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UDC: 821.133.1:: 821.111(73).09-31 Federman R.
10.19090/gff.v48i3.2395
Original research paper

NOSTALGIA FOR WHAT NEVER WAS: SILENCE, ABSENCE AND HISTORICAL ERASURE IN RAYMOND FEDERMAN'S THE TWOFOLD VIBRATION^{†}**

Raymond Federman was a French-American Jewish writer whose works embodied postmodern literary tendencies of the time. His tragic experience with the Holocaust greatly influenced his worldview, leading to the creation of a unique literary theory and style of writing. His works show a defiant stance against the imposed literary norms of the previous decades with central themes being those of absence, loss, historical manipulation and erasure, cancellation and ultimately, silence. His novel *The Twofold Vibration*, however, adds an additional element to his literary opera – that of nostalgia. It being Federman, that nostalgia does not necessarily refer to actual times past, but to a hypothetical past, a what-could've-been. In this novel, Federman displaces this particular feeling of sorrow for something that was not allowed to happen. In this novel, Federman explores the concepts of silence, absence, historical erasure and nostalgia in the aftermath of historical atrocities. One could say that it was in this novel where Federman masterfully manages to make his readers feel nostalgic for a vision of the past. This paper aims to recognize the intricate and subtle application of different language devices Federman used to establish these themes and will also deal with specific instances of the appearance of these themes in the novel. Finally, the author hopes to demonstrate how skillfully Federman managed to convey the strength of an everlasting emotional burden behind these themes.

Keywords: nostalgia, silence, absence, erasure, history, Holocaust

INTRODUCTION

There are many adjectives with which one could describe the fiction of Raymond Federman, ranging from difficult, incoherent, non-sequitur and illegible even, to fascinating, original and unique, yet rare are those who would venture to call it nostalgic. Yet it is precisely the overwhelming feeling of nostalgia, which is encapsulated, though in different degrees, in all of his novels. Being a survivor of the

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** The paper was presented at THE 6TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND ANGLOPHONE LITERATURES TODAY, held in Novi Sad, October 29-30, 2022.

Holocaust, an immigrant forced out of his native land by the burden of the memories of those he had lost, “lost in translation” in a country whose language he did not speak at first, Raymond Federman masterfully managed to sew his feelings, both good and bad, into his novels, including the feelings of nostalgia, grief and guilt. That guilt, the guilt of having survived, may even be deemed a driving force behind his writing, especially the early novels. As Federman himself said, in his last novel *Shhh: The story of a childhood*:

I have written all of that for her [his mother] in order to decode the great silence she imposed on me with her CHUT¹. My duty, if I must have one, is to fill the whole of absence that my mother dug into me. My duty is to render her absence present. And thus give a little dignity to those whose lives were humiliated. (2010: 341)

At the beginning of every impulse to write, there is a central agonizing event, and to write is to acknowledge this event (McCaffery et al., 1998: 362). Nothing could be more true for the works of Raymond Federman than this statement. In all of his works, criticism included, there is without exception the mention of the most tragic event in his life – the loss of his entire family in one night. On the morning of July 16th, 1942, in Paris, during an event now known as *La Rafle d’Hiver*, the police stormed the building in which Raymond Federman lived with his family – mother, father and two sisters – and took them away by force. The only reason he survived was because his mother pushed him into a broom closet and told him to be silent (“CHUT!”). His family was later killed in Auschwitz. This devastating loss for the then 13-year-old Raymond Federman would carve itself into all aspects of his life and fiction and will always be referred to in Federman’s works through the symbol “X-X-X-X”, marking the absence of his parents and sisters.

It is impossible to delve into the works of Raymond Federman without acknowledging the importance of this central event of his youth, which will become the central absence defining his early fiction. However, even though he undoubtedly writes about his own experience as a survivor of the Holocaust, Federman’s writing does not fit the mould of traditional Holocaust writing and his contribution to Holocaust literature is a category of its own (DiLeo, 2011: 18).

Federman’s first five novels, which also make up the exemplary set for his *surfiction*, a term he coined referring to “the kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction beyond its own limitations, [...] which exposes the fictionality of reality” (Federman 1993: 37), are explorations of Federman’s past and in a way

¹ Federman intentionally left this in the original language, French, since it is the language in which his mother spoke and told him this. The capitalization is also his.

represent his confrontation with all the events in his life that took place following the murder of his family and his departure for the United States, aged 19. Out of the five books, the one which stands out the most in terms of coherence and organization, as well as the overt references to the Holocaust and the camps is the novel *The Twofold Vibration*.

This novel is Federman's fifth novel, published in 1982. The very title of the novel was taken from a Samuel Beckett² novel called "The Lost Ones". It is a mixture of the science-fiction genre and historical writing, with an overarching autobiographical narrative. The protagonist of the novel is a man simply called *Old Man* who himself is an amalgamate representation of the personalities of Federman, Samuel Beckett, Federman's father and other figures (McCaffery et al., 1998: 364). The other three characters in the novel are Namredef and Moinous³ and Federman, the narrator of the novel (to be distinguished from the real Federman, the author). The "adventures" of the Old Man and the events described in the novel, carry an unignorable similarity to the events which happened in the life of Raymond Federman himself, though for Federman this is a matter of no consequence since he made no distinction between the stories he wrote and the life he lived (McCaffery–Hartl, & Rice, 1998: 328). To use his words: "There is no story... My life is the story. The story is my life." (LeClair, McCaffery, 1988: 148).

The central story of the novel takes place exactly on December 31, 1999, with the Old Man and his dog waiting at the departure gate, to be deported into space. This is done to people who are no longer considered useful or necessary in that society and is thus a way of "removing" them from it. However, it can also be a kind of punishment for something the person had done and which is looked upon as inappropriate, offensive or simply illegal, or otherwise forbidden. Namredef and Moinous desperately try to save the Old Man, either by talking to the authorities or pleading with him to tell them what was it that he had done to earn him the punishment of deportation, yet no answer is provided. The descriptions of their

² Samuel Beckett is an extremely important influence in the life and work of Raymond Federman. Federman wrote his PhD dissertation called *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction*, on Beckett, and he also considered him his "spiritual father" (McCaffery et al., 1998: 341). The two were good friends and Federman would often travel to visit Beckett in Paris. Apart from his thesis, Federman wrote numerous essays on Beckett and was the co-author of one the best studies of the work of Samuel Beckett – *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*.

³ Federman's literary alter egos. Namredef is "Federman" spelled backwards, whereas Moinous is an important and frequent alter-ego which first appeared in Federman's novel "Take It or Leave It". The name Moinous is a combination of the pronouns "me" and "us" in French.

attempts to talk to the Old Man and to try to talk to the authorities are constantly interrupted with the episodes from the Old Man's life, as described by Namredef and Moinous to Federman, the narrator. These include the Old Man's gambling sprees in Germany, a short love affair with June Fanon (Jane Fonda in the original version, changed at the behest of the publisher), a university protest and the central scene of the Old Man's visit to Dachau. However, in the end, subverting all the pre-set expectations and against all odds, the Old Man is not deported and is the only one left at the departure gate. Thus, the question of "why is he there, what has he done to deserve this" from the beginning of the novel, turns into the "why was he spared, how did he survive" (McCaffery et al., 1998: 365). Much like Federman himself, the Old Man was given an "excess of life" (Federman, 1993: 95) as well as the burden of never knowing why he was the one granted it.

The Twofold Vibration is a complex novel which, even though it deals with the Holocaust, is not a book about the Holocaust. Rather, it is a book which talks about what it means to live/survive in the post-Holocaust era (McCaffery et al., 1998: 361).

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The premise of *The Twofold Vibration* is a glaring reference to the deportation of Jews to the Nazi camps, as well as Federman's own survival story, but it is neither limited to nor by that. In the novel, which may be considered his "first book of answers", following the previous "novels of questions" (Abádi – Nagy, 2002: 140), the narrator "pre-re-members" the past of his protagonist (McCaffery et al., 1998: 364) since the book deals with the future and the past in a rather indistinguishable manner. The two are set on equal planes, almost as if they were happening simultaneously. This form of temporal dislocation allowed for Federman to create a form of distortion of the past, changing the historical narrative without being in any way subject to historical accuracy and truthfulness. This corresponds to Roland Barthes' concept of historical discourse being "a form of ideological elaboration, an imaginary elaboration [...] and thus historical memory easily lends itself to forgery and false or at least *subjective* projections" (Rudaitytė, 2018: Foreword). This is why the subversion of "real" events and "real" historical facts from the collective past may be considered a form of historical erasure in the novel, though they do serve the purpose of accentuating and reinforcing the "realness" of the events themselves.

Another overt reference is when, while describing the Old Man, Federman states that he is also “of Jewish origin on top of that, not that this fact makes much difference here, not at all⁴” (Federman, 1982: 6). It is obvious, of course, that the fact that he is Jewish is extremely important, or at least it would be in the “real” historical sequence of events. Also, the date of birth, May 15th 1918, of the Old Man, coincides with Federman’s birthday (both the narrator and the author), as well as Federman’s father (narrator’s), while the colonies were set up in 1994, a comparison emphasised by Federman himself: “no I don’t think it too obvious, or too soon, there is nothing symbolic, nothing premature in that date, don’t start making all sorts of literary connections” (Federman, 1982: 10). The connection which could easily be drawn between the numbers 1994 and 1944 is obvious in this instance. This “playing” with history, which is very typical of Federman, can be perceived as a mechanism to accentuate the real and the factual, to draw attention to the actual historical events that *did* take place, by subverting them. In the next paragraph, the narrator says: “after all history, as a friend once wrote, is a dream already dreamt and destroyed” (*ibid.*).

In the following paragraphs, Federman goes on to explain how he could change the timeline of the novel, set it either deeper in the past or even further in the future, but that he prefers not to. He also touches directly on the question of the Holocaust and says:

that’s an important item which must never be forgotten, yes my old man⁵ was there, he experienced the Holocaust, that beautifully sad affair for art as it was once called, in a way he was a survivor, an escapee⁶, way back then, he endured that humiliating experience and somehow managed to survive it, by extension one might say, and that’s crucial to our story, I think (Federman, 1982: 12)

Again, a parallel between the events which are to be described and the deportation to the camps is brought into focus by the narrator himself, in an attempt to make distance the plot of the current story from the historical narrative. Later on, however, we find out that the Old Man spent four years in a concentration camp during the war, which is not true for any of the members of Federman’s family, nor himself.

⁴ Original punctuation and orthography kept. This will be the rule for all subsequent quotations.

⁵ Here it is, probably purposefully, left in small letters, indicating that it may not be a name in this particular instance, and could, thus, refer to Federman’s real “old man” i.e., his father.

⁶ Now, on the other hand, it is clear that he is talking about himself.

An event which did take place in Federman's life were the university demonstrations against the war in Vietnam where Federman participated as the only full-time professor. He was arrested, along with 44 other members of staff and protestant, and they will be called the Buffalo 45. Just like him, the Old Man was also arrested, was a part of the Buffalo 45, but unlike him, Federman did not meet Jane Fonda at the demonstrations, nor did he run away with her and have a love affair. This is another example of the blatant overlap of historical fact and fiction, in which the truth of both events is equally questionable, but just as much equally valid, making it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction.

Another instance would be when the narrator claims that the Old Man experienced the Italian Revolution (which historically happened in 1848) and the burning of the Vatican (which never happened) in 1989. He continues to state that the Old Man witnessed the Pope's death, being burned alive in the fire on the roof of St. Peter, which of course did not happen, but it may refer to the bombing of the basilica in 1944, during WWII. This is another example of Federman's alterations of historical facts, where the temporal placement of characters (the Old Man was born in 1918, making it impossible to witness the Italian Revolution) and events is fluid and subject to no standard of historical factuality. Thus, the very historical reality of these events is erased, since in the universe of the novel, their existence is not denied, but the facts surrounding them are altered to the point of unrecognition.

Nevertheless, it is not the past events only which are being altered and erased, it is the future ones as well. By setting future events which have not yet happened (for example, the first baby born in space, a joint Russian - American venture, artificial fruits, etc.) into a past already lived, these events are deleted *a priori* and retroactively, at the same time.

A very important episode in the novel is the Old Man's visit to Dachau, one of the deadliest death camps in Nazi Germany. In it, the Old Man finds himself with a group of people in Dachau, which looks more like a museum than what it actually was, this being a form of historical erasure in itself. There the Old Man takes a special interest in one of the pictures on the wall, a little boy wearing an oversized coat with a yellow star on it, and he is not sure whether it is him in the photograph. Here we have another clash of historical fact and fiction, but also an incongruity within the story itself. First of all, if the Old Man was born in 1918, he would have been over 20 years old during WWII, which immediately makes it impossible for him to be the little boy in the picture: "for a moment I thought it was a picture of me" (Federman, 1982: 100). However, since the Old Man and Federman (author) share a history, it is paradoxically possible for him to in fact be that boy, considering that that is how

Federman emerged from the closet at 13 years old – in his father’s coat with a yellow star on it. Again, several historical accounts clash, making it hard to discern which one was the *real* one, making all of them *a priori* true, or *a priori* false, depending on the stance.

Another flagrant example of historical erasure exemplified within the scene itself is when they come across a room with photographs from which the face of Adolf Hitler had been erased: “there were many photographs of Hitler where the face had been cut out, scratched out, mutilated with a knife or a sharp object in futile gestures of anger” (Federman, 1982: 99). Whether this is in fact true, and there are photographs like this in Dachau is unsure, but it is a very potent illustration of the need for and drive towards historical erasure, yet also a proof of its impossibility, since the existence of those holes in the photographs only points more assertively to what was once there.

Moreover, this is the only scene in the novel which is interrupted only once, for the Old Man to say his (Federman’s) story about how he escaped being caught by German soldiers. This very interjection cancels everything said before, since that is the story of the Old Man’s escape, yet we know that he had been in the camps, spent 4 years there in fact. Hence, once again, we have a subversion of expectations and erasure of historical fact by making it ambiguous.

Furthermore, it is during the trip to Dachau and in the camp itself where the Old Man divulges a bit more about his family and the tragedy that befell it. When it comes to telling this story, Federman is very consistent in all of his novels, altering it minimally. The first mention of the Old Man’s family was at the very beginning, when he talks about the harsh conditions in which his family lived “before they were exterminated [...] x-x-x-x out, is how he always put it” (Federman, 1982: 8). The symbol “x-x-x-x” used to describe the absence of this family members is a very powerful and memorable reminder of their fates. As Walsh (1992, 80) points out: “The remembered dead are undoubtedly one of the most conspicuously absent yet still present forces in our lives”. This absence, however, is viewed also in the physical form of how the pages of the novel are made. There are unusually large gaps between paragraphs, “empty”, unused space, which Bruce Kawin regards as “attempts to replicate real and inescapable limits of human experience beyond which we cannot see” (Walsh, 1992: 77). He goes on to explain that “gaps and silences function as the principal means by which the limitations of human consciousness are encoded” (*ibid.*). In the case of Federman, it is precisely that what is absent that should be given most attention to, because the central theme of his prose is absence (Federman, 1993: 86).

Just like Federman uses silence in his works, the Old Man also does not speak about many things from his past. He is known to be extremely reticent about the matters of his tragedy and subsequent survival, except for the rare occasions when he does share some stories. However, the truthfulness of what he says must always be doubted, since, as he says, “words lie only to those who are haunted by the truth of the words” (Federman, 1982: 63). And since it is his stories that Namredef and Moinous later tell Federman the narrator, one must assume that his narrative is not to be trusted either. In his words: “fiction is merely the reshaping of old truths into lies or vice versa” (Federman, 1982: 70).

What is also notably absent from the novel and the story are the Old Man’s emotions about being deported. All the while we are familiar with the plight expressed by Namredef and Moinous, attempting to save him, yet his own stance on the matter remains unknown until the very end. The only indication of his possible feelings is given in the beginning of the novel where the Old Man says: “I am a survivor, my death is behind me” (Federman, 1982: 50). At the very end of the novel, once we have realized that the Old Man will not be deported, Federman the narrator and Federman the author talk to each other, and it is there that we find out that another thing that will be absent from the novel is its proper conclusion:

That’s it, I say, that’s the whole story, you mean to say you don’t even know what happened to the old man, where he went, what they did with him, after all that, after all we’ve gone through, the days, the weeks, months of probing, questioning, worrying, agonizing over the old man’s fate, that’s all you have to say, I look at Namredef and Moinous, they are still sitting on the sofa in my study, I cannot tell if it is fear or happiness I see in their eyes (Federman, 1982: 174)

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Even though it may not be as conspicuous as the other elements in the novel, such as historical erasure, silence and absence, the overwhelming feeling of nostalgia is asserted precisely through those strategies. Through the retelling of the anecdotes from his life, be they real or imaginary, Federman transfers onto his readers his own feelings and emotions embedded within them. By altering the official versions of historical events, he gave us a glimpse into his own world view and imagination, into how he might have felt during certain events which had taken place in his life, or how he had imagined they would unfold.

At the core of the feeling of nostalgia is a certain lamentation, a yearning for something (Andersson, 2011: 13) which may not necessarily be plausible. It can also be defined as a yearning for an idealized past or as a mechanism for soothing the

feeling of loss (Andersson, 2011: 15, 17) both of which are present in *The Twofold Vibration*. By saying that his death is behind him, yet changing the circumstances of his survival, followed by a failed suicide attempt⁷, the Old Man is expressing nostalgia for his own demise, a yearning for that whose absence made him a survivor, but neither willingly nor knowing why. Not only that, throughout the novel, we see no emotional investment, except when he talks about his past, especially his account of what that past was. Since it is safe to assume that his accounts of his own past may not be entirely true, we can say that it through those stories that he expresses the biggest yearning, thus the biggest nostalgia, for something which only might have been.

Perhaps the best example of this is an exchange he had with one of his lovers: “I mean how do you live without a past, well you manage to survive anyhow, to fake it, fictitiously, extemporaneously, not as revenant, but as devenant, by projecting yourself ahead of yourself” (Federman, 1982: 50).

CONCLUSION

The Twofold Vibration is a novel which, at its core, has one of the most traumatizing events of Federman’s life and as such represents a rare account of Federman’s own emotions towards it as well as relationship with it. Federman stated that much of his writing stemmed from the aloneness, the fear and the apprehension of coming out of the closet and confronting the world (Abádi – Nagy, 2002: 142) and much of that is visible in *The Twofold Vibration*.

Through hypothesizing about what his past might have been like, or exploring different avenues through which certain events could have unfolded, Federman takes his readers through the corridors of his own nostalgic view of a past which never was, but may have been, and obviously could be in a fictitious realm. If it is possible to change a life story, to change the timeline and even the sequence of past events in a life, it may also be possible to go back in history and revisit or re-live certain moments. Nostalgia is the mechanism for most people to go back in time and do that, thorough their thoughts and memories. For Federman, his nostalgia became fiction.

⁷ After returning from Dachau and a failed gambling bout, the Old Man tried to hang himself in his hotel room, but the chandelier fell off the ceiling and the Old Man, disgruntled, was helped up by some people who had heard the noise. In a fit of despair, he shouted: “Goddammit, I can’t even die in this fucking country, no, they won’t let me die here” (Federman, 1982: 111).

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NOSTALGIJA ZA NEČIM ČEGA NIKAD NIJE BILO: TIŠINA, ODSUSTVO I
BRISANJE ISTORIJE U ROMANU *DVOJAKA VIBRACIJA* REJMONDA FEDERMANA

Rezime

Roman *Dvojaka vibracija*, francusko-američkog postmodernog autora Rejmonda Federmana je jedan od primera prisustva nostalgije u njegovoj prozi, najviše kroz korišćenje motiva tišine, odsustva i brisanja istorije. Kao pravi predstavnik američkog postmodernizma, Rejmond Federman je u svojoj prozi koristio i motive i strategije pisanje koje su smatrane eksperimentalnim, čak i za jednog postmodernistu, ali u ovom romanu, iako ne odstupa od svojih principa pisanja, ipak pruža narativ napisan na način koji pokazuje određenu zrelost u pisanju, ali i samom pristupu temi koju obrađuje. Roman *Dvojaka vibracija* kao centralnu temu ima Holokaust, ali nije knjiga o Holokaustu, već bi se pre mogla opisati kao ekploracija pitanja života i prošlosti onoga koji preživi veliku tragediju. Prvi deo rada daje opšti uvod u sam roman, kao i kratke relevantne biografske podatke o piscu. Drugi deo obrađuje motive tišine, odsustva i brisanja istorije kroz konkretne primere u delu, dok treći deo to zaokružuje kroz prizmu nostalgije. Na kraju, u zaključku autor daje svoja završna razmatranja i komentare.

Ključne reči: nostalgija, tišina, odsustvo, brisanje, istorija, Holokaust

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