

Claustrophobic Spaces and the Trauma of History: a Reading of Raymond Federman's The Voice in the Closet

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ABSTRACT

My reading of *The Voice in the Closet* (1979) follows some of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic insights and recent developments in trauma theory. I aim to disclose the postmodern character of a complex text which is open and interpretable, where the fragmentation, the interruption, the tension between articulation-cancellation and the intent to perturb the trap of an (auto)biographical «realism» gains importance. As opposed to any totalizing perspective, Federman creates his rhetoric of antiexpression and lays out the delicate balance between orality and literacy in his typographic experiments. *The Voice in the Closet* could positively be considered a post-modern fable about the death of the Author, displaced and eclipsed by a plurality of voices, which are at once absent and trapped in the writing.

Of course, there is always a matter of... degree of presentness of that authorial voice. But even the fact of pretending to write a piece of fiction which doesn't reveal the voice of the author is a way of pointing to that voice, or to the absence of the voice.

Interview with Larry McCaffery *Anything Can Happen*. 1983, 135.

It is as if the experience of the Holocaust is more than language can comprehend or communicate except, perhaps, by a denial of language

Ronald Sukenick 1972, 40.

All of Raymond Federman's novels without exception –*Double or Nothing* (1971), *Take It or Leave It* (1976), *The Voice in the Closet* (1979), *The Twofold*

Vibration (1982), *Smiles on Washington Square* (1985) and *To Whom It May Concern* (1990)— are a puzzle of variations about his personal history. Their main contents are: the arrival of a Jewish-French youth in the United States after the Second World War, as the sole survivor of his family; the difficulties encountered in starting a new life; difficulties in getting a job, his military service during the Korean War and lastly, his passion for criticism and creation after writing several essays on Samuel Beckett's works. While in *Double or Nothing* (1971) and *Take It or Leave It* (1976) fragments of the protagonist's past are incorporated into the imaginative discourse of the author's present situation, *The Voice in the Closet* directly presents the processes and the materials of memory. The first two novels are an approximation to his Jewish past—persecution, concentration camps, extermination— and the immigrants' confrontation with America in a fragmentary manner. However, in *The Voice in the Closet* all these references to past realities are surprisingly absent, except for the reference to the «final solution» and to «David's Star». It is in this text that the author's voice, displaced for so long, becomes prominent after years and years of forced and self-imposed silence, and emerges from the loneliness of his imprisonment in a closet to lament the loss of his family and his roots. As it is impossible to keep denying the past, Federman, the writer, —describes himself as an «homme de plume» playing with his surname— again experiences the return of what he had repressed in other texts, disguised as vague memories, and which is the only thing capable of restoring the unity with his self:

The self must be made remade caught from some retroactive present apprehended reinstated I presume looking back how naïve into the past my life began not again...I'm beginning to see my shape only from the past from the reverse of farness looking to the present can one possibly into the future even create the true me invent you federman (*Voice*).¹

Federman, in his two previous novels, has dominated the story of his «being-in-the-past», disguising it with his imaginative digressions and assuming the neutrality of a cassette where a series of events are stored. In *The Voice in the Closet*, the cassette is reduced to a mere technical resource —the «selectricstud» of his typewriter— and he becomes a sort of processor of those words that dwell in the memory's voice. The confrontation between Federman's memory of the past and the writer «federman's» imagination in the present, is «grammatically» resolved in *Take It* by means of the conjunction of the two pronouns «Moi» and «Nous» in French, while in *The Voice* it culminates with the re-presentation of the self, whereas the importance of the past greatly exceeds the power of imagination. In any case, the paradox of the separation is still present between the two spheres of his personality:

between the actual me wandering voiceless in temporary landscapes and the virtual being federman pretends to invent in his excremental packages of delu-

sions a survivor who dissolves in verbal articulations unable to do what I had to do admit that his fictions can no longer match the reality of my past (*Voice*).

The absence of an imaginative power that gives shape to the material of diverse nature stored in the unconscious allows for the language of the unconscious to rise to the surface without mediations. Slightly modifying Lacan's words, we could say that Federman's text is a place where «Id» talks to us. The text can only be defined by the geometric design of Federman's «paginal syntax» (1975), it lacks punctuation marks and it sometimes lacks grammaticality, a perfect climate for a long monologue of the memory. Contrary to the practice in his prior fiction, Federman does not attribute an important role to imagination in *The Voice*. Also, our author holds, from his position as a critic, that literature is condemned forever to intertextuality and imagination can only be materialized as «plagiarism.» In this way, imagination appears as a version of memory and the reader is confronted with this material. Instead of representing experiences from the past indirectly, Federman presents a series of memories and interior perceptions directly, revealing a sort of spatial mental drama, instead of a temporal narrative sequence. Like many other contemporary writers, Federman has abandoned the traditional forms, as opposed to the potential innovation that implies the exploration of new languages in narrative.

REVOLUTIONS OF THE VOICE

The contemporary discourse that mostly contributes to an approximation to Federman's narrative may very well be Julia Kristeva's theses in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) and *Desire in Language* (1977), as well as the psychoanalytical theory that deals with matters relating to schizophrenia, which are present in many postmodern texts.

The concept of «poetic language» that Kristeva develops in *Revolution in Poetic Language* is much more extensive than that of the Russian formalists, and although it coincides with Roman Jakobson's general thesis, especially in the idea that this cannot be contemplated as a mere deviation from the linguistic norm: «Any attempt to limit the domain of the poetic function to poetry or to restrict poetry to the poetic function would only amount to an excessive and misleading simplification» (1968: 218), it differs from Kristeva's in the sense that poetic language does not constitute a subcode of the linguistic code, but rather it represents the infinite number of possibilities of language, in such a way that any linguistic act is simply a partial realization of the poetic language's intrinsic possibilities. Therefore, from this perspective,

Literary practice is seen as exploration and discovery of the possibilities of language; as an activity that liberates the subject from a number of linguistic,

psychic and social networks; as a dimension that breaks up the inertia of language habits and grants linguists the unique possibility of studying the becoming of the signification of signs (1968: 178-79).

The link that exists between poetic language and the idea of revolution is not an immediate cause-effect link and the nuance it bears differs from what, for example, Sartre had in mind when he developed the notion of *engagement*. In this way, for Sartre, Mallarmé was an engaged writer, whose commitment consisted in his denial of the bourgeoisie's conventions of his time. However, when he approached his poetic practice, he completely ignored what he describes as «brutish instincts of the dark history of his sexuality»².

Kristeva emphasizes the meaning process at work in Mallarmé's texts, which in her view constitute, together with Lautréamont's, the prototype of modern avant-garde practice. According to semiotic criteria, she demonstrates in her essay how close the writing of both of them is to the logic of the unconscious, however remote and far apart they may seem. Lautréamont's practice transmits what Lacan and Kristeva call «jouissance», and in his final analysis, it is interpreted as an affirmation of liberty and an anarchic revolt against a society with whose ideologies and interests it clashes.

The idea that poetic language constitutes a «semiotic system» should be understood within the polarity that Kristeva proposes in the semiotic/symbolic binomial that will later be incorporated into our analysis. These are the two elements that function in the process of signification, and among which a dialectic is established, that by operating through and between language, its origin is found in infancy, and it is involved in matters connected with sexual difference (instincts and impulses are present in this dialectic, as well as social structures such as the family).

From the above, it is easy to infer that Kristeva will greatly keep in mind the ideas of Lacan and linguistic structuralism³ when elaborating her concept of poetic language. However, her textual analysis includes considerations about the «writing subject» and considerations of a historical nature. Her poststructural inheritance will make her affirm the death of the Author, understood in a traditional sense as an individual that consciously *has* complete authority over the true meaning of his work. For Kristeva, the notion of «writing subject» is a complex and heterogeneous power that not only includes the conscious, but also the writer's unconscious. However, she warns us of the dangers of adopting an incorrect position when psychoanalyzing the writer, starting from a series of biographical notes with the aim of applying the results to explain his work. According to her, the starting point should exclusively be the text.

The unconscious of the «writing subject» is the domain that is not subject to repression. However, it is not totally accessible to the conscious either. The unconscious hides behind the notion of «dominant ideology» —the system

of conventions, values, myths and prejudgements that make up our vision of society and which give a specific orientation to our position in it. The dominant ideology includes all that we assume as being true and that we do not question –without realizing that this system of «truths» is a frame that follows the interests of the governing forces– and it inserts itself in an enormously complex process. Simultaneously, the writer is conscious that he finds himself in a stage of the story he is building and, at the same time, he reacts against a series of forces and past historical tendencies ⁴.

For Kristeva, textual analysis has to take into account all prior factors in order to understand the meaning process. Evidently, there is no single text that «means» if the context is not considered; –without the idea of a global context, be it conscious, unconscious, preconscious, linguistic, cultural, political, literary ...– but we can only approach the different areas of that total context through the text (obviously, whoever is interested in textual analysis should possess a good understanding of the relevant disciplines).

Therefore, Kristeva embarks on her project of textual analysis ⁵. Her approximation to each text contemplates the dialectic that functions between semiotic and symbolic aspects. Leon S. Roudiez, in his introduction to *Revolution*, aesthetically recalls:

...it would be helpful to keep in mind the etymology of the word (text) and think of it as a texture, a «disposition or connection of threads, filaments or other slender bodies, interwoven» (Webster, 2). The analogy stops there, however, for the text cannot be thought of as a finished, permanent piece of cloth, it is in a perpetual state of flux as different readers intervene, as their knowledge deepens, and as history moves on (1984: 5).

According to Kristeva, in our culture, literature is considered a mass consumption product and it is often seen as a finished product whose gestation process was not taken into consideration. If we attend to this process, it is easy to see that what makes a certain work interesting or meaningful depends on the fact that it was initially included or excluded from the canon (this is an ethic and aesthetic judgement) and, therefore, it is subject to the dominant ideology, in the Marxist sense). What really makes a text meaningful is its textual presence. For Kristeva this textual presence is included in the notion of poetic language:

If there exists a «discourse» which is not a mere depository of these linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn body, and is, instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction –productive violence, in short– it is «literature» or, more specifically, the text (1984: 16).

For Kristeva, the semiotic/symbolic binomial is made up of two inseparable modalities within the process of signification constitutive of language. The dialectic functioning between both determines the type of discourse that results (narrative, poetic, theoretical, metalinguistic...) or, in other words, «natural» language facilitates different modes of articulation of semiotic and symbolic aspects.

Kristeva understands the term «semiotic» in its Greek etymological sense as a «distinctive mark, trace, index, preceding sign, evidence, recorded or written sign, print, figuration» (1984: 25). Its distinctive feature enables Kristeva to link it with a concrete modality in the process of signification:

This modality is the one Freudian psychoanalysis points to in postulating not only the facilitation and the structuring disposition of drives, but also the so-called primary processes which displace and condense both energies and their inscription. Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in various constraints imposed on this body –always already involved in a semiotic process– by family and social structures. In this way the drives, which are «energy» charges as well as «psychical» marks, articulate what we call a chora: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated (1984: 25).

Kristeva takes the term «chora» from Plato's *Timaeus*. The concept of «chora» is crucial to my reading of *The Voice*. The «chora» does not depend on representation: it precedes every certainty, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality in terms of disruption and articulation (rhythm). Our discourse –every discourse– moves with and against the «chora» in the sense that it simultaneously depends on it and repels it. Although it can be named and regulated, the «chora» can never be summoned definitively: as a result, we can situate the «chora» and grant it a typology, but we can never give it an axiomatic form (1984: 26).

The «chora» is a rhythmic space which precedes figuration and specularization. Plato defines the receptacle of the «chora» as a nourishing and maternal environment ⁶: «The chora is nevertheless subject to a regulating process, which is different from that of symbolic law but nevertheless effectuates discontinuities by temporarily articulating them and then starting over, again and again» (1984: 26).

For Kristeva, *chora* is a vocal and gestural organization, subject to an ordering principle which is dictated by natural or socio-historical imperatives such as the biological differences between the sexes or the family structure. Psycholinguistic investigation has discovered in the individual a preverbal functional stage that controls the relation between the body, objects and the elements from the family structure. What Kristeva denominates functional

kinetic stage of the semiotic precedes the establishment of the sign, therefore, it is not cognitive as it cannot be assumed by a cognitive subject. The genesis of the functions which organize the semiotic process can only be understood inside a subject that is not reduced to a subject of understanding, but rather open to the scene of presymbolic operations.

Following some ideas from Melanie Klein's drive theory, Kristeva gives definitive shape to the *chora's* environment:

Drives involve pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother. We must emphasize that «drives» are always already ambiguous simultaneously assimilating and destructive: this dualism (...) makes the semiotized body a place of permanent scission. The oral and anal drives, both of which are oriented around the mother's body, dominate this sensorimotor organization. The mother's body is therefore what mediates the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora* (1984: 27).

Therefore, «*chora*» is a maternal space prior to symbolization.

The Voice is a text where the «*chora*» reaches a dimension that is almost mythical. The closet is a maternal metaphor that protects, rescues and gives life, a great uterus where what precedes existence is stored. In a display of self-reflexivity, Federman describes the episode that takes place in the closet as a «symbolic rebirth.»

...what takes place in the closet is not said irrelevant here if it were to be known one would know it my life began in a closet a symbolic rebirth in retrospect as he shoves me in his stories... (*Voice*).

The hero-Federman, before appearing in the stories of the writer-Federman, had to be reborn in the closet of an infancy (threatened and massacred) in order to face the cruel reality of tragedy. The «*chora/closet*» is a comfortable and safe place, free from the aggression of the outside world. In it, the naked hero regains in his original nakedness the «oceanic feeling» of fusion with the maternal element that Freud attributes to the pre-Oedipal stage.

The dichotomy inside/outside is constantly present in *The Voice*. The maternal body is a space inhabited from the inside, but its shape and amplitude is undefined. We should not forget that according to Kristeva, we may situate the «*chora*» and give it a topology, but we may never give it an axiomatic shape (1984: 26). The experiential space of the *chora/closet* is formal and pre-symbolic. Federman is constantly playing with the shape throughout the text. On the left side of the writing, there is a succession of squares inscribed inside other squares: a descendent world equal to the spiral, but inside the dimensions of the closet. The squares acquire depth because the vertical lines are thicker than the horizontal lines. The text's design underlines

the idea of interiorization, of an incursion into more occult and profound spaces. *The Voice* advances rhythmically resting on the repetition of its square blocks, appealing in an evident way to the motif «closet» that has no beginning or end. The story's circularity is seen as an attempt to an ad-infinitum regression to the original infancy stage. We are in Kristeva's semiotic domain. In this place of changes and transformations, where the drives function in an uncontrolled and anarchic manner, at the same time as the subject is both generated and «deconstructed»⁷:

...the term «drive» denotes waves of attack against stases, which are themselves constituted by the repetition of these charges, together, charges and stases lead to no identity (not even that of the «body proper» that could be seen as a result of their function. This is to say that the semiotic chora is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him. We shall call this process of charges and stases a negativity to distinguish it from negation, which is the act of a judging subject (1984: 28).

The chora, the semiotic domain, is a place of permanent scission (1984: 27): it is the place of dualism, scission, fragmentation, thesis and anti-thesis.

The Voice is an impressive example of scissioned text, where fragments of other parallel texts seem to be (theoretically) identical, but in different languages, English and French. Federman had already experimented with this possibility in the two-column pages of *Double or Nothing* the right hand column was a translation of the French text in the left hand column. In *The Voice*, our author has extended the above mentioned format to two parallel texts twenty pages long, united at the end under the same cover (that is, each one is printed upside down with respect to the disposition of the other). This guarantees that the book as a physical object will produce a special impact on the readers. On the other hand, the conception of its typographic form is even more extreme: each and every one of the pages of the English text forms a perfect printed square (a rectangle in the case of the French text). In *The Twofold Vibration* (1982), one of the characters who makes reference to *The Voice* recalls: «...Boxes of words...words abandoned to deliberate chaos and yet boxed into an inescapable form» (1982: 116). The structure of *The Voice* is recursive and, as we have already seen, the motif of a closed space is repeated again and again at different levels. The cuadrangular form is simply a verbal icon of the «closet/chora» where the protagonist successfully escapes the threats of his prosecutors. The form of the closet generates a textual universe, in a similar way to how the closet experience gave way to Federman-writer. The text-closet is no more than a mechanical generator of other worlds in writing, following the productive model of the chora. In this way, in *The Twofold Vibration* we recall:

If you read the text carefully... you'll see appear before you on the shattered white space the people drawn by the black words, flattened and disseminated on the surface of the paper inside the black ink blood, that was the challenge, never to speak the reality of the event but to render it concrete into the blackness of the words (1982, 118).

In another sense, the discontinuity in the «chora» is almost an ordering principle⁸. The connections (or «functions» for Kristeva) between these discrete signals generated from the drives and articulated with respect to its similarities or differences, are established following a process of condensation or displacement. The principles of metaphor and metonymy appear, therefore, as unseparable from an underlying drive economy.

In Federman's text, the «chora/closet» is also a place of scission, prior to the content of identity:

federman featherless little boy damnit in our closet after so many false names foisted upon me evading the truth he wrote all the door opened to stare at my nakedness a metaphor I suppose a twisted laugh wrong again writing himself into a corner inside here they kept old newspapers delirious strokes of typographophobia fatal however only on occasions (*Voice*).

The hero lacks identity, he is attributed names that are not yet signals, false sounds that evade truth: the name will come after his exit from the closet. To go beyond the frontier of the closet, break the «closet/uterus» and abandon the maternal space means to enter the circle of meaning controlled by the «Name-of-the-Father.» The drive economy that is dominant in the «chora» is resolved in a series of metaphors, displacements and substitutions. In the delirium of the «typographophobia» where the play of the signifier imposes its laws, nakedness is the metaphor of origin, of conception and dispossession. The nakedness prior to birth has no cultural value, it exists in an occult way and prior to the codification in order to be inscribed later in an organized system where everything means by opposition. Nakedness does not exist until there is a sight that contemplates it⁹, it does not exist in an empty interior, in a closed space. For a newborn, this is linked to the idea of cleanliness, innocence, initiation, purity, defenselessness, fragility: what is shown as being involuntary and appears as not obscene or stained or violated. In *The Voice*, nakedness is not only the nakedness of the beginning, but also the negation of the sign and the impossibility of the text. For Kristeva, the negation symbol should be understood as being prior, or at least, parallel to the symbolization principle.

The continuous repetitions and displacements throughout the text produce what Eugenio Donato described in another context as «sedimenting one

one layer of language upon another to produce an illusory depth which gives us the temporary spectacle of things beyond words» (1972, 96). It is probable that Federman does not reach that depth beyond words, but this does not mean that he has abandoned the intention to do so. In *The Voice*, the desire to bring to the surface the voice of the past, nourishes the need to get rid of the multitude of voices that inhabit his present, in order to eliminate the logorrhea of duplicity and invention. Words, syntagms and fragments of a text are repeated to create the sensation of «déjà-vu», of a preconscious structure that secures its meaning as a portion of a recurrent model.

The play metaphor to designate writing, present in all of Federman's production, is the central element in the domain of the chora:

When I say playfulness, I use the term in two ways, in order to write: in order to inscribe language into fiction. I need to invent a space within which to move my chess pieces. I have to invent a playground, if you will. We now come to the double meaning of the word play: first, to lay a game; second, to move freely in the invented space (freely in the sense of loosely). So the idea of playfulness, for me, is to create a playground into which I can project myself in order to start writing (1976, 101).

We should not forget that Kristeva defines the chora as:

Neither model nor copy, the chora precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm. We must restore this motility's gestural and vocal play (to mention only the aspect relevant to language) on the level of the socialized body in order to remove motility from ontology and amorphousness where Plato confines it in an apparent attempt to conceal it from Democritean rhythm. The theory of the subject proposed by the theory of the unconscious will allow us to read in this rhythmic space which has no thesis and no position, the process by which significance is constituted (1984, 26).

The vocal and gestural play that Kristeva refers to reaches an omnipresent dimension in Federman's texts. His response to the originality crisis that writing suffers is manifested in his idea of «pla(y)giarism»: the negation of originality as a concept. In «Imagination as Plagiarism»¹⁰, our writer intends to discredit the false myths of the sacred writer and artistic originality and attribute writing the category of «pre-text» to the possible meaning that the reader attributed to the text. In short, he attempts to demystify the text as an expressive entity that starts in the centre: the Author, who is decoded by another centre: the Reader (1976: 565, 572). Without origin or destiny, lacking authority and telology, fiction (or poetry) will not be found, therefore, in certain types of (conventional/traditional) texts, but rather it will end up virtual and diffuse in language, that is, in the relation between writer and writing,

reading and reader, and even in a more general way, in the play of communication (1976: 575). It is evident (and sufficiently explicit in *Take It or Leave It*) that Federman is influenced by the Derridean idea of play as a continuous postponement of referentiality and subversion of the metaphysics of presence.

For Federman, literature does not represent an interior or exterior reality, rather it is purely reflexive. One of the basic premises of «surfiction» is: to write is to produce meaning, and not to reproduce a preexisting meaning (1975: 8). In Federman's texts, author, narrator and protagonists are melted into one single voice, into a discourse that excludes everything else. Therefore, in *Double or Nothing*, he writes: «Through all the detours that one wishes, the subject who writes will never seize himself in the novel: he will only seize the novel which, by definition, excludes him» (1971: 146). For Kristeva, the subject never *is*, the subject is only the process of meaning, and it represents (it-self) in the measure that it is a meaningful practice; that is, when it disappears from the position from which the socio-historical meaning activity is developed (1984, 188).

The «chora» is the domain where signification is generated. R. Coward and J. Ellis explain it in the following way:

She (Kristeva) uses this (the term «chora») to indicate a sort of tracing or marking of a shape around whose form signification constructs itself (...) This tracing or mark is produced by discontinuities marked provisionally in semiotisable material by the resistances and facilitations of the drives. For example, discontinuities and connections are established in things like voice, colors and gestures as well as acoustic, visual and tactile differences and similarities. The connections and functions established in this way are articulated according to their resemblances and oppositions, that is, by condensation and displacement, which is the movement of the primary processes and indicates a close affinity between Jakobson's two axes of language (metaphor and metonymy), and the movement of the drives. It is for such reasons that the primary processes working by condensation and displacement are the fundamental expression of the semiotic (1977, 149).

Also, the «closet» is par excellence a space where signification is generated and *The Voice*, by extension, is a discursive laboratory where Federman sketches the troubled existence he encountered during his infancy (as we have already observed). *The Voice* is also a text that lacks punctuation marks that intentionally build the rhythm and voice in its support axes and it depends on the visual aspect of the writing/reading to articulate its syntactic displacements.

The visual is physically present on the pages of *The Voice* in the continuous typographic experiments, at the same time as it is translated into a multitude of images that evoke the initial situation of a newborn. The text

contains many references to birth and to physiological realities –masturbation, defecation– that are present in an important way during the child's development. In this way, Federman describes his self of the past as that boy who «defecate(s his) fear (...) me blushing sphinx defecating the riddle of my birth,» «(I) squat on the newspapers unfolded here by shame to defecate my fear (...) holding my penis away not to piss on my legs,» or who «(is) going to be serious no more masturbating», and this is all converted into what he describes as «symbol of my origin in the wordshit of his fabulation and futile act of creating images of birth into death backward into the cunt of reality» (*Voice*).

The Voice is also plagued with images relating to the escape. The boy identifies himself with a yellow bird because of the yellow (semitic) star that he carries on his chest, but he cannot start his flight because Federman is unable to improve his story, he can only reinvent what he believes had really happened. The child's frustrated escape coincides with the author's, who can only escape via the monotonous sound of his typewriter –IBM selectric–:

the selectricstud balls away whirls me in a verbal vacuum pretending to set me free at last in the absence of my own presence no I cannot resign myself to being the inventory of his miscalculations I am not ready for my summation nor do I wish to participate any longer willy nilly in the fiasco of his fabrication (*Voice*).

The escape in the text is completely fictitious and it always ends up falling into a circular dimension: the protagonist finds himself «locked in a space beyond his hands on the periphery of his circular rumbling...», «the boy full circle from his fingers into my voice back to him on the machine» (*Voice*). Federman's memory navigates in the space of the chora. For Kristeva, the first germ of signification is produced here, a semiotic continuum that will have to be segmented so that signification emerges. After the segmentation of the semiotic (*le sémiotique*) the subject will be ready to attribute differences, and therefore, signification, to what he contemplated as the chora's incessant heterogeneity. Kristeva follows Lacan when she establishes the mirror stage, as the first step that opens the path for the constitution of all the objects that, will successively separate from the semiotic «chora», and the Oedipal phase in which, under the threat of castration, the separation process is completed. Once the subject reaches the symbolic order, the chora represses itself in greater or lesser degree to flourish in language in the form of contradictions, tautologies, silence, rupture in the syntactic order, etc. The «chora» is a rhythmical drive and it does not manage to constitute a «new» language. It translates the heterogeneous and transgressional dimension of the language that violates the boundaries of traditional linguistic theory.

In avant-garde texts, Kristeva advises of the undisputed presence of the

chora contributing to the dissolution of a fixed and uniform subjectivity¹¹. The texts that we experience as locus of «jouissance» and Barthes defined as «a text that imposes a sense of being lost, a text that produces anxiety, that squanders the reader's cultural, historical and psychological presumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, the text that provokes a crisis in his relation with language» (1975: 14). *The Voice* is evidently one of these texts where the gestation process of meaning is parallel to the development of the subject. The closet/uterus is the chora's space, where the voice appears «in the margins of verbal authenticity», and the subject struggles in the confusion and bewilderment of the origin: «a question of changing one's perspective view the self from the inside from the point of view of the capacity its will power federman achieve the vocation of your name» (*Voice*).

The aim of the textual practice that Kristeva calls for is to give way to a subject that is being built, marked by the multiple and contradictory social processes that are articulated on the basis of the symbolic function:

The function of the text consists in lifting, in whatever society, and whatever situation, the repression which weighs on this moment of struggle in the subject, menacing or dissolving the subjective and social liaisons but also conditioning its renewal (1984: 183)

Therefore, the subject holds a permanent struggle in which the social and the individual, the preconscious and the conscious, the antithesis and the synthesis are confronted. *The Voice* is a text that is built on its own contradictions. The inside/outside dialectic is one of the keys that widens the intricate path of incursion into the «closet/chora» from whose inside the protagonist proclaims:

I was dead he thinks skips me but I am being given birth into death beyond the open door such is my condition the feet are clear already of the great cunt of existence backward my head will be last to come out (*Voice*).

HISTORY AS TRAUMA: TRAUMA AS HISTORY

Federman's personal history, spanning a sequence of traumatic events (World War II, the Holocaust, exile and transplantation on the New Continent), fits the paradigm of the exile, post-Holocaust writer. Federman's fiction –like that of Beckett– has been about «the perception of chaos, the survey of chaos, the immersion into chaos» (Strauss 1966, 505). A historical chaos which could only be broached through the strategies of the postmodern writer: «It is as if the experience of the Holocaust is more than language can comprehend or communicate –except, perhaps, by a «denial of language»

(Sukenick 1972, 40). But this denial has been accompanied by a reconstructive effort. Federman himself has offered, among other possible explanations for his approach, the idea that,

Postmodernism as a literary notion was invented to deal with the Holocaust. The prewar split between form and content was incapable of dealing with the moral crisis provoked by the Holocaust, and therefore writers like Beckett, Walter Abish, Ronald Sukenick, Primo Levi, Raymond Federman, Jerzy Kosinski, and many others, invented Postmodernism to search among the dead, to dig into the communal grave, in order to reanimate wasted blood and wasted tears ... or perhaps simply in order to create something more interesting than death (1993, 122).

Federman's project does not move beyond history, it does not relinquish any attempt to articulate and explain the past, his narratives rather seek to make sense of history. He seems to be raising the issue of how, if at all, can a sequence of repeated death encounters be retold except in «words abandoned to deliberate chaos and yet boxed in an inescapable form» (*TV* 1982, 116) as in *The Voice*. Moving across conflicting voices and narrative styles, *The Voice* provokes history, opening its plots up to infinite possibilities through «digression» and repeated «displacements». Even though the character-writer remains trapped in his «shadowbox of guilt» —guilt for having escaped the Nazi extermination while the rest of his immediate family perished in the gas chambers, guilt for «exterminating» once more that original event through his «fraudulent...edifice of words»— his text manages to move through «questions affirmation texture designs negations speculations» towards «subsequent enlightenment».

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony* (1992) figures history through the Holocaust as a trauma to be borne witness to, by deploying the psychoanalytic assumption that an individual history can metaphorically stand in for History. Other psychoanalytical borrowings include a modelling of history as a traumatic event «voided» in its moment of inscription and known only through its retrospective reconstruction produced in a dialogue with a listening other (Laub). Finally, the problem of knowing one's historical present is figured through the force of a psychic trauma which literally possesses one's subjectivity.

In the context of Federman's narrative, we may raise some questions inspired by Felman and Laub's approach, such as, how is the act of writing tied up with the act of bearing witness? Is the act of reading literary texts itself inherently related to the fact of facing horror? If literature is the alignment between witnesses, what would this alignment mean? And by virtue of what sort of agency is one appointed to bear witness?

From a narratological standpoint, postmodernism also raises a number of

interesting questions concerning the status of «voice» and «agency» in historical fiction. As a participant/witness in the sequence of events, the writer does not yet have, strictly speaking, a historical consciousness; he is at best a «chronicler... always on the verge of participation, or at least of a presence in the action that is in effect the presence of a witness» (Genette 1988, 104). As a historian, the writer becomes in Gerard Genette's apt phrase «a subsequent witness» (80), speaking from an extradiegetic, dissociated perspective: the composite perspective of reconstructing history. In lieu of the authoritative voices of traditional historiography, postmodern narratives prefer more ambiguous, dialogic voices. History can only be (re)articulated through dialogic modes of narrative. Like in Federman's *Voice*, the dialogization of the narrator's own voice involves not only Bakhtin's notion that the narrator speaks for a polyphony of voices, but also a more radical splitting of the enunciating instance into different centers of consciousness irreducible to any possible unity.

Federman's *voice in the closet* becomes disarticulated toward the end of the text, drawing closer to silence, to the paradox of «mute speech/ sign of my presence.» Struggling to rationalize his escape from the original closet, Federman the writer «clumsily continues to fabricate his designs in circles», hoping that his words will eventually «stumble» over some meaning. But his effort is denounced by the voice of the original hero (the boy-from-the-closet), as «reducible to nonsense excrement,» a «verbal vacuum.»

As a fictional exploration of traumatic history, *The Voice in the Closet* inevitably becomes a text of rupture. While upsetting our traditional notions of history, it also allows us to relive its dramatic movement in the supplementary space of the text.

The voice in the closet is that voice which, perceptive to its own frailty and limitation, authentically perceives the paradox accompanying the human position of suffering: that it is both preeminent and nonexistent. The authorial voice (composed of many voices) is described as follows:

in my paradox a split exists between the actual me wandering voiceless in temporary landscapes and the virtual being federman pretends to invent...a survivor who dissolves in verbal articulations unable to do what I had to do to admit that his fictions can no longer match the reality of my past(*Voice*).

Are the crises in accessing historical truth produced by the specificity of the Holocaust generalizable to a more overarching «traumatic» theory of history? In Felman & Laub's approaches, testimony is a speech act (Caruth 17), a medium of healing (20), a process of «the very birth of knowledge» (25), the witness's willingness to «pursue the accident» (31), a poetic «project of address» rather than a poetic «project of artistic mastery» (43), and a teaching practice (56). Can we read in Federman's *Voice* his reiterative style as part of

the meaning of his own theory-of-history? Is it, like current trauma theory itself, «nothing other than a finally available statement (or approximation) of a truth that, at the outset, was unknown but that was gradually accessed through the practice and the process of the testimony» (Caruth 25)? In *The Voice* the repetition mechanism takes on two qualities: that of the repetition of the boy's past closet experience and that of the repetition of Federman's past texts on this experience. Federman's narratives call for a resistance to a silence that can become reified. The discourse which the voice endlessly recites, though it longs to be silent, has the form of an infinite and self-immolating chiasmus, negating all that it affirms. Just as these utterances thrive on their own destruction, the voice (the speaking being) wavers between the poles of life and death. What it mutters is an apocalyptic narrative of origins. It is a post-holocaust narration which speaks its stories into being. Its last statements testify to the presentness of what remained forever delayed, «here now again at last» (*Voice*).

NOTES

¹ *The Voice* is a complex narrative without page numbering where the English and French texts are assembled upside down, and where Maurice Roche's French text, *Echos*, is inserted.

² Cited by Leon S. Roudiez in his introduction to *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. N.Y.: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984: 3.

³ We should not forget that Lacan proclaimed in 1953: «The recourses (of psychoanalysis) are those of speech to the extent that it endows a person's activity with meaning; its domain is that of concrete discourse as field of the subject is transindividual reality; its operations are those of history insofar as the latter constitutes the emergence of truth within the real» (quoted by Roudiez 1984: 4).

⁴ Kristeva covers these matters in depth in the cases of Mallarmé and Lautréamont in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984).

⁵ I agree with Leon S. Roudiez in that «textual analysis» is a more appropriate label (to Kristeva's activity) than «literary analysis» – Kristeva in many occasions, relegates to a second level aesthetic matters or matters that are of formal nature. On the other hand, as Roudiez points out, «textual analysis also denies pertinence to «literary criticism» insofar as the latter evaluates a work by confronting it with one's preconceived or ideal notion of what that work should be. For the point is to give an account of what went into a work, how it affects readers and why» (1984: 5).

⁶ Kristeva explains it in one of her notes: «The Platonic space or receptacle is a mother and wet nurse: «indeed we may fittingly compare the Recipient to a mother, the mother to a father, and the nature that arises between them to their offspring» (*Timaeus*, 50), «Now the wet nurse of Becoming was made watery and fiery, received the characters of earth and air, and was qualified by all the other affections that go with these...» (*Timaeus*, 52)» (1984: 240).

⁷ There predominates a destructive wave in the «double» nature of the drives that Freud already observed in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Kristeva expresses it as follows: «...although drives have been described as disunited or contradictory structures, simultaneously «positive» and «negative,» this doubling is said to generate a dominant «destructive wave» that is drives' most characteristic trait. Freud notes that the most instinctual drive is the death drive» (1984, 28). Although it is enormously controverted and not altogether coherent, the Freudian theory

of the drives is of interest to us here due to the importance that Freud attributes to the death drive, both in human beings and in living matter in general. The death drive is transversal to identity and it tends to disperse narcissism, whose constitution assures the link between the internal structures of the individual, and by extension, in life. However, at the same time and inversely, narcissism and pleasure are only transitorial situations from which the death drive opens new paths: therefore, both are tricks, lies, and in short, manifestations of the death drive.

For Kristeva, the semiotic space «chora,» when transforming the «discharges» of the drives in estasis can be understood as a position of the death drive, or as a possible realization of it as it tends to return to its homeostatic state (1984, 241). The former is coherent with Freud's observation: «At the beginning of mental life, the struggle for pleasure was far more intense than later, but not unrestricted: it had to submit to frequent interruptions» (quoted in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. James Strachey. N.Y.: Norton, 1961, 57).

⁸ Kristeva defines the «chora's» discontinuity in the following way: «Drive facilitation, temporarily arrested, marks discontinuities in what may be called the various material supports (matériaux) susceptible to semiotization: voice, gesture, colors. Phonic (later phonemic), kinetic or chromatic units and differences are the marks of these stases in the drives» (1984, 28)

⁹ We must not forget that Freud situates the principle of sexual differentiation, the origin of the castration complex and the entry into the Oedipal phase in the sight: «In the latter (boys) the castration complex arises after they have learnt from the sight of the female genitals that the organ which they value so highly need not necessarily accompany the body. At this the boy recalls to mind the threats he brought on himself by his doings on that organ, he begins to give credence to them and falls under the influence of fear of castration, which will be the most powerful motive force in his subsequent development. The castration complex of girls is also started by the sight of the genitals of the other sex. They at once notice the difference and, it must be admitted, its significance too. They feel seriously wronged, often declare that they want «have something like it too» and fall a victim to «envy for the penis,» which will leave inradicable traces on their development and the formation of their character and which will not be surmounted in even the most favourable cases without severe expenditure of physical energy.» in «Femininity,» *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Trans. James Strachey. N.Y.: Norton, 1965, 112-35.

¹⁰ «Imagination as Plagiarism,» in *New Literary History*, 7, 1976, 563-76. Also see, «PLAYGIARISM, a Spatial Displacement of Words,» in *Sub-Stance*, 16, 1977, 107-12.

¹¹ In her works, Kristeva studies texts where it is easy to see the significant weight that the semiotic component has versus the symbolic one, as seen in the texts by Artaud, Lautréamont, Joyce, Beckett, Sollers, etc.

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