

POST SCRIPTUM: AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER ABISH*

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– *Although you are often linked with several contemporary writers your prose strikes me as highly distinctive. Did you consciously strive to achieve a unique voice and did you have to overcome any anxiety of influence?*

– I don't know at what stage I became aware of having a voice that was somewhat at odds with that of others. But yes, certainly, I became aware of it, a considerable time ago. I had written three strong novels prior to *Alphabetical Africa* that I could not get published. (I'm still very fond of the first one in fact and would like to return to it one day). I was very, very frustrated. At the same time what happened was that I turned to the short story form. I had always disliked it but in the 60's everything changed. It was really an extraordinary period in my life, very exciting. I read Borges and I was astonished by what you could do with the story form. Then I discovered Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, then the very early Robbe-Grillet, then Butor's *Passing Time*. That was also a period of revolution in the art world: pop art, minimalism, performance. All that enabled me to see the text in a completely different way. Initially I felt terribly constructed because I thought that to write a novel you had to write it in a certain way. Part of this was of course due to the fact that the publishers in a sense imposed that kind of restriction. In order for a book to be publishable it had to follow a certain form, a certain formula.

It was a letter of rejection from New Directions that spurred me on. It was very polite and ended by saying "In any event I'm sure that one day you'll have a large following". I thought this was rather absurd in light of the rejection. How was I ever going to get a following of *any* sort? And I did something I had never done before, and never since. I called the editor. He explained and explained – you know, the usual rejection explanations; he wasn't enthusiastic at all. And then he pauses and, in an afterthought, says "Well, if you have any short pieces send them in. We have a periodical and we

* This impromptu interview took place on May 29, 1990 in New York.

publish short fiction". I had just begun writing short works, just prior to that, out of sheer frustration. I submitted two pieces. James Laughlin, the publisher, responded by asking which one would I like to have published. It was very generous, he would let me choose. And then next thing that happened was I received a call from Donald Barthelme. I was very excited. He said he was working on a magazine, he liked my work and would I submit something. James Laughlin saw that issue with my "Non-site" and he also saw "Minds Meet" which I published in *TriQuarterly* and asked me if I had any more of these for New Directions. I said no, but I'll write something. And that's how it all began.

The voice that you referred to – I think it took me some time to become more cognizant of that particular voice, my voice, and also of what it signifies. I think one reason for the so called uniqueness... well, I hesitate to explain because if I'm able to explain it then it's a kind of diminution in a way. But I will only go so far as to say that I think my writing is predicated on an almost equal emphasis on the historical and the psychological. I don't mean any Freudian analysis but essentially it has to do with a kind of author repression. In other words what you have is states of conflict that are not labeled or announced, that I certainly do not interpret. I mean I am aware of them. I will treat a society the way I would treat an individual. I would see levels of immaturity and infantilism in both a society and an individual. I would try very hard not to provide explanations in order to fuel the text, energize the text and give more life to both the individual and to the societal aspects.

– *How do you look back upon "Alphabetical Africa"?*

– With very strong attachment. I remember I enjoyed writing it, it gave me a great deal of fun and pleasure. I think it is a very encoded text, it is so rich because the process, the procedures may almost distract the reader from closely examining the contents which is essentially responses to an African society as seen by the white man. It is really a book of distinctions: male/female, white/black, victim/victimizer. You have all these distinctions, except that they are somewhat blurred and I do not arrive at any kind of judgment, I do not make any judgments.

– *From the formal point of view it was, still is as a matter of fact an absolutely extraordinary work and it is only astonishing that nobody had done that kind of thing earlier. Did you intend "Alphabetical Africa" to be a statement in itself?*

– How *Alphabetical Africa* emerged is difficult to say but yes, certainly, I considered it to be a statement. It's just that I don't feel it is necessary to shout from the rooftops when you make a statement. If something is a statement its very likely it will be picked up in time. I felt somehow confident about *Alphabetical Africa*, I felt it was a turning point and I felt I could build on that. Yes, the book gave me a strong sense of my own identity and purpose, absolutely.

– *And how did it establish your reputation, how did it influence your career?*

– I really cannot say. I received some very favorable responses. They were quite unique, from John Updike for instance in *The New Yorker*. But by and large very little attention was paid to *Alphabetical Africa* when it was published. Although a number of critics were excited, Jerry Klinkowitz was certainly one and wrote about me at great length. I think the book probably earned me an underground reputation which is what you would expect. And that's how I got to know such writers as Ron Sukenick, Steve Katz, Jonathan Baumbach. And it certainly helped me get some jobs at that time.

– *How do you relate to the contemporary art world?*

– As you know my wife is an artist and so I'm very close to it. As a matter of fact the art world has been at times more enthusiastic about my work than the literary world. I find the art world generally far more exciting. It is certainly much more active and much more ready to discard the old and test the new.

– *And how about your relation to, and appreciation of, the literary scene in America today?*

– I feel close to a number of writers and I feel a link to them. It's hard for me to define this link – is it emotional, is it literary. I don't mean to imply that I'm on equal terms with all those writers. For instance I don't know Barth very well but I feel attached to him and the way he thinks. In the same way Gaddis and Gass are very important to me too. I feel that in a sense they sort of substantiate my work. There are also a number of individuals who are very supportive.

But am I influenced or do I respond to the so called literary scene? I feel this way – I probably wouldn't even know what this scene is, things change so quickly. But it is nice to be part of the present everything. I respond to everything that happens, and I am more likely to respond to things that happen now than I would to something that happened ten years ago.

– *Unlike so much of contemporary fiction your writing features hardly any explicit sexual scenes. Also, you use very few four-letter words.*

– I would find it painful to use four-letter words because I think they banalize the text. I mean I'm not opposed to obscenity. But the point is that it has to be an exacting, an essential element of the text. Otherwise I feel there is nothing more pathetic than graphic descriptions of sex because it is like that other writer, it could be written by anyone. There is something that makes you label the scene as a lie, as totally dishonest. What you get is a feeble attempt to create a sexual exercise and it doesn't come off. It's true, there are writers, Claude Simon for instance, who can really exquisitely describe a sexual intercourse, beautifully. And yet there is something almost too beautiful about it as well. I would avoid sexual descriptions because 1. they offer a false explanation, an easy explanation; 2. those words have lost their vigor, their

resonance. In fact if I read a text and there is a lot of “fuck” use I stop reading, my eye sort of glides down the page looking for something else. I feel I can give power to an event by a certain amount of withholding on the part of either characters or also the author, and by introducing a kind of repression. In other words the criteria for me is to create tension. “Fuck” use does not create tension, a graphic description does not create tension. A tension in the text is created by other means.

– *Another thing you employ rather sparingly are jokes and generally your writing seems to lack humor, certainly in the slick, popular sense, again contrary to some prevailing trends in recent fiction.*

– Look, Pynchon for instance can permit himself curious kind of infantilism at times. He gets away with it. If you examine carefully some of the lines they are terrible, and yet he is an extraordinary writer; I’m filled with admiration for him. But here it is and the infantilism is somehow appropriate. I cannot really answer your question in any other way than to say that if it’s not in my writing I guess it’s not appropriate there.

– *What your fiction offers in abundance is ambiguity and certainly irony. How deliberate is this stance? Do you identify yourself as an ironist?*

– Of course. The whole premise is irony. Irony begins with the first word. The problem with irony however is that it is unsettling for the reader, for the less sophisticated reader, because irony requires more than one reading. And I think the average reader is disturbed by more than one reading, why should he have to give more than one reading for a line?

– *Do you write for a specific audience? Do you entertain the notion of the so called ideal reader?*

– I meet the reader almost every day, here in New York. I was at a party two days ago and a young woman came up to me and said she was a graduate student at Hopkins; Jack Barth gave her my books to read and she said she loved them. So the audience is there. And it is a supremely intelligent audience, I’m very happy with the audience.

– *How political is your writing? The themes seem to be there, and in fact some critics have made quite a lot of them.*

– I don’t see how you can write in a political vacuum. In fact to be apolitical is also to take a political stance. But I don’t think it is a primary concern with me. I’m not a “political” writer, I’m not a “sexual” writer – I’m a writer. My fiction resonates with all the things that we encounter in life. Actually I think any encounter between two people has a certain political resonance as well. And I see conflict between people and within the society; obviously they are not analogous, they are not quite comparable, but in a sense there is the same strife and if the writer understands one he may also have the key to the other. I don’t think I can leave politics aside, but I don’t think that anyone who is politically involved would be happy with my response simply

because it lacks any kind of ideological slant. I would not bring it to a book and for that matter even my German novel is by no means as clear in this respect as some people seem to think it is. It was certainly not written as a condemnation.

– *I understand the novel developed from a short story. How did it happen?*

– I must confess that *How German Is It* happened really quite by chance.

I mean I wrote “The idea of Switzerland” and after *In the Future Perfect* was reviewed many critics seem to have singled out “The English Garden”. At that time I was going to write a book about LA but I thought it would be foolish to ignore his kind of signal. So I turned to that project as a result of that criticism. I took “The Idea of Switzerland” which was to be published in *Partisan Review* (they’d kept it for ages) and I began to work on it. And then – a further stroke of luck, something like pure chance. You know, there is a period before you complete a book, it’s almost like a curious lull – I’m talking really now from my own experience, I don’t know if it’s true for other writers – I found myself in a kind of lull of perhaps not wishing to relinquish the book. To complete a novel it must be finalized, you have to make certain determinations. And there I was when the telephone rang, it was someone at New Directions telling me that if I turned in the book within two months it would come out that year. And this is what helped me get the Faulkner/PEN Award. So it’s often really a question of timing.

I had not seen Germany earlier and my greatest apprehension when I first visited it was that it might be an entirely different kind of society, that it might have absolutely no bearing on the book, that I had completely misread it. I thought it quite possible that there was a new Germany. But now I reach the conclusion that there isn’t. There never is a “new” country/nation. There is no new Germany, no new Poland, no new Israel. In other words things change, we adapt, but we don’t become “new”; you don’t divest your past, it’s an accretion of the past. Of course many things happen. Certainly a capitalist Poland will differ drastically from a communist Poland but maybe not as drastically as you might suspect, maybe there are some characteristics that you might have taken to be communist that were really Polish.

– *All of your fictions project a strong sense of control and unity. Do you aim for specific formal effects?*

– Yes, it’s definitely there, but it’s constantly being enlarged upon, redefined and reshaped. I think some of the lessons I’ve learnt in the art world and also from music have helped me. I have a sense of the entity, of the body of the work. And a strong sense of the thrust of it, of progression, development. Closure is extremely important too. It is hard to evaluate the significance of the story really. It is certainly *not* the central thing. If you are looking for a story you will find it anywhere. There was a very unfavorable pre-publication review of *Alphabetical Africa* which attempted to discuss it

simply as a story! The critic concluded that it was misogynist, that Alva was spreading her legs all the time and that it was just this very banal kind of story, just another way of writing a story about a woman who goes to bed with everyone.

In time the author gets to know his emotional contents, it's almost predictable to some extent. Which means that on beginning a story or a novel the author has some idea – something I do – of the direction, of the emotional direction of the text. The emotional content seeks to articulate itself and now the task is to derail that emotional direction, because it becomes too predictable. All writing, from Homer to Proust, invites the emotional response of the reader and it offers emotions to which the reader will respond. But I think there is now a kind of stasis, the way we present emotions has become almost formulaic. *Alphabetical Africa* was not really out to alter presentation of the novel, it was in a sense to avoid an emotional formula. What happens with a structure such as *Alphabetical Africa* is that emotions do not get easy access. It is to deny or negate the more familiar pattern that develops. The writers I respect are people who most effectively deal with the emotional content.

– *How far can one assert concreteness in literature, to what extent can representational works be considered artifacts?*

– The artifact not only presents but is. But I think the text is more elusive. It's often almost a cartoon-like image as well; it's there in all its awkwardness, and there is a kind of concreteness in it too.

– *How do you see, how do you evaluate your own writing to date?*

– I probably have a much more acute vision of what is significant to me than at the time say of *Alphabetical Africa*. It's more explicit, with also certain drawbacks because the more knowledge you have the more you are as a writer burdened by that knowledge. It's sometimes easier to write in a state of innocence, in a state of not knowing. On the other hand when I turn to my earlier writing then at times I cringe, there are pages here and there that do make me unhappy. But generally I'm very happy with all the things I have published, in other words I'm not ashamed of any of them.