

## *Ragtime* Revisited: History and Fiction in Doctorow's Novel

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Perhaps the crucial difference between E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1976) and other, more thoroughgoing fictional reinventions of history such as Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966) or Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) is that the latter use history to say something about fiction—they display the endlessly fertile capacity of the novelistic imagination to compensate for the stubborn limitations, or paucity, of facts—while Doctorow uses fiction to say something about history. Specifically, Doctorow calls into question the whole business of historicity and the origination of historical "fact" from possibly doubtful sources. Doctorow's metaphor for history in the novel is a "player piano" that plays its own tune, regardless of the style—classical, romantic, ragtime—which the pianist chooses to interpret it in. History, as the music of what happened, the events that actually took place, is not the same as history as it is received in the present from what historians have written down. Events are not scientifically mappable by "history" any more than, in Doctorow's novel, the North Pole is precisely locatable by the explorers of the Peary expedition or the correct alignment of the chair with the room by Theodore Dreiser. We put our flag or chair down anywhere: we make our own centers. As Doctorow, following Roland Barthes, has said in interview statements, there is no fiction or non-fiction, only narrative: the telling of a story.

Indeed, history, insofar as it is always narrowly partial and selective, is one of the least trustworthy and potentially one of the most fictional of narrative forms. As the opening pages of *Ragtime* demonstrate,<sup>1</sup> whole racial groups have been written out of American history simply by not being mentioned, and the task of the novelist, as conceived by Doctorow, is to write them back in. The novelist's own pseudo-history parodies and then rewrites the falsely sentimental, nostalgic picture of the American past, as composed from the patriotic viewpoint of the dominant white middle-class culture which prevailed at the turn of the century. Not only are Doctorow's characters historically syncopated, fractionally offbeat on the historical chronometer like the base key which is marginally behind the melody in Scott Joplin's music (his Emma Goldman and Walker gang belong, in fact, to the 1960s), but his entire quasi-history is itself systematically unsynchronized or "in ragged time" with the school textbook, its facts always slightly askew from the received version. Against the known facts, Doctorow syncopates what he regards as "truthful fictions," which are poetically if not historically true: Freud and Jung mischievous shut up together in the Tunnel of Love on Coney Island and, on a more serious note, the Poverty Balls where guests dress in rags and the Stockyard Ball that is set in a mock-slaughterhouse. Concerning the latter two instances, which were certainly in the spirit of the times whether true or not, Doc-

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<sup>1</sup> E.L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (1976; rpt. London: Picador, 1985) 11-13. Further page references are given in parentheses in the text of the article.

torow's point is that in the early 1900s American reality was already becoming so incredible that it was most accurately located at the point where history fades into fiction, the factual into the fantastic.

History, Doctorow subsequently implies, is so patently fictional that there is no longer any felt need to preserve in separate categories fictional and historical plots and characters as, for example, Dos Passos had done in his trilogy *U.S.A.* (1937). Thus, all the canons of historical decorum are violated: personages from the newsreels and history books enter audaciously into the fictional life of the book either by performing fictional acts or meeting fictional characters.

And yet there are still a number of differences between the novel's fictional and historical material which assert themselves in its narrative form and serve to keep the two kinds of material in separate and clearly differentiated categories. Firstly, the historical vignettes of J.P. Morgan, Henry Ford, and Harry Houdini have a tendency to immobilize the narrative by the sheer mass of detailed information, to clutter it with blocks of fact, most notably in long accounts of the objects and properties the characters own. This draws attention obtrusively to the amount of undiluted factuality that has not been fictionalized, i.e., artistically shaped into dramatically interesting narrative material.

Secondly and more importantly, the abrupt shifts in locale in the historical material give the impression of history as a sprawling chaotic mass of unconnected facts. Doctorow's point, of course, is that history is plotless, playing its own heedless, incomprehensible music and plotted quite arbitrarily by the historian. But in practice this means that the novel acquires a sense of direction and causality, and indeed any coherence at all, only from the momentum of the fictional plots (of Tateh and Coalhouse Walker). Only then do we sense the presence of a causally related train of events and of mounting crisis, leading to a climax. The novel's underlying postulate, argues Barbara Foley, is that "whatever coherence emerges from the represented historical world is attributable to the writer's power as teller of his story, with the result that the process of historical reconstruction itself, rather than what is being represented, comes to the fore."<sup>2</sup> What is implied by Doctorow's choice of form is a rather egotistical and paranoid view of history: that the only coherence history has is to be traced to the writer's superior talents as a storyteller.

Thirdly, there is the matter of characterization. We read of Tateh: "He began to create more and more intricate silhouettes, full-figured with backgrounds . . . With his scissors he suggested not merely outlines but textures, moods, character, despair" (41). Tateh's brief silhouette-sketches illumine character in the light of background; they reveal personality in terms of the determining, victimizing forces acting upon it, and in this they act as a metaphor for the novelist's own flat, silhouetteish, two-dimensional creations—in this case, the types of the Poor Jew and of the entrepreneurial Self-Made Man Tateh turns himself into once he has forsaken his victim-status. Doctorow's figures are essentially passive units impinged

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Foley, "From *U.S.A.* to *Ragtime*: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction," in *E.L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations*, ed. Richard Trenner (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1983) 175.

upon by social and economic forces, conductors of "the flow of American energy" which Tateh, like other American artists, learns to "point his life along" (102), and the novelist seems to be as much interested in this current of historical energy as in the characters it pulses through. The outcome is that the semifictional cast of *Ragtime* are at times presented as the puppet-victims of history, jerked around in both comic and tragic ways by overwhelming forces, whether of repressed sexuality or institutionalized racism—Younger Brother by the rampant penis that "whips him about the floor" at the lesbian encounter of Evelyn Nesbitt and Emma Goldman (55), Coalhouse Walker by the firing squad that jerks his body about the street "in a sequence of attitudes as if it were trying to mop up its own blood" (222).

The aesthetic price paid by Doctorow's historical fiction is that the characters, real or invented, are like historical characters: they are thinly textured creations, seen from the outside, not as intricate, complex individuals. Thus we never know if Younger Brother, in joining the Walker gang, is motivated by a burning passion for justice or simply by thrills and excitement ("I can make bombs"), because we are not admitted to his psychological dilemmas and crises. If we are surprised at the end to find that Walker is really not a revolutionary but just wants his car back, it is because we too have seen him, externally, through the public responses of the media, cinema newsreels, and newspapers features.

It would therefore be fitting that Walker should end his life as a historical character. In fact he does not. His fate is not that of the historical nineteenth-century visionary Hans Kohlhaas, who saw himself as a millennial revolutionary and an avenging agent of the Archangel Michael come to form a new world government. It is, instead, that of the eponymous hero of Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810) about the sixteenth-century horse dealer Michael Kohlhaas (who here becomes "Coalhouse") and his pursuit of justice against the corrupt Junker Wenzel Von Tronka (here, Willie Conklin) over the wrecking of his horses (here, a car).<sup>3</sup> Kleist's Kohlhaas simply wants his horses back but he has to murder, rob, and loot in order to get the injustice redressed and the price, as in Coalhouse Walker's case, is his own execution: the shining new horses are paraded past him as he climbs the scaffold. Society finally pays its debt to him, and he to it, for his crimes. Coalhouse Walker, though he appears to be perceived in historical terms, is really a derived fiction, and he ends as one, paralleling the fiction in which he has his origin. He ends as a character in somebody else's book.

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<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Von Kleist, "Michael Kohlhaas," in *The Marquise of O & Other Stories*, trans. David Luke & Nigel Reeves (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 114-213.