

Federman: The Workshop · Tom Patten

FEDERMAN is a French accent asking set-up questions we don't answer because we know: he waits to beat us down with his words.

"Why do you want to write?"

Ricardo: (first because he's straight across the table—you must see the table as a U; Ricardo sits outside the right-hand shaft, the symmetrical opposite to Federman's distinctly left-hand location) Well. . . .

It is not a good night to be Ricardo, I think, watching his big head work for a response. *I see things differently* (I'm prepping); *I want to be the snake of reason, but not reason, of course. Try this fruit*, I want to say.

Ricardo's answer works. LeeAnn says it's love. Federman asks if any of us write because of pain. He holds his stomach as if an intestine is oozing out. None of says yes. It sounds like a set-up.

"You've seen the Eiffel Tower?"

We haven't, except as Doug, the visiting innovative editor, observes, "on television." We can tell Doug's hot for this affair. He has nothing at stake. His answers are loud, though he's not as loud as Federman. Doug, of course, has no French accent.

Cool Dave, our *professeur* (he will suggest before the reading later that he was invented by Federman), *has* seen the Eiffel Tower. Federman asks him to put the Eiffel Tower on the board. Cool Dave draws a very inexact replica of the structure. Here is a very inexact replica of Cool Dave's Eiffel Tower:



Cool Dave labels his creation "Eiwful Toor." Apparently there is

significance to the spelling, but I don't get it except that (I'm guessing) toor is tower in French. Is Eiwful French too? Cool Dave seems uncomfortable in his role as lackey. He is trying for humor, I think.

Federman says some intriguing things about writing and the Eiffel Tower which I congratulate myself for recognizing as post-structural. We should not be writing about the Eiffel Tower or the image of the Eiffel Tower, Federman says in his French accent. They are not reality. The words with which we write are reality.

Cool Dave has drawn a strange picture of what appears to be a naked child on a line. He labels this picture "angel." It looks like this:



Cool Dave writes on the board in his own self-congratulatory way—"sur-toor." He is quite proud of both the angel and the term, but we all hesitate to ask for an explanation. We fear the set-up.

Federman tells a story about the first story ever told. He tells it well, although it is a stupid story, clichéd and contrived, about a muscular bully of a caveman who ventures into the unknown forest where he encounters a little rabbit. The bully comes back, tells about the rabbit, and his tale is poorly received. A scrawny but clever caveman doesn't venture into the forest but invents a story of a monstrous rabbit with big ears and nasty teeth, and his tale is, of course, a big hit. He is, Federman says with affectation, a storyteller.

Doug, who has nothing to lose, wants to show off, wants to engage in theory. He asks a question about fiction and storytelling.

Federman becomes a nose, a huge hulking beak on the left-hand shaft of the table. Federman snorts that Doug is not a member of the class, that Doug is an observer. Federman doesn't want to engage in theory. He has come to chisel at these students' minds with words. These students are us. Doug has introduced an intimacy into the workshop by becoming the one

excluded. (Later Doug will try to tell us in a quiet voice about his innovative journal and no one will listen.)

Federman turns to the manuscripts. He starts with Ricardo. It is not a good night to be Ricardo. Federman pounces on the title, the changes in typescript, the use of the word “fucking,” the references to Norton and Ali, the Bible LeRoy carries, the Rolls Royce. . . .

Ricardo dances in his chair like one of his characters dodging raindrops the size of cough drops or hurled hot-water cornbread.

“I do not pick on you personally,” Federman says. “I use your story to raise questions, yes?” Set-ups for beatings.

The first sentence of Ricardo’s story keeps tugging at Federman. It’s not the “usta’,” which Federman concedes to Ricardo’s feel for dialect. Federman asks Ricardo to read the sentence.

Ricardo: “I usta’ sit and wonder where I’d be,” Rachel said, “but then the day come and gon’ and I finally started saying ‘fuck them’ if they don’t give a damn about me and my kind.” Should I keep going?

“Yes, a little more,” Federman says, but I can tell he’s chewing on that first sentence. Behind his big nose his face contorts as he tastes the words again and again. Ricardo reads on into the void of the U.

Federman cuts him off between the vehicle and tenor of an intriguing simile. “What are the conventions of writing?”

Beginning, middle, end, I think.

LeeAnn says something that elicits displeasure. The nose swells.

Ricardo: Like the weight of the sentence coming at the end?

Federman accepts Ricardo’s offer, but he’s after something else. He raises both hands (trying to become a whole body, I think), makes little rabbit ears in the air. “What are these?”

We know, but we make the question rhetorical.

“What are they for?” Federman does become a whole body, rises from the table, goes to the board. He peppers the board with quotation marks. “What are they for?” Like all French accents, there is an arrogance and assurance that keeps warning us, Don’t answer.

LeeAnn breaks first. “Someone’s speaking.”

Federman launches into an attack on LeeAnn who has become the embodiment of quotation marks. We all lean away from her (she is sitting on the curve of the U) and duck when Federman’s words ricochet in our direction. “And these baby quotation marks,” the French accent says,

dragging Ricardo out of his chair, through the twists and lines of the ‘fuck them’ and out into the void in the middle of the room. It is indeed a bad night to be Ricardo.

Ricardo: I see, yes, I see what you mean.

Federman recedes, allows his nose to re-emerge. “And these little lines,” the nose says. The nose draws little lines—dashes—on the board:



“You still use these little lines?” His question is aimed at Cool Dave, who, like Federman, wears a coat and tie tonight (though Federman shed his coat in becoming a full body). Cool Dave grins sheepishly, avoids our eyes. He brushes Federman’s words off his shoulder (but picks them up and saves them in a pile on the desk up front).

Federman does not tell us that conventions in writing are the things we all do because we all do them. Federman tells us not to do these things (which he did not tell us) unless there is a reason to do them. Federman challenges punctuation, staring us all down as if I were a comma and LeeAnn a period and poor Ricardo, worst of all, a mutant semicolon squirming in his chair. Federman shows us his story about boxes, and on the page the text is box-shaped. It looks like this:

text text text

text text text

text text text

And all the punctuation, Federman says (we can’t see from our seats behind the table), is made of little boxes. He draws a box on the board:

• •
• •

We all make small notes about parentheses and paragraphing, then Federman goes back to his place on the distinctly left-hand shaft of the U to work again with the manuscripts. A cigarette smoke haze of French accent hangs over the room, little tongues wisping down here and there to touch different students on the shoulder.

The rest of the session is standard stuff, the kinds of questions Cool Dave might have asked, or any other instructor, or even an editor like Doug (who remains encysted on his corner of the table back by the bookshelves where we all sense he belongs). Plot and character and description and cliché and the spelling of words like omelette. Even Federman's nose seems largely deflated.

But Federman has opened a wound I can't close, and the questions drip onto the table in front of me. A little red pool forms and works toward the edge. I catch the spill on a sheet of paper. The stains coagulate into the pressing questions.

Federman disposes of one more story, asks Andy to concur that it is a pretty good story. Andy, who thinks it is a good night to be Andy, concurs.

I interrupt.

I can't get over this fence of punctuation, I say. It had been Andy who had suggested punctuation was a fence, and I think I'm fairly clever for resurrecting his comparison.

Federman's nose twitches.

I continue.

If we write stories that abandon the conventions of writing, then we're forcing the reader to ask why. We're forcing the reader out of the story, right? In essence, we're saying that the story isn't as important as how the story is told, right?

I wave my hand in front of me to clear away some of the smoke. The nose pulses. "Go on," it says in a French accent. I glance at Cool Dave who looks at his watch wishing it were time to leave for the reading.

I become a full body, go to the board (I think better in writing).

Okay, here's the writer. I write the writer on the board. Here's the story. I write the story on the board. It looks like this:

writer — story

Here's the reader. I hold up the space in my hand that represents the reader. Where do you want the reader, I ask Federman. Not in the story, not if you keep making him ask questions that pull him out of the story, right? You really want him with the writer. I'm moving the reader around to show him in and out of the story. All of these questions about testing conventions, they're out-of-the-story questions, don't you see? I've turned to include Ricardo and LeeAnn and even Andy who is hoping I won't make it a bad night to be Andy. But these other questions about plot and characters and description and cliché, they're in-the-story questions, right?

I go to Federman, look over his nose.

It seems to me the kind of writing you're looking for cannot be analyzed. The kind of writing you're asking for is its own reality, apart from the reader and even apart from the writer. This kind of writing just is. We can't ask questions about it, we can't critique it, I say, and notice that critique is a word of French origin. We accept it or reject it, but that's it, right?

Federman stands. He is bigger than I am, and older, and of course he has that enormous nose.

"This boy," Federman says, inhaling through both big nostrils, "he sees that it is time to end the workshop. It is time for the reading." Federman puts on his sportscoat. He smiles. "I will read you my story about Frenchy, eh?"

We all go with him out the door. I watch Federman move down the hall, Cool Dave following after him, picking up pieces of French accent as they fall and break on the tiles of the floor. Ricardo and LeeAnn and Andy and the others chase after them. I follow and catch up to them, then let myself, still holding the reader with a piece of chalk in my hand, disappear in the white space down the stairs