

«DOCTOROW'S RAGTIME: A BREACH IN THE FRAME OF HISTORY»



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This article focuses on Doctorow's conception of the interdependence between fiction and history as it is represented in *Ragtime*. The novel is used to uncover the process by which a naive notion of history as something always already fixed can be deconstructed and substituted by a conception of the absolute indeterminacy of the past. Eternal flux and change become the essence of the past, a past which is always being rewritten. This latter conception is then ascribed to fiction as a valid «speculative history.»

History is a kind of fiction in which we live and hope to survive, and fiction is a kind of speculative history, or a superhistory, by which the available data for the composition is seen to be greater and more various in its sources than the historian supposes ... There is no fiction or non fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative.

E.L. Doctorow, «False Documents»

In his «False Documents» Doctorow emphasized once again a notion that has become a theoretical commonplace in the second half of the twentieth century: the fact that no discourse, either historical or literary, can offer the reader direct access to the world of the referent; or as Barthes would categorically contend, there is no escape from narrative. This radical affirmation of narrativity has partially displaced the belief that linguistic narrative directly reflects a parallel material world in outside reality. As a result, the twentieth century has witnessed how different discourses which traditionally aimed at a direct description of reality (like the discourse of science, historiography, anthropology, etc.) have fallen unusually close to the world of fiction. The disbelief in the referential value of narrative has affected specially the discourse of historiography, which has come dangerously close to the discourse of fiction. In contrast, fiction is increasingly being regarded as the site of struggles for the creation of different and alternative «histories.» This double process of history to recognize its fictionality and of fiction to become historiographical is appropriately conveyed in Montrose's notion of «the textuality of history, the historicity of texts.»

However, as Hayden White affirms (1976: 24), the awareness of the textuality of history is not strictly peculiar to the twentieth century. Before the nineteenth century, historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art, and its fictive nature generally recognized. Together with tragedy, epic, biography, and many other genres, history belonged within the general realm called «letters.» It was the nineteenth century, with the school of Herbert von Ranke and his followers, that initiated a positivist historiography that presumed to narrate the past as it really was. However, before the end of the nineteenth century, philosophers of history like Nietzsche and Dilthey already started to question the validity of historical narrative. In the twentieth century, the quality of history as an empirical and objective science has continued to suffer under constant attacks from the field of

historiography (as is the case with R. G. Collingwood, Benedetto Croce, and lately, Hayden White or Dominick LaCapra among others), philosophy (with Michel Foucault or Derrida) and literary theory (with the so-called New Historicists and Cultural Materialists, among many others). The work of these thinkers has brought about an increasing awareness of the essentially discursive and fictive nature of historiography, an awareness which has had a direct effect in literature in this century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the modernist «nightmare of history» implicitly assumed the provisional and indeterminate nature of historical knowledge; it questioned the epistemological status of history, and exhibited a distrust of the neutrality and objectivity of historiography (Cf. Hutcheon, 1988: 88). Occasionally, this distrust led to the silencing of history in many modernist works, in favor of literary experimentation. The questioning of history was, however, obvious in the fiction produced from the most diverse perspectives in the first half of the twentieth century. From the works of Dos Passos and Steinbeck, to Faulkner and Mailer, among numerous others, the American novel continuously engaged history. However, it is specially the novel of the second half of the twentieth century that has witnessed a spectacular «return to history,» particularly in what has come to be known as the postmodernist novel (and paralleled by a similar «return to history» in literary theory, with revisionist historical approaches like the New Historicism and Cultural Materialism). Far from neglecting historical materials, some writers of the sixties and seventies reflected the impossibility to stand outside history. As Umberto Eco indicates, «The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently» (qtd. in Hutcheon, 1988). The novel of the sixties and seventies returned to history as one of its multiple sources, but this time it was history «with a difference.» The epistemological crisis of the second half of the twentieth century no longer allowed for a naive return to history understood as «wie es eigentlich gewesen,» in Ranke's famous aphorism. In their fiction, these writers revisit the past to put into question—at the same time as they exploit—the grounding of historical knowledge in past events, as Robert Scholes concluded in his *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979):

The major novels of the past decade or so have tended strongly toward the apparently worn out form of the historical novel. . . . But they are not novels based upon the empirical concepts of history that dominated Western thought in the nineteenth century. The North American works, in particular, bristle with facts and smell of research of the most painstaking kind. Yet they deliberately challenge the notion that history may be retrieved by objective investigations of fact (1979: 206).

By the end of the 70s, a corpus of what McHale (1987) terms «innovative historical novels» («historiographic metafiction» for L. Hutcheon (1988) or simply «fabulation» for R. Scholes (1979)) was already established within the North-American literary establishment. Something similar was starting to take place in Latin America as well as in England and other European countries. The corpus of innovative historical novels included works like John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (1964), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), and *Flight to Canada* (1976), E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1974) and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), among others. All these novels were consciously self-reflexive, as they questioned the very act of fictional and historical writing.

This article proposes a reading of Doctorow's *Ragtime* in the light of postmodern literary theory. The analysis centers on some of the strategies Doctorow utilizes in the paro-

dic disruption and manipulation of historiographical hypertexts as well as of naive and sentimental images of the past forged in the popular mind. In *Ragtime* Doctorow offers a personal recreation of the history of the ragtime era in America. Carefully framed within the years 1902 and 1917, the novel witnesses the traumatic death of the nineteenth century and the overwhelming birth of the twentieth century. Far from attempting to capture an objective vision of this historical period, Doctorow's novel is a conscientious construction in which the writer wilfully mixes «nostalgia, memorabilia, data, and factual historical information,» (Cooper 1980: 29) as well as a whole range of historical, semi-historical and fictional characters in order to compose a peculiar revision of American society at the turn of the century.

The novel opens with the presentation of multiple vignettes which outline the profile of different historical figures of the early twentieth century in America, like Stanford White, Evelyn Nesbitt, Harry Houdini, or Emma Goldman. Running parallel to these central factual figures, the novel chronicles the story of three fictional families —WASP, jewish immigrant, and black— who, at the beginning, bear no relationship among them. As the narration evolves, the three families will gradually leave their separate compartments to become, by the end of the novel, one big, interracial, heterogeneous family. The final blending of these fictional families can be seen to reflect the transformation of America during the ragtime era. In this period American society turned from «small-town WASP homogeneity to big-city ethnic heterogeneity» (Levine 1985: 54). Moreover, through the lives of these three families *Ragtime* dramatizes American society's loss of its dream of edenic harmony and stability, and its awakening to a decentered world of conflict and mutability in the twentieth century.

In his revision of the ragtime era Doctorow incorporates numerous historical elements while he retains the autonomy of his novel as fiction. As the writer himself indicated (1983: 39), the narration flows full of «historical imagery» set in a «mock-historical tone.» However, *Ragtime* is not a simple parody of turn-of-the-century America; far from obliterating the past through sheer irony and detachment, Doctorow's parody reveres and questions that very past which his novel recreates. Doctorow's re-writing of the ragtime era enriches older texts and images by recontextualizing and re-plotting them. In so doing, the novel provides a postmodernist attack on what Umberto Eco (1976: 58) calls the «referential fallacy,» the belief that behind the narrative text there is an immediate symmetrical world of fact—a fallacy which lied behind traditional historiography. If nineteenth century positivism tended to consider the characters and events of the past as something forever fixed, some immutable essence to which the historian should strive, Doctorow sets out to deconstruct this view and to expose the utter unreliability and the inescapable textuality of the past. Instead of surrendering his text to the constraints of a particular historical period already textualized, Doctorow brings the elements of that historical moment into his fictional text. Once the reader assumes Doctorow's tenet that the traces of the past, characters as well as events, are exclusively discursive and radically unreliable—that is, fictional—there is no need to keep the fictional and the historical in distinct categories. In this sense, *Ragtime* displays a set of fictional characters who mingle and interact with historical figures of the ragtime era, and who interrupt their daily life and distort the actions they carried out, according to the historiographical texts. The novel openly breaks the «constraints» (McHale 1987: 84-96) that traditionally limited the writer's freedom to recreate the past—as was the case with nineteenth-century historical novels. Under the influence of fictional characters like the brown boy, Coalhouse Walker, Sarah and Tateh, real historical figures like J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Harry Houdini, Emma Goldman or Evelyn Nesbitt, will see their natural course in a preordained history distorted. These fac-

tual figures are forced to break free from newspaper headlines, old photographs, silhouette portraits, and other records of the past; they shatter the historical frames that constrain their liberty and come back to life and change in the pages of the novel. In carrying out an overt fictionalization of history, *Ragtime* implies that history itself is nothing but a form of fiction.

In its declared aim to unmask the fictional construction of the past, *Ragtime* consciously parodies the received version of that past. The narration both inscribes and subverts the popular picture of the ragtime era in America as an age of innocence. Doctorow uses and abuses that idealized picture as reflected from the patriotic perspective of the white middle-class at the turn of the century; he openly exposes the falsely sentimental nature of these received images of the past. As the novel begins, the narrative presents a stream of vignettes of the ragtime era,

That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants (4).

This deliberately naïve image is subverted a few lines later in a radical revision: «Apparently there were Negroes. There were immigrants» (5). The popular image is seen to be based on the exclusion of large portions of reality. Thus, from the very first lines, *Ragtime* forces in the reader a reexamination of the whole concept of historiographical representation. While exposing the illusion of presence of the historical referent—an illusion on which traditional historiography was based—*Ragtime* distances itself from the realm of the referent and overtly plays with the reader's fragmented images of the past. The loss of referentiality of the novel (of *Ragtime* as well as of the American novel of the sixties and seventies), led Fredric Jameson to affirm nostalgically that, in the postmodern moment,

we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach . . . *Ragtime* remains the most peculiar and stunning monument to the aesthetic situation engendered by the disappearance of the historical referent (1991: 25).

The novel is not so much about the ragtime era as about the received discourse about that era. The novelist avoids detailed historical research and centers on the re-creation of the ragtime era through the recurrent and depthless images of popular culture. These naïve images, as well as the most serious fragments of history stand equally apart from the historical referent. In *Ragtime* these images are revealed to actually mask and pervert the past while striving to produce the illusion of pure and transparent representation.

A first exposure of the unreliability of representation is visible in Doctorow's undermining of photography as a true image of life. Although photographic representation has traditionally been seen as a transparent medium, in *Ragtime* it signals opacity and distortion. Admiral Peary's photograph of the arrival of his expedition at the North Pole provides the only tangible proof of his historical achievement. However, the photograph is visually ambiguous:

It shows five stubby figures wrapped in furs, the flag set in a paleocrystic peak behind them that might suggest a real physical Pole. Because of the light the faces are indistinguishable, seen only as black blanks framed by caribou fur (91).

The loss of the referent and its substitution for an image is conveyed in another frustrated attempt at true historical representation, an attempt undertaken by Harry Houdini, a character who, in his career as an escape artist, is reduced to eternal misrepresentation.

Harry Houdini tries to bring his mother back from death by representing her as she was in life. After his mother dies,

Houdini arranged framed photographs of her in his house to suggest her continuing presence. One close-up he laid on the pillow of her bed. He placed an enlarged photo of her seated in a chair and smiling in the very chair in which she had posed. There was a picture of her in a hat and coat walking up the stairs from the street to the front door (228).

This delusion of presence pathetically exposes the referential fallacy. It reveals the unavoidable failure inherent in any attempt at full representation. Texts, as well as pictures, construct an alternative world which will never reach the referential realm, since they are based on the absence of that which they seek to represent. The whole scene exemplifies Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum, the image which takes the place of reality. In «The precession of simulacra,» Baudrillard argues that mass-media have neutralized reality by stages: first they reflected it; then they masked it and perverted it; next they had to mask its absence; and finally they produced instead the simulacrum of the real, with the disappearance of all relation to reality.

Another representational effort doomed from the outset is visible in Tateh's silhouettes. The silhouettes, made of «white paper [mounted] on a black background» (49), reflect the image of a carefully delineated frame which separates the white interior from the black background. In *Ragtime*, the silhouette represents a willful omission of the essential tension of reality (Cf. Budick 1989: 194-95). For the person purchasing it, the silhouette is a black, an unoccupied territory which can contain any meaning the interpreter wants to demand of it. That is, the silhouette only simulates representation, while actually it opens up a place in reality to be filled by the imagination of the one who commissions it.

If photographs and silhouettes mask and pervert reality, the moving pictures produce the perfect simulacrum of the real. The image of the melting pot which Baron Ashkenazy himself a simulacrum hiding the real Tateh, the Jewish immigrant-creates in his film comedies is dangerously mystifying. It erases racial, ethnic and class tension by presenting a peacefully pluralistic social order in which all antagonism has been reconciled (Bevilacqua 1990: 103). The comedies present a sentimental image of American society:

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 (369).

These films willingly misrepresent the action of the novel itself, which tells of violent racial and class conflict (Cf. Morris 1991: 102). They also misrepresent Tateh's own problematic past in his struggle for survival. In his new life as a filmmaker, the Baron has accepted a vision of America that silences and erases his previous life as Tateh, the street artist. His movies readily conform to the official version of American society in the ragtime era.

Besides their inherent failure as truthful representations, the history captured in the pictures, silhouettes and moving pictures is further confined by the unidirectionality of the artist's perspective. Admiral Peary consciously focuses his camera from a certain angle, while Tateh deliberately creates his silhouettes to appeal to his clients, and Baron Ashkenazy willingly misrepresents in his films the racial tension he has lived through. The artist's deliberate construction of a partial view of the world haunts Theodore Dreiser, the novelist now turned into a fiction character in *Ragtime*. In his new apartment in Brooklyn, Dreiser nervously strives to find the right angle from which to perceive the world, and the right perspective from which to capture life in his novels. Sitting on a wooden chair in the

middle of his room, Dreiser anxiously searches for the proper alignment. «One day he decided his chair was facing in the wrong direction. Raising his weight from the chair, he lifted it with his two hands and turned it to the right, to align it properly» (30). However, still discontent, he takes to turning the chair again and again. «Through the night Dreiser turned his chair in circles seeking the proper alignment» (30).

Ragtime is Doctorow's response to Dreiser's struggle to align his chair properly, in one single direction, as well as to the problems posed by the unidirectionality of the camera in photographs and moving pictures, or the emptiness of the silhouette. As if to avoid the problem of having to «align» his novel on a certain fixed direction, Doctorow refuses to offer the narrative voice of the novel to an individual character, or even to an omniscient narrator; rather, he determines to write «at a fixed narrative distance to the subject» (Doctorow 1983: 39). The writer liberates the perspective and makes it fall upon an unidentified human consciousness. This unconstrained consciousness can look in all directions; it is not limited to any particular alignment.

However, although the perspective is deliberately kept open, the historical materials the narrator uses are already textualized, that is, the characters and events of the ragtime era already belong within systems of signification that limit their possible meanings. They are already contained in texts and images (pictures, silhouettes, newspaper headlines, movies, etc.) which function as the metaphorical frames within which an essentially fluid and dynamic past is enclosed and fixed. All the cases of mis/representation exposed in the novel are based on imposing frames, limits, borders, to enclose the essential indeterminacy of life. Since the objects and events of (past) reality have no intrinsic meaning, the imposition of boundaries helps isolate each element and serves to apply concrete meanings to them. Once framed, that is, separated from the indeterminate whole, the different elements are integrated into a complex system where they become the raw material for the construction of a story of a certain kind. As these elements enter the signifying structures superimposed by the historian, they lose their capacity to generate a multiplicity of meanings. However, as Doctorow seems to imply in his novel, no fact can be limited (framed) within one single meaning and subsumed in a story of a particular kind. Quite on the contrary, events and characters always have an excess of meaning which escapes the discourses of history. These excesses allow for the intrusion of the novelist, immersed in a process of textual enrichment beyond any historical limits.

In *Ragtime*, Doctorow liberates his real world figures from the historiographical frames that constrained them. In this sense, Houdini, a character whose factual and fictional personalities are blurred, emerges as a clear parallel of the novel itself. Houdini, the great illusionist and escape artist, earns his living by performing tricks in which he is seen escaping from all kinds of traps or frames: «He escaped from a Siberian exile van. From a Chinese torture crucifix. From a Hamburg penitentiary. From an English prison ship. From a Boston jail» (8). In his well balanced combination of factuality and fictionality, he is the maximum metaphor of the novel itself. He makes history by openly exposing the emptiness of history, by performing mere simulacra of historical facts. Thus, Houdini freely breaks the boundaries that have traditionally set history apart from the free play of the imagination represented by fiction. If, coming from the empty simulacrum, Houdini manages to enter history, the historical characters of the ragtime era (Ford, Morgan, Goldman, etc.) will reverse his path; they will transgress the frames —boundaries— of their historical texts, pictures and newspapers and enter a world of motion and instability, the world of fiction.

Significantly, the novel is partially presented through the eyes of a playful boy. The perception of the little boy is the writer's means to counteract the other characters' cons-

tant attempts at preserving their illusory worlds of full meaning and stability. Far from seeking the essence of life in harmony and fixity (echoing a pre-deconstructed world, as well as the Lacanian «imaginary» state), the little boy strives to unveil difference as the source of reality. He struggles to perceive changes, however minor they may be, from which real life-and meaning-can emerge. In his room, «he listened with fascination to the Victrola and played the same record over and over [...] as if to test the endurance of a duplicated event» (133). Even when looking at himself in the mirror (the utmost duplicated image), he expects «some change to take place before his eyes» (133). In a clear parallel to Lacan's theory of the passage from the «imaginary» to the «symbolic,» the little boy uses a mirror to unveil the unstable essence of all representations. Although the specular image can be seen as the perfect reflection-even beyond the photographic representation-the little boy concludes that it can not fully comprehend the real. It provides mere simulacra of reality, leaving the real always out there beyond its reach: «He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of which could claim to be the real one. The sensation was of being disembodied. He was no longer anything exact as a person. He had the dizzying feeling of separating from himself endlessly» (134). The boy inhabits a world dominated by signifiers in constant motion, as the very statues-those silent silhouettes of history- of the heroes of the past: «Even statues did not remain the same but turned different colors or lost bits and pieces of themselves» (134). To his acute sensibility, what holds reality together is not a pattern in which each element preserves its definite meaning forever unchanged; quite on the contrary, reality-and history-signifies through difference and recreation, never achieving final completion: «It was evident to him that the world composed and recomposed itself in an endless process of dissatisfaction» (135).

This new historical consciousness floods the narration as it displaces the American dream of stability and concentrates on change. His narrative places the steady rhythm of history alongside the free play of fiction, finally establishing a close link with «ragtime,» the musical form from which the novel takes its title. Only once does a «rag» tune sound in the narration, as Coalhouse Walker interprets Scott Joplin's «The Maple Leaf.» The narration clearly states how the music is filtered through the little boy's perception. To him, Coalhouse's ragtime music arises from the confrontation of «syncopating chords» played against «thumping octaves» (183). This musical fight, which «never stood still a moment,» (183) lies at the heart of ragtime music as it emerged at the turn of the century. William Bolcom, a leading scholar in the field of African-American music and a ragtime musician himself, defines ragtime thus:

In its broadest sense, 'ragtime' is the effect generated by an internally syncopated melodic line pitted against a rhythmically straightforward bass. [...] The constant collision between internal melodic and underlined rhythms was its *raison d'être* (1986: 23).

The collision between a syncopated melody and a strict rhythmical pattern suggests the dialectical relationship in the novel between fiction and fact, between the flux of life and the stagnation of history, between the boy's perception of constant change and Morgan's or Ford's search for eternal repetition (Cf. Levine 1985: 58). The thumping octaves materialize as a firm rhythm, a repetitive frame which can be blurred as the richness of the fictive imagination displays its syncopating chords. The partial displacement of the regular metrical octaves is produced by the intervention of the weak beat, the unaccented, irregular, syncopated notes.

According to Budick (1989: 204), «the artform of ragtime/*Ragtime* is the metamorphic artform of the discarded thing. It is the composition created by the pressure of the out-

side notes.» *Ragtime* revises the history of the ragtime era through the introduction of discarded elements, outside notes whose pressure forces paradox and change upon the American dream of stability. Through the little boy's consciousness, syncopation floods the thumping pages of history. He is specially alert to «discarded materials» (131) and rejects the steady rhythm of history in favor of what has traditionally been left out: «In his mind the meaning of something was perceived through its neglect» (131). The boy likes the stories his grandfather —himself a «discarded treasure»— tells him from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* because they depict a world of mutability. «They were stories of people who became animals or trees or statues. They were stories of transformation. [...] Grandfather's stories proposed to him that the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could as easily be something else» (132-33). Like a young Heraclitus, the little boy strives to perceive the essence of life in eternal flow and change, tension and instability: «He found proof in his own experience of the instability of both things and people» (133).

It is through the little boy's perception that the narration presents the gradual shattering of the ideal society portrayed at the beginning of the novel. The boy witnesses the breaking up of his own family, a microcosm of American society. What breaks the stability of the boy's family and of the peaceful New Rochelle society is the intrusion of an «other,» a discarded element: a black woman, Sarah, and her little «brown» baby. On their entrance into the life of New Rochelle, they seem to have appeared out of nowhere, having no family and no past. The black woman and her baby represent the non-white, neglected, transient figures. «There was a settled society of Negroes there, but also, on its margins, a transient element. Apparently she was a transient» (181). The brown baby emerges as the quintessential discarded thing. He was left unattended in Mother's yard. Later, when his biological mother, Sarah, is found and brought to live in the house, the baby will come to be a symbol of rupture in the family. After Father returns from Admiral Peary's expedition to the North Pole, he enters his house to see Mother holding the brown baby in her arms. Afraid, «he wandered through the house finding everywhere signs of his own exclusion» (123). The presence of the brown baby reveals to Father that this time he has been away too long. The baby inscribes instability and contradiction, as he displaces Father from his own family. He represents the new decentered society that the family-and, ultimately, the white society of New Rochelle-tries to negate (Cf. Budick 1989: 191). Once he is admitted into the family, Father and Mother are involved in a process of dissolution. Afraid of this breach in their dream of ideal harmony, «Father wondered at this moment if their lives might no longer be under their control» (240). Later, the baby brings forth the image of his own father, Coalhouse Walker, another intruder who will similarly displace Morgan from his most treasured palace. As the neglected other, Coalhouse will go on to destabilize all New Rochelle and, through the newspapers, the whole country.

Coalhouse Walker, Jr., the black man and ragtime piano player, enters the narration as he periodically visits Sarah and the brown baby. He is gradually admitted into Father's family. From then on, he impersonates the disturber of the peace, the intruder into the peaceful shrines of American civilization. He intrudes into Father's family and causes a mortal break, as Younger Brother leaves the family to join Coalhouse's gang and, later, the Mexican revolution where he will eventually be killed. Coalhouse's violent actions also generate an overspread panic wave in the peaceful society of New Rochelle. Finally, Coalhouse and his band violate Morgan's carefully preserved sanctuary of history: «Coalhouse's gang had broken into one of the city's most celebrated depositories of art, Pierpont Morgan's library on 36th street» (309). Coalhouse supplants J. P. Morgan as an agent of history. The fictional-character occupies the palace of the historical figure. He introduces

syncopated improvisations on the steady rhythms provided by the representative figures and events of the period. As he breaks into Morgan's library, Coalhouse generates a rupture in history as stability and introduces contradiction and crisis as a generator of a new history. Symbolically, as Coalhouse violates Morgan's sanctuary, the frame of history is broken up. If the silhouettes were made of a white interior on a black background, now the black outside—represented by Coalhouse—has flooded the sacred white interior, giving way to innumerable possibilities. He has finally set history in motion. Through the intervention of the marginal, discarded elements, the static pictures of life in the peaceful New Rochelle society are made to change and interact in the whirlwind of life. The historical figures of the time abandon the static pages of history and are brought back to a new life. As the fictional characters immerse themselves into the sacred realm of history, fiction saturates the pages of history and inserts indeterminacy. In his intrusion into Morgan's library, Coalhouse symbolically intrudes into the history of the West and violates its revered documents. In a masterful postmodernist association, Doctorow makes his criminal character enter a «library,» that is, a great metaphorical text. Morgan's library can be taken as a master text, a recipient of all the texts produced in Western literature, history, philosophy, etc., which have remained in an interpretive stasis. Coalhouse's intrusion into this sanctuary challenges the long tradition of closure and centralized meaning of Western texts. As Linda Hutcheon (1988: 130) indicates, in postmodernist writing, «the center of both historical and fictive narrative is dispersed. Margins and edges gain new value.»

The intrusion of Coalhouse Walker into Morgan's library liberates a world of crisscrossing interaction between factual and fictional characters, historical and literary texts. Coalhouse's criminal act has its parallel in the (similarly illegal) intrusion of fiction into history. As the factual figures are displaced and forced to begin a problematic intercourse with fictional characters, the texts of history are problematized by the intervention of fiction. Most of the real-world characters in the novel are involved in events which their historical referents never undertook. As the real characters leave their historiographical world to enter the fictive narration, they abandon their immutable referents in the past, and become the heroes of a textual world. Morgan, Ford, Goldman and Nesbitt become characters extracted from the immutable texts of history and brought to inhabit a textual world of possibility and change. The real-world persons are reduced to mere characters in the texts of history, and as such, they function as the intertexts of *Ragtime*. Once the factual characters and events are dissociated from their textual figurations, the novel can freely establish intertextual relationships with the texts of history. As a result, the novel is infused with multiple historical echoes and allusions which will be ironically subverted and contradicted. In this parodic rewriting of the past within a new context, the novel enters a territory of ontological confusion between the fictional and the historical, the past and the present, as if in a willful attempt to make history dynamic and ever changing, to remove the presupposed statism of the past. Somehow, under the influence of fiction, *Ragtime* envisions history breaking its frame and joining the flux of life.

However, Doctorow's novel does not utterly displace history with fiction, but rather, ultimately maintains the «thumping» pressure of factual reality on the «syncopating» chords of the fictional. As if to show the imposition of the repeated rhythms of history on the free flow of the imagination, at the end of the novel Doctorow makes his characters face the outbreak of the first world war. The war had been ominously announced at the beginning of the novel. The fact that the «syncopating» play of the imagination has been unable to avoid the menacing «octaves» of history suggests the «powerful primacy of historical reality, the boundaries that history places on the imagination» (Budick 1989: 187). As the heavy steps of history finally echo in *Ragtime*, Doctorow closes his fictional re-

creation of the ragtime era. In this revision, the historical context has abandoned its secular immobility within the frame and has metamorphosed under the influence of fiction. Using the cinematographic techniques of Baron Ashkenazy, Doctorow has composed intricate silhouettes and shadows of the ragtime era and projected them onto the pages of the novel. The Baron believed his movies offered the true picture of life. Like the Baron, Doctorow creates an illusion that looks like the truth, but he creates this illusion utterly aware that neither films nor books can actually represent reality or history. Both will always remain elusive to the written text. In this sense, we could even say that what Ragtime represents is the very impossibility of representation. However, the novel suggests that to re-write or to represent the past in fiction and in history is to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological (Hutcheon 1988: 110), a notion which echoes Doctorow's declared belief that «there is no history except as it is composed. That is why history has to be written and rewritten from one generation to another» (1983: 24)

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