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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CULTURE

PIOTR SADZIK*
University of Warsaw

SHHH ^{ITTY}/_{OAH}: Raymond Federman's Autobiographical Strategies

Abstract

The article is an analysis of the posthumously published *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* by Raymond Federman. In the book, Federman revolves around the primary scene of his writing, when his mother pushed him into the closet and, whispering “Shhh,” hid him from the Gestapo. I examine how the author, while undermining the supposedly autobiographical narrative of his survival, simultaneously disarms the discourse of the sublime that has weighed on many reflections on Shoah. For this reason, I analyze the intertwining of scatology and the blunt representation of sexuality present in Federman’s writing.

Keywords

Raymond Federman, Shoah, testimony, postmodernism

The reflection on the possibility of literature “after Auschwitz from the very beginning revolved around the question of whether the experience of the Holocaust is at all effable. Over time, an interpretation that gave the Shoah the status of an Event (with a capital E), that is, a negative Absolute, became particularly important. According to this strategy, the only adequate way of witnessing the Holocaust was silence (Blanchot, Jabès, Lyotard). It was against such a model of writing that Raymond Federman spoke out with his works. The writer

* Contact with the Author: p.sadzik@uw.edu.pl; ORCID: 0000-0002-7897-7992.



exposes the problem of the impossibility of accessing past events (including the story of the death of his loved ones); at the same time, however, he attempts in various ways to violate the sublimity of silence. He does so, moreover, through numerous transgressions of the post-Holocaust discourse of appropriateness. Within its framework it was decided which way of depicting the Holocaust could be considered suitable. Federman in turn disarms the sublime logic of appropriateness through numerous gestures of profanation. Profanation understood, however, not only as blasphemy, but in its root sense, as the attempt to restore the objects which are too elevated in their sacrality and therefore inaccessible to the human sphere.¹

Federman, this classic and one of the founders of the theoretical underpinnings of the prose of American postmodernism was born in France, where as a child he miraculously survived the Holocaust.² However, his entire family, including his parents and both sisters, perished at the hands of the Nazis. The Holocaust is the central event of Federman's existence, which annihilates his past and everything associated with it – family, identity, country and language. Although Shoah becomes for Federman a kind of demonic analogue of Yahweh, whose name in Jewish tradition is not permitted to be said as the all-powerful and the ineffable, and while he “refusing to name it explicitly, it is there everywhere, allusively.”³ All of Federman's books revolve in various ways around this indelible hole that those closest to him left behind in his biography, a hole that is also a hole in language – the most recognizable sign of the Holocaust and its explicit evocation in his books would be the sequence of four Xs, where each character is the designation of one of the family members killed.⁴ This notation (XXXX) makes visible the absence of loved ones, makes it a kind of seam left behind by those whose lives were erased by history. Thus, Federman gives voice to the silence of those whose voice had been snuffed out forever. Characteristically, it is a typographic, and therefore non-letter notation, as if signaling a traumatic moment of language jamming.⁵

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. J. Fort (Princeton University Press, 2007).

² Jerzy Kutnik, *The Novel as Performance: The Fiction of Ronald Sukenick and Raymond Federman* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1986); Thomas Hartl, *Raymond Federman's Real Fictitious Discourses: Formulating Yet Another Paradox* (Mellen Press, 1995); Susan Rubin Suleiman, “When postmodern play meets survivor testimony,” in *Federman's Fictions. Innovation, Theory, and the Holocaust*, ed. Jeffrey R. Di Leo (State University of New York Press, 2011); Marta Tomczok, “Postmodernistyczne wymazywanie Zagłady (Raymond Federman, Georges Perec, Anatol Ulman),” *Poznańskie Studia Slawistyczne* 12 (2017): 299–315.

³ *Jewish Writers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sorrel Kerbel (Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 278.

⁴ For more on the importance of Xs in Federman's writing, see *Federman A to X-X-X-X: A Recyclopedic Narrative*, ed. Thomas Hartl, Larry McCaffery, Doug Rice (San Diego State University, 1998).

⁵ Federman's strategy reminds us of the writing gestures of Georges Perec who, in *La Disparition*, signaled the death of loved ones in the Holocaust by erasing the letter e, the most common letter in the French language.

Against the background of Federman's corpus of texts in which this notation has become a recurring leitmotif, one book, however, differentiates: the last.

At first glance, *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood*, published posthumously (2010), may confuse readers familiar with Federman's work. Here, a classic author of American postmodernism, who owed his status to his formally sophisticated experiments with typography, presents us with a book that is all too blatantly traditional and old-fashioned. This results in the complete marginalization of the text in studies devoted to Federman. In accordance with the instructive subtitle, we get a supposedly autobiographical story in which the work of memory allows the past to be salvaged by extracting childhood memories. Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Spreading the illusion of good-naturedness and wanting to convince us that he will tell the story of things "as they happened," finally without any obscuring formal experimentation, Federman nevertheless takes us for a ride, with an intricately woven unreliability of the message and a metatextual questioning of its status. What is shattered here is the very basis of the classical autobiographical construction, that is, the self-aware and self-transparent subject who, with knowledge of his fate, can give a coherent account of it.⁶ Federman himself realized this when, in a letter to Ronald Sukenick, he wondered how to write a book about his own life, when that life is full of "gaps, lies, deceptions, fantasies and falsifications." As a masterpiece of *marrano* autobiography or rather autofiction, *Shhh* performs a set of gestures characteristic of the genre.⁷ It presents an internally split self, a "split within itself."⁸ It is to this, I think, that the meta-narrative voice countering Federman's memoiristic argument serves, a kind of inner "second self."⁹ This voice, graphically delineated (in italics), interrupts the autobiographical argument, asks Federman questions, enters into a dialogue with him, mocks him, and finally ultimately undermines credibility of his words.

⁶ In *The Two-Fold Vibration* Federman even writes that if readers consider the story presented there as a camouflaged autobiographical tale, they will come to a "misleading and false" conclusion. Raymond Federman, *The Two-Fold Vibration* (Harvester Press, 1982), 172.

⁷ Piotr Sadzik, *Regiony pojedynczych herezji. Marańskie wyjścia w prozie polskiej XX wieku* (Austeria, 2022).

⁸ Yirmiyahu Yovel, *The Other Within: The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity* (Princeton University Press, 2009). *Split Within Itself* is the title of the novel by one of the great *marranos* of Polish literature, Teodor Parnicki, but this figure cannot be limited to a single case. The figure of the "self," shattered into two parts, is the greatest hallmark of authors who express their Jewishness through non-Jewish cultural forms, simultaneously belonging and not belonging to each side of this opposition.

⁹ "Shhh, despite its already assumed autobiographical character, has little in common with a traditional testimony, which can be exemplified by the various interventions of a second voice that draws, in an ironic way, the attention of the Federman narrator." Sabrina Costa Braga, "Fiction, Postmemory and Transgenerational Trauma: Literary Possibilities through the Shoah Paradigm," *Práticas da História* 17 (2023): 273, <https://doi.org/10.48487/pdh.2023.n17.28468>.

In light of this, it would be quite legitimate to raise questions about the reliability of the accounts contained in *Shhh*, which, although given in the form of the author's authenticated personal recollection, may well be also the result of projection and speculation. More important, however, than facing up to this inconclusive question, is what role they play in the string of Federman's plot. In other words, it is not important whether *Shhh* presents us with a testimony about what really happened to a boy who miraculously escaped the Holocaust, it is more important to answer the question of how the components of the allegedly autobiographical story of childhood and subsequent salvation function in the narrative order and what kind of role the author assigns to them. *Shhh* thus promises a collection of memoirs, but in fact turns into a brilliantly constructed, literary superconscious parody of autobiographical testimony, which also becomes a desperate protest against the inaccessibility of past events to language. This becomes all the more paradoxical as the injunction to remain silent is already contained in the title – the "Shhh," refers to it, after all.

Federman promises an autobiographical story in which childhood memories revolve around the primary scene of this writing, a scene around which, in different ways, this work has always revolved, a scene that took place in a Parisian suburb at 4 Rue Louis Rolland in the author's family home at 5.30 am on July 16, 1942. It was then that the French police, acting on orders from the Gestapo, came to arrest the Jewish Federman family. It was then, too, as the family heard Nazi boots on the stairs, Raymond's mother dragged her sleepy son out of bed and, thrusting clothes into his hands, pushed him into the closet, whispering "Shhh," to him. As Raymond stood naked in the darkness, it was only through what he heard that he oriented himself to further developments of events. When the policemen reading out the names of those to be arrested said "Raymond Federman," his mother replied quickly that was in the countryside on vacation: "The policemen didn't say anything. Then I heard them tell my parents to take some warm clothes because they didn't know where they were going to be taken and that the journey could be long, and that it could be cold there."¹⁰ All the members of the Federman family arrested that day would die in Auschwitz. "Shhh," is thus the last word spoken to Raymond by his mother, the last umbilical cord linking him to his childhood, and the order to remain silent as a way to be saved: "With that *shhh* my mother was saying to me: If you keep quiet. If you say nothing. If you remain silent. You will survive." [17] A "Shhh," which "has been resonating ever since," in his head. [17] Terrified and stunned, Raymond remained in the darkness of the closet all day and night, until the next morning. It was only then that he dared come out. It is at this point that the period of

¹⁰ Raymond Federman, *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* (Dzanc Books, 2010), 28. All other quotes from the book I give in the main text, in square brackets. All text emphases are mine.

the boy's permanently exposed wandering begins. Raymond will live to see the liberation of France and then, in 1947, by now an orphan, set off for lifelong emigration to the United States. The act of his mother, who shoved him into the closet is thus the great cut off point of Federman's biography, the saving yet traumatizing kernel around which all of this work will revolve and from which it will grow.

The injunction of silence issued by his mother, however, is based on an obvious paradox. Little Raymond is supposed to be silent "now," sitting in the closet, so as not to give himself away to the police and be sent to death, but it is thanks to this silence that he is able to talk about the situation in the future. As he suspects, this course of events was also assumed by his mother, who supposedly saw him as a future writer. "Shhh," is not only the closure of childhood, it is the beginning of writing: "That *shhh* was not my mother's last word. It was the first word of the book my mother knew I would write some day." [23]

But what can Raymond write about? Despite the promise already expressed in the subtitle, that of a story about childhood ("But my story, I can tell it. The story of the thirteen years I spent with my parents and my sisters. My childhood," [44]), he is not a subject who has a comprehensive narrative of his past, affirming through it his own identity integrity. He emphasizes that when he heard his mother's "Shhh," "the thirteen first years of my life vanished into the darkness of that third floor closet." [16]

Even worse is the case of access to what followed: "That's when the story of my parents and sisters stopped. That's all I know of their story. I know nothing of what happened to them after." [35] The thought of writing down a recollective account of childhood is driven by a lack of access to knowledge about the future fate of his loved ones, where only their death is certain. Instead of a complete story at the disposal of an integrated subject, there is a great "black hole," which cannot be written down but which simultaneously sets in motion the work of fantasy and the multiplication of words, providing a screen onto which any projection can be projected. The "black hole," representing Federman's lack of knowledge, constitutes the key theme of the book, which is the over-represented fecality of the author's memories.

Of course, such a theme should not be surprising to readers of the author of the first American monograph of Beckett's works and one of the greatest experts on Beckett,¹¹ whom

¹¹ See Federman's works devoted to Beckett: *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction* (University of California Press, 1965) – one of the earliest monographs in English on Beckett; (with John Fletcher) *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics: An Essay in Bibliography* (University of California Press, 1970) – the most important early bibliographical study of Beckett; *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Raymond Federman, Lawrence Graver (Routledge, 1979); *Samuel Beckett*, eds. Raymond Federman and Tom Bishop (Fayard, 1997). Federman's writing is full of echoes of Beckett and references to his work; for example, Beckett is the most important voice in *Voice in the Closet* but also when it comes to style, Federman shares characteristics with the writing of its predecessor: "A cryptic, elliptical, use of language; neologism; repetition; the mixing

Federman considered the patron of his own literary project and who appears in *Shhh* as the author of one of the mottoes that begin the books,¹² and last but not least, Beckett, in whom scatology plays a huge role (quite literally, the word becomes shit in his texts, “wordshit,” as he himself put it¹³). Yet Federman adds new layers of meaning to this figure.

The closet – the basic prop of Federman’s universe – is not just a location that served his mother as a hiding place to save her son, as Federman argued in *Shhh* and in other texts, even highlighting it in the title *The Voice in the Closet* (*Shhh* would be a perverse repetition and mockery of this much more famous book). Especially in the face of the excrement recurring in “memories” and the defecation that happens to the terrified Raymond in the closet, it is difficult to lose sight of another meaning. Not the one that refers to the piece of furniture, but which refers to the place where excrement is excreted, the toilet. Especially if we consider the fact that the closet becomes for Raymond a place of salvation and at the same time defecation. And when, years later, the now-elderly writer decides to recount his childhood in the mode of an autobiographical memoir, he finds that he can only do so by phantasmagorically returning to the closet. And this time, too, there will be a defecation. The story “blocked in me” [47] can only be told from the place of “that black hole,” [49] which the closet has become. However, keeping in mind the fecal figures of Federman’s story, these fragments can be read simultaneously in a second way, complementary to the first. Here the past is left blocked in Federman, like constipation, and in order to release it, one has to enter the closet as toilet, where it will only be possible to expel the story like stomach contents

of registers; density of reference and allusion; wordplay; an ambiguous and uncertain narrative voice; and prose that creates its own syntactic units and sequences without punctuation.” Obviously, another important feature of Federman’s prose is its bilingualism which he explicitly links with that of Beckett. For more, see Raymond Federman, *The Sam Book*, trans. Sharon Blackie (Two Ravens Press, 2008), 5.

¹² This is a quote from Beckett’s short story *L’Expulsé* (in English *The Expelled*), a text of particular significance to Federman, who titled the last chapter of *Journey to Chaos* ‘The Expulsion’: “I don’t know why I told this story. I could just as well have told another. Perhaps some other time I’ll be able to tell another. Living souls, you will see how alike they are.” [14] As Alsop notes, in the English version of *Voice in the Closet* “the ‘voice’ wants to be ‘extricated from inside.’ But the French, here, has ‘expulsé du dedans,’ another of the many allusions to Beckett. [...] Federman’s family has been brutally expelled (from their home to their death, literally); but his experience, too, is one of expulsion, from a truth that cannot be extricated by fiction. He has been born again many times into “symbolic” unreality. The expulsion, in Federman’s case, is a matter of both place and language.” Derek Alsop, “Federman’s Beckett: Two Voices in the Closet,” *Modernism/modernity* 20, no. 1 (2013): 18–19. In *Voice in the Closet* and *Shhh* we find a poem *Tongue* in which Federman describes himself as “ex-pelled/ from mother tongue/ ex-iled/ in foreign/ tongue.” Federman used similar terms to describe Beckett: “For more than twenty years, Beckett . . . lived and worked exiled from his native land and tongue.” Federman, *Journey to Chaos*, 204.

¹³ Nathalie Camerlynck, *Raymond Federman and Samuel Beckett: Voices in the Closet* (Anthem Press, 2021).

from an anal hole.¹⁴ And while Federman wants to gain access to knowledge of the past of loved ones, as the recurring “nothing” reminds us, he knows as much as nothing about it or, put it differently, he doesn’t know shit about it.

The accumulation of fecal topics suggests an important context for reading the title phrase. I would claim that it is worth treating “Shhh” not only as an onomatopoeic form of the injunction of silence, but also as an unstable polymorphic figure that, in the course of repeated encoding, enters potentially different contexts of meaning, while also being a formant of words crucial to Federman’s experience as a Holocaust survivor. This process occurs here both on a semantic level and the visual level of materiality of the graphic. “Shhh” is, after all, a cluster of consonants and a potential component of the utterance of words such as “shit,” “she” (it is his mother to whom the book is dedicated) and finally, last but not least, “Sh-oah.” The multiplication of the ‘h’ creates a string that replaces other potentially addable letters here, and at the same time produces the effect of a word broken in half. “Shhh” is a figure of the simultaneous swelling of the word and its splitting. In addition to this, the master of typography, in whose compositions the spatial arrangement of the characters on the page played an important role, and thus an artist overly sensitive to the issue of the materiality of language and the ambiguity of words, could not fail to pay attention to the visual aspect of “shhh.” The number of letters in “shhh” corresponds to the number of members of Federman’s family who will perish in the Holocaust and whom he sees one last time just before his mother throws him into the closet, uttering “Shhh.” In this sense, this figure becomes the spelling equivalent of a sequence of four Xs, a kind of seam of the text with which the writer has hitherto marked the wound and absence left behind by loved ones, and which also appears once in *Shhh*: “The story of my parents and sisters stopped when they went down the staircase. From that moment on they became absences. They were erased from history: X-X-X-X.” [S, 43].

The disturbance of the stability of language by its once-activated polysemy, however, raises legitimate questions about the whole status of this autobiographical quasi-confession. The appropriateness of language to events is undermined here at the point absolutely crucial for the whole story, that is, in the very formula by means of which Federman’s mother orders him to stay quiet, and whose importance is, after all, emphasized by its inclusion in the title. To put it another way, the point is that, despite the appearance of authenticity in the autobiographical confession, his mother did not say “Shhh,” at all. The status of this phrase is

¹⁴ The story of the death of loved ones in the Holocaust, compared to the feces that must be expelled from one’s body in order to grow new life, brings to mind Leo Lipski’s scatological profanities from his novel *Little Peter* and *The Restless*. Here also, constipation as a blockage of the excretion process serves as a metaphor for the blocked story of a traumatic event that annihilated others.

called into question in the very first pages: “It took many years for me to understand what my mother meant with her *shhh*. I can still hear that word in my ear. But I always hear it in French: *chut*. To write *shhh* falsifies what my mother meant. But since I am writing this version of my childhood in English, I have to practice hearing *shhh*.” [16–17] Not only did Federman remain bilingual for the rest of his life, he even produced some of his works in two language codes split into two parallel columns (*La voix dans le cabinet de débarras/The Voice in the Closet*).¹⁵ Although in *Shhh* he emphasizes his mother’s phrase in the title, he does so in the language of his own post-war rooting, that is, English, a language which his mother did not speak. The authenticity that we may reflexively believe when we read a story with the subtitle “Story of a Childhood” turns out to be an illusion if the author translates the most key phrase of his entire story.

To this, let us add another remark. Not only was Federman bilingual, but his vigilance also allowed him to see the meanings of words arising from each other.¹⁶ He could see such a multilingual play on words in his own name. The German “Feder” means “quill,” so “Federmann” means “man of the quill.” Hence one of the many pseudonyms he used: “Featherman” – a kind of “Quillman” or “Homme de Plume,” as he put it in his mother tongue. This circumstance leads us to note that the French “chut” allegedly uttered by his mother is almost a homophone of the word for loo – “chiottes.” This “sewageness,” unsurprising in a Beckett commentator and monographer, an author also steeped in scatology, remains in *Shhh* in feedback with the other parallel strand.

His mother’s injunction of silence that saves him from being a victim of the Holocaust consistently intersects with another injunction of silence, the sexual taboo. By intersecting these two threads, Federman seems to enter into a dialogue with the legacy of psychoanalysis, highly familiar to him as an academic scholar of literature. The story of little Raymond overlaps with one of Freud’s most famous cases, the so-called “case of little Hans,” to whom the “father of psychoanalysis” devoted his study when researching childhood neuroses. Here,

¹⁵ “‘Closet’ is more interesting in French: the ‘cabinet de débarras,’ or a ‘small lumber room’ – ‘débarras’ also means ‘riddance’; ‘débarrasser’ means ‘to clear,’ ‘to relieve’; and ‘se débarrasser’ ‘to get rid of’ or to ‘extricate oneself from.’” Also, “Federman’s Beckett: Two Voices in the Closet,” 18.

¹⁶ That is another common denominator with Beckett: “When reading Beckett it is absolutely irrelevant to ask which text was written first. His twin-texts – whether French/English or English/French – are not to be read as translations or as substitutes for one another. They are always complementary to one another. In many ways, I consider my own work, my bilingual work to be somewhat the same. Whether written in English or in French first, the two texts complement and complete one another.” Raymond Federman, “A Voice within a Voice: Federman Translating/ Translating Federman,” <http://www.federman.com/rfsr2.htm>; “Beckett taught me that to rewrite yourself into one of the languages [...] is to clarify what you wrote in the other language. [...] The two languages *se complètent*, and complement each other. They become inseparable in their interplay.” Federman, *The Sam Book*, 5.

infantile sexuality turns out to be the site of a surprising interweaving of the genital and fecal spheres. In creating a theory of infantile sexuality, Freud demonstrates the fluidity of the transition between these two zones. Here, the excretory complex shows connections with the interest in the genitals,¹⁷ and genital pleasure overlaps with the pleasure of excretion.¹⁸ On top of this, the activity of dressing and undressing – central to the situation of sexual arousal – belongs for the child to the context associated with pooping.¹⁹ This interlacing finds its source in the initial castration threat that comes from the mother's side. When Hans's mother learns of her son's interest in his penis, she threatens to cut it off; the child responds that he will then urinate with his "bottom."²⁰ Raymond's mother, on the other hand, threatens her son with the removal of his penis the moment he discovers masturbation. Freud argues, however, that castration anxiety has roots earlier than this kind of verbalized threat: "It has been urged that every time his mother's breast is withdrawn from a baby he is bound to feel it as castration (that is to say, as the loss of what he regards as an important part of his own body)."²¹ However, we can go back even further: "The regular defecation, indeed the very act of birth, cannot be valued by the infant other than as a separation from the mother with whom it has hitherto been one." In this way, the act of birth, perceived by the child as a form of being excreted (hence Hans's belief that children are born as pieces of poop), sets in motion a whole series of similar events, in which this time it is the child who excretes during defecation. It is excretion as a reproduction (with role reversal) of the act of birth that must therefore, according to Freud, be regarded as the "preimage of all castration."²²

If we transpose these considerations into Federman's universe, they make us put the key prop of Raymond's survival in a new light: the closet. His mother guarantees his salvation only by separating him from herself; in this sense, the scene of her pushing him into the closet replicates the act of birth. At the same time, however, it is also its inversion: here, little Raymond lands back in the darkness from which he emerged at birth, while the closet becomes the distorted figure of his mother's belly. Emerging from it into the world, which will already be a world without a mother, becomes a form of excretion that, as it were, only now

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy," in *Two Case Histories ('Little Hans' and The 'Rat Man')*, transl. J. Strachey (The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955), 23.

¹⁸ Freud, "Analysis," 97.

¹⁹ Freud, 56.

²⁰ Freud, 8.

²¹ Freud, 8.

²² "The castration complex is the deepest unconscious root of anti-Semitism; for even in the nursery little boys hear that a Jew has something cut off his penis – a piece of his penis, they think – and this gives them a right to despise Jews." Freud, "Analysis," 36.

closes the process of separation initiated at the birth. “The expulsion is described as being metaphorically both a birth and a death.”²³ The closet, which becomes the place where the narrator buried his past, also turns out to be a place of re-birth, a kind of “tomb-womb.” [186]

And let us also recall that a penis also becomes involved in the scene of defecation in the closet. Raymond, “holding his penis with two fingers not to wet himself, ... defecated” on the newspaper. The shit “becomes the fertilizer” of Federman’s re-birth.²⁴ Raymond says he defecates out of fear of being exposed by the Nazis; at the same time, excretion here is a form of triumphant survival – the child defecates on the “photos of smiling German soldiers” posted in the newspaper. Raymond, as it were, throws shit in the faces of those who wanted him dead. On top of all this, there is another circumstance that forms a hinge between the scatological thread and the issue of the discovery of sexuality. For the elements of the injunction of silence associated with the child’s discovery of sexuality consistently form complex entanglements with the maternal injunction of silence with which she saves her son from the Holocaust. The scene in the closet is intricately woven with threads that we later recognize in narratives about the discovery of childhood sexuality, specifically the initiation into the genital sphere. This constant intersection of the two dimensions thus results in an interweaving in which the fecal and genital spheres intersect: the fear-driven defecation perpetrated by little Raymond in the closet is finely woven with the microelements of the performances in which the child’s penis will play an overarching role. In a dizzyingly profane gesture, it is in this way that Federman also undermines and abrogates the ineffability of the Holocaust experience. In the face of the impossibility of testifying to the fate of those closest to him, he formulates, as it were, the competing figure of speech-blocking. In doing so, however, Federman weakens the absoluteness of the former, while at the same time allowing himself to cunningly intrude into it, to give himself the possibility of its circular utterance. For every time sexual initiation is mentioned, it is hedged in with the injunction of silence, which nevertheless points to the events behind it. Sexuality here contains a traumatogenic factor, in which it finds a common point with the experience of Shoah. Federman sees each of these as a sphere of traumatogenic realness that resists the possibility of its full expression, which can only be hinted at. Each scene of genital initiation, i. e., when red-haired neighbor, Yvette, masturbates him, touching his “little thing” [210–213] or when Raymond sees his cousin, Salomon, masturbating, who then tries to force the child to have oral sex [268] or when Raymond plays doctors with his sister, future victim of the Holocaust, “playing with Jacqueline’s little thing,” [368] each of these scenes

²³ Alsop, “Federman’s Beckett,” 21.

²⁴ Kerbel, *Jewish Writers*, 279.

is written out according to a similar pattern. They are accompanied by the verbal equivalent of the maternal “Shhh” – the injunction to remain silent. The initiation into sexuality has the character of a surreptitious practice, giving access to a taboo sphere, the validity of which is restored in the final of each scene, when the injunction to remain silent is formulated and then respected. “Don’t tell anyone,” Yvette tells Raymond after she masturbates him with her own hands. Cousin Salomon “just shouted, if you tell my father, you’ll pay for it. Keep your mouth shut *petit con*. [...] I didn’t say anything to anyone.” [268–269] Respect for the injunction to remain silent thus manifests itself through repeated denials that deny an account of the event by categorically stating that nothing happened. When Raymond returns to the courtyard from his neighbor Yvette’s, his sister Sarah asks him: “What did she want to show you?” ‘Oh, nothing,’ I replied. ‘Just a photo of her when she was little.’ ‘Did she show you anything else?’ Sarah asked. ‘Nothing.’” [214] On the farm, on the other hand, a dialogue like this took place: “What were you doing there?” Maman asks when she almost discovers the children playing doctor. ‘Nothing. We were just playing a game [...]’ ‘What kind of game?’ ‘We were looking for something in the hay.’ ‘What sort of something?’ ‘A little thing Jacqueline lost,’ Raymond explains.” [366–367] “What are you holding in your hand?” asks the teacher of a class jester who is participating in a masturbation session with a colleague: Gaston blushed and said, ‘Nothing Madame, nothing.’ ‘I can see that you have something in your hand, and that you are playing with it. Bring it here immediately.’ [224]

“Nothing” is always a buzzword intended to make the sexual experience, or more precisely masturbation, unspoken. Each time “nothing” must be understood entirely literally as the “no” word about “the Thing.” The penis, moreover, is indicated by the pronoun “it” (“It was not very big at that age,” “You never touch it?,” “I hold it when I go pipi.”). As if the discovery of the sexual sphere here belongs to the reality of the thing at which language can only hint but which it cannot grasp, the penis is quite literally a “thing” (“my little thing”).²⁵

And in the context of these recurring figures of “nothing” let us not forget that Federman knows nothing about the fate of their loved ones during the war (“I know nothing of what happened to them after”). Thus, although there is a penis in the scenes of sexual initiation in the role of the “it,” they all, as Federman convinces us, temporally precede and mark the story of another “It,” of “the Thing,” around which the entire narrative of *Shhh*, “the Thing,” which is the Holocaust, revolves. The injunction to be silent about the initiation of sexual

²⁵ Moreover, there is an accumulation of multilingual tensions. After his cousin is caught masturbating by little Raymond, he threatens him: “Keep your mouth shut, *petit con*.” The French expression here conceals a form similar to that used to refer to the penis in the quasi-comment about Yvette’s neighbor: *petit con* means “little prick,” “little thing,” little “it,” which is also not insignificant in the context of the proximity of the “sh” pronoun revealed in the novel’s title.



experience, that “don’t tell anyone” repeated in various ways, again becomes quite literally an injunction to be silent about the “it” - the “shhh of it,” the “shhh-it.” ‘Shhh’ is thus a prelude to saying: “keep silent about it,” where we already lose certainty about what this “it” refers to. As if the violating of the one injunction of silence, so far completely effective, automatically entails an analogous process on the second plane subordinated to a similar command. And as if one’s own survival and the lives of those who did not survive the Holocaust could only be told here omnisciently through a collection of scenes from one’s childhood, including what constituted one of its important elements, that is, one’s awakening sexuality. The silence belonging to the sphere of the Holocaust experience (“Shhh” – “Keep quiet, because that’s the only way you’ll survive”) intersects with the silence with which the sexual-scatalogical sphere is circumscribed in the child’s experience (“just don’t tell anyone”). It is as if it is only with the input of the second register of prohibition, by juxtaposing the two taboos, by crossing them with each other, that the violating of one begins to undo the other. It is as if it is only by doubling the injunctions of silence that the taboos inscribed in each begin to be unraveled, opening the floodgates to inadequate, but finally witnessing, language. It doesn’t take any particular care to notice, either, that underlying both of them is a kind of prohibition of representation. Thanks to the accumulation of silences, thanks to the density and multiplication of taboos, the injunction of silence is paradoxically and subtly abolished. For, after all, *Shhh* is the proof that Federman violates the injunction of silence. He tells the story of what was supposed to remain a secret forever, but in telling it, he tries to intrude into the world of people whose fate he in turn can say nothing about, except that they died. And in this way, by a circuitous route, he makes something of their past fates available to us.

An incredible sequence of incestuous exploration of sexuality immediately precedes an even more stunning finale in *Shhh*. Here is a son receiving a gift from his mother and he is ordered to keep quiet: “Here, for your birthday, but eat it now, and don’t tell your sisters.” [375] The scene of the offering of the *éclair*, which the sisters will not receive, forms a structural analogy (prefiguration?) of the scene of Raymond’s salvation from the Holocaust, when the mother decides that it is the boy, not his sisters, who should be pushed into the closet. It is also at this point in the book that the final order to remain silent rings out, one of the supposed “Shhh”s from which Federman weaves the tale of his survival (“Don’t tell your sisters”). And it is at this point, in order to further call into question the credibility of this autobiographical account, that the author allows a countering “inner voice” to speak one last time:

- Federman...
- Yes? What?
- Nothing...” [375]

“Nothing,” which has always appeared in little Raymond’s responses to questions concerning the taboo spheres, resounds here in the voice of his adult, sober “second self” as a kind of resignation in the face of Federman’s potentially mythomaniacal or rather strictly plot-driven inclinations, thus declaring to us: You were expecting a good-humored autobiographical confession, but who knows, maybe you were fooled from beginning to end? Maybe the whole story of Federman’s salvation, including the scene in the closet, is just a string of well-crafted scenes straight out of a cheap thriller script? You thought to yourself: At last, this well-known opponent of directness in literature has abandoned his disbelief, his conviction about the inevitable plagiarism of words, his typographical experiments, and finally he will simply tell us how it really was. And in the meantime, we have learned nothing, or rather, the object of this knowledge is nothing itself – pure crap! And only then there are the words that conclude the book:

“Shhh.....
Chut.” [377]

On the next page Federman includes a photograph stripped of subtitle. As it depicts a woman with three young children, two girls and one boy, it seems natural to assume that this is a photograph of the author with his mother and sisters. But is it really them? *Shhh* turns out to be a thunderous proclamation of the triumph of life – it was only thanks to the silence from the past that one could survive to now violates all orders of silence and taboos, exploding with an excess of vitality against those who wanted little Raymond dead.²⁶ The only testimony to those who died, thus breaking the sublime silence about the Holocaust, becomes possible only because Federman listened to his mother when she (allegedly) whispered “Chut.”

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²⁶ I refer here to the notion of *sur-vivre* from Jacques Derrida’s analysis of Shelley’s *Triumph of Life*, in Jacques Derrida, *Parages* (Galilée, 1986).



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Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi analizę wydanego pośmiertnie *Shhh: The Story of a Childhood* Raymonda Federmana. Federman krąży w książce dookoła sceny pierwotnej swojego pisania, kiedy to matka wepchnęła go do szafy i szepcząc „szzzz,” ukryła go przed Gestapo. Przyglądam się temu, w jaki sposób autor, podważając rzekomo autobiograficzną narrację o ocaleniu, rozbraja zarazem dyskurs wzniosłości, który zaważył nad wieloma dyskusjami o Zagładzie. Z tego powodu analizuję obecne w pisarstwie Federmana sploty skatologii i dosadnego przedstawiania seksualności.

Słowa kluczowe

Federman, Zagłada, świadectwo, postmodernizm

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