

## INTRODUCTION

## OTHER VOICES

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The Fiction of Raymond Federman

*Jeffrey R. Di Leo*

### BEFORE—AND AFTER—THEORY

Over the past thirty or so years, the fiction of Raymond Federman has been the subject of a good deal of scholarship in multiple languages. Numerous critical studies of his work have been published.<sup>1</sup> Also, doctoral dissertations<sup>2</sup> have been written about him, and several volumes celebrating his achievements<sup>3</sup> have come out. This is in addition to the many articles and book chapters devoted to his work. However, in spite of this wealth of attention, the full range of Federman's achievements have yet to be fully recognized by the academic community.

One of the reasons for this lack of recognition stems from the ways in which Federman's novels have been categorized. In the United States, Federman's work has most commonly been connected with a group of writers that brought new "life" to American fiction in the wake of pronouncements of the death of the novel in the late 1960s.<sup>4</sup> As such, his revitalizing, innovative peers include Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Steve Katz, Clarence Major, Ishmael Reed, Gilbert Sorrentino, and Ronald Sukenick. While the identification of Federman with this group of writers is accurate, important, and not without its merits, in the long run, it has served to exclude or marginalize his work from other—and arguably even more significant—contexts.

Far too many accounts treat Federman as *merely* a member of a small group of writers that created through narrative experimentation a pioneering

body of “metafiction” or “postmodern” American literature. Though relevant to those interested in tracing the development of American letters, such accounts neglect the range of his contributions to both the contemporary critical and world literature canons—contributions that scholars are only just beginning to recognize and explore in detail.

The aim of this volume is to introduce (or, for some, to reintroduce) to the broader scholarly community an amazingly creative and daring thinker whose work is significant to not just considerations of the development of innovative fiction in America, but potentially to a number of *distinct* disciplines, and established and emerging critical discourses. These critical discourses include translation studies, Jewish studies, Holocaust studies, bilingual studies, Beckett studies, cultural studies, philosophy of language, postmodern theory, body criticism, critical theory, identity studies, narrative theory, trauma studies, philosophy of literature, and autobiography theory, among others. It should be noted that the disciplines represented here are far wider than just English, the standard province of Federman scholarship. They include philosophy, comparative literature, foreign languages, history, linguistics, and sociology.

The contributors to this volume place Federman’s work, either through his narrative practice or critical contributions, as an important figure in many areas of contemporary critical concern. They reveal his work to be a rich source for those invested in contemporary cultural studies and literary theory, and show it as contributing to some of the most fascinating and challenging issues faced by the humanities today. Collectively, they establish Federman’s place in an age that has lost interest in narrative innovation as significant in itself and has instead redirected its attention to the cultural, historical, and political powers of fictional discourse.

Ironically, Federman, who recently passed away at the age of eighty-one, is probably more relevant now than ever. Part of the reason for this is that the discourses necessary for appreciating the range and depth of his achievement—discourses such as cultural studies and literary theory—have only recently reached full maturation and institutional acceptance. It is easy to see this when one recalls that when Federman’s early masterpiece *Double or Nothing* came out in 1971, “new criticism” was still considered “radical” by most English departments—departments, which, by the way, rarely if ever considered contemporary fiction in general (let alone fiction such as Federman’s) as worthy of scholarship. One must also remember that Federman’s writing becomes more significant in a critical climate charged by discussions of the relationship between culture, history, language, and narrative. While these discussions were forming in the seventies, they were still far from maturation.

The seventies saw the rise of elegant and close structuralist, deconstructive, Marxist, and psychoanalytic interpretations of literature. Increasingly, emphasis on the libidinal, political, and social nature of signification

would come to challenge the very profession of *literary* studies by laying the foundation for *cultural* studies. It is in the context of this postliterary or postliterature climate that Federman's fictions can be best understood.

While Federman's writing is an amazing resource to be grappled with through structuralist and/or poststructuralist theoretical contexts,<sup>5</sup> it becomes even more powerful when considered through theory sensitive to the personal, social, and political dimensions of interpretation—dimensions that semiotics and deconstruction have had difficulties engaging. So as the eighties saw the emergence of race, class, and gender studies eclipsing the more formalist theories of the literary which dominated the late seventies and early eighties, Federman's work with its attendant foregrounding of issues of culture, history, and identity began to garner more attention from critics. Nevertheless, as the essays in this volume ably demonstrate, Federman's work provides a fruitful context for examination from both a timeless, ahistorical, seventies high-theory context *and* a late eighties low-theory cultural studies perspective that emphasizes the contingent, local, historical, and contextual character of all cultural artifacts.

Today, however, in a critical climate that is highly eclectic and globally situated, Federman's work is probably more powerful than ever. Why? Because like Federman, contemporary critics are less concerned with distinguishing "literature" from "theory" and "fiction" from "reality," and more interested in discussing the identity, consumption, regulation, and production of texts within culture(s).<sup>6</sup> Theory and criticism have finally caught up with Federman.

Consequently, Federman's own approach to fiction and criticism might be best viewed as "posttheoretical" and "postfictional." As the essays in this volume amply demonstrate, Federman made contributions to a range of academic disciplines and critical discourses. However, neither he nor his writing can be contained by any one discipline or discourse. Even seemingly "safe" labels such as "postmodern" or "metafiction" do not exactly capture Federman's achievement. Unlike many thinkers today who *can* be contained by labels, discourses, and disciplines, Federman's thought and writing cannot and will not. It continually has a way of sliding quickly into other areas of critical concern at the point when one feels as though one has captured it. And while the essays in this collection do their best to "contain" it, one always has the sense that the task is ultimately futile. Federman is—and is not—a theorist. Is—and is not—a fictionalist. Is—and is not—a philosopher (of language). Federman's writing is at home both within the context of contemporary theory and against it; both within the frame of fictionality and against it. As such, in many ways, he is our premier "posttheorist" and "postfictionalist."<sup>7</sup>

The aim of this volume then is to more significantly embed Federman into the contemporary conversations and discourses of cultural studies and literary theory. The result—as you will see—is that his work takes on

a power hitherto underappreciated. In some ways, the early categorization of Federman as an innovative or “experimental” writer has been both a blessing and a curse. It has been a blessing because his work has been put in a league with some of the most talented writers of the last quarter of the twentieth century—and this is no small thing. It has been a curse because it has arguably distanced his work from more powerful critical contexts, namely, those of cultural studies and literary theory. While his contributions to these areas have been sporadically mentioned over the years, the power of his work from within these contexts has been neglected. The current volume aims to rectify this.

#### A LIFE IN THE TEXT

A short story by Ronald Sukenick introduces us to a character named “Raymond Federman.” The life of Sukenick’s character is nothing short of amazing, full of danger, adventure, and intrigue. Sukenick’s story lays out this character’s life in one sentence:

One day, Federman, who must be twelve or thirteen at the time, is in the apartment with his family, poor, relatively recent immigrants to France, when the Germans come, he’s pushed into a closet by his mother, and suddenly he’s an orphan, a fugitive jumping from freight train to freight train, a farm laborer in the south of France, a factory worker in Detroit, a white named Frenchy in a black ghetto, a swim champ, a jazz musician, a paratrooper in Korea, a student in New York, a poet, a jock, a Ph.D., a gambler, a Casanova of note, a professor in California, a novelist in Buffalo, an honored literary guest in Germany. (321)

It should come as no surprise that Sukenick’s character, “Federman,” is based on the life of his close friend, the French-born, American writer, Raymond Federman.

Like Sukenick’s “fictional” Federman, the “real” Federman lost his family in the Holocaust, migrated to the United States after the war, and eventually became “an honored literary guest in Germany.” However, distinguishing the facts from the fictions regarding the “real” Federman is not a simple task. Even though most of Federman’s fiction gravitates around events from his “real” life, his fiction is not autobiographical—at least not in the “literal” sense of autobiography. And even when events from his “real” life find their way into his fiction, he provides us with precious little help distinguishing the “real” events from the “fictional” ones.

Right after he lays out the central events in this incredible “character’s” life, Sukenick writes,

A great story, but what's the plot? and which one of the above is the hero? and where's the verisimilitude? and when is the beginning, the middle, the end? and why should this irrational discontinuity be related in sequential sentences from left to right, left to right to the bottom of the printed page? and how in the name of probability can it be called real? (321)

Sukenick's observations regarding his friend's life and fictional technique are right on the mark. Federman's life is a great story—one that is almost too fantastic to believe. Complicating things even more is that in his fiction and in his real life, there are many Federmans—determining which one is the “hero” depends on one's interests and tastes. Even limiting Federman to just his academic character does not help to narrow down the list of Federmans. To some academics, he is a bilingual writer; to others, simply a novelist; to others still, a noted scholar; to others yet, a literary critic. And the list could go on. There are many academic Federmans. Each is intriguing in itself, and all are in *continuous* dialogue with each other. The essays in the first section of this book, “A Life in the Text,” aim to begin to identify some of them, and to introduce their independent strands of discourse.

In “Beckett and Beyond: Federman the Scholar,” Jerome Klinkowitz overviews Federman’s contributions to academic or scholarly publishing. In comparison to the other writers of his generation such as William Gass and Ronald Sukenick, Klinkowitz finds Federman as having “the most useful balance between the vocations of fiction writing and scholarship.” “Although other innovative fictioneers maintained an interest in academic publishing,” adds Klinkowitz, “none of their efforts match the consistency and impact of Federman’s presence in the field.”

The remarkable balance that Federman has achieved throughout his career between his fictional and his scholarly writing is underappreciated. Not only is Federman one of the foremost Beckett scholars in the world—having published three books on him<sup>8</sup>—but he is also a leading scholar of literary theory—with three books also in this area.<sup>9</sup> From his early scholarly work on Samuel Beckett through *Critfiction: Postmodern Essays* (1993), Federman’s criticism and scholarship has developed side-by-side with his fictional development. One of the virtues of Federman’s scholarship is that it is “No mere proselytizing for his own novels.” Rather, observes Klinkowitz, “Federman’s academic publications raise the same formal issues as do his works of fiction, but do so in a manner that enlarges and advances understanding, just as his own creative works take their place in emerging literary history.”

In “How, and How Not, to Be a Published Novelist: The Case of Raymond Federman,” Ted Pelton reviews Federman’s publishing career. His contribution asks why a writer that is internationally regarded and has several major awards including the American Book Award “has never had

a book published by a major U.S. imprint.” Pelton maintains that while Federman had a number of opportunities to publish with major U.S. publishers—for example, St. Martin’s Press was interested in *Smiles on Washington Square* (Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1985) and Little, Brown, & Company was interested in *Double or Nothing* (Swallow Press, 1971)—the author chose not to publish with these major publishers. For Federman, the decision to publish with small presses (rather than major presses) was based on the author’s decision to maintain his aesthetic integrity, rather than to make concessions to the market-driven editorial suggestions made by the major U.S. publishers that approached him. Pelton observes that though a few of Federman’s peers had books published with major U.S. publishers, this was the exception, rather than the rule.

Pelton points out that in the case of *Double or Nothing* as well as other works, Federman “made the decision to rework his own manuscript precisely against marketplace feedback.” In this regard, Federman’s publishing career “serves as a unique measure of the nonparticipation of American publishing in innovative American fiction.” Pelton maintains that the task of publishers should be to support the work of writers like Federman “whose texts bring us new understandings of what constitutes the art form”—not to dictate to them what they should write based on economic motives. Federman’s “refusal to write straight narrative,” suggests Pelton, against the wishes of major American publishers, provides us with “perhaps the most notable case in our time of the writer who growled at his purported master and, by doing so, became his own.”

The next essay, “Samuel Beckett and Raymond Federman: A Bilingual Companionship” by Daniela Hurezanu, introduces us to Federman’s bilingualism through a comparison with Beckett’s bilingualism. Hurezanu’s essay examines some of the philosophical and linguistic links between Beckett and Federman, complementing the scholarly relationship with Beckett established in Klinkowitz’s contribution.

Hurezanu observes that Federman views Beckett “not simply as a ‘model,’ but literally as an alter-ego he calls ‘Sam.’” Not only does Federman’s and Beckett’s literature share French-English bilingualism, the writers also share the fact that they both translate themselves. Hurezanu points out that “For Federman, to be a bilingual writer means to have a voice within a voice,” and that this metaphor was taken from a Beckett quote: “Sometimes I confuse myself with my shadow, and sometimes don’t.”

Federman’s own view of Beckett’s translations of Beckett’s own works is that they should be regarded as “twin-texts”—that is, continuations and amplifications of the work in its original language. With regard to Federman’s own work, he feels that “the original text is not complete until there is an equivalent version in French or in English,” reports Hurezanu. However, for Hurezanu, there is a “point where Federman goes beyond Beckett.” Unlike

Beckett, she argues, Federman aims to “corrupt” both languages and “to create a new, ‘impure’ one.” The new impure language would result in an entirely “bilingual” book that “would have no origin, no original language, no original text,” writes Hurezanu—and a work such as *The Voice in the Closet / La Voix dans le cabinet de débarras* (2001b) is a perfect exemplification of this bilingual aspiration.

In “Filling in the Blanks: Raymond Federman, Self-Translator,” Alyson Waters also reflects on Federman’s self-translations. Waters observes that self-translators might be placed on a spectrum. On one end of this spectrum is the “personal” self-translator, “that is, writers who see their dual cultural and linguistic identities as causing a division of the self.” On the other end of this spectrum is the “historical” self-translator, that is, writers who see “the relation to a second language” as one that is not “caused by personal circumstances, but rather by historical ones.”

Waters places Federman between these two extremes of self-translation, citing a passage from Federman’s essay “A Voice within a Voice”: “The fact that I am, that I became a bilingual writer may be an accident—an accident of history as well as an accident of my own personal experience.”<sup>10</sup> Federman, writes Waters, “sees writing in two languages as a possible *voie/voix* to express those ideas and events that leave us speechless.” Through a comparative analysis of one of Federman’s most recent self-translations, *Mon corps en neuf parties* (2002b) and *My Body in Nine Parts* (2005), Waters shows that what Federman says “seems to shift” as he moves from the French of *Mon corps* to the English of *My Body*. According to Waters, these “shifts” “would be completely unacceptable if the translation were being carried out by anyone other than the author himself.”

The final essay in this section, Larry McCaffery’s “Re-Double or Nothing: Federman, Autobiography, and Creative Literary Criticism,” argues that while “virtually all of the many essays and books that have appeared about Federman’s work during the past thirty-five years” have addressed Federman’s efforts to breakdown the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, far less attention has been given to his efforts to transgress the boundaries between *literary criticism* and autobiography. According to McCaffery, Federman “provided a new creative model of literary criticism—one that encouraged critics to openly acknowledge the role that their own autobiographies and other subjective factors played in writing the particular kind of fiction that is referred to as literary criticism.”

Federman’s intermingling of literary criticism and autobiography begins “the process of unmasking the illusions of neutrality and objectivity spawned by New Criticism.” McCaffery demonstrates (through a critifiction of his own) that while Federman’s critifictions may be drawn more or less directly from his own life, they have “nothing to do with factual accuracy and everything to do with the creation of stories that invent the truth(s).” He

closes this essay by asking, "Was there ever a closet? Who cares." McCaffery's point seems to be that while an autobiographical approach to Federman's fiction and his criticism *may* make sense *prima facie*, on closer analysis it ultimately fails to provide much definitive insight into his real life. Rather, Federman's "avant-garde" form of "autobiography" yields a *life* in fiction and criticism—with the link to his real life being irrelevant.

In sum, the essays in this section provide a glimpse of Federman's academic and scholarly career—one noteworthy for the incredible balance it has achieved between traditional scholarship (Beckett) and creative writing—and criticism. Coupled with his contributions to translation studies and bilingualism, one begins to get a sense of the range of Federman's achievement. He clearly is a scholar and critic of considerable note, even if he is best known for his innovative fictional practices and their attendant "transgressive" philosophy of literature—both of which the next section of the book aims to put in contemporary context.

#### PHILOSOPHY OF LITERATURE

Raymond Federman is the voice within the voice. His fictions are populated by voices that tease one into believing that they have located the "real" Federman only to be left holding empty signifiers—cinders of language. Characters with names such as Moinous, Namredef, French, Boris, Cousin, Ace, Tutu, Homme de Plume, Penman, Dartagnan, Ramon Hombre Della Pluma, the Old Man, Faterman, Federmann, Féderman, and F emerge in his narrative space and taunt one to read them as fictional abstractions of the author. But Federman tells us time and again that they are not him—or are at most only partly him. He makes no distinction between what happened to him and what he imagined happened to him.

Take for example the "plot" of one of his more recent and strongest novels, *Aunt Rachel's Fur* (2001a)—a novel that is exemplary of Federman's writing at the height of his powers. In this work, French expatriate Rémond Namredef travels back to France after a decade of languishing in America. Namredef is in search of a publisher for his novel about a novelist who shuts himself in a room with 365 boxes of noodles to write a novel. Namredef tells Féderman, a professional listener, that his novel, *A Time of Noodles*, is "the story of a guy who locks himself in a room for one year with boxes of noodles, 365 boxes to be exact, one per day, he calculates, to write a novel about a guy who locks himself in a room for one year with 365 boxes of noodles to write the story of his life" (18). Most of *Aunt Rachel's Fur* consists of Namredef telling Féderman stories in no particular chronological order and under no promise of verisimilitude about the history of his family and the series of events which led him to move to America. At essence, this novel is

about Federman (Namredef) talking to Federman (Féderman) about Federman. As Namredef inquires of Féderman: “Does that make sense to you?”

Federman has been challenging his readers with “plots” like the one just outlined since the publication of his first novel, *Double or Nothing*, in 1971. For readers who thrive on narrative innovation and stylistic experimentation, few writers of the last quarter of the twentieth century are better than Federman. Typographical experimentation, characterization that is neither “flat” nor “round” (in E. M. Forester’s sense [1927]), nomadic narrative structure, and an exuberant playfulness place Federman among the most formally adventurous writers of his generation. Federman, by his own account, shares with his innovative peers<sup>11</sup> “a more daring, a more radical use of language” and “a total rejection of traditional forms of narrative, and especially of mimetic realism and mimetic pretension” (1993, 31).

Federman is one of the twentieth-century masters of a genre of writing that came to be termed in the last quarter of the twentieth century as “metafiction.” While Federman himself resists this categorization, opting instead to call his writing “surfiction”—and then later in his career, “critifiction”—the term “metafiction” is a useful designation because it immediately associates his writing with other masters of this genre such as Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino. Like them, Federman has internalized this type of writing to the point where the use of innovative and challenging narrative techniques such as metalepsis and hypodiegesis never seems contrived. Federman’s writing adroitly, methodically, and systematically breaks down the narratological conventions of literary realism and naturalism, offering experimental and innovative alternatives in their stead. In Federman’s hands, strange loops and *mise en abyme* are conventional narrative techniques.

One cannot help but admire Federman’s dedication to and love for this type of writing—a dedication and love he many times addresses in his novels. In *Aunt Rachel’s Fur*, for example, Namredef, tells the professional listener, Féderman,

. . . it’s true that for years I’ve been stuck in digressiveness, wandering endlessly in narrative detours, tumbling again and again into self-reflexiveness, and these old habits, so dear to the storyteller enamored of the interior mirrors of his recitation, will indubitably prevent that wonderful book from being published here in France, that book which caused me so many sleepless nights, but that’s the way it is, I’m addicted to self-reflexiveness, I cannot write if I don’t watch myself writing, to step out of my writing, to close my eyes on the process of writing would reduce it to pathetic realism or romantic agony. . . . (2001a, 242)

Metafictional moments like these which reflect Namredef's infatuation with the process of writing are elegantly scattered throughout Federman's novel, inserted between stories about his past. Namredef is always outwardly respectful of the attention span and interest level of his professional listener. He wants to be certain that the professional listener understands his stories and agrees to the conditions under which they should be understood. The presence of this wholly silent, but omnipresent professional listener—the conceptual complement to Umberto Eco's (1979, 7–10) *model reader*—makes a novel written in a notoriously unreadable form eminently readable. *Aunt Rachel's Fur* remains what Roland Barthes (1968) would call a *scriptible* (writerly) text, but the inclusion of Féderman makes it an excellent introduction to this type of writing. To be sure, *Aunt Rachel's Fur* is a virtual primer on the state of metafiction at the close of the twentieth century.

One of the more interesting characteristics of Federman's metafiction is that it does not limit itself to simply self-reflection on the writing process. Rather, it extends to self-reflection on the publishing industry, marketability, and the reception of innovative fiction. Federman's comments in this regard are often notoriously critical—sometimes even of the very presses that publish his work. In *Aunt Rachel's Fur*, the editors at Les Éditions de l'Amour Fou reject Namredef's novel on the grounds that it is “too postmodern,” explaining that

we believe that our readers will not be able to follow your postmodern detours and circumvolutions, of course this doesn't mean your work is bad or has no literary value, but it's too complicated, too cerebral for our readers, as such it has no commercial value, that's the problem with the postmodern novel today, it's not accessible to the general public, the reader who reads for fun cannot follow what is going on, he wants to be told a straight story, or else he becomes frustrated. . . . (2001a, 242)

The editor, Monsieur Gaston, then tells Namredef that his “reluctance to let the story be told” keeps it “from being what it should be, a *Bildungsroman* . . .” (2001a, 243). In frustration, Namredef rescinds his book from consideration at the press, and attempts to educate the editor as to what literature is and should be. A *Time of Noodles* is not a postmodern novel, explains Namredef, but rather “circulates the death certificate of postmodernism, it warns those who are stuck in the postmodern sack to get out before the banks repossess the houses and the cars and the washing machines they bought on credit because their books didn't make the best-seller list . . .” (2001a, 245). However, “even though postmodernism is dead it doesn't mean that literature is done for . . .” (2001a, 250). For Namredef, “a novel is less the writing of an adventure than the adventure of writing” (2001a, 249)—“your life is not the story you write, the story that you write is your life” (2001a, 248).

Collectively statements in *Aunt Rachel's Fur* are a manifesto to a future literature free from the pressures of market demographics, plot coherence, and genre, but still strongly linked to lives in particular, and life in general. It is fitting, as Ted Pelton explains in his essay in this collection, that none of Federman's fiction has been published by a major U.S. publisher. Rather, it has all been published by small, university, and independent presses like the Fiction Collective (FC), Fiction Collective Two (FC2), Indiana University Press, and Starcherone Books, and not publishing corporations such as Harper and Row or Viking. One cannot help but think that in the hands of a corporate, market-driven publisher, *Aunt Rachel's Fur* would indeed perhaps approach the more traditional *Bildungsroman* genre alluded to by Gaston.

The stories which Raymond Federman shares with us about a life possibly lived by him, possibly by Rémond Namredef, or possibly recounted purely for the pleasure of the professional listener, are spell-binding, captivating, and often bawdy. Namredef is well aware of his storytelling prowess, and continuously teases Féderman about the direction of the narrative. For example, one of the major questions unanswered by *Aunt Rachel's Fur* is whether Namredef slept with his Aunt Rachel: "You sonofabitch, you'd like to know if I screwed my aunt, well I won't tell you, there are things you just cannot tell. . . . In any case, nobody will ever know what happened with my aunt in our intimacy, that's my secret . . ." (225). It would not be correct to call the world created through Federman's novel a Baudrillarian world of simulacra, nor would it be correct to call it a Beckettian fictional space where the coordinates of reality and fiction do not operate à la *L'Innommable*. However, like these authors, Federman continuously challenges our assumptions about fictional space and its relationship to the realities of the author, reader, and characters. In *Aunt Rachel's Fur*, like his other fictions, Federman always keeps the distinction between reality and fiction fluid, floating from one to the other according to the demands of the moment.

We are moved by Namredef's sad account of the callous treatment he received from his relatives in wartime and postwar France, and we empathize with the loss of his immediate family in the "Final Solution." However, by leaving open the possibility that all of Namredef's stories are untrue, Federman compels us to explore questions of historical memory and its relationship to narrativity—questions which are taken up in some detail in the third and final section of this book. Namredef states, "I make no distinction between reality and fiction. . . . Some of my stories are based on my own experiences, and others come from my novel, that's the way I function . . ." (2001a, 127). And that's the way we begin to function as attentive readers (or, listeners, if you will). Considerations of the reality or irreality of the events recounted by Namredef take a secondary place to simply enjoying the "adventure of writing."

This overview of *Aunt Rachel's Fur* provides a glimpse of the complexity and creativity of his philosophy of literature. Federman's writing is

beyond doubt one of the most interesting and vital variations of metafiction in contemporary literature, though it is also much more. The relationship between tragedy, memory, and self-reflexivity result in a philosophy of literature that is unlike any other in American letters. The essays in this section of the book, "Philosophy of Literature," provide an overview and critical discussion of Federman's narrative poetics and its relationship with postmodernism and theory.

In "A Narrative Poetics of Raymond Federman," Brian McHale argues (somewhat surprisingly) that Federman's narrative poetics can be described using only the categories of classical narrative theory. Using only voice and writing, story and discourse, time and space, narrative levels and their violation, and the laying bare of fictionality, McHale challenges the notion that Federman's narrative depends upon "some putative 'postmodern theory of narrative.' "

McHale argues that rather than viewing Federman as a postmodern writer, it may be more appropriate to consider him a "mere" late-modernist, or a latter-day avant-gardist." He maintains that Federman both early and late in his career is "largely *indifferent*" to high theory. While not ignorant of theory, Federman arrives at "surfictional self-reflection" "mainly through reflection on the practice of his precursors—Beckett above all, of course, but also the high-modernists (Proust, Joyce, Kafka), mavericks such as Céline and Le Clézio, contemporaries such as the *nouveaux romanciers* and his American surfictionist compatriots Sukenick, Katz, Chambers, Major, and Molinaro, and even distant precursors such Rabelais, Sterne, and Diderot."

In this regard, McHale's observation is close to Federman's own explanation of his predecessors. However, while agreeing with Federman on the sources of his narrative practice, McHale differs with him on the "transgressiveness" of his poetics. For McHale, Federman's practice is more a continuation of the categories and conventions of world literature than a transgression of them. For example, whereas Federman claims that temporal leaps are transgressive, McHale says, "in point of fact, they are only transgressive relative to a straw man, the putative norm of a chronologically ordered narrative." In the end, McHale goes against the majority opinion which finds Federman's narrative practices to be atypical. For McHale, "Raymond Federman is the most typical novelist of world literature."

In the second essay in this section, "Surfiction, Not Sure Fiction: Raymond Federman's Second-Degree Textual Manipulations," Davis Schneiderman reflects on rewriting in Federman. Schneiderman distinguishes between what he calls "first-degree" and "second-degree" textual strategies. First-degree textual strategies involve spatial manipulation and typographic innovation of the page; second-degree textual strategies involve Federman's efforts to produce "deliberately unreliable biography" through "pervasive cancellations, undoings, and erasures." For Schneiderman, Federman's "failures" to tell his

story “follow his great mentor Samuel Beckett’s injunction, ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.’” But, as for Beckett, so too for Federman, his ostensive “failure” is literally his success—in failing to reveal a complete “*version* of himself at any particular textual moment,” he succeeds in reproducing himself throughout and across his narratives.

According to Schneiderman, Federman’s use of second-degree textual manipulation is both more pervasive and (perhaps) more persuasive than his first-degree textual manipulations. His second-degree textual manipulations “overturn the most easily digestible form: that which should always tell the truth.” What results from Federman’s ceaseless rewriting is a “non-origin” and “non-space” which reveals neither the author nor his family. What is discovered in the wake of Federman’s second-degree textual manipulations is only the “endlessly repeating chatter of Federman’s language.” Paradoxically, for Schneiderman, in the end the failure to tell his life story “becomes one of Federman’s most important techniques.”

The next essay, Eckhard Gerdes’s “Raymond Federman, the Ultimate Metafictioneer,” argues that Federman’s “metafictional” achievements require a much more complex notion than is provided in the secondary literature on the topic. Even Patricia Waugh’s oft-cited definition of metafiction as “a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”<sup>12</sup> does not do justice to the richness of Federman’s achievement.

Gerdes contends that it is simply not possible to provide a definition of metafiction that adequately accounts for Federman’s work. Rather, the only way to capture the many concerns about self-referentiality demonstrated in his writing is to focus on examples of three prominent (or dominant) ones: “textual self-referentiality, authorial self-referentiality, and operational self-referentiality.” Each, in turn, is further subdivided by Gerdes such that ten “types” of self-referentiality are proposed and analyzed. Indeed, Gerdes demonstrates that self-referentiality in Federman is much richer than one might imagine by simply classifying him as a “metafictionalist.” Given Federman’s high degree of textual, authorial, and operational self-referentiality, one might conclude along with Gerdes that Federman is the “ultimate metafictioneer”—or, at the very least, metafictional innovation *after* Federman becomes a much more difficult task.

If McHale and Gerdes are correct—and terms like “postmodernism” and “metafiction” do not capture well Federman’s approach to fiction—then another approach might be needed. The next contribution, Thomas Hartl’s “Formulating Yet Another Paradox: Raymond Federman’s Real Fictitious Discourses,” suggests one: paradox.

Following Douglas Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979, 21–23), Hartl contends that “the main characteristic of paradox is to be found in

self-referentiality and the formation of strange loops.” According to Hartl, Federman uses paradox “to short circuit fiction and criticism, to transgress the boundaries set up between fiction and reality, in short, to break down traditional ontological boundaries set up between text and reality.” Unlike “the absurd,” which “always amounts to a negation of the truth,” “paradox only negates the common beliefs of most people,” notes Hartl (quoting Micraelius). Arguably, one of the “common beliefs” negated through Federman’s use of paradox is our sense of the ontological structure of fiction.

Through the use of paradox, Federman is able to do “away with the observation of different ontological levels within the narrative situation.” “There is always another voice outside the text, a voice that precedes, supersedes each narrative voice, as in the drawing of the hand that holds the pen that draws itself,” says Federman referring to the paradoxical art of M. C. Escher.<sup>13</sup> Instead of resulting in a hierarchical narrative space, Federman’s use of paradox produces a “heterarchical” one, that is to say, one wherein there is “no single ‘highest level.’” As such, says Hartl, “paradox opens a utopian space where truth might be produced—and truth, here, may even itself be paradoxical.” This heterarchical utopian space opened up by paradox breaks down the ontological space of narrative. Thus, in Hartl’s estimation, paradox becomes a concept that captures well the essence of Federman’s fictional practice.

In “The Agony of Unrecognition: Raymond Federman and Postmodern Theory,” Eric Dean Rasmussen situates Federman’s “surfiction” and “critification” in relation to several varieties of postmodern theory. He finds that Federman’s work here “can be seen to inform three varieties of postmodern theory: French poststructuralism, American neo-pragmatism, and German systems theory.” Rasmussen shows a number of ways in which Federman’s surfiction and critification “endorse and enact typically postmodern literary commitments: the open text, the indeterminacy of meaning, self-reflexive and anti-representational modes of writing, and reading/writing as a collaborative (auto)poietic process involving multiple agents working together to harness linguistic *differance* into meaningful formations.”

However, Rasmussen admits that there may seem to be a glaring difference between the “theoretical” work of Federman and that of his continental counterparts like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. The difference being that the continental thinkers appear to be much more “rigorous” theorists (or thinkers) than Federman. Rasmussen rightly disposes of this observing that while “Federman’s critifications may lack the philosophical rigor of writings by continental intellectuals” like Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze, he compensates for this by making these oftentimes complex theories “accessible” “without dumbing them down.” Writes Rasmussen, “He does this in part by articulating his thoughts within a broad emotional or tonal range, thereby avoiding the ‘tone lock’ that

makes so much academic writing sound sclerotic and lifeless." Nevertheless, Rasmussen contends, Federman's surfiction and critifiction have "been overshadowed by, and even integrated into, his novels."

The final essay in this section, "Raymond Federman and Critical Theory," takes on a project similar to the previous one. However, its author, Jan Baetens, is much less optimistic than Rasmussen about Federman's relationship with continental theory. Whereas Rasmussen views Federman as "endorsing" and "enacting" critical theory, Baetens contends while it is possible to situate Federman in the context of critical theory, it "is not necessarily . . . best" to do so. While Baetens agrees with Rasmussen that Federman makes "major contributions to the field of literary theory," it is difficult for him to put Federman squarely on the side of critical theory. Baetens contends that even though this is "not wrong *per se*," aligning Federman with critical theory "does not really do justice to the complexity and the singularity of the author's work."

Instead, Baetens suggests that Federman's work should be aligned more with "global autobiography" and "existentialist aesthetics" than "the language-centered approach of Critical Theory" (or poststructuralist theory). Both alignments suggested by Baetens are intriguing and worthy of more study, particularly Federman's existentialism. Baetens only makes passing mention of Federman's existentialism and really does not develop it in much detail. Nevertheless, his suggestion opens up a host of questions about the possible relationship of Federman's critical thought to continental thinkers in the existentialist tradition, particularly Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. "[I]f there are traces of Critical Theory in Federman's work," Baetens states, "these traces are heavily reworked, assimilated, played and laughed with, i.e., absorbed into a fictional universe that imposes its own logic, which is of course in dialogue with many of the ideas of the Critical Theory movement but without falling prey to a literal illustration of a Grand Theory which does not really define what happens in a Federman fiction."

The essays in this section reveal the depth and range of Federman's philosophy of literature. They also indicate the complex relationship that his writing has to designators commonly associated with his work. While terms like "metafiction" and "postmodern" provide a general indicator of the direction of his writing, they are not entirely accurate. Even terms of his own making such as "surfiction" and "critifiction" do not indicate the rich relationship that Federman's writing has with philosophical issues concerning language, reference, and aesthetics. As such, rather than trying to contain his work with one of these terms, it is probably best to avoid using them to describe his work. In many ways, the uniqueness of his philosophy of literature defies common designators. If, however, one must have a term, then "postfictionalist" or "posttheorist"—as noted earlier—will do better than most.

## LAUGHTER, HISTORY, AND THE HOLOCAUST

In Federman's narrative world, meaning is not achieved through the representation or re-presentation of events outside of the text. Rather, it is temporarily produced through the act of reading; through our engagement with his masterfully playful deployment of language. His work demonstrates how meaning is possible without reference and representation. In a way, Federman's narrative world has a lot in common with Jacques Derrida's vision of the "world as a text" established in *De la grammatologie* (1967).

For Derrida, there is nothing outside of the text ("il n'y a pas de hors-texte"). Aesthetic texts like Federman's novels foreground the play of presence and absence. They are a place of the effaced trace. Furthermore, for both Derrida and Federman, the subject-object distinction does not hold. Both challenge the notion that we are able to objectively describe objects in the world—even those events that we believe are the most meaningful ones in our lives. If Derrida's textualism asserts that we cannot provide answers to questions such as "What is X?"—whether X is fiction in general or a particular event in our life—then Federman's textualism asserts that we cannot provide an answer to the question "What is XXXX?," when "XXXX" stands for the family members that the young Federman lost in his childhood.

The power of Federman's writing comes from the stories he doesn't tell us: from the absence that is the continuous presence of his texts. While Federman's fiction is grounded in a notion of textualism or textuality similar to Derrida's, the power of his novels is established by the fact that Federman is continuously taunting us with the possibility of representation—of a reality outside of the text—which in Federman's case was a particularly traumatic and horrible one.<sup>14</sup>

Born in France in 1928, Federman involves elements in his novels that can be traced back to a central trauma from his childhood. "My life began in a closet among empty skins and dusty hats while sucking pieces of stolen sugar," writes Federman in his 1982 novel *The Twofold Vibration* (53).<sup>15</sup> Specters of this event situate most everything he has written.

This line from *The Twofold Vibration* is part of a much longer passage which was written as a poem in 1957, long before the publication of the novel (McCaffery 437). Federman calls this poem his "autobiography." "My entire work comes out of these two dozen lines which have been dispersed throughout my work," says Federman (McCaffery 437–38). "Some of what is told in that poem may be true," he comments, but some may not be. For example, he says, "whether or not I slipped on the twelfth step cannot be verified" (McCaffery 438).

Federman's poem recalls an incident from a horrific event that occurred on July 16, 1942. It was on this date that the Nazis rounded up 12,884 Jews in Paris. The event, referred to by the French as "la grande Rafle," included

Federman's parents and sisters. Upon hearing the Gestapo making their way to their third floor apartment at 5:30 A.M., Federman's mother, Marguerite, hid her son Raymond in a closet on the landing. The Gestapo sent his parents and sisters to the concentration camp in Auschwitz on train convoys 14, 21, and 25, where they did not survive the year (Hartl 13).

Raymond was fourteen years old at the time. He sat in a closet in only his underwear as his family was taken away. Fearing the anti-Semitic neighbors in the apartment on the floor below, he remained in the closet all day and most of the night. During this time, he sucked on sugar cubes and defecated on newspaper, which he then placed on the roof of the building. When he left the closet, he wore one of his father jackets, having removed the yellow star from it (Hartl 13).

While most of his fiction gravitates around this event, Federman does not consider it to deal with the Holocaust. In an interview with Mark Amerika, Federman (2002a, 421) comments,

My work is really about the post-Holocaust, what it means to live the rest of your earthly existence with this thing inside of you—and I don't mean just me, I mean all of us, wherever we may be—those who experienced it, those who think they experienced it, those who survived it, those who did it, those who witnessed it and said nothing, those who claim they never knew, those who claim it never happened, those who feel sorry for those to whom it happened, and so on and so on. The Holocaust was a universal affair in which we were all implicated and are still.

This comment seems to support Baetens's assertion (noted earlier) that Federman's work should be aligned more with existentialist aesthetics than poststructuralist theory. Nonetheless, Federman's fictions deconstruct our notion of the relationship of fiction to reality, and test our convictions about autobiography, mimesis, and the nature of knowledge. Their direct connection with his experiences as a youth during the Holocaust coupled with his unique philosophy of literature make them a significant contribution to an understanding of the Holocaust and its representation in the arts.

The final group of essays, "Laughter, History, and the Holocaust," takes up this very topic, that is, Federman's contributions to Holocaust history and literature. While Federman's survival of the Holocaust and the inscription of key events relating to this are well known to scholars of his work, what are less well known are his contributions to Holocaust studies, trauma studies, and the philosophy of history. Arguably, some of the most interesting current work being done on Federman lies in these areas—areas that take up his unique and theoretically progressive approach to trauma and history.

In "Surviving in the Corridors of History or, History as Double or Nothing," Dan Stone ruminates on Federman's complex relationship to history, and concludes that "history is always already a form of surfiction." For Federman, surfiction is the notion that "reality as such does not exist, or rather exists only in its fictionalized version, that is to say, in the language that describes it" (1993, 38; quoted by Stone). For Stone, history as a form of surfiction *does not* entail "that the past did not exist" or "that our only awareness that the past did exist comes from historians." Rather, it entails that "the past given meaning, constructs the past imaginatively. Reality does not exist, especially when it is past reality—history is double or nothing."

Stone's approach to history as a genre of writing allows him to reconcile Federman's apparent opposition to "historical method" while still not deserting "his post as witness to history." In Federman's writing, Stone finds a historian who shows us that history is more than just "numbers and statistics." For Federman and Stone, history is "loaded with emotional and moral freight and does far more than just provide information about the past." Stone, citing Jean-François Lyotard, remarks that what is needed is *feeling*, rather than knowledge—and it is here that Federman's work excels. Stone writes, "it is precisely the absence of 'facts' that generates the profound sense of rootedness in history that one feels here."

In the next essay, "When Postmodern Play Meets Survivor Testimony: Federman and Holocaust Literature," Susan Rubin Suleiman reminds us that the discussion of Federman's work within the context of Holocaust literature is a recent phenomena. The reason may be linked to the fact that Federman himself was not deported, but is probably better explained by the fact that Federman's writing does not fit the mold of traditional testimonial writing. One of the central differences between classic Holocaust literature authors such as Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Charlotte Delbo is that unlike them, Federman makes no claim to factuality, witnessing, or veracity. This puts Federman's contribution to Holocaust literature in a category of its own: even Art Spiegelman wants us to classify his *Maus* comix as nonfiction.

Moreover, Federman's work unlike classic Holocaust literature is not concerned with philosophical issues like "the problem of evil" or "the existence of God," rather his problem, for Suleiman, is "how to tell a story." In her chapter, she provides a glimpse of how Federman's use of literary strategies such as multiple narrative voices, paradox, and preterition (the rhetorical figure of "saying while not saying") contribute to his inimitable version of Holocaust literature. She also remarks that Federman's interest in laughter and "preoccupation with sexual transgression and sexual pleasure" are features which set his Holocaust literature apart from that of his contemporaries. For Suleiman, "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 make us realize—the way a great writer does—that although every life is unique, its meaning can be communicated."

Marcel Cornis-Pope's contribution, "‘In Black Inkblood’: Agonistic and Cooperative Authorship in the (Re)Writing of History," maintains that Federman's oeuvre can be viewed as a confrontation between history and rewriting. In his earlier novels such as *Double or Nothing* (1971) and *Take It or Leave It* (1976), Federman's "success at articulating ‘real fictitious discourse’ depended on his willingness to *unwrite/rewrite* the already extant stories of his life." In works from this period, claims Cornis-Pope, "Federman addressed the crisis of history and literature from the perspective of a playful/agonistic authorship, which involved a polemical confrontation between teller and listener, speech and writing." However, in later novels such as *The Twofold Vibration* (1982) and *Smiles on Washington Square* (1985), Federman emphasized a different approach to history, which Cornis-Pope describes as "cooperative" and "integrative." "A character-author addresses his story to a sympathetic narratee," writes Cornis-Pope, "who is invited to receive, but also to contribute to the rewriting of the (his)story."

Cornis-Pope observes as well that Federman's recent novels tend more to emphasize "the task of rewriting over that of deconstruction." In the 1980s and 1990s as opposed to the 1970s, Federman's writing is more concerned with developing "its own alternative story against the dominant cultural narrative" than with the deconstructive task of demonstrating the "impossibility of narrating ‘lives.’" Nevertheless, Federman's postmodern innovative fiction never abandons foregrounding "the problematic nature of all historical representation that relies on the power of narration for ‘truth.’" Here, Cornis-Pope reminds us that Federman's philosophy of history should be disassociated from some of the most influential continental philosophies of history—the "negative dialectic" of the Frankfurt School, Martin Heidegger's notion of "historicity," Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of the freedom of history, and finally, Michel Foucault's discourses on history and power. While not developed in his essay, this dissociation will certainly be a fruitful topic for further investigation.

Cornis-Pope's contribution reminds us of one of the most important consequences of Federman's fiction: the questioning of the ideology of grand narratives of history. By emphasizing "individual experience" over "history's grand plots," Federman is "disrupting official representations" of history. For Cornis-Pope, Federman's "exploratory" form of historical rewriting approaches "self and humanity"—in Federman's words from the opening pages of *The Twofold Vibration*—"from a potential point of view, preremembering the future rather than remembering the past."

Christian Moraru's "Cosmobabble or, Federman's Return" introduces us to Federman as a cosmopolitan writer. For Moraru, novels such as *Aunt Rachel's Fur* (2001a) and *Return to Manure* (2006) are "counter-nostalgic narratives." These accounts of his returning to scenes and sites of his childhood and adolescence are not an effort by Federman to restore or bring back to life a presence from the past that has been lost. Rather, says Moraru, they are efforts

to "recuperate a fuller 'identity'" —an identity which is both the same and different from its historical origin. Counter-nostalgic narrative does not aim to repeat or bring the past to life through narrative—a task which Moraru views as an effort "to regularize the singular, the idiosyncratic, the foreign, and the strange, to integrate their voice into the national chorale."

Instead, Federman's "cosmopolitan 'babble'" with its Kierkegaardian "repetition" always already "blocks a 'recovery' of French and Frenchness." According to Moraru, Federman's bilingual (English/French) and bicultural (America/France) narratives provide a unique perspective on cosmopolitanism. They demonstrate "a point of no return, if returning means going back to one origin, one sound, one way of doing things or seeing the world." Federman's Holocaust narratives take "Federman back to a linguistic and existential nothingness": a narrative space made all the more terrifying because what is found upon returning to events is that "familiar and familial voices [have] been rendered speechless, reduced to nothing." The literal meaning revealed by Federman's cosmobabble is that his "origins" have been "erased."

In the next essay, "Featherman's Body Literature or, the Unbearable Lightness of Being," Michael Wutz argues for the primacy of the body (over the mind) in understanding Federman's art. While some might be inclined to believe that because of the high degree of postmodern textual play in Federman's fiction that his art and life are grounded in an *anti-essentialism*, Wutz seems to disagree. For him, Federman "juxtaposes the fickleness of constructed selves to the solidity of embodied being." Wutz's contribution argues for the stability of *res extensa* in Federman's work, and the instability of *res cogitans*: in other words, the body provides stability and grounding for self- and textual-metamorphoses.

Federman is essentialistic in his body metaphysics and anti-essentialist in his thinking and textual play. For Wutz, Federman reverses the Cartesian formula of *cogito ergo sum* by establishing that life and art begin with *physical*, not mental self-awareness. *Sum ergo cogito* is more appropriate to Federman's metaphysics.

Wutz maintains that the body is for Federman "the primary and primordial horizon of experiential value." Unlike Samuel Beckett, for example, whose work is arguably about the elimination of the constraints of the body from fiction and aspires toward a bodiless journey of verbal self-awareness in his masterwork *L'Innommable* (1953; *The Unnameable*), Federman's fiction strives for a more inclusive cataloguing of corporeal (and many times more graphic) dimensions of bodily existence. Wutz observes that this is "in no small measure, responsible for his marginalization in the canon of contemporary American literature." Wutz's observations about the role of the body in Federman's writing provide a very theoretically progressive portrait of him, which compels one to further examine the links between Federman's textual practices and contemporary body criticism.