



fiction

Grandmother's Wardrobe

by Aali A Rehman

MR Osman, back from the mosque after prayers, was slowly preparing for bed when his daughter Marufa came in on her usual brief nightly visit to his room. Her eyes flicked around, from force of habit, to see what needed cleaning or arranging in the room.

"Baba," she said, after she had tightened a cord on his mosquito-net and retrieved a tea-cup from the bedside table, "do you have a lot of your things in Grandmother's wardrobe? I was wondering — if there's room to spare in it — could I use it too for some of my clothes?" Apologetically, she added: "With the children growing up, the two closets and the steel trunks that we have upstairs aren't really enough. I've been tucking things away here and there so much that my room is looking really untidy. I thought if I could store some of our winter clothes in Grandmother's wardrobe I could make space in my trunks for other things."

Mr Osman looked speculatively at the wardrobe that stood against the western wall of his room. It was actually an old fashioned, solid-looking teak almirah, a large closet, partitioned into halves with shelves and drawers on the right side and wardrobe space on the left where a brass rail at the top accommodated hangers. Traditionally referred to in the family as "Grandmother's wardrobe," it had originally belonged to his mother, having been a present from her husband, who had had it brought over for her from Calcutta in an uncharacteristic fit of extravagance.

In Mr Osman's boyhood home it had been by far the most expensive and most handsome piece of furniture. Upon his mother's death, soon after that of his father, neither of his two elder brothers or their wives had cared to keep it on, considering it an old relic that needed to be sold and replaced with something modern. Mr Osman, on the other hand, had a deep attachment to the so-called relic and he had let it be known that if no one else wanted the thing he would gladly take it off their hands at the appropriate time. After his marriage, he had of-

fered it hesitantly to his wife and to his great pleasure, she had accepted it almost as if it was a family inheritance and had continued to call it, just as he did from force of habit, "Mother's wardrobe." And she had used it exactly as his mother had done: it became the repository of the family's valuables, jewellery and important papers, and of their best, rarely used clothes. The wardrobe had moved with them several times when they changed houses but had come to rest in this room some twenty years ago when he had finally built his own house. For twelve years, ever since his wife's death, it had stood where it was now, though its contents were not what they once were. His wife's clothes-for-occasions, including the saris she had received at her wedding, his own clothes, the sherwanis and achkans that he had once worn, the well-washed starched and carefully folded bed-linen that was meant for guests and festival occasions, had long ago been either given away or used up and never replaced.

The wardrobe now contained the few winter clothes that he had, and the drawers were mostly filled with papers, documents acquired over the years, useless really but which he still had not been able to bring himself to throw away, among them his father's diaries. The only important items that it contained were the deeds and records of taxes paid on property that he still owned: the house and a small amount of land just outside the city. During all the years that the wardrobe had stood in the room it had never been used by anyone else, and it was well known in the family as the one possession that he still valued. It was this that accounted for Marufa's hesitant and apologetic tone, as if she was asking for the loan of a personal belonging or of intruding upon her father's privacy.

Mr Osman's gaze wandered over the wardrobe. "No," he said, "I don't have too many things in there. Yes, of course you can use whatever space there is. In fact, I think I could make more space for you. I'll go through the drawers tomorrow and see if I can't get rid of some of the papers and files I have in them."

"Oh no, Baba," Marufa said quickly.

"That won't be necessary. I wouldn't want you to exert yourself. You don't have to get rid of anything. I only want the space you're using."

"I won't exert myself," said Mr Osman mildly, to put her at ease. "I'll look through the drawers at my leisure, maybe take the whole day tomorrow to do it, and you can start putting your things in the day after. The inside of the wardrobe does need cleaning up, you know. There must be dust and even cobwebs in there. The last time it was cleaned up was when your mother did it." And I don't want to remember how many years ago that was, he told himself.

Marufa looked at him doubtfully. "All right. But if there's any cleaning to be done, I'll do it. Don't you go and start

from government service, and especially after his wife's death, it had been he who had really run his household. He had always, early every morning, done the grocery shopping for the day's meals, often decided what each meal would consist of, had looked after the small kitchen garden in the backyard, seen to the little repairs around the house, even to the daily sweeping and cleaning and general tidying up. It had kept him busy, and after decades of keeping busy, he had never imagined any other kind of life. But during the last few years he had gradually surrendered almost all household duties to Marufa and her husband and resigned himself to the position that, it seemed to him, his daughter and son-in-law wanted him to occupy, the position of

asked favours of him, he sat in judgement in quarrels and disputes; he was invited to every wedding, attended every funeral — funerals that had become more frequent as, one by one, and sometimes within weeks of each other, old residents of the street, his peers, had died off.

Marufa and her husband Jalal had lived with him for eighteen years, from the beginning of their marriage. Jalal was the proprietor of a book and stationery shop in the central city market where he spent the greater part of each day. He was moderately successful in his business but had never really prospered, which had been the original reason why, after Marufa had insisted upon marrying him when she was only seventeen, that Jalal had taken up residence with his father-in-law. When Mr Osman's other two children, his eldest daughter and only son, had settled abroad, it had been understood that Marufa and Jalal would continue to live with him and inherit the house after his death.

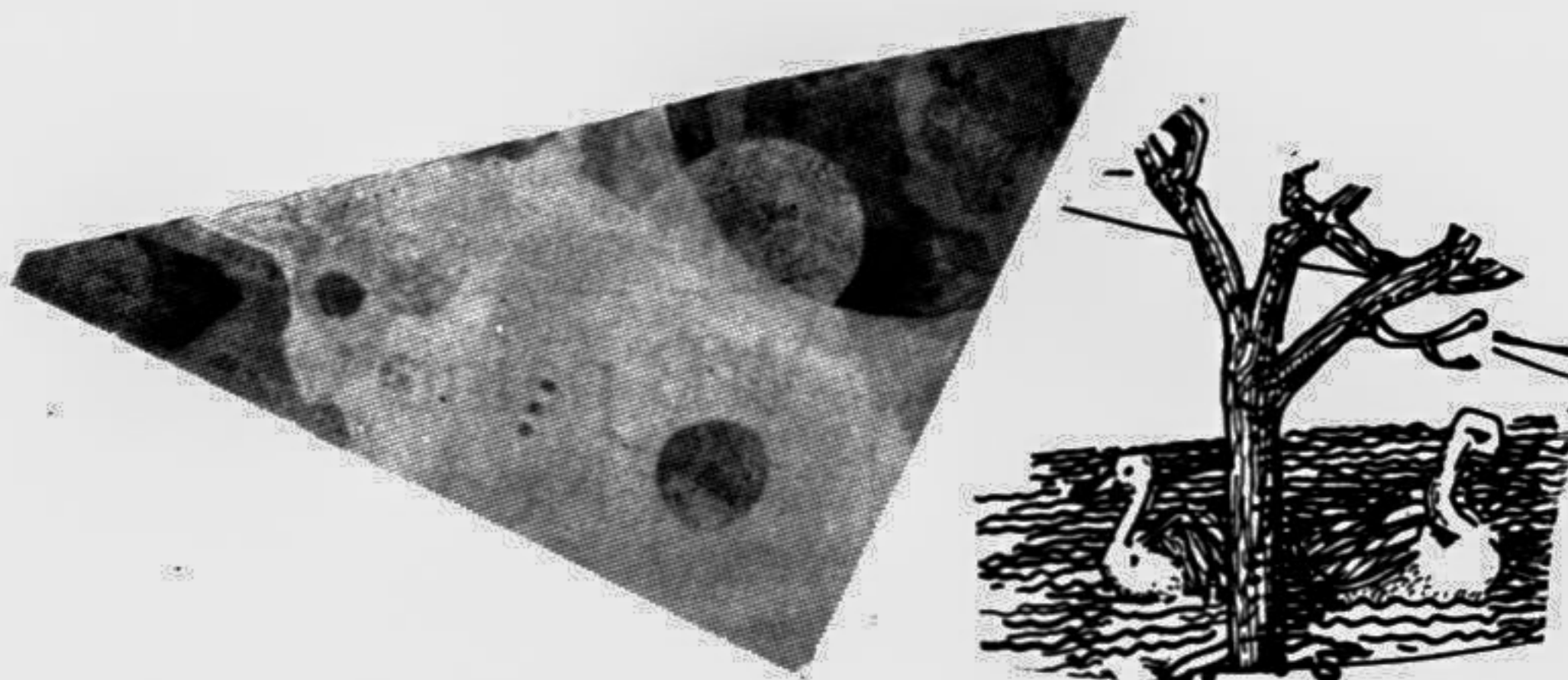
But Marufa now had little time to give him from the beginning of one day to its end, though she saw to his needs dutifully and conscientiously. She cooked dishes occasionally that she knew he liked, put meals on the table at the times he preferred, had his clothes washed, his room on the ground floor cleaned and tidied, and sent his tea to him in the mornings and afternoons. His grandchildren, the sixteen-year-old Amer and his eleven-year-old sister Amena, had once provided diversion and pleasure but when they had ceased to be little children, they had begun to live their own lives and have their own diversions which he could not share. Miraculously, he had been spared the usual illnesses of old age. Beyond the arthritis that had been his companion from a relatively early age, he had no medical complaints and he had often thought that it was partly his excellent health that had relegated him, in his home, to the status of a well-worn piece of furniture, so familiar that it was little regarded — like the wardrobe that stood in his room with the unmistakable patina of age upon it.

In the years since his wife's death, he had learnt to come to terms with his loneliness. Throughout his marriage, like most husbands, he had never thought that his wife would die before him. But she did die before him, and he had striven to cope with that fact and with his grief. The edge of the pain had dulled by now, though it remained as an ache within him, coming to the surface sometimes on sleepless nights or when random moments and random sights reminded him of her and shook free a thought or touched a memory.

When he opened the doors of the wardrobe that midmorning, more than one memory floated free as the mistiness of the interior washed over him in a cloud. The wardrobe smelt of damp and aging paper, but he could detect in it distinctly the odour that was, as far back as he could remember, peculiar to it: a mixed redolence of the amber attar favoured by his parents, of mothballs, old brocade, starched clothes washed in locally-made soap, and the dried neem leaves that had lain on the bottoms of drawers for years in the belief that they kept white ants and termites away. It had smelt like that when his mother had used the wardrobe and it had continued to do so ever after. There were no vials of amber attar in it any more, or brocade sherwanis or Benarasi saris, but the suggestion of these things had definitely remained trapped in it, apparently forever. Cupboards and closets didn't exude odours like that any more, he thought; it was a smell that belonged to an age that had passed away.

Mr Osman stood for a while, breathing in the vestiges of it, while little memories flashed through his mind; of himself as a boy, rushing into his parent's room after prayers on the mornings of I'd-ul-Fitr, in company with his brothers, to receive from his mother shiny one-rupee coins taken from the middle drawer of the wardrobe; of his wife, standing placidly before these open doors, taking out clothes to air on the first cool and sunny day after the rainy season; of how the ancient smell of the wardrobe used to fill the room, even in the most humid weather, when his wife opened it for some reason.

To be continued



dusting and brushing. After you've been through the papers, call me and I'll do the cleaning."

"I will," said Mr Osman shortly and she left the room, teacup in hand. Marufa usually treated him as if he were too old for any kind of work and he had expected protests of the kind that she had just uttered. Nevertheless, he did not intend to call her when he started cleaning up the wardrobe the next day.

After his usual late breakfast the next morning he found himself actually looking forward to the task of going through the drawers of the wardrobe. These days he had so little to do in the house that the prospect of a few hours activity, even a mundane one, gave him a feeling of pleasurable anticipation. For many years after his retirement

the elderly parent who needed to be looked after.

He had receded into the background not only within the family but in his community as well. Few people bothered now to look in his direction as he sat on the front porch in the afternoons, or took his "constitutional", as he still called it, on this street that had been so quiet and backwaterish when he built his house here twenty years ago but which had become so noisy and crowded and bazaarlike in recent years — filled with small shops, large shops, work-shops, auto and motorcycle repair-shops, garment factories, even a cinema hall. Twenty years ago he was an acknowledged figure on the street; he was an elder of the neighbourhood, residents brought their problems to him,

book review

Marx's Poems in Lucid Bengali

by Waheedul Haque

WHEN Karl Heinrich Marx in the mid-nineteenth century drew the best of mankind, as if spell-bound, to his works as well as to his life, who knew the spell would continue for well over a century. He attracted the world's accomplished writers, intellectuals and artists, scientists and professionals. The political activists who took up the Marxian banner and carried it to inconceivable domains, were a completely new breed — excelling the politicians of the contemporary world and of yesteryears in intellect and commitment, integrity and creativity. When after the collapse of Soviet socialism, the era of Marx seemed to have come to a close — this was no handiwork of any intellectual evangelism. The promise of a new dawn and the coming of the new man, all deduced from Marx's writings and philosophy, gathered scholars and writers,

artists and scientists into a following world has never known, one even excelling perhaps the Buddhist intellectual and artistic resurgence sweeping almost all of the world and for more than a millennium. The end of the Marxism era was fashioned by the worst in man. American machinations compounded by Russian parasitism was the main force.

Now that the socialist spectre has receded, it should be easier for all to take an unbiased and objective and fair view of the phenomenon of Marx. The western nations need not anymore paint him as a Prussian monster. And the breed that canonised him as more than a saint and a god for the goddess are by now extinct. Now has come the time to marvel at this man who is on record to have said that he most hated a philistine. Unfortunately for him, the wonderful generations of man worldwide that worshipped him from head or heart or both had always been overwhelmed by leaderships of unredeemed

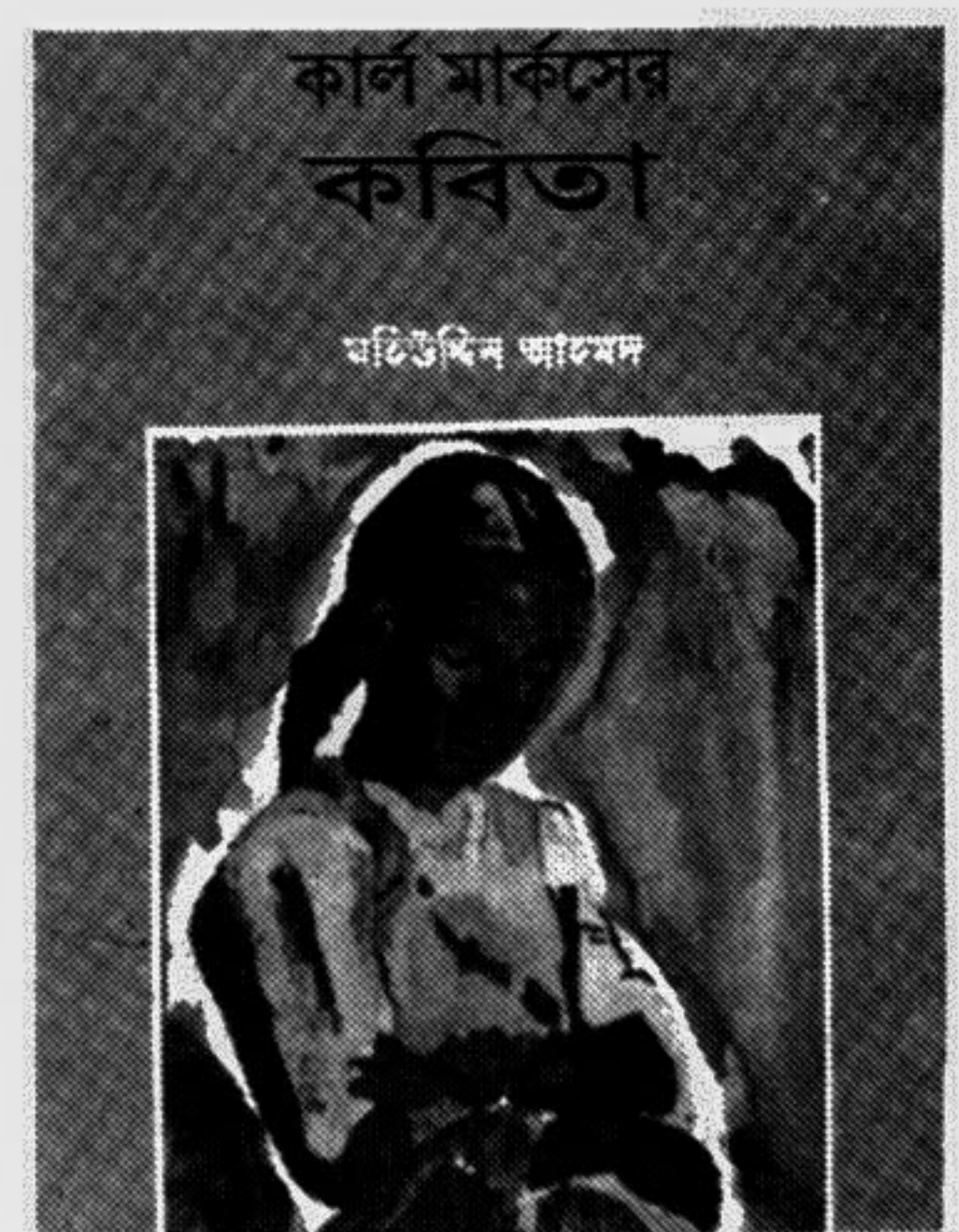
philistines. Marx believed one that did not respond to poetry could not be a revolutionary. He himself chose to become one when he felt that he was only a failed poet. Poetry was his first love, and it continued to act as a balm till his last.

It is natural that Marx set his standards at a level too high for others — in everything. His poems, long available in translation to English readers, never corroborated his idea of unsuccess in poetry. The pieces get to you all right and at times tug at certain strings inside too. One is not sure what magic it could work in the German original. Some of these interesting poems are now available in Bengali, thanks to environmental activist and consultant Mahiuddin Ahmed. Another Bengali translation hit the market somewhat later than Ahmed's but the first performance had so engrossed this writer that he resisted himself from looking up the other book lest the charm took a denting. I am

happy to say Ahmed's survived my poring over the other subsequently.

For Mahiuddin Ahmed it must have been hard labour for there is no history of his wallowing in poetry although he has written and published profusely both in English and Bengali — all in prose. Happily for the reader the labour doesn't show and the love is for all to feel in his highly readable easy-flowing Bengali. Poetry is language's frontier with prose at the back and with music in the front. Perhaps. Not all contemporary practitioners of Bengali poetry have the right command over their language to do some able frontiersmanship. The result is bad language strewn all over what should be of the order of purity and beauty of, say, the mazar of Salim Chishti at Fatehpur Sikri and just opposite the stupendous Buland Darwaza. No, bloomers don't impede when you take on the 25 pieces in Mahiuddin's volume.

Mahiuddin has stuck all along to a vintage *Payar* beat you easily find in



Krittibash's *Ramayan*, smelling of moth-ball. But it gave the poems a clas-

sic incantation which is more than all right with me. But I don't know if these romantic poems were couched in any classical metre in the German.

At the outset there are four sonnets addressed to Jenny Marx. In three volumes Marx had addressed her dear wife 87 poems. Not satisfied with this, he went on to make another anthology of 40 poems, all telling of his love for her. Of all his poetic ventures, he himself liked the poems of this volume. Reading the four sonnets we wish he had kept to this genre as well as spirit. We could then get a remarkable poet. But many of the other pieces in Mahiuddin's volume show the activist in Marx getting the better of the artist in him. The priceless Marx mankind has now can hardly be traded off for a poet, however evocative.

For Bengali Marx-enthusiasts and specially for the worshipping leftists the poems in Mahiuddin's commendable translation will be a great help in breaking a bad and wrong stereotype of Karl Marx.

essay

Raymond Federman: His surfictionist Position

by Neamat Imam

Continued from last week

THEN what is the difference between a writer and a reader, if it is must since we find two different connotations in the words — writer on the one hand, and reader, on the other! Or why a reader is a reader and a writer is but a writer?

IV

Federman wrote another article 'Before Postmodernism and After' some-times between 1989 and 1993. The Federman of this article is modest, systematic, experienced and more engaged in

the demands of life, life which is still not linear and free of chaos, and life which still compels human beings to live it though without the taste of peace, harmony and discipline. While writing this article, he must have remembered the one written in 1973, for they are on same subject, same debate. He must have reassessed what he had said sixteen years ago about fiction, metafiction or criticism and have come to an objective decision what fiction should be or not, what fiction should say (if still it needs to say anything) or not. Indeed, he is more than nostalgic in the later essay, which discusses the past and prospect of the surfiction.

The formation, orientation, evaluation and continuation of such a fiction

started with Samuel Beckett, says Federman, and died (changed Tense) with the very death of Beckett. Beckett said: 'Sometimes I confuse myself with my shadow, and sometimes don't.' Federman terms Beckett's *Murphy* and *Watt* the first surfictions and *Stirring Still* of the same writer the last in this field. In 'Before Postmodernism and After,' he recognizes that the ground on which the entire oeuvre of Beckett was founded was the contradictory condition of movement and immobility, words and silence, wandering and interment, etc. of which the contradictory condition of moving immobility came to be the fundamental to the making and unmaking of surfiction. Apart from Beckett, in the United States surfiction came to have a

flow through wide and intensive discussion on authors like Kafka, Nabokov and Borges, who are still burning matters in the American academia.

Federman does not believe in the death of surfiction; he uses the word *migration* for this death. Or *interruption*. A movement is interrupted by such others when it is in progress, and in this way, says Federman, Cubism interrupted Impressionism, Constructivism interrupted Cubism, Surrealism interrupted Dadaism, Structuralism interrupted Existentialism, and so on. But it is not still clear what has interrupted Postmodern fiction or surfiction, he says, while rejecting the minimum possibility of Cyberpunk Fiction, Hi-tech Fiction, Sudden Fiction, Illumi-

nated Fiction, or Trans-fiction to be the agent. In spite of its final migration with Samuel Beckett, surfiction started changing its tense gradually with the death of such figures as Nabokov, Foucault, Barthes, Borges, Calvino, Barthelme, Bernhard and others of the kind.

But, Federman believes, what is said about surfiction in both the articles is not all about it; it is like confusing with your shadow. In future it may get another name, it may demand different discourse, and it may be engaged in the way the literature of the Middle Ages is engaged nowadays. If we recognize the facticity of this belief, and also of what he said in another article with the same purpose — that 'the act of writing can

only be a PRE-TEXT to the eventual meaning the reader will give to a discourse' and that 'all modern discourses could be called PRE-TEXTS,' because they are 'reasons, excuses, justifications, springboards, for the ultimate texts' — as readers of surfictional discourse and surfiction, we may say that Federman himself is a PRE-TEXT of this kind to be totalized and finalized by us or by the future readers of Federman and of fiction, and that is better for human knowledge, for our pride is in announcing our own power inadequate, our own discovery irrelevant, and our own imagination too salty, too seamy, too unreasonable. Federman Jr. will come to discard, displace and dislocate Raymond Federman.