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ABSTRACT

Like many other writers, Walter Abish first tries out his literary style in short stories and then develops it in a longer work of fiction. This paper first demonstrates his original literary art in his five long works – *Alphabetical Africa, How German Is It, 99: The New Meaning, Eclipse Fever,* and *Double Vision* – and then discusses the characteristics commonly found in his different styles of fiction. Some of these characteristics are similar to what Postmodern thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Frederic Jameson proclaim; however, Abish's liberal humanism, with his social and moral concerns, should instead be identified with what Theodor Adorno, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Terry Eagleton, philosophers profoundly influenced by the Holocaust, maintain. Though Abish's Jewish experience during World War II and just afterwards seems to function only as the material to produce an innovative fiction, its influence may well be recognized in the backbone of his writing.

I. ABISH'S FOREIGN ELEMENTS

Walter Abish was born in Vienna, Austria; when he was seven, the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany and its virulent anti-Semitism forced him and his family to move out of his native country to France via Italy, and then from there to Shanghai. After World War II, the anti-foreign movement in China forced the family to escape to Israel. Because of these unsettled situations in his early years, he was exposed to diverse cultures and languages and acquired a cosmopolitan view so that Sylvie Bauer observes: "Son oeuvre tout entière porte la marque d'une vie commencée dans l'errance" (His whole work bears the mark of a life begun in wandering) (7). That might be related to the fact that many characters in his fiction readily leave behind

the places familiar to them and travel a long distance, putting themselves in strange circumstances.

Though mobility and foreign elements are easily found in Abish's fiction and associated with his own early experiences, they are not used to recreate his past experiences in unfamiliar places or to record them. This is why Abish insists that he wrote *Alphabetical Africa* (hereafter, *AA*), *How German Is It* (hereafter, *HG*) and *Eclipse Fever* (hereafter, *EF*) without visiting the countries that form the background of these novels and emphasizes that the foreign elements of the background are imaginative and chosen only for their literary effects. Furthermore, if *99: The New Meaning* (hereafter, *99*), consisting of phrases written by various European writers, and *Double Vision* (hereafter, *DV*) based on autobiographical elements, are more or less related to his personal life and familiar circumstances, both fictions are too artificially constructed, either as a very experimental collage or as the deconstruction of an autobiographical text, to be regarded as memoirs or works based on his retrospection.

Abish will not–or cannot, if he wants to–depict his foreign experiences in a strange land, probably because even after being removed from his native land, he was continuously brought up in a familiar European culture and atmosphere, as is observed in *DV*. According to *DV*, his parents were quite assimilated to the Christian European culture as members of the well-off middle class in Austria and protected their only child as much as possible. As a result, he did not have to be so sensitive to either his identity originating from his Jewish background or a non-Jewish identity forced on him from the outside, as some black people like Stuart Hall feel they were forced to adopt white people's culture to keep up in Western society. This situation was not much changed even after their exile from Austria. Though I intend later to argue that the wandering of Abish's early years indirectly influenced him in a particular way, its direct influence is found only in his willing usage of foreign elements.

In his works, furthermore, Abish's foreign elements function simply as literary tools, and he mainly uses them as signs to induce the reader to consider for himself or for herself, his or her own society. Abish very carefully withholds authorial explanations as he clarifies his literary intention in the interview on *HG* with Sylvère Lotringer: "I have avoided an explanation. I have introduced German signs to create and to authenticate a 'German' novel" (161). The reader recognizes Abish's signs as German in *HG* but because Abish will not give any authorial support to the reader in defining them as German, his or her recognition of them as German forces him or her to consider how much his or her judgment or understanding are based on his or her preconceptions and biases.

It is also true that in other fictions, Abish relies on the reader's preconception such as the colonial or savage image of Africa or the villainous or criminal image of Mexico, but he never tells the reader how Africa or Mexico really is. Thus, both Africa in *AA* and Mexico in *EF* function as signs to insinuate the reader's prejudice as well as help in overturning his or her familiar world.

Consequently, if Abish's very Jewish experience as a refugee from the Holocaust gives his fictions unique foreign elements, they are completely cut off from any racial or religious Jewishness and can be ascribed to a more universal idea such as the uncertainty of this world or one's problematic thinking. This must be one of the reasons why most critics focus mainly on his literary devices, regarding him as an innovative writer rather than as a Jewish writer.

2. ABISH'S INNOVATIVE DEVICES

In order to clarify innovative devices characterizing his writing, this paper will focus on his five long works of fiction, *AA*, *HG*, *99*, *EF*, and *DV* because he usually experiments with his new literary devices in short works of fiction and then polishes them into longer works of fiction.

Being earnest about creating original fiction, Abish never repeats the same literary device in his long works of fiction. At the very beginning, he experimented with some eccentric forms of writing based on letters of the alphabet in his short works and then, under the encouragement of James Laughlin of New Directions publishers, he developed them into the unique alphabetical usage and arrangement in *AA*. That is, in its first chapter all the words begin with a, in the second they begin

with a and b, in the third they begin with a, b, and c, and in the 26th chapter they begin with all letters. Afterwards chapter by chapter he subtracts usable letters till the 52nd, where all words begin with a. It was so peculiar that Tonny Tanner calls it as "strictly a one-off book" (67). Abish himself believes that he could not have published it without the sharp eye of James Laughlin as he explained in an interview with me: "I wrote *AA* for James Laughlin, my then publisher. …If not for J., I would not have written *AA*. At that time, I don't believe there was another publisher who'd have accepted something as esoteric as *AA*" (80). On the other hand, thanks to its tremendously artificial restriction of letters, the book's fictitious atmosphere easily separates its story from reality enough to allow any absurd or whimsical event or direction of the story and, with an extravagant laugh, emphasizes the uncertainty and instability of our life as a whole.

In *HG*, Abish's concern shifts from letters to sentences–especially interrogative sentences. Many of the interrogative sentences used in this book are unique because they state a certain matter for the reader to consider as if they were affirmative sentences while remaining interrogative sentences without giving any authorial opinion about it. It is true that this fiction seems to be more realistic than *AA* at first glance but as James Klinkowitz suggests in calling it "a superrealism" ("Walter Abish and the Surfaces of Life" 419) or "an experimental realism" ("Experimental Realism" 63), Abish's cultivated diction including many interrogative sentences distinguishes this book's realism from the traditional one.

Abish's interrogative sentences in *HG* construct what Alain Arias-Misson calls "an elliptical world" (154) where the book "is defined by the space between the elements rather than by the character of the elements themselves" (154). Dieter Saalmann similarly recognizes this characteristic when he quotes Olga Bernal's phrase, "the 'novel of absence' " (106). Such a literary device is, in fact, clearly symbolized by the coloring book within the book, which shows the frameworks but leaves the spaces to be colored as one likes. Because the question of how to complete a picture– how to conclude a presented subject–is totally left to the reader, this literary device reveals Abish's openness towards other people.

99 might not be regarded as one long piece but as a collection of five short pieces of fiction. Yet I would like to include it here because these short works of fiction are constructed in the same style, all with quoted sentences, and the book functions as a whole more solidly than other collections of his short works such as *Minds Meet* and *In the Future Perfect*.

As the title of *99* suggests, Abish is very conscious of how many paragraphs are used in each text. Moreover, all of the paragraphs are quoted from what was written by other authors and the main aim does not seem to be to relive those other authors' original intentions. Instead, Abish uses the quoted phrases to focus the reader's attention on certain things he is interested in. He clearly states this purpose in the preface: "In using selected segments of published texts authored by others as the exclusive 'ready made' material for these five 'explorations,' I wanted to probe certain familiar emotional configurations afresh, and arrive at an emotional content that is not mine by design" (9). In fact, the quoted authors are all European. If Abish is well versed in them, the general American reader probably does not know the contexts of the quoted phrases. Yet, Abish does not comment on each phrase and lets the reader decide what new meaning he or she should draw from them in his or her own context.

Abish's interest shifts from letters in *AA*, through interrogative sentences in *HG* and quoted paragraphs in *99*, finally to the deconstruction of the novel genre in *EF*.

As Africa in *AA*, Germany in *HG*, and European authors in *99* are foreign to the American reader, so is Mexico in *EF*. However, it easily offers the reader a familiar image of a lawless land with gangs and corruption. This Mexican image is thoroughly but humorously exploited by the style of a picaresque novel. At the same time, this style is undermined in the process of the story because the book goes beyond a picaresque novel by means of various double and crossing patterns of people and their acts, as well as through the ironical cancellation of the highly anticipated eclipse at the end.

Abish's fifth long work, *DV*, deconstructs another novel genre, the autobiography. In this book, double and crossing patterns are more aggressively used. The book consists of the two crossing sections, "The Writer" and "The Writer-to-Be." In the former,

"The Writer" section, Abish as a writer, who now lives in New York, returns to Europe, while the latter, "The Writer-to-Be" section, describes Abish's early life from his childhood in Vienna, Austria, through the refugee life in France and Shanghai, until he was a young man in Israel. What is more, the chapters of these two sections are presented alternately so that Abish's footsteps in the two sections overlap each other, indicating that the present is always influenced by the past while the past is influenced by the present. Accordingly, the world looks far more complicated than it first appears.

What is more, the book presents Abish's own prejudices and flawed understanding so conspicuously as to suggest that his autobiographical writing is not reliable at all but involves various forms of double vision. Thus, his writing fails to fulfill the normal autobiographical function of a record or a report but becomes another type of fiction demonstrating how difficult it is to understand events properly even when one experienced them in person.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF POSTMODERNISM

Changing from letters to sentences, then to paragraphs, and finally to literary genres, Abish has always attempted new literary forms of fiction with new literary devices. Besides, the artistic challenges in his fiction are always liberal and open enough to reflect the leading culture of his time.

Some of the most fundamental and insistent ideas found in Abish's writing are uncertainty, unreliability and instability. *AA*'s strict usage of letters makes the whole work so unrealistic as to make any event in it caricatured and unreliable. *HG*'s interrogative sentences induce the reader to think but reserve any authorial opinion, leaving the reader uncertain about his or her interpretation. *99* overturns the original meaning of the quoted paragraphs and suggests that there are many possible ways of understanding them. *EF*'s picaresque setting allows any strange development in the story and destroys the reader's expectation. Further, *DV* keeps supplying multiple visions in order to question the reader's assessment and judgment.

To emphasize these characteristics, Abish frequently uses defamilialization by, for instance, tenaciously asking about what we take for granted. One of the common subjects to be questioned in each text is the image of another country or area such as Africa, Germany, Europe, and Mexico. Abish confidently uses the images we have of them while he earnestly insists on how wrong and prejudiced they can be.

Abish also repeatedly uses the image of perfection only to undermine it. Jerry A. Varsava explains that "Abish's characters strive to achieve 'familiarity' and 'perfection'" (83) because they are "the value and achievements most revered in the late twentieth century" (83) by urban people in the United States. The sleek image of perfection is easily found in the collection of short stories, *In the Future Perfect*, as well as in the modern Germany in *HG*, only to be cancelled by the revelation of its deficiencies.

If this world is uncertain, unreliable and unstable, so are people. Hence it is natural that people cannot understand each other perfectly, nor communicate with each other fully. This is why love relationships in Abish's fiction are often a failure or just shallow and frivolous love affairs though there are also men who keep yearning for their wives or loves. The author in *AA*, for example, runs after Alva earnestly; Ulrich in *HG* cannot forget his former wife, Paula; and Alejandro in *EF* wants to regain his wife, Mercedes. Being contrasted with the general flippant promiscuity in each fiction, their irresistible yearning looks naïve and vulnerable enough to impress on the reader the difficulty of a satisfying, fruitful relationship.

Uncertainty, unreliability and instability were, incidentally, nothing new in the early 1970s, when Abish started his writing career in the United States. They were typical postmodern literary ideas, quickly spreading, as shown by the fact that one of the leading philosophers of Postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard, used "the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse [...] making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative" (xxiii) and defined "*postmodern*[ism] as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv).

4. COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HOLOCAUST THINKERS

If postmodern ideas are clearly recognized in Abish's attitudes in producing innovative literary devices, there is also a clear difference between Abish and some of the Postmodernists such as Lyotard. He associates "the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end – universal peace" (xxiii-xxiv) with the term *modern*. For him, therefore, Postmodernism is fundamentally non-ethical and apolitical. So, too, does Frederic Jameson understand it when he reproaches it as "historical deafness" (xi). Without any ethical or political background, uncertainty, instability and unreliability may easily fall into nihilism, cynicism or indecisiveness. However, Abish is completely free from such negative tendencies and is clearly characterized by a liberal humanism open to the future and to the reader.

For example, when Abish explains his literary aims in his first interview with Jerome Klinkowitz, he emphasizes how he avoids any decisive description from the authorial position: "I try to achieve a neutral value in my writing, that is to say, I avoid the intentional and sometimes unintentional hierarchy of values that seems to creep in whenever lifelike incidents are depicted" ("Walter Abish: An Interview" 95). Such "a neutral value" with his reservation induces the reader to consider the matter on his or her own account and assumes a variety of responses. It requires the author, therefore, to have trust in the reader and maintains that the democratic co-existence of different responses is superior to one dominant and governing idea however superb it might be. Because of this strong trust in the reader and the superiority of the democratic variety, Abish's writing is too positive and too liberal to become either cynical or nihilistic whatever uncertainty and instability it may insist on.

In this way Abish's writing deviates from the characteristics of Postmodenism defined by such philosophers and cultural historians as Lyotard and Jameson, but this is not surprising because Postmodernism tends to include variation in itself as indicated by Terry Eagleton's complaint that "postmodernism is such a portmanteau phenomenon that anything you assert of one piece of it is almost bound to be untrue of another" (viii).

In fact, one can easily recall several thinkers after World War II who clearly proclaimed a humanistic liberalism similar to Abish's as well as the postmodern ideas of uncertainty and diversity.

One of the early thinkers who warned against relying on one's preconception and generalization in the same way as Abish does in his highly charged texts is Theodor Adorno. He calls one's careless tendency to generalize or deduce under a certain label or a title, "the ticket mentality" (Jay 38) and criticizes the habit of ignoring differences among people as a totalistic way of thinking. He was strongly against it because it could easily become a soil in which anti-Semitism would thrive. Adorno was forced to seek asylum in the United States by the Nazi anti-Semitic policy, and it encouraged his liberal humanistic thinking, as Martin Jay points out in his book: "The major lesson Adorno drew from the Holocaust was, in fact, the link between anti-Semitism and totalistic thinking" (20).

Similarly, Emmanuel Levinas underscores diversity by emphasizing our ethical obligation towards "the other." His thinking was developed in awareness of the Holocaust, as Robert Eaglestone explains in *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, where he states that "Levinas's philosophy is one of the cinders of the Holocaust" (255), and as Takashi Minatomichi, another Levinas scholar, points out in clarifying his efforts to be a real thinker for peace (130).

Levinas's thinking was inherited by Jacques Derrida, who explains the exorbitant act as "go[ing] out of the wheel track" (Eaglestone 281) clearly with "a sense of openness towards the future" (Eaglestone 299). As an Arabic-speaking Jew of French Algeria, Derrida was brought up in an environment in which he encountered prejudice, and, though he was not directly involved in the Holocaust, was strongly conscious of it. In his famous thesis on Levinas, "Violence et Métaphysique" in *L'Ecriture et la Différence*, he criticizes the lack of otherness, time, or history in Western philosophy by claiming that "la philosophie soit morte hier, depuis Hegel ou Marx, Nietzsche ou Heidegger" (117) and blaming traditional Western philosophy as "des philosophies de la violence" (136). Such a dominant attitude as that of which Derrida accused Western philosophy is exactly the one Abish earnestly avoids in his writing.

Thus, Abish shares the futuristic liberal humanism of his postmodern thinking with some Jewish philosophers of his age. Moreover, it is found in the thinking of non-Jewish philosophers such as Terry Eagleton, as well. He is an Irish Catholic and supports Postmodernism, which he regards as "a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the ideal of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation" (vii). He assumes that his contemporary thinking will prevent "a falsely homogenizing habit of thought" (50) just as the Jewish philosophers influenced by the Holocaust did. He is as conscious of the miserable result of World War II as they were when he maintains that there was a history we should not forget and quotes Adorno's famous phrase, which he considers "delivered in the shadow of Auschwitz" (51): "No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb ... the One and All that keeps rolling on to this day – with occasional breathing spells – would teleologically be the absolute of suffering" (50-51).

As Abish's liberal humanism is also found in a non-Jewish postmodern philosopher, it should not be particularly attributed to his being a Jew. However, as suggested by Robert Eaglestone's emphatic claim that "postmodernism in the West begins with thinking about the Holocaust," (2) some postmodern philosophers and writers who "take into account both its central and consistent commitment to ethics and its rigorous, rational side" (3) are apparently influenced by World War II and the massacres which took place in it. Further, it cannot be denied that Abish's Jewish background exposed him to the historical and political events of his age too much for him to avoid being conscious of them.

5. CONCLUSION

Abish has no equal in creating very original works of fiction that grow with the reader. When he reserves authorial opinions and induces the reader to think for himself or herself, it turns out that the more deeply the reader understands his works, the more meaning they offer. In other words, they offer limitless possibilities open both to the reader and to the future. With their positive openness, his works are liberal and because they basically trust in the reader and the future, they take on a humanistic nature. Furthermore, they are also political as he declares in the interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory: "My work is indeed political" (21). His liberal humanism is very similar to what Adorno, Levinas, Derrida and Eagleton advocated in the memory of World War II and the Holocaust and in their search for a peaceful future. Being political, Abish's fictions cannot be completely free from his being a Jew, either, even if they are not very Jewish. It is true that his Jewish experiences in his childhood are not treated as objects to describe per se but simply as materials to create innovative fiction. Nevertheless, whenever his political consciousness, especially in relation to the Holocaust, is referred to, his childhood experiences as a Jew can never be ignored. Though it looks paradoxical, it is safe to say that Abish's literary art is particularly original in his non-Jewish postmodern writing, under the strong influence of his very Jewish experience.

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