

## **TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: REWRITING OF HISTORY AS FICTION**

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### **I. History as Fiction:**

Individuals and societies need a knowledge of the past for their cultural, national and personal identities. Knowledge of the past keeps the memory of mankind alive, and provides a sense of belonging and a sense of recognition in the world. As Northrop Frye argues in **Anatomy of Criticism**, "the culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind, but our own buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a discovery in which we see, not our past lives, but the total cultural form of our present life" (346).

In order to understand the cultural, literary and historical forms of contemporary reality, and to anticipate the confusion resulting from these concepts, it is necessary to ask a crucial question. What is the knowledge of the past? This question inevitably initiates a chain of other questions that follow. Is an objective knowledge of the past possible? Can we know the past reality in all its versions? If not, are the selected versions of history valid, or do they give a true account of what went on before us? In short, what is history? This article will address and argue about historical and fictional representation in the light of Hayden White's views on historical writing.

First of all, my argument is based on the definition of history as a fictional form, and secondly, I will attempt to show that any conception of historical reality is realized in narrativity. To narrate is a natural impulse, and recording historical events is accomplished by narrative. The problem of translating observed facts or events into telling can only be solved by fashioning those facts in a narrative pattern. In this respect, history is an organized narrative of the past. Dixon Wecter defines history as "the road map of the past" (38). This road map of the past is accessible only through narrative. In other words, history is no longer regarded as the accumulation of facts and

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dates for the sake of storage. It should not, however, be viewed as a story for its own sake either. Yet, the dichotomy between historical events and fictional events has always characterized the difference between historical and fictional representation since Aristotle. For Aristotle the purpose of fiction was not the communication of fact, but the telling of a story. History, in contrast to this, dealt with particular facts, events and persons in specific time-space locations. This idea dominated the Western outlook on history until the 20th century. Accordingly, the difference between historical and fictional representation was thought precisely to be the difference between real events and imagined or invented events. But, in fact, there is no such difference in the representations of reality, whether it is a past, present or an hypothetical reality; because, the discourses that history and fiction employ are actually similar. Both are subject to the same fictional techniques of writing. Both fiction and history give us a verbal image of reality.

History is a form of fiction, a story about reality, in which the referents of the discourse claim to correspond to some observable, empirical reality. Fiction is also a story about reality, but its referents do not always give the illusion of point by point correspondence to an outside reality. Both forms of representation deal with human experience. History refers to the real domain directly, fiction refers to it indirectly. Both history and fiction deal with the past and present perceptions of reality and truth. The remembered past is always a present concern. Therefore, the notion of the past is contemporaneous. We reach down to the records, dating from the remotest periods to the most recent ones, and register them in the present. In other words, the process of viewing the records of the past is a process of interpretation of those records with present consciousness, just as those records are themselves interpretations of facts in their own time. Recording the past is an interpretive activity realized in a given form of narrative. Narrating the past always requires the form of a story because of the need to shape the events in a recognizable form. Thus, historical narrative employs all the strategies of story-telling. The historian works like a novelist when he is writing about the past events and personalities. Since he cannot narrate his material at random, in a chaotic way, he has to shape it in the form of a story, imposing a pattern on his material. Therefore, the facts are re-organized according to the historical imagination. Thus, the reality of the past becomes a discursive reality. Since we can never know, in precise detail and scope, the social, personal, cultural and

historical reality of the past, we can never claim to be objective in our knowledge of it. We can only know the past in its written form. We can, however, re-evaluate, re-interpret and re-think the written documents from different perspectives. In this respect, history can be known only as a discursive reconstruction of the past. As Dixon Wecter aptly argued in 1957, concerning the narration of historical events, "powers of symmetry, proportion, aesthetic design, controlled emotion, even a knack of playfulness, and at high moments a certain unforced eloquence can be summoned into the service of truth" (43). Wecter was, in fact, stating that writing of history is subjected to the form of fiction and cannot avoid metaphoric use of language.

Hayden White calls the writing of history as "the fictions of factual representation" (**The Literature of Fact** 21). White calls attention to the fact that historical narratives, too, are verbal artifacts. They have fictive natures, because the historical events are cast in the form of stories. Hayden White's precise statement about this important factor in historical writing is worth noting. He says: "There is something in a historical masterpiece that cannot be negated, and this non-negatable element is its form, the form which is its fiction" ("Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 43).

Any chronicle of past reality demands a selection from the historian who always faces the problem of choice. He has to include certain details in his discourse and exclude others in order to construct a coherent account of the past. According to White our historical knowledge is determined by what is left out of the story. Our understanding of history depends upon the excluded facts:

For it is in this brutal capacity to exclude certain facts in the interest of constituting others as components of comprehensible stories that the historian displays his tact as well as his understanding. The "overall coherence" of any given "series" of historical facts is the coherence of story, but this coherence is achieved only by a tailoring of the "facts" to the requirements of the story form. ("Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 44-45).

Thus, the form of history in the writer's hand becomes subjected to the form of his story. The historian cannot avoid imposing the form of a story into the historical record. In the uncovering of the facts, the restoration of those facts are transformed into a discursive texture. The facts for the historian present themselves in a structure of

contingently related phenomenon. The historian transforms this mode of contiguity into a mode of metaphor, metonymy and irony that constitute his re-creation process in language. What the historical text presents, then, is an image of reality, just like the verbal images the fictional texts present. On formal grounds, both historical and fictional texts are verbal expressions of human consciousness, human experience and events. They both present "an insight into or illumination of the human experience of the world... The discourse taken in its totality as an image of some reality, bears a relationship of correspondence to that of which it is an image" (White, "Fictions of Factual Representation" 23).

There is no standpoint of individual, social, political or historical perception that is truly objective. It is not possible to write history without using literary techniques. Since perceptions vary according to social, historical and political milieu, and are conditioned by the form of the discourse they use, there emerges many different discourses of historical representation. Thus, it is an illusion, which comes from the 19th century understanding of historical writing, that the historian remains true to facts, and that history can produce precise and objective knowledge.

Most Nineteenth-century historians did not realize that, when it is a matter of trying to deal with past facts, the crucial consideration for him who would represent them faithfully are the notions he brings to his representation of the way parts relate to the whole which they comprise. They did not realize that the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is -in its representation- a purely discursive one. Novelists might be dealing only with imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the object of a representation, is a poetic process. (White, "Fictions of Factual Representation" 27-28).

Recent critical and literary theories, have pointed to the impossibility of purely objective interpretation and knowledge of reality whether past or present. In this view, an objective knowledge of the past is utterly doubtful. Wendy Steiner mentions this interpretive indeterminacy of historical knowledge by arguing that the past is



unknowable in its own terms; it can only be re-evaluated in terms of its present perceptions:

When the objectivity of knowledge, and the dependability of interpretation are in doubt, the past becomes utterly elusive, unknowable in its own terms and thus purely subject to the present. How then can we distinguish history from fiction; how can we read beyond our time into another? (324)

The historian uses precisely the same strategies of language that a novelist uses. He has to relate the series of facts, which exist only in fragments, into a coherent whole in order to construct an ordered picture of the past out of its contingent disorder. The historian works like a novelist when he imposes a form on the reality that operates as the object of representation. In short, history can no longer be opposed to fiction on formal grounds. Thus, history and fiction are not the antithesis of each other, but complement each other formally. As Hayden White convincingly argues, "even the **Origin of Species**, that **summa** of 'the literature of fact' of the nineteenth century, must be read as a kind of allegory- a history of nature meant to be understood literally by appealing ultimately to an image of coherence and orderliness which it constructs by linguistic 'turns' alone" ("Fictions of Factual Representation" 43).

While seeking to explain the facts of historical events, the historians have to describe the facts in language whose basic systematics are deeply embedded in figures of speech. The only difference between the historian and the writer of imaginative fiction is in the kind of events they describe, but the techniques they use in their discourse are the same. Thus, the radical opposition of history to fiction is subverted by the very discourse they seek to describe their respective events. Historical discourse, too, is poetic in its structure. It aims at constructing stories out of mere congeries of facts. Historical record becomes complete when it is transformed into a story. Otherwise, fragmentary facts make no sense at all. Historians bring plausible explanations to the historical facts by fashioning them with the form of a story.

The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive

strategies, and the like- in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play.

(White, "Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 47)

Historical events are potential elements of a story, and therefore, they cannot be considered as self-revealing or value-neutral facts. The historian's choice of plot-structure or story type endows them with different interpretations and meanings. For example, the events of the French Revolution can be interpreted tragically, romantically or ironically, depending upon the kind of plot-structure the historian employs for those events. How a given historical situation is to be shaped depends upon the historian's notion of the kind of story he will tell. As Hayden White states, "This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation" (Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 48). In history, the events themselves do not have inherent plot-structures such as found in novels, but they may suggest possible story forms to the historian. The historian constructs a narrative account of how the events happened. This narrative can figure in various forms, as tragedy, comedy, satire or romance. The historian shapes the events under certain narrative categories. The accuracy of the reflection of the set of events within a given plot-structure, however, cannot be observed objectively. In short, the direct transcription from facts to narrative is a problematic issue. First of all, the language that the historian uses is not a vehicle for the direct correspondence between the world and the word. The transcription process from events to their narrative form is the fictive component in historical writing. Historical narrative, then, is only a verbal model of the past events. But the verbal model cannot be a totally true reproduction of the original set of events. Therefore, historical writing should not be considered as an adequate reproduction of the past. The historian can only create a model of the past in a chosen plot-structure. Hayden White considers those models of past events as "metaphorical statements which suggest a relation of similitude between such events... and the story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings" ("Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 51). Historical narratives function as formal representations of the past. So, the reality of historical narratives can only be discursive. As Alison Lee argues, "the idea of history as discursive practice is informed by the linguistic theories which challenge the traditional position that... the word is the direct means to the thing it represents, and that the connection between them is natural..." (35).

The idea that words have a true relationship with the object they represent, which were called into question by the structuralist theories, is initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure. Accordingly, the view of language as a system of signs related arbitrarily to other signs and to what they signify, has been the dominant view since the turn of the century. The most influential premise behind Saussure's view of language is the relationship between the sign and the thing it represents. The correspondence between word and thing is not natural. Here lies the assumption that meaning is determined by the differences between the structures. Words are endowed with meaning, not because of their descriptive quality, but because of their difference from other words. In this respect, it is the linguistic structures that determine our perceptions of reality, not the reflection of reality. Thus, the possibility of the objective perception of reality is called into question by the very nature of language itself. In this view, historical narrative cannot directly mirror the past reality it seeks to describe. It can only render a metaphoric apprehension of that reality. By constituting the past events within a specific story line, the historian provides us with possible meanings or explanations of a given sequence of historical events. In a different plot structure those events would be endowed with other potential meanings. The meanings are determined by their various forms of narrative. In "Historical Text as Literary Artifact," Hayden White emphasizes this relationship between meanings and the structure they appear in: "Histories, then, are not only about events but also about the possible set of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure" (55).

## **II. Fiction as History:**

The recent historiographic metafiction explores the same discursive relationships in the past events. In this type of fiction history is used, not extra-textually as in historical novels, but as a discursive construct. These novels use Realist conventions in dealing with historical events, but at the same time they seek to subvert those conventions by asking how we know history, and by exposing the textuality of historical reality. They systematically transgress the rules of historical novels. Traditional historical novels often hide the line between fictional representation of facts and the facts themselves, and give the illusion that the novel is a mirror of some historical reality. Brian Mc Hale observes this strategy of representation as follows:

Traditional historical novels strive to suppress these violations, to hide the ontological "seams" between fictional projections and real-world facts. They do so by tactfully avoiding contradictions between their versions of historical figures and the familiar facts of these figures' careers, and by making the background norms governing their projected worlds conform to accepted real-world norms. (**Postmodernist Fiction** 17)

Historical fictions are Realist fictions. The tension between historical and fictional invention is camouflaged in these novels which offer a direct link between the extra-literary facts and their fictional projections. In historiographic metafiction the direct correspondence between reality and fiction is challenged by the text's structure. In these novels the tension between the novel's fictional world and the real-world historical fact is exposed by a combination of realistic and fictional modes. Thus, they violate the ontological boundary between fact and fiction. As Brian Mc Hale argues, "Where the classic historical novel sought to ease the ontological tension between historical fact and historical invention, and to camouflage if possible the seam along which fact and fiction meet, postmodernist historical fictions... aim to exacerbate this tension and expose the seam" (**Constructing Postmodernism** 152). First of all, historiographic metafictions take a historically verifiable object, event or a person and show that these can only be known through written evidence. They demonstrate that the reality of historical events is the reality created by language, and they assert that the past is only a discursive construct. There is no way of knowing the past outside its own narratives. In this way, these novels make the familiar unfamiliar, and vice versa, by questioning our knowledge of history. As an example to this strategy, I have chosen Raymond Federman's recent novel, **To Whom It May Concern** (1990).

In **To Whom It May Concern** the story is contained in history- that is, the events concerning the roundup of the Jews in a city, which is most probably Paris, during the Second World War. There is also a writer who plans to write a novel about the experiences of two cousins during the war and reveal the base of reality. The writer's story is partly his story and partly history. History itself is shown to be a narrative, or only a story. The writer shows clearly the process of re-creating the past out of the discontinuous, fragmented and contingent historical events. The novel addresses the issue of the



inability of the realistic conventions to communicate a past reality. The writer cannot avoid imposing metaphorical structures on his story in his attempts to make sense of what happened almost fifty years ago. He cannot communicate the whole of reality, because the historical knowledge he wants to transmit is ambiguous and mostly indeterminate due to its mnemonic nature. He can only recontextualize the historical events by the very act of writing. And the act of writing history can only point to the indeterminacy of historical knowledge. It can never refer, in direct correspondence, to the past, or imitate it for that matter. Writing about the past events represents the discourses that make up those events, because the medium of all types of narrative is language which foregrounds, by its very texture, the indeterminacy of both history and fiction. The linguistic sign is arbitrary, and therefore, cannot refer directly to the object it signifies.

The writer of **To Whom It May Concern** is the subject of as well as subjected to both the processes of history and fiction. He is at once the subject of the novel, yet he is subjected to the medium of language which controls hi(s)tory. **To Whom It May Concern** is the story of two cousins who are separated from their families when they were children during the Second World War. Now, one lives in Israel described as a land of false promises full of mirages, and the other in the U.S. which appears as a land of misrepresentation. In between is the country where they were born. These two lands exist as a complementary force of meaning, and of difference between the two cousins. The story is concerned about their reunion in their mature age. These two children escaped the roundups of Jews in the war. The writer wants to invent a narrative of their survival and write about their reunion in Israel fifty years later. But is this ever possible? The novel is framed by this crucial question.

The writer begins the story with a direct address to the reader, or to whom it may concern, and continues to interfere with the plot-structure and the story type in order to inform the reader about the reasons why he is narrating the past, about the design of the story, its themes and subject-matter. When he says that "the reconstruction of a traumatic past" is "a powerful theme" (17), he points to the issue of writing and knowing the past through its narratives. Confronting the problem of fictive and historical representation, the writer tries to re-write or re-present the past in narrative in order to open it up to the present, and to prevent it from being conclusive. In this process of

recreation of the past, the perspectives and points of view alternate with each other, and the stable narrative voice disperses itself over the story. The text itself challenges the story by its self-conscious devices. "That's the story I want to tell" (17), says the writer with resolution, but his attempts at a coherent realistic story are constantly interrupted by the text. The telling of a story is transformed into a process that starts dominating the product. The text installs and then subverts the familiar techniques of telling a story with its literary presentation; such as, the use of characters, narrators, plot, events, in order to point to their arbitrariness in the rewriting of the past.

While playfulness abounds with the Realist narrative techniques, the text tries to subvert the dominant discourse upon which it depends. Here it is realistic historical discourse. Such contradictions are held in ironic tension, not for the sake of linguistic virtuosity, but to point to the impossibility of constructing a copy of the past. Besides, as Hayden White argues, "every fully realized story... is a kind of allegory" (**The Content of the Form** 14). He also states that "the plot of a narrative imposes a meaning on the events that make up its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events all along" (**The Content of the Form** 20). Federman addresses this problematic nature of immanence in the narrative account of the past. He questions the authenticity of any such narrative reconstruction of the past as a meaningful representation of reality. Therefore, in this novel the writer's attempts at a fully realized plot fail. It is because the nature of narrative itself withholds any one meaning to be imposed upon what happened in the past. In this text the entire communication situation includes social, ideological, historical and literary contexts. But the whole situation is not a stable means of production and reception of a story, because both the process and the product exist within a verbal communication situation in a confused amalgam of fact and fiction. This prevents the writer from creating a true representative account of the past. All he can do is offer a model, a version of reality within a given structure. Federman here addresses the important question raised by Creed Greer in his discussion of history and narration in relation to John Barth's novels. Greer asks: "rather than be overwhelmed by the problem of discovering historical truth in a narrative or evidence of the factuality of a historical record, we should ask what follows from the questioning of truth in a narrative?... I conclude that a narrative will follow" (236). Both the need of constructing a story of the past and the problems of constructing it are foregrounded in Federman's narrative: "This

Sarah recently read in a book entitled **To Whom It May Concern**. Even after all these years, like her cousin, she seems to have a need to verify the details of that moment in history which changed the course of her life" (22). The book Sarah reads concerns her own story. But also, as the title indicates, the novel may be addressed to history, to the past. It represents the past in fictional terms. May be the fictional process is the only way of coming to terms with the past for the writer.

On the one hand the novel constitutes its identity on a self-reflexive medium questioning and playing with the Realist narrative conventions, on the other hand it de-constitutes this identity by means of decentering and subverting its self-reflexive medium through a recourse to the discourses of history and politics. Therefore, the novel is marked by both historical awareness and self-reflexivity. It is openly historical and self-reflexive. In general, the novel is an ironic re-reading of the past. This past, which frames the story of Sarah and her cousin, is incorporated in the self-conscious medium of the discourse. The text foregrounds the historical contexts with their social and political dimensions, and exploits those contexts in which it is situated. In the introductory pages the writer starts talking about the problems of how to structure his story: "The question before me, however, is not of the story. The story? Always the same. The question is of the tone and of the shape of the story... Its geometry. Yes, how to stage the story of Sarah and her cousin?" (18). Since he dates each chapter in the form of a diary, the novel reads like the personal notes of an author who has not yet decided about the actual construction of his fiction. Thus, the text surveys about five months of an author's thoughts in epistolary style:

Sunday, November 20

Listen... suppose the story were to begin with Sarah's cousin delayed for a few hours in the middle of his journey... stranded in the city where he and Sarah were born... stranded at the airport... many years after the great war... yes suppose... then after the struggle with words has ended I will step back and watch the lies fall into place to shape a truth ignobly wrestled onto the surface of paper. (9)

As the writer makes it quite explicit here, fiction (as he calls it "lies") will shape "truth" (as will be explored in the guise of history). The writer wrestles with the question of finding a proper narration that can fully reveal the truth about the story of Sarah and her cousin. He

asks, "You see what I have before me?" (14). After their survival, Sarah and her cousin have set up totally different lives in opposite directions. The cousin becomes an artist; as the writer says, "Yes, I have decided to make him a sculptor" (15), and Sarah settles down in Israel, "a land which constantly vacillates between a dream of utopia and a nightmare of destruction" (14). In the process of narration those two characters will either "come out and become" or else "recede into a condition of non-being" (16). In order for them to emerge as fully designated characters, the writer will use the devices of realistic fiction and create a mimetic illusion which forms a binary opposition with the self-consciousness of the text. Federman gives voice to this tug of war between the two conventions when he playfully states: "Though it is an inescapable fact of this story that Sarah and her cousin are survivors of the ultimate destruction, it is not its main concern. Yet it will have to be touched upon. I can already hear the objections. Not that again!" (17). The writer's self-asserting presence becomes an inevitable part of the discourse.

In the first chapter the writer already states that he is suffering from a writer's syndrome. He cannot write. This conversational style has ironic overtones. We realize that the story is not only addressed to history, to the reader, but also to the writer himself. At the end of the chapter he suddenly proclaims that he is now able to construct stories, and asks the reader's opinion on the story of Sarah and her cousin. This chapter ends with the closing of a letter that supposedly came from a friend or a reader. The second chapter starts with a letter form as well. Here, we see the writer replying the letter his friend/reader sent him. The absence of the reader's letter is not noticed because the writer is actually rewriting the same letter, as an answer to the questions. His reader has advised him to be faithful to reality, and even use **Life Magazine** of the time he is writing about, so that the novel looks more factual. But, here the writer's comment indicates an ironic displacement of the Realist methods of writing: "What a great ideal! Fictitious life created from real LIFE MAGAZINE pictures. I could even stick some of the pictures inside the book and have a technicolor story full of solid historical facts" (38). It is sagaciously stated that, "historical facts are not important," because, "they always fade into banality. What matters is the account and not the reality of events" (38). Just as the whole plot-structure of the novel does, these exemplary words clearly indicate the suspicion about the objective translation of historical events into a narrative form. Here, Hayden White's idea that narrative is "a form of discourse that may or may not be used for the



representation of historical events" applies perfectly to Federman's aim in showing the difficulty of writing the past (**The Content of the Form 24**). White argues that narrative used for the purpose of representing real events "arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (24). It is precisely this closure that Federman wants to avoid in his efforts to create an account of the past, hence the self-reflexivity in the text. His novel takes a questioning stance towards the "common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of history, of the inscribing of subjectivity" (Hutcheon 106). It deliberately confronts the paradoxes of fictive and historical representation, and refuses to dissolve either side, yet exploits both.

The aim of the novel is to tell a story of the past without closure. In such a case, "the problem of narrativity turns on the issue of whether historical events can be truthfully represented as manifesting the structures and processes of events met with more commonly in certain kinds of 'imaginative discourses'" (White, **The Content of the Form 27**). While addressing the problem of representing historical events truthfully, Federman comes to view the whole matter as a problem of structure, rather than a problem of content. His text shows the processes at work in the attempts of representation of historical events within a story form. In this respect, this novel will be "a story which will be nothing more than the speculations on ways to tell that story" (38). The problem then is "always form, form, always form!" (38). It is the problem of finding a proper form for the narration of the past events.

**To Whom It May Concern** establishes and then disperses stable narrative voices that use memory to try to make sense of the past. In this way, as a self-conscious text, the novel problematizes the issue of historical knowledge by using irony, and plays fiction off against history. The doubleness of history and fiction is maintained throughout the text. Then the story becomes "Voices within voices entangled in their own fleeting garrulousness" (77). Towards the end of the novel the writer states: "After all this is a story of erasures. Then why not erase all the traces of pretense, and have a story that empties itself of references" (168). The act of writing becomes a manifest issue and is privileged over the story of reference, but its relationship to historical knowledge is also maintained: "Perhaps this time while delighting in form I'll manage to tell a real story" (38). Here,

intertextuality plays a crucial role in supporting the text's referential stance as well as its self-reference. This is realized through allusions to a number of literary figures and forms of the past, like, Blake (38), Rimbaud (31), "ode to the Dead" (51-2), Diderot (103) and so on.

Framing the story with certain historical and ideological contexts is also crucial to discourse. But, if this framing is forced to be the center, it starts to give way to the margins, just as the text starts to question the very basis of any certainty, such as history, truth, or ideology. Yet, "Sarah and her cousin need to be situated in the proper frame... a place of perfect certainty where something fundamental can be said about them" (39). However, this "place of perfect certainty" does not exist within any discourse, let alone in a discourse which questions any certainty. Here, certainty becomes a symbol of erasure from the memory. For example, the cousin has glimpses of the past that he remembers in fragments. In the course of the narrative concerning how the cousin became a sculptor, and how Sarah and her cousin erased the past from their memory, the writer suddenly refers to a missing coat, and many other items that were lost during the roundup. These marginal things gain a sudden significance of meaning that challenge the central issues. By asking the question of "what happened to the father's coat the boy wore when he stepped out of the closet? And what happened to the things the boy found in the coat pocket?" and "what happened to the loaf of bread Sarah left with the neighbor? ... to the yoyo the little girl in the square showed Sarah before being trucked away? And what happened to the package the boy left on the roof?" (157-58), the writer points to the marginal elements of the story. These elements also indicate intertextual fragments of Federman's previous novel, **The Voice in the Closet**. What was central in this novel causes the very point of dispersal in **To Whom It May Concern** by appearing to be the marginal. These elements also imply that in writing of historical events, one cannot avoid the mind's subjective perspective, as well as the issue that what is left out of the story can change its meaning and bring a different interpretation to the past. These marginal details actually provide the major link to historical reference more than the central aspects of the story whose form rejects totalized meanings. That is why Sarah's cousin needs to have a name which the writer cannot easily supply. One reason is, because he is revealed to be the listener of Sarah's story- partaking of the reader's function- he is nameless, and another reason is, because he is one of the characters whose "story overlaps hers" (39). Thus, he is always the cousin without a name.

In fact, the novel encourages the reader to re-think the marginalized aspects of the past and its unfitting elements. Federman shows the importance of those provisional elements which actually contribute to the multiple interpretations of, not only historical events, but of their stories as well. He focuses on what the historical texts do not include (such as the lives of ordinary people and the small details in their tragedy) and foregrounds them in such a way as to make them the defining characteristics of the entire signification process of both history and its story. Federman also subverts the assumption that fiction could pretend as fact, and that facts could be recounted in absolute reference. He decenters the notion of a coherent essence of history, and marginalizes, by a dominant metafictional play, a sense of identity constructed through social relations and power structures.

Moreover, the writer is reluctant to give exact dates of the time of his story, because he wants the reader to understand that the fictionality and the form of his narrative is more important than its factual pretenses, and also because he wants to show that the past cannot easily be reproduced in writing. For him what matters is the truth which does not need factual support to be stated. As he states, "What difference does it make when and where it happened, since none of it is verifiable. We're not dealing with credibility here, but with the truth. That's not the same. Certain truths do not need the specificity of time and place to be asserted" (39). This binary opposition of credibility and truth creates one of the crucial contradictory tensions in the writer's emphasis of his distance from the events of the 1940s. By thus combining "argument by poetics" with "argument by historicism" (Bradbury 15), the text inscribes critical questioning within its discourse: "Dates give history a semblance of stability and continuity. In this story there cannot be stability and continuity" (40).

Trying to invent stories in the likeness of real life events is a frustrating act for the writer, because, after a while the story "would stop, disintegrate, dissipate into incomprehension as if refused to be spoken" (49). In the same manner the writer constantly breaks the frame of reference by interfering with Sarah's story; he puts in other stories and includes anxieties of writing, points attention to the process of writing, stops the narrative to make his address to the reader, and shifts perspectives. The displacement of the main story by the inclusion of other stories and discourses by means of time shifting points to the impossibility of creating master narratives with a central reference. Thus, the story wrestles with referentiality while

not being able to discard its reference to history altogether. Therin lies its most effective paradox concerning historical and fictional representation. Each time the writer attempts to convey a referential process, the text denies totalization, and dissipates into an instability and confusion. For example, the meaning of the novel lies in absences, not in the presence of Sarah and her cousin. The writer states this directly: "you shouldn't ask how absence has marked their lives and shaped their personalities" (40). Yet, the characters try to shake off "the unimaganible condition of non-being" as we observe Sarah being escorted by her neighbor after her parents are arrested by the Germans. Here, the reference to the atrocities of the war points to the historical facts about the destruction and oppression of the Jews during the war. Sarah's and her cousin's story is told in a discontinuous way to convey the confusion of the times. Their respective stories are interlinked. Their beginning and end get confused, and also get ignored during the act of telling. Thus, the blurring between fact and fiction points to a fictional emplotment of historical representation as well as to different kinds of historical interpretations of the same set of events.

While waiting in the lounge of the airport, the cousin remembers the past and Sarah. He tries to remember her survival story, but feels that "he is inventing a story for her, mixing his own survival, his own story with hers, his own words with hers" (49). It is precisely this point that the novel's message lies on, that an objective recreation of the verifiable events in the past seems to be a frustrating act. As soon as one tries to prefigure the events in writing, a form is inevitably imposed on them; that is a form which depends upon the writers' own subjective interpretation. Moreover, the "description of events already constitute interpretations of their nature" (White, "Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 57). The cousin's failure to construct Sarah's survival story is thus envisaged by his own narrative perception of the past events. That means, when the writer tries to create a comprehensible form of the past, which is apparently formless, he cannot construe the primary mode of the original set of events in their original state, but instead he can only "invent" his own narrative account of them. Cast into a new modality, this invention becomes one of the many other possible interpretations of the historical events. This process is best explained by Hayden White:

Narrative style, in history as well as in the novel, would...  
be construed as the modality of the movement from a



representation of some original state of affairs to some subsequent state. The primary meaning of a narrative would then consist of the destruction of a set of events (real or imagined) originally encoded in one tropological mode and the progressive restructuration of the set in another tropological mode. As thus envisaged, narrative would be a process of decodation and recodation in which an original perception is clarified by being cast in a figurative mode different from that in which it came encoded, by convention, authority, or custom.

("Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 58)

When the writer can only arrive at a confused awareness of the past events even when he tries to remember them in detail, he cannot be expected to produce a totalizable re-presentation of the past. He tries to identify the relationships that combine discernible elements of the formless perception of the past. In order to make sense of his past experiences, he can only convey the relationships within the events, in language. The events themselves do not change. What changes are the different interpretations of their relationships. The writer's own interpretation is conditioned by the form of the story of the past he is creating that imposes itself on the past events. The problematic line between the past and its narrative presentation, which is the major issue in the novel, indicates the significant debate about historical knowledge. The novel makes us aware of this new view of history that "the recognition that we can only know the actual by contrasting it with or likening it to the imaginable" (White, "Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 60). When the writer mentions "the difficulty... to keep track of everything, not only the past and the present, but the future too" (76), we realize that we can only have "poetic constructions" dependent on language of the "real" and the actual. This is the manner of making sense of the past that brings us to a higher level of self-consciousness.

By combining referential and self-reflexive modes of narrative in a mixture of fact and fiction, Federman reveals how history can be explained in its different interpretations that arise out of the form of narratives. Furthermore, by inserting remarks arbitrarily about the difficulties of historical representation and the difficulties of fictional processes, he cuts the linear progression of the story and prevents it from becoming a stable entity. The gaps and the undecidable elements, which are signified as "non-being," are

foregrounded as the ultimate contingency and the formlessness of the past. Those gaps in the story are like the grotesque statues of the cousin that do not "reflect reality but the crumbling reality in the mind" (92). As the cousin argues, "truth could not be reproduced" (93), because, like the past, the present itself was "pure chaos" (102). In this way the story keeps its decentered stance. The cousin's sculptures form a symbolic link to the historiographic elements of the story. He wonders in what ways his sculptures are relevant to the lives of the Israelites, to their problems. "His aim is not so much to comfort or celebrate as to confront and disturb" (92). In a way his statues challenge certainty and absolutes. They characterize an energy derived from re-thinking of the value of provisionality, and point to an opposition between making and unmaking, just as the land which was given to the Jews after the war. They make it for themselves and unmake it for its other inhabitants by their "contradictory politics" and "restrictive laws" (91). The cousin's sculptures are also the symbolic manifestations of the postmodernist aesthetics. For example, he contemplates that "truth could not be reproduced" (93), and therefore the rocks he works with and actually presents uncut to the public, in fact represent nothing but themselves: "Huge boulders, untouched and uncut, representing nothing but themselves, as if the stone refused to let forms come out" (93). But, this kind of refusal to connect to the "worldly" creates agonizing doubts in his mind about his work as well as about reality. Thus, the dichotomy of creating a systematic representation of reality and of shattering that system is prevalent throughout the novel. So, the text first establishes and installs traditional codes, and then challenges and undermines them, partaking of a logic of 'both/and' instead of the logic of 'either/or'.

The logic of 'both/and' can be seen in the descriptions of the two lands the cousins have settled after the war. They both reflect hope and hopelessness at the same time. The cousin's land is described as "the fertile land of misrepresentation," and Sarah's as "the barren desert" (102). Both lands are full of "so many possible points of departure" (103) for the story. This enhances the difficulty of creating a comprehensible, referential story. Alluding to Diderot, the writer says, "one must avoid precision. One must digress. Skip around. Improvise. Leave blanks that cannot be filled in. Offer multiple choices. Deviate from the facts, from where and when, in order to reach the truth" (104). He claims that "Sarah's story should not be touched by the banality of realism... Reality is a form of disenchantment. The only reason it interests us is because behind it

always lurks a catastrophe, or a bad joke" (106-7). Therefore, Sarah's story will not be given any specific time and location, because dates can only give a semblance of reality and not the reality itself. They cannot offer a copy of history. For the writer, history cannot be reproduced by the strategies of realism either, so why get entangled in a strategy which is an illusion? History can be written down only in a form of a story, and the form itself already carries the meanings and endows the historical events with those meanings. History itself is formless and therefore appears to be a joke: "History is a joke whose punch line is always messed up in advance. But since this is not the story of what happened and how it was or was not resolved, but of the consequences of what happened, there is no need of a punch line" (108). The writer challenges historical representation by reimagining the past as a world made up of many alternative discourses. He emphasizes the narrativity of history as an imagined act: "But we must wait for that, for the rest of their story. I have not yet imagined it as it should be imagined. I have not yet found the words, the correct words to speak that part of the story" (143).

**To Whom It May Concern** takes its events from history and subjects them to a process of fiction, and thus exposes the fictionality of history. The story shows the need to verify the details of the past to be irrelevant when Sarah and cousin realize that the answers to the events of the past actually lie in the present situation of their lives. They have built upon those reminiscences and already constructed in their lives a presence of their past. Thus, the past is placed critically to the present, because the novel is concerned with rewriting of history from present perceptions which are unconsciously formed by the past experiences. In this respect, Federman's novel is an ironic recreation of a comperensible story of history whose form defies such attempts. By using a historical frame he questions certainty in historical reference. The reference to real events and places highlights the illusion of such referentiality, but all these events and places exist, not as facts, but as fictional perceptions. The historical references become fictional constructs by the very form in which they are narrated. That form is always a poetic form. Thus, the novel challenges the Realist conventions from within those conventions. In this manner, historical reality is transcribed as a critical construct.

The novel displays and displaces itself as a form of history by using letters, realist voices (the writer's and his daughter's voice), and dates in a diary. It asks a crucial question that the historians and the

novelists have been discussing for a long time: can there be a direct transcription from reality to fiction? The answer is "No" and it is found in the discontinuous and fragmentary form of the story. The only valid perception of reality is provided by language, by the very act of narrative which appears in a variety of different styles. Also, the idea that the novel is only a verbal construct which cannot duplicate reality is maintained throughout the text. In this respect, the reader is subjected to the use and challenge of familiar conventions of historical and fictional representation. Thus, **To Whom It May Concern** plays with the very notions of history and fiction as subjectifying processes. As Alison Lee argues, "history is dependent upon the form in which it is communicated" (74). This becomes apparent in the textualized confusion of a historical past which is tried to be rendered in a fictional story. Textualizing the past and questioning the validity of fictional representations of the past emphasize the novel's structural self-consciousness.

The epistolary form, the anxieties of writing the story of the past, the problems of finding a proper structure for the story, and the interference of the writer with his comments, all contribute to this self-conscious process as well as to the idea that history is a discursive practice. The novel investigates the creation of representation processes. The past exist only in its discourse, and our knowledge of it depends on our interpretations of that discourse. In short, Federman points to the fact that history is his story. Thus, the representation of history gives way to the re-presentation of historical narratives.

Narrative references to history as artifice and as discourse show the metaphorical relation of literature to the actual. While emphasizing this issue the novel offers a connection to, and not a separation from, the historical process. It does, however, question this connection by moving beyond the accepted codes of traditional writing. Therefore, the subject and the story in such fiction grow out of such questioned connections. The arbitrary order of the past is revealed through the self-conscious re-construction of historical process from present perspectives. This should not be viewed as a construction of arbitrary systems of order, and as a mere play of language as in purely self-reflexive texts. Instead, this novel shows that fictional presentation should not seek to create a mimetic illusion of history by imposing upon its story a formal coherence. Because formal coherence and realistic narratives do not give a truer account of the past than the self-conscious ones. Also because



historically representative and ordering power of narrative which expresses a unified subject has been shattered by the self-conscious views of historiography and the Postmodernist theories. Thus, if we accept the fictionalization of history as a narrative form, we should also accept the more subtle fictional techniques of narrative presentation- that is laying bare the process of writing the past. This is what Federman does in his novel. He fictionalizes the reference to history, and reinforces our perceptions of history and fiction by rewriting history as fiction, and presenting fiction as history.

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