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Raymond Federman: Origin, Originality, History

Let me say a few things, first, about this “life writing” business. I think Federman would have encouraged this sort of self-reflective opening, if you will. At any rate, what I want to say is that, “Presidential” as it may be, “Narrating Lives”—the theme of this year’s MLA and the broader heading under which our session comes—calls for some querying. On this very subject, the writer himself would have probably offered a word of caution, and he did, throughout his work. For, autobiographical in the deepest way imaginable, his oeuvre is *had* to be fiction, though, again and again; the kind of “document” that haunts you for a long time, his life-writing *had* to take up fictional form, as he declares in *Critifiction*, in order to be real, more exactly, to attempt to capture empirical reality, a certain personal and collective story, or to gesture toward them, at least.

Why? Because only fiction is real, as Federman quips repeatedly. I may have a true story tell—and what a story he did have!—and yet I have to fictionalize, to submit it to the protocols of fiction, so I can tell its truth. That is because, of course, “fictionalizing about it” is *not* the same as “lying about it.” Or, if it is, what comes into play here is a variety of the “extra-moral,” Nietzschean sort of lying, that is, the rhetorical or, more accurately, the textual, the “writerly.” Writing, Federman stresses in *Critifiction* and elsewhere, originates. It writes origin into being, into fictional being, more precisely.

With this, we can now circle back to our theme and, still following Federman’s lead, underscore the theme’s redundancy: life *is* written life—this is, of course, one of modernism’s commonplaces. The world, as Stéphane Mallarmé actually put it, exists so that it ends up in—or simply ends up—a book. Federman says something slightly different: The book, complete with

its whole writing apparatus, is there so that it brings life into the world. In neither author does the text “reflect,” but what Federman underscores primarily is not an end, a textual teleology, but a beginning, forward-looking life writing and writing overall as an *Ur-phänomenon* of sorts, as an origin or, even better, originating mechanism that creates, projects an origin as it chugs along from one page to the next. Here, life, life as representation subject, does not come before writing. Yes, there is, indeed, “life *after* writing,” so much so that all represented life and, in a sense, all life, all presumed origins and “true incidents” of representations, all Helens of Troy and all *madeleines* of Proust are apóchryphal.

Originating writing, writing that originates, then, does not represent *post factum* the actual life circumstances writing is traditionally assumed to stem from. Federman is unequivocal on this account too: I may be writing about myself, but I am not the origin or my writing. That is not because in setting out or in presuming to write about my life I only rewrite somebody else’s life writing, a situation if not an entire postmodern genre that I tackled elsewhere—and that discussion did include, I might add, a passing mention of Federman’s *playgiarism* theory. I will not rehash that analysis here because Federman’s case is somewhat different: he is not retelling somebody else’s life stories; as I say, he does have a story to tell, but my sense is that to tell it or, more precisely, “just” to tell it, to represent it, is not, cannot be *the* point of the story. The point of the story—and the 2005 *Retour au fumier* (Return to Manure) is as good an example as any, the point of the story, then, is not to re-tell, in the strictly mimetic-reiterative sense this time around, the Holocaust tragedy, but to un-tell it, as it were. In other words, the point is not to document, to reconstitute an unspeakable life episode—or the point is not simply that—but to un-speak the episode in question by reconstituting it, by re-originating that occurrence, that putative origin of writing, by subjecting it to the workings, and re-workings, of fiction.

Now, the unspeakable is just that, something so traumatically horrifying that it cannot be spoken. So how do you speak it? How do you tell it if telling, storytelling are your livelihood? How do you bear witness? How do you represent the unrepresentable? This has been, as we know, the stumbling block of testimonial discourse, in particular of Holocaust literature and scholarship. On the other hand, and this only seems to compound the storytelling predicament, let us consider that the unspeakable need not be understood only negatively, as something that ontologically and narratologically stands beyond speaking, as something that, accordingly, cannot be spoken, as something absent from the phenomenology of the speakable, as lack, void, gap in, or absent from, the archive of things said, sayable, or worth saying.

This is, however, the way Holocaust victims have been represented “back then,” originally, at the time of the original phenomenon whose upshots Federman’s writing battles fictionally. Why is he doing this? I have used the word “absent,” but I will take it back now to say “absented,” rather, because this was the Shoah’s objective: to absent, to *render* absent, write out of existence the Jews, and other “others” alongside them. The Holocaust was the instrument of this collective and individual absence, of absenting as process and absence—or minus, void, gap in life and history—as outcome. So, in this vein, the historical and autobiographical “origins” of Federman’s literature are absent because they were absented. Whether, along the same lines, we call mimetic treatment of the tragedy an accomplice to the crime, aesthetic insult added to the historical injury or not, whether or not we question writing that “just” documents, reenacts the horror, what Federman chooses to do is this: he re-originates the “factual” origin, re-eventuates the event fictionally so as reinscribe the absented, the obliterated, the expunged other back into the grotesquely simplified and mono-vocalized chorale or history. Soon to be followed by the Communist copycat, the Nazi Holocaust remains the biggest monist attempt in world

biopolitics so far, the dark dream of a world as one, de-originated, estranged from its multiple and rich origins, picked apart, and remade into aberrant oneness.

No wonder this is not the story Federman wants to tell or the only story he wants to tell. For what he declines to do is recapitulate, rehearse by “documenting,” and so do it all over again, in a way. It is in this sense that he does not tell but retells; it is in this sense too, that he perhaps does not tell at all but fictionalizes, originates. This is also the sense in which the ethics of originating writing accedes to an originality no less ethical, beyond and before the aesthetical. For, if *originating writing* discredits that which against it must write—the defacing and absenting horrors of history—*original writing* credits that *with* which it must of necessity write: the voices of the past; the languages of the past; the styles of the past; the forms that willy-nilly form us, as Gombrowicz notes in *Ferdydurke*; and all the intertextual archive of the past, which, no matter how original we purport to be, is always already here, guiding us, carving us out, mixed in our ink, both checking and bolstering our capacity to originate and re-originate, to make it new while getting it used at once, again and again, in a predicament both paralyzing and sublime. But “[p]erhaps,” Federman reflects in *Critifiction*, “my French and English play in me in order to abolish my own origin. In the totally bilingual book I would like to write, there would be no original language, n[o] original source, no original text—only two languages that would exist, or rather co-exist outside of their origin, in the space of their own playfulness.” We now realize one more time how serious this playfulness is, how serious, how simultaneously derivative and innovative his “playgiarism.” This is, it seems to me the, the paradox of Federmanian originality, one traceable and not so traceable to France and French, to English and the United States, the paradox of a writing that suspends origin but only to afford Federman’s originality, time and again.