Constraints, concealment and buried texts: reading Walter Abish with Georges Perec and the Oulipo

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Walter Abish (1931-) is a contemporary Austrian-American writer, best known for his rich, experimental novels and short stories Alphabetical Africa (1974), In the future perfect (1977), and How German Is It (1980). The formal experimentation of his constraint-based writing has led certain critics to highlight the affinities between Abish and the French literary group the Oulipo (the "Ouvroir de littérature potentielle" or "Workshop of potential literature"). The Oulipo was founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais and gathers together writers and mathematicians who use various forms of literary constraints in the production of their texts. Some of the best-known Oulipian texts in the English-speaking world include Raymond Queneau's Exercices de style (Exercises in style) and Cent mille milliards de poèmes (One hundred million million poems), and Georges Perec's La Disparition (A void) and La Vie mode d'emploi (Life a user's manual). Their communal enterprise is the elaboration of constraints, mathematical, alphabetical or compositional, and the subsequent production of texts that adhere to the given constraint. Among the first to identify the link between Abish and the Oulipo were Oulipians themselves, such as Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie, who described Abish's novel Alphabetical Africa as "one of the most remarkable Oulipian works by an author not belonging to the group" (45). They continue:

> The work must be qualified an Oulipian masterpiece, even though its author is unconnected to the Oulipo. The method he has used, of his own devising, is Oulipian

> both in its axiomatic simplicity and in the extent to which it determines both the ingenious narrative and its beguiling linguistic texture. (48)

Where Mathews and Brotchie show a clear enthusiasm for Abish's work, the feeling is certainly mutual; Abish described the Oulipo as an "intellectual haven", using "constrictive devices … to expand textual possibilities" ("Vanishing Act" 11). In 1995, Abish published a review of Georges Perec's La Disparition (1969), which had just been translated into English by Gilbert Adair under the title A Void (1994).[1] Reading Abish's reflections on Perec, it is clear that there are a number of significant similarities between these two writers. The article that follows will explore some of these similarities, with particular reference to Abish, whose body of work has attracted far less literary scholarship than his French counterpart's. It will investigate the significance of constrained writing practices in Alphabetical Africa, In the future perfect and How German Is It, reading the American novelist with or alongside Perec and the Oulipo. I begin by paying particular attention to Abish's first novel Alphabetical Africa, a text that has clear structural and thematic parallels to Perec's La Disparition. This leads to an exploration of the Oulipian notion of the "constraint", and the way in which the constraint goes beyond the ludic or arbitrary imposition of a structural rule. I examine not only the constraint's generativity, its "potential" to use that key Oulipian term, but also the way in which, much like the lipogram at the heart of La Disparition, the distinct structural form of Alphabetical Africa is in harmony with the thematic concerns of the book. I explore how some of these themes that are generated by Alphabetical Africa's formal constraints are then elaborated in Abish's subsequent texts, some of which are constraint-based, some of which are not. Over the course of the article, I aim to illustrate how the parallels between Perec and Abish's writing can be found not only in their overlapping formal and stylistic features, but also in their shared themes and motifs.

Perec's novel La Disparition (1969) is perhaps the most famous example of a constraint-based text in modern French literature. It is a "lipogram": a text that excludes one or more letters, in this instance the most common letter in the French language, "e". The constraint is reinforced by the novel's structure: it is divided into six parts, the second of which is left blank, reflecting the absent second vowel. Of the novel's twenty-six chapters, the fifth is comprised of a single blank page, again mirroring the missing fifth letter of the alphabet. Numerical references are found throughout to these two key sets of numbers: "cinq ou six" (La Disparition 79; five or six) and "vingt-cinq … vingt-six" (La Disparition 159; twenty-five … twenty-six). The novel is highly self-reflexive, with pervasive references to the absent "e", such as the following: "Il y avait un manquant. Il y avait un oubli, un blanc, un trou qu'aucun n'avait vu, n'avait su, n'avait pu, n'avait voulu voir. On avait disparu. Ça avait disparu" (La Disparition 28; "A unit is lacking. An omission, a blank, a void that nobody but him knows about, thinks about, that, flagrantly, nobody wants to know or think about. A missing link," A Void 13). However, Perec's novel sustains multiple layers of interpretation throughout, so while this passage can be read as a reference to the text's lipogram constraint, it also refers to the novel's plot which is driven by the mysterious disappearance of the protagonist, Anton Voyl, whose friends then set out to find this missing character. In a frantic narrative filled with surreal happenings and implausible coincidences, the novel unfolds with one unexplained and seemingly arbitrary death or disappearance after another. Thus, the novel's title, which translates into English as "disappearance" but which is also a common French euphemism for death, has at least two possible readings. It is both an allusion to the missing "e" and a reference to the string of deaths and disappearances in the novel's narrative development. As I shall explore in greater detail later on in this article, it has a further level of possible signification which resonates with Abish's own work; it can be read as an oblique

allusion to the disappearance and subsequent death of Jewish people during the Holocaust. The novel's title is a prime example of where Perec has interwoven a number of different layers of meaning, all of which pivot around the central significance of the text's formal constraint.

Like La Disparition, Alphabetical Africa is a dense, complex novel, filled with surreal plot developments, and incredible, improbable twists and turns; both novels play on the conventions of the crime fiction genre or the detective novel. Amidst a tale of murder, kidnap and robbery, the author-protagonist of Alphabetical Africa is hot on the tails of three enigmatic characters – Alex, Allen and Alva. The novel charts the author's quest, a pursuit which leads him on a fast-paced romp around Africa, from the "African amulets and amorous Angolan abductors" (2) to the "badly bitten Bushmen and Bantus" (149). The novel is structured around an idiosyncratic alphabetical constraint, whereby the first chapter of the novel contains only words beginning with the letter "a", the second chapter only words beginning with "a" or "b", and so on, until the 26th chapter which contains all possible words. This structure is then reversed, so that the 27th chapter contains all possible words, 28th all words except those beginning with "z", and so on until the 52nd and final chapter, which contains only words beginning with "a". Somewhat erroneously, the constraint has been labelled a lipogram. There are some lipogrammatic elements to Alphabetical Africa; we could conceptualize it, for example, as a kind of progressive alphabetical lipogram on the first letters of each word, but this is perhaps to do the complexity of Abish's constraint a disservice, and in turn, to twist the notion of the lipogram beyond all recognition. Other aspects of Alphabetical Africa's structure resonate with pre-existing Oulipian constraints (the first and last chapters of the book are, effectively, "tautograms": texts where all words begin

with the same letter, much like Perec's Chapitre cent-cinquante-cinq (Chapter 155) but Alphabetical Africa's structural framework is truly sui generis.

The first half of the novel sees the text's gradual construction as the writer has access to an increasingly available vocabulary. As the novel progresses we see, effectively, the expanding horizons of Africa's land mass, so that in the first chapter of the novel only Angola can exist, joined shortly after by Chad, and so on until the middle of the book, where Senegal and Tanzania join Zambia and Zanzibar in a veritable toponymic deluge. Abish plays on the link between naming and coming into being: in the first "E" chapter, a character exclaims "Eritrea exists, Eritrea exists" (10), and in the first "I" chapter, the writer, finally able to use the first-person pronoun, states: "Bit by bit I have assembled Africa" (21). In such a way, Africa itself and the novel bearing its name become conflated and Africa expands and then shrinks as the novel does. Using images of construction to chart the novel's progression, in the first half of the book the author-protagonist writes: "Everywhere I go I come across engineers constructing Africa" (23), and as the novel heads on its return journey back to "A", he observes: "As a great African continent is gradually decreasing and crumbling at its edges, buried black caskets are becoming more and more meaningful" (119). The second half of the text charts this subsequent dismantling of both novel and continent, and in a typically self-referential remark the author-protagonist writes: "Daily I had been complaining how I had been losing a few letters each day. I couldn't explain it … Later I learnt how everyone believed I had a hand in all letter disappearances" (121). Little by little, the text folds back up on itself, so that the novel expands and contracts, forming a parabolic, mirror structure.

In the first half of the text, the increasing availability of the alphabet marks an "opening-up", whereby the constraint generates the possible direction of the narrative. Referring back to

Mathews and Brotchie's reflection on Alphabetical Africa, it is the constraint that, to a large extent, "determines" the narrative. It is no surprise then that the book is set in Africa, and that the main protagonists are the author, Alva, and an army of ants. The constraint also determines the order in which events can occur, as Anthony Schirato remarks: "Angolans can be bombed in chapter 'B' and suffer death in chapter 'D', but until chapter 'S', they, of course, cannot suffer at all" (135). Abish himself comments on this feature:

> I was fascinated to discover the extent to which a system could impose upon the contents of a work a meaning that was fashioned by the form, and then to see the degree to which the form, because of the conspicuous obstacles, undermined that very meaning. For example, I could not introduce the first person singular until I had reached the ninth section. Frequently I intended to follow one direction and was compelled to follow another. (McCaffery and Gregory 20)

In this remark Abish also identifies the way the constraint structures the grammatical and syntactic properties of the text: for example, no first person singular until chapter "I", in fact no personal pronouns at all until chapter "H". The constraint also dictates, to a significant degree, the stylistic features of the text, and it is here that a strong similarity can be found between Alphabetical Africa and La Disparition. Both use a distinctly variegated register, where "learned" or specialized lexis coexists with slang and vernacular. This is, in part, an effect of the limitations on vocabulary that their particular constraints necessitate, so that where one word is not permitted by the constraint, because it contains an "e" or begins with the wrong letter, either a higher or lower register form might take its place. Thus, for example, in La Disparition where "médecin" (doctor) is not permitted, the slang form "toubib" (doc) and the specialized term "oto-rhino" (ear, nose and throat specialist) take its

place (23). This variation in register creates a hybrid feel to the text, where lexical and tonal incongruity produce distinct effects, as in the following passage from Alphabetical Africa:

> Bach's blackguard brother Butoni, bemused by Bach, by Boccherini, Beethoven and Brahms, blunders a bit by badly boasting about backing Beatles, Butoni's angry brother assaults and beats blabbering bullshit Butoni. Ahhh, August brings bitterness, brings busted branches, as Butoni, back badly bruised, badly beaten, badly bested and bleeding, borrows a big boat, and breaking anchor, as August blows a breeze, begins a broadening adventure. (3)

Here the alphabetical constraint generates a distinctly heterogeneous text, where colloquial, low register forms ("blabbering bullshit"), alternate with high register references to classical musicians ("Boccherini, Beethoven and Brahms"), and antiquated lexis ("blackguard", "bested"), with allusions to the somewhat tired literary tropes of the changing seasons ("August brings bitterness"), and the setting off on an adventure ("breaking anchor"). Reading this passage, one notes the absence of certain syntactic forms: conjunctions, other than the most rudimentary "and", as well as common pronouns such as "he", "it" or "whose".

Alongside these stylistic features, in both Alphabetical Africa and La Disparition there is often an "accumulation" effect, whereby noun phrases are juxtaposed in list-like fashion, typically to avoid certain syntactic forms that are not permitted by the constraint. In the passage above this effect can be seen in the enumeration of different classical composers "Boccherini, Beethoven and Brahms", and in the polyptoton "badly bruised, badly beaten, badly bested". Elsewhere in Alphabetical Africa the accumulative, list-like effects of the constraint are pushed to their extremes when one of the characters, Alfred, is ordered to draw

up an inventory by the French Consul, and so it begins: “the seventeenth-century armchair, the oak buffet, the inlaid floor tiles, the wrought-iron candlestick …” (82). This feature is similar to the elaborate lists Perec draws up in La Disparition: lists of clothes (21), food (132), drinks (166) and illnesses (24). This predilection for lists in Perec’s work has received much critical attention; in his essay “Notes sur la poétique des listes chez Georges Perec” (Notes on the poetics of lists in the work of Georges Perec), the Oulipian poet Jacques Roubaud observes: “les textes de Perec … sont mangés de listes” (201; Perec’s texts … are eaten up by lists). The significance of lists in these authors’ writing is manifold, but they are often a stylistic effect determined by the particular form of constrained writing techniques they practice. Using Wittgenstein’s term, as Jacques Roubaud does in “The Oulipo and Combinatorial Art”, the prevalence of lists demonstrates the way that a particular constraint produces the rules to an entire “language game” (40). Effectively, the constraint generates a distinct language for each text, “French without e” for example, which in turn governs not only its vocabulary, but also its syntax, grammar, register and stylistic features. The overlapping similarities between Perec’s lipogram and Abish’s alphabetical constraint make it unsurprising that La Disparition and Alphabetical Africa share certain stylistic similarities too.

Although lists in Abish and Perec’s work are often generated by a given constraint, their significance extends beyond being a mere by-product of a compositional limitation, and they often tie into the broader thematic concerns of the texts in which they appear. In Abish’s In the future perfect, a collection of short stories that take contemporary America as their primary focus, lists play a central role in the depiction of a consumerist culture obsessed with the sheer stuff of daily existence. This “stuff” is painstakingly transcribed by Abish, so that,

in the short story “In so many words”, the contents of a shopping list are carefully recorded in all their glorious banality:

> The money for the cleaning woman has been left in an envelope. Next to the envelope is a shopping list. Eggs, coffee, bacon, cereal, mushrooms, Boston lettuce, Sara Lee croissants, artichokes, frozen peas, frozen spinach, one chicken, soap, margarine, cigarettes, and Draino. (79-80)

The stylistic effect of this list is reinforced by the Oulipian-style constraint that Abish uses in “In so many words”. Every paragraph is accompanied by a preceding paragraph in italics that lists all the composite words of the following passage once and in alphabetical order. Hence, the passage above is preceded by:

> a an and artichokes bacon been Boston cereal chicken cigarettes cleaning coffee croissant Draino eggs envelope for frozen has in is Lee left lettuce list margarine money mushrooms next one peas Sara shopping soap spinach the to woman (79)

This formal constraint creates a certain “monotonie” (monotony), a term that Roubaud also employs to describe Perec’s use of lists (“Notes” 201-208).[2] The reader is bogged down in the tedium of working their way through a series of nominal phrases, and the tiresomeness of such a task is reinforced by the prosodic effect of these passages which display a flat, repetitive rhythmic quality. As Dieter Saalmann suggests, this atonal, often clinical attention to detail in Abish’s work points towards something altogether more unsettling: “Like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Abish sets down physical details with a degree of flat precision, laconic brevity, and matter-of-factness that suggests a menacing emptiness” (105). This is certainly

true in “In so many words”, where the focus on material possessions and shiny surfaces hints at a deeper sense of lack that Abish identifies within American society. Shopping and interior design, two key motifs in the text, are seen as displacement activities, filling a void, concealing deeper anxieties. The story, while focusing overtly on things: the “heavy expensive chrome and glass coffee table” (76), the “polished surface of [the protagonist’s] furniture” (90), hints at more profound issues hidden beneath the surface. Abish’s description of America’s obsessive fear of erectile dysfunction prompts a reflection on the broader notion of dysfunctional emotional and sexual relationships that result from a commodifying, consumerist culture (80). The female protagonist of the story actively avoids “old friends” (85) and instead her main relationships, conducted in near-total silence, are with her sexual partners (who “know nothing about her except what is on view” (94)), and those who have a service to offer her: her cleaning lady, the barman, her driver. Significantly, she is given no emotional or psychological depth, and remains nameless throughout the story; she is used – both sexually and financially by other characters, and as a literary vessel for the exploration of such themes by the author himself.

In Abish’s writing the excessive focus on the trivial and insignificant, reinforced through his pervasive use of lists, draws the reader’s attention to precisely what is missing, to what is not being said. Abish comments on this explicitly: “I want what is left unsaid to remain a strong presence. As strong as what is stated specifically” (Lotringer and Abish 172). Paradoxically, his writing involves a series of transparent acts of suppression and omission, both concealing and revealing that which is being hidden and that which is being left unsaid. Interestingly, Abish is quick to identify this same feature in Perec’s writing. In his review, Abish describes how the protagonist of La Disparition “keeps a diary in which he enters the trivial everyday events of his life, omitting nothing”, but goes on to identify the “concealment” at the heart of

Perec's novel ("Vanishing Act" 11). Abish writes that in La Disparition: "There is not so much a subtext to interpret as there is a buried text, something the author is at pains to conceal from the reader" ("Vanishing Act" 11). Here Abish gestures towards the fact that Perec's own personal experience of the Holocaust is encoded deep within La Disparition, and that, although obfuscated by the paraphernalia enumerated in the novel's pervasive lists, what is not said becomes significant precisely through its absence. This notion that something is all the more present through its absence is true also of the novel's constraint; despite being absent from the text altogether, never has the letter "e" been more prominent in a novel than in La Disparition. The theme of concealment reappears throughout the novel, but is most tangible in relation to the missing "e", which oscillates between being concealed and revealed to the characters at various points in the plot's development.

In Abish's work, this process of conspicuous concealment is demonstrated most clearly in How German Is It, a novel which, while not written according to Oulipian-style constraints like Alphabetical Africa and In the future perfect, nonetheless returns to many of the same themes found in Abish's, and indeed Perec's, writing. In How German Is It, a novel that explores German identity (or, indeed, America's perception of it), intricate descriptions of the modest tourist attractions of the fictionalized town of Würtenburg cover up the altogether more problematic traces of Germany's recent past. The narrator writes:

> True, Würtenburg possessed a small but outstanding botanical garden and a zoo, a gift of the former king of Naples, Joseph Bonaparte, presently consisting of two zebras, one elephant, one hyena, one leopard, four polar bears and seventeen mountain goats. (6)

Excessive detail becomes the unmarked mode for the novel, in such a way that key passages are all the more conspicuous for their economy of style and minimal description. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the brief and laconic passage where it is revealed that Würtenburg is built on the site of mass graves:

> Five days ago a section of the pavement near the school caved in, and three days later, as they were fixing the broken sewage pipe, someone who deserves a medal discovered a mass grave, Helmuth announced to Ego and Rita. It's a real mess … Everyone is complaining. The storekeepers are losing their customers. The street is still closed to traffic. Well, what more is there to say. (139)

In this passage the detailing of the timeline of events ("five days ago", "three days later") and who told who ("Helmuth announced to Ego and Rita"), contrasts with the distinct absence of reflection on the significance of such a finding: on its emotional or psychological impact on the town's inhabitants, or on the possible symbolism (or resistance to symbolism) of such a finding. The focus on the pragmatic response of shopkeepers, annoyed at the effect on their trade, and city-dwellers, put out by the inconvenience of a road closure, reinforces this. The litotes "it's a real mess" summarizes the situation with striking flippancy, and contrasts with the hyperbolic focus on the inconvenience caused to the town's inhabitants. The final phrase of the passage, "what more is there to say" takes on an added significance in light of this. Indeed, what is originally a rhetorical question is transformed into an actual question, or indeed a series of questions: what more <u>is</u> there to be said? What <u>can</u> be said? What <u>should</u> be said? <u>Who</u> should say it? These are precisely the questions that Abish goes on to grapple with in the course of the novel.

What will no doubt be clear by now, through the references to mass graves in How German Is It and bombed Angolans in Alphabetical Africa, is that Abish's writing, like Perec's, is imbued with a high coefficient of violence and death. This violence has particular salience when Perec and Abish's biographical experiences are taken into account and their novels are situated in the broader context of post-Holocaust literature. Perec's parents, Polish Jews who had immigrated to France before the war, were both killed when Perec was a child: his father fighting against the German army, and his mother in Auschwitz. Many critics have subsequently read an additional layer of signification in Perec's work, even in La Disparition which addresses this aspect of the novelist's experience more obliquely than many of his other novels. For example, the way that one by one the majority of the characters in La Disparition disappear or die in abrupt and unexplained circumstances might be read as a gesture towards Perec's own personal experience of the loss of his parents, as well as a wider comment on the disappearance and subsequent death of Jews in France under the Occupation. Where La Disparition sees the systematic and arbitrary eradication of one particular letter of the alphabet, there is a clear analogy to the attempt in Nazi Germany to completely eliminate an entire people. Likewise, the theme of absence that pervades La Disparition operates on many levels, evoking not only the absent letter "e" and the unexplained disappearance of Anton Voyl, but also the void left behind after the genocide. This parallel between the omitted "e", the missing Jews of the Holocaust and Perec's absent parents is one that Perec himself gestures towards in the dedication to W, ou, Le souvenir d'enfance (1975). The dedication reads "Pour E" (For E), playing on the homophone in French whereby "e" can mean either the letter "e" or the pronoun "them" (eux). In La Disparition there are other detectable references that support this particular reading, such as the motif of asphyxiation which appears throughout (30, 65, 176, and so on) and which evokes the use of hydrogen cyanide and other asphyxiant gases in death camps.

Abish himself reads Perec in this light, and in his review of La Disparition, he is keen to point out that "concealed between the lines of A Void is an untold account of decimation and survival" ("Vanishing Act" 11). In the same article Abish reflects on Perec's choice of the lipogram:

> He may have chosen the constrictive form of the lipogram for any number of reasons, not least of which was that it enables the writer, in the words of Rimbaud, whose lipogram-poem appears in the novel, "to express the inexpressible." It is also, it should be noted, an ideal vehicle for concealment, for hiding the inexpressible. (11)

In this analysis of Perec, Abish invites a similar, biographical reading of his own work, and the two writers share certain similarities in this respect. Abish was born into an Austrian-Jewish family who fled persecution from the Nazis in 1938. They moved briefly to France before having to move again, this time to Shanghai, later to Israel, before finally settling in America for the rest of Abish's adult life. In How German Is It the presence of his experiences can be felt; the novel engages more or less explicitly with the violence of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Published in 1980, it is set in contemporary Germany and focuses on a network of characters whose ambiguous pasts are revealed in a fragmentary fashion throughout the course of the book. Ulrich, the central character, belongs to the infamous Hargenau family; his father, originally a member of the Nazi party, is later executed by firing squad for turning on Hitler at the close of the war. Franz, the family's "fixer", while not left with any visible scars from the war, deals with the ongoing psychological impact: "once in a while, not so often now, Franz would begin to howl, just a plain continuous howl" (73). As the central image of the burst water pipe that unearths the

remains of a concentration camp would suggest, in a country attempting to rebuild itself the past is never far away; the violence of this recent past seeps into the present with a menacing vitality.

In Alphabetical Africa similar references to Nazi Germany can be found, but much like La Disparition, they are subtle, forming slight but discernable threads encoded in the fabric of the text. Certain words and phrases trigger associations with the atrocities of the first half of the 20th century: "airforces bombing beaches" (4), "annexation" (1), "German gestures" (14). The author-protagonist finds what he describes as a "fascinating book": "Die Ratsame und Nützliche Ausrottung der Gefährlichen Afrikanischen Ameisen*", translated in the text as: "The Advisable and Useful Extermination of the Dangerous African Ants" (91). While references such as these lie buried in the text, the novel focuses much more transparently on colonial violence. As in La Disparition, Alphabetical Africa recounts a lengthy string of gory deaths, but in Abish's novel they are set against a backdrop of relentless colonial warfare and violence. French airplanes drop bombs, and "all islanders attend a mass funeral, collecting arms, legs, heads and mutilated bodies" (112). Elsewhere the author-protagonist, totting up the death-toll, writes: "By now [Bob and Boyd have] killed or crippled eighty elephants, thirty-five alligators, one hundred and forty-two rhinos, two egrets … and thirty-seven men, mostly black" (95). As if pre-empting the novel's dialogue with La Disparition, chapter "V" enumerates a list: "Vanishing Africa, vanishing Alva, vanishing African armies …" (57). Certain phrases and expressions recall some of the most abhorrent aspects of colonial writing: we hear of "childlike Chad attitudes" (6), Africa's "backwardness" (118), and the proclamation: "All Africans are cannibals" (133). Elsewhere, American airforces threaten air attacks on Ashanti beaches, Germany alarms Ghana with its growing armies, the French Consul watches over Zanzibar with a menacing eye.

Reference is made to the linguistic violence of history books, to the threadbare notion of "documentation" in a colonial context. The author-protagonist is charged with the task of documenting Africa, and, appointed "acting alphabet authority" (2), he writes:

> If I am ever asked how I could erase history, I can answer at once. It's easy. I bought an eraser. After carefully choosing an East African dictionary, I begin by erasing a few phrases. I didn't erase everything I didn't like. I left a few lines for future historians. (114-115)

The edited, colonial approach to African history represents a particular example of linguistic violence, where certain voices are silenced, atrocities and horrors simply "erased". Anthony Shirato, in his essay on Abish and the politics of the comic, identifies the link here between the text's colonial focus and its formal constraint: "The narrative is produced out of a rigid and limiting system in much the same way that Western colonial discourse determines what we can 'see' of Africa, to borrow Conrad's term" (134). It is this similarity that makes the formal constraint of Alphabetical Africa so appropriate a vessel for a work that explores the discourses of colonial writing. The novel's alphabetical restriction delineates what can be represented and how, just as Western accounts are limited in their capacity to depict or to give voice to African experience. In the passage above, Abish's reference to the erasing of history is significant as it focuses on what is omitted or left out in a given text. There are clear resonances here with La Disparition, with its missing "e" and its central motifs of absence and omission. Although Perec does not have the same colonial focus as Abish, the notion of documentation and the questions of what can be omitted or what one is compelled

to record, takes on a further significance when pursuing a biographical reading of La Disparition as a novel written in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

This question of documentation also arises in How German Is It, where Abish questions his own appropriateness to write a novel that explores German identity, as an Austrian-American novelist who, at the time of writing, had never set foot on German soil. The opening chapter of the novel concludes with a list of questions; their pertinence is marked by their italic type and their otherwise incongruous relationship with the surrounding paragraphs. The passage reads:

> What is well known?
>
> What is not known?
>
> What is surmised?
>
> What is omitted?
>
> What is distorted?
>
> …
>
> What is rejected?
>
> What is visible?
>
> What is disapproved?
>
> What is permitted?
>
> What is seen?
>
> And what is said?

(8-9)

The list sets up a series of questions about the nature of documentation and of fiction writing, and challenges the reader to be attentive to the problematic representation of Germany in the novel that follows. It asks the reader to pick apart the narrator's facile touting of weary German stereotypes (Germans are characterized in turn by their "punctuality" (2), their "well-mannered" behavior (3), their "humorlessness" (23), and are described as "tall blond men and women" (3), drinking "beer" (3)). The novel's epigraph, a quote from Jean-Luc Godard, states "What is really at stake is one's image of oneself", and this is certainly true in How German Is It. The novel documents a distinctly American vision of Germany, more than it documents an objective portrayal of contemporary German society. Abish appears to be questioning his own prejudices and preconceptions, both as a post-war American citizen, and as a Jewish writer, exiled from Nazi Austria. As the novel progresses it calls into question the very notion of an objective, literary representation of a country, examining instead the signs and symbols that are involved in the construction of such a portrait. As Abish states, "My interest in Germany is not to explain it, but to highlight the German 'signs' that elicit a set response – a German truth – which in my book is either subtly questioned or negated or defamiliarized" (McCaffery and Gregory 22). These signs range from the highly charged final image of the novel, where Ulrich, hypnotized in the therapist's seat, raises his arm in a gesture that resembles a Nazi salute, to the most mundane and commercial brands of national industry: "Mercedes, Audis, BMWs, Porsches, VWs" (How German Is It 3). Abish talks elsewhere about Lévi-Strauss and a semiotic approach to other cultures (Lotringer and Abish 163). He appears to be wary of such an approach, and warns of the dangers of reducing the infinite complexity of reality into a series of generalizations and insufficient signs. History will only repeat itself if the same reduction of Jewish identity to stereotypes around greed and parsimony transmutes into a diminution of German identity to

stereotypes of ruthless efficiency and clinical detachment, or African identity to illiteracy and cannibalism.

Amidst these various forms of linguistic violence explored in Abish's work, the use of constraints in Alphabetical Africa and In the future perfect plays an instrumental role. What becomes clear, taking Alphabetical Africa as an example, is how the text's intrusive formal framework serves to foreground language, advancing in turn the idea that language itself often operates as a constraint. From the history of colonial documentation to the imposition of a given colonial language on a given colonized people, language represents, in these instances, a form of straightjacket. In an interview, Abish describes how:

> [Alphabetical Africa's] history is the distorted, unreliable history of colonialism. When writing was introduced in Africa, it was done in order to impose law and order – to dominate, not to elucidate. Africa's boundaries are still in dispute – they are unclear, for the actual boundaries are tribal ones. Linguistically the continent has not been properly charted. (McCaffery and Gregory 19)

In this remark Abish touches on two particular ways in which language acts as a constraint; he describes the imposition of the colonial language as a tool for domination, a notion which he explores in the novel, for example in a reference to handwriting: "according to Lévi-Strauss, handwriting in Africa has been used in the past principally to exploit its people" (Alphabetical Africa 62). He also references the notion of language and barriers, naming and geographical boundaries. Significantly, like Germany in How German Is It, Africa exists in Alphabetical Africa as a series of anglicized names, and as little more than that. Abish goes on in the interview to talk about why he chose to write about Africa (and not Austria or

America for instance). Just as, in How German Is It, Abish explores Germany as a truly unfamiliar country, in Alphabetical Africa it is Africa's foreign topography that is of interest. In both Germany and Africa, Abish finds a "foreign surface", a continent or a country that he has encountered only on a map, and never as an actual land mass (Lotringer and Abish 161). It is also significant that both Africa and Germany have a particularly salient presence in the American collective consciousness. It is unsurprising that Abish chooses to write about countries or continents that carry with them a multitude of associated images and connotations (in short the range of cultural "signs" discussed above), connotations that are reinforced by their portrayal in the media, literature, film and television.

Fundamentally, Alphabetical Africa is a novel about the limitations of language, about the constraints of a language barrier, or multiple language barriers, on cultural understanding. As a result of his own personal background, Abish might be particularly sensitive to the significance of language barriers and the intimate link between language and identity. Abish's experience of geographical and linguistic exile meant that German, his mother tongue as a child, was soon replaced with English, and he wrote exclusively in the latter. Likewise, Perec, despite his parents' mother tongue being Polish, grew up speaking French, something which he addresses directly in Récits d'Ellis Island:

> je ne parle pas la langue que mes parents parlèrent, je ne partage aucun des souvenirs qu'ils purent avoir, quelque chose qui était à eux, leur histoire, leur culture, leur espoir, ne m'a pas été transmis (59)

> I don't speak the language that my parents spoke, I don't share any of the memories that they may have had, something that was theirs, their history, their culture, their hope, was not transmitted to me[3]

Here Perec stresses the intimate link between language and identity. He reportedly attached a particular significance to the assimilation of his parents' Polish surname "Peretz", to the (almost) French "Perec". He was very conscious of the symbolic divorce this name change involved; it signified for him a rupture, both from his parents themselves, and from his wider cultural heritage.

In Alphabetical Africa Abish explores these same themes: language barriers continuously obstruct the possibility of cultural understanding, and as we saw above in the discussion of How German Is It, Alphabetical Africa's frequent attempts at "understanding Africa" result only in the perpetual demonstration of its own failure to comprehend. Alphabetical Africa is a book less about Africa itself, than about the complete non-understanding of a culture and the limitations that language imposes on cultural communication. At the very heart of the book, in the first chapter "Z", we read: "Zambia helps fill our zoos, and our doubts, and our extrawide screens as we sit back" (64). This is a book about distance, about viewing Africa from the comfort of our sofas, as a whole alphabet of exotic animals in our zoos and on our televisions. It is also about two-dimensionality and "foreign surface" (my italics), to return to the word Abish uses to describe Germany in How German Is It. This motif of the surface is prevalent throughout Abish's novels, in Alphabetical Africa it finds its various guises in the recurring references to makeup (6, 8, 49) and appearances (51, 60, 74), and in the surreal central image of Queen Quat who sets about painting the surface of Africa orange (53, 54).

In Alphabetical Africa, the protagonist comments directly on the wide linguistic gulf that throws the possibility of true cultural understanding into doubt:

> Understanding Africa requires patience, and an understanding of at least fifteen click languages, also an understanding of the rapidly growing elephant grass, the tribal-relationships, and the cuneiform data banks. (55)

Here, the reference to "click languages" is significant, and forms a key motif that spans the entirety of the novel. The click language represents perhaps the most alien of languages to the Western world, the foreign language par excellence, that has neither a shared phonology, nor, most significantly, a shared alphabet. Any attempt to transcribe click languages into English necessarily requires the superimposition of a European alphabet. The author-protagonist writes: "Luckily all Africans have a language. Arriving in Africa I immediately hear a language I don't comprehend. It is a click language of Africa. It goes: click, click, click, like an empty gun" (Alphabetical Africa 29) The undercurrent of violence in this image is particularly apt; it serves as a reminder of the limitations or constraints of language, and of the potentially negative consequences that a subsequent failure to communicate might provoke.

This thematic focus on language barriers in Abish's work, alongside his formal use of Oulipian-style constraints, draws attention to a broader question about the types of constraints that are inherent or already present in writing. We see here a further parallel with certain Oulipian writers, whose use of constraints prompts broader reflections on language and its limits. Jacques Roubaud, for example, uses constrained-writing in the collection Quelque chose noir (1986) to explore the inadequacies and impossibilities of language faced with the

absoluteness of death. For Abish, these limitations on and in writing are manifold. We saw above how given national languages present immediate obstacles to writing fiction set in other countries; Africa and Germany are wrenched from their original linguistic frameworks and transposed awkwardly into English-language texts. Likewise, Abish demonstrates how all authors are grounded in their own particular linguistic situation, as well as their own historical, sociocultural and idiosyncratic frames of reference; writing the "other" will always be problematic. A further limitation appears in the notion of the "inexpressible", touched on above in relation to La Disparition and How German Is It. Albeit indirectly, both Abish and Perec explore questions of documentation and testimony, of silence and the obligation to provide witness, questions that the Holocaust led many 20th century writers and philosophers to consider. In How German Is It, through the central image of Franz, a character who is condemned by his fellow townsfolk for building a matchstick model of the recently unearthed Durst concentration camp, Abish elaborates a poignant parallel with literature. Writing might indeed be conceptualized as the construction of a linguistic "model" or literary representation of real-life events, and the legitimacy of fiction, the ethics of writing about the Holocaust for the purpose of entertainment or catharsis, is subtly called into question. This same notion is explored in Alphabetical Africa, where the tradition of travel literature is parodied, raising questions about colonial violence and its documentation (or lack thereof) in texts that, ultimately, provide entertainment for the Western reader.

In Abish's later work, 99: The New Meaning (1990), we can see the extension of these same questions around literature, language and limitations. The text is a "cut-up" text; the titular chapter, for example, collages borrowed phrases from page 99 of 99 texts from 99 authors. This writing technique pushes to its extreme the understanding of language as an iterative system, characterized by repetition, always second-hand, always borrowed and always

collective. Even if new configurations of words offer the possibility of innovative ways to say something, there is also a broader reflection on the "exhaustion" of literature, the idea that everything that there is to be said has already been said. This theme of repetition, while explored most radically in 99: The New Meaning, is already apparent in the alphabetical list constraint described above in In the future perfect, and in two key chapters of Alphabetical Africa. Chapter 34 elaborates a two-page list following the formula "same … same …": "Same shit same scenery same suffering saints same soup same spiel same safaris …" (100). Chapter 52, the final chapter of the novel, concludes in a similar manner, this time spanning the entire chapter and terminating on the following line: "another awareness another awakening another awesome age another axis another Alva another Alex another Allen another Alfred another Africa another alphabet" (152). These two chapters reinforce this notion of the limitations of language; language is not only a resource characterized by systematic repetition, but literary language in particular runs this risk of exhausting itself, reworking the same subjects and same themes ad infinitum. The task is then for the writer to find novel subjects (or novel approaches to old subjects), and novel ways of using language to express them.

Abish's writing, read alongside the constraint-based practices of Georges Perec and the Oulipo, provides various fruitful lines of enquiry. Alphabetical Africa in particular stands out as a powerful example of an English-language Oulipian-style text. It demonstrates the technical competency of constrained writing, a ludic yet complex text whose own literary artifice never fails to entertain the reader, and whose generative capacity is forever in play. Like Perec's La Disparition, it is also a richly encoded novel where the text's alphabetical constraint has a heightened significance, drawing together an exploration of the limits and boundaries of language itself, set against the backdrop of colonialism and Nazi Germany.

Indeed, Alphabetical Africa demonstrates a kind of “littérature engagée” (engaged literature) where you might least expect to find it. Like La Disparition, it develops a key motif of the “code”, explored in all its various forms: “drums” (75), “cuneiform code” (7), “cipher” (147), “semaphore or smoke signals” (59). This motif is a highly metalinguistic one; it asks the reader to read attentively, unpicking the encrypted meaning of the text, looking for patterns of signification. Significantly, when asked how he looked back on Alphabetical Africa, Abish replied: “With 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” (Semrau 154). In such a way, just as the characters of La Disparition and Alphabetical Africa embark on a quest, unravelling the significance of clues left behind, so too the reader of these novels must unpick the broader signification of the texts’ formal constraints. This leads the reader to uncover a buried text, where themes of concealment, violence, documentation and the limitations of language are just some of the many rich topics that might be unearthed.

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[1] Abish's article was entitled "Vanishing Act" and appeared in the Book World section of The Washington Post on 12 March 1995.

[2] While I am using the term constraint to describe this particular formal feature, it is unclear whether in the writing of this short story Abish elaborates the alphabetical, italicized lists first, and then generates the following passage from this list, or whether he writes the roman type passage and then produces the italicized, list-passage next. Clearly if the former is true then this provides a more rigid compositional constraint than the latter. The placing of the italicized, list-passage before the roman type passage might suggest the former is true.

[3] My translation.

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