

Assimilation in Postmodern Globalization

— In Relation to Walter Abish's Jewishness in *Eclipse Fever* —

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Walter Abish's third novel, *Eclipse Fever* (1993; hereafter, abbreviated as EF) is, at first glance, an entertaining picaresque novel mainly set in contemporary Mexico. One of the major characters, a Mexican critic named Alejandro, is involved in the U.S. in two ways — his wife, Mercedes has an affair with an American writer, Jurud, whose books Mercedes translates into Spanish, while he himself is involved with an American entrepreneur, Preston Hollier, betraying him at the end to Mexican politicians under their threat of violence. In juxtaposition with Alejandro's story and in contrast to Mercedes's visit to the U.S., Jurud's daughter, Bonny, goes to Mexico to see a total eclipse of the sun and, like Alejandro, suffers from violence. Both Alejandro and Bonny encounter so many thrilling incidents such as an illegal deal in pre-Colombian artifacts, promiscuity, betrayal, violence and even a murder, that EF looks "accessible and even melodramatic" (1) as Steven G. Kellman comments.

It is, however, a highly intellectual postmodern work and has important postmodern characteristics such as a narrative which deviates from the modern metanarratives and which has lost "its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal" (Leotard xxiv), and "an affinity for 'dispersal'" (Conte 11) which "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Leotard xxv). Like Abish's other works, it also promotes an ethical and historical responsibility similar to that encouraged by Levinas's and Derrida's philosophy¹⁾. To apply such a popular and commercial style as the picaresque to these postmodern characteristics is, therefore, a new challenge in Abish's writing. What is more, in EF, Abish for the first time adopts the theme of assimilation, focusing on Mexico's development in its relations with Spain and the U.S. In this essay, therefore, I will analyze Abish's literary challenge in the light of assimilation and then later discuss the meaning of his challenge in relation to the present globalization and his Jewishness.

1. Assimilation to Connect Today's Mexico with Its Past

Abish's literary challenge in EF is especially apparent in his new way of handling Mexican history and its relation with the present. Unlike EF, for example, in his second, PEN/Faulkner Award-winning masterpiece, *How German Is It* (1980; hereafter, abbreviated as HG), it is apparent that the Nazi era is treated as Germany's negative heritage and that the reader is requested to recognize a similar danger in the present peaceful-looking society to prevent Nazi atrocities in future. In contrast, in EF, Mexican history, even such as Aztec human sacrifice and the Spanish bloody intrusion, are treated with more detachment and equivocation. It does not mean that Abish affirms these violent incidents in any way. When Alejandro pessimistically comments: "A history [...] so intensely bloody, so insanely chaotic, so driven by dementia and rapacity and passion and greed" (172), his passive attitudes are slightly ridiculed. Abish is just noncommittal toward violent Mexican history and emphasizes the fact that we are surrounded by harsh reality, in order to seek a wise way to handle it.

Alejandro is not good at facing the difficult reality and does not think of a way to change it. Even when he suspects Mercedes's affair with Jurud, he does not ask her to stay but thinks:

In Mexico, where betrayal is so well understood, every man has grown up with the dread as well as the anticipation of it... Because la Malinche, who slept with Cortés and bore him a child, betrayed every one of her countrymen, modern Mexico began with an act of treachery. (208)

Attributing Mercedes's betrayal to Mexico's historical incident, Alejandro regards it as unavoidable in Mexico and passively accepts it. Thus he excuses not only la Malinche but also Mercedes from moral responsibility, and even ignores the cruelty of a massacre antecedent to la Malinche's affair with Cortés. This must be one of the reasons why Harold Bloom recognizes in EF the cynical impression "of an era darkening to its extinction" (9).

As mentioned above, however, Alejandro's narrow view and submission are often ridiculed in the book so that his views and attitudes are hardly recognized as Abish's. In fact, if mestizos — people of combined Indian and European extraction — are the majority in Mexico today and if they would not have been born without la Malinche's treachery, things could have been different. One does not have to accept her treachery as an element that was necessary to lead Mexico in the right way in its history. As Jurud "would discuss history as

if it were the most farfetched fiction and fiction as if it were an outrageous form of history” (55), understanding history could be a subjective matter and dependent on the individual. Reserving his opinions on whether la Malinche’s treachery is immoral or necessary, Abish simply points out difficulties in Mexican history, leaving judgment to the reader so that the reader can decide in his own situation how much influence he should accept from a dominant power and how much independence he should retain.

As la Malinche’s treachery and Alejandro’s attitudes suggest, Mexico absorbed an external power into itself without much resistance. When Preston’s wife, Rita, envies Fuentes, a famous Mexican writer, for having grown up in the U.S. because of “[t]he thrill of being free of the constrictive familiar” (235), Alejandro’s friend, Francisco, disagrees with her and says: “In Mexico we are never free of the familiar [...]. Unless physically prevented from doing so, we familiarize everything” (235). Francisco sounds ironical because he thinks Mexico has been too easy about external influences. Yet, considering how much the Mexicans had been threatened by external powers throughout history, familiarization must have been one way to sustain their family blood as Abish explains to Van Delden in the interview: “I suspect the notion of the familiar has an altogether different significance in Mexico with its strong familial bonds and, as a result, the incurred obligations to the family” (383).

In Abish’s works, familiarization usually invites a crisis of one’s existence because people tend to stop thinking about a familiar thing and neglect an important signal of danger in it. This is why the reader is always asked to question whether a familiar thing is really what it seems. In EF, on the other hand, familiarization is, for good or evil, one of the ways of assimilation. Conquered Mexicans chose to familiarize the conqueror, Cortés, and integrate themselves into Spanish blood, in order to survive and protect their own blood and culture from being completely exterminated.

This Mexican flexibility in assimilation is ironically contrasted to German rigidity through their opposite reactions toward their respective new innovative concert halls:

Unlike its Mexican twin, the unconventionally shaped golden Berlin Philharmonic Hall, erected on what had been an area devastated by the war, was initially perceived even by its friendliest of critics as aesthetically at odds with Berlin’s formerly rich architectural history, whereas the Brazilian architect’s oddly shaped creation for Mexico City was immediately accepted as an anomaly only the Aztecs or their unknown precursors might have created in a moment of aberrational bloodletting inspiration. (21)

In HG, Abish sarcastically observes the German passions for reconstructing old buildings. In EF, once again, their persistence in their traditions prevents them from accepting a new building, but here Abish's sarcasm is not aimed at German rigidity but at Mexicans' easy acceptance of an odd creation by a foreign designer, only as "an anomaly." They are so ready to adjust their culture to unfamiliar things.

Incidentally, Abish warns against these new buildings by associating them with past atrocities. The perfection of the hall in its acoustics and inner decoration recalls the glorious ideal advocated by Hitler's Third Reich, which caused such devastating destruction to Germany that Germans can no longer much appreciate anything that suggests it. The new Mexican hall resembles this German hall and is associated with another bloody aspect of Mexican history, Aztec human sacrifice, too. Like its German twin, therefore, their new hall should signal their inner danger of driving their country into destruction, but they do not seem to care about it at all.

In my interview with him held on Dec. 25, 2006, Abish answered my question about why he chose Mexico as a setting and said: "I wasn't all that interested in the relationship of Mexico to the United States. It's a subject that has been explored thoroughly. I was primarily interested in the relationship each had to its own past, especially Mexico to its painful Hispanic past." It is significant that he observes Mexicans, the weaker group, in their relation to Spain, the stronger group, because in his earlier works, he depicted the danger created by a more powerful group or person through their thoughtlessness, affectedness, superficiality, etc. In this book, Abish for the first time examines a possibility of survival from the point of view of a weaker group.

Today Mexico is disrupted enough to be the background of a picaresque novel, being exposed to the influences of more powerful countries. In particular, U.S. consumerization is as threatening to today's Mexico as Cortés's armed forces to the Aztecs. To survive and attain a good future, they have to accept some of the U.S.'s influence but to accept it too much may cause the loss of their Mexican identity and their own cultural characteristics. The question of la Malinche's treachery — how much and in what way one should assimilate oneself into an external dominant power — is a very contemporary Mexican question.

2. Wrong Examples of Assimilation: Alejandro and Bonny

In Mexico, everybody faces a big problem of assimilation and like everybody else, Alejandro tries to join more powerful and dominant groups. Abish, however, does not seem

to appreciate his efforts very much, as Van Delden observes, "Alejandro is treated with considerable irony" (386). Though Abish points out in the interview that "Alejandro comes closest to what you might call a central character" (Van Delden 387), Alejandro lacks charm. Compared to him, Ulrich, a central character of HG is treated far more sympathetically and often represents Abish's points of view.

Alejandro, on the other hand, appears unreliable from the beginning of the book. He claims that he does not remember anything to speak of and wonders how relevant the little he can recall is. His poor memory, however, could be self-betrayal because he is challenged by the very first sentence of the book: "Was it true that the critic had no past to speak of?" (3). Similarly, when he thinks that "[m]emory is ever so selective" (5), Mercedes asks reproachfully, "Do you erase everything you find disagreeable in your past?" (6). Her question hints that Alejandro is just trying to avoid facing difficult matters.

Out of flippancy, Alejandro goes to meet Preston in the concert hall. It is after he has witnessed Preston's helicopter with the name of the Eden Enterprise on it, carelessly endangering the ascending and the descending tourists at the pyramid. He might well predict, therefore, how harmful Preston and his Eden Enterprise might become to him. Yet, as he was immediately attracted by the helicopter, the symbol of riches, at the pyramid, he is drawn to Preston without examining what risks he might take. Then he excuses his inability to be cautious: "As a Mexican, he had learned to recognize and accept fate. Now he wasn't going to let his critical faculties obtrude" (24).

It is not only Alejandro's judgment that is criticized. His moral integrity is also questioned when he is willing to write a favorable article for Jurud, the man who cuckolds him. And when he helps Jurud in locating his daughter who is in trouble at a pyramid, his sympathy for Jurud looks more absurd than kind.

Moreover, Alejandro has never been to the U.S. and explains: "I avoid it out of fear that it will not approximate the United States of my imagination" (184). To be a good critic, he is expected to know the reality of the U.S. but he instead clings to his imagination. Without facing the reality, Alejandro cannot assimilate into America in an appropriate way. It is not surprising that he is involved in some trouble without noticing it, on account of Preston, the symbol of U.S. capitalism. Meeting Preston for himself, he actually brings danger on himself.

In contrast with Alejandro, who will not remember the past to speak of and lets himself be cuckolded without any resistance, Jurud's daughter, Bonny, remembers everything and tries to intervene between her father and Mercedes with all her might. Bonny is,

nevertheless, as helpless as Alejandro. It is because she cannot think about what she sees and hears. Jurud “had trained her to be his eyes, his ears” (41) so that she can report what she experiences to him but cannot examine it and make a correct decision by herself. When she was intimidated by her father’s relationship with Mercedes, “[s]he had no option, she felt, but to leave!” (41). Like Alejandro, Bonny does not have any ability to face a problem and solve it alone but just runs away from it. She expects her father to abandon Mercedes and come to look for her. She even childishly presumes that the more ignominious her acts are, the sooner her father will come to stop her, and dares to sleep with a middle-aged man, a substitute for her father. Though she wants to believe herself to be a controlling force over him, she actually depends on him.

Bonny’s last resort is her boyfriend, Tom. Therefore, when he as well as her father fails to join her, Bonny no longer has any source of intelligence. Without proper guidance from her protectors, her acts become spur-of-the-moment. She cannot tell that what she learns about the total eclipse in Mexico is wrong and heads in the wrong direction — Yucatán. The deeper she enters into Mexico, the younger she becomes, because she is more and more lost in a strange country. Thus, without learning the reality of Mexico, Bonny fails to assimilate herself into Mexico in an appropriate way. It is quite natural that she witnesses the eclipse on TV — as she would do in the U.S. — and that she is injured in very strange circumstances and falls into mental regression.

Abish points out in the interview that “it is the muse, the source of our inspiration, that is being eclipsed” (Van Delden 388). Supplying the source of a book to her father, Bonny is Jurud’s muse. But she works well only when she is protected and guided by her father. Good inspiration is not good enough by itself but has to be supported by good intelligence.

At the end of the book, Mercedes helps Alejandro out of his trouble and he seems to be admitted to her family, which belongs to a higher social class than his and looks attractive to him. Jurud also helps Bonny to escape from Mexico as she wanted. Still, Alejandro finds himself suffering from what looks like herpes zoster, a disease often caused by inner troubles, while Bonny has mentally regressed. Both Alejandro and Bonny lack thoughtfulness so much that they cannot assimilate themselves into an external dominant power without endangering their lives — the most fundamental element of their existence. And as wrong examples of assimilation, their predicaments suggest that it is indispensable for a successful assimilation to face the harsh reality as well as to examine it with enough information.

3. Better Examples of Assimilation: Mercedes and Jurud

Unlike Alejandro and Bonny, Mercedes and Jurud look much more independent and secure and have succeeded in their assimilation.

For example, if she has an immoral affair with Jurud, an American writer, Mercedes never loses her Mexican identity. She relies on her mother tongue, Spanish, as Jurud's translator for Mexicans, and does not hesitate to go back to Mexico to save Alejandro as soon as he is abducted by the authorities. Though Jurud asks her if she will come back to stay in the U.S. permanently, both of them clearly know she will not.

Of course he wasn't serious. He had looked baffled when she said chidingly, Mexico is my home. Perplexed, frowning: Think of it, America is user-friendly. Within two months you'll consider yourself an American....

That's not the issue. I am not trying to replace Mexico with — (327-28)

The epithet "user-friendly" ironically indicates that America condescendingly expands its influence over anybody and everybody as a large company would sell its goods to as many customers as possible, and that it is not unpleasant to be taken in by it, either. Mercedes actually earns some money as Jurud's translator and has some fun as his lover. Yet, she retains her mother tongue as his translator, while — as his lover — keeping her husband in Mexico. She is cunning enough to take advantage of the U.S. without losing her foothold in Mexico. If she is guilty of infidelity to her husband and is not free from criticism for that, she assimilates herself into America much better than Alejandro and is surely better off than him.

Like Mercedes, Jurud retains his identity firmly, too. When he invades Mexico in a commercial way, marketing his books there, he is counterattacked by Mexico in the form of Mercedes's charms, which cause his muse, Bonny to run away from him. Mercedes is not, however, a grave threat to his identity because she will not remain in the U.S. permanently and enables him to regain Bonny at the end. As Mercedes takes advantage of the U.S., Jurud makes the most of Mexico.

In fact, Jurud is a good survivor in the U.S., too. He is a Jew, a minority in the U.S. but has attained a solid social status and fame as a writer who describes "a once glamorous WASP ruling class" (17). Alejandro wonders why he sells so well and asks: "Or were the books read because Jurud, not a WASP himself, depicted the WASP imperfections with an almost

Proustian delight [...] ?” (17). He established himself by utilizing the dominant WASP culture as well as his Jewish point of view. Today, the U.S. has already become multicultural because many minorities like Jurud have assimilated themselves into the once dominant WASP group, without losing their minority identities. Jurud is the symbol of a successful assimilation into the once dominant WASP group that makes today’s energetic U.S.

Mercedes and Jurud are different from Alejandro and Bonny, too, in that they can resort to power and influence. Unlike Alejandro, a mestizo, Mercedes is from a “blanco” family. Her family is “old money” (134) and part of the privileged class in Mexico. When she asks her father to help Alejandro get out of trouble, she knows not only what she wants, but also how to get it. Likewise, as a famous American writer, Jurud can ask Preston for help to find Bonny when the ordinary sources such as the embassy and the police do not work. With a more secure status in each society, both Mercedes and Jurud have the ability to realize their wishes.

It is certain that the moral question of their affair cannot be overlooked because it is after all their affair that drives Alejandro and Bonny into their troubles. If they are much better off than Alejandro and Bonny, therefore, their ways of living are hardly Abish’s ideal of assimilation. Their success in assimilation indicates that one has to know not only what is important for oneself but also how to exert a certain amount of power, while the moral issue of their affair raises the further question of what kind of power to acquire and how to use it.

4. Assimilation and the Future Perfect

Assimilation into a dominant society means the upward mobility to acquire more money and power, which are often connected with the idea of “perfection” in Abish’s works.

For example, Alejandro’s Mexican friend, Francisco attributes the qualities of Preston Hollier’s gorgeous wife, Rita to “the American perfection.”

Though he had no way of knowing what she was thinking, he was able to categorize her thoughts, her musings, as part of the American perfection, that unattainable, antiseptic perfection. You make me feel so Mexican, he admitted. (112)

Whatever Rita thinks, it reflects her large amount of riches and power which are all derived from U.S. capitalism. And as these things embody an ideal which everybody yearns for, it looks “perfect.” They are, on the other hand, beyond ordinary people’s ability, and lack

humanity and its warmth as the epithet “antiseptic” suggests. When Francisco feels “so Mexican,” he recognizes a large gap between Rita’s “American perfection” and his modest but humane way of living as a Mexican.

“Perfection” is connected with the U.S. in the comparison between the U.S. as a capitalist empire and Mexico as a developing country but within Mexico it is connected with a higher privileged social status like that of Mercedes. Alejandro is an intelligent critic but being a mestizo, he feels inferior to Mercedes and her “blanco” family with her father working in the ministry. His yearning to join her family is revealed in his sigh of praise: “she’s been conditioned to excellence, to perfection!” (135).

It is this “perfection” related to riches and power that impels assimilation and becomes its motive force. And Preston Hollier is the servant of “the American perfection” while his Eden Enterprise is a corporation aiming to create a new Garden of Eden in Mexico, as Abish explains to Van Delden in the interview: “I imagine that if the Garden of Eden were to exist today, it would be run by an institution” (385). The fact is that the Eden Enterprise thoughtlessly plans to develop houses for American retirees in a very hot place like Mexico and rashly tries to install an elevator in a pyramid to attract them there, and illegally purchases pre-Columbian artifacts, which even entangles Preston in a murder case at the end. What the Eden Enterprise creates is a silly dream such as the editor of a Mexican feminist magazine ridicules:

After meeting Rita and Preston, it finally dawned upon me that U.S. consumerism is not a passion but an ideal.... [..]

What draws us to America is not the superabundance of their malls but the underlying promise.... The Walt Disney virtual reality of life dominates.... It’s a kind of Edenic promise of an extended childhood — a Nintendo existence: I’m a child, therefore I am! (248-49)

Preston serves the American “perfection” as if it were God’s holy call and applies much of his energy to the Eden Enterprise. But what he creates is a shallow, irresponsible and unrealistic fantasy commercialized by Disney movies and Nintendo games.

As to the Garden of Eden, Abish explains to Van Delden in the interview: “From a writerly point of view it is necessary to see Eden as something created not for the habitation of Adam and Eve but only for the sake of their expulsion” (385). Our world is actually far

graver and more serious than the ideal Garden of Eden, which is free from either sadness or pain. It is a harsh reality similar to what the innocent Adam and Eve had to face after being expelled from the Garden. Preston and Rita, the inhabitants of the U.S. Garden of Eden, nevertheless, behave childishly like the innocent Adam and Eve, who could not yet tell the difference between good and evil, and are careless enough to ignore Mexican laws and morality and even nonchalantly to toy with Mexicans for their profits. Without proper consideration, their “perfection” could become a dangerous dream in our reality. Even if it is tantalizing enough to become our ideal, therefore, we should not yield to it but have to assimilate ourselves into it in a wise way without losing our humanity and keen discernment.

Incidentally, one of Abish’s collections of short stories is entitled *In the Future Perfect*. Combining “future” and “perfect,” Abish indicates that “perfection” is what we pursue for a better future. Still, with the unnatural order of “future” and “perfect,” he also raises the question of whether our present efforts to attain materialistic “perfection” through consumerism is really good for our future. His apprehension regarding what represents “perfection” for our future is revealed in the Mexican way of assimilation into Preston’s godlike capital.

When a total eclipse of the sun is approaching, Preston and Rita come down to Mexico to exploit Mexicans as if to realize the Aztec belief that “during an eclipse their gods would come down to devour men” (264). This is why Diane Johnson interprets the eclipse as being “a suitable metaphor for the erosion of the Mexican by the American culture, and the triumph of non-history (America) over history (Mexico)” (39). Still she also points out that America’s invasion is not one-sided:

We are familiar with the premise of a predatory American culture victimizing other cultures and imposing our values but the suspicion seems inescapable that now the terms may be reversing; now it is Mexico with Chevrolet factories and a burgeoning GNP, and it is ourselves we see in Abish’s Mexicans, depressed and eclipsed. Or perhaps this has been Abish’s intention all along? (41)

Johnson might well wonder if Abish describes more than the U.S. intrusion into Mexico. As Mercedes counterattacks Jurud’s invasion of Mexico, Preston is counterattacked by Mexican politicians. For example, when Preston does not pay enough bribes to Mexican politicians, the Department for the Prevention of Delinquency abducts Alejandro to have him confess that he

is Preston's accomplice in some crimes. It does not mean that they want to arrest Preston. Mercedes's father reveals: "It appears that Preston Hollier has enemies, but for the time being everything has been settled. Preston was made to see reason. He has agreed to accept Senator Galindez as a full partner. Alejandro was a cog ... the means to put pressure on Hollier" (333). It is very ironical that the Department for the Prevention of Delinquency asks for a bribe but it actually prevents U.S. delinquency and protects Mexican profit. Preston's investment in Mexico is thoroughly based on give-and-take. His aggressiveness is absorbed by Mexican politicians and made into Mexican business.

This is a kind of Mexican assimilation into a more dominant external power in the world. But to attain their "perfect" future, Mexican politicians, the more powerful group within Mexico, ignore the less powerful group of people like Alejandro and even resort to violence. Abish depicts with a cynical laugh how people struggle for the "perfect" future and questions whether we are pursuing the right ideal in the right way.

5. Assimilation as a Typical Jewish Issue in Postmodern Globalization

Assimilation has always been a very important subject for the Jews because they form only a small group and have had to work out how to coexist with other peoples. Especially since the Diaspora, they have been forced to live as a minority under strange ruling powers. If they had never yielded to ruling groups at all, they might have been persecuted. On the other hand, if they had adjusted themselves to ruling groups too much, they would have lost their Jewish identity. How to keep a balance between their own group and other ruling groups, without losing their Jewish identity but without offending ruling groups either, has all the time been a life-and-death matter for the Jews.

Today this typical Jewish issue has become more and more important for us all as Ranen Omer-Sherman points out in *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature*:

Yet in our time there are intriguing indicators suggesting that the new century, with the consolidation of worldwide communication and multinational corporations, will be a place in which individual identities will no longer defined by the nation-state. [...] identities will be at once more local and more transnational, based on community as well as international communication. And this of course is precisely the paradigm of which the Jews have been history's most consistent exemplars — a global people expressed as vital local communities. (275)

Since around the 1970s, varieties of peoples and their particularization have been emphasized under the influence of Postmodernism. Still, U.S. capitalist imperialism and corporate commercialism have expanded so dominantly and so widely, advocating their materialistic “perfection,” that our identity is no longer protected by geographical and political entities such as the nation-state. By ignoring these external powers of globalization, we are put at a disadvantage, while to be involved in them too much will cause the loss of our ethno-racial characteristics and perhaps our humanity as well. Consequently, Mexicans under the strong influence of U.S. capital and commercialization in EF present, by means of the very Jewish topic of assimilation, a much needed contemporary topic through which to establish our new affiliation in the 21st century.

It should be, however, immediately added that assimilation is not necessarily identified as Jewish. Just as postmodern humanism does not have to be attributed to the Holocaust in the way that I connected them in “Postmodernism and the Influence of the Holocaust in Walter Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa*,”²⁾ so assimilation is often nothing peculiar to the Jews and very difficult to define as Jewish. Henry Bial, for example, recognizes the same difficulty in defining Jewishness in American theater and explains that unlike the black people’s “double-consciousness” (16), “the Jewish reading of a performance is most commonly *supplemental* to the dominant or gentile reading” (17). In other words, in Jewishness, “assimilation and identity (or American and Jewish) are not binary opposites in the way that white and black seem to be” (17). Bial understands that Jewishness is not anything explained or negated clearly by a certain definition and states:

Quite frequently, what a spectator identifies as Jewishness is equivocal, affective, and not exclusively Jewish. It is Jewishness by proxy: an absence, but a palpable one. [...] a character or situation may be “not Jewish” but it is also frequently “not not- Jewish.” (18)

Bial also analyzes: “these codes, while not exclusively or essentially Jewish, are nonetheless connected to an ideal of Jewishness” (20). As Abish’s treatment of assimilation is also based on humanism and morality, it agrees well with Bial’s definition of Jewishness. And yet a rigid critic might still claim that whether one finds Jewishness in EF or not depends on the reader, and denounce such a reading as arbitrary. On the other hand, it seems more than natural to claim that Abish’s Jewishness cannot be overlooked when Abish casually comments on Kafka: “After all, Kafka doesn’t have a single Jewish character in his work, and can there

be a more Jewish writer than Kafka?" (156).

In the last analysis, the Jewishness in the theme of assimilation is equivocal. It is this equivocation, however, that characterizes Abish as a postmodern American writer, because it rejects the binary and accepts a wide range of variations — a postmodern characteristic — and because Abish has succeeded, as Kafka did, in gaining more American readers while retaining his Jewish identity by resorting to the “not not-Jewish” theme of assimilation instead of a particularly Jewish theme or a completely non-Jewish theme. In other words, the way in which he used his Jewishness in EF is the best example of assimilation in this book, and demonstrates one good possibility of maintaining a balance between globalization and ethno-racial particularization and establishing one’s new identity for a better future.

notes

- 1) These postmodern characteristics of Abish’s works are more carefully described and discussed in my essay, “Postmodernism and the Influence of the Holocaust in Walter Abish’s *Alphabetical Africa*.” This essay also explains that Abish shares his social, ethical, and historical attitudes with Levinas and Derrida, who are influenced by the Holocaust.
- 2) In this essay, I analyze Abish’s postmodern humanistic characteristics in *Alphabetical Africa* and conclude that even his books which may not seem to be related to the Holocaust are actually influenced by it. Considering that Abish’s family had to flee from his native country, Austria, due to the threat represented by the Nazis, and that there are some descriptions and intimations of the Holocaust in *Alphabetical Africa*, not to mention much clearer references to it in HG, it is not surprising that he shares with Levinas and Derrida with a postmodern humanism reflecting the influence of Holocaust. It is fair, however, to admit that the Holocaust is hardly mentioned in EF. In EF, Abish seems to be more interested in the topic of assimilation and one may discuss it without relating it to his Jewish background.

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