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*From U.S.A. to Ragtime:  
Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness  
in Modern Fiction*

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WHEN E. L. DOCTOROW'S *Ragtime* recently soared to success among critics, academics, and the general public, a number of reviewers commented upon its marked resemblance to Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy. John Seelye, impressed by the structural and ideological connection between the two works, remarked that

what Doctorow has done, in effect, is to take the materials of Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*—a sequential series of fictional, autobiographical and historical episodes—and place them in a compactor, reducing the bulk and hopelessly blurring the edges of definition. And yet the result is an artifact which retains the specific gravity of Dos Passos' classic, being a massively cynical indictment of capitalistic, racist, violent, crude, crass and impotently middle-class America.<sup>1</sup>

Calling attention to an important contrast between *U.S.A.* and *Ragtime*, another critic observed:

. . . Logically, this is the kind of novel that should focus on the lives of its fictional characters, interrupting the narration only as Dos Passos did in the biographical sections of *U.S.A.*

What Doctorow manages to do, however, is even more intriguing. In Dos Passos' great trilogy, the biographical is used as a counterweight to the fictional. In Doctorow, the stuff of J. P. Morgan is, indeed, the stuff of fictional life.<sup>2</sup>

Other reviewers as well noted the admixture of fact and fiction in Doctorow's novel and compared his achievement to that of Dos Passos.<sup>3</sup> While these scattered observations have been helpful in

<sup>1</sup> John Seelye, "Doctorow's Dissertation," *New Republic*, CLXXIV (April 10, 1976), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Leonard Kriegel, "The Stuff of Fictional History," *Commonweal*, CII (Dec. 19, 1975), 632.

<sup>3</sup> See Roger Sale, review of *Ragtime*, *New York Review of Books*, XXII (Aug. 7, 1975), 21; Walter Clemens, "Houdini, Meet Ferdinand," *Newsweek* (July 14, 1975), 73; Marcus Cunliffe, "Material for Every Appetite," *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, CXIV (Feb. 11, 1976), 22; and Emma Tenant, "Boneyard," *Listener*, XCV (Jan. 22, 1976), 92. The influence

stimulating our awareness of the relation between these two authors, little effort has been made to ascertain the exact nature and extent of Dos Passos' influence upon Doctorow. One purpose of this essay will be to provide such an assessment, with the aim not only of illuminating Doctorow's sources for subject matter and technique but also of suggesting the continuing impact which Dos Passos' work is having in our time.

But such narrow "influence" studies have limited value at best. What emerges from an extended comparison of *U.S.A.* with *Ragtime* is an equally pronounced sense of the profound divergence between the two works—a divergence which comments significantly upon the changing strategies by which novelists of the twentieth century have chosen to depict historical materials in their fiction. For all its obvious similarity to the great trilogy of Dos Passos, *Ragtime* bears a closer relation in outlook to such diverse works as Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, John Berger's *G.*, or even John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. My primary goal here is thus to locate both *U.S.A.* and *Ragtime* in the more general development of the historical novel and to touch upon the major tendencies which historically conscious fiction is exhibiting today.

## I

Like *U.S.A.*, *Ragtime* contains a satiric commentary upon the development of American society in the early years of the twentieth century. Its time-span is for the most part confined to the prewar years chronicled in *The Forty-Second Parallel*, although it skims briefly over the years covered in *Nineteen-Nineteen* and foreshadows the era of *The Big Money*. While Doctorow evinces a far keener awareness of the problems stemming from sexual and racial oppression in the prewar period, he and Dos Passos are similarly concerned with formulating a radical critique of capitalism. At the same time both authors infuse into their portraits a curious admixture of nostalgia: for all the brutality underlying its bravado, the era of Theodore Roosevelt is seen as the final age of innocence before the decisive molding of modern America.

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of Dos Passos is also noted by Kenneth L. Donelson in the recent "Teaching Guide to E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*" (New York, 1976).

In addition, despite some evident disparities in technique, *Ragtime* and *U.S.A.* have a number of crucial structural elements in common. The anonymous Boy who provides Doctorow's most important angle of fictional vision—and who might indeed be the narrator himself as a child—performs a function very like that of Dos Passos' Camera Eye: both respond with almost excruciating sensitivity to the callousness of their historical worlds and thus furnish a naive but clear-eyed standard of ethical judgment for the narratives in which they appear. Moreover, while he has eliminated the dramatic breaks in narrative that characterize the earlier trilogy, Doctorow often adopts the broadly ranging public stance of Dos Passos' newsreels and offers a streamlined version of the *simultanéisme* which his predecessor had learned from the Cubists, the Italian Futurists, and such experimenters with cinematic montage as Eisenstein. Indeed, the opening passage of *Ragtime* in some ways echoes the ironic dawn-of-the-century newsreel that begins *The Forty-Second Parallel*:

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.<sup>4</sup>

What is more, although many "real" historical figures enter into the plot of Doctorow's novel with an audacity undreamed in Dos Passos' more somber work, *Ragtime* also contains numerous sketches of historical personages—e.g., Theodore Dreiser and Sigmund Freud—who, in the characteristic Dos Passos manner, remain peripheral to the main action of the fiction. Finally, the spectrum of American society reflected in the stories of the nameless Anglo-Saxon and Jewish families and in the dramatic saga of the black Coalhouse Walker furnishes a broadly representative microcosm of society in

<sup>4</sup> E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York, 1975), pp. 3–4. All further quotations from *Ragtime* will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

many ways akin to the rich fictional world built up around Mac and J. Ward Moorehouse, Margo Dowling, and Charley Anderson. In short, the four-part structure of *U.S.A.* survives in *Ragtime*, although in compressed and integrated form.

Dos Passos' trilogy has influenced not only the shape but also, I believe, much of the specific content of Doctorow's novel. There appears throughout *Ragtime* a multitude of characters and incidents, both major and minor, which contain distinct echoes for those familiar with *U.S.A.* For instance, the portrait of the prewar radical movement so central to the rhetoric of *The Forty-Second Parallel* is also sketched in *Ragtime*. The Lawrence textile strike, which is chronicled in *Camera Eye* (25), reappears in the story of Tateh, the socialist immigrant. Big Bill Haywood, the Wobbly leader, enters Tateh's life in Lawrence much as he enters Mac's during the Goldfield strike. Emma Goldman's lover, Ben Reitman, participates in the same I.W.W.-led San Diego free speech fight which causes Mac to give up his settled married life and join the insurgent rebels in Mexico. Younger Brother, the revolutionary idealist, disappears in the thick of the Mexican Revolution at the end of *Ragtime*, just as the more politically wavering Mac does at the end of *The Forty-Second Parallel*. Even the colorful portrait of Emma Goldman is prefigured in the *Camera Eye*'s description of the anarchist: "Afterwards we went to the Brevoort it was much nicer everybody who was anybody was there and there was Emma Goldman eating frankfurters and sauerkraut and everybody looked at Emma Goldman and at everybody else that was anybody and everybody was for peace and the cooperative commonwealth and the Russian revolution. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Doctorow clearly shares Dos Passos' fondness for the Wobblies and Anarchists of the prewar era. He introduces in *Ragtime*, however, a much broader range of historical personalities and events that are, I suggest, also drawn from the pages of *U.S.A.* Edison, Steinmetz, and Burbank, all subjects of biographies in *The Forty-Second Parallel*, parade through the pages of *Ragtime*, and furnish a similarly skeptical perspective on science and technology in the prewar years. The monstrous details of Teddy Roosevelt's safaris are treated with delight by Dos Passos and Doctorow alike. Halley's Comet

<sup>5</sup> John Dos Passos, *The Forty-Second Parallel, U.S.A.* (New York, 1937), p. 350. All further quotations from *U.S.A.* will be taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. Pagination is not continuous in the 1937 edition of *U.S.A.* (i.e., each volume begins on page one), so page citations will be accompanied by title of volume.

offers the same fascination for the Boy as it does for the young Camera Eye. Doctorow's Wilson, with his "prim renunciatory mouth of someone who had eaten fish with bones in it" (p. 259), calls to mind Dos Passos' hypocritical "public champion of right" with his "grey stony cold face" and "little smile around the mouth [that] looked as if it had been painted on afterwards" (*Nineteen-Nineteen*, pp. 243, 374).<sup>6</sup> And, finally, J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford, the respective villains of *Nineteen-Nineteen* and *The Big Money*, are immortalized in the discussion of reincarnation so central to the satiric political commentary of *Ragtime*. *U.S.A.* exercises not merely a peripheral influence upon *Ragtime*: it furnishes a crucial model for the blending of fact and fiction and supplies a mine of historical particulars that enrich the panorama of Doctorow's created world.

Doctorow's evident reliance upon Dos Passos' trilogy thus suggests that, contrary to the prevailing critical assessment, Dos Passos can perhaps more profitably be seen as a pioneer in contemporary treatments of fact in fiction than as a figure closing out the earlier naturalistic tradition in the American novel.<sup>7</sup> Doctorow's adaptation of Dos Passos' materials and form—as well as the influence of Dos Passos upon other contemporary authors, most notably Norman Mailer—suggests that the enduring power of Dos Passos' best work may lie not so much in his literary "collectivism" or even in his radical technical experimentation as in his construction of a fiction based upon the illusion that the central events depicted in his narrative "did," as Carlyle put it, "in very deed occur."<sup>8</sup>

## II

The very neatness of the parallelism between Dos Passos and Doctorow, however, makes all the more striking the important differences between the treatments of history in the two works. For his-

<sup>6</sup> A highly probable source for Dos Passos' cynical portrait of Wilson is John Maynard Keynes's *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York, 1920), which Dos Passos has termed "historical vituperation in the grand manner" (*Mr. Wilson's War*, Garden City, New York, 1962, p. 501).

<sup>7</sup> For such a critical assessment of Dos Passos, see Wilbur M. Frohock, *The Novel of Violence in America* (1950, rev. ed. 1957; rpt. Boston, 1964), pp. 3-51, and Andrew Hook's "Introduction" to the recent Twentieth-Century Views collection on Dos Passos (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Ralph W. Rader, "Literary Form in Factual Narrative: The Example of Boswell's *Johnson*," in *Essays in Eighteenth-Century Biography*, ed. Philip B. Daglian (Bloomington, Ind., 1968), p. 39.

tory provides the frame of the "plot" in *U.S.A.* with a solidity and confidence wholly alien to the conception of *Ragtime*—or, indeed, I would suggest, to that of any historical novel written in the last forty years. As Alfred Kazin has commented, "The old faith that 'history' exists objectively, that it has an ascertainable order, that it is what the novelist most depends on and appeals to, that 'history' even supplies the *structure* of the novel—this is what distinguishes the extraordinary invention that is Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* from most novels published since 1940."<sup>9</sup> Determining the exact nature of this "structure" will be crucial if we wish to understand Dos Passos' significance in the development of historical fiction and to account for Doctorow's subsequent divergence from his model.

What does it mean to say that history provides the frame for *U.S.A.*? In part, it means that the lives of the characters coincide with what Henry Adams called the "lines of force" in any historical epoch; as Georg Lukács would propose, it requires that the "crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis."<sup>10</sup> In this sense the intersecting fates of the characters in Dos Passos' fictional cross-section of the United States recall works of classical historical fiction like *War and Peace* or *Henry Emond*, in which the conflicts and dilemmas of fictional characters mirror the contending historical forces of the times. But, in the examples of Tolstoy and Thackeray—both of whom, incidentally, Dos Passos acknowledged as influences on *U.S.A.*—historical significance resides more in general currents than in specific figures and events: Kutuzov and Napoleon, Marlborough and the Pretender are peripheral elements in actions which find their center of interest in the historically representative experiences of a group of imagined characters. Indeed, remarks Lukács, in the classical historical novel "it matters little whether individual . . . facts are historically correct or not. . . . Detail . . . is only a means for achieving . . . historical faithfulness . . . , for making concretely clear the historical necessity of a concrete situation."<sup>11</sup> The battle of Borodino and the fall of Moscow

<sup>9</sup> Alfred Kazin, "Introduction," *The Forty-Second Parallel* (1930; rpt. New York, 1969), pp. v–vi.

<sup>10</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (1937; rpt. London, 1962), p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Lukács, p. 59.

are, accordingly, vital historical elements in *War and Peace* insofar as they endow with epic significance the fates of the fictional characters; but the reader is not led to question whether or not Tolstoy has described these military operations with utmost historical accuracy, or whether his characterization of Kutuzov corresponds to the personality configuration of the "real life" Russian general. Using Tolstoy's novel as a vehicle for distinguishing historical from fictive discourse, Murray Krieger has argued, "Tolstoy's Kutuzov . . . has a different 'material' status from that of history's Kutuzov," since *War and Peace* has a "different responsibility toward those beings and events which it is . . . presumably about" than does a work of historical narrative.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in *Henry Esmond* the curve of the hero's personal and political fortunes reflects and also illuminates the crucial shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy which is encompassed by the span of his life. Nonetheless, the reader's attention remains primarily fixed upon Esmond himself, and in particular upon the rising and falling plot centering upon the transfer of his affections from the Augustan Beatrice to the proto-Victorian Rachel. Indeed, in such a historical novel as *Esmond*, as Herbert Butterfield shrewdly observed, "sometimes a wrench has to be given to history in order to subdue it to the demands of the novel."<sup>13</sup> At the end of *Esmond*, such a "wrench" is in fact given: "And you might have been king," remarks Esmond to the lascivious Pretender, "if you hadn't come dangleing after Trix."<sup>14</sup> The "real" reasons for the Pretender's failure to attain the throne are audaciously distorted to accommodate the demands of the story: fiction takes command of history. Borrowing the useful formulation of Warner Berthoff, we may say that both *War and Peace* and *Esmond* are not primarily historical documents, in which the "problem is verification," but fictional documents, in which the "problem is veracity."<sup>15</sup>

In the strange medley of fact and fiction which is *U.S.A.*, however, history provides the frame for the novel in a far deeper sense. Not

<sup>12</sup> Murray Krieger, "Fiction, History, and Reality," *Critical Inquiry*, 1 (Dec., 1974), 344.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert Butterfield, *The Historical Novel: An Essay* (1924; rpt. Ann Arbor, Mich., 1974), p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *The History of Henry Esmond, Esq., The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, X (New York, 1910), p. 509.

<sup>15</sup> Warner Berthoff, "Fiction, History, Myth," in *Fictions and Events: Essays in Criticism and Literary History* (New York, 1971), pp. 39-40.

merely representative historical trends, but externally verifiable historical events, furnish the structure for the narrative, and the fictional lives which constitute the focus of interest in the classical historical novel are relegated to subordinate status. Where the fall of Moscow serves as a tragic backdrop for the death of Prince Andrei and the moral awakening of Pierre, the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti occupies the foreground of action in *The Big Money*, and Mary French's participation in the movement to stay the anarchists' deaths functions principally to flesh out and comment upon this historical event. Where Tolstoy's Kutuzov emerges as a semimythic figure embodying the spirit of an entire people, Dos Passos' Frederick Taylor, founder of the "American Plan," is inseparable from the actual person described in biography, history, and technological manuals.<sup>16</sup> And where the fate of Thackeray's Augustan hero furnishes a microcosmic fictional embodiment of historical change, even to the point of distorting historical particulars, the fate of Dos Passos' exemplar of the Wobblies, Mac, functions in quite a different way.

Indeed, to turn around Butterfield's helpful phrase, in Mac's case a wrench is given to fiction to subdue it to the demands of history. To begin with, the time sequence of Mac's story is cleverly juggled in order to highlight the rapid rise and fall of the I.W.W. during the first two decades of the century. Mac leaves Chicago when he is seventeen, and after a year of vagabondage he lands in San Francisco. Almost immediately he experiences the San Francisco earthquake of 1905 and then participates in the Goldfield, Nevada, strike of 1906-1907, the first significant strike led by the Wobblies. If we compute his age by dating forward from his childhood, then, he is about nineteen in 1906-1907. By the time he quits his wife during the San Diego free speech fight of 1912, however, he is depicted as being considerably older than twenty-five; and when he reflects back upon his life from the midst of the Mexican Revolution in 1915 or 1916, he reveals that he is "close to forty." Which is he—twenty-eight

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Dos Passos' account of Taylor's life adheres so closely to its source, Frank B. Copley's *Frederick W. Taylor: Father of Scientific Management*, that the biographer accused the novelist of plagiarism. See Charles Townsend Ludington's description of this episode in *The Fourteenth Chronicle: Letters and Diaries of John Dos Passos* (Boston, 1973), pp. 424, 490-491. Such strict adherence to biographical sources is characteristic of Dos Passos' practice in writing the biographies throughout *U.S.A.*

or twenty-nine, or ten years older? By telescoping two decades of fictional time into a single decade of historical time, Dos Passos has created the illusion that Mac's shift from militant class solidarity to petty bourgeois individualism encompasses not merely his youth but a significant span of his maturity. The "truth" of Mac's futile career is thus determined not by the internal coherence of fiction, but by the external coherence of history; he is less a character in his own right than a vehicle for exploring the weaknesses and contradictions of a broader historical phenomenon. Moreover, the thread of Mac's story is then abruptly dropped, without any kind of fictional resolution, in order to compound Dos Passos' historical critique: Mac's "dropping out" of *The Forty-Second Parallel* is a fictional analogy to the behavior of many "real life" Wobblies. Mac's career is, of course, being delineated in the picaresque mode, for which Dos Passos had a marked affinity. But in even the most episodic and open-ended of picaresque narratives, such as *Gil Blas*, which Dos Passos ardently admired, the reader is apprised of the hero's eventual fate. In *The Forty-Second Parallel*, however, the shaping power of the plot derives from history itself, and not from the principles of form inherent in any mode of fictional narrative. If we seek a "shaped" life which recapitulates *in parvo* the tensions of the I.W.W., we must look to the biographies of Big Bill Haywood or Wesley Everest: not because biography is *per se* a more structured species of narrative discourse than fiction, but because, for the imagination informing *U.S.A.*, history is more dynamic and coherent than fiction. Novelistic elements may enrich and broaden the scope of *U.S.A.*, but the principal thread of unity in the narrative is history itself. *U.S.A.* thus encompasses but also transcends the strategy of the classical historical novel, making historical actuality the focus of literary interest and perceiving in the flow of public events a plot with an inherently moving pattern of rise and fall. Indeed, in his overall conception Dos Passos approaches more closely the tragic historical imagination of Gibbon—whom Dos Passos on several occasions acknowledged as his most valued mentor in the writing of the trilogy.

Within the framework for discussing historical fiction which I have set forth above, *Ragtime* occupies a peculiar position. Doctorow's practice clearly diverges from that of Dos Passos insofar as the informing "plot" of his novel is patently fictional. For all his

boldness in making "characters" of historical figures like Houdini and Emma Goldman, Doctorow treats history ultimately as motif—what one critic has called "post-Passos pastiche"<sup>17</sup>—and relies upon Coalhouse Walker's supremely fictional clash with the racist establishment to provide his novel with a sense of direction and a point of climax. It bears mention here that the story of Coalhouse Walker is, like the rest of *Ragtime*, cleverly derivative; but its source is not in historical fact but, rather, in fiction: in a little-known 1930's novel by George Milburn entitled *Catalogue*<sup>18</sup> and in Heinrich Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*. Milburn's novel climaxes with the lynching of a black owner of a Model T who has been viewed as "uppity" by a redneck neighbor; while Kleist's novella chronicles the resort to arson and outlawry on the part of a medieval horse-dealer who, after refusing to pay an unjust toll, has lost his horses and failed to obtain redress from the Elector of Saxony. There are many parallels with Kleist's tale in *Ragtime*, starting with Doctorow's daring pun on "Kohlhaas" in his own hero's name.<sup>19</sup> The significance of these sources lies, however, not so much in what they reveal about Doctorow's literary tastes as in what they indicate about the relative weights which he assigns to historical and fictional elements in his narrative. The first half of *Ragtime* may provide a highly entertaining survey of notorious historical figures of the day, but it is wilfully chaotic in its sudden shifts of character and locale: only in the second half, with the mounting crisis of Coalhouse Walker's story, does the novel attain momentum. However amusing history may be, Doctorow seems to be saying, it does not provide a sufficiently coherent—or, perhaps, merely a sufficiently interesting—pattern around which to structure a causally related train of events. No Sacco and Vanzetti

<sup>17</sup> Tenant, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup> For the discovery of this source, I am indebted to Seelye, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> The parallels between *Michael Kohlhaas* and *Ragtime* are close to the point of imitation. Just as Coalhouse Walker's name echoes that of Kleist's hero, Willie Conklin, Coalhouse's redneck adversary, calls to mind Wenzel Von Tronka, Kohlhaas's opponent. Kohlhaas's two black horses, the subject of his dispute with Von Tronka, are a medieval analogy to the Model T. Like Sarah, Kohlhaas's wife is crushed in the chest when attempting to plead with the powers-that-be on her husband's behalf, and shortly thereafter she dies. For more on the relation between the two tales, see John Ditsky, "The German Source of *Ragtime*: A Note," *Ontario Review*, IV (Spring-Summer, 1976), 84–86. As Walter Clemens has commented, however, the "confounding of fact and fiction is particularly intricate here, since Kleist's novella was based on an actual revolutionary incident in medieval Germany" (Clemens, p. 76).

climaxes for Doctorow: fiction—albeit a borrowed one—must provide the model for his plot.

This subordination of the historical to the fictional calls to mind Thackeray's rather cavalier treatment of historical particulars in *Esmond*. Can *Ragtime* thus be seen as representing a return to the practice of the classical historical novel? Not quite. In the first place, historical figures like Kutuzov or the Pretender may be "wrenched" from strict historical fidelity in order to accommodate the demands of fiction, but such departures from the historical record must be confined to the realm of plausibility. Events so audaciously "invented" as Freud's and Jung's trip through the Tunnel of Love at Coney Island or Emma Goldman's massage of Evelyn Nesbit clearly violate this canon of historical decorum. Doctorow is doing something quite different here: he is utilizing the reader's encyclopedic knowledge that a historical Freud, Jung, Goldman, and Nesbit did in fact exist in order to pose an open challenge to the reader's preconceived notions about what historical "truth" actually is. Asked on one occasion whether Goldman and Nesbit ever really met, Doctorow has boldly replied, "They have now."<sup>20</sup> In his satiric debunking of Swift, Addison, and Marlborough, Thackeray never approached such willful manipulation of the historical record: the venture of the two writers differs not in degree but in kind.

In the second place, Doctorow diverges from classical historical fiction in his treatment of the novel's main fictional personality. For fundamental to the strategy of a Thackeray or a Tolstoy is a necessary condition that the principal invented characters be, in the fullest sense, "typical" of the age which they inhabit and illuminate—as *Esmond* is "typical" of the wavering aristocrat witnessing the decline of absolute monarchy. Lukács argues, "typical" characters are those who "in their psychology and destiny always represent social trends and historical forces."<sup>21</sup> While the anonymous Anglo-Saxon and immigrant families in *Ragtime* are clearly representative of their age, it is significant that Coalhouse Walker, the novel's hero, is in no way "typical" of the prewar years; nor is the climactic event of the novel a plausible occurrence of the times. This is not to imply that significant struggles against racism did not take place during the

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Donelson, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Lukács, p. 34.

Progressive period. These were, after all, the years of the Brownsville rebellion and of W. E. B. DuBois' vigorous ideological opposition to the concessionary politics of Booker T. Washington; during this period the seeds were sown for the Garveyite movement and for the massive antiracist upheavals in the nation's major cities immediately after the war. But Doctorow, it seems, has deliberately overlooked many of the fictional possibilities inherent in the historical materials at hand. The terrorist bombings of the "Coalhouse" gang, their designation of themselves as the "Provisional American Government," their takeover of the Morgan mansion as a symbolic political gesture—these are elements more distinctly reminiscent of the 1960's than of the ragtime era. Both the hero and the climactic event of the novel are, I think, outrageously and deliberately anachronistic. Doctorow is commenting upon the age of Wilson by importing a dramatic example from the age of Nixon, and his point is, quite clearly, that the forms of present-day racism have their roots in the past. While Doctorow's ethical strategy here is effective, however, it also carries the implication that historical change is itself chimerical. A primary goal of most nineteenth-century historical novelists was to recreate a bygone era in the fullness of its specificity: reacting against the eighteenth-century notion of "generic man"—epitomized by Fielding's lawyer who is not only alive, but has been so for four thousand years—they implicitly endorsed a progressive view of history and sought to uncover what was uniquely characteristic of a chosen epoch in the past. In *Ragtime*, however, Doctorow seems to be implying that accurate representation of the past is less crucial than revelation of the haunting continuity of the past in the present. Just as his Emma Goldman and Freud and Jung tease our epistemological assumptions about how we know historical fact, his proto-Black Panther hero teases our complacency about the supposed superiority of our own time over the age of Teddy Roosevelt. As a "typical" historical representative of the ragtime era Coalhouse Walker is a fraud; but as a means of commenting upon the racism continuing in our own time he projects an alarming degree of truth.

What I hope to have demonstrated thus far is that both *U.S.A.* and *Ragtime*, in different ways, represent a significant departure from the form and outlook of classical historical fiction. Although Dos Passos creates a typical and microcosmic fictional world, he subordinates

the fates of his invented characters to the "plot" of history itself. Although Doctorow subordinates historical particulars to a structural pattern which is clearly fictional, he aims less at constructing a fully convincing representative picture of the Progressive era than at enhancing the historical self-consciousness of his readers. What the two writers share, in contradistinction to nineteenth-century historical novelists, is a reduced reliance upon the mimetic illusion and an increased tendency to intrude "documentary" particulars into the realm of fiction. Where they diverge is in the effect which they extract from these particulars: Dos Passos frames his narrative around facts which are ordinarily held to be "true," in the sense that they are externally verifiable; whereas Doctorow treats with equal aplomb facts that are "true" and those that are "created," thus calling into question our concept of factuality and, indeed, of history itself.

### III

Before we investigate the important differences between *U.S.A.* and *Ragtime* as works of historical fiction, it is useful to establish their common derivation from an ancestry which predates the classical historical novel of the nineteenth-century—namely, that grouping of factual and pseudofactual narratives popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, best typified in the work of Defoe.<sup>22</sup> Works like *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Moll Flanders* are "historical" not in the usual sense of the word—i.e., as evocations of past eras—but in the sense that they make an implicit, if at times false, claim to veracity. Their narrators assume the pose of real persons telling of real events, and much of the reader's pleasure in these narratives derives from this pronounced effect of historicity—even if at times it is, paradoxically enough, felt to be an illusion. The complexity of this grouping of narratives, however—and its important bearing upon the work of Dos Passos and Doctorow—stems from the variety of ends to which this illusion of factuality can be directed. In *Moll Flanders*, for example, the narrator claims to be a "real"

<sup>22</sup> For a stimulating assessment of Defoe's reliance upon factual illusion, see Ralph W. Rader, "Defoe, Richardson, Joyce, and the Concept of Form in the Novel," in *Autobiography, Biography, and the Novel: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar* (Los Angeles, 1973), pp. 31-72. Rader also discusses the formal qualities of nonfiction in his "Literary Form in Factual Narrative: The Example of Boswell's *Johnson*," *passim*.

person, but the historical plausibility of her tale collapses rapidly and the reader almost immediately recognizes her pseudofactual ontology: Moll is, in the fullest sense, a fraud, though one that is to be openly acknowledged and enjoyed as such. The link between this narrative approach and what Doctorow is doing in *Ragtime* is evident. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, on the other hand, Defoe utilizes a number of the tools of fiction, yet the ultimate goal of his work is to evoke by imaginative means a historically true picture of London at the time of the plague.<sup>23</sup> Here the reader willingly accepts numerous fictional accretions, such as the lengthy story of Thomas and John, as reinforcing elements in a work whose principal effect remains primarily factual. The kinship between this strategy and Dos Passos' achievement in *U.S.A.* should be equally apparent. In addition, there appeared at this time a number of falsified biographies and travel journals, of which Madame d'Aulnoy's *The Lady's Travels into Spain* furnishes a good example, that baldly lied about the historicity of their content and presented imagined incidents as externally verifiable fact. Dos Passos clearly has little relation to this tradition (although readers who dispute his political outlook might be led to challenge the "factuality" of such evidently partisan diatribes as his biography of Woodrow Wilson). The way in which Doctorow flirts with true and false "facts" in *Ragtime*, however, suggests a possible relation to these earlier "false true documents"—although Doctorow obviously does not share the fraudulent ends of a Madame d'Aulnoy.

In short, the peculiar richness in the varied factual and pseudofactual strategies of these prenovelistic "true histories" suggests a seminal relation between these earlier works and the works of Dos Passos and Doctorow—and perhaps, of a whole host of writers of the contemporary period. Interestingly enough, both Dos Passos and Doctorow have been most willing to acknowledge their indebtedness to Defoe. Dos Passos praised Defoe's conception of the "novel as natural history" and admitted that he learned from the earlier writer's "behavioristic" method of "generating the insides of characters by external description."<sup>24</sup> More explicitly, Doctorow has

<sup>23</sup> Michael Moore Boardman (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1975) offers an able comparison of Defoe's various factual and pseudofactual strategies, on which I have based some of my observations.

<sup>24</sup> Ludington, pp. 452, 522.

described his approach in *Ragtime* as a resurrection of the method of Defoe:

[Defoe] claimed to be the 'editor' of 'Robinson Crusoe.' At the same time he relied on the public's knowledge of Alexander Selkirk [the real-life model for Crusoe]. Selkirk's whole life was justified by 'giving' Defoe his life story.

From the beginning, novelists have used strategies, have mixed up fact and fiction. That's the region where 'Ragtime' is located—halfway between fiction and history.

Kenneth Rexroth said that 'Moll Flanders' is a false document because Defoe wrote in a voice of a prostitute. My book is a false document. A true document would be the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution or the Watergate tapes.<sup>25</sup>

Norman Holland has speculated that, beginning in the late Renaissance, writers based their narratives upon balanced claims to historicity and fiction because they feared that their readers would distrust any work which admitted to be wholly a product of the creative imagination.<sup>26</sup> While the question has of course been of continuing interest since the time of Plato, critics and writers of this period were especially preoccupied with the issue of truth and falsehood in literature.<sup>27</sup> Sidney based much of his argument in the *Apology* on the contention that poetry projects a "truth" superior to that of history, while Bishop Pierre Daniel Huet, one of the earliest commentators on the emerging genres of fiction, decried the dishonesty of simulated histories "invented only for default of truth."<sup>28</sup> The historical world has obviously undergone vast alteration since the time of Sidney, Huet, and Defoe; yet it is possible that some of the ontological skepticism experienced by earlier writers and audiences pertains again today, though for very different reasons. Bernard Bergonzi has established such a link between contemporary writers of documentary fiction and eighteenth-century writers working in the pseudofactual mode. Both, he notes, share a

<sup>25</sup> Mel Gussow, "Novelist Syncopating History in *Ragtime*," *New York Times* (July 11, 1975), p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York, 1961), p. 70.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the ontological problems encountered by the Renaissance writer, see William Nelson, *Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of The Renaissance Storyteller* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973).

<sup>28</sup> Bishop Pierre Daniel Huet, *A Treatise of Romances and Their Original*, trans. anon. (London, 1672), p. 9.

“comparable uncertainty about the nature of the form and its power to convey reality”—the principal difference being that the uncertainty of the earlier writers “stem[med] not from extreme sophistication or critical self-consciousness, but from simple temerity [sic] about the enterprise of writing novels.”<sup>29</sup> Have readers begun once again to question the value of fictions and to hunger for documents—false or true—more explicitly related to their own world? Have writers lost a degree of faith in the powers of the mimetic imagination, preferring instead to rely upon a concrete “sense of the real”?

The historian Barbara Tuchman has noted that particularly rich opportunities are opening up for the contemporary historian:

Given the current decline of the novel and the parallel decline of poetry and the drama, public interest has turned toward the literature of actuality. It may be that in a time of widening uncertainty and chronic stress the historian’s voice is the most needed, the more so as others seem inadequate, often absurd. While the reasons may be argued, the opportunity, I think, is plain for the historian to become the major interpreter in literary experience of man’s role in society.<sup>30</sup>

We may not fully agree with Tuchman about the “decline of the novel”: certainly large numbers of “novelistic” fictions appear every year, and, as Malcolm Bradbury reminds us, there is a continuing impetus toward “realism” in contemporary fiction.<sup>31</sup> The difference between the treatments of fact in *U.S.A.* and *Ragtime*, however, suggest that significant changes have indeed occurred in the strategy of the historical novel over the past forty years. In a sense, *U.S.A.* can be seen as occupying a watershed position in the development of the genre, insofar as it represents an amalgam of the microcosmic portrayal of the historical world embodied in the nineteenth-century historical novel with the felt sense of historical truth informing many works of the time of Defoe and before. And the trilogy achieves such a balance largely because it is posited upon an assumption that historical reality is knowable, coherent, significant, and inherently moving. It would appear, however, that since the time of Dos Passos there has occurred a curious polarization of these

<sup>29</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (New York, 1970), p. 189.

<sup>30</sup> Barbara Tuchman, “The Historian’s Opportunity,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, L (Feb. 28, 1967), 27–28.

<sup>31</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, “The Postwar English Novel,” in *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel* (London, 1973), pp. 167–180.

two strategies. Writers interested in retaining the specifically historical have tended to opt for a far narrower canvas, taking a small slice of historical reality and endowing it with "plot" and significance. Works such as Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, Hunter Thompson's *Hell's Angels*, or Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*<sup>32</sup> typify this "documentary" grouping: they bring to bear the techniques of fiction upon their reconstruction of history, but they take care to define and limit the particular segment of historical reality which is their concern and to shun any broader interpretation of historical change. On the other hand, writers committed to a full imaginative recreation of the past have moved in an increasingly "apocalyptic" direction, subordinating "fact" to a mythic or highly personal view of history. The writer working in this mode often relies upon his readers to supply necessary information—as Fowles does with his barely disguised intrusion of Christina Rossetti at the end of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—but utilizes this sense of immediate historicity to create an effect of the bizarre. In the "apocalyptic" historical novel history is itself ultimately absurd, and whatever coherence the novelist extracts from it is a reflection not of any pattern immanent in his materials but of his own narrative control. Other examples of "apocalyptic" historical novels would include Pynchon's *V.*, Berger's *G.*,<sup>33</sup> Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—and Doctorow's *Ragtime*.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Gaines's work is somewhat different from the other three cited in that its materials are largely fictional. Nonetheless, he assumes the stance of an "editor" of taped interviews, and the goal of *The Autobiography* is to convince the reader that such a person as Miss Jane Pittman really did exist. *The Autobiography* is thus pseudofactual in the same way that *A Journal of the Plague Year* is: fictional material is used for a factual end.

<sup>33</sup> The curious similarity between the anonymous titles and central figures of the two novels suggests, perhaps, a parallel concern with steering away from the depiction of the fleshed-out, "typical" hero or heroine so central to the traditional historical novel.

<sup>34</sup> In recent months there have appeared two book-length studies which examine the phenomenon of the "nonfiction novel" in considerable depth. John Hollowell's *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1977) explores the social and political context of recent documentary fiction and provides some useful insights into the literary techniques employed by the New Journalists. Hollowell generally avoids, however, any discussion of the larger theoretical and literary-historical questions raised by the works he examines. Mas'ud Zavarzadeh's *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel* (Urbana, Ill., 1977) is a considerably more ambitious enterprise. Zavarzadeh provides a thorough analysis of the epistemological underpinnings of the nonfiction novel, offers a cogent description of its generic identity, and gives illuminating readings of a wide range of texts. He coins a disturbing number of neologisms,

Doctorow himself has been most explicit about his sense of alienation from the school of “documentary” writers (who have also been called “new journalists” and “nonfiction novelists”). His plan in *Ragtime*, he states, is to “deify” facts: “give ’em all sorts of facts—made up facts, distorted facts. It’s the reverse of Truman Capote. I see all these new journalists as guys on the other side.”<sup>35</sup> Pursuing the epistemological implications of this practice, he has remarked that he is currently testing the proposition that

there’s no more fiction or nonfiction now, there’s only narrative. All the nonfiction means of communication employ narrative today. Television news is packaged using devices of drama and suspense and image. News-magazines package fact as fiction—in the sense of organizing and composing the material esthetically. There’s something else: the reader of a novel usually thinks, well, these things really happened to the author, but for legal or other reasons he’s changed everybody’s name. In ‘Ragtime’ I’ve just twisted that around and written about imaginary events in the lives of undisguised people.<sup>36</sup>

In fundamental outlook, however, Doctorow may not be as distant from Capote as he believes. Georg Lukács, discussing the writer’s alienation from history in the modern period, has observed that, once the writer loses faith in the direction of history, it either becomes “a collection and reproduction of interesting facts about the past” or “a chaos to be ordered as one likes.”<sup>37</sup> David Lodge draws a similar conclusion from his analysis of contemporary fiction:

*The Armies of the Night* and *Giles Goatboy* are equally products of the apocalyptic imagination. The assumption behind such experiments is that our ‘reality’ is so extraordinary, horrific or absurd that the methods of conventional realistic imitation are no longer adequate. . . . Art can no longer compete with life on equal terms, showing the universal in the particular. The alternatives are either to cleave to the particular—to ‘tell it like it is’—or to abandon history altogether and construct pure fictions

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however, and insists perhaps too strongly upon the novelty of the genre and upon the prevalence of absurdist philosophical premises among all writers of contemporary nonfiction novels. Zavarzadeh’s book nonetheless makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the relationship between the documentary novel and contemporary fiction in general, and it boldly challenges a number of widely held beliefs about generic distinctions.

<sup>35</sup> Gussow, p. 12. In the original version, the article read “defy” facts. This error was corrected, however, in the next day’s edition of the *Times*.

<sup>36</sup> Clemens, p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Lukács, pp. 176, 181.

which reflect in an emotional or metaphorical way the discords of contemporary experience.<sup>38</sup>

The imagination which conceives Houdini as "the last of the great shameless mother-lovers" (p. 30) is, perhaps, subtly allied with that which insists that Robert Lowell was on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in the fall of 1967: both, in Doctorow's words, "deify" facts—the principal difference being that Mailer displays the journalist's reverence for facts which are externally verifiable, while Doctorow pays equal homage to facts corroborated in the historical record and those which are the products of his own imagination.

It is, however, with the contemporary school of "apocalyptic" historical novelists—whom Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, in his recent *The Mythopoeic Reality*, would dub "transfictionists"—<sup>39</sup> that Doctorow has a closer affinity. To group under this single rubric such diverse writers as Barth, Fowles, Pynchon, Berger, García Márquez, and Doctorow is, of course, a problematic enterprise. First, as Martin Green has pointed out, Berger, Fowles, and Doctorow actually belong to a subgenre within this grouping, whose distinguishing characteristic is, in addition to elegance, taste, tact, and erudition, a penchant for "teas[ing] . . . the reader . . . to discover the imaginative status of [their] characters and events—the status and character of the imaginative experience he is being offered."<sup>40</sup> Second, it is questionable whether a writer like Pynchon can be said to be "apocalyptic" in *Gravity's Rainbow* in exactly the same way that he is in *V.*: in Pynchon and other contemporary novelists, the 1970's may be witnessing a somewhat different version of the "apocalyptic" outlook of the decade before. Nonetheless, what the various writers of this tendency have in common is a fundamental skepticism about the "objective" nature of historical reality—or, to put it another way, about the necessary subjectivity which any writer infuses into his attempt to reconstruct a picture of the past. Aware that distortions of "history" have often been legitimated in the name of objectivity, writers like Berger and García Márquez are openly challenging the positivist view of history: hence the patent mysticism of Melquiades's

<sup>38</sup> David Lodge, "The Novelist at the Crossroads," in *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971), p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> Zavarzadeh, pp. 38–41.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Green, "Nostalgia Politics," *American Scholar*, XLV (Winter, 1975–1976), 841.

prophecy to the unchanged generations in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and the equally mystical process by which G. discovers a rationale for committed political action in the present through reversion to memories of senseless violence buried deep in his subconscious mind.

In one sense what such novelists are confronting is an epistemological problem which has been familiar to practicing historians and philosophers of history for some time: the crucial distinction between what Charles Beard called "history as past actuality" and "history as thought."<sup>41</sup> In another sense, however, the pronounced historical self-consciousness of a Fowles or a Barth significantly corresponds to the historicist tendency of much post-World War II historical writing, which projects a keen awareness of the historian's inbuilt bias and tends to shun the positivist application of general "covering laws" to a given series of historical particulars.<sup>42</sup> Doctorow's bold grafting of fictional invention onto the historical experience of a Houdini or a Goldman is curiously related to Collingwood's definition of history as a "web of imaginative construction":<sup>43</sup> implicit in both is an open acknowledgement of the process of selection—indeed, of creation—which is inherent in the task of the historical writer. Like Tom Stoppard in *Travesties* or Nicholas Meyer in *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, Doctorow wants not only to entertain his audience with audacious historical improbabilities but also deliberately to carry the process of historical "creation" to the threshold of fantasy. "One of the governing ideas of this book," he has declared, "is that facts are as much of an illusion as anything else."<sup>44</sup>

There is no denying that Doctorow's particular method of playing fast and loose with the materials of history has a definite appeal—as does that of a number of other contemporary historical novelists. In his extreme self-consciousness, however, there is also a certain mannered quality which we may occasionally find bothersome. It

<sup>41</sup> Charles Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *American Historical Review*, XXXIX (Jan. 1934), 219; rpt. in Hans Meyerhoff, ed., *The Philosophy of History in Our Time: An Anthology* (Garden City, N.Y., 1959), p. 140.

<sup>42</sup> For a stimulating account of the relationship between contemporary historicism and the "apocalyptic" novel—especially *V.*—see Mark A. Weinstein, "The Creative Imagination in Fiction and History," *Genre*, IX (Summer, 1976), 263-277.

<sup>43</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; rpt. London, 1967), p. 242.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Donelson, p. 22.

would not be quite accurate to say that *Ragtime* is decadent, since it is clearly radical in outlook and proposes an unillusioned confrontation with class, race, and sexual oppression in the nation's past—and present. But if Doctorow's mannerism is not itself decadent, it is, like all mannerism, associated with a period of decadence; if it does not suggest that history is meaningless, it does imply that the meanings we find in it are chimerical and at best highly subjective. What I ultimately find disturbing about *Ragtime*—and about many other works of contemporary historical fiction, whether “apocalyptic” or “documentary”—is its underlying postulate that whatever coherence emerges from the represented historical world is attributable to the writer's power as teller of his story, with the result that the process of historical reconstruction itself, rather than what is being represented, comes to the fore. “Once History inhabits a crazy house,” writes Mailer, “egotism may be the last tool left to History.”<sup>45</sup> For all its cynicism about the possibilities of rescuing history from the grasp of POWER SUPERPOWER, I find *U.S.A.* a more inspiring work, insofar as it leaves one with the sense that the problems which Dos Passos confronts reside to a large extent in his materials themselves, and not just in the working of his own historical imagination. Like the Beard of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, Dos Passos boldly incorporates his selective bias into his depiction of past events and directs his skepticism not toward the integrity of his own enterprise, but toward the integrity of people and forces at work in his represented historical world. All readers may not share the view of class conflict which informs the best work of Beard or Dos Passos. Yet it would be difficult to gainsay the comprehensiveness and power of the materialist treatments of history in *An Economic Interpretation* or *U.S.A.*, or to suggest more than a handful of works of the postwar era which approach them in scope or rhetorical power. For the majority of novelists and historians writing today, history does indeed seem to inhabit a crazy house, and the ingenious strategies which they adopt to uncover a method in its madness bear testament to the fundamental alienation from history experienced by even the most resilient imaginations of our time.

<sup>45</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (New York, 1968), p. 54.