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AUTOBIOGRAPHY OR FICTION? – RAYMOND FEDERMAN'S *SHHH: THE STORY OF A CHILDHOOD*

Abstract

Raymond Federman, a French – American postmodern writer, created his own literary manifesto in which he announced a movement he called “surfiction”. According to Federman, surfiction does not differentiate between reality and fiction since they are interchangeable. Federman followed this closely in his works, to the point where it is impossible to state that anything he had ever written, even about his own life and childhood, is based on reality or is entirely fictitious. His novel *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* is truly representative of Federman’s surfiction, since it does offer an account of his early childhood, something he refused to write about for a very long time, yet it is written in such a way that the reader is left constantly questioning the veracity of the text in front of them. This novel is Federman’s last, which is important to note because of his reluctance to address that part of his life until much later in his career. *Shhh: The story of a Childhood* was intended to be written as an autobiographical piece, covering a part of Federman’s life preceding one pivotal moment of his early years. The aim of this paper is to present the ways in which Federman succeeded in writing this autobiographical piece, yet still leaving room to doubt its authenticity, which is in line with his theory of surfiction. Juxtaposing different theories on autobiographical writing with Federman’s literary theory, the author of the paper aims to present the novel *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* through a multi-layered lens in order to determine its classification in terms of literary genres.

Key words: postmodernism, surfiction, autobiography, Holocaust

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1. Introduction

In the fiction of Raymond Federman, the lines between reality and fiction are blurred to such an extent that the two overlap in a way to create a singular entity. Bearing in mind this interwoven nature of the two concepts, it is almost impossible to talk about the differences between them, as well. Thus, it naturally follows that to distinguish autobiography from fiction, in Federman's terms, would also prove a very difficult task. Federman said so himself, stating that "fiction and autobiography are always interchangeable, just as life and fiction, fact and fiction, language and fiction, that is to say history and story are interchangeable" (1993: 89). For Federman, the only material a writer can use to write about is his/her own life (Đorđević 2024: 36). In his novel *The Twofold Vibration*, Federman confirms this by saying that "all fiction is based, to some extent, on the author's own experiences, lived or imagined, transposed into the life of his characters, it always works this way, not blood relations, ink relations" (1982: 11).

This paper aims to demonstrate the dual nature of Federman's *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* and how Federman managed to make the differences between fact and fiction almost indistinguishable in the story. We will demonstrate how by writing this form of *autobiographical fiction* Federman, once again, succeeded in reinforcing the tenets of his literary criticism and his *surfiction*.

2. Federman and the Truth of Autobiography

The general definition states that an autobiography is a self-written account of the author's life and it aims to provide a detailed and personal narrative of the writer's experiences, emotions, and reflections. However, actually defining autobiography can be challenging due to its inherent subjectivity and varying forms, to the point that some claim that it is indefinable (Abbott 1988: 599). Lejeune defined it as: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (1989: 4)

While it is expected that an autobiography should be based on true events, the line between autobiography and fiction can sometimes be blurred, as memory is selective and interpretive (Smith & Watson 2010). In his essay on writing autobiographies, *Federman on Federman: Lie or*

Die, Federman writes that “[a]utobiographies and self-portraits are always distortions of reality because they are created on the basis of a memory or an image” (1993: 91), further emphasizing the possibility of inaccuracy present in autographical writing. Additionally, autobiographies may include embellishments or subjective interpretations that complicate their classification as purely factual accounts.

Nevertheless, even though many classify autobiography as non-fiction (Shen & Xu 2007: 45), it is undeniable that certain elements of fictionalization do come into play even in this context. However, unlike most works of fiction, autobiographies are susceptible to two kinds of scrutiny, in terms of truthfulness: extratextual and intratextual reality. As Shen and Xu explain further “despite varying degrees of fictionalization in individual works and despite the difficulty, if not impossibility, of accessing or tracing the real-life experiences of the autobiographer (especially a non-contemporary one), autobiography does have a different ontological status, for, as we all know, the criterion of “truth” is applicable to this genre” (*ibid.*). This is especially pertinent when discussing any piece of writing by Federman.

In this vein, according to his own account of the event, Federman was once confronted by a critic concerning the veracity of the events described in his monumental novel *The Voice in the Closet*, where Federman describes the traumatizing way in which he survived the arrest of his family and, subsequently, the Holocaust (1993: 95). Instead of trying to refute the critic’s claims, or in any other way attempt “defending” the truth of his stories, Federman agreed with the critic saying that indeed there was no way of proving the truthfulness behind his stories, but that that was not at all important (Federman 1993: 97–100). For Federman, what matters are the stories we tell, not the truth behind them:

I became a writer in order to tell stories. And I am sure this is true of all those who call themselves writers. If some of the stories I have told happened to be based on my life, finally it is totally irrelevant – especially when it comes to judging the quality, or the efficacy, or even the beauty of my fiction. [...] What is interesting in the relationship between fiction and autobiography is the mechanism by which a writer transforms elements of his life into stories. What is fascinating is the process which makes it possible for a life to become fiction, or vice versa for fiction to make it possible for a writer to have a biography – real or imagined. (Federman 1993: 100)

Delving further into what Federman said, he positioned the origin point of his biography within his stories and his fiction: “My fiction was nourishing the story of my life.” (Federman 1993: 93) It is important to notice the very subtle wording Federman uses here, “the **story of my life**”¹. For him, everything is a story, even his own life. Thus, everything, even his life, is fiction. He reinforces this by saying that something we may consider as factual as history “is made of stories one tells of what happened” (Federman 1993: 90). Paul de Man offers a similar stance in his view of autobiography, stating that it would not be untrue to suppose that just as life influences autobiography it may also, in return, influence life, “the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life” (1979: 920). This is in line with Paul John Eakin’s belief that human beings live narratively (Maftai 2013: 62). By taking into consideration his words that “story functions as the primary avenue to the self of another person” (Eakin 2008: 57) we can view someone’s writing and our subsequent reading of that writing as a way of getting to know that person, but also of that person getting to know themselves.

The primary difference between autobiography and fiction lies in the intent and nature of the narrative, and this is inextricable from the process of determining the truthfulness of a piece of writing (Maftai 2013: 21). Fiction is crafted from the imagination and not constrained by factual accuracy. In contrast, autobiographies are expected to adhere to the truth of the author’s lived experiences, although they are filtered through personal perception and memory (Olney 1980). Paul de Man challenges these notions by hypothesising about a different spin on the relations between reality (factual accuracy) and autobiography. He asks: “is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity?” (De Man 1979: 920–921). The issue could be that the authors might unintentionally or deliberately alter or omit details, leading to debates about the authenticity and reliability of autobiographies.

With Federman, the debate is heightened by his own words: “The reader of my autobiography can only **take my word[s]**² for it” (1993: 91). This, of course, does not in any way indicate that Federman was or

¹ Author’s emphasis.

² Original emphasis.

was not lying about the events that “nourished his fiction”, as he described it. Barbour explains this by saying that “just as not every fact about an autobiographer’s life qualifies as significant truth, so not every omission, exaggeration, or inconsistency counts as self-deception” (1992: 19). It simply points out the intricacies connected to the very subtle art of writing a kind of fiction that both fictionalizes and represents an author’s life.

Autobiographical writing can safely be placed on the crossroads of one’s own ideas of what is true and the ideas of other people (Maftai 2013: 21). But the text is not the only thing that is located on this crossroads, it is the writer as well. When writing any text which is connected to personal experience, the author has to remove itself to a place outside of that experience in order to write about it (Maftai 2013: 59). But, therein lies a paradox, because, even though the author must displace him/herself out of the textual form of the experience, they are an integral part of it (*ibid.*). It naturally follows that writers must somehow distance themselves from their own writing in order to preserve their own selves. One of the ways Maftai mentions is a kind of multiplication of the author through the creation of the voice within the text (*ibid.*) and Federman does precisely that.

3. Federman’s Surfiction

Another important aspect which must be taken into consideration when discussing autobiographies in Federman’s terms is his view of reality as well. As was mentioned before, Federman believes only in the reality of fiction, dismissing any other possible form of a world outside the text. With his fiction, he tried to “abolish the notion that reality is truth” (Federman 1993: 38) leading us to question the very life which he used as the inspiration for his works. Yet, to fully understand Federman’s fiction, most of which is in fact based on a reality he aims to abolish, we must understand what his fiction actually is, and this is where we are thrust into the realm of *surfiction*.

Federman defines *surfiction* as the type of fiction which exposes the fictionality of reality and tries to explore the possibilities of fiction beyond its own limitations (1993: 37). In its essence, *surfiction* “reveals life as fiction” (*ibid.*). Very much in line with what was previously said, through writing *surfiction*, Federman created literary works which undermined the

very concept of reality, since “reality as such does not exist, or rather exists only in its fictionalized version, that is to say in the language that governs it” (Federman 1993: 38).

One of the basic tenets of surfiction is the belief that no meaning pre-exists language (Federman 1993: 45), from which it naturally follows that “there cannot be any truth nor reality exterior to fiction” (Federman 1993: 43–44). Everything that Federman wrote creates its own truth and its own reality which is not subject to any form of validation outside the text. Surfiction is not interested in the truth of reality nor the truth of life outside of the language that creates it. This, Federman explains, means that “writing fiction will be a process of fabricating or improvising on the spot the material of fiction” (1993: 44). This does not mean that the material of surfiction is lies. On the contrary, the material of surfiction is the only truth and the only reality that matters, which are the truth and reality of fiction itself.

Since Federman declares himself a surfictionist, all of his writing, be it fiction or non-fiction, portrays the ideas of surfiction. His writing does not depend on the veracity of the tales that create surfiction, simply because by the very act of being written they are, ipso facto, true. Federman himself stated, quoting his role-model Samuel Beckett, that the reason for his writing was to transform “the fiasco of reality into a howling success” (1993: 47).

Some would say that, in light of this, if a writer calls him/herself a surfictionist, then nothing they write can ever be autobiographical, no matter how much they rely on real-life events. However, those who claim so would be in the wrong. Just because surfiction does not believe in any reality outside of itself, it does not mean that it cannot represent it. After all, surfiction is fiction, and it is based on imagination, which, again, has to stem from somewhere. Federman asked the same question, can autobiography be fiction, or, vice versa, can fiction be autobiography (1993: 100) and the answer he gave was: “What is interesting in the relationship between fiction and autobiography is the mechanism by which a writer transforms elements of his life into stories. What is fascinating is the process which makes it possible for a life to become fiction, or vice versa for fiction to make it possible for a writer to have a biography – real or imagined” (*ibid.*).

Throughout his prose, Federman created a number of characters and fictional voices to speak his truth, yet he remains exempt: “Writing as I

do, very much out of my own personal experience, I had to invent a way of distancing myself from my fiction. Or if you prefer, of fictionalizing myself. [...] I did it by creating a plurality of voices.” (Abádi-Nagy 2002: 143–144) This pulverization of the Self allows the author to make the necessary break from him/herself in order for the necessary reconstruction and rearrangement to take place (Maftai 2013: 84). Federman succeeded in doing this to such an extent that his Self was dispersed throughout everything he wrote in such a way that it is almost impossible not to find a glimpse of Federman in his texts. This inevitably leads to the conclusion that questioning the “truth” of his fiction would be equal to questioning his very existence and his whole life. Thus, we could say that all his fiction is his autobiography, yet none of it must necessarily be true, but for Federman, that is not even important.

4. *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood: A Surfictional Autobiography?*

Even though, Federman himself believed that one’s life story is the only thing a person can, in fact, write about (McCaffery et al. 1998: 221), this does not necessarily mean that every work of fiction Federman wrote was an autobiographical piece. Most of his novels are based on his life story, especially on the story of the tragic death of his family and his survival of the Holocaust, yet his fiction encompasses much more than those biographical facts. As a true postmodern writer, Federman’s fictions deal with the state of literature and the novel, the possibilities of language, but also with its limitations. And it is precisely those limitations of language that bring into question the veracity of even the biographical aspect of Federman’s texts, which he himself admits: “But the text: can it be trusted? Can the language of the text be trusted? And even less so, the vents related by that language?” (1993: 91).

All of this notwithstanding, it is still important to consider the biographical aspect of Federman’s prose when discussing it. Thus, it is no wonder that some of his novels may be considered pieces of autobiographical writing, especially taking into account how many elements from his real life Federman decided to include in them. One novel in particular stands out and that is his last published novel *Shhh: The story of a Childhood*. This novel is a chimera of sorts, since it is governed by both the norms of Federman’s *surfiction*, an approach to literary writing which does not

distinguish between reality and fiction, and by the norms of autobiographical narration, clearly visible in the text itself.

The novel *Shhh: the Story of a Childhood* was published one year after Federman's death and it recounts his early childhood years, until the day his parents and his two sisters were arrested and taken to Auschwitz. It is interesting to note that even though Federman had been writing about his life through most of his fiction, it was his very last novel where he would talk about his family in such detail. This novel, alongside two more, *Aunt Rachel's Fur* and *Return to Manure*, could be said to present a part of an autobiographical trilogy (Đorđević 2024: 191). However, though it definitely has elements one would immediately and indisputably connect to autobiography, *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* is still a surfictional novel and must be viewed as such. Thus, in this novel, like in all of its predecessors, the reader is pulled into a vortex of a past inextricably bound to fiction (*ibid.*).

For Federman, there is no debate when it comes to the veracity of his fiction, or any fiction for that matter, no matter whether it is based on actual life events or not. Federman proclaims that "only fiction is real, only fiction is true" (1993: 90). He explains this further: "The rest cannot be verified for it remains in the domain of absence, in the domain of what has already happened in the past, and the past can never be totally recaptured, as writers quickly learn in the process of writing fiction or their autobiography" (*ibid.*). These words echo the thoughts of Roland Barthes who asked: "What right does my present have to speak of my past? Has my present some advantage over my past?" (Barthes 1975: 121). This sentence supports the existence of the underlying uncertainty woven into any autobiographical work (Maftai 2013: 64), especially if we bear in mind that that uncertainty cannot be removed even by the very author of the autobiographical text.

Shhh: The Story of a Childhood is about Federman's early childhood years, while he was living with his family, father Simone, mother Marguerite, and two sisters, Sarah and Jacqueline, in Paris. They lived in a very small apartment rented to them by Federman's aunt, with whom the family had a somewhat turbulent relationship. In this novel, Federman talks about his family in a very emotionally charged way, unlike any of his previous novels and gives his readers a glimpse of who Federman was before the Second World War took away everything from him, including his sense of self.

Firstly, it is important to explain the very title of the novel, specifically the audible "shhh" at the very beginning. In order to do so, we must be

familiar with the backdrop of the whole story of Federman’s very existence in light of the Holocaust. In the early morning hours (Federman states that it was 5.30 in the morning (2010: 12³)) on the 16th of July 1942, during an event now known as *La rafle du Vélodrome d’Hiver*, the police stormed the building where Federman lived with his family and arrested anyone who was Jewish. As the police was approaching Federman’s apartment, his mother grabbed him by the collar and threw him into a broom closet on the third floor. Federman never saw his family again. After the war had finished, Federman found out that his family had been killed very soon after that dreadful day, all of them killed in Auschwitz.

This event is an indisputable historical fact, with numerous documents showing that there really were Simone, Marguerite, Sarah and Jacqueline Federman who were arrested during *La Rafle* and subsequently killed in Auschwitz. Federman found all of these documents and gave a detailed account of all the material in his essay *Convoi 21* (Đorđević 2024: 172). In *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood*, Federman describes the event of his survival and of his mother’s last words at the very beginning:

I have often told that this *shhh* was the last word I heard from my mother, on that sad July day, when the door of the closet into which my mother hid me closed.

Shhh, murmured my mother. And the thirteen first years of my life vanished into the darkness of that third floor closet. Me who was so afraid of the dark when I was a boy, me who did not dare go to the toilet alone in the courtyard because it was so dark, me who trembled with fear when I had to go down into the cellar of the house to get coal for our stove, frightened because of the dark and the rats that scuttled around, me I stayed in the darkness of that closet an entire day and an entire night, lost in incomprehension. [...]

I did not comprehend why my mother pushed her half-naked son into the darkness of that closet after having shoved his shorts, his shirt, and his sandals into his arms. And this *shhh* into my ear. Into my head where it has been resonating ever since. (Federman 2010: 12)

³ The novel *Shhh: The story of a Childhood* does not have assigned page numbers in the author’s version of the book. The page numbers will, thus, be given based on the number of the page as they are counted from the cover.

Nevertheless, no matter how linear and factual this opening sequence of the novel may seem, the reader will soon find out that they are not reading a typical story in which a writer recounts his childhood. Even in the story of his youth, Federman keeps his surfictional style of writing, constantly going back and forth with narrative timelines, tossing the reader from the past to the present and vice versa in a vertigo-inducing manner, to the point of utter confusion. Furthermore, after the first initial pages of the novel we are made aware of the presence of at least two voices in the novel, besides that of the author. The words of those voices always interrupt the narrative flow of a particular story the writer is trying to present and are given space on separate pages:

Phew, Federman, what's going on? This is so serious. Your readers are going to find it boring. They're going to wonder what's happening to you. If you're not starting to cultivate senility. What! No more mad laughter, no more sexual effrontery. What's wrong with you? No more exuberant typographical gimmicks. No more scatology. No more self-reflexiveness. It's not possible. Federman is now writing agonizing realism. That's what people are going to say.⁴

It's true that I'm on the edge of the imposture of realism in this story, and that I could easily tumble into it. But when one tells the story of one's childhood one is always on the edge of the precipice of sentimentality that makes you crumble into whining realism. That's the risk to take while telling what happened in Montrouge during my childhood.

Well, I'll go on anyway (Federman 2010: 18)

This kind of *intrusion* in the text has a specific purpose. The soliloquy nature of these words emphasises the self-reflexiveness of the text, but also establishes a close relation between Federman (both the writer and the character in the novel) with his reader (Đorđević 2024: 195). It is clear that the bolded and italicized shape of the letters used is deliberate, used to mark a clear distinction between these voices and the one narrating the whole story. Even though we may be tempted to identify the latter voice as the same one which is telling the main story, that may not necessarily be

⁴ Original emphasis.

the case. As was said earlier, Federman can take on a multitude of selves when writing, so though it may be that both voices are coming from the same person, they themselves do not represent the same person. The voice of Federman, the writer, is from the past, it comes from memory, whereas the voice of Federman explaining his writing is in the present.

Federman was acutely aware of how his readership and his critics would view this novel, and he underlines that in the novel itself. Though he wishes to tell the story of his childhood, that story is incessantly delayed and postponed, all of which makes up the very build of the novel. Toeing the lines of surfiction, Federman wrote a novel which is self-contained, but also auto-canceled by every new word that appears. Federman’s sentence “I want to write a story that cancels itself as it goes” (Federman 1976) illustrates Federman’s ultimate goal in fiction writing, but also the purpose of most of his texts. Federman even goes as far as to point this out in the novel itself:

Federman, stop repeating that you’re going to tell your childhood, and start telling it. You’re not going to use the same old leap-frog technique again in this story—delaying and digressing all over the place.

What do you think? That I’m going to tell this story straightforward? That would be something. I’ve said it and repeated it many times: chronology handicaps me. I don’t know how to walk the straight line. And I don’t understand logic at all. Besides, what’s left of my childhood in my head are only fragments, debris, torn souvenirs for which I must now improvise a form.

OK, I’ll try to tell it anyway (Federman 2010: 31)

From this point onward, Federman proceeds to tell the story of his childhood “backward”, for which he had to return to his primordial closet (Federman 2010: 32). In order for him to do that he must reconstruct with his words what he believes his childhood to have been (Federman 2010: 204). However, Federman knows that memory can be false and he defiantly proclaims that he owes nothing to memory, that his only debt is to those who have been silenced and “whose lives have been humiliated” (Federman 2010: 197).

As a way to repay the debt of life to his mother, and to “decode the great silence she imposed on me with her CHUT⁵” (*ibid.*), Federman goes

⁵ French (original) version of “shhh”.

on to write the stories of his father, his illness, his art and his gambling; the stories of his “poor mother” (Federman 2010), her looks, her relentless diligence and dedication to her children, her difficult childhood and youth, up to the last “shhh” Federman heard from her. He writes very little about his sisters, simply because he doesn’t want to reduce those stories to “pathetic naturalism” (Federman 2010: 227). In the end, Federman dedicates this book to his mother.

The novel *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* is a complex collection of auto-reflexive thought intrusions, memories and stories which make up a single story of a life once lived. This novel serves as a form of surfictional autobiography (Đorđević 2024: 204), blending reality and imagination so seamlessly that it becomes impossible to tell them apart, even for the author. Despite being his most realistic work, Federman still crafts a metafictional narrative, immersing the reader in a world of possible fictional realities under the pretence of autofiction (*ibid.*).

5. Conclusion

Throughout the paper, we explored how Federman’s innovative approach challenges the reader to question the very nature of reality and truth in a narrative form. Federman’s work does not simply recount events from his life; instead, it transforms these events into a hybrid narrative that is as much about the act of storytelling as it is about the story itself. By blending real experiences with fictional elements, Federman invites readers into a space where the distinction between the two becomes almost irrelevant, emphasizing that all narratives are subject to the constraints and distortions of language and memory.

By integrating autobiographical elements with fictional techniques, Federman not only tells his personal story but also explores broader themes of identity and memory. The aforementioned pulverization of the Self in Federman’s works, including *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood*, as well as the re-envisioning of his own memory and mental images, leads the reader down the surfictional path of re-evaluation of how we perceive and construct our own narratives, ultimately suggesting that the search for truth in literature is a complex, multifaceted endeavour. Thus, Federman’s work stands as a testament to the power of fiction to convey deep and often elusive truths about our lives and experiences.

Even though the classification of the novel *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* may not prove an easy task, it is indubitably a piece of writing that walks the borderlines between autobiographical writing in the conventional sense and Federman’s own, surfictional, view of autobiography. It is a novel that lends itself freely to the interpretation of the reader who, in turn, assesses its truthfulness. This is completely in accordance with Federman’s view of fiction and makes *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* a true example of surfictional writing.

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