

Welch Everman

RE: RAY

AMERICAN WRITERS

What is it that makes an American writer an *American* writer? Place of birth? Citizenship? The language in which he/she writes? And is Raymond Federman an American writer? Am I permitted to teach his novels in my Contemporary American Fiction course, along with the works of Jerzy Kosinski and Andrei Codrescu?

Please understand that when most people in the Western Hemisphere say “American,” they mean the New World. When we say “American,” however, we mean south of Canada and north of Mexico. Does that mean that an American writer must live or have lived within those geographical limits? Is Gertrude Stein an American writer?

I’m quibbling. Federman is a United States citizen who lives in the all-American city of Buffalo, New York and who, most of the time, writes in English—a very American English, as a matter of fact. Admittedly, he wasn’t born here; he came here from France when he was nearly an adult. He is also bilingual, which comes very close to being downright un-American. On the other hand, he loves football and was a Bills fan long before it was fashionable. He doesn’t particularly enjoy going to the mall, but he gets a real kick out of shopping in enormous supermarkets. He plays golf.

On the *other* hand, he enjoys those esoteric foreign films with subtitles and adores Wagnerian opera. He speaks with an accent. He even writes his very American English with an accent. He dresses well but in a kind of continental style. Let’s face it—for us Americans, there is something irrevocably and relentlessly *foreign* about the guy, even though he drives an American-made car.

And yet, like most of us in this country, Federman is of two minds about America and his place in it. Maybe that fact alone is enough to make him a truly *American* writer.

FEDERMAN

Federman loves his name, if only because it's another word that he can play with. When someone notes that it is a strange family name for a Frenchman, he points out that his father's family was Russian. He never seems to notice that Federman is a pretty strange name for a Russian, too.

The name is a polylingual pun. *Feder* is German for *feather*, and so *Federmann* would be *featherman*. In French, *feather* is *plume* which, of course, is also *pen*. By a rather roundabout linguistic route, then, Federman becomes the *penman*—a very Joycean name which contains within it Ray's vocation as a kind of etymological guarantee.

GOLF

It is golf—not literature—that is the meaning of Federman's life. The guy is a fanatic, and he's good. Ray has been in all kinds of tournaments—even Pro-Ams—and he and his wife often travel south during the winter to play. Needless to say, golfing isn't much fun during a Buffalo winter, though Federman's been known to play anyway, using orange or purple golf balls so they won't get lost in the snow.

I have never played a game of golf in my life, so this is one aspect of Ray's personality that I simply do not get. Even so, I have a Federman golf story.

One Sunday during the time my wife and I lived in Buffalo, the Federmans were coming over to our house for dinner. It happened to be the last day of the U.S. Open tournament, and, even as Ray and Erica were pulling into our driveway, I could hear him shouting: "Turn on the TV, Everman."

As it turned out, we were already watching the U.S. Open. My wife Liz and I had been following the tournament all weekend, because Andy North, a high school friend of hers from her hometown, was one of the front runners. North had already won the U.S. Open once a few years earlier, and it looked as if he had a chance to do it again.

Federman charged in the door and started to explain what had been going on during the tournament and why it was vital that we have dinner in front of the tube, but he was stunned when he learned that Liz and North were old friends. "Andy North? You know Andy North?"

Ray listened open-mouthed as Liz told him stories about Andy as a kid, Andy's sister, his girlfriends, his work as a caddie, etc. Meanwhile, the U.S. Open moved into its final moments, and North scored a thrilling, last-second, come-from-behind victory. It was quite a performance.

Suddenly, Federman looked at me in a way I didn't recognize, and it took a moment for me to figure out what that look meant. It was a look of new-found respect for a guy—a non-golfer, at that—who had had the good sense to marry a woman who knew Andy North.

IMMIGRANT

Despite his mixed feelings about his adopted homeland, as an immigrant Federman is the quintessential American. After all, even Native Americans migrated to the New World from Mongolia, and people from all over the globe have been more or less dropping in ever since.

While many immigrants make a concerted effort to fit into the mainstream, however, Federman has held on tenaciously to his immigrant status. He is, of course, a naturalized citizen, and he has done very well for himself in this new land. Even so, he insists upon keeping his heavy French accent—"for social reasons," he explains, as if that explains anything. If he is proud of being an American—and I suspect he is—and if he is also proud of having achieved something of importance in this country—and I know he is—he is also proud of his immigrant status which allows him to live both within and outside of American culture at the same time. It is important to him that he is here; it is equally important that he was not born here.

JEW

In the Jewish cemetery in Lodz, Poland, there is an area called Ghetto Field where the graves reach off to the horizon. Federman and I visited there in the spring of 1995, along with a group of Poles and a few fellow Americans. Most of us just sort of wandered around through the rows aimlessly. I, for one, wasn't sure of what I was doing there, what I ought to be thinking or feeling. I was moving through an enormous space with no point of focus, and, though I knew how and why most of these people had died, being there among them brought me no closer to an understanding or comprehension of the event which had cost them their precious and unrecoverable lives.

Then Ray—the only Jew among our living group—knelt down and put a small stone on one of the graves. I'm not sure how many of the others saw him do this, but I did. My friend of fifteen years, orphan and survivor, a man I cannot imagine never having known, had put a stone on a grave, and some absence I could not and cannot now name coalesced around that stone.

LODZ

Federman and I were invited to attend a conference entitled “Jerzy Kosinski: Man and Work at the Crossroads of Culture” to be held in Kosinski's hometown in Poland at the University of Lodz. At first, Ray wasn't sure that he wanted to go. Then, for awhile, it looked as if health problems might prevent his attending. Fortunately, in the end, everything worked out, and we made plans to connect up at Kennedy Airport and fly over together.

Federman's novels are best-sellers in Poland, so Lot Airlines—a Polish company and co-sponsor of the conference—sent him a free ticket to encourage him to attend. Ray arrived at JFK ahead of me and went over to the Lot check-in counter. The lovely young woman working there was from Lodz, and Ray struck up a conversation with her about the city, the conference, and Kosinski. Soon he was explaining to her that Lot had sent him a ticket for the event but that, through some unfortunate mix-up at the home office in Warsaw, they had only provided economy class accommodations, even though they had promised him business class.

This, of course, wasn't true. Lot had promised nothing of the sort. Ray was drawing the young woman from Lodz into another of his fictional worlds. She made a few phone calls and told him that, yes, everything had been corrected and he was now going to Warsaw in one of those big, comfortable, over-stuffed business class seats which come fully equipped with fancy meals and the best Polish vodka. Was everything to his satisfaction? Why, yes, of course. And then she asked him one more question: “Are you traveling with anyone?”

At that instant, I walked around the corner, and Federman said: “I'm traveling with him.”

And that's how a new Federman fiction, improvised on the spot, got the two of us a very upscale trip to Poland.

MOINOUS

This is one of those crazy characters who keeps cropping up in Federman's writing. The name is, of course, more Federmanian wordplay—"me/we." But wordplay is supposed to be funny, right? Moinous is kind of ominous.

NAMREDEF

.mih fo dias eb thgim revetahw, esrever ot, epacse ot smees syawla ohw
retirw eht fo daetsni/fo/rof seman, srettel fo snoitarugifnoc, sdrow era
yeht, rehtaR .sretcarahc era yhcnerF ro, naM dlO eht, suonioM naht
erom yna, retcarahc a yllaer ton si federmaN, esruoc fO .tbuod on,
dnah tfel sih htiw gnitirw—rohtua eht fo egami rorrim eht "ew/em"
ni "ew" eht fo tneleme na sa *noitarbiV dlofowT ehT* ni ylno sraepa
federmaN, krow s'namredeF ni retcarahc gnirruceR a si suonioM hguohT

PARKER, CHARLIE

Alto saxophonist Charlie Parker is arguably the greatest jazz improviser who ever lived. Parker transformed American music in general and jazz in particular by the power and the intelligence of his playing. He was perhaps as much influenced by 20th century European music—Debussy, Stravinski, et al.—as he was by Duke Ellington and Count Basie, but jazz was clearly his idiom, and Parker was one of the first jazz musicians to insist on his status as an artist and on the status of jazz as an art form. Certainly, there were great artists in jazz before Parker, but, because most musicians in the idiom were black and because of a long American tradition which has it that black music exists to entertain whites, the American public has looked upon jazz primarily as entertainment, as dance music. By playing music that was too complicated to permit dancing, that had to be listened to and listened to carefully, Parker was calling on American white culture to recognize African-American artists working in an African-American art form. It was a revolutionary moment.

Charlie Parker died at the age of thirty-four. God only knows what our music would sound like today if he had lived.

Parker has long been one of Federman's primary heroes, perhaps as primary as Beckett. In *Take It Or Leave It*, Parker himself appears at a

Detroit jam session following a Jazz at the Philharmonic concert and borrows Frenchy's tenor to play a few choruses. If this story is true, then we can assume that the tenor saxophone Federman still noodles around on from time to time is the very one that Parker once played.

Despite his death at an early age, Parker left hours and hours of his music behind—some of it recorded in studios, much of it preserved by amateur fanatics in club settings using old wire or tape recorders. But, as every jazz musician and listener knows, jazz is not about preservation. Jazz is improvised music, and improvised music disappears at the very moment of creation. By its very nature, jazz is ephemeral, and in fact it is this very ephemerality that has long kept it out of the canons of High Art. Unlike symphonic music, literature, painting, or sculpture, there is little of jazz that can go into museums, libraries, and archives. The vast majority of all the jazz ever created no longer exists and never did exist except for that fleeting moment in which it both came into being and passed away.

Federman is an avowed improviser in words, weaving long, rhythmically complex paragraphs that are, in many ways, very similar to Charlie Parker's improvised alto lines. Like a jazz musician, Federman often improvises within certain themes and structures, not knowing precisely where he is going until he gets there. Of course, because writing leaves behind traces of itself and its processes, Federman also has the option of going back to what he has done and reworking it, an option jazz musicians do not have. And Federman is also an avowed rewriter.

Even so, I've suspected for a long time that Federman envies the ephemerality of jazz, its process of self-erasure. *Double or Nothing* is a text that cancels itself out. So, in its own way, is *The Twofold Vibration*. Don't get me wrong—Federman wants the books, the physical objects there on the shelf. But perhaps the perfect Federman text would be the one that, like the jazz solo, would fade away, if not in the process of writing, then in the process of reading.

PHOTOGRAPH

I've always liked the photo of Federman on the dustjacket of *The Twofold Vibration*. It shows Ray simply looking into the camera, smiling. It's an outdoor shot, and the blurry street scene behind Federman's head could be anywhere.

This first time I ever visited the Federman home, I saw that same photo hanging in a frame on the wall of the living room. As it turns out, the picture on *The Twofold Vibration* had been cropped from the original. Now, looking at the complete photograph, I could see that Federman was sitting at one of those outdoor café tables in Paris. I could also see that the person sitting opposite him—also looking into the camera but definitely not smiling—was Samuel Beckett.

QUIZ

Time for a Federman trivia test!

1. Ray's late lamented dog was named _____.
 - a. Gogo
 - b. Didi
 - c. Sam
 - d. George
2. True or False: Raymond Federman and Ronald Sukenick are really the same person.
3. _____ is Federman's all-time favorite TV game show.
 - a. "The Price Is Right"
 - b. "Wheel of Fortune"
 - c. "Bowling for Dollars"
 - d. "The Gong Show"
4. The co-author of *Twilight of the Bums* is Federman's longtime friend and correspondent _____.
5. Before coming to stay with his uncle in the United States after World War II, Federman almost immigrated to _____ to live with an aunt who had been there for many years.
 - a. Buenos Aires
 - b. Moscow
 - c. Dakar
 - d. Toronto

ROLLINS, SONNY

Sonny Rollins is one of the greatest tenor saxophonists in the history of jazz, a musician of such extraordinary power and grace that making brilliant music seems to come as easily to him as breathing. Needless to say, he is one of Federman's idols.

One evening, my wife, her sister, Ray, and I went to hear Rollins perform at the Tralfamadore Café in Buffalo. In the mid-80s, the Tralf was a wonderful jazz club and a great room, and Liz had booked us a table right in front, not six feet from the bandstand. This was going to be something.

The sidemen came out first, followed by Rollins, a man so huge he makes the tenor saxophone in his hands look like an alto. I had heard Rollins live before, but tonight something new had been added. Rollins' gigantic foot was covered by an even larger cast, and he was pushing one of those office swivel chairs on wheels.

In his surprisingly gentle voice, Rollins explained that he had broken his ankle and apologized because he would have to play sitting down. As a performer, Rollins is a wanderer—he strolls around the stage as he plays and often rocks back and forth when the music really gets going, swinging his horn the way a baby elephant swings its trunk. Tonight, however, it seemed that he was going to be confined.

He plopped down into his chair and kicked off the first tune, and the music rushed over the four of us who were sitting only a couple of steps away. As it turned out, the broken ankle didn't slow Rollins down. Planted firmly in the chair, he still managed to swivel around, rock back and forth, even stroll across the bandstand, thanks to his tiny wheels. He seemed to be having a good time and even offered us a bizarre version of "Shuffle Off to Buffalo" that surprised everyone, even the rest of the band.

Between tunes, Federman leaned toward me across our table and said: "This is an important night. Because he's sitting down, he's holding the horn differently, playing differently, thinking differently. Sitting in that chair, he's playing stuff he's never played before and will never play again. And we're hearing it. We're here!"

For Ray, it was an unrepeatable moment. But, for Ray, every moment is such a moment—unrepeatable, unique, brilliant in its intensity, wondrous. And the most wondrous thing of all is the fact that—we're here.

SENTENCE

Federman always starts a new novel on October 1st. Not every October 1st, of course, but, when there is a new novel to begin, the writing begins on October 1st. I have no idea why.

In fact, though the writing begins on October 1st, the novel really begins much earlier, and it begins with a single sentence. The sentence pops into his mind from somewhere, and then he starts trying it out on everybody he knows—his wife, his children, his colleagues, his correspondents, his friends. He calls you on the phone:

“Everman, what do you think of this sentence?”

And you say:

“Good one, Ray.”

Or:

“Maybe the conjunction should be a ‘but’ instead of an ‘and.’”

Or:

“Let me alone with your damn sentences!”

The sentences rattle around, sometimes for months, inside Federman’s skull and out. Then, on October 1st, he sits down and writes it.

WANG

Sometime in the mid-to-late 1980s, Federman was awarded a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. The very fact that the United States government would give money to Federman to encourage him to do what he does says a lot about this bizarre country.

Ray was happy to have the money, of course, but, if anything, he was even happier when he found out that the Wang Corporation was sending a Wang XKB2000 Word Processor to every NEA writing fellow. The thing arrived at his house in about half a dozen gigantic packages, and Federman managed to get it up and running.

Needless to say, the word processor was an obsolete model—the Wang Corporation sure as hell wasn’t going to give away their cutting edge models to a bunch of writers. Even so, Ray was thrilled. He quickly discovered that he could do all kinds of playful stuff with his new high-tech gizmo, stuff he never could have done with his beloved IBM Selectric and its interchangeable balls.

The word processor had made Federman's balls superfluous, but some things never change. Often, in those days, I'd run into Ray in the hallways or parking lots of the university, and he'd say: "Everman, I'm going home to play with my Wang."

XXXX

In the text of *The Voice in the Closet*, "XXXX" stands for Federman's mother, father, and two sisters.

Once Ray said to me: "When people ask me about the Holocaust, I tell them that I lost my parents. I don't even mention my sisters."

"Why not?"

"I guess I'm afraid they won't believe me. If I told them everything, it would be too much."

*Answers to QUIZ: c; False; b; George Chambers; c.