FEDERMAN’S FICTIONS

Innovation, Theory, and the Holocaust

Edited and with an introduction by
JEFFREY R. DI LEO

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Language is the sum total of myself.
—Charles Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities"

I speak therefore I am.
—Raymond Federman, My Body in Nine Parts

CONTENTS

Preface
Some Answers for Raymond Federman
Charles Bernstein xi

Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction
Other Voices: The Fiction of Raymond Federman
Jeffrey R. Di Leo

PART I. A LIFE IN THE TEXT

Chapter 1
Beckett and Beyond: Federman the Scholar
Jerome Klinkowitz 29

Chapter 2
How, and How Not, to Be a Published Novelist: The Case of
Raymond Federman
Ted Pelton 39

Chapter 3
Samuel Beckett and Raymond Federman: A Bilingual
Companionship
Daniela Hurezaru 51

Chapter 4
Filling in the Blanks: Federman, Self-Translator
Alyson Waters 63

Chapter 5
Re-Double or Nothing: Federman, Autobiography, and
Creative Literary Criticism
Larry McCaffery 77
PART II. PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE

Chapter 6
A Narrative Poetics of Raymond Federman
Brian McHale

Chapter 7
Surfiction, Not Sure Fiction: Raymond Federman's Second-Degree Textual Manipulations
Davis Schneiderman

Chapter 8
Raymond Federman, the Ultimate Metafictioneer
Eckhard Gerdes

Chapter 9
Formulating Yet Another Paradox: Raymond Federman's Real Fictitious Discourses
Thomas Hard

Chapter 10
The Agony of Unrecognition: Raymond Federman and Postmodern Theory
Eric Dean Rasmussen

Chapter 11
Raymond Federman and Critical Theory
Jan Baetens

PART III. LAUGHTER, HISTORY, AND THE HOLOCAUST

Chapter 12
Surviving in the Corridors of History or, History as Double or Nothing
Dan Stone

Chapter 13
When Postmodern Play Meets Survivor Testimony: Federman and Holocaust Literature
Susan Rubin Suleiman

Chapter 14
"In Black Inkblood": Agonistic and Cooperative Authorship in the (Re)Writing of History
Marcel Comis-Pope

Chapter 15
Cosmobabble or, Federman's Return
Christian Moraru

Chapter 16
Featherman's Body Literature or, the Unbearable Lightness of Being
Michael Wutz

Chapter 17
Federman's Laughterature
Menachem Feuer

Afterword
Critifictional Reflections on the Novel Today
Raymond Federman

About the Contributors

Index

241
257
277
289
305
309
THIRTEEN

WHEN POSTMODERN PLAY
MEETS SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

Federman and Holocaust Literature

Susan Rubin Suleiman

It is that absence, that emptiness, that gap in me that controls my work and gives it its urgency. That's what the Americans don't always understand.

—Raymond Federman, Aunt Rachel's Fur

It is NOT through content but form, NOT with numbers or statistics but fiction and poetry that we will eventually come to terms with the Holocaust and its consequences.

—Raymond Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer”

Elie Wiesel and Raymond Federman are almost exactly the same age, born a few months apart in 1928 (Federman in May, Wiesel in November). Both belong to the somewhat loose but increasingly used category of child survivors of the Holocaust, what I have called the “1.5 generation” (Suleiman 2002). Both Wiesel and Federman lost all or almost all of their immediate family to deportation; both settled in the United States after the war; both have spent
many years in university teaching positions; and most important, both are prolific writers whose work is unimaginable without the historical catastrophe that shattered their adolescence. In addition, both write their literary works in French—Wiesel exclusively, Federman increasingly in recent years.

It may seem odd to begin with this comparison, given the obvious differences that separate these two writers. Wiesel, who was deported to Auschwitz with his family of ultra-religious Jews from Hungary at the age of fifteen, is the author of what is probably the single best-known work of testimony about the Nazi death camps. Night (published in French in 1958, in English translation in 1960, and again in 2006) is read by millions of schoolchildren in the United States every year, and by countless readers elsewhere; Wiesel himself represents, for many people all over the world but especially in the United States, the exemplary spokesman for victims of mass persecution as well as the most noble embodiment of a Holocaust survivor. Federman, by comparison, is relatively unknown—at least to the public at large. For many years, his work has interested the select few (mostly literature professors and their students) who concern themselves with American "experimental" or "postmodernist" writing; and it has been admired by many fellow writers in the experimental mode, including Samuel Beckett, the subject of Federman's PhD dissertation and one of his great inspirations, as well as writers closer to Federman in age, such as Ronald Sukenick, Walter Abish, and the French novelists Serge Doubrovsky and Maurice Roche. At present, Federman is probably best known in Germany, where his work began to receive wide attention in the 1980s; in France, too, he has gained recognition in the past few years, especially after the French translation of his first novel, Double or Nothing (published in 1971), appeared in 2004.1

Until very recently, Federman's work was never discussed in the context of Holocaust literature, especially in the United States, where studies of Holocaust writing have been most numerous.2 One reason for that absence may be that Federman was not deported (the rest of his family was); but a more plausible reason is doubtless that his works do not enter into the mold of testimonial writing—in other words, they make no claim to factuality and witnessing. The great classics of Holocaust literature, works by Primo Levi, Jean Améry, Tadeusz Borowski, Charlotte Delbo, Jorge Semprun, and of course Wiesel—all owe their power and renown to their testimonial status, in addition to their considerable literary achievement. Wiesel, Levi, and the others speak with the authority of the survivor, who seeks to arrive at the truth of a life-shattering experience; although their works are highly crafted and shaped by aesthetic awareness, they also lay claim to veracity about experiences the author has lived through—this being the minimal requirement for the "autobiographical pact" (Lejune 1975). A number of other works as well, more removed from the author's experience, have attained to classic status in the Holocaust canon, perhaps the best known being Art Spiegelman's Maus, a "comix" narrative by an artist born after the Second World War. But despite its postmodern use of the animal fable and the comix form, the book also lays claim to testimonial status, since it is based on lengthy interviews Spiegelman conducted with his father, a survivor of Auschwitz, and indeed is mainly an account of the father's story as told to his son. (Spiegelman, significantly, insists that the book be classified as nonfiction).

Now here is the paradox: Federman's work appears (or rather, appeared until recently) not to "fit" into the Holocaust canon, despite the fact that he is incontrovertibly a survivor victim of that historical cataclysm. The fact of his escape from deportation in the summer of 1942, hidden in a broom closet where his mother had thrust him at the last minute, while the rest of his family—mother, father, and two sisters—were taken away by French police and murdered in Auschwitz, is the event he obsessively returns to in his writing. The incomprehensibility of his survival, contemporaneous with the brutal disappearance of his family, is the central recurring motif of his books, the event around which all his writing turns.

One could say something similar about Wiesel, of course, or any other survivor, whether a writer or not: for them, survival itself in the face of many others' death is a mystery constantly to be grappled with. Federman, unlike Wiesel, is not religious; the enigma of his survival and his family's disappearance is, for him, neither spiritual nor metaphorical—it has nothing to do with God, or with His absence. Nor is it primarily a philosophical quandary: the problem of human evil is not his primary concern, as it is for Levi, Améry, and many others. Rather, the problem as Federman sees it is how to tell the story. How to give form and shape to an experience that was in its essence chaotic and incomprehensible? This is not simply an aesthetic problem; or more exactly, the aesthetic problem is also, fundamentally, an ethical and historical one. Ethically, it is the writer's responsibility—and not only the Jewish writer's, according to Federman, but all contemporary writers—to face the "Unforgivable Enormity" that the Holocaust represented in human history. Historically, the paradox is that even events of the enormity of the Holocaust will be forgotten, despite the efforts of historians; it will therefore be up to writers and artists to "rummage through the debris in search of a design," as Federman states in what is probably his most manifesto-like essay about writing and the Holocaust, "The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer" (2004a). For "in spite of all the frantic activities still on in the world today to gather, to record, to preserve, to remember what refuses to speak or be represented, the Unforgivable Enormity will inevitably vanish into its own silence and its own absence." But if the event will inevitably disappear from view (and from memory) despite the historians, the hope voiced here is that it may continue to exist through art: "For if the essence, meaning, or the meaninglessness of the Holocaust will survive our sordid history, it will be in works of art" (Federman 2004a).
The next question is: which works? In which artistic works, or what kind of artistic works, will the Holocaust survive? It is an open question, to which no certain answer can be given. But Federman, at least, has been consistent in his view that the self-conscious, self-reflexive, and playful art of postmodernist experimentation—or what he calls a mode of writing that “shift[s] its vision and its energy from content to form (from the WHAT to the HOW)”—provides the best chance for grappling with the tragedy of the Holocaust (Federman 2004b). But there’s the rub: playfulness and the Holocaust are difficult to envision in the same breath, or the same piece of writing. Little wonder that it has taken decades for critics to read Federman as a Holocaust writer.

In what follows, I will suggest some of the ways in which Federman’s postmodern playfulness negotiates the encounter with survivor testimony—in other words, the ways in which Federman’s works, from first to last, engage with the problem of “how to tell the story” of a traumatic break in existence.

**DISSEMINATION: MULTIPLE VOICES, UNSTABLE IDENTITIES**

The most constant recurring feature of all of Federman’s fiction is the presence of multiple (or at the very least, two) narrative voices, or what might be called ego-personas, instances of the narrating “I.” From *Double or Nothing* (1971), where the “noodler” who is planning the tale we are reading is joined by three other narrative personas, including the protagonist whose name keeps constantly changing, to *Chut: Histoire d’une enfance* (2008), where the narrating “I” is regularly interrupted/interpellated by a voice calling him to order (“Federman, stop procrastinating!” and so forth), and throughout all the intervening works, one finds this kind of splitting or multiplication. It is what the critic Larry McCaffery has called the “voices-within-voices narrative structure” of Federman’s works. Federman explained, in a 1980 interview with McCaffery, that this internal division is both a way of “distancing” himself from his subject (a distancing he sees as especially necessary for writers “who base their fiction on personal experience”), and an indication of his own “bilingual and bicultural” status as a writer; it is also an allusion, he noted, to his “many different lives...: a jazz musician, a factory worker, a G.I., a paratrooper... Frenchie, the poet, the critic, the professor” (McCaffery 1983, 299–300). Federman didn’t mention, in that interview, his life as a scared Jewish teenager hiding from the Nazis on a farm in southwestern France, or as a Jewish boy whose mother sewed the yellow star on his jacket and advised him to “put a scarf over it so people won’t see,” for these “lives” were to be fully recounted in works written after 1980. But in another sense, he did not have to mention them, just as he didn’t have to mention the boy sitting in the closet for a whole day and night, in the silence following his family’s departure—for all of these personas were present, in a disseminated but ubiquitous way, in all of his works past and to come.

I have discussed at length elsewhere (Suleiman 2006, chapter 8) some of the psychological implications of the unstable narrative identities manifested in Federman’s work. The vacillation or splitting of identity, even down to the proper name, as indicated in Federman’s most enduring self-designation, “Moinous” (literally, “Me-We”), a name he first introduced in *Take It or Leave It* (“I & MOINOUS finally at last the two of us enfin together oneo each in his direction hand in hand”), could be read, I suggested, not only as a sign of experimental writing but also as a sign of childhood trauma. Federman, like a number of other French writers who are known for their formal experimentations—chief among them Georges Perec, whose biography shares a number of points in common with Federman’s—belongs to the “1.5 generation” of the Holocaust: people who were children or young adolescents when disaster hit them. The sudden, brutal separation from family, the need to adapt to new circumstances, which often included having to take on false identities while living with strangers, was a common experience of such children, and left a permanent mark on them. Writers like Federman and Perec inscribed the traumatic breaks of their childhoods into their fiction, but always in an indirect, oblique way rather than through direct, mimetic representation. This was partly due, no doubt, to the fact that their memory of the trauma was itself vacillating and imperfect, as childhood memory often is and as traumatic memory often is. Memory had therefore to be supplemented, or even replaced, by invention. But now I think there was another factor involved as well, which I would call the *restorative function of play*.

The British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott has explored, in writings that have become classic, how playing is related to both “ordinary” childhood trauma—that is, temporary or sometimes even prolonged separation from the mother, which every child has eventually to face—and to artistic creativity (Winnicott 1982). Winnicott’s work actually unites two strands of thought: on the one hand, philosophical speculations about the relation between playing and artistic creativity, which began with Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), where Schiller emphasizes the importance of the “free play of the imagination” in artistic creation; on the other hand, reflections on the role of play in the overcoming of “everyday” childhood trauma (separation from the mother figure), which began with Freud’s famous example of the *fort-da* game: Freud had observed that a young toddler (his own grandson) played a repetitive game whenever his mother left him. In the game, the boy would throw away a spool-toy, exclaiming “fort!” (“gone”), and then retrieve it, crying “da!” (“here”). Freud theorized that the game, a symbolic repetition of his mother’s disappearance and reappearance, was the child’s way of mastering the anxiety he felt at his
mother's temporary absence (Freud 1961, 8–11). Winnicott, building on Freud, sought to understand how the developing baby and child learn to cope with what he calls "disillusionment"—the necessary but gradual discovery, by the baby, that he/she is not omnipotent. Disillusionment, as Winnicott defines the term, involves the baby's recognition that some things—namely, the external world—are beyond his or her "magical control." This process is facilitated by what Winnicott calls the "transitional space," a space that is neither totally interior nor totally external (neither "me" nor "not-me"), but that in a sense allows for an ambiguity between the two (Winnicott 1982, 10–13). This transitional space, which allows for a certain illusion of omnipotence to persist, but with "shape" to it, is according to Winnicott the space of play and of creative imagination; more generally, he views it as the "location of cultural experience" (95–103).

Now there may seem to be a contradiction in using Winnicott's theories to illuminate the role of play in works relating to childhood trauma. For as he notes, extreme trauma—or as he puts it, the "loss of dependability" in the world—can lead to an inability to play (102). But the contradiction disappears, or one might say that it turns into mere paradox, if one formulates it this way: Writers like Federman and Perec experienced more than ordinary childhood trauma—but they benefited from sufficiently "favorable circumstances" (to use Winnicott's terminology) that allowed them to symbolize, in indirect artistic ways, the very break in identity that was at the source of their creative work. Psychoanalysts might speak here of the somewhat mysterious quality known as resilience, which allows some children (and adults) to cope with traumatic experiences where others succumb to despair or illness (see Anthony and Cohler 1987); or they might speculate about the strength of maternal nurturing received in the early years, before the occurrence of the traumatic event.

Not being a psychoanalyst, I prefer to theorize in a more literary way. About paradox, for example. The New Critics, long ago, already suggested that paradox—one of whose dictionary definitions is "An assertion that is essentially self-contradictory, although based on valid deductions"—was at the heart of poetry, for poetic language feeds on ambiguities, internal tensions, and double meanings (Wimsatt 1954). But paradox in the work of Federman has other connotations as well. In addition to being the hallmark of poetic language, it can be thought of as the hallmark of the unstable or split identity that is the consequence of traumatic experience.

FIGURES OF PARADOX

In my earlier study of Federman's work, I argued that the rhetorical figure of preterition, which is a way of "saying while not saying" (as in a sentence of the type "I will not talk about that," or even more radically, "I must forget about that," where "that" designates the very thing that is not to be talked about) was central to Federman's writing, and was a way of both talking about his personal experience and avoiding talking about it (Suleiman 2006). The four XXXXs that occur in each of Federman's works to refer to the murdered members of his family are a perfect example of preterition, for they are signs that indicate both presence and absence, both the lost objects and their "exing out," their erasure. I would now expand my earlier argument to claim that paradox itself is the ruling trope of Federman's work, with preterition being merely one kind of paradoxical figure.

The workings of paradox are especially interesting to observe in Federman's early works, Double or Nothing and Take It or Leave It, which put into play visual as well as verbal contradictions and "self-cancellations." The play with typography and concrete poetry in these works is extremely complex, and not uniform in its effects. The visual configuration can confirm what is being said verbally and thus be redundant, as in the "Beginning" page of Double or Nothing, where the words talking about the room in which the "noodler" plans to hole himself up for a year form a "room" visually, with four walls enclosing the words inside; but the visual configuration can also contradict the verbal statement, as on the page later in the novel where the "noodler" and the protagonist he is writing about are projected to merge (Federman 1971, 31; 1998, 45):

And little by little we'll coincide. We'll overlap. HE & I. TO GE TH ER

The denotation of "together" is contested by the fragmentation of the word on the page, just as the denotation of "overlap" is contradicted by the large amount of empty space above and below it. But whether redundant or conflicting, the meanings created by the visual configuration always act as a disruption, dispersion, or "pulverization" of the narrative. As one of the characters remarks about the "old man's" story in The Two-Fold Vibration: "the story was all pulverized, as if it refused to be told" (1982, 55).

This pulverization is especially apparent when the Narrator speaks about Jewishness, or about the fate of Jews in the Holocaust. One particularly complicated example, among many, occurs in section 2 ("The Masturbatory Gesture") of Take It or Leave It (whose pages are unnumbered). In the middle of a passage that apparently has little to do with Jewishness or the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust, since it concerns the Narrator's military service in the U.S. Army during the Korean War, we suddenly find the following:
the occupation
the Germans the French
the JEWS
the

\[ \text{ou} \]
\[ \text{se} \]
\[ \text{ewish} \]
\[ \text{yau} \]
\[ \text{t didn't know} \]
\[ \text{Loo} \]
\[ \text{k at my nose} \]
\[ \text{But that—} \]
\[ \text{doesn't mean} \]
\[ \text{that I'm som} \]
\[ \text{er sort of fanatic about all t} \]
\[ \text{hat crap about religion tradition} \]
\[ \text{deportation extermination etcetera et} \]
\[ \text{Y} \]

the yellow star & then the great round-up in 42 (le 14 juillet) the entire family
mother father sisters uncles aunts cousins everybody picked up everybody remade into lamps shades (after the showers) yes at AUSCHWITZ

Between the two passages in block form, ending in the capitalized "AUSCHWITZ," the words in italics form a "yellow star" whose shape is further outlined by the dashes and connecting lines. Within the italicized passage, words are broken up even more radically than usual: out of ten lines, only two end in a word that is complete ("that" in line 6 and "tradition" in line 9); the others all break words ungrammatically, by a kind of linguistic violence that seems to reproduce, symbolically, the physical and psychological violence done to Jews—both those who were exterminated and those who were left behind. Furthermore, the passage in italics advances by way of negation: "of course I'm Jewish, didn't you know?" is followed by "but that doesn't mean that I'm some sort of fanatic about religion, tradition, deportation, extermination, etcetera." The series of nouns that precedes "etcetera" is itself somewhat self-contradictory, since there is no logical connection between religion/tradition and deportation/extermination. There is, however, an associative connection, at least in the Narrator's mind. It's as if, once Jewishness is mentioned, all roads—and all trains of thought, one might say—lead to Auschwitz and to the family members who perished there. By means of negation, self-contradiction, and one might even say self-mutilation (albeit only in symbolic form, through linguistic violence),

the Narrator arrives at an affirmation: but what the affirmation affirms is the massive disappearance of his family.

In fact, the passage I have quoted comes immediately after a repeated mention of "a big hole"—or rather, "a big HOLE," which is reinforced visually by a rectangular "hole" formed by a collection of o's:

\[ \text{oooooo} \]
\[ \text{ooo} \]
\[ \text{ooo} \]
\[ \text{ooooooo} \]

Yes a big HOLE

Here we see the workings of paradox in a particularly striking way: on the one hand, the visual redundancy and repetition emphasizes the "big hole" created in existence when one's whole family disappears. Jacques Lacan noted, in discussing mourning, that the death of loved ones creates a "hole in the real" (Lacan 1977, 37). The gaping spaces, the broken-off words, the ambivalence about being Jewish ("I'm Jewish but not fanatic") displayed on this page all recreate, in their own way, the "hole in the real." But—and this is the "other hand," or the other side of the paradox—the play with words and images, and the enumeration of the family members who were murdered, can also be thought of as Federman's version of the fort-da game. For the disappeared are here evoked, if not by name then at least by means of their relation to the Narrator: "mother, father, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, everybody." Suddenly, the dead make their appearance, just when we least expected them. (But only on the page).

SEX AND SUBSTITUTION

Along with unstable identities and a love of paradox, one constantly recurring feature of Federman's work is a preoccupation with sexual transgression and sexual pleasure. A full discussion of this theme would require a whole separate study, but it is worth remarking that in the context of Holocaust writing, an interest in sex is often seen as transgressive, as if a taboo were being broken, just as humor is judged by some critics to be incompatible with the gravity of the Holocaust. In Federman's work, the sexual and the humorous are intimately bound up with traumatic experience, and often with each other.

Consider, for example, the first subway ride of the protagonist in Double or Nothing: the young man, newly arrived in New York City, unsure of everything including his own name (in this passage, his name is Boris), sits on the subway heading for the Bronx with his Uncle David, with whom he cannot communicate as they have no shared language. He passes the time by staring at the "triangle" of a beautiful black girl who sits across
from him with her legs spread so that he can see her crotch. The narrating/inventing voice slips into this scene via a reflection on language, on how Boris thinks mostly in French, especially during his first months in the United States. (I will quote the text here without trying to reproduce its visual component):

For instance in the subway he thinks in French. And he sees all sorts of dirty images in his mind and describes them to himself in French. And what's even worse some of these images seem to gather between the girl's legs. Right there in the spot he's staring at. That gives him a hard-on immediately on the spot... the rectangular piece of flesh becomes like a screen on which the images are reflected quite vividly. He sees faces there even his own face. He sees the face of his mother. Also the face of his father. But not Uncle David's face. That would really be indecent. It's as though he could almost touch that screen so real and so palpable it appears... But can one really remember the touch of flesh under such conditions? I suppose. One can always invent a little. Particularly if it's not possible to remember. Or else one can simply approximate how it feels. For instance: Flesh is like a banana peel

Flesh is like a piece of white paper
Flesh is like a dozen eggs in a basket
Flesh is like a glass of wine at night

(1971, 144; 1998, 202)

This stunningly complex passage combines sexual pleasure and fantasy with reflections about language, invention, and imagination as a replacement for lost objects. The woman's flesh, first of all an object of pleasure, becomes a screen onto which the faces of lost loved ones are projected. Significantly, while Uncle David's face does not appear on the screen (perhaps because he is sitting next to Boris, or because Boris doesn't know him well enough and so it would be "indecent" to project his image onto the sexual screen), Boris's own face does appear—perhaps because his identity is so unstable, or because he too is in a sense a "lost object" to himself. The flesh/screen becomes something "one can almost touch," a kind of consolation, or substitute, for what has been lost.

Here once again, we have an image that functions as both a figuration of absence and as compensation for it. This is emphasized by the page layout that I omitted in quoting the passage, for the words are arranged to form a triangular white space in the middle: at once screen, flesh, and "hole in the real." The screen, itself a metaphor for the woman's flesh, can be said to compensate for the absence of the (dead) faces projected on it; but the empty white space on the page also figures that absence, which cannot be "filled" except in imagination, or approximation—in this instance, by means of a series of similes for "how it feels." Note that the "it" here refers to "the touch of flesh" ("can one really remember the touch of flesh!?"), which suggests a slippage between the flesh the Narrator is looking at in the subway car and the "touch of flesh" (perhaps the mother's?) that he is trying to remember, and to figure by means of his comparisons. Banana peel, eggs, and wine all have a "smooth" quality, like a woman's flesh; but so does white paper, with its suggestion of expectation, availability, and virginity. The joining of sensuous pleasure with writing and with psychological compensation for loss (especially of the mother?) is beautifully rendered here, as in many other places in Federman's work.

LAUGHTERATURE

It was in *Take It or Leave It* that Federman first used a term he evoked frequently after that, in both English and French, and that any reader of his works will instantly recognize as part of his signature: "laughterature" or "fourire," which can also be translated as "fit of laughter." The sad or serious clown is a familiar, age-old trope that writers have exploited ever since Aristophanes. Federman's famous humor owes something to this tradition, which was itself revived and reinterpreted in the existential vaudevilles of Samuel Beckett. Federman's love and veneration of Beckett is due in large part, I think, to Beckett's extraordinary—and paradoxical—combination of radical hopelessness with raucous humor. "All good story tellers go to BETHICCKETT on their way to Heaven," we read on the first page of section 14 of *Take It or Leave It*, a section titled "Laughter & Literature." Further down on the same page, after yet another evocation of "the trains the camps" and the murdered family, we read the following: "The only sane thing to do in cases such as these he said is either to shut up and forget or else learn to laugh—LAUGH—laugh..." And a few lines after that: "that's the only way to keep going reinvent yourself in mad giggles laugh your life out into words call it the fourire: laughterature!"

Reinventing himself by laughing his life out into words: that is the program Federman faithfully followed during almost forty years of practicing his "real fictitious discourse" about the break in his existence that occurred one sunny July day in 1942, on a nondescript street in the suburb of Montrouge just outside Paris. Similar breaks occurred in the lives of many thousands of Jewish children on that day, in that year, in France and elsewhere in Europe. Federman's achievement as a writer of the Holocaust has been to
give us his own inimitable version of that experience, and at the same time to make us realize—the way a great writer does—that although every life is unique, its meaning can be communicated: Shared.

NOTES

1. Quitte ou double (2004b). The book was widely reviewed in the French press, and several of Federman’s other books originally published in English were also translated. Most importantly, perhaps as a result of his success in France, Federman wrote two more novels in French after that: Retour au fermier (2005) and Chat: Histoire d’une enfance (2008).

2. A quick check in the indexes of some standard works on Holocaust writing shows no mention of Federman. See, for example, (in chronological order) Efran (1980), Lang (1988), Young (1998), Hirsch and Kacandes (2004). Two recent exceptions, which may indicate a shift, are Efrain Sicler’s The Holocaust Novel (2005), which has a brief section on Federman, and my own Crises of Memory and the Second World War (2006), which devotes a long chapter to Federman’s work in the context of experimental writing by “the 1.5 generation.”

3. His stay on the farm is the subject of Retour au fermier (2005); the anecdote about his mother sewing on the star is recounted in Chat (2008).

4. Since these two editions of Double or Nothing are often somewhat different in their page layout, I will indicate both in subsequent quotes. In this instance, the sentence appears identically in the two editions.

5. Perhaps the most memorable, as well as the most transgressive, of such moments occurs later in Double or Nothing, in a sequence describing the young protagonist’s sexual encounter with the mother of his black friend Ernest, in Detroit: “. . . Ernest’s mother all around him and him inside of her: inside her huge cunt and once more he whispers MAMAN in French . . . ” (1971, 177, 1998, 240). The conflation of sex and substitution for the mother couldn’t be more explicit.

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