Ryerson University
Digital Commons @ Ryerson

Philosophy Publications and Research | Philosophy

3-1-2009

"Mad Laughter" in Federman's The Twofold Vibration

Menachem Feuer
Ryerson University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/philosophy

Part of the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation
Feuer, Menachem, ""Mad Laughter" in Federman's The Twofold Vibration" (2009). *Philosophy Publications and Research.* Paper 16.
http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/philosophy/16

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Digital Commons @ Ryerson. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ryerson. For more information, please contact bcameron@ryerson.ca.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture (ISSN 1481-4374), the peer-reviewed quarterly of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, is published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University online in full text and in open access. The journal publishes scholarship following tenets of the disciplines of comparative literature and cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies" in a global, international, and intercultural context and with a plurality of methods and approaches: papers for publication are invited to <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/submit.html>; for the aims and scope of the journal consult <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebaims>; for the journal's style guide consult <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/clcwebstyleguide>. In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series* <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/library>. Work published in the journal is indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature, in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, in Humanities International Complete, and in the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America. *CLCWeb* is member of The Council of Editors of Learned Journals <http://www.celj.org> and it is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals. *CLCWeb* is mirrored on the website of the British Comparative Literature Association <http://www.bcla.org/clcweb/>, it is preserved at research libraries in the Stanford University lockss system <http://www.lockss.org/lockss/>, and it is archived in the *Electronic Collection* of *Library and Archives Canada* <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/electroniccollection/>. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* is affiliated with the Purdue University Press hard-copy monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies and selected papers of the journal are published in thematic annuals in the series <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu/comparativeculturalstudies.html>.
Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 11 Issue 1 (March 2009) Article 5
Menachem Feuer, "'Mad Laughter' in Federman's *The Twofold Vibration*"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/5>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.1 (2009)
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/>
Thematic Issue *New Work in Holocaust Studies*
Edited by Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek

Abstract: In his article "'Mad Laughter' in Federman's *The Twofold Vibration*" Menachem Feuer discusses one of the central questions in the debate over post-Holocaust representation with regard to comedy and laughter. Several authors and filmmakers including Mel Brooks, Lina Wertmüller, Roberto Benigni, Michael Chabon, or Jonathan Safran Foer employ comedy in work. Although the books and films of these authors and filmmakers certainly test the limits of representation through the use of comedy in post-Holocaust art, the use of "mad laughter" in the work of Raymond Federman to represent the Holocaust stands out as the most important exploration of post-Holocaust comedy today. Feuer argues that Federman's text traverses the fine line between a self-referential text, which alludes only to itself and not to any extrinsic historical referent (such as the Holocaust) and a form of laughter that is intimately connected to the trauma of the Holocaust. Further, the novelty of Federman's textual forays is the simultaneous exaltation of the self-referential to the level of what Susan Sontag would call camp style and the rigorous awareness of historical trauma. Federman shows readers that "mad laughter" can preserve history and a self-referential sensibility which sees itself as textual and desires to recreate itself through (inter)textuality.

Menachem FEUER

"Mad Laughter" in Federman's *The Twofold Vibration*

Following Theodor Adorno that "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34) given the unspeakable inhumanity of the Shoah, certainly comedy and laughter would have no place in Holocaust art, in literature, film, or drama, and, at best, only tragedy seems appropriate. However, Lawrence Langer, in his *Literature and the Holocaust Imagination*, argues that neither modes are adequate and claims that in response to this failure of traditional representation post-Holocaust poets and writers such as Paul Celan, Elie Wiesel, and Jerzy Kosiński created a new genre called the "art of atrocity" (Langer 30) to represent the Holocaust aesthetically. Although Langer is correct in arguing that these authors started a new trend in literature, poetry, and drama by creating a new genre, neither their work nor his own, with its insistence that tragedy and comedy are inadequate, has kept writers and filmmakers from drawing on tragedy or comedy in their post-Holocaust works. Indeed, some of the most successful post-Holocaust (i.e., fictional texts about the Holocaust) books, films, and plays such as Mel Brooks's *The Producers* (musical 1968), Lina Wertmüller's *The Seven Beauties* (film 1975), Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (film 1997), Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (novel 2000), or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (novel 2003, film 2005) -- to list just a few -- draw heavily on comedy. But of all these works, *Life is Beautiful* was the only one to receive criticism because of its use of comedy. While a number of scholars and critics chimed in with their polemics against the use of comedy in this film, Sander L. Gilman, in his article "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah be Funny?" has provided convincing arguments in this regard. Nonetheless, he does not insist that all forms of comedy are inadequate. Using Jurek Becker's novel *Jacob the Liar* -- which was also made into a film starring Robin Williams -- Gilman argues that this novel "makes it possible to use the elicitation of laughter as a means of representing the unrepresentable, not only of the Shoah, but the randomness of life" (304). He adds that the laughter solicited by this novel "doesn't bring resolution; rather, it brings a sense of unease about the Shoah … a promise that there are no accidents, that at the end of the comedy the gods in the machine will arrive to resolve the action and rescue those in danger" (304). What Gilman implies in his argument is that laughter, when it is deeply unsettling, can go against the nature of the comic mode which lies, specifically, in the "promise that there are no accidents."

Beside Becker's *Jacob the Liar*, there are a few other post-Holocaust novels which make use of unsettling aspects of laughter in the aesthetic representation of the Holocaust. *This Way to The Gas Ladies and Gentlemen* by Tadeusz Borowski and Jakov Lind's *Soul of Wood* are quite exemplary in this regard. But in comparison to these notable works, which are preoccupied with ironic laughter, the post-Holocaust fiction of Raymond Federman is quite remarkable. It is not simply an example of an unsettling form of ironic laughter, as the above works surely are; it is also an exploration of a different form of laughter, one which traverses the fine line between irony and the humor that attends self-reflexive/referential textuality. The former type of irony, which is moral and historical in nature, is challenged by the latter form of humor, which effaces the seriousness of morality at the heart of traditional irony and satire. The laughter in Federman's novels happens between these two extremes. In his novel *The Twofold Vibration* he calls this laughter "mad laughter" and in his most recent novel, *Aunt Rachel's Fur*," sad laughter." Both forms of laughter are certainly not exclusive of each other. Nonetheless, they do address a few very important questions to postmodern post-Holocaust representation. Can a self-reflexive/referential text be said to have any relation to the Holocaust as a historical referent? Or, put another way, do texts speak to themselves or do they carry on a dialogue with history? Is what Federman calls "laughterature" a form of escape from or a relation to history (see, e.g., McCaffery 172)?

Editors Larry McCaffery, Thomas Hartl, and Doug Rice of the collected volume *Federman from A to X-X-X-X*, a "recylopedic narrative" on Federman's life and work, argue that the main model for Federman's notions of laughter is the "romantic philosopher" E.M. Cioran, who argues that laughter is an "integral part of writing and … a weapon against despair" (172). Although this influence can definitely be found in Federman's work, there is another who is certainly more ironic and less melancholic than E.M. Cioran and is more similar in temperament to Federman: Charles Baudelaire. In his essay "The Essence of Laughter," Baudelaire, in the most ironic and theatrical manner, argues that laughter is, first and foremost, "satanic": "Laughter comes from the idea of one's own superiority. A Satanic idea, if there ever was one! And what pride and delusion!" (152). But, although, for Baudelaire, laughter uses the object of its humor to elevate the self to a sense of deluded greatness, it is haunted by a contradiction: the fact that the person laughing is neither divine nor superior but a pathetic and deluded creature. Indeed, "since laughter is essentially human, it is, in fact, essentially contradictory; that is to say that it is at once a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery – the latter in relation to the absolute Being of whom man has an inkling, the former in relation to the beasts" (154). For Baudelaire, laughter happens when these two realities, of grandeur and misery, "collide": "It is from the perpetual collision of these two infinities that laughter is stuck" (154).

Baudelaire, putting forth an attitude similar to Nietzsche's about the *Übermensch*, observes that few people are able to laugh at this collision. To be sure, only a "philosopher, one who had acquired by habit a power of rapid self-division and thus of assisting as a disinterested spectator at the phenomena of his own ego," could laugh at his "own fall" (154). In contrast to the laughter of the ordinary person, the laughter of the "philosopher" is ironic and re-enacts consciously the greatest contradictions known to humanity. It is the laughter of someone who is laughing at oneself as a contradictory being who claims superiority, knowledge, and mastery, but is in fact just another *Schlemiel*. One's existence is happenstance, contrived, and random and, as Gilman would say, someone who could laugh at the randomness of existence over which he/she is not the master. But this laughter, although mad, is not without its tenderness and naiveté. Baudelaire provides a few examples of what type of literature or artwork would evoke "essential laughter." For Baudelaire, the most exemplary is E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story *Daucus Carota, the King of the Carrots*. In the story, a little girl becomes fascinated with a "regiment of English soldiers, with enormous green plumes on their heads, like carriage-footmen, going through a series of marvelous tricks and capers on their little horses!" (Baudelaire 163). Baudelaire notes in an ironic and yet tender tone, "the unfortunate young girl, obsessed with dreams of grandeur, is fascinated by this display of military might" (Baudelaire 163). Her obsession is ruined when she sees that they are truly not as superior that they appear, but are in fact an assembly of grotesques: "Her father, who is a wise man and well versed in sorcery, wants to show her the other side of all this magnificence. Thus at an hour when the vegetables are sleeping their brutish sleep…he lifts up the flap of one of the tents of this splendid army. Then it is that the poor dreaming girl sees all the mass of red and green soldiery in its appalling undress, wallowing and snoring in filthy midden … In its night-cap all that military magnificence is nothing more than a putrid swamp" (Baudelaire 163).

Although Hoffmann is not a character in his own fiction, he divides or doubles himself through the character of the little girl: in other words, he can laugh at his own fall through the naïve little girl's shocking discovery. Baudelaire argues that this comic moment is like an allegorical rendering of a "drunken man" who also happens to be a physiologist, alienist, and sage of sorts. Hoffmann's "most supernatural and fugitive comic conceptions" (164) which are often like visions of a drunken man, have a very conspicuous moral meaning; you might imagine that you had to do with the profoundest type of physiologist or alienist who was amusing himself with clothing his deep wisdom in poetic forms, like a learned man who might speak in parables or allegories" (164). From this passage, we can see that such humor, although morbid at times and even "intoxicated," has a moral import for Baudelaire. It is not simply a self-reflexive/referential aesthetic venture. It reveals the human as a

serious yet naïve being whose sense of grandeur is at times warranted, but is ultimately naive. The little girl embodies this, so to speak, serious-naiveté.

To include the oscillation between the naïve and the serious as properties of "essential laughter," Baudelaire goes on to say that the "most distinctive marks of the absolute comic is that it remains unaware of itself. This is evident not only in certain animals, like monkeys, in whose comicality gravity plays an essential part, nor only in certain antique caricatures … but even in those Chinese monstrosities … A Chinese idol, although it be an object of veneration, looks very little different from a tumble-toy or pot-bellied chimney ornament" (164). Strangely enough, what Baudelaire calls the "absolute comic" in the above passage is identical to what Susan Sontag calls camp. Indeed, the best forms of camp are naïve: "Pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp ('camping') is always less satisfying" (Sontag 282). For Sontag, in addition, "in naïve, or pure, camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails" (283). Indeed, we are moved to laugh and cry at such passionate failures, for in them there is, as Baudelaire himself argues, a collision between two infinities: one of grandeur and the other of misery. Hence, camp and the absolute comic are in many ways synonymous. But in contrast to Sontag's analysis of camp, Baudelaire teaches us that the novelty of the absolute comic or the "philosopher" of essential laughter is that he or she can divide him/herself from him/herself and laugh at his or her foibles. This implies that the virtue of the "philosopher" is that he/she can divide a stylized self from a natural self. In addition, Sontag sees camp as devoid of any morality (Sontag 287); whereas Baudelaire sees a profound moral aspect to the absolute comic. Nonetheless, one will notice that according to Sontag's reading of camp, aesthetics is exalted over morality yet in a way that is not triumphant but indeed a bit melancholic for Camp is a "tender feeling" (292) that manifests a "love for human nature" (291) and its failed seriousness (283). Baudelaire would agree with this assessment of camp and of the absolute comic. However, Paul de Man, in his essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality" argues, using a few citations of Baudelaire, that the absolute comic is not simply tender or melancholic; rather, it is mad (214-16). For de Man, this means that it is self-reflexive/referential to the extent that it loses all touch with empirical reality as it clings to the medium of irony: language (219). Thus, for de Man, the "philosopher" is an essentially mad and solipsistic self; she/he cares not for humanity and its fallen nature, she/he experiences paranoia and madness, not love or tenderness. Is this the self Baudelaire had in mind when he wrote of the philosopher? Is this the end point of a laughing meditation on the central contradictions of humanity?

Rather than concede to de Man's argument that Baudelaire's philosopher/artist is solipsistic, Kevin Newmark, in an essay entitled "Traumatic Laughter: Charles Baudelaire and the Shock of Laughter," argues that de Man's reading of Baudelaire is faulty. According to Newmark, de Man sees Baudelaire's ironic laughter as causing an "unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness" and the "principle of consciousness and self-reflexivity" (249), which leaves "open the possibility that the ironic consciousness -- however 'mad' -- could somehow remain wholly enclosed within itself and therefore devoid of any substantial contact with material historical reality" (249). Newmark argues that this, the greatest danger of ironic or "mad" laughter, needs to be understood properly so as to be avoided. For Newmark, Baudelaire's ironic laughter does in fact make contact with historical material reality. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire's poetry as a parrying and attempt to master shock, Newmark argues that this contact marks a contradiction between experience and cognition, and that this mark or trace if you will is registered in the "shock" of ironic language: "Laughter occurs as a shock because it occurs semiotically as language, and as language, laughter is traumatic because it always refers to its inability to occur as anything other than a compulsively repeated reference that is never allowed to come to rest in the fullness of meaning. The laughter of language can only refer, infinitely and compulsively, that is, traumatically, to its inability to reach the fullness of pure thought and being from which it is infinitely separated" (251). But rather than confuse this with a subjective state of vertigo or madness, as de Man believed it would, Newmark sees Baudelaire's ironic laughter

as reminding us of the inability to reconcile, in language, experience and cognition during and after the historical, extra-textual moment of trauma/shock. Therefore, to laugh at one's own accident is to laugh at the shock of that moment over which one has no control whatsoever. This feeling of powerlessness, coupled with the feeling of power or superiority that comes with laughter, creates a sense of double-ness that is at the core of laughter and the human condition. It connects us to history and not just to ourselves as contradictory beings or to a text which establishes our "consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness"(de Man, 216).

Given Newmark's reading, Baudelaire's insights into laughter and the absolute comic demonstrate that comedy does in fact have a place in representing the unrepresentable, Baudelaire teaches us that unrepresentable can be represented through laughter if and only if the narrator appropriates a form of irony that sets language against itself, as Baudelaire so often does in his poetry and prose, and yet in such a way that it alludes to or addresses a moment of trauma or shock. In addition, the absolute comic (or even camp figures) can also be used to represent the unrepresentable if they are thought of in relation to the passionate failure of character in the face of the impossible. As suggested above, the apperception of this can be tender, loving, and even melancholic. To be sure, even camp or the absolute comic, which are seemingly devoid of morality, has qualities that are profoundly moral, as Baudelaire argues with respect to Hoffmann. Nonetheless, as Sontag with her obsession with the triumph of style over content and aesthetics over morality and deMan's reading of Baudelaire demonstrates, it is clear that this also runs the risk of becoming wholly aesthetic and (a)historical.

In the post-Holocaust literature of Raymond Federman, an appeal is made to the philosopher in de Man's sense and in Newmark's sense. For, unlike much post-Holocaust fiction, the work of Federman engages in self-division and self-reflexivity to an extent unheard of in this genre. Indeed, as many commentators worry, and as Newmark fears in de Man's work, this poses the risk of falling into a self-referential reflexivity without historical reference, and this is especially important when the Holocaust is the historical referent. Federman's forays into self-reflexivity bring this risk into focus in ways similar and at the same time quite different from Baudelaire. On the one hand, the question posed by Federman's post-Holocaust fiction is following de Man: is the madness of Federman's mad laughter a madness caused by a vertigo of textual self-reflexivity? Yet, it is also a question of history: is the madness of Federman's "mad laughter" caused by historical trauma? Baudelaire notes that one of the primary aspects of the philosopher/absolute comic is self-division. By doing this, the philosopher can laugh at herself/himself and, it goes without saying, test herself/himself in a variety of comic situations which involve a "collision of infinities." This collision involves putting figures of power and superiority in conflict with figures of the abject and powerlessness. It involves the serious and the naïve. In *The Twofold Vibration*, Federman breaks himself into two characters and the narrator, himself. The two characters, a twofold vibration of sorts, are Moinous (translated roughly, between two languages (French and Greek) as Me-Mind) and Namredef (Federman spelled backwards). Both Moinous and Namredef are naïve *Schlemiel* types of characters similar to Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. In an interview with Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, Federman, a Beckett scholar, concedes to the fact that he modeled Moinous and Namredef on Becket's characters (150). He also notes the slapstick nature of these characters was based on their opposite natures: "One being more intellectual, the other more physical, they form one being. They complement one another" (150). The interplay of such opposites is not just the essence of slapstick or camp humor; it is also the nature of essential laughter. For, as Hoffmann knew and Baudelaire was cognizant of, the collision of opposites makes for laughter, especially when they are the embodiments of the intellect and the body which are, respectively, associated throughout the Western tradition with the superior and inferior aspects of the human being. To put both in a comic situation, in which both fare in the same absurd predicament, is to incite laughter and a reflection on the human condition as collision of misery and infinite grandeur, to paraphrase Baudelaire. In addition, the loving portrayal of the comical and naïve characters Estragon and Vladimir by Beckett is paralleled in the narrator's treatment of Moinous and Namredef.

In the beginning of the novel, Federman, the narrator, rounds these fools up for a mission: "Hey you guys wake up, wake up, it's starting all over again, but this times it's going to be serious, the real story, no more evasions, procrastinations, and you won't believe this, it begins in the future, can't stray too far from the present, and besides there is a certain logic to keep in mind, a certain urgency" (9). The novelty of this mission is that it involves telling the "real story," one that has been approached many times, much like a trauma: "Wake up, wake up, it's starting all over again" (9). But unlike the previous times, this time "it's going to be serious" (9). Together, these statements bring together trauma and slapstick comedy and serve as a foreshadowing to the entire novel. Like Estragon and Vladimir, who are serious about meeting Godot and completing a project that has been going on perhaps indefinitely, Federman assures Namredef and Moinous that the "real story" will finally be told, the story they have been "waiting" for. This seriousness already seems like a failed seriousness, which is the hallmark of camp. It also includes elements of essential laughter as the passage indicates that this endeavor has taken place in the past but has failed several times. Indeed, the attempt to master trauma by telling the real story is a central theme in Federman's novel and failure haunts its every step. The decision by Federman to have the story "begin in the future" marks another act of doubling. It brings in another element of fiction which complicates the historical focus of the real story: the life of the "old man." As the novel progresses, we learn that the old man, in the science fiction plot, is about to be deported to a space colony. One of the central questions for the narrator, Namredef, and Moinous is why he is being deported. But, in addition to this question, there are several others which allude to the most traumatic, unrepresentable event of all for Federman, the Holocaust:

> I am mostly interested in the old guy, or rather I should say we meaning here myself and those who subsequently in this story might get involved with the old man's predicament, I am not alone in this, anything can happen, and others might come into play, but at any rate interested above all in the reasons he is being sent, banished rather to the colonies, thrown out of our world like a piece of trash, useless piece of burnt out light bulb, it's the human that concerns me here, but also the coincidental vibrations of life, a question of ethical curiosity on my part, yes a profound and personal need to come to terms with the unexplainable, no not the morbid, why should I, on the contrary, the salubrious, in fact I am almost tempted to say the problematic and the unjust. (17)

As the novel progresses, Federman lets us know that his ethical curiosity is over something that can only be called accidental; indeed, the old man is such a good person that it doesn't make sense as to why he would later in life be deported, or, as we shall see, earlier in life be deprived of his parents who were murdered by nazis. The laughter over this "accident" is what he calls "mad laughter." But interlaced with this laughter is a strong sense of self-reflexivity which complicates the relation of this novel to history. Immediately, at the inception of the second chapter, Federman notes that this novel is neither autobiographical nor historical. "All progeny real or fictitious, are verbal extensions in time and space, and my dead father and the old man should have the same date of birth as myself, or that my father and myself should have the same birthdate as the old man, is purely coincidental within the creative license of the story … after all history, as a friend once wrote, is a dream already dreamt and destroyed" (26). To give more credence to a reading of this novel following de Man and its laughter as self-reflexive/referential and textual, Federman goes on to write: "You may wonder why the need to go into my own background, my own sordid life, to tell the story of the old guy, all fiction is based, to some extent, on the author's own experiences, whether lived or imagined, transposed into the life of his characters, it always works that way, not blood relations, ink relations" (27). Nonetheless, one cannot read these passages without detecting their ironic tone. Indeed, if history is a "dream already dreamt and destroyed" (27), why does this novel turn to history over and over again as if it were a traumatic memory? History obviously lives on albeit through irony. Furthermore, when Federman goes on to speak about "ink relations," he mixes traumatic memory, his own and that of others (real or imagined), with these relations to demonstrate that these relations are not purely creatures of a self-reflexive/referential text but are shared: "or, Here we are, alone again, it's all to slow, so heavy, so sad, I'll be old soon, then at last it will all be over … or better yet, many years later, as he faced the

firing squad, Colonel Aurelio Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (28). In the above passage, he engages in some "ink relations" as these are texts borrowed from Proust and Márquez. For this reason, one can say that this is simply an inter-text and has nothing to do with history; nonetheless, they illustrate an overlapping of common historical traumas; it is this which is also familial.

To complicate the notions of the self-reflexive/referential (a)historical text to an even greater extent, history, in tandem with textual self-reflexivity, becomes the central focus of this chapter as the narrator meditates on how the old man's "cosmicomic" future is also a part of the logic of his fictional existence which has "experienced some of the events, tragic historical events especially, and comitragic too, I would like him to have experienced during his lifetime on earth" (29). The narrator goes on to list these "tragic historical" and "comitragic" events, but the majority of these events, all of them in fact, are shocking, and strangely enough "laughable" in some manner: "For instance the laughable Treaty of Versailles, the pitiable fiasco of the League of Nations, the failed Chinese revolution of 1927 and the long March of Mao Tse-Tung, slim Lindenberg across the Atlantic solo, the Crash and the Great Depression and the mass suicides of the ruined capitalists, the burning of the Reichstag" (29). The long list goes on but concludes with the "Nazi persecutions of the Jews and the concentration camps" (29). These are surely not laughing matters; nonetheless, the collision of misery and grandeur is pronounced in all of these historical events. Indeed, we see man lifted up and dropped to the lowest of lows in these historical events that effaced man's mastery over the world and revealed barbarity rather than culture in ways analogous to the Hoffmann story quoted by Baudelaire. The narrator goes on to use the terms tragic and comic in his description of the Holocaust as fact and representation, which, in his account, overlap. This usage is similar in many ways to Langer's argument that in the literature of atrocity fact and fiction overlap: "for the stupefying truth is that the Holocaust is the epic event of the 20th century never striking bottom in the resonance of tragic fact" (30). In this situation, all of the "most innocent questions of daily routine [reach] the level of Greek tragedy, or at least the level of the Theater of the Absurd" (30). After writing this, the narrator evokes the comic representation of the Holocaust and, at the same time, the comic nature of the Holocaust by quoting from Borowski's novel *This Way to the Gas Ladies and Gentleman*. The narrator points out the novel's comic approach to the Holocaust was not simply fictional; rather, it expresses an "old historical trick": "Here little boys little girls have a piece of chocolate to take away your fear, it only takes three minutes for gas to choke you" (31). The narrator formulates an epithet out of this comic situation which is ironic and hits at the essence of "essential laughter," yet in ways neither Baudelaire nor Hoffmann could imagine: "deception is the only permissible form of charity in the process of extermination" (31). The fact that the children are told that they will die and that the chocolate will take away their fear puts a bizarre spin on the naïve in the most tragic of situations. Compared to the effacement of the naïve in Hoffmann, this is extreme and mad; not in a self-reflexive/referential sense of irony that de Man espouses, but a historical-traumatic madness that comes with historical irony. Federman's novelty is to include both together to show that text and history share irony as a "family" trait. They are both marked with trauma and constitute the basis for essential laughter.

Federman, the narrator, tells us that history and the text comprise, in a double sense of fiction and fact, the essence of the old man's condition since both are subject to erasure: "but if we deal with the matter of the camps at all, it will have to be clear that the central concern is not the extermination of the deportees, including the old guy's entire family, incidentally, father, mother, and sisters too, but the erasure of that extermination as a central event, and it is, I believe, the old man's ambivalence toward this erasure that charges his life emotionally and informs his risks, but perhaps I am anticipating too much"(31). To be sure, the narrator does not anticipate as much as foreshadows too much of the novel. Indeed, without taking this "twofold" meditation on the text-ed ("scripted") and traumatic-historical essence of the old man into consideration, we would not be able to understand the rest of the mad forays of the old man in the novel, which, I argue, are his attempt to foreclose

erasure. These acts, to be sure, are acts of "mad laughter" which provide Federman with a distance from the Holocaust and, at the same time, provide him with an understanding of his traumatic past that extends and, at the same time, redefines Baudelaire's notion of the absolute comic by including a notion of writing or rewriting the self as a quasi success. Moinous, Namredef, and the narrator recount the old man's journey into the night from America back to Europe. The old man is swept up by chance historical events, but the madness that moves him to laugh at them and pursue them to their limits is informed by the Holocaust and an ironic self-consciousness of madness spurred by what de Man calls the "irony of irony" (218).

The old man's adventure begins in the U.S. at a rally in Buffalo: by accident, he walks into the rally, gets excited by the madness of it, and ends up participating. To heighten the virtual and filmic element of the narration, the scenes of the rally are made to seem as if they were drawn out of Michelangelo Antonini's film *Zabriskie Point*. In that movie, and in this text, the protest reaches its pinnacle and is broken up by police. The old man happens to get arrested and is included in the "Buffalo 40," a term created by the mass media to sensationalize the event. The inclusion of the old man into this tabloid reality is brought to the forefront when the press makes him out to be the leader of this group (since he is the oldest person amongst the 40). The juxtaposition of what the newspapers say and what the "real" circumstances are adds to the comic and slapstick grandeur and irony of this scene. The old man's inclusion into pop-political history is sealed when a character named June Fanon (a character obviously patterned after Jane Fonda), a Hollywood actress and political activist who flies to Buffalo so she can lead a rally. June, like camp film stars, is beyond life in her grandeur, she is "the public myth we all admire and desire" (71). In sync with the times and the elegiac appeal of her transgression of film and reality, the old man welcomes her stardom: "She walked into his life as though it were a movie script" (71). Since he is considered to be the leader of the "Buffalo 40, the old man is included in the rally she has set up" (70). The fact that he does not dispute the role shows us that he is the type of person who wishes to ride the wave of fiction to the very end. June ends up seizing him during the rally and having him sit near her as she addresses the crowd with her "mythical" star-like presence. Her enthusiasm somehow touches off a riot, and in panic she flees the rally with the old man. Spontaneously, they decide to take a cab together to the airport and fly to Europe, and, strangely enough, this is the beginning of a journey that will end up in Germany and in a confrontation with the Holocaust. The enthusiastic drive of this departure to Europe does not dissipate. When the "old man" and Fanon get to Europe, they go on a gambling tour, which includes expensive hotels, food, and sex. But after one of their sexual encounters, the plot shifts. The old man tells June that he is a survivor and that his death is behind him (99). These enigmatic words inspire June to ask him questions about what he means. June says that he is being too abstract and she thinks that he is being an escapist when he says he is improvising his life and that his death is behind him since his past is erased. This falls in with the above-mentioned passage as it shows that the old man would rather erase then remember his past for it is too painful. One of his most important reflections to which June at first resists is that "you [the survivor] go along, re-invent what you think happened" (106). This presupposes that text can replace history; nonetheless, after the old man recites a poem that re-invents the past, she comments, "How beautiful, and it's so moving, I think I understand now what you meant before about surviving" (106). After she says this, the old man declines and calls it sentimental and "too hermetic" (106). She disagrees and says, "it works, and tells a great deal about you" (106). The literature and poetry Federman articulates convey a sense of what it means to re-invent the past and posit the survival of the Holocaust -- or of someone submitted to its exigencies -- in a postmodern world. But this poses the risk of totally rewriting history and erasing the past. But, as we shall see, history finds its way into the text and precludes erasure.

The journey continues after June leaves the scene and Moinous and Namredef enter it. The narrators, Moinous and Namredef, point out when he enters Germany his behavior becomes mad. Indeed, it manifests something of a death drive. It gets to its high point when he hires three hookers

to perform sexual acts with him and in his ribaldry causes a forced eviction from the hotel. This marks a major turning point as it repeats one of the main themes of this novel as a novel about the past and a sci-fi novel: deportation. When in Germany, the old man notes that he wants to get something back from the Germans. Since he is a survivor, this implies that money will offer some type of compensation for the losses he suffered due to the Holocaust. After gambling and winning large sums of money in Germany, we see what he thinks of this compensation. Moinous and Namredef tell us that after winning a large sum of money at a casino he went to his room and used the money in a way that violates both its exchange and use value. They found him rubbing his body with the money, "stuffing it in his mouth and laughing hysterically" (163). The next morning, when they return to his room they find a scene which is simultaneously erotic and grotesque: "We found him buried under the crumpled bills, some of them stained with sweat and sperm and shit" (163-64). The erotic element, typical of Hollywood film and pornography, is displaced by this scene wherein the sexual act is not with a few women but with money. In addition to this, it is stained with excrement, which removes the element of pleasure and the grandeur one might derive from a "normal" erotic scene and from money. The signification of the whole scene is excessive waste: money now bears the mark of waste and the old man contaminates the possibility of accepting reparation by soiling it. But what is most amazing about this scene is the reaction to it; rather than look on at the soiled money with horror and disgust, he looks at it and laughs. This is a correlate of what Baudelaire meant by translating Hoffmann's grotesque story as the absolute comic. In addition, he leaves a trace on waste on the money and counters the "erasure" that is, as we have seen above, a major concern of both the old man and Federman, the narrator. The effacement of grandeur and the naïve state evoked by the old man's madness evokes a feeling of tenderness and love for this passionate failure**,** caused not so much by the character of the old man as a combination of traumatic history and a passionate character that tries to master it via the most extreme effacement of reparation and grandeur and their material supports. By doing this, the old man goes out of the normal register of language and the acceptable. This transgression and his state of being "wasted" evoke his own "mad laughter" and our own as well. Furthermore, this "mad laughter," like the essence of laughter explored by Baudelaire, has an additional moral dimension. Indeed, Moinous notes that though mad laughter the old man was "re-adjusting to the idea that he's still alive" (164). In contrast to the well-formulated words uttered to June, now, the old man is "Re-inserting himself into life with mad laughter" (164). With this observation, Moinous provides the reader with not only a greater understanding of this novel, but also a moral: Mad laughter is a way of living on and coming back into the world after being exiled from it due to historical disaster. The form and the content of this novel bring out this mad laughter. Moinous paraphrases this approach, which is a seemingly new approach to the Holocaust which echoes Baudelaire's observation that few people can laugh at their own fall: "Only a few are able to laugh in the face of death" (164). Thus, Moinous recounts his own death and his laughter in order to prove the point. However, in the most naïve manner, Moinous's account reduces the transparency of this mad laughter at death by associating it with fiction and intertextuality. The reference to Moinous's death is a reference to its narration in the book *Take it Or Leave It*. In that book the narrator tells the reader that Moinous was stabbed to death in San Francisco. The laugher at this death is something shared with the reader because in *The Twofold Vibration* Moinous is a "living" character. He is fictionally resurrected. In this scenario madness is expressed as a process of fiction; therefore, the Nietzschean cliché that only that which kills me makes me stronger -- a cliché used by the psychologist and Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl to argue that literature could aid Holocaust victims in their survival -- which is epitomized in the notion of the "few" who are able to laugh at in the face of death is thus parodied through fiction. Given this passage and the one above, however, we must conclude that laughter in the face of death is not only existential, as Nietzsche and Frankl envision it. For Federman, it has to do with being a "real" human being and a fictional being, whose survival is real and fictional. It is clear to me that Federman's mad laughter is a challenge to the notion that comedy cannot be

used in relation to the Holocaust. As I suggest previously, Gilman advocates laughter in the face of the accidental, but he does not address the textual nature of such laughter; nonetheless, he is close to Federman and Baudelaire when he argues that the "accident is the wellspring of comedy and laughter, not because it is the opposite of tragedy, but because it is the instantiation of the random in life, over which one can only laugh or weep" (304). Federman's mad laughter acknowledges the random aspect of history: it is a tragicomic laugh that marks the collision of infinities that Baudelaire saw in terms of the misery and the grandeur. But instead of feeling misery at the fact that he is feigning greatness in comparison to a great being, Federman feels misery -- or madness -- at the fact that he is feigning mastery, on the one hand, over an event that is much greater than his ability to conquer it and, on the other hand, a language which has infinite connotations and permutations; nonetheless, there is certainly a sense of grandeur as well in these ribald attempts to master the Shoah and his own personal life through art. The collision of these two makes for the passionate camp failure embodied in the old man's mad laughter. It marks a noble attempt to master the unknown and the impossibility of such an endeavor, which is also quite sad. In a sense, both the narrator and the old man are "deported" from the space of such mastery.

In conclusion, Federman's notion of mad laughter -- part and parcel of what he calls "laughterature" -- has an important role in post-Holocaust literature and can show us that laughter, like love, may not conquer death and trauma but can certainly show us our desire to do so; although it is ultimately a failure, such grandiose and deluded desire, for Federman, is what makes us "essentially human" and brings us one step closer to relating honestly to the Shoah.

Works Cited

Abádi-Nagy, Zoltán. "Twofold Welcome to Raymond Federman." *Journal of Experimental Fiction* 23 (2002): 139-59.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*. 1951. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998.

Baudelaire, Charles. "The Essence of Laughter." *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. By Charles Baudelaire. Trans. Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon P, 2001. 147-65.

De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.

Federman, Raymond. *The Twofold Vibration*. Los Angeles: Green Integer P, 2000.

Gilman, Sander L. "Is Life Beautiful? Can the Shoah Be Funny? Some Thoughts on Recent and Older Films." *Critical Inquiry* 26.2 (2000): 279-308.

McCafffery, Larry, Thomas Hartl, and Doug Rice, eds. *Federman A to X-X-X-X*. San Diego: San Diego State UP, 1998.

Langer, Lawrence. *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1975.

Newmark, Kevin. "Traumatic Poetry: Charles Baudelaire and the Shock of Laughter." *Trauma: Explorations is Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995. 236-55.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Picador, 1966.

Author's profile: Menachem Feuer teaches philosophy at Ryerson University. His publications include articles and reviews in journals such as *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, *The Journal of Experimental Fiction*, *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review*, *Ctheory*, and *German Studies Review*. He has also published in book collections on Holocaust literature and has articles forthcoming in *CinemAction* and *International Studies in Philosophy* as well as contributions in collected volumes published by the State U of New York P and the U of Mississippi P. He is currently working on a book about the *Schlemiel*, a preeminent Jewish comic character found in Yiddish and Jewish American literature, theater, poetry, film, and stand-up comedy. E-mail: <mfeuer@ryerson.ca>