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**“The whole world in a book”: Fact, Fiction and the Postmodern in
Selected Works by E. L. Doctorow**

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Compulsory Declaration

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[T]he underlying conflict to come might be understood as between the old stories and the new, or between the fanatical readers of the old and the impertinent writers of the new, between the ancient revealed-as-divine writings and the writings of our later civilizations whose authors are mortal, multiple, and, while lacking any holy credential or indeed necessary exemption from evil of their own, are engaged in reporting the universe.

- E. L. Doctorow, *Reporting the Universe*

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation considers the manner in which the thematic and stylistic interests displayed in E. L. Doctorow's fiction derive from the postmodern context in which he works. Encapsulating the spirit of subversion so typical of postmodernism, Doctorow not only questions established modes of perception, but reinvigorates cultural and social traditions through the reformulation of customarily unchallenged norms and values. Departing from the conventions of traditional narrative, he emphasises the need for a continual critical interrogation and revision of absolutist grand narratives in order to achieve a more complex understanding of human experience. He grapples with concepts relating to the fluidity of meaning and the constructed nature of texts, deftly experimenting with narrative form in order to destabilise conventional perceptions of history, reality and representation.

The strong sense of postmodern scepticism infusing Doctorow's work gives rise to a tension implicit in both his fiction and his non-fiction writings: while he repeatedly expresses his belief in the power of fiction to produce truth, his work simultaneously illustrates the indeterminate, provisional nature of writing, truth, and human existence, disclosing the impossibility of creating finite meaning through textual representation. Advocating fiction as an inclusive mode of perception, Doctorow nevertheless suggests that the multiple perspectives generated by literature effect new and fuller understandings of both the human condition and an always elusive reality.

Focusing on the manner in which Doctorow's postmodern scepticism informs both the aesthetic and the thematic aspects of his fiction, this dissertation examines three of his novels: *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1974) and *City of God* (2000). These works sensitively describe individual responses to the overwhelming sense of doubt and disillusionment characterising contemporary times, the characters engaging in self-conscious, critical explorations of the social, spiritual and moral uncertainties plaguing their fractured worlds. The novels endorse and illustrate key themes of postmodernism: all three texts subvert narrative traditions and destabilise conventional interpretive frameworks through stylistic experimentation with narrative, the merging of factual and fictional realms, the blurring of conventionally delineated literary genres, and a metafictional self-reflexivity.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used:

For works by Doctorow:

FD	“False Documents”
UD	“The Importance of Fiction, Ultimate Discourse.”
RU	<i>Reporting the Universe</i>
PP	<i>Poets and Presidents: Selected Essays, 1977-1992</i>
<i>Drinks</i>	<i>Drinks Before Dinner</i>
<i>Beliefs</i>	“The Beliefs of Writers”
<i>Creationists</i>	<i>Creationists: Selected Essays, 1993-2006</i>

For collections of essays on and interviews with Doctorow:

EC	Trenner, Richard, ed. <i>E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations</i>
<i>Conversations</i>	Morris, Christopher D., ed. <i>Conversations with E. L. Doctorow</i>

INTRODUCTION

The Power of Fiction: E. L. Doctorow as a Postmodernist Writer

A novelist is...unendowed by discipline and therefore able to travel back and forth freely across the borders that demarcate disciplines. I can employ the concepts of science, the poetics of theology. I can speak as an anthropologist, a philosopher, a pornographer. I can employ the materials of history, I can report as a journalist, I can resort to confession, autobiography, myths, legends, dreams, hallucinations, and the mutterings of poor mad people in the street. All of these have equal weight as far as I am concerned. I will use all the words from every mode of thinking with the assurance that they can meld into a sensible composition.¹

- E. L. Doctorow, *Reporting the Universe*

E. L. Doctorow is a writer with many voices: cultural critic, theorist, radical historian and master storyteller, he recreates himself every time he engages with language. Over a literary career that has spanned roughly four decades, Doctorow has invoked an astonishing range of authorial voices across a wide selection of fictive and non-fictive disciplines in order to articulate his concerns. His dissemination of knowledge over these diverse fields of discourse has facilitated the emergence of multiple authorial personae: a committed fictionist who composes novels, short stories and screenplays, Doctorow is also a public intellectual who delivers lectures, writes essays, grants interviews and dispenses criticism. The dispersal of authorial identity in Doctorow's work posits questions concerning not only the relationship between author and text, but also the concept and stability of authorial identity. Doctorow's fictive and non-fictive voices play with and against each other, their interactions giving rise to complex fictional constructions in which the voices of author and characters intermingle and blend. The conventional image of the author as a stable, singular entity gives way to the multiple subjectivities that reverberate throughout Doctorow's narratives. This is not to deny the presence of Edgar Lawrence Doctorow, who demonstrates a sustained imaginative and political investment in the central issues of his times and his country, and who gives dramatic voice to these issues through the staging of his novels and their characters.

In view of the multiple authorial identities performed in Doctorow's writings, it is not surprising that he is widely considered a postmodernist writer.² Such classification is contentious, however,

¹ All ellipses used in this dissertation are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

² In his recent study of the popular and critical reception of Doctorow, John Williams proposes that the author's critics, having been informed by postmodern literary theory, have largely read him as a postmodern writer (1996: 3).

and has given rise to debates hinging on a variety of arguments, including definitional problems with the term “postmodernism”, difficulties with the concept of literary periodisation, and the allegedly unclassifiable nature of Doctorow’s work.³ However, it is unquestionable that Doctorow’s writings encapsulate the spirit of subversion so typical of the postmodern era. Characterised by a marked scepticism towards the totalising ideologies of nineteenth-century philosophical and scientific thought, his fiction displays the ironic self-consciousness common to literature produced during the latter half of the twentieth century. Doctorow’s writings, which are known for their compelling depictions of American history and society, exhibit extraordinary technical sophistication and embrace an unusually broad spectrum of themes, exploring with sensitivity and intellectual vigour the complex relations between history, reality and fiction. The social, spiritual and political issues that are so integral to Doctorow’s work are inextricably related to his stylistic experimentation with narrative.

The novels *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1974) and *City of God* (2000) have been selected for the manner in which they, in different ways, illustrate Doctorow’s postmodernist formal approach and his ongoing preoccupation with themes of a distinctly postmodernist nature.⁴ I provide in the introductory pages of this dissertation an overview of the critical theory that best illuminates, for my purposes, the three above-mentioned works. I then undertake a detailed critical consideration of Doctorow as a postmodernist writer, focusing on the manner in which his scepticism informs both the aesthetic and the thematic elements of his fiction.

Wide-ranging in its critical conceptualisations, the term “postmodernism” is notoriously difficult to define.⁵ Terry Eagleton observes that it is “the most widely-touted term in cultural theory today, one which, in promising to cover everything from Madonna to metanarratives, post-Fordism to pulp fiction, threatens thereby to collapse into meaninglessness” (1996a: 200). In attempting to define postmodernism, it is useful to begin with Jean-François Lyotard’s seminal text, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Lyotard conceives of a cultural

³ See Arthur Saltzman (1990: 218-219) and Geoffrey Galt Harpham (1985: 81) respectively.

⁴ Although originally published in 1971 and 1975 respectively, I work from the 1996 Plume edition of *The Book of Daniel*, and the 1976 Pan Books edition of *Ragtime*. I use the original Little, Brown edition of *City of God*.

⁵ Linda Hutcheon, who acknowledges that no one conception of postmodernism is more correct or incorrect than another despite critics’ differing approaches, endorses Brian McHale’s observation that all constructions of postmodernism “are ‘finally fictions’” (1989: 11).

state characterised by the rejection of those absolute values or “grand narratives” which had, prior to the twentieth century, explained humankind’s existence by legitimating the central belief systems of developed societies (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii). According to Lyotard, the postmodern “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984: xxiv) has given rise to an unstable, decentred culture characterised by its fragmented systems of thought and an overwhelming sense of plurality. Lyotard asserts a preference for this state of fragmentation, arguing that the universalising narratives of truth, science, religion, politics and reason have, since the Enlightenment, repressed the complex multiplicity of reality. “Let us wage a war on totality” (1984: 82), he declares, capturing in this proclamation the pervasive mood of transgression engendered by the postmodern scepticism towards absolutes.

Importantly, Eagleton underscores the inherently paradoxical nature of postmodernism.⁶ In spite of its fierce rejection of absolutist systems of thought, postmodernism possesses its own totalising system: its insistence on the contingency of reality is, in itself, a grand narrative. Indeed, postmodernism has developed its own ideological foundations by virtue of its fundamental assertion that there are no single meanings or conclusive interpretations. Accordingly, Patricia Waugh contends that “[p]ostmodernism is itself...another Grand Narrative, but one about the End of Grand Narratives” (1992: 12).⁷ Postmodernism has, arguably, evolved into a discrete tradition, complete with conventions, systems and ideologies. To speak, then, of “the postmodern tradition” or of “the conventions of postmodernism”, while not inaccurate, is to employ terms replete with irony. All references in this dissertation to the “tradition”, “ideologies”, or “conventions” of postmodernism are, therefore, made in full awareness of their implicit irony.

⁶ This significant facet of postmodernism was brought to my attention in a lecture of Terry Eagleton’s entitled “Postmodernism”, which was delivered on 20 August 2007 at the University of Cape Town. Eagleton explicates fully the paradoxes, contradictions and ambivalences of postmodernism in his 1996 book, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*.

⁷ Linda Hutcheon claimed earlier, however, that the flexibility of postmodernism enables it to question and problematise any totalising structures, including its own. “It tries to problematize and, thereby, to make us question,” she argued, “[b]ut it does not offer answers. It cannot, without betraying its anti-totalizing ideology” (1988: 231).

It is important to distinguish clearly between *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*.⁸ While the former is “the designation of a social and philosophical period or ‘condition’” (Hutcheon, 1989: 23), the latter denotes the cultural or aesthetic forms corresponding to this state, its manifestations ranging from literature and visual art to music and historiography. Postmodernist writing’s self-reflexive non-compliance with literary convention, which typically includes the fragmentation of narrative form and the dismissal of rigid genre distinctions, accentuates the distinctive pluralism, instability and discontinuity of postmodernity, as does the ironic scepticism commonly underpinning postmodernist literature, which functions to dispel the totalising ideologies of modernism. “The typical postmodernist work of art is arbitrary, eclectic, hybrid, decentred, fluid, discontinuous, pastiche-like,” writes Eagleton:

True to the tenets of postmodernity, [postmodernist art] spurns metaphysical profundity for a kind of contrived depthlessness, playfulness and lack of affect, an art of pleasures, surfaces and passing intensities. Suspecting all assured truths and certainties, its form is ironic and its epistemology relativist and sceptical. Rejecting all attempts to reflect a stable reality beyond itself, it exists self-consciously at the level of form or language. (1996a: 201)

Linda Hutcheon, in her influential works *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), emphasises the self-conscious scepticism and formal focus exhibited by postmodernist literature, but argues that it also possesses a complex political element. In Hutcheon’s view, postmodernism is inherently paradoxical in that it operates within the very societal structures it seeks to challenge and assess. As a result, it is able to maintain a persistent and effective critique of postmodernity without ever relinquishing a sense of its own complicity with the ideologies responsible for establishing our perceptions of reality.⁹ Indeed, Hutcheon stresses the fact that postmodern culture does not *deny* the totalising forces of western metaphysics, but seeks instead to challenge them from within its own assumptions in order to convey the necessarily provisional and illusive nature of universal absolutes (1988: 6). Hutcheon’s postmodernism is thus a “paradoxical postmodernism of

⁸ Hutcheon draws attention to the differences between the two terms, stressing the importance of separating them. Unlike other scholars (Hutcheon cites Frederic Jameson [1984a], Eagleton [1985], and Charles Newman [1985]), who tend to conflate the terms *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*, Hutcheon distinguishes clearly between the two in order to avoid the ambiguities arising from the common “polemical generalizations” about postmodernism (Hutcheon, 1988: 3).

⁹ Charles Jencks calls this “double-coding”, which he defines as “a strategy of affirming and denying the existing power structures at the same time, inscribing and challenging differing tastes and opposite forms of discourse” (1992: 13). Jencks argues that this “double-voiced discourse” is the “fundamental agenda” of the postmodern movement (1992: 13).

complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world” (Hutcheon, 1989: 11). Her recognition of the paradoxical nature of postmodernism is mirrored in Frederic Jameson’s suggestion that postmodern cultural manifestations stem from capitalistic society yet, paradoxically, they also feed, endorse and build that society. Jameson asserts that postmodernism *is* “the very element of consumer society itself; no society has ever been saturated with signs and images like this one” (1984: 131). Driven by private enterprise and the ongoing quest to fulfil consumer desires, late capitalism is at the core of Jameson’s concept of postmodernism. Importantly, Jameson conceives of postmodernism as the intertwining of culture and capitalism, implying that postmodernism is both socio-economic and cultural; a phenomenon that integrates commodity production and aesthetic production. Thus, he remarks that “the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation” (1991: 4-5).¹⁰

Jameson’s discussion of postmodernism and the capitalist economy communicates the significance of postmodernism’s correlations with aspects of consumerism and mass culture, the most pervasive of which are media-related. The potent influence of media and technology has been commented upon by Jean Baudrillard, who controversially argues that reality has become synonymous with the “simulacra”, or systems of signs, depicting that reality (1988: 166-167). Reality, he suggests, is merely “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1988: 166): signs have come to precede, replace and determine reality so that it is impossible to

¹⁰ Jameson applies the term “postmodernism” both to the socio-economic and philosophical condition that is the postmodern age, as well as to its cultural manifestations. Hutcheon criticises Jameson’s conflation of the terms “postmodernism” and “postmodernity”: “The slippage from *postmodernity* to *postmodernism* is constant and deliberate in Jameson’s work,” she writes. “[F]or him postmodernism *is* the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism.’ It replicates, reinforces, and intensifies the ‘deplorable and reprehensible’ (85) socio-economic effects of postmodernity” (1989: 25). That Jameson equates “the culture and its ground, rather than allowing for at least the possibility of a relation of contestation and subversion” (Hutcheon, 1989: 26) forms the crux of Hutcheon’s difficulty with Jameson’s conception of postmodernism, for she believes that postmodernism is far more active, challenging and critiquing these effects while remaining firmly rooted within the ideological constructs that produce them.

distinguish the representation from any original.¹¹ The real has thus been substituted by a collection of signs which allow for the development of a “hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference” (1988: 167). Mass communications, which are intimately related to consumer culture and Baudrillard’s conception of hyperreality, have played a powerful role in the advancement of postmodernism’s fragmented representations of a pluralistic, incoherent reality in which the real and the imaginary have become indistinguishable.¹² In taking cognisance of several related contemporary phenomena, including the western world’s loss of faith in conclusive ideologies, the supremacy of consumerism, and the rising influence of technology and the media, postmodern critical theory reflects the acute uncertainty of the postmodern state, an insecurity that has stimulated widespread interest in matters of teleology and ontology.

Robert Scholes was one of the first scholars who attempted to define the character of a distinctive literature which began to emerge in the 1960s. In *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979) he meditates critically on the relationship between fiction and reality in the postmodern age, identifying contemporary fictional writing as “fabulation”, a literary mode that foregrounds the complex relation of fiction to reality by privileging narrative form and by self-consciously asserting the presence of the narrative’s author, or “fabulator” (Scholes, 1979: 2-3). Drawing on the work of pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, Scholes cites the theory of “fallibilism” in support of his contention that modern fiction does not “[turn] away from reality, but [is] an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality” (1979: 8). Quoting Peirce, for whom reality is absolute but incapable of literary signification, Scholes writes: “[S]ince ‘people cannot attain absolute certainty concerning questions of fact’ (p. 50), the appropriate intellectual position for a human being must

¹¹ Doctorow articulates this sentiment well through the voice of one of his fictional characters in “The Leather Man”, a story appearing in his collection of short fiction, *Lives of the Poets: Six Stories and a Novella* (1984). In the story, a troubled astronaut is asked about his landing on the moon. “Look,” he replies, “the truth is I don’t remember. I mean, I remember that I walked on the moon but now I can see it on television and I don’t feel it, you know what I mean? I can’t believe it happened. I see myself, that I did it, but I don’t remember how it felt, I don’t remember the experience of it” (91).

¹² Baudrillard writes that “this confusion of the fact with its model...is what each time allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable, in the image of the models from which they proceed, in a generalized cycle” (1988: 175).

be...‘fallibilism,’ which [Peirce] expressed in this fashion: ‘On the whole, then, we cannot in any way reach perfect certitude or exactitude. We never can be absolutely sure of anything, nor can we with any probability ascertain the exact value of any measure or general ratio’” (1979: 8). Contemporary fiction, Scholes avers, accepts its fallibilism – its inability to represent reality absolutely or with certitude – aiming instead to tell “such truths as fiction may legitimately tell in ways which are appropriately fictional” (1979: 8).

Scholes’ recognition of the erosion of traditional realism’s positivistic foundations, and the resultant necessity for a fresh set of fictional skills with which to depict effectively a new, contemporary reality, recalls the sentiments expressed by John Barth in his essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967). First published in *The Atlantic*, the essay posits the “used-upness” of certain fictional forms, documenting the seeming exhaustion of literary possibilities in the late twentieth century. Barth refers to “The Literature of Exhaustion” in a later essay, clarifying that it was about “the effective ‘exhaustion’ not of language or of literature but of the aesthetic of high modernism” (1992: 180). In essence, the 1967 essay was an attempt to record and demystify the emergence of what is now known as postmodern fiction. Illustrating his argument with references to the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, Barth contends that, in an age of “ultimacies and ‘final solutions’” (1984: 73) ranging from the death of God to the disappearance of the author, the work of fiction ought to be transformed into a new and original examination of its own fictional techniques and formal construction. Applauding the writer who “doesn’t merely exemplify an ultimacy; he employs it” (1984: 74), Barth maintains “that artistic conventions are liable to be retired, subverted, transcended, transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work” (1992: 179). Barth, like Scholes, describes the emergence of a self-conscious literature which, frequently parodying generic literary conventions, exposes its own fictional devices, calls into question the act of representation, and challenges the pre-eminence of master narratives.

It is against this theoretical background that critics have viewed Doctorow’s work. John Williams goes so far as to say that any critical analysis of Doctorow’s career, which “parallels the ascendancy of both postmodern and poststructural theory”, *must* take into consideration the remarkable influence of postmodernism (1996: 6). Not all critics agree on the postmodern

character of Doctorow's writings, however. Neither Paul Levine nor Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson, for example, are committed to the idea that Doctorow is best described as a postmodernist writer. Levine groups Doctorow with authors such as Saul Bellow and Philip Roth and comments that, while his fiction "may suggest the self-reflexive concerns of post-modern fictioneers like Robert Coover and John Barth...Doctorow's interests lie elsewhere" (1985: 79). Highlighting Doctorow's political vision and his recurrent engagement in cultural critique, Levine emphasises the "abiding political interests" displayed throughout Doctorow's extensive body of work (1985: 23). In a similar vein, Harter and Thompson propose that his focus on the imagination as a source of truth differentiates him from both those traditional novelists aiming for realism, and the postmodernists, whose fictional strategies he frequently employs (1990: 12). Accentuating Doctorow's existentialist concerns, they suggest that his innovative use of fictional devices is meant not just to remind the reader of the aesthetic qualities of fiction, but to make sense of a complex, disjunctive reality. Quoting the work of Dieter Schultz, they claim that Doctorow's "fiction 'undercuts itself, not in the postmodernist sense of free play, but from an impulse to do justice to the complexity and elusiveness of history which defies whatever interpretive constructs one may impose upon it'" (1990: 12). Unlike Levine, however, Harter and Thompson warn against political interpretations of Doctorow's work, underlining the primacy of art over ideology: "[T]he artist," they write of Doctorow, "uses all the strategies he can invent to control the absurd world through an artistic mastery of it; for in an absurd world the understanding achieved through art is the only control possible for the writer, whatever the activist's belief might be" (1990: 12). Since the birth of academic criticism on Doctorow in the early eighties, scholars have thus generally classified him either as a quintessentially postmodernist writer, concerned only with narrative experimentation and linguistic innovation, or as a cultural analyst engaged in rigorous socio-political critique. This schism in Doctorow criticism mirrors a broader theoretical subject concerning the art-life dialectic, or the disparity between an exclusive focus on the processes of artistic composition, and an awareness and examination of the socio-political climate. As Barth notes, many critics of postmodernism maintain that "postmodernist writers write a fiction that is more and more about itself and its processes, less and less about objective reality and life in the world" (1992: 176).

It is well documented that postmodernist literature exhibits a heightened sense of “artistic narcissism”, tending to dwell on the technical and stylistic aspects of its own fictional nature to the point of excluding the socio-political conditions surrounding its production.¹³ The subordination of social interests to stylistic concerns has thus given rise to a literature whose foremost subject is the act of its own composition or, as Hutcheon puts it, to a “fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1984: 1). Hutcheon documents the popular critical designation of such literature as “metafiction” in her book *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), describing it as “process made visible” (1984: 6).¹⁴ Foregrounding the complex relationship between fictional narrative and reality, metafiction exhibits a formal and thematic self-consciousness which, Wallace Martin observes, extends to the story being told, its audience, reality and even narrative theory (1986: 179). The resultant effects are significant: when the author of a text self-reflexively refers to the text itself, or to a narrative within that narrative, “s/he has put it in quotation marks, so to speak, stepping beyond its boundaries” (Martin, 1986: 181). Metafiction thus possesses an element of transgression, in that its self-conscious focus on the processes of its own composition contravenes the terrain of traditional literature, destabilising conventional interpretive frameworks. Refuting Robert Alter’s suggestion that there exists a dialectic between fiction and reality,¹⁵ Hutcheon asserts that metafiction indicates the impossibility of separating art and life by unifying the *process* of storytelling with the *product* – the story itself (1984: 5). Although Alter’s argument – that contemporary writers ask the reader to examine a dichotomous relationship between fiction and reality – seems more in line with Doctorow, the approaches of both critics are germane to my analysis.

¹³ See Saltzman (1983: 73), Wallace Martin (1986: 178-181) and Hutcheon (1988: 22).

¹⁴ Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980), and Steven G. Kellman’s *The Self-Begetting Novel* (1980) are two particularly useful studies of the metafictional phenomenon as manifested in postmodernist literature. Hutcheon (1980: 4) notes that Jean Ricardou, Lucien Dällenbach and Robert Scholes were among the first critics to study the phenomenon of metafiction, but it was Robert Alter who forged new ground in the study of *narrative* narcissism with the publication of *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* in 1975. Alter works from the premise that “in many important novelists from Renaissance Spain to contemporary France and America the realistic enterprise has been enormously complicated and qualified by the writer’s awareness that fictions are never real things, that literary realism is a tantalizing contradiction in terms” (Alter, 1975: x).

¹⁵ Hutcheon discusses Alter’s proposition that writers are aware that fictions are never real things. Alter, she explains, suggests as a critical framework a dialectic between fiction and reality which implies a distinct separation of art and life (1984: 4-5).

Hutcheon proposes that the primary paradox of metafictional literature is that the reader is, on the one hand, unable to ignore the artifice, or constructed nature, of what s/he is reading, but on the other, s/he is implicated in the telling of the story, and is therefore forced to respond intellectually to the text as its “co-creator” (1984: 5). Hutcheon’s emphasis on reader-involvement is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’ formulation of the contemporary reader’s function. In his influential essay “The Death of the Author” (1977), Barthes proclaims “the birth of the reader” (1977: 148) in postmodern literature, concluding that the reader’s role in fiction today is essential. Barthes argues that texts are multifarious in their inevitable pluralism and intertextuality, but proposes that the one place to which the total energy of this multiplicity is directed is the reader: “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (1977: 148). Alluding here both to the eradication of the author and to the supreme significance of the reader, Barthes alleges that the reader holds together in a single frame everything presented by the text. He thus imbues the reader with extraordinary power, in that the reader alone is able to see the text in its entirety and, in possession of all the available data, is placed in a position to interpret it. As Arthur Saltzman writes, “Postmodern fiction ungirds those formidable conventions that suspend our disbelief, for only a wary reader, as purposefully self-conscious as the text he enters, will be an effective accomplice in the making of revelation” (1990: 12).

Confirming John Barth’s earlier observation that contemporary literature has eliminated not only the traditional audience, but also the established notion of the artist (1984: 71), Roland Barthes boldly asserts that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (1977: 148). Barthes, who contends that writing begins when the authorial voice “loses its origin [and] the author enters into his own death” (1977: 142), describes reality as a “field without origin” (1977: 146), echoing the poststructuralist notion of “the demise of the referent” (Walsh, 1992: 55). Owing to postmodernity’s perception of the era’s termination of the grand signifiers of modernity, the words, texts and images signifying reality have become disconnected from the real objects (the signifieds, or referents) to which they were attached, leaving a reality immune to any form of representation (Walsh, 1992: 54-55). Accordingly, Barthes writes, “life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost,

infinitely deferred” (1977: 147).¹⁶ Without the anchoring presence of a material referent, reality cannot be signified and is, as a consequence, rendered open-ended and ambiguous. Similarly, in the absence of a unitary meaning-making conception of the author, ultimate meaning can never be assigned to texts as they exist purely on the level of form, or language.¹⁷ Commenting on the linguistic consequences of an endlessly disappearing writing subject, Michel Foucault notes: “[T]he writing of our day...only refers to itself, yet it is not restricted to the confines of interiority. On the contrary, we recognize it in its exterior deployment. This reversal transforms writing into an interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier” (1977: 116). With the disappearance of all referents, including that of the author, language in postmodernity exists as an unattached, self-determining signifier. The refusal of language to be fixed allows for a continuous deferral of meaning: writing is, necessarily, a hermeneutically limitless structure; it cannot be assigned a final or conclusive interpretation. Today’s literature thus possesses a distinctive quality of transgression in that it “ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning” (Barthes, 1977: 147). For Martin, the transcendent nature of contemporary writing is the key element of metafiction, its parodic self-reflexivity enabling it to step beyond traditional literary boundaries by facilitating an infinite suspension of meaning (1986: 181).

Despite its interpretive potential, contemporary literature’s tendency to concentrate on the formal procedures of its own fictional composition inevitably results in the marginalisation of socio-political concerns. However, remarking on this most frequently criticised aspect of postmodern fiction, Levine states that there is no reason for the two categories to be mutually exclusive, as “[s]ocial vision and formal experimentation have gone hand in hand throughout the evolution of American literature” (1985: 8-9). Doctorow’s fiction, certainly, displays both social awareness

¹⁶ Barthes’ statement echoes Baudrillard’s conception of an unsignifiable reality composed of simulacra. Of the hyperreal, Baudrillard writes: “In this passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials – worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs” (1988: 167).

¹⁷ Indeed, Jameson argues that postmodernism’s effacement of the referent “leav[es] us with nothing but texts” (1991: 18). Both Barthes and Foucault assert the primacy of language in the contemporary age, viewing it as a discrete structure, in and of itself: Foucault expresses the idea of language (and not the author) producing the text, bringing the focus back to the language itself (1977: 116), while Barthes contends that language is its own enunciatory act, saying, “...*writing* can no longer designate an operation of recording, notation, representation, ‘depiction’....[R]ather it designates exactly what linguists, referring to Oxford philosophy, call a performative, a rare verbal form...in which the enunciation has no other content (contains no other proposition) than the act by which it is uttered” (1977: 146).

and stylistic innovation. Indeed, Saltzman maintains that Doctorow “continues to prove that it is possible to have it both ways: his novels are simultaneously artistically venturesome and socially conscientious” (1983: 75).¹⁸ According to Saltzman, Doctorow explores the possibilities of language in typical postmodernist fashion, yet he simultaneously “employs language in the study of social ills” (1983: 75):

The source of these two distinct – and, very often, mutually resistive – novelistic activities lies in Doctorow’s very inclusive concept of reality itself. Thematic questions lead him to aesthetic ones: What is the reality which underlies the deceptive images of America perpetrated by the media, by the ruling elite, and by our penchant for nostalgic remembrances and patriotic abstractions? And what method of narration is most reliable for conveying the reality of a given situation, or of a given idea? (1983: 75)

Saltzman confronts this – a dominant postmodernist trend – in his book, *Designs of Darkness in Contemporary American Fiction* (1990), in which he proposes that literature today challenges its readers to adapt themselves “to fiction that purports to escape subjection to pre-existent reality and launch competitive alternatives” (1990: 2). One such “competitive alternative” is the contemporary novel’s self-reflexive focus on linguistic method and technical innovation. Through stylistic experimentation, traditional perceptions of a stable reality informed by the positivistic values of Enlightenment thinking can be challenged and even subverted, and new possibilities of an interpretive and semantic nature can be brought to light. Barth, in “The Literature of Exhaustion”, reminds us that “the medium is the message” (1984: 78): by self-consciously concentrating on its own mode, or form, writing has the capacity to effect change. As Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin and Robin Parmar write, “Changing the medium may help us find new messages, or at least new ways of re-using the old ones. Certainly it offers new ways to re-conceive the legacy of cultural traditions” (Keep, McLaughlin and Parmar, 1993-2000).

Through the process of fictional composition, Doctorow explores the possibilities of reconstructing and redefining the American past in order to understand better the realities of the present. A pervasive feature of his writings, Doctorow’s innovative use of history involves the

¹⁸ See also Harpham (1985: 81), Levine (1985: 8), John G. Parks (1991a: 11), Susan Brienza (2000: 193) and Stephen Harris (2002: 168-169). Harris writes: “[O]n a formal level [Doctorow] acknowledges the philosophical complexities and epistemological ambiguities characterising the ‘question of history’, whilst at the same time making his stories work as politically engaged and socially concerned dramas” (2002: 168-169).

integration of factual and fictional modes, and has garnered a wealth of critical attention.¹⁹ For Doctorow, history is an ideal subject through which to express the infinite meanings of reality, as it “shares with fiction a mode of mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning, and it is the cultural authority from which they both derive that illuminates those facts so that they can be perceived” (FD 161). Drawing on the writings of Barthes, Saltzman affirms that “the linguistic character of history – historical reality is a human construction, a man-made significance – must be acknowledged if we are to avoid idolizing culturally sanctioned accounts of ‘what really happened’ and so relinquish our freedom to make meaning” (1990: 33).²⁰ Unlike traditional historical writing, which is customarily assumed to be teleologically verifiable and “mandate[s] such explanatory techniques as emplotment, formal argument, and ideological implication that ‘prefigure’ the experiential field” (Saltzman, 1990: 31), postmodernist literature consciously emphasises the fact that its portrayals of history are representations only. Saltzman explains: “just as the realistic novel has been debunked for its naïve presumptions regarding the reliable transmission of reality through the faithful and transparent medium of language, and has been contested by the self-conscious postrealist novel with its confessions of artifice, so too has historical writing undergone a reappraisal that reveals how its descriptions are actually constructions” (1990: 31).²¹ By constructing fictional histories from actual historical events and figures as well as from elements of the imagination, all the while engaging in self-reflexive explorations of language and form, Doctorow creates an unbounded textual space which is amenable not just to one, but to infinite interpretations. Indeed, the marked intertwining of fact and fiction in Doctorow’s work forms a crucial aspect of his project to redefine the past in order to introduce new meanings and interpretive possibilities. He effectively destabilises the traditional novel-reader relation through his inventive approach towards history, prompting his readers to probe and question previously accepted norms and ideals. Thus, like other writers of postmodernist American fiction, who illustrate Barth’s suggestion that written texts have the

¹⁹ See Barbara Foley (1978), Barbara Cooper (1980), Levine (1983), Harris (2002) and R. A. York (2003), amongst others.

²⁰ Saltzman also quotes Louis A. Mink, who declares that history and fiction provide the same lessons in “how to tell and to understand complex stories, and how it is that stories answer questions” (1990: 31).

²¹ See also Harris, who examines the manner in which the contemporary American historical novel addresses the relationship between the individual and history. Harris defines “history” for the purposes of his study as “those animating and shaping forces in the extra-personal domain” (2002: 167), writing of Doctorow: “[He] provocatively exploits the form of the historical novel in order to call into question the very act of historical representation” (2002: 165).

capacity to generate fresh insights through the self-conscious appraisal of their own fictional modes, Doctorow uses fictional constructions and narrative representation as a means of exposing the possibility of new and multiple meanings.

Multiplicity of meaning entails open-endedness: characteristic of most postmodernist literature is its easy allowance of ambiguities and its propensity to leave matters unresolved. Exemplifying the concerns of postmodern theory, Doctorow has, throughout his novelistic career, attacked notions of stability, teleological completeness and totalising theories, remaining “faithful in all his novels to what we might call the integrity of irresolution” (Saltzman, 1990: 35). Commenting on contemporary literature’s “pronounced tendency to let ambiguities blossom far beyond our capacities to stabilize, summarize, or restore them to sense” (1990: 2), Saltzman writes,

The old rules of the game – anxious grasping after Truth is rewarded by a more or less reliably “composed” product, and readerly resolve by narrative resolution – cannot be confidently applied. Literature comes out of the answerless, our authors now seem to tell us, and we touch the reminders shut in books, which are never so clever as calendars or so certain as the railroad timetables Kafka’s Gregor Samsa used to peruse for the pleasure of firmness...[C]ontemporary fiction so respects – even advocates – the resistance of experience (of world and word alike) to decipherability that interpretation may no longer be seen as the vanquishment of fiction but as its inevitable extension. (1990: 2)

The pervading sense of irresolution inherent in postmodernist fiction is attributable to its underlying acknowledgment that some matters cannot be explained in absolute or finite terms. Consequently, novelist Milan Kundera has referred to the postmodernist novel’s “wisdom of uncertainty” (1988: 7). By virtue of its metafictional nature and its overt scepticism towards universalist values, Doctorow’s work embodies the so-called postmodernist “demise of the referent” (Walsh, 1992: 55), indicating the ultimately unsignifiable nature of reality.

In addition to the widespread critical recognition of reality’s illusiveness, the social, technological and political actualities that contribute towards contemporary American experience are so numerous, fickle and extraordinary that writers today feel incapable of capturing a single, composite view of reality. The overwhelming multiplicity and inconsistency of experience has been remarked upon by authors such as Don DeLillo and Robert Coover, who self-consciously grapple with ways in which to portray or interpret such experience in writing.²² Indeed, contemporary society is overloaded with “such diverse and disparate views of reality that no

²² In *White Noise* (1984) and *The Public Burning* (1977) respectively.

single interpretive frame can contain them all and still present a coherent vision of experience” (Zavarzadeh, 1976: 7). Doctorow asserts, “I certainly would much rather trust as a source of truth the variousness of literature, and its width and breadth, than, for instance, a press release from a government agency, or even a sermon. It seems to me what must be maintained is the absolute multiplicity of us all, the numbers of us who color the palette from which the society draws its own portrait” (*Conversations* 52).

Christopher D. Morris, whose critical approach to Doctorow and his writings constitutes a significant departure from other early scholarship on Doctorow insofar as he concentrates specifically on matters of representation, is another critic who explores the complex relationship between fiction and the “uncertain” truth as construed in postmodernist literature. Morris questions the ability of fictional texts to produce definite meaning, relying heavily on Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and J. Hillis Miller, all of whom challenge the western philosophical tradition “in which truth is defined in terms of representation” (Morris, 1991: 4). According to Morris, Doctorow’s literary offerings “teem with rendered life” on a superficial level, but ultimately illustrate the fictional text’s “incapacity to represent” (1991: 3). Identifying the supposedly intentional inconsistencies in both Doctorow’s fiction and his nonfiction writings, Morris argues that Doctorow’s work discloses the impossibility of making concrete meaning through textual representation, yet it is fundamentally paradoxical in that Doctorow believes fiction to be a valuable source of truth and knowledge. Indeed, Doctorow declares, “I believe so completely in fiction that I regard it as a mega-discipline, one that incorporates all others, blurs the genres, whips together fact and imagination, and at its best reasserts the authority of a single unaffiliated mind to render the world. Just as it did in ancient times, when the story was a knowledge system, indeed the primary means of organizing and storing knowledge” (RU 51-52). As Morris writes,

The major contradiction in Doctorow’s fiction [is] the assertion that the world as it is constituted is wholly arbitrary, but at the same time, the belief that fiction can give it meaning....In the same manner, Doctorow’s nonfiction depicts the writer as engaged in a meaning-making enterprise that is, simultaneously, a delusion. The nonfiction pieces offer no resolution to this contradiction but, instead, exemplify it again and again, just as the novels have. (1991: 176-177)

Doctorow emphasises the artifice that is fiction, yet he simultaneously accentuates the special relation of fiction to truth and knowledge, describing narrative as the “ultimate” epistemology

(UD 41).²³ In composing texts defined by their ironic self-consciousness and their unresolved inconsistencies, Doctorow communicates the inherently constructed nature of narrative. The surface cohesion of Doctorow's fiction, with the significant exception of *City of God*, whose narrative arrangement is overtly fragmentary and disjointed, belies its lurking sense of irresolution. With its deliberate ambiguities and its suggestions of a multiplicity of meaning, the typically postmodern self-reflexivity visible in Doctorow's work destabilises the reader's trust in the narrated story. Accordingly, in a 1988 interview with W. F. Bevilacqua, Doctorow remarked:

I was attracted to formal experiments of the time in which writers sort of broke down the compact between reader and writer and intruded in ways to suggest to the reader that the material was totally unreliable and not to be trusted. Whenever you want to suspend your disbelief and believe what you are reading, the writer will intrude and say: "Ah ha! I caught you that time. Don't believe this. There's no such thing as human character and all stories are a sham and I'm telling you this and now we'll go back to the story." (*Conversations* 134)

It is this parodic self-consciousness to which Morris refers when he discusses the "misrepresentations" inherent in Doctorow's writings. These crucial misrepresentations, he suggests, indicate the impossibility of fulfilling the "representation-as-deciphering" (1991: 4) imperative, for, in accordance with the postmodernist literary tradition, Doctorow does not embrace universalising theories or propose one conclusive, governing truth. It would seem, though, that the writer's belief in the power of writing to access truth and affirm human knowledge contradicts the postmodern rejection of absolutes. Although Doctorow advocates the authority of fiction, however, he recognises the ultimate indeterminacy of literature, expressing through the enigmatic plot detail and multiple linguistic and structural ambiguities of his fiction the ever-elusive nature of both writing and human experience. Espousing Barth's conception of metafiction's ability to transform and reinvigorate tired traditions, he suggests that fiction has the capacity to contest accepted truths and open the reader's mind to new possible meanings. Essentially, Doctorow argues for a more sophisticated comprehension of the relation of fiction to reality. "[S]ince history *can* be composed," he states, "you want to have as many people involved in the composition as possible. A kind of democracy of perception. Thousands of eyes, not just one. And since we're not only talking about history, but reality as well, then it seems to me a noble aspiration of a human community to endow itself with a multiplicity of witnesses" (*Conversations* 113). Calling on both novelists and readers to act as witnesses, Doctorow

²³ Doctorow discusses his views on the supreme authority of fiction in his 1986 essay, "The Importance of Fiction, Ultimate Discourse."

suggests that through shared perceptions, multiple perspectives will reveal themselves so that new and fuller understandings of reality arise. He thus “democratises” meaning, implying that subjective meanings do exist in contemporary culture in spite of the marked absence of objective truth.²⁴ As John G. Parks writes, “The goal is to disclose and challenge the hegemony of enshrined or institutionalised discursive practices in order to make available new possibilities of thought and action. Doctorow’s fiction shows a willingness to take risks, to counter the tendency of a culture to monopolize the compositions of truth” (1991b: 462). Ultimately, as Doctorow himself concedes, all textual representation is artifice – every narrative is a construction, every story an imaginative fabrication. This does not, however, negate the capacity of fiction to function as a source of guidance and knowledge.

Doctorow articulates this sentiment in his important 1977 essay, “False Documents”, in which he privileges fiction over other forms of discourse. Described as a “major manifesto of American postmodernism” (Morris, 1991: 177), the essay examines the role of language in the contemporary world, citing the rise of scientific empiricism and absolutist thinking as the reason for literature’s diminished status as a source of truth. Unlike in the past, when the knowledge and counsel provided by their narratives imbued storytellers with immense social power, literature today has fallen in perceived value. In the modern world, writes Doctorow, “there is no presumption of truth in the art of storytelling except in the minds of children” (FD 154). By contrast, the influential language of politicians, historians, journalists, and social scientists “always presumes a world of fact discovered” (FD 157). In “False Documents” Doctorow adopts the terms “the power of the regime” and “the power of freedom” (FD 152) to refer to the divisions in language arising from an increased emphasis on positivistic values of rationalism and verifiability. The former refers to the certifiable world of objective facts, while the latter describes an ideal, nonverifiable world which derives its power not “from what we are supposed to be”, but from “what we threaten to become” (FD 153). Although Doctorow draws this distinction between a “regime language” and a “language of freedom”, he accentuates the increasingly blurred boundaries between fact and fiction. “Alone among the arts,” he writes, “literature confuses fact and fiction...[in] a mixing-up of the historic and the aesthetic, the real

²⁴ Speaking of postmodernism in more general terms, Williams writes, “On one level...postmodernism does not break with, but continues the romantic and modern existential quest to create subjective meaning in the absence of objective truth” (1996: 146).

and the possibly real” (FD 154, 157). For centuries, he argues, writers have adopted narrative strategies as a means of gaining authority for their texts. Presenting themselves not as authors of their works but as dissociated literary executors, Cervantes and Defoe were amongst the first to legitimate their fictional texts using the convention of the “false document”.²⁵ As Doctorow observes, fictional devices such as this are used in all narrative compositions: “every fiction is a false document” (FD 156); every narrative, regardless of whether it is a fictional story or part of the scientifically verifiable world, is an artificial documentation of reality. In Doctorow’s view, therefore, all factual records are inherently fictional, as no text is exempt from the use of narrative techniques.²⁶ He concludes that “there is no fiction or non-fiction as we commonly understand the distinction: There is only narrative” (FD 163).²⁷ Doctorow admits to being “less than hospitable to...forms of nonfictive discourse” (FD 159), elevating fiction as a source of truth. As Williams remarks, Doctorow “asserts the superiority of fiction over other forms of discourse, primarily because of fiction’s comprehensiveness, but also because of its honesty; it admits that its stories are lies, while other ‘scientific’ discourse claims truth....Doctorow’s essay celebrates...the skepticism that liberates fiction from claims of any kind of absolute truth” (1996: 145-146).

“False Documents” thus embodies the characteristically postmodern scepticism towards totalising ideologies and singular systems of thought. For Doctorow, fiction is an inclusive discourse that has the capacity to compose truths greater than those of empirical research and

²⁵ Doctorow acknowledges that the phrase “false document” was coined by Kenneth Rexroth (FD 155).

²⁶ In *Creationists: Selected Essays, 1993-2006*, Doctorow uses the narrative history of the Bible to illustrate this point. Of the first book of the Old Testament he writes: “The story [of Genesis] has turned the human condition into a sequential narrative of how it came to be; it has used conflict and suspense to create a moral framework for *being*” (*Creationists* 4).

²⁷ Harpham notes the contradiction inherent in this statement, observing that the essay claims “first, that there are two kinds of power in language; second, that there are two kinds of language; third, that one of those kinds dominates and even constitutes the other; and, finally, that there is only one kind of language but that it is neither the first nor the second” (1985: 82). Harpham, like Morris, recognises that Doctorow’s essay is in itself a kind of false document, as it makes confident assertions on the credibility of texts, the role of the writer in ancient and modern times, the place of fiction in today’s society, and the use of narrative techniques in fiction and non-fiction writing, yet it systematically undermines these claims with its breakdown of distinctions (between the power of freedom and the power of the regime, and between fiction and non-fiction writing). For a detailed critical analysis of the essay as a false document in itself, see Morris (1991: 177-183). While I am aware of the obvious contradictions in accepting “False Documents” as an authoritative source of information, I use the ideas expressed in the essay to illuminate certain issues in Doctorow’s fiction. As Williams notes, the contradiction inherent in the essay – that “literature competes against the regime of power by offering a more valuable form of truth, but...all discourse collapses into narrative” – drives Doctorow’s aesthetic (1996: 92). The sentiments articulated in “False Documents” therefore have direct bearing on any analysis of Doctorow’s writings, whether fictional or non-fictional.

allegedly verifiable documents. Indeed, as a writer Doctorow feels that he “can attest to the power of the not entirely rationally derived truths of good storytelling to affect mass consciousness and create moral constituencies” (RU 78). Citing the Bible as an example, Doctorow writes that stories are able to provide us with an ethical framework by which to live, a way of understanding the perplexities of human life, and that sense of community so essential for the psychological and spiritual completeness of human existence. As in the days of old, when fiction “bound the present to the past, the visible to the invisible, and...helped to compose the community necessary for the continuing life of its members” (FD 154), literature today is, in Doctorow’s view, essential for human survival. In highlighting the power of the storyteller to shape human consciousness, Doctorow establishes the story as a powerful mechanism with the inimitable capacity to influence our sense of being and understanding. As he argues in his 1993 collection of essays, *Poets and Presidents: Selected Essays, 1977-1992*, literature “finds the meaning, or the hidden life, in the observable life. It discovers the significant secrets of places and things. That is what makes it so necessary to us; that is why we practice it; that is why it is such an essential human function” (PP 202).

In his lucid and illuminating study of Doctorow and his writings, John G. Parks highlights Doctorow’s belief in the power of narrative as a moral pedagogical tool – an important feature of Doctorow’s work which is not explored in equal depth by other scholars.²⁸ Doctorow, writes Parks, “provokes the reader to a radical reassessment of the American experience in essentially *moral terms*” (Parks, 1991a: 11, emphasis added). Recognising the strong moral force present in Doctorow’s fiction, Parks, like Harter and Thompson, stresses Doctorow’s conviction that “writing matters, that there is salvation in witness and moral assignment” (*Beliefs* 618). Doctorow’s assertion of the ethical motivation of his writing is reinforced by his statement, “What is just? What is unjust? That’s where it all begins for me” (*Conversations* 95). In Parks’ view, Doctorow attempts to achieve moral transformation by blending his related interests in linguistic innovation and social justice: “[Doctorow] is passionately committed to engaging the

²⁸ This is excepting Susan Brienza who, in her essay “Writing as Witnessing: The Many Voices of E. L. Doctorow” (2000), explores, amongst other things, the relation between narrative style and morality in Doctorow’s writings. Sam B. Girgus and John Clayton also refer to the moral imperative in Doctorow’s fiction in their essays “A True Radical History: E. L. Doctorow” (2002) and “Radical Jewish Humanism: The Vision of E. L. Doctorow” (2000), respectively. However, their discussions of Doctorow’s moral impetus form part of their broader explorations of Doctorow as a specifically radical Jewish humanist writer. See pages 27-28 of this dissertation for elucidation of this point.

American social reality, all of its components, and doing so in highly original narrative forms. Each work shows this dual and related concern for the problems and possibilities of narrative, of fiction making, and of the penetration of American society, an exploration of its myths, history and values” (Parks, 1991a: 11). Adopting an approach akin to that of Saltzman, Levine and Hutcheon, Parks acknowledges Doctorow’s interconnected concerns for narrative process and socio-political realities. However, he openly criticises those who classify Doctorow as a political novelist: “Such a label is simplistic and misleading,” he writes, “for it implies that an author has an agenda, a program, or an ideology to promulgate in fiction” (1991a: 11). Indeed, Doctorow does not promote specific political regimes in a systematic manner. Although he maintains that storytellers are “ordained to contest the aggregate fictions of their societies” (*Creationists* xii), Doctorow emphasises the fact that “[n]ovelists are not politicians....So if you ask am I a historical novelist, I say no. Am I a political novelist? No. Am I an ethnic novelist? No. I’m a novelist” (*Conversations* 117, 95). Doctorow repeatedly denies that he is writing with particular political aims in mind:

[I]f there is some sort of programmed intention, a set of truths to be illustrated, the work will be compromised and will not be art but polemic. We will have corrupted the occasion and betrayed the calling. (RU 69)

[T]o think that I’m writing to advance a political program misses the point. To call a novel political today is to label it, and to label it is to refuse to deal with what it does. My premise is that the language of politics can’t accommodate the complexity of fiction, which as a mode of thought is intuitive, metaphysical, mythic. (*Conversations* 44)

Morris writes: “Doctorow...insists that his political ideas are only born and discovered, as it were, by the writing of the novels themselves, rather than existing beforehand and being imposed on the work from the outset” (1999: xi). However, while Doctorow insists that his fiction is not written with overt political motives in mind, he acknowledges the politics inherent in his work. Indeed, he claims that “it is hard to think of a writer who cannot be given a very rigorous political interpretation” (EC 60), and admits that his is “a poetics of engagement” (EC 48). Doctorow’s politics arise from his cultural and social context, the postmodern condition in which he lives and works. Like Morris, who concedes that Doctorow’s fiction is inescapably political in its thematic reach, commenting on the “old relation” between literature and politics (1991: 183), Parks emphasises that all fiction has some measure of socio-political implication (1991a: 11). He thereby reinforces Hutcheon’s claim that postmodern literature “cannot be but political” (1989:

3). Both Morris and Parks explicitly dismiss the view that Doctorow can be classified as simply a political writer, choosing instead to focus on Doctorow's examination of existential questions such as "what was or is America? Who are we and why? Where are we going? Is there hope for positive change?" (Parks, 1991a: 16). Such questions are indicative of Doctorow's strong belief in the transformative power of narrative, as expressed in "False Documents" and his 1985 essay, "The Beliefs of Writers". As Doctorow has affirmed, fiction has the remarkable capacity to induce positive change in the world. Hence, Parks writes:

It is perhaps inevitable that a writer whose fiction is engaged in such imaginative, historical revisioning would be criticised for being a "political novelist," especially by those whose politics differ from Doctorow's. But such labeling does not do real justice to Doctorow's work. First and foremost, he considers himself a novelist, unmodified by such terms as historical, political, or ethnic....*His political passion, then, is essentially a moral passion for justice* deriving from basic historical formulations such as the Bible and the Constitution, which places him in that rich and varied tradition of the American jeremiad, which Sacvan Bercovitch describes as "a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting 'signs of the times' to certain traditional metaphors, themes and symbols." (1991a: 16-17, emphasis added)

John Clayton uses the "attitude of moral seriousness" (2000: 192) expressed throughout Doctorow's work in support of his contention that Doctorow belongs to the prophetic tradition of radical Jewish humanism.²⁹ In Clayton's view, Doctorow advocates such values as human kindness, compassion and justice (ideals shared by the humanist and Jewish traditions), exhibiting a normative vision inspired by his radical Jewish socialist forebears (2000: 185). "Identifying with the oppressed," writes Clayton, "the Jewish voice, in a passionate, non-modernist tone, argues in defense; humor or pathos or both come out of the ironic tension between human beings expressing kindness, dignity, hope, and a world expressing injustice. It is also a heritage of Jewish writers to insist on probing, often self-torturing examination of themselves, of institutions, of life itself" (2000: 184). Although these qualities do not form the focal point of all of Doctorow's writings, they are certainly evident in *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime* and *City of God*. Designating "humanist critique" and "social or political skepticism" (EC 54) as distinctly Jewish traits, Doctorow himself has appeared to endorse this labeling as a radical Jewish humanist writer, saying of the tradition, "Humanist, radical, Jewish. The sense of

²⁹ As Williams notes, there is a relative scarcity of criticism placing Doctorow in the Jewish literary canon (1996: 66). Girgus, however, is one of the few critics who sees Doctorow as a distinctly Jewish writer, differing from Clayton only in his emphasis on the concern expressed by Jewish American writers for the relevance of America as a space of freedom and equality. Accordingly, Girgus maintains, "Doctorow writes from the perspective of a moral consciousness to reexamine the meaning of the American experience and to revivify our moral imagination" (2002: 7).

possibility. All the solutions were to be found here on earth....[I]f I was not in that tradition, I would certainly want to apply for membership” (EC 53-55). Doctorow’s existentialism, his emphasis on human kindness, and his concern for social justice indeed reflect a markedly Jewish sensibility that has at its core a strong sense of morality. Girgus and Clayton’s arguments for the radical Jewish humanist nature of Doctorow’s work are, therefore, persuasive.

Entrenched in the metafictional tradition, Doctorow’s literary examinations of the historical and contemporary state of American culture are accompanied by self-reflexive explorations of a linguistic nature. Language is integral to Doctorow’s project. In an interview with Richard Trenner, editor of *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations* (1983), Doctorow asserts that certain politically motivated works of literature have been “destroyed by ideological commitment [and are] obscure today” (EC 49). He continues, maintaining that where political aims are overt, literary failure results:

The failure arises from diction. What very often happens is that the novelist or poet assumes the diction of politics, which, by its very nature, tends to be incapable of illumination. If you use political diction you’re not reformulating anything. You’re telling people what they already know. Your rationale is your own language, and the danger of explicit politics in a book is giving that up. (EC 49)

Although conscious of the politics inherent in his work, Doctorow places emphasis on the crucial role of language in reformulating and illuminating social facts such that new understandings arise. In his discussion of Doctorow’s sensitivity to the politics of language, Parks quotes Eagleton’s comment, “The hallmark of the ‘linguistic revolution’ of the twentieth century, from Saussure and Wittgenstein to contemporary literary theory, is the recognition that meaning is not simply something ‘expressed’ or ‘reflected’ in language: it is actually *produced* by it” (1991a: 17). In a lecture delivered at the University of Michigan in 1985, Doctorow urged young American writers to reclaim the waning authority of fiction by overcoming the contemporary American “exhaustion of hope that writing can change anything” (*Beliefs* 615).³⁰ He implored them to rebel against the “modesty of conception and language” characterising present-day literature, and to use language to shake the foundations of conventional perceptions and passive assumptions (*Beliefs* 614). In a similar vein, Saltzman stresses that when language is used effectively it has the potential to unsettle systems of ossified preconceptions. Following in the

³⁰ Entitled “The Beliefs of Writers”, the lecture was revised by the author for publication and appeared in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* in the Fall of the same year.

tradition of Barthes, who maintains that reality “has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins” (1977: 146), Saltzman hypothesises that the “will to truth in literature is inseparable from its verbal conveyance” (2000: 184). Doctorow would most certainly endorse these views: he attempts to expose moral, spiritual and social truths through his inventive use of language and form and, in doing so, the socio-political elements of his work become closely related to his linguistic concerns. “The task of narrative is to disrupt or dismantle the prevailing ‘regimes of truth,’ including their repressive effects,” Parks affirms. “The ultimate political enterprise of the novelist is to prevent the power of the regime from monopolizing the compositions of truth, from establishing a monological control over culture” (1991a: 18). Doctorow aims to do just this: through language and narrative technique his fiction challenges and invigorates traditionally accepted societal beliefs, engaging in a political endeavour intimately connected to a strong sense of morality and the desire for spiritual restoration.

Like Morris and Harter and Thompson, who emphasise Doctorow’s privileging of the fictional text, critic Geoffrey Galt Harpham underscores the primacy of narrative in Doctorow’s work. He writes of the author’s seminal essay, “False Documents”:

It gives us a way of thinking about Doctorow: not as a formal innovator or as the author of fictionalized history but as a creator of texts whose ambivalences define his central continuing concern, narrative itself, and its relation to power, imagination, and belief. Within the terms of this problem, Doctorow’s career has taken shape. It has developed...from a critique of the coercive power of the textual and ideological regime to a celebration of the powers of imaginative freedom. (1985: 82)

While stressing the writer’s concern for narrative itself, Harpham recognises the inadequacy of viewing Doctorow’s technique as independent of, or secondary to, his portrayals of history and politics. A more suitable approach, he suggests, would be to describe how narrative technique interpenetrates and complements the political, social or historical subjects of Doctorow’s writings (1985: 81). What Harpham fails to identify, however, is the pervasiveness of the postmodern influence on all aspects of the writer’s work. Doctorow’s political, social and religious views, the formal means he uses to express them, and his celebrated faith in the power of writing are all firmly rooted in his postmodern context.

Doctorow's writings thus correspond with Hutcheon's view that postmodernism involves "a strange kind of critique, one bound up...with its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyse and maybe even undermine" (1989: 4). The writer's work embodies these ambiguities, self-consciously operating within and challenging through both its thematic and formal aspects the norms and values structuring contemporary society. Unlike Jameson, whose emphasis rests on the process of composition and the technical expression of Doctorow's fiction to the exclusion of socio-political realities, Hutcheon suggests that Doctorow engages with political and social issues in a more direct manner (1988: 61-62). While she does not refute the self-reflexive, aesthetically informed character of Doctorow's work, she asserts that its inevitable ideological grounding serves as a foundation from which postmodernist critique can and does occur. Like other postmodernist art, Doctorow's writings simultaneously inscribe and subvert the perceptions and ideologies of the society from which they arise. Indeed, Doctorow's approach to narrative is far more socially, historically and politically explicit than Jameson's "politically naive" (Hutcheon, 1989: 3) stance on Doctorow. As Hutcheon writes,

On the surface, postmodernism's main interest might seem to be in the processes of its own production and reception, as well as in its own parodic relation to the art of the past. [But it is this parody] that paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, to a discursive world of socially defined meaning systems (past and present) – in other words, to the political and the historical. (1988: 22)

Doctorow's writings, all of which have been produced in an era fraught with scepticism, instability and multiplicity, engage with the dominant social and political climates of their conception. As Williams writes, "It is harder to imagine a better fit of writer and historical moment than exists in the case of E. L. Doctorow and the postmodern age" (1996: 14).

The three chapters comprising the body of this dissertation demonstrate the manner in which these concerns are manifested in selected works by Doctorow. While dissimilar in narrative style and content, the novels *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime* and *City of God* are unified by their implicit endorsement and illustration of the key themes of postmodern thought outlined above. Doctorow is attentive in these three works both to the socio-political realities of his time and to the self-reflexive stylistic innovation characteristic of so many postmodernist authors. My first chapter consists of a detailed critical analysis of Doctorow's third novel, *The Book of Daniel*. Inspired by

the highly publicised 1950's trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, *The Book of Daniel* explores the complex relation between narrative, truth and textual representation, foregrounding narrative's capacity to generate self-understanding and the acquisition of knowledge. I show how the novel, with typical postmodernist scepticism, destabilises some of the central tenets of Enlightenment thinking by problematising traditional modes of historical and linguistic representation. Engaging in complex experiments with narrative form and technique, Doctorow reveals the incapacity of language to represent an ever-illusory reality, conveying the inherent arbitrariness and multiplicity of existence. Through a comprehensive examination of the novel's narrative structure, thematic focus, and metafictional elements, I reveal how *The Book of Daniel* ultimately posits the indeterminate, provisional nature of truth and human experience, and expresses the necessity for an inclusive mode of perception whereby history and its representations are challenged and reconstructed through the critical reassessment of conventionally unquestioned textual readings.

In the second chapter I shift my attention to Doctorow's *Ragtime*, a novel which on publication enjoyed significant commercial success, satisfying both popular and critical appetites. Set at the turn of the twentieth century, *Ragtime* displays the fluid integration of factual and fictional worlds for which Doctorow has become renowned. The novel takes up the concerns presented in *The Book of Daniel*, challenging literary norms by attempting to subvert traditional conceptions of reality, history and textual representation. It departs from the earlier novel, however, by focusing more explicitly on the nature and validity of *historical* representation. Accordingly, I provide in this chapter a brief overview of the evolution of the historical novel, commenting on the parallel development of concepts of history and historical representation. I demonstrate how, through his deliberate and innovative confusion of historical and invented characters, events and settings, Doctorow conveys the artifice that is historical representation. The writer's ironic manipulation of the historical record in *Ragtime* illustrates his scepticism towards the perceived credibility of textual representation, endorsing *The Book of Daniel's* implicit assertion that human experience is inherently ambiguous and, ultimately, indeterminate. *Ragtime* reinforces and expands on this theme, accentuating through its recurring thematic threads and its cinematic narrative style the mutability and plurality of history, experience and writing.

City of God, Doctorow's penultimate novel to date, forms the subject of my critique in the third chapter of this dissertation. Written and published almost three decades after *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*, it is not surprising that the novel differs substantially from its predecessors in both its formal presentation and its thematic interests. However, *City of God*'s divergences from Doctorow's earlier writings exist on a perceptual level only, in that it furthers and intensifies the postmodernist concerns instituted in his previous works. Patrick A. Smith rightly maintains that *City of God* is "the culmination of Doctorow's quest for the quasi-fictional narrative" and is "significant in the body of Doctorow's fiction as a testament to the continuing evolution of his narrative technique" (2004: 392). The most complex of Doctorow's novels, *City of God*'s linguistic and stylistic experimentation produces a disjointed narrative characterised by its blurred genres, its multiple voices, and its stark juxtapositioning of thematic content. The novel pushes the bounds of conventional literature, exemplifying Doctorow's belief (seen also in John Barth's argument) that "[t]he novel has constantly to recreate itself by assaulting its own traditions, the form has to be abused somehow in order to be reinvented each time you write a book" (*Conversations* 10). *City of God*, like *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*, embraces a diverse range of subjects, yet Doctorow extends the scope of his enquiry to include moral and spiritual concerns. By virtue of the manner in which the novel approaches such issues, *City of God* locates itself within the postmodernist literary tradition, its distinct scepticism, narrative fragmentation, subtle merging of factual and fictional modes, and explicit self-reflexivity consonant with the radical departures from traditional literary conventions exhibited in *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*. Indeed, Doctorow issues overt challenges to the metanarratives of religion, science, history and politics in *City of God*, emphasising the contemporary necessity for a continual critical examination and rearticulation of universal narratives.

CHAPTER ONE

Writing, Knowledge and Truth in *The Book of Daniel*

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –
- Emily Dickinson

Immediately after its publication in 1971, *The Book of Daniel* attracted considerable critical attention for its portrayal of an individual response to a particularly turbulent period in America's political history. The novel, which on publication was hailed as one of the great political novels of the twentieth century, has since received relatively little critical consideration.³¹ Over and above its unique treatment of familiar political and historical issues, *The Book of Daniel's* significance lies in its implicit commentary on the connections between literature, self, and politics, and its questioning of the credibility of textual representation. As indicated above, Doctorow consistently highlights the power of the storyteller to shape human consciousness, thereby establishing the story as a powerful mechanism with the capacity to influence our sense of being and understanding. For Doctorow, narratives are storehouses of knowledge that can act as precious portals to truth. In *The Book of Daniel* Doctorow uses his story of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to explore the complex relations between narrative, truth and historical representation. Virginia Carmichael comments that “[t]he Rosenberg story provides a particularly apt occasion for a consideration of the function of storytelling – of narrative – in history” (1993: xii). It is perhaps because of this potential that the Rosenberg affair has attracted such an overwhelming response from writers, playwrights and artists, whose incorporation of the Rosenbergs in their creative ventures is noteworthy. Since 1966, several novels and plays featuring the couple have been produced, namely Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1966), Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), Donald Freed's play, *Inquest* (1969), Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), and Joyce Carol Oates' *You Must Remember This* (1988), amongst

³¹ This is remarked upon by Virginia Carmichael (1993: 131), who notes that interest in the novel was renewed in the late 1980s/early 1990s, when the democratisation of specific Eastern European countries necessitated a “rearticulation of the meaning and practice of the left in those countries” (1993: 132).

others. Some of these artistic interrogations of the Rosenberg case, including and especially *The Book of Daniel*, attempt to dismantle both the ideological assumptions underlying this controversial story as well as its representations in history.

Inspired by the sensational “atom spy” trial and execution of the Rosenbergs in the early 1950s, *The Book of Daniel* successfully captures the charged atmosphere of the age. The political climate of post-World War II America was fraught with tension: the Cold War premise of an overpowering “communist threat” had created a pervasive sense of hysteria, experienced in public as well as private domains. Daily life was infused with “paranoid terrors of dark forces” (Miller, 2000: 193), attributable in large part to the activities of Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, who was first elected to the senate in 1946. Through the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), an organisation established by the Republicans in 1938 to investigate persons who were deemed suspicious or potentially threatening to national interests, McCarthy was able to conduct a vicious and relentless communist hunt. The Republican senator, whose name has since become synonymous with the era’s mood of political hysteria, effectively staged a series of anti-communist show trials which disseminated and intensified Cold War doctrine. Playwright Arthur Miller, who himself appeared before the HUAC, describes the atmosphere engendered by McCarthy’s “Fifties’ Red hunt” as a state of “helpless paralysis...a mass, mythic shadow dance, a ritualised, endlessly repeated consent to a primitive anticommunism” (2000: 193). McCarthy, who had obtained the all-important support of the media, opposed any person even remotely associated with communism or the Left. As Miller elaborates, the senator’s “very name struck terror not only in the hearts of the several million Americans who in the previous decades of the Forties or Thirties had had a brush with any branch or leaf of the Left, but also those who had ever expressed themselves with something less than violent hatred of the Soviets, Marx...or even certain kinds of poetry” (2000: 190). Aided by the print media, which published HUAC and FBI reports from allegedly informed sources as “factual”, as well as by the human predilection to succumb to mass hysteria, McCarthy successfully whipped the American public into a self-destructive, communist-hating frenzy.

Stephen Harris writes that “the political rhetoric of the day manufactured a modern-day myth of the apocalypse, in which America assumed the heroic role of defender of good against the forces

of Russian (communist) evil” (2002: 196). Even Judge Irving R. Kaufman, a supposedly impartial affiliate of the American justice system, exhibited a complete internalisation of Cold War mentality in his judgment of the Rosenbergs. The Federal trial judge declared:

The issue of punishment in this case is presented in a *unique framework of history*. It is so difficult to make people realize that this country is engaged in a *life and death struggle* with a *completely different system*. This struggle is not only manifested externally between these two forces but this case indicates quite clearly that it also involved the employment by the *enemy of secret as well as overt outspoken forces* among our own people. *All our great democratic institutions* are, therefore, directly involved in this *great conflict*. (Kaufman, quoted in Radosh and Milton, 1984: 283, emphasis added)

The epitome of Cold War consciousness, this speech is reflective of the swollen sense of political importance of the age, conveying the potency of the period’s ever-present sense of danger. The emotive language used by Judge Kaufman is akin to the hyperbolic, often falsely catastrophic language typical of Cold War rhetoric, which served to entrench Cold War ideology in the minds of members of the American public.³² Post-Cold War critical opinion is encapsulated in R. A. York’s retrospective summation of the morality and politics of the 1950s. Apt in its indictment of McCarthy and the American justice system, York writes that “the McCarthyite processes of elimination of suspected communists...can be seen as a hysterical product of cold war mentality which is a blemish on American civilization rather than a proper response to Russian aggression” (2003: 76).

The Rosenbergs provided the American government with an ideal opportunity to demonstrate to the nation the consequences of engaging in communist activity, as well as to justify anti-communist Cold War ideology. Robert Detweiler, in his illuminating article on the interaction between religion and history in *The Book of Daniel*, draws an evocative comparison between perceptions of communism in the 1950s and more general perceptions of disease. Communism, he writes, was projected as a potentially fatal malady such as cancer, “its cells multiplying out of control and metastasizing throughout the body politic. Major surgery seemed justified, and the Rosenbergs would be the victims of the most radical operation” (1996: 65). Detweiler effectively captures the post-World War II attitude that communism was a dangerous and rampant threat which, if not timeously annihilated, would result in ultimate destruction. In the eyes of the American government, the Rosenbergs embodied such a threat. They therefore required

³² See Robert Detweiler (1996: 65) and Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton (1984: 283-284) for reiteration of this point.

elimination. The execution of the couple in 1953 for conspiracy to commit espionage against the United States was thus a critical moment in the development of Cold War consciousness (Carmichael, 1993: xi). Taking place at the height of America's anti-communist sentiment, their electrocutions served only to amplify the mass hysteria of the period. Although the famous case has been documented extensively in the five decades since its controversial conclusion, familiarity with the "official" sequence of events will prove valuable as a context within which Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* may be analysed.

In February 1950, German-born British physicist Dr Klaus Fuchs, who had worked on a wartime atomic bomb project at Los Alamos, confessed to having provided the Soviet Union with atomic bomb information. Shortly thereafter the FBI arrested Philadelphia chemist Harry Gold for admitting that he had acted as Fuchs' courier from 1944-1945, later detaining David Greenglass, Gold's accomplice and the younger brother of Ethel Rosenberg. Julius Rosenberg, the owner of a New York machine shop and a card-carrying member of the Communist Party, was arrested in mid-July for conspiracy to commit espionage with Greenglass and Gold in the mid-1940s and, less than a month later, his wife Ethel was taken into custody on the same charges as her husband. The trial of the Rosenbergs and Morton Sobell, a former classmate of Julius Rosenberg who was arrested by the FBI for having been involved in the same spy ring, was heard before Judge Irving R. Kaufman in March 1951, at the Foley Square Courthouse in New York City. The primary witnesses called by the prosecution were David and Ruth Greenglass and Harry Gold, all of whom testified against the Rosenbergs. Found guilty, the three defendants were convicted: Sobell was given thirty years in prison, and the Rosenbergs were sentenced to death. The couple was transferred almost immediately to Sing Sing penitentiary to await execution, while their sons, Michael and Robert, went to live with a string of relatives and friends of the family before being adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol, whose surname they assumed. Despite twenty-three motions and appeals for new trial, reduction of sentence, stay of execution and even presidential clemency, the Rosenbergs were electrocuted on 19 June 1953.

Although the Rosenberg affair took place more than fifty years ago, it has remained a subject of intense public scrutiny and academic interest. Immediately after the trial, the media adopted the "official" government position on the Rosenbergs, saying, "The prevailing opinion in the United

States...is that the Rosenbergs for two years had access to every court in the land, and every organ of public opinion, that no court found grounds for doubting their guilt, that they were the only atom spies who refused to confess and that they got what they deserved” (*New York Times*, 29 April 1953, quoted in Carmichael, 1993: 119). However, controversy and speculation abounded in the months and years after the execution. The “post-Rosenberg era”³³ has seen the publication of numerous articles and books attempting either to justify or to contest the couples’ guilt, the severity of their sentence, or the fairness of their trial. Consequently, the actions of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations and the quality of the American justice system have been rigorously and controversially challenged in both fictional and non-fictional writings.³⁴ Even with the release of previously classified FBI information on the Rosenberg trial under the 1974 Freedom of Information Act, no consensus has been reached as to their guilt or innocence.

When Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* was written, therefore, the Rosenberg incident was still a topic of passionate debate (York, 2003: 76). Unlike countless other scholars, however, Doctorow does not attempt to establish the Rosenbergs’ innocence or guilt. Avoiding the polarised approach adopted by so many studies devoted to the case, *The Book of Daniel* documents instead the devastating effects of McCarthyism on individual lives and on subsequent decades, focusing on the protagonist’s processes of perception and self-realisation.³⁵ Doctorow maintains that his reason for using the Rosenberg affair as a basis for his novel was to explore what happens “when the entire antagonistic force of a society” is directed against one or two individuals (*Conversations* 86). Departing from the use of generic fictional modes in his previous novels *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960) and *Big as Life* (1966), which assumed the popular genres of the American western and science fiction respectively, Doctorow employs a number of innovative narrative techniques in *The Book of Daniel*. Narrated by Daniel Lewin, son of tried and executed communists Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, the novel is told not from a unified narrative perspective, but is fragmented into multiple viewpoints. The narrative’s fractured chronology and its abrupt shifts from first- to third-person narration reflect the protagonist’s anxious, often

³³ The phrase “post-Rosenberg era” was coined by Gore Vidal in his notorious 1968 novel, *Myra Breckinridge*. Deriving from the flurry of social criticism that arose after the Rosenberg executions, the phrase refers to the state in which traditionally accepted societal norms are questioned.

³⁴ See Detweiler (1996: 66-67) for a comprehensive list of non-fiction books written about the Rosenbergs.

³⁵ As Susan E. Lorsch rightly maintains, “Though the catalyst for the hero’s quest may be his need to know the truth of his parents’ innocence or guilt, the quest transcends such concerns, rendering them finally irrelevant” (Quoted in Morris, 1991: 83).

incoherent pursuit of the truth. Daniel, a self-professed “criminal of perception” (31), is seeking the truth about his parents as well as desperately trying to understand his own identity; his quest establishes in the novel an insidious tension between socio-political realities and personal exploration.³⁶ Narrative perspective in *The Book of Daniel* is of fundamental importance to Doctorow: after dedicating six months to the writing of a straightforward, third-person version of the story, Doctorow threw away the “awful” 150 pages in reckless despair, having come to the realisation that the novel had to be conceived in Daniel’s voice rather than in his own voice: “To do the book from his point of view rather than my own – that was the discovery that came out of my despair. Not I, but Daniel, would write this book. And the act of writing would be part of the story” (EC 60).³⁷

Mirroring the troubled exploration of his past and his identity as both man and writer, Daniel’s voice is necessarily disjointed. In “a formal critique of unified subjectivity” (Carmichael, 1993: 141) Doctorow challenges the prevalence of conclusive ideological assumptions by incorporating multiple narrative perspectives. Although the novel has been criticised for what is considered to be an excessive use of postmodern formal techniques,³⁸ its self-reflexive, discontinuous style successfully exposes the multifariousness of reality, the ambiguity of textual representation and the elusive nature of truth. Daniel does not ultimately discover the truth behind his parents’ verdict. Through the course of his narrative, however, he comprehends the infinitely complex, inescapably contradictory nature of reality and, as a result, he is able to accept his personal history in spite of its irresolvable uncertainties. Harter and Thompson note that “the primary focus of the novel is on the manner and limits of Daniel’s knowing, not on the known” (1990: 27). Doctorow’s emphasis is on his protagonist’s search for knowledge, meaning and identity: the reader is early on alerted to the fact that Daniel is “searching, too late, for a thesis” (7). Daniel’s impetus for writing his story reflects Doctorow’s own compulsion to write, accentuating

³⁶ Eugénie L. Hamner argues that Daniel arrives at a better understanding of mankind’s history through understanding his own history on a microlevel (2000: 165). See pages 61-62 of this dissertation for detail on writing the self in *The Book of Daniel*, especially as regards “the novel as private I” (269).

³⁷ As mentioned above, metafictional awareness of the process of literary production is a feature common to Doctorow’s writings: Doctorow’s narrator-protagonists are frequently the authors of their own stories, which form the fictional texts we read. See *Welcome to Hard Times* (1960), *Loon Lake* (1980), *Lives of the Poets* (1984) and *World’s Fair* (1985) in addition to the three novels examined here. For discussion of this point in relation to *Ragtime* and *City of God*, see pages 70-71 and 97-100 respectively.

³⁸ See Carmichael (1993: 141).

the complex layering of authorial identity visible in *The Book of Daniel*, as well as in *Ragtime* and *City of God*. “We can’t know too well what we’re doing,” Doctorow declares. “If you know too well what you’re doing, then writing simply becomes a matter of filling in. At its best you write to find out what it is you’re writing” (EC 45). In another interview Doctorow asserts, “...whatever I have to offer only emerges or is realized through the act of writing...Fiction is really a different mode, an illuminated way of thinking” (EC 67).

This concentration on the epistemological functioning of narrative, coupled with *The Book of Daniel*’s oscillating narrative pattern and its non-linear chronology, draws immediate attention to the process of literary creation and to Daniel as the inquisitive author of his own text. Importantly, the etymology of the word “narrative” is, as Harpham acknowledges, associated with “knowledge”, “known”, and “knowable” (1985: 85). Indeed, in the introduction to his recently published collection of essays, *Creationists: Selected Essays, 1993-2006* (2006), Doctorow writes provocatively, “...composition [is] the reigning enterprise of the human mind; it affirms that we know by what we create” (2006: ix). Narrative is thus how we know: through the active composition of a narrative Daniel discovers complex truths about himself, his history and reality. Commenting on the novel’s epistemological capacity and the key role played by the text’s fictional creator, Harter and Thompson state:

Since [Doctorow] believes that all texts, including versions of history itself, are fictional and freely create or discover their own meaning, discovery rather than statement becomes central here. “searching” is very much the issue...[Daniel] is overwhelmed by the need to sort out a reality so complex as to defy objective analysis; he can hope to understand only through an artist’s act of the imagination. (1990: 32)

Making clear the distinction between author and narrator in *The Book of Daniel*, Eugénie L. Hamner writes, “Doctorow has not explored the [Rosenberg/Isaacson] case: Daniel has” (2000: 165). The novel can thus be read on a number of levels: Doctorow presents Daniel’s autobiographical composition within his own fictional text and, to complicate matters further, the novel depicts a constant, ambiguous interplay between history and fiction. Historical incidents are included in Daniel’s autobiography which, by the very nature of the genre, purports to be truth. Harris suggests that this simultaneous reading of historical and autobiographical texts forms an ironic relation, in that “the explicit subjectivity of the autobiographical text epistemologically cancels the objectivity of history” (2002: 217). The novel’s subjectivity is

further illustrated by the fact that Daniel, the protagonist and narrator, is a fictional construct himself: he is the fictive subject of his own narrative; “an ‘autograph’, a written version or interpretation of the self constructed by memory gathering together or ‘recollecting’ the disparate elements of experience” (Wright, 1988: 93). Doctorow, the novel’s author, and Daniel, the protagonist and fictional creator of *The Book of Daniel*, engage in a quest to attain knowledge and a renewed state of awareness through the creative act of writing.

Foucault conceives of the author of a written text as corresponding not to a single person, but to multiple selves, in that any text’s “author-function”³⁹ is characterised by a “plurality of self...[I]t does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects” (2003: 386).⁴⁰ Enacting Foucault’s conception of the author-function as a plurality of selves, *The Book of Daniel* operates on several authorial levels. Over and above the complexity of the novel’s subjective narrator and his amalgamation of fiction, historical record and myth (in the form of allusions to the biblical Book of Daniel), the reader is always aware that the text is in fact a fictional work written by American novelist E. L. Doctorow. In conformity to his well-rehearsed dictum, “There is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: There is only narrative” (FD 163), Doctorow’s use of formal narrative techniques undermines notions of autobiographical and historical objectivity, suggesting that ambiguity is entrenched in this multi-layered narrative. The metafictional construction of an historical novel in which the writer is the fictional subject of his own autobiographical narrative, together with the indistinct merging of fact, fiction and myth, gives rise to an overwhelmingly pluralistic text that is defined and elucidated by these very formal complexities.⁴¹

³⁹ Foucault prefers the term “author-function” to the more inclusive term “author”. The former designates the socially and culturally defined role of the author in relation to a particular type of text, while the latter has, in different cultures and time periods, referred to the writer of any written text (including things like shopping lists, notes, or posters) or to those responsible for the production or conception but not the actual writing of a text (Foucault, 2003: 382; Gutting, 2005: 11-12).

⁴⁰ Drawing on Bakhtinian discourse, Parks uses the term “polyphonic” (1991a: 35) to refer to a text’s multiple voices.

⁴¹ Highlighting the novel’s narrative sophistication, Carmichael writes: “Doctorow uses the techniques of realism and postmodernism in a complex and multivoiced, multi-mode, first-, second-, and third-person, self-referential counterpoint of historical synthesis and narrative, interrogation and delegitimation, and imaginative reconstruction” (1993: 133).

As Doctorow has himself noted, *The Book of Daniel* is not a documentary text. Rather, the Rosenberg affair has been used as “*occasion*” for the narrative (*Conversations* 85). The novel tells the story of Daniel and Susan Lewin, the children of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, who are arrested, tried and executed for conspiracy to commit espionage against the United States of America. While the parallels between the real-life situation as it occurred in the 1950s and the novel’s characters and events are undeniable, Doctorow has made adjustments to his narrative deliberately, in order to dismantle the ideological assumptions underlying the Rosenberg story and its representations in history. The author presents an array of characters that have true-life correlatives, the most significant of which are Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, the Lewins, Jacob Ascher and Selig Mindish. Indeed, much of the novel is derived from historical documents written by and about the Rosenbergs, not least of which, as Brian Dillon notes, are the irregularities and complexities of the trial, and the emotional tone of the Rosenbergs’ prison letters (1999: 366). Importantly, however, Doctorow departs from the known facts of the Rosenberg case on several counts: the Rosenbergs have become the Isaacsons; the Rosenberg sons, Robert and Michael Meeropol, have been transformed into a son and a daughter, Daniel and Susan Lewin; and Harry Greenglass, the brother of Ethel Rosenberg, has been replaced by Selig Mindish, a close family friend and the dentist of the Isaacsons.⁴² These factual divergences accentuate the notion that the Rosenberg trial provided the *idea* for the novel, which is not about the Rosenbergs as such, but rather about the type of situation in which they were placed. York acknowledges the difficulty in believing that the novel depicts only the same *kind* of experience when Doctorow has in so many ways “systematically translated the life of the Rosenbergs into that of the Isaacsons” (2003: 84). However, while the multiple similarities between the novel’s plot and the official facts of the Rosenberg affair create verisimilitude, deceptively lulling the reader into believing this, the novel, to be the “true” story, Doctorow’s notable departures from the known facts dismantle the reader’s previously unquestioned faith in the events purported to have taken place. While the similarities are crucial to Doctorow’s project, it is the differences that ultimately generate his envisioned effect: the disparities between the fictional text and the historical record remind the reader of Doctorow’s fundamental premise, “All history is

⁴² See York (2003: 85-86) for an exhaustive list of the ways in which *The Book of Daniel* deviates from the known facts of the Rosenberg affair, as well as for the factual similarities between the novel and the historical events of the 1950s.

composed” (*Conversations* 113), and emphasise the fact that historical representation is vulnerable to manipulation. Indeed, Harris writes:

[T]he point is not to critically insist on a consistent correlation or simple parallel between the true text of history and the fictional....Nor should this be seen as a means of asserting that history is nothing more than an interchangeable fiction. Rather, we should understand an ironic relation between secondary and “master” text, in which case, given the comparative freedom afforded the fictional text, the imaginative text can “play” with and against the more fixed text of history. In effect, this is to challenge the authority of that master text, to undermine its claims through an imitative re-viewing of event, an approach that re-opens the past to reconsideration and the possibility of meanings beyond the accepted readings. (2002: 219)

Through the process of fictional composition Doctorow explores the possibilities of reconstructing and redefining recorded American history in order to provide greater clarity on the actualities of the present. Commenting on the prevailing attitude towards historical representation expressed in American fiction today, Saltzman writes,

One profound feature of contemporary American fiction is its equal skepticism towards statements derived from both fictional and historical contexts: not only is fiction confessed as artifice, but the history out of which it emerges and from which it presumably departs is exposed as relying on fictional strategies, thereby revealing history to be one more realm of discourse stripped of privilege. (1990: 30)

By merging fictional and non-fictional characters in *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow consciously blurs the boundaries between reality and history. Not only do the fictional Isaacsons resemble the historical Rosenbergs, but the author weaves other true-life characters, including Norman Mailer and Robert Lowell, into the text.⁴³ In an assertion reminiscent of the ideas expressed in “False Documents”, Doctorow declares that “those who make history write it, just as those who write it make it” (PP x). By alluding both to the subjective element of historical representation and to its constructed nature, Doctorow disturbs the common ideological hypothesis underlying history, namely that it is verifiable and absolute. Just as Paul Isaacson teaches his son to analyse and question the official historical record and, indeed, other dominant ideologies, Doctorow prompts his readers to engage in a critical evaluation of historical “truth” such that alternative

⁴³ Mailer, who is associated with the “non-fiction novels” of the 1960s (Morris, 1999: xiv), appears with Lowell during Daniel’s narration of the 1967 student demonstrations. Aligned with the school of New Journalism, a style of reporting that emerged in the 1960s, Mailer recounts in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Armies of the Night*, his participation, with Lowell, in the 1967 march on the pentagon. Doctorow’s inclusion of these personae highlights the formal and stylistic resonances between *The Book of Daniel* and the writing of the New Journalists, who combined journalistic reporting with the stylistic techniques traditionally consigned to the realm of fiction, thereby providing the means for a crucial redefinition of experience in linguistic terms. The work of the New Journalists is thus underscored by an interesting tension between fact and fiction, exhibiting a blurring of boundaries between the real and the imaginary. This metafictional confusion of fact and fiction, which is visible in *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime* and *City of God*, is a prominent feature of Doctorow’s broader body of work, and forms a central concern of the bulk of critical attention focused on Doctorow and his writings.

interpretations of history come to light. In *The Book of Daniel* Doctorow effectively opens up multiple semantic and interpretive possibilities by creating a text that is inconclusive, enigmatic and ambiguous, yet simultaneously engages with the social and political realities of individual existence. Importantly, however, Doctorow does not negate or invalidate the historical record; he merely identifies its fundamental shortcomings and proposes ways of arriving at some sort of historical truth beyond the (mere) quest for facts. In the 1988 interview with Herwig Friedl and Dieter Schultz in which Doctorow articulates his important idea of a “democracy of perception”, he suggests that through collective perceptions, the human community can see “through the phenomena to the truth. So the absurdity, the futility may still plague us, but not painfully” (*Conversations* 113). With its layered narrative structure and its multiple perspectives, *The Book of Daniel* embodies Doctorow’s vision of a comprehensive version of history composed from an encompassing mix of observations, perceptions and opinions.

References to the manipulation of historical representation through writing specifically, proliferate in *The Book of Daniel*, the most significant of which is Susan’s letter to her brother. “I am writing you out of my mind,” she writes. “You no longer exist” (77). Susan’s explicit adoption of the act of writing to eradicate Daniel from her consciousness reflects Doctorow’s broader preoccupation with the authority of writing and its capacity to create and manipulate history and human consciousness. Parallel to Susan’s pivotal letter to her brother is the action of the Communist Party directly after the arrest of Paul Isaacson. Daniel explains that both of his parents were “written out of the Party. They were erased from the records...Quickly and quietly erased out of existence” (123). The author’s pointed reference to the Communist Party’s erasing of the Isaacsons’ record of membership illustrates the malleability of historical representation and thus the artifice of historiographical “truth”. History, the novel suggests, is a product of interpretations; it is a construct that cannot exist independent of human construal. Thus, Daniel states, “I have searched and searched for one story from history that is invulnerable to radical interpretation...[I]t is harder than it sounds and if you think not give it a try” (140).

Despite his recognition of the subjectivity of history, Daniel endeavours to achieve a level of objectivity in order to write a neutral account of his past. The chief manner in which he attempts this, York observes, is through the language of objective research (2003: 77). Daniel incorporates

in his narrative purportedly authoritative documents such as letters, historical accounts of Cold War politics, and essays on various matters, including the history of American literature. The novel's pervasive sense of historical "accuracy", authority and impartiality is heightened by Daniel's ubiquitous references to authoritative figures such as Bukharin, Horowitz, E. H. Carr and Shannon, and is further underlined by his frequent adoption of a detached tone and elevated diction. Daniel ultimately fails to create a convincing sense of objectivity, however. His sudden and unexpected shifts from third- to first-person narration, including his direct, frame-breaking addresses to reader, as well as the mixing of voices and genres, gives rise to a text whose technical innovation and sophistication mirrors its conceptual complexity. In a consecutive sequence the narrator writes:

...he and Susan were transfixed by the placards, the oversized pictures of their mother and father everywhere above the crowd, going up and down in rhythm as the crowd roared Free them, free them, free them.

Oh baby, you know it now. We done played enough games for you, ain't we. You a smart lil fucker. You know where it's at now, don' you big daddy. You got the picture. This the story of a fucking, right? You pullin' out yo lit-er-ary map, mutha? You know where we goin', right muthafuck?

AN INTERESTING PHENOMENON

Many historians have noted an interesting phenomenon in American life in the years after a war....
(22-23)

In an uninterrupted run Daniel moves abruptly from a conventionally descriptive, third-person narrative style, to the passionate, violent discourse of a radical African-American hoodlum who reflexively refers to the text itself, to a detached, formal register appropriate to the language of objective historical research. These stylistic changes, which accentuate the multiple authorial presences in *The Book of Daniel*, reiterate the novel's central proposition that textual representation is neither objective nor determinate. In addition to his reproduction of the rhetoric of historical documentation and the language of the African-American radical, Daniel reproduces the stoical voice of his immigrant grandmother, whose moral fortitude endures despite her life of tragic hardship and exploitation; he captures a sense of childhood innocence with the words, "Fathers talked to each other in big words" (88); he recounts a colloquial conversation with an American journalist, with whom he hypothesises on the fate of his parents; and he reflects on his life, his family and his emotional state with lyricism and humility. As York remarks, Daniel constructs a narrative in which "Stalinist impersonality clashes with real anguish" (2003: 79). Thus, *The Book of Daniel* itself does not offer an entirely coherent or consistent interpretation of

the turbulent events of the 1950s or the radical climate of the 1960s, nor does it claim to be wholly objective (York, 2003: 78). Instead, in a manner that exemplifies Doctorow's notion of a "democracy of perception", it presents a multi-faceted view of both decades using a complex blend of genres and voices.

Harris notes that Doctorow's emphasis on the power of writing and the effects of "authoritative" representation indicates the manner in which ideologies "insinuate themselves into society – how individuals are insidiously subsumed within the logic of ideology" (2002: 250-251). Conceived and disseminated through writing, ideologies seep into the plasma of daily existence, infusing thought patterns and informing modes of action. In *The Book of Daniel* Doctorow takes issue with the individual's unquestioning, often unconscious, acceptance of and conformity to these dominant ideological trends, exposing print and audio-visual media as key players in the propagation of ideas:

The newspapers were constantly trying my parents in releases from the Justice Department....An image grew of my father as a master spy. As a master spy and ringleader. Over a period of a few weeks he became more and more prominent in any discussion of various spy arrests. Dr. Mindish was portrayed as one of those who carried out his orders. I was becoming confused. If my father was a ringleader was I in his ring? How could I be in his ring if I didn't know about it before I read it in the newspaper? Was this the Paul Isaacson who was my father? If it wasn't where was my father? I found many of the words difficult. I missed my father's voice analyzing, endlessly analyzing and exposing the lies in the newspaper, on the radio and television, in the air; I missed his truth, I missed his power to tell me the real meaning of what was presented to me. (160)

The young Daniel, whose parents and family life have suddenly and irrevocably been snatched from him, is depicted by the older Daniel as vulnerable and confused. While he recognises that television, radio and the newspapers promulgate "lies", he needs his father to guide him, to explain difficult words and to tell him "the real meaning" behind the newspaper reports. His age and the unfamiliar surroundings in which he finds himself render him dangerously susceptible to the "facts" reported in the media. Daniel's helpless bewilderment reveals the powerful effect of the print media in disseminating ideologies, which become so entrenched in the minds of individuals that they eventually attain the status of objective truth.⁴⁴ Through his revealing portrayal of Daniel as a young boy, Doctorow, through the voice of an older Daniel, alerts the reader to the indoctrinating effect of the media and hence challenges society's unthinking acceptance of prevailing ideological trends. As Harris comments, "If [Doctorow] communicates

⁴⁴ The young Daniel, paradoxically, also entertains the belief that his father has access to the unequivocal truth.

scepticism regarding accepted and commonplace understandings of the nature of reality, his aim is to alert us to this very danger of manipulation perpetrated through the misuse of language, the deceptions practiced by ‘official’, authoritarian modes of discourse” (2002: 171). The older Daniel recognises the power wielded by institutional structures to influence human consciousness, remarking wryly, “All societies indoctrinate their children. The marvelous Mrs. Goldstein in total innocence taught us the glorious history of our brave westward expansion: our taming of the barbaric Indians, our brave stand at the Alamo, the mighty railroads winning the plains. Thus I must understand the nature of the conspiracy against me: it is mounted in full faith and righteousness by the students of Mrs. Goldstein” (187). Daniel has learnt to distrust “official” sources of meaning, whose status as unqualified truth traditionally remains unquestioned. The implication of this, of course, is that there is no verifiable “truth”; there are no absolute, unimpeachable facts. Accordingly, following his long-awaited meeting with Selig Mindish, the family friend and dentist who had testified against his parents in court, Daniel concludes that the absolute truth is irretrievable.

In addition to its formal and conceptual ambiguities, which are displayed in the fragmented chronology, incorrect dates and inconsistency of thought in the text,⁴⁵ *The Book of Daniel*'s ultimate indeterminacy indicates the powerlessness of literature to create finite meaning. Through his narrator Doctorow proposes that just as history is vulnerable to misinterpretation, language is vulnerable to misconstrual. The susceptibility of both the spoken and the written word to interpretation, he suggests, effectively results in compromised articulation. Accordingly, despite the fact that Daniel listens attentively to his sister speaking to him subsequent to her suicide attempt, he cannot determine what she says:

Daniel must have sighed. Susan reached out and patted him gently on the back. “They’re still fucking us,” she said. “Goodbye Daniel. You get the picture.”

He listened alertly. He was not sure if she had said goodbye or good boy. (9)

Whether Susan said “goodbye” or “good boy” in her final cryptic message to her brother becomes a definitive motif in the novel (Estrin, 1983: 199). The words “good boy” and

⁴⁵ York notes a basic contradiction in the fact that Daniel’s narrative at times reflects the bewildered consciousness of the young Daniel, yet he can quote verbatim long political speeches which he heard as a child (2003: 78). This contradiction accentuates the interplay between the voices of Doctorow and Daniel, drawing attention to the text’s sophisticated blending of authorial identities.

“goodbye” are suffused with the scent of Daniel’s past: the women in his life repeatedly call him a good boy prior to saying goodbye. His grandmother, a woman whose life has been defined by poverty and hardship, ritually hands him a penny as a parting gesture, calling him a good boy and giving him a “dry kiss on the forehead” (67). To his mother, he is a good boy in that he silently endures the trials of being the child of parents so actively involved in combating an established system of social iniquity. Both of the maternal figures of Daniel’s childhood leave him shortly after articulating the words “goodbye” and “good boy”; words which have, as a result, assumed an evocative psychological association in Daniel’s mind. In alerting the reader to three words that induce such intensely personal memories for Daniel, Doctorow illustrates the sensitivity of language to subjective interpretation. Indeed, as “floating signifiers” (Walsh, 1992: 57) existing in an age devoid of concrete referents, words and texts elude final or conclusive interpretation, allowing for a continuous deferral of meaning. According to Barbara L. Estrin, Daniel’s mother and grandmother recognise in him a degree of remoteness from the dark forces of poverty and exploitation that beleaguer their existence; forces which are ultimately responsible for taking them away (1983: 199). Susan, Daniel realises, has become victim to the idealistic forces of the New Left, which she blames along with the world at large for depriving her and her brother of their parents: “THEY’RE STILL FUCKING US. She didn’t mean Paul and Rochelle. That’s what I would have meant. What she meant was first everyone else and now the Left. The Isaacsons are nothing to the New Left. And if they can’t make it with them who else is there? YOU GET THE PICTURE. GOODBYE, DANIEL” (153). In a move generated to designate the possibility of multiple interpretations, Daniel “gets” the picture, in its figurative as well as its literal sense. Daniel’s fervent attempts to establish the “truth” surrounding his parents’ lives, politics and deaths, and hence to reach a comprehensive understanding of his own history, succeed only in pointing to the failure of textual representation to provide definitive answers. Morris, who calls this the “irrevocably double gesture of all language” (1991: 97), draws attention to the very last line of the novel, “Go thy way Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end” (303). As Morris notes, the ability of language to represent or denote truth remains impossible to judge until the end of time, or “as long as time, sequence, and selection govern discourse” (1991: 97).

Doctorow challenges the credibility of written and oral representation through both the conceptual and the formal elements of his narrative.⁴⁶ Daniel's text itself undermines the authority of language:

"The decision to impose constitutional safeguards on treason prosecutions formed part of a broad emerging American tradition of liberalism....No American has ever been executed for treason against his country," says Nathaniel Weyl, *TREASON: THE STORY OF DISLOYALTY AND BETRAYAL IN AMERICAN HISTORY*, published in the year of 1950. I say IF THIS BE TREASON MAKE THE MOST OF IT!

If this bee is tristante make the mort of it
If this be the reason make a mulch of it
If this brie is in season drink some milk with it
If this bitch is teasing make her post on it
If this boy is breathing make a ghost of him (168)

In this playful sequence Daniel craftily manipulates language to convey the utter futility of his parents' deaths. Stemming from his capitalised outburst, "IF THIS BE TREASON MAKE THE MOST OF IT", the narrator plays on similar-sounding words to produce a seemingly nonsensical progression of sentences, thereby emphasising the devastating ineffectuality of the "safeguards on treason" entrenched in America's constitution. Daniel is cunning in his indictment of the American justice system: his playful tone obscures the derisive cynicism colouring his expression. The words "mort", "mulch", "post", and "ghost" bear an ominous suggestion of death, decay and destruction, creating an underlying impression of menace and morbidity. Contemptuous in tone, Daniel's linguistic innovations highlight the dangers of American liberalism and the unmitigated tragedy of his parents' idealism.⁴⁷ Paul and Rochelle died for a cause in which they placed not only their unqualified trust, but also their lives, yet they failed to recognise their complicity in the very system that forsook them. As one of the new hippie radicals states, "You want to know what was wrong with the old American Communists? They were into the system. They wore ties. They held down jobs. They put people up for President" (150). Through the clever manipulation of language, Daniel reveals the empty rhetoric of

⁴⁶ However, the novel's fractured chronology, multiple authorial interruptions and unexpected fluctuations in narrative voice and tone ensure that the correspondences between formal and thematic elements are not always consistent. As Carmichael points out, while the multiple interruptions and modalities are in keeping, to a degree, with the historical, personal and socio-political uncertainties and arguments prevalent in the text, "a schematic correspondence between formal and semantic disruptions would itself be problematic, offering an aestheticized narrative coherence that it is the book's purpose to interrupt and interrogate" (1993: 142).

⁴⁷ In the context of *The Book of Daniel*, liberalism can be understood as the favouring of political and social reform that supports individual freedom or democracy. As members of an Old Left that valued party organisation and union activism (as opposed to the New Left's anti-establishment, often radical, social activism), Paul and Rochelle Isaacson display distinctly liberalist attitudes.

American liberalism, disclosing the impossibility of making concrete meaning through textual representation due to the vulnerability of language to interpretation.

Hutcheon documents the rising phenomenon of linguistic play in contemporary fiction in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Using the term “generative word play” to refer to the linguistic experimentation characterising postmodern literature, she argues that “the linguistic self-reflectiveness or even self-generation of the text are forms of resistance to the act of reading, shifting attention to the semantic, syntactic, and often also phonetic texture of the words which actually serve to structure as well as constitute the work” (1980: 119). Daniel’s linguistic play draws attention to the creative process of writing and, by implication, to the text as a constructed, fictive entity. Invoking reader participation, the narrator’s word-play emphasises that both reading and writing entail active and imaginative engagement with language, reinforcing the crucial yet inherently subjective role of reader as well as writer in textual interpretation and the construction of meaning.⁴⁸ Foucault, like Doctorow, advocates the transformative power of language, and observes that an essential function of linguistic experimentation is to provide readers with the possibility of new modes of perception.⁴⁹ Describing succinctly Foucault’s interest in the potential of experimental narrative, Gary Gutting writes, “[Foucault’s] fascination is...with writing that puts extreme pressure on language, that presses it to its limits with paradox, and that, as a result, produces experiences of violation and transgression” (2005: 15). While Daniel’s word-play may be more conservative in theme than the explicitly pornographic writings of Georges Bataille, which are used by Foucault to illustrate this concept, the resultant effect is similar: through experimentation with language Daniel challenges traditional perceptions of writing and reading, introducing the reader to fresh ways of thinking, and exposing new possibilities of truth.⁵⁰ Simultaneously, the ambiguity deriving from Daniel’s linguistic innovation points to and acknowledges the important complexity and

⁴⁸ See pages 59-62 of this dissertation for a comprehensive discussion of reader participation and witness in *The Book of Daniel*.

⁴⁹ As mentioned in my introductory discussion of postmodern critical theory, Barth, too, suggests that narrative has the innate capacity to generate new and original insights through the self-reflexive reconsideration of its own fictional mode (1984: 78).

⁵⁰ Similarly, author Michael Herr, frustrated by the fissure between American consciousness and the increasingly foreign realities of the Vietnam War, experiments with language, genre and form in his documentary novel, *Dispatches* (1977), in order to convey the truth of his lived experience. Just as Daniel’s linguistic innovations expose new possibilities of truth, Herr’s stylistic and formal experimentations convey with devastating authenticity the actualities of his experience.

multiplicity of meaning governing society. *The Book of Daniel* thus embodies the delicate yet complex tension between postmodern scepticism towards what Eagleton calls the “conceptual straitjacket” (1996a: 200) of absolutist ideologies, and the possibility of attaining truth through narrative.

Daniel’s pressing desire to vindicate his parents through the critical reassessment and recreation of history thus becomes problematic. Owing to the ambiguous plurality of human experience and the ultimate indeterminacy of historical texts, his quest cannot result in definitive answers. Doctorow, who throughout his novelistic career has opposed universalist thinking, has consistently produced novels whose thematic tensions are never completely resolved, a quality illustrated by the three possible conclusions to *The Book of Daniel*. The first ending sees the protagonist return to his old home in the Bronx, only to discover that it is occupied by a black family. In a statement signifying a newfound ability to move on from his past, Daniel states reconciliatorily, “It’s their house now” (299). In the second ending Daniel merges the funerals of his parents and his sister, drawing on his Jewish heritage by hiring professional mourners to say Kaddish for his family.⁵¹ “I think that I am going to be able to cry” (302), he admits. Finally, the third ending describes Daniel’s liberation from his now finished dissertation by student protestors, who have seized and closed the library at Columbia University in protest against the Vietnam War. Seeking traditional novelistic resolution, several literary critics argue that the three endings together suggest a successful progression of self-realisation.⁵² Signified by the long-overdue description of his parents’ electrocutions, Daniel’s liberation from his past through writing has, according to such critics, enabled him to embrace adulthood and a new sense of identity. Addressing the reader with barely concealed anguish, Daniel says, “I suppose you think I can’t do the electrocution. I know there is a you. There has always been a you. YOU: I will show you that I can do the electrocution” (295-296). He tackles the appalling scene head-on,

⁵¹ Although the “Jewishness” of *The Book of Daniel* is debated in critical circles (see Williams [1996: 67-68], Clayton [2000: 184-187], Girgus [2002: 10-26], and Harris [2002: 206-207]), the influence of Doctorow’s Jewish heritage reveals itself in both the characterisation and the latent thematic concerns of the novel: many of the main characters are Jewish and, in Clayton’s view, Daniel’s tortured introspection, his existential analysis, and his evaluation of societal norms are typically Jewish activities (2000: 184, 187). *City of God*, by contrast, exhibits a more concrete manifestation of Jewish themes, explicitly engaging in an examination of the nature of Judaism and its role in contemporary society.

⁵² See Harter and Thompson (1990: 47), Parks (1991a: 52), Levine (1985: 47), Hamner (2000: 164) and Williams (1996: 67). As Williams puts it, Daniel has come to terms “with the destruction of his parents and original home, the death of Susan, and the tortured attempt to write his own book” (1996: 67).

describing in agonisingly raw detail the execution of first Paul, and then Rochelle. The resolute Rochelle, who refuses to allow the prison rabbi to preside over her as she is electrocuted, proclaims as he retreats from the death chamber, “Let my son be bar mitzvahed today. Let our death be his bar mitzvah” (298).⁵³ Having confronted the horrific deaths of his parents, Daniel is finally able to accept without reservation the responsibilities of manhood. He is “liberated” (302), set free from his past through the act of writing. Indeed, Harpham argues that the novel achieves closure with this scene: “[I]f Daniel would purchase the security of narrative, he must bring the account to closure and ‘do the electrocution’” (1985: 87-88).⁵⁴ Significantly, however, Daniel does not discover the truth of his parents’ guilt or otherwise, nor does he present a coherent analysis of Cold War culture or American liberalism (Harter and Thompson, 1990: 47). Furthermore, he fails to offer a clear-cut or conclusive account of history. While Daniel is, indeed, liberated in the sense that his narrative performs a cathartic role, no final conclusions are reached. Harris writes that Daniel is “always modern, a self in flux – mobile, insecure, anxious. As he ‘is’ the text we read, and as his text ‘is’ history, we would be misguided in deducing that Doctorow is promoting the idea that a stable self inhabiting a ‘rational’ history is desirable or possible” (2002: 265). The ambiguous ending of *The Book of Daniel* thus undermines conventional understandings of novelistic conclusion and authority.

Doctorow implies, then, that the only certainty is indeterminacy. Daniel narrates: “Of one thing we are sure. Everything is elusive. God is elusive. Revolutionary morality is elusive. Justice is elusive. Human character. Quarters for the cigarette machine. You’ve got these two people in the poster, Daniel, now how you going to get them out?” (42-43). Daniel fails to “get [Paul and Rochelle] out” of the poster, in that he does not succeed in ascertaining the truth about his

⁵³ According to Clayton, Rochelle’s cry signifies the characteristically Jewish tension between suffering and faith, in that she expresses her rejection of Judaism while asserting “a counter-ritual to bring her son to manhood, an initiation into the community of the oppressed” (2000: 185). Similarly, Daniel’s hiring of official Jewish mourners to say Kaddish at Susan’s grave is both an ironic and a cathartic act. For Clayton, it is these contrasting elements of irony and longing that render *The Book of Daniel* a distinctly Jewish novel (2000: 185). Daniel’s scepticism, which is, paradoxically, combined with a desire for ritual, mirrors the constant shifting between secular humanism and an inherited impulse to reverence displayed by Thomas Pemberton in *City of God*. This tension is of central concern to Doctorow and underpins the thematic substance of *City of God*. It will be discussed fully in Chapter Three.

⁵⁴ Hutcheon strongly disagrees, arguing that closure does not occur in any sense. Focusing on the last words of the novel, she writes: “[Intertextuality] in historiographical metafiction...can both thematically and formally reinforce the text’s message or it can ironically undercut any pretensions to borrowed authority or legitimacy...[The last words effect] closure *sous rature* so to speak, because they are not its own but those of its biblical namesake” (1988: 138).

parents. His quest thus ends in ambiguity, an ambiguity which, in Doctorow's view, characterises the "true novel":

[T]he most important trials in our history, those which reverberate in our lives and have most meaning for our future, are those in which the judgment is called into question: Scopes, Sacco and Vanzetti, the Rosenbergs. Facts are buried, exhumed, deposed, contradicted, recanted. There is a decision by the jury and, when the historical and prejudicial context of the decision is examined, a subsequent judgment by history. And the trial shimmers forever with just that perplexing ambiguity characteristic of a true novel. (FD 160)

However, while Daniel's search may end in ambiguity, it does not end in futility (Parks, 1991b: 458), for the protagonist has discovered the complexity of truth while confronting his painful past through an emotionally and intellectually engaged narrative. Any resolution provided by the novel's multiple endings is therefore perceptual only. It is conditional, the elusive "contingency of the song" (*Drinks* vi) to which Doctorow so often refers. As Harter and Thompson conclude, "The book's order...is achievable only by a criminal of perception, and the liberation it offers is the artist's victory – provisional in nature and visionary in significance" (1990: 48).

The irresolution of *The Book of Daniel's* multiple endings undercuts the nature of conclusions, suggesting that history is merely an ongoing sequence of repeated events. Daniel's encounter with the New Left radical, Artie Sternlicht, confirms his unsolicited views on the iterative character of history. "EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME" (136), Sternlicht announces, asserting his belief in the tautological course of history thus far, and his anticipation of a new, *real* revolution led by the New Left. "A revolution *happens*," he fervently exclaims. "It's a new animal. A new consciousness! It's me! I am Revolution!" (137). Unlike Daniel, however, who is familiar with the idealism and fallibility, in his case, of traditional liberalism, Sternlicht fails to perceive the equal irony of his position as a radical member of the New Left. Overwhelmed by optimism and confidence at the prospect of genuine revolution, he does not recognise that he is part of the repetitive historical process which he is so quick to dismiss. Just as Daniel's parents were complicit in the system that killed them, Sternlicht is simply another component of the structures against which he actively rebels. For Daniel, Morris writes, the radical movement of the sixties is a "reminder of the [Nietzschean] 'eternal return' of protest" (1991: 88): Daniel is outraged by the iterative nature of both history and narrative. As a writer he feels constrained by the necessarily structured, sequential nature of language, which hampers his ability to represent (Morris, 1991: 87). His frustration with the restrictions imposed

by narrative builds as the novel progresses, culminating in a furious attack on the “monstrosity” of sequence:

What is most monstrous is sequence. When we are there why do we withdraw only in order to return? Is there nothing good enough to transfix us? If she is truly worth fucking why do I have to fuck her again? If the flower is beautiful why does my baby son not look at it forever? Paul plucks the flower and runs on, the flower dangling from his shoelace. Paul begins to hold, holds, ends hold of the flower against the sky, against his eye to the sky. I engorge with my mushroom head the mouth of the womb of Paul’s mother. When we come why do we not come forever? The monstrous reader who goes on from one word to the next. The monstrous writer who places one word after another. The monstrous magician. (245-246)

Sparked by the memory of a childhood visit to the jail in which his parents were incarcerated, Daniel angrily protests against the difficulty of capturing a concrete sense of life in language. Commenting on this crucial speech of Daniel’s, Morris argues, “The temporal condition of reading and writing is here aligned with the intuition of the impossibility of finally fixing a present truth. Daniel seems to understand that the pathos of his visit to his mother loses all significance merely by virtue of its sequential place in narrative; it becomes just one more scene among many in a repetitive succession” (1991: 88). Daniel’s fury stems from the fact that the defining incidents in his life, which are of utmost value to him, are dwarfed by their place in the never-ending sequence of narrative. This particular episode, like all the other important events of Daniel’s existence, merely slots into his text as yet another instalment in the repetitive progression of narrative and history. “The problem with sequence,” writes Harpham, “is that it implies an indifference to the shape and closure of narrative” (1985: 85). According to Harpham, in his quest to secure the truth through narrative Daniel discovers that “the poles of narrative are, respectively, monstrous and boring, meaningless and all too meaningful, and that narrative is only a crossing of two types of misrepresentation” (1985: 85). The protagonist’s resentment against the sequential nature of all narrative is palpable, as is his guilt and self-rebuke for having to relegate the fateful events of his parents’ tragic lives to the page, in what becomes just another plodding succession of “one word after another”. Language, Daniel discovers, is a repetition of that which is inconclusive and arbitrary: not only is it unable to capture a fixed truth, but it consigns all matters, whether trivial or tremendous, to a continuous, iterative sequence. This idea is reinforced by the formal structure of the novel, which is organised within an explicit temporal cycle. Progressing from Memorial Day through to Christmas, the narrative is set in the recurring temporal sequence constituted by a year, indicating the inexorable progression of time and its

intrinsically iterative character. For Daniel, both the arbitrary character of reading and writing and the cyclical nature of time diminish the significance of the momentous events of his life.

In an isolated meditation on the nature of electricity, a dominant motif in the novel, Doctorow illustrates the central role played by repetition in language:

om om om omm omm omm om om ommmmm
ohm ohmm ohm ohm ohm ohhmm ohm ohmmmm
what is it that you can't see but you can feel
what is it that you can't taste and can't smell and can't touch but can feel
ohm ohm ohm ohm ohm...
What makes you smell when you touch it, blacken when you feel it, die when you taste it.
ohm
What is it that lightens the life of man and comforts his winters and sings that he is the master of the
universe; until he sits in it.
ohm (225-226)

In this disturbing riddle the “ohm” associated with electricity is deliberately confused with the “om” of meditative chants. By equating similar-sounding words in a repetitive sequence, Doctorow emphasises the arbitrary nature of language and its heightened vulnerability to interpretation. Like the language games Daniel plays with the words, “IF THIS BE TREASON MAKE THE MOST OF IT” (168), his consideration of electricity borders on the nonsensical yet features an underlying menace. Electricity constitutes the determining force in Daniel’s life: it was through the abuse of electrical currents that Daniel and Susan were rendered orphans and, as a result, Daniel’s consciousness is plagued by thoughts of electricity. He is consumed by its appearance, its theory, its production, and its effects, a preoccupation reflected in the references to electrical power permeating his narrative. The thrilling rides at Disneyland are “like an electric shock” (289); Daniel’s senile grandmother possesses “waves of [hair] sticking out from her shawl, shockingly, like electric wire” (67); the “rigid dance” (206) of Susan’s scheduled shock therapy is expressed in graphic detail; an imagined law firm is ironically called “Voltani, Ampere and Ohm” (240); “[a]n electricity of rage” (279) flowed through Rochelle at the sight of Selig Mindish; and Daniel describes the process of human education in electrical terms, saying, “Small secret chemical switches are thrown in the dark. Tiny courses are hung through the electric passages of the tissues. Silken sequences of atoms which have no property other than self-knowledge” (169).

The protagonist struggles to accept the paradoxical nature of electrical power: it provides warmth, comfort, light and even life, yet it possesses the devastating capacity to destroy. The electrical imagery pervading Daniel's narrative conflates the inherent value of electricity and its destructive potential, giving rise to a subtle but ubiquitous sense of danger. Critic T. V. Reed expresses clearly the conflicting properties of electricity depicted in *The Book of Daniel*, observing that it is a "power that connects only when it meets resistance, a power to rearrange the senses, a power to reanimate or kill the body, a power mistaken for spirit, a *productively destructive* power [that] will require another kind of analysis beyond the us/them logic of his parents or Sternlicht" (1992: 297, emphasis added).⁵⁵ Electricity occupies a justifiably prominent place in Daniel's consciousness, as it is the power that killed his parents. Simultaneously, however, it lights the library in which he writes his dissertation and, as a child, it was the source of his family's income. The window of Paul Isaacson's radio sales and repair shop boasted

...an advertising cutout faded from the sun: a modern housewife, smartly turned out in a dress that reaches almost to her ankles. She has her hand on the knob of a radio and does not look at it but at you, as she turns it on....She is in green, faded green. Her dress, her face, her smile, all green. Her radio is orange. The table it is on is orange. She is a slim, green woman for whom the act of turning on an orange radio is enormous pleasure. Maybe it was a defective radio and gave her a jolt. (38)

As the owner of a shop that repaired and occasionally sold radios, Paul Isaacson was dependent on electrical energy for his livelihood, in that electricity powered the vessels affording his customers their listening pleasure. Without electricity, his business would be rendered redundant. Remarking on the faded advertisement displayed in his father's shop window, Daniel notes the "enormous pleasure" that the woman derives from listening to her radio, but remarks sardonically that her facial expression could be the result of an electric shock from turning it on. Indicative of the conflicting electrical images at the forefront of his consciousness, Daniel's comments encapsulate the paradoxical nature of electrical power: while they illustrate electricity's harmful, potentially devastating effects, they portray electrical power as a productive and valuable source of energy. The electrical references infusing Daniel's narrative foreshadow the climactic electrocution scene and act as a warning of the uncensored horror and destruction that is to come. Only when Daniel has finally communicated the electrocutions of his parents does he begin to heal emotionally. Indeed, subsequent to his description of the traumatic

⁵⁵ Harpham reiterates the paradoxical nature of electricity in *The Book of Daniel* by describing electrical awareness as "fatal enlightenment....In each significant reference to electricity, this narrative paradox is reinscribed: as the price for a desirable ideality and coherence, reality is deadened" (1985: 86).

electrocution, his narrative is free from electrical allusions. Unlike Susan, who dies of a psychological and political “failure of analysis” (301), Daniel creatively grapples with the conflicting perceptions of electricity expressed in his written text. In describing his parents’ electrocutions in raw detail, he confronts this sinister force that has defined his life. He is able to accept that electrical power is both a productive and a destructive force by shedding the one-dimensional thinking of his parents, Susan and Sternlicht, and realising that electricity, like life, is indeterminate, unpredictable and fraught with inconsistencies. Through writing Daniel is able finally to acknowledge the contradictory nature of existence, thereby eradicating from his consciousness a powerful and deep-rooted source of anxiety, fear and anger.

The Book of Daniel is divided into four discrete sections, entitled “Memorial Day”, “Halloween”, “Starfish”, and “Christmas”. Beginning on Memorial Day of 1967, a day dedicated to the official commemoration of war victims, the novel progresses chronologically through Halloween, ending in the winter at Christmas time. Despite the temporal linearity of the novel’s formal arrangement, it exhibits a fractured chronology within the distinct chapters such that the structured framework belies its inherent ambiguity. As Detweiler notes, the sections do not in any consistent sense celebrate America’s national holidays; instead they are used as spatiotemporal settings for the development of the novel’s multiple, interconnected plot strands (1996: 69). Doctorow deviates from established notions of narrative temporality in *The Book of Daniel*, disregarding the chronological ordering of time common to nineteenth-century fiction. Characterised by temporal oscillations, the novel’s narrative discourse frequently diverges from its narrative content, giving rise to unsettling effects of disorder and fragmentation.⁵⁶ At random Daniel makes both proleptic and analeptic movements in time, jumping from childhood reminiscences, to his anguished present, to past confrontations with Susan, to future discussions with other characters. In addition to his juxtaposing of past and future incidents, his self-reflexive authorial interjections produce “rhythmic interruptions” (Harris, 2002: 213) which further disturb the temporal progression of the narrative. Morris maintains that the novel’s fractured chronology divulges the arbitrary nature of reading, in that Daniel painstakingly reconstructs his past through a series of non-sequential flashbacks to create a chronological progression of events, yet his chronology is

⁵⁶ See Seymour Chatman (1980: 221) for a comprehensive discussion of Gérard Genette’s distinctions between narrative content (*diegesis*) and narrative discourse (*récit*).

ultimately incoherent and flawed (1991: 90). Doctorow thereby destabilises the reader's faith in both the narrator and the text itself, while reflecting in his narrative the inconsistencies and multifariousness of human existence.

Narrative temporality is vital to the novel's thematic advancement, as the non-sequential depiction of events indicates the irregular evolution of Daniel's moral and personal understanding, effectively capturing the nature of experience. The narrative structure of *The Book of Daniel* is interrupted, fragmented and reordered so that it accurately reflects life, which, rather than being strictly chronological, vacillates between the actuality of the present, the remembered past, and the projected future. Tony Tanner, in reference to Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), argues that a dislocated narrative structure "reflects a conviction that the world is more like a 'damaged kaleidoscope' than an orderly panorama, and that meaning and truth have to be hunted for among the scraps and fragments of experience and then tentatively pieced together like an incomplete jigsaw puzzle" (1963: 11). Doctorow, who proposes that through a multiplicity of witnesses the human community can together arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of truth and experience, would endorse this view. Fittingly (and somewhat ironically, given that the novel's protagonists are Jewish), *The Book of Daniel* concludes at Christmas, a time of hope and rebirth. While the formal arrangement of the text's four parts belies the distorted, non-linear progression of time within Daniel's narrative, it nevertheless bears thematic significance. Daniel, who has actively engaged himself in a process of self-discovery through writing, has become conscious of the complexity of truth and the ultimate indeterminacy of human knowledge, judgment and perception. He can now move into the uncertain future with the knowledge that reality, being inherently contradictory, needs to be approached flexibly and dynamically. In this sense, then, the novel ends on a note of hope. Despite the non-chronological order of the text, it is possible to piece together some semblance of a sequential, linear trajectory at its conclusion.

As the only section of *The Book of Daniel* not named after a commemorative day, "Starfish" constitutes a disruptive element in the novel, signifying the inevitability of disjuncture. Named for the obsolete thirteenth zodiac sign, "Starfish" evokes the five sides of the United States' national war centre, the Pentagon, to which there is direct reference in the chapter. More

importantly, however, it refers to the rigid position assumed by Daniel's sister, Susan, on her hospital bed. According to the narrator's account of the Egyptians' modifications to the Chaldean calendar in 4000 B.C., the starfish was a symbol of "the union of the various mental faculties and the coordination of the physical faculties....It implied the unification of all feelings. Belief was joined with intellect, language with truth, and life with justice" (250). Daniel, who refers to Susan as "my silent Starfish girl" (257), witnesses her metamorphosis into the mythical sea creature:

I watch my sister. Slowly her legs spread, her feet slide over the sides of the mattress and her toes hook into the crevice between the mattress and the spring. Her arms move outward; her hands curl over the edge of the mattress and find the same ledge. She holds her bed in her hands and by her ankles....Today Susan is a starfish. Today she practices the silence of the starfish. There are few silences deeper than the silence of the starfish. There are not many degrees of life lower before there is no life. (207)

Originally associated with genius, peace and happiness, the obsolete zodiac sign has today become linked with bad luck. This, Daniel remarks, "is undoubtedly because modern man can conceive of nothing more frightening than the self-sufficiency of being of the beautiful Starfish: he mistakes it for death" (250). As Harter and Thompson maintain, "...if life is consciousness and hence identity, as the entire novel would seem to suggest, then [the retreat into unconsciousness], however understandable or serene, *is* death" (1990: 28).⁵⁷ Ironically, rather than denoting the unity of language and truth, life and justice, and belief and intellect, the starfish comes to symbolise the harmonious unity of death for Daniel's sister. The pain and confusion of Daniel and Susan's traumatic childhood has trailed them into adulthood, yet they cope with their shared past in infinitely dissimilar ways. Susan, who noiselessly withdraws from her world by sinking into a state of unconsciousness, chooses silence and death,⁵⁸ while Daniel, ever the "little criminal of perception" (34), elects knowledge and life, however agonising they may prove to be. Susan's nihilistic reaction to life is in fact a disturbing act of defiance: she finally recovers a lost sense of peace and unity in her retreat into the perfect silence of death:

We understand that when St. Joan led them into battle none of the soldiers watched the way her ass moved. We understand that Churchill found it of immense value to have played with toy soldiers as a child. Every line of every novel of Henry James has been paid for. James knew this and was willing to accept the moral burden. We can accept our moral burdens if our underlinen is clean. That is why we have toy soldiers. *Susan*

⁵⁷ Susan's death results from her explicit denial of conscious existence: "...she was driven finally to eradicate [Daniel] from her consciousness by the radical means of eradicating her consciousness" (82).

⁵⁸ Foreshadowing Susan's fatal choice, "Starfish" begins with the Gerard Manley Hopkins quotation, "Elected silence sing to me" (183).

digs all this. A starfish is not outraged. We must preserve our diminishing energies insofar as we direct them to the true objectives. A certain portion of the energy must be used for the regeneration of energy. That way you don't just die like a bird falling, like a rock sinking, you die on a parabolic curve. You die in the course of attack. Susan knows this. To be a revolutionary you need only hold out your arms and dive. (210, emphasis added)

In seeking her origins Susan is, in a perverse sense, cleansed. Daniel plainly discerns that Susan's death, which occurs as the end point in her pursuit to rediscover her lost beginnings, has not been entirely futile or inadvertent. She dies "in the course of attack". Her silent withdrawal is not accidental; rather it is a deliberate move in her search for identity. In naming the third chapter "Starfish", Daniel not only indicates that disjuncture and confusion are an inevitable part of diachronic existence, but he emphasises the crucial significance of Susan's emotional and intellectual unhinging, inviting comparison to his own coping mechanisms. The reader is thereby encouraged to appreciate Daniel's undeterred quest for knowledge and truth through narrative.

Doctorow's metafictional awareness of the written act further discredits commonplace perceptions of historical representation and, in addition, questions the conventionally authoritative status of the author.⁵⁹ Doctorow repeatedly reminds the reader that fiction is artifice by drawing attention to the novel's fictional composition, destabilising the reader's trust in the narrated story. Steven G. Kellman, who describes such fiction as "self-begetting", writes:

Its central protagonist a novelist and its central action the conception of a novel, the self-begetting novel is supremely reflexive. Demonstrating "a consistent effort to convey to us a sense of the fictional world as an authorial construct set up against a background of literary tradition and convention," it easily satisfies Robert Alter's criterion for self-consciousness. Like slapstick farce in which the side of a building collapses to expose a demure gentleman at his bath, the self-begetting novel deliberately lays bare all its working parts. (1980: 9)

The form of *The Book of Daniel* – a doctoral dissertation in progress that shifts unsystematically from dissertation to diary to documentary to lyric – lends itself to this kind of authorial presence and exposure of creative process. While Kellman refers to "the self-begetting novel", Hutcheon conceives of such literature as "metafictional" and "narcissistic". Having defined "metafiction" as "fiction about fiction", she clarifies her choice of the word "narcissistic" to describe such literature: "'Narcissistic' – the figurative adjective chosen here to designate this textual self-awareness – is not intended as derogatory but rather as descriptive and suggestive...it is the

⁵⁹ Harris makes this point by saying that Daniel's metafictional techniques mark "both a profound questioning of the role of the author-as-textual-authority and a bracketing of the source-narrative – history – upon which the novel is clearly based" (2000: 218).

narrative text, and not the author, that is being described as narcissistic” (1980: 1). *The Book of Daniel* exhibits a strong awareness of itself as a text throughout. Daniel’s self-consciousness as a writer is made manifest from the outset of the novel, which begins,

Daniel Lewin thumbed his way from New York to Worcester, Mass., in just under five hours. With him was his young wife, Phyllis, and their eight-month-old son, Paul, whom Daniel carried in a sling chair strapped to his shoulders like a pack. The day was hot and overcast with the threat of rain, and the early morning traffic was wondering – I mean the early morning traffic was light, but not many drivers could pass them without wondering who they were and where they were going. (3)

The narrative’s initial objectivity quickly lapses into Daniel’s own consciousness, an occasion signified by the sudden shift from third- to first-person narration. The novel continues in this manner, slipping in and out of different voices, genres and registers of writing. Oscillating between bitter self-condemnation, abrasive interrogation of the reader, and cutting sarcasm, Daniel self-reflexively considers the technical aspects of his own writing. He addresses the reader directly, he frequently criticises himself as writer, and he instructs himself to “do” (295) certain subjects. Reflecting on his parents’ possible guilt, the protagonist writes, “...my mother and father...went to their deaths for crimes they did not commit. Or maybe they did commit them. Or maybe my mother and father got away with false passports for crimes they didn’t commit. How do you spell comit?” (42). Later, he describes the Old Left activists with surprising lyricism, only to switch abruptly to a tone of acerbic self-deprecation:

Their minds were free. They had ideas....Together like a flock of soft-throated birds they were beautiful to one another, strutting around each other, displaying the plumage of their species, trilling out the key word-cries of this very articulate race of birds that were like the ritual wisdom of their ancestors. They kept each other warm.

Oh yes Lawd. Oh yes, complacent lawd.

Let’s see, what other David Copperfield kind of crap. (95)

Daniel’s acute embarrassment at having succumbed to the descriptive powers of poetic rhetoric is evident. Indicative of the confusion surrounding his identity as both man and writer, Daniel’s self-mockery functions as an instinctive defence mechanism. As he struggles to identify and establish himself as a writer, unable to fix on a specific writing style or genre, he is alternately uncertain, confident, vulnerable and angry. The reader is thus witness to Daniel’s constant psychological and creative development. Indeed, Harris writes, “If in his self-consciousness he betrays a debilitating insecurity, he also in his self-knowing anticipates our criticisms and disarms us” (2000: 231). In openly contemplating the artistic process of the author, Doctorow,

through the voice of Daniel, upsets the conventional author-reader relation and underlines the fact that this is a narrative, a constructed text.

The protagonist's multiple authorial interruptions in the form of direct addresses to his reader serve both to challenge the reader and to implicate him/her in the production of the text.⁶⁰ Employing the impersonal pronoun "you" to delineate the distinction between writer and audience, Daniel addresses his reader overtly, asking, "Do you believe it? Shall I continue?...Who are you anyway? Who told you you could read this? Is nothing sacred?" (60). The self-conscious intimacy of this subversive act jerks the reader out of a comfortable state of complacency. Elsewhere Daniel explicitly addresses a "NOTE TO THE READER" (54) and later commands the reader to "[s]ave this space for the letter my father wrote back" (154). The protagonist's blatant attempts to draw his audience into the narrative are successful. Just as Daniel is intellectually involved in examining representations of the past, his personal history, and the writing of his dissertation, the reader is encouraged to participate in the text's action, which comprises both the narrative's subject matter – Daniel's quest to discover the truth about his past – and its construction. By virtue of the fact that the process of literary creation forms a prominent focus of the narrative, it in turn becomes crucial to the thematic thrust of the novel, accentuating its metafictional core.

Significantly, prior to his crucial meeting with Linda Mindish, during which he proposes his "Theory of the Other Couple" as a solution to the puzzle that is their shared history, Daniel describes his "novel as private I" (269). Referring both to his personal quest to solve and analyse the mysteries of his past, as well as to the reader's piqued, parallel desire to establish an "accurate" sequence of historical events, Daniel's telling description of the "novel as *private I*" (emphasis added) also denotes the idea of the "text-as-self" (Harris, 2002: 231), which signals the key role played by writing in the identification and construction of self. Through the act of writing Daniel is able to undergo a vital process of personal investigation and discovery: as I pointed out above, unlike Susan, who died of a "failure of analysis", Daniel confronts his past by readily and actively engaging in the creative process of constructing his own text. Simply by

⁶⁰ This phenomenon as manifested in *The Book of Daniel* is documented by Harter and Thompson (1990: 35), Morris (1991: 82, 84), Carmichael (1993: 141-145) and Harris (2000: 227) amongst others.

reading Daniel's metafictional narrative, which is suffused with direct, intimate appeals to the reader, the reader becomes co-conspirator in the quest to seek out Daniel's "true" history. While the narrator's unobtrusive use of the indefinite second-person "you" throughout the novel ensures reader involvement on a largely unconscious level (Carmichael, 1993: 142), Daniel's endeavour to include the reader in the development of his narrative is fulfilled to an extent by his active alignment with the reader. Breaking down the traditional barriers between writer and reader, he theatrically exclaims, "SO THAT'S WHERE THEY'RE GOING!" (6), after revealing the Worcester State Hospital as his destination in "Memorial Day". Later, Daniel allies himself with his audience by means of the inclusive personal pronoun "we", narrating: "We will watch this well-meaning but outclassed man [Jacob Ascher] as he goes downtown on the subway and learns the law as it is administered by highly motivated Federal prosecuting agencies" (119). The narrator's complicity with his reading audience is manifest and, as Harris remarks, Daniel implicitly recognises that as a textualised persona, he exists purely by virtue of the reader's act of reading him (2000: 231).

While Daniel's self-conscious identification with his audience dismantles the traditional author-reader relation by actively involving the reader in the progression and production of the fictional text, the reader is simultaneously distanced as a result of this very self-reflexivity. Hutcheon, who calls this the paradox of metafictional literature, writes: "[the reader] is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the 'art,' of what he is reading [yet] explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience" (1980: 5). In an exemplification of Barthes' conception of the "birth of the reader", Doctorow, through his narrator, compels the reader to participate actively in the construction of *The Book of Daniel*, inviting him/her to act as a witness to Daniel's explorations of self and history in their multiple forms.

CHAPTER TWO

A Theatre of Illusions⁶¹: History, Reality and Representation in *Ragtime*

...of one thing we can be sure, about this distinctively modern way of experiencing anything: the seeing, and the accumulation of fragments of seeing, can never be completed....There is no final photograph.

- Susan Sontag, "Photography: A Little Summa"

Not much chance anymore for history to go on unselfconsciously.

- Michael Herr, *Dispatches*

While *The Book of Daniel* imaginatively recreates a specific historical event in order to question the act of historical representation, *Ragtime* (1974), Doctorow's fourth and arguably his most popular novel, deals with history in a different manner.⁶² Declared the "great American novel" by Al Alvarez in his introduction to the 1996 Penguin edition, *Ragtime* presents a sweeping panorama of American life as it was in the early 1900s. Spanning approximately a decade, from 1902 to 1914, the novel focuses loosely on three fictional families from various social strata: a protestant family of the upper-middle class, an impoverished immigrant family of Jewish descent, and a young African-American couple and their baby. Amidst his fictional characters Doctorow inserts an array of true-life personages, including Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, J. P. Morgan, Emma Goldman, Evelyn Nesbit, and Harry K. Thaw – all prominent personalities of the early twentieth century. Doctorow's extraordinary treatment of history in *Ragtime* exemplifies his firm belief that history is "composed": he dexterously intertwines actual historical figures and events with invented characters in fictional circumstances, deliberately dissolving the formerly delineated boundaries between fiction and recorded history. For Hutcheon, *Ragtime* is an archetype of historiographical metafiction in that it is one of those "well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages....[Its] theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (historiographic metafiction) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (1988: 5). Michelle Tokarczyk asserts that Doctorow's use of history in *Ragtime* is not only unlike anything he had attempted in previous works, but it is an

⁶¹ This phrase was used by Umberto Eco in his essay "The Power of Falsehood" (2002: 274).

⁶² *Ragtime* is so popular, in fact, that it appears on *Time Magazine*'s list of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to the present. Compiled by Lev Grossman and Richard Lacayo, the list was published in 2005.

approach that no novelist has yet replicated (2000: 90).⁶³ Doctorow's creative appropriation of history in *Ragtime* illustrates his scepticism towards the perceived credibility of textual representation, endorsing *The Book of Daniel's* thesis that human experience is inherently ambiguous and, ultimately, indeterminate. *Ragtime* confirms and develops this theme, highlighting through its iterated thematic threads and its distinctly cinematic narrative style the fluidity and multiplicity of experience, history and art.

The postmodern era has seen a radical rethinking of critical concepts of history. Perceived as a finite entity in the nineteenth century, when the presumption of a universal truth prevailed, history was a "closed" record. As Horst Steinmetz observes, when writers or historians spoke of history, they were referring to a *single* history, to *the* history (1995: 90). Accordingly, classical historical thought posited that all eras and all of mankind were embraced by a single, all-encompassing history. Identified as a chronological continuum along which events could be situated and whose fixed, linear sequence invited comprehensive understanding, "[h]istory was taught as an absolute. It was one of the fundamental master narratives...that could not be altered, a vantage point from which to regard, read and judge events, and, as Pomain suggests (1984), ignored those events judged insignificant because they did not fit into the mainstream of history" (Benedict, 1995: 119-120).⁶⁴ These views of an homogeneous history are implicit in traditional historical novels, which frequently support the nineteenth-century assumption of a progressive, linear history (Elias, 1995: 107). Originating in the early nineteenth century, fictional historiography sought to bring to life the purportedly objective historical record through artistic means.⁶⁵ The work of mid-nineteenth-century writers such as Charles Dickens and Sir Walter Scott, who wrote in the realist tradition and, later, modernists Joseph Conrad and John Dos

⁶³ However, as Cushing Strout notes, "the breaking down of *any* boundary between novelists and historians" is a "vivid literary sign of our times" (2002: 61), and is visible in the work of John Barth and Norman Mailer, in *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) and *The Armies of the Night* (1968) respectively. Where *Ragtime* differs, perhaps, is that on publication it successfully captured the popular imagination, becoming an instantaneous bestseller. Strout argues that *Ragtime's* style of fictionalising history finds its precursor in the American classic *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) by Mark Twain, as the two novels share important similarities regarding plot detail, narrative structure and characterisation. Stressing his point, Strout writes, "If *The Connecticut Yankee* is not a close relative of *Ragtime*, it is surely at least a first cousin once removed" (2002: 62).

⁶⁴ Steinmetz observes that this idea prevailed despite the relativism of all historical research and all literary representations of history (1995: 90-91).

⁶⁵ For an excellent discussion of the evolution of the historical novel, see Steinmetz (1995: 81-103).

Passos, contributed to the evolution of this popular genre.⁶⁶ Importantly, the traditional historical novel preserves the distinction between fiction and history: historical figures and events are clearly differentiated from fictional characters and situations. Steinmetz notes that regardless of the manner in which history is mediated in such literature, a “hiatus” between history and fiction is maintained (1995: 85). Typically, the plot of a classical historical novel is supported by a framework of broadly representative historical trends, while the lives of the novel’s fictional characters, which constitute the central focus of the narrative, mirror the undulations of these historical forces and assume greater significance as a result (Foley, 1978: 90). As Barbara Foley writes, specific historical events and figures become “peripheral elements in actions which find their center of interest in the historically representative experiences of a group of imagined characters” (1978: 90). Thus, while there exists this hiatus between fact and fiction in traditional historical literature, the representative historical elements structuring such works are of interest only as they relate to the lives of the main fictional characters.

The twentieth century heralded a new era for historical thought. One effect of the general disillusionment and sense of unpredictability engendered by the two World Wars was the dissolution of the master narrative. The traditional view of history as a stable metanarrative underlying and ordering human existence was shattered by the realisation that history is, in fact, a human construction, conceived of and recorded to satisfy our desire for meaning and stability. Postmodern times are characterised by an awareness of the complex incoherence of reality: owing to its inherent multiplicity, human experience cannot be consigned to one sequential progression and is, consequently, not amenable to traditional literary forms of representation. Critical notions of history as a finite entity that progresses along a linear continuum have thus been debunked. While the classical historical novel commonly exhibits an ordered narrative sequence, establishing the accepted nineteenth-century notions of continuity and coherence, the postmodern historical novel consciously embraces the fact that history is a “chaos of details” (Steinmetz, 1995: 94). As Steinmetz concludes, “History is nothing but past reality, like contemporary reality it is a complex reality, but nevertheless a reality composed of the minutiae of human actions” (1995: 95). Contemporary historical literature endeavours to reproduce this

⁶⁶ While critical thought on history and its representations may have shifted, traditional forms of the historical novel are still produced today. The novels of Mary Renault, Philippa Gregory, Tracy Chevalier, Sarah Dunant and Thomas Flanagan are some examples.

reality as accurately as possible, which necessarily entails deviation from traditional narrative techniques. In replicating a state that is multifaceted, inconsistent and open-ended, such literature accepts and promotes the ambiguous plurality of existence, reconceiving the historical record in non-absolute terms and challenging the linear conceptions of history implicit in the traditional historical novel.⁶⁷ Where postmodern historical thought is concerned, writes Francesca Benedict, “It is not a question of redefining *History*, but rather of registering that such a concept is outdated, and that only *histories* can be of some use. Such histories become the means of expressing plurality, multiplicity, heterogeneity in a society where the sciences and technology have virtually taken over and have led to the feeling that our world is ‘shrinking’ around us” (1995: 117). Indeed, with its ever-expanding, readily accessible networks of information, technology has intensified the sense of uncertainty pervading today’s unpredictable world.⁶⁸ Herein Benedict identifies the crucial elements of postmodernist rendering of history: in recognising the inconclusive plurality of experience, postmodern historical fiction attempts to capture the heterogeneity of reality, both past and present.

Populated by an assortment of fictional and non-fictional characters whose lives freely intertwine, *Ragtime* foregrounds three fictional families: an upper-middle-class white protestant family consisting of Father, Mother, Mother’s Younger Brother, Grandfather, and the little boy; an immigrant family headed by Tateh, a Jewish socialist from Latvia; and an African-American family comprising ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker Jr, his partner Sarah, and their baby, Coalhouse Walker III. Over the course of the novel the stories of these individual families become entwined in a complex web of connections such that the class, racial and ethnic differences separating them begin to dissipate. While the African-American family is assigned names, the rest of the fictive characters are identified only by means of their capitalised family roles. The generic names designating members of the prosperous Anglo-Saxon family are suggestive of a contented familial solidarity, evoking the popular American ideal of the cohesive family unit. Barbara Cooper maintains that the “flatness” of these unexceptional characters

⁶⁷ Although strict definitions of the postmodernist historical novel differ, Amy J. Elias posits that the key trait of postmodernist historical fiction is that it dismantles the assumptions underlying traditional historical novels by redefining history as an “open work”, and by “spatializing” history such that postmodernist historical literature challenges the “conceptual (linear) model of history implied in traditional historical novels” (1995: 108).

⁶⁸ Kevin Walsh attributes this effect to a postmodern “time-space compression” (1992: 60). In the contemporary world, he argues, the proliferation of information technologies and media of mass communications has resulted in a compression of time and space that puts us at risk of losing a sense of history and place (1992: 60).

stimulates reader identification, as their lack of distinction renders them representative of larger ideas and American values (1980: 36). However, while Cooper is correct in asserting that Doctorow uses characterisation as a tool through which to express national values and certain socio-political ideas, the invented characters' formulaic naming is deceptive, making reader identification difficult.

As the novel unfolds, the characters' stereotyped roles are systematically refuted. Father is, to all appearances, the successful businessman dealing in American flags, bunting and other accoutrements of patriotism, for "[p]atriotism was a reliable sentiment in the early 1900's" (11). He neglects his role as head of the family, however, by accompanying Admiral Peary on a lengthy expedition to the North Pole. Bewildered by the broader societal change influencing his family on his return, he is unable to reintegrate into family life. Mother, the stereotypical housewife who attends to her duties with quiet compliance, capably manages her husband's business in his absence so that, on his arrival home, he is simply "astounded" (87). Mother's growing confidence and newfound self-awareness enables her to embrace actively the rapidly changing world around her. The introspective, acquiescent Younger Brother is employed in the family business, yet he succumbs to the alluring beauty of rising movie star Evelyn Nesbit, and later engages in terrorist action with Coalhouse Walker in New York, and with Zapata in Mexico. Broken by poverty and disappointment, Tateh pragmatically refutes his high-minded socialist ideals in order to succeed as an entrepreneur in the film industry. While the rise of the enterprising immigrant may be a stereotype in itself, Arthur Saltzman notes that Tateh's miraculous success does not minimise Doctorow's criticism of the American Dream, as Tateh's blind luck emphasises the unpredictability and infrequency of the dreams being realised by the large immigrant population (1983: 94). Hence, Doctorow's naming of his fictional characters establishes a superficiality that is deceptive: the familial stereotypes are methodically challenged, accentuating the unreliability of both textual representation and preconceived notions of history.

While the classical historical novel tends to separate fictional and non-fictional characters by situating an imagined story within a documented historical period and relegating non-fictional figures to the tale's periphery, Doctorow's writing ignores such conventions. *Ragtime* is an intricately crafted web of interactions between real and invented characters, in which historical

figures are imbued with equal authority to that of their fictional counterparts. Although historical thought has been radically reconceptualised in recent times, Doctorow's imaginative reconstruction of history in *Ragtime* reflects the postmodern literary impetus to re-examine the historical record in order to understand the complexities of the heterogeneous present more accurately. The novel's reworking of history embodies Cushing Strout's contention that the objective of postmodernist historical literature "is to suppress in the reader's mind any question about 'what actually happened' as a matter of detail, but at the same time to suggest to the reader something pertinent in contemporary terms about the meaning of the past" (2002: 62). As noted in Chapter One, it is not Doctorow's intention to negate or invalidate the historical record. Rather, he manipulates history in order to expose the fundamental shortcomings of its conventional representation, and to propose new ways of arriving at some kind of historical truth. Accordingly, Hutcheon observes that Doctorow does not "rewrite, refashion, or expropriate history merely to satisfy either some game-playing or some totalising impulse; instead, [he juxtaposes] what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal memory) with an alternate representation that foregrounds the postmodern epistemological questioning of the nature of historical knowledge" (1989: 71). By freely weaving together the fictional and the factual in *Ragtime*, Doctorow obliterates the boundaries between history and fiction such that entrenched concepts of the nature of historical truth are destabilised.

The earliest instance of the novel's fictional story merging with the realm of non-fiction is the unplanned visit of Harry Houdini to the little boy's family home in New Rochelle, New York:

An automobile was coming up the hill from North Avenue. As it drew closer [the little boy] saw it was a black 45-horsepower Pope-Toledo Runabout. He ran along the porch and stood at the top of the steps. The car came past his house, made a loud noise and swerved into the telephone pole....Father, adjusting the chain on his vest, went down to the sidewalk to see if there was something he could do. The car's owner was Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist. He was spending the day driving through Westchester. He was thinking of buying some property. He was invited into the house while the radiator cooled. He surprised them with his modest, almost colorless demeanor. He seemed depressed....He was a short, powerfully built man, an athlete obviously, with strong hands and with back and arm muscles that suggested themselves through the cut of his rumpled tweed suit which, though well tailored, was worn this day inappropriately. (15-16)

Doctorow's bold construction of this scene is disconcerting. He proposes that Harry Houdini, the legendary escape artist, crashes his car into a telephone pole and is invited into the home of an imaginary New Rochelle family, with whom he drinks lemonade and converses genially. But for the fact that Doctorow demonstrates a remarkable ability to create the illusion that this bizarre

meeting did “in very deed occur” (Carlyle, quoted in Foley, 1978: 89), an encounter between a fictional American family and an historical figure would seem implausible and contrived. The author’s rendering of the scene is skilful and persuasive: with inimitable ease he weaves together fact and fiction such that the fantastical is convincingly transformed into an ostensibly authentic occurrence. At once catering to and undermining historical representation, Doctorow’s construction of the episode is painstaking. Houdini’s physical attributes are described in scrupulous detail: the famous magician is short and athletic, with strong hands and well-defined back and arm muscles. His thick, unruly hair is cleanly parted in the middle, and his “clear blue eyes” (16) constantly rove around the family’s dark, oppressive parlor. Reminiscent of photographic images of the historical Houdini, these accurate physical details heighten the credibility of the scene, as does Doctorow’s detailed inclusion of other particulars. Houdini is imbued with specific character traits: he is respectful, charming and modest, and he expresses genuine interest in Father’s adventurous expeditions. However, the magician is depicted as feeling claustrophobic and, to the family, he seems depressed. This fluid combination of factual and invented detail at once lends historical authenticity to the situation, producing a strangely unsettling effect. Foley rightly comments that Doctorow “treats with equal aplomb facts that are ‘true’ and those that are ‘created’”, which not only results in a blurred distinction between the real and the imagined, but “call[s] into question our concept of factuality and, indeed, of history itself” (1978: 97).

The verisimilitude of Houdini’s encounter with the established Anglo-Saxon family is echoed in the seeming actuality of Younger Brother’s dealings with Evelyn Nesbit and Emma Goldman; Henry Ford’s luncheon with J. P. Morgan; Freud and Jung’s boat trip through the Tunnel of Love at Coney Island; and Coalhouse Walker’s climactic meeting with Booker T. Washington. Doctorow’s seamless integration of factual and imagined detail gives rise to situations that are confusingly authentic: the reader is never certain whether the narrator is presenting facts, fictionalised versions of facts, or pure fiction. Describing *Ragtime* as “fictive nonfiction” located “halfway between fiction and history”, Doctorow admits his own uncertainty over the veracity of certain events portrayed in the novel: “What’s real and what isn’t? I used to know but I’ve forgotten” (*Conversations* 1). The manipulation of history in *Ragtime* is, as Amy J. Elias observes, symptomatic of postmodern historical thought, in that cultural assumptions about what

constitutes “fact”, what constitutes “history”, and what constitutes the boundaries between the real and the linguistic, have been brought into dispute (1995: 109). Doctorow’s flouting of novelistic custom shatters the reader’s ingrained perceptions of the conventions to which fictional narrative “should” conform, challenging the very nature and credibility of textual representation. Just as *The Book of Daniel* repeatedly discredits commonplace perceptions of historical representation, reminding the reader both implicitly and overtly of Doctorow’s central premise that all history is composed, *Ragtime* illustrates the inherent subjectivity of history, revealing the unreliability of the historical record. Accordingly, Harris concludes, “In terms of an historical novel, then, *Ragtime* becomes...a ‘master simulation’; that is, it has the appearance of being a cleverly ‘simulated’ and thus completely metafictional historical novel. While always convincing in a conventional dramatic sense, it is always, above and beyond the immediate fact of its own invention, a parodic imitation of itself as an historical novel – a literally duplicitous text” (2002: 187). Doctorow’s parodic transgression in *Ragtime* of the literary conventions underpinning traditional fiction draws attention to the self-conscious, fictive nature of the text, effectively conveying the artifice that is historical representation. Through his innovative representations of historical personages and events, the author openly challenges preconceived notions of historical truth. While for the most part the metafictional integration of factual and fictional characters satisfies this imperative, the disconcerting historicity of this fictional work is enhanced by Doctorow’s considered choice of narrator.

The author’s experimentation with narrative voice in *The Book of Daniel* persists in *Ragtime*. In both texts Doctorow detaches himself from the narrative “through the use of storytellers who are themselves engaged in composing the account of the past that we read” (Harris, 2002: 186). The metafictional nature of all three of the novels analysed in this dissertation renders them, to varying degrees, examples of Barthes’ “death of the author”: in all three works we see the disappearance of the author as a defined, singular entity in favour of multiple, often self-conscious, authorial presences whose origins are not always apparent. Unlike the clearly identifiable Daniel, who self-consciously interacts with his reading audience, the identity of *Ragtime*’s narrator is unclear. While most critics have inferred from Doctorow’s occasional use of the pronouns “I” and “we”, and from allusions to the family archives, that *Ragtime* is narrated by the little boy, others

conclude that the novel's narrator is anonymous.⁶⁹ At no point is decisive reference made to the narrator's identity, however; thus the narrative voice is ultimately unidentifiable. Morris, who maintains that *Ragtime* is the first of a series of novels⁷⁰ in which Doctorow's principal narrator cannot finally be determined as either omniscient or as an identifiable character, contends that *Ragtime* "show[s] in new ways the delusion of the self as the autonomous manipulator of language" (2002: 91; 1991: 98). In detaching language from a source, the author reveals the subjectivity of all linguistic construction, exposing the multiple forces at work in the shaping of textual representation. As Harris writes, Doctorow's deliberate distancing of narrator and author in *Ragtime* is an approach that "incorporates at a fundamental level the process of mediation that inevitably occurs between the raw events occurring in time and the narratives of history" (2002: 186). Even a purportedly accurate historical document, Doctorow suggests, is at its most elemental level a subjective interpretation. Owing to the fact that such historical interpretations are frequently outdated, past events as recorded in history are often difficult to reconcile with contemporary realities, and thus have no bearing on the present. Jameson, who calls this the postmodern "crisis in historicity", posits that *Ragtime* addresses the seemingly unbridgeable interpretive void between history as gleaned from "authoritative" sources, and today's lived experience (1991: 22). By reworking the historical record through the voice of an ambiguous narrator, Doctorow conveys the postmodern idea that language is "originless", existing independent of any material referent. He thereby alerts the reader to the fact that textual representation is vulnerable to interpretation, indicating the existence of multiple interpretive options. These possibilities for historical construal not only reflect more precisely the plurality of human experience to which Jameson alludes, but they also indicate the variable, open-ended nature of historical representation. Through both his creative composition of history and his use of an "absent" narrative voice, Doctorow demonstrates that language, and hence all forms of textual construction, are not only susceptible to interpretation, but will always be inconclusive as a result of their inherent subjectivity.

⁶⁹ See Cooper (1980: 31). Morris engages in a detailed, interesting discussion of the determinacy of the narrator's identity in his article "Illusions of Demystification in *Ragtime*" (2002: 91).

⁷⁰ The other works in which Doctorow's narrator cannot clearly be identified are *Loon Lake*, *Lives of the Poets: Six Stories and a Novella* and *World's Fair*.

The indeterminacy of *Ragtime*'s narrative consciousness constitutes a significant departure from the plainly identifiable, actively engaged narrator of *The Book of Daniel*. Just as striking a difference between the narration of the two works, however, is the detached tone adopted by *Ragtime*'s narrator. Throughout the novel, the reader is kept at an "impersonalising distance" from the characters and their stories, preventing engagement with the narration in a conventionally intimate sense (Harris, 2002: 188).⁷¹ The relative detachment of the narrative voice, which contributes to the overwhelming impression of historical authenticity in *Ragtime*, is accompanied by a subtle yet pervasive sense of irony. Established in the novel's opening pages, this irony asserts a delicate presence throughout the narrative. The narrator begins the novel by attempting to capture the atmosphere of the early 1900s in a series of disjunctive images: "Teddy Roosevelt was President....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" (11-12). Shortly thereafter, however, the reader is informed that Emma Goldman, the revolutionary, propagates a very different view of the American population: "Apparently there *were* negroes. There *were* immigrants" (13). The narrator's initial sketch of an apparently idyllic period in America's history is swiftly and ironically undermined. Doctorow's prose is deceptively simple, in that it is characterised by an irony "ranging from the innocently bland to the bitterly comic, [which] significantly qualifies the usual effect of such stylistic simplicity" (Harter and Thompson, 1990: 56). According to Harris, the irony suffusing the narrative engenders a "pervasively sceptical mood" that confers a caricatural quality upon the characters, specifically the historical figures of Houdini, J. P. Morgan and Henry Ford (2002: 188). Heightened by the impersonality of the disconnected, ironic narrative consciousness, these personages assume a "flat" quality that borders on the satirical, an effect reinforced by the ironic assignation of generic names to most of the novel's fictional characters.

While the narrator's unwavering detachment creates an impression of objective historicity, the narrative's insidious irony perpetually undercuts its carefully constructed realism, thereby undermining the supposed reliability of historical representation. The subtlety of the novel's

⁷¹ This does not mean, however, that readers are exempt from active participation and witness. On the contrary, *Ragtime*'s metafictional qualities enforce a critical response from readers, who are made aware of the text's status as a constructed entity, yet are simultaneously involved in the processes of its narrative composition.

pervasive irony, in conjunction with the narrator's impersonal distance from the narrative, produces a result that is unsettling in its duality. "The over-all effect," writes Harris, "is to suggest a peculiar self-cancelling quality in which the historicity of the narrative is simultaneously inscribed and unsettled, its realism always compromised by a studied pretence" (2002: 188). The narrator consistently attempts to establish himself as a reliable source of information, his desire to construct a narrative characterised by objective rationalism and truth manifest.⁷² Accordingly, while maintaining an aloof distance from his readers, he frequently interrupts the tale to assure his audience of the text's credibility: "Even at this date we can't condone the mayhem done in [Coalhouse Walker's] cause," he writes, "but it is important to know the truth insofar as that is possible" (140). In repeated efforts to consolidate the "truth" of his narrative, the narrator justifies his assertions by citing "authoritative" source material. He remarks, "Our knowledge of this clandestine history comes to us by Younger Brother's own hand. He kept a diary from the day of his arrival in Harlem to the day of his death in Mexico" (181). Later, after describing an incident involving Houdini which, due to its intensely personal nature would presumably be known only to Houdini himself, the narrator is quick to defend his report, saying, "We have the account of this odd event from the magician's private, unpublished papers" (233). Intent on providing clarity and proving his reliability as an objective storyteller, the narrator is careful to distinguish between truth and rumour. When reviewing the life of the notorious Coalhouse Walker, he writes: "*It was widely reported...* that Coalhouse Walker had never exhausted the peaceful and legal means of redress before taking the law into his own hands. *This is not entirely true.* He went to see three different attorneys recommended by Father. In all cases they refused to represent him" (138-139, emphasis added). These concise, lucid sentences, which are reflective of the author's broader syntactical approach in *Ragtime*, cater to the narrator's unswerving desire for clarity. Consequently, they inspire in him trust and confidence. Yet the narrator's self-conscious awareness of both his audience and the act of writing undercuts the meticulously crafted historical accuracy of the novel, which is revealed to be a mere textual construction. While the narrator-protagonist of *The Book of Daniel* addresses his readers directly, expressing an overt, often abrasive awareness of himself as originator of the text, *Ragtime's* narrator asserts a subtle but studied presence throughout his narrative. The effect

⁷² Although I am working on the assumption that the identity of the narrator is indeterminate, in this chapter I will refer to the narrator in the masculine form.

of these differing styles is the same, however: the narrators' metafictional awareness of the written act discredits commonplace perceptions of history by reminding the reader of the artifice of textual representation. Corresponding with Hutcheon's formulations of postmodern literature, the "studied pretence" of *Ragtime's* narrator, which parodies the classical voice of historical objectivity, entails a simultaneous adherence to and metafictional subversion of the tenets of historical representation (Hutcheon, 1989: 4). *Ragtime's* carefully constructed historicity is thus subtly but systematically destroyed by the narrator's ironic awareness of himself as storyteller.

When Booker T. Washington, the celebrated champion of Negro education, is called upon to counsel a dangerously defiant Coalhouse Walker in the library of J. P. Morgan on New York's 36th Street, the ironic effects of employing a detached, unidentifiable narrator become clear. As an overture to the pseudo-historical confrontation, the true-life Booker T. is introduced by the novel's dispassionate narrator:

Booker T. Washington was at this time the most famous Negro in the country. Since the founding of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama he had become the leading exponent of vocational training for colored people. He was against all Negro agitation on questions of political and social equality. He had written a best-selling book about his life, a struggle up from slavery to self-realization, and about his ideas, which called for the Negro's advancement with the help of his white neighbor....He wore a black suit and homburg. He stood in the middle of 36th Street, a sturdy handsome man with all the pride of his achievement in the way he held himself, and he called out to Coalhouse to let him in the Library. (207)

Shifting fluidly from history to fiction, Doctorow adeptly generates an impression of historical truth by providing a verifiable summary of Booker T.'s professional background. Reminiscent of the "newsreel" effect described by Foley in reference to the narration of both *Ragtime* and Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* (1978: 87), the historical tone of the account presents the narrator as an objective historian engaged in what appears to be an authentic recitation of the historical record. The narrator's dissociation from the events being narrated contributes significantly to the novel's historical authenticity, in that it gives rise to a convincing sense of impartial omniscience. Doctorow includes numerous plausible details which, in addition to the narrator's authoritative detachment, heighten the credibility of this fictional scene. Booker T., the president of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, is delivering the key-note address at a luncheon held in New York City's great hall of Cooper Union when summoned by Charles S. Whitman, the city's District Attorney. He immediately leaves the luncheon "to ringing applause" (206) in order to

assist Whitman with the contentious “matter of the mad coon” (202). Doctorow thus steers the narration flawlessly from its carefully laid, historically valid foundation into the realm of fiction.

On entering the “awesome gilded library” (27) of J. P. Morgan, which has been annexed by Coalhouse and his co-conspirators, Booker T. expects from the band of antagonists nothing less than the thorough obedience and respect to which he has become accustomed:

Coalhouse stood waiting upon him in a well-pressed hound’s-tooth suit and a tie and collar, although he carried a pistol in his belt. Washington looked him over. His handsome brow furrowed and his eyes flashed. Summoning all his declamatory powers he spoke as follows: For my entire life I have worked in patience and hope for a Christian brotherhood. I have had to persuade the white man that he need not fear us or murder us, because we wanted only to improve ourselves and peaceably join him in enjoyment of the fruits of American democracy. Every Negro in prison, every shiftless no-good gambling and fornicating colored man has been my enemy, and every incident of faulted Negro character has cost me a piece of my life. What will your misguided criminal recklessness cost me!...A thousand honest industrious black men cannot undo the harm of one like you. (208-209)

Using the socio-political beliefs and professional record of the real-life “great educator” (206) as a foundation, the narrator effectively recreates the speech and persona of Booker T. such that the scene acquires an eerie authenticity. His imaginative adoption of the voice of the African-American orator reinforces the historically certifiable facts supplied at the scene’s beginning. The political rhetoric used by the narrator in formulating Booker T.’s voice conveys a wealth of information, both about the respected educator’s ideological leanings and about his personality. The lengthy, comma-less sentences, which differ from the syntax characterising the narrative as a whole, not only capture the auditory quality of Booker T.’s fervent speech, reflecting his forceful, flowing anger, but they reveal his remarkable skill as an orator. Making use of the words “Negro” and “colored”, which have since been discarded in favour of the currently approved “African-American”, the narrator accurately reproduces the language of the early twentieth century, thereby conveying the prevailing racial politics. Clearly a proud and supremely confident man, Booker T. communicates a rigid assurance in his own convictions and achievements: “What will your misguided criminal recklessness cost me!” he rhetorically exclaims after describing to Coalhouse the principles and motivation behind his life’s work. Booker T.’s unconscious exploitation of rhetorical questions, coupled with his failure to recognise the principled basis of Coalhouse’s actions, transmit a sense of arrogance and superiority that is mirrored in the substantive thrust of his impassioned speech. The narrator’s diction and stylistic approach in reconstructing the voice of the prominent educator cement the

historical authenticity of the episode, giving rise to a plausible character sketch of Booker T. the man. Doctorow effectively grounds the pseudo-historical confrontation between the historical Booker T. and the invented Coalhouse Walker in historically verifiable fact, but goes on to merge fact and fiction such that, in the reading, it becomes impossible to distinguish the fictional from the historical.

The carefully constructed historicity of this scene is dramatically undercut by the subtle irony and satirical underpinnings of its narration. The narrator's ironic, faintly mocking tone subverts any existing assumptions about Booker T. conferred by established historical representations. Doctorow's convincing creation of an atmosphere of historical legitimacy is thus quickly revealed to be an illusion. Awed by the great man's speech, the members of Coalhouse's gang wait in anxious anticipation of their leader's reply. Speaking with soft deliberation, Coalhouse proposes that he, like Booker T., is subject to certain social constraints and that both men may be fighting for the same ideals, albeit in different ways: "It is true I am a musician and a man of years," he ventures. "But I would hope this might suggest to you the solemn calculation of my mind. And that therefore, possibly, we might both be servants of our color who insist on the truth of our manhood and the respect it demands" (209). Unaccustomed to any form of dissent, much less from an armed antagonist, Booker T. is so stunned by Coalhouse's insinuation that they share similar beliefs that he "[begins] to lose consciousness" (209). The comically exaggerated reaction of the "great educator" (206) immediately imparts a sense of satire: having successfully lulled the reader into accepting the historical credibility of the text, Doctorow cunningly upsets the reader's perceptions of what is "true" and what is invented. Indeed, Harris writes of *Ragtime*: "Employing a parodic historiographical style, Doctorow uses the approved 'impersonality' of the historiographical text as a satirical device; it results in a thorough self-effacing ficticity that becomes a kind of formalistic game that plays both on the reader's willingness to suspend disbelief and one's expectations of the veridical" (2002: 188). The author adroitly inspires confidence in his readers by means of the seeming veracity of the narrative, but quickly dismantles this belief through satire and ironic self-reflexivity on the part of the narrator. Through his carefully considered narrative strategy, Doctorow provokes his audience to question the entrenched ideological bases of historical truth, thereby challenging the very nature of historiographical representation.

In his article “E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* and the Dialectics of Change”, Mark Busby argues that *Ragtime* documents the human struggle for stability in the face of time’s inexorable force towards change (2000: 177). While *Ragtime* successfully captures the dialectical tension between change and stability, demonstrating the dire consequences of failing to recognise an ever-changing reality, it also illustrates the fluidity of history and the relentless mutability of existence. Reality, the novel suggests, is open-ended and ultimately inconclusive: it can never be grasped with finality. Outraged by the iterative nature of history and narrative, a frustrated Daniel furiously lashes out against the sequence that prevents him from “finally fixing a present truth” (Morris, 1991: 88). Daniel’s rage stems from his inability to capture a concrete sense of reality in writing, which consigns the momentous events of his life to an indifferent, repetitive sequence. Likewise, the narrator of *Ragtime* expresses the incapacity of a multi-faceted, inconclusive reality to be fixed in a similarly elusive history, a history which, “as ‘referent’, has found itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (Jameson, 1991: 19). The first indication of this thematic focus in *Ragtime* reveals itself in the narrator’s meditations on Theodore Dreiser, whose first novel, *Sister Carrie*, was at the time suffering from “bad reviews and negligible sales” (28). The narrator describes the morose novelist sitting on a wooden chair in the middle of his rented room in Brooklyn:

One day he decided his chair was facing in the wrong direction. Raising his weight from the chair, he lifted it with his two hands and turned it to the right, to align it properly. For a moment he thought the chair was aligned, but then he decided it was not. He moved it another turn to the right. He tried sitting in the chair now but it still felt peculiar. He turned it again. Eventually he made a complete circle and still he could not find the proper alignment for the chair....Through the night Dreiser turned his chair in circles seeking the proper alignment. (28)

Dreiser’s search for “the proper alignment” is echoed in the thinking and behaviour of the bulk of *Ragtime*’s characters, who struggle to comprehend a constantly shifting reality. Despite efforts to capture and control experience, the world in which these fictional and historical figures live is unquantifiable and fluid, dominated by an overpowering mutability. Accordingly, Admiral Peary fruitlessly endeavours to establish the exact locale of the North Pole, shuffling back and forth over the ice to make his observations: “No one observation satisfied him. He would walk a few steps due north and find himself going due south. On this watery planet the sliding sea refused to be fixed. He couldn’t find the exact place to say this spot, here, is the North Pole” (66-67). Peary

discovers that reality cannot be pinned down, just as “History refuses to succumb to the impositions of the human ego” (Parks, 1991b: 460). Thus, neither Peary nor Dreiser is able to find “the proper alignment”: their efforts are thwarted by the unclassifiable, essentially incomprehensible nature of reality. Endorsing this central preoccupation of the novel, Angela Hague proposes that *Ragtime* posits a world which is “ultimately mysterious, beyond a final rational explanation” (2000: 174).

At a time when transformations in industrial, political, social and scientific thought were occurring on a continuous basis, change was inescapable. The novel’s geographical and temporal settings are of the utmost significance: the Ragtime Era, also known as the Progressive Era, was witness to a sudden, substantial growth in industry. Influenced by the arrival of scores of immigrants on American shores, the nation’s population increased drastically, giving rise to the mobilisation of countless workers both by factory and sweatshop owners and by the expanding railways. Describing the rapid industrial growth and increased production of the period, the narrator explains: “America was in the dawn of the Twentieth Century, a nation of steam shovels, locomotives, airships, combustion engines, telephones and twenty-five-story buildings” (150-151). *Ragtime*’s repeated references to trains, trolleys, automobiles, ships, aircraft and other developments in technology accurately reflect the era’s preoccupation with industry, speed and invention. Capturing an atmosphere imbued with wonderment and promise, the narrator excitedly broadcasts the burgeoning possibilities created by the newly laid railroads: “Tracks! Tracks!” he exclaims. “It seemed to the visionaries...that the future lay at the end of parallel rails. There were long-distance locomotive railroads and interurban electric railroads and street railways and elevated railroads, all laying their steel stripes on the land, criss-crossing like the texture of an indefatigable civilization” (77). Home to a multitude of locomotives “waiting in an impatience of steam and shouts and tolling bells to be released on their journeys” (179), *Ragtime*’s Pennsylvania Station is an architectural marvel, boasting a vast roof of “corrugated green glass vaults and arches supported by steel ribs and needlelike steel columns” (179). The wonder and reverence with which the grand building is described is echoed in the narrator’s description of a shiny New York train’s “varnished dark green cars” (18) and “brass drive pistons” (18), as seen through the awed eyes of the little boy. Similarly, in depicting the noise and bustling activity of New York City’s streets, the narrator effectively conveys an overriding

atmosphere of thrilled excitement: “The streets were crowded with cabs and cars and their horns blew at one another. Trolleys went along in clusters, their bells ringing, the flashes of electricity from their pantographs crackling along the overhead wires in minute intensifications of the heat lightning that flattened the sky over the darkening, sultry city” (73). However, the sweeping scientific and industrial changes affecting the era also brought with them a “terrifying rate of acceleration and disheartening loss of unity and order” (Barrett, 2000: 803). Hit by a whirlwind of action, speed and invention, the formerly steady pace of daily life increased exponentially. *Ragtime*’s frequent, detailed allusions to the multiple technological inventions of the early twentieth century not only capture the electric promise infusing everyday life, but they also document the period’s explosive industrial growth, and the attendant disintegration of a previously stable reality.

It is no wonder, then, that Doctorow’s characters are bewildered by the increased activity and overwhelming change of the time; change which was not limited to industrial development only, but encompassed shifting social and political ideologies. The characters’ desire for comprehension and stability in the midst of this upheaval mirrors the need for definite understanding reflected in the existence of nineteenth-century metanarratives, which created a false sense of assurance. The characters that ultimately succeed in this world of volatility and chaos are those who perceive the human need for certainty and permanence, yet simultaneously accept the arbitrary repetition and mutability of existence. These insights arm them with a more comprehensive understanding of reality, enabling them to adapt to their shifting surroundings with ease. The little boy recognises the dialectic of change and stability that is *Ragtime*’s thematic focus, finding “proof in his own experience of the instability of both things and people” (91). He first realises the fluid nature of reality while listening to his Grandfather recount Ovid’s tales of magical metamorphosis:

[Grandfather] would sit in the parlor and tell the boy stories from Ovid. They were stories of people who became animals or trees or statues. They were stories of transformation. Women turned into sunflowers, spiders, bats, birds; men turned into snakes, pigs, stones and even thin air. ...Grandfather’s stories proposed to him that the forms of life were volatile and that everything in the world could as easily be something else. The old man’s narrative would often drift from English to Latin without his being aware of it, as if he were reading to one of his classes of forty years before, so that it appeared nothing was immune to the principle of volatility, not even language. (90-91)

The little boy is deeply aware of the mutability of human existence, comprehending that reality is neither fixed nor certain. “It was evident to him,” remarks the narrator, “that the world composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction....[T]he boy’s eyes saw only the tracks made by the skaters, traces quickly erased of moments past, journeys taken” (92). In order to grasp this the little boy resorts, paradoxically, to studying patterns of repetition and order. His fascination with replications of reality, which are manifest in his diverse interests and activities, indicates his desire to comprehend the constant flux of his surroundings. He enjoys going to the movies, perceiving that “moving pictures depended on the capacity of humans, animals or objects to forfeit portions of themselves, residues of shadow and light which they left behind” (91). He listens with fascination to records on the family’s Victrola, playing the same record over and over again “as if to test the endurance of a duplicated event” (91), and he studies himself in the mirror, having discovered it to be a means of self-duplication: “He would gaze at himself until there were two selves facing one another, neither of which could claim to be the real one” (91). Testing the principle of replication on himself, the little boy “discovers his own personality to be as mutable and reproducible as the other objects in the physical universe” (Hague, 2000: 172). Hague notes that the duplicated event as portrayed in *Ragtime* represents a means of overcoming the volatility of reality, yet, in a paradoxical twist, it exemplifies that very changeability (2000: 171). The little boy realises that, like the concrete items occupying his surroundings, the self is subject to recombination and reinvention. While he attempts to analyse and comprehend the ceaseless change and instability of his surroundings through the examination of seemingly stable images of order and repetitive sequence, he is, however, wholly aware of the illusion of stability created by these images.

During a rare father-and-son outing to Coogan’s Bluff to watch a New York Giants baseball game, Father asks the child the reason for his enjoyment of baseball:

What is it you like about this game, [Father] said. The boy did not remove his gaze from the diamond. The same thing happens over and over, he said. The pitcher throws the ball so as to fool the batter into thinking he can hit it. But sometimes the batter does hit it, the father said. Then the pitcher is the one who is fooled, the boy said. (172)

The little boy thus expresses a complex understanding of the illusory nature of reality: while the universe appears to be stable and predictable, it is besieged by volatility and disarray. Human experience cannot be defined or fixed in history any more than present reality can be grasped

concretely. To the little boy, the images and the physical objects forming his world are of equal weight: the metamorphoses expressed in his grandfather's magical tales and in the moving pictures he so enjoys echo the mutability of the hairbrush on his bureau, as well as the constantly changing statues in the park, which were simply "one way of transforming humans and in some cases horses....[E]ven statues did not remain the same but turned different colors or lost bits and pieces of themselves" (92). As Morris writes, "In a kind of radical solipsism, [the boy] acknowledges no permanent reality separate from his own perception" (2002: 101). His experience of reality resonates with Baudrillard's conception of a "hyperreality" comprised of signs and simulacra unattached to any material referents, a transient state in which the real and the imaginary are always indistinct and it is impossible to separate the representation from the original. The little boy's world is composed of transitory images and concrete substances which are constantly mutating such that he perceives a reality in which the only constancy is impermanence.

Morris, who argues that any sense of understanding or certainty constructed in *Ragtime* is deliberately undercut to reveal the illusory nature of human experience, observes that the little boy registers the empty repetitions of the world without conferring meaning upon them: "The boy resists the hermeneutic need to assign a meaning to repetition, preferring instead to see himself and the universe as part of history's dumb metamorphosis" (2002: 103-104). *Ragtime*, Morris suggests, seems to endorse the little boy's understanding of reality as an infinite series of meaningless repetitions. As a structuring principle of the novel's plot, repetition abounds: Harry K. Thaw has two trials; Tatch's movies are made as sequels in a series; Emma Goldman bathes Evelyn Nesbit, who has, in turn, washed the little girl; both Dreiser and Peary repeatedly search for the proper alignment; the fire station suffers two explosions, and Scott Joplin's rags are heard both in Atlantic City and in New Rochelle.⁷³ The repetitions, like the myriad empty coincidences occurring in *Ragtime*, appear to be unrelated and arbitrary. However, while they bear little significance in terms of the novel's plot, the recurring images and events do perform a thematic function.⁷⁴ According to Morris, the futile monotony of such repetition and coincidence is

⁷³ For a comprehensive list of the structural repetitions in *Ragtime*, see Morris (2002: 100).

⁷⁴ Parks, who takes note of the chance meetings, unexpected incidents and accidental events permeating the narrative, suggests that these coincidences are fitting for an "age undergoing transformation, an age discovering relativity and the principle of uncertainty" (1991a: 69).

indicative of the fact that “history signifies nothing at all...Moments of insight, supposed climaxes, and turning points are revealed, in retrospect, to be hollow” (2002: 100). Like its parodic subversion of historical representation, the novel’s deceptive plot detail undermines classical perceptions of fictional composition, effectively prompting the reader to query the role and authenticity of the narrative.

While the little boy recognises the random arbitrariness of an endlessly repetitive reality, J. Pierpont Morgan seeks “universal patterns of order and repetition that give meaning to the planet” (112). Like the little boy, he needs to understand the recurring patterns that seem to order existence, yet Morgan’s approach differs from the boy’s in that he attempts to assign concrete meaning to the repetition: “I have retained scholars and scientists to assist me in my philosophical investigations in hopes of reaching some conclusions about this life that are not within the reach of the masses of men” (112), he tells Henry Ford. As Cooper observes, Morgan is passionately concerned with “the apprehension of external reality and the interpretation of life” (1980: 14). In order to imbue the world with rational significance, he turns to the ancient Egyptian belief in reincarnation. Convinced that he, like Ford, is a reincarnation of history’s intellectual elite, descended from an “awesome lineage” (116) of great rulers, Morgan invites the pioneering car manufacturer to lunch with him at his stately residence on Madison Avenue. He wishes to explain to Ford his theory that “the transcendently gifted among us...are with us today nevertheless. They are with us in every age. They come back, you see? They come back!...Why should we not satisfy ourselves of the truth of who we are and the eternal beneficent force which we incarnate?” (114-115). In accepting the doctrine of reincarnation, a philosophy which “combines the concepts of change and repetition—and insures a final victory over mortality” (Hague, 2000: 171), Morgan recognises the eternal repetition and mutability of human existence. Unlike the unusually insightful little boy, however, he is unable to accept a reality that is subject only to laws of chaos and volatility. Indeed, Morris states that Morgan’s beliefs and actions expose his inability to tolerate “a condition of uninterpreted redundancy” (2002: 103).

The futility of the great businessman’s extreme attempts to assign meaning to reality is revealed during his much-anticipated trip to Egypt. Intent on learning the disposition of his ka (soul) and

his ba (physical vitality), Morgan resolves to sleep the night alone in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid at Giza. His grand hopes are crushed, however, when, while being bitten mercilessly by bedbugs, he dreams of a past life as a peddler. Disturbed by the dream, Morgan renews his efforts to uncover the meaning and origins of his life. He decides:

...one must in such circumstances make a distinction between false signs and true signs. The dream of the peddler in the bazaar was a false sign. The bedbugs were a false sign. A true sign would be the glorious sight of small red birds with human heads flying lazily in the chamber, lighting it with their own incandescence. These would be ba birds, which he had seen portrayed in Egyptian wall paintings. (229)

As the stars begin to fade and Morgan's sleepless night in the King's Chamber comes to a close, the mystical birds fail to materialise. The wealthy businessman's confident attempts to explain the world's patterns of repetition and order are, ultimately, fruitless, and highly comical. While he perceives the constant change and iteration of human experience, he cannot accept the inherent, inexplicable disorder of the world. Parks argues that Morgan's "historical narcissism is doomed to failure", in that he sees history "almost wholly in terms of the self, an immature and infantile philosophy of history, one that is static and degenerate" (1991b: 460). Although Morgan recognises the repetitive mutability of existence, his elitist philosophy is rigid and outdated: his attempts to allot a fixed meaning to life fail, revealing the impossibility of attaching any form of definite significance to an ever-elusive reality. Complying with Morris' proposition that *Ragtime* demonstrates the illusory nature of human experience, the novel seems to endorse the little boy's perceptive awareness and acceptance of a volatile, finally arbitrary world.

Morgan and Ford's attempts to attach a permanent meaning to reality are mirrored in the actions and beliefs of Harry Houdini. An internationally celebrated magician, Houdini is a master of escape: to his awed public he is a symbol of ultimate freedom and unfettered change. He travels the world "accepting all kinds of bondage and escaping" (14):

He was roped to a chair. He escaped. He was chained to a ladder. He escaped. He was handcuffed, his legs were put in irons, he was tied up in a strait jacket and put in a locked cabinet. He escaped. He escaped from bank vaults, nailed-up barrels, sewn mailbags; he escaped from a zinc-lined Knabe piano case, a giant football, a galvanized iron boiler, a rolltop desk, a sausage skin. His escapes were mystifying because he never damaged or appeared to unlock what he escaped from. The screen was pulled away and there he stood disheveled but triumphant beside the inviolate container that was supposed to have contained him. He waved to the crowd. He escaped from a sealed milk can filled with water. He escaped from a Siberian exile van. From a Chinese torture crucifix. From a Hamburg penitentiary. From an English prison ship. From a Boston jail. He was chained to automobile tires, water wheels, cannon, and he escaped. (14)

Houdini's reputation as an icon of escape and freedom is, like his elaborate trickery, merely an illusion. Privately, the great magician is devoted to his mother, bound to her in both life and death. The narrator describes him as "passionately in love with his ancient mother....Houdini was destined to be, with Al Jolson, the last of the great shameless mother lovers" (34).⁷⁵ After his beloved mother's death, Houdini commits himself to preserving her memory, placing framed photographs of her on the pillow of her bed, on her chair, and on the inside of their front door "to suggest her continuing presence" (149). Every evening he plays his mother's favourite records on her old oak music box; he compulsively rereads the letters she wrote to him while alive; and he stands in the door of her closet, breathing "the redolence of her wardrobe" (149). In contradiction to the unrestricted freedom and magically transformative powers of his public persona, Houdini's profound inability to cope with the death of his mother reflects a deep-seated resistance to change, a resistance further exposed in his perceptions of humankind and society. Originally a poor immigrant, Houdini is now a highly successful and wealthy entrepreneur. He remains intimidated by the upper classes, however, revealing an unconscious acceptance of existing social hierarchies, and the correlative inability to perceive the pervasive social and demographic change of the age. Moreover, Houdini demonstrates a fundamental lack of insight in failing to recognise the reason for his audiences' rapt interest in the dangerous stunts he executes. As Hague observes, the magician's spectators pay to see his ability to transform and magically escape from a reality previously accepted as static and impervious to human manipulation (2000: 173). Through his performance of illusions, Houdini accommodates the general public's growing need to understand the illusory, transformative nature of reality. Indeed, in a wry aside the narrator proclaims, "Today, nearly fifty years since [Houdini's] death, the audience for escapes is even larger" (15). Crucially, however, Houdini himself fails to understand the intrinsic fluidity and ultimately inexplicable nature of reality.

⁷⁵ "Shameless" mother-loving was sensitised by the rise of the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud. Fittingly, Doctorow has Freud make an appearance in *Ragtime*, writing with ironic humour: "Freud's immediate reception in America was not auspicious. A few professional alienists understood his importance, but to most of the public he appeared as some kind of German sexologist, an exponent of free love who used big words to talk about dirty things. At least a decade would have to pass before Freud would have his revenge and see his ideas begin to destroy sex in America forever" (34).

Busby remarks that the novel's dominant dialectic between change and stability is heightened by "illusions of stability in change or change in stability" (2000: 178).⁷⁶ Houdini is, clearly, a manifestation of these contradictory forces. Not only are his dangerous stunts illusions on a grand scale, dangerous yet artificial representations of an illusory reality, but he presents an external illusion of transformation and unhindered escape while unable to accept change on a personal or societal level. Even the famous magician's name is false: Harry Houdini, Doctorow reveals, is the stage name for Erich Weiss, a Jewish immigrant whose career had had inauspicious beginnings in a small circus in western Pennsylvania. As the non-exhaustive list of Houdini's feats quoted above attests, the illusionist's escapes were daring and dangerous, becoming increasingly so as his career progressed and his dissatisfaction grew. In repeated attempts to gratify his insatiable desire to capture an authentic, "real-world act" (79), Houdini attempts to defy mortality by asking to be buried alive in a grave. Horrifyingly, he finds he cannot escape. Although the great magician masterfully engineers convincing illusions of escape, he is unable to enact the real:

There was a kind of act that used the real world for its stage. He couldn't touch it. For all his achievements he was a trickster, an illusionist, a mere magician. What was the sense of his life if people walked out of the theatre and forgot him? The headlines on the newsstand said Peary had reached the Pole. The real-world act was what got into the history books. (79)

Houdini displays a distorted sense of reality. Problematically, he cannot distinguish between the real and the artificial in his work: he wants to master the *real* acts of death and resurrection as opposed to creating the mere illusion of rising from the grave. Commenting on his frightening attempts to resist mortality, Morris writes: "it becomes obvious that death cannot be truly represented by artifice (if only because no successful performance could be iterable). Thus, even in his harrowing performances, Houdini can only repeat an artifice that can never 'more closely approximate'" the real (2002: 99).

In addition to his unsuccessful attempts to perform an authentic escape, Houdini's active daily remembrances of his deceased mother, coupled with his passionate quest to find "someone who

⁷⁶ This argument is also made by Barrett (2000: 804), who asserts that Doctorow's focus on change and stasis, speed and stillness as two halves of the same coin has been a concern of his since the start of his novelistic career. She justifies her view with convincing reference to Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times* and *The Book of Daniel*, both of which, she contends, insist that history repeats itself in an endless cycle of destruction, thereby denying the possibility for substantial change (2000: 804).

had genuine gifts as a medium” (150) through which he might contact her spirit, reflect his flawed assumption that the absent can be accurately represented in the present (Morris, 2002: 99). He wants to capture the uniqueness of his mother and the solid reality of the world but, as Harpham asserts, “his insistence on these qualities constitutes a blindness to the force of replication in life” (1985: 89). The impossibility of making the absent present is demonstrated in Houdini’s failed attempts to enact genuine incidents: his feats are mere illusions, no more authentic than his name or his attitude towards change. Unlike the little boy, who perceives the mutability of the past and the present, Houdini fails to recognise that the past, which “exists *for us – now* – only as traces on and in the present” (Hutcheon, 1989: 73), cannot be fixed in the present. Life, like the self, is subject to the indomitable force of change, a fact to which Houdini is blind. Unable “to distinguish his life from his tricks” (153), the doomed magician can therefore offer only imperfect, repetitive representations of a reality whose illusiveness he does not fully comprehend. Thus, Harpham concludes that Houdini “epitomizes failure in *Ragtime* as an inability to forfeit a portion of oneself, to peel the image off and begin the composition anew” (90).⁷⁷

Emphasising the novel’s themes of movement, stasis, and change, the defining moment of Tateh’s life in America occurs on a forward-moving train. Having decided to leave the brutal poverty of Hester Street for good, Tateh and his daughter board a series of streetcars and trains with the aim of traveling as far as each vehicle will take them. Bound for Springfield, Massachusetts in a swaying wooden carriage, Tateh begins to smile and then laugh at the increasing speed of the train: “...for the first time since coming to America he thought it might be possible to live here....[He] clutched the suitcase on his lap and kept his eyes on the tracks ahead, shining now in the single beam of the powerful electric headlamp on the front of the car” (76-77). This crucial moment of illumination produces in Tateh the beginnings of a physical and psychological metamorphosis. Inspired by the thought of a more promising future, the once desperately downtrodden Jewish socialist becomes focused and hopeful, providing himself and the reader with a glimpse of his future transformation into a successful and immensely energised entrepreneur. Before the critical train journey, Tateh is described as an “old artist” (75), the

⁷⁷ Doctorow explores in *City of God* the necessity to revise individual perception and universal systems of thought in order to survive in the postmodern world.

stooped and ancient father of the beautiful little girl. Subsequent to his transformative experience on the train, however, he is depicted as a “small, limber man...a flamboyant, excited person whose eyes darted here and there, like a child’s” (189).

Tateh displays a newfound mental and physical energy which manifests itself in his state of constant motion. Mother, who is able to recognise Tateh’s energetic figure from a distance, watches him leap about on the beach in efforts to amuse his young daughter. As Hague notes, Tateh’s unremitting physicality contrasts sharply with Father’s static being (2000: 173), giving rise to the explicit tension in the novel between movement and stasis, stability and change. Exhibiting jubilant energy and optimism, Tateh runs, cartwheels, somersaults, stands on his hands, and walks upside down on the beach to entertain Mother and the children. Significantly, Father sleeps through this action, reinforcing Mother’s growing realisation that her husband “had reached [his limits], and that he would never move beyond them” (186). Laura Barrett, commenting on the dangers of stasis perpetuated in the novel, maintains that “the concept of an essential self is not just obsolete but fatal. Characters who cannot adapt to change vanish” (2000: 803). Father does, quite literally, “vanish”: after a gradual process of exclusion following his return from the Pole, during which he feels “altogether invisible” (161), his voyage on the British passenger liner *Lusitania* ends in grave disaster when the ship is torpedoed and sinks. Appropriately, then, in an aside that suggests both Father’s everlasting search for a stable self and his inability to adapt to changing circumstances, the narrator writes, “Poor Father, I see his final exploration. He arrives at the new place, his hair risen in astonishment, his mouth and eyes dumb. His toe scuffs a soft storm of sand, he kneels and his arms spread in pantomimic celebration, the immigrant, as in every moment of his life, arriving eternally on the shore of his Self” (235).

While Father is paralysed by a fundamental incapacity to detach himself from established modes of thought, Tateh expresses an awareness of both the human need for order and stability reminiscent of the little boy’s astute perceptions of the world, and the need to adapt continually to change. Tateh’s role in *Ragtime* is vital in that he, like the boy, embodies the dialectic of change and stability so crucial to the thematic force of the novel. Geoffrey Galt Harpham writes: “What segregates them from others is their ‘capacity to forfeit portions of themselves,’ to

relinquish imaginative projections, to embrace the volatility of the world, and to control their lives by generating successive self-representations. In treating their selves as subject to recomposition, they achieve individuation by mastering the process of replication” (1985: 89). Tateh’s paper silhouettes, in which rising film star Evelyn Nesbit takes such delight, provide Tateh with a rare sense of control over his unstable world, as do the moving pictures which later become the source of his great wealth and success. Expressing a child-like curiosity mirroring that of the little boy, the newly-named Baron Ashkenazy brandishes a “rectangular glass framed in metal which he often held up to his face as if to compose for a mental photograph what it was that had captured his attention” (189). Tateh is “alive to every moment” (190) of life, dwelling ebulliently on his own sensations and impressions. He is thus able to articulate the human desire to understand an inexorably fluid existence:

In the movie films, he said, we only look at what is there already. Life shines on the shadow screen, as from the darkness of one’s mind. It is a big business. People want to know what is happening to them. For a few pennies they sit and see their selves in movement, running, racing in motorcars, fighting and, forgive me, embracing one another. This is most important today, in this country, where everybody is so new. There is such a need to understand. (190)

Tateh recognises that movies capture the illusory, fleeting nature of existence and that witnessing the human body in motion equips audiences to comprehend more fully the repetitive fluidity of their reality, as well as the vital necessity to invent and reinvent the self. Movies, the filmmaker discerns, possess the remarkable capacity to convey the mutability of human experience while providing an illusion of stability. As Hague writes, “moving pictures combine the fact of their reproducibility with the sense of their transitoriness” (2000: 172). Like the little boy, Tateh recognises the human need for stability and permanence in a world constantly in flux, yet he understands the inherent variability and arbitrary repetition of existence. He is thus able to adjust to his ever-shifting surroundings. It is precisely because of his adaptability and progressive thought that Tateh is successful as a filmmaker, a creative occupation that has at its foundation concepts of motion and metamorphosis. Indeed, Busby notes that through his paper silhouettes, his glass frame and his films, Tateh is able to provide some semblance of order and coherence in an unrelentingly volatile world (2000: 181). Over and above his professional interests and triumphs, however, Tateh’s personal success derives from the crucial reinvention of himself.

Hague draws an interesting comparison between Doctorow's Tateh and Charlie Chaplin, both European immigrants and both famous entertainers in the early twentieth century. She notes that Chaplin's comedic portrayal of "The Tramp" personified the theme of poverty in the New World, as well as the possibilities of gaining wealth through magical transformation (2000: 173). In a similar manner, Tateh uses the power of his imagination "to transmute reality and to enlarge his personal boundaries" (Hague, 2000: 173). Conscious of the infinite iterability of existence, both Tateh and the little boy use their intellect and imagination to comprehend and adjust to the shifting circumstances of a volatile world. Houdini, Morgan, Ford and Father, by contrast, are entrenched in stagnant thought patterns from which they are unable to disengage. They fail to adopt the evolving social thought of the period, and they do not possess the capacity to adapt to the daily repercussions of technological innovations. The successes, failures, beliefs and behaviour of *Ragtime*'s characters play an essential role in cementing the novel's dominant themes of perpetual change and unattainable stability, and the paradoxical relationship between the two.

Tateh's creation of moving pictures allows him to control, to an extent, an amorphous and incoherent reality such that it can be analysed and appreciated. Indeed, in her essay "*Ragtime* and the Movies" (2000), Hague contends that the replication inherent in film satisfies an elemental human need to preserve and duplicate experience such that it can be understood. As an organising principle of the novel, film becomes a key means for characters "bewildered by the seeming mutability and formlessness of reality to subject time to rational control" (Hague, 2000: 166). Thus, it is through film that both Tateh and the little boy are able to evaluate and grasp the shifting intricacies of their worlds: their fascination with moving pictures stems from the fact that while movies permanently "fix" time, capturing and preserving the essence of the focal object, they simultaneously show movement in time, illustrating the unconstrained, inexorable movement of time. In other words, as John Williams suggests, "the on-screen illusions of film derive from the most fundamental illusion: eternal life" (1996: 54). Movies therefore simultaneously contradict and reinforce Tateh and the little boy's shared belief in a complex, constantly fluctuating reality, a reality in which it is necessary to recompose the self on a continual basis in order to flourish.

The prominence of filmic representation on a thematic level is mimicked aesthetically in the novel. *Ragtime*'s structure and narrative techniques imitate the rapid progression of captured images constituting a motion picture, revealing the ceaseless malleability of reality. With its repetition of short, declarative sentences, Doctorow's staccato prose style reflects the repetitive flow of filmic images: "...it is as if," Hague writes, "the narrator presents the reader with an interminable series of photographs and challenges him to decipher them" (2000: 174). Doctorow's economy of language is maintained throughout the narrative: he rarely makes use of figurative language or complex syntactical constructions, yet, as the following passage testifies, the precise simplicity of his prose does not preclude imagery of a distinctly evocative nature:

Back home a momentous change was coming over the United States. There was a new President, William Howard Taft, and he took office weighing three hundred and thirty-two pounds. All over the country men began to look at themselves. They were used to drinking great quantities of beer. They customarily devoured loaves of bread and ate prodigiously of the sausage meats of poured offal that lay on the lunch counters of the saloons. The august Pierpont Morgan would routinely consume seven- and eight-course dinners. He ate breakfasts of steaks and chops, eggs, pancakes, broiled fish, rolls and butter, fresh fruit and cream. The consumption of food was a sacrament of success. A man who carried a great stomach before him was thought to be in his prime. Women went into hospital to die of burst bladders, collapsed lungs, over-taxed hearts and meningitis of the spine. (67)

In spite of the prose's simple diction, Doctorow presents a series of sumptuous, vivid images which are reminiscent of the quick succession of photographs comprising a film. Indeed, Doctorow admits to having been influenced by "seventy years of optical technology....[T]he use of the cut, for instance, the use of entirely visual images to create emotion, [and] the use of repetition" (*Conversations* 40).⁷⁸ As Williams observes in his study of *Ragtime*'s reception history, several critics have examined the significance of film as a motif in the novel, as well as cinema's suggestion of new ways to interpret reality.⁷⁹ *Ragtime*'s fragmented narrative technique certainly reflects the character of film. As in film, the novel seems to suggest, the real is made up of multiple images which are subject to the inevitable progression of time. Like film, reality is ultimately illusive, and always vulnerable to interpretation. The novel's cinematic construction of a series of images, scenes and intertwined stories complements its thematic endorsement of a

⁷⁸ Although freely acknowledging and appreciating film's influence on his writing, Doctorow does express certain reservations about film, calling it "culturally regressive, non-verbal, simplistic, and a cause of rising illiteracy around the world" (*Conversations* 126). His anger towards the medium seems, on the whole, not to be directed at its formal techniques, but rather at its literalisation of events as well as the fact that cinema seems, increasingly, to be taking the place of reading.

⁷⁹ Such critics include Susan Brienza, Barbara Cooper, Barbara Estrin and Angela Hague.

new, distinctly postmodern, mode of perception.⁸⁰ Employing a combination of formal and thematic methods, Doctorow advocates a new way of seeing that conforms to Susan Sontag's meditations on photographic vision in the postmodern age:

The modern way of seeing is to see in fragments. It is felt that reality is essentially unlimited, and knowledge is open-ended. It follows that all boundaries, all unifying ideas have to be misleading, demagogic; at best, provisional; almost always, in the long run, untrue. To see reality in the light of certain unifying ideas has the undeniable advantage of giving shape and form to our experience. But it also...denies the infinite variety and complexity of the real. Thereby it represses our energy, indeed our right, to remake what we wish to remake—our society, our selves. What is liberating...is to notice more and more. (2007: 124-125)

Our infinitely varied existence necessitates the possession and active utilisation of acute powers of perception. In exercising such attentiveness, implies Sontag, one inevitably attains a more comprehensive view of reality, which enables both an awareness and an informed interpretation of the world's inherent "mortality, vulnerability, mutability" (Sontag, 1977: 15). Like *The Book of Daniel*, which confers upon the reader the responsibility to act as a witness to Daniel's explorations of self and history, illustrating the need for Doctorow's "multiplicity of witnesses", *Ragtime* also advocates this vision: the little boy is instinctively inquisitive and actively fulfils his intense "need to see things and to go places" (14), while Tatch "remakes" himself and his society through film, perceiving its affinity with reality. Both are depicted as characters who understand the arbitrary complexity and infinite possibilities of human experience. The ambiguity generated by the layered narrative structure and multiple perspectives of *The Book of Daniel* effectively exposes manifold semantic and interpretive possibilities, embodying Doctorow's idea of a "democracy of perception". Although few similarities can be drawn between the prose style of *The Book of Daniel* and that of *Ragtime*, the latter's formal appropriation of filmic devices, coupled with its thematic underpinnings, gives rise to a narrative that posits a similarly inclusive mode of perception.

Contemplating the distinctly cinematic narrative frames of the novel, Cooper writes,

⁸⁰ Williams notes that the first critical documentation of Doctorow's assertion of shifting modes of perception occurred in the early 1980s, in essays written by Angela Hague and Anthony B. Dawson. As Williams goes on to say, such critics advocate what is essentially a postmodern sensibility (Williams, 1996: 55). Hence, Hague closes her article (written in 1982) with a definitively postmodernist idea: "Doctorow attempts to make the novel, like film, part of a 'new aesthetic' which irreverently appropriates all of art and experience for its material without compromising its artistic independence" (2000: 175).

...this intricate pattern of still pictures and movie sequences is skilfully arranged to disclose many perspectives and angles of vision. By juxtaposing these many pictures and camera angles, Doctorow's narrative photographer captures the facts and fictions of the era of ragtime. Carefully, he splices together subjectivity and objectivity, thereby depicting both the physical experience and the feel of a historical moment. (1980: 34)

Through his detached narrator, who maintains a steady ironic distance throughout the narrative, Doctorow presents a sweeping collage of images, drawing together multiple perspectives on the ragtime era. He portrays a world in which the only way to reach an objective view of reality is through a multiplicity of witnesses: "...the important thing," Doctorow declares, "is to have as many sources of information as possible—because if you don't, history turns into mythology" (*Conversations* 114). Humankind, the novel suggests, can arrive at truth and freedom by integrating all possible facets of experience such that the subjective is resisted. In an echo of *Ragtime's* mention of New York City as a "crazy quilt of humanity" (22), Doctorow concludes his work with a final image of unified diversity. Merging the three culturally varied fictional families to create a new familial entity, Doctorow emphasises the unpredictable mutability of existence and the fundamental necessity to recognise and actively embrace social and technological change.⁸¹ Initiating a process of regeneration, the new family manages to survive the upheaval of the ragtime era and begins to compose a new history. Particularly triumphant in the elusive reality portrayed in the novel are the little boy and Tateh who, in the words of Sontag quoted above, are liberated by "notice[ing] more and more" (2007: 125). Illustrating a basic human desire, they hanker after stability and permanence in a world beleaguered by constant change, yet their superior powers of perception enable them to accept the variability and inexplicable repetition of an ultimately mysterious existence. The true success of these characters, however, lies in their realisation that the self is subject to the same unyielding force of replication that is the source of the world's continual recomposition.

⁸¹ The new family comprises Mother, Tateh, the little boy, the little girl and Coalhouse Walker III. Morris observes that the merging of the families is the final illusion in a novel teeming with illusions. The sentimental depiction of a "bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds...a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again" (236) is a gross misrepresentation of the novel's central action, which tells of violent racial and ethnic conflict. Furthermore, the narrator seems to endorse Tateh's "Pollyannaish" vision of the new family, revealing a blindness to the truths of his own completed narration (Morris, 2002: 94).

CHAPTER THREE

“The whole world in a book”⁸²: Spirituality, Morality and the Postmodern in *City of God*

Religious knowledge, it might be conceded, does not resemble science so much as it does taste.
- Phillip E. Hammond, “American Civil Religion Revisited”

The song is for you big town, you were always my song.
- E. L. Doctorow, *City of God*

Deep down, the first duty of the Community is to be on the alert in order to be able to rewrite the encyclopedia every day.
- Umberto Eco, “The Power of Falsehood”

Highly ambitious in its thematic scope and narrative structure, Doctorow’s *City of God* (2000) explores a number of diverse and complex subjects with a range of reference radically exceeding that of his previous works. In its astute contemplation of the human struggle with tradition and spirituality, the novel considers matters of religion, history, science, morality and popular culture in what becomes an encompassing commentary on the predominant ideas of the twentieth century. By virtue of the manner in which it handles such themes, *City of God* situates itself firmly within the postmodernist literary mode, its marked scepticism, narrative fragmentation and explicit self-referentiality consonant with the departures from traditional literary conventions displayed in *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*. As in his earlier works, Doctorow emphasises the need for continual critical interrogation and revision of universal narratives, extending his enquiry in *City of God* to include matters of an overtly ontological nature. In his short non-fiction work, *Reporting the Universe* (2003), Doctorow makes clear his preoccupation with issues of spirituality in a world characterised by individual isolation and doubt, examining with characteristic lyricism and intelligence the tensions between secular humanism, religion, and morality in contemporary America. An articulation of the author’s deepest concerns, the ideas enunciated in *Reporting the Universe* resonate strongly throughout *City of God*. Doctorow uses the essays, which were originally presented in 2003 as the William E. Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization, to communicate the complexities of his internal spiritual quest, a conflict at the heart of *City of God*’s investigations. Describing the religious dialectic defining

⁸² Asked by Mary B. W. Tabor in a 1998 *New York Times* interview which work of literature, excluding his own, he would like to have written, Doctorow responded, “[I]f there was just one book I could choose, it would be [Cervantes’] *Don Quixote*. I think the whole world is in that book.” The same, it seems to me, can be said for *City of God*, whose concerns are multiple in number and astonishingly diverse.

his own life, Doctorow explains that he matured having combined within himself “the secular humanism” inherited from his father and grandfather, and “the impulse to reverence” inspired by his mother and grandmother:

I think of it as a spiritual sort of alternating current, wherein never at rest I swing constantly back and forth from one pole to the other....As the son of my fathers I am non-observant, a celebrant of the humanism that has no patience for religious imagination and asks me to abandon my intellect. But as the son of my mothers, I am unable to discard reverence, however unattached to an object, in recognition that a spontaneously felt sense of the sacred engages the whole human being as the intellect alone cannot. (RU 67)

Reflective of Doctorow’s own spiritual oscillations, *City of God* endeavours to reconcile the divergent humanist and sacred traditions in spite of the “profound incompatibility of opposing ideas” (RU 67). The novel is, as Lawrence Wilde notes, Doctorow’s first attempt to deal directly with religious belief, and is a pure expression of the author’s conscience (2006: 392). Documenting the search for a genuine spirituality in a world seemingly devoid of compassion, moral impetus, and human unity, *City of God* challenges universal norms and narratives, exploring the underlying reasons for contemporary culture’s resurgent interest in spirituality. Identifying ethics as a foundational link between secular and religious traditions, the novel suggests that moral and spiritual fulfilment is attainable through a constructive, revisionary interrogation of traditional concepts of religion.

City of God is a novel of exceptional structural complexity, the narrative consisting of a disjointed assortment of diary entries, prayers, emails, speeches, letters, and documentary-style observations on a variety of subjects. Together these pieces of writing constitute the body of notes collected by the novel’s narrator and protagonist, Everett, for his own work of fiction. *City of God*’s non-sequential narrative structure gives rise to a strong sense of discontinuity and fragmentation, which in turn imbues the text with an extraordinary energy. Switching rapidly and irregularly between characters, scenes and genres, the uneven narrative style represents a world composed of numerous disparate elements, echoing Everett’s consciousness as he composes sketches, meditates on information, and gathers ideas for his novel. In typical postmodernist fashion, Doctorow refutes traditional genre distinctions to create a work consisting of a diverse mixture of prose, poetry and authorial annotation. Everett’s biography provides an interesting example of Doctorow’s disregard for genre conventions. Entitled “Author’s Bio”, Everett’s

biographical history takes on a Homeric verse style and structure, in what becomes a variety of mock-epic:

I was a breech baby, the first of many difficulties
I gave my mother, Ruth, a resolute woman, a gifted
pianist
who had at a much earlier age fallen in love with a
dreamer
Her original experience of the difficult race of men,
an impetuous ensign-in-training at the Webb Naval
Academy on the Harlem River
my father, Ben, who in the First World War would leap
over the fence
and break into the army canteen where my mother was
serving coffee and doughnuts
to the doughboys, and risk death in the wrong white
uniform
to see to it that nobody interfered with her. (126-127)

In this poetic format Everett describes in detail his birth, his upbringing in the Bronx, the individual histories and personalities of his parents and brother, and an epic World War II airplane battle scene. Although modern biography is traditionally written in prose, Doctorow strays from narrative convention by composing Everett's full biography in verse form, effectively blurring the content-based differences between prose and poetry. Doctorow's rejection of rigid genre distinctions is visible throughout *City of God*. In addition to his fusion of the poem/prose traditions, he transcribes scenes as film scripts, frequently including the "movie version" of certain scenes ("guy gets back from his morning run, sees a film company setting up on his street..." (107) or "The movie from this:..." (271)). An interesting feature of the text is its interpretations of American popular songs from the 1920s and 1930s. Performed by the "Midrash Jazz Quartet", these interpretive commentaries take the form of long rap-like poems, which are accompanied by brief authorial insertions describing the audience's responses.⁸³ Deriving from the Hebrew root meaning "to investigate", the word "midrash" describes a tradition wherein "scriptures are interpreted so as to make the text relevant to a wide range of questions of rabbinic interest" (*Penguin Encyclopedia* 3rd ed., s.v. "Midrash"). The satirical musical interpretations included in *City of God* thus invoke the ancient Jewish tradition of non-literal interpretation (Wilde, 2006: 394). Doctorow, who describes great songs as "ultimate and lasting artifacts of public consciousness" (PP 168), remarks in an essay entitled "Standards", "If we allow that

⁸³ The Midrash Jazz Quartet alternately receives "laughter, applause" (112), "grumbling" (113), "acclamation" (160), and "prolonged heavy applause" (224).

culture by its nature imprisons perception, that for a poignant creative moment it may enlighten us but then, perversely, transforms itself into a jailhouse walling out reality, then songs are the cells of our imprisonment” (PP 178). By subjecting these musical standards to thorough and radical interpretation from a modern perspective, Doctorow illustrates the necessity to review and reevaluate the societal perceptions ingrained in the lyrics of these songs so that their meanings are rendered pertinent to contemporary culture. Doctorow’s hybridisation of genres throughout *City of God* indicates the disintegration of previously held distinctions, emphasising the incapacity of traditional modes of representation to convey a newly disjointed and multifarious reality. As in *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*, the contravention of novelistic custom shatters the reader’s entrenched views of the conventions to which fictional narrative “should” conform, encouraging the active and critical revision of traditionally unchallenged norms.

City of God’s structural complexity is further complicated by its sophisticated layering of narrative voice. An ongoing concern of Doctorow’s, experimentation with literary voice features throughout his writings, which exhibit repeated and increasingly complex innovations in narrative form. Narrated by its self-conscious fictional protagonist, Daniel, who uses narrative as an epistemological tool, *The Book of Daniel* incorporates multiple perspectives through which Doctorow challenges the prevalence of conclusive ideological assumptions. Voice is used to similar effect in *Ragtime*, in that the novel’s unidentifiable or “absent” narrative consciousness signals the ambiguities inherent in language and points to the ultimately inconclusive nature of textual representation. Displaying a fundamental commonality with *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*, *City of God*’s protagonist is a writer engaged in composing the fictional creation that is Doctorow’s novel.⁸⁴ As in his earlier works, this metafictional dimension is explicit, yet *City of God* is Doctorow’s most ambitious project to date in this regard, as it operates on multiple authorial levels. Everett, the protagonist and principal narrator of *City of God*, is the author of the novel-in-progress which is presented as Doctorow’s own fictional text. The metafictional construction of a multi-layered narrative in which the narrator is a fictional subject of his own part-autobiographical novel is further complicated by the inclusion of several other narrative

⁸⁴ As has been mentioned (see page 38), this is a feature characteristic of Doctorow’s writings, in which the fictional protagonists are narrators of Doctorow’s novels as well as creators of their own literary compositions, which are the texts we read.

voices. Thomas Pemberton (Pem), the main character in Everett's fictional work, is portrayed primarily in the third person, yet his voice is crucial to *City of God* as he frequently assumes the role of first-person narrator. Similarly, the voices of an array of fictional and fictionalised personae emerge as the novel progresses: Frank Sinatra, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Albert Einstein and Sarah Blumenthal's father are, in addition to Everett and Pem, the first-person narrators of substantial sections of the text and, consequently, they assume significant roles in communicating the novel's chief thematic interests. In conformity to Foucault's conception of the author-function as a plurality of selves, *City of God* thus exhibits a multiplicity of narrative voices through which Doctorow raises several issues of central and enduring concern. He articulates his often incongruent and unresolved views through the individual voices of a diverse collection of characters, presenting, to use the critical terminology of Mikhail Bakhtin, a markedly dialogic text.⁸⁵ Owing to the complex authorial constructions in *City of God*, certain phrases and concepts reverberate eerily throughout the narrative. The overt repetition, for example, of "this is my laboratory, here, in my skull" (36, 52), a sentiment voiced by separate characters in different time periods, is not unintentional on Doctorow's part. First uttered by Einstein in reference to his scientific and philosophical thought experiments, the words are later spoken by Everett, who is alluding to his creative invention of fictional worlds. Such linguistic and conceptual repetitions highlight the text's self-referential dimension, emphasising the blurring of authorial identities in the novel and accentuating its multi-layered narrative structure. Doctorow thereby ensures that his readers are always aware of the metafictional nature of the work.

Over and above Doctorow's oblique references to the novel's authorial layers, *City of God's* form – a writer's notebook containing idea fragments for a novel – foregrounds the process of literary production. Replete with concrete references to storytelling and the act of writing, the novel displays both a formal and a thematic focus on the manner in which stories, whether biblical, fictional or scientific, are composed. Central to Doctorow's structural and thematic exposition of the writing process are Everett's meetings with Pem at Knickerbocker's on Ninth

⁸⁵ That Doctorow's views are disseminated through his characters is corroborated by his non-fiction writings, in which appear verbatim many of the novel's core concepts. Compare, for example, *City of God* 90 with *Reporting the Universe* 67, *City of God* 3 with *Reporting the Universe* 77, and *City of God* 65 with *Creationists* 4. By adopting multiple authorial personae, Doctorow explores issues across both his fictive and his non-fictional texts.

and University Place, during which the priest and the writer review Everett's work-in-progress. At the first of these meetings, Pem says to the novelist: "You write well enough...but no writer can reproduce the actual texture of living life....You're offended. But I'm telling you you're exemplary. It's a compliment. After all, I might have chalked you off as just a lousy writer. It's unsettling reading about me from inside my mind. Another shock to another faith" (47). This exchange, which occurs relatively early in *City of God*, alerts readers to the complex structure and the central storyline of the novel, which had until now remained a mixture of only vaguely reconcilable scenes and ideas. Accentuating the text's metafictional character, this discussion provides the first clear indication of the identities of the narrator, Everett, and his protagonist, Pem.

In a similarly instructive scene, Everett relays a conversation between him and Sarah Blumenthal, to whom he had given the written material inspired by her father's experiences in the Jewish war ghetto:

[S]he was quiet, thoughtful, and so that I would not keep staring at her, I turned to the food on my plate. Only after the silence went on did it occur to me that she was composing herself to talk about my pages.

I said: "Did you—?"

"I did. I'm very impressed."

"Really? I was so—"

"No, it's terribly moving. Of course," she said, "anyone familiar with the literature will recognize that this is the Kovno ghetto you're talking about, from the Abraham Tory diary?"

"Yes, I relied heavily on it."

"But the Kovno ghetto was larger than you represent."

"Yes, I made it not much more than a village. But I wanted that geography. The bridge across to the city. The fort."

"And my father was not from Kovno, of course. He was from a village closer to Poland. The Jewish resistance in Poland was more developed than in Lithuania. Those could be Polish Jews you're talking about, their attitude, that Benno and so on."

"Yes."

"And I have to say, you must be careful not to oversimplify the way things were....But I was very moved...It may be inaccurate, but it's quite true. I don't know how, but you caught my father's voice." (146)

Doctorow's inclusion of this scene is noteworthy: not only is it structurally important for the timeous clarification it provides of the text's layers of narrative voice, but the conversation is significant thematically in that it contains explicit reference to the methods of research and writing involved in the creation of fictional literature. Doctorow's formal elucidations of the process of artistic production are mirrored throughout the novel in its thematic strains, with characters alluding specifically to the manner in which stories are constructed. In response to

Pem's criticisms of the factual inaccuracies in his prose, Everett states, "Well, Father, when you compose something, that's what you do, you make the composition. Bend time, change things, put things in, leave things out. You're not sworn to include everything. Or to make something happen the way it did. Facts can be inhibiting. Actuality is beside the point. Irrelevant." (48). Everett here explains what Sarah Blumethal articulates and what Doctorow has elsewhere affirmed: although writers may at times manipulate the factual truth in the name of fictional creation, they frequently do so in order to convey a deeper, elemental truth. As Joan Didion explicates in her 1966 essay, "On Keeping a Notebook", "I [have] always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what merely might have happened, but *I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters...*[P]erhaps it never did snow that August in Vermont; perhaps there never were flurries in the night wind...*but that was how it felt to me, and it might as well have snowed, could have snowed, did snow*" (1990: 134, emphasis added).⁸⁶ Like Didion, Doctorow (through Everett) disregards the traditional barriers between fact and fiction in order to capture the essence of a situation, the faithful transmission of a scene or character's true spirit superseding a factually accurate communication of events.

Just as *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime* undermine commonplace conceptions of historical representation in order to emphasise the inherently constructed nature of all narrative, *City of God's* self-referential contemplation of the process of literary composition conveys the fundamental unreliability of textual representation. Doctorow alerts readers to the fact that the novel is a fictional text itself, consisting of the author's views, projections and edited opinions. Referring to the Bible, Everett asserts, "...as a writer, I am only fascinated by the power of this hodgepodge of chronicles, verses, songs, relationships, laws of the universe, sins, and days of reckonings...this scissors-and-paste job that is in its original form so terse, inconsistent, defiant of common sense, and cryptically inattentive to the ordinary demands of narrative as to be attributed to a divine author" (115). In explicitly drawing attention to the process of literary

⁸⁶ The narrator of Margaret Atwood's metafictional *The Blind Assassin* (2001) expresses this sentiment succinctly: "I didn't think of what I was doing as writing – just writing down. What I remembered, and also what I imagined, which is also the truth" (Atwood, 2001: 626). Similarly, Michael Herr, who in *Dispatches* turns to fictional techniques (including the invention of characters and events) to redefine consciousness and convey the truth of his lived experience, has said, "I say to myself, 'Oh, no, you can't say that! It isn't done....So and so never did it. And since he never did it, you can't do it.' But you reach a point where you realize that of course you can do it. You can do anything. You just have to issue yourself a licence to do those things....Everything...happened for me, even if it didn't necessarily happen to me" (Quoted in Weingarten, 2006: 172).

creation, *City of God* destabilises the audience's trust in the narrated story, challenging readers to reconsider preconceived notions of textual authority and, indeed, to question all forms of authoritative discourse. Capturing with poignancy and precision the sense of instability pervading the postmodern period, *City of God*'s formal irregularities, in conjunction with its thematic focus, depict a distinctly postmodern quest mentality according to which individuals are constantly re-examining, questioning and exploring traditional as well as fresh ontological approaches.

It would seem that secularism has become the dominant ideology of the western world. Contemporary literature, however, displays a repeated tendency towards the spiritual, demonstrating the increasingly significant role played by issues relating to religion and morality in the modern era.⁸⁷ Commenting on the notable resurgence of supernatural and religious elements in the literature of the postmodern period, Alfred Hornung asserts, "The disintegration of all known pillars of reference to a concrete reality, the famous assumption of the collapse of the realms of fact and fiction, and the freedom given to the power of imagination actually facilitate the abandonment of secular securities for the sake of imaginative worlds and the beyond" (2002: 166). Doctorow describes this phenomenon as "the deeply serious American thirst for celestial connection" (RU 84-85), saying of his compatriots, "We want spiritual release from the society we have made out of secular humanism" (RU 85). Since the 1960s, this renewed interest in matters of spirituality has manifested itself in a diverse and flourishing proliferation of religious practices and traditions. Indeed, the period from the 1960s to the present has been described by sociologists of religion as the third "Great Awakening" of American culture, signifying the scale and intensity of the new preoccupation with spiritual concerns.⁸⁸ Documenting this revival of religious ideologies and discourses, Hornung quotes Wade Clark Roof's 1980s study of spiritual trends in postmodern society: "Religious and spiritual themes surface in a rich variety of ways – in Eastern religions, in evangelical and fundamentalist

⁸⁷ For comprehensive studies of such literature, see Alfred Hornung (2002: 166-167) and John A. McClure (1995: 142-143). In the discussion that follows, the words "spiritual" and "religious" will be used interchangeably. Robert S. Ellwood notes that, today, usage of the term "spirituality" is increasingly preferred to "religion", as it is perceived to be more flexible and open-ended (1994: 9).

⁸⁸ For more detail in this regard see Robert Bellah (1970), Ellwood (1994), McClure (1995: 142), Wade Clark Roof (1999: 132-3) and Hornung (2002: 167). Salman Rushdie emphasises that this religious revival is a western phenomenon only: "...the idea of large numbers of persons going *back* towards religion is an essentially Western one. In the East, relatively few people ever left their faiths" (1991: 380).

teachings, in mysticism and New Age movements, in Goddess worship and other ancient religious rituals, in the mainline churches and synagogues” (2002: 167). Doctorow attributes this postmodern religious pluralism, which he calls a “virtual supermarket of spiritual choice” (RU 84),⁸⁹ to the secular principle of religious freedom, a foundational tenet of the American constitution which consigns all religious belief and practice to the realm of private life. The principle of religious freedom has enabled America’s vast and ever-burgeoning array of religious traditions to prosper such that the nation has become, to Doctorow’s mind at least, “God-soaked” (85).⁹⁰ Roof suggests that the changes in the American population’s attitude towards religion over the last half-century can be ascribed to the culturally strained 1950s, during which time any unified sense of spirituality seemed to disintegrate:

In their [the post-World War II “baby boom” generation’s] rebellion against bourgeois culture, against Vietnam, and against the political, military and religious establishments of the sixties and seventies, they rediscovered the romantic tradition, the Transcendentalists, the spiritual teachings from the East that had been, to varying degrees, a part of the American heritage but which had become stifled by an uptight, conformist culture. The collapse of the old Protestant establishment opened up a religious vacuum in the country that made it possible for these submerged traditions to reassert themselves....In those years, we can document a turning inward that was expressed in the exodus of young people from the so-called mainline churches, in the appeal of experiential evangelical and charismatic faiths, and, to a lesser degree, in the interest in Eastern and Native American teachings, which, by this time, were being thematically packaged for a hungry American audience. (1999: 132)⁹¹

⁸⁹ Interestingly, Roof also uses the language of economic consumerism to describe the explosion of spirituality in America since the 1960s, referring to the “supply and demand equation” (1999: 133) of the “new, expanded spiritual marketplace” (1999: 132). In addition to the individualistic, self-regarding mentality of post-1960’s culture, Roof attributes the postmodern resurgence of spirituality and religion to such concrete factors as successful spiritual entrepreneurship, large-scale book chains, and the media (1999: 133-136), thereby indicating the profound impact of America’s capitalistic culture on the rise and multiplicity of diverse religious practices over the last half-century. Roof’s implicit criticism of spirituality today is raised by McClure, who acknowledges the contradictory nature of contemporary spirituality: McClure observes that, while today’s spiritualism is often inflected with the rhetoric and values of consumer capitalism, it simultaneously challenges consumer values and appeals to a population dissatisfied with secular means of fulfilment (1995: 142).

⁹⁰ Homung quotes the Gallup polls of 1988 in support of the contention that contemporary American society is deeply religious. The polls indicate that in the late 1980s 94 percent of the American population believed in God or a universal spirit (2002: 167-168). Roof quotes a 1996 Gallup survey, which found that the number of Americans believing in God or some kind of ultimate spirit had risen to 95 percent (1999: 136).

⁹¹ Roof notes that historians and sociologists are divided over this interpretation of the impact of the 1960s on contemporary culture, but argues that much of what we observe of spirituality today has been influenced by the 1960s even if many of the themes do not strictly originate from that time: “Concerns for the environment, the reclaiming of the feminine, the search for the holistic, the importance of the inner life, the body as the locus of the spiritual, the unity of body, mind and spirit, an emphasis on quality of life—all are sixties themes and all...play into the popular spiritual styles of the late nineties” (1999: 132-133). For a detailed analysis of the state of religion in the 1950s and 1960s in America, see Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (1997) and *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening: American Religion Moving from Modern to Postmodern* (1994).

The range of religious possibilities exhibited in contemporary American culture bears testament to the profound “thirst for celestial connection” to which Doctorow refers in *Reporting the Universe*. Indeed, the smorgasbord of religious options crowding postmodern society has evolved in order to satiate this hunger, for, as Roof maintains, “Americans want to feel the presence of God” (1999: 135). Doctorow’s own impulse towards the sacred, despite his overt secular humanist leanings, illustrates this.

Contemporary American fiction frequently reflects a mood of spiritual exploration, capturing the force of the postmodern spiritual revival. The range and diversity of religious possibilities today means that individuals have been placed in the empowering position of full spiritual choice. “Increasingly,” Roof observes, “one need not rely simply upon the resources of the religious fellowship to which one belongs; one has an expanded menu of possibilities” (1999: 134). Although this freedom of choice seems boundless, it is nevertheless subject to the influences of individual context and conditioning.⁹² A feature characteristic of the postmodern condition, this individual autonomy nevertheless allows for a deliberate and self-conscious selection of personal beliefs and states of being, whether religious, social or ethical. While such independence would seem empowering, it has given rise to a curious and widespread, although not unsurprising, atmosphere of insecurity, loneliness and anxiety. Zygmunt Bauman calls this “the ethical paradox” of postmodernity, arguing that the deluge of moral and social alternatives results, ultimately, in existential crisis:

The ethical paradox of the postmodern condition is that it restores to agents the fullness of moral choice and responsibility while simultaneously depriving them of the comfort of the universal guidance that modern self-confidence once promised. Ethical tasks of individuals grow while the socially produced resources to fulfil them shrink. Moral responsibility comes together with the loneliness of moral choice....If the civilizing formula of modernity called for surrendering at least a part of the agent’s freedom in exchange for the promise of security drawn from (assumed) moral and (prospective) social certainty, postmodernity proclaims all restrictions on freedom illegal, at the same time doing away with social certainty and legalizing ethical uncertainty. Existential insecurity – ontological contingency of being – is the result. (1992: xxii-xxiv)

Individual autonomy in a world heaving with choice has thus resulted in pervasive feelings of uncertainty, doubt and alienation on both societal and personal levels. Compelled to turn inward and consciously interrogate traditional approaches to religion and morality, individuals are forced to rely on their own subjectivity as supreme authority for all social, ethical and religious

⁹² It is no coincidence that, as Doctorow’s Thomas Pemberton notes, “...all these brilliant theologians [Tillich, Barth, Teilhard, Heschel, Kierkegaard] end up affirming the traditions they were born into” (236).

decisions.⁹³ The intensely self-reflexive nature of spirituality today has been noted by, amongst others, Harold Bloom, who theorises that America's spiritual life is informed by a "religion of the self" (Quoted in Roof, 1999: 136). Characterised by elements of interiority and isolation, Bloom's hypothesis acknowledges the deep loneliness of the contemporary period, corroborating Bauman's view that, in the postmodern world, "morality has been *privatised*...ethics has become a matter of individual discretion, risk-taking, chronic uncertainty and never-placated qualms" (1992: xxiii).⁹⁴ Doctorow comments extensively on the postmodern privatisation of religious choice and, like Bauman, argues that it results in a potentially dangerous multiplicity of options. When religious preference is relegated to "the personal choices of private worship," Doctorow writes, "you admit the ineffable is ineffable, and in terms of a possible theological triumphalism, everything is up for grabs" (RU 86). Such plurality quashes all moral, religious and social certainty, causing a loneliness of choice that gives rise to deep-seated personal insecurity and unremitting anxiety. Salman Rushdie, who acknowledges that "God—or, rather, formal religion—has begun once again to insist on occupying a central role in public life" (1991: 376), recognises the dangers of this condition, warning, "We are entering a tricky, contradictory zone, full of paradoxes and blind alleys" (1991: 379). The "reflexive spirituality" (Roof, 1999: 137)⁹⁵ emerging today caters to the distinctly postmodernist quest mentality, according to which individuals are constantly revising, challenging and exploring traditional as well as new ontological approaches. As Roof contends, spirituality in the postmodern world is "a mode of searching that may not end up in religion as we have conceptualised it but that looks more like the features of Peter Berger's 'metaphysical homelessness' or Arthur Green's 'post-modern seeker' or Zygmunt Bauman's 'tourist' who, unlike the pilgrim, is unscripted, in a place but not of it" (1999: 138-139). The cultural, spiritual and ethical drift of autonomous individuals in a world plagued by choice is reflected in *City of God*, which conveys the chronic moral and religious instability of the postmodern era through characterisation, depiction of place, and narrative structure.

⁹³ Ellwood asserts that "[s]ubjectivity is supreme" (1994: 327) when it comes to religious preference in today's society, while Bauman writes of moral choice: "Individuals are thrown back on their own subjectivity as the only ultimate ethical authority" (1992: xxii).

⁹⁴ Bauman is speaking here of morality, but his observation is equally true of social and spiritual choice in postmodern times.

⁹⁵ Roof notes that the last half-century has seen a radical shift from a mentality of self-denial to a mentality of self-fulfilment, with emphasis increasingly placed on concepts of self-expression, personal growth and fulfilment, inner well-being and belief in oneself (1993: 243-260).

City of God's plot revolves around an investigation into the mysterious disappearance of a cross from St. Timothy's Episcopal Church on Manhattan's Lower East Side, and its bizarre reappearance on the roof of the Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism, a small reform congregation located on the Upper West Side. While each character in the novel is connected to this inexplicable occurrence and is actively involved in its resolution, each is engaged in his or her own personal quest – for truth, stability, faith, morality or God. Pem, the disillusioned rector of St. Timothy's, is involved in a search for religious and moral fulfilment, seeking to reconcile his vocation as a Christian priest with his deep-seated doubts pertaining to the nature of organised religion, God and faith. Similarly, Rabbi Sarah Blumenthal is seeking a deeper and renewed understanding of God, while her husband, Rabbi Joshua Gruen, is dedicated to finding a long-lost Holocaust diary believed to be located somewhere in Eastern Europe, a search taken up by Pem after Joshua's sudden death. Everett, too, is engaged in complex investigations: the novel's narrator is intent on accurately capturing both Pem and Sarah's stories, while attempting to unravel the mystery surrounding the curious relocation of St. Timothy's cross. In reaction to their unstable, pluralistic surroundings, the protagonists of *City of God* are all seeking some far-reaching vision. Commenting that its central characters are "individualistic questers, seeking to redefine God in the post-Holocaust world" (2002: 2), Bloom classifies the novel as a postmodern quest narrative.

As the rector of an Episcopal parish in New York City, Pem is expected to possess a calm and unshakeable confidence in his faith. Contrary to societal expectation, however, Pem is deeply sceptical of church doctrine, entertaining severe doubts as to the nature of faith, and publicly questioning foundational theological concepts. Troubled by the far-reaching implications of what he perceives to be a politicised history of the Christian Church, Pem describes the power struggle between the followers of the Gnostic and synoptic gospels, a battle whose decisive outcome has been an informing element in the Christian religion's evolution since the fourth century.⁹⁶ As Pem remarks to the bishop's examiners, "the early Christians were profoundly divided between those who proposed a church according to apostolic succession based on a literal interpretation

⁹⁶ Wilde asserts that the doctrinal divisions within the early Christian Church not only impacted upon the fate of Christianity, but also significantly affected the development of western consciousness (2006: 400).

of Jesus' resurrection and those who rejected resurrection except as a spiritual metaphor for gnosis emotionally, mystically achieved, as knowledge beyond ordinary knowledge....So there was a power struggle" (70). Pem argues that the institutionalist Christians triumphed over the Gnostics only as a result of their centralised structural organisation, saying of Christianity's politically inflected history:

[I]t is also true that the struggle for Jesus was a struggle for power, that the idea of an actual resurrection, which the institutionalists put forth and the gnostics ridiculed, provided authority for church office, and that the struggle to define Jesus and canonize his words, or interpretations of his words by others, was pure politics....It was a politically triumphant Jesus created from the conflicts of early Christianity, and it has been a political Jesus ever since, from the time of the emperor Constantine's conversion in the fourth century through the long history of European Christianity, as we consider the history of the Catholic Church, its Crusades, its Inquisition, its contests and/or alliances with kings and emperors, and with the rise of the Reformation, the history of Christianity's active participation, in all its forms, in the wars among states and the rule of populations. It is the story of power. (70-71)

Pem is affected profoundly by the notion that the history and development of Christian thought has been shaped entirely by the outcomes of centuries-old power struggles. Today's Christianity, he concludes, "is a political creation with a political history" (71). Although he frequently seems cavalier and even flippant about this knowledge, Pem's hardened, sarcastic responses to questions posed by friends and colleagues contain an underlying bitterness that betrays his deep angst and disillusionment. When chastised by the bishop for the controversial sermons he has delivered to the diminished congregation of St. Timothy's, Pem retorts, "My five parishioners are serious people, they can take it" (15). Pem attempts to mask his deep-seated resentment with humour, but his rejoinder nevertheless conveys the suppressed frustration and disappointment driving his unorthodox behaviour. Pem's facetious dismissal of the bishop's well-intentioned warnings only intensifies the sense that his lurking discontent is dangerously close to eruption: "Amen to that, Charley," he replies, with barely concealed anger. "You don't suppose there's time for a double espresso?" (16).

Although Pem insists that he is not experiencing spiritual crisis or psychological decline (41), his interrogation of the nature of faith and church doctrine certainly indicate that he is undergoing some kind of ontological crisis. He confesses to an abiding state of despondency, writing: "I do feel somewhat isolated. I will even admit that for the past few years, no, the past several years, I have not found anything better to do for my chronic despair than walk the streets of Manhattan" (41). The embodiment of the "postmodern seeker", Pem takes to wandering the streets in search

of answers to the moral and spiritual uncertainties saturating his world. Despite his protracted meditations, however, the priest cannot seem to establish certainty over any of his concerns, as evidenced by the guest sermon for which he was officially called to account by the bishop's examiners:

If faith is valid in all its forms, are we merely making an aesthetic choice when we choose Jesus? And if you say, No, of course not, then we must ask, Who are the elect blessedly walking the true path to salvation...and who are the misguided others? Can we tell? Do we know? We think we know—of course we think we know. But how do we distinguish our truth from another's falsity, we of the true faith, except by the story we cherish? Our story of God. But, my friends, I ask you: Is God a story? Can we, each of us examining our faith—I mean its pure center, not its consolations, not its habits, not its ritual sacraments—can we believe anymore in the heart of our faith that God is our story of Him? To presume to contain God in this Christian story of ours, to hold Him, circumscribe Him, the author of everything we can conceive and everything we cannot conceive...in our story of Him? Of Her? OF WHOM? What in the name of Christ do we think we're talking about! (14-15)

This public sermon is an expression of Pem's innermost concerns and, flooded with fragmented thoughts, unanswered questions, and "ifs", it reveals his desperate confusion over the nature of God and faith. Although he elsewhere articulates an awareness of the doctrinal divisions within the early Christian Church, Pem is unwilling to reject his faith completely, for, as Wilde writes, "...merely to assert that certain doctrinal outcomes are explicable in terms of social and political struggle does not mean that [they can be dismissed] as mere inventions, for each doctrinal position was carefully argued for and the outcomes might still have been truthful" (2006: 400). Pem is no doubt cognisant of this contention, yet he is driven by a deeper impulse: his reference to the "pure center" of Christianity not only indicates an ability to separate rationally the essence of his religion from the institutionalised structures supporting it, but it reveals his intense desire to connect with the spiritual core of his faith. Imploring the bishop's examiners not to punish him for what he sees as a profession of faith rather than its renunciation, Pem pleads, "I hope you will not use [my outspokenness] to expunge from the ranks someone of my generation who you feel has brought the 1960s along with him" (71).

As Pem suggests, his thinking displays marked parallels with trends emerging in theological philosophy in the 1960s. A primary source of theological inspiration for him had been the prominent Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, whose influence reached its zenith in the 1960s.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ In yet another illustration of his trademark merging of factual and fictional realms, Doctorow includes in *City of God* the real-life personae of Tillich and Bishop James Pike, amongst others.

Tillich, who distinguishes clearly between the eternal message of Christian theology and the challenges posed by the contemporary situation, posits that the eternal truth of the Christian message can provide answers to questions raised by the modern period. Moving away from the classical Christian conception of a personal God towards a recovery of Christian mysticism and spirituality, Tillich asserts: “A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs, the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation” (1951: 3). In an attempt to eradicate the potential confusion between eternal truth and the temporal expression of that truth, Tillich advocates a “‘method of correlation’ as a way of uniting message and situation. It tries to correlate the questions implied in the situation with the answers implied in the message” (1951: 8). Tillich’s approach therefore entails the continual analysis and questioning of Christianity’s essence in order to find answers that meet the demands of the contemporary context, and resonates strongly with Pem’s desire to challenge, “redesign [and] revalidate” (40) his religious tradition.⁹⁸ Accordingly, Wilde conceives of a harmonious relationship between Tillich and Pem’s philosophies:

Pem’s Christianity...can best be understood through Tillich’s 1952 text, *The Courage To Be* (published in the year that Doctorow graduated in Philosophy from Kenyon College). Tillich rejects the simple “acceptance” of religious faith as amounting to a surrender of the self and calls instead for a faith in which simple theism is transcended through a process of deep doubt and searching resulting in commitment to the “God above the God of theism.” Tillich’s appeal for a reflexive and open “Church under the Cross” (188) is particularly appropriate to the story in *City of God*, in which the cross of St. Tim’s is stolen and then found in the reform synagogue. (2006: 400-401)

In *The Courage To Be*, Tillich attributes the pervasive feelings of doubt, anxiety and meaninglessness in the western world to the “universal breakdown of meaning” heralded by the twentieth century (1952: 138).⁹⁹ Affected by an atmosphere of social, religious and political uncertainty, Pem, like Tillich, feels the need to reflect critically on his faith in order to attain a greater sense of existential security. Within their religious traditions, the two theologians seek an eternal truth that will be germane to the contemporary situation: the only way of locating this

⁹⁸ Although Pem is speaking here of Judaism specifically, this mentality extends to all religious traditions in the modern era. Throughout the novel Pem questions and analyses the nature of faith more generally in search of an eternal truth.

⁹⁹ David Chidester observes that Tillich’s establishment of an existential Christianity was not only responsive to the crisis of meaning in the modern world, but also presented a Christian counterpoint to the social, political and religious tensions of the Cold War period (2000: 564).

truth is through a continuous process of interrogation and revision.¹⁰⁰ After considering the manner in which Karl Barth “made a serious attempt to rediscover the eternal message *within* the Bible and tradition, over against a distorted and a mechanically misused Bible”, Tillich proclaims Barth’s “greatness”, declaring that it stems from his “[correction of] himself again and again in the light of the ‘situation’” (1951: 5). While Tillich’s promotion of a consistent searching for and reworking of the essential truth of his religion takes place from within the Christian faith, Pem’s questioning begins within a Christian framework but ultimately leads him back to Judaism, which he regards as “Christianity without Christ” (258). Appropriately, Pem finds spiritual restoration at the Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism, which was founded in order to “get back to the crucial first things” (258). The Episcopal priest finds in the Jewish tradition the true faith he has been seeking: “I feel liberated,” he declares, “restored to my mind, my intellect is being admitted into my faith” (258). Although there is an obvious and fundamental divergence in belief between Tillich’s Christianity and Pem’s eventual conversion to Judaism, Wilde is correct in aligning Pem’s religious sentiments with those of Tillich. Over and above their shared impulse to challenge and refresh the eternal truth of their religions in order to satisfy the needs of contemporary culture, their conceptions of true faith converge such that their differences in belief are rendered irrelevant. “Absolute faith,” writes Tillich in *The Courage To Be*, “is not a state which appears beside other states of the mind....It is always a movement in, with, and under other states of the mind” (1952: 182). Similarly, Pem conceives of absolute faith as a condition of all-encompassing perception, testifying, “The sensation of God in us is a total sensation given to the whole being, revelatory, inspired....I take the position that true faith is not a supersessional knowledge. It cannot discard the intellect” (65). The long-time priest of St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church eventually finds his “true faith” in Judaism.

Despite the fact that Tillich’s theological philosophies have declined in popularity since the 1960s, Pem’s religious thinking nevertheless continues to show striking correlations with the existential Christianity developed by the famous theologian.¹⁰¹ Pem’s theological approach also

¹⁰⁰ Endorsing Tillich’s approach, Pem says, “...if God is to live, the words of our faith [found in the ancient Christian texts] must live. The words must be reborn” (16).

¹⁰¹ Pem recognises that public interest in Tillich’s Christianity has waned since the 1960s, commenting, “[T]hat was then and this is now” (16). Nevertheless, he explicitly attributes the formation of his religious philosophy to the Protestant theologian, writing in an email to Everett, “my man was Tillich” (6). For a discussion of the reasons for

displays similarities to the philosophical advances of the notorious Bishop James A. Pike, another major source of inspiration for Pem. An icon of 1960s religion, the historical Bishop Pike was known for his liberal stances on controversial social issues such as civil rights, women's ordination, and matters of theological doctrine (Ellwood, 1994: 128). Ordained as the Episcopal bishop of California in 1959, Pike adopted increasingly radical views on doctrinal issues, publicly expressing doubt over the literal truth of the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and the authority of Jesus Christ (Ellwood, 1994: 128-129).¹⁰² Throughout the 1960s, charges of heresy were laid against him by conservative members of the Episcopal Church, but the allegations failed to culminate in the formal heresy trial requested by Pike. In an open rejection of organised religion, the outspoken bishop left the Episcopal Church in 1969 to establish the Foundation for Religious Transition, whose aim was to promote non-institutional spirituality (Ellwood, 1994: 129).

In *City of God* Doctorow fictionalises the famous Episcopal bishop, reinventing him as Pem's ex-father-in-law, with whom Pem shares a close, if unusual, relationship. Identifying himself as Pem's "faux pop" (164), Pike solicits Pem's advice about a protester who has taken to picketing Pike's "house here in Alexandria" (166). That Doctorow situates Pike in Alexandria, an American town in which the historical James Pike never resided, is highly significant. The name "Alexandria" invokes an ancient city of the same name located in Egypt. The centre of learning and philosophical conversation in the Greco-Roman world, Alexandria was the "intellectual home" of Valentinus, the founder of Christian Gnosticism (Chidester, 2000: 53). Jewish and Christian thinkers in Alexandria embraced the ancient philosophy of Plato, according to which the supreme God was not a being with personal attributes, but "was transcendent being itself. As unchanging perfection – the good, the true and the beautiful – the supreme God was entirely above and beyond the world" (Chidester, 2000: 53). Having been educated in ancient Alexandria, Valentinus was heavily influenced by Platonic philosophical reflection and, combining it with Gnostic thought in a bid to achieve radical transcendence of the material

Tillich's drop in popularity, see Phillip E. Hammond, who draws interesting parallels between the work of Tillich and religious sociologist Robert Bellah (1994: 12-13).

¹⁰² According to Ellwood, Pike declared that the Virgin Birth was "probably a 'myth' and the creed was better sung than said, because people can sing things without meaning them literally more easily than they can say them" (1994: 98). After the death of his son in 1966, Pike attracted much criticism from the Christian community for developing an interest in alternative spiritual methods: he experimented with séances and began working with clairvoyants and a medium in order to contact his dead son.

world, he developed a form of Christianity known as Christian Gnosticism.¹⁰³ By locating his fictionalised Pike in a town called Alexandria, Doctorow recalls the historical home of Christian Gnosticism, drawing attention to Pike's alliances with Gnostic thought, and emphasising his public renunciation of the proscriptive interpretations of religious doctrine advocated by the institutionalised church. Everett reports of *City of God*'s Pike: "[Pike said] all the evidence as well as theological common sense suggested Joseph was the biological father of Jesus. Said he could not accept the doctrine of the Trinity, that it verged on tritheism. Said he had trouble with the Second Coming, too. Said none of this made him a bad priest or weakened his faith" (206). Having been influenced by Pike, whose outspokenness in the 1960s ensured widespread circulation of his radical views, Pem expresses similar doubts over the church's interpretation of key religious texts: "Nothing shakier in a church than its doctrine" (42), he remarks with wry scepticism early in the novel. Pem, who is clearly aware that the institutional Christianity of today resulted from an ancient split between the Gnostics and the followers of the synoptic gospels, asserts that the Gnostics failed because of their belief that "no church was needed, no priest, no episcopate" (70). Like Pike, who was censured by the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops in 1966 for his open criticism of church policy (Ellwood, 1994: 129), Pem is called to account by the bishop and his examiners for publicly questioning the Christian faith, its doctrine, and the value of its institutional structures. Expressing disapproval over Pike's "destructive influence" (162), Pem's bishop says of the radical Bishop of California: "Standing in the pulpit, he cast doubt on Immaculate Conception, the Trinity...it was as if the wretched counterculture had seeped through the church walls" (162). Doctorow thus aligns Pem's behaviour with the anti-institutional stances for which Pike became renowned, drawing interesting parallels between the two priests' views on the historical evolution and doctrinal bases of Christian thought.

In order to explore novelistically his interest in matters of religion, morality and secularism in contemporary America, Doctorow speaks through Pem, a disillusioned cleric experiencing the isolation and existential uncertainty so typical of the postmodern period, to raise questions regarding the Christian and Jewish faiths; the nature of morality and its relation to religion; and

¹⁰³ Although Doctorow does not use the term "Christian Gnosticism", his allusions in *City of God* to the historic divide between the Gnostic and synoptic gospels indicate that he is referring to Christian Gnosticism as opposed to the "pure", or ancient, Gnosticism which drew upon "Egyptian, Greek, Persian, and Jewish resources, [and] resulted in the formulation of a new mythic universe" (Chidester, 2000: 54).

religious and scientific creationist theories. Pem came of age in the 1960s, when the radical views of well-known theologians such as Tillich and Pike had reached their height. His theological perspectives were thus formed amidst an atmosphere of philosophical and cultural revolution, when the perceived legitimacy of established institutions was disintegrating and spiritual pluralism was beginning to flourish. Indeed, Pem's bishop remarks that Pem "has never quite shaken the sixties" (161), suggesting the extensive effects of the era's radicalism on Pem's ideological conditioning. Tillich's belief in the continual, self-reflexive investigation and revision of Christianity's eternal truth inspired in Pem an awareness of the existence of such a truth, intensifying his desire to seek, find and analyse the essence of his faith, while Pike's public criticism of church doctrine, his willingness to consider new spiritual possibilities, and his anti-institutional stances not only embodied the questioning mentality of the 1960s, but exerted a powerful force on Pem's approach to religion. "I loved Pike," remarks Pem, "because he knew the accumulated doctrine was simply not credible. Fantasy. Historically accumulated bullshit. But he adored Jesus the man. He wanted to find the real Jesus" (208). Pem's telling observation reveals the central, seemingly divergent facets of his religious belief: while he is deeply sceptical of church ritual and organisation, he simultaneously retains a profound and inexplicable faith in a transcendent power, expressing the desire to connect with God in His purest form. Everett recognises these apparently contradictory forces operating within the priest, attributing them to Pem's 1960s background:

...as vague and as inherited as it may have been, [Pem] had faith. He may have been confused, but began to see in all that roiling madness of Vietnam and the agonies of the civil rights movement that the church was an institution of truth and sanity. There were clerics around—not just Bishop Pike—antiwar clerics, liberation theologians, models of principled civil disobedience getting themselves manhandled and thrown in jail. Martin Luther King, the Berrigans....what gave them such strength? What carried them? Faith was the redoubt. (163)

As Everett mentions, Pem's faith is inherited: his father was the Suffragan Bishop of Virginia. A Christian traditionalist with a firm standing in the institutional church, the fictional R. R. John Pemberton was "a stern guardian of the faith" (162), and was responsible in part for the heresy charges laid against *City of God's* Bishop Pike. Doctorow thus establishes John Pemberton in direct opposition to James Pike, ascribing Pem's clashing spiritual impulses to the conflicting belief systems imposed on him by his two father figures. Pem's bishop recognises the paternal origins of his charge's inner conflict, remarking to Everett: "Pem has internalized them—his

natural father, John, of the historic church, and the maverick adopted father, Jim Pike—and set them against each other” (162).¹⁰⁴ The spiritual isolation and enforced individualism of the postmodern era nourish Pem’s religious doubts, intensifying his continuous internal shifting between faith and reason. Affected by the sense of insecurity contaminating contemporary culture, as well as by the diverse theological philosophies of his three role models – his biological father, his “faux pop”, and Paul Tillich – the bewildered Episcopal priest begins seriously to question traditional conceptions of religious doctrine, the true meaning of faith, and the role of religion in the modern world.

A point of major contention for Pem is the dogma-bound character of the Christian Church. In his “Remarks to the Bishop’s Examiners” he poses an explicit challenge to the doctrinal tenets of Christianity, boldly alluding to the fact that the biblical and gospel stories are the works of mortal storytellers. Emphasising the power of the storyteller to shape human consciousness, he undermines the importance and validity of fundamental Christian doctrine:

Migod, there is no one more dangerous than the storyteller. No, I’ll amend that, than the storyteller’s editor. Augustine, who edits Genesis 2-4 into original sin. What a nifty little act of deconstruction – passing it on to the children, like HIV. As the doctrine of universal damnation, the Fall becomes an instrument of social control... We are bound to a theology hard-pressed to hold the line against incredulous common sense. So, for instance newborn babies who die unbaptized as Catholics are condemned to the limboic upper reaches of hell? I mean... but in all denominations, punitive fantasies of original sin have begotten and still beget generations of terrorized children and haunted adults, and give those Calvinist graveyards in New England a particular poignancy as they call to mind the witch burnings, scourgings, and self denials of the ordinary joy and wonder of life on earth to which the unindoctrinated mind is naturally heir... (66)

The scornful disbelief intoned by the narrator betrays his scepticism towards Christian doctrine, exemplifying Lyotard’s postmodern “incredulity toward metanarratives” (1984: xxiv). Pem’s words convey more than a mere incredulity, however. The priest seems to harbour a tangible contempt for those narratives upon which foundational Christian belief is based: he compares the passing on of the “story” of original sin to the transmission of a fatal disease, HIV, thereby conferring upon this precept of Christian thought a quality of lethal destruction. In a statement complementing his political reading of church history, Pem proclaims that these narratives are

¹⁰⁴ Pem disagrees with the bishop’s formulation on the basis that Bishop Pike believed in non-Christian alternative spiritualities. “I know, that’s my bishop’s read on me—Pemby, son of Pike,” he says to Everett. “You don’t buy that, do you?” he continues. “I mean, true, the man was gutsy, liberal as hell, a breath of fresh air. But he was also a bit of a lightweight. When his son died of an overdose, Pike went to a medium who summoned up the son for a chat” (206). Although Pem disapproves of Pike’s involvement with such forms of spirituality, the two share strikingly similar ideals as far as the institutional church is concerned.

calculating instruments of social control, declaring that one need only look at the “generations of terrorized children and haunted adults” to understand that the church’s interpretations of biblical and theological texts – the stories of Adam and Eve, the Fall of mankind, Augustine’s concept of original sin – have had incalculably harmful effects on humankind. “How,” he asks with despair, “given the mournful history of this nonsense, can we presume to exalt our religious vision over the ordinary pursuits of our rational minds?” (66). Pem’s increasing anger at the devastation wrought by the Christian Church stems in part from his growing awareness of the atrocities committed by Christians against Jews during World War II. A defining moment in both Jewish and world history, the Holocaust has become lodged in the consciousness of Jewish American writers, who represent the harrowing experience in literature as part of a project to delineate a collective Jewish American identity (Budick, 2003: 217-218).¹⁰⁵ Doctorow’s inclusion of scenes from a Jewish war ghetto foregrounds the immeasurable trauma of the event, confronting the reader with the brutalities inflicted on Jews by fellow members of the human race. As a Christian priest, Pem feels immense guilt over the unspeakable horrors perpetuated by his religious counterparts during the war. Pem reports that he asked his congregation “what they thought the engineered slaughter of the Jews in Europe had done to Christianity. To our story of Christ Jesus....I asked them to imagine...what mortification, what ritual, what practice might have been a commensurate Christian response to the disaster. Something to assure us our faith wasn’t some sort of self-deluding complacency” (49). This guest sermon, which attracted the censure of the bishop’s examiners, displays the simmering anger and deep shame engendered in Pem by the behaviour of Christians during the Holocaust. Sandwiched between “Pem’s Remarks to the Bishop’s Examiners” and contemplations of astrophysical phenomena, Doctorow’s positioning and portrayal of this catastrophic historical event renders Pem’s questioning of the institutional church in an even more acute light, highlighting his mounting religious scepticism.

Pem’s trouble with Christian doctrine is amplified by his difficulties with the organisational structure of the church. He expresses concern over the controlled nature of Christian ritual, praying:

¹⁰⁵ There exists an extensive body of critical commentary on representations of the Holocaust in Jewish American writing. For detailed discussions of the distinguishing features of Jewish American literature and its emphasis on history, memory and identity, see Kramer and Wirth-Nesher (2003), Berger and Cronin (2004), and Bauman (1989).

...we are so ritualized in our faiths: You are a special concern, and we think to address ourselves to You only in special ways, at prescribed times in architecturally induced states of mind. Usually we wear our best clothes. We sing our hymns of desperate expectation. We appoint one of us to petition You without embarrassment, on behalf of all of us....Speaking to You from a pulpit is deemed appropriate, whereas speaking to You unhoused, unshaven, at an ill-chosen time, everyone rushing by on business, is a piteous form of madness. We must have a title, a pulpit, a day, to speak aloud, my Lord, to You. (210)

To Pem's mind, the rules and regulations imposed by the institutionalised church are gravely prohibitive in that they deny honest spiritual feeling or unaffected communion with God. In a manner reminiscent of Tillich's commitment to a living spirituality, Pem advocates the view that religious agency should not be dictated by the church, but should and will appear as "a revelation that hides itself in our culture, it will be ground-level, on the street, it'll be coming down the avenue in the traffic, hard to tell apart from anything else" (254). Sincere, unmediated communication with God should be unconstrained by societal standing or geographical or temporal location, he maintains, pronouncing: "We're living in a postmodern democracy" (254). As such, everyone has the right to pursue his or her own spirituality without hindrance from the dogmatic traditional church.

Pem's explicit questioning of church doctrine is underscored throughout the novel by a broader examination of the historical background and legitimacy of biblical texts. Together with Everett, whose escalating interest in the history and nature of religious thought parallels his increasing intellectual and emotional engagement with the various characters represented in his novel, Pem attends the Friday evening study services at the Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism. The Sabbath services have been "redesigned to the basic and unarguable essentials" (113) of the Jewish faith, and are performed by Rabbi Sarah Blumenthal, who conducts vibrant discussions of the Torah's fundamental teachings based on careful analysis of key texts. The objective of such painstaking review, writes Everett, is "to take the various aspects of Jewish teaching and practice, consider their historic sources or origins and their theological rationale and, insofar as possible, hold them up to modern scholarship and begin to separate what appears to be inessential, or intellectually untenable, or simply, blindly, customary...from what is truly crucial and defining" (247).¹⁰⁶ Unfamiliar with theological scholarship, Everett finds the collegial study

¹⁰⁶ Sarah's desire to locate the essential truth of her faith and use it to inform a new Judaism geared towards modern society is reminiscent of Tillich's belief in the reappraisal of Christianity's eternal truth such that it meets the challenges of contemporary culture. Such an approach reflects Scholes' argument that

and discussion sessions fascinating. He listens attentively to the arguments raised by members of the small congregation, capturing in his subsequent reports the rich diversity of opinion expressed during the lively conversations. Providing an account of one such evening, Everett documents the ideas presented by a “doctoral candidate from Harvard” (114), whose eminent teacher had studied the “distinction between the original texts and the interpretive commentary that sprang up in the three hundred years before and a hundred years into the Common Era that has created the Bible we read today” (114). Everett describes in detail the inconsistencies of Judaism and Christianity arising as an inevitable result of such interpretations, or misinterpretations, of the original biblical texts.¹⁰⁷ Committed to representing the scope of the discussions, he includes an opposing viewpoint introduced by “a professor of Comparative Religion at Columbia” (114), who had argued that the “interpreters knew what they were doing when they didn’t try to erase the inconsistencies and neaten things up....The very contradictions, the histories living side by side with their rewrites, manifest the same struggle described in the narratives – to apprehend and accept the awesome completeness and creative totality of the Unnameable” (115). Doctorow’s incorporation of multiple, contrasting voices not only enhances Everett’s credibility as principal narrator, but enables him to convey a fullness of discussion that reflects the complexity of Doctorow’s own thoughts on the nature and role of religion in contemporary society.

City of God’s questioning of widely held religious beliefs and customs is expanded through the character of Srebnitsky, the elderly Jewish tailor who is hanged by the Nazis for asserting his right to be paid for a job that he had completed for the chief Nazi officer, Commandant Schmitz. Sarah Blumenthal’s father, who as a child lived with the tailor in a Jewish ghetto in Lithuania, narrates:

The only book in the house was a Bible, so I took to reading it closely. I found some of it puzzling. Assuming the old man was pious, I began to ask questions of him. Gleams of triumph came into Srebnitsky’s watery eyes. With relish he pointed out the contradictions and absurdities of the biblical text.

“Both the forms of existence and the forms of fiction are most satisfying when they are in harmony with their essential qualities” (1979: 107).

¹⁰⁷ Doctorow communicates in *Reporting the Universe* the emergence of this body of biblical interpretation, documenting its metamorphosis into church doctrine: “The sacred texts of all religions based on Hebrew scripture have been communally amended, rewritten, commented upon, interpreted by rabbis, priests, imams, in order to transform religious apprehension into churches, unmediated awe into dogma, inchoate feeling into sacrament, brute expression into ethical commandment” (RU 54).

“Look closely at what you’re reading,” he said. “The dates will tell you. When this happened, when that happened. Samuel could not have written Samuel any more than Moses could have written Moses. How could they themselves know when they had died? Stories, nonsense, all of it. Pious fraud.” (63)

Through the voice of the old tailor, who delights in exposing the contradictions and irregularities plaguing the Torah, Doctorow once again brings into question religious ideologies upon which centuries of thought and understanding are based. He undermines the authority bestowed by the Judeo-Christian rulers upon these ancient stories “that we read and are ruled by to this day” (RU 52) by identifying their obvious inconsistencies, opaqueness and subjectivity. Doctorow’s rejection of universal narratives is noted by Clayton, who quotes Doctorow as saying that he “take[s] exception to prevailing mythologies” (2000: 189). Clayton asserts that Doctorow’s work is “always an act of demythicizing”, pointing out that *Ragtime* flattens history into myth only to demolish the myth, while *The Book of Daniel* undermines several myths, including that of the Cold War, the counter-myth of heroic communist resistance, and the myth of youth revolt in the 1960s (2000: 189-190). By means of a variety of characters with diverse geographical and ideological backgrounds and different places in history, namely Thomas Pemberton, the Christian priest; Everett, the young writer; Sarah Blumenthal, the progressive Rabbi; Srebnitsky, the elderly Jew; and academics from Columbia and Harvard, Doctorow illuminates in *City of God* some of the principal challenges to the universally accepted grand narratives of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Pem cannot help but feel an inexplicable pull towards the transcendent, however. During his final visit to the hospice where he had been administering to the terminally ill, the priest experiences a moment of unlikely spiritual connection. On entering the ward, he finds a nun singing with her guitar. Instead of playing hymns, she has been entreated by the dying patients to play a medley of old standards, including “Shine on, Harvest Moon” and “Someone to Watch Over Me”. Pem joins the patients in the singing and, tears welling in his throat, experiences an emotionally charged religious moment which not only reinforces his faith in God, but confirms his conviction that religious agency, rather than deriving from the scriptures, “has to appear in the manner of our times” (254). In order to experience God at an elemental level, free from the strictures of the institutionalised church, Pem realises that traditional perceptions of God need radical revision:

...as it is, I think we must remake You. If we are to remake ourselves, we must remake You, Lord. We need a place to stand. We are weak, and puny, and totter here in our civilization....We have only our love for each other for our footing, our marriages, the children we hold in our arms, it is only this wavery sensation, flowing and ebbing, that justifies our consciousness and keeps us from plunging out of the universe. Not enough. It's not enough. We need a place to stand. (268)

Pem's poignant prayer reflects the instability and isolation pervading the postmodern era and illustrates his subscription to what Walter Truett Anderson describes as postmodern "shifts in belief about belief" (1996: 2), which entail a continued belief in something despite changed perceptions about that belief. Pem's faith in God, which endures despite his knowledge that Jewish and Christian doctrine is the product of centuries of historical and cultural interpretation, reveals the human need for some form of faith and stability. He makes no claims to reason nor asks for a universal truth; he simply yearns to establish a pure connection with God, a bond unfettered by the prohibitive rules and regulations of a politicised church. Pem finds in the aims and values of the Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism a similar hunger to return to this unpolluted spiritual space. Discussing the theoretical basis of the small synagogue's theological approach, Sarah says:

[Y]ou subject the tradition to your irreverence to get back to where it began, only that, back down to the ground level of simple...unmediated awe. It is there, which is necessarily the state of reverence, the sharp perception of God's presence in the fact of our consciousness...and therefore everywhere and in everyone and everything—it is that constancy of awe we hope for, a pre-Scriptural state as alive to us as the contemporary moment, and which, of course, comes with absolutely no guarantees. That is where we begin. (194)

Sarah here articulates Pem's longing to experience that rare feeling of "unmediated awe" by returning to the essential, incontestable foundations of his faith.

In the light of his severe criticisms of all forms of institutionalised religion, Pem's ultimate conversion to Judaism seems surprising. However, during his conversion process he announces, "I have never felt as honest, as without misgivings in my belief in the Creator" (258). While Sarah's evolved form of Judaism satisfies his impulse towards reverence, Pem feels that it allows him an intellectual freedom denied by other forms of organised religion. It is through his conversion to Judaism that he discovers some truth in his bishop's conception of the complementary relationship between reason and faith. "Reason no less than faith sanctifies the ethical life," states the bishop. "Both would liberate man from himself. The same mind that conceives the mathematical theorem loves the order of a world under God. Reason and the

imagination are parallel paths to God” (162). Impressed by Sarah’s attempts to preserve her faith through a critical reading of sacred texts, Pem displays an interest in her efforts to determine the importance of morality in contemporary religion. In her “Address to the Conference of American Studies in Religion”, Sarah explores whether the ethics and positive social values that have developed with religious thought can survive without reference to religion or the authority of God. She observes that in advanced industrial democracies social behaviour is regulated by civil law, which has extracted the essence of the Judeo-Christian ethical system (255-256). Sarah’s recognition of the integration of certain fundamental religious teachings into the nation’s founding documents harkens back to the ideas expressed by Doctorow in *Reporting the Universe*:

...our Constitution with its Amendments adapted as the basis of civil law what are essentially the ethical proscriptions common to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. There was not only a separation but an appropriation which goes largely unremarked and is consequential not just in our national history but in human history....[T]he average secular individual in a modern constitutional democracy...has quietly accepted and installed in himself or herself the best ethical teachings of religious traditions. (RU 112-113)¹⁰⁸

The idea that all American citizens have unwittingly imbibed the values of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions is an important one, and one which Doctorow develops in both *Reporting the Universe* and *City of God*. Through the voice of Sarah Blumenthal he argues that the secular individual has internalised the values of these religions merely by living under the statutory laws of the secular state, in which religious values and principles are deeply ingrained. “In this view,” says Sarah, “the supreme authority is not God, who is sacramentalized, prayed to, pleaded with,

¹⁰⁸ Robert Bellah makes a similar point: “The words and acts of the founding fathers...shaped the form and tone of the civil religion as it has been maintained ever since. *Though much is derived from Christianity, this religion is clearly not itself Christianity*” (1970: 175, emphasis added). Throughout *Reporting the Universe* Doctorow refers to America’s “civil religion”, a term first used by Jean Jacques Rousseau in the penultimate chapter of *The Social Contract* (1762) to define a reigning social order in which political, moral and religious principles are interrelated. Emphasising the importance of civic duty, Rousseau articulates the need for “a purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject” (1935: 114). Rousseau describes a civil religion containing “positive dogmas” that ensure the unity, justice and stability in the State, and “negative dogmas” that exclude intolerance (1935: 114). Rousseau’s writings on the civil religion are strikingly similar in sentiment to those of Doctorow, which accentuate principles of justice, morality and social order, and describe an American civil religion that has combined religious values and socio-political ideals. The term “civil religion” was popularised in the American context by Bellah in his famous 1967 essay “Civil Religion in America”, which posits the existence of a complex and well-institutionalised civil religious tradition in America that operates “alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches” (Bellah, 2006: 225). Like Doctorow, Bellah argues that a set of beliefs, symbols and values has been incorporated and institutionalised in American political and social life since its inception as a republic. Although Doctorow makes no overt reference to Bellah in *Reporting the Universe*, his writings echo strongly the ideas expressed by the scholar.

portrayed, textualized, or given voice, choir, or temple walls, but God who is imperceptible, ineffable, except...for our evolved moral sense of ourselves” (256). In contending that the secular state imbues its citizens with a distinct moral code, the rabbi effectively eradicates the long-perceived link between religion and morality, suggesting that the latter can be attained in the absence of conventional religion.¹⁰⁹ Herein lies a patent and fundamental paradox: while conceiving of a moral universe independent of religion, Sarah acknowledges that the American state, although secular, is intricately bound up with and influenced by entrenched religious values.¹¹⁰ Her understanding of the nature of the religious values ingrained in the governing institutions of America sheds light on this seeming inconsistency, however. Importantly, she sees these structuring religious principles as man-made, conceived in order to structure civilisation within an ethical framework. Meditating on Exodus 19-24, in which Moses is handed the Decalogue, Sarah confidently states, “These commandments were devised by human scriptural genius....The biblical minds who created the Ten Commandments that have structured civilization...provided the possibility of an ethically conceived life, an awareness that we live in states of moral consequence that, if not yet, must someday bring us closer to a union of understanding with the Creator” (116).¹¹¹ She thus makes an implicit yet crucial distinction between religious values as disseminated by the ancient texts, which are human constructs and have been subsumed into the institutional fabric of America, and the essence of God. Her outlook accords with Doctorow’s conviction that the American civil religion, with its underlying religious values, “leads us to live in states of moral consequence that [bring us to] a truer

¹⁰⁹ Doctorow, who clearly holds this view himself, even goes so far as to comment, “The fact is that since the providing genius of the ancient texts of thousands of years ago, the rare moral advances of the human race have come not of religious but of secular institutions. The concept of democracy and its attendant freedoms was one such advance. The perception of the earth as a destructible environment is another” (RU 95).

¹¹⁰ Sarah herself recognises this paradox, asking whether the ethical commandments of religion can be maintained without reference to God. “In my undergraduate seminar in metaphysics at Harvard,” she argues by way of response, “the professor said there can be no *ought*, no categorical imperative in Kantian terms, no action from an irresistible conscience, without a supreme authority. But that does not quite address the point. I ask if after the exclusionary, the sacramental, the ritualistic, and simply fantastic elements of religion are abandoned, can a universalist ethics be maintained—in its *numinousness*?” (255). As Doctorow comments in *Reporting the Universe*, “this conclusion [that there can be no action without a supreme authority] may be begging the question if, as seems likely, God is hidden in its premise” (RU 114).

¹¹¹ The ideas expressed in Sarah’s sermon mirror Doctorow’s thoughts on the subject: “I understand from biblical scholarship that the Ten Commandments have a generic form—they are modeled on the lord and vassal treaties of ancient Mesopotamia. They are man-made. But I honor the biblical minds who crafted them to structure civilization on an ethically conceived family life—a life that leads us to live in states of moral consequence” (RU 67). This idea is expressed by Pem elsewhere in the novel (page 90), highlighting Doctorow’s articulation of his own ideas through the disparate narrative voices of his fictional characters.

perception of, what Einstein, with his scrupulously precise scientific humanistic outlook, could only bring himself to call the Old One” (RU 67-68).

Sarah and Pem’s shared belief in an informing ethical code whose origins are biblical but not divine does not, therefore, preclude a belief in the existence of some kind of sacred power. As evidenced by his lifelong vacillation between the divergent poles of secular humanism and Christian faith, Pem’s scepticism towards traditional understandings of religion by no means extends to all that is sacred. Pem finds in Sarah’s ethical conception of God an intermediate position that caters both to his rational intellectualism and to his appreciation of the spiritual:

Suppose then that in the context of a hallowed secularism, the idea of God could be recognized as Something Evolving, as civilization has evolved – that God can be redefined and recast, as the human race trains itself to a greater degree of metaphysical and scientific sophistication. With the understanding, in other words, that human history does show a pattern at least of progressively sophisticated metaphors. So that we pursue a teleology thus far that...has given us only the one substantive indication of itself – that we, as human beings, live in moral consequence....Dare we hope the theologians might emancipate themselves, so as to articulate or perceive another possibility for us in our quest for the sacred? Not just a new chapter but a new story? (256)

Pem, like Sarah, refutes the notion of a conventional church God in favour of the more abstract, intellectual idea of a constantly evolving, purposive God, perceptible in the innate morality that has been displayed by human beings over time. Their understanding of the implications of such long-term moral demonstrations concurs with Joseph Natoli’s view that “the very fact that humans are continually telling moral stories indicates that something not totally graspable may yet be penetrating their lives” (1997: 142). Sarah’s words echo Pem’s sentiments regarding the need for a radical reconceptualisation of conventional understandings of God. As Bloom suggests, “Pemberton and Sarah are not looking for Yahweh, and would be unable to accept him if found. They need the stranger or alien God of the Gnostics, who is exiled from our solar system, and wanders out in the interstellar spaces” (2002: 5). Focused on the maintenance of an ethical code that has for centuries manifested itself in human behaviour, Sarah’s Judaism is anchored by a sense of humanity, morality, and unencumbered reverence. The rabbi envisions an expansion of ethical obligation such that all human beings begin to practice a “daily indiscriminate and matter-of-fact reverence of human rights unself-conscious as a handshake” (256). Pem, who perceives Christianity to have been the perpetrator of countless historical cruelties and grave human wrongs, is drawn to the moral- and human-centred approach of this

revised form of Judaism, appreciating the way in which the Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism uses religious ritual “to [take] us out of the ordinary range of feelings and direct...our minds to the consideration of who we are and hope to be” (251) in an ethically meaningful manner. While he admits to the “pseudohistorical clutter” (258) of the Jewish tradition, Pem realises that he can exercise a true faith in his Creator through this form of spirituality, which extracts and treasures the essence of God and moral being.

John Clayton asserts that this emphasis on values of compassion, morality and justice is central to the Jewish faith. Commenting on the “attitude of moral seriousness” visible in Doctorow’s writings, he contends, “Such an attitude towards art—an attitude of moral seriousness—is by no means the property of the Jews, but it runs deep and strong in Jewish culture. Again, caring and doing for other people and a critical attitude to contemporary myths do not belong to Jews. But Jewish culture has always insisted on these qualities” (2000: 192). It is these ideals to which Pem is drawn. By rejecting the doctrinal constraints of conventional religion and choosing instead an evolved Judaism that caters to the spiritual and intellectual needs of contemporary humanity, Pem endorses the contention that “God is not honored by a mechanical adherence to each and every regulation but by going to the heart of them all, the ethics, and observing those as if your life is at stake...your moral life, your life of consequence as a good, reflective, just, and compassionate human being” (250). Pem’s conversion to Judaism not only imbues him with a deep sense of spiritual contentment but, ultimately, it “affirms the need for some unifying principle and for spirituality in a world dominated by instrumental rationality, something which can call to the potential saving power of ethics” (Wilde, 2006: 401).

In their radical reconceptualisations of God and religion, *City of God*’s protagonists turn away from the threat of cold rationality towards a world defined by community, morality and spiritual connection. Their behaviour is symptomatic of the broader postmodern spiritual revival, a phenomenon perceived by Hornung as indicative of a desire to return to a premodern consciousness, “when religious and moral values were still upheld and when the human subject still held a central position in the world” (2002: 168). Bauman posits that postmodernity “can be seen as a restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a *re-enchantment* of the world that modernity tried hard to *dis-enchant* (1992: x). Pem and Sarah’s

reverence of the sacred in spite of their rational intellectualism illustrates this profound need to respiritualise contemporary society. In an article entitled “Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality” (1995), John A. McClure documents this trend, arguing that the spiritually inflected literature of today suggests a counter-construction of postmodernism whereby premodern moral and spiritual values are increasingly upheld. Drawing on Bauman’s conception of a re-enchanting postmodern world, McClure writes: “some of the very features of fiction which secular theorists have singled out as definitively postmodern must at least in some cases be understood in terms of a post-secular project of resacralization” (1995: 142). The solution proposed by Doctorow in *City of God* – the attainment of true spiritual connection through a reversion to the essential elements of religion, including the critical reworking of traditional concepts of God – is emblematic of this postmodern return to premodern values. Doctorow himself refers to the contemporary era as a “strange period of atavistic energies, when what is very old is very new, as if time is a loop” (RU 97). Although Pem and Sarah derive intellectual and spiritual gratification from their evolved form of Judaism, Doctorow’s aim is not to convert his readers to the Jewish faith.¹¹² Instead, *City of God* suggests the importance of spirituality in a world characterised by alienation, religious difference and doubt, stimulating its readers to seek moral and spiritual fulfilment by actively interrogating and revising traditional concepts of religion.¹¹³ As Wilde writes, the novel affirms “the need for an overt ethical awakening, in which faith in human potential and a profoundly caring attitude ought to prevail over doctrinal difference. In this outlook, ethics becomes the reconciling mediation between the secular and the religious” (2006: 393).

The physical space in which these ontological explorations occur is New York City. For Pem, the streets of New York hold a mysterious allure: “My real home is the city streets,” he says to Everett. “I walk them. There is something in the streets for me, some secret...” (88). Pem is

¹¹² Indeed, it is not Doctorow’s intention to promote one faith over others, as evidenced in *City of God*, in which the heroic actions of a Catholic priest are responsible for saving the ghetto diary, and Pem’s transcendent experience at the hospice is instigated by his atheist friend, McIlvaine. Accordingly, Doctorow asserts that a writer who declares that “this religion is the only religion” is writing “worthless prose” (*Conversations* 157). *City of God* aims to accentuate the shared ethical values of a range of faiths while questioning the significance attached to doctrine by institutional religions.

¹¹³ In *City of God*, as in *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow implies that personal discovery and fulfilment are impossible without the conscious, critical interrogation both of oneself and of societal norms. While in *The Book of Daniel* Susan dies from a “failure of analysis”, her brother comes to a greater understanding of himself and his personal history by actively engaging in the creative process of composing his own text.

compelled by the city's streets, sensing that they somehow hold the answers to his ontological uncertainties.¹¹⁴ As he wanders the teeming thoroughfares Pem reflects on New York's rich history, commenting on the layers of historical meaning embedded in its buildings, bridges, waterways and streets. He acknowledges the alienation, aggression and multicultural divisions of city life yet, in a moment of lucidity, Pem envisions the modern New York as an important site of human connection:

I can stop on any corner at the intersection of two busy streets, and...know I am momentarily part of the most spectacular phenomenon in the unnatural world...There is a specie recognition we will never acknowledge. A primatial over-soul. For all the wariness or indifference with which we negotiate our public spaces, we rely on the masses around us to delineate ourselves. The city may begin from a marketplace, a trading post, the confluence of waters, but it secretly depends on the human need to walk among strangers. (11)

Infusing the city is an underlying sense of kinship that, for the most part, evades conscious recognition. Pem, however, expressly acknowledges the innate and generally undiagnosed "specie recognition" within himself and his fellow city-dwellers, deriving comfort from the sense of belonging and human unity engendered by this "spectacular phenomenon". Through this instinctive recognition, Pem suggests, we are able not only to define our individual identities, but also to "register our commonality, a foundational sense of common fate and complex interdependence" (Wilde, 2006: 395). Pem thus derives pleasure from spending time on the city's busy streets and in Central Park, the famous natural haven in the middle of the urban centre, where "[a]ll New York" (238) gathers in a collective and reaffirming celebration of being. Pem realises that his city is not defined by its infrastructure or its reputation, but by its human population, whose behaviour dictates the mood of the city and ultimately informs the nature and evolution of its society. Doctorow emphasises this notion in "The Nineteenth New York", an essay in which he describes the eerie, unnatural stillness pervading the air after Abraham Lincoln's funeral procession through New York in 1865. For Doctorow, the funeral march "was like a commencement procession for our century" (PP 145). Despite the fact that the parade occurred in the mid-1800s, the event inspired strange energies which, taking hold in

¹¹⁴ Rushdie suggests that finding solace in the city streets is a continued theme of Doctorow's. Indicating the centrality of the city in Doctorow's novels, Rushdie quotes from *Billy Bathgate* (1989): "'The city has always given me assurances,' says Billy Bathgate, 'whenever I have asked for them.'" He continues, "[Doctorow's characters] draw their self-belief, their sense of solidity and permanence, from the metropolis itself, which suggests that only those who can believe in the permanence of the city are able to master it; or perhaps it's only when you believe in that permanence that you can survive the city's transformations, its tricky changes of light and lethal shadowplays, because it's belief that keeps you one step ahead" (1991: 332). Rushdie here foreshadows Doctorow's meditations on the importance of contemporary New York City in *City of God*.

public consciousness, heralded the birth of a new era. “And then some soulless, social resolve began to work itself out of [Lincoln’s] grave and rise again,” writes Doctorow, “And the city’s new century began” (PP 147).

Doctorow’s formulations of a new “soulless” twentieth-century New York reverberate throughout *City of God*, which portrays the city both as an over-crowded, hostile and corrupt place from which religious and moral values are notably absent, and as a potential utopian sanctuary. Despite his proprietary love for the energised streets of New York, Everett’s representation of the city is disturbingly bleak. Tinged with a sense of doom, his narrative hints at imminent catastrophe as he depicts a world characterised by noise pollution, fraudulence, crumbling infrastructure and human congestion. Commenting on the disquieting state of “hypershock” induced by the city’s “Fire sirens. Police-car hoots....All the restaurants booked. Babies tumbling out of the maternity wards. Building façades falling into the streets. Bursting water mains. Cop crime...social pretension, subway tunnel condos. Napoleonic real estate mongers [and] grandiose rag merchants” (10), Everett avers that the city is simply “too much to bear even by the people who live in it” (11). As the century draws to a close, the novel suggests, New York is reaching its breaking point: “There may not be much time,” writes Doctorow in *Reporting the Universe*. “If the demographers are right, ten billion people will inhabit the Earth by the middle of [the twenty-first] century....Under these circumstances, the prayers of mankind will sound to Heaven as shrieks. And we will have such abuses, such shocks to our hope of what life can be, as to make the blood-soaked, incinerated century just past a paradise lost” (RU 118).¹¹⁵ Significantly, Doctorow concludes *City of God* with a sweeping, apocalyptic vision of New York, inserting himself into an extensive tradition of apocalypse in literature:¹¹⁶

And now more and more people are born into it. The wretched of the earth stream into it. All at once it passes its point of self-containment. Its economy is insufficient. It becomes less able to employ, to house and feed the crowds that hunker about in its streets. As the smog thickens and the rising global temperatures bring on intolerable heat waves, droughts, hurricanes, and monumental snowfalls, the sustaining rituals of the society

¹¹⁵ These words were published in 2003, two years after the events of September 11, 2001. *City of God*, however, was written prior to Al Qaeda’s attacks on New York City’s World Trade Centre, rendering Everett’s prophecy of disaster eerily accurate. *City of God*’s ominous warning is foreshadowed by the premonitory words of Joan Didion who, meditating in the 1960s on the apparent loss of morality in America, wrote: “then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble. And I suspect we are already there” (1990: 163).

¹¹⁶ For a wide-ranging examination of North American apocalyptic literature, see Douglas Robinson’s 1985 study, *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature*.

break down and ideas of normal daily life erode. The city begins to lose its shape, its outlines blur as its precincts expand, and the class distinctions of its neighbourhoods are no longer discernible. Crimes against property increase. The food supply is erratic, power blackouts come with greater and greater frequency, the water arrives contaminated, the police forces are like armed soldiers, and inflation makes money useless....Strange diseases appear for which the doctors have no cure. Schools are closed. They become neighbourhood armories. Plagues break out, hospital corridors become morgues, the elected leaders declare martial law, troops are everywhere, and the befouled shantytowns that have sprung up on the metropolitan outskirts are routinely swept by machine-gun fire....

It becomes a political commonplace resisted not even by theorists of the democratic left that totalitarian management, enforced sterilization procedures, parentage grants issued to the genetically approved, and an ethos of rational triage are the only hope for the future of civilization. (271-272)

This imaginative projection of a future New York is terrifying: soulless, godless, and subjected to increasingly destructive forces, the city becomes a nexus of violence, infection, sterility and hopelessness. In this, the novel's concluding image of New York City, Doctorow conceives of a dystopian world suffering the adverse consequences of present and past human behaviour. Although his apocalyptic visualisation of this rapidly deteriorating society is grim, Doctorow leaves his readers with a trace of hope, suggesting in the final lines of *City of God* that relief is attainable by way of "a vitally religious couple who run a small progressive synagogue on the Upper West Side" (172). Exemplars of a return to the pure centre of religion, Pem and Sarah possess a deep and genuine spirituality underpinned by a strong moral core and a searching intellectualism. These are the values, Doctorow implies, that will remedy the moral contamination and spiritual desolation of modern society.

The new city of God, Doctorow proposes, is akin to Bauman's "re-enchanted" postmodern world: it is a New York in which people have reconnected with God and with each other in a considered and meaningful reclamation of spirituality; a New York in which morality, compassion and human unity are informing ideals. This is the New York familiar to Pem, who appreciates the inclusive promise of a city that invites far-off nations to "[g]ive me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me."¹¹⁷ However, Pem recognises the ugly realities of the very same city, which houses

¹¹⁷ These words, taken from Emma Lazarus' famous 1883 poem, "The New Colossus", are engraved on the concrete pillar at the base of New York's Statue of Liberty. The impassioned sonnet, which appears there in its entirety, reads: "Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, / With conquering limbs astride from land to land; / Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand / A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame / Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name / Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand / Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command / The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. / 'Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she / With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming

“the migrant wretched of the world...[yet] is no place for poor people” (10). The reflective priest thus comprehends the complex dualism of this glittering, globalised city: “Each of the passersby,” he remarks from his hypothetical street corner of “specie recognition”, “is a New Yorker, which is to say as native to this diaspora as I am, and a part of our great, sputtering experiment in a universalist society proposing a world without nations where anyone can be anything and the ID is planetary” (11). However, he quickly undercuts the idealism implied in this observation with the streetwise warning, “Not that you shouldn’t watch your pocketbook, lady” (11). Pem is fully accepting of New York’s deep-seated contradictions, displaying a thorough understanding of the incongruous realities of this multifaceted city. Similarly, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s nostalgic contemplation of New York entitled “My Lost City”, the author returns to New York after a two-year absence only to suffer a sudden, “awful realisation” about the actualities of the city which had once been a source of infinite mystery and magic for him:

From the ruins, lonely and inexplicable as the sphinx, rose the Empire State Building and, just as it had been a tradition of mine to climb to the Plaza roof to take leave of the beautiful city, extending as far as eyes could reach, so now I went to the roof of the last and most magnificent of towers. Then I understood – everything was explained: I had discovered the crowning error of the city, its Pandora’s box. Full of vaunting pride the New Yorker had climbed here and seen with dismay what he had never suspected, that the city was not the endless succession of canyons that he had supposed but that *it had limits* – from the tallest structure he saw for the first time that it faded out into the country on all sides, into an expanse of green and blue that alone was limitless. And with the awful realisation that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground. (30)

For Fitzgerald, New York has lost the shining promise it once held: “Come back, come back, O glittering and white!” (31), he cries in vain hope. He knows that this city, a majestic “miracle of foamy light suspended by the stars” (27), will always be home, yet he realises that the pluralistic, decentred city’s splendid façades conceal both a poisonous underbelly and “a lot of rather lost and lonely people” (25). Fitzgerald abruptly comprehends that New York is subject to the same geographic and social limitations as any other big city. Like Pem, however, he accepts the dualistic nature of the dazzling metropolis, celebrating its utopian promise in spite of the reality of its obvious imperfections.

Poverty, ethnic schisms, pollution, crime and over-crowding all afflict this vibrant metropolitan hub, yet the city’s flaws do not detract from its significance as a centre of human interaction.

shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!” (Jacob, 1949: 178-179).

Pem, who realises that the sense of commonality and alliance stimulated by such human contact is of critical importance, comments that “we will never acknowledge [the phenomenon of ‘specie recognition’]” (11), indicating that such connection is experienced only subconsciously. Similarly, in defining the state envisioned by Pem as a “utopian vision” (2006: 395), Wilde implies that it is too idealistic to be realised on a practical level.¹¹⁸ However, there is evidence in *City of God* to suggest that Pem’s hopes for New York exceed the unrealistic idealism of a utopian paradise, and have, in fact, already taken root in the contemporary city. The new city of God, the novel advises, is the New York of today: a diverse, multicultural community united by a renewed spiritual understanding and characterised by continuous intellectual, moral and social development. Quoting Girgus, Williams asserts that Doctorow’s “sermon-like diatribes issue a ‘call for both introspection and cultural renewal in the light of an ideology that sees America as a new way of life’” (1996: 67). Indeed, in the revisionary manner typical of Paul Tillich, Doctorow has reconceptualised Augustine’s idea of the city of God to accord with the ever-changing realities of the postmodern world. Contemporary New York is certainly not the ideal Christian community in Heaven envisaged by Augustine, but with its deepened spiritual awareness and its continuous, critical revision of ontological problems, it provides the capacity for spiritual and moral fulfilment in a manner more befitting a world constantly in flux.

¹¹⁸ Utopia is “an imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect....The name in modern Latin is literally ‘no-place’, from the Greek *ou* ‘not’ + *topos* ‘place’” (*Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, s.v. “Utopia”). As its etymology suggests, utopia is too ideal to be realistically possible. Impractical and unattainable in its idealism, it is “no-place”.

CONCLUSION

“Reporting the Universe”: The Comprehensive Vision of E. L. Doctorow

It is Whitman, our great poet and pragmatic philosopher, who advises us not to be curious about God but to affix our curiosity to our own lives and the earth we live on, and then perhaps as far as we can see into the universe with our telescopes. This was the charge he gave himself, and it is the source of all the attentive love in his poetry. If we accept it as our own...we can hope for the aroused witness, the manifold reportage, the flourishing of knowledge that will restore us to ourselves...

- E. L. Doctorow, “The White Whale”

In the penultimate essay of his acclaimed collection of non-fiction writings, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie argues compellingly that literature is the crucial art form of the postmodern world. Entitled “Is Nothing Sacred?”, the essay asserts that fiction occupies a privileged position in the ranks of discourse, not because it is sacrosanct,¹¹⁹ but because it is the only arena of discourse which brings together a multiplicity of thought, opinion and perspective: it is the realm of discourse, as Rushdie puts it, which allows us to hear a proliferation of voices “*talking about everything in every possible way*” (1991: 429). Rushdie’s contemplation of the role of fiction today brings to mind Doctorow’s thoughts on the same subject. Over a period of nearly four decades, Doctorow has expressed concern over the waning authority of literature, urging writers and readers alike to appreciate fiction as a precious resource and a valuable instrument of human survival. “Stories,” he writes, “were the first repositories of human knowledge. They were as important to survival as a spear or a hoe. The storyteller practices the ancient way of knowing, the total discourse that antedates all the special vocabularies of modern intelligence (*Creationists* x).¹²⁰

Because of its capacity to shape human consciousness and supply crucial insights into the human condition, Doctorow has consistently identified narrative as “ultimate” discourse (UD 41).

¹¹⁹ Rushdie emphasises the absoluteness of that which is declared sacrosanct, expressing his resistance to such totalising forces: “To respect the sacred is to be paralysed by it. The idea of the sacred is quite simply one of the most conservative notions in any culture, because it seeks to turn other ideas – Uncertainty, Progress, Change – into crimes” (1991: 416). Of literature, he writes, “Nothing so inexact, so easily and frequently misconceived, deserves the protection of being declared sacrosanct. We shall just have to get along without the shield of sacralization, and a good thing, too. We must not become what we oppose” (1991: 427). Rushdie’s opposition to universal absolutes echoes Scholes’ contention that “[b]elief is comfortable, but it is in a sense the enemy of truth, because it stifles inquiry” (1979: 7).

¹²⁰ Doctorow’s use of the word “total” refers to fiction’s comprehensiveness rather than it being an absolute or totalising force.

Emphasising the “variousness” (*Conversations* 52) of literature, he upholds the unique power of fiction to provide witness and moral guidance in an increasingly unstable postmodern world, highlighting its ability to reformulate and illuminate social facts so that new understandings of the human community arise. Doctorow’s position in this regard is strikingly similar to that of Rushdie, in that both writers privilege fiction because of its inclusive presentation of a “harmony of judgments” (*Beliefs* 618). Literature, they contend, does not provide an exclusive truth. Instead, it incorporates the many voices of a culture infused with accents of both the past and the present to produce a deeper understanding of an ever-elusive reality. Doctorow writes that “a novel is nothing more than an intricate construct of opinions. Opinions are the novel’s molecules and altogether these opinions, judgments, facts, yield a world view” (*Beliefs* 617).

Appropriately, then, John G. Parks situates his discussions of Doctorow’s writings in the context of the linguistic theories posited by Mikhail Bakhtin and Kenneth Burke. He designates contemporary culture as “polyphonic, as a heteroglossic dialogue or conversation which allows for the speaking and hearing of the many voices which constitute it. This, according to Bakhtin, is what prose can do best in an age of competing languages” (1991b: 455). Doctorow, wary of totalising ideologies, also celebrates the capacity of fictions, “false documents”, narrative *constructions*, imaginative *fabrications*, to compose truths greater than those produced by “verifiable” scientific discourses. Fiction can provide us with a moral framework by which to live, an understanding of the complexities of life, and that sense of human community necessary for psychological and spiritual wholeness. Quoting Walter Benjamin, Doctorow remarks in “False Documents”, “In the midst of life’s fullness, the novel [today] gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living” (FD 154-155). For Doctorow, it is the role of the novelist to create as many witnesses to history and reality as possible, for, being composed, both are subject to infinite interpretations. As Williams comments, Doctorow asserts the superiority of fiction over other forms of discourse primarily as a result of its comprehensiveness, but also because of its honesty: unlike other modes of empirical discourse, which purport to produce a final, singular truth, fiction admits that it is artifice, allowing for multiple possibilities of truth to emerge (1996: 145). Doctorow thus rejects with scepticism the existence of any kind of absolute truth, allowing instead for the possibility of many truths. These, he believes, are attainable through fiction’s “multiplicity of witnesses”.

Nowhere is Doctorow's stance on the function and importance of writing more clearly expressed than in his volume of short fiction, *Lives of the Poets: Six Stories and a Novella*. First published in 1984, the anthology crystallises Doctorow's thematic interests and stylistic approach: the seven narratives included in the collection engage in self-reflexive explorations of the nature of writing and the role of the writer in the modern world, displaying the thematic diversity, narrative discontinuity and textual ambiguity that have come to be so strongly associated with Doctorow's writings. The distinctive work, while a notable departure from the author's customary use of the novel form, illuminates and augments the ideas expressed in his novels, public addresses, essays and criticism. Two stories in particular elucidate these views: the opening story of the collection, "The Writer in the Family", illustrates Doctorow's steadfast belief that truth can be found in fiction, while "The Leather Man" demonstrates the essential role played by the writer in acting as a witness.

The narrator of "The Writer in the Family", Jonathan, is persuaded by his wealthy Aunt Frances to write letters to his elderly grandmother in the name and voice of his father, who had died some months earlier. Claiming that news of her son's death would be unnecessarily traumatic for the fragile old lady, Frances convinces Jonathan to pretend to his grandmother that the family has moved to Arizona, where the dry air is good for his father's health. Although uneasy over the dishonesty of the project, Jonathan complies with his aunt's request, composing several letters in which he purports to be his dead father. Unexpectedly, in writing the fictive letters Jonathan discovers formerly unknown truths about his father, who had harboured an unexpressed but deep-seated love for the sea and adventure. Through writing, Jonathan perceives for the first time how restless and unfulfilled his father had been in life. Berating himself for his lack of discernment, he exclaims, "...how stupid, and imperceptive, and self-centred I had been never to have understood while he was alive what my father's dream for his life had been" (20). Accordingly, in the last letter to his grandmother, Jonathan draws on the powers of fiction and the imagination to reconstruct a more fitting conclusion to his father's life:

Dear Mama,

This will be my final letter to you since I have been told by the doctors that I am dying....

As for the nature of my ailment, the doctors haven't told me what it is, but I know that I am simply dying of the wrong life. I should never have come to the desert. It wasn't the place for me.

I have asked Ruth and the boys to have my body cremated and the ashes scattered in the ocean.

Your loving son,

Jack (21)

In uncovering such truths about his father, Jonathan's letters assume a function far greater than their original one of deceiving his ancient grandmother. As Stephen Matterson notes, the letters not only have a profound effect on Jonathan, but they have a deep impact on Aunt Frances in that they bring the father to life again for her, revitalising his spirit and keeping his memory alive (1993: 113). Remarking on his aunt's response to the first of his letters, Jonathan reports: "My aunt called some days later and told me it was when she read this letter aloud to the old lady that the full effect of Jack's death came over her. She had to excuse herself and went out in the parking lot to cry. 'I wept so,' she said. 'I felt such terrible longing for him. You're so right, he loved to go places, he loved life, he loved everything'" (5).

"The Writer in the Family" illustrates Doctorow's conviction that fiction, although composed, has the capacity to produce truth. Invoking the rhetoric used by Doctorow in "False Documents", John Williams affirms that such fiction "hides its serious values in the play of art, seeking to lure victims of the regime of power away by a false documentary surface in order to reveal a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of reality" (1996: 148). Jonathan's older brother Harold, who doubts the necessity for such fictional compositions, says heatedly to Jonathan: "Grandma is almost totally blind, she's half deaf and crippled. Does the situation really call for a literary composition? Does it need verisimilitude? Would the old lady know the difference if she was read the phonebook?" (15). Yes, Doctorow seems to respond, Jonathan's letters *are* necessary: not only do they provide the writer with a more truthful reflection of his father, but they keep the man alive for others. In composing the fictional letters, Jonathan composes truths far greater and more meaningful than those conveyed by the factual detail of his father's life. However, in spite of the genuine truths generated by his writings, Jonathan decides to discontinue the dishonest enterprise for, as Matterson observes, he is too young to grasp fully that fiction, although ultimately a deceit, is able to disclose truths that facts alone cannot (1993: 113). "The Writer in the Family" confronts directly Doctorow's ongoing concern with the complex relation between fiction and truth, a theme that asserts itself throughout his considerable body of work.

“The Leather Man”, whose fragmented narrative takes the form of an informal CIA discussion about the potentially subversive nature of displaced persons, highlights Doctorow’s conception of the writer as witness.¹²¹ The spirit of this group of vagrants and societal outcasts is encapsulated by the ancient “Leather Man”, a ten-foot-tall “hulk, colossally dressed, in layers of coats and shawls and pants, all topped with a stiff hand-fashioned leather outer armour, like a knight’s, and a homemade pointed hat of leather” (79). As an observer who exists on the fringes of society, the Leather Man signifies the artist figure.¹²² Indeed, Levine argues that “[t]he Leather Man’s sense of estrangement identifies him...with the modern artist whose perceptions are also sharpest when he feels detached” (1985: 82).¹²³ Slater, a dominant personality in the featured CIA debate, perceives such people to be a political and social threat to society because of their heightened perceptions of humanity which, he alleges, are provoked by their societal estrangement: “...the essential act of the Leather Man [is to make] the world foreign. He distances it. He is estranged. Our perceptions are sharpest when we’re estranged. We can see the shape of things” (88). The artist, Doctorow suggests, possesses acute powers of perception: s/he is able to see the true shape of things, offering perspectives on society similar to those provided by the outsider. As Parks writes, and “The Leather Man” illustrates, “The artist as derelict sees the world as it is and tells the truth about it” (1991a: 90). Through the voice of the story’s narrator, Doctorow cements his view that the primary function of writers is to bear witness to the world. “We’ve got thousands of people in this country whose vocation is to let us know what our experience is,” declares the narrator, “Are you telling me this is not a resource?” (91). By virtue of their keen powers of observation, writers have the capacity to provide fresh views on human experience and important insights into the human condition.

¹²¹ Although Doctorow does not reveal the identity of the assembled group, Matterson concludes that the organisation is the CIA because of the narrator’s reference to the group’s infiltration of the Woodstock festival (1993: 121).

¹²² See Matterson (1993: 121) and Parks (1991a: 94) for reiteration of this idea.

¹²³ Doctorow makes this point explicit in the title story, “Lives of the Poets”, which foregrounds a writer who isolates himself from his family and the outside world by secluding himself in his Greenwich Village apartment. He feels that this seclusion is a necessary condition for his writing. However, because of his complete detachment from the world, the writer fails to witness events occurring right before him on the street. Doctorow uses this scenario to highlight the complex tension between alienation and engagement plaguing the life of the artist. As the writer-narrator of “Lives of the Poets” comments, “I isolate myself, a man whose state of rest is inconsolability. I walk the streets feeling like a vagrant, I’ve got this stinging desolation in my eyes....[B]etween the artist and simple dereliction there is a very thin line” (107, 121).

For Doctorow, to read fiction is to perceive the world in its multiplicity. Fiction rearticulates an inherently elusive reality such that new understandings of experience arise. Advocating fiction as an inclusive mode of perception, Doctorow calls upon novelists and readers to engage critically in processes of composition and recomposition, suggesting that through intellectual engagement with the text and the world, deeper truths about humanity will emerge. While *City of God* challenges the universal norms and narratives pertaining to conventional spiritualities, suggesting that moral and spiritual satisfaction is attainable through the constructive, revisionary interrogation of traditional concepts of religion, *The Book of Daniel* implies that personal discovery and fulfilment are impossible without the conscious, critical interrogation both of oneself and of societal norms: Susan dies from a “failure of analysis” while Daniel obtains an expanded understanding of himself and his past by engaging in the creative and intellectually rigorous process of composing his own text. Similarly, Doctorow promotes concepts of curiosity, perception and metamorphosis in *Ragtime*, indicating the necessity for a persistent renewal of the self in order to succeed in an indefinite and finally indeterminate world. Conscious of the arbitrary complexity and infinite possibilities of human existence, both Tatch and the little boy use their intellect and imagination to comprehend and adjust to the constantly shifting realities of a particularly volatile era. In all three novels, therefore, Doctorow places immense value on continual personal inquiry and social questioning.

In *The Book of Daniel*, *Ragtime* and *City of God*, grand narratives of religion, history and representation are challenged and assessed in order to raise new possibilities of thought and action. In all three works we see a radical subversion of narrative tradition and a destabilisation of conventional interpretive frameworks through the overt blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, the merging of customarily delineated literary genres, and a metafictional self-consciousness. Accentuated by Doctorow’s stylistic experimentation with narrative, which underscores the distinctive pluralism, instability and discontinuity of the postmodern age, the strong sense of transgression pervading these texts prompts readers not only to question established modes of perception, but to reinvigorate tired cultural and social traditions through the reformulation of conventionally unchallenged norms.

Sam B. Girgus maintains that Doctorow is “at once both the most conservative and the most radical of Americans. He is the most conservative because of his concern for preserving those institutions and values of democracy that constitute the American idea. At the same time he is the most radical because he extends and modernizes the ideology and meaning of America to make it relevant to contemporary American life, thought, and needs” (2002: 26). Doctorow’s work embodies Hutcheon’s conception of a “paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique” (1989: 11): while his writings question and critique the ideological structures governing contemporary society, revising and revitalising them, he simultaneously defends those values informing America’s democratic culture, promoting principles of justice, equality, freedom and diversity. The ironic self-reflexivity of Doctorow’s work demands that readers actively engage with established understandings of history, politics, religion and ideology, alerting us to their inherent conditionality. Inextricably related to his stylistic experimentation with narrative, the socially relevant themes of his work, like the aesthetic innovations, stem from a sustained involvement with the instabilities and sense of isolation and doubt pervading modern society. Doctorow’s critical and imaginative engagement with contemporary American culture has given rise to a distinctive body of literature that acknowledges the ultimate indeterminacy of reality, but holds onto the possibility of truth, however provisional that truth may be.

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