The Dynamic of Escape in the Writings of E. L. Doctorow

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This study could not have been completed
without the very helpful advice of
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ABSTRACTS

This study examines problems of escape in the fictional writings of E. L. Doctorow. It makes clear that the characters in the stories as well as their creator frequently try to break free from restrictions or control--the protagonists physically, the author more theoretically. A description of the nature of the confinements as well as the difficulties associated with getting away reveals much about Doctorow's perception of 20th century American reality and the writer's place in it. Thus, the study moves from a relatively straightforward assessment of the kinds of escape featured in Doctorow's narratives and the way in which these are justified to a more complicated evaluation of Doctorow's situation as a writer in relation to his characters' predicaments and recent critical analyses of his prose.

Cette étude examine les problèmes d'échappement dans les oeuvres fictifs de E. L. Doctorow. Cela nous précise le fait que les personnages aussi bien que leurs créateur essayent souvent de s'échapper de restrictions ou de contrôle--les protagonistes physiquement et l'auteur, plus en théorie. Doctorow percoit non seulement la réalité Americaine du 20^{ieme} siècle, mais il percoit la place de l'écrivain dans cette réalité, aussi. Cela est révèlé dans sa description des consignes et les difficultés d'échappement. Donc, l'étude commence par une évaluation assez simple des genres d'échappements representés dans les récits de Doctorow et elle continue en évaluation plus compliquée qui décrit la situation de Doctorow comme écrivain, par rapport aux situations de ses personnages et on trouve aussi des critiques de sa prose la plus récente.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines problems of escape in the fictional writings of E. L. Doctorow. It makes clear that characters in the stories as well as their creator frequently try to break free from restrictions or control--the protagonists physically, the author more theoretically. A description of the nature of the confinements as well as the difficulties associated with getting away reveals much about Doctorow's perception of 20th century American reality and the writer's place in it.

The four chapters which comprise this study discuss discrete aspects of escape. The first two sections focus primarily on plot. Chapter One defines some key terms and delineates the methods and techniques employed by the main characters in their efforts to flee. It includes a close analysis of Ragtime which emphasizes the importance of Houdini in this one book and points out the relevance of his character to Doctorow's fiction in general. Chapter Two elucidates the immediate causes and sociological implications of the characters' attempts to find a way out.

The last two chapters are more theoretical, dealing with Doctorow's unique and experimental representations of reality. Chapter Three observes that in the works in which Doctorow rewrites history the author is trying to break free from established views of the past. Chapter Four debates at length one critic's claim that Doctorow's novels prove that in art there exists an "inescapable textuality"--in other words that there is a certain discursive form of knowledge from which, ultimately, there is no getting away.

In sum, then, the study moves from a relatively straightforward assessment of

the kinds of escape featured in Doctorow's narratives and the way in which these are justified to a more complicated evaluation of Doctorow's situation as a writer in relation to his characters' predicaments and recent critical analyses of his prose.

CHAPTER ONE

ELEMENTS OF ESCAPE: HOUDINI'S HEROICAL HOAXES

A great number of E. L. Doctorow's stories include characters who attempt somehow to escape their immediate surroundings. In fact, in just about every fictional work by this author there is someone who is remarkable mainly for his or her struggle to make a quick and final getaway. Of course the grounds for the escapes are different in every case; and the strategies employed, though sometimes predictable, are most often innovative and unique. However, while the escapes that Doctorow illustrates are many and diverse, there is one way in which they are all alike: namely, their result. In Doctorow's fiction the effort to get free from restrictions or control is usually made in vain. The escapes one encounters in his work are hardly ever successful.

At first glance it appears that many individuals in Doctorow's work have mastered the art of breaking free. A closer look reveals, however, that the author portrays those who accomplish such feats as extraordinary beings. Even more important perhaps is this fact: When a character does seem to escape, his or her apparent success is always primarily due to some form of deception. The escape is not pure, so to speak; upon close examination it proves to be based on some kind of illusion or hoax. Indeed, even the seemingly successful escaper, in Doctorow's twentieth century American reality, gets nowhere. While the majority of the author's writings substantiate this notion, his highly acclaimed novel Ragtime, whose action takes place in the early 1900s, proves it in a most singular and remarkable manner.

Admittedly, most of Doctorow's characters are unable to make a successful escape, no matter in what age they live. In his first novel, Welcome to Hard Times, the author depicts a variety of individuals, active during the 1800s, who are similarly powerless to break free. The people described in this story have moved gradually westward in order to evade the hardships imposed by a newly established eastern civilization--poverty, diminished social status, and political impotence. In the wilderness they band together and form a kind of community. Not surprisingly, however, the small society's destruction approaches quickly. The narrator, Blue, together with his fellow townsfolk, finally finds that he cannot escape the difficulties associated with the part of the country he thought he had left behind. The message seems to be that some kind of evil force, in this case incarnated in the Bad Man from Bodie, will always emerge to disrupt a peaceful community; it will assert a kind of dreadful control over a population that wants desperately to be free of just such constraints.

In the novels that follow Welcome to Hard Times, Doctorow's preoccupation with the possibilities of escape continues. The Book of Daniel, for instance, portrays a young woman, the protagonist's sister, who wishes fervently somehow to get out of a world that has sanctioned the execution of her parents. In the opening chapters of Doctorow's science fiction novel, Big as Life, a whole mass of people tries frantically to escape; the inhabitants of New York recklessly scramble to get away from two ominous giants who have recently and inexplicably appeared in the harbour. In Loon Lake it is the main character, Joe, who makes a decisive move away. He departs from

his small-minded and poverty-stricken home town and ends up in a luxurious estate built in the wilderness by a millionaire; later, however, Joe finds that he must devise yet another, far more dangerous and adventurous escape in order to get away from the money baron who owns the grandiose house and grounds. In World's Fair, the person who endeavours to escape is less easy to spot. It is the little grandmother of one of the narrators, Edgar. Apparently she often feels compelled to break away from the company and influence of her relations. Edgar explains that there were "several episodes in which Grandma, crying and calling curses down on our house, wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and ran off" (64).

Other works also contain noteworthy attempts to escape. The main character of the drama Drinks Before Dinner--another Edgar--in a way tries to get out of unfortunate circumstances, although his effort to escape is perhaps a bit more philosophical than practical. Brandishing a gun at a dinner party, Edgar seeks to vacate his place in a society which, in his view, has lost all its moral integrity. In Doctorow's most recent novel, Billy Bathgate, the central character is a streetwise youth who spends his days during the 1930s in New York City, trying to give the slip to city officials and anyone else who is antagonistic to a certain lot of New York mobsters. And Doctorow's collection of short stories, Live of the Poets, includes characters like the teacher in "The Hunter," who is described as running desperately away from both harmless old people and potentially injurious young men.

It is Doctorow's third novel, however, that most interestingly incorporates the dynamic of escape. In Ragtime the writer most clearly and fully develops ideas

which, when one considers the full body of his fictional work, appear to be characteristic of his authorial vision. Indeed, in this novel Doctorow features a greater number and larger variety of escapes than anywhere else. Almost all of the main characters, including Father, Mother's Younger Brother, Tateh, Coalhouse Walker Jr., Evelyn Nesbit, J. P. Morgan, and Harry K. Thaw, make at least one serious effort to escape. Moreover, Houdini, the historical performer skilled in methods and techniques of escape, plays an especially significant role in the course of events.

Because Doctorow has included so many escapes in Ragtime, it possible to observe certain patterns of departure present in all of his writings merely by focusing on this single work. Most fundamentally, a close analysis of some of the more prominent escapes in Ragtime, makes clear that, for Doctorow, finding a way out is undeniably difficult. In this novel, as in so many of the fictional worlds that Doctorow creates, a person trying to escape is unlikely to fare well for long. Generally, the attempt to get away from a difficult situation is seen to be frustrated from the beginning. However, when a person overcomes the usual hindrances and does effect a successful escape, in Ragtime as elsewhere in Doctorow's fabricated realities, this achievement is finally revealed as involving the mastery of clever tricks which make it *appear*, outwardly but yet somewhat falsely, as though he or she has escaped or gone free.

The analysis of the major characters of Ragtime in terms of their attempts to escape leads quickly to the question of how the label "escaper" is to be applied. The answer is threefold. First, an individual who tries to escape is obviously very

dissatisfied with his or her predicament--domestic troubles are too great, social pressures are overwhelming, a personal misfortune has made life in its present form unbearable, or, as with Houdini, physical constraints seem to impede a necessary corporeal freedom. This leads to the second feature of escape. Whatever the case may be, whatever the cause of the initial dissatisfaction, a bodily move away from or out of the place associated with the adverse or restricting circumstances is most often the primary gesture or response. Indeed, the majority of the characters in Ragtime who try to get away do so by attempting to move to another geographical location.

The third important aspect of the escape is perhaps more important--but also less conspicuous. It has to do with a person's lack of confidence or with his or her want of motivation to improve a deplorable condition. In other words, the escaper in each case gives up on the possibility of changing the established order, and so can only envision abandoning it. Interestingly, one of two critics who have dealt extensively with escapes in literature, Sam Bluefarb, fails to make this distinction. In his book The Escape Motif in the American Novel: Mark Twain to Richard Wright, Bluefarb includes Albert Camus' The Rebel in his discussion of typical escapers. But the person described in this essay is determined to resist and fight against what he perceives to be the ills of society. Indeed, Camus stresses the "spirit of rebellion" (Bluefarb 143; Camus 20); such a revolutionary figure exhibits a willingness to assert himself which most escapers, especially as defined here, certainly lack.

The escaper does not aim to change the present. Unlike the rebel, he or she is not driven by a desire to reform. The escaper does not aim to remedy social

injustices, for example. The escaper wants primarily to avoid a difficult situation. He or she wants to find the quickest way out. Perhaps vague notions of a better life strengthen the desire to leave, but as Gorman Beauchamp points out in his study of classical and contemporary escapes, goals of self-improvement are hardly ever well-defined or very realistic. In an essay entitled "The Dream of Cockaigne: Some Motives for the Utopias of Escape," Beauchamp asserts that usually an escaper envisions such general and remote luxuries as "perpetual youth, life without work, joy without stint, and a natural environment suited, womb-like, to the cradling and nourishing of man" (351).

Indeed, the escaper is in not in any way a revolutionary. Neither, for that matter, is he or she on a quest. Usually the escaper does not have a specific destination or positive goal in mind when attempting to make the getaway. In the words of Janis P. Stout, author of The Journey Narrative in American Literature: Patterns and Departures, the escaper places the emphasis rather on the "negation of the existing order" (xi).

Discontented, basically directionless people wanting to escape are plentiful in Ragtime. The novel is filled with characters who, without any specific plans or concrete goals, suddenly leave their surroundings. That is not to say that escape is the major theme of this work; but the narrative is punctuated with so many rash departures that one is forced to consider their significance in relation to the meaning of Doctorow's work as a whole.

What Doctorow intends to convey in this novel is not really explicit. Indeed,

even the basic storyline of Ragtime is difficult to summarize, as most of the events seem to be the result of bizarre coincidences. Basically, however, the action takes place in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Three different families interact with each other as well as with some famous personages. A father-mother-daughter trio of Jewish immigrants, a middle class WASP family, and a young black woman, her lover, and their child meet on occasion and share fates with people whose names are J. P. Morgan, Harry K. Thaw, Evelyn Nesbit, Emma Goldman, Henry Ford and Harry Houdini. Other celebrated personalities like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Theodore Dreiser have cameo parts to play.

Among these groups of well-known persons and people of lesser notoriety, escapers abound. As remarked earlier, many characters try to rid themselves of their troubles by making the move to different terrain. Father, head of the WASP household in New Rochelle, New York, renounces the responsibilities of his job and family to voyage with Commander Peary to the arctic circle. Although Father does have a specific purpose--he and his fellow voyagers hope to discover the exact location of the North Pole--his trip is significantly described by the narrator mainly as a "departure" (10).

Father's wife's sibling, referred to as Mother's Younger Brother throughout the novel, in the beginning lives with his sister's family, but he, too, ultimately makes a kind of escape from it. When his liberal ideas are no longer tolerated, he abruptly removes himself from the suburban home without any public explanation. Once Mother's Younger Brother moves out, he becomes superstar Evelyn Nesbit's lover.

But the affair is not a happy one for long. In fact, Evelyn soon feels compelled to make an impetuous escape herself: In order to get away from the oppressive affections of the new young man in her life, she bids a hasty farewell. The narrator, speaking retrospectively, explains that "gradually Evelyn had become indifferent to [Mother's Younger Brother] and when he persisted in his love she had become hostile. Finally one day she had gone off with a professional ragtime dancer" (95). Subsequent to Nesbit's departure Mother's Younger Brother joins an unofficial army of black revolutionists; but his participation in that group also leads to disaster. As a result of his membership in the rebel gang he is forced to make another, this time stealthy, escape from people far more threatening than his suburban sister and brother-in-law. In a stolen car and with a blackened face, Mother's Younger Brother flees westward in order to get free from a corrupt and angry New York Police force.

The police from whom Mother's Younger Brother is escaping want to arrest him for his affiliation with Coalhouse Walker Jr., leader of the black rebel group of which he was a part. Walker is a black ragtime musician who, in the process of trying to get his automobile restored to the condition it was in before it was desecrated by a few red-neck, racist whites, repeatedly breaks the law and incites other people to do the same. Granted, the narrator personally thinks that Walker is without a doubt a revolutionary individual, but other people in Ragtime are not so sure that he is not, at least in his last moments, more of an escaper. In the views of the law enforcers, for example, the black man's final movements represent an inappropriate attempt to escape detention. This is the scenario: Near the end of the novel Coalhouse takes a

hostage and illegally occupies the house of billionaire J. P. Morgan. According to the narrator, Coalhouse probably knows what the consequences of every one of his actions are. When he walks out of the mansion towards the police and turns his head and lowers his arms, it is presumably not because he is ready to elude the authorities but rather because he wants swiftly to end his life. Nonetheless, the New York police interpret the black man's last actions differently. "In the bright floodlit street," the narrator explains, "the black man was said by the police to have made a dash for freedom" (255). The police's view is obviously incorrect; but on another level maybe Coalhouse is seeking to make a final escape--through death. While the ragtime musician's actions are most probably not motivated by a desire merely to avoid detention, perhaps they are influenced by a yearning finally to get out of a world filled with too many crooked constabularies.

Tateh, the immigrant father from Latvia, is a character who really does make a kind of lunge for liberty. After enduring months of poverty and humiliation, Tateh, in one rash moment, gives up his squalid home and meagre job, takes his little girl by the hand, and boards a tram. Together father and daughter ride to the end of the line. Once the trip has ended, they climb up on the next available streetcar; again they stay aboard until the car has reached the last stop. In this haphazard way they continue their voyage until they reach Boston. Exemplary escapers, the two are not concerned with their ultimate destination; their primary objective is rather to get away from New York, "the city that had ruined [Tateh's] life." The narrator tells the reader that "Tateh did not know anything about the routes. He only planned to keep on going as far as

each streetcar would take him" (76).

J. P. Morgan is another character who senses that a long trip away from his usual dwelling place might prove beneficial. He is highly distressed by his countrymen's poor intellectual abilities. The stupidity of those around him oppresses him, and he cannot tolerate it long. "Once years before," we learn, he

> had arranged a dinner party at his residence on Madison Avenue in which his guests were the dozen most powerful men in America besides himself. He was hoping the collected energy of their minds might buckle the walls of his home . . . [But] the business elite could think of nothing to say. How they appalled him. How his heart quaked . . . Without exception the dozen most powerful men in America looked like horse's [sic] asses.

The only way to be free from these moronic human beings seems to be to escape to another geographical location. Indeed, J. P. Morgan, convinced that life among such dull-witted men would soon become completely unbearable, "fled to Europe" (116-7).

Morgan's flight, however, is not worthwhile. As it turns out, the European continent is home to a lot more of what the billionaire considers to be blockheads. Morgan finds that the intellectuals on the other side of the Atlantic are ultimately no more mentally stimulating than their American counterparts. No one in any of the European countries wants so urgently to penetrate the mysteries of the universe as he does. This insight makes Morgan frantic, and it compels him to plan yet another escape. The next escape, interestingly, is far more radical than the original. Morgan decides that he will leave the present era. He aims to escape, bodily or mentally, to a

time richer with other-worldly ideas. Unfortunately, though, this second effort to escape is also unsuccessful, since Morgan cannot transport himself out of the present. He spends the night entombed in an ancient pyramid waiting to communicate with pharaohs, but the only entity that makes itself known to Morgan is decidedly less venerable than an ancient deity: A group of bedbugs nips at him throughout his stay.

The creatures that crawl over Morgan's body at night are certainly not messengers sent by long dead kings trying to make contact with an eccentric American; yet the bugs do serve a specific purpose. They prove, by their persistent and undeniable presence, that Morgan cannot successfully escape his own predicament. He is stuck in the twentieth century, a time in which pharaohs are no longer alive. Wingless blood-sucking insects occupy the chambers of once heralded men. It is a time, furthermore, when a person cannot get completely away from American culture, no matter how far he or she voyages. Indeed, much to Morgan's distress, it seems that one can get a glimpse of something American almost anywhere in the world. After spending the dark fruitless night under tons of Egyptian stone, Morgan emerges into the light only to witness members of a New York baseball team scrambling over the top the Great Sphinx in the process of arranging themselves for a photo.

Other characters in Ragtime who attempt to escape from their problems by moving to a different geographical location are generally no more successful than J. P. Morgan. Rarely does anyone in Ragtime prosper in any way in the place to which he or she has escaped. Harry K. Thaw escapes from the Matteawan State Prison Farm and flees to Canada, but his sojourn there, marked by monstrous crimes which Thaw,

typically, finds satisfying, is not a long one. "Eventually," the narrator writes, "he came back across the border. He was discovered on a train near Buffalo" (165). Though Mother's Younger Brother is able to avoid imprisonment in New York by fleeing through the States to Mexico, the life he lives in the south is not depicted in the novel as being especially productive or joyful. Below the border Mother's Younger Brother has a brief love affair, becomes an efficient bomb maker, and attaches himself to Francisco Villa's Division of the North. As *"companero"* he is continually reckless. He does not back away from explosives and thus loses his hearing; soon afterwards he succumbs completely to injuries similarly incurred. But even Mother's Younger Brother's demise, hints Doctorow, is of no great importance. His relatives had long gotten used to his absence, and in retrospect, "[No one was] sure of the circumstances of his death" (259).

One might argue, as in the case of Walker, that by dying a person does actually, in a way, perform a rather successful escape, perhaps even a singularly effective one. After all, it is possible that after death one is finally free of all one's earthly troubles. But Doctorow hints in Ragtime that even a dead person is not likely to be permanently released from mundane pressures. In the one passage in which the narrator of Ragtime describes a life after death, it is clear that the other-worldly existence is certainly not without difficulties. Father from New Rochelle breathes his last breath, but his troubles definitely continue. It is worth noting here that the impediments to Father's personal freedom in his bodiless state are strikingly similar to the obstacles that hindered his achievement of autonomy during his lifetime. "Poor

Father," the narrator says, "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" (269). Father's life after death is described as a parody of his earthly existence. When Father journeyed with Commander Peary to the North Pole, he was sent back early due to the fact that he suffered too severely from frost bite to go any further. Father never reached the purported final destination. Instead, he was forced to return early to the family he had rather eagerly left. So Father never became a celebrated explorer; neither did he escape his parental duties as he had planned. As it happened, he returned to New Rochelle a thin, lost old man, sadly lacking in authority.

Furthermore, a sense of not belonging plagues Father in the afterlife in the same way that his superfluousness worried him at his home in suburbia. And his journey away from earthly life lacks completion in just the same way in which his personal trip to the North Pole does not come to its intended conclusion. The "new place," which seems to be the destination after death, is, just like the exact location of the North Pole, never reached by Father. True, in death Father does experience some kind of ecstasy upon arriving at the "new place," but his euphoria merely makes him a ridiculous figure and emphasizes his weaknesses. Indeed, Father is in his afterlife transformed into an idiotic version of the type of person he instinctively feared when he was a young living human being. At the beginning of the exploration to the North Pole, the ship Father was on passed a boat full of people who were hoping to settle in

the United States. Upon seeing the group of foreigners, Father at once became anxious and fearful. "Father, a normally resolute person," one reads in the novel, "suddenly foundered in his soul. A weird despair seized him" (12). Once he is deceased, Father himself becomes a kind of perpetual immigrant, one who is never really accepted in "the new place." The narrator makes clear that Father will probably never fully belong even to the symbolic land of his "Self" (269).

In the world of Ragtime, then, even bodily decrepitude does not necessarily signify an end to one's troubles. Death is apparently not a satisfactory way out. Similarly problematic is the geographical move away from a difficult or unfortunate situation, a notion clearly demonstrated by Mother's Younger Brother's trip to Mexico and J. P. Morgan's flights to Europe and Africa. However, in Ragtime, a successful escape is not altogether impossible. Through the figure of Houdini, Doctorow suggests that new, more complicated or devious methods of escape can, in fact, guarantee a certain kind of triumph.

Houdini is the single most important escaper in the novel. Not only is he the only character who repeatedly seems to make successful escapes, but he achieves both fame and fortune as a direct result of his performances of them. "I'm Harry Houdini," this man says by way of introduction, "I escape for a living, that's my profession" (81). Although some rich people may find that his shows lack prestige,--"his audiences were poor people--carriers, peddlers, policemen, children" (6)--Houdini has created a stage show phenomenon that is nevertheless attractive to a great number of people. "Houdini was a headliner in the top vaudeville circuits," the narrator explains.

> He went all over the world accepting bondage and escaping. He was roped to a chair. He escaped. He was chained to a ladder. He escaped. He was handcuffed, his legs were put in irons, he was tied up in a straight jacket and put in a locked cabinet. He escaped. He escaped from bank vaults, nailed-up barrels, sewn mailbags; he escaped from a zinc-lined Knabe piano case, a giant football, a galvanized iron boiler, a rolltop desk, a sausage skin . . . He escaped from a sealed milk can filled with water. 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. He was chained to automobile tires, water wheels, cannon, and he escaped . . . (6-7)

Indeed, Houdini repeatedly and publicly frees himself from captivity. It appears, significantly, that he has the ability to do that which few others can: Houdini seems, astonishingly, to be adept at "negat[ing] the existing order."

However, when one gets a closer look at the daring deeds of the entertainer, one finds them to be less glamorous and not so awe-inspiring. Indeed, the narrator sometimes gives a detailed account of Houdini's manoeuvres and so reveals to the reader that the escapologist's expertise lies mainly in deceiving the general public--in performing clever yet certainly clandestine tricks.

Houdini's escape from "the Tombs," the supposedly escape-proof jail wherein the accused murderer Harry K. Thaw is being kept, is, for example, somewhat surreptitious. "Houdini," we find out, "was led, stark naked, up the six flights of stairs

to Murderer's Row on the top tier of the jail." The spectators wait diligently and ignorantly outside; meanwhile, the narrator exposes to the reader Houdini's stealthy actions within. "Houdini carried in various places on his person small steel wires and bits of spring steel," we learn. Once inside the cell,

> he ran his palm along the sole of his foot and extracted from a slot in the callus of his left heel a strip of metal about a quarter-inch wide and one and a half inches long. From his thick hair he withdrew a piece of stiff wire which he fitted around the strip metal as a handle. He stuck his hand through the bars, inserted the makeshift key in the lock and twisted it slowly clockwise. The cell door swung open. (25)

Once the escapologist emerges from the jail house, he is celebrated for his ability to pass ghost-like through the bars of the prison cages. But the public that cheers him on has significantly been deceived. Houdini's seemingly incredible escape, the reader knows by having followed the procedure, definitely involves a kind of fraudulence on the part of the artist.

On other occasions Houdini appears to be able to disappear at will, but in a way these displays are also shams. In reality, the escapologist gets nowhere; he is never far removed from the original place. Like the majority of the other people who in Ragtime try to escape, Houdini is literally stuck in his own situation--a notion clearly illustrated in the scene in which Houdini tries to free himself from a grave. Wanting to perform the most difficult escape of all, the escape from death, Houdini demands to be buried beneath the ground. He claims that in the space of a few

minutes he will prove that he is able to defy any law, be it man-made or natural. But Houdini cannot complete this daring stunt: Once entombed, he finds that he is unable to get out of the dark hole in the ground by himself. Doctorow tells us that:

> [Houdini] was buried alone in a grave and could not escape, and had to be rescued. Hurriedly, they dug him out. The earth is too heavy, he said gasping. His nails bled. Soil fell from his eyes. He was drained of colour and couldn't stand. His assistant threw up. Houdini wheezed and sputtered. He coughed blood. They cleaned him off and took him back to the hotel. (7)

Houdini's failure is at this point especially important because it is public. When the great escapologist needs to be extricated from the earth by the onlookers, everyone for a moment understands that a real, bona fide escape is, even for Houdini, sometimes impossible.

One critic thinks that at least one character in Ragtime, namely Mother, successfully performs a variation of the escape at which Houdini fails. T. G. Evans writes that "in rescuing Coalhouse Walker's baby in the garden, [Mother] does the trick that baffled Houdini--the escape from the grave" (83). But in fact, no one anywhere in Doctorow's fiction is described as having the ability independently to avoid the reality of death or the difficulties associated with a personal demise, be it even a symbolic one. Indeed, there is quite a difference between helping someone out of a hole and escaping from a sepulchre oneself. When Mother disinters the infant, she is not escaping herself; actually her actions in this case resemble more closely the deeds of the cooperative spectators of Houdini's stunt who were generous enough

quickly to pluck Houdini out of his potentially very real tomb.

When Doctorow thus documents Houdini's failures and describes how his triumphs are tainted, he seems to be arguing that one must rely on chicanery and subterfuge in order to make a successful escape. That this is a notable aspect of Ragtime is undeniable: The importance of Houdini is evidenced by the number of times that he appears (and disappears) in the novel. It is also underscored by the prominent place afforded him in terms of the structure of the book.

The escapologist's presence looms large at both the beginning and the end of the narrative. At the start of the story, Houdini visits with the New Rochelle family when his touring car breaks down near their home. The little boy of the family who is playing outside is intrigued by the headlight of Houdini's large black vehicle. He stares into it, entranced by the distorted image of himself. While looking at the weird likeness, the little boy gets a strange premonition. "Warn the Duke," he says specifically to Houdini, and then he runs off (9). The little boy's words do not make much sense as he utters them, and in fact his message is more or less meaningless to Houdini until the end of the narrative. In the last chapter of the book, however, it becomes terribly significant. Houdini, performing yet another escape, is hanging upside down in a straight jacket halfway up the Times Tower. He plans to release himself from this bondage--with a fake struggle that will make the escape seem more legitimate--in clear view of crowds gathered on Broadway and Seventh Avenue. Before the act is completed, however, Houdini pauses. In Doctorow's words:

He rested for a moment. He was upside down over Broadway, the year was

> 1914, and the Arch-duke Franz Ferdinand was reported to have been assassinated. It was at this moment that an image composed itself in Houdini's mind. The image was of a small boy looking at himself in the shiny brass headlamp of an automobile. (267)

While he is dangling dangerously high in the air, in the midst of his dramatic performance, Houdini at last comes to understand the heretofore incomprehensible statement of the little boy. He realizes, finally, that the youngster somehow knew that he, Houdini, would eventually meet the Austrian Duke and have the chance to advise the ruler of the forthcoming assassination. But the moment of illumination comes to late: The Duke is already dead when Houdini has the revelation. Yet had he been able to inform the Duke of the imminent attempt on his life, Houdini might well have helped to circumvent earth-shaking disasters, since the Duke's death sparked the beginning of World War I, which, incidentally, also marked the end of the era of ragtime. But while the escapologist fails significantly to influence the course of history, his sudden realization near the close of the novel does help the reader better to make sense of the development of events in Ragtime.

Houdini is the quintessential escaper, and his initial and final appearances, coming as they do at the beginning and end of the book, bracket and put into context all of the other escapes. It is important to consider, then, how the figure of Houdini becomes problematic. He is introduced as the most successful escaper of all; indeed, he is also the first one we meet. But Doctorow does not allow him to appear to be very respectable for long. The author shows us the occasional failure of the artist as

well as the tricks he uses in the effort to succeed in an escape. By giving Houdini such an important place in the novel, and then explicitly showing us his shortcomings, Doctorow in a way prepares the reader for what is to come. In depicting the character of the famous escapologist, Doctorow implies early on that, in the world of his fiction, a pure and perfect escape will usually prove to be impossible; on the other hand, it is also made clear that the apparent success of any escape will normally be based on some kind of illusion or deceit.

Successful escapers can deceive their society in many different ways. They may, for example, assume a pseudonym in order to avoid being found out. The Russian immigrant, Tateh, is the one character in Ragtime beside Houdini who does in fact successfully accomplish a kind of escape. He is able permanently to leave the slums in New York and establish a better life elsewhere: In another state he prospers as a producer of motion pictures. However, a falsehood contributes to his prestige and wealth. Tateh daily pretends to be someone other than himself. Rarely does he admit to having once been a poor Russian immigrant; rather, he lays claim to the title of Baron Ashkenazy, a name which supposedly signifies that he is a member of European nobility. (Interestingly, the escapologist known to the world as Houdini also uses an alias: He was brought up as Erich Weiss). This form of trickery is also practised by other characters in different novels by Doctorow. In Loon Lake, for example, Joseph Korzeniowski of working-class Paterson, New Jersey, legally becomes Joseph Paterson Bennett when he completes his escape from his former life of poverty. But one character in Ragtime sums up the general pattern of such escapes. When Harry K.

Thaw is asked to explain the way in which he broke out of the mental institution in which he was a patient, he contends that he effected his escape by behaving like someone else. With reference to his accomplishments, he says, "just call me Houdini" (165).

The one aspect of Mother's Younger Brother's escape in Ragtime which could be seen as relatively successful is also based upon pretence. When Mother's Younger Brother makes his getaway from New York, he does so disguised as another person: his brother-in-law. When Mother's Younger Brother flees from the police, he pretends, as he gets into the black Model T car, that he is the hostage whom the revolutionaries have been recently holding in J. P. Morgan's mansion, namely Father. Mother's Younger Brother is able to get away primarily because the crowd outside the building, just like an audience of Houdini's act, is being duped.

A simple, direct escape, achieved honestly--without fraud or deception--is apparently not possible in Doctorow's fictional worlds. If a person is unwilling to accept that some kind of deceit or trickery is necessary to get out of a difficult situation, trouble arises. Edgar's little grandmother in World's Fair does not bother even to change her outward aspect before she runs off. Because she is then easily identifiable, it does not usually take very long for either an embarrassed relative or a dutiful city employee to find her and haul her back home. Similarly, Edgar in Drinks Before Dinner cannot get out of his conservative community because he does not have the courage to give up his well-established social role. Though he starts, at the outset, to verbally contradict the party-goer's opinions concerning social issues, by the end of

the dinner party he has once again accepted the rigid role he has to play in order to function in the circles of his friends and associates.

In sum, then, it appears that unless a person is willing to engage in some kind of duplicitous behaviour, some form of trickery or subterfuge, he or she will be unable permanently to break free. Doctorow's characters generally live in societies that do not sanction the effort to get away. In the following chapter I will look further into the social background of Doctorow's escapers, and examine whether in Doctorow's fictions characters of all classes try now and then to escape, or if the author sees part of the American population as being more desperate than another to get away.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SOCIAL SCENE: POSSIBILITIES OF ESCAPE

"American fiction," writes Janis P. Stout, "has traditionally presented the escape as a victory, a rite of passage in celebration of personal transcendence. By escaping, the lone hero pronounces judgement on his society, implicitly shaking its dust from his feet in assertion of his freedom from its conventionalism or corruption" (33). In other words, as an individual attempts to get away, he or she makes explicit a desire to reject the customary practices of his or her society. The prevalence of this desire for escape in American literature strongly suggests that values established by a given community are not always considered fair or just by all living in it; it indicates that behaviour which is normally found to be acceptable by an entire group of people has, in many cases, actually not been sanctioned by its every member.

E. L. Doctorow's stories so often include people who try to escape that one can readily draw the conclusion that this author sees that a great many Americans, in several different historical periods, are dissatisfied with the prevailing order. In Doctorow's view, the lack of contentment is widespread; in his fictions would-be escapers can be found at every level of society. Indeed, a person's financial position is not necessarily a factor contributing to a desire to get away, since wealthy people feel the need to flee just as keenly as their more indigent fellow citizens. Ragtime's J. P. Morgan, America's richest man, for example, seems to want to escape just as urgently as does the financially destitute Joe of Paterson in Loon Lake. Nor does a specific gender or ethnic origin make a protagonist especially inclined to skip town,

either. Women and men, immigrants and Americans--all strive equally to distance themselves from a difficult situation. Evelyn Nesbit's sudden departure is proof enough that escape is a viable option for females as well as males. And the Russian immigrant Tateh's headlong tram ride through a number of eastern cities easily rivals in its intensity and seriousness the American WASP Mother's Younger Brother's blind flight through the southern Unites States.

But if it is easy to locate in Doctorow's fiction a person who wants to abandon the established order, it is indeed difficult to find someone who does escape it successfully. Negative aspects of life in America may readily be recognized by a lot of people, but they are not so easily repudiated. As illustrated in Chapter One, Doctorow's characters are most often *un*able to get out of restrictive circumstances. Apparently it is almost impossible to declare one's independence from what Stout calls society's "conventionalism or corruption." Through a careful examination of three diverse works, namely Drinks Before Dinner, The Book of Daniel, and Ragtime, it quickly becomes clear what, in Doctorow's opinion, this "conventionalism and corruption" involves. Though the play and novels in question are obviously very different from one another in terms of content, form, and style, the social ills that Doctorow describes in each are remarkably similar. In each work there is an upper class that is intellectually torpid and resistant to change. Furthermore, the ruling government is sometimes dishonest and usually indifferent to the welfare of the nation's minorities and economically disadvantaged citizens.

A relatively bleak vision of American existence is not, however, unique to

these three books by Doctorow. Though there are sporadic scenes of happiness, a kind of hopelessness informs most of this author's novels. In his first book, Welcome to Hard Times, Doctorow suggests that good fortune is destined to be destroyed by evil forces. It is only a matter of time before someone like the Bad Man from Bodie disrupts a peaceful and prospering community. In the subsequent work, Big as Life, the main characters are part of a community whose actions are motivated by fear and anxiety, and whose government is secretive and somewhat deceitful.

A similar sentiment is conveyed in The Book of Daniel, where the course of events alluded to and explicitly described seems to suggest that America is a country whose leaders may openly perform acts of great injustice against its citizens and yet not be held publicly accountable for the atrocities they commit. Ragtime, Doctorow's fourth novel, depicts early on a group of hopeful immigrants sailing towards New York; unfortunately, though, these travellers are bound to find out that their destination is hardly a utopian place. In the New World ethnic groups continually quarrel with one another, violence erupts on street corners, and poverty is widespread. Privation and destitution are definitely motifs of the novel. As Walter Matheson most interestingly points out, there are eleven passages in Ragtime in which Doctorow includes the word "rag" or "ragtime"; the majority of these have a kind of non-musical meaning, usually one of poverty (21).

Especially in Doctorow's later works, poor people nearly always have an important role to play. Loon Lake shows Joe of working-class Paterson making his troubled way in a world easily antagonistic towards a penniless person. The central

character of Billy Bathgate lives in the slums. True, the narrator of World's Fair grows up in a comparatively affluent suburb of New York, but his upper-middle class neighbourhood nonetheless serves as a shelter for some underprivileged individuals. And these indigent people, like the janitor who occasionally rises scowling from the basement of the narrator's own home, periodically make themselves visible and so demand attention.

Undeniably, then, social stratification is stressed in Doctorow's novels; the author finds that the political system of the United States has left a significant part of the population needy. Though rich people also sometimes feel dissatisfied and inclined to get away, it is worth noting here that the disadvantaged people Doctorow pictures, in their desire to escape their oppression, seem to solicit more pity from the reader. This is probably due at least in part to the fact that Doctorow is careful to describe in more detail the meagreness of the lives of the poor. In Ragtime, for example, the narrator's depiction of Tateh's life with a desperate wife and meek daughter in the slums is more charitable and extensive than the portrayal of J. P. Morgan unhappily leading "the good life" in his mansion. In general, the indigent person's situation is seen to be more dire, certainly bleaker.

The less well-off citizens of America cannot expect their socially superior peers to accept that they would like to get out of their miserable circumstances. The privileged classes are on the whole hostile towards anyone who attempts through honourable means to change or improve his or her social status. As Arthur Saltzman points out in "The Stylistic Energy of E. L. Doctorow" with regard to Loon Lake,

> Doctorow's method is to refute the conventional assumptions of the American Dream by demonstrating its irrelevance to specific cases. Indeed, were Joe to succumb meekly to such assumptions, his fate would never rise above bare subsistence. Out of necessity Joe is a hustler, a thief, a liar and a rogue, for these are the "virtues" which best assure him of advancement. (Trenner 100)

An honest attempt to redress wrongs resulting from the operation of a corrupt social system is generally forcefully discouraged, even ridiculed. No one is allowed freely to ascend the social ladder. As a result, escape, which so often proves to be a futile endeavour, is still the most promising way to get out of straightened circumstances. In fact, unless the underprivileged members of society resort to using some kind of trickery or deceit to escape, they will consistently be unable to get out of their low social position.

Of course, Doctorow, as a late twentieth century author, is not alone in describing dismal worlds. In a way, he is actually typical of his generation. Eva Manske, who has assessed the content and purport of much recent American fiction, finds that a great number of authors writing during the 1960s and 1970s are greatly concerned with depicting the miserable lives of certain luckless private citizens. This critic notes that many contemporary novelists are these days describing the "deplorable situation of the sensitive individual in the mass society of the United States" (21). In "Individual and Society in Contemporary American Fiction," Manske asserts that "we see everywhere a complete disillusionment with everyday life and with the ideology of state monopoly capitalism." There is an overall awareness, she finds, that "spiritual

and ethical values and moral principles in public life are being undermined and flouted to such an extent that their extinction seems imminent" (20).

Indeed, in his fictional work Doctorow rarely extols the virtues of contemporary American life. However, not all critics agree that this author primarily pictures cheerless existences. Dieter Schulz, for example, feels that the author most often describes hopeful circumstances. According to Schulz, Doctorow's characters have the ability freely to change the direction of their lives, to determine their own fate. "Identity," he writes in a recent assessment, "emerges in Doctorow's America as a self-conscious act of will, not as something predetermined by birth, family, and tradition" (13). To substantiate his claim, Schulz refers to the protagonist Joe in Loon Lake, who seems easily to "invent" his persona to suit his own purposes. He furthermore points out that the narrator's father in "Lives of the Poets" can deny his Eastern European heritage and thereby conveniently become (what Schulz, a German, considers to be) more completely "American." Significantly, Schulz holds that inasmuch as the boy's father is an immigrant, he personifies a "dynamic phenomenon" of identity. Schulz explains that his positive conception of the foreigner who has decided to live permanently in the States comes primarily from reading a specific scene in Ragtime. "Whether collective or individual" he writes,

> [identity] is rendered as a thoroughly dynamic phenomenon, combined with physical and psychic mobility. In this sense, identity is epitomized by the figure of the immigrant. The privileged status of the immigrant in Doctorow's fiction shows most markedly, perhaps, in the ending of Ragtime. Father has

> died on the *Lusitania*. The boy-narrator, in commenting on his father's death, feels reminded of exploratory expeditions; his father's voyage on the *Lusitania* strikes him as 'his final exploration,' and he imagines Father as 'the immigrant . . . arriving eternally on the shore of his Self' (13).

Unfortunately, Schulz has taken Doctorow's words out of context. When one considers the entire passage from which Schulz quotes only a few phrases, it quickly becomes obvious that the immigrant in this case is not someone who enjoys very many advantages. "Poor Father," the narrator says,

> 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 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. (269)

The immigrant pictured here is absurd; he is a ridiculous figure, a caricature of an adventurer, a person who is so surprised at arriving at "the new place" that he is rendered forever speechless and must frantically wave his arms to express emotion. Certainly he is not someone who benefits from a "privileged status." In fact, he cannot profess to hold any kind of social position at all. Father is perpetually unable to integrate himself in the new location. For all eternity he is an outsider, who, paradoxically, is always "arriving."

Father's negative after-life experiences are strangely akin to the events that take place in the mundane lives of actual immigrants. The foreigners arriving at the shores of New York in Ragtime are, like Father coming to the land of his Self, not welcome.

Upon reaching Ellis Island they are "tagged, given showers and arranged on benches in waiting pens." Doctorow explains that officials "changed names they couldn't pronounce and tore people from their families, consigning to a return voyage old folks, people with bad eyes, riffraff and also those who looked insolent." The immigrants are allowed to set up homes, but they are nonetheless "despised by New Yorkers" (13). Their idiosyncrasies, like Father's, are described in grotesque and disparaging terms:

> They were filthy and illiterate. They stank of fish and garlic. They had running sores. They had no honour and worked for next to nothing. They stole. They drank. They raped their own daughters. They killed each other casually. (13)

For the most part these immigrants, like the first- and second-generation Americans along-side whom they dwell, do not have control over their destinies. They are stuck in crumbling buildings and tenement houses where there is no proper sanitation and little privacy (Ragtime 15). Contrary to what Schulz thinks, the inhabitants of these slums are definitely not able to "shape their own identity." Indeed, their fates seem to be determined to a large extent by the fact that they are poor. A heat wave which for a while eliminates access to fresh water will, for example, bring about the death of a considerable portion of the population (Ragtime 16-7).

Admittedly, there is one immigrant who does get out of the poverty-stricken ghetto. His name is Tateh. He is a Russian Jew from Latvia who escapes from his

one-room apartment in New York eventually to make a new home in Philadelphia. The means by which he achieves this end, however, are partially duplicitous. He pretends to nobility and establishes himself as Baron Ashkenazy. The Baron is a rich western European entrepreneur; no trace of his former identity is visible to the outside world. As a poor immigrant Jew he would have had his beard pulled and been knocked down even by Irish street kids (13). However, his new self is accepted into the finest hotels, where he is revered by the regular guests (214-6).

But Tateh's success is exceptional. While it may be possible, under certain conditions, to go from rags to riches, most often one's social position will not simultaneously improve. Coalhouse Walker Jr.'s life illustrates this notion perfectly. He is a masterful musician and has both excellent manners and enough money to buy a Model T in an era when cars are unquestionably a luxury item. Yet Coalhouse is black, and for that reason he is looked down upon by the authorities and upper classes. He is never allowed to rise above the low social rank customarily reserved for this minority. Indeed, the difference between Tateh's and Coalhouse's cases is poignant and clearly illustrates the prejudices of many white Americans. As Phyllis Jones points out in "Ragtime: Feminist, Socialist and Black Perspectives on the Self-Made Man,"

> though a Jew, Tateh is white; and he can exploit his foreign heritage by giving himself a title. Mother finds him perfectly fit as a husband even when she finds out he is a Jewish socialist. If success is held out to all in the great American melting pot, we are reminded that there can be no black pigment in

that mixture" (24).

Granted, one could argue that because Tateh and Mother adopt Sarah and Coalhouse's baby into their new family, a drop of "darkness" has indeed been added to the composite substance of good fortune. But the black child remains inactive and voiceless throughout the novel, and so cannot rightly be said to represent a positive black future. Furthermore, the only other black person in the novel who could perhaps be seen as successful is Booker T. Washington. Yet when this celebrity gets involved in the stand-off between Coalhouse Walker Jr. and the New York police force, he shows himself to be an emotional, weak-willed man who is obsequious to the legal authorities.

To a lesser extent, even Houdini's life illustrates the fact that Doctorow's American society does not so easily accommodate a person who wants to better his or her social status. Like Tateh, Houdini is a Jew who has changed his name to hide his ethnic identity, and like the Russian, Houdini has also perfected a marketable skill and thus achieved popular success and financial prosperity. Nevertheless, ultimately Houdini's situation more closely resembles Coalhouse's, in that he is continually slighted by upper-class Americans. They disdain him for the way he has acquired his fortune, and they sneer at his humble heritage, which causes the artist an immense anxiety. "People who did not respond to his art profoundly distressed Houdini," writes Doctorow. "He had come to realize they were invariably of the upper classes. Always they broke through the pretence of his life and made him feel foolish" (26). As Paul Levine points out, "though he dedicates himself to the American ideal of self-

perfection, [Houdini] realizes that he can never escape his working-class origins" (58). Indeed, Houdini is not mistaken in perceiving that he is slighted by the socially successful. When "one of the Four Hundred," Mrs. Stuyvesant Fish, invites Houdini to perform his art at a benefit, she treats him as if he were a veritable circus clown. Before the performance, Mrs. Fish situates Houdini in a back room of her mansion and surrounds him with a company of professional freaks (28-9).

Ragtime repeatedly shows how steadfast, affluent Americans desire to maintain the status quo, how they unfairly use the less fortunate part of the population to their own advantage. "Very few people ever attain privileged destinies in Doctorow's fiction," writes Saltzman, "and those who do, attain them at the expense of the many they choose to exploit" (Trenner 107). Indeed, people like Mrs. Fish who have attained a superior position in society routinely insist on the subservience of the rest of humankind.

In Doctorow's United States a person cannot realistically hope that his or her community will change its customs quickly. Reform, Doctorow repeatedly makes clear, is at best a slow and arduous process. It is likely that advocates of social change will be shot down--literally, like Coalhouse Walker Jr. in Ragtime, or figuratively, like Edgar in Drinks Before Dinner. In Doctorow's one drama, the protagonist wants terribly much to effect some social change. Edgar belongs to a group of rich New Yorkers that meets regularly for dinner parties at which one superficially enjoys one's friends' luxuries and engages politely in intelligent but inoffensive conversation. On the evening depicted in the play, however, Edgar decides

to alter the way that his small community of acquaintances makes decisions; he wants to alert it to its own ridiculousness. Interestingly, Edgar senses that the crowd around him will dismiss his forthcoming remarks as completely inappropriate and silly, and so he suddenly brandishes a weapon to reinforce his authority. He takes the occupants of the apartment hostage to ensure that they will obediently listen to the point of view he has lately developed. Once his audience is captive, Edgar-cum-gunman holds forth on the ills of society. He is fed up; his harangue is pitiless. Americans have inexcusably misplaced values, he announces, and he chastises the dinner party crowd for acting selfishly and mindlessly.

Even after a couple of hours of ranting, however, Edgar is only frustrated and exhausted. His speech is not effective in the least. The guests and hosts appear to be frightened by his words and manic gesticulations, but inwardly they are contemptuous of his presumptions. Edgar's arguments fail to convince them that they are ludicrous. When he realizes that there is no respectable way out of his situation, he resigns by putting down his gun, which, it becomes obvious, had not even been loaded. Interestingly, the crowd senses that the weapon somehow symbolizes the nature of the words of the man who held it. Once the small party sees that the gun is empty, it acts as if Edgar's statements were merely hollow words.

As soon as the threat of death is rescinded, the dinner party crowd quickly and loudly dismisses Edgar as a fool, as someone momentarily given over to recklessness. However, their reaction ironically confirms Edgar's notions. The small crowd gathered in the apartment is obviously concerned only with itself; it is not interested in

actually solving social problems or even dealing with the potential madness of their friend. As a matter of course, the gathered company goes on with the dinner. The only strong emotion Edgar has succeeded in instilling in his fellow party-goers is resentment: They are indignant that their festivities have been delayed.

In the same way, the main character of The Book of Daniel equally discovers that Americans generally are opposed to change and not interested in an active pursuit of truth. Daniel Isaacson is a young married college student whose parents many years ago were executed by the government of the United States for the crime of selling military secrets to the Soviets. Details of the espionage case were never made fully available to the general public. While a small sector of society was aroused and deeply perturbed by this fact, most Americans allowed the events of the scandal to fade back into insignificance after only a short period of time.

Daniel, however, is inspired by his sister not to accept the hushed-up nature of his parents' death. Like his sibling, he comes actively to believe that the government has behaved unpardonably. Though he is himself given to performing some rather callous deeds--burning his wife's genitals with a cigarette lighter, for example--he cannot forgive the people involved in his parents' case for their cruelty and hypocrisy. But no protest from Daniel or his sister will be taken seriously. The authorities will not accommodate them in their search for the facts. The Isaacson's children may challenge the validity of the official explanation of the execution, they may publicly denounce the machinations of the government, but their voices, like the young social rebel Artie Sternlicht's, will go more or less unheard by the directors of the

government.

It seems that Doctorow is of the opinion that vociferous protests, or complaints made, say, by carrying a banner through a park, are relatively useless. Daniel's sister Susan's early political standpoint and social actions are a case in point. In the beginning Susan is convinced that rallies and riots are the best means by which to communicate dissent. She was "always taking stands, even as a kid," her brother explains.

> This is right, that is wrong, this is good, that is bad. Her personal life carelessly displayed, her wants unashamed, not managed discreetly like most people's. With her aggressive moral openness, with her loud and intelligent and repugnantly honest girlness. (9)

But few people, if any, will listen to her objections. Her protests, like Edgar's in Drinks Before Dinner, are finally useless. Her projects and endeavours merely leave her physically and mentally spent. As a young adult Susan becomes profoundly depressed and must be admitted to a hospital. Once established in there, she quickly gives up the will to live.

A recollection of some events in Ragtime helps to confirm the notion that, according to this author, displaying outwardly an oppositional attitude is often fruitless. In Ragtime at least four characters try their luck at changing what they feel is a corrupt system. Through verbal confrontations with authorities or sometimes even physical attacks on persons in charge, the recalcitrant individuals attempt to reform their society. Not surprisingly, they are hardly successful.

For instance, the black ragtime musician, Coalhouse Walker Jr., is determined to be compensated for having been harassed because he is not white. Indeed, Walker is a black man who demands consideration in an era in which respect is given first of all to someone with a lighter colour of skin. When a group of rowdy Irish firemen deposits pieces of excrement in the back of his car and then refuses either to clean up the mess or even to admit that the defilement was their doing, he is enraged. The firemen feel so provoked by Coalhouse's anger that they demolish the vehicle further. The black man publicly demands, then, to be treated with the same respect that whites are treated: He says he shall be recompensed--his automobile shall be restored to its original condition. However, the government makes it obvious to him that a black ragtime musician is not likely to be accommodated in this way. As a result, Coalhouse becomes violent. With a small team of followers, he blasts buildings, takes hostages, and threatens his enemies with murder. In the end, his wish to be recompensed is indeed granted, but he personally cannot for long enjoy this fact. Soon after the car's renovations are completed, Coalhouse is shot down by the same authorities that brought about its restoration.

Less riotous protests are not necessarily any more worthwhile. According to Doctorow, the government of America is an impersonal entity that by its very nature is oblivious to the concerns of its minorities and poor citizens. The underprivileged people have little political power in the United States, and their appeals for justice routinely go unheard. Indeed, common folk are most often literally pushed aside, out of the way of the authorities. For example, Coalhouse's fiancée, Sarah, is a quiet

young woman given to introspection who becomes desperate when she learns that her husband-to-be has performed violent acts against the authorities and will soon be severely punished. Hoping to be of help, she decides one evening to petition the President himself, to importune him to intercede in the course of events. In an effort to reconcile the government to Coalhouse, Sarah undertakes the trip to the place where the President is scheduled to make an appearance. But it is not the head of state that first catches Sarah's eye; rather, the Vice-President is the first person of high rank visible to Sarah. Naively she mistakes him for the man to whom she wishes to address herself. She reaches out to get his attention. However, such personal solicitation is not tolerated by the militiamen guarding the politicians. As soon as she stretches out her hand, she is beaten down. As Doctorow explains:

> Sarah broke through the line and ran toward [the Vice-President] calling, in her confusion, President! President! Her arm was extended and her black hand reached toward him. He shrank from the contact. Perhaps in the dark windy evening of impending storm it seemed to Sherman's guards that Sarah's black hand was a weapon. A militiaman stepped forward and, with the deadly officiousness of armed men who protect the famous, brought the butt of his Springfeld against Sarah's chest as hard as he could. She fell. A Secret Service man jumped on top of her. The Vice-President disappeared into the hotel. In the confusion and shouting that followed, Sarah was put in a police wagon and driven away. (159-60)

Sarah is terribly hurt by the blow: Her body as well as her spirit is crushed. Shortly

after she is felled she seems to realize the utter futility of someone of her status protesting the government's actions. Like Susan of The Book of Daniel, Coalhouse's fiancée soon gives up entirely. She refuses even to speak, and her condition steadily worsens. In fact, the narrator tells us that after only a few days in the hospital, "Sarah died" (161). This incident illustrates an idea about the ruling powers that Doctorow expresses elsewhere. "It seems to me certainly a message of the twentieth century," he says in an interview, "that people have a great deal to fear from their own governments. That's an inescapable world wide fact" (Levine 37).

Personal petitions, then, are ultimately no more useful than violent public protests. And, as we see in Emma Goldman's story, lengthy orations on the need for the government to change its ways are in the end not especially productive either. Speeches will not stir the government quickly to modify its course of action. Goldman is a public lecturer who is famous for her socialist attitudes and her repeated calls for the liberation of women. In a way that anticipates Edgar's tirade in Drinks Before Dinner, Goldman angrily expostulates with the public and its leaders about the state the country is in. She finds fault with the way females and minorities are treated, with the way the working class is exploited. For example, when Coalhouse Walker Jr. illegally occupies the mansion of J. P. Morgan, America's richest man, Goldman publicly supports the scandalous actions of the musician. "Wealth is the oppressor," she cries out to the authorities (233). Alternatively, she declares at a public gathering that "the truth is . . . women may not vote, they may not love whom they want, they may not develop their minds and their spirits, they may not commit

their lives to the spiritual adventure of life, comrades they may not!" (46).

Admittedly, Goldman's rhetoric is not entirely without effect. It does inspire a few people to reevaluate their lives, to consider more critically the necessity and value of the labour they perform daily. It is implied that Mother's Younger Brother is encouraged by Goldman's speeches (though Nesbit's rejection of him also catered to this impulse) to give up his suburban lifestyle to join the revolutionary gang headed by Coalhouse Walker Jr. Goldman's words also leave their mark on the mind of superstar Evelyn Nesbit. The sex symbol does not, like Mother's Younger Brother, become bellicose, but she is shocked into realizing that in America, contrary to what she had previously been told, "apparently there *were* Negroes. There *were* immigrants" (5).

But while Goldman may succeed in enlightening a few individuals, Doctorow makes clear that the American government still maintains ultimate control over the population. Furthermore, it will not let the opinions of one solitary woman prejudice its actions. Goldman, for all her locutionary prowess, cannot influence the officials' decision to do away with Coalhouse Walker Jr., for example. The black musician is shot down regardless of the fact that she can apparently explain and justify his behaviour. Indeed, in the end the government has a way of even rendering the self-proclaimed anarchist comparatively speechless: Goldman is deported and thereby becomes less of an immediate threat to the established order of the United States.

Throughout Doctorow's fiction, there are relatively few people who, like Emma Goldman, care enough about the underprivileged to publicly champion their causes.

Most affluent Americans are as solipsistic and as apathetic as the members of the dinner party in Drinks Before Dinner. Well-off Americans are obsessed with maintaining the established order while the lower classes suffer. The novels Drinks Before Dinner, The Book of Daniel, and Ragtime, show that upper-class Americans in general are not willing actively to help the lower classes out of their misery. Instead, like the government, through their indifference or disdain, they attempt to maintain the status quo.

As an episode in Tateh's life illustrates, the only way to change one's circumstances in this American society so resistant to criticism or reform is escape. It shows that escape, though it often seems to be a rather bleak option, is still the most viable alternative when a change in circumstance is desired. Indeed, knowing that attempts at social reform are most often useless, the reader can appreciate that escape ultimately seems to be a necessary action. Having gotten out of the slum of New York but not yet out of poverty, Tateh engages in a quasi-communist protest against unfair labour laws. Together with some coworkers, he walks out of his place of employment, a factory in a New England town. Tateh has joined the brotherhood, and to be useful to the organization he has become a placard artist. He paints billboards that read "All for one and one for all" (102). He joins other members of the group to go on marches. He listens to speeches. He applauds union leaders. However, in the description of Tateh's situation, Doctorow once again makes clear his scepticism about the efficacy of protest. Even though the strike is ultimately won by the workers--a raise in pay and better working conditions is going to be implemented--the final

outcome does not guarantee any kind of prosperity. The concessions made by those in charge are minimal. The increase in the weekly salary, for instance, is from six dollars to eight, at a time when a tenement apartment in a poor neighbourhood costs just under three dollars a week--hardly sufficient cause for rejoicing. It is important to note that Tateh becomes successful only after he permanently leaves the mill town. It is only when he decides never to go back, and through clandestine ways to establish himself as a foreign baron, that he succeeds in transcending the prevalent social evils.

Doctorow consistently pictures societies which discourage a person who lives in dire circumstances from improving his or her social status though legitimate or honourable means. The author makes clear that underprivileged individuals, when they recognize that there is no real hope of betterment, will usually discern that some kind of escape is the most hopeful way of getting out of an unpleasant situation--even if the escape is perhaps not an honourable means of getting free.

On the whole, then, American existence, as it is presented in Doctorow's books, is somewhat dismal. Attempts at social reform are routinely thwarted; public demonstrations and personal petitions are mostly ineffective. An individual must behave furtively and clandestinely if he or she really hopes to avoid economic hardship or get permanently out of a socially inferior position.

In the next chapter it will become clear that Doctorow's depictions of existence in the United States in Drinks Before Dinner, The Book of Daniel or Ragtime, constitute only three of very many possible and equally valid descriptions of the American life. His writings in a way demonstrate that any particular version of life is

always only one conceivable interpretation of reality. Indeed, in a way that recalls the actions of one of his major characters, Doctorow also tries to get free. Chapter Three illustrates that Doctorow's prose, especially in the latter two works, also represents an attempt to escape. The author, it will be shown, endeavours through his fictions to make a theoretical break from authoritative or seemingly definitive versions of the past.

CHAPTER THREE

RUNNING FROM RULES: E. L. DOCTOROW REWRITES HISTORY

Chapter One of this study shows that Houdini plays a significant role in the progression of the plot of Ragtime. Chapter Two makes clear that the escapologist is one of many characters in E. L. Doctorow's fictions who are led to escapist tendencies in a world which offers little hope for betterment for poor people like Tateh and visible minorities like Coalhouse Walker Jr. and his fiancée Sarah. In the present chapter it will become clear that just as Houdini's prominent social position in America is somewhat precarious, the narrative in which he is depicted is also somewhat provisional--as temporary, Doctorow indicates through his own, more theoretical attempt to escape, as any other account of past of events.

At the end of Ragtime, Houdini hangs upside-down in a straight-jacket half-way up New York's tallest building. He is about to perform a spectacular outdoor feat: Shortly he will get out of the garment that confines his movements and visibly escape from his precarious position at the side of the Times Tower. A crowd of thousands will watch from the streets. As a novelist, Doctorow attempts some forms of imaginative escapes that share certain affinities with Houdini's last public exhibition. Like the latter in his performance, Doctorow through his prose demonstrates to the world at large that in fictional writing it may be possible to get free from something as monumental as the "Times." For the writer, however, the "Times" is not a concrete structure. Rather, it is a version of the past that has been established by a society's politicians and historians. In order fully to understand

Doctorow's procedure, however, it is necessary to discuss his relationship to the historical matter.

Houdini usually grapples to get physically free; in the case just mentioned he aims to release himself from his bondage to a building. Doctorow's escapes, though, are more theoretical in kind. The author is dissatisfied with popular interpretations of history; he feels that they impose too many limits on the imagination, that they restrict one's understanding of what has gone on before. He tries to show, through his fiction, that one is not necessarily bound to accept a particular explanation of the past. Doctorow's writing in The Book of Daniel and Ragtime, for example, represents a writer's attempt to escape from socially sanctioned accounts of American history.

Many critics have discussed Doctorow's work with regard to his unconventional use of historical figures. Writing in the 1970s and 1980s, Doctorow reinterprets, even rewrites, bygone eras. In The Book of Daniel and in Ragtime he adapts the lives of actual people like convicted spies Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, political activist Emma Goldman, financier J. P. Morgan--indeed, even escape artist Houdini, to suit his own narrative. Occasionally he contrives the interactions between these "real" characters and imagined ones. "Real" and fictional people converse, become lovers, quarrel, threaten each other's lives, and sometimes live happily ever after together.

As Doctorow describes these various encounters, it soon becomes apparent, however, that his artistry resembles not only Houdini's last exhibition, but also Houdini's escapes more generally. Like the majority of the escapologist's performances, a great number of the author's verbal exploits seem ultimately to be

based on some kind of trick or illusion. Doctorow very often makes it appear, for example, as if there were no real difference between fact and fiction. Whether he is able to sustain this illusion for very long is somewhat debatable. But his efforts in this regard serve at least one positive and specific purpose, which again can fruitfully be compared to a particular function of Houdini's escapes. Houdini emerges magically from boxes that are bolted shut and seems to pass easily through the bars of prison cells. He creates, thereby, an awareness in the spectator's mind of the adaptable nature of visual reality. Doctorow, specifically in The Book of Daniel and Ragtime, while trying to get away from more traditional views of the past, presents fact and fiction as strangely similar phenomena; in doing so, he alerts the reader to the tentative nature of any single account of historical events.

Like the escapers that figure in his books, Doctorow himself is not concerned with permanently changing the established order. He does not intend ultimately to substitute his own conventional, given version of past events. But his writing does work somehow to "negate" or render irrelevant other, authoritative accounts of the past. His fiction frequently makes clear that reading only a single report is inadequate to a full appreciation of preceding periods.

Doctorow, of course, has his own reason for his peculiar procedure. According to him, it is exceedingly difficult to determine exactly and finally what has happened in earlier times. The author finds that the past is never completely accessible to those who live in the present: there is always some aspect of it that remains unknowable, obscure. In order to make sense of previous incidents, an individual must develop or

create certain details. He or she must make connections, organize and assess the existing data. "There is an objective event," Doctorow contends, "but until it is construed, until it is evaluated, it does not exist as history" (Doctorow, "Multiplicity" 184). The author makes a similar point in his essay "False Documents." "There is no history," he writes, "except as it is composed" (24).

Doctorow finds, furthermore, that the attempt to compose a meaningful record of events that have already transpired will always result in at least a partial distortion of their historical reality. In verbal documents the past will consistently be coloured by opinion; to a certain degree an apparently objective report will also always be a subjective account. Through an analogy to the processes of experimental science, Doctorow makes clear that he finds that this distortion happens as a matter of course. "When a physicist invents an incredibly sophisticated instrument to investigate subatomic phenomena," he writes,

> he must wonder to what degree the instrument changes or creates the phenomena it reports. This problem was elucidated by Werner Heisenberg as the Principle of Uncertainty. At the highest level of scruple and repertorial disinterest there is the intrusive factor of an organized consciousness. At lower levels, in law, in political history, the intrusion is not instrumental but moral: meaning must be introduced, and no judgement does not carry the passion of the judge. ("False Documents" 23)

With respect to historical writing, this means that a composition, while it will not necessarily be wholly false or invalid, will never completely relate how it *really* was;

always, to a certain extent, it will remain a biased rendition of past events. As Malcolm Bradbury points out, Doctorow, like other writers of the seventies, is completely willing to confess authorial subjectivity (Bradbury 159).[1]

The historian, however, is not alone in creating a skewed version of reality. In Doctorow's view, every written sentence somehow distorts the reality it is meant to depict. Indeed, the author claims that no one kind of literature can ultimately represent the world more accurately than any other. In what might be considered typically postmodern fashion, Doctorow denies that any single mode of verbal communication can claim to be pre-eminent.[2] In interviews and essays the author repeatedly asserts that all verbal texts are in this way essentially similar: Their production involves a significant manipulation of reality. It seems to him that all writing should therefore be classified together. In his essay "False Documents," Doctorow thus states that "there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative" (26). In other words, a purportedly "factual" or historical account is just as fictional as a made-up story; or, conversely, once information has been related through a piece of prose, details that have been invented are just as "true" as scientifically verifiable "facts."

With the declaration that there is "only narrative," Doctorow is evidently attempting to revise conventional definitions of different types of literature. Present-day culture usually discriminates between at least the two kinds of writing that are mentioned in "False Documents": fiction and nonfiction. Jonathan Culler in Framing the Sign makes clear the difference. "Non-fiction treats real characters and events," he

states, "while fiction treats imaginary ones, makes assertions about characters who do not exist, events that never occurred, or in short, about fictional worlds" (207).

It is precisely Doctorow's aim to dispute the usefulness of such general categories. As a writer he refuses to separate what is true or existent in the external world from what has been invented by the creative faculty of the mind. He accepts fancied events as "true," as is evidenced by his remarks concerning an episode in Ragtime. Asked whether Emma Goldman and Evelyn Nesbit did in fact ever meet, Doctorow announces, "they have now" (Foley 166). At a conference discussion of his work, Doctorow makes a similarly radical statement. "Reality," he avers, "is amenable to any construction placed on it" ("Multiplicity" 186).

These pronouncements, however, are problematic. They imply that facts can be invented at will. It seems that Doctorow presumes that the act of writing works to legitimize all ideas, that it inevitably makes imaginary inventions objectively "real" and "true." Yet when Doctorow attempts to argue the validity of this notion, as is the case in "False Documents," difficulties arise. Indeed, the author's message emerges as somewhat inconsistent. The essay is a verbal exposition in which the author sets out to prove, factually and in a straightforward manner, that non-fiction does not really exist. There is obviously a contradiction. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, analyzing Doctorow's ideas as they figure in "False Documents," points it out. In "E. L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative," Harpham shows that the "novelist's proposition" (Doctorow's own term for his central argument) is self-contradictory and that, furthermore, Doctorow's way of arriving at certain "truths" is not completely

logical. "If fiction subsumes fact," asks Harpham, "then how can the reader be persuaded to believe this as a fact?" (82). Likewise, "If narrative is the single complex mode within which appearances of grounded knowledge and pure imaginative freedom arise, then why [does the] essay [begin] by arguing for the distinction between them [?]" (82). Harpham notes that "the forensic method of the essay is at odds with itself," since in "False Documents" Doctorow cites authorities, makes distinctions, and observes rules of evidence in order to substantiate his claim that these techniques do not necessarily aid in the discovery of truth (82). "The essay is itself an especially complicated kind of false document," writes Harpham, "as it seeks to persuade but becomes something we can neither believe nor disbelieve" (82).

Yet it would be imprudent to discount Doctorow's argument in "False Documents" altogether. Doctorow's reasoning may be inadequate in certain instances but, as Harpham suggests, the essay in its entirety leads one to consider Doctorow's concept of narrative more seriously.[3] Doctorow's remarks call attention to an issue that is directly relevant to a major problem in contemporary literary theory. In asserting that the difference between fiction and nonfiction is negligible or perhaps even nonexistent, Doctorow is in a way saying that the structures of these different modes of writing are basically the same. Indeed, elsewhere in "False Documents" he claims that "history shares with fiction a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning" (25). That is to say that a historian, who purportedly deals primarily with "facts," records the course of human affairs in a manner similar to that of a storyteller, who is generally not bound to a "factual" exposition when spinning his

or her yarn.[4] With reference to historians E. H. Carr and Carl Becker, and also to structuralist critic Roland Barthes, Doctorow points out that "a visitor from another planet could not by study of the techniques of discourse distinguish composed fiction from composed history" ("False Documents" 24). The key word in this sentence is of course "composed." It is Doctorow's opinion that every written document, whether it is a weather report, a television news presentation, or a history book, has somehow been arranged artistically; he finds that it is therefore unmistakably and unavoidably "fictional" ("False Documents" 25).[5]

The Concise Oxford Dictionary points out that the word "fiction" derives from the Latin *fingere*, to fashion. The "fictional" nature of supposedly objective accounts is a topic with which the historiographer Hayden White has dealt extensively.[6] In an article entitled "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," he shows that a number of different kinds of discourses have similarly been made or "fashioned." He explains that history, literature, and myth, for example, share "systems of meaning production" as well as a tendency to "emplot" (21). Every verbal exposition thus involves the use of the creative faculties. Just like Doctorow in "False Documents," White in his article argues that in order to make a series of events or a set of data meaningful, a person must imaginatively order and interpret them; he or she must narrate their significance. White argues that in historical discourse, for example, the narrative "serves to transform a list of historical events that would otherwise be only a chronicle into a story" (20). The resulting prose is not a disinterested report, but rather a biased and imaginative description of particular

occurrences. According to White, it is inevitable that our past should be construed in such a "novelistic" fashion. "How can any past," he asks, "be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an imaginary way?" (33).

The Book of Daniel, although it was published thirteen years before White's article was put into print, seems nonetheless to provide an answer to this specific question. In this novel Doctorow illustrates in a number of ways that historical reality is always difficult to determine absolutely, and that when it is verbally represented, the outcome is necessarily an imaginative interpretation, since the person construing it has as a matter of course creatively--indeed, sometimes arbitrarily--invented its form and/or its structure. Furthermore, the very subject matter of the book, as well as the particular manner in which this is presented, seems to imply that each distortion of the facts, each "fashioned" account, can ultimately be just as valid as the next.

The idea that the past is not permanently definable is important especially to the plot. The difficulty of determining the past finally or perfectly is revealed relatively soon in the story. Fairly quickly we notice that the narrator, Daniel Isaacson, is consistently unable to ascertain the exact circumstances of his parents' death, which took place some fifteen years earlier. It seems that there is no single answer to the question of whether the father and mother were actively involved in espionage. In his search for the solution to the problem of his parents' innocence, Daniel finds instead that there are various plausible explanations, all quite different from one another. Linda Mindish, the daughter of the man whose testimony was crucial to the confirmation of Isaacson's guilt in the eyes of the officials, is sure that

during the trial her father acted honestly and responsibly; she is reluctant to admit the possibility of Daniel's newly-found theory of the "other couple," which would call into question the righteousness of her father's motives. The Lewins, on the other hand, though they do not openly discuss Daniel's parents' case, have already confirmed their belief in the Isaacsons' respectability and integrity by adopting the couple's two children. Another opinion is voiced by Daniel's sister Susan, who blindly blames her parents' suffering entirely on the political system and insists that the members of this organization are "still fucking us [the children]" (9). Alternatively, Artie Sternlicht proclaims that the Isaacsons were naive American communists who were moronic enough to play by the rules of the authorities, and thus in a way deserved their fate. By comparison, the eastern bloc countries celebrate on a grand scale the Isaacsons' "liability" by naming city streets after the executed American couple.

Taken collectively, these differing responses to the case might constitute a kind of "truth" about the Isaacsons' political life during their last months; in any event, Doctorow finds that consideration of the variousness of the interpretations would bring a person nearer to it. In a discrete discussion of his work as a whole Doctorow has said that a "democracy of perception" leads to a better understanding of worldly phenomena. "I think you may hope to reach the objective view with a multiplicity of witness [sic]," he asserts. "The important thing is to have as many sources of information, as many testimonies as possible" (Doctorow, "Multiplicity" 184).

Granted, if one were presented with a variety of conflicting interpretations of past events, one would probably be more inclined to notice the subjectivity which

marked each rendition. Nevertheless, in order to make sense of the "multiplicity of witness," a person would still need to be able to evaluate the pertinence of each of the existing views. Daniel Lewin distinctly lacks such a skill. He cannot make connections between the different reports. The narrator wants desperately to be able to reconcile the various opinions, yet the dissimilarities between them simply serve to perplex him. He is powerless to consolidate all of the conflicting evidence. In his "book" Daniel shifts, haphazardly it seems, from first- to third person narration and from topic to topic in a frantic effort to make sense of his family's history. Indeed, the confused style of the narrative, as Susan Brienza has aptly noted, comes to mirror the difficulty of determining the exact nature of the past (98).

Daniel naively hopes to come to know the "truth" by hearing the "objective" view stated by a single individual, a solitary "witness." For a while this does seem feasible. Apparently there exists a man, namely Selig Mindish, who would be able to substantiate Daniel's theory of "the other couple" and thus restore respectability to the Isaacson name. Anticipating that his questions regarding his parents' innocence will finally be answered, Daniel travels from the east coast to California, where the supposedly knowledgeable individual resides. But the climactic scene which takes place in Disneyland perfectly illustrates the notion that inherent in the present is a confusion about the past. When Daniel meets Selig Mindish, he discovers that the old man is incapable of acting as a reliable source of information: Selig Mindish is senile. Disneyland is not merely a place of amusement for the elderly gentleman, it has become his favourite hang-out, the place in which he feels most at home. It is a park,

significantly, in which one can for a time escape the harsh reality of the quotidian urban world. Indeed, Selig is no longer able for very long to make a connection to the outside world and the events that have taken place in it; his mental energy is totally spent just by trying to steer a bumper car. The past which Daniel endeavours to explicate in his book therefore remains as muddled as Selig Mindish's thought processes.

Yet Doctorow hints that even if Selig would have been able to relate to Daniel his conception of the past events, a final "truth" would not necessarily have been clearly defined by him. In the author's view, "truth" is very often made ambiguous by the words employed to describe it. On the level of language, specifically in The Book of Daniel, the attempt to express a truth very often fails. When Daniel goes to visit his sister Susan in the hospital, for instance, Susan speaks to her brother, but the meaning of her words is not fully understood by him. "They're still fucking us," she says, patting her brother on the back. "Goodbye, Daniel. You get the picture" (9). Daniel is ignorant as to what Susan means. Unfortunately, Susan dies before Daniel is able fully to understand the purport of her statements. Instead, when he contemplates Susan's message, he is disturbed to find that the words could mean any number of things. From the very beginning Daniel is uncertain even as to the most literal, denotative meaning of Susan's sentences. A part of the message may have got lost in the oral transmission. "He was not sure," we learn, "if she had said goodbye or good boy" (9).

It should be noted that Daniel not only has trouble comprehending the exact

meaning of certain conversations with others, but also has trouble coherently conveying his own thoughts. Near the beginning of the narrative we find out that The Book of Daniel is a version of Daniel's doctoral thesis. The narrator is sitting in the library of Columbia University writing the major paper for his degree. In this "dissertation" Daniel switches often, haphazardly it seems, from first- to third-person narration. Neither mode seems for very long to be suitable to the expression of his ideas. Nor is Daniel's dissertation limited to the exploration of a single idea, or even a group of related subjects. By the end of the narrative such a vast array of material has been covered that he is fully justified in claiming that the book is "A Life Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Social Biology, Gross Entomology, Women's Anatomy, Children's Cacophony, Arch Demonology, Eschatology, and Thermal Pollution" (302).

Indeed, these topics are not presented in an orderly fashion. Throughout the novel Doctorow's narrator is continually baffled by questions of sequence, by the way in which events can be connected. Daniel is consistently unable to make sense of existing data. He writes candidly, and sometimes his critical concerns come to light. Considering the systematic narration of events, for example, he laments,

> what is most monstrous is sequence. When we are there why do we withdraw only in order to return? Is there nothing good enough to transfix us? If she is truly worth fucking why do I have to fuck her again? If the flower is beautiful why does my baby son not look at it forever? Paul plucks the flower and runs on, the flower dangling from his shoelace. Paul begins to hold, holds, ends

> hold of the flower against the sky, against his eye to the sky. I engorge with my mushroom head the mouth of the womb of Paul's mother. When we come why do we not come forever? The monstrous reader who goes on from one word to the next. The monstrous writer who places one word after another. The monstrous magician. (245-6)[7]

Doctorow, as the author of The Book of Daniel, however, is clearly superior to his narrator in his ability to develop, connect, and even create certain data. Doctorow is not so astonished by problems of sequence. He easily assumes the role of "monstrous magician" and shows, for example, a person who is progressively writing his doctoral dissertation. The content of Daniel's "thesis" may well be disorganized and Daniel may treat the subject matter randomly, but the novel as a whole certainly has a distinct and comprehensible chronology: It begins with Daniel writing the first pages of his "thesis," and concludes with him trying out different types of endings to his work.

In The Book of Daniel Doctorow celebrates his ability to act as a "monstrous magician." In the novel he "conjures up" or composes a brand new version of historical events. As number of critics have perspicaciously observed, certain episodes in The Book of Daniel are based to a great degree on the trial of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. The Rosenbergs were a couple who were executed for selling atomic secrets to the Soviets in the 1950s. The names of the major characters in this story have been altered in Doctorow's novel, and the gender of the younger child has been changed to female, but many of the incidents that Doctorow "creates" nonetheless

correspond to well-known "facts" surrounding the case. So too are events that took place many years after the trial also part of Doctorow's story. Cushing Strout points out that Doctorow includes, for example, the theory of the "other couple," as well as the Peekskill riot of 1949, the march on the Pentagon in 1967, and the student rebellion at Columbia University--all occurrences that have already been documented elsewhere (174-5).

It is important to note, however, that Doctorow does not develop the setting, characters, or events with careful attention to the known facts. The Book of Daniel varies substantially from other versions of the case.[8] Nor does his narrator ever arrive at an answer to the question of his parents' liability. One critic finds this cause for concern. Pearl K. Bell feels that since Doctorow has not allowed Daniel to come to a resolution, the book is on the whole deficient. The author's "refusal to confront the issue of the Rosenbergs' guilt," she states, "robs the book of its crucial credibility" (18). The Book of Daniel lacks integrity anyhow, in Bell's view, because Doctorow does not relate all the details of the case with complete accuracy. The novel is a "failure," she writes, because it "fudges the facts of the Rosenberg case." She protests that "a novelist who tampers with details of history can do so with impunity; but one who changes or ignores its essence is indefensibly evading the truth" (18).

The critic in this case seems to have missed the point of Doctorow's prose. While The Book of Daniel is definitely modelled in part on the Rosenberg's case, Doctorow has not anywhere claimed that his aim in writing the novel was finally to determine the couple's culpability. Indeed, the book does not verify or refute

anyone's guilt; but The Book of Daniel does not therefore "evade the truth," either. Nor does the novel imply, as Barbara Cooper claims in "The Artist as Historian in the Novels of E. L. Doctorow," that there can be no truth (27). The "truth" contained in the novel is simply not as straightforward as one might wish it to be. Through Daniel's narrative it emerges as something rather more paradoxical. The primary "fact" which is exposed by the novel is that "facts" need to be connected and organized; they need to be narrated and interpreted to be meaningful. The narrative in which they are contained, moreover, is shown in the novel to be an artificial construction that is likely to change the significance of the facts every time that it is made or "fashioned."

Doctorow, then, fashions certain events of the 1950s as he sees fit. By creating a different, entirely plausible version of past events, Doctorow makes clear that it is possible to escape from established texts. As Paul Levine puts it, "in Doctorow's view the subversive writer is always political in the best sense of the word: not in the sense that his work is programmatic and prescriptive but in the sense that it is speculative and descriptive. This means that the writer must be willing to move beyond the "truth" as defined by the prevailing ideologies" (Trenner 194).

Interestingly, Doctorow does, albeit indirectly, confront the issue of the Rosenbergs' guilt. In a roundabout way he examines the legitimacy of the American government's verdict. He shows in The Book of Daniel how arbitrary the assignment of blame can be. "The most important trials of our history are those in which the judgement is called into question," Doctorow contends in "False Documents" (23).

These trials have the ability to remind us that all accounts of occurrences are somehow "fictional," inasmuch as they have been construed by an individual; and they prompt us to see that "truth" as it is expressed in words is temporary, since verbal texts are created by people whose knowledge and ability to express an idea clearly is ultimately limited. An official version of events can always legitimately be challenged. It can be revised. A "monstrous writer" who is an able craftsperson, can, for example, create a story that is just as plausible, indeed, just as "fictional" and as "true" as a socially more accepted one--a point well made by critic Steven Bloom. Bloom constructs a fictional meeting between a "real" Rosenberg son and the "real" E. L. Doctorow. As the two exchange words about The Book of Daniel it becomes evident that Doctorow's book is no more invented that any other, purportedly factual account of the case. Perhaps the novel, as Bloom suggests in his title, is even "truer for never having taken place."

Indeed, whether the Rosenbergs are ever formally exonerated by the American government or its people will not necessarily affect the literary value of The Book of Daniel in a negative way, contrary to what Cushing Strout suggests. "Since the case against [the Isaacsons] depended on testimony, rather than on physical evidence . . . it [is] doubtful that future research could confirm the government's case unequivocally," writes Strout. "But if it did," he continues, "the pertinence of the novel would be changed. From being the possible truth about the case the novel's hypothesis would become instead a mere opinion of Danny's, plausible but no longer possible" ("Case" 428). However, to say that the main premise of the book is that the "other couple"

theory might be true is reductive. The way in which Doctorow writes about the case, the manner in which he develops the specious version of "facts," shows that he is postulating, significantly, that an official version of historical events is not necessarily ever final. As Paul Levine notes, Doctorow's The Book of Daniel implies that a writer can move beyond the claims to "truth" as defined by prevailing ideologies (Trenner 194). It demonstrates that a writer can, in a way, escape from the established "Times."

In the novel that follows The Book of Daniel chronologically, Doctorow even more blatantly disregards established historical facts. His attempt to break free from the "Times" in Ragtime is brazen. Many of the major characters in Ragtime are given the names of real people who lived during the early 1900s. On the one hand, a few of the deeds and characteristics attributed to these historical personages are apparently "factual." Freud, for example, is reputed actually to have said that "America is a giant mistake" (Trenner 57). Emma Goldman was indeed a radical who fought for the liberation of women and the lower classes. J. P. Morgan was certainly one of the world's richest men. On the other hand, these well-known people are sometimes made to perform almost unbelievable acts. Freud and Jung, for example, take a trip through the Coney Island Tunnel of Love together. In a scene with lesbian overtones, Emma Goldman gives superstar Evelyn Nesbit a thorough massage. Henry Ford is shown to base his spiritual life on the writings found in a bulletin of the Franklin Novelty Company.

Doctorow proclaims it is his right, indeed his obligation, to use the novel to

construct a new form of history that is contrary to the established one. In an interview Doctorow states that he desires to "break out of the little world of personal experience which has bound the novel, to escape that suffocating closeness to the character. History and journalism have taken on that great ongoing energy of narrative," he continues, "and history is too important to be left to historians" (Gelus and Crowley 24).

People must be reminded that it is possible to interpret the past in a number of different ways, according to Doctorow. In an article entitled "Ultimate Discourse," the author states that fiction should reassert "the authority of the single mind to make and remake the world" (41). In Ragtime, as in The Book of Daniel, he does just this. He acts as an unusual witness to a bygone era. In an innovative way Doctorow describes the beginning of the 1900s and the 1950s respectively. Barbara L. Estrin in "Recomposing Time: Humboldt's Gift and Ragtime," remarks upon this in relation to the later book; she feels that with the figure of Houdini Ragtime "escape[s] the present and return[s] to the past" (17). But while Estrin is right in assessing the content of the book, she fails to mention the significance of the style. For the way in which Doctorow has written his book proves that he not only gets away from current events through his writing but in a way escapes from previous accounts of the past as well. As David Gross points out, Doctorow's prose calls into doubt both the validity and appropriateness of existing historical narratives.

> [In Ragtime] Doctorow is most directly satirizing the non-ironic presentation of the sort of text he is mocking in traditional schoolbook histories, wanting to

> destroy their easy and mystifying historical generalizations which prevent any accurate historical understanding. He seems almost to question the possibility of accurate linguistic, historical generalization, mocking our views of the past from art history to popular culture. (Trenner 130)

Cushing Strout, however, finds that the way in which Doctorow writes Ragtime jeopardizes the value of the novel. He says that

> Doctorow, like Houdini, performed to a wide audience by escaping from the usual restraints. Houdini, as Ragtime points out, made a show of appearing to struggle in making his straightjacket escape, because otherwise people would not believe he was legitimate. Ragtime appears to struggle with the complexities of history, but it is only a clever trick. (Strout, Veracious 193)

Admittedly, it may well be a "clever trick" that Doctorow performs when he equates fact with fiction, but the importance and success of this magical manoeuvre should not be so easily dismissed.

Doctorow's peculiar escape from the established "Times" in Ragtime has proven to be productive in at least two ways. First, in a more mundane sense, Ragtime has undoubtedly been a success with the American and British reading public. Observers of Doctorow's deft artistry are apparently multitudinous: The novel was on the bestseller list for forty weeks, and the American Bookseller's Association attributed a remarkable rise in book sales (up 30 percent) in July of 1975 to the popularity of Ragtime. Furthermore, academic magazines praised the work as enthusiastically as did the more popular presses (Sutherland 4).

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Doctorow's portrayal of a world in which historical characters and invented persons are equally "real" is astonishingly convincing. As Walter Clemons points out in "Houdini, Meet Ferdinand," Ragtime leads a reader to speculate as to which of the described events actually took place. It is relatively difficult to find out which events are "factual" without consulting other sources. However, if one must check other texts in order to find out how accurately Doctorow has rendered the first few decades of the twentieth century in America, then the author has probably already achieved his goal: Readers are led to question what it is that makes one account more authoritative or accurate than another. "Many, not all such 'questions' [of veracity] can be answered by combing through biographies and histories of the period," writes Clemons. "[But] the very fact that the book stirs one to parlor-game research is amusing evidence that Doctorow has already won the game" (73). Barbara Foley expresses the same idea, but a bit differently. She writes that since "Doctorow treats with equal aplomb facts that are 'true' and those that are 'created,' [the author calls] into question our concept of factuality and, indeed, of history itself" (Trenner 168).

In The Book of Daniel and Ragtime Doctorow brings to light the fictional methods by which accepted histories--the "Times"--are created. In order better to understand the way in which he does this, one might draw yet another analogy to the actions of the famous escapologist who figures so prominently in the latter book. In Ragtime Houdini attends seances, purportedly desiring to join in the witnessing of spiritualistic phenomena. Once he is admitted to such a meeting, however, the

magician performs some subversive action that is designed to reveal the fraudulent means by which the medium "communicates" with the spirits. Similarly, Doctorow seems to be seriously participating in the writing of history, but during the course of his narratives he frequently exposes the elusiveness of historical "truth" and discovers the spurious ways in which historians establish "facts."

CHAPTER FOUR

INESCAPABLE TEXTUALITY:

E. L. DOCTOROW STRUGGLES TO BE ORIGINAL

The preceding chapter examined the ways in which what is usually referred to as historical writing can significantly be related to what is normally understood to be fictional prose. This chapter, which deals with another aspect of the dynamic of escape in E. L. Doctorow's work, will explore how the author's fictions can fruitfully be associated with other kinds of media as well. The implications of these connections are relevant to certain recently published statements concerning twentieth century theories of intertextuality. A consideration of some of the main ideas expressed in these theories will help to show that Doctorow, as a contemporary author, is himself stuck in a situation which resembles the predicament of many of his major characters. Houdini and the other protagonists are hindered in their efforts truly to break free. Doctorow is similarly frustrated in his creative labours. Though in a way he does escape from the "Times" by reordering existing materials or "facts," contemporary critics repeatedly deem Doctorow ultimately to be unable to effect a pure escape from other, already established, "texts."

Doctorow's stories incorporate an abundance of references to other literary works. Some of these references are overt and easily recognizable, since they are present in the form of quotations from established canonical texts or the names of, for example, well-known literary figures. Others, however, are less obvious: In some instances an antecedent text might merely be alluded to, or a remote passage from a

previous work might be included in a distorted form.

Yet however plentiful either kind of reference may be, there are still more ways in which Doctorow's prose can be related to different artistic works. Some reviewers find that a few of Doctorow's fictions imitate the spirit or style of a previous book; others remark that in certain cases the author has reworked a particular plot in order to update an older story's message. In addition, many critics analyzing Doctorow's novels discuss the possibility of discerning extraliterary influences. They propose to discover, for example, that Doctorow models much of his prose on the structures of popular media and art forms. The way in which Doctorow constructs his stories, these critics hold, in some instances bears a resemblance to the means by which film makers create motion pictures or composers write music.

A number of prominent twentieth century literary theorists from T. S. Eliot to Harold Bloom have studied both the nature and the implications of the links that exist between one artistic work and another. Their conclusions are hardly homogeneous. However, one particular critic's analysis of the subject of intertextual relations is especially relevant to the study of the dynamic of escape in the writings of Doctorow. In "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," Linda Hutcheon examines contemporary American novels in light of recent writings on the subject of post-structural discourses; in doing so she takes into special consideration Doctorow's Loon Lake, The Book of Daniel, and Ragtime. With regard to these novels she makes a rather important claim. Hutcheon contends that these works prove, importantly, that in art there exists an "inescapable textuality" (11). In other

words, what she declares is that a careful examination of Doctorow's novels reveals that there exists a certain discursive form of knowledge from which, ultimately, there is no getting away.

When Hutcheon thus writes of "knowledge" she is generally referring to a knowledge of the past. In her view, novels like those which Doctorow has written serve to remind us, indeed they work parodically to inform us, that the only way that we can know any part of our history is by analyzing the extant texts. She finds, interestingly, that Loon Lake, The Book of Daniel and Ragtime illustrate this idea on a metafictional level. Part of the meaning of structure of these novels, she claims, is that in order to make the days of yore comprehensible an author must rewrite parts of older literatures; the way in which Doctorow communicates his ideas in these books brings to the fore the notion that we understand our past only in terms of other portrayals of it. "The novel," Hutcheon asserts, "actually enacts the realization that what we 'know' of the past derives from the discourses of that past" (21). Furthermore, Hutcheon is of the opinion that every meaningful piece of literature is as a matter of course a reformulation or recomposition of various older works. "A literary work can actually no longer be considered original," she writes. "If it were, it could have no meaning for its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance" (7). Indeed, Hutcheon can be located at the front of the bandwagon on which sits the group of critics and theorists who insists that an author cannot avoid rewriting other people's texts. Hutcheon says discretely that certain contemporary fictions like Doctorow's incorporate this idea into their formal

composition; but she joins the crowd behind her in announcing that whether it is obvious or not, no new novel can ever be completely unique or unconventional--a printed story can never, in another sense of the word, be totally novel.

This chapter, then, will investigate still another aspect of the dynamic of escape. An investigation of some of the various ways in which critics have deemed that other texts are present in Doctorow's fiction, especially Ragtime, will help to determine the validity of Linda Hutcheon's remarks concerning an "inescapable textuality." A consideration of how Hutcheon's ideas are related to the findings of the preceding chapters will then follow. It will become evident that concept of an "inescapable textuality" as Hutcheon presents it has much in common with the more straightforward conclusions of the earlier chapters. The current notion that a person is unable to produce a purely original work of art actually corresponds very closely to the idea that there is no longer an "unexplored" geographical area to which one can flee. The twentieth century author is considered unable successfully to "negate the existing order" of prior discourses. If Doctorow's case is typical, then the artist in general cannot claim to have creative autonomy. Doctorow's characters may be stuck in a certain social situation, but their creator is himself restricted as well. He is stuck in a world of "texts," a sphere from which, it appears, there is no legitimate way out.

As Hutcheon notes in "Historiographic Metafiction," a few critics have been rather prolific in writing about the links between Ragtime and other pieces of literature (21-2). Books like George Milburn's Catalogue , Dos Passos' U.S.A and Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe (see Hutcheon 22; Foley in Trenner 159; Doctorow in

Trenner 20; McCaffery in Trenner 42; and Clemons 73, respectively) are frequently mentioned as having influenced Doctorow's writing of Ragtime; however, the most avidly discussed intertext remains Heinrich von Kleist's nineteenth century novella "Michael Kohlhaas." Interestingly, Doctorow freely admits that he has adapted certain parts of the German tale to suit his own purposes. In an interview with Larry McCaffery he openly acknowledges the fact that he owes the nineteenth century German author a considerable literary debt. Talking about Ragtime he says, "I had always wanted to rework the circumstances of Kleist's story. I felt the premise was obviously relevant, appropriate--the idea of a man who cannot find justice from a society that claims to be just" (Trenner 44).

A person familiar with both books would certainly recognize that some similarities exist. The central character of Kleist's tale, for example, has a name that very much resembles a major personality in Doctorow's fiction: Michael Kohlhass. Hutcheon succinctly describes a few other noteworthy parallels. "In Kleist's tale," she writes,

> Kohlhaas is a medieval horse dealer who refuses to pay an unjust fine to Wenzel von Tronka's servant and so loses his beautiful horses. Doctorow's Coalhouse faces similar injustices at the hands of Willie Conklin, but the horses have been replaced by his new model T. Failing to obtain legal redress from the Elector of Saxony, Kohlhaas' wife--like Coalhouse's--attempts to intervene and is killed in a manner which Doctorow again updates but basically retains. (21-2)[9]

John Ditsky likewise records these corollaries, but he notes as well that less specific aspects of Kleist's fiction are also repeated in Doctorow's work: The spirit and tone, for example, are virtually the same.[10] In "The German Source of Ragtime: A Note," Ditsky states that in both the German and the American tale "there is the offhand telling of an outrageous miscarriage of justice, with the result that the reader of each shares the wrath that impels the central character of each to a path of violent retribution"; both Kleist and Doctorow, Ditsky adds, are given to a "dispassionate rendering of historical event[s]" (Trenner 180-1). Walter Clemons, for his part, expands on this last idea when he remarks that Doctorow, in patterning his prose after a previous work, is in fact repeating a process enacted by Kleist in the writing of "Michael Kohlhaas," since Kleist's novella has as its primary source a verbal account of an actual revolutionary incident in medieval Germany (76).

In the interview in which Doctorow mentions his manipulation of Kleist's "Michael Kohlhaas," the author also hints that critics should not look solely to literary texts to find out what has influenced his writing. He suggests that an awareness of certain aspects of cinematography might well have affected the way in which he composed a few of his novels. In a few succinct statements he reveals to McCaffery that he is actively interested in understanding the meaning and significance of the discontinuity apparent in film, for example. "Beginning with Daniel," he says,

> I gave up trying to write with the concern for transition characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel. Other writers may be able to, but I can't accept the conventions of realism any more. It doesn't interest me as I write. I'm not

> speaking now of a manifesto--but of the experience of the writer, or at least this writer. You do what works. Obviously, the rhythms of perception in me, as in most people who read today, have been transformed immensely by films and television. (Trenner 40)

Perhaps not only as a result of comments like these, but certainly in part due to them, reviewers have enthusiastically compared the construction of Doctorow's prose to the methods employed in creating motion pictures. Anthony B. Dawson, for instance, observes that things like "strategies of discontinuity," "the spatializing of temporal relations," and "the twin notions of 'volatility' and duplicability," which are present in Ragtime, are more usually associated with film. Furthermore, Dawson contends that Doctorow's verbal techniques achieve an end that is comparable to the results of moving pictures on a screen. "The illusion of actuality in Doctorow's novel," this critic holds,

> is achieved in an analogous way [to film]. The flickering quality of the style functions in the same manner as the camera to reverse background and foreground, to arrest or speed movement, to break down reality into fragments and reassemble it. And its effect is authenticity, not exactly optical authenticity as in film, but one that depends on a similar kind of illusion, of the second degree. The reader is simultaneously aware of the objects represented and the artifice of their reproduction. Immediacy and remoteness are thereby artfully conjoined. (209)

Geoffrey Hart detects in Doctorow's style the influence of yet another type of

cinematography. He writes that the novel has "the feeling of newsreel externality" (893). And Charles Eidsvik goes further than all of these critics when he proposes that while Doctorow does in fact use "film-like techniques" in his prose, his stories finally have more in common with a somewhat different popular cultural medium: the comic strip. Eidsvik submits that in Ragtime, for example, "stars" are put together in "new but shared contexts." Other comic strip phenomena that figure prominently are magic, violence, beautiful women, powerful people, wish fulfilment, and a child narrator (304-7).

Hutcheon, together with like-minded critics working in her field, is perfectly willing to define the concept of intertextuality in terms broad enough to include such extraliterary media. Indeed, it has become commonplace for contemporary theorists like Hutcheon to accept far more than verbal documents into their study of intertextuality. Thais Morgan, in her essay "The Space of Intertextuality," explains:

> The product of encoding signs or 'semiosis' can be termed a 'text,' so that the text may be as small as a phrase or gesture, or as large as a novel or football game. With the view that any event--whether in verbal, visual, aural or kinesic 'discourse'--can be analyzed as a text, or a hierarchy of relations among codes and their constituent elements, the gateway is open to applying the concept of 'intertextuality,' defined generally as the structural relations among two or more texts, to any of the disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences. (246)

Most reviewers of Doctorow's prose seem to approve, either candidly or

implicity, such a "spacious" notion of intertextuality. Film techniques and comic strips are mentioned in connection with Ragtime. Moreover, some critics draw an analogy between the mechanics of ragtime music and Doctorow's Ragtime. Paul Levine serves as a perfect example of a critic who notes such affinities. He writes:

> Coalhouse Walker's ragtime piano provides the central metaphor of the novel . . . The musical image of 'syncopating chords' playing against 'thumping octaves' suggests the dialectical relationship in Ragtime between fiction and fact, individual will and historical necessity, the organic vision of community expressed by Emma Goldman and the mechanical view of corporate society created by Henry Ford. (58)

Another reviewer also finds that certain features of the content correspond to aspects of music, but he adds a judgement to his observation. Leonard Kriegel asserts that the book Ragtime "lacks depth, in much the same way as the music from which it derives its title lacks depth" (632).

Hutcheon is ready to accept all of these allusions and references to other artistic works in order to substantiate her ideas about the intertextual nature of literature. Indeed, her notion of a truly expansive intertextuality is very similar to Morgan's idea of it. "It is not just literature and history . . . that form the discourses of postmodernism," Hutcheon writes. "Everything from comic books and fairy tales to almanacs and newspapers provide historiographic metafiction with culturally significant intertexts" (16). It should be noted that when Hutcheon approaches this idea more closely, she introduces a new term. "Interdiscursivity" is the name she

gives to "other textualizations of experience." In her view "*interdiscursivity* would perhaps be a more accurate term for the collective modes of discourse from which the postmodern parodically draws: literature, visual arts, history, biography, theory, philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology, and the list could go on" (12). Nonetheless, what her neologism seems essentially to describe is simply an intertextuality that is not strictly limited to the realm of verbal discourse.

Perhaps the author of Ragtime is himself an unwitting proponent of such a sprawling intertextuality. Good "fiction," writes Doctorow in an essay entitled "Ultimate Discourse," "excludes nothing" (41). The corollary, or course, is that it includes virtually everything. Granted, the many and diverse texts which have been described as being an integral part of Doctorow's prose make the claim seem almost credible. Doctorow's stories are always being understood in connection with another piece of writing. Christopher Morris, for example, goes so far as to say that Doctorow's collection of short works, Lives of the Poets makes complete sense only when it is considered as a whole. "Ostensibly autonomous stories become fully readable only in terms of others," he asserts. "Hence, the collection directly confronts the issues of intertextuality and representation" (133). Whether or not a specific story--short or novel length--is more valuable when read as part of a group than when perused as a separate entity is debatable. But Morris' point is worth considering, because it highlights the fact that Doctorow's fictions are so very often being related to different texts in order to elucidate their meaning.

However, to claim that not just literary texts but virtually anything, including

musical scores and humorous cartoons, can be labelled a text that is relevant to the deciphering of meaning of a particular work is somewhat problematic. In the introduction to Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction, Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis judiciously caution that such a theory of intertextuality can quickly become promiscuous. They note that when it is taken to an extreme, such a concept "projects all texts as further divisible into other texts, and these into yet other texts (or signifiers), ad infinitum" (x). In other words, when it is so defined, intertextuality actually does become "inescapable." If everything which the writer draws upon to create his or her work is a text, then of course it is true that there can be no legitimate way out of the intertextual universe. If postmodern discourse draws upon the world to make its points, and every part of the world is deemed to be a text, then certainly one can say that there is no escaping a discursive form of knowledge.

Yet, it should be noted that while there is no way out of such an intertextual universe, the prospect of being contained inside it does not seem to be entirely menacing, either. If, in the process of creating a narrative, one can draw upon virtually everything, any thing present in the world as "text" in order to make one's point, then one might not feel too restricted when constructing one's narrative.

It is Hutcheon's main premise, however, that the great variety of intertextual references in Doctorow's fiction serve to demonstrate the postmodern realization that a writer is finally not able in any way to escape this certain discursive form of knowledge. Hutcheon concentrates on the idea that Doctorow's stories make the reader aware that an author, as a matter of course, must reuse existing texts when

creating a piece of prose. Especially in Ragtime, the obvious presence of some of the texts alerts the reader to the true nature of the composition of the work in question. According to Hutcheon, Doctorow's blatant insertion of pieces of different literary works brings to the fore the idea a writer is destined to rewrite at least segments of other people's stories. "The present, as well as the past, is always already irremediably textualized for us (Belsey 46)," she writes, "and the overt intertextuality of historiographic metafiction serves as one of the textual signals of this postmodern realization" (9). The literary intertexts serve to remind the reader that every literary creation is finally a compilation, virtually a reordering of diverse, already-existent materials.

Interestingly, Thais Morgan, in "The Space of Intertextuality," notes that many present-day literary theorists, including Hutcheon, very often express ideas concerning intertextuality using spatial metaphors (274). Indeed, Joseph Culler, for example, writes literally of "intertextual space" (113). Similarly, in one of the two epigraphs to Hutcheon's article Michel Foucault mentions that the "*frontiers* of a book are never clear-cut" (italics mine). Hutcheon herself, though she bases her theory of historiographic metafiction primarily on recent developments in architecture[11] in the course of her article consistently refers to "'world|s| of discourse" (6); she writes about the "closing" and "opening" up of texts (7), about "margins" and "edges" (12), and about "crossing boundaries" (25). As Morgan puts it, "theorists today are rethinking literature and literary history in terms of space instead of time" (274), a notion which is accentuated by the title of the article in which she discusses the

champions of these theories.

The impression one gets from studying these concepts is that there are no distinct borders which confine a piece of writing to a specific or limited "area." It seems that in a theory of rampant intertextuality such as the one that Hutcheon espouses, the universe of already existing texts is all-encompassing; all of the available space, moreover, has always already been accounted for. Using the fashionable "spatial" or "geographical" jargon, one can say that an author is unable to escape to an area of discourse where no author or text has been before. The present-day author must always reside in a place where others have already left what might be considered a literary landmark. More to the point, there is no room for originality: There is no place to which a person can flee to escape the burden of things already written or texts previously produced.

The idea that there exists such an "inescapable textuality," however, fits in very well with Doctorow's vision of twentieth century America. In an article entitled "Living in the House of Fiction," Doctorow writes that "American culture suggests an infinitely expanding universe that generously accommodates, or imprisons, us all" (459)--a message similar to the one which emerges from his novels. In his fictions Doctorow describes a world in which people are invariably unable really to escape. Societies do not sanction the effort to leave without intending to return. Indeed, in the America that Doctorow creates in his prose it is virtually impossible to make a real and honest escape. All individuals living in Doctorow's fabricated realities, regardless of their social status, unless they contrive to base their escape on some kind of trick or

illusion, are equally frustrated in their attempts to get away.

Doctorow, interestingly, admits that he may be participating in a world very much like the ones which he creates in his novels. In "Living in the House of Fiction," Doctorow describes what he thinks is the predicament of most later twentieth century authors. "Rather than making the culture," he writes, "we seem these days to be in it" (459). He makes a similar remark in the interview with McCaffery, to whom he says that he simply does not "finally accept the distinction between reality and books" (Trenner 42). Hutcheon takes the latter comment to mean that Doctorow feels equally free to draw on the texts of history and literature when he creates his fictions (21), and indeed, this might well be the case. But considering the limited creative power ascribed to contemporary authors--"somehow in this postmodernist time we have been cowed," Doctorow laments in his article "The Passion of Our Calling" (22)--Doctorow could also be alluding to the fact that he feels that he is in a situation comparable to that in which his fictional characters find themselves.

Indeed, just like his characters, Doctorow, who moves within a society populated by literary theorists and critics, is repeatedly shown to be unable to effect a pure escape. U. S. authors apparently count among the American citizens who are unable to break free. The escape that the fiction writer cannot effect, however, is the departure from the reordering existing materials. There is apparently no free creative space to which the writer can flee. The advocates of intertextuality work always to locate a writer by making a trail with other people's discourses. So it seems that the creator of the fictional Houdini must suffer a fate similar to that of his character.

Neither is able to find a legitimate way out. A genuine escape is, during the latter half of the twentieth century, proven to be impossible even for the verbal artist.

Nonetheless, Doctorow honours the creative attempt to break free. The prominent place afforded Houdini in Ragtime testifies to Doctorow's esteem for the master performer and his craft. Doctorow is very much concerned with the possibilities of escape, and he pursues his interest on different levels and in various works. The author himself tries out some escapes, although they are more abstract than Houdini's ventures. Doctorow attempts to escape from the established "Times," for example, by creating a subversive and personalized version of past events; and his endeavours in this regard are just as consequential as any stunts performed by Houdini. Yet as has been shown in a preceding chapter, the apparent success of Doctorow's escapes is, like that of his protagonists, rather spurious in that it is usually based on some kind of trick or illusion. Granted, Doctorow through his writing does seem to get away from established or popular versions of history; but his fictions, in the end, as Cushing Strout points out, still do not change some of the basic facts (193).

There are additional interesting parallels between Houdini's actions in Ragtime and Doctorow's writerly deeds. For one, the so-called social circumstances surrounding both artists are similar. The general public that stands in awe of Houdini's stunts is generally ignorant of how it is that he has gotten out of his confinement. It may well be that part of the audience is not even aware that a subtle trick has been played out, and thinks rather that Houdini can, for instance, magically

walk through concrete prison walls. In most cases his spectators and fans, which are multitudinous, come simply to witness the spectacular performance and not to decipher the technique behind it.

The majority of the readers of Doctorow's prose are, like the fans of Houdini's escape, probably not enlightened as to the technique by which the author creates his stories. Indeed, Doctorow is celebrated by the public for his ingenuity, his innovation. The general reader who is not as critically inclined as, say, Hutcheon and her peers, does not quickly surmise that Doctorow has in many instances incorporated other, well-established as well as relatively obscure "texts" into his prose. Probably a lot of people who peruse Doctorow's fiction will recognize the names of certain historical figures, but most will remain ignorant of the majority of other "texts" that exist alongside these.

Perhaps this ignorance is due in part to the fact that Doctorow in many ways diverts the reader's attention away from the nature of the content of his stories. True, a careful examination of the novel, backed by a relatively extensive knowledge of international literature, will make the "intertextual" composition of Doctorow's Ragtime seem obvious. But a simple reading performed by someone not tuned in to the arts will not necessarily bring out the fact that there are many "reused" fictional characters present in the work, for Doctorow has distorted their appellations as well as the chronology of their existences. But just as the pleasure that Houdini's fans derive from watching him perform is not diminished by the fact that they do not know how he gets free from his restrictions, so is the meaning of Doctorow's prose not

necessarily reduced if a reader does not decipher all of the existing "intertexts." As Michael Rifattere rightly notes, an intertext need not actually be discovered in order to achieve full understanding of the text in question (Morgan 265). Of course there are spectators or readers who recognize that a "trick" is being played out. Houdini's associates may well understand the method of a particular escape; they may suspect, for instance, that he uses razor blades concealed on his person in order to get out of a high-security prison. Similarly, Doctorow's literary critics may readily recognize some of the narrative devices he uses; they may discern that what, on one level, seems to be an original work of art, is, on another level, actually a re-ordering of extant texts. However, both groups of people can probably also appreciate the deftness of the achievement in either case.

A comparison of Houdini's function in Doctorow's fiction and Doctorow's capacity as a writer yields at least one other interesting parallel. Houdini's escapes have made him a popular international artist. Crowds gather to observe his masterful escapes. Yet Houdini is not sure that his art has any connection to the real world. In fact, he is seriously plagued by the thought that his exploits have no relevance at all to daily life. Houdini walks down the streets of New York thinking that

> there was a kind of act that used the real world for its stage. He couldn't touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theatre and forgot him? The headlines on the newsstand said Peary had reached the Pole. The real-world act was what got into the history books (82).

In essays and interviews Doctorow conveys a sentiment regarding his own art that is very similar to Houdini's concern. Although he feels that novels can "find out things," Doctorow claims that there is nonetheless "a discouraging amount of historical evidence that art doesn't change anything" ("Living in the House of Fiction" 459). However, it is Doctorow's aim to get out of the position of the practically ineffectual artist. One critic, Stacey Olster, writes in Reminiscence and Re-Creation in Contemporary American Fiction that although writers may model their fictions after the real world, there will always be a difference between them: "Despite . . . deliberate correspondences . . . the universes novelists make are finally not the universes in which they live" (142). But Doctorow actively tries through his fiction to amalgamate the two. To McCaffery he says, "I think art and life make each other. Henry Miller said, 'We should give literature back to life.' I believe that. I believe more than that" (Trenner 38). Hutcheon may claim that Doctorow is stuck in an intertextual universe that deals with the actual world only as discursive texts. She asserts that "the 'world' in which the text situates itself is the 'world' of discourse, the 'world' of texts and intertexts. This 'world' has direct links to the world of empirical reality, but it is not itself that empirical reality" (6). But Doctorow, in creating worlds that function the same for characters as for novelists, is starting, perhaps, to make a stronger connection. He is describing in a number of ways in his novels the predicament of every American citizen. He makes clear that though there may not be a completely honest way to escape either from social ills or a certain discursive form of knowledge, the creative attempt should be celebrated. Indeed, from Ragtime we

get a sense that this is already in a way happening. "Today, nearly fifty years since [Houdini's] death," the narrator submits, "the audience for escapes is even larger" (7).

NOTES

1. Barbara Foley makes a similar point with regard specifically to Ragtime. She writes that implicit in this work is "an open acknowledgement of the process of selection--indeed, of creation--which is inherent in the task of the historical writer" (174).

2. Douwe Fokkema notes that an important feature of postmodernism is "indeterminacy." He writes that it is implied or explicitly illustrated in the literature of postmodernism that "no intellectual or moral system, no way of perceiving reality can ultimately be legitimized (Lyotard's term), nothing can *ontologically* claim superiority over anything else and fruitful interchanges have become possible" (29).

3. Harpham writes, "This essay gives us a way of thinking about Doctorow: not as a formal innovator or as the author of fictionalized history but as a creator of texts whose ambivalences define his central continuing concern, narrative itself and its relation to power, imagination, and belief. Within the terms of this problem, Doctorow's career has taken shape. It has developed, I argue, from a critique of the coercive power of the textual and ideological regime to a celebration of the powers of imaginative freedom" (82). Harpham's main premise, interestingly, seems to be that the closed circuit of Doctorow's text is represented in the novel by electricity.

4. It should be noted that to communicate his point Doctorow does make use of the categories of nonfiction (history) and fiction, categories which he otherwise assumes are irrelevant to his discussion.

5. The list of "composed" documents continues. In the article "Ultimate Discourse" Doctorow explains that he sees in the "government's representations of its activities," as well as in modern psychological documents the phenomenon of the "industrialization of storytelling" (41).

6. For a comprehensive discussion of conflicting opinions on this matter of distinguishing between history and literature, see Joseph W. Turner's "The Kinds of Historical Fiction: An Essay in Definition and Methodology." Turner's central argument, however, is somewhat self-defeating. The primary assertion is that the only generalization that can be made about historical fiction is that it resists generalization.

See also Mark A. Weinstein's "The Creative Imagination in Fiction and History," wherein the author makes clear that the dilemma is by no means unique to the 20th century. Weinstein notes, though, that historians in the last one hundred years are especially known for their reaction against "faith in facts" (265).

Cushing Strout in "Historizing Fiction and Fictionalizing History: The Case of E. L. Doctorow" also deals with the more general question of the relation between history and fiction.

7. Interestingly, Daniel's queries concerning narrative and its function are very similar to the questions J. Hillis Miller poses in his definitional essay entitled "Narrative." Miller asks: "What's the problem? Why do we need stories?" He adds, "Why do we need the 'same' story over and over? Why is our need for more stories never satisfied?" (68). In both Miller's and Doctorow's text the writer emerges as someone who indeed resembles a magician; he or she has the ability for a time to

create the illusion that an orderly progression of events exits, and that this order can be completely comprehended and finally recorded.

8. See, for example, Paul Levine's "The Conspiracy of History: E.L. Doctorow's The Book of Daniel," especially 184-5. Levine compares some of the more celebrated version of the case and notes a few of the facts that Doctorow has apparently changed

9. Hutcheon is mistaken about only one minor detail: In Doctorow's fiction, Sarah, the woman who is accidentally involved and killed in the Coalhouse scenario is his fiancée, not his wife.

10. For other comparisons between the two fictions see also Gelus and Crowley (20-6) and Levine (56-7).

11. Hutcheon writes that "it is usually metafiction that is equated with the postmodern . . . [but] we must add something else to this definition: an equally self-conscious dimension of history. My model here is postmodern architecture, that resolutely parodic recalling of the history of architectural forms and functions" (3).

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