THE NEW AMERICAN WRITING: Essays on American Literature Since 1970

edited by

Graham Clarke

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Introduction

by GRAHAM CLARKE

The contemporary American writer is in no way a part of the social and political scene. He is therefore not muzzled, for no one fears his bite; nor is he called upon to compose. Whatever work he does must proceed from a reckless inner need. The world does not beckon, nor does it greatly reward. This is not a boast or a complaint. It is a fact. Serious writing must nowadays be written for the sake of the art. The condition I describe is not extraordinary. Certain scientists, philosophers, historians, and many mathematicians do the same, advancing their causes as they can. One must be satisfied with that.

—William Gass, Preface to *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country and Other Stories* (1976)

The daily newspapers, then, fill us with wonder and awe (is it possible? is it happening?), also with sickness and despair. The fixes, the scandals, the insanity, the idiocy, the piety, the lies, the noise. . . . Recently, in *Commentary* Bejamin DeMott wrote that the 'deeply lodged suspicion of the times [is] namely, that events and individuals are unreal, and that power to alter the course of the age, of my life and your life, is actually vested nowhere.' There seems to be, said DeMott, a kind of 'universal descent into unreality'. The other night—to give a benign example of the descent—my wife turned on the radio and heard the announcer offering a series of cash prizes for the three best television plays of five minutes' duration written by children. It is difficult at such moments to find one's way around the kitchen. Certainly few days go by when incidents far less benign fail to remind us of what DeMott is talking about. When Edmund Wilson says that after reading *Life* magazine he feels he does not belong to the country depicted there, that he does not live in this country, I understand what he means.

—Philip Roth, *Writing American Fiction* (1961)

'My project', he told us, 'is to learn where to go by discovering where I am by reviewing where I've been—where we've all been. There's a kind of snail in the Maryland marshes—perhaps I invented him—that makes his shell as he goes along out of whatever he comes across, cementing it with his own juices, and at the same time makes his path instinctively toward the best available material for his shell; he carries his history on his back, living in it, adding new and larger spirals to it from the present as he grows. That snail's pace has become my pace—but I'm going in circles, following my own trail! I've quit reading and writing; I've lost track of who I am; my name's just a jumble of letters; so's the whole body of literature: strings of letters and empty spaces, like a code that I've lost the key to.'

—John Barth, *Chimera* (1972)

When we talk about the 'rise' or 'death' of literary genres, we are talking about status, mainly. The novel no longer has the supreme status it enjoyed for ninety years (1875–1965), but neither has the New Journalism won it for itself. The status of the New Journalism is not secured by any means. In some quarters the contempt for it is boundless . . . even breathtaking. . . . With any luck at all the new genre will never be sanctified, never be exalted, never given a theology. . . . All I meant to say when I started out was that the New Journalism can no longer be ignored in an artistic sense. The rest I take back. . . . The hell with it. . . . Let chaos reign . . . louder music, more wine. . . . The hell with the standings. . . . The top rung is up for grabs. All the old traditions are exhausted, and no new one is yet established. All bets are off! the odds are cancelled! it's anybody's ball game! . . . the horses are all drugged! the track is glass! . . . and out of such glorious chaos may come, from the most unexpected source, in the most unexpected form, some nice new fat Star Streamer Rockets that will light up the sky.

—Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (1973)

Later I got out of Berkeley and went to New York and later I got out of New York and came to Los Angeles. What I have made for myself is personal, but is not exactly peace. Only one person I knew at Berkeley later discovered an ideology, dealt himself into history, cut himself loose from both his own dread

and his own time. A few of the people I knew at Berkeley killed themselves not long after. Another attempted suicide in Mexico and then, in a recovery which seemed in many ways a more advanced derangement, came home and joined the Bank of America's three-year executive-training program. Most of us live less theatrically, but remain the survivors of a peculiar and inward time. If I could believe that going to a barricade would affect man's fate in the slightest I would go to that barricade, and quite often I wish that I could, but it would be less than honest to say that I expect to happen upon such a happy ending.

—Joan Didion, 'On the Morning after the Sixties' (1970)

The word 'new' seems endemic to American culture, surfacing constantly as an epithet to define the essential terms, and intentions, of the culture's beliefs and values. The 'new', as such, speaks not just to America's modern condition, nor just to its novel and distinctive place in history (a continuing mission to create a new society); but to its belief in continuing change. 'New' thus has about it a sense of American idealism, for it does not threaten the culture so much as speak to its most positive aspects: its optimism, pragmatism, and, of course, openness to the present and innovation. Harold Rosenberg's description of the United States as a 'tradition of the new' is, thus, both apposite and pertinent and gives precedence to a continuing belief in the radical. New is, thus, now.

And certainly one major tenet of the American literary tradition has always been fuelled by a belief that part of its destiny is to speak to and for the new. It is as fundamental to Whitman and Emerson as it is to William Carlos Williams and Dos Passos just as, in a more general context, it underpins so many other developments in American painting, photography, music, dance, film and, of course, architecture. Ezra Pound's dictum that the American artist must 'make it new' is pervasive; as much a part of the writer's perspective as is Whitman's declaration that he would 'strike up for a new world'.

The 1960s in particular seemed to take upon themselves this sense of the radical, and much of the literature from the period reflects an underlying (but misplaced) sense of

optimism based on what it was felt the times could create. The expansive rhetoric of John F. Kennedy offered a return to American idealism and a resurgence of American myth and possibility. As it moved away from the 'tranquilized fifties' so America, once again, seemed on the verge of yet another new beginning and new direction. In 1967, for example, Penguin Books published Donald Allen's and Robert Creeley's *The New Writing in the U.S.A.* (Allen had already edited his central *The New American Poetry*): an anthology of prose and poetry which reflected much of this sense of possibility and new-found impetus in a recharged and radical literature which found much of its imaginative energy from its use of American myth. What made it speak so directly to the times was what the editors saw as a 'shift' on the part of the writers,

> first, to their own places: the actual conditions of their lives; and second, westward—towards the West and the Pacific slopes of America, to the Orient, and southward to Central and South America.[1]

A cultural geography which, in its echoes of Whitman, saw in place an alternative reality: an ideal condition central to the culture's continuing sense of destiny and mission.

Such a perspective hardly seems possible from this point in the 1980s. Indeed one of the consistent concerns of the new writing since the '60s is the extent to which geography and the myth of American place has succumbed *to* history. Where it remains central is when 'place' is asked to yield a *lost* history: a separate cultural nexus to counter the times in which the ethnic writer finds him or her self. Indeed, one of the common characteristics of the writers considered in this volume is the way in which each is concerned *with* history: as condition, process, abstraction, fiction; as a force which increasingly seems to overwhelm and threaten. History bears down on the writing to at once question not just the validity of the 'self' but, in many instances, the very possibility of 'art' and of the 'word' to understand the world at all.

Watergate and Vietnam, of course, have for many compounded this sense of confusion and madness; but there is a larger, more pervasive atmosphere in much recent writing

which, as part of a larger historical condition, constantly qualifies any attempt to be 'new'. If in many ways the '70s and '80s have seen a retrenchment on the part of the writer, they have done so against a larger sense of things being at once more complex and disordered whilst equally seeming to be more predetermined and categorized. What Tony Tanner called, in his seminal study of post-war American fiction, *City of Words* (1971) part of an 'abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life'[2] has increasingly been felt amidst a reality which itself seems meaningless and unknowable. What Philip Roth saw as the attempt to 'make credible' an American reality which 'stupefies' and 'sickens', and what Norman Podhoretz called 'the incredible reality of American life in the twentieth century', has seemingly become more incredible and more problematic.[3] It has become for many writers what Umberto Eco has called a 'furious hyperreality'[4]: a surreal otherness increasingly beyond any attempt to picture or understand the terms on which it exists.

Given such circumstances the American self does indeed seem under what Saul Bellow has called a 'great strain': a predicament according to Christopher Lasch where the self is 'overwhelmed by the cruelty, disorder, and sheer complexity of modern history'. In such circumstances the writer 'retreats into a solipsistic mode of discourse' and thus 'The only art that seems appropriate to such an age . . . is an anti-art or minimal art.'[5] If one response has been towards just such a minimalist aesthetic, in other writers the response has been the very opposite. The period, as we might expect, has been characterized by an insistent and continuing plurality of effort and of changing and unpredictable developments. Thus Tom Wolfe's claim in *The New Journalism* (1975) that this 'new' genre would 'wipe out the novel as literature's main event'[6] is as welcomingly contradicted by the publication of his own mammoth *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1988) as is the sense that partial groupings and themes cannot match or do justice to the period's most obvious achievement: what has been called its 'insistent diversity of the ways in which experience can be organized in prose'.[7]

Certainly this has remained, rightly or wrongly, one of the

major distinctions between American and English writing over the same period. Bernard Bergonzi, for example, was adamant in his 1970 study *The Situation of the Novel* that there was a qualitative difference between the two literatures: the one (English) increasingly conservative and limited; the other (American) increasingly innotative and exploratory: open to the terms and conditions of the age in which it was written—a response on the part of the American writer which he defined as 'the constant probing of the relation between fiction and reality'.[8]

Indeed, in an anthology of American prose writing published nine years later in 1979, the *New American Writing* (*Granta*) Bergonzi's distinctions were reiterated with the fervour of fundamental belief. A collection which included pieces from John Hawkes, William Gass, Joyce Carol Oates, James Purdy, Donald Barthelme, Stanley Elkin and Ronald Sukenick was offered as exemplary evidence of American dominance and innovation. Thus 'today's British novel is neither remarkable nor remarkably interesting' but characterized by 'a steady, uninspired sameness, a predictable, even if articulate prattling of predictable predicaments'. As distinct from this the contemporary American writer has achieved 'some of the most challenging, diversified, and adventurous writing today.'[9] A distinction further emphasized by a second *Granta* anthology entitled *Dirty Realism: New Writing from America* (1983) where such figures as Raymond Carver, Jayne Anne Phillips and Elizabeth Tallent were viewed as part of a new fiction, of a 'peculiar and haunting kind':[10] yet another distinctive and 'new' American development.

It is against such a background that the following essays are offered. They are not concerned with the established talents who came to the fore in the immediate period following 1945 (Mailer, Salinger, Capote, Burroughs and Bellow, for example), nor with the 'second' generation of post-war writers who challenged and extended the writing of the '40s and '50s (Pynchon, Vonnegut, Brautigan and Hawkes, for example). Significantly not one of the writers considered is mentioned in *City of Words*, but all have created a literature notable for both its awareness of an American tradition and

the demands of the time to be understood and perceived through a response appropriate to the 'new' age in which the writers find themselves.

The first five essays, then, offer assessments of writers who have extended and recast the concerns of the American writer. 'New writing' in this sense does not imply a radical break or technical innovation but a continuing attempt to make literature amidst what A. Alvarez termed 'a new kind of reality'. Thus five prose writers, E. L. Doctorow (the most established of the writers considered), Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo, Raymond Carver and Gordon Lish are each treated as individual talents responding in distinct and individual ways to this 'new reality'. While their work is seen as symptomatic of larger developments and concerns, they are, primarily, considered as individual figures for their individual effort. Two final essays suggest wider contexts in which to view some of the newer writing. The first, on recent developments in American ethnic writing, considers the significance of Chicano, American Indian and American Chinese writing and how their resurgence at once extends and complicates the map of American ethnic writing; the second, on recent American detective and crime fiction, suggests the ways in which a traditional American genre has developed in radical and distinctive ways in response to a world bounded by the realities and moral ambiguities created by such major historical events as Vietnam and Watergate.

Taken as a whole the essays speak to what can only be a small part of an ever-increasing plurality and complexity of response on the part of American writers: what has recently been called the 'embarrassment of riches' of the contemporary American offering; a body of work which consistently 'defies easy reduction to tendencies and trends'.[11] Perhaps above all what the writers here considered speak to is precisely that continuing belief in the capacity of the written word to make sense of an impossible world and an impossible situation. Their attempts to confront the implications of their historical circumstances, for all their differences of belief and subject-matter, thus share a common basis and compulsion. Their writing speaks to what, in his analysis of DeLillo, Eric Mottram calls the 'real needs' of man; not just

to 'make it new', but to confront the new in distinctive terms, appropriate to the times in which they live.

NOTES

1. Donald Allen and Robert Creeley (eds.), *The New Writing in the U.S.A.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 10. Allen's *The New American Poetry* was published in 1960 (New York: Grove Press). *The New Writing in the U.S.A.* includes Brautigan, Burroughs, Creeley, Ginsberg, Jones, Kerouac, Olson, Sorrentino and Zukofsky.
2. Tony Tanner, *City of Words: A Study of American Fiction in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), p. 15.
3. See Philip Roth, 'Writing American Fiction' in *Reading Myself and Others* (London: Corgi, 1977), pp. 107–25. The essay was first published in 1961. See also Norman Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings* (1964).
4. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (London: Picador, 1987), trans. William Weaver. See especially Eco's brilliant chapter 'Travels in Hyperreality', pp. 1–58.
5. Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (London: Picador, 1985), Section IV: 'The Minimalist Aesthetic', pp. 130–62. The quotation is from page 131.
6. Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson (eds.), *The New Journalism* (London: Picador, 1975), p. 22.
7. *New American Writing*, *Granta* (Autumn, 1979), 5.
8. Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (1970, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 114. But see especially Chapters 3 and 4.
9. *New American Writing*, pp. 3–5.
10. *Dirty Realism: New Writing from America*, *Granta*, No. 8, 4–5.
11. Eugene Goodheart, 'Four Decades of Contemporary American Fiction' in Vol. 9, *American Literature*, of *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), pp. 617–37.

1

Writing on the Margin: E. L. Doctorow and American History

by HENRY CLARIDGE

1

It is an accepted part of the 'conventional wisdom' about the American novel that it has largely eschewed history and society in preference for existential and metaphysical speculation. Alexis de Tocqueville predicted as much in *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) and much post-war criticism of the American novel has tended to find evidence for his thesis. In *The American Adam* (1955), for example, R. W. B. Lewis proposed that at the epicentre of the American myth was

> an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritance of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.[1]

Some five years later Leslie Fielder in *Love and Death in the American Novel* gave this individual a sexual life, but the essential features of an a-historical culture remained intact. Throughout the 1960s this view of the American novel more or less held sway, but it took on the colourings of a different vocabulary: in his synoptic account of post-war American fiction, *Radical Innocence* (1961), Ihab Hassan spoke in the

existential language of freedom and self-definition for those anti-heroes who occupy centre-stage in most contemporary American novels; in *Beyond the Waste Land: The American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (1972) Raymond M. Olderman gave the fiction of the period a configuration and character that owes much to myth criticism, arguing that the novel of the 1960s deserts realism and its attendant problems for the romance form with its freedom from fidelity and its gravitation towards the 'fabulous nature of fact'.[2]

Critics, of course, can often be accused of selecting those works which fit their *weltanschaung*, but the view of the American novel as an essentially a-historical and a social phenomenon, offered initially to account for the 'classic' phase of American Literature but subsequently extended into the fiction of the 1960s, was receiving powerful reinforcement from the practitioners themselves, notably from Philip Roth who, in his 1960 Stanford University speech, spoke of the American writer in the middle of the twentieth century as having

> his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's meagre imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.[3]

Roth, in other words, offers good reasons for the writer's retreat from the 'actual' into the freer latitudes of the romance or the fantastic. Something of the same kind of disavowal of objective reality is at work in Norman Mailer's notion of 'factoids' or in the increasingly phantasmagoric, allegoric and satirical strain that surfaced in black fiction in the late 1960s, notably in the writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Sam Greenlees, Ishmael Reed and John A. Williams.

Obviously a more elastic definition of realism can be used to accommodate the various forms of experimentation, both with narrative and subject-matter, that characterize the American post-modernist novel of the past two or tree decades. An account of realism that emphasizes the interaction

between the individual and society at the expense of, or the increasing exclusion of, the subjectivity of the author (something, in other words, like the notion of 'classic realism' in contemporary critical theory) will not adequately describe the fiction of John Barth or John Hawkes or John Irving, but one that can embrace the subjectivity of the author and his or her denial of the 'significance' of 'daily life' might satisfactorily include the differing 'realities' that emerge from introspective and autobiographical modes of fiction. It is hard to establish the extent to which contemporary criticism of the American novel may have buttressed developments and changes in the American novel itself, but much recent criticism of the American novel has tended to promote a less exclusive definition of literary realism and the novel itself has presented strong evidence in support of the definition.

All this is by way of 'placing' the fiction of E. L. Doctorow in both that larger history of the American novel which takes us back to Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville, and that more immediate history which includes contemporaries such as Hawkes, Roth and Updike. Doctorow's relationship to his contemporaries is both curious and ambiguous: he has been, particularly in recent years, an extremely successful novelist (he turned to writing as a career, it might be noted, in 1969) and this might necessarily exclude him from a place amongst the avant-garde; at the same time, he has experimented with narrative voice and narrative method in ways which give his fiction certain first-order difficulties. Moreover, the experimentation has been in two senses backward-looking: Doctorow's materials are those of American history, particularly that phase from the 1900s to the late 1960s, and his forms show a striking resemblance to those of the American historical romance.[4] For Doctorow the 'self-reliant and self-propelling' individual of whom R. W. B. Lewis spoke is not a plausible subject, since for him identity is a socially and historically constructed concept, not one immune from historical determinism. His characters, in other words, are treated as historically determined (no differently, it might be noted, from the characters one meets in the great realist novels of the nineteenth century), yet the narrative pattern against which their histories are played out wilfully fractures

the stability and order that comes from chronological and temporal progression and places them in an essentially indeterminate and elusive historical space.

Although Doctorow is very much 'our contemporary' it is salutary to remind ourselves that his first novel, *Welcome to Hard Times*,[5] was published in 1960. It was followed by *Big as Life* (1964), a novel Doctorow has effectively disowned and which he has blocked against subsequent reprinting. After this there was an hiatus of seven years before the appearance of *The Book of Daniel* (1971), and one can surmise that it was the critical and commercial success of this novel which gave rise to that productive phase of the past decade and a half which includes *Ragtime* (1975), *Loon Lake* (1980), *Lives of the Poets* (1984), *World's Fair* (1985), and, most recently, *Billy Bathgate* (1989), as well as the play, *Drinks Before Dinner* (1979).

Taken as a whole the novels (*Lives of the Poets* is a collection of loosely connected short stories and a novella) constitute an imaginative revision of American history from the closing of one frontier, the real frontier of the American West, to that of another frontier, the idealized frontier of the Great Society programmes (and its attendant mythology) at the end of the 1960s. For all the various experiments with voice that Doctorow effects, the signature these texts carry is that of a liberal-left American, the product of a lower middle-class, Jewish, socialist-leaning, Bronx family. The natural scepticism such people have traditionally had to the more extreme claims of the American dream (though they often, of course, manifest it) was powerfully reinforced by the Depression (Doctorow was born at its beginning in 1931). The older products of this kind of environment, writers like Abraham Cahan and Henry Roth, were drawn to political commitment and philosophical scepticism; Doctorow seems to have replaced the latter with historical scepticism, particularly with regard to the 'received' history of the United States in the twentieth century. He has sought a fictional form that can accommodate a revisionist and imaginative history of modern America, one that can unpack the mythology of American life and at the same time encompass the moral fate of the American people.[6]

These are large, one might say, grandiose demands and

they seem to presuppose an almost Tolstoyan magnitude; but Doctorow like any novelist has been constrained by the ineluctable individualism of the novel form, its besetting concern with individual lives and individual cases. The constraints are especially visible in his first novel of the post-1970 period, *The Book of Daniel*. Here Doctorow's subject was, as he himself explained in an interview, 'the story of the American left in general and the generally sacrificial rôle it has played in our history'.[7] One could be forgiven for thinking that such a statement describes the subject of an historical study or the proposal for a doctoral dissertation, rather than a work of fiction, but Doctorow has clearly always seen his writing originating in some aspect or moment of historical change which is then subjected to imaginative re-creation. In *The Book of Daniel* the 'story of the American left' narrows to the 'story' of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed on 19 June 1953 for espionage (particularly the passing of top secret information to the Soviet Union, including details of the atomic bomb). Doctorow is not interested in the case history as such (which for him is another *kind* of narrative or fiction), but in the resonances of the Rosenberg case as it is viewed from the hindsight accorded to it by the events of the late 1960s. Doctorow's historical scepticism, of course, tells him that the events of the 1960s do not inhabit some objective, verifiable historical world, but belong to the anecdotal and the autobiographical. We know from his interviews that he began *The Book of Daniel* in the third person, found the voice boring, and was in despair at his failure to imaginatively realize such a momentous subject. The shift to a more fluid medium, where Daniel Isaacson's (the weakly disguised invented name for the imagined son of the real life Rosenbergs) voice interacts with that of an ostensibly third-person narrator, successfully fractures and subverts the expected chronology of events, forcing the reader to see that the history of the executed spies is, literally, 'the book of Daniel', that account of it, autobiographical and subjective, offered by a son and subject to the vagaries of impression and memory.

Behind Doctorow's wilful obliquity there is, of course, an intellectual and argumentative paradox. While *The Book*

of Daniel retreats from the question of the Rosenberg's guilt or innocence (it is, after all, a work of fiction and thus *could* make the Isaacsons guilty or innocent, but cannot by extrapolation apportion guilt or innocence to the Rosenbergs), it does make historical claims: it invites the reader to accept that Daniel's story is more real and palpable than any straight historical narrative and thus, implicitly, privileges this account above all others; we are invited, in other words, to treat this as the 'real' history.

The constraints of which I spoke earlier are those which demand that the novelist tells a story with individualized characters whose destinies concern and often, emotionally, affect us. In addition, Doctorow is constrained by the demands that his concern with history places on him; he cannot, after all, simply make things up (in part a good reason for thinking him a realist), nor is he content with the historical past as it is passed down to him through the 'received' histories. His recent expressions of his great interest in oral history and the sometimes striking similarities his books have with notable works of oral history (I am thinking particularly of the profitable comparison that can be made between Studs Terkel's *Hard Times* (1970) and Doctorow's *Loon Lake*) is indicative of the new social historian *manqué* one often discovers when reading him. Oral history, it seems, has for Doctorow the strength that comes from 'felt' experience and is free of the mediating control of an author with a particular thesis or 'version' of the past; in addition, the historical witness addresses the reader with the freedom of idiom and the conversational voice that authenticates the experiences recorded. Finding a way of using this mode has, I think, been at the centre of Doctorow's technical innovations over the past decade.

It is in *Ragtime* (1975) that Doctorow's relationship with American history and the fictional problems of recasting history become more salient and significant. Where *The Book of Daniel* had, in a sense, re-imagined historical figures and given them new fictional identities, *Ragtime* circumvents the fictionalizing process by using real historical figures in the imagined context of the novel where they play out their destinies alongside those 'complex predicates' of

the author's imagination. There is, of course, nothing new about this: in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* Napoleon and General Kutuzov are 'characters' in the fiction and are given words, speeches and motives which belong not to history (though Tolstoy always insisted on his fidelity to the historical record) but to the imagination. In *Ragtime* the Jewish radical Emma Goldman inhabits the story of Coalhouse Walker, a ragtime pianist and, later, black revolutionary, and his wife, Sarah. Coalhouse, driven by racism to radical action, steals the art treasury of the real J. P. Morgan and threatens to destroy it. His 'conversion' to political radicalism is dramatized against a sharply realized and re-created background of those debates about the black cause, between integrationists and separatists, that surfaced in the United States in the early years of this century. After the death of Sarah (she is mistaken by the police for an assassin, hit in the chest by the butt of a rifle, and dies later from pneumonia) Coalhouse leads a gang of like-minded black Americans on various terrorist missions, and, in an attempt to divert him from his senseless path, is visited in J. P. Morgan's library by the 'real' Booker T. Washington. Thus Doctorow constructs the confrontation of the real and the imagined as a dramatized moment in the history of competing black ideologies.

As this account of part of Coalhouse Walker's story should suggest, Doctorow is attempting to give his fiction historical authenticity by obscuring (and complicating) the relationship an imaginary character has with his 'real' background, since the background here is not simply some geographically locatable place (in this case, New York) but also historical personages taken from it and made into fictional characters. Doctorow is, therefore, in part, constrained by known historical events and is not free to re-invent the past in some way that makes it peculiarly accessible to his fictional concerns. On the other hand, by treating historical personages as characters in his work he is given a certain amount of freedom to improvize 'historical' events around them, and in *Ragtime* he does this with a good deal of *brio*. But this is fraught with danger: the reader may take a particular pleasure in the conclusion of *Ragtime* when, after Coalhouse's surrender, Younger Brother drives the band's Model T Ford off to

Mexico to find the revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, while we are simultaneously reminded of Woodrow Wilson's election, J. P. Morgan's European tour, the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo, and a spectacular feat by Harry Houdini in Times Square, all compressed into a conclusion in which we are told that 'the era of Ragtime had run out'.[8] The pleasure is mitigated, however, by our sense of Doctorow's pushing of things towards the whimsical, and when Sigmund Freud travels through an amusement park 'Tunnel of Love' with Carl Jung this reinforces our sense that the playfulness can quite easily backfire; we are not so much dazzled by Doctorow's technique, as Paul Levine argues,[9] as irritated and slightly embarrassed. Whether this trip occurred or not is beside the point (Freud and Jung visited Coney Island during their American tour in September 1909): the detail serves no purpose, it provides no more than a spurious historicity which directs our attention towards the clever, rather than intelligent, author.

A number of commentators have suggested the possible comparison of *Ragtime* with John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* (1938), but the comparison is not a particularly productive one, largely because *U.S.A.* (by which I mean the completed trilogy) is so much the more ambitious work, and, in part, because Doctorow and Dos Passos take such differing attitudes to the dramatization of the historical past. But the two novels are similar in their attempts to treat of more than one character's story (in *U.S.A.* it is a multiple of stories) and to render something of the density of American social experience. The story of Coalhouse Walker which I described above is held 'inside' another story, that of Tateh, a socialist Jewish immigrant who goes from silhouette artist to film-maker, and whose upwardly mobile life (away from working-class radicalism towards the American dream) provides a check and a foil to Coalhouse's bleaker tale. Tateh's story (and that of other Jewish immigrants like him) is, one might reasonably surmise, the autobiographical tale, the closest approximation to the 'camera eye' sections that punctuate *U.S.A.* And one might think, therefore, that it provides the strategic route whereby Doctorow can escape from the text by offering competing, and thus neutralizing, versions of

the American experience. This, however, is not the case. *Ragtime* is quite merciless in its indictments of American life, and these often verge on, if not fall into, the sentimental and the romantic, notably in the treatment of Coalhouse Walker and Mother, and in the way we are invited to wallow in the ultimately bogus revolutionary zeal of the novel, siding with the 'oppressed' while we luxuriate in Doctorow's re-creation of the cars, clothes, furnishings, and *mores* of an unregenerate capitalist age.

Ragtime was the critical and commercial success of the year on its appearance in the United States, winning the National Book Critics' Circle Award for 1976 and marginally coming in first as best-selling hardback novel of the book year (the film rights were subsequently sold for $2,000,000). It is, however, by no means Doctorow's best novel and should be seen, essentially, as a developmental point in his progress as a writer of fiction. In it Doctorow finds a way of taking hold of a rich historical period and dramatizing it through a host of background characters (some real, some invented) who give us a sense of society in action. What he does not adequately resolve is the relationship between the historical and the fictional materials, of which the use of real historical personages is the most visible exemplification. It is this relationship which is addressed again in the later novels, *Loon Lake* and *World's Fair*.

2

Other than some minor pieces of non-fiction (some political, some autobiographical reflections on the rôle of the writer) Doctorow published nothing after *Ragtime* for four years. 1979 saw the appearance of the play *Drinks Before Dinner*, an interesting exercise in the imaginative voicing of what appear to be allegorical parts, but an unequivocal failure as a dramatic work, though Doctorow in his introduction to the script tries to forestall this obvious criticism.[10] The play's interest, for any student of Doctorow, lies in its place as a kind of 'first-run' of *Loon Lake*, the novel which appeared, uncharacteristically for Doctorow, almost immediately after the play. The contrasts between the two works are legion,

the play contemporary and concerned with middle-class characters, the novel historical and dealing with the marginalized poor and unemployed of the Great Depression, but the techniques are markedly similar with *Loon Lake* putting its characters before us in 'disynchronous' (Doctorow's word), first- and third-person forms made more perplexing by shifts (seemingly random) in time and space. The technique makes *Loon Lake* a 'difficult' work for the reader, and Doctorow is to be commended for not following the commercial route offered by the success of *Ragtime* and resting his talents on its essentially formulaic nature.

Loon Lake gives further, and arguably, stronger, evidence for the description of Doctorow as 'the novelist as revisionist historian' with his impulse to restore 'lost' groups to the historical record. Like the earlier novel it is an attempt to tell a series of stories, initially discontinuous with one another, which in themselves enact a vertical history of the United States in the year 1936, though contextual information is provided backwards and forwards from this date. The central characters through whom this world is reconstructed are: Joe (christened, we learn at the end, Joseph Korzeniowski, the 'real' name of Joseph Conrad), a young man from Paterson, New Jersey, who becomes one of the innumerable hobos of the Depression years; Warren Penfield, a poet from Indianapolis, born at the turn of the century, who serves in the Great War and dies mysteriously in 1937; and F. W. Bennett, a multi-millionaire industrial overlord, whose mansion at Loon Lake in the Adirondack mountains (in upstate New York) acts as a kind of centripetal draw on the various destinies which inhabit the novel. Doctorow is here reworking something of the tripartite structure we saw him using in *Ragtime*, setting Joe and Warren as countervailing forces in the novel (like Coalhouse and Tateh in *Ragtime*) with Bennett filling the rôle assigned earlier to J. P. Morgan. These individuals are, in part, devices to enable him to dramatize his version of American history and, in turn, fill out the necessary human and social context. By presenting society as a complex web of individual relationships, Doctorow overcomes the problems often set for the historical novel by the tendency towards the generalized and the abstract which one sees in

novels with either a vast historical canvas or a vast canvas of characters (for example, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), where the intercalary chapters are hopelessly abstract and externalized).

Much of the world of *Loon Lake* is presented through what one might call a fictional form of oral history, using the various voices, particularly that of Joe, to provide an anecdotal and autobiographical historical document, not a verifiable and objective one. Doctorow, as I remarked earlier, seems to be conversant with the rich body of autobiographical reminiscence of the Depression years and Joe's voicing of his story (Doctorow aims at a conversational and spoken idiom for him which is often masterful) echoes the voices of some of those interviewed for the 'Hard Travelin' ' section of Terkel's *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression.*

> I got along with all the freaks, I made a point to. It was as if I had to acclimate myself to the worst there was. I never let them see that I had any special awareness of them. I knew it was important not to act like a rube. After a while they stopped looking at me with the carney eyes and forgot I was there.[11]

(Thus Joe describing the freaks with whom he works on an itinerant carnival.) But while he adequately renders the flatly descriptive nuances we would expect of Joe, Doctorow also gives him poetic and literary qualities, an effect we can compare with that balance of the naturalistic and poetic that Twain achieves with Huckleberry Finn or Faulkner with Dewey Dell in *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Thus the opening words of the novel, 'They were hateful presences in me' (p. 7), Joe describing his parents, or the following account Joe gives of being bitten by dogs on Bennett's estate—

> Somehow I was vaulted or inspired upward in some acrobatic backward tumble through the unframed shack window. I took one of the dogs with me, slamming it fixed in my wrist against the inner wall of the shack while the heads of the others appeared outside the window, a fountain of faces leaping and falling back in rage and frustration. (p. 46)

—belong to the internal, poetic voice rather than that which we would naturalistically expect of him. Yet Doctorow is

aware that this voice, whether naturalistic or poetic, is insufficient for the whole work (and, probably, unsustainable), so it is interrupted by another voice, discontinuous with it and not authorial, but in effect 'speaking itself' and providing at first poetical invention and subsequently narrative detail. This 'interrupting' voice is presented in what looks like 'computerese', computer data which composes a life in factual information, and this voice, in turn, is interrupted by what looks ostensibly like third-person narration.

Increasingly, as we plunge deeper into the world of *Loon Lake*, the novel becomes more like a montage, or what another critic has called a 'bricolage'.[12] The shifts of point of view, the interweaving of differing languages, styles and registers of speech, produce a deliberately destabilizing effect on the reader which Doctorow has argued produces few problems for anyone familiar with the techniques and conventions of narrative film. It is also, I surmise, evidence of Doctorow's familiarity with contemporary narrative theory with its emphasis on the polysemantic nature of the written text and its appeal to the re-creating and defamiliarizing processes given such importance in the act of writing in post-modernist fiction. The difficulty, however, raised by the wilful use of these fracturing and fragmenting techniques is that they may work at the expense of the subject-matter, and for a writer like Doctorow, keen of dealing with the 'real' and on unpacking the obfuscations of history, there may be an unhappy marriage of methods and materials. Joe's voice with its attentiveness to detail and its rich particularity helps to overcome this, and despite his rags-to-riches story (two other characters in the novel, Penfield and Clara, Bennett's mistress, also enact this escape from working-class upbringings) Joe is used by Doctorow, particularly in the opening chapters of the novel, as the voice of moral commentary on the acquisitive capitalist world (as he sees it) of Sim Hearn's carnival and the insulated mansion of F. W. Bennett. It is this world of which Joe is initially the critic that finally seduces and absorbs him with its connected attractions of power and status.

While *Loon Lake* to my mind is a qualified success (it is, on a second reading, a more satisfying and rewarding book

than *Ragtime*), the vertiginous effects wrought by the shifts of narrative voice and genre produce an initially bewildering experience for the reader, and given Doctorow's relentless experimentation with form we are not surprised to find that his two subsequent works are presented in a very different register. I want to leave *Lives of the Poets* (1985) to my conclusion, both for reasons of its form and its materials. In *World's Fair* (1986) Doctorow has moved the date on three years from that of *Loon Lake* to 1939 and the New York World's Fair, but the retrospective element of the novel takes us back through the early 1930s to the First World War in a loving re-creation of the sights, sounds and smells of a Bronx childhood. Throughout the novel is in the first person, but the voice varies. At the beginning it is that of Rose, the mother, in the later stages of the book it is the two sons, Donald and Edgar, the last name not seeking to disguise the fact that we are reading an autobiographical voice; Donald's and Rose's sections are marked, as is one by Aunt Frances, while the remainder of the novel is in Edgar's voice. In its presentation of different points of view without the presence of any intervening or mediating authorial voice the novel has affinities with Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. What is also worth noting, moreover, is how so much of the first-person mode continues that experimentation with the oral historical form that I noted in *Loon Lake*.

There can be no doubt that *World's Fair* is more accessible to the reader than the earlier work, in great part because of the temporal linearity of the novel. There can also be no doubt that Doctorow, like so many other American writers, is very much at home in the autobiographical medium, and while this medium is by its very nature introspective and self-regarding, it is also available to Doctorow's particular kind of historical inquiry, for it is a way of connecting one's present circumstances with those past experiences, familial and social, which gave rise to them. We need Rose's voice here, not so much as a way of providing a perspective on her sons (she speaks her sections as if *to* them), but more as a way of enlarging and deepening our sense of the social and historical world the family inhabits. In *World's Fair*, in

other words, Doctorow makes the novel over into a form of oral history.

The inevitable consequence of this move towards the autobiographical is that Doctorow is forced to dispense with what he would see as the fictional contrivances of plot and story, and has to rely on his ability to create a picture of the world the family inhabits. With Edgar he goes back to experiences of which the boy, presumably, would have only the most indistinct memory but which are presented with great directness:

> Startled awake by the ammoniated mists, I am roused in one instant from glutinous sleep to grieving awareness; I have done it again. My soaked thighs sting. I cry, I call Mama, knowing I must endure her harsh reaction, get through *that*, to be rescued. My crib is on the east wall of their room. Their bed is on the south wall. 'Mama!' From her bed she hushes me. 'Mama!' She groans, rises, advances on me in her white nightgown.[13]

What Doctorow records is the birth of a subject slowly taking possession of the world around him, first the room in which he sleeps and the parents he occasionally sleeps with, later his brother and the family dog, then his Grandmother, and by a series of extensions of the boy's enlarging consciousness, his street, his neighbourhood, his city, and finally the world itself, symbolized in the World's Fair, which in a striking historical paradox comes in 1939 to image a prosperous and stable future precisely at that moment when, in Europe, war comes to dampen such innocent hopes:

> And then the amazing thing was that at the end you saw a particular model street intersection and the show was over, and with your I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE button in your hand you came out into the sun and you were standing on precisely the corner you had just seen, the future was right where you were standing and what was small had become big, the scale had enlarged and you were no longer looking down at it, but standing in it, on this corner of the future, right here in the World's Fair! (p. 241)

All this is done with the memorizing voice, unlike that James Joyce uses at the beginning of *A Portrait of the Artist*

as a Young Man (1916) which re-creates and replicates the consciousness of an infant; Doctorow's method deliberately dispels the objective, mimetic effect of the child's first person—

> In my own consciousness I was not a child. When I was alone, not subject to the demands of the world, I had the opportunity to be the aware sentient being I knew myself to be. (p. 19)

—thus challenging the separation of child from adult, by seeing the former as merely a coercive construction by the latter. This kind of psychological sophistication and complexity makes Doctorow's epigraph from Wordsworth's *The Prelude* less casual than it might initially appear. The lines, 'A raree-show is here, / With children gathered round . . . , from Book VII of *The Prelude* refer to the peep-shows, or shows in a box, that Wordsworth saw in the streets of London, and while Doctorow's reference is on one level to the idea of the World's Fair as a kind of show, of the world in miniature, it also carries the suggestion of the autobiographical eye/I as a 'peeping' out on to the world. Wordsworth's subtitle, of course, carries even deeper resonances which Doctorow is keen to pursue: *The Growth of a Poet's Mind* insists on us the degree to which the introspective, self-examining account takes precedence over the record of witness to external events. While *World's Fair* gives us a richly detailed picture of a New York, Jewish childhood in the 1930s and is, at times, a kind of imaginative guidebook to the texture of the period, it is even more so an act of introspective memorializing which comes close to, but happily never falls into, outright confession.

From *The Book of Daniel* in 1971 to *World's Fair* in 1986 there has been a development in Doctorow's fiction which can be seen as an inversion of his earlier premises. *The Book of Daniel* takes hold of historical events, re-imagines them, and introspects them through the eyes and thoughts of its eponymous hero. *Ragtime* in part does the same for a different historical period, but extends the method of fiction by drawing history and historical figures into the fictional world by making them co-extensive with the

author's imaginings. *Loon Lake* maintains the contract with historical subjects but presents the past in a discontinuous, fragmented medium which suggests that Doctorow is becoming more interested in the techniques of story-telling than the materials of story-telling, but it remains, as I have argued, a more than qualified success. With *World's Fair* (it remains to be seen what Doctorow has done in *Billy Bathgate**) the first-person mode is used throughout the novel, and the shift to the autobiographical this brings finds Doctorow replacing the self-examining voice of Daniel with his own. All this, however, is prefigured in *Lives of the Poets* (1985), the collection of six short stories and a novella which preceded *World's Fair* and which Doctorow announced as having a direct connection with the novel that was to follow. The connection, of course, is the autobiographical one. *Lives of the Poets* draws on Doctorow's sojourn in a Greenwich village studio apartment at that point in his career when the success of *Ragtime* had catapulted him into the world of the literary celebrity. The novella which concludes the volume (it carries the title 'Lives of the Poets') is transparently autobiographical, recording the frustration, difficulties and inner turmoils of Jonathan, our writer and first-person witness:

> After you're married for several years you start waiting, and you don't even realize it, you become alert to something at the edge of the forest, you look up from your grazing and it isn't even there, the delicate sense behind all events all occasions of putting in time, making, killing time. Isn't that so, compadre? I mean bear with me even though you think I'm taking strength from numbers: You notice younger men than you going off stunningly from coronaries, embolisms, aneurysms, sudden cancerous devastations, every manner of swift scything, the achievement of their lives still to come. From one moment to the next, all that feisty character is plaintive, all that intention and high design has turned to pathos, and the custom-tailored suits are spectres in the closet. And what they did, these raucous smartass go-getters, turns out to be shamefully modest, of little consequence, they were their own greatest publicists and all the shouting was their own. So my discovery at fifty is that this mortal rush to solitude is pandemic, that is the news I bring.[14]

These kinds of reflections are commingled in the story with observations and pictures of the life beyond Jonathan's apartment, presented not in any coherent pattern but randomly, as they might occur in life, so that the whole, while perfectly intelligible, reads like a stream of consciousness. Some of Jonathan's remarks, moreover, echo that despair of the American condition one finds in other contemporary Jewish writers, notably Saul Bellow. The comments, for example, on the new patterns of immigration to the United States, particularly that from Latin and Central America, are suffused with the sense of political and moral instability these new immigrants bring, but Doctorow's condemnation of American values remains unequivocal:

> Dear God, let them migrate, let my country be the last best hope. But let us make some distinctions here: The Irish, the Italians the Jews of Eastern Europe, came here because they wanted a new life. They worked for the money to bring over their families. They said good riddance to the old country and were glad to be gone. They did not come here because of something we had done to them. The new immigrants are here because we have made their lands unlivable. They have come here to save themselves from us. They have brought their hot politics with them. (p. 131)

Though we can question the truthfulness of what Jonathan says we cannot question, or impugn, the moral force of it. Indeed, Doctorow seems to have found in the autobiographical voice an instrument for his moral and political commentary that is so much more eloquent and authentic than that strident, but ultimately disingenuous, narrative voice which irredeemably weakens *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*. But the success of the autobiographical voice is not unqualified, and 'Lives of the Poets' often takes on an exaggerated, over-insistent tone. It is in the earlier stories, particularly 'The Writer in the Family', 'The Water Works', and 'The Hunter', that the real strengths of the collection are to be found, and they contain, arguably, the best writing Doctorow has yet done. Ironically, the strength of these tales lies not in the style we have come to associate with Doctorow—demythologizing, politically committed, inventive,

sometimes whimsically so, in its use of historical materials—but in a style that is leaner, sparer, elliptical and emphatically within that great tradition of American story-telling one associates with Crane, Anderson and Hemingway, and contemporaries of Doctorow such as Brautigan and Carver. One senses it as much in *World's Fair* as here, and it offers powerful evidence that Doctorow is at his best, like so many other writers, when he ignores his manifesto.

3

In a chapter of her recent study of the American historical romance, Emily Miller Budick has argued that in Ragtime Doctorow has confirmed American fiction's 'continuing commitment to exploring the undecidability of literary meaning and to placing that indeterminacy within the claims of history.'[15] She charts the kinship, as she sees it, that *Ragtime* has with nineteenth-century works such as Cooper's *The Spy*, Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, and Melville's *Billy Budd*, works which are finally sceptical about the nature of the reality and history they confront. It is the historical tendency in the classic American novel which contemporary critics of the American novel have been keen to discover, both as a revision and a correction of that view of the American novel, exemplified by Lewis and Fiedler, with which I opened this essay, and as a measurement of their commitment to the novel as an instrument of social and moral commentary and analysis. Doctorow's 'rediscovery' of American history as a subject, especially that excluded and marginalized part of it about which he writes, makes him peculiarly susceptible to this kind of criticism where the critic looks to the imaginative writer to confirm his or her moral and political positions. Doctorow, like so many writers, is taken over by his critics, and by instantaneous extrapolation one work comes to stand for the whole *oeuvre*. It is a superficially attractive view of him, but, as I have tried to show in this essay on his development as a writer from *The Book of Daniel* to the present, it is by no means adequate to what Doctorow has given to us. He has not remained static: the vertiginous effects of *Loon Lake* might have suggested that

he was going to have even greater recourse to a technique of narrative fragmentation, only for us to find that his subsequent two works have found him drawing on the simple and the personal. Like so many of 'our contemporaries' he is still writing, and one can only speculate as to what his particular hybridization of the historical, the autobiographical and the post-modern will produce next. One thing is certain: it will not be what we expect, nor will it be what we have already read.

NOTES

1. R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 5.
2. Raymond M. Olderman, *Beyond the Waste Land: The American Novel in the Nineteen-Sixties* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 5.
3. Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 176.
4. For a recent analysis of this form in American fiction see Emily Miller Budick, *Fiction and Historical Consciousness: The American Romance Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
5. Published in England as *The Bad Man from Bodie* (London: André Deutsch, 1961).
6. See Richard Trenner (ed.), *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations* (Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1983), pp. 31–47.
7. Ibid., p. 61
8. E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 236.
9. Paul Levine, *E. L. Doctorow* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 53. Levine's book is the best short introduction to Doctorow and it carries a useful bibliography.
10. E. L. Doctorow, *Drinks Before Dinner* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. xvi.
11. E. L. Doctorow, *Loon Lake* (London: Picador, 1985), p. 22. Subsequent references to this novel are given in parentheses in the text. The title, the name of a lake, refers to the loons, aquatic birds, found in upstate New York, and also, perhaps, to the sixteenth-century meaning of the word, 'rogue' or 'scamp', to describe the picaresque hero, Joe.
12. See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 'E. L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative', *PMLA*, 100 (January 1985), 81–95.
13. E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair* (London: Picador, 1987), p. 6. Subsequent references to this novel are given in parentheses in the text.