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Literary Innovation and Childhood Trauma

This short essay is part of a book I recently finished, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*.¹ Under “crisis,” Roget’s thesaurus lists the following nouns, among others: critical time, key moment, turning point, pressure, predicament. In speaking of crises of memory, I have all those meanings in mind. “Crisis” and “criticism” have the same Greek root: *krinein*, to discriminate, to choose. A crisis of memory is a moment of choice, of discrimination and sometimes of predicament or conflict as concerns the remembrance of the past, whether individual or collective. On the collective side, one example would be the ways that the period of the Occupation in France has been interpreted and narrated ever since the Liberation; on the individual side, the problem concerns the vicissitudes of memory and testimony and the relation between autobiography and fiction.

My subject here is experimental writing by child survivors of the Holocaust, those I have called the “1.5 generation”, i.e. people who were too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have *been there* during the Nazi persecution of Jews (as opposed to the second generation, born after the war). It is only relatively recently, in historical terms, that the concept of “child survivor of the Holocaust” has emerged as a separate category for scholarly attention, just as it is relatively recently that child survivors themselves have integrated it into their consciousness. Widespread use of the term “child survivor,” in the psychological literature as well as by organized associations of child survivors, started around the early 1980s and has gained momentum in the past two decades.

Almost without exception, Jewish children in Europe during the war experienced the sudden transformation of their world from at least some degree of stability and security to chaos: moving from a familiar world to new environments, alone or with strangers, having to learn a new name and new identity, learning never to say who they really were – these were among the “everyday” experiences of Jewish children who survived the war. Only 11 percent of Jews in Europe who were children in 1939 were still alive at the end of the war.²

Of course, it can be said that not only children (and not only Jews), but all those who were persecuted by the Nazis experienced feelings of bewil-

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1: Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

2: Debórah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe*,
New Haven: Yale UP, 1991, p. xxiii.

derment and helplessness, not to say massive trauma, during the war. But the specific experience of Jewish children was that disaster hit them before the formation of stable identity that we associate with adulthood, and in some cases before any conscious sense of self. Since the majority survived in some form of hiding, they were obliged to cover over or “forget” their Jewishness, thus complicating an already fragile identity; for children in assimilated Jewish families, who didn’t have a sense of Jewishness to begin with, this involved the bizarre simultaneity of becoming aware for the first time of an identity and having to deny it at the same time.

There are an impressive number of contemporary writers, writing in a wide array of languages, who were children or adolescents during the Holocaust and who have dealt with that experience in their works. The Franco-American novelist Raymond Federman, who dates his “birth” from the moment when his whole immediate family was rounded up by French police and deported to Auschwitz, leaving him the sole survivor at age fourteen, has observed: “My life began in incoherence and discontinuity, and my work has undoubtedly been marked by this. Perhaps that is why it has been called experimental.”³ What is the relation between experiment and existence, when existence starts out with a fracture?

Despite the fact that all of his creative works revolve around his childhood trauma, Federman was known for many years chiefly as an American avant-garde writer and theorist, and that was how he presented himself as well. His theoretical statements of the 1970s omitted any reference to personal experience. In a 1983 interview, however, he invoked personal experience as the source and even as the subject of his fiction: “I think that it’s true of all fiction writers. [...] that they have to invent for themselves a way of distancing themselves from their subject. [...] And yet, paradoxically in my case, the more complex the system of distancing becomes the closer I seem to be getting to my own biography.”⁴

Federman’s statement has important implications both for the psychology of childhood trauma and for the experimental writing of the 1.5 generation. He has made use, in his novels, of the full panoply of distancing devices, including a boisterous humor even when – or especially when – treating the most painful subjects. His first novel, *Double or Nothing* (1971) is a brilliant work. Federman has explained that he began it as a series of handwritten notes for a novel, and only gradually discovered that the notes were themselves to be the substance as well as the form he was seeking. He ended up with a manuscript which looked like a verbal collage and yet conveyed the picaresque tale, in fractured form, of a young French Jewish immigrant to America who had lost his whole family during the war.

The book has two opening chapters, the first of which is titled “This Is Not a Beginning” and begins this way:

Once upon a time (two or three weeks ago), a rather stubborn and determined middle-aged man decided to record (for posterity), exactly

3: Federman, “A Version of My Life – The Early Years,” *Contemporary Authors*, vol. 208, 2003, p. 118.

4: Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with Raymond Federman,” *Contemporary Literature*, 24:3, 1983, pp. 299–300.

as it happened, word by word and step by step, the story of another man (for indeed what is GREAT in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal), a somewhat paranoiac fellow (unmarried, unattached, and quite irresponsible), who had decided to lock himself in a room (a furnished room with a private bath, cooking facilities, a bed, a table, and at least one chair), in New York City, for a year (364 days, to be precise), to write the story of another person – a shy young man about 19 years old ...⁵

and so on to the bottom of the page in a single sentence that contains, in summary form, not only the narrative we are about to read but also the whole past history of the young man whose story in America will be told by the “paranoiac fellow” who plans to shut himself in a room for a year. Although the traditional opening formula, “once upon a time,” promises a tale of adventure told by a single narrator in chronological mode, the tale told here will be that of a writing project involving at least three narrative “persons” whose relationship is ambiguous; and the march of linear time will be replaced by the meanderings of retrospection and prospection.

The large number of parentheses that pepper these first few lines continue down the page, both prolonging the sentence and impeding its progress. Postponement is the basic principle of this novel, as of many others by Federman. The effect is to make the reading more difficult, as well as to call attention to the act of telling. It can also often be humorous, as it is here; however, the humorous effect is in jarring contrast to the past history of the young man, which is evoked briefly on this opening page:

his parents (both his father and mother) and his two sisters (one older and the other younger than he) had been deported (they were Jewish) to a German concentration camp (Auschwitz probably) and never returned, no doubt having been exterminated deliberately (X-X-X-X).

The four X’s that mark the extermination of his family are a typographical sign Federman uses throughout his works. In one sense, the X’s repeat what has already been said (“exterminated deliberately”), and are therefore redundant. In another sense, they are conventional signs of erasure, and also function as cover-ups for the names of the parents and the sisters, which are not given either here or elsewhere in this book.⁶ Commenting on these X’s in an autobiographical essay, Federman wrote: “For me these signs represent the necessity and impossibility of expressing the erasure of my family.”⁷ More recently, he has stated that he sees the writer’s task as “the subtle and necessary displacement of the original event (the story) towards its erasure (the absence of story).”⁸

The paradoxical combination of an *excess of communication* (redundancy) and a *lack of communication* (‘exing-out’, covering up) creates an elaborate

5: Federman, *Double or Nothing: A Real Fictitious Discourse*. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

6: In more recent works, Federman has evoked his family in some detail, but always in fragments that one needs to piece together from novel to novel.

7: “A Version of My Life – The Early Years,” p. 119.

8: Federman, “The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer,” <http://www.federman.com/rfsr5.htm>

structure of saying and unsaying (or qualifying) what one has just said. Roland Barthes called this kind of speech “le bredouillement,” a stammering or sputtering.⁹ When a speaker or a machine sputters, it is a sign that something is not quite right. It is significant that the “sputtering” in *Double of Nothing* occurs most strikingly at the moment when the word CAMPS appears in the text (in capital letters). At that point, the horizontal movement of reading breaks down completely, and we have large white spaces between words. The white spaces signal emptiness, a disruption or arrest of speech, but they also reinforce the meanings of reduction and abandonment associated with deportation.

I propose to call the paradoxical figure of affirmation and denial, of saying and not saying, by its rhetorical name: preterition. The emblematic form of preterition is a sentence of the type “I will not speak about X,” where X is named and designated precisely as the thing that will not be said. The most radical figure of preterition is doubtless the sentence: “I must forget about X” – and that is exactly the sentence we find at almost the very end of *Double or Nothing*, in the context of Jewish identity and of the protagonist’s name:

(I don’t like Dominique. I’ve never liked Dominique)

Too effeminate not Jewish enough (you can’t avoid the facts) But we must forget about that about the Jews the Camps (p. 181)

You can’t avoid the facts, but we must forget about that: Preterition, the self-contradictory figure of approach and avoidance, affirmation and negation, amnesia and remembrance, is, I would propose, an emblematic figure for writing about childhood trauma and about the early experience of loss and abandonment. How to say it while not saying, or while saying in pieces: Federman’s whole oeuvre is a series of variations on the crucial event that is both everywhere and yet nowhere recounted in straightforward fashion in his books.

9: Barthes: “Le bruissement de la langue,” in *Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris: Seuil, 1984, pp. 99–102.