1971), p. 155.

<sup>17</sup> William Boelhower, "Inventing America: The Culture of the Map", *Revue Française D'Études Américaines*, 36 (1988), 221.

provides for probably only too obvious play of differences. Egocentrism, materialism and the very social stratification of the white man's world – from the ghost of the Duke of Albuquerque himself, Marcel's society friends, through the real estate agent, down to the local butcher – clashes with the egalitarian, classless organization of the Indians who, significantly, are always featured as a group. Compartmentalization, of which Pueblo architecture is an extreme most example, need not entail exclusion, anxiety and frustration. As opposed to DOUBTS, LONGING, IMPATIENCE, RECKLESSNESS, "reluctant" INTIMACY, FALSEHOOD (these are all captions of Marcel and Mrs. Dip sections), the Indians project harmony, endurance, warmth, patient understanding:

The Pueblo Indians are convinced that [the children's] abnormality is sacred, and that everything that is related to the children is equally sacred.

...once inside her car Mrs. Dip is unapproachable. Sadly the children stand on the promontory of the pueblo and watch her drive away in a cloud of dust. It is the sweeping cloud of the spirit, say the Pueblo Indians, consoling the children.

However – once again – this is not (at least not primarily) 'moral fiction'. The telling substitution of Albuquerque for Things Past in the title of Marcel's voluminous work signals not one but several inset layers or surfaces of signification. In an interview Abish said: "I want [my settings] ... to help shape the text and not to serve as a romantic or lyrical backdrop. The cities, the towns, the architecture ... as well as the interiors I describe, are not merely convenient locations for the characters".<sup>18</sup> It is reasonable that the venue of Mrs. Dip's one and only meeting with Marcel – "when he volunteered to visit retarded children" – should be the sociofugal space of the pueblo. But the two stories are brought together here not only on the thematic level. The retarded children and the pueblo, like the narrow bridge spanning a canyon across which Mrs. Dip drives to work each day, are the essential links providing for the larger compositional and aesthetic unity of the text. Marcel's is the artistic sensibility, but it is the children's atemporality and confusion of realms that enables us to see underneath the present act of cognitive cartography the removed and unwritten intertext. Existing as they do in a state of retardation, the city map on the wall of the children's playroom resembles in their minds – we are told – an Indian sand drawing for a ceremonial dance. Unfailingly, this is a highly subjective reading. Indeed, this is to promote a map of misreading. Sand-drawings and -paintings, a unique Southwestern art form, defy the popular idea of a work of art. Relying on set formal patterns, technical skill, tight control – they are not spontaneous creations. Used to plan out rituals, encode rules of behavior or to present a generalized world view, they can be regarded as cognitive maps of sorts, especially that the center of

<sup>18</sup> Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, *Alive and Writing: Interviews with American Authors of the 1980s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 20.

the painting usually features a geographical location. Static and circumscribed, they project a sense of containment and inwardness. Space is fully used but never crowded. Sandpaintings are made up of a limited number of simple, mainly angular and linear elements. Governed by repetition and recombination they can produce very complex designs, an evidence of the power of abstraction and conceptualization. There are also some references in the story to the Indian ceremonial robes, masks and baskets. The essence of Pueblo art is simple geometry, plain surfaces, unsophisticated profiles. Its mode is a structural rhythm of solid boxes and triangles, frets and mazes, parallel and parallel-stepped lines. Again, the result is an apparently endless variety of design which derives from astonishingly few basic elements. The Pueblo Indians' overriding preoccupation with space and spatial arrangements, as well as their ahistorical perception of time (in fact diminution of the importance of time), allows one finally to trace in Abish's work a shadowy but powerful presence of their prehistoric architecture which is still seen today as the legitimate, primary text of Pueblo culture. If we are prepared to continue reading in this distant realm, all these seemingly incongruous elements begin to converge and the texts begin to frame each other to suggest a reduplicating, corrective condition of possibility and a gratifying code of meaning and appreciation. The structures of particularly Classic Pueblo Period illustrate a reciprocally balanced universe, an idea that is central both to the Pueblo Indians' thought and art. Many pueblos appear to have been built according to a preconceived plan and viewed from above are models of symmetry. Each pueblo is a compact, autonomous entity stemming from a distinct concept of growth: multiplication of the basic unit – rectangular, flat-roofed rooms built against one another and arranged in a cellular fashion. Even today, as J. B. Jackson describes it<sup>19</sup>, the Pueblo Indian building is a collection of individual rooms, each of them individually built and owned. A number of small rooms are added on, one by one, at different times; upper rooms are never merely superimposed, they always seem to have some relation to the room underneath; lateral communication – communication from room to room parallel to the front – is all but unheard of; there is rarely an outside door, as a rule no windows, and the outside surface is never adorned in any way.

Even though "How the Comb Gives a Fresh Meaning to the Hair" emerges from a remote library, its crossing, translating, transgressing demonstrates that "the passage between apparently exclusive realms of divided territories"<sup>20</sup> is possible. Still, to end on a personal intertextual note, some doubts remain: as a site of mirrors and mirages Albuquerque might be wiped out by the wind and exiled from memory at the precise moment when one finished deciphering the parchments ...

<sup>19</sup> See J. B. Jackson, "Pueblo Architecture and Our Own", *Landscape*, 3 (1953-54), 20-25.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. John Carlos Rowe, *Through the Custom-House: Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Modern Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 194.