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CONVERSATIONS WITH RAYMOND FEDERMAN: *TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT AND THE VOICE IN THE CLOSET*

This is part of a tape-recorded interview conducted in the Debrecen Center of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences on 19 February 1986, when Raymond Federman visited Kossuth University as part of a highly successful lecture tour in Hungary. Professor Federman kindly revised the transcript of our conversation. In this part of the interview—published here for the first time—he discusses Take It or Leave It and The Voice in the Closet. Some other sections of our book-size talks have already been published separately. The “chapter” principally addressed to fiction generally (“An Interview with Raymond Federman”) is available in Modern Fiction Studies (34.2 [1988]: 157–70)—while the Hungarian version of the same section, complemented with the discussion of Smiles on Washington Square, is accessible in Hungarian, in Világregény—regényvilág: amerikai íróinterjúk (“The Novel of the World—The World of the Novel: Conversations with American Writers”; Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1997. 213–51). The section devoted to Double or Nothing has also been published in English (“Conversations with Raymond Federman: Double or Nothing.” Happy Return Essays for István Pálffy. Ed. Péter Szafrkó and Tamás Bényei. Debrecen: KLTE, 1999. 270–78.). The Twofold Vibration segment was carried by the Federman issue of Experimental Fiction (“Twofold Welcome to Raymond Federman.” 23 (2002): 139–59.).

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Q: Take It or Leave It has a French version, *Amer Eldorado* that immediately preceded it. How do the two relate to each other?

FEDERMAN: First let me explain that the two books were not written one after another, but simultaneously. The French and English versions of this book progressed at the same time, or rather I should say alternated one day to the other as I kept writing. However, *Amer Eldorado* was published first (in Paris in 1974), and then I spent a couple more years working with the English version which became *Take It or Leave It*, but which also became quite a different book, in length as well as in structure and in texture. In a way, even though the two books tell basically the same story, they are overlapping texts. This is, of course, another aspect (personal and unique) of my work, the fact that I write both in French and in English, and that I even translate myself from one language to the other. But to answer your question. After I finished *Double or Nothing*, I wanted to continue the story of the young man who comes to America from France, but this time I wanted to go beyond the threshold of America (*Double or Nothing* basically relates only the arrival of the young man), I wanted to write the story of the young man *in* America, his discovery of America. By chance it happened that I was in Paris (directing some graduate program the university had there), and again by pure chance I had found a room in a little hotel called *Hôtel des deux Continents*. I immediately saw the possibility of a dual text, a bilingual novel coming out of this place. What irony! Hotel of the two continents. And so I started writing a novel in French and in English simultaneously. I even visualized the book finished and published in a beautiful bilingual edition where the two texts would echo one another, the two stories overlap and mix, and become one huge text speaking with a plural voice. Not unlike, in fact, what I eventually did with *The Voice in the Closet*. That does not mean, however, that the French and English texts are exact duplications of one another. I was writing the same story in French and in English, but I was not repeating the same words—the words were different. I was not translating, I was transacting. One day the French would feed the English, and the next day the English would inspire the French. It was maddening, because one text was always ahead of the other, or one

text always behind the other. I went on like that for almost a year. I was going crazy in that hotel room, because gradually the twin-texts not only were feeding each other but also destroying one another. It was a most interesting and revealing experience. I don't think I have yet recovered from it. It has affected everything I have written since then.

Q: Destroying in what sense?

FEDERMAN: In the sense that the two texts were not only feeding one another, but eating one another (to pursue a bad metaphor). Or if you prefer, they were cannibalizing one another. Damn, I can't get out of this culinary metaphor! You see, there were things which did not work in one language but worked in the other. Let me explain. From the window of my hotel room (by the way the hotel was on rue Jacob, right next door to Les Editions du Seuil—all this is in the book), I could see inside the building across the courtyard, I mean inside the offices of the Editions du Seuil, the famous French publishing house. And there, one day I saw the guys from the TEL QUEL GROUP—Philippe Sollers, Jean Ricardou, Marcelyn Pleynet, and so on. They were all there, having a heated discussion. The TEL QUEL GROUP was in power then in the literary milieu of Paris. And it occurred to me as I watched them that the French version of the book I was writing was addressed to them, that in fact they were the “listeners” of that text. But of course, that did not work in the English text. In *Take It or Leave It*, the listeners became, perhaps, the guys from the *Partisan Review* clique. In any event, it is then that I realized that these listeners (whether from the TEL QUEL GROUP or the *Parisian Review* clique) were activating the text I was writing, feeding it material and inspiration with the questions they were asking of the narrator. They became an integral part of the text. As I said, *Amer Eldorado* was published in 1974, and I worked for another two years on the English text of *Take It or Leave It* before it was ready for publication. There are other important differences between the two books. For one thing the French version is about 200 pages long, whereas the English version is close to 500 pages (I don't really know exactly since there are no page numbers in that book). This means that the English version more than doubled in size. This is because a

second narrative level was introduced in the novel. *Amer Eldorado* is basically told in the first person, whereas *Take It or Leave It* moves back and forth from a third person to a first person narrative. Therefore there is more interplay between the narrator (the second-hand teller, as he is called) and the protagonist. Also, the English text has much more elaborated typographical designs than the French. Perhaps the way to understand the relation between these two books is to say that *Amer Eldorado* is contained in *Take It or Leave It* in a loosely adapted English version—not as a translation, but as a free adaptation. Incidentally, the pages of *Amer Eldorado* are numbered. I don't know if this kind of work, this kind of literary elaboration and duplication of a text in two languages has ever been done before, but for me it was a most revealing experience.

Q: In *Take It or Leave It* you call your book a “battle against the linearity of syntax,” where “the pages become the syntax.” Is this another way of putting the shuffle-novel idea or is it something else?

FEDERMAN: No, it has nothing to do with the idea of the shuffle-novel. Remember when I said earlier that in *Double or Nothing* I was looking at language and designing it in order to explore all its possibilities? By the time I finished that book I think I knew what the English language could do for me and what I could do with it. It had been over twenty years since I started to learn English, but it was not until I finished *Double or Nothing* that I became aware that I had appropriated that language, and that now I could use it and even abuse it in my work. I could now write sentences which would be my own. So what I did in *Take It or Leave It* was to explore the possibilities of syntax, or rather syntactical topology. Yes, in a way I engaged in a “battle” with and against traditional syntax, and especially against the linearity of syntax. I wanted to see if it were possible to write sentences without shape, sentences which would go on and on and would digress from their grammatically predetermined course. In this sense the book is more a syntactical experiment (even though it remains visual in places) than a typographical experiment.

Q: Kostelanetz refers to your “individually defined pages” as “visual prose.” The prevalence of the visual and the typographic elements may also define your early work as concrete prose. Can you accept this term?

FEDERMAN: I’m not sure the expression “concrete prose” is appropriate for my work. It’s true I did write some concrete poetry which perhaps grew out of my fiction, but I don’t think that the visual and typographical aspects of my work have anything to do with what goes on in Concrete Poetry as it has been defined, let’s say, by Haroldo de Campo in Brazil, who was the first to use the expression for this kind of poetry. I prefer the term “visual” to “concrete.” I think some people were too quick in connecting concrete music with concrete poetry, but when it comes to the novel, I don’t think it can be called concrete just because of its unusual typography. The novel cannot evacuate meaning as concrete poetry does, or else it would really die. I think it is important to realize that what made my novels possible (and of course this is true of all novels which also play with typography) was the typewriter. The action of the typewriter is an integral part of the writing process, of the creative process in my work. In those days I was not working with a word-processor, but I could easily claim that, in writing *Double or Nothing* and *Take It or Leave It*, I invented the possibilities of the word-processor as we use it today.

Q: What are the functions you want the typographical play to fulfill? Graphic presentation of an idea as a new source of aesthetic pleasure? Or fuller reader-participation by forcing us to concentrate harder since automatic reading habits are frustrated?

FEDERMAN: Several of these functions. The first one—expressed in my *Surfiction* essay—was to challenge reading habits. I am convinced that many readers feel a sense of frustration and boredom when they confront a 600 page book and know they can only move in it from left-to-right, left-to-right, and down the page. Therefore I wanted to question all this and introduce in it an element of diversity and playfulness—an element of amusement. Another reason was to

render some aspects of the page (and of the language too of course) more visual—painterly you might say—in order to have the reader accept language and writing on their own terms as self-referential. In other words, I wanted to make the language visible so that it would not be transparent and vanish after one has read the meaning supposedly hidden in words. I think also that I started playing with typography and visual language simply because deep inside I am a frustrated painter. Even though I cannot draw or paint, I am deeply involved with the plastic arts as a viewer. I suppose that comes to me from my father who was a painter. But the ultimate reason is more interesting for me because it relates not to painting but to music. As you know, I was a jazz musician at one time, and though I don't play anymore, jazz has remained extremely important in my life and my work. Jazz, of course, is improvisation. The designs in my writing are improvisational. When working on the visual aspect of a page in one of my novels, I have no pre-conceived design in mind. It all happens there, in front of me, as I compose, as I type the page. So that writing a story is not just inventing the situation, the characters, but also inventing the writing of that story, that is to say improvising the mechanism of writing. The result of such a process is that the pages (because they are different from one another) become autonomous. It is in this sense also that discontinuity is created. Each page then becomes a space of improvisation and exploration. As you can see, there are many reasons for experimenting the way I did with typography and the topology of the page. Some of these reasons (or justifications) I confronted while doing the work, and others I discovered after the work was finished.

Q: Part of it may be what you call “the unpredictable shape of typography” in *Take It or Leave It*. For some critics, though, the surprise element of the typographical play became a distraction.

FEDERMAN: Oh, absolutely, it is always unpredictable. ... Distraction, you know, also means “amusement.”

Q: Robert Scholes in *Fabulation and Metafiction* speaks about “intentional boredom” in reference to your kind of experiments.

FEDERMAN: That means, I suppose, that either Robert Scholes is happy with the way things are, or totally missed the point of what I was doing since he reacted in the reverse of what I intended. Or else Scholes does not know how to play.

Q: My complaint with unpredictable typography is that it is far from being unpredictable. When a word is suggestive of any typographical possibility, that possibility is bound to be exploited by the typographical game, especially in *Double or Nothing*. And if something predictable is pursued by all means and at whatever length, it will alienate rather than sustain interest.

FEDERMAN: What happened when I sat in front of the typewriter, as I did, day after day, page after page, for more than four years as I was writing *Double or Nothing*, is that sometimes I would spend an entire day working on the same page, designing it over and over again, not knowing where it was going or what it would become. It was either pleasure or fatigue which determined the final shape, the outcome of the page—pleasure in the sense that I felt pleased with the way the page finally looked, aesthetically that is, or fatigue because I couldn't go on any more with that particular page. Some days I did not feel like playing any more. There are pages that may have been pushed too far, and as such locked themselves into a predictable form, and others which I did not push far enough. This was the risk. But the title of the book suggests that much. I was gambling with a mode of writing which could have failed totally.

Q: Visualization and typographical play imply the aspect of spatialization. You have just said that for you the page is a space of exploration. Adopting Sharon Spencer's phrase, Ronald Sukenick describes your *Double or Nothing* as an "architectonic novel." You obviously agree with him regarding the novel as a technological structure with imaginative content, where the technological structure can be improved "to suit the purposes of our imagination" and to alter our perception of the world.

FEDERMAN: I would leave the word “technological” out of my work. I am not a technological person. I have no sense of mechanics. I barely know how a typewriter functions, except that I type very fast. I am not mechanical at all, therefore there is no technological intention in my work.

Q: He means that the novel is also a technological structure.

FEDERMAN: Yes, I know, but still it is purely accidental. What interests me, fascinates me about writing a novel (unlike the short story or poetry, which I have almost completely abandoned), is that when you begin you have no idea where you’re going. It’s like exploring an unknown region. Ahead of the writer lies a huge empty space which must be filled with words and designs and shapes and geometries. And, of course, time is part of all that. I don’t mean the time it takes to write the book, but temporality. In other words, writing fiction is always dealing with time and space, and if along the way the work gains a technological structure, so much the better. My primary concern is to render time and space visible—concrete. That does not mean that even in my more recent novels, which have no typographical or visual designs, there is no concern for time and space. *Smiles on Washington Square* is all about time and space.

Q: Your work is not all technique. Those first two novels handle concrete social problems too, and the centrality of a hinted but repressed private apocalypse during the Holocaust—the extermination of your parents and sisters in Auschwitz—does not escape the reader’s attention. And in *The Voice in the Closet*, one begins to grasp fully what you mean by the “unreality of reality” and the “unself” of the self. What you talk about is something that really happened to you and is still happening to the survivor in you. I wonder if the Federman-story is or is not there behind the statement that can otherwise be read as an expression of a deconstructionist aesthetic: “I want to tell a story that cancels itself as it goes”?

FEDERMAN: I suppose my entire existence—surexistence I should say—as a so-called “survivor,” but also as a writer (but then writers

are survivors too), has been framed between the necessity and the impossibility of telling *that* story. The same old sad story. And I often wonder if perhaps I have not exploited the Holocaust (and my personal experience of it, direct or indirect as it may have been) in order to be able to write those novels. It disturbs me sometimes to think that I am able to write, that I became a writer because of that sordid affair. It's in this sense that I want to write a story that cancels itself as it goes. A need to tell the story and at the same time to erase it forever. But to push this question further. I often ask myself what was my "real" experience of the Holocaust? Or is it rather an "unreal" experience? After all I survived, I was not physically and even mentally wounded, my wrist has no tattoo, my mind seems to function more or less normally, I was not imprisoned in a concentration camp, did not enter the gas chamber. What am I suffering of? Am I perhaps suffering of not having suffered enough? I recently found part of the answer to these questions in a dream I had. Let me tell you about this dream because I think it is extremely important, for me, but also for my work. You know the movie *Shoah* by Claude Lanzman. It's about the Holocaust. Well, I had the dream before I saw the movie, though of course I must have read about it somewhere. I dreamed that I was having a conversation with Claude Lanzman (I have never met him of course). I assumed that he was a man of my age whose experience of the Holocaust was similar to mine. In this dream I asked Claude Lanzman: why are we, you and I, so obsessed with the Holocaust? You spend a good part of your life making movies about it, and I spend a good part of mine writing novels about it, and yet you and I did not directly suffer from the Holocaust. We have no marks on our bodies, our minds function well. In fact, we live rather good, easy, comfortable lives. And suddenly we reached the same conclusion in the dream: what we suffer of, we both said to each other simultaneously, is an absence—the absence of our parents, brothers and sisters, but also the absence of not having been there totally. Perhaps what we really suffer of is the absence of our own death. And then I woke up. Several months later, I was in Paris, by then I had seen the movie *Shoah* which moved me and disturbed me greatly, and it occurred to me that perhaps I should try to get in touch with Claude Lanzman and tell him about the dream, and also talk to him about his

film. Through a friend of mine in Paris who is a film-maker himself, I managed to get Lanzman's phone number. I dialed the number and the phone started ringing, but suddenly I hung up. My wife, who was in the room at the time, asked, "Why did you hang up?" "I've already spoken with Claude Lanzman," I said, "I don't need to talk to him any more ..." I think ABSENCE is the key term in all this. Something was taken away from me, from us—parents, sisters, brothers, homes, countries, lives—and we were left with an absence in a state of aloneness and loneliness. I think that is perhaps the most important theme in my fiction: aloneness, which is, of course, a form of suffering of an absence. For the rest of our lives, we as survivors must feel it concretely, almost as a presence, if one can reverse the terms. When I sat in the closet alone, when I was a boy, I was not aware then that it was the beginning of my survival but also the beginning of an absence. It is only years later, when I started to write *The Voice in the Closet*, that I realized how loaded with meaning that closet was. Yes loaded with meaning, but also with images, symbols, metaphors. All sort of aesthetic possibilities. Yes, perhaps I have exploited my limited experience of the Holocaust for aesthetic reasons. But it also occurred to me, when I sat down to write that book, in the late 1970s, almost forty years after the original events, that a great deal had already been written about the Holocaust, good and bad, a great deal of it plain exploitation, often reducing the drama to mere melodrama, the tragedy to a mere soap opera. If I am to deal with those events I should try to avoid such reduction. Even though I wanted to write about that aspect of my life which can be called the experience of the Holocaust, I decided that I would never use the word "Jew" in the text, never mention the words "German" or "Nazi." I would never write the words "concentration camp" or "Holocaust." In other words, what I wanted to do is capture the essence of the closet experience in its relation to the Holocaust but outside the specifics of history and of my own personal life. I worked very hard on this rather short text (bilingual text, as you know), for many months, but I think I achieved what I set out to do—not by adding more words, not by melodramatizing, not by expanding with facts and statistics, but on the contrary by reducing, by taking away, by cancelling, by trying to arrive at what is central to the book: absence.

Q: The Voice in the Closet, this painful concentrated and condensed text charged with emotion to a suffocating degree, is primarily, in Charles Caramello's view, the erasure of what happened. I would add that if one compares the novels that precede *The Voice* with those that follow, that book—even if it is another “disarticulation” as you call it—turns out to be a dividing line in your oeuvre. It seems to be an erasure of several aspects of your earlier prose style, too. It is not only a debate between the survivor's remade self and the surfaced and reburied voice of the past or of the subconscious, but, I feel, it is also your art negotiating its survival. You realize that your fictions “can no longer match” the reality of the past, “verbal delirium” is not enough, and, I would say, a new novelist emerges from “the primordial closet.” Is this a correct assessment?

FEDERMAN: I think what you've just said is an amazing analysis not only of my evolution as a writer but of my work too. But let me mention something which in terms of chronology is very important. *Take It or Leave It* was published in 1976, but you realize that the date of publication never corresponds to the date when a manuscript is finished. It takes a year or more for a book to come out. Soon after I finished *Take It or Leave It*, I began writing a new novel. No, not *The Voice in the Closet*, but something which was then called *Winner Take All*. I worked on this for almost two years, though I was not satisfied with what I was writing and where it was going. But what I had really started was what eventually became *The Twofold Vibration*. In between I wrote *The Voice in the Closet*. In 1977, in fact, while I was in France for the year. Perhaps that is the reason why I decided to do the text bilingually. The French and the English were written almost simultaneously. Parts of this twin-text were published in various magazines, and eventually a first version of the entire English text appeared in an issue of the *Paris Review*, I think it was in 1978. But the book itself, the bilingual book appeared in 1979. By then I was working again on the manuscript I had set aside, and now it was called *The Twofold Vibration*. I mention this not only to set the chronology of these books straight, but to point out that indeed *The Voice in the Closet* grew out of an early version of *The Twofold Vibration*, but that it is the writing of *The Voice in the Closet* which made *The Twofold*

Vibration possible as a new departure in my fiction. Therefore, yes, you are right. *The Voice in the Closet* marks the end of one phase, one project, in my work, and the beginning of another. I always think of *Double or Nothing*, *Amer Eldorado*, and *Take It or Leave It* as one project, perhaps even a trilogy. By the time I got into the next project (*The Voice in the Closet*, *The Twofold Vibration*, *Smiles on Washington Square*—these three books also have something in common, if not stylistically at least thematically), ten years had passed since I started *Double or Nothing*, and I felt I could say certain things, make certain pronouncements which I could not have made in the earlier books. With *The Voice in the Closet* I was able to write about my experience of the Holocaust without being sentimental or self-pitying. And I think the same is true of *The Twofold Vibration*, even though the tone there is not as serious as in *The Voice*. I think of the more recent works as being moral books, whereas one could say that *Double or Nothing* and *Take It or Leave It* have a kind of moral irresponsibility. Perhaps that's how it should be with the early work of a writer. One should move from irresponsibility to responsibility—moral as well as aesthetic. Witold Gombrowicz defined this as the process of maturity in a writer. Some writers remain irresponsible and immature their entire writing life, and others move towards responsibility and maturity in their work (I would like to think of myself in that category), and others still begin with responsibility and maturity and have nowhere to go (they are usually boring). I think of *The Twofold Vibration* as a book which goes toward establishing a form of morality about certain historical events. And so your question is crucial, it points to the importance of *The Voice in the Closet* in my work.

Q: If you look back at what took place around *The Voice* as a change, would you say that the change was the result of a conscious effort?

FEDERMAN: Yes a very conscious effort to go beyond what I had done before, not only in terms of style but also of subject matter. It seems to me that before you can call yourself a writer you must write a lot of stuff, all of it being a kind of preparation for the day when you

will be able to say “I am a writer.” I think it was not until I began working on *The Voice* that I felt I had become a writer, and that now I could make conscious decisions about what I wrote. Before that a great deal of what was happening in my writing was often accidental, I mean some of the experimental and more outrageous aspects of the early books.

Q: The voice itself in *The Voice in the Closet* is seemingly something spontaneously surfacing in a surrealistic fashion.

FEDERMAN: It is and it is not. The manuscript of *The Voice in the Closet* is a *very big* thing, and in it there is a lot of spontaneous stuff, but as I worked at reducing, deleting, cancelling that text, I shaped, chiseled the spontaneous, one might say, into a very rigid form. The genesis of that text is interesting. In the first draft I worked across the wider side of a regular sheet of paper, and wrote the text in two columns down the page. One column was called THE VOICE the other THE CLOSET. I don’t remember which side of the paper each was, but the text of THE VOICE was very abstract, unpunctuated, almost deliberately incoherent, and the text of THE CLOSET was a more or less conventional and even linear punctuated narrative. I worked this way for a while thinking that I could sustain this duality of the text and of the closet. On the one side there was the original closet with the boy in it, and on the other the closet where the writer was writing the boy’s story. But gradually the two closets began to overlap, and the two texts merge. It is at this point that I realized that the voices were not separate, but contained in one another, and therefore they had to be abstracted into one another. Very much as a painter goes from a realistic design to total abstraction, I erased, blurred, abstracted the story. What was left then was the essence of that story. That, in fact, is what I wanted to get to: the *essential* of what had happened in the closet. And so I removed punctuation, capital letters, names, syntax even, any element of the language which moved toward discursiveness and narrativeness. What remained was a sort of non-syntactical delirium locked in the design of the pages, the absolute *squareness* of the pages, and inside these squares the words

trembled like leaves. That kind of work does not happen by accident, I assure you, it is carefully crafted.

Q: It seems that up to the point when your art could finally handle what happened—however evasively—you were grappling with a paradox. You had to speak the unspeakable. The imaginative content of your work was to be something that happened in what Ihab Hassan calls the Age of the Unimaginable.

FEDERMAN: I think too much emphasis has been put—not only in my case but in the case of those who have written about that experience of the Holocaust—on the impossibility of writing about it. I could easily write the story of what happened to me and to my family. That story, or a story very much like it, has been told a thousand times. What is more important is why I am refusing to write it in a normal, conventional manner, let's say the way Elie Wiesel writes about the Holocaust? Why have I been reluctant to do this—to give away that story just as it happened, loaded with emotion and sentimentality, and melodrama? The reason I cannot write like that, like Elie Wiesel, is because between the original event and my sitting down to write the story of what happened back in 1942 there is Samuel Beckett, the work of Samuel Beckett. It is impossible for a writer who is serious about what he is doing not to confront the work of Beckett before he begins himself. For me the experience of having read and reread Beckett, and of having spent many years writing about his work, is as crucial in my life as the experience of having somehow escaped the Holocaust. Beckett *changed* me, deeply affected my way of thinking and of writing. When the day came for me to write what I had to write, I knew that I could not do it like Elie Wiesel, even though we shared part of the same experience. That would be too simple. It would mean cheating myself. Beckett showed me that one cannot simply write *the* story, but one must also write the impossibility of writing *the* story, that is to say one must also write the anguish and even the unavoidable failure implicit in all writing. That does not mean that I write like Beckett, or that Beckett had a direct influence on my work, but that Beckett taught me how to think about writing. Reading such novels as *Molloy*, *The Unnamable*, or *How It Is*

taught me that writing fiction is not only what can be expressed but also what cannot be expressed. Writing fiction is always about the necessity and the impossibility of doing it.

Q: Could you point out aspects of your prose where you *depart* from Beckett?

FEDERMAN: In *Molloy*, you remember, there is a remarkable passage, totally gratuitous in terms of the structure of the book, where Molloy is trying to work out a way to suck sixteen stones in order, without sucking the same stone twice. He shuffles them in four pockets, he calculates, tries out other systems, goes through incredible mental gymnastics. It's a most amazing piece of fiction—beautiful, moving, disturbing, funny, sad. And yet one could remove that passage from the book and it would not alter its form in the least. It does not seem essential to the whole, and yet it is the whole of *Molloy*, the book, and Molloy, the character. And when eventually Molloy throws away his stones just when he is on the verge of finding the solution, he erases the whole passage. As one reads this, one goes through an amazing kind of acrobatics—linguistic and intellectual gymnastics. And then it is erased as if nothing happened. The whole thing was for nothing. It's like watching a circus act where an acrobat does difficult and dangerous somersaults but always falls back on his feet, and we have seen perfection. Or same thing with a beautiful ballerina who goes through all the pirouettes and when she stops there is nothing left but the image of perfection. That's how Beckett works. In my own *Double or Nothing* there is a passage towards the end of the book where the narrator (the writer-to-be who wants to lock himself in a room to write the book that you are reading) calculates how many packs of chewing gum he will need in the room in order to survive for a year, and beyond that calculates how many times and how long one can chew a stick of gum, and so on. And he too, like Molloy (and this was, of course, deliberate on my part) goes through an incredible mental gymnastics, but unlike Molloy who leaves us with the image of perfection when he throws away his stones, my acrobat falls flat on his face after he has completed his linguistic somersaults and leaves us with the image of failure. In other words, if you go to the circus or to the ballet, and in the course of the program

the acrobat or the ballerina falls down, what you remember afterwards is not beauty or gracefulness, but clumsiness. In Beckett you remember beauty and grace, and perfection. In my work you are left with deliberate clumsiness and failure. Yes, it is deliberate. As such it is no longer an imitation, or a pastiche, or even a parody of Beckett. It is a way for me and my work to pull away from Beckett, to free myself from his work.

Q: And your intention with this clumsiness, the final effect we leave the circus with? What is it aiming at?

FEDERMAN: Ultimately what it is aiming at is the same thing Beckett is doing. Obviously we are talking about language, always about language. Earlier I quoted this statement: "Language is what gets us where we want to go and prevents us from getting there." Somehow in spite of the obstacle of language Beckett managed to get where he wanted to go. I have a feeling that I have not yet managed to overcome the obstacle of language, and therefore have not yet arrived where I want to go. Beckett, of course, has arrived. There is no question about that. Let's say that I am on my way there. But I may never get there, wherever *there* may be.