

THE ARTIST AS HISTORIAN
IN THE NOVELS OF E. L. DOCTOROW

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IN THE NOVELS OF E. L. DOCTOROW

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This study shows how a new narrative persona, who acts as both artist and historian, develops through E. L. Doctorow's four novels: Welcome to Hard Times, Big as Life, The Book of Daniel, and Ragtime.

In his novels, Doctorow examines the problem of recording events in a world divided between subject and object. This tension between internal and external reality not only problematizes many of his characters, but it underlies Doctorow's own theoretical study of novelistic form and traditional narrative devices. Both the author and his characters struggle with the same problems: how does the artist tell what happened? how does the artist align the subjective and the objective perspectives? As writers, the historians in Doctorow's first three novels attempt to tell the objective truth about what happened, but they confront their own subjective limitations. In

Welcome to Hard Times, Blue assumes that words can control the truth, but he discovers that words are bound by the subjectivity of personal experience. Wallace Creighton, the historian in Big as Life, believes that he can capture the patterns of external reality, but when he finds no order, he is personally and subjectively overwhelmed. In The Book of Daniel, Daniel Isaacson hopes to find truth and order in internal reality; but he sees that words are bound by subjectivity, that there is no order, and that there is no truth. The problem of reconciling the tension between subjectivity and objectivity remains unsolved until Doctorow's fourth novel. He finally reconciles the subjective and the objective perspectives in Ragtime by creating an "anonymous narrative consciousness" who transcends the limitations of a single human perspective, yet at the same time, humanizes his subject matter. In this manner, he creates a new history--a "true" history that combines real events with the fictional inventions of the historical memory.

Doctorow's novels are a study of the artist and the historian as well as historical fact and historical fiction.

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PREFACE

One year ago I discovered Ragtime. In spite of the pressures of summer school and the dry heat of July, 1976, I lost myself in the subtle pleasures of E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime. After reading it, I read it again and read passages to my friends. Then, I sought out Welcome to Hard Times, Big As Life, and The Book of Daniel. Thoroughly intrigued with this man's work, I wondered what made me like his novels, especially his magical tale of the ragtime era. Thus, I began my study with this question: What made Ragtime so successful? Certainly, this is not an easy question to answer. Still, I looked for some clue in the book reviews and biographical material concerning E. L. Doctorow. What I found in these few secondary sources was as baffling as the novel itself. Many critics agreed that nothing like Ragtime had ever been written before. But why? What makes Ragtime so different? Looking deeper within the four novels, I discovered what I believe to be Doctorow's special contribution to the novel. Through his first three novels, Doctorow discovers the need for a new narrative persona which he develops in his fourth novel, Ragtime. It is a persona who acts as both artist and historian. It is a persona who transcends the limitations of individual consciousness and acquires the

consciousness of America, 1902-1917.

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Chapter 1

WELCOME TO HARD TIMES, BIG AS LIFE,
THE BOOK OF DANIEL, AND RAGTIME:
E. L. DOCTOROW'S SEARCH FOR
THE "PROPER ALIGNMENT"
TO THE "REAL WORLD"

A. THE WRITER AND HIS AUDIENCE

. . . I was not satisfied to be recognized, enjoyed, studied only by the specialists who had encouraged me from the start; I was eager to write for the "reading public," I resented being considered a "difficult" author.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel.

Novelists write "to be read." All artists want an audience for their creations. Of his own work, E. L. Doctorow says: "I do want the book [Ragtime] to be accessible. I want working class people to read it."¹ Writers not only work to reach a reading public, they also strive to attain an appreciative audience. By the time E. L. Doctorow had published both The Book of Daniel and Ragtime, his work had won him wide critical and public attention. In 1971, The Book of Daniel was nominated for the National Book Award. Then, by the end of 1975, Ragtime had appeared as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection; it had been on best seller lists for twenty-two consecutive weeks;

¹Jeffrey Hart, "Doctorow Time," National Review, 15 August 1975, p. 893.

Bantam Books had purchased the paperback rights for \$1,850,000; and Hollywood Director Robert Altman had acquired the rights for the movie version of the novel. Then, in January, 1976, Ragtime was among four winners of the awards given by the National Book Critics Circle.² Clearly, the name E. L. Doctorow had become a name of considerable importance. By the time he had achieved wide public acclaim, Doctorow had written four novels: Welcome to Hard Times (1960), Big as Life (1967), The Book of Daniel (1971), and Ragtime (1975). Welcome to Hard Times is a narrative set in the old American West. Blue, the self-appointed mayor of Hard Times, confronts the murderous rage of Bad Man from Bodie. The second novel, Big as Life, exploits a science fiction theme in which one morning New Yorkers awake to find two gigantic male and female figures in the harbor. These monsters are creatures of another space-time continuum. But The Book of Daniel is apparently inspired by an actual historical event--the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg in 1953 as alleged atom spies. The novel focuses upon Daniel Isaacson and his efforts to understand why his parents were executed as enemies of the United States Government. Then, in Ragtime, Doctorow probes yet another historical period, for this novel is a

²Current Biography Yearbook: 1976 (New York, The H. W. Wilson Co., 1977), pp. 125-6.

magical, cinematic rendering of the ragtime era. In Doctorow's Ragtime, Henry Ford meets J. P. Morgan; Emma Goldman meets Evelyn Nesbit; Harry Houdini meets Father, Mother, and the little boy; Coalhouse Walker Jr. meets Booker T. Washington. By the time Doctorow had written his four novels, he had not only gained wide public attention but had also created a literature worthy of serious critical study.

Doctorow says that he wants "working class" people to read his work; he wants their recognition and appreciation. But the gulf between writers and a "working class" audience may be wide and forbidding. If, as a novelist, he does not find the means to narrow this gap, his audience may find him "difficult." People may not respond at all to his writing. The novelist may, then, suffer from bad reviews and poor sales of his book. In Ragtime, Doctorow briefly describes Theodore Dreiser's suffering and shame from the poor public reception of his first novel, Sister Carrie. Alone and out of work, Dreiser took to sitting in a wooden chair in the middle of his room. One day, deciding that his chair faced the wrong direction, he lifted the chair and turned it to align it properly. But this was not the correct position, either. He turned it again. Eventually, states Doctorow,

he made a complete circle and still could not find the proper alignment for the chair. The light faded on the dirty window of the furnished room. Through the night

Dreiser turned his chair in circles seeking the proper alignment.³

The term, "proper alignment," precisely describes the artist's ambition--alignment of his materials, his intention, his creation, the conventions of writing, and his audience's expectations about the nature of the novel. Readers want a story with characters they can care about. Moreover, they want the story and characters to be "lifelike." The audience wants to believe that the fiction is true. To receive attention from the "reading public," the writer must carefully align his choices and his intentions with the needs and expectations of his audience, and must find a way to give the audience what it wants and expects to find in a novel.

What are the possible solutions to the problem of alignment? Eighteenth-century novelists inherited from the Renaissance the Aristotelian concept of form and unity. These rhetorical principles acted as a mould into which the writer poured all the material of his literary work.⁴ Gradually, the novel took on its own unique form and set of conventions. Sheldon Sacks precisely describes the shape of this early novel:

³E. L. Doctorow, Ragtime (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 30; subsequent references are indicated parenthetically.

⁴Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgement, eds. Mark Schorer, et. al. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948.

. . . characters about whose fates we are made to care are introduced in unstable relationships which are then further complicated until the complications are finally resolved by the complete removal of the represented instability.⁵

These novels began with the words: "I was born. . . ." They followed their heroes through a series of adventures to a resolution where characters died, were married, or were re-united. Later, with his epic novel, James Joyce went far beyond what anyone else had ever dared before. Seemingly, he had transported the novel and its conventions to their utmost limits. What more could then be done? Critics cried out the death of the novel and wrote its obituary. Still, writers persisted in writing novels; they kept on telling more stories. Others, like Alain Robbe-Grillet, proclaimed the birth of the new novel--a novel that "invented itself" without such obsolete notions as story and character.

In their unceasing efforts to achieve the "proper alignment," writers tell more and more stories; they break the old rules to create new forms. Still, their goal is unchanged. Novelists want people to respond to their work. Harry Houdini, the great illusionist who appears in Ragtime, clearly exemplifies this artistic problem. Like Dreiser,

⁵Sheldon Sacks, Fiction and the Shape of Belief (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967) p. 15.

Houdini struggles bitterly to achieve the "proper alignment": "People who did not respond to his art profoundly distressed him. . . ." (R:35). Houdini wanted people to remember him. He wanted his act to be big enough--real enough--to make the headlines. The absurd artist-figure of Houdini points towards Doctorow's extensive study of the artist in his four novels. In Welcome to Hard Times, he carefully examines his first-person narrator, Blue. This man of the American West attempts to write a true historical document. Doctorow, then, uses an omniscient narrator to focus upon a historian in Big as Life. Wallace Creighton, as historian of the new world, must be able to perceive, organize, and understand a massive amount of data before he can write his history. In the third novel, The Book of Daniel, Daniel attempts to write a book in which he makes sense of his memories about his parents' arrest and execution. Finally, with Ragtime, Doctorow writes a novel that mingles fact and the inventions of historical memory. In this novel, he examines the successes and failures of a number of artist-figures--Harry Houdini, Coalhouse Walker Jr., Tateh. Each of these artist-figures confronts the problem of "proper alignment"; each works to align his materials, his intention, his creation, the conventions of writing, and the expectations of his audience, and reality. For each artist, the goal is the same--the creation of reality.

B. THE CRITICAL DILEMMA: THE "REAL"
WORLD AND THE "REAL-WORLD ACT"

There was a kind of reality that used the real world for its stage. He [Houdini] couldn't touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theatre and forgot him? The headlines on the newsstand said that Peary had reached the Pole. The real-world act was what got into the history books.

E. L. Doctorow, Ragtime.

Robbe-Grillet writes that all artists believe they are realists: "It is the real world which interests them; each one attempts as best as can to create 'the real'."⁶ Like Houdini, the novelist wants to perform a "real-world act." But often magicians, novelists, and audiences do not understand each other because each has different ideas about reality. Each speaks of the world as he sees it, but no one sees it in exactly the same way. The problem is, again, one of "proper alignment." The artist must align his personal vision with public "real" world events. Theorists of the novel offer possible solutions to this problem. But they, too, have different ideas about reality and about giving narrative form to real events.

In 1945, Joseph Frank published "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," within which he traces a movement

⁶Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 157.

towards spatial form: "This means that the reader is intended to apprehend the work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence."⁷ As an example, Frank cites Flaubert's Madame Bovary. In this novel, states Frank, Flaubert's intention was to demonstrate that we perceive many things simultaneously, not in a temporal sequence as traditional narration suggests. Thus, Flaubert focuses upon "reflexive relations" between the different levels of action. He fixes his attention upon

the interplay of relationships within the limited time area. These relationships are juxtaposed, independent of the narrative process; the full significance of the scene is given only by the reflexive relationships among the units of meaning.⁸

To approximate more closely the manner in which we actually perceive a moment in time--to set forth what is for us a psychological reality--Flaubert, and later Joyce and Proust, worked independently of the time sequence of the narrative. Proust believed that "at certain moments, the physical sensations of the past came flooding back to fuse with the present." In these moments, Proust felt he had grasped a reality. It was only through the simultaneous juxtaposition of past and present, images, scenes, and actions that one could grasp what Proust called "pure time." "Pure time," however, is not time, but a perception

⁷Frank, p. 381.

⁸Frank, p. 384.

in a moment of time, that is, space.⁹

Building upon Joseph Frank's comments about narration, Ralph Freedman studies the philosophical dimensions of lyrical fiction in The Lyrical Novel. Because the lyrical novel transcends both the temporal and causal movement of the narrative, it

seeks to combine man and world in a strangely inward, yet aesthetically outward, form. . . . Rather than finding its Gestalt in the imitation of an action, the lyrical novel absorbs action altogether and refashions it as a pattern of imagery.¹⁰

In this manner, the novelist unites self and other; he joins the experiencing self with the world of experiences. Using the traditional tools of point of view and narrative plot, he attempts to reconcile objective and subjective reality. Freedman explains this process as "the technique of mirroring:"

Since the self is the point at which inner and outer worlds are joined, the hero's mental picture reflects the universe of sensible encounters as an image. The "world" is part of the hero's inner world; the hero, in turn, mirrors the external world and all its multitudinous manifestations.

This image of "spiritual awareness unfolds a picture of infinite reality which is hidden to the ordinary glance."¹¹

⁹Frank, p. 386-7.

¹⁰Ralph Freedman, The Lyrical Novel (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 1-3.

¹¹Freedman, p. 21.

By exploiting the traditional narrative framework, the lyrical novelist thereby develops a new orientation toward experience and reality.

While Freedman and Frank demonstrate the manner by which the novel may transcend traditional narrative devices, Frank Kermode argues in The Sense of an Ending that such devices as plot and character are necessary lies that help us make "human sense" of a frightening and chaotic reality. For Kermode, fiction is "something we know does not exist, but which helps us make sense of and move in the world."¹² Literary fictions, too, are devices that help us find out about the world. Novels, states Kermode, "have beginnings, ends, and potentiality even if the world does not." In the same manner, "novels have characters, even if the world has not."¹³ Novels must utilize these lies because reality is too incomplete, too chaotic. A literary fiction, "creates a human duration, destroys the disorder and dead time of the world."¹⁴ For Kermode, fictions and narrative conventions have a moral, human dimension; they humanize the frightening disorder of

¹²Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 37.

¹³Kermode, p. 138.

¹⁴Kermode, p. 147.

reality. Still, Kermode asserts that these fictions must also be engaged with reality; they must do justice to a "chaotic, viciously contingent reality, and yet redeem it."¹⁵ Thus, the novelist must both humanize the world's contingency and "induce the proper sense of horror at the utter difference, the utter shapelessness, and the utter inhumanity of what must be humanized."¹⁶ The job of the novelist, then, is to create a literary fiction that establishes "a concord between the human mind and things as they are."¹⁷

Alain Robbe-Grillet presents yet another theory of fiction in For a New Novel. Frank, Freedman, and Kermode have each written about narrative devices. But finally, Robbe-Grillet insists that these traditional tools are totally obsolete. Of the traditional novel, Robbe-Grillet writes: "All the technical elements of the narrative . . . tended to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe."¹⁸ But reality, argues Robbe-Grillet, stubbornly resists these literary rules. These rules and other

¹⁵Kermode, p. 145.

¹⁶Kermode, p. 145.

¹⁷Kermode, pp. 148-150.

¹⁸Robbe-Grillet, p. 32.

"interpretative grids" do not coincide with the contours of reality. Instead of placing a grid or form across reality, the novelist should allow the work of art to create its own form and meaning.¹⁹ The novel, then, is in itself a unique experience, and verisimilitude is no longer an issue for the storyteller or the audience. Robbe-Grillet explains that "the real, the false, and illusion represent the focus of modern works." Rather than claiming to be "a piece of reality," the new novel "is developed as a reflection on reality It no longer seeks to conceal its necessary deceptive character by offering itself as a 'real-life story.'"²⁰ In this light, the only time and space--the only reality--that matters is that of the novel itself.

Clearly, each theorist has his own ideas about reality and the way a novelist achieves realism in his work. Doctorow, too, became involved in all aspects of this critical debate, and his novels reveal his own confrontations with these theoretical problems. To resolve the debate in his own work, he adopts no single theory; instead, he skillfully combines many of the ideas of the four theorists. Like Frank, Doctorow experiments with spatial form in Ragtime. Like Freedman, he seeks in Ragtime to join "the

¹⁹Robbe-Grillet, pp. 43-46.

²⁰Robbe-Grillet, p. 150.

experiencing self with the world of experiences." According to Kermode's theoretical ideas, each of Doctorow's novels, including the unconventional Ragtime, contain "beginnings, ends, and potentiality." With Robbe-Grillet, Doctorow realizes in Ragtime that the concept of central character and plot is obsolete. Through his reconciliation of the differences between these theories, Doctorow writes Ragtime--his own theoretical contribution to the problem of writing a novel.

C. THE CARTESIAN PROBLEM IN DOCTOROW'S
NOVELS: "REAL" TIME AND "MEMORY"
TIME

Each of Doctorow's artist-figures--Blue, Wallace Creighton, Daniel--illustrate the problems of the writer. Each is a historian attempting to write about reality, but each sees that reality in a different way. They live in a world that Descartes long ago split apart into the res extensa--the realm of matter--and the res cogitans--the world inside. The res extensa operates according to mathematical and scientific laws, while the res cogitans concerns feelings, impressions, and sensibilities.²¹ Since each world has its own truth and reality, no one could know again exactly what was real. Scientists believed that the physical world held all truth, while romantic writers

²¹Wylie Sypher, Loss of Self in Modern Literature and Art (New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 20.

affirmed the self against the res extensa, "asserting that the world is my idea of the world, a creation of my own will and idea."²²

The problems of the Cartesian universe take a definite shape in Doctorow's four novels. In Welcome to Hard Times, he specifically describes this problem in the context of his own work. Blue, the narrator, attempts to write a historical document about a monumental event in his life--the destruction and rebuilding of a town. But for Blue, two kinds of time complicate the problem of telling what happened. "Real" time is the mysterious way in which "life gets on." "Real" time, states Blue, "leads you along and you never know when it happens." Memory, however, which puts a form on things, "makes its own time."²³ Throughout the writing of his ledgers, Blue finds himself hopelessly limited in his perception of the event because he can see and write about it only through his memory. Still, tirelessly struggling against the subjective perceptions of the memory, Blue strives to record the objective, historical facts--to tell what actually happened.

²²Sypher, p. 21.

²³E. L. Doctorow, Welcome to Hard Times (New York: Bantam, 1976), p. 139; subsequent references are indicated parenthetically.

It is with this tension between "real" and "memory" time--between external and internal reality--that Doctorow begins the writing of his next novels. In Big as Life, the second novel, the appearance of the giants creates a new time, a new world, and a new reality. As a historian, Wallace Creighton studies "real" time, but this new time and new world is a confusing chaos of facts and statistics. Distressed by his overflowing files of information and new knowlege, Wallace cannot make sense of the massive amount of data before him. He cannot comprehend external reality, and the structure of the new "real" time is beyond his understanding. Then, in his third novel, The Book of Daniel, Doctorow studies the nature of "memory" time and Daniel's attempts to find the truth in internal reality. Daniel's task is to find out what really happened to his parents. Thus, he analyzes what he remembers about the time of his parents' execution. But "memory" time is elusive, and Daniel cannot determine the truth about his parents' innocence or guilt. For Blue, Wallace, and Daniel, the problem of the historical writer clearly concerns finding the "proper alignment" of self and world, of subject and object, of "real" time and "memory" time.

Through his examinations of these characters' problems of alignment, Doctorow finally reconciles the objective and the subjective perspectives in Ragtime by creating an anonymous narrator who transcends the limitations

of a single human perspective, yet at the same time, humanizes his subject matter. This anonymous narrative consciousness finds correspondences between "real" time and "memory" time. In this manner, he creates a new kind of history--a history that combines real events with the fictional inventions of the historical memory. In Doctorow's history, real people meet fictional characters; historical figures meet in imaginary confrontations. Through his skillful alignment of the actual and the imaginary, Doctorow creates in Ragtime artistic reality and artistic time. Thus, speaking through his anonymous narrative voice, Doctorow creates a "true" history--a "real world act."

Chapter 2

HOUDINI, BLUE, AND "THE REAL-WORLD ACT": THE ARTIST AS ALCHEMIST IN WELCOME TO HARD TIMES

There was a kind of act that used the real world for its stage. . . . The real-world act was what got into the history books.

E. L. Doctorow, Ragtime.

All our literature has not yet succeeded in eroding . . . [reality's] smallest corner, in flattening . . . [its] slightest curve.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel.

Harry Houdini, the great magician and an important figure in Doctorow's Ragtime, strives desperately to make an impression on the world--to flatten a small corner of reality. He wanted people to take his act seriously. He wanted to be bigger than life. In the newspapers, Houdini read that Peary had reached the North Pole, and he, too, wanted an act big enough--real enough--to make the headlines. Houdini wanted to perform a "real-world act," for he was not satisfied with tricks and illusions. Instead, he wanted to alter the world substantively and to make truth. In precisely the same manner, the narrator of Doctorow's first novel, Welcome to Hard Times, also works to change the facts of his life. The narrator, a Westerner named Blue, attempts to build a life on the harsh Great Plains. Here, he labors to alter the depressing and frightening realities of the Plains experience into a prospering civilization where families and communities can

grow. Like an alchemist, Blue works to alter matter substantively--to change the empty mountain near Hard Times into a rich gold mine. Like Houdini, Blue wants to perform a "real-world act." But his efforts lead him toward a terrible and shocking realization: nothing he can do will alter the facts of his life; mere words cannot make truth. Through this inquiry, Doctorow studies the nature of reality, explores the range and power of words, and examines a theory of storytelling.

Blue purposefully strives to perform a "real-world act" and directs all of his energy toward this goal. As a Westerner, he firmly believes that, with forceful, decisive action, a man can make his life on the bleak Dakota Plains. Moreover, from the Western mythos, Blue draws his hope and belief that a good man can be an invincible force--a force bigger than life--against Bad Men and a frightening and chaotic reality. But above all, he understands that as a Man of the West, as a Man bigger than life, he must maintain his countenance in the face of death. His greatest threat is fear and weakness. And it is from within this tradition that Blue derives his action when a remarkable villain, the Bad Man from Bodie, brings his rage to Hard Times. Confronted by an overwhelming power that takes pleasure in brutality, murder, and arson, Blue abruptly discovers that he is weak and afraid--that he cannot act decisively and forcefully. Helplessly, he sends

Molly ahead of him to face the Bad Man. Fearfully, he runs from the Bad Man's bullets, tripping in the dirt, . . . [his] heart like a hand clenching . . . [his] insides" (WHT:19). Thus, from this point early in the novel, he sees himself as a failed Westerner, as a man unable to turn the course of events.

Blue is a failed Westerner, for the Western mythos could not give him impetus and force enough to face the Bad Man. Armed only with the Code of the West, he was clearly an ineffectual combatant against the Bad Man. In this Code, he could not find the materials for the construction of a "real-world act"--the materials to build truth. But he cannot understand his failure. Gazing at the rubble of the town, smelling the stench of charred corpses, Blue cannot account for what happened. No facet of the Western mythos can help him explain either this destruction or his weakness. He is a failed Westerner. Thus, with an immense burden of guilt and shame, he labors in the sun to bury the dead. Guiltily, he builds a sod house and shelters Molly Riordan and Jimmy Fee. Shamefully, he sifts through the ruins and ponders the disparity between what happened and what he believed ought to have happened. To resolve this disparity, he sees only one course of action, only one remaining hope: "The only hope we have is that we can pay off our failures" (WHT:36).

Blue's sense of failure within the Western mythic tradition, his desire to "pay off" these failures, and his lingering belief that he can alter reality all greatly inform his habitual mode of action and propel him towards his final tragedy. Motivated by guilt and a sense of failure, he attempts to bury the past and to transform chaos and destruction into a stable, comfortable civilization. As a result of these labors, he searches for "good signs"--signs that can hide the old scars of destruction and failure. He looks around at the town and at his "family" and remarks: "A person cannot live without looking for good signs, you just cannot do it, and . . . if a good sign is so important you can just as soon make one up and fool yourself that way" (WHT:89). To alter the face of a disturbing and frightening reality, he works at finding and making "good signs." To hide the scars of the Bad Man's destruction, he works at rebuilding the town. Like a true politician and businessman, he talks Zar into setting up his bar in Hard Times; Alf into bringing the stage back to the town; and Isaac Maple into being the town's storekeeper. With these men and the wood taken from a ghost town, he builds a civilization from the burnt-out ruins. Then, to hide the scars from Molly's burns and to block out the sadness of Jimmy's father's death, he builds a family. He takes Molly as his wife and Jimmy as his son. And in the three of them, he sees a "good sign"--the formation of a "true family"

(WHT:89). In the family and in the town, Blue finds evidence that he is paying off his failures, and that he can transform the world to hide a contingent reality. In his roles as husband, father, and city-founder, he sees that he can perform a "real-world act."

After surviving the fierce Dakota winter, when spring arrives, bringing with it hope and prosperity, he believes that he has successfully hidden all the old wounds--that he has paid off his failures. This was the time, states Blue,

when Swede settled and Bert Albany came down, the hurts were healing in the warm sun and the expectations were nourished into life. A greenness of hopes grew up like scrub along the rocks coming up green. (WHT:114)

Springtime, the new arrivals in town, the promise of a road to the gold mine, and Molly's closeness help to bury the past a little deeper. In Bert Albany's love for the chinagirl, Blue sees yet another sign proclaiming good fortune and prosperity. For him, such a display of feeling was like a revelation: "It was like someone had come along to put up a flag" (WHT:128). In the rumors that the mining company planned to lay a road through Hard Times, he sees further evidence of the town's prosperity and of his own successful city-founding. It is true, he remarks, "that the town was to be blessed with luck; and some of it was even to rub off on me" (WHT:129). In his new warmer relationship with Molly, he sees "two new people sprung up from . . .

old pains" (WHT:132). And to celebrate this prosperity, he begins keeping ledgers, "keeping a write on things." Here, on the columned pages, he records the names, dates, and numbers that represent prosperity. Everywhere, he sees signs that proclaim success and not failure--signs that show unwavering, comfortable stability and not chaos. Even when Molly, in her pain and fear, cries out that the town is still a wilderness, Blue quickly rejects that dark possibility:

. . . for one chilling moment I knew what Molly meant. A shudder ran down my back. But then the true sight of our town returned to me, and once more Molly and I were looking at the same scene but with different eyes. I had to smile how like a woman it was to scare in the good times. (WHT:146)

Clearly, Blue's vision is clouded by a green glow of hope and the belief that he can substantively alter the world. He firmly believes that he has performed a bigger-than-life task--that he has transformed the town to hide failure and chaos.

But no matter how many "good signs" Blue raises around him, no matter how he labors to change what has happened, the scars of failure and destruction are still there. Much later through hindsight, he comments on this problem: "If I was a wiser man I would have seen where the misery was. You could step out the door and the scar of the old town was blocked from your sight, but the scar was still there" (WHT:151). What he later realizes is quite true; none of his efforts to alter reality have been successful.

No matter how he labors, the "good signs" fall away to reveal not merely scars but open, gaping wounds. No matter how he labors to change what happened--to "pay off" his failures--both the family and the town dissolve into failure and destruction. One of the "good signs," Molly's warmth, falls away to reveal hate, an obsession for revenge, and the glinting blue double-barrel of a gun. And with this sudden revelation, Blue curses himself:

How could one man have been so blind stupid in his life! God help me for my sight, my heart went out to this child [Jimmy]. Was everything, even her old sweetness to me, a design on him? She was training him for the Bad Man. . . . (WHT:162)

Under Molly's careful supervision, Blue's relationship with Jimmy culminates in a brutal and violent scene of failure. As the boy kicks him in his side, Blue has another revelatory vision of the futility of his labors. That moment, he cries, was "the true end of me no matter what happened after. Sharp as the boy's kick in my side, clear as the pain, was the sudden breathless vision I had of my unending futility" (WHT:171). Clearly, all of his attempts to perform a "real-world act" have been ineffectual; nothing has changed; nothing he has done has altered the facts of his life.

Nothing has changed; the town once again balances on the brink of destruction; and still, Blue labors to alter reality substantively. Like an alchemist, Blue attempts to reclaim gold from trouble and destruction.

Early in the novel, after the fire, he sifts through the rubble of his burnt-out office and reclaims a few pinches of gold dust. Then, much later, when the town is threatened by an economic disaster, he still attempts to reclaim gold and profit out of trouble and chaos. He tells himself: "Once there was work, once there was money . . . everything would be alright" (WHT:177). In a desperate effort to change destruction into gold, he invests his savings. He hires four men to hunt for wood; he lends money to another man to start a press; and to an old drover, he gives money to bring a dozen head of cattle to Hard Times. Even when the mining company abandons the town and people run from the town's collapse, he thinks wildly that if he pushed boulders in front of the trail, he could hold the town's citizens. Throughout destruction, prosperity, and failure, Blue is an alchemist who firmly believes that he can turn the course of events, alter the facts, rebuild the world. His tragedy is that no matter how he labors to change things, he never realizes this personal goal: "Like the West, like my life: The color dazzles us, but when it's too late we see what a fraud it is, what a poor pinched-out claim" (WHT:186).

If Blue's actions reveal his role as alchemist, his writing of the three ledgers clarifies his belief that he can control and rearrange life. He sees himself as a failed Westerner, and his ledgers contain his attempts to

account for what happened, to bury the past, and to rebuild the town. In these pages of "dealings," a town charter, census list forms, and a petition for statehood, he not only seeks an affirmation of his personal value but also hopes to find actuality. As a writer, his purpose is "to tell the way things happened"--to write a document (WHT:114). However, throughout his ledgers, he fights the limitations of his memory and constantly searches for a means of what he calls "real" time. Of this problem, he comments: "Really how life gets on is a secret, you only know your memory, and it makes its own time. The real time leads you along and you never know when it happens . . ." (WHT:139). Remembrance, states Blue, puts a form on things that cannot be trusted. But in spite of the limitations of memory, he still struggles with the writing of a factual document. Moreover, he is obsessed with the belief that his ledgers can be true, bury the past, and prove his personal value. Blue writes a historical document that he hopes will be a "real-world act."

Just as he believes that his actions can "pay off" his failures and change what has happened, Blue also believes that words on a columned page can make truth. But once the town finally collapses, he is again confronted with a terrifying reality: his town is again destroyed; his neighbors have been brutally murdered. The sight of Zar, scalped expertly and with a bullet in his stomach, prompts Blue to

take out his books and "try to write what happened" (WHT: 214). Then, in his despair, he cries: "I can forgive everyone but I cannot forgive myself" (WHT:214). Once again, he cannot resolve the disparity between what happened and what he believed ought to have happened. He is a failure--a man unable to change things, to turn the course of events. And again, he sees only one remaining course of action--to "pay off" his failures. Thus, in his ledgers, he attempts to account for the way things happened and for his own actions in the face of disaster. But as he writes in his ledgers, he sees that mere words cannot make reality. As Blue remarks: "Words don't turn as the earth turns, they have their own season . . ." (WHT:139). Words cannot make truth; and it is in the process of writing that Blue makes this revelatory discovery: "I know it, it's true, I've always known it. I scorn myself for a fool for all the bookkeeping I've done, as if notations in a ledger can fix life, as if some marks in a book can control things" (WHT: 187). If he saw in his actions that he could not "fix" or "control" life, he sees it most clearly in his writing. Words and actions cannot alter reality; instead, they merely "add to the memory" (WHT:188). Finally, in the last words of his ledgers, Blue states: "Nothing is ever buried" (WHT:214).

What finally makes these revelations concrete is the climactic scene in the novel. This scene, when he is

again confronted with the Bad Man, tests both Blue's habitual mode of action and his belief that words can make truth. In this confrontation, he realizes: "He [the Bad Man] never left town, it was waiting only for the proper light to see him where he's been all the time" (WHT:198). Nothing has changed; and still, Blue, the Man of the West--the Man bigger than life--decisively attempts to alter the facts of his life by this time standing up to the Bad Man. To make the final payment for his old failures, he traps the Man from Bodie in barbed wire and then drags the half-dead body onto Molly's kitchen table. But instead of atonement for past failures, instead of changing what happened, he witnesses an even harsher reality when Molly performs indescribable acts upon the Bad Man's body. Fainting in disgust, Blue pulls the trigger in a blast that kills them both. Later, still shocked and horrified, Blue cries: ". . . I wish now I could not have seen what happened, or if I had to see it that my mind could split me from the memory" (WHT:211). But nothing can change the brutal reality of what has happened. And again, he sees himself as a failure. In his despair, he mourns: "What more could I have done--if I hadn't believed, they'd be alive today. Oh Molly, oh my boy . . . The first time I ran, the second time I stood up to him, but I failed both times, no matter what I've done it has failed" (WHT:214-15). No matter what Blue has done, the facts have not changed.

Not even in his ledgers can he bury past failures. Words in a ledger cannot control life; they cannot make truth. Moreover, they are bound by his own limitations. Stunned by the harsh reality of the Bad Man and the atrocities Molly commits on the body, Blue cries out: "I cannot describe what she was doing" (WHT:212). Words cannot make truth; they cannot even show the truth about what happened, for words are bound by the trauma of personal experience, by perception, by memory.

Blue's greatest error as a writer and his personal tragedy both stem from his belief that he can make truth. Throughout his ledgers, he struggles with the writing of a factual document:

I'm losing my blood to this rag, but more, I have the cold feeling everything I've written doesn't tell how it was, no matter how careful I've been to get it all down it still escapes me: like what happened is far below my understanding beyond my sight. In my limits, taking a day for a day, a night for a night, have I showed the sand shifting under our feet, the terrible arrangement of our lives? (WHT:203)

Words and actions deal with human facts, but they cannot alter the facts. They cannot make truth. But to the end, he is a writer of documents; he attempts to perform a "real-world act" that substantively alters the world. For Blue, it is too late when he realizes: "Nothing is ever buried, the earth rolls in its tracks, it never changes . . ." (WHT:214). Nothing he has written in his document has succeeded in changing one small corner or curve or reality.

To the end of his life, he never becomes a storyteller--a writer who so joins the real and the inventions of memory in a way that makes his stories look like truth.

Chapter 3

J. P. MORGAN, WALLACE CREIGHTON,
AND "UNIVERSAL PATTERNS":
THE CLASSICAL ARTIST OF
"REAL" TIME IN BIG AS LIFE

Suppose I could prove to you that there are universal patterns of order and repetition that give meaning to the life on this planet.

J. P. Morgan to Henry Ford in Ragtime.

Our tragedy today is a general and universal fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?

William Faulkner, "Speech of
Acceptance upon the Award of
the Nobel Prize for Literature."

In Welcome to Hard Times, Blue, like Houdini, worked tirelessly to create the real, to perform a "real-world act." Another Ragtime character, J. P. Morgan, is concerned, not with creation, but with apprehension of external reality and the interpretation of life. In fact, Pierpont Morgan was a monarch of the external world. He was "that classic American hero, a man born to extreme wealth who by dint of hard work and ruthlessness multiplies the family fortune till it is out of sight" (R:158). But Morgan's monarchy went far beyond the world of commerce, for he also surrounded himself with ancient paintings and manuscripts. Through an extensive examination of these objects of art, Morgan hoped to reach "some conclusions about this life" (R:169). He collected data in hopes of apprehending the "universal patterns" of order and stability.

But what happens when patterns explode in gigantic proportions, when the amount of data concerning the external world is enormous? These are the questions that concern Doctorow in his second novel, Big as Life. Working now within the science fiction formula, Doctorow envisions a monstrous reality--a world in which two enormous, naked human figures, towering above the New York skyline, appear in the harbor. This event drastically changes the lives of millions of New Yorkers, but Doctorow's third-person narrator gives the most extensive and in-depth coverage to Wallace Creighton, professor of history. Unlike Blue of Welcome to Hard Times, Creighton does not work to alter objective reality through subjective action; no one can change the fact of the giants' existence. Instead, his role is that of historical writer, and as a writer, he insists upon a strict analytical observation of the object, determines to portray this data exactly, and assumes that the apprehension of this data will enable him to be a critic and interpreter of life. In his efforts to analyze, chart, and interpret this monumental event, Doctorow limits his focus to the nature of external reality--"real" time--and studies the equipment necessary for the apprehension of a changing world and for human co-existence with chaos.

When the giants suddenly appear, the old history is dead, and Wallace Creighton becomes the historian of the new world. He turns from "his dusty, uncompleted one-man

history of the United States," from the wisdom of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson to the observation and interpretation of an unprecedented new age in American history.²⁴ To the study of this new age, he brings the skills he learned as historian of the old world. From the moment of his earliest glimpse of the giants, he uses all the tools of his profession to help him apprehend and interpret what has happened. At his window and at the television set, he "recorded every bit of news, realizing the professional value of a personal diary of events" (BAL:59). As a historian, he observes the facts, collects data, verifies his data against other sources, and makes systematic deductions. Moreover, he believes that these skills of objective, historical analysis have a new and vital significance in the new age of man. For it is through the perceptive eyes of the historian that Wallace hopes to find out about the changing world and to discover "universal patterns" of meaning.

But even a perceptive analysis of the situation cannot sustain him through moments of intense personal fear, anxiety, and stress. With his first glimpse of the giants, Wallace, like millions of other New Yorkers, saw imminent death--a big foot stepping down with violence and

²⁴E. L. Doctorow, Big as Life (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), p. 12; subsequent references are indicated parenthetically.

destruction upon a "swarm of insidious little vermin" (BAL:40). But the giants, prisoners of another space-time continuum, do not move. People are not crushed to death; instead, they die in hysterical, blind terror. And Wallace, too, suffers from the "pain of comprehension": "They [the giants] were impossible to comprehend continuously; each moment of perceiving them was a fresh event, an unprecedented shock" (BAL:42, 46). In his observation of the object, the immense reality becomes more frightening. Even a photograph taken for the historical record is terrifying, for the picture itself seems to grow in gigantic proportions. All efforts to apprehend, analyze, and interpret this monstrous reality are frightening and painful; there is no release from the truth of the situation. In each moment of the new time, he feels an enormous reality

. . . descending, like darkness, on his shoulders. . . . He felt the pain of comprehension, as if his mind had been dislocated, like a bone, and it was a pain so intense that it carried with it a ridiculous self-awareness, so that at the same time he felt it, he could not believe he was feeling it. (BAL:46)

Clearly, he suffers from the peculiar dread of knowing that nothing separates him from the brutal fact of the giants' existence. Exhausted by this unbearable reality, Wallace at such times ". . . would lie in his bed almost paralyzed with fear, imagining mad men skulking up the carpeted staircase, poised to kill" (BAL:62). The facts are too brutal; the "pain of comprehension" is too intense; and nowhere can Wallace find the "universal patterns" of

stability that bring relief.

To find some relief from the "pain of comprehension," from the "dark depressing data of his profession," Wallace searches for a source of optimism, hope, and comfort (BAL:12). Suddenly in his methodical notes of the television news, he had "a vision of the recuperative powers of his society" (BAL:61). Thrilled by the machinery of the social system, Wallace forms a new hope and belief in the survival of man. Moreover, he sees his own secure niche within the social machinery of civilization: "He was thinking that among the intellectual resources of the nation were her historians. In the bright blue light of the television screen his face had the pallor of revelation" (BAL:68). Then, in his appointment as senior member of the Records and Data Team for the New York Command for Research and Defense (NYCRAD), Wallace finds a temporary source of immunity against the "pain of comprehension" and a source of the faith that "we shall endure" (BAL:68).

For Wallace Creighton, the organization and his job in it are sources of personal sustenance in the face of disaster. In NYCRAD, he finds lingering signs of the lost order of the time--of the lost patterns of stability. Moreover, the organizational life becomes a safe and convenient abbreviation for actual experience in a chaotic world. Looking out the tinted glass of his office window, he cannot see the giants. Instead, he submerges himself in memos,

requisition orders, charts, news clips, and official transcripts. Despite the sense of personal relief he finds in NYCRAD, the organization has a life of its own totally indifferent to the individual man. With a superhuman institutional power, NYCRAD can easily perform and rationalize gross acts of personal indignity. Stripped of his clothing, Wallace is examined by a security officer who pretends that Wallace had not yet been approved for the job he had been doing for two months. But in spite of these personal indignities, he decides to adjust to organizational life--"to wear the ID card on his lapel as if he had been born to it" (BAL:92). For in the framework of his new life, he found both a sense of security and a release from the "pain of comprehension." The fact was that "the laminated ID card worked its spell even in the privacy of one's mind" and in the organization, Wallace feels "the enrolled official's sneaking sense of immunity" (BAL:96).

But as a historian, Wallace was trained in the brutally perceptive skills of objective analysis, and it is this training that finally will not allow him to blind himself with the conventions of organizational life to the facts, statistics, and measurements of reality. Still, the tools of the historian cannot help him make sense of the over-flowing files of information, for the enormous amount of data has become as incomprehensible as the giants

themselves. Shocking scatological letters from private citizens concerning the giants cross Wallace's desk. Later, in the role of historical observer, he takes a helicopter ride in close range of the massive human formations--the flesh, the musculature, the sickeningly familiar foulness of the human body. Finally, in a tour through the agencies, laboratories, and libraries of NYCRAD, he finds himself confronted with an even more chaotic and incomprehensible reality: the giants are moving. And with this realization, he is nauseated with data--with the pain of knowing too much. In his sickness and pain, in near hysterical tones, he cries out: "How did they get here? How is such a thing possible?" (BAL:110).

"Universal patterns" of order and stability have deteriorated. The movement of life is toward death. And nowhere can Wallace find the tools that will help him interpret and understand the painful facts of his life. One evening, drunk, in a night club with Red Bloom and Sugarbush, he lies on the floor in a pool of whiskey. His drunken state and the absurd act of grabbing a girl's ankle clearly express Wallace's pain and fear: "It just got to me tonight" (BAL:142). To Red and Sugarbush, he exclaims: ". . . you two are inviolate. I mean you don't give in to the huge demeaning conditions of life. . . . You've survived. You've prevailed" (BAL:140-143). But of himself, Wallace states: ". . . I have gotten lost in this

organization. My job seems to be of no importance to anyone but me. No, that's not it. I know too much. That's it" (BAL:142). Wallace knows too much; he cannot interpret or understand the horrible facts of the new, changing world. What he needs desperately is a tool--what Kermode would call a "fiction"--to "make human sense" of the world around him.²⁵ Unlike the conventions of the organization, fictions are "mental structures" that constantly change as the needs for sense-making change.²⁶ But even more importantly, fictions humanize the world's contingency; they assuage the horror of chaos.²⁷ And fictions do this better than history, asserts Kermode, because they are "consciously false."²⁸ This pretense is a convention--a useful, flexible tool--for finding things out, for interpreting data, and for finding comfort in the midst of a chaotic, viciously contingent reality. But in his efforts to capture reality in the pages of his history, Wallace has not learned the convention that would teach him endurance and survival.

He has not learned the conventions necessary for the apprehension of a changing world and for co-existence with chaos. His fierce desire for understanding and relief

²⁵Kermode, p. 41.

²⁶Kermode, pp. 39-40.

²⁷Kermode, p. 145.

²⁸Kermode, p. 64.

is a natural human reflex in the time of a crisis: "It was the simple organic response of flesh trying to heal itself" (BAL:149). Moreover, analysis, interpretation, and understanding are integral facets of Wallace's job as historian. But all of his efforts to understand what is happening are futile; he cannot live amidst chaos. Wallace is overwhelmed by the anxiety of randomness. What happens in the world around him is increasingly incomprehensible to him. Struck in the temple by a jet airplane, the giant male emits a sound of pain. The duration of the sound is four months, and Wallace ". . . felt himself strained beyond his capacity to recognize it for what it was" (BAL:149). Slowly, the giant raises his hand to his temple, and the raised hand is a sign of benediction to masses of people. A new religious fervor burns throughout the city. In the midst of this religious struggle, Wallace doubts his ability to perceive, analyze, and understand:

Perhaps my own history book will record me as a man with approximately the same quality of perception as one of Pilate's soldiers, yawning and scratching himself as Christ passed on the way to Calvary. . . . Is it history I should worry about? Or my own salvation? (BAL:161)

In the midst of chaos, Wallace cannot see how to survive; he does not know what direction to take or how to understand what is happening. Finally, all semblance of order is destroyed by mob insanity; and sitting in the war room, he was

. . . mesmerized by all this randomness. It had the effect of unstructuring his mind; his own communications center refused to organize the information he received, he was in a daze, seeing, hearing, but not feeling. (BAL:180)

Overwhelmed by chaos--by the anxiety of randomness--Wallace cries out: "It was unendurable to be working in the lag of history while the city burned" (BAL:180). He cannot work; he cannot live with what is happening.

Suddenly, in a brief fleeting vision, in a clear illustration, Wallace sees a model that can teach him how to live and work amidst doubts and chaos. On the screen in the war room, he sees Red Bloom,

. . . the glimpse of a shadow flitting between the police and their tormentors, a momentary vision of a thin fellow wheeling a bass, dancing through no man's land in what to all eyes but his had to be a classic moment of total incongruity. (BAL:181-2)

In this image of Red Bloom, the jazz musician dancing through the riot, Wallace sees a man able to live and create music in the midst of chaos. As a historical writer, he attempts to capture reality in the pages of his book. But he lacks the ability to organize, interpret, and live with that reality. However, in his music, Red Bloom found a tool so flexible that he could humanize the startling facts of the new reality and dance through no-man's land. Red Bloom lives by his fictive powers, and one evening he tells Wallace the source of his energy: "You make believe, that's what. You make believe that there is some order and that what will happen is up to you" (BAL:143). In this

flexible convention of "make believe" lies all hope for survival and endurance. Through Red Bloom's dancing image on the screen, Wallace sees clearly illustrated the tool for survival that has been available to him from the beginning. Early in the novel, to escape from military harassment, he successfully impersonates a general, and in this scene, Red comments on the skillful use of make believe. "Wallace, when you said before that you take roles . . . to me, that means you're a judiciously powerful man" (BAL:54). A man able to take roles--to use fictional conventions--is a man able to live and work successfully in a viciously chaotic world. But it is not until the vision of Red Bloom flitting through chaos appears on the screen that Wallace begins to understand the significance of fictional conventions.

Throughout his experience in the new world, Wallace has suffered the agonizing "pain of comprehension"--from the nausea of knowing too much. Reality, states Wallace, "blasted a fissure in . . . [my] brain" (BAL:149). The monstrous facts, out of control, have blasted their way into all the crevices of his brain, and for this reason, the realization that after a year researchers have only begun to comprehend the giants' existence, Wallace's mind receives a jolt so strong that Doctorow himself marks its intensity with a distinct shift from third-person to first-person narration. In the anguish of his new awareness, in

words fraught with pain and stress, Wallace states:

How long have I believed that we would come to a moment of release, a release from this suffering? When everything would be all right again. But there is no such moment. There is no end to this ordeal. Therefore they [the giants] really are unendurable. I can't endure them. They are such absurd pain, such impossible, intolerable pain. They are hideous with existence; we will all die of revulsion, we will be overwhelmed with revulsion for them. I am on the wrong side here. They have to be destroyed. (BAL:212)

For Wallace, there is no release from suffering--from the "pain of comprehension." The giants are "hideous with existence"; they are a monstrous reality. But still, they are reality, and the destruction of the giants may mean the destruction of all existence. Finally, in the company of friends, in loving consideration of Red Bloom's unborn child, Wallace realizes that he must learn to live in the new world:

We're joined to them [the giants], they are in our world, they are our world and if we destroy them we destroy ourselves. . . . I believe this is the beginning of our real history. I think it would be nice to get past the beginning, to give ourselves that chance. (BAL:216)

At this point, Wallace no longer asks: When will I be killed by the giants? But instead, he poses this question: How can I live in the new world? Death, destruction, failure, and the "pain of comprehension" are no longer important issues. Instead, the novel ends proclaiming a hope for the survival and endurance of the human spirit: Red Bloom dreams of music and of buying a new bass; Wallace Creighton "makes believe" once again that he is a general

to protect General Rockelmayer from arrest. But even more importantly, Doctorow sees in this musician and this historical writer the hope which William Faulkner proclaimed in his Nobel acceptance speech:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion, sacrifice, and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.²⁹

With this new hope and belief in the endurance of man, and with this new interest in the musician who dances through chaos, both Wallace Creighton and Doctorow turn from the painful comprehension of external reality to internal reality and the problems of the human spirit.

²⁹William Faulkner, "Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature," The Faulkner Reader (New York: The Modern Library, 1959), p. 4.

Chapter 4

COALHOUSE WALKER JR., DANIEL, AND "A DRAMATIC, EXALTED SELF-AWARENESS": THE ROMANTIC ARTIST OF "MEMORY TIME" IN THE BOOK OF DANIEL

Coalhouse Walker was never harsh or autocratic. He treated his followers with courtesy and only asked if they thought something ought to be done. He dealt with them out of his constant sorrow. His controlled rage affected them like a magnet. . . . They believed they were going to die in a spectacular manner. This belief produced in them a dramatic, exalted self-awareness.

E. L. Doctorow, Ragtime.

Now three things make up my songs, the words, the music, and the attitude. And of these the least understood is the attitude. I mean in this song some critics think I am talking about Life or America or the Futility of Orgasm or some goddamn thing, but I am not, I am talking about the place where I grew up, the orphan's home. . . .

E. L. Doctorow, "The Songs of Billy Bathgate."

Many of Doctorow's characters--Blue, Harry Houdini, Wallace Creighton, Red Bloom--are portraits of the individual in confrontation with the harshness and brutality of American social reality. Blue and Houdini wanted to create reality, while Wallace Creighton and J. P. Morgan searched for "universal patterns" of order and stability in the chaos of external reality. Moreover, as a historian, Creighton wanted to be a critic and interpreter of life, but he could not find a critical perspective. Coalhouse Walker Jr., however, adopts a radical, militaristic perspective through which he critically judges his enemy and demands justice.

When his Ford is vandalized, and his beloved Sarah is killed, Coalhouse Walker Jr., once a ragtime musician, militarizes his grief, his rage, and his demands for justice. His fierce belief in justice and his willingness to die for it produced in him "a dramatic, exalted self-awareness." In precisely the same manner, in The Book of Daniel, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, with their vehement socialism, are willing to die for justice. Like Coalhouse Walker Jr., they refused to be victims; they "rushed after self-esteem."³⁰ Accused of conspiring to give away atomic secrets, Paul and Rochelle Isaacson are electrocuted for their communism--for their critical, radical perspective. But the real victims are their son and daughter, Daniel and Susan. Born into their parents' idealistic radicalism, nurtured in the Isaacsons' "dramatic, exalted self-awareness," Daniel and Susan live a childhood of nightmares as their parents are arrested, placed on trial, and executed. Even when Daniel reaches adulthood, the images of his parents and the brutal perceptions of his childhood torment and sicken his spirit. In his heart and mind, both the disorders of civilization and his own disorders swell and erupt into a fiery inflammation of the spirit. Staggering under the weight of his sickness, Daniel asks: "IS IT

³⁰E. L. Doctorow, The Book of Daniel (New York: New American Library, 1971), p. 43; subsequent references are indicated parenthetically.

SO TERRIBLE NOT TO KEEP THE MATTER IN MY HEART, TO GET THE MATTER OUT OF MY HEART. TO EMPTY MY HEART OF THIS MATTER? WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH MY HEART?" (BD:27). Thus, Daniel, like Coalhouse Walker is obsessed with the reality of self. But unlike Coalhouse Walker and his parents, Daniel lacks a critical perspective through which he can understand internal reality. Through Daniel's analytical inquiry in search of critical understanding, Doctorow continues in his third novel, The Book of Daniel, the quest he started in Welcome to Hard Times, the quest to find order in human experience. Big as Life demonstrates the futility of finding order in external reality, and The Book of Daniel explores this possibility in the internal world. In The Book of Daniel, Doctorow examines the formlessness of "memory" time and indicates that the artistic conventions of perspective and form are the tools that permit human co-existence with the chaos of the human mind and with the harshness of American social reality.

In this novel, Doctorow's examination of reality is apparently inspired by the actual execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg as atom spies in 1953. Like Daniel, the Rosenbergs' sons have written their own account of their parents' execution. In We Are Your Sons (1975), Robert and Michael Meeropol include many of their parents' prison letters and tell their own story of the events of 1950-1954. Always sure of their parents' innocence, the

brothers write:

. . . we reasoned that to reopen the case would shed light on and thus improve the current political situation of Americans [Watergate]. . . . It is time to explode the myths that the lie of our parents' guilt helped to perpetuate.³¹

Daniel, too, reopens the case of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson. Through his re-examination of his parents' case, Daniel relives the heart-break and the nightmares of all children of political victims.

As a child, Daniel is a "little criminal of perception," and later when he is an adult, his over-sensitive perceptions of past experiences transform his heart and mind into a hellish nightmare world of images (BD:44). Images, states Daniel,

break with a small ping, their destruction is as wonderful as their being, they are essentially instruments of torture exploding through the individual's calloused capacity to feel powerful undifferentiated emotions full of longing and dissatisfaction and monumentality. (BD:194)

Indeed, his heart is tormented by images of his grandma's cursing him, ". . . her grey hair all uncombed, undone, the waves of it sticking out from her shawl, shockingly, like electric wire" (BD:79). He remembers a woman rammed through the schoolyard fence. She had been carrying bottles of milk in her grocery bags, and "the bottles had broken and the milk was mixed with her blood, and glass was in it" (BD:101).

³¹Robert and Michael Meeropol, We Are Your Sons (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), pp. 316-17.

Daniel sees with brutal clarity the image of his father bandaged and broken after the anti-communist riots at Peekskill. He sees in his mind his father's arrest and his parents in the death house. Every image bore another; every image was a ghost that "hovered in . . . [his] brain like fear" (BD:87). He is tortured and haunted by these ghosts of the past, and gradually "the real life of his childhood, that had become a dream, became real again" (BD:75). Thus, Daniel, like the Biblical Daniel, begins his attempts to analyze and interpret the visions of his head, to get the matter out of his heart. But the images are so painful and so dreadful that "one glance in the mirror scorched the heart and charred the eyes" (BD:18).

The matter in Daniel's heart is the question of his parents' innocence or guilt and the most frightening of all childhood nightmares--that of the parents who leave the little boy alone and never come back. In it, the child cries: "Why do they do that to Daddy?" (BD:131). His childhood is the nightmare in which the Law proclaims his parents guilty and then electrocutes them for their guilt. When the FBI harassment begins, he imagines "a giant eye machine" that will pin the family in its searchlight, "like the lady jammed through the schoolyard fence with her blood mixed with the milk and broken bottles." And our blood, states the little boy, "will hurt as if it had glass in it" (BD:122). For Daniel, this is exactly what happens. The

FBI and American-Law-and-Order pinpoint the family and then pronounce them guilty. This declaration of his parents' guilt by the FBI, the press, and the Law confuses the mind of the seven-year-old boy. Puzzled and frightened by what has happened, he asks: "If my father was a ring-leader was I in his ring? . . . He was being transformed before my eyes and he wasn't there to stop it from happening. If he was in jail maybe he was an atomic ringleader" (BD:176). Daniel reasons that if his parents are in jail, they must be guilty; only bad people are in jail. Certainly, Paul and Rochelle were guilty of seeing through a radical, socialist perspective. Certainly, they were guilty of making Daniel and Susan orphans. Daniel himself remarks: "I felt guilty" (BD:176). It is this matter of innocence or guilt--of right or wrong--that underlies Daniel's inquiry through the troubling images of his childhood.

When The Book of Daniel opens, Daniel sits in the library of the University of Columbia scribbling down the images of his childhood and his account of his parents' death. But his attempted analyses are "diffuse, apocalyptic, hysterical" (BD:22). He suffers from the dream of his childhood, the dream that has become real. And the pages of his book are filled with false starts, outlines, lists, a catalogue of tortures and executions, literary allusions, a grocery list, essays, and a history of American postwar diplomacy. However, amidst the visions and randomness of

Daniel's mind is Doctorow's delineation of a character who attempts to analyze and interpret his memories and the matter of his parents' guilt. In the midst of the chaotic formlessness of Daniel's mind lies Doctorow's plot--the story of a young man forced to reconsider the matter of innocence and guilt, right and wrong. Doctorow examines a character whose private life clashes violently with the institutions of American social reality. Specifically, Doctorow focuses on Daniel, who travels on a journey into the very heart of American Law.

To first challenge Daniel's belief in the rightness of American Law, in a Law sanctioned by the "monumental justice" of God, Doctorow leads Daniel into a scene where he himself is judged (BD:20). As a little boy, he knew that the Law is always right; only bad people go to jail. Moreover, he knew that God "gets" the guilty ones (BD:20). But when Susan at twenty attempts suicide (significantly on the day before Memorial Day, 1967), and when Daniel receives a letter written days before her attempted suicide, all of his beliefs and assumptions are drastically challenged. In the state hospital for the mentally ill, looking through her spacious eyes, Susan makes a quiet, firm statement: "They're still fucking us. . . . Goodbye, Daniel. You get the picture" (BD:19). This statement jolts him out of his apathetic indifference back into the old sense of being a victim, of being an orphan abandoned by parents who were

guilty because the Law said so. But Susan, too, is a moralist and a judge, and in her letter, she judges Daniel guilty and her parents innocent. Terrified, he reads her verdict:

You think they [the Isaacsons] are guilty. It's enough to take someone's life away. Someday, Daniel, following your pathetic demons, you are going to disappear up your own asshole. To cover the time until then, I'm writing you out of my mind. You no longer exist. (BD:89-90)

For Susan, the moralist, Daniel is clearly guilty of betraying their parents' cause; he is also responsible for her attempted suicide. He is enraged. Crazed by the fact that he is a victim of the Law, he burns his wife with a cigarette lighter to test "the effect of three concentric circles of heating element glowing orange in a black night of rain upon the tender white girlflesh of . . . his wife's ass" (BD:72). He victimizes his wife with his own fear and guilt. Shocked by the fact that he has been judged by Susan, the girl who shares his orphaned state, Daniel annotates and analyzes the letter--the pronouncement of the verdict. He then attempts to analyze and interpret his visions and memories in light of Susan's moral judgment. For more than anything else, this judgment forces him to search himself, to re-open his parents' case, and to reconsider his assumptions about American Law. In the summer of 1967, when other students in the universities protested the atrocities of American Law and Order by dousing themselves with gasoline and burning to death,

Daniel sits in the library, scribbling down notes, reconsidering the matter of innocence and guilt.

Then, leading Daniel farther into the dark heart of American Law, Doctorow lets loose "that scream from the smiling face of America" (BD:194). And Daniel steps into the hellish Halloween world of Law, Order, and Justice. He tours the city, running from his own fear, guilt, and criminality into the midst of the American community, into a confrontation with the "merciless radical temperament," and finally into the waiting arms of the American Law (BD:170). On a hot summer day in Riverside Park, he once again victimizes his family with his own fear and guilt. Enjoying the fear he creates in them, he throws his baby son higher and higher into the air. Later, writing about the event, he comments: "I can't bear to think about this murderous feeling--about my own guilt and criminality" (BD:146). Looking around and seeing some people staring at him--some witnesses of the crime almost committed--Daniel runs into the midst of the American community, down Fourteenth Street, "the most dismal street in the world," through Tompkins Park Square, "the community," with its crowds of young girls, old men, old ladies in babushkas, black men, hippies, and dogs (BD:147-8). Daniel runs to the merciless radical of Avenue B , Artie Sternlicht. Listening to Sternlicht, the revolutionary who befriended Susan, Daniel suddenly sees "the lower East Side with

Sternlicht's vision. . . . With the poor people of this earth I want to share my fate" (BD:154). But he is mistaken; the radical temperament of the New Left is in no way idealistic. Instead, Sternlicht gives him a merciless interpretation of the actions of the Old Left and the Isaacsons' trial: "Your folks didn't know shit. The way they handled themselves at their trial was pathetic. I mean they played it by their rules. The government's rules" (BD:166). Moreover, Sternlicht advocates a new moral law and tells Daniel how he would conduct himself on trial:

. . . if they find me guilty I will find them guilty, and if they find me innocent I will still find them guilty. And I won't come on except as a judge of them, a new man, like a new nation with new laws of life. And they will be on trial, not me. (BD:167)

But Daniel is still not fully acquainted with the harshness and brutality of the radical temperament until he asks Sternlicht what he thinks about Susan's idea to establish the Paul and Rochelle Isaacson Foundation for Revolution. Smiling mercilessly, Sternlicht says:

. . . that would change every opinion I have about the Isaacsons, and I would gladly become a beneficiary of her Foundation. Fuck me if I'm ever consistent . . . if there's bread in the Movement I don't care if it's in the name of Ronald Reagan. (BD:168-9)

Shocked by the mercilessness of Sternlicht's radicalism, Daniel suddenly realizes and understands Susan's point of view; he sees the idealistic and moralistic Susan in confrontation with the New Left. Abruptly, he realizes the meaning of Susan's statement after she attempted suicide:

THEY'RE STILL FUCKING US. She didn't mean Paul and Rochelle. That's what I would have meant. What she meant was first everyone else and now the Left. The Isaacsons are nothing to the New Left. And if they can't make it with them who else is there? (BD:169)

In this scene, Daniel stands in the courtroom of yet another merciless, moralistic judge--the radical, Artie Sternlicht. In the presence of this judge, he witnesses the judgment of both his sister and his parents. Moreover, he sees his own orphan state, his role as victim, in a new light: the children were made victims not by their parents but by the "system" and by the Left. After this brutal confrontation with "the merciless radical temperament," he relearns the puritan mercilessness of the American Law. A letter from his foster father should have been filled with love and compassion for Daniel. Instead, the letter contains the sterile emotion of the American Law--the "true blue American puritan" idea of legal responsibility. Nowhere can Daniel find mercy, not in the Courts of the New Left, not in the Courts of American Law. In each case, in each courtroom, he learns that Law, Order, and Justice are ghoulish inhabitants of hell. In light of his experiences, Daniel names Poe, the "master subversive," the revolutionary, who wore a hole into the parchment just below the Preamble. Through this aperture in the parchment,

the darkness of the depths rose and rises still from that small hole all these years incessantly pouring its dark hellish gases like soot, like smog, like the poisonous effulgence of combustion engines over Thrift and Virtue and Reason and Natural Law and the rights

of Man. . . . It's Poe who ruined us, that scream from the smiling face of America. (BD:193-4)

Daniel grew up and was nurtured in the idealism, belief in Justice, and the "dramatic, exalted self-awareness" of his parents. He grew up believing that innocence and guilt--right and wrong--could be justly determined in a Court of Law. But through his experiences, Daniel abruptly understands the brutal mercilessness of both the radical revolutionary and the American Law. Nowhere can Daniel, Susan, or their parents receive a just, merciful verdict, for the matter of innocence and guilt is clouded by fierce partisanship. Propelled by these realizations and by Doctorow's inquiry, Daniel then steps into the presence of amorality. Still trying to analyze and interpret the horrifying visions of his head, he visits his catatonic sister in her sanitarium. In his sister, who no longer speaks, only the natural responses of her nerves betray the presence of life, he sees a vision of amorality. Susan, he states, is a Starfish: "There are few silences deeper than the silence of the Starfish. There are not many degrees of life lower before there is no life" (BD:223). A Starfish is not enraged by injustice--not overwhelmed by the ponderous matter of innocence and guilt. Instead, the Starfish, a lost sign of the Zodiac, experiences "serenity and harmony with the universe, and therefore great happiness. The five points of the star lead not outward as is

commonly believed, but inward, toward the center. . . . It referred to the wedding in the heart of the five senses" (BD:267). But in spite of this vision of the "self-sufficiency" of the Starfish, Daniel now steps inside the courtroom of his own heart and mind where he becomes his own judge (BD:167). Standing at the foot of Susan's bed, he can see that the sanitarium does not require underwear, and he asks himself if he is guilty of desiring an incestuous relationship with his sister. But the verdict is not guilty, and Daniel, the judge, comments: "My involvement with Susan has to do with rage, which is easily confused with unnatural passion" (BD:224). On the case of Susan's imminent death, he judges himself legally incapable of saving her: ". . . my God, she is dying and there is nothing Daniel can do" (BD:225). He has gone into the serene, peaceful presence of amorality. It is a presence untroubled by partisanship, by the matter of innocence and guilt. Still, it is a presence easily mistaken for death, for it is totally free of a critical, human perspective. The matters of the human heart are lost in its speechlessness. Thus, Daniel's liberation from the merciless morality and judgments of his family, the Left, American Law, and himself can only be accomplished through his own speechlessness or death.

But Doctorow's story is not an inquiry into speechlessness or death, and Daniel's search is not for

amoral speechlessness. Instead, he seeks a critical perspective through which he can analyze and interpret the visions of his head. He does not look for a way to commit suicide; he wants to learn how to live with himself in American society. For as he states: "The final existential condition is citizenship" (BD:85). Thus, he turns from the silent presence of amorality and drives to Washington, into "the heart of darkness," to "do whatever is being done" (BD:267-269). Thoreau-like, the citizen Daniel, practices civil disobedience: he burns his draft card, marches on the Pentagon, and is arrested. Once again, like his parents, Daniel is brought into the Court of American Law. Moreover, he, like his parents, is an enemy of his country. For Daniel the verdict is guilty, but the sentence is not death. Still, like his parents in the death house, he distinctly feels the powerlessness, the rage, the fear, the "progressive deterioration of possibilities, a methodical constriction of options available to him" (BD:163). Since he is locked in jail, Daniel should find himself guilty of a criminal act, but he cannot. What he learns in this revelatory experience is the terror of the citizen proclaimed guilty, an enemy of his country:

He sweats in a chill of possibilities knowing now what it means to do what is being done, and sweats every minute of just one night only one night, every second sweating it, a twenty-five-dollar ten-day suspended trip INNOCENT, I'M INNOCENT I TELL YA, eyesight skating up and down the walls like flies, interpreting the space between the bars, and Daniel discusses the end-

less reverberations of each moment of this time, doing this time in discrete instants, and discussing each instant its theme, structure, diction and metaphor with her, with Starfish, my silent Starfish girl.
(BD:274)

To Susan, the girl who rejected the harsh judgments of society for the silent, lifelessness of amorality, Daniel tells exactly what it means to be a citizen--what it means to be victimized by the demands of American Law. But as he now understands, Law, Order, and Justice are man-made concepts. A guilty verdict and a death sentence do not mean that the judge has spoken an irreversible Truth.

With his new understanding of what it means to be an innocent man locked in prison, Daniel seeks to clear the Isaacson name of all guilt; he seeks a new verdict of innocent. Thus, he travels to California to speak with Selig Mindish, the man whose testimony put Paul and Rochelle in prison. Armed with a good defense case--with a theory of another couple and a theory of Mindish's own innocence--Daniel confronts the man's daughter with his carefully prepared legal briefs. But Linda Mindish fearfully and angrily attacks his case with a restatement of her father's testimony. This confrontation leads Daniel to yet another realization about the American Law. Not only are Law, Order, and Justice man-made concepts, but they are also characterized by relativity. Just as Daniel now wants his parents to be innocent, Linda Mindish wants them to be guilty. And Daniel, for one moment, "experienced the truth

of the situation as an equitability of evil . . . that moment passed and . . . [he] saw her [Linda] as locked into her family truths as . . . [his family] was in . . . [theirs]" (BD:291). But in spite of these realizations, he still insists upon his right to see Selig Mindish, who he believes can give the final truth and provide order for his memories. But Mindish is senile, frolicking in a toy automobile in Disneyland and unable to answer any questions or make any final judgments. Thus, through this confrontation, he sees a clear illustration of a statement he made early in the novel: "Of one thing we are sure. Everything is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is elusive. Justice is elusive. Human character. Quarters for the cigarette machine: (BD:54).

Daniel learns one sure thing: "everything is elusive." There can be no final judgment of innocence or guilt--right or wrong. There can be no truth. But his realizations have served only to confuse and frustrate him even more, for he wanted to find the truth--the truth that would give the randomness and disorder of his memories shape and form. Instead, his scrawls on the page become more and more "diffuse, apocalyptic, hysterical" (BD:22). To the end of his book, he never masters the conventions of critical perspective and form. To the end, Daniel's book is a random jumble of data and brief insights that mirror the formlessness of his memories. Even in the last pages, he cannot

fulfill the expectations created by his outline. Since he still does not know how to see and interpret his memories, he requires three endings to conclude his writing. But even the third ending does not conclude his thoughts. Sitting in the library on the day of the Columbia uprising, a protesting student commands him: "Close the book, man, what's the matter with you, don't you know you're liberated?" (BD:318). Obediently, he closes his book and resigns himself to speechlessness. He may be liberated from a search for the truth, but still he cannot understand or organize internal reality. His book contains no critical perspective--no form. As an artist, he tries to write a romantic lyrical novel of personal growth, but he cannot find the lyrical perspective; his book is as chaotic as his life. Daniel's book is merely a therapeutic chart of the heart's illness. But Doctorow's novel, The Book of Daniel, clearly delineates a character who lacks the conventions that would allow him, like Red Bloom, to dance through the chaos of human memories.

Chapter 5

PICTURES, STORIES, AND VOICES--"TOOLS OF THE TRADE": THE ARTIST AS MASTER OF ILLUSION IN RAGTIME

I'm losing my blood to this rag, but more, I have the cold feeling that everything I've written doesn't tell how it was. No matter how careful I've been to get it all down it still escapes me: like what happened is far below my understanding beyond my sight. In my limits, taking a day for a day, a night for a night, have I showed the sand shifting under our feet, the terrible arrangement of our lives.

E. L. Doctorow, Welcome to Hard Times.

He [Wallace Creighton] felt the pain of comprehension, as if his mind had been dislocated, like a bone, and it was a pain so intense that it carried with it a ridiculous self-awareness, so that at the same time he was feeling it he could not believe he was feeling it.

E. L. Doctorow, Big as Life.

Of one thing we are sure. Everything is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is elusive. Justice is elusive. Human character. Quarters for the cigarette machine.

E. L. Doctorow, The Book of Daniel.

He carried on a chain around his neck a rectangular glass framed in metal which he often held up to his face as if to compose for a mental photograph what it was that had captured his attention. . . . He was, he said, the Baron Ashkenazy. He was in the moving picture business and the glass rectangle was a tool of the trade. . . .

E. L. Doctorow, Ragtime.

For Blue, Wallace Creighton, and Daniel Isaacson, the problem is how to tell what happened. Throughout his ledgers, Blue struggles with the writing of an objective factual document. He wants to account for what happened

when the Bad Man from Bodie came to Hard Times. But Blue's greatest error as a writer stems from his belief that he can create truth. To the end, Blue attempts to perform a "real-world act" that substantively alters the world. In Big as Life, a third-person narrator tells the story of Wallace Creighton. But Creighton, too, is deeply involved in the problems of composition. As a historical writer, he insists upon strict analytical observation of the object, determines to portray this data exactly, and assumes that the apprehension of data will allow him to become a critic and interpreter of life. But all of Wallace's attempts to apprehend, analyze, and interpret a monstrous, gigantic reality are frightening and painful, for he lacks the necessary tools or conventions for "making human sense" of the changing world. Just as Wallace cannot objectively make sense of external reality, Daniel Isaacson cannot analyze and interpret the visions of his head. To find the objective truth about his parents, he searches through memories and images which he then writes down. Because Daniel never masters the conventions of critical perspective and form, however, his book remains a jumble of data and brief subjective insights. It is as chaotic as his life. Each of Doctorow's characters searches for truth and objectivity; each is a historian attempting to write a factual document of public events and private history. But as writers, Blue, Wallace, and Daniel confront their own

limitations. Blue assumes that words can control truth and reality, but words cannot show the truth about what happened, for they are bound by the subjectivity of personal experience, perception, and memory. Wallace Creighton believes that he can precisely capture the contours and the pattern of reality. But he cannot find order in his overflowing files of factual information. He is personally and subjectively overwhelmed by a contingent reality. Daniel Isaacson hopes to find truth and order in the visions of his head. However, he sees not only that words are bound by subjective partisanship and that there is no order in internal reality, but he also learns in his confrontations with his memories and with the American Law that everything is elusive. There is no truth. Clearly, the problem remains unsolved: How does one tell what happened? How does one resolve the tension between inner and outer reality? between the subjective and the objective? Who should tell the story of what happened?

It is with this problem of telling what happened that Doctorow begins the writing of his fourth novel, Ragtime. But in this novel the narrative problems of the first three novels are even further complicated, for in Ragtime Doctorow attempts to tell the story of a historical period. Carefully framing his novel between 1902 and 1917, he aims to tell what happened during these years of great transition and change. During the era of ragtime, people everywhere

experienced the shocking death of the old century and the traumatic birth of the twentieth century. Across the country, people felt new cultural and historical forces at work. To tell what happened in this era of tumultuous changes, Doctorow has several modes of narration available. As in Welcome to Hard Times and The Book of Daniel, he could choose to tell what happened through someone's memory. Any of the people in Doctorow's novel could remember and tell what happened during the era of ragtime: J. P. Morgan, Harry Houdini, Evelyn Nesbit, Emma Goldman, Coalhouse Walker Jr., Father, Mother, Tateh, the little boy. But of the memory, Blue writes in his ledgers that "the form remembrance puts on things is making its own time and guiding my pen in ways I don't trust" (WHT:149). Memory makes its own time, and the subjectivity of the human memory greatly limits and influences the telling of what actually happened. Rather than through "memory" time, Doctorow could choose, as in Big as Life, an objective third-person narrator to render "real" time. But "words," states Blue, "don't turn as the earth turns, they only have their season. . . . The real time leads you along and you never know when it happens. . ." (WHT:139). Even for an objective third-person narrator, "real" time is elusive. Moreover, even this narrator allows the subjective human character to give his story its perspective. In Welcome to Hard Times, Big as Life, and The Book of Daniel, a single narrator attempts to

tell what actually happened--to tell the truth about a particular historical event. In each case, these storytellers fail, for they are hindered by the demands of their egos in their efforts to tell what happened. Their stories are thus limited and colored by personal guilt, fear, hope, ideologies, and partisanship. Through the writing of his first three novels, Doctorow examined the crippling limitations of "memory" time and the utter elusiveness of "real" time. As the title of his fourth novel suggests, however, Ragtime is not merely the product of "memory" time, nor does it seek to capture "real" time. Instead, this novel is "rag" time which encompasses nostalgia, memorabilia, data, and factual historical information.

In Ragtime, Doctorow reconciles the subjective and the objective perspectives and, thus, solves the problem first seen in Welcome to Hard Times. This reconciliation of internal and external reality entails new relationships among the artist, his materials, and the "real" world. As in the previous novels, it is the artist-figures who best illustrate both the problem and its solution. Harry Houdini, the great illusionist, firmly believes that he can perform a "real-world act" and that he can create truth in the "real" world. While not an artist himself, J. P. Morgan looks for "universal patterns" of wisdom, order, and truth in objects of art--the materials. Coalhouse Walker Jr., the black ragtime musician, seeks

truth and justice in his own "dramatic, exalted self-awareness"--in himself. In each case, however, their efforts end in personal failure and dissatisfaction. Only Tateh, who later becomes the Baron Ashkenazy, discovers the "proper alignment" of artist, materials, and world. The Baron makes his fortune in the moving picture business, and a vitally important "tool of his trade" is a rectangular glass framed in metal. Alive to every moment and every scene, he often held the frame to his face "as if to compose for a mental photograph what it was that had captured his attention" (R:295). "In the movie films," states the Baron, "we only look at what is there already. . . . People want to know what is happening to them" (R:297). People want to know what is happening, so Baron Ashkenazy showed his audiences life viewed through a frame. With this frame, he composed pictures of scenes, objects, and people. But more importantly, it is this frame that creates the "proper alignment" of self, materials, and world, for simultaneously it distances the artist from the demands of his ego; it gives the artist a perspective or means of viewing the world; and it allows the artist to compose or arrange his materials. Following the example of the Baron Ashkenazy, Doctorow reconciles the subjective and the objective perspectives by means of an "anonymous narrative consciousness" whose frames enable Doctorow to tell the story of the ragtime era.

In Ragtime, Doctorow creates the illusion of a human consciousness telling stories without the limitations of character. What results from this new narrative device is an unconventional novel composed of many pictures and movie-like sequences, accompanied by the syncopating rhythms of ragtime music. Carefully framed by both a historical time period and an apparent novelist beginning and end, Ragtime is almost totally comprised of photographic descriptions and framed portraits. For a moment the frame focuses upon J. P. Morgan, the epitome of wealth and power, alone in an Egyptian pyramid. In the frame appear pictures of Henry Ford, Admiral Peary's discovery of the North Pole, Harry Houdini's dramatic escapes, Evelyn Nesbit's sexual attractiveness, and Emma Goldman's anarchism. In addition to these historical portraits, the frame centers upon a fictional musician named Coalhouse Walker Jr. and the unnamed members of two families. Father, Mother, Younger Brother, and the little boy live in the affluence of New Rochelle, New York. Tateh and his little girl rise from the poverty and filth of the slums into the heights of wealth and success. Within the frame, all of these portraits appear flat and incomplete; none of the characters is a rounded individual personality. Moreover, the frames do not fall together into a single plot or story line; instead, there are many stories and anecdotes. Even the story of Coalhouse Walker's search for justice and dignity in a

hostile "white" world--the only story that might be considered a plot--does not develop until the second half of the novel. Thus, the frame completely structures the novel. Only the historical dates, 1902-1917, and the traditional novelistic beginning and end carry the burden of the novel's structure. Plot and character are not used. Rather than once again confronting the crippling limitations of character and narrative perspective, Doctorow focuses not upon one character or story but upon many carefully framed compositions.

Using the frame, Doctorow's "anonymous narrative consciousness" transcends the limitations of historical memory and the frightening elusiveness of historical fact. The frame shapes a narrative perspective and a tone that is neither subjective nor objective. However, it is difficult to identify this unique perspective unless Doctorow's narrative voice is compared and contrasted to other examples in narration. Thus, examples from Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s Breakfast of Champions and Alain Robbe-Grillet's Jealousy serve to define more specifically the perspective and narrative tone in Ragtime. First, in Ragtime, the frame at one point focuses upon Father:

Father had been born and raised in White Plains, New York. He was an only child. He remembered moments of light and warmth in the days of summer at Saratoga Springs. There were gardens there with paths of washed gravel. He would stroll with his mama down the large painted porches of the great hotels. On the same day every year they went home. She was a frail woman who died when he was fourteen. Father attended Groton

and then Harvard. He read German Philosophy. In the winter of his sophomore year his studies ended. His father had made a fortune in the Civil War and had since used his time losing it in unwise speculations. It was now entirely gone. The old man was the sort who thrived on adversity. His confidence rose with every loss. In bankruptcy he was beaming and triumphant. He died suddenly, all his expectations intact. His flamboyance had produced in his lonely son a personality that was cautious, sober, industrious and chronically unhappy. Coming into his majority, the orphan took the few dollars left to him and invested it in a small fireworks business owned by an Italian. Eventually he took it over, expanded its sales, bought out a flag manufacturing firm and became quite comfortable. He had also found the time to secure an army commission in the Philippine campaigns. He was proud of his life but never forgot that before going into business he had been to Harvard. He had heard William James lecture on the principles of Modern Psychology. Exploration became his passion: he wanted to avoid what the great Dr. James had called the habit of inferiority, to the full extent of the self. (R:247-8)

In the frame, Father's life passes before the viewer. This frame highlights not only objective facts about Father but also the way Father feels: proud, sober, unhappy. Still, the description is free of editorial comments; the author's voice does not dominate the material. Instead, the voice lets Father's life structure and order the paragraph. The narrative voice in Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s Breakfast of Champions provides a clear contrast to the voice and to the narrative frame in Doctorow's paragraph:

I sat there in a cocktail lounge of my own invention, and I stared through my leaks at a white cocktail waitress of my own invention. I named her Bonnie MacMahon. I had her bring Dwayne Hoover his customary drink, which was a House of Lords martini with a twist of lemon peel. She was a longtime acquaintance of Dwayne's. Her husband was a guard in the Sexual Offenders' Wing of the Adult Correctional Institution. Bonnie had to work as a waitress because her husband

lost all their money by investing it in a car wash in Shepherdstown.³²

The narrative voice of Breakfast of Champions describes Bonnie MacMahon in a cool, objective tone. Nevertheless, these characters are clearly seen from Vonnegut's own perspective. The scene and the characters in it are shaped out of the mind of the storyteller. In Ragtime, readers see through the frame what is out there in the external world, not what is in the mind of its narrator. Still, Ragtime is not as free of a human, narrative consciousness as this passage from Alain Robbe-Grillet's Jealousy:

Half of the hair hangs down the back, the other hand pulls the other half over one shoulder. The head leans to the right, offering the hair more readily to the brush. Each time the latter lands at the top of its cycle behind the nape of the neck, the head leans farther to the right and then rises again with an effort, while the right hand, holding the brush, moves away in the opposite direction. The left hand, which loosely confines the hair between the wrist, the palm and the fingers, releases it for a second and then closes on it again, gathering the strands together with a firm, mechanical gesture, while the brush continues its course to the extreme tips of the hair. The sound, which gradually varies from one end to the other, is at this point nothing more than a dry, faint crackling, whose last sputters occur once the brush, leaving the longest hair, is already moving up the ascending part of the cycle, describing a swift curve in the air which brings it above the neck, where the hair lies flat on the back of the head and reveals the white streak of a part.³³

³²Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Breakfast of Champions (New York: Dell, 1973), p. 194.

³³Alain Robbe-Grillet, Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: Jealousy, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 66.

Robbe-Grillet's description is an objective scientific rendering of an action in the external world. He transmits the action of brushing the hair to the eyes of his audience with no narrative or authorial intrusion; the action itself orders the paragraph. Through the frame however, readers of Ragtime see the external world--"what is out there already"--with the realization that someone holds the frame, focuses, and composes the picture. Thus, Doctorow has created a new narrative persona, a persona who uses photographic and cinematic techniques to combine the subjective and the objective perspectives. Using his frame, this narrative photographer frees himself from the limitations of character and conventional narrative perspective.

Through the camera's eye, Doctorow's narrative consciousness views both the facts and the fictions of the era of ragtime. Setting the exposure time and the shutter speed, this narrative photographer composes pictures that depict both the physical appearance and the feel of an historical moment. Each detail, character, and anecdote is carefully framed in a manner that broadens the reader's awareness and feeling for this particular time and space. Each framed picture offers a new angle of vision and another way to understand what happened. For example, Ragtime opens with a picture that shimmers in the hazy golden light of nostalgia:

In 1902 Father built a house at the crest of the Broadway Avenue hill in New Rochelle, New York. It was a

three-story brown shingle with dormers, bay windows and a screened porch. Striped awnings shaded the windows. The family took possession of this stout manse on a sunny day in June and it seemed for some days thereafter that all their days would be warm and fair. (R:3)

The opening paragraph shows the reader a once-upon-a-time picture of a happy American family. They live in a world where "There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants" (R:4). But the gauzy lighting of an American dream offers only one narrow angle of vision. To disclose yet another camera angle, Doctorow's narrative photographer composes pictures that reveal the stark outlines of American social reality. Through the lens of neutral objectivity, the photographer shows the reader inside the slums of New York City:

. . . by the end of the month a serious heat wave had begun to kill infants all over the slums. The tenements glowed like furnaces and the tenants had no water to drink. The sink at the bottom of the stairs was dry. Fathers raced through the streets looking for ice. Tammany Hall had been destroyed by reformers but the hustlers on the ward still cornered the ice supply and sold little chips of it at exorbitant prices. Pillows were placed on sidewalks. Families slept on stoops and in doorways. Horses collapsed and died in the streets. The Department of Sanitation sent drays around the city to drag away horses that had died. But it was not an efficient service. Horses exploded in the heat. Their exposed intestines heaved with rats. And up through the slum alleys, through the gray clothes hanging listlessly on lines strung across air shafts rose the smell of fried fish. (R:22)

Using this objective lens, Doctorow with his artistic consciousness highlights the harshness of life in the slums and leads the reader into the hot, dark heart of the picture, through the tenements and into the streets, through the stench of rotting horse flesh and into the slum alleys permeated with

the smell of fried fish. To achieve yet another special effect or angle of vision, the photographer disregards this objective lens and attaches an editorial lens onto the camera eye:

. . . when the name Coalhouse Walker came to symbolize murder and arson, these earlier attempts to find redress no longer mattered. Even at this date we can't condone the mayhem done in his cause but it is important to know the truth insofar as that is possible. (R:212)

With this editorial lens and the pronoun "we," the narrative photographer discloses historical attitudes that help his audience see and understand what happened. Using still another cinematic technique, the narrative photographer creates brutal, sensationalistic compositions. In movie-like slow motion, the frame pans the bloody scene of Coalhouse Walker's execution: "The body jerked about the street in a sequence of attitudes as if it were trying to mop up its own blood. The policemen were firing at will. The horses snorted and shied" (R:350). Each framed picture, documentary film-clip, and movie sequence offers a new angle of vision and another way to understand what happened. Thus, when the narrative photographer clamps a more personal lens onto his camera, it is not to reveal his own personality or identity. Instead, this personal lens and the pronoun "I" disclose yet another way of seeing the era of ragtime:

Poor Father, I see his final exploration. He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb. His toe scuffs a soft storm of sand, he kneels and his arms spread in pantomimic

celebration, the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self.
(R:368)

With this subjective, almost mystical lens, the narrative photographer focuses upon a single character and films the subject through the eyes of compassionate understanding. Clearly, this intricate pattern of still pictures and movie sequences is skillfully arranged to disclose many perspectives and angles of vision. By juxtaposing these many pictures and camera angles, Doctorow's narrative photographer captures the facts and fictions of the era of ragtime. Carefully, he splices together subjectivity and objectivity and thereby depicts both the physical appearance and the feel of a historical moment.

The accomplishments of Doctorow's anonymous photographer and his frame greatly influence the shape of Ragtime. This narrative device carries the burden of the novel's structure. A large time frame with a novelistic beginning and end support many pictures, compositions, and stories. As a narrative tool, the frame also influences the content of Ragtime, for it allows the artist to compose and arrange the wide variety of story materials. As well as structure and content, the frame permits a tone, neither objective nor subjective. Instead, it juxtaposes many perspectives and angles of vision. By means of the narrative frame, Ragtime depicts the lives and actions of many people, endeavors to portray realistically a particular

setting, engages the reader in confrontations with this reality, and strives to help them understand what they see.

But is it a novel? Can a novel seek to capture the appearance and feel of a place and time rather than the physical and emotional qualities of a specific character?

In her basic handbook, The Novel and the Reader, Katherine Lever states:

What happens in a novel is action. Action is basic but not simple. Action takes place in a physical world. The people acting have a physical appearance and they act in a physical universe.³⁴

According to Lever's definition, a novel must contain an action or story. E. M. Forster adds in Aspects of the Novel that character is an essential facet of the novel. He writes that a novelist makes up a number of "word-masses," which he gives "names and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas, and perhaps to behave inconsistently." These "word-masses," states Forster, are characters.³⁵ But even more importantly, these characters are involved in "a narrative of events, the emphasis falling upon causality." Forster argues that causality creates a plot capable of high development.³⁶ Both Lever and Forster agree that the

³⁴Katherine Lever, The Novel and the Reader (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960), p. 17.

³⁵E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1927), p. 44.

³⁶Forster, p. 86.

novelist must place prime importance upon plot, character, and development. However, by such criteria, Ragtime can hardly be called a novel at all. Certainly, Ragtime does contain stories and anecdotes. Perhaps the most memorable is the story of Coalhouse Walker Jr.'s fight for personal justice in a hostile environment. But this anecdote does not strictly conform to Forster's definition of a novel. First, Coalhouse Walker's story does not begin until Chapter 21 in the middle of the book. Moreover, this story lacks both conventional plot and character development. As readers, we can only guess at the nature of Coalhouse's involvement with Sarah. Both his character and his motives are mysterious. We do not know precisely why he acts as he does. In addition, Coalhouse Walker's story is only one of many such stories in Ragtime, and each of the other characters and their stories are just as unconventional. None of the fictional characters (except Coalhouse Walker and Sarah) have names. Instead, they are Father, Mother, Younger Brother, the little boy, Tateh, and his daughter. Rather than depicting unique, human qualities, these characters represent ideas and American values. Father is the respected gentleman and businessman. Mother is the new twentieth-century woman with a growing self-awareness. Tateh is the impoverished immigrant who climbs to the top of his profession by means of his wit and talent. These characters are not uniquely developed people; instead, they

are people, like any of us. Clearly, Ragtime does not meet the standards set by two authorities on the novel. There is no developed central plot. There are no well-developed characters involved in a chain of causality.

In Ragtime, Doctorow's narrative consciousness, then, does not use plot and character in a conventional or a traditional manner. Nevertheless, Ragtime is a novel. Rather than focusing entirely upon Coalhouse Walker Jr. and his personal fight for justice, the frame highlights the contours of a particular place and time. Thus, Coalhouse Walker's story is one of many stories that illuminate not character but the appearance and feel of a historical moment. Doctorow's narrative consciousness looks beyond the character to the setting of which this individual is a part. Alain Robbe-Grillet writes in For a New Novel that our world today looks beyond the individual, beyond character: "The exclusive cult of the 'human' has given way to a larger consciousness, one that is less anthropocentric."³⁷ Rather than struggling with the limitations of egocentric plots and characters, Doctorow's anonymous narrator asserts a much larger consciousness--one that encompasses not only the individual but also public attitudes and the world. In an essay entitled "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections

³⁷Robbe-Grillet, p. 29.

on the Hipster," Norman Mailer further defines this larger consciousness: "Hip sees the context as generally dominating the man, dominating him because his character is less significant than the context in which he must function."³⁸ Thus, character is seen as a "vector in a network of forces" where "there are no truths other than isolated truths of what each observer feels at each instant of his existence."³⁹ Consequently, what takes place is "the divorce of man from his values, the liberation of the self from the Super-Ego of society."⁴⁰ Similarly, Doctorow's "anonymous narrative consciousness" sees characters only in the web of social and cultural forces. This narrative consciousness is submerged not in the ego but in the flow of American energy and thereby creates the novel of context. Thus, Doctorow transcends anthropocentrism and confronts the problem of recording history by arranging photographic descriptions and movie sequences. Doctorow's narrative consciousness is not only a photographer but a film editor as well. This editor splices together the pictures and film-clips in a way that features not the egos of characters but the historical context.

³⁸Norman Mailer, The White Negro (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957), n.p.

³⁹Mailer, n.p.

⁴⁰Mailer, n.p.

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³⁸Norman Mailer, The White Negro (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957), n.p.

³⁹Mailer, n.p.

⁴⁰Mailer, n.p.

Doctorow's story of the ragtime era is a novel of context. To write a novel of this kind, his narrative consciousness splices together bits of both "memory" and "real" time, and in his compositions he juxtaposes historical facts with the inventions of memory. Thus, Ragtime is simultaneously a documentary and a movie featuring a particular place and time. In much the same manner, the Baron Ashkenazy understands how to film a context. "In movie films," states the Baron, "we only look at what is there already. Life shines on the shadow screen, as if from the darkness of one's mind. It is a big business" (R:297). With his frame, Baron Ashkenazy views what is out there in the "real" world and then casts silhouettes of this world onto the screen. Using the same cinematic techniques, Doctorow's narrative consciousness also views life through a frame and then composes intricate silhouettes and shadows of the ragtime era in the pages of his book. Like the Baron, he creates an illusion--the novel--that looks like truth. Moreover, he creates this illusion with the complete awareness that neither films nor books actually contain reality--the true historical context. But a frame may measure the dimensions of this context just as a clock measures so-called "real" time. These measurements of the context are the story materials, and in the arrangement of these materials, Doctorow achieves artistic time. Through the achievement of artistic time, he transcends the

limitations of "memory" time and the frightening elusiveness of "real" time. His anonymous narrative consciousness holds the frame at numerous angles, composes many silhouettes and shadows, and then through the achievement of artistic time, gives the illusion of capturing the reality of a particular historical context.

The achievement of artistic time in the novel of context depends greatly upon the flexibility of the storyteller; his perspective can be neither subjective nor objective. Instead, he must locate the still juncture between "memory" time and "real" time--between what actually happened and what might have happened. The frame is the "tool of the trade" that permits the artist to find this still juncture--the point where self, materials, and world are properly aligned. Since words can capture neither internal nor external reality, the artist must create the illusion of time and reality which is artistic time. To create this illusion, he must overcome the demands of the ego, organize the confusing chaos of the world, and transcend the rigid restraints of novelistic form. Moreover, the creation of the illusion depends upon the realization that both reality and artistic form are valuable. In Ragtime a children's game on the beach clearly illustrates and symbolizes the achievement of artistic time in which all forms and conventions are flexible tools. The children play a "burial game":

First, with his arm, he [the little boy] made a hollow for her body in the damp sand. She [the little girl] lay in this on her back. He positioned himself at her feet and slowly covered her with sand, her feet, her legs, her belly and small breasts and shoulders and arms. He used wet sand and shaped it in exaggerated projections of her form. Her feet were magnified. Her knees grew round, her thighs were dunes and on her chest he constructed large nipples. . . . From her forehead he built lappets of sand that spread out to her shoulders. (R:301-2)

Once this "elaborate sculpture was completed, the little girl began to destroy it (R:302). Then, it was the little boy's turn to be buried in a sand sculpture, and "when the work was done he slowly broke it to pieces, cracking it carefully, as a shell, and breaking out then for the run to the water" (R:302). The sand sculpture is a flexible, breakable tool of a children's game. Like films and novels, the exaggerated sand shell gives the illusion of reality. The "elaborate sculpture" is a silhouette of a real human body. This silhouette measures the dimensions of reality in the same way that ragtime is the artist's clock of both "memory" and "real" time. In this light, the artistic time of films and novels is just as real as time measured in minutes and hours. Each is only an illusion that looks like truth, so finally, it is only through the creation of an illusion that the artist truly performs a "real-world act."

Chapter 6

BARON ASHKENAZY, E. L. DOCTOROW, AND THE "PROPER ALIGNMENT"

Through his first three novels, Doctorow carefully examined the problem of recording events in a universe divided between subject and object. In each novel, he scrutinized the efforts of would-be historians who seek truth in the "real" world, in "universal patterns" of order and stability, or in their own "dramatic, exalted self-awareness." However, each of these would-be historians fails to achieve the "proper alignment" of self, world, and materials, because they do not understand how to align "real" time and "memory" time, external and internal reality, the objective and the subjective perspectives. Doctorow's extensive examination of these problems of alignment finally leads him to a solution in his fourth novel, Ragtime. Through the creation of an anonymous narrative voice, Doctorow accomplishes the alignment of the subjective and the objective perspectives. This voice transcends the limitations of a single human perspective, yet at the same time, humanizes the subject matter. In this manner, the anonymous narrative consciousness joins and refashions the real and the inventions of memory into an illusion that looks like truth.

Audiences want to believe that novels are true; they want plots and characters to be lifelike. In fact, they want novelists to be historians. As the Baron Ashkenazy remarks in Ragtime, people want to know what is happening to them in America where everyone is so new. The society, the historical figures, and the artist-figures that Doctorow creates in Ragtime all illustrate this desire to understand life in America during the ragtime era. During these years, people wanted to understand their lives, so they listened to Sigmund Freud who came to America to present a lecture series. However, to most of the public, he appeared as "an exponent of free love who used big words to talk about dirty things" (R"39). Even Freud could not comprehend American life. Back in Vienna, he said: "America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake" (R:44). While Freud left America in disgust, Tateh, the immigrant-artist, pointed "his life along the lines of American energy" (R:153). He pointed his energy toward Hollywood where, as Baron Ashkenazy of the moving picture business, he had yet another idea for a film: "A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighborhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang getting into trouble and getting out again" (R:369). To help American people understand their life, Baron Ashkenazy created intricate silhouettes of

society and cast its shadows upon the movie screen. Like the Baron, Doctorow also fashions a society of people, "like all of us." As in the Baron's films, this society of people are silhouettes--illusions--skillfully designed to help readers view their history and understand life in America during the era of ragtime.

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