

Raymond Federman's Strategies of Absence: *Aunt Rachel's Fur* and *Return to Manure* as Postmodern Holocaust Novels*

Reiko Nitta

1. Introduction: The Important Role of Absence in Federman's Fiction

In an essay on his own work, "Federman on Federman: Lie or Die," Raymond Federman admits the importance of absence for his work: "And indeed, the fundamental aspect, the central theme of his fiction is ABSENCE. Federman writes in order to cancel, or better yet, in order to absent the very story he wants to tell. In the same process, Federman writes to absent (or, to use a contemporary term, to deconstruct) the very language he employs" (86). Here Federman explains his absence as an issue in his Postmodern writing but the absence in his writing is often related to another absence in his life -- the absence of his family, caused by the Holocaust. Lisbeth Rieshøj Amos assesses it as "the past under erasure" (12) in his discussion of Federman's earlier novels, *Double or Nothing* (1971) and *Take It or Leave It* (1976) and remarks: "the momentary glimpses we do get of the past remain strangely present [...], implying that there is more to these stories than meets the eye" (14).

Federman's parents and two sisters were caught during the great roundups of the Jews in Paris in July, 1942, and were sent to a concentration camp to die. He often indicates their deaths with a sign, "x-x-x-x." The four xs symbolize the inhuman erasure of their existence as well as the irrevocable absence in his life caused by their deaths. Moreover, in his later works, *Aunt Rachel's Fur* (2001, from here on, *Fur*) and *Return to Manure* (2006, from here on, *Manure*), Federman deals with the absence of his native country, France, with some resentment about what it could not do for him during the war. It did not treat him with enough sympathy even after the war. He left for

* This paper was presented at the 27th International Literature and Psychology Conference, held in Pécs, Hungary, June 23-28, 2010.

America for a better life, and there, as a foreigner, he had to strive for his own survival, adopting English and American customs.

Besides the influence of Postmodernism, therefore, Federman's literary challenges should be discussed in the light of the influence of the Holocaust. Though his novels have all been written under the strong influence both of Postmodernism and of the Holocaust, he looks back at his war experience in France directly for the first time in *Fur* and *Manure*. This essay, therefore, mainly deals with these two novels and analyzes the influence of Postmodernism and the Holocaust in them in order to clarify his strategies of absence and finally the nature of his fiction.

2. The Holocaust and Federman's Strategies of Absence in Postmodern Writing

In "In the Beginning Was the Silence," the introductory part of *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, Lawrence L. Langer states that after the Holocaust, artists are destined to ask themselves, "How should art – how *can* art? – represent the inexpressibly inhuman suffering of the victims, without doing an injustice to that suffering?" (1). Similarly, in *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone declares that Postmodernism developed out of the struggle with a special difficulty of language after the Holocaust: "These writers and survivors, and many others, believe that it is not possible for those who did not survive to understand, in a truthful way, the events of the Holocaust. Language is not enough" (18). Amy Hungerford likewise refers to this difficulty in *The Holocaust of Texts* and introduces Wendy Steiner's "claim about silence and the limitations of language after the Holocaust" (15). The impossibility of writing the Holocaust or its unspeakability is thus widely recognized and most of the Holocaust novels such as Eli Wiesel's *Night* and Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*, bear traces of writers' struggles truthfully to testify to the unspeakable, unforgettable, and inhuman atrocities they experienced¹.

It is therefore natural that in his study of one of Federman's early books, *Double or Nothing*, Jesper Christensen attributes the falsity of Federman's memory to the common unspeakability of the Holocaust: "So absurd and unfathomable is the absence of an entire family that it takes a discourse in which nothing can be certified as being textual reality proper for Federman to

be able to confront this gruesome twist of fate" (27). Yet, Federman looks too strong merely to yield to such familiar difficulty of expression because in his essay he connects the unspeakability of the Holocaust to the theme of his writing and the reason for it in the Postmodern era:

[...]what must be apprehended in Federman's fiction is what is missing, what has been deliberately or perhaps unconsciously left out. But not because what is missing could be told or written (such as the unspeakability of the Holocaust that informs Federman's life and work, and which he refers to in one of his novels as **The Unforgivable Enormity**), but because Federman is primarily writing to demonstrate the impossibility and the necessity of the act of writing in the Postmodern/Post-Holocaust era. ("Federman on Federman: Lie or Die," 86-87)

It may be true that an obsessive memory of the Holocaust inspired Federman to write a novel, but he was all the more interested in the Holocaust as the subject of his writing, because, in the Postmodern era, it is widely recognized that language is not a sufficient tool of communication. Failing of full description or explanation is not the privilege of the Holocaust. Postmodernism ascribes this characteristic to anything and everything in this world. After all, for Federman, the unspeakability of the Holocaust not only had an important message of its own but also represented a very adequate and worthy subject of his age. What is more, the very impossibility of depicting the Holocaust provided him an unlimited challenge in his writing.

Federman's positive use of the unspeakable Holocaust is also apparent in his essay, "Surfiction: A Postmodern Position":

The experiences of life gain meaning only in their recounted form, in their verbalized versions [...]. To write, then, is to PRODUCE meaning, and not REPRODUCE a preexisting meaning. To write is to PROGRESS, and not REMAIN subjected (by habit or reflexes) to the meaning that supposedly

ⁱ Alan L. Berger and Gloria L. Cronin write in the "Introduction" to their edited work, *Jewish American and Holocaust Literature*, "Elie Wiesel observes that every age has produced a distinctive literary form. 'If,' he writes, 'the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.' Holocaust literature, which for Wiesel is itself an oxymoron, is paradigmatic. Written in many languages, this literature underscores the fact that no field of human endeavor remains untouched by the extermination of the Jewish people." (2)

precedes language. (38)

This statement makes it clear that even if the Holocaust is very much a historical event, to record his past experience as it was is not a good enough reason for his writing. While the credibility of the narration is essential for other Holocaust writers, he presents his narrators as completely unreliableⁱⁱ. Taking advantage of the absence caused by the deficits in the narrators' memories and extracting some new meanings from them, he generates a new possibility and hope even from such an abominable past as the Holocaust. This is one of the reasons why his fiction is different from other Holocaust writers' works and is characterized by rare liveliness and vigor.

In *Fur*, for example, when the narrator, Rémond Namredef, returns to France for the first time after immigrating to America and looks back at his experience during the war and just after the war, he announces that "the work of fiction is always a form of recovery of the past, even if that past has to be falsified" (99). It underscores the role of this novel as "a form of recovery" but it also discloses that the book will be different from what he actually experienced. In fact, Rémond manipulates his memory on purpose, in order to extract a new meaning from it, and even declares, "Writing is not what you remember but what you have forgotten" (240).

In *Manure*, the manipulation of past is more ostentatiously demonstrated. In this book, Federman, the narrator, visits the farm in Southern France where he worked as a farm hand during the war and through this recent visit he recalls the wartime days. The two people, his friend, Ace, and his wife, Erica, control the narration by inducing him to recollect his war experience as well as by checking his account of it. Regarding the narrator's relaxed attitude towards "details that keep changing every time I tell them" (39), for example, Ace openly accuses the narrator, "If only once you were to tell the true version of that story

ⁱⁱIn I. B. Singer's *Shosha*, for example, *Shosha* represents the old life of the Warsaw ghetto because she is retarded enough to be left behind by the current of the times. This is why the narrator of the book is attached to her. He finds her a miracle resembling that of "the world book" (241), in which "everything that had ever been still existed" (241) and "where everything is preserved, inscribed down to the smallest detail" (285). Singer himself must have yearned for it when he kept using the dying language, Yiddish, to recreate the lost world of Eastern Europe. In contrast, when Federman recreates the lost family and his past experience, he keeps emphasizing that his presentation is "falsified." He makes sure that his fiction will not be taken as a re-production of his past.

it would help!" (39). His accusation implies that Federman's stories are always unreliable and should not be taken at face value. Likewise, when the narrator claims that he is suddenly reminded of a name he could not remember, Erica denies its credibility, denouncing him: "Stop your foolishness. For all I know you may have invented that name just now, while talking about her, and pretend that it was her real name. I know your surfictional tricks" (47) .

The narrator's impaired memory is similarly emphasized again and again in all of Federman's novels and is treated as a suitable means to present their very Postmodern characteristics such as ambiguity, uncertainty and instability. Still Postmodernism generates uneasiness, discomfort and anxiety from those characteristics, while Federman extracts a more positive and hopeful meaning from them. In fact, if Rémond's memory in *Fur* were correct when he says, "Tante Rachel who was so beautiful ten years ago now looks like an old lady" (136), it would simply mean that she actually lost some of her beauty in the passage of time. On the other hand, as his memory could be mistaken, she might not have been, as a young woman, so beautiful as he thought she was. In those days she may have looked more beautiful to his eye than she was, because he was so helpless as to depend on her kindness completely. Now he has grown up and away from her, she looks different. Thus, his false memory intimates something more important and encouraging than the way in which his aunt lost her charms over the years -- in other words, the fact that he has grown up enough to cope with the reality by himself.

As Federman often calls the Holocaust "the Unforgivable Enormity" with bitter resentment, it is easy to imagine that he suffered from it enough to realize the impossibility of testifying to the Holocaust. Instead of lamenting over this impossibility, however, he accepted the challenge it presented and devised new literary forms to combine his unspeakable experience of the Holocaust with the Postmodern understanding of the limitations of the language and human nature. His fiction thus holds much more meaning than a simple testimony to the Holocaust. It records a certain aspect of the Holocaust in the sense of bearing witness to it, but it also presents human potential and courage to try to overcome even such an impossible adversity as the unspeakable Holocaust. Together with his energetic and dynamic narrative, Federman's expressions of such determination give his fiction very vigorous and hopeful characteristics of struggling against adversity.

3. The Ambivalence about the Absence of the Native Country

From his first novel, Federman always strategically combines the absence caused by the Holocaust with the Postmodern stylistic absence in order to make use of his unspeakable experience of the Holocaust most effectively. This attitude is fundamentally unchanged through his life but the way in which the absence of his native country, France, is treated in *Fur* and *Manure* is very different from that in his earlier novels. Before *Fur* and *Manure*, his relation to France is much simpler. Examining *Double or Nothing*, Jerome Klinkowitz discusses Federman's remaining French accent. He first ascribes it to his special attachment to his lost family and then claims that "[i]t is an accent that I'm sure he cannot abandon, having given up so much else in his life and replaced it with things he's made from scratch" (153). He regards Federman's French accent as an important tie to his native country and the only identity he could rely on in his struggle to survive without any help in such a frenzied foreign country as America.

Klinkowitz's analysis is correct as far as the early novels are concerned because Federman bases their stories on his American experience as a young man. As the young Federman did, their main characters struggle in a foreign country to become a writer in a foreign language. In these novels, France is related to their good happy childhood which they were unreasonably deprived of by the Holocaust. This is why they look back at it with a sense of longing.

A similar happy relation to France can be also observed in *Fur*. At the beginning of this novel, Rémond, who failed as a writer in America, comes back to France "to see if [he] could start a new life, a quiet normal regular life, finish [his] novel" (19). At this stage, he openly blames America for its silly people such as "celebrities without talent [...], wallowing in money, perversion, deprivation, exploitation" (24-25) or "a basketball player who recently bragged that he fucked twenty thousand women in his life" (25). He denounces America as "a very anti-intellectual country" (98) and accuses "[e]specially those who are obsessed with the idea of success, financial success" (99) because they cannot understand his sophisticated European fiction. In condemning America for its incapability to appreciate his work, he takes a French stance as if his native country, France, could share his views, tastes and criteria sufficiently enough to recognize the real value of his work. He assumes that France will grant him a comfort similar to that given by his sympathetic aunt, Rachel, during the lonely days after the war without his family. The pleasure of this comfort is symbolized by the title of this

book, "Aunt Rachel's Fur," whose rich softness and warmth easily recall the protection given by a loving mother to her children. At this point of the novel, Rémond's attitude toward France is similar to that of the main characters in the early novels.

Once back in France, however, Rémond cannot help facing the reality and limitations of France, remembering why he had to leave his native country in the first place. France would not help him and his family in their need, even if his relatives pretended to be sympathetic toward them. Being back in France, he realizes that he will never receive any sympathy or help from France. At the end of the book, therefore, he declares, "I prefer America's mediocrity to France's hypocrisy" (255). He sounds all the more angry at France because he believes that his native country, France, should have responsibility for his welfare. He feels forsaken once again in his need and the second betrayal arouses a larger resentment than the first one.

Likewise, the narrator of *Manure* has two opposing and inconsistent feelings toward France. He reveals his deep attachment to his French background when he laments, "American grows on you. It distorts your origin. Makes you forget who you were" (26). Here one may even detect his lingering affection for France. When he thinks of the absence of his family, nevertheless, it is his French relatives' selfish behavior that he remembers with anger: "They took off just before La Grande Raffle of July 16, 1942, and abandoned us, my parents, my sisters, and me. That would have been five mouths more to feed" (42). He may take it for granted that the original cause of their absence, Nazi Germany, should be condemned, but he is infuriated at France and his French relatives as much as, if not more than, Nazi Germany.

The new ambivalence in the narrators' attitudes toward France could easily be ascribed to the fact that the stories of *Fur* and *Manure* are located in France. Yet, there may be more to it than that because in both novels, Federman wanted to use a certain episode to emphasize a likely defect in French society. In my interview with Federmanⁱⁱⁱ, he told me that it really occurred during his first return to France, when he took a taxi in Paris to go to the airport to meet his rich New York girlfriend. The taxi driver recognized him as his childhood neighbor and playmate. On the way to the airport, the driver kept talking to Federman in

ⁱⁱⁱ My interview with Federman was conducted in his house in San Diego, in December 2007.

tutoyer, the familiar form of address in French. He asked Federman what he was doing and Federman answered that he became a writer in America. The driver did not seem to believe it and kept talking in tutoyer. However, later when he saw Federman guiding a gorgeous American girl out of the airport and talking to her in English, he suddenly shifted into vouvoyer, the formal form of address in French. Federman assumed that the driver at last recognized him as a writer. He thought that the driver did not believe it at the beginning because a strong sense of the social hierarchy still remained in France. A writer has a much higher social status than the one he used to have. Federman then imagined that if he had stayed in France, he could never have improved his social status and economic circumstances as much as he did in America.

The rigidity of the French society is openly criticized when Rémond says in *Fur* that “my friend who worked in a factory in Detroit” (107) made himself “[a] distinguished professor in one of the Ivy League Universities. Professor of Comparative Literature” (107). Apparently he refers to Federman's own career and regards his own success as a miracle for a Frenchman because he further comments on it:

You believe that the same opportunities exist in France. Well I cannot agree, because you see, in America, it is possible to erase the distance between people, between social environments, between ethnic groups. (108)

For all its faults, America offered Federman a degree of social mobility that might never have been available in France. And thanks to this mobility, he could “erase the distance” and attained a better life. What is more, when he draws attention to “the distance between people, between social environments, between ethnic groups,” he suggests that American mobility may help in eliminating cultural, ethnic and religious differences and prevent another Holocaust.

4. Federman's Strategies of Flexibility

In *Fur* and *Manure*, Federman presents contradictory attitudes towards France. This seems to be a response to a very Postmodern notion that nothing is completely unified in a grand narrative. His inconsistencies are not, however, due to such circumstances beyond his control. On the contrary, he seems to take advantage of this Postmodern notion to convey a very important message of his own – the importance of flexibility.

In fact, Rémond in *Fur* freely changes his attitudes according to the

circumstances in order to obtain whatever good chance in life he can get. When he meets a rich female French editor at a party, he flatters her with exaggerated compliments. Expecting her to publish his book, he plays a typical hypocrite though he later bitterly condemns her and French society for it. He also plays a nice young man in front of his relatives in spite of his intention to accuse them for their deed during the war:

I told them I was writing a novel about the family [...] and that's why [...] I was back in Paris, to verify the facts, the important details, to dig into the past, of course I didn't tell them I was here to settle my accounts, and did I have a score to settle with them, no, I didn't tell them that, at first I even pretended to be happy to see them again ... (62)

Rémond can change his tune quickly for his convenience, demonstrating that his survival comes before anything else including integrity and consistencies.

A similar practical emphasis on survival can be observed in young Federman in *Manure* when he suffers from the life in the farm and says to God, "Give me a sign. I'll count up to 20, and if at 20 you have not given me a sign, then I will be finished with you, and I will try to go on by myself" (150). He will not believe in God if He cannot help him. And when there is no sign, he does not fall into despair or cynicism but simply accepts the absence of God and tries to find a way out for himself. How to survive is a far more important concern for him than the faith itself.

Federman's practical emphasis on survival accredits him with the flexibility to look at his past experience from various points of view. This is why *Fur* and *Manure* are full of inconsistent definitions and opposing interpretations. In *Manure*, when the narrator looks back at his lonely days in the farm, he reveals his resentment, confessing that "on the farm I was always angry. [...] Everything made me angry. Everything that was free" (174-75). Later, however, he easily admits the merits of his farm experience and says, "I now realize how important, how crucial it [his experience on the farm] was in determining who I would become" (124) so that his friend, Ace, calls it "a rite of passage" (124) for him. He also admits that he grew up from a fragile, clumsy, little Parisian boy into a strong young farmer and proudly reports that the old man at the farm regretted his departure and said, "It's too bad you've to leave. You're a good farmer now" (181).

In *Fur*, Rémond even presents a possibility of appreciating the Holocaust though he himself regards it "the Unforgivable Enormity":

The Federman I know in America always says that being a survivor is a joy, an occasion to celebrate, that it should never make you sad, that on the contrary this excess of life relieves you from all responsibilities, personally I don't agree with him, once I even explained to him that my role as a survivor here or over there, in the cities, the countries, in the books I write or will write, my responsibility is to give back some dignity to what has been humiliated by the Unforgivable Enormity ... (265)

Rémond himself refuses to evaluate the Holocaust positively and believes in his responsibility to remember its atrocities. Federman is a self-reflective writer. The opinion of the narrator, Rémond, can easily be regarded as Federman's. Still, it cannot be ignored, either, that the man who blesses the Holocaust is named Federman. This naming assures us that this man's opinion also contains a certain amount of truth.

To tell the truth, similar contradictory opinions are already found in Federman's early work, *Take It or Leave It*. The narrator, a French Jewish survivor of the Holocaust mocks Hitler by claiming that Hitler actually helped many Jews, including himself, to make a better life in America. He says that "jews in general are not generous, warmhearted [...]" (260)^{iv} but that "between jews there is always a fraternal rapport a racial bond especially in those days just after the war jews in this country [America] felt a kind of link with us refugees from the holocaust" (259-60). He then cries, "What do you think I would be today if it were not for Hitler? [...] A tailor ! A little Jewish tailor [...] Hitler in a way was my Savior!" (261). In other words, he alleges that without Hitler he could not have got any help from other Jews, and that he could not have come to America and made his way out of poor living conditions in Europe, either. What is more, he avers that this laughable way of thinking is not only his but also the author's: "I've already told you. Or rather HE told you what HE thinks of laughter. The other guy. MY STORY-TELLER!" (261) Because of the ironical tone of the narrator, it is certain that Federman, the author, never justifies the Holocaust in any way. Still, if he is a victim of the Holocaust, he refuses to indulge himself in the status of a victim but obliges himself to keep trying to overcome its damage for the sake of a better life.

^{iv} *Take It or Leave It* has no page numbers. This is the page number counting from the beginning.

Afterwards, in “The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer,” Federman quotes a passage from the above pages of *Take It or Leave It* in order to explain how “the Jewish Writers” were authorized with dignity only after World War II: “Many of us have found a voice to speak, and write, during the Post-Hitler era because of our tragic and traumatic experience during the Hitler era” (no page). When he asserts that the Holocaust is such an unspeakable atrocity that Jewish writers had to speak up, he also recognizes that they drew world attention to themselves thanks to their tragedy. And the latter attitude of Federman is supported by his efforts to survive and obtain better opportunities in his life and is the source of his flexibility as well as his ironical and daring sense of humor.

5. Conclusion: Fiction for Survival

It is possible that in *Fur* and *Manure* Federman is quite optimistic about his life because those novels were written long after he was established as a scholar and a writer in America. Actually, from a realistic point of view, Rémond in *Fur* sounds quixotically absurd when he declares, “I’m going to be famous, it’s bound to happen, I just know it, it’s written above in the sky” (40). His confidence is completely groundless. He came back to France because he could not succeed as a writer. During his stay in France, his situation in America has not been changed at all. There is nothing new to support his expectation of becoming a successful writer. Nevertheless, Rémond’s enduring determination is impressive and convincing when he declares: “Life is a little like a boxing match. It’s a matter of being able to keep going, to remain standing despite all the blows” (98).

After all, Federman’s adamant will to survive enabled him not only to derive the necessity and the reason for his writing from his tragic experience of the Holocaust and its unspeakability, but also to create a very original Postmodern fiction, combining the requirements of his age with those of his own experience. His fiction results from overcoming even such an “Unforgivable Enormity” as the Holocaust. He never yielded either to the unspeakability of the Holocaust or to the limitations of Postmodernism but always tried to bring something meaningful to this world. These attitudes of Federman are especially apparent in *Fur* and *Manure* partly because they were written after his success in America but mainly because they deal with the Holocaust experience more directly than his other novels^v. And because of that, these novels impress us all the more with

Federman's positive vitality, boundless hope and inexhaustible ingenuity.

Hiroshima University

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^v *The Voice in the Closet* also deals directly with his Holocaust experience in France. It is another powerful work combining his postmodern writing and his tragic experience. In those early days, however, his Holocaust experience seems still to have been so traumatic that his intention to survive the tragedy and the absence resulting from it by creating a postmodern fiction had not yet clearly appeared.

Reiko Nitta

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