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# *In So Many Words*

IN THE FUTURE PERFECT by Walter Abish. New York: New Directions, 1977. Pp. 113. \$10.75, hb., \$3.95, pb.

Walter Abish is a subversive writer. He is less interested in plot and character — at least what we conventionally mean by these terms — than in the *words* which contain them. Thus his “stories” are narratives in which barely recognizable individuals act in unbelievable ways. He is, if you will, an “anti-realist” who tries to tell us that reality itself is as meaningful (less) as art. Let me clarify.

Abish quotes some lines from *Masculine/Feminine* — the Godard film — as the epigraph to his brilliant collection:

Madeline: What is the center of the world for you?

Paul: The center of the world!

Madeline: Yes.

Paul: It's funny. I mean we've never spoken to each other and the first time we talk, you ask me such surprising questions.

These lines are worth study because they indicate the directions Abish takes when he gives us his seven “stories.” Paul and Madeline are innocents; they are meeting — a favorite word of Abish — for the first time and they somehow see the world (word) freshly. They want to find the “center” but because they come from different places — their attitudes, genders, and words are “unbalanced” — they seem to be trapped in a minefield. There is a wry, subtle, philosophical point to the apparently arbitrary exchange.

In every story Abish uses the same devices to unsettle us. Coincidences abound; characters appear (and disappear) suddenly; words — and the things they represent — dominate the universe. We do not know how to respond; we can laugh and/or cry at the alarming, playful juxtapositions of tone, character, and scene. It is not surprising that Abish is drawn to these lines of John Ashbery: “Remnants of the old atrocity subsist, but they are converted into ingenious shifts in scenery, a sort of ‘English Garden’ effect to give the required air of naturalness, pathos and hope.” These lines, like Godard's, suggest a complex, shifting world in which things are as important and mysterious as the people viewing them.

It is useless to give the plot of any Abish story — the very act of retelling the narrative is a kind of “atrocity” because it uses words to

flatten and distort effects — without making it seem silly or mad or “funny.” The story itself is perhaps like the “center of the world” Godard’s characters are searching for; if I were to “map” or “chart” the adventures of all Abish characters, I would soon be drawn into the plot. It is his desire, of course, to force me to this realization — any interpretation of chart (criticism, autobiography, or melodramatic narrative) is an attempt to impose “perfection” upon a chaotic world. The title of the collection maintains that perhaps in the “future” (whatever that means) we can find “perfection.” But at the same “time” we will have changed so that “perfection” may no longer mean what it means *now* — “then” it may be “imperfect” because it is humdrum, usual, and normal.

There is a wonderful passage in “Ardor/Awe/Atrocity” in which Southern California is described: the landscape fuses with the image of Mannix (a television detective) — like an “alphabetical Africa,” California seems to be an imaginary world made up of real things which are, in themselves, imagined: “With each new shopping center, with each new airport, with each new office building complex, Southern California<sup>7</sup> is expanding the range of the plausible. The immediate future,<sup>16</sup> the immediate immaculate<sup>25</sup> future<sup>16</sup> lie mapped<sup>37</sup> out in the brain cells as the suntanned people on the Coast carefully observe Mannix’s arrival at the airport.” Abish does not give us the real California, the center of our new world, because he believes that the place is less real than our notions of it (borrowed from Steinbeck or West or the *National Geographic* or American Airlines). He views it as an idea — a belief in earthly perfection. He does not stop here. By deliberately repeating certain words and using numbers as flashing signals, he forces us to read “innocently.” The whole point is that we can never *see* “California” — the idea and the word dominate the atmosphere.

Abish is obviously obsessed by measures, numbers, lines, maps; he even implies that artistic delight arises only when we note that narrative itself is another “chart.” He will take an arbitrary detail — say a quantity of words — and then write a descriptive passage with precisely the same number of words. The passage itself is usually violent or fantastic. We have a battle, therefore, between the arbitrary choice (say sixty words) and the realistic actions. The tension mounts, of course, when this device is repeated with variations. “In So Many Words” is the “story” which contains this pattern. We can concentrate upon the realistic actions and/or the “many words.” We are given the choice, but we are so used to believing that people are more important than words that we are breathless. How dare Abish do this? How dare he mix styles? How dare he make us realize that we are *reading*?

Abish is not the only employer of various arbitrary/non-arbitrary designs. His various characters tend to mirror him because they also search for clues — say the remains of a concentration camp (as in “The English Garden”) or a missing father (“Crossing the Great Void”) — and they cross and recross their steps; they “reflect” upon the “center” of things and words. There is wise play at work here. Abish writes “perfect” fictions about the desire for “perfections,” and he recognizes in them that such desire itself often leads to madness, violence and death.

I guess that a psychoanalyst would impose his map upon these “stories”; he would see the quest for fatherhood, the fear of castration *et al.* I guess that a philosopher would force his reading; he would trace the concerns of Wittgenstein and Heidegger (who is alluded to in “The English Garden”), the relation of word and object. I find that I have read the “stories” in a literary way as “anti-literature.” The very fact that such interpretations can be offered about Abish’s interpretations (about his characters’ interpretations) suggests that his art is shrewd, compelling and original.

At one point in “In So Many Words” — the puns are inescapable here and in various other titles — the heroine thinks of her costume as “perfect.” She is, however, not satisfied with it. Then juxtaposed to the frivolous costume we have a Whitehead quotation: “To sustain a civilization with the intensity of its first ardor requires more than learning. Adventure is essential, namely the search for new perfections.” Abish writes “stories” of passion and ardor and atrocity, but he grounds them in philosophical earth. He is a significant, disturbing, and adventurous artist.

IRVING MALIN