

E. L. Doctorow's Ragtime in the Context of Historiographic Metafiction – A Study

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“History ... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.” - James Joyce

“History is a nightmare during which I'm trying to get a good night's sleep.” - Saul Bellow

“History is a nightmare which we can best survive by rewriting it.” -E. L. Doctorow

The blurring of the boundaries between fiction and history and the constructedness of history through discourse are major themes in E. L. Doctorow's novels. Doctorow's bestseller, *Ragtime*, imitates the genre of the historical novel but reveals its limitations and corresponds to what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. Like other postmodern writers, Doctorow does not consider history as a reliable field and treats notions such as truth, reality, and objectivity in an ironic fashion. Doctorow's use of intertextuality, his mix of historical and fictional characters, and his rewriting of the narrator and the characters' identities all point to how reality and history are not fixed notions and they are rewritten and recreated continuously.

A short critical overview of the treatment of history explains the theoretical context which Doctorow works against and the one he adheres to. Since antiquity, critics have mused over the relationship between history and fiction. Aristotle, for instance, sees history and fiction (or poetry as he calls it) as antithetical subjects because “the historian,” he argues, “narrates events that have actually happened, whereas the poet writes about things as they might possibly occur” (48). The distinctions mapped out by Aristotle are disregarded by twentieth-century critics because history is not considered as a reliable domain that narrates truthfully the “events that actually happened” and because history and fiction are not separated anymore, but complementary.

Recent criticism stresses the textual and therefore fictional nature of history. R. G. Collingwood defines the historian's role as a mental activity “envisaging for himself the situation in which Caesar stood, and thinking for himself the situation and the possible ways of dealing with it. The history of thought, and therefore all history, is the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind” (215). Hayden White posits that historiography is a poetic construct in the sense that one narrates and interprets when one writes history. The historical work, he says, is “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse” (*Metahistory* ix). White believes that because historical or nonhistorical discourse is achieved through narrative, “one can produce an imaginary discourse about historical events that may not be less ‘true’ for being imaginary” (Content 57). In his books, *Time and Narrative* and *History and Truth*, Paul Ricoeur also argues for the interweaving of history with fiction.

A critic who writes extensively about the unreliability of history and about the fortunate meeting of history and fiction in historical novels is Linda Hutcheon. In her prominent books on postmodernism and in numerous articles, she emphasizes how history is de-constructed and re-constructed by writers in

their works. The novelists who write literary texts based on historical events have to respect – according to Hutcheon – at least two sets of conventions:

Like historians, they [writers] must use ‘emplotting’ strategies of exclusion, emphasis, and subordination of the elements of a story, and they must also deal with ‘a veritable chaos of events *already constituted*.’ But they have another set of conventions to confront as well: those of fiction. What we end up with is a new, curiously paradoxical form that we call ‘*historiographic metafiction*’ rather than historical fiction. (“Running in the Family” 302)

Historiographic metafiction according to Hutcheon displays both “a world of fiction ... self-consciously presented as a constructed one [and] also a world of public experience” (*Politics* 36). In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, she argues that historiographic metafiction incorporates literature, history, and theory and that “its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs ... is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past” (5). In the same study, she defines historiographic metafiction as a domain that challenges notions such as historical truth and accurate knowledge of the past:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact or fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity. (93)

Historiographic metafiction cancels the truth-falsity binary that dominated traditional historiography and replaces it with the multiple truth tendency employed by postmodernism. Hutcheon demonstrates that history itself becomes a text because it can only be recovered via texts. We know the public and historical world today through discourses and texts or, as Hutcheon puts it, “traces of [past] historical events” (*Politics* 36). The past existed, but it can only be (re)constructed by the people of the present, who turn it into a text. We only have representations of the past that constitute the writers’ foundation for their fictions.

Hutcheon gives many examples of postmodern authors of different nationalities that write historiographic metafiction among which: Christa Wolf, Salman Rushdie, Michael Coetzee, John Fowles, Julian Barnes, E. L. Doctorow, Umberto Eco, Gabriel García Márquez, Italo Calvino, Milan Kundera, William Faulkner, Don DeLillo, Peter Ackroyd, Graham Swift, Ronald Sukenick, Timothy Findley, John Dos Passos, D. M. Thomas, Michael Ondaatje, E. M. Foster, and Thomas Pynchon. They all expose the textuality of the historical discourse. Hutcheon argues that for Doctorow, “there is no neat dividing line between the texts of history and literature, and so he feels free to draw on both” (*Poetics* 136). The blurring of the boundaries between history and fiction, a common characteristic of historiographic metafiction, underlines Doctorow’s mistrust for the objectivity of history and opens up possibilities for the parody of this objective historical discourse.

Recent critics distinguish between historical novels and historiographic metafiction. Although the authors of historiographic metafiction imitate to some extent the traditional historical novel written even before the eighteenth century, they question notions of truth and objectivity and their relation to history. Susana Onega argues that “historiographic metafiction differs from traditional historical novels in that the former do not seek historical accuracy and realistic verisimilitude but, on the contrary, challenge the reparability of the two discourses” (1). The critics’, writers’, and readers’ attitudes toward history and truth changed especially after World War II insofar as history is not regarded as a reliable domain that renders the past accurately.

Because the United States is a relatively young country, the historical genre has been less fertile there than in Europe. Events such as the American Revolution, the Civil War, or the Westward movement triggered patriotic feelings in American writers who wanted to describe these historical events. Ernest Leisy posits that the historical novel in America “satisfies a desire for national homogeneity. It helps us realize the sacrifice for ideas and ideals, the sweat and blood that have made democracy work” (4). The American writers who base their fiction upon history usually focus on local historical events and emphasize episodes from American history with a focus on patriotism and nation. Postmodern authors, however, have an ironic and more critical attitude towards American historical past. Authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and E. L. Doctorow present America as torn by disorder and chaos and deconstruct the notion of patriotism and national homogeneity through parody. In *Ragtime*, Doctorow reveals an America in flux during the first decade of the twentieth century when social, economic, and political changes shaped the country as well as its citizens’ identities.

In an interview with Paul Levine, Doctorow confesses that: “history as written by historians is clearly insufficient. And the historians are the first to express skepticism over this ‘objectivity’ of the discipline. A lot of people discovered after World War II and in the fifties that much of what was taken by the younger generations as history was highly interpreted history” (58-9). Doctorow offers in *Ragtime* an interpreted and fictional version of twentieth-century American history. Although *Ragtime* leaves the impression that this version is an almost reportorial and thus objective account of American social life, the novel mixes real persons and events that happened with fictional characters and events. Even if some characters and events are verifiable, for the most part, the author invents and recreates their history and writes a historiographic metafiction. Doctorow rewrites his characters’ lives and identities by inventing plots and stories about them and changes the voice and identity of the narrator as well.

Doctorow emphasizes the economic and social changes that took place in America during the *Ragtime* period and underscores these further transformations in the characters’ identities and even the narrator’s. America at the beginning of the last century was on its way to becoming an economic power, but it had to deal with poverty, inequalities, and civil rights violations. The nation was trying to search for its own identity while changing, integrating these changes, and consequently rewriting continuously its identity. Similarly, Doctorow’s characters change and rewrite their identity in an attempt to find

their own identity. The author juxtaposes the changes that occurred in the country with the fluctuations in the characters' lives, and by doing that, he shows that history itself is in flux and is rewritten continuously.

Like the protagonists, the narrator remains ambiguous and changes his identity throughout the novel. Some critics suggest that the omniscient narrator is the little boy; others reflect on the lack of a narrator's persona and on the possibility that the story tells itself in *Ragtime*. There is one instance when the narrator refers to himself in the first person: "Poor Father, I see his final exploration. He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb" (269). Here, the narrator conceded to call himself an "I." As the narrator refers to Father as "Poor Father," one could argue that the little boy is the narrator. Because he was not with his father when the latter died, the little boy must interpret his father's last exploration and thus his entire family's history.

The omniscient narrator moves periodically from narrating stories about the characters of the novel to describing events and situations in American society. The reader does not know whether the narrative voice dissociates itself when the narrator tells the characters' stories as opposed to when he describes events from twentieth-century America. The novel has many chapters that simply describe different flashes of American history and social life apparently unrelated to the plots and subplots of the novel: "Most of the immigrants came from Italy and Eastern Europe. They were taken in launches to Ellis Island. There, in a curiously ornate human warehouse of red brick and gray stone, they were tagged, given showers and arranged on benches in waiting pens" (13); or "In the killing summer heat politicians up for reelection invited their followers to outings in the country. Toward the end of July one candidate led a parade through the streets of the Fourth Ward" (18). The novel abounds in seemingly objective observations that, in fact, are part of Doctorow's fictional experiment.

Not only is the narrator's status slippery but also the narration does not follow a logical or chronological sequence in recording some of the characters' stories, thoughts and conversations, or commenting upon the early twentieth-century American society. At the end of the novel, the reader is left with a fictional overview of American society and the changes that occurred at the beginning of the last century but not necessarily with an in-depth message taken from the characters' dispersed stories. The characters' stories start in medias res and they are not connected to one another. *Ragtime* looks like a descriptive novel because its author observes the American social life, but, in fact, it is experimental because the narration's reportorial style is ironic. Doctorow's prose sounds newspaper-like, but lacks facts. Doctorow's reportorial style is misleading if readers think that what they read is historically objective. His narrative experiment refers to a presentation of fictional situations in an objective fashion as the author invents stories about both historical and fictional characters.

The events of *Ragtime* focus mainly on the history of three families: an Anglo-American family, a European immigrant one, and an African-American family. One plot in the first part centers on the upper-middle class family from New Rochelle whose members are Mother, Father, Grandfather, little boy, and Mother's Younger Brother and on its family disintegration and reintegration. Another plot refers to the second important family in the novel, that of Tatch, a

Jewish immigrant and socialist, who after an affair with Evelyn Nesbit, flees to New York with his daughter, named in the novel the little girl. The second part of the novel opens with the mystery around who the father of Sarah's baby is. Readers find out eventually that the African American ragtime musician, Coalhouse Walker, is the father; together they represent the third important family of the novel. In the last part, Mother marries Tateh, now a film producer, whose name has changed to Baron Ashkenazy and together with the little boy, the little girl, and Sarah's black child, they move to California. The last scene of the novel shows how the three important families of the novel merged into a controversial mix of identities. The newly formed family presented at the end of the novel proves that the American family became an inter-racial and multiethnic entity.

The novel's ending contradicts its beginning where the narrator announced that the nation had only white Americans. The narrative voice presents an unrealistic image of America that alludes to racial purity, national unity, and prosperity, image which will be deconstructed throughout the novel.

Patriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's. Teddy Roosevelt was President. The population customarily gathered in great numbers either out of doors for parades, public concerts, fish fries, political picnics, social outings, or indoors in meeting halls, vaudeville theatres, operas, ballrooms. There seemed to be no entertainment that did not involve great swarms of people. Trains and steamers and trolleys moved them from one place to another. That was the style, that was the way people lived. Women were stouter then. They visited the fleet carrying white parasols. Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants. (3-4)

The mix of serious issues such as patriotism and race with details about tennis racquets and parasols indicates that the narrative voice is ironic and playful. Although the narrator describes America as being devoid of African Americans and immigrants, the new family formed at the end of *Ragtime* is the epitome of a mix of identities that includes immigrants and African Americans. Mother, for instance, marries an immigrant and adopts a black child. This mingling of families, races, and ethnicities underlines both the history and the destiny of America and of Americans who based their national identity on a paradoxical mix of new peoples, and it alludes to a continuous revision of history. When the American family accepts members of different ethnicities and identities, it constantly re-writes and revises its history.

The physical, mental, social, and political metamorphoses that the characters undergo reinforce the rewriting and revision of history itself. Tateh, for instance, changes his name and even his political views; no longer an idealist working-class radical, he becomes Baron Ashkenazy, a successful film producer. When asked by Larry McCaffery why Tateh achieves financial success even though he sells his moral beliefs, Doctorow answers that "very often a man who begins as a radical somehow – with all his energy and spirit and intelligence and wit – by a slight change of course can use these gifts to succeed under the very system he's criticizing" (45). Tateh renounces the cause of the left and becomes successful by undermining it. His new profession advances him on the scale of

the equally new film business. Film – according to Baron Ashkenazy – is the photographed version of reality. By extrapolation, film is a copied and unreliable version of history: “In the movie films, he said, we only look at what is there already. Life shines on the shadow screen, as from the darkness of one’s mind. It is a big business. People want to know what is happening to them” (215).

While Tateh rewrites his history by changing his identity and embracing a simulacrum of reality, the little boy transforms his reality into fiction when he “replicates” himself in the mirror. The little boy’s “duplicated event” continues Tateh’s experience with copying persons and objects on the big screen because the little boy copies his own self. His double-sided replica reflected in the mirror resembles the way various actors are reproduced in a film or a photograph. The little boy is described as an introverted child without friends who turned to literature instead of playing outside. He enjoys the lessons of history and fiction given by his grandfather, who reads to him from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Ovid’s texts “were stories of people who became animals, trees, or statues. They were stories of transformation. Women turned into sunflowers, spiders, bats, birds; men turned into snakes, pigs, stones and even thin air” (97).

The little boy transfers his experience of a work of fiction into his experience of reality when he applies Ovid’s stories of transformation to his gaze in the mirror. In a narcissistic gesture, the little boy investigates the physical and psychological transformations that his body and mind have suffered over time. The little boy describes his whole experience as a disembodiment of “a self” from the other part of himself: “He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of which could claim to be the real one” (98). In other words, the copy and the reality are intertwined because his interpretation of the copy shown by the mirror looks as real as his body and self. The boy starts from a copy of reality, which is Ovid’s work, moves to his real body to transform it into an image, and arrives full circle at another copy or a fictional account mediated by an initial work of fiction.

The double reflection seen by the little boy in the mirror has roots in the boy’s fascination with movies and the parallelism between the two selves anticipates the copies of selves and bodies seen on the big screen. The boy wants to separate his body from himself and to see his fictionalized body in the mirror or on the big screen. The narrator explains that the boy “knew the principles of photography but also that moving pictures depended on the capacity of humans, animals or objects to forfeit portions of themselves” (97-8). In fact, the novel ends with Tateh’s idea to make a film about his three children and to transform them into unreal selves – a possibility anticipated by the little boy’s self-examination.

Mother also changes her identity and rewrites her individual history when she marries Tateh and becomes a stepmother of two children: the little girl and Sarah’s son. Younger Brother wants to change his identity as well and become black in order to join Coalhouse’s team: “He shaved his blond moustache and he shaved his head. He blackened his face and hands with burnt cork, outlined exaggerated lips, put on a derby and rolled his eyes” (205). Younger Brother is willing to give up his privileged identity as a white man in order to defend the rights of a black man. He waits four nights in front of a bar only to get to speak with Coalhouse and let him know that he (Younger Brother) could help him.

Younger Brother deserts and betrays his own family in order to serve the interests of an African American.

Even outside the three main families, characters are prone to changes and transformations. Morgan and Ford are both obsessed with reincarnation and repetition. Morgan believes in universal cycles that keep repeating themselves over time: "Suppose I could prove to you that there are universal patterns of order and repetition that give meaning to the activity of this planet. Suppose I could demonstrate that you yourself are an instrumentation in our modern age of trends in human identity that affirm the oldest wisdom in the world" (123). Morgan thinks that history and the past are still "present" in our time. In his conversation with Ford, he elaborates and fictionalizes on the Rosicrucians' knowledge and their "secret wisdom" of reincarnation and claims that this secret wisdom and magic came from the Greek translations of the Egyptian priest, Hermes Trismegistus (124). Morgan eventually shows Ford the sarcophagus of the mummified Pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty, Seti the First. He invites Ford to join him on a journey to Egypt, where they could find the truth about who they are, who they incarnate, or who they replicate. Ford contends that he too cherishes a belief in reincarnation: "Reincarnation is the only belief I hold ... some of us have just lived more times than others" (127). Ironically, Ford finds some "enlightening" ideas on reincarnation in a cheap book: "And in this book [*An Eastern Fakir's Eternal Wisdom*], which cost me twenty-five cents, I found everything I needed to set my mind at rest" (127). The author mocks Morgan's apparently serious attempts to unravel historical mysteries by juxtaposing them with Ford's not so in-depth research. Their conversation is humorous as the author emphasizes Morgan's enthusiasm and excitement and Ford's aplomb and self-control. While Morgan exposes secrets about reincarnation and almost loses his breath, Ford contemplates his shoes. The dialogue between the two businessmen, their preoccupation with reincarnation, and their tools of researching history are Doctorow's invention. It is doubtful that Ford and Morgan ever had a conversation on reincarnation.

Houdini practices a different kind of reincarnation and metamorphosis. He defies death by challenging it constantly; he dies and is born again with his every performance. He escapes from chains and milk cans; he asks to be buried alive, and so on. His exercises of resurrection are fake because Houdini succeeds in manipulating his audience and changing their sense of reality. His performance depends on the audience's reaction, their entertainment, fear, and anxiety. Through Houdini, the audience learns to challenge death, escape from reality, and then return to it. Angela Hague argues that Houdini's audiences pay because of "their fascination with his ability magically to transform – and escape from – a reality previously perceived as static and impervious to manipulation" (173). When the narrator muses on Houdini's fate as a magician, he says: "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 real-world act was what got into the history books" (82). Houdini makes it to the history books because he makes the illusionary look real. His name deserves to be in the history book next to other pseudo-historical individuals such as Ford, Morgan, Goldman, and Freud.

Another type of reincarnation is, metaphorically speaking, the rewriting of historical traces and has to do with Doctorow's source of inspiration for his novel and with intertextuality. He borrows and rewrites a plot line from nineteenth-century German author, Heinrich von Kleist, who wrote "Michael Kohlhaas." His use and modification of an intertext are a few steps further from notions such as truth, originality, and objectivity. More than that, von Kleist's story is based on a medieval chronicle of the history of Hans Kohlhasen (Morris 106). Thus, Doctorow writes a fictional text by rewriting another fictional text that is already based on a historical one. By this act of intertextual plagiarism, he creates a new character and story and places them in the context of American history. Yet his new story and character have nothing to do with objective history.

In an interview with Larry McCaffery, Doctorow confesses that he rewrote Kleist's 1808 novella: "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" (44). Doctorow adapts Coalhouse's story to twentieth-century American standards, which is why his hero rides a Ford and not a horse. In Kleist's short story, Michael Kohlhaas (whose name resembles, of course, Coalhouse's) is a horse-dealer who was swindled. In an attempt to find the justice that was repeatedly denied to him, he raises a militia and starts looting towns. He is eventually punished for the atrocities he incited. Coalhouse remains a fictional character that is rewritten after his nineteenth-century fictional ancestor. Maria Diedrich speculates that Doctorow's black protagonist, Coalhouse Walker, borrows characteristics and similarities from both fictional characters such as Michael Kohlhaas and historical ones such as David Walker and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (113-23). Like Coalhouse, the last two historical personages fought for racial equality and for civil rights.

Finally, Doctorow's ironic mix of historical and fictional characters alludes to the constructed narrative discourse of history. Whether he arranges occasional meetings between fictional and historical characters in the same chapter or the omniscient narrator intermediates dialogues between them, Doctorow combines history with fiction to the point that nobody knows which is which anymore. Doctorow himself comments on the real-unreal or historical-fictional dichotomies that abound in *Ragtime* and other historiographic metafiction and concludes that truths, if they ever existed, are not relevant; the variety of possibilities that fiction proposes is what matters. He contends:

I'm under the illusion that all my inventions are quite true. For instance, in *Ragtime*, I'm satisfied that everything I made up about Morgan and Ford is true, whether it happened or not. Perhaps truer because it didn't happen. And I don't make any distinction any more – and can't even remember – what of the events and circumstances in *Ragtime* are historically verifiable and what are not. (69)

Both characters and readers should embrace the bedazzlement brought by the lack of truth and enjoy the infinite possibilities resulting from this lack.

Doctorow includes actual figures such as Harry Houdini, J. P. Morgan, Henry Ford, Andrew Carnegie, Sigmund Freud, and Emma Goldman with fictional characters such as Mother, Father, little boy, Grandfather, Younger

Brother, and Coalhouse Walker. The author puts historical characters in situations they have never been in before and he makes them say words they have never uttered previously. Doctorow's fictional characters interact with historical ones to form a mix of ethnicities, nationalities, races, backgrounds, and religions. Henry Ford has lunch with J. P. Morgan to discuss reincarnation. Harry Houdini visits Mother's and Father's family and plays with the little boy. Younger Brother watches how the famous Evelyn Nesbit is massaged by Emma Goldman; later on, he fights for general Zapata in Mexico. Freud comes to America with his disciples, Jung and Ferenczi, and he is so disappointed by American food and facilities that he finally confesses: "America is a mistake, a gigantic mistake" (33). The humorous dialogues between real and fictional characters also underscore Doctorow's point that fiction is more enjoyable and creative.

Doctorow's interesting amalgamation of historical and fictional characters that undergo transformations, his narrator with an ambiguous identity, his seemingly objective prose, which is anything but, and his use of intertextuality suggest that truth is constructed and history can only be fictional. Or, as Doctorow puts it in an interview with Larry McCaffery, "All history is composed. A professional historian won't make the claims for the objectivity of his discipline that the lay person grants him ... Fiction has no borders, everything is open. You have a limitless possibility of knowing the truth" (43-7).

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