

Returning from the “Edge of Forgetfulness”: Reification, Language, and Memory in Walter Abish’s *How German Is It*

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In his lucid essay on Walter Abish’s *How German Is It*, Richard Martin characterizes the novel as “an extended examination of the familiar in its absorption of the unfamiliar, and of responses to apparent perfection” (238). In a similar vein, Winifred Fluck cogently argues that “Abish, in drawing on ideas of Russian formalism on the effacement of knowledge by the familiar thus pursues a subtle strategy of disturbing the familiar—a strategy, however, that no longer relies on modernist mode of defamiliarization, but on the sometimes almost unnoticeable integration of difference into the familiar” (81). The novelist himself has remarked that the “innovative novel is, in essence, a novel of disfamiliarization, a novel that has ceased to concern itself with the mapping of the ‘familiar’ world” (qtd. in Martin 238).

While it would be difficult to read the novel without considering the centrality of the “familiar,” it requires neither complex logical manipulation nor a reference to the Heideggerian philosopher Brumhold’s notion of “thingliness”¹ to link the absorption of the “unfamiliar” by the “familiar” to the concept of reification. Anna Heller lectures on the “familiar” to her students in the novel as follows:

We want to visit museums and monuments and ruins that we only know from reproductions in books. Having seen the photographs of what we have come to visit, we naturally know what to expect. So the ruins, the works of art, the foreign cities are not entirely unfamiliar. And then, in no time, we discover that the longer we stay in one place, the longer we sleep in unfamiliar beds, the longer we meet people from other countries, the more familiar it all becomes. How long can something remain unfamiliar?
(120)

From “a pencil sharpener” to “the long face of the principal,” “the bus taking the children to Daemling,” “the driver” to the “length of the ride,” “everything is

familiar" (120). The accuracy of Anna's account does not concern me here (it might be doubted that the familiarity of "the ruins, the works of art, the foreign cities" caused by photographic "reproduction" of their images is qualitatively the same as that of "the familiar outlines of our possessions, our furniture, our walls, our wall posters and drawings, our shutters and our windows" [121]). My parenthetical skepticism seeks to catch the degree to which Anna's, or Abish's, concept of the familiar is generic in ambition, an ambition which seems to have prompted variety in the interpretation of "familiarity," as seen in the difference between Martin's account of the concept and Fluck's. Timothy Bewes defines reification as "the moment that a process or relation is generalized into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a 'thing'"² (3). We may argue that the familiarization of everyday things denotes reification, since the passages above suggest that people ("the driver," "the principal," "people from other countries") are seen (via the concept of "familiar") in the same way as things, commodities, and photographic images are seen. As Paul Wotipka observes, "Familiarization in the novel functions as a process of converting experience into discrete, reproducible, and easily circulated images or clichés" (507). What I want to draw attention to here, however, is the totalizing aspect of the concept itself; to the fact that Anna insists that "everything" is familiar. Familiarization in the novel resembles the concept of reification not only in its implication concerning the commodification of human relations, but also in its tendency to "conceptual expansion" (Bewes 4): "Reification is unsurpassed in all these respects by any other category of Marxist theory. Inseparable from its utility, however, is the crudeness of the concept—a crudeness reflected in the term itself" (Bewes 3). Both familiarization and reification depend upon a "totalizing narrative"; as reification relies on a "duality of distinct reified (existing) and non-reified (lost, or not yet realized) worlds," so familiarization presupposes a duality of "distinct" familiar ("existing") and unfamiliar ("lost, or not yet realized") worlds (Bewes 10). Familiarization in the novel is, of course, not totally synonymous with reification, yet the close proximity of the two concepts seems to justify a reading of the novel in terms of reification. Reading the novel in relation to the "crude" and useful concept of reification might allow us to explore the intricate network that extends from the "familiar," toward issues of national identity, language, forgetting and remembering, and "returning" in the novel.

We should avoid essentialist reading of this thoroughly anti-essentialist, postmodern novel. Uncompromisingly putting into question any essentialist discourse with regards to the "Germanness" and involving the reader in the

very process of familiarization, Abish forcefully demonstrates that there is no escaping the process. Nevertheless, my reading attempts to detect some moments in the novel that seem to signal the possibility of stepping outside the totalizing system of the “familiar.” Such “outside,” which Fredric Jameson would call “Utopia,” would be conceivable only when the *impossibility* of imagining it is rightly recognized. Jameson states that the “limits” in the “Utopian blueprint . . . do not become visible except in the desperate attempt to imagine something else” (*Postmodernism* 208). I would argue that the novel is a rare instance of such attempt. As Jerry A. Varsava claims, “Abish, a subtle social critic, always return to a single question: ‘Is there any other way to live?’” (84). The narrator of the novel himself repeatedly asks, “Could everything be different?” I hope the following essay would catch a glimpse, if momentarily, of such a “desperate attempt.”

1.

As Wotipka aptly puts it, *How German Is It* is less concerned with “a particular nation or location” than with “the very familiarizing processes of appropriation and reproduction that make the concept of national identity possible and even appealing” (511). The novel opens with a question, “what are the first words a visitor from France can expect to hear upon his arrival at a German airport?” (1). The question is less concerned with what it might be to be “German,” than with the stereotypical images that the term “German” arouses in people. The absence of the titular question mark seems to indicate that “how German” something is cannot constitute a valid question because the very form of the question points to a “reified consciousness.”³ According to Alexander Houen, “Abish himself states that he was not interested in revealing a German essence so much as arranging an ensemble of German signs: ‘To me the title is not primarily a question. Essentially it functions as a sign, the most effective sign to create and authenticate a ‘German’ novel’” (219). And yet Wotipka seems to miss the point when he concludes that “whatever its mode of presentation, surely the novel functions in part as a sharp critique, not of Germany or Germans, but of certain ahistorical tendencies of contemporary culture at large” (516). Wotipka sees the novel as commenting on postmodern culture in general, where everything—even national identity and history—turns into a cliché or reproducible image. Wotipka misses the point because he tacitly privileges the force of Americanization while ignoring the historical charge

retained by the unasked question, "how German is it."

Thomas Peyser observes that "there is nothing particularly German about the way the new German identity is formed . . . [since] one thing currently globalized is the imperative that everyone lay claim to some kind of cultural identity" (246). To apply this kind of "global" view to the novel necessarily results in marginalizing the possibility that the obsessive identification of German qualities might originate in the "bodies" on which Brumholdstein, the fictional, ostentatiously standardized and modernized city sits:

To begin with, how would Brumholdstein have proceeded with such an undertaking? Just one example: Are the corpses—really skeletons—to be buried separately or in another mass grave? Should an attempt be made, no matter how difficult and how embarrassing it may turn out to be—to identify them, and the cause of death? Was an accurate count essential? Was a breakdown of age and sex, provided it was possible, necessary? (191)

Abish, to be sure, implies that the surfacing corpses also undergo commodification given that the narrator describes the event firstly in terms of governmental treatment of the corpses and secondly as a matter of financial loss: "Clearly, whatever the procedure, priority would have to be given to the repair of the Geigenheimer Strasse and compensation to the shopkeepers for any loss of revenue they may have suffered as a result of the street being closed to traffic" (191). Furthermore, Helmuth links the inspection of the bodies to German "thoroughness": "Anyhow, as you can imagine, with our tradition of thoroughness, we have to inspect the grave before we can repair the pavement" (139). Helmuth, so to speak, attempts to repress the materiality of the bodies by veiling them with German-ness.

Though privileging the return of the repressed bodies might seem to distort the textual reality, textual distortion would also inhere in amnesia over the disjunction between the narrator's obsessive identification of German qualities, and his marked taciturnity over the non-identification of the found corpses. Indeed, even as the evasive anonymity attending the disinterred invites the pronoun "it," so the titular usage of the impersonal term ("It") may be thought to find its shifty referent in the massive grave and the official veiling of that pit. We might even say that the pronoun "It," in the impossible and titular non-question, "How German Is It," alludes directly to the unidentified bodies:

"Hence, it could not be ruled out that the skeletons found in the mass grave were Germans. It was unlikely, improbable, but could not be ruled out" (192). The narrator refers to the "unlikely, improbable" possibility because how "German" the bodies are *does* matter to him, to Ulrich and to people in Brumholdstein. The demand for "German" logical strictness, or "thoroughness," leads people to superimpose German-ness on the anonymous bodies. The redundant yet compulsive identification of German-ness throughout the text contrasts with the imagined, excessively curt epitaph on the grave for the bodies: "Men and women, inmates of Durst. Identity unknown. Causes of death, unknown. May they rest in peace" (192). Symptomatically, Anna Heller, who gives a long lecture on the "familiar," remains reticent as to the mass grave: "What did Miss Heller say in class? Or didn't she mention it? She said, Rubbish. She said she didn't want to talk about it. She said that a lot of people were killed in the war, and that it was very sad" (138). Anna's as well as the narrator's silence as to whether or not the dead bodies are "familiar" indicates the possibility that the bodies resist the form of the question. We should also remember that Helmuth is "so infuriated" by Rita's "deliberately careless combining of skeletons lying at the bottom of a long open trench that had been dug in the pavement, or being loaded unto the truck, and photographs of Helmuth in the garden watching Gisela playing with Erika" (201). Rita exposes the repressed base of the reality by her "deliberately careless" juxtaposition of the photographs.⁴ The skeletons, it seems, constitute the socially unthinkable, a necessarily and historically particular imperative, which obliges and forbids the narrator as well as the reader to pose or even to think about the question, "How German Is It?"

In an essay entitled "On the Question: 'What Is German?'"⁵ Theodor W. Adorno writes:

"What is German?"—I am unable to answer this question immediately. . . . The very form of the question already desecrates the irreparable experiences of the last decades. It presupposes an autonomous collective entity, "German," whose characteristics are then determined after the fact. The fabrication of national collectivities, however, . . . is the mark of a reified consciousness hardly capable of experience [*Erfahrung*]. Such fabrication remains within precisely those stereotypes which it is the task of thinking to dissolve. (121)

For Adorno "fabrication of national collectivities" typifies "a reified consciousness hardly capable of experience." As Bewes writes, a politics grounded in "identity" is a politics "which cements people, by implication, into a different kind of thingitude" (74). If we take Adorno's words at face value, his paragraph would seem simply to suggest that Abish and Adorno (both of Jewish descent) address the same issue and share a pessimistic view of the reification involved in the formation of "national collectivities." Importantly, however, Adorno *does* pose the question at the risk of desecrating "the irreparable experiences of the last decades," though he is "unable to answer this question immediately." He does not argue for the impossibility of the question, even though he remains aware that to pose it desecrates "irreparable experiences." By implication, by posing a damaged and damaging question at the outset of his essay, Adorno chooses to face "irreparable experiences," even though these experiences may be rendered more "irreparable" by this question. Adorno identifies a "risk" relevant to my own essay.

Arguably, he chooses to pursue the issue because by *identifying* the question, "What is German?" as "the mark of a reified consciousness," he signals that historical enquiry is and should be ghosted by anxiety over reification. Put another way: Adorno implies that the fear that a question may be deemed stereotypical, may render that question less than stereotypical. The formation of the question, "How German Is It" "already" desecrates the unidentified "corpses" or what might have happened in Durst; hence Abish's invalidating of the question by the removal of the titular question mark. And yet despite the absence of the question mark we know that the phrase remains a question. In fact, the narrator will pose the titular question *as a question* in the novel itself. Despite the fact that the narrator's question tends to cliché, particularly given his recurrent reference to "stereotypes," there remains a residue—the possibility that the origin of the question lies in *specific*, yet unidentified bodies, or in a *specific* space under Brumholdstein. Put differently, the novel, through its compulsive or traumatic questioning resists the familiarization of the very notion of familiarization.

2.

Whether or not Abish read Adorno's essay, the essay provides the reader of *How German Is It* with surprisingly rich and pertinent materials. "What is German?—I am unable to answer this question immediately." Adorno's deferral

of his answer recalls the imperative statement that recurs towards the beginning of *How German Is It*, “*Answer. Answer Immediately.*” If the question, “How German Is It?” is the sort of question to which an “immediate” answer might yield a “stereotype,” the imperative (caught within the italic) precisely urges the reader to accept stereotypes. Put differently: Adorno’s statement, “I am unable to answer this question immediately,” suggests that the question somehow urges him to “answer immediately.” Both texts begin with a sense of urgency caused by the question, “What is German?” As if exactly defying Adorno’s warning, the narrator of the novel lists a number of stereotypical or commodified (and Americanized) German images, from “the well designed highways, *die Authobahn*,” to “gleaming Mercedes, Audis, BMWs, Porches, VWs,” and “the blue sky, *der blaue Himmel*” to “the large number of tall blond men and women” (3).

In order to clarify why each text exhibits a sense of urgency concerning the question as to what is German, we might usefully consider a striking point of affinity between the two texts—the similarity of Adorno’s and Ulrich’s circumstances. At the beginning of the novel, Ulrich *returns* to Germany after half a year in France, partly because he feels the need to be “among the people who speak the same language as I do” (29). Asked by Helmuth why he has decided to “return to Wurtenburg in the first place,” Ulrich answers: “Because I was tired of hearing everyone around me speak only in French” (12). Significantly, the question “How German is it?” first occurs in the novel in relation to the German-ness of the German language: “Still, notwithstanding the doubtful foreign elements in the language today, the German language remains the means and the key to Brumhold’s metaphysical quest; it is a language that has enabled him, the foremost German philosopher, to formulate the questions and the solutions that have continued to elude the French- and English-speaking metaphysicians. How German is it?” (5). Though the comment skirts a stereotypical nationalism, it remains important that the novel frequently links the philosopher Brumhold to linguistic “Germanness.” In a speech at the inauguration of the museum he designed, Helmuth states: “So ultimately, to understand Germany it is necessary, it is essential to speak, read, and think in our mother tongue. It is the language that Brumhold, our great Brumhold, used daily” (170). He further asserts that “[w]ithout a thorough understanding of our language, our visitor will be deprived of that one element that serves and still functions to generate the German uniqueness, the German genius of a Brumhold, after whom this community—long may it live—has been

named" (170). The centrality of Brumholdstein to the novel, it would seem, points to the centrality of the German language to the notion of the New Germany.

Meanwhile, in the essay, Adorno "slightly reduce[s] the question as to what is German and frame[s] it more modestly in terms of what moved me as an emigrant—as one who had been driven out in shame and disgrace, and after what had been done by Germans to millions of innocent people—to come back nevertheless" (125). He returns to Germany for two reasons: home-sickness and language. "Not for a moment during the emigration," writes Adorno, "did I give up the hope of coming back. The identification with the familiar is an undeniable aspect of this hope" (125-26). Adorno is blatantly honest, almost sentimental, in his account of his return to Germany: "I simply wanted to go back to where I had spent my childhood, to where whatever was most specifically mine was mediated to the core. Perhaps I felt that whatever one accomplishes in the course of one's life is nothing but an attempt to recover one's childhood" (126). His "return," as an attempted recovery of lost "childhood," recalls the ending of *How German Is It*, where Ulrich under hypnosis "regress[es] . . . back to his childhood" or "re-experience[s] his childhood" (248). Both for Adorno and Ulrich, returning to Germany, or "the identification with the familiar," entails the attempt to recover the lost "childhood." In addition (and like Ulrich), Adorno returns to Germany also because of "language":

The decision to return to Germany was hardly motivated simply by a subjective need, by home-sickness, as little as I would deny having had such sentiments. There was also an objective factor. It is the language. Not only because in the newly acquired language one can never quite convey the intended meaning as exactly What is more, the German language seems to have a special elective affinity for philosophy and especially for its speculative element [*Moment*] which is so easily distrusted in the West as dangerously unclear—and not entirely without justification. (129)

Adorno further states that the "impossibility of non-violently transposing into another language not only highly developed speculative thoughts but even particular and quite precise concepts such as those of spirit [*Geist*], the element [*Moment*], and experience [*Erfahrung*]" suggests that "there is a specific,

objective quality of the German language" (130). In spite of the clear similarity between the passage above and Helmuth's account, I do not intend to argue that Adorno was susceptible to linguistic nativism. Rather, I want to suggest that Adorno's account tells us that the problem of the language in the novel may matter more than is first apparent. The "question as to what is German" and the issue of his "return to Germany" are connected (or, the former is "reduced" to the latter) through "language" in Adorno's essay.

Even as his "home-sickness" derives from his sense of loss of "childhood," so the "language" as an "objective" factor for Adorno's "decision to return to Germany" involves a certain irrecoverable loss; witness his sense of the "impossibility of non-violently transposing into another language." Indeed, Adorno appears to recognize or appreciate the "specificity" of the German language only through and after his experience of loss:

I had presented a lecture at the Psychoanalytic Society in San Francisco and had given it to their professional journal for publication. In proofreading the galleys, I discovered that they had not been content simply to correct the stylistic flaws of an emergent writer. The entire text had been disfigured beyond recognition, the basic intentions no longer recoverable. (128)

By the "grotesque" disfiguration of the draft, "the basic intentions" are lost (128). Adorno returns to Germany in order to overcome a double loss: the subjective loss of "childhood"; the objective loss of language, realized through the experience of translation as an "impossibility" (insofar as it constitutes an "impossible" assault on "intention"). Arguably, the sense of urgency accompanying the "question as to what is German" originates in grief, a grief that drives Adorno to answer the question even as its asking risks "reified consciousness."

Needless to say, *How German Is It* continues to foreground the problem of loss originating in the (im)possibility of translation. As Germans, the characters may be assumed to be speaking in German; which German, Abish simply translates. The reader can never be entirely clear whether this text faithfully translates an original German text or whether there is such a thing as original text at all. The uncertainty as to the linguistic loss deriving from translation is a *premise* of the novel, as it were. To ask, "How German is the German language?" in German, and to pose the same question in English are not

qualitatively equivalent acts. That the novel is written in English may support an assertion that the novel is less specifically about Germany than about Americanized, "global," standardized space; and yet we should not hastily "reduce" the novel's problematizing of language to the concept of globalization. The American Daphne's account of a certain kind of loss caused by linguistic situation illustrates the significance of what might be termed "loss of the mother tongue" in the novel. The following passage brings us back to the issue of the "familiar."

Instead of reading on and on about the tenuousness, ambiguity, or uncertainty of someone's feelings, she preferred to question the meaning of a thing or the meaning of a thought, preferably raising the question in German, a foreign or at any rate adopted language that enabled her to reduce these crucial questions to pure signs, since in German the word *thing* and the word *thought* did not immediately evoke in her brain the multitudinous response it did in English, where the words, those everyday words, conjured up an entire panorama of familiar associations that blunted the preciseness needed in order to bring her philosophical investigation to a satisfactory conclusion. Could this be the reason why she had come to Germany? To think in German, to question herself in a foreign language? (36)

Adorno suggests that German "seems to have a special elective affinity for philosophy and especially for its speculative element." If Adorno's "return" to his first language coincides with an "identification with the familiar," Daphne's preference for using the German language as a tool for "philosophical investigation" registers her *dis*-identification from the "familiar." As a self-professed former student of Brumhold, Daphne radically deconstructs Hemuth's (if not Adorno's) nationalistic, nativistic, and reified view of the "speculative" quality of the German language, by implying that (at least for her) its "speculative" quality simply derives from its being "a foreign language." In other words, the German language enables her to pursue her "philosophical investigations" precisely through a quality *not* specific to itself, through becoming itself "pure signs," released from its putatively "speculative" quality. The passage suggests that Daphne can "bring her philosophical investigation to a satisfactory conclusion" precisely through linguistic loss (the loss of her mother tongue).

Fittingly, Daphne, who chooses to be lost linguistically, does not “return” to America although she writes to Ulrich in a note that “I am returning to America” (44). Whatever her true nationality, Daphne’s remaining in Europe contrasts with Ulrich’s “return” to Germany. If Ulrich returns to Germany to face the problem of the “familiar,” Daphne’s lie in the note indicates her essential indifference to the act of returning. Learning that her father is a former president of “Dust Industries,” “one of America’s largest armament manufacturers,” Ulrich speculates, “that’s why Daphne doesn’t wish to speak about her father” (39). If Ulrich projects his anxiety over the identity of his father—that is, his anxiety about the possible *explosion* of his mind due to the “return” of “the memories of childhood”⁶—Daphne’s not being “the real Daphne” mocks such a quasi-psychoanalytic, Oedipal interpretation (53). Arguably, Daphne’s social and linguistic practices link her to the practices of finance capital, less through her association with the massive American military corporation or her possible connection with state power through Dietrich, than through her non-identity, flexibility, ubiquity, and through her freedom from any kind of “return.” Instead of returning to recover “an entire panorama of familiar associations,” she changes her linguistic loss (if her “mother” tongue is indeed English) into a certain gain (the “satisfactory conclusion” of her “philosophical investigation”), as it were.

Daphne’s involvement with Brumhold’s philosophy underscores her proximity to a reifying logic at work in the novel. As quoted earlier, she “preferred to question the meaning of a thing” (36); the term “meaning” is, in Brumhold’s formula, interchangeable with a “thingliness,” “that is intrinsic to all things, regardless of their merit, their usefulness, and the degree of their perfection” (19). The narrator further juxtaposes “question[ing] the meaning of a thing” with “measure[ing] the degree to which it is authentic, or German” (125). “Thingliness,” in the novel, connotes German-ness. We can here see the subversive role of Daphne and of her indifference to “return.” As I have argued, Daphne prefers to question “the meaning of a thing,” perhaps as Brumhold did, in the German language because the language allows her to think in terms of “pure signs.” As a “former student” of Brumhold (take note of the word “former” here), she questions the “meaning” of a “thing,” outside the context of “the German uniqueness.” Whatever weight her “philosophical investigation” carries, she deconstructs Helmuth’s stereotyped view regarding the importance of the German language in Brumhold’s philosophy, exposing the degree to which the German language matters in the philosophy, not through its

"German" or "intrinsic" quality, but through its non-German quality, or simply through its being a language. While Daphne's preference for thinking in "pure signs" evinces her affinity to a commodifying logic, it also *de-reifies* Hemuth's reified view of the language. Timothy Bewes writes:

In this situation of progressive appropriation [or commodification], implies Spivak, the commodity form itself may provide a means of genuine resistance. Commodification, after all, bestows a power of abstraction from one's immediate reality; commodity fetishism even offers a means of passage out of materialistic thingitude—physically, by way of the propensity of circulating goods to cross boundaries and frontiers, or imaginatively, by way of the transcendence which attaches to the object of fetishization—which constitutes that fetishization, and which elevates the thing itself above both instrumentality and exchange value. (76)

To be sure, the appearance of Dietrich in the final section may suggest that Daphne symbolizes a woman under the control of a male associated with state power. And yet Daphne's ubiquity and non-identity, and the concomitant deconstruction of Ulrich's "return" and Helmuth's view concerning "German-ness," seem to offer a certain "means of passage out of materialistic thingitude," out of reified worlds.

3.

Daphne's preference for German to English in her philosophical thinking also indicates that, at least in theory, the true antithesis to the "familiar" is not so much the "unfamiliar"⁷ (or "foreign") as it is "pure signs." Daphne does not prefer to think in German because she values the "unfamiliar" (or, "the German uniqueness"), but because the liberation from "an entire panorama of familiar associations" enables her to "reduce these crucial questions to pure signs, since in German the word *thing* and the word *thought* did not immediately evoke in her brain the multitudinous response it did in English." If Daphne escapes the familiar, she does so less through the recourse to the "unfamiliar" than through an accuracy of correspondence between sign and referent. Daphne, in short, seeks to stabilize the connection between the sign and the referent which has been disturbed by "an entire panorama of familiar associations that blunted the preciseness."

Daphne's (if not Brumhold's) "philosophical investigations" do seem to represent a certain utopic space of reification in which an object has an adequate meaning. Yet Abish allows no easy solution to the problematic of the familiar. For to stabilize the connection between sign and referent is exactly what the authorial habit of italicized interpolation prompts the reader to do. The italicized interrogations (e.g., "*What is well known? What is not known? What is surmised? What is omitted?*" 8) and imperatives (e.g., "*Answer. Answer immediately!*") imply a speech situation in which the addressee is *forced* to be precise or to attach a single referent to a sign. Here, readers are denied the freedom of choice which is given to Daphne; in effect, readers are not allowed to come up with "multitudinous response." For the reader of the novel, imprisonment within the familiar, or the stereotypical, is liable to take place when precision is achieved. Yet as Fluck argues forcefully, for Abish, "talking about the unnamable horrors of the Nazi past can also become a cliché. In order to prevent this, the sign has to be kept from a stable and habitualized attachment to a referent that would restrain readers from exploring the full range of semantic possibilities" (82). Why then does an aspect of the novel (one might even say, its implied speech situation) encourage abrupt and presumably concise answers? "*Answer. Answer immediately,*" speaks to the tonal flatness of the novel. "*What is well known? What is not known? What is surmised,*" with its implication of interrogation or linguistic instruction, requests that the text (as a response) obstinately stays on the surface. Hence, perhaps, Abish's unwillingness to indulge in metaphor. The tone of *How German Is It* effectively blocks the reader's attempt to "explor[e] the full range of semantic possibilities."

The "coloring book" received by Ulrich in the mail from Daphne reiterates the reader's necessary immersion in the process of familiarization. The totalizing question which I mentioned in the introduction, "Could everything be different?" first occurs in the chapter where the coloring book appears (176). The same question appears on the "blackboard": "Another page of the coloring book showed a schoolteacher, a young woman, in front of the blackboard, pointing with a ruler to the hand-lettered question: COULD EVERYTHING BE DIFFERENT?" (177). The "hand-lettered question" evidently links to the word "familiar," as written by Anna Heller "in large block letters" in her classroom (119).

The point of this "hand-lettered question" in the coloring book, however, lies as much in its enticing the reader to make such an association as in the interplay of terms as such. Ulrich, looking at another page in which "a number

of officers were listening to a senior officer, who was pointing toward the distant hill," experiences a similar association of two images: "The pointing gesture reminded Ulrich of the schoolteacher pointing at the blackboard" (178). Ulrich's linking of two similar images suggests that one of the defining characteristics of this coloring book lies in its imposition of association on its readers (including Ulrich). The "busy airport" on "page one" reminds us of the "German airport" mentioned in the "page one" of the novel; a "work crew" "repairing a sewer pipe" necessarily takes us to the repair of the sewer pipe which led to the discovery of bodies; "a drawing of a young man wearing a visored military cap and a striped jersey" recalls the jacket of *How German Is It*; "an ancient-looking railroad freight car" reminds us of the "freight car" which carried foreign, mostly Jewish, workers to Daemiling (177-78). In short, what "English" did for Daphne (causing her to avoid it), these drawings do for the reader, "conjur[ing] up an entire panorama of familiar associations." The reader, like Ulrich seeing the "pointing gesture," is caught up in a series of déjà-vues. The coloring book serves as a tiny "replica" of the whole novel, as it were.

As I have mentioned in the first section, the official attempt to conceal the "skeletons" is flawed and the skeletons are made literary visible through photographs by Rita. By juxtaposing images from very different locations, Rita effectively exposes Helmuth's unconscious (or, perhaps more accurately, what Helmuth finds unthinkable). Rita takes advantage of the medium of photography, which allows such a "deliberately casual," "deliberately careless" juxtaposition, or parataxis. The coloring book, most of the material of which derives from Rita's photographs, also represents such parataxis. When Ulrich finds a connection between the pointing gesture of Anna Heller and that of a "senior officer," he, consciously or unconsciously, seems to expose a quasi-military coerciveness at the heart of Anna's pedagogy. When Ulrich asks, "Could one read anything into these drawings? Was it a message?" he, in effect, stands in for the reader (178). Consequently, we may argue that the reader is tasked to find possible connections between apparently unlinked images in the novel. In other words, the reader is urged to transcend the novel's tonal flatness by taking the coloring book as a gloss on, or exercise in, the activity of reading across parataxes. Nonetheless, one should recognize that such active agency on the part of the reader reflects only one side of the coin. On the one hand, the coloring book represents potentiality⁸; the reader is, in effect, she who "fill[s] in" the drawings and thereby completes them. On the other hand, however, the coloring book *orders* the reader to paint the drawings according to a code. In

Daphne's book, the order of coloring is given by "a tiny replica of the drawing": "Printed beneath each drawing were the words: See color key inside front cover. Also, a tiny replica of the drawing, with each object in the drawing bearing a color key number" (177). The reader of the coloring book is *forced* to paint¹ what are, in effect, already painted images; potentiality turns into the abandonment of agency. The coloring book (if the code is followed) amounts to an instance of a book in which the reader is required to attach a single referent to a sign—to be, that is, "precise." The question, "Could everything be different?" precisely points to this ambivalence of potentiality and lack of potential. If the "tiny replica" of each drawing metaphorizes the significance of the coloring book in the novel, and if the coloring book serves as a "tiny replica" of the novel, we may conclude that the reader of the novel is also compelled to engage in paratactic activity, but in a manner that reduces the potentiality of the paratactic.⁹

4.

Adorno wrote to Benjamin that "all reification is a forgetting" (qtd. in Bewes 208). The skeletons embody "irreparable experiences," and yet they fail to "blow [up]" the forgetfulness of official culture (205). Adorno decides to return to Germany in order to face such "irreparable experiences," thereby achieving an "identification with the familiar"; his essay registers the possibility that the "familiar associations" of childhood will transcend the commodity's "spectacular" efforts to engineer those amnesiac responses which seem to be emulated by the narrator of *How German Is It*. Daphne, meanwhile, seeks to escape the "familiar associations" her native tongue conjures up by *not* returning. She remains, as it were, on "the edge of forgetfulness." The coloring book, on the other hand, plays with the reader's memory. The book forces readers to recall the images they witnessed and find some link between them. The problem of the familiar always in some way involves the matter of memory. In this section, in place of conclusion, I want to dig further into this matter of the awkward and necessary relation between memory and familiarization. Let us return to the coloring book in order to clarify this issue.

Importantly, the narrator does not describe all the drawings in the coloring book, but only the ones he has carefully selected; for example, we are not at all sure what sort of drawings the book includes between "page eighteen" and "page twenty-four" (178). By referring to the page numbers, Abish foregrounds

the fact that the narrator invites us to develop a certain association between images even where other images are conspicuously omitted. Using phrases applied to Rita's "uniting of the prints," the narrator prompts the reader to witness, in the coloring book, a "deliberately casual," "deliberately careless," "deliberately nonchalant" selection of drawings (201). When we see Ulrich make an association between the two drawings, we become aware that our own associations may well be more or less controlled by the narrator. The narrator's ostentatious selection of Daphne's drawings, in other words, makes the reader conscious of the unselected drawings or unselected pages excluded from the text, which might constitute the outside of "an entire panorama of familiar association." The coloring book connotes that showing is simultaneously hiding, or that seeing is simultaneously unseeing in the novel.

Arguably, the reversibility of visibility and invisibility, and of exposure and hiding, constitutes a central motif in the novel. The discovery of the "bodies," for example, is narrated as a series of exposures. First, a "heavy downpour . . . caved in, exposing a ruptured sewage pipe" (136). The mayor presses the "Department of Public Works" to complete the repair, which leads to workers' "removing the concrete chunks and the wet soil, exposing the massive sewage pipe" and only eventually the mass grave (138). This "exposing" requires obfuscation insofar as the "windows of the bakery as well as the windows of all the other stores were covered with a fine gray film of dust" (138), and traffic to the site of excavation is blocked by "guards" (201). The exposure of bodies coincides with the attempt to make them invisible. The "Department of Public Works" appropriates, secularizes, and privatizes them. Even as it reveals, so the official response renders the bodies radically invisible—unidentifiable, anonymous, multitudinous and silent. Exposure here is simultaneously concealment; the reader never witnesses the actual bodies, she merely sees Rita's photographs.

The relation between Franz's scrupulous replication of camp Durst and Helmuth's architectural model of the police station links a reversibility between seeing and un-seeing to a reversibility between remembering and forgetting. Not only does Franz's model replicate "what had ultimately been destroyed to make room for Brumholdstein," but the replica is placed in the "basement" or made invisible to guests including Ulrich and Helmuth (158). Even Ulrich (Franz's favorite) is granted no opportunity to see the model; the reader too remains uninvited. The replica insists on the presence of the absent camp, and yet the replica itself remains ultimately absent in the book. The replica, hidden in the

basement from visitors and readers, metaphorizes the camp *in its destroyed (or buried) state* rather than the camp that had once existed. Put another way, Franz exposes the destroyed camp in the very act of hiding it. Abish hangs a “large reproduction of the destroyed police station” in Helmuth’s room, as a counterpart of Franz’s replica,¹⁰ thereby signaling the presence of absence: “In the room in which they [Ulrich and Helmuth] were seated, Helmuth had hung a large reproduction of the destroyed police station in Württemberg. Hargenaus do not forget anything” (94).

“Hargenaus do not forget anything,” should not, however, be taken as the message of the “reproduction of the destroyed police station.” If Hargenaus did not indeed “forg[e]t anything,” Helmuth would have no need to make the “reproduction”; he would simply remember it, as it was. The “reproduction” performs Helmuth’s forgetting of things by indicating that he needs the model in order to be reminded of the destruction. Referring to the uncovered skeletons, the narrator writes: “Furthermore, if the township were to bury the skeletons, should it also then erect some sort of monument, or would a simple marker or grave stone suffice?” (191-92). The erection of a monument does not signify that people “do not forget anything”; on the contrary, the passage suggests that to monumentalize is to forget “skeletons.” Similarly, the point of Helmuth’s “reproduction,” of the “skeletons,” and of Franz’s replica does not lie in the danger of forgetfulness. The imagined cursory epitaph (“Men and women, inmates of Durst. Identity Unknown. Cause of death, unknown. May they rest in peace”) implies that the act of remembering itself is a form of forgetting. The “precise” force of the following passage, which occurs in the first section of the novel, suggests that to make “replicas” of “destroyed” objects is not to revere the “past” or the “truth,” but rather to fail to bear witness to the arbitrary nature of an historically constructed “German” uniqueness, or to un-see the “truth”:

To his left, the old Jaeger Bridge, a graceful-looking bridge spanning the Neckar. Or to be quite precise, a bridge that resembled the old Jaeger in every detail, the old Jaeger having been destroyed in the war. Replicas of this kind testify to a German reverence for the past and for the truth, a reverence for the forms and structures upon which so many of their ideals have been emblazoned. (7)

Anna Heller might be glossing the narrator’s account of the “old” Jaeger Bridge,

in her emphasis on the ossification of memory, or the familiarization involved in the act of remembering:

If we ever forget something that is familiar, then, quite likely, someone will remind us, saying: You forgot to say good morning. . . . Now, if we think about the past, if we think about anything that happened in the past: yesterday, the day before, a week ago, aren't we to some extent thinking about something that we consider familiar? For if nothing else, the memory, pleasant or unpleasant as it may be, has become a familiar one. (121)

Anna, as it were, indicates that "the experience as remembered is not the same as the experience remembered" (Kermode 292). The substance of Anna's lecture may lend itself to a comment from Frank Kermode's on memory:

So the concept of memory offered by psychoanalysis is at first sight hostile to the truth of autobiography. What we profess to remember is what we have devised to protect us from the truth; and this will be the case even when, or perhaps especially when, the attempt to hide nothing is exceptionally strenuous and well advertised, as with Rousseau. The concept of *Nachträglichkeit* explains how a past is recovered in a distorted form; a childhood memory becomes a trauma, a trauma not directly associated with a "real" childhood memory. Memory invents a past. Its reworkings defend us against the appalling timelessness of the unconscious. What we remember we may remember because we are forgetting in the wrong way; our remembering, then takes the form of repetition, of acting out. (295)

What we remember professedly protects us from the "truth of autobiography." This is exactly what the last section ("Could everything be different?") of the novel, with its sudden psychoanalytic turn, brings to the fore. The recurrent question in the final section, "*Are memories only unreliable when they serve as an explanation?*" suggests that the professedly announced memories direct us away from the "truth of autobiography." Ulrich's account of his childhood, given to the analyst, serves as a typical instance of "explanation" in which "memories are unreliable." His explicitly psychoanalytic confession about his origin ostensibly lacks affect. After mentioning his conviction that he is a "bastard,"

Ulrich says to Dr. Magenbach: "I mention this because you said, Tell me something about yourself. I must also add that I do not find it difficult to speak about this. In general, if I have not done so in the past it was because I felt hampered, constricted by convention, by a question of good taste" (250). For Ulrich his earlier silence concerning his conception merely expresses his "good taste" and accordance with "convention." Ulrich, or perhaps Abish himself, who many critics see as deliberately using a "neutral"¹¹ or affectless style in the novel, seems accurately to illustrate what Fredric Jameson calls "the waning of affect":

The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego—what I have been calling the waning of affect. But it means the end of much more—the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). (*Postmodernism* 15)

As what Jameson might term as an instance of "[the] end of the psychopatholog[y] of that ego," Ulrich's lack of affect points to a familiarization of the activity of memory itself, whereby a psychoanalytic trauma turns itself into a matter of "good taste" in order (in Kermode's terms) to "defend against . . . the appalling timelessness of the unconscious." Intriguingly, Abish in a letter to Martin wrote, of the conclusion to *How German Is It*, that, "[t]he memory of a dream to end all dreams is a vague statement. I had Hollywood in mind" (241 n. 24). That is to say, the final ambiguous, yet crucial sentence concerning "memory" was written in association with an American incarnation of commodification.

While every act of remembering and seeing in the novel can be characterized as a form of forgetting, and therefore an unseeing the "truth," the novel also indicates that "[f]orgetting is the only way to remember" (Kermode 295). As I have argued, the final section of the novel overtly deals with the issue of memory. It can hardly be a coincidence that Daphne, who *returns* to the novel in this section, declares that she does "not remember," when asked by Dietrich about how she has conducted her meeting with Paula:

. . . You knew that she was fond of the beach. Fond of that untidy working-class beach.

I no longer remember, she said with a faraway look.
 Sure you do.
 I no longer remember.
 If you concentrate hard enough, it’ll come back to you. (225)

“Sure” Daphne remembers, but she professes that she does not. If Dietrich here represents “someone [who] will remind us, saying: You forgot to say good morning,” Daphne’s remark invalidates such a “reminder”—and its attempt to reduce the “past” to a “familiar” memory—because she does remember. Daphne seems to imply that she can “remember” her past with Paula only by professing that she forgot it.

If we were to try to find the “truth” of the novel, or the *true* representation of “experience,” perhaps we might identify it in Franz’s “howl.”¹² Franz, who “emerged from the war without any visible scars,” changes the invisible “scars” into an audible but inarticulate “howl”: “Only she [Doris] could read on his face the howl that was to follow . . . this particular wild look signified a momentous encounter with the past” (73). If the “howl” signals the “truth of autobiography,” the truth can be the truth only to the extent that it is inarticulate and unknown. Put differently, the “encounter with the past” can only be experienced as a sort of linguistic loss, or, as the impossibility of translation. If Franz shows one extreme way of remembering the past without reification, Daphne’s remark indicates another possible way of doing so—to articulate that she has forgotten. Daphne’s stake lies in her verbalizing the forgetfulness; in starting from the announcement of the forgetfulness.

Adorno goes back to Germany because of “language”; he tries to recover himself from the “impossibility” of translation. He thus writes the essay in German. He returns to Germany, in other words, in order to *write* in German. Ulrich returns to Germany in order to “start on another novel” among “the people who speak the same language I do” (29). Both Adorno and Ulrich choose to “return” rather than staying within the “impossible” locus of translation, in order to “write,” even at the risk of a “reified consciousness,” through an “identification with the familiar.” Ulrich’s writing of “another novel” professedly involves an attempt to forget the past rather than remembering it: “Was he aware that he would eventually return to Württemberg and there, in a new apartment, quietly piece together his next novel, a novel based on his six months’ stay in Paris, a novel based on his affair with Marie-Jean Filebra, a novel based on his desire to efface everything that had preceded his trip to

Paris" (17). Asked by Helmuth, "From where are you calling?" Ulrich answers, "I am returning from the edge of forgetfulness" (9). Whether Ulrich encounters the "past" or the "truth of autobiography" in Germany ultimately remains ambiguous. Yet he seems to suggest that the possibility of encountering the "past" or "truth" occurs only when writing (i.e., the forgetting of or recovery from linguistic loss) originates in the professed announcement of a certain forgetfulness.

Notes

- ¹ I shall discuss this notion of "thingliness" later in this paper.
- ² Bewes's definition of the term is deliberately "crude." Fredric Jameson, for example, defines the term in more specific terms: "The theory of reification (here strongly overlaid with Max Weber's analysis of rationalization) describes the way in which, under capitalism, the older traditional forms of human activity are instrumentally reorganized and 'taylorized,' analytically fragmented and reconstructed according to various rational models of efficiency, and essentially restructured along the lines of a differentiation between means and ends" (*Signatures of the Visible* 10). I here want to draw upon Bewes's more "crude" definition because Bewes's account is, in its crudity and totalizing feature, more akin to the notion of the "familiar" in the novel and therefore seems useful in analyzing the text.
- ³ See the passage from Adorno's essay I will quote toward the end of the section.
- ⁴ Anthony Schirato argues that "Rita's photographs blatantly attempt to enforce a reading of Brumholdstein's concentration camp legacy" (80).
- ⁵ Houen, Wotipka and Varsava also briefly mention Adorno's essay (Houen 219, Wotipka 503 and Varsava 102-03).
- ⁶ At the scene where Helmuth takes Ulrich to the "bunker," asked by Ulrich, "What is it that you want me to see?" Helmuth says, "Something that will bring back the memories of childhood. Something that will blow your mind." "Is that what I need?" answers Ulrich (205).
- ⁷ The "unfamiliar," in a sense, is always already reified or familiarized: the narrator writes, for instance, that "all photographs" today should "satisfy the longing for the unexpected, the unfamiliar" (199). The "unfamiliar" is in itself an object of consumption here.
- ⁸ In a somewhat different context, Houen also discusses potentiality. See 218-19.
- ⁹ The agency of the reader is also foregrounded by the self-referential graffiti in the toilet of the Pfaume: "*Must one read the writing on the wall?*" (155). The imperative statement, "Answer. Answer immediately" would also involve a similar issue. Schirato observes that the imperative statement "might be read as a narrative attempt to

harass the reader into finding an explanation for, and making a judgment about, Ulrich's behavior" (82).

¹⁰ Schirato maintains that the narrative makes a frequent use of "pairings and parallels" (83). Franz's replica and Helmuth's reproduction seem to make one of such pairings. Franz himself says that the model "is like an architectural model" (156).

¹¹ For example, Alexander Houen writes: "A primarily polyvocal novel is not readily acceptable to Ulrich, however. He would rather have all the different characters speak in the same neutered voice" (207). Also see Wotipka 507 and Peyser 254.

¹² Wotipka, for instance, argues that the howl "most effectively fulfills the defamiliarizing role of terror" (514).

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