

THE EMPORIA STATE

RESEARCH



STUDIES

THE GRADUATE PUBLICATION OF THE EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

**The Artist as Historian
in the
Novels of E. L. Doctorow**

by

Barbara Cooper

EMPIRIA STATE UNIVERSITY
EMPORIA, KANSAS

The Artist as Historian
in the
Novels of R. L. Doctorow
by
Barbara Cooper

"Statement required by the Act of October, 1962; Section 4369, Title 39, United States Code, showing Ownership, Management and Circulation." **The Emporia State Research Studies** is published quarterly. Editorial Office and Publication Office at 1200 Commercial Street, Emporia, Kansas. (66801). The Research Studies is edited and published by the Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas.

A complete list of all publications of the *The Emporia State Research Studies* is published in the fourth number of each volume.

813.5
D659Zc

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY
EMPORIA, KANSAS

JOHN E. VISSER
President of the University

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE
AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

HAROLD DURST, *Dean*

EDITORIAL BOARD

- CARL W. PROPHET, *Professor of Biological Sciences*
- WILLIAM H. SEILER, *Professor of History*
Division of Social Sciences
- CHARLES E. WALTON, *Professor of English*

Editor of This Issue: CHARLES E. WALTON

Papers published in this periodical are written by faculty members of the Emporia State University and by either undergraduate or graduate students whose studies are conducted in residence under the supervision of a faculty member of the University.

412890

DATA PROCESSING

MAY 20 1981

The Artist as Historian in the Novels of E. L. Doctorow

by

Barbara Cooper*

I

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"

. . . 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*.

Of one of his own works, E. L. Doctorow said: "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 strive, as well, to attain an appreciative audience. By the time Doctorow had published both *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*, he had won wide critical and public attention. In 1971, *The Book of Daniel* was nominated for the National Book Award. By the end of 1975, *Ragtime* had appeared as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, having been on best-seller lists for twenty-two consecutive weeks; Bantam Books had purchased the paperback rights for \$1,850,000; and Hollywood Director Robert Altman had acquired the rights for the movie version. Then, in January, 1976, *Ragtime* was among the four winners of awards given by the National Book Critics Circle.² By the time he had achieved wide public acclaim, Doctorow had already 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 the Bad Man from Bodie. The second novel, *Big*

*The author is a graduate student at the University of Missouri-Columbia, where she is completing a doctoral program. Portions of this monograph originated in a thesis offered for the Master of Arts degree in English at Emporia State University.

¹Jeffrey Hart, "Doctorow's Time," *National Review*, 15 (August, 1975), 893.

²*Current Biography Yearbook*: 1976, pp. 125-26.

as *Life*, exploits a science fiction theme in which, one morning, New Yorkers awake to find in the harbor two gigantic male and female figures, creatures of another space-time continuum. *The Book of Daniel*, on the other hand, is apparently inspired by an actual historical event—the execution in 1953 of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg 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. In *Ragtime*, Doctorow probes yet another historical period, for this novel is a magical, cinematic rendering of the ragtime era. In *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 these four novels, he had not only gained wide public attention but had also created a literature worthy of serious critical study.

Doctorow states that he wants “working class” people to read his fiction, but the gulf between writers and a “working class” audience may be wide and forbidding. In *Ragtime*, he briefly recalls Theodore Dreiser’s suffering and shame, the result of a poor public reception given 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 in the wrong direction, he turned it to align it properly. Finding that this position was not correct, either, he turned it, again. Eventually, explains 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—the alignment of his materials, his intention, his creation, the conventions of writing, and audience expectations about the nature of the novel. Readers desire a story with characters they can care about, that are “lifelike.” They want to believe that the fiction is true. To receive such attention from the “reading public,” a writer must carefully align his choices and his intentions with the needs and expectations of his audience and must find a way to give this audience what it wants and expects to find in a novel.

³E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*, p. 30; subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

In their unceasing efforts to achieve this “proper alignment,” writers tell more and more stories and break old rules in creating new forms. Still, their goal is unchanged: they want readers to respond to their work. Harry Houdini, the great illusionist who appears in *Ragtime*, clearly exemplifies this artistic problem. Like Dreiser, he 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. Houdini’s absurd artist-figure, thus, points towards Doctorow’s extensive study of the artist in his four novels.

Each of Doctorow’s artist-figures (Blue, Wallace Creighton, Daniel) illustrates the problems of the writer. Each is an historian attempting to write about reality which each sees in a different way, living 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.⁴ Because each world has its own truth and reality, no one could ever know, again, exactly what was real. Scientists believed that the physical world held all truth, while the romantic writer affirmed the self against the *res extensa*: “the world is *my* idea of the world, a creation of my own will and idea.”⁵

The problems of the Cartesian universe take definite shape in Doctorow’s four novels. In *Welcome to Hard Times*, he specifically describes this problem as it exists in 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 two kinds of time complicate his telling about what has happened. For example, “real” time concerns 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 imprints a form upon things, “makes its own time.”⁶ Throughout his writing, Blue finds himself hopelessly limited in his perception of the event itself because he can see and write about it only through memory. Still, tirelessly struggling against his subjective perceptions, he strives to record the objective, historical facts—to tell what actually happened.

⁴Wylie Sypher, *Loss of Self in Modern Literature and Art*, p. 20.

⁵Sypher, p. 21.

⁶E. L. Doctorow, *Welcome to Hard Times*, p. 139; subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

It is with this kind of tension that exists between "real" and "memory" time—between external and internal reality—that Doctorow begins the writing of his next novels. In *Big as Life*, his second, the appearance of giants creates a new time, a new world, and a new reality. As an historian, Wallace Creighton studies "real" time, but this new time and new world are a chaos of facts and statistics. Distressed by overflowing files of information and new knowledge, Wallace cannot make any sense out of his massive amount of data. He cannot comprehend external reality, and, thus, the structure of new "real" time is beyond his understanding. Next, in *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow studies the nature of "memory" time and Daniel's attempts to find the truth in internal reality, to discover what really happened to his parents, analyzing what he remembers about the time of his parents' execution. However, because "memory" time is elusive, Daniel cannot judge 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.

Doctorow finally reconciles these objective and the subjective perspectives in *Ragtime* by creating an anonymous narrator who transcends the limitations of a single human perspective, who, at the same time, humanizes his subject matter, discovering correspondences between "real" time and "memory" time. In this manner, the narrator creates a new kind of history, combining real events with fictional inventions from historical memory. Thus, in Doctorow's history, real people meet fictional characters; historical figures meet in imaginary confrontations. Through skillful alignment of the actual and the imaginary, he creates in *Ragtime* both artistic reality and artistic time, and speaking through his anonymous narrator, produces a "true" history—a "real world act."

II

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*.

Harry Houdini, the great magician and important figure in Doctorow's *Ragtime*, strives desperately to impress the world. Having heard that Peary had reached the North Pole, he, too, wanted an act that was big enough—real enough—to make the headlines. He wanted to perform a "real-world act" and was no longer satisfied with tricks and illusions. He wanted now 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. As a Westerner named Blue, he 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 flourish. Like an alchemist, he works to alter matter substantively—to change the empty mountain near Hard Times into a rich gold mine. Like Houdini, he wants to perform a "real-world act." But his efforts lead him to a terrible and shocking realization: nothing he can do will alter the facts of his life; mere words cannot make truth. Herein, Doctorow studies the nature of reality, explores the range and power of words, and hints at a theory of storytelling.

As a Westerner, Blue firmly believes that, with forceful, decisive action, a man can shape his life on the bleak Dakota Plains. Moreover, from the Western mythos, he derives his hope and belief that a good man can be an invincible force against Bad Men and frightening reality. But above all, he understands that as a Man of the West, as a Man bigger than life, he must maintain this countenance in the face of death. And it is from this tradition that Blue derives strength when a remarkable villain, the Bad Man from Bodie, comes with rage to Hard Times. **Confronted by this** overwhelming power that takes pleasure in brutality, **murder, and arson**, Blue abruptly discovers that he cannot act decisively and forcefully. Helplessly, he sends Molly ahead 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, early in the novel, he feels that he is unable to turn the course of events. He has failed as a Westerner, for the Western mythos could not provide him with strength to face the Bad Man. Armed only with the Code of the West, he could not find the materials for the construction of a "real-world act"—the materials with which to build truth. However, he cannot understand his failure. Gazing at the wrecked town, smelling the stench of charred bodies, he cannot account for what has happened. No facet of the Western mythos can help him to explain either this destruction or his own weakness. Yet,

he labors in the sun to bury the dead. Guiltily, he builds a sod house to shelter Molly Riordan and Jimmy Fee. Shamefully, he sifts through the ruins and ponders the disparity between what has happened and what he believed ought to have happened. To resolve this disparity, he sees only one course of action: "The only hope we have is that we can pay off our failures" (WHT:36). His sense of failure within the Western mythic tradition, his desire to "pay off" these failures, and his lingering belief that he can alter reality 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, transform chaos into a stable, comfortable civilization. As a result of his labors, he searches for "good signs" that can hide the old scars of destruction and failure. He 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 labors at rebuilding the town. Like a true politician and businessman, he talks Zar into setting up a bar in Hard Times, Alf into bringing the stage back to the town, and Isaac Maple into being the town's storekeeper. With the help of these men and with wood salvaged from a ghost town, he builds a civilization out of the charred 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, taking Molly and his wife and Jimmy as his son. In the three of them, he sees a "good sign"—the formation of a "true family" (WHT:89). Hence, in the family and in the town, he finds evidence that he is paying off his failures and that he can transform the world in order to hide a contingent reality. In his roles as husband, father, and city-founder, he sees that he can perform a "real-world act."

Springtime, 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 rumors claiming that the mining company has planned to lay a road through Hard Times, he sees further evidence of the town's prosperity, 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). To celebrate this new prosperity, he begins to keep ledgers, "keeping a write on things." Here, on columned pages, he records names, dates, and numbers that represent pro-

sperty. Everywhere, he sees signs that proclaim success and not failure, that promise unwavering, comfortable stability, not chaos. Even when Molly, in pain and fear, cries out that the town is still a wilderness, Blue quickly rejects this dark possibility.

No matter how many "good signs" there are that Blue raises around him, no matter how he labors to change what has happened, scars of failure and destruction remain. With 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). No matter how he labors, the "good signs" fall away revealing not merely scars but open, gaping wounds. No matter how he labors to change what has happened—to "pay off" his failures—both the family and the town fail and are destroyed. Molly's warmth, one of the "good signs," gives way to hate, an obsession for revenge, and the blue double-barrel of a gun. And 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, violent scene of failure. As the boy kicks him in his side, Blue realizes, again, the futility of his own 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).

Nothing has changed; the town, once again, balances on the brink of destruction; still, Blue labors substantively to alter reality. Like the alchemist, he 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 salvages a few pinches of gold dust. Much later, when the town is threatened by economic disaster, he still attempts to reclaim gold to profit from trouble and chaos. In a desperate effort to change this devastation into gold, he invests his savings. He employs four men to hunt for wood, lends money to another man to start a press, and gives money to an old drover to bring a dozen head of cattle to Hard Times. Even when the mining company abandons the town and the citizens run from its collapse, he thinks wildly that, if he pushed boulders in front of the trail, he could restrain these people. Throughout destruction, prosperity, and failure, Blue is the 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 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 him as an alchemist, his writing of the three ledgers make clear that he believes he can control and rearrange life. Herein, he sees himself as a failed Westerner, and the ledgers contain his attempts to account for what has happened, to bury the past, and to rebuild the town. In these pages which consist of "dealings," a town charter, census list forms, and a petition for statehood, he not only seeks to affirm 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 struggles with the limitations of his memory and constantly searches for 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). Rememberance, he believes, puts a form on things that cannot be trusted. Nevertheless, in spite of his limited memory, he continues to struggle with the writing of a factual document. Moreover, he is obsessed with the belief that his ledgers can be true, can bury the past, and eventually can prove his personal value. Blue also believes that words on a columned page can make truth. When the town finally collapses and he is again confronted with a terrifying reality (the sight of Zar, scalped expertly and with a bullet in his stomach) Blue takes out his books and tries "to write what happened" (*WHT*:214). Thus, in his ledgers, he attempts to account for the way things occurred, justifying his own actions in the fact of disaster. But as he writes, he begins to understand that mere words cannot make reality: "Words don't turn as the earth turns, they have their own season . . ." (*WHT*:139). If he learned by his actions that he could not "fix" or "control" life, he encounters this idea most clearly in his writing, and he realizes that words and actions cannot alter reality, but merely "add to the memory" (*WHT*:188). Finally, in the concluding words of his ledgers, he states: "Nothing is ever buried" (*WHT*:214).

What finally makes these revelations concrete occurs in the climactic episode in the novel. This scene, in which Blue is once again confronted with the Bad Man, tests both Blue's habitual mode of action and his belief that words can make truth. In this confronta-

tion, 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—this time decisively attempts to alter the facts of his life by standing up to the Bad Man. To make the final payment for his old failures, he traps the Man from Bodie in barbed wire, dragging the half-dead body onto Molly's kitchen table. However, instead of changing what happened, he now witnesses an even harsher reality when Molly performs indescribable acts upon the Bad Man's body. Fainting in disgust, he triggers a blast that kills them both. Later, still shocked and horrified, he 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). Because nothing can change the brutal reality of what has happened, he, again, sees himself as a failure and mourns in despair: "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). Not even in his ledgers can he bury past failures. Stunned by the reality of the Bad Man and the atrocities Molly commits upon the body, Blue exclaims: "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, like an alchemist, 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 end, he is a writer of documents, attempting to perform a "real-world act" that substantively alters the world. 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 to make his stories look like truth.

III

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*.

Just as Houdini recalls Blue, another character from *Ragtime*, J. P. Morgan, recalls Wallace Creighton, the protagonist of *Big as Life*. Unlike Houdini, J. P. Morgan is concerned, not with creation, but with the apprehension of external reality and the interpretation of life. In fact, Pierpont Morgan was a monarch of the external world, "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). However, his monarchy extended far beyond the world of commerce, because he also surrounded himself with classical art and ancient manuscripts. By extensively examining these *objects d'art*, he hoped to reach "some conclusions about this life" (R:169). Thus, he avidly collected such material in the hope that he would ultimately apprehend the "universal patterns" of order and stability. But what takes place 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, he envisions a monstrous reality—a world in which two enormous, naked human figures, towering above the New York skyline, appear in the harbor. Although this event drastically changes the lives of millions of New Yorkers, Doctorow's third-person narrator gives his most extensive attention 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, in his role as historical writer, he insists upon a strict analytical observation of data, determines to portray these data exactly, and assumes that the apprehension of these data will enable him to be a critic and interpreter of life. In Creighton's 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.⁷ From the moment he first glimpses the giants, he employs all of the tools of his profession to help him apprehend and interpret what has happened. At his window and at his television set, he "recorded every bit of news, realizing the professional value of a personal diary of events" (BAL:59). As historian, he observes the facts, collects data, verifies these data against other sources, and makes systematic deductions. Moreover, he is convinced that these skills of objective, historical analysis have a new and vital significance in this new age of man, because it is with the perceptive eyes of the historian that he hopes to understand the changing world and to discover "universal patterns" of meaning.

A perceptive analysis of the situation, however, cannot sustain him during moments of intense personal fear, anxiety, and stress. In his first glimpse of the giants, Wallace, like millions of other New Yorkers, saw imminent death—a big foot stepping with violence and destruction down upon a "swarm of insidious little vermin" (BAL:40). But these giants, prisoners of another space-time continuum, do not move. People are not crushed to death, but die in hysterical, blind terror. 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 each moment of the new time, he felt 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

⁷E. L. Doctorow, *Big as Life*, p. 12; subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

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 he find the "universal patterns" of stability that bring relief. Wallace searches, nevertheless, for a source of optimism, hope, and comfort "from the pain of comprehension," from the "dark depressing data of his profession" (BAL:12). Suddenly in his methodical notes of the television news, he has "a vision of the recuperative powers of his society" (BAL:61). 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), he enjoys a temporary immunity from the "pain of comprehension" and discovers a source of the faith that "we shall endure" (BAL:68).

For Wallace Creighton, the organization and his job within it are sources of personal strength in the face of disaster. In NYCRAD, he finds lingering signs of the lost patterns of stability. Moreover, the organizational life became a safe and convenient substitution for actual experience in a chaotic world. Looking through the tinted glass in his office window, he cannot see the giants. Instead, he submerges himself in memos, requisition orders, charts, new clips, and official transcripts. Despite the sense of personal relief which he finds in NYCRAD, the organization has a life of its own, totally indifferent to that of the individual man. With a superhuman institutional power, NYCRAD can easily perform and rationalize gross acts of personal indignity. In one episode stripped of his clothing, Wallace is examined by a security officer who pretends that Wallace had not yet been approved for the position in which he had been working for two months; but in spite of such personal indignities, Wallace decides to adjust to organizational life—"to wear the ID card on his lapel as if he had been born to it" (BAL:92); because within the framework of his new life, he found a sense of security and a release from the "pain of comprehension."

As historian, Wallace was trained in the brutally perceptive skills of objective analysis, which training ultimately will not allow him to become blind to the facts, statistics, and measurements of reality. Still, the tools of the historian cannot assist him in making sense out of the overflowing files of information, for the enormous amount of data has now become as incomprehensible as the giants themselves. Later in the role of historical observer, he takes a

helicopter ride near to these massive human formations for a close-up view of 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. 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). His fierce desire for understanding and relief is a natural human reflex in a time of 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 role as historian. However, all of his efforts to understand what is happening are futile. He is overwhelmed by the anxiety of "randomness." When the male giant is suddenly struck in the temple by a jet airplane, the giant emits a painful sound which endures for four months, and Wallace ". . . felt himself strained beyond his capacity to recognize it for what it was" (BAL:149). Slowly, the giant raises a hand to his temple, and this gesture becomes a sign of benediction to the masses. Thus, a new religious fervor burns throughout the city. Finally, when all semblance of order is destroyed by mob frenzy, sitting in the war room, Wallace is

. . . 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 exclaims: "It was unendurable to the working in the lag of history while the city burned" (BAL:180). Suddenly, however, in a brief fleeting vision, in clear illustration, he finds that which 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 the image of Red Bloom, the jazz musician dancing through the riot, Wallace discovers a man able to live and create music in the midst of chaos. As historical writer, Wallace attempts to capture this reality in the pages of his book, but he lacks ability to organize, interpret, and live with this reality. Yet, in music, Red Bloom had discovered a tool so flexible that with it he could humanize the

startling facts of the new reality and dance through no-man's land. Red Bloom, who lives by his fictive powers, one evening reveals to 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 Red Bloom's dancing image on the screen, Wallace sees clearly illustrated the means 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. 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 able to live and work successfully in a viciously chaotic world. But it is not until he sees Red Bloom flitting through chaos on the screen that Wallace begins to understand the significance of fictional conventions.

In the new world, Wallace has suffered the agonizing "pain of comprehension"—the nausea of knowing too much. Reality, states "blasted a fissure in . . . [my] brain" (BAL:149). His mind receives such a strong jolt that Doctorow marks the intensity with a shift from third-person to first-person narration. Wallace, in the anguish of his new awareness, in words fraught with pain and stress, states:

How long have I believed that we would come to a movement 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. Nevertheless, they are reality, and their destruction 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 his 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, he no longer asks: When will I be killed by the giants? Instead, he asks: How can I live in the new world? Death, destruction, failure, and the "pain of comprehension" are no longer important issues. Indeed, the novel ends on a hope for the survival and en-

durance 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, in order to protect General Rockelmayer from arrest. More importantly, Doctorow sees in this musician and this historical writer the hope proclaimed by William Faulkner 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.⁶

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

IV

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*.

Many Doctorow characters—Blue, Harry Houdini, Wallace Creighton, Red Bloom—portray an individual confronting the harshness and brutality of American social reality. Blue and Houdini sought to create reality, whereas Wallace Creighton and J.

⁶William Faulkner, "Speech of Acceptance upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature," *The Faulkner Reader*, p. 4.

P. Morgan searched for "universal patterns" of order and stability in the chaos of external reality. Moreover, as historian, Creighton aspired to be a critic and interpreter of life, even though he could not find a critical perspective. Coalhouse Walker, Jr., however, adopts a radical, militaristic perspective through which he critically evaluates 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 *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."⁹ 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 experience a nightmarish childhood as their parents are arrested, placed on trial, and executed. Even when Daniel reaches adulthood, images of his parents and brutal perceptions of his childhood remain to torment and sicken his spirit. In his heart and mind, both the disorders of civilization and his own problems swell and erupt to inflame his spirit. Staggering under the weight of this sickness, Daniel asks: "IS IT 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. Unlike Coalhouse Walker and his parent, however, Daniel lacks a critical perspective to understand internal reality. Concentrating upon Daniel's search for critical understanding, Doctorow continues, in his third novel, the quest which he began in *Welcome to Hard Times*, to find order in human experience. In *Big as Life*, he demonstrates the futility of finding order in external reality and in *The Book of Daniel* explores this possibility in the internal world. In *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow examines the formlessness of past remembered time and indicates that the artistic conventions of such a 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.

⁹E. L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel*, p. 43; subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

In this novel, Doctorow's examination of reality is apparently inspired by the 1953 execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. 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 1950-54. 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.¹⁰

Daniel, too, reopens the case of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson. In reexamining his parents' case, he relives the heartbreak and nightmares of all children of political victims.

As a child, Daniel is a "little criminal of perception." Later, as an adult, he is plagued with a hellish nightmare world of images that spring out of his over-sensitive perceptions of past experiences (BD:44). In one particular sequence, he 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 a 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). He 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 bears another; every image is a ghost hovering "in . . . [his] brain like fear" (BD:87). He is tortured and haunted by these ghosts out of the past, so that gradually "the real life of his childhood, that had become a dream, became real again" (BD:75). Thus, Daniel, like the Biblical Daniel, begins to analyze and interpret these visions, to remove this matter from his heart; however, the images are so painful and dreadful that "one glance in the mirror scorched the heart and charred the eyes" (BD:18).

The matter in Daniel's heart is, of course, the question of his parents' innocence or guilt and the most frightening of all childhood nightmares—that of the parents who abandon little boy and never return. In it, the child cries: "Why do they do that to Daddy?" (BD:131). His childhood is nightmare in which the Law proclaims

¹⁰Robert and Michael Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons*, pp. 316-17.

his parents guilty and electrocutes them. When 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 pronounce them guilty. His parents declared guilty by the FBI, the press, and the Law confuses the mind of this seven-year-old boy. Puzzled and frightened, 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, because his parents are in jail, they must be guilty; only bad people are kept 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 the matter of innocence or guilt—of right or wrong—that underlies Daniel's inquiry into the troubling images of his childhood.

When *The Book of Daniel* opens, Daniel sits in the library of the University of Columbia, jotting down the images of his childhood and writing his account of his parents' death. But his attempted analyses are "diffuse, apocalyptic, hysterical" (BD:22). He suffers from his childhood dream which 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, inside these visions and "randomness" of Daniel's mind is Doctorow's delineation of a character attempting to analyze and interpret his memories and 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 upon Daniel, who travels on a journey into the very heart of American Law.

To challenge, first, 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 in which 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 many days before the attempted suicide, all of his beliefs and assumptions are drastically challenged. Susan, in the state hospital for the mentally ill, looking through spacious eyes, jolts Daniel out of his present apathy into his former sense of being a victim, an orphan abandoned by parents, guilty because the Law said so. Susan, too, is moralist and judge, and in her letter, she pronounces Daniel guilty and her parents innocent. Terrified, he reads her verdict:

You think they [the Isaacsons] are guilty. . . . You no longer exist. (BD:89-90)

For Susan, the moralist, Daniel is clearly guilty of having betrayed their parents' cause; he is also responsible for her attempted suicide. Thus, Daniel is enraged, and crazed because he is a victim of the Law, he burns his wife with a cigarette lighter; he victimizes her with his own fear and guilt. He, then, attempts to analyze and interpret his visions and memories in light of Susan's moral judgment, because, more than anything else, her 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 university students protested the atrocities of American Law and Order by dousing themselves with gasoline and burning to death, Daniel sits in the library, scribbling his notes, reconsidering the matter of innocence and guilt.

Leading Daniel farther into the dark heart of American Law, Doctorow, then, lets loose "that scream from the smiling face of America" (BD:194). On a hot summer day in Riverside Park, Daniel, once again, victimizes his family with his own fear and guilt. Enjoying the fear he thus creates within them, he tosses his infant son higher and higher into the air. Later, when writing about this event, he comments: "I can't bear to think about this murderous feeling—about my own guilt and criminality" (BD:146). Then, noticing some people staring at him ("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). He seeks out the merciless radical of Avenue B, Artie Sternlicht. Listening to Sternlicht, the revolutionary who befriended Susan, Daniel suddenly sees "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 does not fully become acquainted with the harshness and brutality of the radical temperament until he asks Sternlicht what he thinks about Susan's idea for establishing 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. . . . 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 Sternlicht's merciless radicalism, Daniel suddenly realizes and understands Susan's point of view; he sees the idealistic and moralistic Susan in confrontation with the New Left. In this sequence, Daniel stands in the courtroom of yet another merciless, moralistic judge—the radical, Artie Sternlicht. In his presence, Daniel 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 had been made victims, not by their parents, but by the "system" and by the Left. After his brutal confrontation with "the merciless radical temperament," he relearns the puritanical mercilessness of the American Law. A letter from his foster father, which should have been filled with love and compassion for Daniel, embodies, instead, the sterile emotion of 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 the ghoulish inhabitants of hell. In light of his experiences, he 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 was nurtured in his parents' idealism, their belief in Justice, and their "dramatic, exalted self-awareness," believing that innocence and guilt—right and wrong—could be justly determined in a Court of Law. But through his subsequent experiences, he abruptly understands the brutal mercilessness of both the radical revolutionary and the American Law. Nowhere can he, Susan, or their parents receive a *just*, merciful verdict, because the matter of innocence and guilt is clouded by fierce partisanship. Propelled by these realizations and by Doctorow's inquiry, Daniel, then, is confronted by amorality. Still trying to analyze and interpret his horrifying visions, he visits his catatonic sister in her sanitarium. She, however, no longer speaks, and only the natural responses of her nerves betray the presence of life. In her, 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, as a lost sign of the Zodiac, it 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 [refers] to the wedding in the heart of the five senses" (BD:267).

In spite of this vision of "self-sufficiency," Daniel now steps into the courtroom of his own heart and mind to become his own judge (BD:167). Standing at the foot of Susan's bed, he sees that the sanitarium does not require its patients to have underwear, and he asks himself if he is guilty of desiring an incestuous relationship with his sister. 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). Considering 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 entered the serene, peaceful presence of amorality, one untroubled by partisanship, by the matter of innocence and guilt. At the same time, it is a presence easily mistaken for death, being totally free of critical, human perspective. Matters of the human heart are lost in its silence. Thus, Daniel's liberation

from the merciless morality and judgments of his family, the Left, American Law, and himself can only be accomplished through the means of his own speechlessness or death.

Doctorow's story, is, however, not an inquiry into speechlessness or death, nor is Daniel's search for an amoral speechlessness. Instead, Daniel seeks a critical perspective by the means of which he can analyze and interpret his visions. He does not look for a way to commit suicide; rather, he wishes to learn how to live with himself in American society, because, as he states: "The final existential condition is citizenship" (BD:85). Thus, he abandons 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, citizen Daniel practices civil disobedience: he burns his draft card, marches on the Pentagon, and is arrested. Once again, like his parents, he is brought into the Court of American Law. Moreover, he is, like his parents, an enemy of his country; for him the verdict is "guilty," but the sentence is not "death." Nevertheless, as do 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, he should find himself guilty of a criminal act, but he cannot do so. What he learns from this revelatory experience is the terror of a citizen proclaimed guilty and named an enemy of his country. To Susan, the girl who rejected the harsh judgments of society for the silent, lifelessness of amorality, Daniel explains 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 an innocent man to be imprisoned, Daniel seeks to clear the Isaacson name of all guilt, seeks a new verdict—"innocent." Thus, he travels to California to speak with Selig Mindish, whose testimony sent Paul and Rochelle to prison. Armed with a good defense case, involving another couple and the suggestion 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, restating 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, all three are also

characterized by relativity. Just as Daniel now wants his parents to be innocent, Linda Mindish wants them to be guilty. Thus, 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). In spite of these realizations, he still insists upon his right to see Selig Mindish, who he believes can give the final truth and, thereby, provide order for his memories. Mindish, however is senile, frolicking in a toy automobile in Disneyland, unable to answer any questions or make final judgments. Thus, by means of this confrontation, Daniel has a clear illustration of a statement he had made earlier 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 positive thing: "everything is elusive." There can be no final judgment of innocence or guilt—right or wrong. There can be no truth. However, these realizations have served only to confuse and frustrate him the more, for he wanted to find the truth that would give shape and form to the randomness and disorder of his memories. Instead, his scrawls upon 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 of 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, he is accosted by a protesting student: "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. Nevertheless, *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.

V

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

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 that of knowing how to tell what has happened. Each of Doctorow's characters searches for truth and objectivity; each is the historian attempting to write a factual document about 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 these words cannot show the truth about what has 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 because 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, from 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 that Doctorow begins the writing of *Ragtime*, his fourth novel. Here, the narrative problems of his first three novels are even further complicated, for in *Ragtime* he attempts to tell the story of an historical period. Carefully framing his novel between 1902 and 1971, he aims to tell what happened during this period of great transition and change. In 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 sensed new cultural and historical forces at work.

To tell what happened in this era of tumultuous changes, Doctorow has available several modes of narration. As in *Welcome to Hard Times* and *The Book of Daniel*, he could choose to tell what happened through the medium of 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 by means of "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 has happened. Their stories are, thus, limited and colored by personal guilts, fears, hopes, ideologies, and partisanship views. In 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; rather, this novel is "rag" time which encompasses nostalgia, memorabilia, data, and factual historical information.

In *Ragtime*, Doctorow reconciles subjective and objective points of view and, thus, solves a problem first encountered 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," 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 holds 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). Because people wanted to know what was happening, Baron Ashkenazy showed his audiences life as 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 Baron's example, Doctorow reconciles the subjective and objective viewpoints by means of an "anonymous narrative consciousness" whose frames enable him to tell the story of the ragtime era.

In *Ragtime*, he creates the illusion of a human consciousness that is 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 an historical time period and an apparent novelistic beginning and end, *Ragtime* is almost totally comprised of photographic descriptions and framed portraits. 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. Moverover, 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 which 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.

With this frame, Doctorow's "anonymous narrative consciousness" transcends the limitations of historical memory and the elusiveness of historical fact. The frame shapes a narrative perspective and tone, neither subjective nor objective. However, this unique perspective is difficult to identify unless Doctorow's narrative voice is compared and contrasted to other passages in narration. Thus, examples from Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s *Breakfast of Champions* and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* will 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 not 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 has 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 permits Father's life to 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 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.¹¹

Although the narrative voice of *Breakfast of Champions* describes Bonnie MacMahon and others in a cool, objective tone, these characters are, nevertheless, 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 lies beyond in the external world, not what exists in the mind of the narrator. Still, *Ragtime* is never as free of a human, narrative consciousness as is this following 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.¹²

Robbe-Grillet's description is an objective scientific rendering of an action in the external world. He transmits to the eyes of his audience the action of brushing the hair, with no narrative or authorial intrusion; the action itself orders the paragraph. Through the frame,

¹¹Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 194.

¹²Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet*, p. 66.

however, readers of *Ragtime* see the external world—"what is out there already"—with the realization that someone holds the frame, focuses the lens, and composes the picture. Thus, Doctorow has created a narrative persona who uses photographic and cinematic techniques to combine subjective and objective viewpoints.

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 capture 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 in which to understand what has 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 Broadview 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, living 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, this 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. Father 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 his objective lens and attaches an editorial lens to the camera's eye:

... when the name of 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 enable his audience to 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 in which 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, thereby depicting 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, this frame also influences the content of *Ragtime*, allowing the artist to compose and arrange the wide variety of story materials. As well as contributing to structure and content, this frame also permits a tone, neither objective nor subjective. Instead, it juxtaposes many perspectives and angles of vision. By means of this narrative frame, *Ragtime* depicts the lives and actions of many people, endeavors to portray realistically a particular setting, engages the readers 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.¹³

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, stating that a novelist makes up a number of "word-masses," to 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Both Lever and Forester agree that the novelist must place prime importance upon plot, character, and development. However, by such criteria, *Ragtime* can hardly be called a novel. Certainly, it does contain stories and anecdotes, perhaps the most memorable of which 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. Readers can only guess at the nature of Coalhouse's involvement with Sarah. Both his

¹³Katherine Lever, *The Novel and the Reader*, p. 17.

¹⁴E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 44.

¹⁵Forester, p. 86.

character and his motives are mysterious. One does not know precisely why he acts as he does. In addition, Coalhouse Walker's story is only one of many such stories to be found in *Ragtime*, and each of these other characters and their stories are just as unconventional. None of the fictional characters (except Coalhouse Walker and Sarah) has a name. Instead, each is referred to as either 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 are not uniquely developed people; instead, they are people, like any of us. Clearly, *Ragtime* does not meet the standards set forth 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 employ plot and character in a conventional or 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 that illuminate not character but the appearance and feel of an historical moment. Doctorow's narrative consciousness looks beyond the character to the setting of which this individual is a part. In *For a New Novel*, Alain Robbe-Grillet writes that the 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.¹⁶ 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 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." 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." Consequently,

¹⁶Robbe-Grillet, p. 29.

what takes place is "the divorce of man from his values, the liberation of the self from the Super-Ego of society."¹⁷ Similarly, Doctorow's "anonymous narrative consciousness" see 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 anthropocentricism and confronts the problem of recording history by arranging photographic descriptions and movie sequences. His 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.

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 contest. "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 upon 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 upon 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 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.

¹⁷Norman Mailer, *The White Negro*, n.p.

The achievement of artistic time in the novel of context depends greatly upon the flexibility of the story-teller; 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 and bosoms. . . . 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 that measures 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 that, finally, it is only through the creation of an illusion that the artist truly performs a "real-world act."

VI

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

Throughout 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 fail to achieve the "proper alignment" of self, world, and materials, because he does 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, he 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, and they listed 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 these shadows upon the movie screen. Like the Baron, Doctorow also fashions a society of people, "like all of us." As in the Baron's film, this society of people are silhouettes—illusion—skillfully designed to help readers view their history and understand life in America during the era of ragtime.

VII

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON DOCTOROW'S LATEST NOVEL: A POSTSCRIPT TO *LOON LAKE*

There is a scene in *Loon Lake* in which Warren Penfield, a failed poet, visits a Japanese Bunraku puppet theater in which the performers do not attempt to make the play seem like present reality; instead, the focus is on the illusion itself, on how puppets are manipulated by presences on stage. Each movement of the puppets in accompanied by black shadows, and at the crucial intimate moment between lovers, eight presences are on the stage. For Warren, the experience of the play is a personal revelation: "When I speak I hear someone else saying the words when I decide to do something else is propelling me when I look up at the sky or down at the ground I feel the talons on my neck how true what genius to make a public theater out of this why don't we all stand up and tear the place apart what brazen art to tell us this about ourselves knowing we'll sit here and not do a thing."¹⁸ In *Ragtime*, the characters were very much like these puppets; they were manipulated. Their actions were synchronized. It just so happened that Houdini interrupted Mother and Father's coitus. It just so happened that Henry Ford met J. P. Morgan in the Morgan library where they talked of Egyptian mysticism. Doctorow's fifth novel, *Loon Lake*, is also very much concerned with the problem of perceiving characters in time.

Any attempt to describe what happens in *Loon Lake* fails because the book cannot be considered in linear terms. In fact, it is often unclear what is happening to whom. The novel's movement is circular, or like a "world of mirrors" as it has been described by its critics, or like the lake as it has been described on the book jacket: "Like the lake which refracts, distorts, highlights and shadows what

¹⁸E. L. Doctorow, *Loon Lake*, pp. 182-3.

happens on its shimmering surface and beneath." It is a dream and not a dream. It is before the war after the war. It is the question: Haven't I seen you somewhere before? It is the images of yesterday which are the images of today. It is the shock of recognition. It is "everyone having seen someone somewhere before" (255). It is "the account in helpless linear translation of the unending love of our simultaneous but disynchronous lives" (254).

In *Ragtime*, Doctorow attempted to solve this problem of translating to linear form our simultaneous lives by so arranging the lives of historical and fictional characters as to indicate parallel existence or occurrence. However, in *Loon Lake*, the problem is much more complex. It is as if Doctorow asked: What of those parallel lives which are separated by time and space? What of those parallel lives which are not chronologically simultaneous? And what of those lives which construe their own reality, compose their own lives? In *Loon Lake*, he explores further the problem of simultaneity in the lives of his characters.

To say that the poet, Warren Penfield, and Joe, the hero of *Loon Lake*, live parallel lives or that their lives mirror each other is far too easy. Penfield was born in 1899, and Joe in 1918. Penfield spent his boyhood in Ludlow, Colorado, and Joe in Paterson, New Jersey. But irrespective of time and space, their lives are simultaneous. Both have the same childhood memories of a mining town, a mill town. Penfield's memories of Ludlow include the image of himself standing on the dirt street watching a miner's wife hold an infant girl at arm's length just beyond the edge of the wooden sidewalk. He remembers the infant's dress raised up and the mother's words of encouragement:

The boy standing there happening to be there remained to watch shamelessly and the beautiful little girl turned upon him a face of such outrage that he immediately recognized her . . . and with then saintly inability to withstand life she closed her eyes and allowed the thin stream of golden water to cascade into the dust where instantly formed minuscule tulips he beheld the fruition of a small fertile universe. (14-15)

Joe remembers the same scene in Paterson on Mechanic Street. A mother holds a baby girl, her pants pulled down:

It was desired of this child that she relieve herself there and then schoolchildren going past in bunches peddlers at their cars mothers pushing strollers and an older boy with ice cream stopping shamelessly to watch. And this beautiful little girl turned a face of such outrage upon me . . .

and with then saintly inability to withstand life you closed your eyes and allowed the thin stream of golden water to cascade to the tar which was instantly black and shone clearer than a night sky. (116)

This memory has so impressed itself upon the lives of both men that the image has become a symbol. All the world's terror and beauty is reflected in the child's look of outrage. Later in the novel, when the lives of Penfield and Joe physically coincide at Loon Lake on the estate of the rich F. W. Bennett, they meet Clara Lukacs, and each man experiences the shock of recognition. Running through the woods, Joe sees a train with a private car, and framed in its window for only an instant is the image of a naked girl, presumably Clara, holding a white dress before a mirror. In his imagination, that naked girl is the baby girl of his memory of Paterson. Long after he finally meets Clara, he tells her, "Little did we know we were destined to meet! We saw the same Tom Mix movies. We ran along the sidewalks pointed to the sky at the same airships!" (151). In his imagination, Penfield also recognized Clara as the girl urinating upon the dirt street of Ludlow, Colorado: ". . . it's her, the same girl, returned to my life, changed in time, true, changed in place, changed let us be honest in character, but how can I doubt my feelings they are all I have I have spent my life studying them and of them all this is the indisputable constant, the feeling of recognition I have for her when she appears" (49).

Regardless of the limitations of time and space, Warren Penfield and Joe have the same memories, the same experiences. The images of Ludlow, Colorado, are the images of Paterson, New Jersey. They've seen the same girls, shamelessly stared at a look of outrage on a child's face, unknowingly acted out the same rituals, felt the same shock of recognition: "Question haven't I seen you somewhere before answer yes in the mirror" (255). *Loon Lake* is a novel in which nothing will hold still, not even its characters. At times Warren Penfield could be Joe, and at others Joe is Warren Penfield. Penfield tells Joe, "My pain is your pain. My life is your life" (115). Doctorow seems to be using these fluid, interchangeable characters to explore the problems of perceiving these lives in simultaneous yet disynchronous time.

Bibliography

- Catinella, Joseph. "The Book of Daniel." *Saturday Review*, 17 July 1971, pp. 32, 61.
- Charyn, Jerome. "The Book of Daniel." *New York Times Book Review*, 4 July 1971, p. 6.
- Clemons, Walter. "Houdini, Meet Ferdinand." *Newsweek*, 14 July 1975, pp. 73, 76.
- Current Biography Yearbook: 1976*. New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1977.
- Doctorow, E. L. *Big as Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966.
- _____. *The Book of Daniel*. New York: New American Library, 1971.
- _____. *Ragtime*. New York: Bantam Books, 1975.
- _____. *Welcome to Hard Times*. New York: Bantam Books, 1976.
- _____. *Loon Lake*. New York: Random House, 1980.
- Forster, E. M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1927.
- Frank, Joseph. "Spatial Form in Modern Literature." *Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment*, eds. Mark Schorer, et. al. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948.
- Freedman, Ralph. *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide, and Virginia Woolf*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1963.
- Hart, Jeffrey. "Doctorow Time." *National Review*, 15 August 1975, pp. 892-93.
- Howes, Victor. "Spinning a Magic, Cinematic Tale." *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 August 1975, p. 22.
- Kauffman, Stanley. "A Central Vision." *Saturday Review*, 26 July 1975, pp. 20-22.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967.
- Lever, Katherine. *The Novel and the Reader: A Primer for Critics*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1960.
- Mailer, Norman. *The White Negro*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1957.
- Marsh, Pamela. "On the Novel of Cruelty." *Christian Science Monitor*, 17 June 1971, p. 11.

- Meeropol, Robert and Michael. *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975.
- Moses, Joseph. "To Impose a Phrasing on History." *The Nation*, 4 October 1975, pp. 310-312.
- Prescott, Peter S. "Lion's Den." *Newsweek*, 7 June 1971, pp. 110-111.
- Robbe-Grillet, Alain. *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press, 1965.
- _____. *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet: (Jealousy) & (In the Labyrinth)*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965.
- Sacks, Sheldon. *Fiction and the Shape of Belief: A Study of Henry Fielding, with Glances at Swift, Johnson and Richardson*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967.
- Sheppard, R. Z. "The Music of Time." *Time*, 14 July 1975, pp. 64-66.
- Starr, Kevin. "Welcome to Hard Times." *The New Republic*, 6 September 1975, pp. 25-27.
- Sypher, Wylie. *Loss of Self in Modern Literature and Art*. New York: Vintage, 1962.
- Todd, Richard. "The Most-Overrated-Book-of-the-Year Award, and Other Literary Prizes." *Atlantic Monthly*, 237 (1976), 95-96.
- Vonnegut, Kurt, Jr. *Breakfast of Champions*. New York: Dell, 1973.
- Williams, Writ. "Bad Man from Bodie." *New York Review of Books*, 30 April 1960, 7.