

“It is never right to play Ragtime fast...”: Recovering Counter-Narratives to Prevailing Understandings of Ecstatic Progress in the Critical Discussion Surrounding E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*

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*T*hroughout the 19th and 20th centuries especially, narratives of human progress have been increasingly presented in terms of acceleration in a phenomenon testifying to what can be termed “the ecstasy of speed.” In considering, unpacking, and interrogating such ecstasy, we investigate the ways in which individuals and cultures seek to rush towards the beyond of present realities. The points at which general societal themes and expressions of progress and change explode within texts oriented towards the “out of” of human history into especially ecstatic declarations of world-historical acceleration are certainly some of the most easily arrived at examples of this phenomenon. In turn, texts which challenge accepted narratives

of speed and progress at precisely the points at which these narratives are most powerful emerge as a fascinating part of our study. Already a critically heralded, wildly popular, and twice-adapted cornerstone of 20th century American literature, E.L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime* stands as a vivid example of precisely this sort of text.

The task of understanding *Ragtime's* role in unsettling a historical master narrative of ecstatic acceleration hinges on the exploration of two themes which constantly appear within the critical material surrounding the novel: first of all, there is the challenge of interpreting Doctorow's unique historical vision and, secondly, there is the question of the musical and cultural formation of *Ragtime* as what critic Brian Roberts has called the "central metaphor" of the novel.¹ When considered together with the hope of discovering a cohesive historical narrative within the novel, these two discussions ultimately echo one another and reveal the ways in which Doctorow uses *Ragtime* to perform what could be characterized as an ontological deceleration through the introduction of a distinctive way of reading history which is both vitally deconstructive and politically charged.

Nearly all of the critical material available on *Ragtime* focuses at some level on the curious relationship between form and theme at its core: that is, it is a piece of historical fiction which explores the natures of, and ultimately challenges the differences between, history and fiction as categories of not only writing but also of understanding the historicity of one's being-in-the-world. These qualities have inspired many to consider the novel's place within broad traditions of American post-modern fiction, comparing Doctorow to Nabokov, Barthes, Pynchon, and others, yet it is also important to understand the specificities of Doctorow's project as revealed and realized in *Ragtime*. Indeed, as critic Geoffrey Harpham points out, questions of history and narrative have long informed Doctorow's novels and critical work.

In "E.L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative", Harpham traces the development of Doctorow's great "protest" of "the opposition of fact and fiction": "that, as there is no meaning without the mediation of images, knowledge can never be grounded, and fiction actually lies at the heart of all factual records."² Harpham quotes Doctorow himself on this point, using the author's claim that "there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative" as the starting point for

a discussion of the ways in which Doctorow develops “his central continuing concern, narrative itself and its relation to power, imagination, and belief.”³ This framework opens up several questions which can be utilized to organize a range of perspectives on Doctorow’s historical vision: what are the specific narratives within and about the history *Ragtime* portrays that Doctorow seeks to challenge and deconstruct, what sort of narratives does Doctorow see as preferable to these, and finally, what sort of understanding of power and of human ways of being-in-the-world arises out of Doctorow’s narrative reconstruction of historical experience?

In order to properly situate *Ragtime* as a piece of historical fiction about history and fiction it is important to first understand the historical narratives with which the text interacts due to both the period it portrays and the period in which it was published. The significance of the former is perhaps best introduced by critic Mark Busby, who frames the novel’s historical context with this comment: “The time the book covers, roughly 1900-1917, the Ragtime Era, was a time of great social, political, scientific, and industrial change in America, reflected as well in the age’s other name—the Progressive Era...most Americans were confident that humankind was moving toward perfection.”⁴ The latter on the other hand is more contested as several theorists have ventured to interpret Doctorow’s place within late 20th century American literature according to conflicting paradigms.

However, in Fredric Jameson’s discussion of the novel in his work *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* we find certainly one of the most poignant and challenging descriptions of Doctorow’s place in post-modern culture. Jameson describes Doctorow as “the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past” who “has had to convey this great theme...by way of that very cultural logic of the postmodern which is itself the mark and symptom of his dilemma.”⁵

Here, then, we have two different narratives of the ecstasy of progress, one which *Ragtime* inherently comes into conversation with as it re-writes the history of the early 20th century, and the other which, at least according to Jameson, the novel inescapably participates in due to its location in the late 20th century amidst a culture moving rapidly towards the disintegration of traditional structures of meaning and resistance. While Doctorow certainly recognizes, perhaps even reproduces, the allure of these narratives, a

closer examination of several aspects of his re-writing of history reveals the ways in which *Ragtime* serves to alter and replace both the early and late 20th century narratives of ecstatic acceleration.

From a diverse range of discussions of the novel's unique narrative framework, several different critics present perspectives on the ways in which Doctorow challenges the assumptions and metaphors central to the narrative of the Progressive Era. This occurs on one level as Doctorow riffs on the lives and fates of various historical figures. Critic Charles Berryman takes up this point at length in his article "*Ragtime* in Retrospect", identifying a pattern in which:

The majority of the characters in the novel, whether the reflections of history or fiction, all follow adventures that are frustrating and inconclusive. The unsatisfactory nature of the heroic quest is illustrated in a variety of adventures: Commander Peary takes his expedition in search of the North Pole; J. P. Morgan attempts to contact the ancient gods of Egypt by spending a night in the Great Pyramid; Coalhouse Walker seeks justice through revolutionary violence; Houdini wishes to contact his dead mother; and Emma Goldman wants to break the tyranny of capitalism. What do all of these quests have in common? Why does Doctorow bring them all together in *Ragtime*?⁶

Later in the article Berryman answers his own question with the assertion that Doctorow presents "the mutability of all things" as the deconstructive property within history itself that causes the progression of time to act as a "comic mirror" in which "the many adventures of human will" see themselves "frustrated".⁷ It should be noted that this conceptualization of mutability both as the ground of human experience and challenge to narratives of progress and accomplishment is echoed in Harpham's article.

For Harpham, Doctorow posits "transformation as a universal phenomenon of which narrative is only a local instance."⁸ In other words, even the reading of history as narrative in fact redefines both history and fiction

as ontic representations or locations of an ontology of transformation which resoundingly defies the simplicity and certainty of a narrative of progress. Harpham's reading of the plot of *Ragtime* reveals the further implications of this move on Doctorow's part as transformation provides the basis of a "chain of related concepts"—"volatility, repetition, durability, replication"—which come to define "the process whose effects *Ragtime* traces everywhere" and which comes to be embodied in the lives of characters.⁹

As with Berryman's reading of the novel, these processes do not serve to inflate the stature of Doctorow's characters, but rather to "miniaturize" them as part of a schema in which "everything is symptomatic of the process, an instance of it; everything is presented in miniature and has the curiously aesthetic quality of tiny things."¹⁰ Here we clearly see *Ragtime's* multifaceted resistance to a narrative of ecstasy through progress not only as a refutation of its particular set of historical claims and doctrines, but also as a reversal of the concept of ecstasy itself: as the fabric of Being is revealed in beings, this revelation does not accomplish an amplification of beings or movement outwards from Being, but rather a grounding through the radical contingency of beings to Being.

Within criticism of *Ragtime* it is therefore relatively easy to discern the existence of a strain of discussion unpacking the ways in which Doctorow re-writes the dominant narrative of the Progressive Era as one of transformation and of the frustration of progress and the ecstasy of acceleration. Jameson's criticism, however, presents quite another problem. To read *Ragtime* as embodying a counter-logic to the ecstasy of speed must at some level be to contest Jameson's basic claim that the text, as part of a post-modern movement away from the possibility of political commitment as the foundation of being and writing, participates in precisely the late 20th century version of the sort of narrative it opposes in early 20th century history.

It is important to note here before considering a response to Jameson both that his critique of the novel is only a small part of a sweeping book-length criticism of wider cultural patterns and that it does in fact capture an important aspect of Doctorow's work in its acknowledgement of the potentially paradoxical nature of his place astride different discourses and philosophies of literature. However, it is even more important for the sake of

our conversation here to establish the ways in which Doctorow resists another form of the ecstasy of speed—the acceleration towards the apolitical—through the recovery of political commitment out of the challenges to master-narratives posited by post-modernism. This trait in *Ragtime* is established through a number of means, ultimately including a consideration of the second major theme within discussion of the text: the function of Ragtime music as the central metaphor of the novel.

One of the major claims to consider within this line of discussion of the text is made by critics who seek to establish continuity between significant modernist American texts and *Ragtime*. Such analyses are performed by Thomas Evans and Barbara Foley, who compare Doctorow's novel to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy, respectively. For Evans, *Ragtime* exists within a framework in which "politics and history are essentially linguistic constructs", yet this hyper-modernist stance on Doctorow's part dictates that "fiction is inevitably political" just as it suggests that history is "inevitably fictive."¹¹ Consequently, *Ragtime* can be classified alongside a more explicitly didactic political novel such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, for both are ultimately about "the political education of a family" and by implication, of their audiences.¹²

Foley is quite a bit more critical in her interrogation of Doctorow's historical stance, yet she similarly classifies *Ragtime* as a "clearly radical" work and categorizes it within a long standing tradition of American novels which present historical fiction in order to construct a coherent politics for the present.¹³ Each critic therefore presents *Ragtime* primarily as a novel which both attempts to recover political commitment out of the potential haze of hyper/post-modern aesthetics and is profoundly rooted within a tradition of American political fiction. These comparative analyses thereby maintain Jameson's critical eye towards *Ragtime's* treatment of history while casting a far more positive light on the novel's political implications.

Critic John G. Parks takes this discussion of the novel even further by claiming that *Ragtime's* "aesthetically complex" blurring "of the lines between fact and fiction" is precisely how the novel manages to be political.¹⁴ Parks sees *Ragtime* as a work finely crafted in its narrative complexity to "disclose and challenge the hegemony of enshrined or institutionalized discursive practices" and to therefore "prevent the power of the regime from

monopolizing the compositions of truth.”¹⁵ In the Bakhtinian terminology he eventually turns to, Parks identifies the same qualities of Doctorow’s historical vision discussed earlier as the foundation of a “polyphonic fiction”, capable of introducing a “heteroglossic dialogue” into an otherwise “monologic culture.”¹⁶ *Ragtime* therefore exists to be “both disruptive or even subversive of regimes of power, and restorative of neglected...or unheard voices in the culture”: in short, it is a novel which both deconstructs and reconstructs.¹⁷ The challenges pertain to what the novel lays forth in its deconstruction of existing narratives of progress. Moreover, in order to further explore its reconstructive possibilities, the role of *Ragtime* within the novel must be considered.

Two coherent perspectives on the meaning of *Ragtime* as the guiding metaphor of Doctorow’s novel arise out of criticism on the question: the first, as articulated by Barbara Cooper and David Emblidge, sees *Ragtime* music as the summary metaphor for Doctorow’s challenges to history, while the second, as supported by Brian Roberts’ historicist close-reading of the novel, focuses on the ways in which references to *Ragtime* music and culture give the novel its political richness. According to Cooper, Doctorow’s examination of “the utter elusiveness of ‘real’ time” and his efforts to reconcile “subjective and objective points of view” on history in *Ragtime* result in the creation of what she calls “‘rag’ time”, or a perspective on history “which encompasses nostalgia, memorabilia, data, and factual historical information” towards “the reconciliation of internal and external reality” and the creation of a new relationship between artist and history.¹⁸ References to *Ragtime* as art form therefore become metaphoric representations of the “‘rag’ time” crafted by the author who stands astride the categories of artist and historian.

Emblidge also sees *Ragtime* music as representative of Doctorow’s perspective on history and the place of his own work within it. The “repetitive” nature of *Ragtime* music in particular is a metaphor for a “historical principle” in which “certain patterns of belief and action prevail no matter how much the outside world may seem to change.”¹⁹ As an intensely patterned music which should never be played fast, *Ragtime* becomes the perfect representation of “the historical process” of “endless recurrence under a distracting façade of individualistic variation” and progress.²⁰

These summaries of Ragtime's metaphoric importance reiterate many of views of other critics regarding Doctorow's project, yet it seems crucial to recognize the ways in which the use of Ragtime music as the metaphor which encapsulates the sprawling historical vision of the novel reflects a deliberate, pointed reconstructive move. In other words, Ragtime music gives the novel's thematic landscape some much needed coherence and is, in a sense, Doctorow's encoded message to readers of the seriousness of his intentions to replace the narratives with which he engages with something better. And, just as was highlighted earlier in the work of other critics, Roberts' essay, "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jewish Identity: Fleshing Out Ragtime as the Central Metaphor in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*," further reminds us that a radical political voice is an indispensable part of the narrative at which Doctorow eventually arrives.

Roberts reads Doctorow's novel through the keen lens of cultural studies, exploring at length the ways in which Ragtime-as "more than a musical formation, also a cultural and racial formation"-creates a political subtext of racial identity within the novel by conjuring up the world of minstrel shows and early Ragtime performance.²¹ For Roberts, Ragtime must be read as a Jewish novel and therefore one specially concerned with the ways in which Ragtime music and the minstrel show tradition references a cultural context in which Jewish identity was constructed somewhere on the borders between White and Black.²² The novel therefore can be read as a consideration of the possibility of solidarity between Jewish Americans and African Americans with Houdini as its central figure. Roberts examines the ways in which Doctorow links Houdini with Black cultural forms through several facets of his persona; from his "indebtedness" to a tradition which "relegated Jewish performers to perpetually perform stereotypes of blackness" to the prominence of caricatures of black masculinity within Houdini's performances as described by Doctorow.²³

Ultimately, Roberts sees it as Doctorow's goal to bring Houdini from the point of exploiting hybridized forms of Black culture to the ability to experience genuine solidarity with African-Americans. In the climactic scene within the Houdini storyline, Houdini hangs suspended above New York, is verbally abused by a man watching him from an apartment building, and experiences a moment of epiphany as he realizes he could have

saved Archduke Franz Ferdinand from assassination.²⁴ For Roberts, this incredibly weighty scene both subjects Houdini to a mock lynching and turns its gaze to future horizons of violence and anti-semitism.²⁵ Thus, out of a performance rooted in complex racial signification and tension, there arises a need for solidarity between oppressed peoples, a solidarity that does not obscure meaningful differences but rather one which is necessitated by the grim realities of shared violence. Ragtime music, in turn, becomes the point of entry for the decoding of the radical and far-reaching political consciousness which Doctorow embeds within a novel which, for all of its narrative playfulness, is deadly serious.

From a summary of various critical perspectives brought to bear on the question of the ecstasy of acceleration in *Ragtime*, we are left with both a testament to the novel's magnitude and the possibility of a specific strategy for closer readings of not only this novel, but also of 20th century historical fiction in general. Just as so many layers and episodes of *Ragtime's* rich narrative are left unexamined by this brief analysis, so there remain a host of important modern and post-modern texts which deal with the question of history, a question which will always be beset by what we might term the allure of acceleration. As the present writes its own history, it is vital to maintain a careful discussion of *Ragtime* and related texts, not only in order to keep track of which narratives are gaining and losing ground but also to continue to probe the question of the viability and ethicality of these narratives. As *Ragtime* and the critical materials surrounding it constantly remind us, such discussions take place with both authentic and false possibilities of ecstasy constantly at stake.

ENDNOTES

¹ Roberts, Brian. "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jewish Identity: Fleshing Out Ragtime as the Central Metaphor in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*." *Critique*: Gale Literary Resource Center, 2004. p. 247

² Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. "E.L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative." *PMLA*: JSTOR, 1985. p. 82

³ Ibid. pp. 82-83

⁴ Busby, Mark. "E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* and the Dialectics of Change." *Critical Essays on E.L. Doctorow*. New York: GK Hall and Co., 2000. p. 177

⁵ Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. pp. 24-25

⁶ Berryman, Charles. "Ragtime in Retrospect." *South Atlantic Quarterly*: Gale Literary Resource Center, 1982. pp. 32-33

⁷ Ibid. p. 33

⁸ Harpham, "E.L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative." p. 88

⁹ Ibid. p. 89

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 89

¹¹ Evans, Thomas G. "Impersonal Dilemmas: The Collision of Modernist and Popular Traditions in Two Political Novels, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Ragtime*." *South Atlantic Review*: JSTOR, 1987. p. 78

¹² Ibid. p. 78

¹³ Foley, Barbara. "From *U.S.A.* to *Ragtime*: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction." *American Literature*: Gale Literary Resource Center, 1987. p. 87

¹⁴ Parks, John G. "The Politics of Polyphony: The Fiction of E.L. Doctorow." *Twentieth Century Literature*: JSTOR, 1991. pp. 454-455

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 455

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 455

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 455

¹⁸ Cooper, Barbara. *The Artist as Historian in the Novels of E.L. Doctorow*. Emporia: School of Graduate and Professional Studies of the Emporia State University, 1980. p. 29

¹⁹ Emblidge, David. "Marching Backward Into the Future: Progress as Illusion in Doctorow's Novels." *Southwest Review*. Gale Literary Resource Center, 1977. p. 405

²⁰ Ibid. p. 405

²¹ Roberts. "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jewish Identity: Fleshing Out Ragtime as the Central Metaphor in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*." p. 249

²² Ibid. pp. 249-250

²³ Ibid. pp. 254-255

²⁴ Doctorow, E.L. *Ragtime*. New York: Random House, 1975. pp. 266-267

²⁵ Roberts, "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jewish Identity: Fleshing Out Ragtime as the Central Metaphor in E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*." Pp. 255-256